UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI TORINO

DIGITAL HUMANITIES: TECNOLOGIE DIGITALI, ARTI, LINGUE, CULTURE E COMUNICAZIONE

THE SELFISH EVENT AND THE PROXIMAL-ANCILLARY COVERAGE CONTINUUM

♦

A Dialogical Approach to the Discourse(s) of the American 'War on Terror'

A thesis submitted for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy*

Supervisor:
PROF. ANDREA CAROSSO, PhD

Candidate:
ROBERT MOSCALIUC

2018

To my parents who worked in factories to pay for this, and to my husband, Stefano, who was always there.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: THIS IS NOT A WORK OF FICTION

Akin to history books, some novels come with maps. The maps are often placed at the very beginning of these novels, and they are maps of either real or imaginary places. Regardless of the places they represent, be they real or fictional, all of them are an accretion of lines, boundaries, that define space, punctuated here and there, with the names of cities, places, rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans. Still, most of the times, we look at these maps with a different eye, even when we know they show 'real' places as if the context in which they are placed reduces their verisimilitude. At other times, we dismiss the map because we have the sense that it is of no help in the fictional realm we are about to enter. The 'reality' these maps represent is suddenly suspended as if they pointed to a parallel universe. The North that the little compass at the bottom of the map shows is no longer our North, but a fictional North.

This dismissal is, however, one of the central tenets of fiction and intellectual life in general. Without it, writers would be arrested and thrown in jail (some are), and we would not be able to have polite discussions. History books would lose their value because then we would not know whom to trust. To have 'fictional' literature we need to keep these aspects separate, but to have a thorough understanding of the world we need to have both of them. "The historian," Jane Smiley argues in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel* (2005), "is required to give up dramatic interest in the pursuit of accuracy, but a novelist must give up accuracy in the pursuit of narrative drive and emotional impact" (Smiley 2006, 21). However, a loss in accuracy does not necessarily imply a loss in importance, on the contrary, it is a gain on other fronts.

This is not to say that the knowledge gained from these fictional accounts is inaccurate or lacks any value. They are accurate at least in the ways they show what happens when accuracy is no longer an objective. "The personal isn't by definition false," Charles D'Ambrosio told Leslie Jamison in an interview for *The New Yorker*, "nor is confession, but in writing both have to meet this other demand, the demands of language" (Jamison 2014). Nor is this knowledge simply emotional or 'subjective.' The writer's dual allegiance, D'Ambrosio concludes, "to the truth of the thing and to the truth of writing, inevitably takes you away from the merely heartfelt" and "maps a path

out of the self" (Jamison 2014). Fiction also maps a path out the limitations and the rigidity of facts.

In this dissertation, I strive to prove that at least under certain *circumstances*, the fictional and the non-fictional can be seen not as separate but as part of a *continuum*. To do this, I divided my dissertation into two parts, one that deals with the *circumstances* for a reconsideration of the truth-fiction dichotomy, and one that deals with how a *continuum* between the two is much more productive given those circumstances. In view of this, I base my arguments on two theoretical constructs, which will be explained in full in the first few pages of each part. The first part of my dissertation forwards the notion of *selfish events* and will focus chiefly on the literature dealing with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, while the second part proposes the notion of a *proximal-ancillary continuum* and will focus primarily on the literature coming out of the American 'war on terror' in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The first part of my dissertation is divided into three chapters, each of them dealing with either a theoretical element or a specific group of texts. While the first chapter outlines the theoretical trajectories, my argument is based on and from which it draws its substance, the second and third chapters will bring theory and practice together through an in-depth analysis of texts. In this first part, I argue that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, created an *ethos of perception and cultural production* that can be traced throughout the vast majority of texts that tackle the events either directly or indirectly. Because of this, 9/11 can be called a *selfish event*, namely one that, due to the acute effects of its occurrence, does not have the time and the cultural resources to forge a discourse of its own that could reflect upon and explain the complexity of that event, and as such it resorts to cultural artifacts that happen to be in its proximity. A *selfish event*, as I will argue, *absorbs* and *contaminates* these cultural artifacts to sustain its cultural authority at least until a separate discourse of its own has been created and culturally reinforced. This appropriative move then translates into a cultural practice and is reflected, as I shall show, in narratives that perform a similar appropriative move.

This first part also traces a cultural symptomatology of *selfish events* by discussing notions such as the *erasure of locality*, *impairment*, and *diplopia*. In particular, it will look at how these notions, which can be seen as signature moves of the *selfish event*, work in narratives such as Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* (2007) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Furthermore, I shall also address the issue of what kind of texts

have *not* been absorbed and contaminated by the *selfish event* and discuss the reasons why a text such as James Howard Kunstler's novel *World Made By Hand* (2008) was not caught within the cultural selfishness of the event. Additionally, the third chapter will focus primarily on what I believe to be the pivotal signature move of the event, namely the dis-integration of the narrating self and the coercive integration of otherness. In this chapter, I will discuss narratives such as Paul A. Toth's *Airplane Novel* (2011) and Elliot Ackerman's novel *Green on Blue* (2015). Finally, the last section of the third chapter will try to bring forth a "reparative reading" of post-9/11 fiction, one that would emancipate discourse from the grip of the selfish event. Following Eve K. Sedgwick's distinction between *paranoid* and *reparative reading*, the chapter will conclude that a reparative reading practice would also curtail the culturally expansive tendencies of a selfish event and perhaps emancipate reality from the fear of the inevitability of another attack.

The second part of my dissertation is divided into three chapters and focuses primarily on the *proximal-ancillary coverage continuum* and how it can be applied to the interpretation of the literature currently coming out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In particular, this part revolves around the notion of *ancillary coverage*. This particular concept derives, on the one hand, from the terminological necessity of differentiating between what I call the proximal/journalistic coverage of a particular military event – in this case the wars in Afghanistan in Iraq – and the ancillary/fictional coverage of that same event, and, on the other hand, from the logical necessity of rendering two corpora of texts into two operational categories that could be defined according to a set of features. Albeit my research groups together these two corpora under the generic umbrella of *coverage*, the ultimate purpose is not only to bring to the surface the perceived similarities between these two types of coverage, but also to show how common features, such as the *post-factum feedback*, operate differently in the case of each type. Considering that *proximal coverage* is governed by its own internal rules and regulations, chiefly dictated by the necessities of the profession of journalism, this part of my dissertation strives, on the one hand, to identify at least in part the rules and regulations that exercise control over *ancillary coverage*, and, on the other hand, to define them in terms of how they operate in relation to the fictional accounts I have chosen as primary sources.

Thus, the first chapter of the second part will focus primarily on the theoretical framework and the distinctions between the two types of coverage. With regards to proximal coverage, this chapter will argue that the *selfish event*, in typical fashion, had prescribed how it came to be represented by the media. In particular, it will argue that the proximal-ancillary continuum permits an extension of Robert M. Entman's "cascading network activation," which limited the frame-modifying capacities of ancillary coverage. The main text that I will discuss in this chapter is Mark Doten's novel *The Infernal* (2015), and I will argue that, due to its position within the continuum, *ancillary coverage* such as Doten's novel occupies a privileged position within the discourse of the 'war on terror'.

The second and third chapters will instead focus entirely on war literature and will start by making some considerations on the genre. These two chapters will argue that what we call war literature might not apply to the narratives coming out of the American "war on terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan because of the way they approach the idea of enemy, family, homeland, and battlefront. There will also be a lengthy discussion on whether these texts can be seen as having belligerent or pacifist tendencies and will propose a series of solutions to this conundrum. Besides trying to create a literary genealogy of the "war on terror", these chapters will take into consideration and discuss narratives such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), David Means' novel *Hystopia* (2016), Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* (2015), Harry Parker's *Anatomy of a Soldier* (2016), Phil Klay's collection of short stories *Redeployment* (2014), Michael Pitre's novel *Fives and Twenty-Fives* (2015), Roy Scranton's novel *War Porn* (2016), George Saunders' short story "Home", and Siobhan Fallon's collection of short stories *You Know When the Men Are Gone* (2011), among others.

The connection between the two parts of my dissertation, as well as between the two concepts that constitute their theoretical foundation, might not be evident and/or might be seen as resulting from personal choice. This latter impression is not entirely unfounded because the connection *does* stem, in a way, from personal choice, namely that of not seeing the events of September 11, 2001, as separate from the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan that followed them. Similarly, historians do not see the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 as separate from the chain of events that followed it and started the First World War. Akin to the assassination of the Archduke or the political takeover in 1933 of Germany by Hitler and the Nazi Party, which was one of the elements that led to the Second World War, the

terrorist attacks of 9/11 constitute one in a chain of *triggering* events that led to the American interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The gravity of these events would seem to make this entire discussion about semantics frivolous if not impertinent, and thus open to attack, yet seeing these events on a continuum rather than as separate entities, or dots on a timeline, might shed light on how the discourse surrounding them informs and is informed by those events. After all, semantics, as Steven Pinker puts it, "is about the relation of words to reality – the way that speakers commit themselves to a shared understanding of the truth, and the way their thoughts are anchored to things and situations in the world" (Pinker 2008, 3). Additionally, as I shall argue in the following pages, some of the literary techniques that had been forged in the fictional representations of 9/11 were carried into the fiction currently coming out of the "war on terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The type of analysis this dissertation undertakes is not without precedent. In fact, considering the richness of this emerging field, a series of other scholars have already discussed some of the aspects I take into consideration and challenge further in the following pages. In particular, the study that has most influenced my research is Adam Hodges' *The 'War on Terror' Narrative: Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction and Contestation of Sociopolitical Reality* (2011). The purpose of Hodges' analysis is to showcase how the use of language structures and changes sociopolitical reality. By analyzing George W. Bush's speeches given in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Hodges sets out to show "how political rhetoric can pave the way for justifying war in the hope that such an understanding might raise awareness and develop the critical ethos needed to avoid future wars" (Hodges 2011, x). Sandra Silberstein performs a similar analysis in *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11* (2002), where she "explores the use of language in developing the public understanding of, and response to, the events that surrounded 9/11" and concludes that public language (re)created national identity in the aftermath of the events (2004, xvii). Much like that of Hodges and that of Sandra Silberstein's, my analysis sets out to cultivate a similar critical awareness with regards to post-9/11 discourse/literature.

With regards to studies analyzing post-9/11 literature, titles abound. Among these, I consider Kristiaan Versluys' *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009) and Richard Gray's *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011), both of whom are responsible in a way for laying the groundwork in the establishment of a 9/11 canon.

While Versluys is chiefly concerned with the complications writers came across in the representation of 9/11 and is particularly keen on proving that 9/11 is a traumatic event, Gray tries to break away from Versluys by expanding the 9/11 canon. Thus, Gray includes not only those texts whose subject is 9/11, but also texts that show how it is to live in a post-9/11 world. Gray is also among the first, if not the first, to include Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* into the canon, and to argue that post-9/11 fiction includes even those narratives that do not make specific references to the events.

Georgiana Banita's *Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture After 9/11* (2012) takes a step further and argues that the terrorist attacks of September 11 triggered profound changes at cultural and moral levels. In this sense, Banita argues that "the aim of the post-9/11 novel is not to cease judging the Other but to show we are judging even when we think we are not, how we have judged wrongly and how to make amends for it" (Banita 2012, 26). Tim Gauthier's *9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness* (2015) and Daniel O'Gorman's *Fictions of the War on Terror: Difference and the Transnational 9/11 Novel* (2015) both follow in Banita's footsteps and argue that "the impact of 9/11 on literary fiction has reached far beyond the limits of the 9/11 genre: it has given rise to a cultural condition that permeates contemporary literature more broadly" (O'Gorman 2015, 13). Both of them analyze how difference is framed, and both focus on the role of literature in shaping and critiquing issues of difference.

By far the most expansive study of post-9/11 literature and discourse is Birgit Däwes *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel* (2011). Däwes' approach is systematic and gives a certain order to an otherwise chimeric genre of literature. In this sense, Däwes proposes six categories of "Ground Zero fiction": "metonymic approaches" (those that "substitute the subject [...] by characteristics of that subject or something closely related to it"), "salvational approaches" (those that "explore various narrative methods of preservation from destruction or calamity"), "diagnostic approaches" (those that "contextualize 9/11 within larger historical and/or geographical frameworks"), "appropriative approaches" (those that transcend "the boundary to the Other by constructing the voice of the perpetrator"), "symbolic approaches" (those that use 9/11 "as a symbolic setting and event, which provides a parallel or contrastive background to tales of personal crisis, loss, or decline") and "writerly approaches" (namely those that transform "the representational challenges into semantic, structural or formal innovations, such as multiple perspectives, exten-

sive allegories, non-linear forms of narration, visual elements, creative layouts, metafictional angles, and various other textual experiments") (Däwes 2011, 20–22). By following some of the principles of New Historicism, in particular the idea that fictional texts and historical contexts are not independent entities but permeate and influence each other, the purpose of Däwes' study is to show how fictional texts contributed to the shaping and installation of the cultural memory of 9/11. Stuart Croft follows a similar path in his *Culture, Crisis, and America's War on Terror* (2006), where he argues that "a focus on the cultural can enlighten international relations and security studies" (2006, 34) because the cultural does not merely reproduce discourse in the aftermath of 9/11, it actually co-produces it. However, as opposed to Däwes and the other scholars I mentioned above, Croft has a more inclusive understanding of culture and extends his analysis well beyond textual artifacts.

Academic work focusing exclusively on the literature coming out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is still at an inchoate stage at the time of writing this, but the canon keeps growing every year. Worth noting in this sense is Catherine Mary Mcloughlin's *Authoring War: the Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (2011), which sets out to identify, akin to Versluys' *Out of the Blue*, "what makes war impossible or very difficult to write about", and "to explore the means by which it has, nevertheless, been written about with some success" (2011, 8). David A. Buchanan's *Going Scapegoat: Post-9/11 War Literature, Language, and Culture* (2016) does not match the ambition of Mcloughlin's work but instead makes a compelling point about how language not only frames reality but also prescribes certain behaviors. In view of this, Buchanan adapts Kenneth Burke's scapegoat mechanism to the criticism of literature and film and applies it to three novels that tackle the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), David Abram's *FOBBIT* (2012) and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012). Buchanan also dedicates a good part of his book to discussions of genre and the notion of combat gnosticism, which for a very long time has dictated how war literature is produced and consumed.

Another authoritative source with regards to the literature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is Peter Molin's blog *Time Now: The Iraq and Afghanistan Wars in Art, Film, and Literature*, which besides offering constant updates about new releases also gives excellent reviews of basically all there is in terms of text and image about these

wars. At the end of every year, Molin also publishes a full list of all books (poetry included), films, and documentaries released up until that point. It is one place to start researching this topic. Michiko Kakutani's articles for *The New York Times*, in particular "Human Costs of the Forever Wars, Enough to Fill a Bookshelf" and "A Reading List of Modern War Stories", both published in 2015, also set out to provide readers and scholars with a list of books on the topic and map a territory that is yet uncharted and will continue to be so for years to come.

Worth noting in this sense are the numerous articles on the topic published in newspapers and magazines. One of them is George Packer's "Home Fires: How Soldiers Write Their Wars" (Packer 2014), published in *The New Yorker* (April 7, 2014), in which he traces Paul Fussell's notion of irony and analyses texts such as Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012), Brian Turner's collections of poems *Here, Bullet* (2005) and *Phantom Noise* (2010), and Phil Klay's collection of short stories *Redeployment* (2014). Brian Castner's lengthy article "Afghanistan: A Stage Without a Play", published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (October 2, 2014), also sets out to map an uncharted territory and argues that, as opposed to the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan has not been as productive as the former in terms of the number of texts written about it. In Castner's view, the literature of the Afghanistan war has shed the expected standard conventions of modern war writing, and it now has to forge a new path for itself. Roy Scranton's "The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to 'Redeployment' and 'American Sniper'", published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (January 25, 2015), is yet another lengthy article that traces a trend and as such tries to make both readers and writers of war narratives aware of its detrimental tendencies. In it, Scranton argues that "the myth of the trauma hero" has led to an increasing reliance on combat gnosticism and has served a "scapegoat function", in the sense that it discharged "national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy" (Scranton 2015). As I will argue in the final sections of the second part, Scranton tries to go against this trend with his novel, *War Porn* (2016).

Ácoma, the international journal of North American studies, has dedicated one of its issues to the topic of war. Edited by Giorgio Mariani, whose work on the concept of war I shall discuss lengthily in the second part of my dissertation, and published in 2016, the issue contains a wide variety of articles addressing aspects related to the representation of war in cinema, literature, and art. As opposed to other scholarly studies on the topic, the articles in this issue of the journal do not focus solely on texts written

by American writers but also on those written by Iraqi writers. The issue also contains an article that later became the starting point for a chapter from the second part of this dissertation.

My dissertation takes a slightly different approach, one that might seem overly ambitious at first glance, since it examines a large number of texts. However, I firmly believe that the theoretical framework my dissertation is proposing is not only innovative but could also constitute the basis for further studies. Both the notion of *selfish events* and that of the *proximal-ancillary coverage continuum* could be perceived as umbrella-concepts that, if defined and refined further, could solve issues related to the sheer quantity of material that is being produced on a daily basis in this field of study and could be applied to the discourse of other events. If the books and articles I mentioned above try to map out this yet uncharted and shifting territory, my dissertation could be, not a map, but the little compass at the bottom of that map.

PART ONE. FICTIONAL CASUALTIES OF THE FALLING TOWERS: 9/11 AS *SELFISH EVENT*

> *Nothing adequate, nothing corresponding in language could stand in for it. No metaphor could carry language across to it. There was nothing to call it because it had taken over reality entirely. But almost immediately, people began to name it. (James Berger, "There's No Backhand to This")*

> *"'Yeah,' he calls to everyone in and out of earshot, spinning there in the middle of the highway, 'oh yeah! Explain* that*,' gesturing at the two towers." (Steve Erickson, Shadowbahn)*

CHAPTER ONE: CULTURAL LANDSCAPING

In this chapter, I will examine how the events of September 11, 2001, can be understood as *selfish events* and will argue that due to the acuteness of their occurrence and their impact worldwide they constitute a peculiar kind of occurrences. To that end, I will begin with a series of observations that have led me to this conclusion and will continue by laying the theoretical groundwork for the kind of analysis I undertake in my dissertation. As I shall argue in the following pages, *selfish events* tend to absorb and contaminate cultural artifacts, such as texts, images, and concepts, which happen to have some *affinity* with at least one of the elements of the event. As a result of this contamination, these cultural artifacts will appear *displaced* when situated in the 'gravitational field' of the *selfish events*, and their interpretation will mutate to acknowledge and accommodate a definition prescribed by the events. Additionally, I shall consider and discuss some theoretical precedents.

1.1. Altered Landscapes, Changing Views: A Disaster Unlike Any Other

When Liberty Island reopened to the public three months after the attacks of September 11, 2001, tourist information plaques on the island still needed to catch up with the altered Manhattan skyline. A vacancy had appeared where the Twin Towers

of the World Trade Center stood; something was "critically missing" as Don DeLillo puts it in *Falling Man* (2007). "Amid the glittering impassivity of the many buildings across the East River," John Updike wrote in *The New Yorker*, "an empty spot had appeared, […] beneath the sky that […] was pure blue, rendered uncannily pristine by the absence of jet trails" (*The New Yorker* 2001). Even three months after the events, one of those tourist plaques, situated just at the edge of Liberty Island where visitors could get a breathtaking view of the tip of Manhattan, still featured the *old* Manhattan skyline in which the two towers stood smugly intact.

The disparity between reality, which was in plain sight, and its representation was eerily unnerving. The tourist plaque and the awe-inspiring view hovering just above it, placed the two instances, the old and the new, in a *dialogic simultaneity*. This simultaneity between reality and representation gave an ominous aura to *that day*, as 9/11 came to be called in its aftermath, and it reflected a state of mind, one that had to revisit the traumatic spectacle of the falling towers to complete the image, to offer an explanation for the blatant vacancy that had appeared in the well-known skyline. In other words, it was a showcase of before-and-after, akin to shampoo TV commercials or those brain-fitness puzzles that ask players to spot the differences between two frustratingly similar drawings. It indicated something else as well, a *transferal* not just in terms of landscape. The towers' "end in material space," Jean Baudrillard explains, "has borne them off into a definitive imaginary space. By the grace of terrorism, the World Trade Center has become the world's most beautiful building – the eighth wonder of the world!" (Baudrillard 2012, 36–37) The gap in the "glittering impassivity" (*The New Yorker* 2001) of Manhattan's skyline needed more than concrete and hard physical work to be sealed.

The plaque on Liberty Island was not the only one to proffer such uncanny commentary on the changing scenery. In November 2015, while I was staying in New York City, during one of my morning runs in Astoria Park, I stumbled across a similarly ominous plaque. Situated on the sidewalk, approximately halfway between the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge and the Hell Gate Bridge, the green plaque faces the East River and, beyond it, Manhattan's familiar skyline climbs to its dizzying heights. It does not contain any images, yet the weather-beaten plaque tells the story of the 1904 General Slocum Disaster, which involved a steamboat that sunk in the East River along with its 1,300 people on board. Out of all those people on board, only about 280 survived.

However, that was not the information that caught my eye as I was skimming the long commemorative text. What drew my attention was the last sentence of the first paragraph, which tells its readers that "prior to September 11, 2001, the burning of General Slocum had the highest death toll of any disaster in New York City history" ("Astoria Park Highlights - General Slocum Disaster : NYC Parks" n.d.). Besides the seemingly innocuous comparison that this piece of information offers, which is most likely meant to help New Yorkers and tourists get a sense of perspective regarding the death toll and the importance of such an event, I could not help but think how the plaque is incidentally much more about what happened on and in the aftermath of 9/11 than about the General Slocum Disaster. The spot on the East River, though distant and somewhat disconnected from Ground Zero – the two towers would not have even been visible from there – seemed charged with a significance foreign to its own.

Within the commemorative text, the two events, akin to the two versions of Manhattan's skyline, were also placed in a *dialogic simultaneity*. However, in this case, the comparison between the two was no longer about dynamic changes in an otherwise recognizable landscape but rather about how specific events are *dethroned* by culturally resounding ones in a city's cultural memory. This simultaneity somehow chronicled the degree to which 9/11 turned into a watershed moment in the city's history since most people will not remember a steamboat that sunk on a Sunday afternoon due to "organizational and leadership failings" ("Astoria Park Highlights - General Slocum Disaster : NYC Parks" n.d.). The comparison also offers 9/11 as a unit of measurement for the perception of that other disaster, as if the General Slocum Disaster could not be understood without bringing 9/11 into the picture, and maybe even the other way around.

There is also a sense of historical *competitiveness* implied in the comparison between the two events, one which is akin to that of world records. In its implied dialectics, the tourist plaque shows that, as time passes, one could expect even higher death tolls, which will consequently break the current "record." In the future, another disaster of the scale of 9/11 could dethrone the current 9/11 and take its place in the history of the city. Similar but smaller events will continue to refer back to it as if to attain authoritativeness. For instance, while reporting on the truck attack that took place in lower Manhattan, New York City, on October 31, 2017, members of *The Guardian* staff note that the suspect "appears to have been inspired by Isis in deadliest

terror attack on New York City since 9/11" (Staff 2017). In addition to this, because of the proximity in which the two events are placed, there is a sense that, since the General Slocum Disaster is ranked as *disaster*, then, by virtue of their proximity, 9/11 could also be perceived *as* disaster, and as such trigger the emotional responses required by such infelicitous events.

On a similar note, the terrorist attacks of September 11 also offer a sense of completion to the General Slocum Disaster. Once culturally *dethroned*, the latter acquires the quality of a resolved issue or that of a closed wound. Following the investigation of a commission appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt, the plaque explains further, the culprits had been identified, and safety measures were enforced so that an incident of this nature might not happen again. Since then, the U.S. Coast Guard has employed safety personnel to make sure regulations are followed strictly. A fountain in Tompkins Square Park was dedicated in remembrance of those who perished in the fire and every year a ceremony is held to commemorate the victims. The *perennial* nature of the commemoration is also a reminder of that sense of completion: those who perished can rest in peace knowing that the culprits had been identified and that due to their death safety regulations are once again done by the book. The victims are almost heroic in this sense. Conversely, 9/11 does not attain the quality of a resolved issue, or at least, in the dialectics between the two events, it is still an open wound. Albeit the alleged culprits have been identified and eliminated, this did not have the same effects as in the case of the General Slocum Disaster. Safety measures are being enforced, but the threat still hovers menacingly on the horizon. And even if commemorations are held every year at the 9/11 Memorial, these do not celebrate the same sense of completion.

The presence of 9/11 on the commemorative plaque of the General Slocum Disaster not only places the two events within a historical order but it also *cancels* the latter, and this kind of cancellation is endemic to the post-9/11 atmosphere. One symptom of this can be observed in the way the term "Ground Zero," a military phrase that originally referred to a site of nuclear detonation, came to be employed to refer to the place where the two towers stood:

> The term not only captures – just as the comparisons with Pearl Harbor or with movies such as *Independence Day* did – the tension between the attacks' initial indescribability, on the one hand, and the need to discursively place them within a historical order, and thus within the

> knowable, on the other; but it also overwrites another event, in which the United States was responsible for the deaths of some one hundred thousand civilians. By appropriating the original meaning, "Ground Zero" erases its historical pretexts – from the nuclear bombing of Japan in World War II to the fears and threats emanating from the Cold War. (Däwes 2011, 15)

In its *proximity* to the General Slocum Disaster, 9/11 is akin to an authoritative force. Despite its numerical ambiguity, it is uncomfortably similar to the emergency telephone number; its significance is entrenched in the cultural imaginary of people around the world. The convenient shorthand, 9/11 or September 11, Marc Redfield argues in "Virtual Trauma: The Idiom of 9/11" (2007), "presents itself as a constative, if deictic, description (it was that very day) that simultaneously unfolds as a performative, and imperial command (you shall have no other September 11ths; should you mention others, they will be secondary to this absolute, toxic punctum: if you wish, say, to refer to Chile, you will have to speak of 'the other September 11'" (Redfield 2007, 59). And Noam Chomsky, while referring to Chile, does follow Redfield's prescription by calling it "the first 9/11: September 11, 1973, when the US succeeded in its intensive efforts to overthrow the democratic government of Salvador Allende in Chile with a military coup that placed General Pinochet's brutal regime in office" (Chomsky 2011, 23). The very use of the term, Redfield suggests, engenders the idea of a *principality*, of cultural hegemony.

This incidental "overwriting," as Brigit Däwes describes it in *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel* (2011), occurred often enough to consider it a signature move. Joan Didion, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, makes a similar, albeit unconscious *overwriting* when, while speaking about how violent events are almost always preceded by unremarkable circumstances, she brings together the "ordinary Sunday morning" of Pearl Harbor and the "ordinary beautiful September day" before 9/11 happened (Didion 2007, 4). However, the mental leveling Didion succumbs to in her comparison is not far-fetched. Akin to Pearl Harbor, 9/11 was an act of unswerving aggression perpetrated on the homeland, and Didion was undoubtedly not the only one to shed light on the connection. David Ray Griffin, an American professor, and political writer, declaratively entitled his book on the Bush Administration after 9/11 *The New Pearl Harbor*, and in the days following the attack, politicians of all colors resorted to the same association in their public addresses. In this sense, it is as if there is a transfer of *cultural weight* between events placed in this

dialogic simultaneity: 9/11 offers the death toll, numerically superior to that of the General Slocum Disaster, as well as the attitude and the solemnity the latter somehow fails to trigger, while Pearl Harbor legitimizes a military response. The three seem to complement each other, and all three seem to have something to gain from it.

Nonetheless, the media's attempt to position the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as a reenactment of Pearl Harbor did not hold, Susan Faludi argues in *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (2007). When those attempts failed, the attention of the media turned "to another chapter in U.S. history – the 1950s Cold War", which, at the time "seemed a better fit" (Faludi 2007, 3). Hidden deep in the mustering of forces against an enemy that was still as undefined and contextual as the plural personal pronoun "they", there were once again discussions about the "enemy among us" and the togetherness of a nuclear American family, vaguely defined by the pronoun "us", which had to stick together and take a stand against that faceless enemy.

Much like the "reds" of the Cold War, the alleged enemy was also seen as unreasonable and set on spreading around the world a system of values that was inherently incompatible with the American one. Al-Qaeda's objective, former President Bush said in his State of the Union address following the attacks, "is not making money; its goal is remaking the world – and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere" (*The Guardian* 2001). And much like during the Cold War, Farish A. Noor argues, the world was suddenly split "along the faultlines of religion, culture and civilisation, and as the discourse of terror was invented and articulated by the proponents of American hegemony it should come as no surprise if America and the West are configured in terms almost entirely positive" (Noor 2010). The discourse of the "war on terror," Noor suggests, strongly resonated with that of the "war on Communism" of the McCarthy era.

Faludi and Noor are not the only ones to point to this parallelism. Giovanna Borradori argues in her introduction to *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003) that "the specter of global terrorism haunts our sense of the future because it kills the promise upon which a positive relation with our present depends. In all its horror, 9/11 has left us waiting for the worst" (2003, 21). Given this trend, it is no wonder that the narratives that followed made extensive use of the family trope. Besides the toll and physical damage that was inflicted on the city itself, which *New York Times* analysts estimated

to be somewhere around 55 billion dollars (Carter, AM, and Cox 2011), the damage that was done to families residing in the city and beyond took center stage in these narratives.

However, the problem with these parallelisms was that they all pointed to an inherently flawed reaction. "We reacted to our trauma," Faludi rightly comments, "not by interrogating it but by cocooning ourselves in the celluloid chrysalis of the baby boom's childhood" (2007, 4), in reenactments of the fifties Western. Primarily, the discourse that was weaved around September 11, 2001, was not about the event itself, but rather a reconsideration of already existing discussions that took on another appearance in these newfangled circumstances. In the presence of the event, specific artifacts, namely the ones that have a certain amount of affinity with the event itself, exchange meanings or become contaminated with connotations that are foreign to them. Their implications are thus *relocated*. The force and the symbolic power of the event, as well as its immediacy and capacity to permeate the media and its subsequent outlets around the world, had opened a symbolic emergency: one of naming and, by extension, one of *procedure*.

This *relocation of cultural weight* could be explained and understood in psychological terms by invoking such notions as the "availability heuristic" (Kelman 2011) or that of "illusory correlation." First identified in 1973 by the Israeli psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, the "availability heuristic" is defined as a "cognitive heuristic through which the frequency or probability of an event is judged by the number of instances of it that can *readily* be brought to mind" (emphasis added). The heuristic can "generate biased or incorrect judgments, as when people are asked whether the English language contains more words beginning with the letter *k* or more words with *k* as the third letter, most people finding it easier to think of instances of words beginning with *k* and therefore concluding that there are more words beginning with *k*, whereas in fact, a typical long text contains twice as many words with *k* as the third letter" (Colman 2009). There is a vicious circle, Daniel Kahneman argues in *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), that comes into play within this heuristic, and it regards the way in which information travels from media outlets to consumers and vice versa. "People tend to assess the relative importance of issues," Kahneman explains, "by the ease with which they are retrieved from memory – and this is largely determined by the extent of coverage in the media. […] In turn, what the media choose to report corresponds to their view of what is currently on the public's

mind" (Kahneman 2011, 11). The implications of the "availability heuristic" thus go beyond mere psychology and extend to how the whole apparatus of perception works.

If applied in this context, the "availability heuristic" would reveal that whoever conceived the text for the plaque offered readers a mental shortcut by relying on immediate examples that come to a given person's mind when evaluating, for instance, the death toll of the General Slocum Disaster. Furthermore, akin to the ways in which the media and the public's mind enter a continuous feedback look, the two events, placed in immediate vicinity within the text of the plaque exchange content and influence each other. However, to use the availability heuristic as an interpretive tool is limiting. It reveals more about the authors and the readers of the text on the plaque, about their mental frame, as well as about the post-9/11 atmosphere than about the nature of the events themselves, if such nature could ever be graspable. Within the text of the plaque, it could be argued, the presence of 9/11 opened a common space, one that is known not only to the authors of the text but also to its readers, one where the two could meet. Authors and readers alike know in an instant what mental images to recall in creating an immediate understanding of the General Slocum Disaster.

Following this line of reasoning, I contend that this *dialogic simultaneity* indicates a modification in the world's "primal scenes" and constitutes a symptom of how 9/11 and the ensuing wars have created a ripple effect from a cultural point of view. "Many people," George Packer argues in *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq*, "allowed historical analogies to do their thinking for them" (Packer 2007, 86). In the case of the 'war on terror', triggered by the events of September 11, the two 'primal scenes', or mental shortcuts, were the Second World War and the war in Vietnam and many people funneled their perception of the new wars along these lines. However, the General Slocum commemorative plaque indicates a further development in that mental process. The plaque seems to suggest that, concerning casualties, 9/11 has become the 'primal scene' for the understanding of the *General Slocum Disaster* despite the chronological primacy of the latter.

By taking into consideration both fictional and non-fictional texts as well as other cultural artifacts coming from different fields, I shall look at how culturally resonant occurrences such as the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the ensuing 'war on terror' tend to become *selfish events*. I shall argue that this transformation is particularly fruitful when these artifacts enter processes of dialogic simultaneity with

those artifacts that have "circulating signifiers" (Willis 2005, 15) and whose cultural frames could be exported to fit new contexts. To this purpose, by looking at series of texts such as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Siri Hustvedt's *Blazing World*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue* as well as other texts pertaining to the discourse(s) of 9/11 and the "war on terror", I shall hereby posit that such dialogues result in "violent" interpretative intrusions not only at the level of succeeding cultural discourses but also at the level of preceding ones.

However, the notion of dialogue employed in my argument does not inherently imply *intertextuality* or, at least, it does not imply what Norman Fairclough calls, in *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), "'manifest' intertextuality" (Fairclough 2009, 117). The latter notion, as Fairclough puts it, refers to the case in which "specific other texts are overtly drawn upon Within a text" (2009, 117), while my argument builds upon Fairclough's notion of "interdiscursivity" or "constitutive intertextuality", which essentially refers to "how a discourse type is constituted through a combination of elements of orders of discourse" (2009, 118). As I shall show in the following pages, albeit certain texts do seem to communicate with each other directly, the relations that form between them are seldom explicit. Often, these relations can only be formed when two or more texts come together into the mind of an external observer. Fairclough's notion of "interdiscursivity" is particularly fruitful in this case because it implies the idea that "the complex interdependent configuration of discursive formations [...] has primacy over its parts and has properties which are not predictable from its parts" (2009, 68), and because it makes a clear separation between whole and parts, a separation that shall be useful in my theoretical discussion of *selfish events*.

Additionally, germane to my analysis of *selfish events* is Fairclough's definition of "interdiscursivity" as "structural entity which underlies discursive events, rather than the individual formation or code" (2009, 68). Selfish events, as the following chapters will show, do not establish *strict* rules of production and procedure, but instead, it is the cultural artifacts that come to be interpreted in the light of those events that develop a set of *acceptable* methods. Thus, these cultural artifacts, though interdependent, do not necessarily manifest intertextuality, and their only common ground constitutes the symbolic meaning of the event itself. They are akin to planets gravitating around selfish events, and, in most of their cases, their features do not explain why they gravitate toward those events. Albeit their authors do acknowledge some writerly debt to other cultural artifacts and authors, hinting at some degree of

interconnectedness, the degree of influence is never explicitly stated within the texts themselves. *Dialogue* hereby implies *simultaneity*[1] and is most observable when these texts and cultural artifacts are brought together in interpretative processes, and their overlaps are pinpointed and discussed.

1.2. Theoretical Trajectories: Toward a Theory of *Selfish Events*

My notion of *selfish events* stems from different streams of thought that radiate from the discourse surrounding the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This sequence of events constituted a springboard not only for writers and artists, who took this opportunity to pitch in with their vision of the events, but also for philosophers, thinkers, and politicians of all colors. On all sides, there had been a felt need to mollify the acuteness and nearness of the events, to offer, if not a stabilizing discourse, then at least a way of coping with it.

Albeit none of the streams of thought I refer to and discuss in the following pages make use of the same terminology, each of them contains within itself some hints at the unifying metaphor that the notion of *selfish events* seeks to constitute and at how it might work in this case. By looking at each of them and outlining their main ideas, this particular chapter tries to back-engineer the notion of *selfish events* and seeks to offer some possible precedents. The list of texts that provide earlier instances, or at least a prefiguration, of my idea, is by no means exhaustive, but it does place the notion within a system.

One particularly fruitful domain in this sense was that of philosophy. Since philosophy deals with general and fundamental notions related to existence and knowledge, as well as language, philosophers were among the first to be asked to make sense of the uniqueness of such an event. However, it was not just the novelty of the event that baffled everyone; it was also its capacity to elude old categories and invite the production of new ones. In particular, one of the notions that came under heavy criticism was that of "terrorist/terrorism", which came to circulate freely in the aftermath of 9/11. "Despite the marked differences in their approaches," Giovanna Borradori writes in her preface to *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003), both Habermas

[1] For this reason, I decided to use the phrase "dialogic simultaneity" to imply the idea of a dialogue that is imagined, and to reject the idea of a perfect synchronicity between two or more cultural artifacts.

and Derrida "hold that terrorism is an elusive concept that exposes the global political arena to imminent dangers as well as future challenges" (Habermas and Derrida 2003, xii). For Derrida in particular, terrorism is "the symptom of an autoimmune disorder that threatens the life of participatory democracy, the legal system that underwrites it, and the possibility of a sharp separation between the religious and the secular dimensions" (2003, 20). Given its threatening nature, in Derrida's view, the focus of terrorism is "always on the future, somewhat pathologically understood as promise, hope, and self-affirmation" (2003, 22). The disorder, Derrida argues, has been there for quite a while and 9/11 was only one of its recent manifestations.

Alain Badiou, in his *Polemics* (2011), also took issue with the use of the term "terrorism" to describe current events. While in the past the term was used to refer to "a particular figure of the exercise of state power," its current use refers to something entirely different. "The word has finally come," Badiou argues, "to designate, from the viewpoint of the dominant, anyone who, using whatever means available, commits to a combat against the prevailing order that the latter judges to be unacceptable" (Badiou and Winter 2011, 18). As a result, the notion also took on propagandistic connotations and "had become an essentially formal term", stripped of any "neutral currency" so that it "no longer designates either a political orientation or the possibilities inherent to such and such a situation; rather, it exclusively designates the form of action" (2011, 19). The event, with its semantic force, created the need for a reevaluation of the term to fit the new context.

Habermas, when asked about whether 9/11 should be considered an unprecedented event, stresses the novelty of the event by arguing that not only the "monstrous act" behind it was new, but also its "symbolic force." "Perhaps," Habermas explains, "September 11 could be called the first historic world event in the strictest sense: the impact, the explosion, the slow collapse – everything that was not Hollywood anymore but, rather, a gruesome reality, literally took place in front of the 'universal eyewitness' of a global public" (Habermas and Derrida 2003, 28). In the symbolic milieu created by the force of the events, the protagonists themselves, figures such as Osama bin Laden and his acolytes, almost serve "the function of a stand-in" for an elusive opponent. This is, Habermas explains, what lends terrorism a "new quality," namely the impossibility of identifying the opponent and making any realistic assessment of the danger (2003, 29). September 11 was, following Habermas' reasoning, a fortuitous alignment of different elements that, strictly because of their difference, managed to

magnify the force of the event. Without the "universal eyewitness," which in this case might refer to television, news, and the Internet, namely mediums capable of storing and replicating data *ad infinitum*, the event would not have had the same magnitude.

"With the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City," Jean Baudrillard writes in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2003), "we might even be said to have before us the absolute event, the 'mother' of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place" (Baudrillard 2012, 3). In Baudrillard's view, this particular event has a somewhat unusual status because, at its heart, it is the embodiment of a guilty desire, namely that of witnessing the destruction of a power that had become hegemonic to a considerable degree. It is the coronation of something that all of us had dreamt of at any given point.

This thought is, of course, "unacceptable to the Western moral conscience" because it would imply wishing for calamitous events that destroy assets and human lives. Albeit unacceptable, Baudrillard rightly points out, "[without] this deep-seated complicity, the event would not have had the resonance it has, and in their symbolic strategy the terrorists doubtless know that they can count on this unavowable complicity" (2012, 5). Thus, there was no "purely destructive logic" (2012, 20) behind the terrorist acts of 9/11, but rather a tactic that brought about "an excess of reality," one that would bring down the system the way it brought down the two towers. There is, Baudrillard seems to suggest obliquely, a *dual agency to the event*. On the one hand, there is that of the alleged terrorists, the masterminds of the operation, while, on the other hand, there is that of the event itself, that which brings down the system.

The event was also a form of *radicalization* in itself, one that clashed not two civilizations, as it was argued in its immediate aftermath[2], but image and reality. In fact, Baudrillard claims, it was the symbolic collapse of the towers that triggered their physical destruction. Akin to Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series (1963), the

[2] The notion "clash of civilizations" was coined by Samuel P. Huntington and it first appeared in an essay published in the Summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Entitled "The Clash of Civilisations?", Huntington's essay posits the idea that after the Cold War the "fundamental source of conflict" will be a "conflict between civilisations" and not "among princes-emperors, absolute monarchs and constitutional monarchs attempting to expand their bureaucracies, their armies, their mercantilist economic strength and, most important, the territory they ruled" (Huntington 1993). Huntington's notion resurfaced in the aftermath of 9/11 in an attempt to classify the event as a symptom of that "clash of civilisations". Following this resurfacing, the notion came under heavy criticism and was dismissed repeatedly by such prominent figures as Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Žižek (2012, 51), and Jürgen Habermas (Habermas and Derrida 2003, 36).

image of the two burning towers became serial, replicated *ad infinitum*, the image becoming stronger, and as such disconnected from the event itself, with every replay. In this sense, Baudrillard argues,

> the terrorists exploited the 'real time' of images, their instantaneous world-wide transmission, just as they exploited stock-market speculation, electronic information and air traffic. The role of images is highly ambiguous. For, at the same time as they exalt the event, they also take it hostage. They serve to multiply it to infinity, and, at the same time, they are a diversion and a neutralization (this was already the case with the events of 1968). The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecedented impact, but impact as image event. (Baudrillard 2012, 21)

In the clash between image and reality, as Baudrillard puts it, the image is the one that becomes hegemonic because it manages to engross the event itself, in the sense that the real is less real than the "'real time' of images." However, this *absorption*, as Baudrillard sees it is, is directly connected to the *replicability* of the image. The image becomes hegemonic because it is *numerically* superior to the event itself, thus *overwhelming* the event and separating from it at the same time:

> In this case, then, the real is superadded to the image like a bonus of terror, like an additional *frisson*: not only it is terrifying, but what is more, it is real. Rather than the violence of the real being there first, and the *frisson* of the image being added to it, the image is there first, and the *frisson* of the real is added. Something like an additional fiction, a fiction surpassing fiction. (2012, 22)

Slavoj Žižek makes a similar point in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002). Following Karl Heinz Stockhausen's rabble-rousing assertion that 9/11 was essentially the ultimate work of art, Žižek argues that the collapse of the towers can be seen as the "climactic conclusion of twentieth-century art's 'passion for the Real'" (Žižek 2012, 13), one that forces us to question the very reality of 'reality TV shows':

> [The] 'terrorists' themselves did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but *for the spectacular effect of it*. When, days after September 11, 2001, our gaze was transfixed by the images of the plane hitting one of the WTC towers, we were all forced to experience what the 'compulsion to repeat' and *jouissance* beyond the pleasure principle are: we wanted to see it again and again; the same shots were repeated *ad nauseam*, and the uncanny satisfaction we got from it was *jouissance* at its purest. (Žižek 2012, 13)

Akin to Baudrillard, Žižek sees the spectacular effects of the event taking center stage rather than the event itself, a process that culminates in its "apparent opposite," namely a "theatrical spectacle" (2012, 10). The effects of the event are particularly acute because the process goes against the postmodern "passion for the semblance" by coupling it with a "passion for the real." The event is not only image but it is also reality and it thwarts the postmodern virtualization of the real that deprives products "of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol", and just as these products come to be experienced like "the real thing" so "Virtual reality is experienced as reality without being so" (2012, 12). The event, on the other hand, is not only a "virtualized" version but also a real one. The precedents for this kind of setting had been prepared by the Hollywood motion picture industry, whose productions had corrupted the perception of the real thing, so much so that for us, "the landscape and the shots of the collapsing towers could not but be reminiscent of the most breathtaking scenes in a big catastrophe production" (2012, 17–18). In fact, reports in the press, Žižek explains, have shown that "a group of Hollywood scenarists and directors, specialists in catastrophe movies, had been established at the instigation of the Pentagon, with the aim of imagining possible scenarios for terrorist attacks and how to fight them" (2012, 18). Without this "fantasmatic background" created by the Hollywood motion picture industry, the event would not have had the same spectacular effects (2012, 19).

Nonetheless, unlike Baudrillard, Žižek does not bestow agency on the image, and instead explains its *replicability* as stemming from the viewers' pathological compunction, in Freudian terms, to repeatedly look at the images of the planes hitting the two towers:

> The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition. This is what the compelling image of the collapse of the WTC was: an image, a semblance, an 'effect', which, at the same time, delivered the 'thing itself'. (Žižek 2012, 22)

In this sense, Žižek explains the process by taking a step forward: he is not only separating the image/effects from the event itself, but he is also placing those

image/effects under the tutelage of the viewer, where they are objectified and thus replicated to the point where they overwhelm the event. However, what is brought forward by these images/effects is not the event itself but another semblance, that is, another image/effect. In the clash between image in reality, as Baudrillard puts it, reality is always on the losing side because every time the images/effects come to the fore they do not bring the viewer closer to the "reality" of the event but rather increase the distance between the two.

The virtualization of the Real, as Žižek puts it, is also the primary focus of Paul Virilio's *Ground Zero* (2002), where he places the event within a dialectics of mass media and art development, one that inevitably leads to decadence. Much like Žižek and Stockhausen, Virilio comes to the point of equating the events of September 11 to a work of art by connecting it to the postmodern artist's search for authenticity. In this sense, Ground Zero becomes the locus where art and reality overlap. However, Virilio does not go straight to the point in his book, and at times, it seems as if he is trying to prove that since the Renaissance things have been going downhill. Within this dialectic of decadence, September 11, as a thwarted form of art, occupies a rather small space because Virilio chooses to talk about it somewhat obliquely:

> The artists of the twentieth century, like the anarchist with his home-made bombs, the revolutionary suicide bomber or the mass killers celebrated by the mass-circulation press, would themselves become wielders of plastic explosives, visual mischief-makers, anarchists of color, form and sound, before coming to occupy the gutter press's gallery of horrors. (Virilio 2002, 48)

The order is thus reversed. The attacks of September 11 can be seen as a work of art because of the trend that had been set by twentieth-century artists. Based on an increasingly techno-scientific imagination this form of art is ultimately a 'miscarriage' because this kind of imagination, in Virilio's view, suffers the same fate as "e-tainment." The techno-scientific imagination, Virilio argues, "comes to resemble that of those TV viewers who thought the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11 was merely another disaster movie, or that of the Islamist suicide-attackers no doubt dying happy at becoming actors in a global super-production in which *reality would tip over* once and for all *into electronic nothingness*" (2002, 68). For Virilio, Ground Zero is both the place where the two towers went down and the point in history where art and reality overlap to the point of confusion.

At this point, what becomes salient in the works of these authors is the *dualistic* nature of the event. The event is both physical, it produced changes at the level of what we perceive as "real" (the vacancy in the Manhattan skyline for instance), and symbolic, it created a semantic void that required a reevaluation of older notions or the creation of new ones. Additionally, there is also a sense that once this dualistic nature is established, the symbolic, generally prone to alterations through frequent use, tends to break away from the physical and create an autonomy of its own. Reality, in this sense, becomes unnecessary, it becomes superfluous as the symbolic starts to circulate and gain momentum.

The compunction to replay the events, brought forward by Žižek, can be seen as a symptom of that malleability of the event's symbolic nature. With every replay, the event gains new meanings and new angles up to the point where there is no need for the replay anymore because the event is already present and only a minimal stimulus is needed to bring it back. This process of *recalling*, akin to that of Proust's *involuntary memory* that "comes unsolicited, often with explosive force, to unsettle the individual in the present" (Gross 2000, 47), is at the same time predicated on the event's permanence in visual terms. Albeit the "real" becomes unnecessary in terms of a tangible participation in the unfolding of the event, it is the "real", and the tragedy behind it, that makes the symbolic so pervasive and compelling, since a denial of the image would ultimately result in a denial of the "real", a movement that is first and foremost refuted by the sheer quantity of amateurish and professional material that could serve as proof of its existence. Yet, if in the case of Proust's involuntary memory, the uniqueness of the triggering stimulus, the Madeleine, will recall different experiences with different users, in the case of selfish events that order is reversed: diverse triggering stimuli will point to a singular experience, not that of having been there when it happened, but of witnessing the event by other means. One of the most recurring tropes in talking about 9/11 was that of recalling where one was when it happened. The event thus acts with centripetal force, pulling disparate situations to move toward itself. Within this gravitational vacuum, each disparate situation is made to offer some inkling into the event itself.

1.3. Genes, Memes, and Relativity: An Event's Eye View of Culture

The notion of the *selfish event* I am arguing for in this part of my dissertation has its *terminological* roots in two fundamental ideas coming from two different fields of research. The most obvious one, of which my notion of *cultural selfishness* is a variant, comes from genetics and evolutionary theory and it refers primarily to how singular organisms fight for survival in extreme and changing external conditions. Thus, my notion is based on Richard Dawkins' idea of "selfish genes," which he discusses extensively in *The Selfish Gene*, originally published in 1976. The second seminal idea, which I use in conjunction with the notion of "selfish gene," comes from physics, and refers to the relationship between spacetime and matter and how the two interact. The idea was proposed and developed by Albert Einstein in his well-known work *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* (1916).

At the time of its initial publishing, Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* posited a rather curious idea. The analysis *anthropomorphized* genes by allotting them decisional powers that animated their struggle for survival to explain evolution better. In his preface to the second edition, Dawkins explains that rather than focusing on individual organisms the book "takes a gene's-eye view of nature" (2006, xv), a perspective that deeply affects the way we see organisms, which, in Dawkins' almost fictional rendition, become secondary to genes. In this equation, higher-order organisms such as human beings and animals become mere "machines created by our genes" to ensure their survival along the ages (2006, 2), while genes become "the fundamental unit of selection, and therefore of self-interest" (2006, 11). The genes, also known as *replicators*, of which the human beings and animals of today are containers, "indirectly control the manufacture of bodies" by supervising, for instance, the manufacture of proteins, which "not only constitute much of the physical fabric of the body" but in their turn "exert sensitive control over all the chemical processes inside the cell, selectively turning them on and off at precise times and in precise places" (2006, 23). From this point of view, bodies are not replicators because they do not replicate themselves. The sole purpose of bodies is to "propagate their replicators" by behaving in such a way as to preserve those replicators (2006, 254). In this sense, the genes are like computer programmers because all they can do is "set up" one of their survival machines to work on its own from the very beginning (2006, 52), or much like

policy-makers that instruct their machines to do whatever they think best to ensure its survival (2006, 60). Thus, considering the influence, albeit indirect, that genes have on these processes, an influence that extends well beyond the manufacturing of proteins, a body comes to be seen as "the gene's way of preserving the genes unaltered" (2006, 23). The stronger the body, the higher a gene's chances of survival are in the long run.

Dawkins' notion of selfish genes came under heavy censure, and it is almost impossible to miss the reason why this happened. The shift to a gene's-eye view of life also implies a shift away from the importance of the individual in any species. In Dawkins' equation, individuals are unstable, fleeting things, while genes are immortal:

> Another aspect of the particulateness of the gene is that it does not grow senile; it is no more likely to die when it is a million years old than when it is only a hundred. It leaps from body to body down the generations, manipulating body after body in its own way and for its own ends, abandoning a succession of mortal bodies before they sink in senility and death.
> The genes are the immortals, or rather, they are defined as genetic entities that come close to deserving the title. We, the individual survival machines in the world, can expect to live a few more decades. But the genes in the world have an expectation of life that must be measured not in decades but in thousands and millions of years. (Dawkins 2006, 34)

Thus, every action the individual performs must be seen as an action a gene undertakes to ensure its survival, which means that "any one individual body is just a temporary vehicle for a short-lived combination of genes" (2006, 25). At the time, Dawkins' theory was akin to that of Copernicus, robbing us of the belief that we were at the center of the universe.

Another compelling fact to be found in Dawkins' theory of selfish genes, a fact that will come in handy when discussing how selfish events work, is his notion of cooperation as a form of *affinity* between genes. Collaboration between genes in inchoate stages of development, as well as collaboration among members of a species or between species, is predicated upon similarities between genes. Good genes, Dawkins argues, "must be compatible with, and complementary to, the other genes with whom it has to share a long succession of bodies" in the same way that a gene for "plant-grinding teeth is a good gene in the gene pool of a herbivorous species, but a bad gene in the gene pool of a carnivorous species" (2006, 84). When it comes to selfish

events, as the following chapters will argue, notions of cooperation and affinity regard chiefly how this type of events attract and exploit only those cultural artifacts with which they have a specific affinity or those artifacts that have *gliding signifiers*. The selfish event, akin to a *replicator*, replicates itself only within those cultural environments that are optimal for its development.

Akin to Dawkins' notion of "selfish genes," my notion of *selfish events* takes an event's eye view of cultural phenomena, and it sees cultural transmission as analogous to genetic transmission. This might constitute a leap of faith, but I believe this reversal of roles could shed some light on how such events as 9/11 manage to have this ripple effect in a cultural sense. Dawkins does hint at this type of transmission when he discusses memes and defines them as "the new replicators" (2006, 189). Memes, namely units of *imitation*, can range from "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases" to "clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (2006, 192), and can propagate themselves from brain to brain:

> Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. […] When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. (Dawkins 2006, 192)

While genes are considered successful when they manage to create gene machines that survive the longest, a meme's success rate stems from "its great psychological appeal" (2006, 193). Its appeal, Dawkins argues in this sense, comes from the fact that a meme "provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence" (2006, 193). However specious that answer may be, it must also be short and offer the gist of a complex situation or at least offer some alleviation, a way to mitigate injurious situations that go beyond our control, such as the destructive forces of nature. According to Dawkins, the idea of God is the ultimate example of a successful meme because it has managed to survive for so long. Albeit we do not know how it arose in the meme pool, we do know by now that part of its success stands on its suggestion that "injustices in this world may be rectified in the next" (2006, 193) and that those who are good in this world will receive their due reward. "Memes for blind faith," Dawkins suggests, "have their own ruthless ways of propagating themselves,"

which is also true of "patriotic and political as well as religious blind faith" (2006, 198). In other words, memes constitute a form of shorthand for culturally complex situations or matters too difficult to express otherwise. In fact, a big part of their success is based on their capacity to be short and easily understood or remembered.

Both 9/11 and the ensuing "war on terror" can be seen as a form of shorthand for culturally and politically complex situations. The "war on terror" in particular became shorthand for a bevy of actions on domestic as well as international levels to the point where it "emerged as a powerful ideological frame", one that offered not only "linguistic cover for widespread political change in the name of national security," but also "an institutionalized way of seeing the world" (Reese and Lewis 2009). Additionally, as the following chapters will suggest, the "war on terror" can be perceived as a *sub-meme*, or a subordinated frame[3], of 9/11, in the sense that, at least from a structural point of view, the discourses surrounding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan follow at least in part some of the trends that had been set in the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. If early post-9/11 literature often resorted to fragmented narratives told by different narrators as a way of coping with the semantic void opened by the events, as well as to cultural appropriation so as to close the gap between the alleged perpetrators and the victims, the literature of the "war on terror" more often than not resorted to the same mechanisms. The vast majority of narratives analyzed in the second part of this dissertation are fragmented narratives and make extensive use of cultural appropriation.

Much like Dawkins' intuitive study of genes and memes, Albert Einstein's study of relativity constituted a break with traditional physics. At the time of its publication, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* (1916) provided its readers, in a language that is both simple and elegant, with a brand-new theory of gravity, one that made Sir Isaac Newton's theory of gravity almost obsolete. Additionally, while Newton's theory

[3] Stephen D. Reese's definition of *frames* comes very close to Dawkins' definition on *memes*. In "Finding Frames in a Web of Culture: The Case of the War on Terror", included in *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical, Theoretical, and Normative Perspectives* (2009), Reese defines frames as "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (D'Angelo and Kuypers 2010, 17). Albeit the notions of both authors are very similar in this regard, their definitions focus on different aspects. While Dawkins' definition of *meme* emphasizes its *viral* component, namely its capacity to travel rapidly and efficiently from mind to mind, Reese's definition of *frame* emphasizes its power to organize the social and political reality that surrounds it.

spoke of apples being pulled down by the Earth gravitational pull, Einstein's theory augured a new perspective on the universe as a whole.

In Einstein's view, the gravitational pull of a massive object such as the sun or the earth affects not only objects, such as Newton's apple, but also light, radio waves, and even space-time itself. "An atom," Einstein argues in Appendix 3c, "absorbs or emits light of a frequency which is dependent on the potential of the gravitational field in which it is situated" (Einstein, Lawson, and Calder 2006, 119). For this reason, stars situated, for instance, in the vicinity of a massive star such as the sun might appear displaced when observed from the earth because "rays of light are propagated curvilinearly in gravitational fields" (2006, 70). Conversely, in the absence of gravitational fields, and on a smaller scale, rays of light are propagated linearly. Within this equation, Einstein concludes, "the general principle of relativity permits us to determine the influence of the gravitational field on the course of all those processes which take place according to known laws when a gravitational field is absent, i.e. which have already been fitted into the frame of the special theory of relativity" (2006, 92). Massive bodies, Einstein seems to be saying, distort the space and time that is in their immediate vicinity. That distortion wanes as we move further away from those massive bodies and as their gravitational pull diminishes.

Selfish events, akin to massive bodies, prompt similar distortions in a cultural sense, distortions that are particularly salient, and as such measurable, in the case of those cultural artifacts that were produced before the occurrence of the event and whose subsequent interpretations are affected to a certain degree. One of the many examples of this kind of distortion, which I will call *interpretive intrusion*, is George Segal's sculpture *Woman on Park Bench*, which will be discussed extensively in the coming section. When placed within the "gravitational field" of selfish events, cultural artifacts that have a certain degree of affinity with the nature of the selfish event will appear displaced in the sense that their interpretation will mutate to acknowledge the presence of the selfish event. Placed in conjunction with the images of men and women covered in ash running away from the falling towers, the whiteness of Segal's sculpture no longer refers to its initial intended meaning but becomes an echo of the men and women covered in ash, and only a reparative reading, namely one that would make abstraction of the presence of the selfish event, could recover that initial meaning.

CHAPTER TWO: A CULTURAL SYMPTOMATOLOGY OF *SELFISH EVENTS*

In the last chapter, I argued that 9/11 can be understood as a *selfish event* and I tried to place the notion within a more extensive discourse as well as define it and identify its theoretical sources. In this chapter, I will survey how selfish events formulate an *ethos of production and perception*, one that must necessarily acknowledge their presence as regulatory "primal scenes" and one that prescribes a series of permissible interpretations. To this end I will examine a series of novels such as Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World* (2014), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), David Levithan's *Love is the Higher Law* (2009), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), as well as James Howard Kunstler's *World Made by Hand* (2008). Additionally, I will show how this ethos of production and perception has permeated not only literary creation but has also engendered an interpretative practice based on notions of trauma.

2.1. Plural Voices, Singular Views: Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World* and Other, *Stranger Things*

One way to go deeper into this process of *relocating cultural weight* to understand it better would be to look for other instances in which this dialogic simultaneity and transfer of "cultural weight" occur, and post-9/11 literature offers plenty of revelatory examples. One of these moments of cultural transfer is accurately documented, for instance, in Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World* (2014), a novel that builds out of different fragments the identity of Harriet Burden, a fictional artist. The novel is also a sort of *mise-en-abyme* of the post-9/11 atmosphere because it records how the interpretation of something, be it an event or a work of art, is always easily influenced by external factors. Concerning narrative tactics, the novel strategically builds the story using different points of view thus permitting the reader to see the issue from dissimilar angles. In this sense, readers of the novel can inhabit for the duration of the

reading the minds of different narrators whose names appear in the title of each chapter.

The chapters themselves do not assume any unity. They are, in fact, clippings from different sources, gathered by an enigmatic editor whose introduction, placed at the very beginning of the novel, bestows upon the novel an investigative aura, if not one of veracity. The unity that the alleged "editor" seems to be implying is the one resulting from all those different points of view. "The best policy," the editor explains towards the end of the introduction, "may be to let the reader of what follows judge for him- or herself exactly what Harriet Burden meant or didn't mean and whether her account of herself can be trusted" (Hustvedt 2014, 6). However, the final judgment the reader could give is always curtailed by these different yet limited points of view.

At times, the editor's introduction sounds more like a warning, particularly when the editor, who is not the author of the novel and whose gender and identity remain undecided except for some vague allusions, declares that Burden's writings often descend into sheer psychosis. There is even talk of mental breakdowns, mental illness, and the artist's self-diagnosed "intellectual loneliness" (Hustvedt 2014, 6). Some of the notebook entries were dated while some of them were not. Additionally, Burden "had a system of cross-referencing the notebooks that was sometimes straightforward but at other times appeared byzantine in its complexity or nonsensical" and handwriting that often oscillated between vanishing into illegibility and disappearing behind "drawings that intrude into the written passages" (2014, 4). Despite the documentary value of the notebooks at times the editor seems to throw his/her hands up in near despair. "I sometimes had the uncomfortable feeling," the editor confesses, "that the ghost of Harriet Burden was laughing over my shoulder. She referred to herself several times in her journals as a 'trickster,' and she seems to have delighted in all kinds of ruses and games" (Hustvedt 2014, 10).

The editor's own murky identity tinkers with the reliability of the whole narrative despite the reputable academic credentials being waved at the reader. At one point, the editor's introduction mentions a heavy teaching schedule interfering with the investigation into Harriet Burden's works and the public scandals she occasioned, and an ensuing sabbatical the editor took to "work on my book *Plural Voices and Multiple Visions*" (2014, 2), a writing project that somewhat echoes the one contained within the pages of *The Blazing World*. The novel is a form of adjacent research that resonates

with the editor's intellectual concerns. *The Blazing World* is an exercise in exploring "plural voices and multiple visions." One identity, the editor's, overlaps playfully with the one of Harriet Burden, the "trickster" (2014, 10), the focal point around which the narrative revolves, to the point where one could even wonder whether the editor and the protagonist is the same person.

The narrative that results from this overlapping of identities is multilayered and multifaceted. Rachel Cusk, in her review of Hustvedt's novel for *The Guardian*, argues that the novel is "a kind of artefact" whose true subject is "the indefatigability of denial" (Cusk 2014), the denial of those who refuse to attest to the credibility and truthfulness of Burden's identity as an artist. However, besides the fact that the novel makes this denial salient in its discussion of how in the art industry the names and gender of both art critics and artists play an essential part in how art is interpreted and hence sold, it does not seem to turn that denial into a scapegoat. The task to figure things on our own is not a burden that is easy to carry. Akin to the editor, readers might experience the same sense of giddiness and despair as Burden's scheme starts to become apparent.

Burden's burden (pun intended) is also multi-layered. She is a female artist, and after having lived for so long in the shadow of her art-connoisseur-dealer husband, she decides to conduct an experiment by concealing her female identity behind three male artists who agree to present her work as if it was their own. The purpose of the experiment, as explained by the protagonist herself in the many journal entries included in the novel, was to show the degree to which the art world was biased against female artists, the latter being portrayed as victims of a phallocentric perception of art. "All intellectual and artistic endeavors," goes the opening quote attributed to Burden, "fare better in the mind of the crowd when the crowd knows that somewhere behind the great work [...] it can locate a cock and a pair of balls" (Hustvedt 2014, 1).

The experiment goes well, at least up to a certain point. While works signed by Burden herself were deemed by critics as "high-flown, sentimental, and embarrassing" redolent "of a half-baked Existentialism" (2014, 170), her works acquire new significance in the art-world once they are exhibited under the name of a male artist. The outcome of the experiment, Fernanda Eberstadt claims in her review of Hustvedt's novel for *The New York Times*, seems "to vindicate [Burden's] thesis about the art world's biases" (Eberstadt 2014). Anton Tisch, the first of the three male fronts, becomes a sensation and, eventually, in Burden's eyes, a "monster" of her own making.

The second male mask, Phineas Q. Eldridge, does not get Tisch's attention and does not get featured in Gap-style ads for sneakers the way Tisch did, but gets a gallery show nonetheless. However, the experiment goes awry when the third and last of the male fronts, an artist known as Rune, plays a double game and makes claims against Burden behind her back. The issue, however, is not with Rune's whispered claims but with the art critics who deny Burden's contribution to his works. Burden's archenemy is the male-oriented inertia of the art world. Oswald Case, an art critic whose written statement is included in the novel, claims that Rune might have used Burden as a muse because the show mounted under the male artist's name "looks nothing like those squishy Burden works that are being shown" (Hustvedt 2014, 168). The issue, it seems, is with the "indefatigability of denial", as Cusk puts it. The fault in choosing Rune, the novel suggests, is that, as opposed to the other two male artists who were chiefly underdogs of the New York art scene, Rune's artistic persona overtook that of Burden. Rune had been an established and critically acclaimed artist well before Burden's experiment. And critics such as Oswald Case gave a helping hand in discrediting the outcome.

Burden's art experiment is also a *mise-en-abyme* of the post-9/11 atmosphere. *The Blazing World* is a novel that deals rather shrewdly with the idea that when it comes to how artworks are perceived and interpreted "the mind of the crowd" (2014, 1), as Burden puts it, is susceptible to external influence. It is so susceptible in fact that all it takes for it to change is a simple speech act, that of name switching. Burden's works acquire new meanings under another name. Once her work is separated from her persona and attached to another name, it becomes something else. Much like the pieces of discarded food or wrappings that Mary Douglas uses as examples in *Purity and Danger* (1966), which pass from being "unwanted bits of whatever it was they came from" and therefore dangerous, to gaining another identity once they become part of a rubbish heap (Douglas 2002, 197–98). Burden's works are not perceived individually; they gain substance only when they are subsumed within a category, that of being authored by a male artist.

Examples of this kind of conversion in perception are plenty. In *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (1999), Colin McGinn uses Adolf Hitler's mustache to illustrate this point. Albeit inherently free of any moral or ethical attributes, the mustache "comes to seem the very mark of organized viciousness, a sort of death signature. A thin one-inch strip

of facial hair has become fearful and repellent (who now will venture such a mustache?)" (McGinn 1999, 145). In the atmosphere of fear that pervaded post-9/11 America facial hair had a similar fate as it was turned into one of the defining features of Islamic fundamentalists and by extension of alleged terrorists. The first-person narrator of Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) urges his voiceless interlocutor to disregard his beard because he is in fact "a lover of America" (Hamid 2008, 1). Later in the novel, the narrator also confesses that perhaps, in the tensions created by the American response to 9/11, the beard became a "form of protest" on his part (2008, 130). Akin to Hitler's mustache, the significance of Changez's beard is misconstrued and triggers a bevy of interpretations that are extraneous to the beard itself. After the event, an insignificant element such as a man's facial hair acquires meanings that by default lead back to the event itself.

The meaning of one of Burden's art installations, suggestively titled *The Suffocation Rooms*, is also misconstrued merely because it was mounted in the aftermath of 9/11:

> The show was mounted the spring after New York was attacked, and the little mutant that crawled out of the box had the haunting look of a damaged survivor or a new being born in the wreckage. It didn't matter that the work had been finished well before 9/11. The increasing heat in the rooms contributed to the interpretation; the last, hot room felt ominous. At the same time, my debut was an insignificant casualty of the falling towers. (Hustvedt 2014, 129)

In Hustvedt's fragmented narrative, Burden's art installations are not the only ones that fall prey to the cultural violence of the "falling towers" (Hustvedt 2014, 129). The previous works of one of her male fronts, Rune, are subjected to the same kind of interpretation with the only exception that his works are exhibited well before the events of September 11. The narrative thus chronicles how after 9/11 Rune's "colored crosses" exhibition (2014, 169) took on an entirely different meaning. "Modeled on the Red Cross symbol in different colors," Oswald Case explains in his written statement included in the novel, "they could have been an ironic reference to the whole history of Christianity or to the Crusades. After 9/11, they looked prescient: East-and-West conflict, civilizations at war. Or were they just a shape?" (Hustvedt 2014, 170) Akin to a deflector in space, the *selfish event* distorts the perception of Rune's works by an external observer.

In a similar vein, the novel also accounts how after 9/11 artists themselves felt compelled to change their aesthetics. In an interview with the same Oswald Case, Rune allegedly confessed that he had never felt awe before 9/11. "He called it 'emotional superconductivity,'" Case recounts, "he wanted it in the work" (Hustvedt 2014, 168). Culturally resounding events such as September 11, the novel seems to suggest, not only contaminate interpretation but also engender a need for aesthetic shift and a commitment on the part of the artist to transcend the boundaries of representation. In the post-9/11 atmosphere, the dilemma on every artist's mind was whether "a slaughter that had already been manipulated into multiple narratives" (2014, 167) could still be represented in any meaningful way. Such events, the argument might follow, formulate an *ethos of art production and perception*, one that must necessarily acknowledge the presence of these events as a regulatory 'primal scene,' and one that prescribes a series of permissible interpretations.

The September 11 attacks, Roland Bleiker argues in "Art after 9/11", "engendered a more fundamental breach in human understanding," one which eludes security experts but can be revealed through aesthetic insights that can ultimately "identify and shed light on this fundamental breach of understanding" (Bleiker 2006). A symptom of this, Bleiker further argues, is the outpouring of creativity that followed in the aftermath of the events. However, what Bleiker somewhat fails to acknowledge in his survey of artistic representations of the events is that besides the pressing cultural need to represent the un-representable, of which that outpouring of creativity is a symptom, there is also a whiff of opportunism in the air. Artists created not only because they were required to pitch in with their understanding of the events but also because the attacks constituted a *stage* on which they could showcase their works. *Because* of the nature of the events, 9/11 became a springboard for these artists.

This double movement, of *contamination* and *aesthetic shift*, became the topic of a 2012 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Entitled *September 11*, the exhibition was on beginning with the tenth anniversary of the events until January 9, 2012. For the exhibition, MoMA PS1 curator Peter Eleey gathered a series of artworks most of which were not necessarily connected to 9/11 but were close enough to force the audience to come to terms with the idea that while the works themselves had suffered no alterations in the meantime their perception had in fact changed in the aftermath of the events. "The exhibition," as Michael H. Miller notes in the *Observer*, "is more about

how September 11, 2001, changed the experience of viewing art after the fact, and less about the day itself. This new kind of context gave certain works a more menacing appearance" (Miller 2011). In the catalog essay for the exhibition, Eleey's argument follows a similar line of thinking. In it, he explains that by "creating a setting that directly challenges visitors to read 9/11 into the art (or to reject such a context), I could interrogate [9/11's] persistence in the mind" (Eleey 2011).

An instance of this persistence can be found in Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man*, where a still life painting by Giorgio Morandi, showing a series of household items (boxes, biscuit tins, and bottles), appears to be weighed down by the same artistic prescience with regards to 9/11. It is worthwhile to note that Morandi's paintings, much like Rune's "colored crosses" from Hustvedt's novel, had been conceived and exhibited more than fifty years before 9/11:

> Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to. 'What do you see?' he said. She saw what he saw. She saw the towers. (DeLillo 2011, 49)

The two dark objects in Morandi's painting could have been any two household objects as the series itself suggests. After September 11, their obscurity and lack of a definite signifier take on a precise meaning. The mere resemblance to the Twin Towers makes them appear as representations of the towers themselves and the profound implications that come with that interpretation. In the cultural vicinity of the event, DeLillo's novel seems to imply, even art is incapable of opening a space for interpretation, imagination falls short of its central purpose. Similarly, George Segal's sculpture titled *Woman on a Park Bench* mounted as part of MoMA PS1's *September 11* exhibition corroborates the same kind of interpretation process. When the show was mounted at MoMA in 2012, the artist had been dead for more than ten years, and his artwork first came to the light of day well before 9/11. Yet, the woman in the sculpture, of complete whiteness as if covered in white powder, could have been easily seen, akin to the 'little mutant' in Burden's art installation, as one of the survivors who had fled the clouds of dust coming from the falling towers (LUAG n.d.). The sculpture's poorness regarding features places the sculpture on the receiving end in this interpretive process.

In other cases, the intrusion of the event into interpretative processes that are inherently disconnected from the event itself is much more violent. Peter, one of the narrators of David Levithan's novel *Love is the Higher Law* (2009), sees the smoke coming from the Twin Towers while in Washington Square and in the process, he notes how the reality prior to the events, one embedded in the music he loves and constantly listens to, is suddenly altered. "I know if I press play," Peter explains his abrupt inability to listen to his beloved music, "the song will never be able to work for me again, because instead of the song playing under the moment, the moment will weigh on top of the song, and I am never going to want to remember this, I am never going to want to remember this, I am never going to want to be here again, so I walk without anyone else's words in my ears, and all the music falls away from the world, because how can you have music on a day like today?" (Levithan 2010, 39) The music stays the same, but the event prescribes the way the music comes to be heard and experienced. The "moment," as Levithan's narrator puts it, claims authority as hegemonic discourse.

The acknowledgment of this interpretive intrusion returns almost obsessively in Peter's narrative, partly because of his passion for music, a form of art particularly sensitive to external contamination. The sounds, with their *gliding signifiers*, seem to fit the context. "We all understand that this is just music," Peter notes during a Travis concert he attends in New York City, "[we] all understand that these songs were written Before – there is no way the band could have known how we would hear them After" (2010, 87). Despite that knowledge lurking in the background, Peter and the rest of the audience still falls prey to the shifting signifiers of the event as they stand up and sing together with the band. September 11 also changed the way Peter felt about a U2 album that came out approximately one year before the event. While before the event Peter appreciated the album "but didn't need it," after the events that perception changes almost entirely. "The song I latched onto most," Peter explains, "the song that I would play ten times in a row because I needed to hear it all ten times, was 'Walk On.' It was that unexpected, almost religious thing: the right song at the right time" (2010, 119). The reasons for this alignment between reality and representation also testify to the selfish nature of the event as another event, of a similar nature and scope, is brought into the picture. "I think one of the reasons [U2 spoke] to so many Americans right after 9/11 is because they know what we're going through. They lived

through Ireland in the '70s and the '80s. They know what it's like to be bombed and threatened and afraid. They know what it's like to walk on. They're not just singing it" (Levithan 2010, 119–20). Akin to the tourist plaque in Astoria, the songs bring together two events that were initially unconnected, giving new meanings to the most recent event, which acts as a primal scene.

The same process of intrusive and dialogic simultaneity becomes apparent even in the case of the discourse(s) surrounding the American 'war on terror'. To include even examples from popular culture, consider for instance the atmosphere of government surveillance portrayed in Netflix's original series *Stranger Things* released in July 2016. Though set in 1983 the audience of the series could only perceive this atmosphere from the point of view of the Edward Snowden leaks and the ensuing surveillance scandals that dominated the mass media immediately after. In the seventh episode of the first season, when Mr. Wheeler, the oblivious dad from *Stranger Things*, tells his wife to trust a pack of shady government officials because the government is always on their side, somehow that does not ring true anymore considering the recent uncovering of state surveillance following 9/11.

The government was on nobody's side, the series suggest, except for Jim Hopper (played by David Harbour), the lone policeman whose involvement in the situation is more personal than professional, and some of the aspects depicted are in fact based on real events. In a piece for *Rolling Stone* magazine, Cady Drell speaks of how the series, besides being influenced by big cinema names such as Steven Spielberg and Stephen King, "some of its creepiest source material comes from the real world" (Drell n.d.). "Past the plot points about the Upside-Down and the slime monsters," Drell explains further, there are "references to government mind-control programs and covert experiments in telepathy that actually took place in the U.S. throughout the 20th century – like MKUltra and Stargate Project" (Drell n.d.). Throughout the series, Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), the bizarre girl who manages to move objects, even cars, with the power of her mind, has frequent flashbacks of equally bizarre mind-control experiments involving a certain Dr. Martin Brenner (Matthew Modine). Following the experiments, the girls remains emotionally crippled, which was also the case of those involved in the MKUltra experiments.

On August 28, 1982, Jack Anderson writing for the *Washington Post* reported that following his uncovering of the horrors of the MKUltra program, and because of the

series of lawsuits that ensued, the CIA was forced into admitting that it had performed experiments on people without informing them about the side effects and the true purposes of those experiments. Proof of this is the fact that no written consent forms could be produced by the agency upon request, and often there were no doctors on hand when some of the participants were drugged. "One of the plaintiffs," Anderson reports, "Farrell V. Kirk, was used as a chemical mixing bowl" despite the fact that the agency was well informed that he was mentally and emotionally unstable. As a result of the experiments, "Kirk attempted suicide by burning and hanging, and once tried to gnaw an arm off" (J. Anderson 1982, 17). All of these elements are hinted at in the series.

Stranger Things also makes extensive references to sensory deprivation techniques used, Drell adds, "to coerce testimony out of suspected terrorists at government black sites." Drell's reference to CIA torture methods is telling. Released in 2016, the series was picking at the open wounds left by the Senate Intelligence Committee report on CIA Torture, released in late 2014. In the series, Drell notes, "sensory deprivation tanks are used to trigger [one character's] powers to help her listen in on far-away conversations and sneak up on the monster from the Upside Down. In real life, they mostly trigger hallucinations" (Drell n.d.). Which is exactly what happened in real life. The report on CIA torture methods spoke of sensory deprivation as one of the many "advanced interrogation techniques" employed by the CIA to obtain sensible information. In a footnote, the unclassified report mentions that "[detainees] at DETENTION SITE [named edited out] were subjected to techniques that were not recorded in cable traffic, including multiple periods of sleep deprivation, required standing, loud music, sensory deprivation, extended isolation, reduced quantity and quality of food, nudity, and 'rough treatment'" ("Publications | Intelligence Committee" n.d., 107). Following a *selfish event*, namely one that due to its resonance triggers a relocation of cultural weight, cultural artifacts acquire new meanings and they narrativize not only their initial signifier, in this case the MK-Ultra experiments and the atmosphere of state surveillance of the 1980s, but also their acquired signifier, state surveillance and torture in the post-9/11 world.

With its division between a "real" world and an "upside down" world that resembles the former but where evil is at home, *Stranger Things*, akin to Peter's songs from Levithan's novel, rings true to the situation at hand *and* to that of the 1980s at the same

time. Like the terrorists who turned passenger planes into mortal instruments, creatures from the "upside down" disrupt the expected order of the "real" world, causing terror and mayhem. And much like the works of art in Hustvedt's and DeLillo's novels, these images become prescient and almost an admonition directed at those who, in their daily ignorance, "had not seen it coming" even in the 1980s. On the viewer's end, state surveillance in the 1980s appears distorted, and it gains the knowledge developed by recent events.

Now, considering these examples, one might begin to see a connecting thread. Even though these representations do not make specific references to the events of September 11 or the ensuing "war on terror" along with their subordinate discourses, they do tend to have, as Susan Willis would put it, "circulating signifiers" (Willis 2005, 15) that can be easily exploited by a culturally dominating event or a *selfish event*, following Richard Dawkins' notion of the "selfish gene" (Dawkins 2006). However, Willis' notion of "circulating signifiers", which she introduces in *Portents of the Real: A Primer for Post-9/11 America* (2005) implies that, though circulating, the signifier is also *objectified* and then reified in different situations that affect its meaning, a new meaning that then reflects a change in policy. Indirectly, her notion also implies that there is at least some amount of affinity between the signifier and the situation in which it is reified. A case in point is the national flag that she uses as an example:

> Not only is the flag displayed at fixed positions, on homes, freeway overpasses, and storefronts, it has also become a circulating signifier. The flag raised Iwo Jima style over New York's Ground Zero was subsequently shipped to Afghanistan where it was raised over the Kandahar airport. Passed from the hands of firefighters to those of the Marines, the flag designates a shift in America's interest away from a host of domestic needs left pending after 9/11, and towards a politic aimed at military operations overseas, whose repercussion on the domestic is, then, the militarization of the homefront under the guise of Homeland Security. (Willis 2005, 15)

In this process of reification, Willis argues, the flag becomes a "supersymbol" because through its many uses it "shows itself as an empty signifier, capable of designating a host of referents without being perceived as contradictory" (2005, 16). "Like the shroud of Turin," Willis adds, "this flag speaks for a form of patriotism raised to the level of religion" (2005, 16). Nevertheless, what Willis somewhat willingly avoids to notice is that the flag is *quintessentially* an abstract representation of a "host of referents" even

is a pre-9/11 world. Flags are *always* "supersymbols" because first and foremost they are the representation of abstract notions such as nation, empire, national pride, etc. They are *meant* to accommodate disparate referents, particularly in the case of a society as multicultural as that of the United States. Thus, the abundance of flags she refers to does not necessarily imply a mutating or "empty signifier," instead it refers to an oversaturation of reality with the abstract notions that the flags *already* stood for, particularly at a time when such abstract notions were reinforced by the urgency of the events of 9/11.

Given the inappropriateness of Willis' notions of "circulating signifiers" and "supersymbols," I contend that a more appropriate notion that would explain this process, namely one of cultural relocation between two signifiers that do not necessarily have affinity, is that of *gliding signifier*. The notion, a variant of *gliding sounds* or *glides* (McMahon 2010, 42), has its roots in phonology where it describes how certain sounds, such as the /w/ and /y/ sounds, when placed in a particular phonological environment, borrow some of the characteristics of their neighboring sounds thus modifying both itself and its neighboring sound. To put it more bluntly, gliding sounds, because they do not have phonological stability, they "intrude" upon their neighboring sounds to gain that stability. A process which is very much akin to how selfish events "intrude" upon artifacts to gain a degree of cultural stability. This interpretative intrusion occurs not only at the level of succeeding cultural discourses (consider, for instance, the examples from Hustvedt's novel) but also at the level of preceding cultural discourses (consider, for instance, the Morandi painting in DeLillo's novel), up to the point where even cultural artifacts that previously bore no inherent connection to the events themselves begin to gain new significance in the aftermath of the occurrence of those events. These cultural artifacts become prescient in a bizarre kind of way.

Such was the case for instance of an episode from Van Partible's American animated television series *Johnny Bravo* that was aired on April 27, 2001, on Cartoon Network. Entitled "Chain Gang Johnny," the episode innocuously shows in the background of one of its scenes a movie poster that features a burning tower. Ominously enough, the movie poster vaguely states that the movie with the burning tower is "coming soon." The movie featured in the poster does not have a title, which further fueled the imagination of conspiracy theorists around the world. A *Simpsons* episode that aired

on May 2, 1997, fell into the same 9/11 conspiracy vacuum. Entitled "To Surveil with Love," the episode features a magazine on whose cover the dark shadows of the two towers are situated close enough to the price of the magazine ($9) to form 9/11. The theory later gained even more momentum with Trump's rise to power, another aspect that *The Simpsons* had predicted accurately.

Even more ominously and perhaps somewhat ironically, on September 10, 2001, on a stage in Vegas, George Carlin, the comedian, performed a "red-hot closing bit he planned to use for his latest HBO special" in which he told his audience that he enjoys "fatal disasters with a lotta [sic] dead people" (Edgers n.d.). It is worth noting that before this closing bit of the show Carlin had also joked about Osama bin Laden and airplane explosions due to excessive flatulence:

> These planes get flying so fast that all the most vicious, lethal, volatile, flammable, unstable farts get pushed toward the back of the airplane, where they begin to build up pressure [...] and they build, and they build, and they build until they reach critical fart density—C.F.D.—and they continue to build throughout the flight, until finally some kid turns on a Game Boy and *boom!* The whole back end of the plane blows off. And you know who gets blamed? Osama bin Laden. Terrorists get blamed for these explosions that are nothing more than cabbage-fart detonations. (Crouch 2016)

Because of its content, the HBO special was released only fifteen years after its initial recording by Carlin's daughter and other collaborators. In a "Culture Desk" special Ian Crouch writing for *The New Yorker* called it Carlin's "shocking prescience on the nights before 9/11", and spoke of how at a time when comedians were having a hard time due to the solemnity that the situation required, "there were some things, it seems, that even the combative Carlin considered off-limits" (Crouch 2016). Carlin had supposedly withheld the release on matters of taste although he did not avoid the topic in a show in New York City. Yet, Crouch, among others who commented on Carlin's "prescience," was careful enough to end his piece on a rational note. Toward the end of his article, he speaks of how releasing a lost performance to the public always has an uncanny effect because the piece "is both old, a capsule of the moment when it was recorded, and new, and thus heard in the context of the present" (Crouch 2016). The cultural artifacts I have referred to up to this point also create this uncanny effect in the aftermath of the event. However, as opposed to Carlin's recording, which had been withheld from release, most of the cultural artifacts I mention had been released to

the public well before the event. In this sense, I contend that *selfish events* also perform a cultural reset that qualifies any future interpretation.

The Quiet American (Philip Noyce, 2002), a movie based on Graham Green's novel with the same title, had been ready for release immediately after September 11, but Miramax's fears that the movie might be seen as unpatriotic hindered its distribution for more than a year. Set in Saigon in the early 1950s, the movie portrays the growing American involvement in Vietnam, which subsequently leads to the war in Vietnam. Yet, albeit the movie was not released immediately after 9/11 on "matters of taste" and because it did not fit the mournful attitude of the period, it seems, in fact, to have been released exactly when it was needed. The situation portrayed in the movie seems to follow closely what was happening in the United States in 2003. In the movie, Alden Pyle (Brendan Fraser), an American idealist and CIA operative, is sent to Vietnam to steer the war in favor of the United States, closely following the credos of an American foreign policy theorist, York Harding, who posited the idea that the solution for the conflict in Vietnam was the creation of a "third force" to oust the French colonialists and mollify the Vietnamese rebel forces. To accomplish this, Pyle arms a Vietnamese splinter group led by a corrupt militia, which leads to terrorist bombings in Saigon killing innocent people. The blame for the bombings is thrown on the communists, who become scapegoats for the American presence in Vietnam. The situation portrayed in the movie is not necessarily unpatriotic. Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) was making a similar point about the war in Vietnam. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) was also about American forces running amok in Vietnam. The issue Miramax had with *The Quiet American* was rooted in its fears that, in the post-9/11 context, the movie might be seen, akin to Sontag's short piece in *The New Yorker*, as an adverse reevaluation of America's foreign policies. The movie lacked the reverent tone the situation required.

By 2003, when the movie was released, the situation in Afghanistan, a battlefront the United States had opened in its global "war on terror," was fairly similar. The Taliban resurgence was in full swing and American forces, allied with Afghan forces, attacked a band of fighters in what was called "Operation Mongoose." Yet, the battlefront in Afghanistan had a long history going all the way back to 1979, when CIA's "active encouragement" along with those of Pakistan's Like Burden's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), led to "some 35,000 Muslim radicals from 40 Islamic countries

[joining] Afghanistan's fight between 1982 and 1992" against the Soviet Union (Rashid 1999, 31). The full extent of this support eventually led to "more than 100,000 foreign Muslim radicals [who] were directly influenced by the Afghan jihad" (Rashid 1999, 31). "U.S. government support of the Mujahideen," Michel Chossudovsky argues in "Al-Qaeda and the 'War on Terrorism'," "was presented to world public opinion as a 'necessary response' to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in support of the pro-communist government of Babrak Kamal" (Chossudovsky 2008). And since it had been necessary, no room was left for debate.

In the long run, the covert support offered by the United States government, and signed by President Carter, constituted the foundation of al-Qaeda. A similar scenario occurred in the case of the 2003 Iraq invasion, which ultimately *produced* ISIS. After the invasion of Iraq, Robert Wright writing for *The New Yorker* argues, "Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who led an obscure group of radical Islamists, rebranded it as an Al Qaeda affiliate and used the wartime chaos of Iraq to expand it" (Wright 2015). That mere "affiliate" then became the ISIS we know today. Like in *The Quiet American*, in Afghanistan and Iraq U.S. support and presence had created a "third force" meant to solve the issue of terrorism, a force that, within the 'war on terror,' turned against their initial "active supporters." Albeit the movie was released later, it was still making a good point about U.S. foreign policies even in 2003, and the only way to see the similarities between the two conflicts was to erase the locality portrayed in the movie and superimpose the new one. Although the movie was still unpatriotic, at least the surge in patriotism in the aftermath of 9/11 had more or less subsided. If it had been released on time, *The Quiet American* was bound to become another "victim" of the falling towers.

To put it differently, culturally resounding events can *contaminate* cultural artifacts that happen to be in their proximity and change the way they come to be interpreted by an interpretative community, a 'contamination' that is never unidirectional from a chronological point of view. When cultural artifacts with *gliding signifiers* are placed in dialogic simultaneity, be it temporal or spatial, with these *selfish events* they tend to be *absorbed* within the discourse of those events, especially when the events have not yet had the time to form a stable discourse of their own and they are still 'cultural stumps'. Like Dawkins' "selfish machines" they will stop at nothing to preserve their

cultural subsistence (Dawkins 2006, 66). The more cultural artifacts these events manage to absorb the higher their chances of survival in the meme pool.

2.2. Erasures of Locality, Impairment, and Diplopia: Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

To a certain degree, the cultural *contamination* I refer to in the previous section mimics the disruptive force of the terrorist attacks. The attacks, Birgit Däwes suggests, have "deeply unsettled the relationship between image and reality" (Däwes 2011, 26) and one of the symptoms of this derailment of representation and perception is the fact that "any sight of two aircrafts near buildings, and especially of a plane so precariously tilted toward a vertical structure, summons the one association which iconically opened the twenty-first century: the World Trade Center's spectacular destruction" (2011, 26). Part of the cultural power of the 9/11 attacks is rooted in their capacity to summon or to recreate, within other cultural artifacts their cultural constitution. Once the events have entered, with the help of the terrorist attacks' media coverage, in a group's cultural vocabulary, they tend to overtake and supplant that group's cultural vocabulary. Even speaking of other events, no matter how disparate, will make use of this new vocabulary.

The type of interpretation and mental leveling that was performed on Segal's sculpture as well as on Morandi's paintings has its roots in the kind of imagery that circulated in the days and months following the attacks. *New York Magazine* for instance, in its *Encyclopedia of 9/11* includes a photo of men and women escaping from the fallout that covered the area after the towers collapsed (*New York Magazine* n.d.). In the picture, the ash and the dust are so dense that the viewer can only make out the people covering their mouths and the heads of two streetlamps in the background. The dust seems to annihilate any sense of place to the point where the picture could have been taken anywhere. In the photo, which ominously bears the caption "Gray Escape," New York City is erased. The man in the foreground has loosened his yellow tie and pulled the collar of his shirt over his nose. His shoulders are covered in dust, and his facial expression appears incomplete, almost unreadable. The watch on his wrist looks eerily luminous as if its capacity to tell the time has been impaired by the shock of the situation. In the background, a man is holding the hand of a woman walking closely, their shoulder almost bumping. The woman's hand, though it mimics

the gesture of the others, seems more like a gesture of shock rather than protection, her raised hand more like a fist. The man holding her hand, his body almost like a shield, is not covering his mouth but curiously looking about at the wreckage. Yet, in their lack of features, they all resemble Segal's *Woman on a Park Bench* (LUAG n.d.).

This *erasure of locality* is prevalent in some of the other works included in MoMA PS1's *September 11* exhibition. William Eggleston's dye-transfer print *Unentitled (Glass in Airplane)* (1965-74) shows a hand inserting a straw in a glass full of a brown-red liquid with ice cubes in it. Sunlight coming through the small window of a plane falls upon the glass and the tray table on which the glass is placed. Tucked in the back pocket of the seat in front a magazine can be seen just behind the tray table. There is a ring on the middle finger of the hand. The rest of the context is hidden from view. Akin to the "Grey Escape" featured in *New York Magazine*, the picture could have been taken in a limited but still great number of contexts. And it is within this semantic void that the mental persistence of 9/11 the Eleey refers to is best seen at work as it provides a ready-made context. The picture could have been taken on one of the flights on that bright September day and as this new context sinks in it gains emotional momentum. The interpretation is almost prescribed despite the dates appearing in the caption of the picture. The drink might have been the last, akin to the last meal of an inmate before an execution. Was the person about to enjoy the drink aware of what was happening or where the plane was headed? Is the moment immortalized in the frame an instance of the calm before the storm?

Yet, in Eggleston's picture, this *erasure of locality* requires the presence of prior knowledge of the events on the part of the viewer for this kind of interpretation to occur. It engenders the need for an extra layer to be poured over the frame. Should the mental persistence of 9/11 cease to operate, the picture would attach itself to a different context, one that would not bear the weight of the event. Viewers might bring in their memories of similar moments spent on a plane while enjoying a drink. However, both the institutional context in which the picture is exhibited, MoMA's *September 11* exhibition, and the ideological context in which it reemerges, post-9/11 New York City, do not leave room for this other, more innocuous interpretation. In other words, because of its interpretative permissiveness, the picture has been reframed. The same kind of reframing occurs in the case of Alex Katz's 1994 painting entitled somewhat ominously *10:00 AM*, also included in the exhibition, which features a series of gray

and white lines akin to ripples on the surface of the water against a greenish-gray background. Almost imperceptibly two long smoky shadows loom over as if reflected on the surface of water. Both the title of the painting, it recalls the time of the day at which 9/11 occurred, and its erasure of locality corroborate to create that interpretative permissiveness.

To a certain degree, DeLillo's *Falling Man* builds on the same *erasure of locality* and interpretive permissiveness. In addition to these, the novel embeds the moment of passage between a pre-9/11 and a post-9/11 world via temporal markers. Similarly, in the opening sentences of H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* the narrator recalls how he and his friends became "Japs, Jews, Niggers" after 9/11 and that they "weren't before" (Naqvi 2011, 3). "It was not a street anymore," DeLillo's novel abruptly commences, "but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. […] This was the world now" (2011, 3). The street has *just* ceased to be a street; its initial purpose and context have been lost. To use Mary Douglas' theoretical framework, in the world of "falling ash and near night" (DeLillo 2011, 3) the street is "recognizably out of place", its "half-identity" as street "still clings to [it] and the clarity of the scene in which [it obtrudes] is impaired by [its] presence" (Douglas 2002, 197). And because it is out of place, its persistence in the memory of the narrator becomes almost ludicrous. How could it have been a street considering its current state, the "falling ash and near night" in which it has been engulfed? How does it fit in this new context?

The *impairment* Douglas refers to is what makes the next sentence in the novel even more violent. In it, "anymore" becomes "now," "the roar" of the falling towers still in the air. The world might have been different *before,* but this is how it is *now*. At this point, the "street" loses its "half-identity" and becomes part of a "defined place," the world of *now*, one where the rules that regulate traffic implied by the presence of the street become obsolete. "The world was this as well", the narration continues as if to emphasize this suspension of rules, "figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space, and the stink of fuel fire, and the steady rip of sirens in the air" (DeLillo 2011, 4). The maelstrom has taken over the identity of the street, and it has imposed its own view of the world.

Yet, in DeLillo's novel, like in the "Grey Escape," the erasure of locality also obliterates the rest of the world to the point where it even overtakes the internal integrity of the protagonists. The event, as James Berger suggests, "had taken over

reality entirely" (Berger 2003, 54). As DeLillo's Keith Neudecker, the 39-year-old lawyer who works in the World Trade Center, joins the stream of survivors escaping the carnage he somewhat eerily maintains a sense of calm. "Things inside were distant and still," the narrator notes as if to point to an inner core that manages to stay undisturbed beneath the roar of the falling towers, "[it] happened everywhere around him, a car half buried in debris, windows smashed and noises coming out, radio voices scratching at the wreckage" (DeLillo 2011, 3–4). As opposed to the other people around him, Neudecker is walking, not running away, and when a woman tries to offer him a bottle of water, he takes the time to put down the suitcase he was carrying and then take the bottle. Every gesture he makes is minutely described. Neudecker is aware of the water going down his throat as he is drinking it.

However, as Neudecker distances himself from the smoke and the dust and as the world comes into focus again – he crosses Canal Street, out of the cloud of smoke that engulfed him – he is pulled back into the maelstrom by the sound of the north tower coming down to the point where he becomes one with the tower. "That was him coming down," the third-person narrator notes, "the north tower" (DeLillo 2011, 5). The use of the personal pronoun "him" to denote a tower has been interpreted by Versluys as a symptom of the stream-of-consciousness technique of which the novel makes extensive use. "External observation," the critic argues, "seamlessly flows into internal impressions" to the point where the entire passage "points to a reordering of reality, a shift in reference" (Versluys 2009, 41). This interpretation falls perfectly in line with the kind of psychoanalytical analysis that Versluys is performing. For him, this seemingly unimportant slip of the tongue is almost Freudian because then it leads to him concluding that it is indicative of "compulsion, an obsessive fixation, and, since the referent of the personal pronoun remains cryptic, it also indicates the repression of the traumatic memory, the refusal to remember" (2009, 42). I would suggest a different kind of interpretation, one that does not necessarily treat the novel's protagonists or the narrator for that matter akin to psychiatric patients. I contend that the slip in the use of the personal pronoun at the very beginning of the novel is in fact indicative of the presence of a *selfish event*. For a short instance, Neudecker's individuality is replaced by that of the event, the "soft awe of voices" that the fall of the tower occasions is the equivalent of an appropriation of voice.

That initial integrity and clarity of thought that Neudecker maintained while still within the cloud of dust suddenly dissipate as if it was only indispensable while he was still inside it, or rather as if it was absorbed by the violence of the event. Outside it, "[he] tried to tell himself he was alive but the idea was too obscure to take hold" (DeLillo 2011, 6). Outside the bubble of dust, the characters appear to have been robbed of a part of their individuality. It is only when "an old panel truck" pulls up and gives Neudecker a ride that he realizes where "he'd been going all along" (2011, 6). Inside the bubble of dust, individual time is displaced, it creates a hiatus in the narrative Neudecker was engaged in before the event. References to the world beyond the bubble, even to the name of the protagonist himself, are absent. And inside this hiatus, the event starts to acquire agency.

2.2.1. Against the Melancholic State and Other Misuses of Trauma

DeLillo is not the only one to notice this difference between the *inside* and the *outside* of the *selfish event*. In the wake of the attacks of September 11, it seemed as if the more one got farther from New York City, and from Ground Zero, the stronger the change in perception. Joan Didion makes a note of it in *Fixed Ideas: America Since 9.11* (2003) when she writes about a book promotion trip she made seven days after the events. "[Like] most of us who were in New York that week," Didion writes, "I was in a kind of protective coma, sleepwalking through a schedule made when planning had still seemed possible" (2003, 3–4). Akin to Keith Neudecker who is suddenly awakened to the reality of his life, Didion notes how she had a similar moment of coming out of that "protective cone" she had felt in New York. While in San Francisco, Didion was handed a book onstage and was asked to read a few lines from a 1967 essay about New York City. She begins to read somewhat assured that the essay had been written in 1967, which meant there were no traps she could fall into: "'New York was no mere city,' the marked lines began. 'It was instead an infinitely romantic notion, the mysterious nexus of all love and money and power, the shining and perishable dream itself'" (2003, 4). The word that strikes a chord in her and, most likely in the audience, is "perishable." For a moment, an essay written in 1967 seems to have predicted the event.

Yet, that is not the only discovery Didion makes on her book promotion tour. The spatial divide between New York City and the cities she visits during her tour seem to

engender a mental divide as well. Removed from the spatial violence of the events the people she speaks to see things under an entirely different light. "These people to whom I was listening", Didion notes in her book, "in San Francisco and Los Angeles and Portland and Seattle – were making connections I had not yet in my numbed condition thought to make: connections between that political process and what had happened on September 11, connections between our political life and the shape our reaction would take and was in fact already taking" (Didion 2003, 5). The shock Didion has in this moment of epiphany does not slip by easily. Didion continues in this sense:

> These people understood that when Judy Woodruff, on the evening the President first addressed the nation, started talking on CNN about what "a couple of Democratic consultants" had told her about how the President would be needing to position himself, Washington was still doing business as usual. They understood that when the political analyst William Schneider spoke the same night about how the President had "found his vision thing," about how "this won't be the Bush economy any more, it'll be the Osama bin Laden economy," Washington was still talking about the protection and perpetuation of its own interests.
> These people got it.
> They didn't like it. (2003, 6–7)

And Didion gets it, too, at one point, particularly when she returns to New York and realizes that the people there, as opposed to the people in San Francisco and Los Angeles and the other places she had been to, had stopped talking about it, and instead replaced that discussion with a pervasive display of nationalism. "I came in from Kennedy," Didion writes, "to find American flags flying all over the Upper East Side, at least as far north as 96th Street, flags that had not been there in the first week after the fact" (2003, 7). In New York City, the event was being "systematically leached of history and so of meaning, finally rendered less readable than it had seemed on the morning it happened" (2003, 8–9). To Didion, it seemed as if reality was superimposed by the event, a reality in which every place in New York City was a constant reminder of the event.

Given this initial appropriation of individuality on the part of the event, *Falling Man* is not, as Richard Gray suggests in *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011), "immured in the melancholic state, offering a verbal equivalent of immobility" (Gray 2011, 28). The lack of mobility does not stem from the fact that the protagonists fall prey to melancholic feelings. When Neudecker goes to the gym and gets lost into the

fatigue of the rowing machine or falls into the habit of gambling, he does not do it for the sole purpose of reaching a state of emotional numbness. Rather, the need to reach that state is a symptom of having been emptied of the capacity to think outside the mental loop imposed by the *selfish event*. That mental loop is present when Martin and Lianne stand in front of the Morandi painting and see the same thing. DeLillo even delivers it in two short but melodic sentences akin to a tongue-twister that resembles Hamlet's "to be or not to be" in tone: "She saw what he saw. She saw the towers" (DeLillo 2011, 49). The mental loop is not the "verbal equivalent of immobility" as Gray puts it, on the contrary, it is a symptom of excessive movement, between a passive mental state (the paintings had always been there, yet they went unnoticed) and an overly active mental state (the two dark objects in the painting acquire new meanings).

Gray is not the only critic to fall into this interpretive trap and suggest an interpretation along these lines. In *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009), Kristiaan Versluys argues that DeLillo's novel is "the darkest and the starkest" and that "[to] an unusual extent, the novel is death-driven" (Versluys 2009, 20–21). Yet, to a similarly unusual extent, Versluys' interpretation is subtly influenced by a close reading of DeLillo's response to 9/11 in *The Guardian*, ominously called "In the Ruins of the Future" (2001), to a point where the critic sees *Falling Man* as an extended commentary on that immediate response. It is no surprise then that Versluys sees the novel in psychoanalytical terms. The novel, Versluys claims, "describes pure melancholia without the possibility of mourning" and as such the trauma endlessly reenacted in the novel "allows for no accommodation or resolution" (2009, 20). This, in turn, makes the characters seem "minimally alive in that they are numbed and they labor under the shadow of an overwhelming sadness that they cannot throw off" (2009, 23). Like Gray's, Versluys' critical response to the novel is to a greater extent a response to what the novel *should* be about considering that it is a "9/11 novel" than to the novel itself. *Falling Man* is DeLillo's 9/11 novel, and therefore it *must* be a novel that deals with trauma and melancholy because those are the most appropriate ways to deal with the enormity of such an event. The tone of these texts *must* be elegiac and thoughtful because that is the prescribed tone.

This view has led, as Georgiana Banita explains in *Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture after 9/11* (2012), to an extolment of Jonathan Safran Foer's

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close (2005) "as the only compassionate vision" to the detriment of DeLillo's *Falling Man*, which was castigated as a "heartless and alienating rendering of horror corresponding to 'nothing in this life'" (Banita 2012, 63). To any reader, this critical reception is disconcerting and at the same time revealing because it brings to the fore the kind of expectations that the publishing industry had created in the aftermath of the events. In this vein, the message of the publishing industry was rather clear: novels that engendered a compassionate view of the events were to be extolled while those that engendered less than a compassionate view had to be considered almost "un-American." The tone these works assumed was as crucial as the topics they tackled.

These expectations gained momentum as more and more "affect-driven" novels were published. Such was the case, for instance, of David Levithan's young-adult novel *Love Is the Higher Law* (2009), which focuses particularly on the emotional reactions that were somehow prescribed by the event. In its fractured narrative that moves from one character to the next, Levithan's novel offers a "compassionate vision" of those involved directly or by mediation in the events and sees the creation of an emotional community as the only way to counteract or at least dilute the hate lurking behind the terrorist attacks. In this sense, Levithan's novel prescribes a set of emotional actions germane to the event at hand by describing the way these dissimilar characters come together to face violent adversity to the point where it becomes tacky. "And suddenly I'm feeling this," one of the narrators recalls, "I guess you could call it tenderness – for people I never even liked before" (Levithan 2010, 82). The novel thus taps into the hackneyed notion that people create tightly woven communities only when individuals must face a common enemy and presents that notion as the most viable under the circumstances. A couple of pages later, Claire tells Jasper, another narrator in the novel, that the event is a lesson to be learned. "I think we were walking around like we were invincible," Claire tells Jasper after assuring him that she holds no hidden intentions behind her judgment, "[and] maybe that's a bad way to live your life. Because you're not invincible. Nobody is. And maybe now that we've learned that, we'll be better" (2010, 105). Yet, these are not the only aspects that the novel prescribes.

Levithan knows his young-adult audience well enough and writes accordingly. The three protagonists in *Love is the Higher Law* are not only teenagers with whom a juvenile readership could sympathize, but they also voice the kind of concerns that

were expected from teenagers and adults alike in real life. Claire's concern that "we" (i.e., Americans) walked around as if Americans were "invincible" is, in fact, a concern regarding the way the U.S. acted on the international scene, a concern that was voiced by such intellectuals as Susan Sontag and Noam Chomsky on different occasions. Slavoj Žižek is voicing a similar concern when he states that "on September 11, the USA was given the opportunity to realize what kind of world it was part of. It might have taken this opportunity – but it did not' instead it opted to reassert its traditional ideological commitments: out with feelings of responsibility and guilt towards the impoverished Third World, *we* are the victims now!" (Žižek 2012, 58) Akin to Žižek, Claire is pointing out that perhaps 9/11 constituted an occasion for self-reflection: America was in part to blame for what had happened because it had acted unilaterally, as if it was "invincible" at home and abroad. However, Levithan immediately censures it with Jasper's reply. "Or we'll bomb the shit out of Afghanistan," Jasper cannot help but say because not saying it would be akin to succumbing to a *soft view* of the event.

The two characters, Claire and Jasper, are also strategically placed in this sense. Claire, a girl, gives voice to the "softer view" of the matter, while Jasper, a boy, gives voice to the more belligerent view of the situation. Claire's view invites discussion and evaluation. Jasper's view offers violence as the most viable solution in a language that is itself violent. Yet, Jasper is only echoing what has already been said. In his State of the Union address ten days after the attacks George W. Bush was using a similar tone when he listed the U.S. demands on the Taliban. "These demands," the then U.S. President said, "are not open to negotiation or discussion" (*The Guardian* 2001). The ultimatums were thus issued. There was no time for self-reflection.

As opposed to Levithan's novel and other affect driven narratives, DeLillo's novel, Banita argues, resists rather than "[advances] affective responses to the 9/11 events" (Banita 2012, 64), in the sense that while he is pointing "to media narratives of trauma and survival", DeLillo is also counterbalancing "their emotional overload" by proposing "an anesthetization of emotion in everyday life – not as the 'proper' response to the 9/11 attacks but as the only means of tracing their deeper repercussions without risking involvement in affect-driven nationalist euphoria" (2012, 64). This "anesthetization of emotion," as Banita calls it, was not merely one of DeLillo's writerly whims, albeit he is a writer who has a penchant for whims of this degree and nature. There was a strategy behind it.

The trend toward affect-driven responses to 9/11 had been set well before the publication of *Falling Man*, and it permeated discourse at all levels. The first ones to set the tone were journalists, and this was due in part because of the institutional constraints from which journalism suffers. The emotional undertones that the political elites assumed in their responses to the crisis had to be reported the way they were delivered, namely, with the same pathos. In the immediate aftermath of the event, Michael Schudson argues in "What's Unusual About Covering Politics as Usual", an essay included in the second edition of *Journalism After September 11* (2011), "journalists felt thrust into the sphere of consensus" (2011, 48) because leaving room for controversy came to be considered as a form of disloyalty and as an inappropriate response to the gravity of the events. Journalists, Schudson adds, "moved into what might even be called a priestly or pastoral mode. The tone of detached neutrality was replaced by a quiet, solemn tone, as if speaking at a funeral" (2011, 48). Other responses were either deemed inappropriate or just avoided.

Thus, journalism was no longer about finding scapegoats, the way Susan Sontag tentatively did in her own response for *The New Yorker* (September 24, 2001), where she denounced "the voices licensed to follow the events", which seemed at that time "to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public" (*The New Yorker* 2001), because searching for the scapegoats "was just not appropriate at a time of national mourning" (2011, 48). "Instead," Schudson argues, "post-September 11 journalism sought to provide comfort or reassurance, not just information or analysis" (2011, 48). In other words, the events of 9/11 had set an *ethos of reporting* that was chiefly driven by affect, one that would police and denounce those who dared to fall out of ranks. In *The Weekly Standard* in October 2001, Sontag was accused of "unusual stupidity," of "moral vacuity," and of "sheer tastelessness," and was included among a long list of other "chattering asses" (Bottum 23:01) for her piece in *The New Yorker*. Incidentally, the kind of answer Claire got for her insolent thoughts was on the same level: "bomb the shit out of Afghanistan" and "chattering asses" pretty much pertain to the same lexical field.

Literary criticism, by extension, also fell into this emotional trap. Given the shock and awe of the September 11 attacks, as well as their traumatic impact upon the life of the city and on the lives of those in the city, literary critics keenly assumed that the literature dealing with those same events is particularly open to interpretations based

on trauma studies. This error of reasoning, Birgit Däwes argues, stems from the mistaken supposition that events such as the 9/11 attacks are "inherently traumatic" and that just because they were disastrous they can be labeled as traumatic (Däwes 2011, 64). "Traumatic status" Jeffrey Alexander argues in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004), "is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of their actual harmfulness or their objective abruptness, but because these phenomena are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity" (Alexander 2004, 10). Trauma, Alexander further explains, is not necessarily "the result of a group experiencing pain" but rather the burrowing of that discomfort "into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity" (2004, 10). To put it differently, the violence of one event, irrespective of how sudden or protracted it is, does not ensure that event's traumatic status. Compared to the Buffalo Creek flood, Däwes exemplifies to make her point clearer, "or to the forced removal of Native Americans on the Trail of Tears [...] the terrorist attacks of September 11 hardly left the city of New York destroyed as a community, let alone the American nation of 'Western civilization' at large" (Däwes 2011, 64). Additionally, 9/11 had to be *construed* as a traumatic event to legitimize military and political action.

The error also stems from the fact that the very definition of trauma is a nebulous one. Initially, the definition referred explicitly to the physical or psychological wounding of an individual, yet with the advent of the Holocaust Studies, the definition was extended to refer to collectivities. What is more, those who apply trauma studies to literary texts, Däwes argues in this sense, fail to see that "fictional characters are not subject to natural or medical laws" (2011, 67). These characters can be seen as symbolic outcomes of the meaning-making machine that works to represent a specific event as traumatic. Literature, as an apparatus of memory, and the cultural structures that it creates provide the meanings that will then give the event its traumatic status. It is only after the consequences of the traumatic event have been acknowledged and translated into a form of cultural trauma that trauma studies could provide some possible hermeneutic reward. Alexander explains this process thoroughly by separating the violent nature of the event from the claims of victimhood of those involved:

> It is not that traumas are never constructed from nonexistent events. Certainly, they are. But it is too easy to accept the imagined dimension of

> trauma when the reference is primarily to claims like these, which point to events that either never did occur or to events whose representation involve exaggerations that serve obviously aggressive and harmful political forces. […] Imagination informs trauma construction, just as much when the reference is to something that has actually occurred as to something that has not. It is only through the imaginative process of representation that actors have the sense of experience. Even when claims of victimhood are morally justifiable, politically democratic, and socially progressive, these claims still cannot be seen as automatic, or natural, responses to the actual nature of an event itself. (Alexander 2004, 9)

Given the discursive effusion in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the ways in which the media and the publishing industry have reacted to the events, it can be safely assumed that we are dealing with an event whose representation involves "exaggerations that serve obviously aggressive and harmful political forces", as Alexander puts it. The way the event was framed by cultural producers reinforced the idea of a traumatic event.

Ulrike Tancke notices a similar trend in her article "Uses and Abuses of Trauma in Post-9/11 Fiction and Contemporary Culture" (included in *From Solidarity to Schisms: 9/11 and After in Fiction and Film from Outside the US*, 2009), where she argues that "the notion of trauma has been embraced as a means of accounting for the complex interaction of individual and collective responses to 9/11 and has been credited with producing a new subjectivity based on a collapse of history and memory, time and space" (Cilano 2009, 78). Long anticipated by Hollywood movies, Tancke further explains, what happened on 9/11 interlaced with preexisting fantasies that further cemented this connection with the notion of trauma. Nevertheless, "the idea of trauma alone fails to adequately capture the collective impact of 9/11, as the events are already involved in prefigured processes of signification" (Cilano 2009, 78). In this sense, Tancke's somewhat provocative suggestion is that the notion of trauma can also be instrumentalized for political purposes. Trauma, Tancke claims, is not just a primary emotional state and, as Alexander argues, it does not follow naturally from the violence of the events.

This process of instrumentalization is particularly evident in the way dissenting voices were silenced in the press and beyond. Anyone who expressed reservations of any kind with regards to the kind of decisions that were being taken at the level of the administration, the inevitable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, increased security, detentions, or military tribunals, were considered to be 'against' America, and as such

had to be silenced. And it was hard to be against the wave of sentimentality that flooded New York City. The event, Joan Didion argues in *Fixed Ideas: America Since 9.11* (2003), "had been made manageable, reduced to the sentimental, to protective talismans, totems, garlands of garlic, repeated pieties that would come to seem in some way as destructive as the event itself. We now had 'the loved ones,' we had 'the families,' we had 'the heroes'" (2003, 9). The victims themselves had to be celebrated somehow as if the violence that had been perpetrated on them was akin to the blood spilled on a battlefield in a battle that was formative for the nation itself. "America," George W. Bush said in his address to the nation on the evening of September 11, "was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining" (*The Guardian* 2001). That evening, President Bush used a language that was symbolic at its core, and which required responses that were at least as symbolic.

Now, given the kind of critical response that Foer's and DeLillo's novel got, it would be safe to assume that literary production, too, had to adopt a similar tone. It had to reassure that, despite the hardships and the challenges brought on by a group of people that was allegedly *inherently* evil and envious of America's freedom, that freedom was stronger than ever, and it was going to prevail. It, too, had to adopt the "priestly or pastoral mode," as Schudson puts it, and participate in that "campaign to infantilize the public," as Sontag put it. And to a certain extent, Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* did what Sontag warned against in her response. The novel imagines the events as seen from the perspective of a nine-year-old boy, Oskar Schell, whose father dies in the September 11 attacks. One could not possibly get more infantile than that. To deal with the loss of his father and with an increasingly estranged mother Oskar sets on a quest to solve a "mystery," presumably left behind by his father, and which, in the end, turns out to be just the figment of the boy's overly active imagination. One episode in the novel, which, to my view, partakes in this infantilizing tendency, is the one in which Oskar, as part of a school project, plays to his classmates a recording of an interview with Kinue Tomoyasu's about the bombing of Hiroshima. The reaction of the classmates then comes as no surprise considering the solemnity the topic required. "The girls were crying," Oskar notes the moment he presses stop on the boom box, "and the boys were making funny barfing noises" (Foer 2006, 189). The only seemingly reasonable reaction comes from the teacher, Mr. Keegan, as he

wipes his forehead with a handkerchief. Michel Faber, in his review of Foer's novel for *The Guardian*, sees this episode as Foer's enterprise in a nutshell: "a painfully serious topic is given a whimsical spin in order to make a painfully serious point" (Faber 2005). Both the topic that Oskar tackles in his class presentation and the kind of language that Foer puts in the mouth of the nine-year-old seem misplaced within the economy of the novel.

Albeit, as Faber notes in the same review, Oskar can be easily placed within a tradition of overly intelligent youngsters in American literature, a tradition that has given us characters such as Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye* or, more recently, Christopher John Francis Boone from Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), or even his namesake Oskar from Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum* (1959), Foer's hero is "constructed not from freshly materials but from embroidered scraps of language, poetic notions, allegorical conceits" (Faber 2005). Michiko Kakutani, in her review of the novel for *The New York Times*, seems to suggest the same when she claims the novel "feels simultaneously contrived and improvisatory, schematic and haphazard" and that the protagonist himself "comes across as an entirely synthetic creation, assembled out of the bits and pieces of famous literary heroes past" (Kakutani 2005). Foer's Oskar is also "a genuinely annoying nine-year-old" (Gessen 2005). Additionally, the fact that a nine-year-old boy can roam freely on the streets of New York City "all over the five boroughs, inquiring, in alphabetical order, at the two hundred and sixteen different addresses listed in the phone book under the name 'Black,' which was written on an envelope containing a key that Oskar found in a blue vase on a high shelf of his father's closet", has left critics and writers such as John Updike "boggled" and frantic for credibility (Updike 2005). Oskar is also allowed to browse the internet freely without any parental control. His internet searches lead him to websites in Portuguese showing videos of bodies falling. "Whenever I want to try to learn about how Dad died," Oskar confesses to the mysterious renter in his Grandma's house, "I have to go to a translator program and find out how to say things in different languages, like September…" (Foer 2006, 256). The fact that "people all over the world can know things that I can't" leaves him incredibly angry (2006, 256).

Yet, Foer's novel got the emotional response it needed to gain a substantial amount of cultural sustainability and replicability. When told about post-9/11 literature, people

will most likely recall the title of Foer's novel, often with the words in the title mixed up. In 2011, the novel was also turned into a movie directed by Stephen Daldry, whose cast includes actors such as Tom Hanks and Sandra Bullock. All this notwithstanding, and despite the apparent tear-jerking, syrupy moments in the novel, such as the moment when Oskar thinks of inventing "a special drain that would be underneath every pillow in New York" that would then collect the tears of those who cried themselves to sleep (Foer 2006, 38), the putative trauma of 9/11 seems a form that lacks content. In fact, within the economy of the novel, that trauma absorbs most of its emotional content from the other traumas depicted in the novel. Oskar's grandfather, the senior Thomas Schell, loses his fiancée, Anna, in the bombing of Dresden by the Allied forces in February 1945, an experience so traumatic to him that he refuses to speak from then on and instead communicates through writing. Mirroring that trauma are the dreams Oskar's grandmother has, dreams in which "people apologized for things that were about to happen, and lit candles by inhaling" (Foer 2006, 311), and which in turn signals the desire to undo the past, a desire akin to that of Oskar, expressed in the series of images of a man falling from one of the World Trade Center's towers included in the last pages of the novel. Placed in reverse, as the reader flicks through them, the images show the man floating upwards, back to the window from which he fell.

Placed within the ranks of such traumatic events as the Dresden bombing and their consequences on the human psyche, the drama of 9/11 feels oddly out of place. Foer's choice to put these events together almost as if to create a chronology of traumatic events is perhaps an indication that, as a putatively traumatic event, 9/11 is still in its infancy and therefore needs similar events to be placed in its vicinity. This placement operates on a different level as well. By situating 9/11 within this series of other events, Däwes rightly points out, "Foer implicitly defies the discourse of an innocent America under attack and locates 9/11 instead in a historical dialectics of violence. His foregrounding of the event's relative position is reinforced by another atrocity committed by the U.S. American military: the atomic bombing of Hiroshima" (Däwes 2011, 380). It is within this context that one can truly see the amount of imagination that has been invested into representing 9/11 as a traumatic event for political purposes. With this "dialectics of violence," Foer creates a system of checks and balances that could ultimately rein in further exaggerations in portraying the event.

This need for *cultural scaffolding* is evident in the case of the grandmother, who does not manage to shed her memories of Dresden. "In her mind," Versluys notes, "Dresden has become an absolute event, so totalizing in its impact that it no longer has a definable place in space or time" (Versluys 2009, 96). Even when she watches the attacks of September 11 happen on television "she is occupied with memories of Dresden" (2009, 97). In this dichotomy, however, 9/11 seems to be the 'weaker' event, since it does not manage to displace Grandma's traumatic memories. As opposed to the trauma of Dresden, which does not permit a full recovery, 9/11 seems to leave room for hope in that sense, as the tensions in the novel get somewhat resolved. In line with these emotional undertones, the novel ends with the rather emotionally absent mother declaring her love for the son, a declaration that magically resolves the boy's "frustration over his father's unceremonious farewell and lack of affectionate parting words" (Versluys 2009, 118), as if, in the end, that was the issue all along. The novel thus traces the possibility, Versluys concludes his interpretation, "that, in an act of love, all that violence destroyed can be mended; that the lost sense of security can be recovered. Most essentially, it becomes possible again to speak. Through the act of speaking, love conquers the suffering of generations" (2009, 118). Which is yet another way of saying that Foer's novel invites an appropriate emotional response to the events.

Putting aside the limitations imposed by this sort of interpretation, namely one that takes as its starting point a prescribed set of emotions deemed appropriate for the kind of event that is being described, would undoubtedly make some episodes from DeLillo's novel point readers and critics alike in a seemingly different direction. One of those episodes is certainly the one in which Keith and Lianne, the estranged spouses around which the narrative revolve, enjoy a moment of genuine intimacy when they watch TV together and vicariously experience 9/11 as it unfolds again on the screen. It is as if being once again sucked into that mental loop together is a way of getting their minds in sync, or rather as if, in its narcissistic unfolding, the event itself can restore order by rendering the protagonists selfless. By selfless I do not intend ready for sacrifice or united for a common purpose as such an event would imply, but rather in the sense of having been emptied of their selves in the presence, albeit mediated, of the event. In this episode, the presence of the event does not leave room for the protagonists. The event has almost replaced them.

As opposed to Foer, who portrays 9/11 as an event that disrupts but then reunites families around a streamlined notion of love, "[in] my only life, she was my mom, and I was her son" (Foer 2006, 324), DeLillo bypasses this strategy by portraying a family that is already dysfunctional in Foer's terms even before the occurrence of the event. Albeit it might be argued that the moment of true intimacy Keith and Lianne enjoy is, by the looks of it, proof of the fact that the event *does* bring them together, it is worth noting that the putative togetherness they obtain is given by the uniqueness of the event itself. It is the togetherness that people around the world had when they were watching the events unfold on their TV screens. We find out about those family dysfunctionalities in the second chapter of the novel when Lianne discusses Keith's appearance at her apartment "gray soot head to toe" (DeLillo 2011, 8) with her mother, Nina Bartos. The mother, a former university professor, retired two years earlier following a knee-replacement surgery, does not miss the opportunity to point out, albeit subtly, the dysfunctionalities at the heart of Keith's relationship with Lianne. "Why didn't he go straight to a hospital," Nina comments, "[why] didn't he go to a friend's place?" To Lianne "[friend] meant girlfriend" (2011, 9). In the same conversation, the mother warns against an emotional interpretation of Keith's reappearance at Lianne's apartment. "He was in grave danger, I know," the mother says, "[but] if you let your sympathy and goodwill affect your judgment" (DeLillo 2011, 10). Nina leaves out the remark that should have closed this statement, yet, given the background that we have been given about Keith and Lianne, the mother clearly disagrees with the two getting back together.

To a certain extent, the mother's comments are also a warning directed at the reader and, by extension, a hint at the emotional scope of the novel. A certain gravity marks these comments, and DeLillo builds around Nina an ambient that is minimalist to the core. The north wall of her New York City apartment is punctuated by the two still life paintings by Giorgio Morandi I mention above, and which somewhat reflect, akin to Vermeer's portraits, the mother's interior life. Later in the novel, when Lianne reunites with the mother and her lover, Martin, Nina appears, like the simple objects in the Morandi paintings, "in a dark skirt and a white blouse, leaning on her cane" (DeLillo 2011, 44). The dark and light colors of her attire, as well as her slow, "segmental movements" (2011, 44), turn her into a personification of the paintings. Yet, there is no indication whatsoever to the fact that this personification is an outcome of the event,

which, again denies the notion that DeLillo's novel is a symptomatic portrayal of post-traumatic melancholy. When Martin tells Lianne that the moment he set foot in the US coming from Europe Nina has given him only grief, Lianne revealingly replies that grief is Nina's job (2011, 45). Her grief is thus wrongly interpreted as post-9/11 grief. Like the two dark objects in the Morandi paintings in her apartment, her general grief is appropriated by the event.

The idea that the characters have been replaced, akin to changelings, or emptied by the *selfish event*, returns several times in the novel. When Lianne first sees Keith after the events in "Chapter Six," the first thing she experiences is a feeling of doubt with regards to the identity of the man standing in the doorway. "When he appeared at the door," the narration goes, "it was not possible, a man comes out of an ash storm, all blood and slag, reeking of burnt matter, with pinpoint glints of slivered glass in his face" (DeLillo 2011, 87). After letting him in, Lianne quickly switches the TV off to protect him "from the news he'd just walked out of" (2011, 87). It is almost as if Keith's identity is being constantly mediated by something else whose identity is much stronger than his own. Then, as Lianne begins to rid him of the dust, she realizes that the blood on his clothes was not his own but coming "from somebody else" (2011, 88). The blood is almost ritualistic, akin to a religious rite of rebirth. Later in the novel, when Keith returns the suitcase, which he had found on his day out of the WTC towers on that fateful day, to its rightful owner, Florence, he feels a strange connection to her.

Yet, while the fact that they have both experienced it creates a sense of belonging and comradeship, there is also a sense that the event has robbed them of their individuality. When Keith is with Florence, he has the uncanny feeling that when she looks at him she does so "in a way that made him feel he must be someone else, standing there by the bed, ready to say what someone always says" (DeLillo 2011, 138). In their conversations, Versluys also notes albeit for the sake of a different argument, "[neither] of the interlocutors is fully present to him- or herself. Lacking a rock-bottom sense of identity, they cannot express themselves fully or authentically" (Versluys 2009, 26). The protagonists' lives begin to unravel, but one gets the sense that their lives had been unraveling well before the event, and the latter is merely making them salient. These characters have not been woken up from a dream and transferred to a reality that is inherently different from the one before the event, as they have not been

wakened from an American dream. The problems were there all along; they just were not aware of them.

To a certain extent, the visual character of the event has affected their sight, or rather, it has appropriated it. "The fire and ash," Banita argues with regards to Keith's sense of sight following the event, "instead of impairing [it], only lower the threshold of his perception. In contrast, life before 9/11 suddenly strikes him as a form of blindness, where not noticing used to be a quality and a condition of living" (Banita 2012, 65). When he returns to his apartment, Keith is not overwhelmed by feelings of loneliness or melancholy but rather comes to face "the overwhelming emptiness of his life" (2012, 65). Regarding the narrative structure, the discovery of the "overwhelming emptiness" echoes the transition between a world of "then" and a world of "now" that DeLillo uses in the opening of the novel:

> When he entered his apartment, he stood for a while, just looking around. The windows were scabbed in sand and ash and there were fragments of paper and one whole sheet trapped in the grime. Everything else was the same as it had been when he walked out the door for work that Tuesday morning. *Not that he'd noticed*. He'd lived here for a year and a half, since the separation, finding a place close to the office, centering his life, content with the narrowest of purviews, that of not noticing.
> *But now he looked*. Some light entered between splashes of window grit. He saw the place differently now. Here he was, seen clear, with nothing that mattered to him in these two and a half rooms, dim and still, in a faint odor of nonoccupancy. (DeLillo 2011, 26)

DeLillo's description of Keith's apartment is somewhat paradoxical, and it brings together opposing metaphors. I contend that the narrative strategy inherent to this description, with its *inward-outward duplicity*, represents another *trope of the selfish event*. The windows, essentially metaphors of looking and seeing, are covered with debris coming from the towers, which implies a partially impaired field of vision. This impairment, in turn, focuses the gaze of the protagonist inwardly, towards the interior of his apartment. Consequently, the gaze starts to notice things that were there before but had gone unnoticed, and the clarity of this inward gaze is set against the murkiness of the outward gaze. This is also a sign of the fact that following the event the characters do not fall into mental apathy as Gray argued in his interpretation of the novel. On the contrary, the selfish event makes them mentally hyperactive, the way detectives often are.

DeLillo's Keith Neudecker is not the only one who is suddenly awakened to a new internal reality. In "Living Up to It", the opening essay of *Interesting Times: Writings from a Turbulent Decade* (2009), George Packer tells the story of an investment banker who, "[in] the minutes after the South Tower fell on September 11, [...] had an epiphany" (Packer 2009, 24). As the investment banker stumbles through the debris and the confusion in Lower Manhattan, he suddenly finds himself in a church in Greenwich Village. Despite the environment, the epiphany is not religious. When a policeman tries to reassure him by telling him that he is probably in shock, the banker replies that, on the contrary, he is not in shock, and that he has never been so "cognizant" of his life before. That cognizance, Packer further argues in his essay, extended well beyond the category of investment bankers. Matthew Timms, an "unemployed video producer" tried to film the attacks only to realize that the battery of his camera had gone dead. "His own detachment," Packer reports, "so disturbed him that he wanted his blood drawn in order to overcome it" (2009, 24). It is almost as if the event had made him aware of his self for a brief instant.

Most of New Yorkers felt the same thing in the days following the attack, "they had not been living as they would have liked; the horrors of the day before had woken them up; they wanted to change" (2009, 26). DeLillo, too, registers this general desire to do something irrespective of the necessity of those directly affected. As Neudecker is walking away from the falling towers, a woman hands him a bottle of water. When he gets to Lianne's apartment, she also offers him water. "Everybody's giving me water," Keith almost desperately replies (DeLillo 2011, 87), as if that is the only appropriate reaction to the event itself. In a similar vein, hundreds of New Yorkers went to donate blood even when they were turned away because no more blood was needed. To do something, no matter how purposeless, was one of the most widespread reactions.

The *diplopia* engendered by the selfish event thus creates a sense of duplicitousness and separation, akin to one of distancing from a former self. When Keith looks inside his refrigerator he looks at the bottles and cartons as if they were somebody else's when in fact he was "the man who used to live here" (DeLillo 2011, 27). In the hallway, he says to no one that he is standing there, and no one replies to his acknowledgment of presence. "In the movie version," the narrative continues, "someone would be in the building, an emotionally damaged woman or a homeless old man, and there would be dialogue and close-ups" (DeLillo 2011, 27). Yet, there is no "emotionally damaged

woman" because that would have meant falling for the cliché Foer fell for in his novel. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* really *is* the movie version of that scenario both metaphorically and literally. Abby Black, one of the characters Oskar encounters on his quest, and who lives in "the narrowest house in New York" (Foer 2006, 90) starts crying for no reason when the boy visits her. Ada Black, another woman that Oskar visits, lives in a beautiful apartment and owns two Picasso paintings as well as an African American woman who works as a maid. "There's no shame in being a maid," Ada tells him, "[she] does a serious job and I pay her well" (Foer 2006, 150). When Oskar tells Gail, the maid, that her uniform is beautiful Ada scorns him for having made the woman feel embarrassed. Georgia Black, from Staten Island, "had turned her living room into a museum of her husband's life. She had pictures of him from when he was a kid, and his first pair of shoes, and his old report cards" (Foer 2006, 239). These characters are all emotionally damaged in a way and Oskar's presence, akin to the emergence of the event in DeLillo's novel, becomes the force that brings that damage to the surface.

The people that Oskar encounters, David Holloway argues in *9/11 and the War on Terror* (2008), are "invariably as damaged, scarred, unstable or fixated as he, and their experience seemed to be offered as the personification of the narrative interiorisations practised by the novel – each of them gripped, like Oskar, by private tragedy so all-consuming that they became private universes in which their victims endured blighted and asocial lives" (Holloway 2008, 116). When Oskar shouts into the silence, akin to Keith standing in the corridor, that he is "standing here" (DeLillo 2011, 27), he hypothetically gets a reply from the other protagonists that he encounters on his quest to uncover the secret of the key found in his father's study. Contrariwise, DeLillo denies his characters that hypothetical reply. The only reply that they get is an echo of the *selfish event* itself.

The falling towers, Versluys seems to suggest with regards to DeLillo's novel, have created an environment in which the very notion of genuineness "has become a staged condition", as if "the characters are playing their own lives, as if they were actors on a movie set" (Versluys 2009, 26). When these characters try to be themselves, they are only faced with a performance of themselves. Both Florence and Keith, Versluys further adds, "have the sense that they have been expropriated, that their own lives have their centers somewhere outside themselves, somewhere distant and out of

control," leading to a "feeling of self-othering" (Versluys 2009, 27). Inside the mental loop created by the event, these individuals are bound to feel as if they have been emptied of any agency, as if their identity has been liquefied and has become slippery, or that it has been absorbed, subsumed.

Versluys notes this slipperiness when he talks about the names used as titles for the three parts of the novel. All three of the names play on the idea of an uncertain identity, one that can be easily switched or appropriated. Bill Lawton, the name that becomes the title of the first part of the novel is an infantilized if not sanitized version of Bin Laden made up by Keith and Lianne's son, Justin, a move that somehow liberates the latter of its dark implications. It becomes a code word used by teenagers akin to the "You-Know-Who" or "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" of the Harry Potter franchise. It becomes a stand-in name, a form of secondary appropriation that only proves the malleability of identity in the presence of a selfish event. The second name, Ernst Hechinger, is indicative of another form of identity appropriation. Trying to separate himself from his terrorist past (possible involvement in a militant left-wing group in his native Germany), Hechinger, an art dealer and the lover of Lianne's mother, Nina, appropriates another name and starts to go by Martin Ridnour. The third name, David Janiak, like the other two, is also the mark of a slippery identity, with the only exception that in this case, it is the real name of a person that is publicly known by another name, the Falling Man. Janiak is the performance artist who remakes Richard Drew's famous picture *The Falling Man* which appeared in *The New York Times*, in his art by jumping off tall buildings around New York City while tied to a safety harness. Janiak's art in this sense becomes the embodiment of the mental loop produced by the selfish event, a reenactment of a moment within the unfolding of the event that had had a firm hold on the media apparatus in the days following the event.

That same mental loop is there when, while sorting through her mail, Lianne finds a postcard sent to her by a friend who was staying in Rome. What draws her attention is the image on the face of the card, which "was a reproduction of the cover of Shelley's poem in twelve cantos, first edition, called *Revolt of Islam*" (DeLillo 2011, 8), and albeit she realizes that the card had been sent a week or two earlier, namely well before 9/11, she cannot deny the aura of prescience that surrounds the arrival of the postcard. "It was a matter of simple coincidence," Lianne thinks, "that a card might arrive at this particular time bearing the title of that specific book" (DeLillo 2011, 8). DeLillo's *Falling*

Man does not offer a "verbal equivalent of immobility" (Gray 2011, 28) but rather a verbal equivalent of a mental gravitational pull. Each cultural artifact and each object, however insignificant, becomes polarized with the significance of the *selfish event*.

In DeLillo's novel, identity and memory are closely intertwined to the point where the latter threatens to overcome and engulf the former. This is particularly evident in the way the novel tackles the issue of Alzheimer's disease, a topic that becomes a quasi-obsession for the novel. Keith, the narration explains in the fourth chapter of the first part of the novel, "had his poker game, six players, downtown, one night a week" (DeLillo 2011, 29) to keep his mind busy. His allegiance to that group of people is also part of his separation with Lianne, who pledges her allegiance to yet another group. Lianne "has her storyline sessions, in East Harlem, also weekly, in the afternoon, a gathering of five or six or seven men and women in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease" (2011, 29). During the meetings, the patients are asked to write for approximately twenty minutes about themselves and then read out loud what they had written. The episodes that they describe in their writings range from family, "hard times, happy memories, daughters becoming mothers" to "the revelation of writing itself" (2011, 31), namely things that would later be difficult to remember once the degenerative disease progresses. Yet, after the event, the narration notes, "[there] was one subject the members wanted to write about, insistently, all of them but Omar H. It made Omar nervous, but he agreed in the end. They wanted to write about the planes" (2011, 31). It is as if the event has absorbed their willingness to record their own lives.

The commentary that the novel makes with this episode with regards to the nature of the selfish event is one that might leave readers baffled or at most intrigued. Alzheimer's is a degenerative disease that ultimately leads to complete, or almost complete memory loss, dementia, and loss of cognitive functions, out of which there is no way out yet except for treatments that make the disease reduce its pace in its downward progress. When Lianne tells Dr. Apter that she would like to increase the number of storyline sessions with the patients, Apter tells her that it would only be a mistake. "Their situation will grow increasingly delicate," Apter tells Lianne, "[these] encounters need space around them. You don't want them to feel there's an urgency to write everything, say everything before it's too late" (DeLillo 2011, 60). Yet, this is precisely the issue. The writing sessions that Lianne moderates are a way of

transferring the patients' memories on a support that is not continuously on the verge of being lost forever; they are a mode of linear recording that recodes mental processes in a way that is decipherable to both authors and readers/listeners. Given the felt urgency of this way of recording and recoding and that of the patients' situation as the disease progresses, the fact that the event interferes even in that process robbing them of the mental space needed to recall a time that is outside the event itself is a form of suppression. The *selfish event* becomes in this sense a form of self-censorship and self-denial; it has imposed a regime that dictates its self-replication even in the minds of those whose memory is on the verge of collapse.

Akin to Keith, who finds comfort in his poker games, in the realness of it, its repetitive ritual, Lianne recalls a similar comfort in her writing sessions. She prompts the patients with a form of curiosity that somehow exceeds her role as a professional. When the patients write about "where they were when it happened" or about "the people they knew who were in the towers, or nearby" (2011, 60) she discovers in those writings a pleasure that is almost experimental because she realizes that even these people, who are inherently different from her from at least one point of view, are experiencing the same things, go through the same mental qualms with regards to the event. "She wanted to hear everything," the narration explains, "the things everybody said, ordinary things, and the naked statements of belief, and the depth of feeling, the passion that saturated the room. She needed these men and women. […] It was possible that the group meant more to her than it did to the members" (DeLillo 2011, 61). And as Lianne desperately tries to get out of the mental loop imposed by the event, she discovers that she cannot escape it by taking refuge in the experiences of her patients. The mental loop is there, too, and the only comfort she gets out of the sessions is the pure knowledge of not being alone.

In this sense, I contend that the comfort these group meetings seem to give her go well beyond mere sympathy and professionalism. Besides being "the living breath of the thing that killed her father" (DeLillo 2011, 62), Jack Glenn, who committed suicide because he "did not want to submit to the long course of senile dementia" (2011, 40), these patients and their writing sessions are a reassuring exit out of the mental loop superimposed by the event in at least two ways. On the one hand, the scheduled repetitiveness of the meetings, reflect and at the same disrupt the mental repetitiveness of the event. On the other hand, it is as if, in the degenerative progress

of the disease, part of the acuteness of the event gets lost as well. It reassures Lianne and readers as well that the obsessively recurring memory of events such as these, akin to the memories of family and happy moments that had shaped the identity of those patients, is also caught in the degenerative entropy of memory. Despite its acuteness, the memory of the event will fade with time.

The Alzheimer patients play a central role in the whole economy of the novel. Their presence is not incidental because, in a way, their situation is a synecdoche of the post-9/11 atmosphere. They are "the living breath" of the kind of (de)individualization that occurs in the close vicinity of a *selfish event*. The dissolution and loss of individuality that they will undoubtedly undergo, Versluys argues in this sense, "is anticipated in the way they are written about. Lightly sketched, known only by their first name and initial, they remain shadowy presences, partly rubbed out already, getting more and more vague as time goes by" (Versluys 2009, 35). Yet, what Versluys somehow fails to see is the subtlety that DeLillo uses in these episodes. Albeit the lack of the patients' last names might be interpreted as a form of professionalism on the part of Lianne, the well-known physician-patient confidentiality, the narration also remarks that it was Lianne's "affected" idea to create a fiction-like context, "as if they were characters in European novels" (DeLillo 2011, 30). They are only shadowy because of the way Lianne sees them.

The mention of European novels might seem a fleeting one in the eyes of the casual reader, but it bears some implications with regards to Lianne's character and, by extension, the post-9/11 atmosphere. There is an almost pathological distancing implied in the statement. One the one hand, the fact that they are European and not American suggests that in Lianne's perception these patients are affected by something inherently foreign to her, and they pertain to a place that is, because of its removal from a contemporary American reality (that of the event), almost idyllic, frozen into a prelapsarian state. On the other hand, by means of this removal the patients are almost objectified. This is evident especially when Lianne provokes them to talk about the terrorists when the patients seem to want to circumvent the topic. "She prompted them," the narrator describes the situation, "[there] has to be something you want to say, some feeling to express, nineteen men come here to kill us" (DeLillo 2011, 64). She does this albeit the topic proves delicate to discuss for Omar H., one of the patients, whose name indicates Arabic origins. Yet, like all prompts,

Lianne's already contains within itself at least a part of the answer. Although we are informed of her uncertainty about not knowing "what it was she wanted to hear" (2011, 64), when she hears Anna, one of the patients, talk about the impossibility of naming the terrorists because "they're a million miles outside your life" (2011, 64), in her mind Lianne defines the response "in terms of revenge [...] the small intimate wish, however useless in a hellstorm", and "welcomes" it (DeLillo 2011, 64). They acquire the sheen of literary study cases.

DeLillo's *Falling Man* and H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* both embed loss into their verbal structures from their very opening sentences signaling a preoccupation with the movement from a pre-9/11 to a post-9/11 atmosphere. Other novelists, such as Mohsin Hamid, chose to embed that same loss in more subtle ways. Changez, the protagonist and the narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, is a "lover of America" but he is also in love with a version of America that "was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia" (Hamid 2008, 113) embodied in Erica, whose name, too, seems to have that loss embedded into it. Erica sounds a lot like an echo of America. Akin to Neudecker's loss of individuality in the bubble of dust or to that of the three protagonists of Naqvi's *Home Boy*, Changez also succumbs to the hiatus nested within the Erica/(Am)Erica analogy. When the two make love, Changez notices Erica's sudden estrangement and rigidity and asks her whether she still misses Chris, a former lover, whose name appears to be a severed version of that of Christopher Columbus (Gray 2011, 62). "She nodded," Changez recalls, "and I saw tears begin to force themselves between her lashes. 'Then pretend,' I said, 'pretend I am him'" (Hamid 2008, 105). Akin to a cultural artifact, Changez is absorbed into a narrative that is not his own.

Changez's readiness to assume the identity of Erica's lost lover, Martin Randall argues in *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (2011), signals a loss of his "real self" (2011, 141). And this is not the first time he shows his malleability. "He mimics," Randall adds, "the financial high-flyers he works with at Underwood and Sampson and then – after cultivating a thick beard – deliberately assumes what many Americans consider to be the look of a terrorist" (2011, 141). Yet the void and the absence that Changez is trying to fill by projecting himself into a series of identities that do not belong to him in the first place – he begins to feel like a foreigner – is too big to fill and he begins to reject both America and Erica. Like DeLillo's Neudecker who is suddenly aware of where

"he'd been going all along" (DeLillo 2011, 4), the shock of 9/11 "'wakes' Changez from his dream of America" (Randall 2011, 143). In this sense, Hamid's novel seems to be implying that perhaps the American dream required just that, a loss of the real self in favor of a series of external values, which is what happens in Changez's case.

The plethora of fictional(ized) characters that populate the texts I mention above seem to point to the fact that a decentering of identity is a common trope in post-9/11 literature. Given the transfer of cultural weight I argued for in previous chapters, I contend that this process of decentering is another signature move of the *selfish event*. Additionally, while in the case of cultural artifacts their identity was often supplanted with vestiges of the event itself (see for instance the Morandi paintings in DeLillo's *Falling Man*), in the case of these characters the situation is slightly different. Their identity is never supplanted but is always on the verge of being supplanted or, at least, there is a moment when their own identity is threatened or questioned. This is particularly evident in the case of Mohsin Hamid's Changez and H.M. Naqvi's three narrators. Once the selfish event destabilizes their identity, as American citizens or as documented immigrants, another identity is forced upon them, that of the Islamic fundamentalist, whose allegiance, no matter where it stands, is at least suspicious.

2.3. The Post-post-9/11 Novel: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

All three of the novels mentioned previously choose the moment of passage between a pre-9/11 and a post 9/11 atmosphere as their focal point, albeit in slightly different ways. They grapple with the before and after, as well as with the immediacy of the event, its singularity. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), though not explicitly a 9/11 novel except for the fact that perhaps it had the *misfortune* of being published after the event, takes on a different task within post-9/11 discourse, namely that of portraying a post-disaster world. In it, the world in which the two protagonists, a father and his little boy, live is that of *now* and the *before* lives only in recollection. The loss is *built into* that world. In the aftermath of a great fire whose ignition point remains unspecified, the world is a "valley of ashes" made universal. Perhaps this is why I refer to McCarthy's novel as the "post-post-9/11 novel" because, as opposed to some of the narratives I discuss in this part of my dissertation, this is the only one that manages to fathom a return to a pre-apocalyptic time by denying at the same time the

possibility to perform that return without the knowledge of the loss occasioned by the event that caused the cataclysm.

The indeterminacy of the disaster that affects the world portrayed in *The Road* and turns it into a wasteland is *at least* one of the main reasons why the novel fits so comfortably into the category of 9/11 novels. The novel's "grounding in apocalyptic trauma," Holloway suggests, "made the novel's many poetic resonances with 9/11 and the war on terror explicit and unavoidable" (2008, 110). It is a novel that permits this sort of interpretation because, as Gray suggests in his analysis of the book, McCarthy "both says and remains silent" (Gray 2011, 39) about the true nature of the cataclysm. Yet, following this line of reasoning Gray also reductively attributes McCarthy's silence on the matter to the nature of the novel's topic. Trauma, Gray argues in this sense, needs to be approached "by circuitous means, by indirection", and McCarthy does just this, up to the point where the novel becomes "a symbolic narrative, a powerful but also slippery tale of something, some trauma that seems to resist telling" (Gray 2011, 40). Yet, Gray's focus on the notion of trauma is also an easy way of attaching a signifier to McCarthy's silence about the catastrophe as well as an interpretation that only proves the persistence of 9/11 as a *primal scene*. Akin to the art critics who saw the 9/11 survivor in Burden's "little mutant" and the viewers who might see a similar survivor in Segal's *Woman on a Park Bench*, Gray is also interpreting an indeterminacy as a metaphoric take on an event that is otherwise culturally available to fill and resolve that indeterminacy.

The novel is also, I believe, subtly armed against this somewhat oblique mode of interpretation, which, in a way, is perhaps McCarthy's silent warning against interpreting everything from the vantage point of something that is readily available in the mind of critics and readers alike. *The Road* is first and foremost a novel that plays heavily on several indeterminacies, which, due to their frequency and the stubbornness with which reoccur *as* indeterminacies, might seem like a subtle signal against the novel's lack of a central signifier and hence of its openness to interpretation.

Following this reasoning, it is almost as if the broad aperture that the novel construes and maintains throughout the narrative instructs its readers to be guarded against an excess of interpretation. In the end, the fact that the catastrophe is so far removed from the characters' knowledge and understanding, might be a commentary

on how certain conflicts affect even those who do not play a direct part in the unfolding of those conflicts. Military conflicts overseas, for instance, might seem distant but they equally affect our lives directly or indirectly, most of the times without us realizing, and, in a way, McCarthy's novel does seem to point to the somewhat *ethereal* nature of the catastrophe, in the sense that the protagonists, akin to our own experience of conflicts overseas, suffer the consequences of that catastrophe but not the catastrophe itself.

The first signs of the calamity that the novel records are the clocks that stop at 1:17 and the "long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (McCarthy 2010, 54). No signs of mounting violence that could lead to it, no talk of trouble, even before the event the world recorded seems incredibly quiet and uneventful. We are only told about the "dull rose glow in the window glass" that followed the "long shear of light" (2010, 54). Though distant the event is still present and is altering the reality, prompting the characters to action. The man switches on the light, but the power is already down, so the next thing he does is to fill the bathtub with water in case that system fails as well. To use a notion developed by Marc Redfield in *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror*, McCarthy seems to point at the event's "spectrality" (2009, 6) or the "virtual" nature of the trauma inflicted by the event (2009, 2). Though not seen on TV akin to the intense mediatization of 9/11, the disaster in McCarthy's novel is still somewhat mediated, its signs projected not on a TV screen but on another screen, that of the window glass. At this point in the narrative, to follow Redfield's reasoning, the event's trauma is still "virtual", where "'virtual' intends to suggest the trembling of an event on the edge of becoming present: one that is not fully or not properly 'actual'" (2009, 2). The signs are there, but the acute outcomes of the event are still always on the verge of happening.

The "virtual nature" of the event is equally reinforced by the fact that *The Road* is first and foremost a work of fiction. Akin to war literature, the literature of disaster can, as Lynne Hanley suggests in *Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory* (1991), misrepresent the event not only by manipulating facts but also, and most importantly, "by promoting a false sense of security" (Hanley 1991, 5). "However vivid and gripping the account," Hanley further explains, "a reader's experience of [the event] will never include one of [the event's] most definitive emotions: the immediate and entirely legitimate fear of losing one's life, limbs, or senses, or of seeing the person next to one

lose his" (1991, 5). One thing a disastrous event is not is "settling down in an easy chair with a good book" (1991, 5). From this point of view, McCarthy's novel seems to somewhat radicalize this view by denying his readers the comfort of a complete picture. If the protagonists of the novel are removed from the cause of the disaster, then we as readers are further removed from it through the many layers of indeterminacy that operate inside McCarthy's novel. To us, the 'true nature' of the events, if such a nature is graspable, is even more *virtualized*.

To a certain extent and besides the many indeterminacies that surround it, the disastrous event in *The Road* refuses to be contextualized. Albeit the past does come back in the momentary flashes of the father, the only one having the mental resources to recall a meaningful past, we are never told about a time *before* the great fire started. The occasional recollections of the past that the father has are free-floating and they interdigitate with the mass of images from the present. They lack a temporal and spatial frame that could situate them in a context that is beyond their mere occurrence. The fire appears at one point, and it gathers biblical momentum. This *erasure of context* for the cataclysmic event, combined with the novel's *erasure of locality*, falls well in line with the notion of *selfish event*: the absence of a precise signifier makes it the perfect contender for a relocation of cultural weight between the fire in McCarthy's novel and 9/11. In this sense, the fire is also akin to the one referred to in the title of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, the one that was promised after the flood. At the same time, and in line with this biblical background, the novel also "recasts one of the iconic images of American literature, the journey" (Gray 2011, 36) under a different light:

> The journey here is not a linear progress, from the East to the West, a liberatory flight from the old to the new as in the classic American Western. It is a turning back, from the North to the South, across an unobstructed space that triggers, not a sense of freedom but a feeling of empty immensity. This is a landscape that denies definition, distinction; and it gives the sense that beyond the indeterminacy and vacancy of the immediate surrounds, the grey wastes that confront father and son in the course of their travels, there is only more vacancy, more empty space. (Gray 2011, 36)

The grayness that pervades the landscape is what makes it so hard to define, and though the two protagonists do carry a map the names of the places they travel through is never specified. There is a certain stubbornness to the narrative when it

comes to indicating names of places. Although the two characters stay on the roads for long periods of time road signs go unnoticed, or they have been modified to reflect the geography of the time: billboards that had been whited out to warn people away and which became "a pale palimpsest of advertisements for goods which no longer existed" (McCarthy 2010, 135). At night, the boy sits by the fire studying the maps, and we are told that "[he] had the names of towns and rivers by heart and he measured their progress daily" (2010, 229). Yet, we are never told the names of those towns and rivers as if the journey described in the novel is one that McCarthy did not want to popularize. If fans of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* could retrace the famous journey from east to west, a similar endeavor could not be undertaken in this case.

The narrative also lacks any kind of landmarks except for the sea at the end of the novel. The buildings the two protagonists encounter are as nondescript as the ash that covers them and include houses, such as the house where the father grew up in (2010, 24), and looted supermarkets. The cities the two characters pass through are obliterated by the grayness of the ash, showing no signs of life. "Cars in the street caked with ash," the narrator describes, "everything covered with ash and dust" (McCarthy 2010, 11). Ground zero, the one where Neudecker found himself on the day of the event, is here extended indefinitely, to its ultimate consequences. The only names of places recorded by the narrative are Tenerife, where the ship, *Pájaro de Esperanza*, the father ransacks in search of food originates, and London, inscribed on the Hezzaninth marine sextant he finds on the ship. A third name appears on an advertisement on a log barn that the two see on their way south. "See Rock City," the advertisement silently screams in "faded ten-foot letters" (2010, 20). Akin to the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), these signs are more like side-comments on the scenery rather than sources of information.

The subtle commentary the novel proffers on these three quasi-accidental references is almost anti-capitalist. Tenerife might have once stirred images of luxurious white beaches on bright summer days while the antiquated brass Hezzaninth sextant from London might have recalled a measurable world. Both mental images stand in stark contrast with the world described in McCarthy's novel. The beach the two characters arrive at is gray, "with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden and the distant sound of it. Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of" (McCarthy 2010, 230). There is no trace of the

blueness promised by the maps that the boy studies by the fire. The sextant is of no use to the man as if the world is not worth measuring any longer. When the boy asks his father whether there is something beyond the sea the father replies that there is "nothing" beyond it, or that perhaps "there's a father and his little boy and they're sitting on the beach" (2010, 231). In McCarthy's biblical imagination the rest of the world mirrors the same barren landscape and quest for survival.

The color of the ash itself is indicative of an indeterminate place that has lost its features. Somewhere between white and black, it might suggest not only a loss of distinguishing features but also a limbo. Akin to the bubble of dust portrayed by DeLillo, the landscape McCarthy imagines is the ultimate representation of that erasure of locality to which *The Road* adds an *erasure of temporality*. As the father wakes up one indeterminate morning, he studies the country to the south and sees it "[barren], silent, godless," a description that precedes other indeterminacies. "He thought the month was October," the narrator adds, "but he wasn't sure. He hadnt [sic] kept a calendar for years" (McCarthy 2010, 2). The titles of the volumes they discover in a house go unmentioned, their only features being their dampness and rotting (2010, 138). The titles and the words probably register with the protagonists, yet it is as if they have long ceased to matter. What does seem to register with the father and to matter under the circumstances is, for instance, is a can of Coca-Cola, which he finds blocked inside a vending machine (McCarthy 2010, 22). It is almost as if an explanation of the world, one that would be proffered by books, is no longer needed. The world has been finally liberated from the tyranny of thought and what remains is pure instinct and necessity.

The structure of the narrative is as indeterminate as the landscape the two characters behold along the way. McCarthy does not opt for a division into chapters, and the only respite from the toothless terror of the ever-expanding grayness are the short breaks between some of the paragraphs. The entire novel is one long stream of undifferentiated days, punctuated only by disturbing dreams, hunger and the occasional discoveries and encounters with other survivors. The few lines of dialogue we find in the novel often go unattributed as if what is being said lacks any kind of agency or direction. These dialogues, the novel seems to suggest, are not meant to be heard of recorded because that would be futile. By the time the narration starts the world had long ceased to engage in any kind of meaning-making activities, and though

the father still maintains the tradition of telling stories to the child at bedtime, "stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (McCarthy 2010, 42), that activity becomes futile as well, rejected by the child himself. "Those stories are not true," the child tells the father after a violent episode in which the father gets hurt and kills another man, "in the stories we're always helping people and we dont [sic] help people" (2010, 287). The reality portrayed in those stories is no longer compatible with the reality the two protagonists must face on a daily basis.

The stories of "courage and justice" (2010, 42), like the dreams "so rich in color" of the vanished world that return in the form of temptations (2010, 20), are inadequate because they do not reflect reality anymore as they do not make any moral prescriptions or simplifications. When the father asks the child to reverse the roles or storyteller and listener and tell him a story instead, the boy almost admonishes the father. The boy's stories are "more like real life" (2010, 287) while the father's stories are not. And while the father's dreams are brightening with color, a symptom of a death he warned the boy against, the child's dreams increasingly showcase the impossibility of reconstructing the world without the loss suffered in the ambiguous cataclysm the world had experienced. When asked about his dreams the boy retorts "nothing" (2010, 194). The child cannot imagine another world beyond the vast wasteland that surrounds them. The greyness of the world has seeped into his imagination.

2.3.1. The Post-Nuclear Family

This generational gap between the father and the child has serious implications in McCarthy's novel, and its unfolding is mostly visible as the narration advances. In fact, Holloway argues, *The Road* is structured in a way that emphasizes simultaneously "both the young child's awful vulnerability to the predations of the post-apocalypse (extreme cold, starvation, illness, rape, slavery, cannibalism) and the likely death of the father who protects him" (Holloway 2008, 110). In the critic's view, the novel heightens "to an almost unbearable degree, the genre's central concern with children/citizens divested of parental/state protection" (2008, 110–11). The state is no longer active, it has lost its ability to provide security to its citizens, and the father, who somewhat takes on the duties of the failed state, is threatening to die in the process. And while the father invests the child with a sort of messianic nature ("If he

is not the word of God, God never spoke."), a gesture that betrays his belief into a higher power, the child imagines a world that is built with destruction in mind. Towards the end of the novel, as the man is fixing dinner, the child builds a small village in the sand, complete with a rational "grid of streets" (McCarthy 2010, 261). Yet, even before the father tells him, the boy knows that the small village is going to get washed away by the sea. In other words, the boy no longer needs to be told by an adult how the world works. The most revealing episode in this sense is when the man discovers an underground shelter filled with food and other vital supplies and, in his dreams, he is visited "by creatures of a kind he'd never seen before":

> Maybe be understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he. He tried to remember the dream, but he could not. All that was left was the feeling of it. He thought perhaps they'd come to warn him. Of what? That he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own. (McCarthy 2010, 163)

The boy is then a harbinger of a generation that could not imagine the world otherwise, of a generation that must live, to use DeLillo's phrase, "in the ruins of the future" (DeLillo 2001), just as in a post-9/11 world we could not imagine a world without this event. When the father carves a flute and gives it to the boy, the music that comes out of it is like "formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin" (McCarthy 2010, 81). In its formlessness, the music does not stand out from the formlessness of the surrounding ash-covered environment. In the throes of this formless music, the boy "seemed some sad and solitary changeling child announcing the arrival of a traveling spectacle in shire and village who does not know that behind him the players have all been carried off by wolves" (2010, 81). And though the signs of the event itself might be subtler in the lives of the readers, the enormity of it somehow removed from the trenches of daily life, McCarthy imagines a world in which the signs are palpable, breathable even.

Family matters, it seems, constitute a nagging preoccupation of the post-9/11 novel. Foer, DeLillo, McCarthy, they all take a shot at it in their novels, as if it was a prerequisite for being accepted in the 9/11 fiction club. When Pankaj Mishra, writing for *The Guardian*, adds Ken Kalfus' novel *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006) to

the list of 9/11 novels that tackle family matters, the rhetorical question that he asks, as a side note, comes as no surprise. "Are we meant to think of domestic discord," Mishra broods, "as a metaphor for post-9/11 America?" (Mishra 2007) Yes, besides this preoccupation with how "privileged Americans absorb and respond to trauma" (Keeble n.d.), as Arin Keeble puts it in a quick survey of post-9/11 literature for *The Independent*, deep down, these narratives are also strewn with the guilt of an older generation that secretly thinks of having destroyed something that cannot be made whole again. And this surreptitious guilt is most pervasive in McCarthy's novel.

"What emerges most powerfully as one reads *The Road*", Michael Chabon argues in his review of the novel for *The New York Review of Books*, "is not a prognosticatory or satirical warning about the future, or a timeless parable of a father's devotion to his son", but rather the fact that the novel is essentially "a testament to the abyss of a parent's greatest fears. The fear of leaving your child alone, of dying before your child has reached adulthood and learned to work the mechanisms and face the dangers of the world, or found a new partner to face them with" (Chabon 2007). What the father finds most difficult to do throughout the novel is to smother "[the] fear of one day being obliged for your child's own good, for his peace and comfort, to do violence to him or even end his life" (Chabon 2007). This ever-present fear, argues Chabon, extends well beyond the temporal barriers of the present moment and further amplifies the generational gap that the novel brings to the fore. The father fears, "as every parent fears – that you have left your children a world more damaged, more poisoned, more base and violent and cheerless and toxic, more doomed, than the one you inherited" (Chabon 2007). Which is most likely the main reason why McCarthy's novel, albeit vague with regards to the cataclysmic event that it portrays, was immediately labeled a post-9/11 novel and included in the canon. The novel portrays the vague fears of an older generation at having left behind a world in which their younger peers could not get on a plane without thinking about what happened on 9/11. Although the fear might be unconscious, it is still present.

However, this is not the only instance that McCarthy uses to comment upon this generational gap. Well into the novel, the boy and the father watch from a distance as a group of people, whom the man later denominates as "the bad guys" (2010, 97), travel along the same road:

> An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. […] The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry. […] Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each. (McCarthy 2010, 96)

The group's social structure is visible from the outset, and its murderous intent is inscribed in the way the members of this group look and act, and though this might be a social structure that we would deeply resent in Western societies, it is one that accurately reflects the hierarchical needs of a society that has been stripped bare of any civil feelings. It is also the kind of social structure that the father does want the boy to see because, given the underage status of the latter, the image would have serious repercussions on the boy's view of the world. Yet, McCarthy's description also points out, almost akin to Shreve's remark from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* which imagines a future in which everyone will have "sprung from the loins of African kings" (Faulkner 1995, 378), a sobering glimpse at a future of conflict. The children of the few pregnant women in the phalanx, like the father's boy, will not only inherit an earth depleted of its resources but will carry on the social structure imposed on them by their parents. Perhaps that is why the father asks the boy to cover his eyes and not look at the passing horde. The description of the "phalanx," with its visible social structure and intent, recalls the description of the "legion of horribles…clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream" (2015, 48) from McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

At the opposite side of the spectrum, namely where "the good guys" would fit, is another type of itinerant family, described in more modest terms yet also seen from a distance, this time with no explicit request for viewer discretion:

> They came down the road and crossed the bridge. Three men and a woman. The woman walked with a waddling gait and as she approached, he could see that she was pregnant. The men carried packs on their backs and the woman carried a small cloth suitcase. All of them wretchedlooking beyond description. Their breath steaming softly. They crossed the bridge and continued on down the road and vanished one by one into the waiting darkness. (McCarthy 2010, 208)

In stark contrast to the other group, this one has no visible social structure, as they do not seem to nurture any aggressive nature. It is a group that does not inspire fear, on the contrary, they seem, akin to the illclothed catamites, ill-suited for the kind of environment in which they find themselves. Yet, this other family's way of life somehow rings true to the father, albeit he is still being very cautious about revealing himself and the boy to them. Like the boy and his father, these other transients have not succumbed to the benefits of living in a bigger group which could have perhaps made their chances of survival increase exponentially because that other group's view of the world automatically devalues and dehumanizes that survival. The power system put into effect by "the bad guys," as the father keeps defining them, takes survival in a literal sense to the point where they even devour each other to survive. The father and the boy get a sense of the goriness of their lifestyle when they come across one of their headquarters and discover a basement where they kept humans akin to livestock for slaughter. Even well before that, the two encounter another itinerant group of "bad guys" that almost gets them killed.

When it comes to the bad guys, the father has no qualms about showing his contempt for their lifestyle even when things go from bad to worse and he comes to realize the gravity of the situation. Food and fresh water are scarce, and they are running out of options, their bodies emaciated, consumed by the hunger that is a constant threat to their existence, the progress of that hunger made particularly evident by the changes the father notices in the boy's body. "Taut face and hollow eyes," the father painfully depicts the boy's face, "[a] strange beauty" (2010, 108), "like something out of a deathcamp. Starved, exhausted, sick with fear" (2010, 123). And later, "[the] boy's candlecolored skin was all but translucent," the narration recounts, "[with] his great staring eyes he'd the look of an alien" (2010, 137). It is particularly here, in this context of reduced comfort and bodily despair, the world shrunk down to "a raw core of parsible entities" (2010, 93) that *The Road* takes moral undertones as it reduces the world to a convenient *us-versus-them* dichotomy that falls in line with the kind of atmosphere that took shape in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. At times, the tone adopted by the narration is almost biblical particularly when one of the "bad guys" is confronted up close:

> Eyes collared in cups of grime and deeply sunk. Like an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes. He wore a beard that had been cut square across

> the bottom with shears and he had a tattoo of a bird on his neck done by someone with an illformed notion of their appearance. He was lean, wiry, rachitic. Dressed in a pair of filthy blue coveralls and a black billcap with the logo of some vanished enterprise embroidered across the front of it. (2010, 65)

It is as if the moral depravity of the individual described has seeped out from the pores of this man's skin; as if there is no disconnection between an evil core and the wretched appearance of the individual. When the father revisits the episode later the individual whom he shoots and whose remains he finds devoured by his companions, the "bad guy" almost takes the shape of the biblical snake. "My brother at last," the man thinks, "[the] reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh" (2010, 79). To put it differently, and to use Colin McGinn's "aesthetic theory of virtue," the "bad guys" in McCarthy's narrative "act as visible embodiments of evil, by way of the idea that evil is a form of ugliness. If the evil spirit were to become visible, *this* is how it would look – as 'ugly as sin'" (McGinn 1999, 144). Their arrival on the scene is announced by the sound of their coughing and the rumble of what sounded like a diesel truck. Following this line of reasoning, the evil otherness represented by the "bad guys" becomes a "reification of the soul made ugly through vice and innate depravity" (McGinn 1999, 145). Their outer life is one with their inner life.

Matters stand slightly different with the other group the two protagonists see during their journey. The essential difference between the two groups, the narrative seems to suggest, is in the way the members of those groups choose to carry on living. There is a stubbornness with regards to that choice on the part of both groups, yet that stubbornness takes different forms. While in the case of the "bad guys" their outer appearance, as McGinn explains, was a "reification of the soul made ugly" (1999, 145), in the case of the alleged "good guys" the wretchedness of their appearance does not seem to reflect their inner lives. There is a silence to their passage that stands in stark contrast to the "rattle and flap" (2010, 64) of the truck with which the bad guys arrive. The only sound that they make is the one suggested by "their breath steaming softly" (2010, 208). And while in the case of the bad guys the wretchedness of their appearance feels like a just punishment, it does not seem so in the case of the good guys. In the case of the latter, their shabby appearance feels as if it has been unjustly forced upon them. The "good guys," such as the father and his boy, feel as if "in the history of the

world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime" (2010, 33). The good guys are also keenly aware of the wretchedness of their situation.

The father feels a certain kinship toward the latter group of people not only because of the way they act but also because he somehow sees in it an echo of his own lost family. As opposed to the pregnant woman he sees with the group of "good guys," his wife and the mother of his child refused to carry the fire further and disappears into nothingness. Her image comes only in flashes. In one heated discussion recalled by the father in one of his moments of reflection, the mother begged the father to put an end to their lives. "We're the walking dead in a horror film," the mother admonishes the father, "[sooner] or later they will catch us, and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont [sic] face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen" (2010, 57–58). There is no argument against the mother's admonition because the nothingness outside does not offer any hope of relief, the damages inflicted on the world by the cataclysm are irreparable. "And she was right," the man thinks shortly after her departure, "[there] was no argument. The hundred nights they'd sat up arguing the pros and cons of self-destruction with the earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall" (2010, 60). The sight of this other itinerant group, however, seems to offer a glimpse of hope.

Seen from the perspective of this Manichean division between *us and them*, the novel can almost be regarded as one of those stories of courage and justice that seem so suspect to the boy. This is even more evident when the father insistently reminds the boy that they could not possibly die because they were "the good guys" and that they were "carrying the fire" (2010, 87, 136). Like in any traditional narrative, the good guy always gets the prize and is rewarded with the alleged happily-ever-after. Yet, again, McCarthy's ambivalence and silence with regards to certain aspects of the story, tampers with a definitive interpretation of the "fire" that is being carried by the two. If we were to ground our interpretation in this *us-versus-them* dichotomy, the fire in this case would stand for a type of lifestyle that still maintains, despite the hardships of their day-to-day life, a certain decency and morality. The father and the boy act morally because they have not succumbed to cannibalism and because, occasionally, they give a helping hand to those in need. They offer food and conversation, for instance, to Ely, the old man whom they encounter shortly after they leave the supply-packed underground shelter that saved their lives. They do not attack or murder other

people unless the situation requires it, and only when their own lives are under threat. When everyone else, including the mother of the boy, seems to have given up on humanity, the man holds on to the somewhat sacred belief that there is still a good world the boy might help to build in the future.

Yet, the fire that they carry can also be an echo of the other fire, the one that had consumed the world and reduced them to their current condition. Lurking behind the love and protection that the father swears to offer to his child there is also a sense that it is this very blind belief in the goodness at the heart of their beings that might have led them to this situation in the first place. Reinforcing this interpretation is the vagueness of both fires mentioned in the novel. The tangible fire that turned the world to ashes lacks context and scope as well as causes and a fathomable outcome. In the same vein, the fire the boy and his father carry lacks a clear definition. Is it the moral position that the two characters occupy in their quest? Is it the survival of an allegedly moral species that the father so stubbornly tries to protect? Is the novel constructing a narrative in which physical hardship then leads to a spiritual epiphany? If so, what is that spiritual epiphany? That one must persevere in one's beliefs no matter what? The idea of "carrying the fire" is part and parcel of the grand narrative that the father forges for the entertainment of the boy. It is the story that holds suspended the looming death drive embodied in the one bullet that is left in the father's gun. Albeit the man never specifies what this fire consists of, Chabon argues in this sense, "from this hopeful fiction or hopeless truth the boy seems to intuit a promise: that life will not always be thus; that it will improve, that beauty and purpose, sunlight and green plenty will return; in short that everything is going to be 'okay,' a word which both characters endlessly repeat to each other, touching it compulsively like a sore place or a missing tooth" (Chabon 2007). The father's stubbornness in repeating the phrase over and over again is akin to a form of cognitive behavioral therapy; it provides the child with the mental tools to overcome the despair that pervades the grey world around him.

To a certain extent, McCarthy denies his readers a definitive answer to these questions. At the end of the novel, that almost religious belief in "carrying the fire" (Into what? Where?) seems rather misplaced. When a man approaches the boy after the death of his father and the boy asks him whether he is carrying the fire as well the man says that the boy might be "kind of weirded out" (2010, 303). However, in the end,

the boy's narrative aligns with that of the man, who is part of another group and who invites him to come along. The narrative also tells of a woman who embraces him and talks to him about God, two gestures that close the circle of the narrative with the boy's return to a maternal embrace and to a constant reminder of his father: "He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt [sic] forget" (2010, 306).

In these final pages, the image of the father overlaps with that of God and the novel ends on a religious note. In fact, throughout the novel, the father resembles the figure of Christ when he falls prey to doubt and almost curses God's name (2010, 120). After their first encounter with the bad guys, the father tells the boy that he had been "appointed by God" to take care of him (2010, 80). Particularly striking in this sense is a short fragment in the second half of the novel in which a divine voice, as if coming out of nowhere and as if it is the voice of temptation itself, questions the purposefulness of the man's moral stand. "Do you think your fathers are watching," the voice goes, "[that] they weigh you in their ledgerbook?" (2010, 209) The answer to those questions goes hand in hand with the moral ambient embodied in the bearing of the "bad guys": "There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground" (2010, 209). Since all moral laws and any sense of decency have been suspended there is no use in following them anymore. The woman in whose embrace the boy returns, and who somehow rebalances the moral scope of the novel, also tells him that "the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (2010, 306), a statement that, in my view, also includes the "bad guys" since they, too, hold "the breath of God" in their lungs.

In contrast with the religiousness of the "older generation" embodied in the figure of the father is the boy's subtle atheism, or rather, secularism, and his fear of not doing the right thing. The novel performs in this sense, as David Roman argues in an essay published by the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, an "ethical game" whose master puppeteer is the boy rather than the father. If for most of the survivors in the novel, and particularly in the case of the "bad guys," life or death has become the binary upon which the new world is founded, the boy "wants to keep some semblance of humanity. He wants to stick to the old rules, when stealing, cannibalism, rape, and murder were serious breaches of the existing order" (Roman n.d.). Yet, this ethical drive of the son does not stem from a belief in God or any other religious figure. Those figures are as

distant from him as the prelapsarian world he did not get to see after his birth. "By not clinging to his religion," Roman argues in the same essay, "and abstaining from using God's law as a cover for the ethical impulse, the son cuts a more appealing figure for the average modern reader" (Roman n.d.). Since he is the harbinger of a new generation, the "ethical game" envisioned by the novel is "to ensure that the next civilization to emerge from the ruins of the blight is not built by those who have survived by savagery" (Roman n.d.). From this point of view, *The Road* also envisions future conflict, a clash between those who, akin to the boy, have been raised with a moral compass, and those who, like the "bad guys," have taken survival by its most literal meaning.

The final paragraph of the novel is a sort of genesis of the world but in reverse, a genesis that is alluded to a couple of times in the novel. "[Beyond] the numbness and the dull despair" that the father feels at times, he also feels that the world around them is "shrinking down" to a core, "[the] names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true" (McCarthy 2010, 93). As opposed to Adam and Eve who, in Genesis 1:28, are given dominion over the animals and plants that surround them, in the novel that process if reversed. In the novel, unnaming is a way of losing that dominion. Yet, McCarthy chooses to end the novel with a vivid image of the "vanished world" as the father calls it throughout the narrative, an image that not only reconstructs that lost past but also suggests that the beauty of that world contained its demise. The "trout in the streams of the mountains" bear on their backs "vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (2010, 307).

The reversed genesis is yet another symptom of the *diplopia* engendered by the selfish event, as the outward gaze is directed inwardly. The indeterminacy of the world outside, its features blurred by the ever-present ash that covers everything, is placed in contrast with the internal life of the father, perhaps the only conscience in the novel to which we are offered access. As the world is reduced to its essentials (survival that requires no embellishments, no system of choice), its inner mechanics are revealed. If in *Blood Meridian*, for instance, nature appears oblivious to the plight of man and follows its deadly rhythms, here too, this absent nature seems to impinge on the

individual by forcing it to gaze inwardly, at a mental landscape that is as bleak as the one on the outside. McCarthy also enhances this doubling of the gaze by performing a narrative feat that makes the novel itself gaze inwardly. Holloway argues in this sense that the novel, albeit replete with literary clichés such as "the wasteland, civilisations in ashes, the endless road, the child as repository of goodness, hope, innocence," McCarthy uses those very clichés to make a point against the proliferation of apocalyptic imagery in Western culture. "McCarthy's real achievement," Holloway adds, "was to evoke prevailing sensibilities with such poetic poignancy by infusing hackneyed tropes with resonant meaning and fresh emotional depth" (Holloway 2008, 111).

The Road is in this sense a meditation on the genre itself, which at the same time points to the kind of trap writers of post-apocalyptic fiction might fall into as they tackle the topic. McCarthy, akin to the father who disregards the mother's choice, which seems the most appropriate given the current conditions, seems to be repeatedly pondering on how to end things. The author himself, Chabon claims in his review,

> is ensnared and his hell undone by the paradox that lies at the heart of every story of apocalypse. The only true account of the world after a disaster as nearly complete and as searing as the one McCarthy proposes, drawing heavily on the 'nuclear winter' scenario first proposed by Carl Sagan and others, would be a book of blank pages, white as ash. But to annihilate the world in prose one must simultaneously write it into being. (Chabon 2007)

To be able to say that the trees were dead, and the leaves turned to ashes as the crushed them in between his fingers is to build this new world on the foundations of that previous one, where trees and magnolias were still possible. One must have that world first to make it dead.

The voice in this last paragraph of the novel is akin to the divine voice that almost tempts the father into succumbing to the defective moral code of the new world. It is the voice of the narrative itself that speaks here. The mysteries that it alludes to, and which have been unveiled violently in the cataclysm, might suggest, on the one hand, that any attempt, be it peaceful or forceful, to unveil the workings of the world, has dire consequences on the mysteries themselves, and that a quest, such as the one the son and the father perform, must be undertaken to restore the balance between good

and evil. On the other hand, they also suggest that whatever the nature of the unveiling cataclysm, a point of no return has been reached. The mysteries that held the world together cannot be reconstructed because any reconstruction would have to account for that loss, which is embedded into whatever structure, social, political, or cultural, might come after that loss. Yet, this is not the first time this notion comes to the fore. Throughout the novel, the father alludes to the images that cannot be removed once they have been placed there. "What you put in your head," the father warns the child, "is there forever" (2010, 203). In McCarthy's novel, the "persistence in the mind" that Peter Eleey refers to in his catalogue essay for MoMA's *September 11* exhibition, is made tangible, yet not in the sense of creating an image that makes a reference to the events themselves but rather in the sense of imagining a world in which reality itself bears within it the signs *and* the symptoms of the event.

2.4. Apocalypse Then, Utopia Now: James Howard Kunstler's *World Made by Hand*

One of the few novels that have not yet been included in the post-9/11 imaginarium, and as such has been mostly disregarded by literary critics, is James Howard Kunstler's *World Made by Hand* (2008). The reasons for this exclusion are yet unclear, since Kunstler's novel tackles themes analogous to many reputed post-9/11 novels, but as this chapter will show, the way in which Kunstler approaches the topic has a minimal affinity with that of other post-9/11 novels. Akin to McCarthy's *The Road*, Kunstler's novel portrays a post-disaster American society, a portrayal that is much more accurate than that in McCarthy's novel. Part of the reason why Kunstler's novel has been ousted from the post-9/11 canon may be that while most of those post-9/11 novels imagine a world mired in post-traumatic melancholy, *World Made by Hand* portrays a world stuck in a nostalgia for the unappeasable luxury of a capitalist system that could not imagine its own demise. Kunstler's novel is also a story of abandon and surrender, the kind of mindset that was not entirely attractive to those who still shuddered at the sight of an airplane flying low. The characters in the novel are no longer seeking for the culprits behind the cataclysm that shattered their world to pieces and instead have settled into a kind of numbing scenario that still maintains a semblance to their previous lives. What is more, the novel's "eco-millenarian" perspective, as Paul Greenberg calls it in his review of the novel for the "Sunday Book Review" of *The New*

York Times, does not seem to fit with the kind of gloomy vision of the world that critics of post-9/11 literature expected (P. Greenberg 2008), as it does not seem to be unusually open to interpretations based on trauma theory.

Trauma is present in the characters' recollections, but it never gains momentum, and it never leads to self-destructive behavior. On the contrary, the protagonists of the novel insist on a rebuttal of any kind of return, traumatic or otherwise, to a moment before the cataclysm that reduced the world, not to ashes, but to a pastoral society where all people were turned into laborers. This rebuttal, however, does not stem from the fact that the protagonists have been turned into "peasants" and they are thus unhappy with the current state of things, but rather from the fact that they have come to terms with the impossibility of regaining what was lost in the cataclysm except by hard work and inventiveness. "It's not healthy to obsess about the past," Robert Earle, the protagonist, tells Loren, the Reverend of their community (Kunstler 2009, 2). Merely thinking about the past, about "how well the world used to work and how much we'd lost" (2009, 4) is a chilling prospective. The community in which Robert Earle and Loren live is one where a certain balance has been restored, and people relate to each other through mutual exchange. To them, the past is no longer an attractive destination but a place to avoid because it only brings pain and suffering.

In Kunstler's novel, the past is not altogether absent. It resurfaces repetitively enough, yet it does so only for the sake of comparison. "In the early twenty-first century," the narrator recalls, "[we] got our food from the supermarket, and not everybody cared where the supermarket got it as long as it was there on the shelves" (2009, 5). Farming all but died out to make way for capitalist endeavors. "Now, in the new times," the narrator explains a couple of lines down the page, "[farming] was back. That was the only way we got food" (2009, 5). The stark contrast between the two societies, one incredibly ruthless in its ways of satisfying the growing needs of an ever-growing population, the other meek and deeply marked by penury, is emphasized even more when, on their way back home from fishing, Loren and Robert encounter a man named Brother Jobe who offers to pay a thousand dollars for the insignificant amount of fish Loren managed to capture. "The old persuader," as Brother Jobe refers to money, has lost its persuading powers in these "new times," yet people still pretend that it has value. "A dollar isn't what it used to be," Robert tells Brother Jobe when he

offers to buy his fish as well (2009, 10). Albeit dollars have no value, people still pretend that they might regain their value in the future and so continue to use and amass them.

Another possible reason lurking behind the novel's exclusion from the canon might be that, as Greenberg argues, literary utopias such as Kunstler's novel tend to resurface "when an appropriate niche opens up," and the post-9/11 atmosphere created such a niche. Therefore, *World Made by Hand* might be regarded as the result of socio-political and economic forces much broader than those triggered by the terrorist attacks because in the world portrayed by the novel the terrorist bombings that wipe out Washington and Los Angeles go hand in hand with the end of oil and with the intense political unrest in the Middle East. These terrorist attacks represent only the tipping point that led to a failure of the state as well as to a loss of the technological advantage the US had on both domestic and international levels. In fact, at times the novel seems like a fictional rendition of the things Kunstler discusses in his nonfiction work *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century* (2005), which by and large speculates on the cataclysmic repercussions of a possible decline in oil production at a global level. The notion that the attacks were a mere tipping point into a more extensive scheme that could not be entirely blamed on the terrorists is also reminiscent of the kind of view that intellectuals such as Susan Sontag held and professed in their writings but were never entirely accepted by the general public. As I have argued earlier, selfish events tend to prescribe how they are represented by sanctioning those representations/views that do not maintain a certain tone or venture on paths that are discursively inaccessible.

In Kunstler's universe, the American state is still present, but only as an idea, and citizens have taken upon themselves the task to recreate a sense of community at a local level. State symbols, as expected, are invaded by vegetation, and a sense of quiet resignation pervades the atmosphere:

> The once meticulously groomed grounds of the state capitol building, an impressive limestone heap in the Second Empire style, were now choked with box elders, sumacs, and other woody shrubs. Knapweed, vetch, and blue chicory sprouted from the cracks between the broad front steps where a few ill-nourished layabouts sat listlessly surveying the scene. Inside the grand old building, every surface had been stripped down to the bare masonry. Carpets, draperies, chestnut wainscoting, metal fixtures, all gone, probably long gone. The stink of urine and excrement told the rest of the story. (Kunstler 2009, 166)

The steps that Kunstler is taking in his narrative are huge, and perhaps that is also part of the problem. The ruins are already overgrown with weeds, and with this the reader is asked to make a giant leap of faith. The protagonists seem to have accepted their situation well before the actual narration of the story begins, and in a very short span of time. The action of the novel unfurls at a time when not much could be done about the terrorist attacks except look ahead and make do with whatever comes, including capricious weather. As opposed to the vast majority of post-9/11 novels, which featured almost obsessively that return to the events and their traumatic outcomes, Kunstler's book is fast-forwarding to a time that needed to be acknowledged perhaps at a later date. The novel's almost optimistic tones did not fit with the overall atmosphere of the period in which it was published.

The novel also describes a comfortable inertia, which did not quite fit with the overall post-9/11 atmosphere. The building of the capitol, overgrown with weeds, is a metaphor for both loss of faith in politics and inaction on the part of those who survived. The survivors set up communities and regulate their own lives according to the prevalent religious beliefs of those communities. "The lack of county code enforcement," the narration explains, "had a positive effect on the creative side of things there. Many of the trailers and cottages had totem poles in front too. Totem pole carving was something that seemed to have taken the place of TV and motor sports for them" (Kunstler 2009, 268). And while this lifestyle might seem attractive to some, it did not resonate with the post-9/11 atmosphere. In fact, the novel seems to be saying that the violent events have converted society into one in which capitalist pursuits, such as the ever-increasing accretion of wealth, are no longer valid. Kunstler imagines a world that no longer desires to grow in that sense but rather to continue existing for an unspecified purpose.

Kunstler's new world, however, evolves on a different level, one which is primarily religious. If on the physical scale the world has been downgraded, it becomes the optimal space for tightly knit groups, such as the New Faith brotherhood. In this sense, the novel almost sends out a warning. The liberal community in which Robert and reverend Loren live is functional, but besides a civic sense of duty towards the other there is nothing else keeping it together. Albeit Robert and the others make a credo out of the refusal to return, at least mentally, to a past before the disastrous attacks,

they do not seem to be envisioning a future for themselves or their community. Their only objective is to keep the community up and running, which means providing its inhabitants with the services that the state used to give them, services such as running water and primary healthcare. Clinical locutions such as depression, Robert explains at one point, had been dropped "because despair was a spiritual condition that was as real to us as the practical difficulties we struggled with in everyday life" (2009, 17). The imagination of the Union Grove inhabitants does not go beyond the immediate future and is predicated upon "the goodwill of the neighbors" (2009, 70). And in terms of demographics, Robert's community seems to be on the losing side. This is particularly evident in the way the women of the New Faith brotherhood are described:

> The New Faith women dressed differently than our people. They wore a kind of uniform: a long, herb-dyed linen shirt and a sun-bleached white muslin blouse buttoned primly at the throat. The only real difference between them was in the sleeves. Some long, some short, and some no sleeves. But their figures were on display despite the superficial modesty. They apparently did not wear anything in the way of underwear. Perhaps they dressed for the summer heat, but their muslin blouses were surprisingly sheer, and here and there, if one of them was standing in the light a certain way, you could see her figure outlined through the fabric. Our women were generally older, and despite the décolletage on display, and the variety of fabrics and styles they wore, they came off more modestly than the New Faithers. (2009, 211–12)

Despite the somberness of their attire and the repetitiveness of their appearance, these women seem much more attractive than the variegated women in Union Grove, where Robert is elected mayor. Robert is in the best position to notice these women: he is a former software company executive who lost his wife to encephalitis, a disease that could not have been treated under the circumstances, his daughter to a form of flu, and his son to the changing world, and has an affair with Jane Ann, the wife of his best friend, Reverend Loren. Much like Rayford Steele, the airline pilot from Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's *Left Behind* novel series, Robert is a man who has lost all his roots as well as his belongings and his faith in God. He is the embodiment of uprootedness. His religion is revealed only towards the end of the novel and when it is exposed, he is dismissive of it. From this perspective, in terms of genetic appeal and set of values, Robert Earle does not seem to be the man appropriate for the perpetuation of the species in a post-apocalyptic world.

In dystopian/utopian fashion, Robert Earle is akin to the visitor meant to help the reader navigate this new society. His comments, as well as his judgments, shape the way this new world is portrayed. And that might be another reason why Kunstler's novel did not gain momentum in the post-9/11 atmosphere. As opposed to novels such as DeLillo's *Falling Man* and even McCarthy's *The Road*, *World Made by Hand* adopts a point of view that besides being singular is also uncomfortably didactic, told in a strong masculine voice, one that does not quite resonate with the fragmentary and traumatized voices that emerged in the post-9/11 fictional world. When Shawn Watling, one of the men working on a farm is shot by Bunny, one of Wayne Karp's men, the people in the village decide to look the other way and ignore the situation. Shawn's wife is angry at her husband's death rather than being mournful, and Robert manages to notice all of these aspects and put them together in a description of the justice system:

> Surprisingly little curiosity was expressed about the incident that had left Shawn dead, once I had related what I knew two or three times and it got around to all present. It was eerie, a portentous signifier of our true social condition beyond the conventions of a funeral. Nobody wanted to disturb Wayne Karp and his bunch anymore that they would poke a nest of rattlesnakes with a stick. We all knew the apparatus of justice had dissolved. (2009, 57)

One particularly compelling episode that somewhat showcases Robert's sense of superiority regarding the new world is his encounter with Mrs. Raynor, a lonely woman who offers him and his associates a place to stay for the night. The woman promises them a feast of wine and lamb stew yet what they get is far from it:

> 'Potatoes and peas coming right up,' Mrs. Raynor said, and she came back in with two serving bowls. I took the one full of potatoes. It was not the least bit warm. I took one and put it on my plate. It was a rock. I passed to bowl left to Seth and he took his and so on. When the peas came around, I took a helping. It was grass. The lamb stew on our plates was watered up dirt: mud. Mrs. Raynor told us to dig in. I pantomimed eating and the rest did as I did, except Brother Minor, who could barely conceal his mirth. Of course, I did not regard this as a mirthful situation, and I doubt the others did either. (Kunstler 2009, 130)

In this reenactment of a family dinner, Robert seems to be the master of ceremonies, as he guides the other participants' actions and their emotional reactions. At times, he

seems to be lecturing the reader when he criticizes our pre-apocalyptic ways of life. When the narrator says at the very beginning of the novel, that "not everybody cared where the supermarket got [the food] as long as it was there on the shelves" (2009, 5), he is using a condescending tone that is at times alienating and it places a significant part of the blame for what happened not on the attacks themselves but the conditions leading to them. In Kunstler's vision, in the pre-apocalyptic society, the capitalist pursuit of satisfaction led to a desensitization of individuals, one that was the prelude to the disasters that had hit them in the aftermath of the attacks. It is almost as if Robert believes they deserved it considering the way they were living before the attacks.

This tentative shift of the blame is another reason why Kunstler's novel feels so removed from the ranks of post-9/11 fiction. Regarding the kind of reaction that it prescribes, *World Made by Hand*, as its very title suggests, is very much akin to Susan Sontag's response to 9/11. Like Sontag, Kunstler's protagonist assumes a position that is not belligerent with regards to the perpetrators and instead turns to the issues at the core of American society at large. "Where is the acknowledgement," Sontag wrote in her short response to the attacks in *The New Yorker*, "that this was not a 'cowardly' attack on 'civilization' or 'liberty' or 'humanity' or 'the free world' but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?" (*The New Yorker* 2001). Similarly, Kunstler seems to be imagining a world in which it seems the attacks did more good than damage. Albeit the characters miss some of the commodities of modern life, such as electricity and moving cars, there is a sense that this return to a pre-modern life has helped them focus on other aspects, that it has redefined man's relationship with nature and the others. "Back in the machine times," Brother Jobe tells Robert after he visits Mary Beth Ivanhoe, the "queen bee" of the New Faith brotherhood, "there was so much noise front and back, so to speak, it kept us from knowing what lies behind the surface of things. Now it stands out more" (2009, 263). In the economy of Kunstler's story, the bombs that hit Los Angeles and Washington D.C. have unveiled the true nature of things.

The novel is filled with such small revelations that hit more than one nerve. For instance, the "act of Jihad" that set the disaster in motion is almost seen as vindication and is described as having been "extraordinarily successful" (2009, 23). The atomic

bombs that fell on Los Angeles and Washington D.C. "tanked the whole U.S. economy," one by one, the countries that were still able to trade with the United States were incapable of maintaining trade routes because of heavy border controls. Fear of future attacks took hold of American authorities. Ships had to return with their cargo because of extreme delays. Little by little the U.S. economy staggered and eventually died. It was back to gang-controlled resources and getting food with the sweat of one's brow.

However, if 9/11 created favorable conditions for the dystopian/utopian novel to resurface, it was also 9/11 that became the demise of these novels. Kunstler's speculative fiction did not click with the post-9/11 apocalyptic atmosphere because of its specificity and its prescriptions. As opposed to McCarthy's *The Road*, whose portrayal of disaster left room for speculation regarding the nature of that disaster, Kunstler's novel, by being very specific about the two bombs and the consequences they had on the U.S. economy, defines that disaster as something *other than* what we have witnessed on 9/11. While McCarthy's novel permits a reading that overlaps the two events, the one in the novel and 9/11, in *World Made by Hand* the two events run parallel, but they never entirely overlap. The atomic bombs in Kunstler's novel are akin to the many parallels politicians used in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

When two disasters meet, the one that is most immediate and culturally resounding supplants the one whose long-term consequences are too blatant or whose discursive outlets seem to direct the blame into another direction. Additionally, the fact that Kunstler's novel was published in the aftermath of 9/11 affected the way it was interpreted. The solutions that it seemed to offer were too demanding and came too soon, and the kind of view of the past it brought forward lacked the amount of affinity that selfish events need to have to contaminate a cultural artifact. Albeit, thematically, the novel does deal with themes and tropes that became emblematic for the post 9/11 novel, it did not resonate with the post-9/11 atmosphere.

The novel also seems to bear with it a warning that, though legitimized by the Muslim scare that permeated all levels of the American society particularly in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, was rarely voiced by Americans in general. The New Faith brotherhood is a group that, albeit not necessarily extremist or fundamentalist, has the kind of configuration that is particularly skeptic of reason and is inclined to believe in the power of charismatic leaders such as the "queen bee". The "old faith," namely

the one represented by Earle and the people from his community, ossifies and stagnates, while the "new faith" keeps on marching despite the hardships thrown their way. Within this post-apocalyptic atmosphere, the novel seems to be suggesting, returning to the "old ways" of community-making (i.e. through a form of religion or other shareable systems of beliefs) is much more productive than that propositioned by Robert's secular mindset.

CHAPTER THREE: STABILIZING DISRUPTIONS

In the last chapter, I showed that specific "symptoms", or signature moves, of the *selfish event* can be traced at least within some of the texts pertaining to the canon of post-9/11 fiction (or "Ground Zero fiction"), and argued that a *selfish event* formulates an ethos of production and perception that then extends beyond literary creation and permeates even literary criticism. In this chapter, I will continue this argument and focus on narratives that make use of these signature moves in even more blatant ways. In view of this, I will analyze novels such as John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Paul A. Toth's *Airplane Novel* (2011) and Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue* (2015). Taking all of these texts into consideration, I will argue that *selfish events* resort to other cultural artifacts to sustain their cultural presence at least until a separate discourse, of their own, has been created and culturally reinforced. This *appropriative* move then translates into a cultural practice and is reflected in narratives that perform a similar appropriative move. The chapter will conclude with a section on how to elaborate reading methods that would counteract these appropriative moves and emancipate texts and other cultural artifacts from the gravitational pull of a *selfish event*.

3.1. The Ghost-Writer Complex: Disintegrating Selves, Dis-integrating Narratives

> *A material West encounters other cultures – which owe their profile to the imprint of one of the great world religions – only through the provocative and trivializing irresistibility of a leveling consumerist culture. (Jürgen Habermas, Philosophy in a Time of Terror)*

In the introduction to *Culture, Crisis, and America's War on Terror* (2006), Stuart Croft claims that "behavior patterns can be reproduced through cultural power" (2006, 4). Following this line of reasoning, Croft then goes on to suggest that while it might be easy to assume that "popular culture reproduces discourse, even that it amplifies it," some might find it difficult to see popular culture as a (co-)producer of discourse

(2006, 9). "Those responsible for the production of a decisive intervention," Croft argues, "one capable of shaping a policy programme following the creation of a shared understanding of a particular crisis, *have to include the creators of popular culture* in a society such as that of contemporary America" (2006, 8–9). In Croft's view, one cannot separate the political from the cultural because none of them can be adequately articulated without the presence of the other.

However, Croft's argument is neither new nor provocative enough. Marxist and sociological literary critics would nod to the gist of Croft's statement since it somehow confirms what they had been arguing for a very long time. In her introduction to *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel* (2011), Birgit Däwes argues that her approach to discussing post-9/11 fiction is "closely affiliated with the principles of New Historicism", which lead her to conclude that "fictional texts and historical contexts are not independent entities" (Däwes 2011, 10) and that fiction "not only brings to light the various manifestations of the 9/11 imaginary, or simply responds to them, but it also redefines that very imaginary and opens familiar master narratives for new meanings" (2011, 16). From the point of view of critics such as Däwes and others, popular culture and, by extension, literature, do not bring to the fore "works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams 1999, 149). Croft's argument, however, is essentially a customized version of Althusserian thinking. While Louis Althusser sees the structure of society as a heterogeneous whole made of a series of "ideological state apparatuses" (the Church, different political parties, trade unions etc.) that "function both by repression and by ideology", and which possess a "relative autonomy" (Althusser 1984, 23), Croft takes a step further and argues that, in the post-9/11 atmosphere, the political *and* the cultural have lost their 'relative autonomy' to a certain extent, and have become synchronous, thus shaping each other in unexpected ways. The cultural, in Croft's view, does not merely *reproduce* the ideology of the political/elite state apparatus, but becomes a co-producer of it:

> This is to say, in effect, that the political elite and some producers of popular culture are mutually constructed in the contemporary United States. One cannot articulate a political project without impact upon popular culture; popular culture is not comprehensible without considering the political. Not all political discourse is apparent in popular culture (consider, for

> example, the nuances of taxation policy); not all elements of popular culture are political in a sense understood by the political elite. But the articulation of a particular understanding of crisis, the formation of discourse, occurs both at the level of the political elite and that of popular culture. Their mutual constitution means that the way in which the crisis of 9/11 came to be understood was produced by both the Bush administration *and* many cultural producers in the United States. (Croft 2006, 9)

A compelling aspect of Croft's argument, which will come in handy later when I will argue that one cannot separate post-9/11 discourse and cultural production from that of the "war on terror", is that he sees the "war on terror" as the result of the discursive practices that surround the terrorist attacks of September 11. The "war on terror," as narrative and discursive practice, was forged in the wake of the September 11 attacks. In this sense, Croft argues that "the key elements of the narration of the crisis of 9/11 that paved the way for the development of the 'war on terror'" were four:

> The first was an articulation of self and other: the heroic, resilient American self and the absolute evil of the enemy. The second concerned inclusivity, an attempt to create a sense of identity with all Americans at home, and with all non-terrorist Muslims abroad. The third focused on American claims to exceptionalism; that the United States embodied the best values and was a beacon for the world. The fourth was a claim to global leadership in pursuit of those values and interests." (Croft 2006, 149).

The narrative that was thus created then dictated what type of action should be undertaken, the attitude that was acceptable, and the kind of vision of the future that these actions and attitudes strove to obtain. The narrative also legitimized some ideas, while it *de*-legitimized others.

The notion of "crisis" plays an important part in this equation, since it creates the ideal atmosphere for intense synchronization between the cultural and the political spheres, as well as for an increase in the consumption of the textual and material products created by the exponents of these two spheres. "In all crisis situations," Croft claims, "a meta-narrative of crisis is constructed, which then frames each individual narrative" (Croft 2006, 73). A heightened dependency of the public on these discursive products or outlets, S.J. Ball-Rokeach and M.L. DeFleur argue in "A Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects" (1976), "occurs when a relatively high degree of change *and* conflict is present in society" (1976, 7). It is only when events of a certain scope occur, namely those events that permit a reevaluation of a society's core and derivative

values, that the synchronization between the two spheres has visible and lasting impact on the society at large. However, despite the scope of those events, and despite the specific areas that they affect in their wake, their impact can sometimes be seen even in the most unexpected places. Gestures that today some of us take for granted might be vestiges of a bygone era or the harbingers of something that happens at other levels of the society.

For instance, amid national crises, Americans often choose to *run*. And *not* in a figurative sense. Data shows that distance-running skyrockets at times of social and political unrest. The first surge in running, Christopher McDougall notes in *Born to Run* (2009), occurred "during the Great Depression, when more than two hundred runners set the trend by racing forty miles a day across the country in the Great American Footrace" (McDougall 2010, 11). Running emerged again triumphantly in the early 70s, when Americans were struggling to recover from the trauma of Vietnam, the energy crisis and the overall economic downturn that the 70s brought. Soon after the September 11 attacks, "trail-running suddenly became the fastest-growing outdoor sport in the country" (McDougall 2010, 12). Coincidence or not, choosing *flight* over *fight* when "we sense the raptors approaching" (2010, 12) does fall in line with our evolutionary past, particularly when the *raptors* threaten our physical integrity. Albeit it is not clear whether these Americans were running from an imagined or real enemy, this surge in specific physical activities following national crises can be an excellent example of how aspects that we take for granted might reflect changes at different levels of society.

The raptors have changed in the meantime. If during the Pleistocene epoch our hunter-gatherer ancestors had to run from saber-toothed cats to survive, nowadays we must run from terrorists and financial crises threatening our cultural survivability. Yet, we have *also* become somewhat increasingly preoccupied not only with what our modern-day raptors are doing but also with what they are thinking. And while we lack sufficient evidence to prove whether our hunter-gatherer ancestors genuinely pondered over what a saber-toothed cat might have had in mind while chasing its bipedal prey in Sub-Saharan Africa, we have plenty of evidence for this increasing preoccupation nowadays, particularly in the literature that follows national crises such as the one occasioned by the 9/11 attacks. Since literature is one of the most important

and most informative repositories of thought, it can be seen as an authoritative source that provides plenty of evidence in this regard.

This preoccupation with the enemy has a long history that sees a gradual change from thinking and writing *about* the enemy to writing and thinking *with* the enemy, or even *from the perspective* of the enemy. John Gardner's novel *Grendel* (1971) is supposedly the book that gave life to narratives written from the perspective of the "enemy" or the villain. As the title suggests, the novel is a retelling of the Old English poem *Beowulf* from the perspective of Grendel, the evil monster tormenting a mead hall and a town, and who, in Gardner's book, is not the bloodthirsty villain that desire to kill everyone. However, from this point of view, this gradual change seems rather counterintuitive, since our instincts should make us run away *from* and not *toward* our enemies. It is even more counterintuitive considering that this process triggers a series of other issues concerning the representation of the "inimical other." And yet, akin to Gardner's portrayal of Grendel, this preoccupation with what is happening in the mind of the "enemy" is also indicative of the fact that there is a fascination with that mind and a desire to reform the kind of relationship prescribed by that very term, enemy. Problems abound even within this reformist trend. What do we do when otherness is delivered to us in a language that is not ours, along with cultural baggage we are unable to comprehend? What do we do when that otherness is not delivered to us peacefully but rather violently, in the shape of four commercial airliners?

Grendel is a figment of somebody's imagination. The terrorists, on the other hand, were not, and they sought to superimpose two radically diverse discourses by riding airplanes into buildings. One of those discourses spoke of unlimited growth, the two towers akin to a cluster of columns in a progress chart, while the other one spoke of stunted growth and improvised weapons, the fours commercial airliners akin to materialized versions of Caliban's swearing. In the violent exchange between the two parties, the four airplanes, akin to the flags that flooded New York City immediately after the attacks, had been emptied of their initial signifier ("symbol of indigenous mobility and zest", as Martin Amis put it) and been given a new one (deadly weapon). Within this dialogue, these elements become, as Susan Willis argues in *Portents of the Real* (2005), "circulating signifiers" (Willis 2005, 15), and as such not resistant to change.

Yet, those were not the only elements that had been emptied of their signifier and were assigned a new one. In the days following the attacks, it seemed as if the only meaning that could be applied to what had happened was the one provided by the limited spaces and daily activities *interrupted* by the event. Everyone was suddenly aware of what they were doing at the time. John Updike was visiting some kin in Brooklyn Heights when it happened. Denis Johnson was visiting New York City when it happened. In fact, everyone *happened* to be doing something when it happened. On a broader scale, the opening of this semantic void initiated a *cultural practice*.

In the desperate search for meaning, "circulating signifiers" acquired meanings that fit the situation. The word "terrorist" for instance, as Alan Badiou notes in *Polemics* (2011), has been turned into "an intrinsically propagandistic term" since "it no longer designates either a political orientation or the possibilities inherent to such and such a situation; rather, it exclusively designates the form of action" (Badiou and Winter 2011, 19). The face of the terrorist also became a repository of meanings. "Osama bin Laden's name and face," Edward Said argues in an article written for *The Guardian*, "have become so numbingly familiar to American as in effect to obliterate any history he and his shadowy followers might have had before they became stock symbols of everything loathsome and hateful to the collective imagination" (Said 2001). The same goes for "terrorism" and the wars unleashed against it. "We have," Badiou argues, "war as an abstract form of the *theatrical capture of an adversary* ('terrorism'), which is in its essence vague and elusive. The war against nothing: itself subtracted from the very idea of war" (2011, 28–29). If the enemy was vague and elusive, it also meant that the actions that could be taken against it could also be vague and elusive.

Yet, I believe, Badiou is also somewhat unwillingly pointing to something else. The "theatrical capture" does not necessarily entail soldiers swarming battlefields and physically capturing/eliminating enemy combatants. If running became a social practice that reflected some instinctual and cultural reaction to a looming invisible raptor, the need to *capture* the enemy, factually, created, in cultural terms, the need to capture the enemy by other means. And when the actual enemy other is absent, cultural stand-ins are produced, and like all stand-ins, they usually do what they are told. In the Hollywood-like cultural machine of post-9/11 America, the perpetrators were akin to the fictional Vietnamese people from Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), namely "herded into the roles of the poor, the innocent, the evil,

or the corrupt." If the French were naive enough to believe they needed to visit a country to exploit it, Nguyen's "sympathizer" explains, "Hollywood was much more efficient, imagining the countries it wanted to exploit" (Nguyen 2016b).

"Hollywood's high priests" and by extension those who held a certain amount of cultural capital in the United States (i.e. writers such as Updike, Martin Amis, among others), "understood innately the observation of Milton's Satan, that it was better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven, better to be a villain, loser, or antihero than virtuous extra, so long as one commanded the bright lights of center stage" (Nguyen 2016b). These American cultural capitalists did hold the center stage in this theatrical capture of the enemy not only because they had the mass cultural means to do it but also because of the nature of 9/11 and because of the act of appropriation inherent to its "enactment." They were the victims, and this victimization further engendered a *ghostwriter complex*. If for a short historical instant, the terrorists held the reins of the narrative unfolding on September 11, 2001, as they drove the four airliners into the towers of the World Trade Center, the American continuation of that same narrative was much more invasive in this sense. While the perpetrators *appropriated* four American airliners, the American cultural apparatus appropriated their words, actions, faces, cultures. Comprised of politicians, oligarchs, corporate and intellectual elites, the American cultural apparatus divided "the world into us versus them and good versus bad, the more easily to build alliances and target enemies" (Nguyen 2016a, 11). Appropriation became a cultural practice from the very instant George W. Bush wondered why the terrorists hated the Americans so much.

The motif of the ghostwriter returns in Nguyen's latest book, a collection of short stories, entitled *The Refugees* (2017). In *Black Eyed Women*, the story that opens the wide-ranging collection, a Vietnamese American woman works as a ghostwriter for those unfortunates who have the story but do not have the writerly skills. To one of her prospective clients, the sole survivor of an airplane crash, she forwards one of the books she had ghostwritten, a book whose "ostensible author" was "the father of a boy who had shot and killed several people at his school" (Nguyen 2017, 11). Akin to Nguyen's ghostwriter, in a post-9/11 world, writers throughout the world also found themselves in this position. Semantic voids can be, at times, clean slates. Yet, while in the case of Nguyen's narrator the stories she wrote were willingly given up by their

original narrators, in the literature of September 11 the narrative of the "other" is *coercively integrated* into the narrative of the ghostwriter.

Martin Amis, too, assumes the role of a *cultural* ghostwriter in *The Second Plane* (2008), when he defines terrorism as "political communication", a definition which in turn gives him leverage to state that the message broadcast on 9/11 was loud and clear: "America, it is time you learned how implacably you are hated" (Amis 2009, 3). Amis' cultural clairvoyance notwithstanding, the message was never put in this way. The hijackers did not, akin to Major Kong in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), ride those four commercial airliners screaming at the top of their lungs how much they hated America. Except perhaps in Amis' imagination, where he inflates the situation to universal proportions: the four airplanes, the Pentagon, and the WTC become "American artifacts" in the hands of "morally 'barbaric'" terrorists (Amis 2009, 3). In the hands of these ghostwriters, every gesture that the alleged terrorists commit becomes a form of barbarity because it violates the sense of cultural superiority that is inherent to the ghostwriter complex.

3.1.1. Updike's Final Act of "Ethnic Ventriloquism"

This tendency towards narrating *otherness* at a time when an obsessive display of nationalism took place might seem counterintuitive. In fact, as David Holloway argues in *9/11 and the War on Terror* (2008), the early 9/11 novel was one of "heightened subjectivities and interiorized or 'narcissistic' narrative voices" (Holloway 2008, 107). The most "exaggeratedly narcissistic'" novel, Holloway argues, is by far Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005). Foer's novel is first and foremost a novel *about* interiorized individuals who seem to be forcefully pushed out of their withdrawal and back into a public narrative space by Oskar's narrative. In Holloway's view, "almost everything" about Foer's novel pulls "the attention of the reader inward, into the private agonies of the traumatized self and away from any meaningful contextualizing of 9/11 in public or historical space" (Holloway 2008, 114).

However, Holloway is also right in being cautious when he uses the phrase "almost everything" because there are instances in which "meaningful contextualizing" does occur in Foer's novel. While he is on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, Oskar imagines another plane coming straight at him, and in the few seconds before the impact he sees the terrorist's eyes *telling* him how much he hates him (Foer 2006,

244). Except the word "hate" and the actions it entails never materialize. Oskar, in this case, is only a victim of too much meaningful contextualizing. What Amis fails to concede, and what the underage narrator of Foer's novel seems to acknowledge, is that terrorism, *as* form of communication, requires an act of *coercive integration* of the perpetrator into the discourse of the victim when the discourse of the former is not delivered in a recognizable pattern, or in a recognizable language.

Birgit Däwes notices a similar pattern when she sets out to categorize the plethora of narratives that came to be called post-9/11 fiction, or "ground zero fiction." Among the six categories[4] of post-9/11 novels that she identifies "according to their respective effects and emphases in unearthing the cultural imaginary of 9/11"(2011, 19), she also discusses those that have an "appropriative approach." Albeit these narratives, by telling the story from the perspective of the allegedly inimical "other," "disclose the underlying ideological paradigms and anxieties in the post-9/11 cultural landscape," they are in fact more revealing with regards to the cultural and political contexts in which they were forged. "As acts of 'ethnic ventriloquism'," Däwes explains by using Mita Banerjee's expression, "they tell us more about the location of their origins (i.e., non-Muslim, Western writers)" as well as "expose a remarkably profound unease at the heart of Western identity" (Däwes 2011, 249–50). The function of these texts, Däwes seems to suggest, is not to reveal the complexities of the Other's mind but to highlight the forces that are at work in a situation of crisis. Although these forces are invisible, their impact on cultural production is measurable to a certain degree.

Albeit cautiously, John Updike performs a similar act of "ethnic ventriloquism" in his novel *Terrorist* (2006), whose narrator almost always makes sure to maintain a certain distance from Ahmad, the alleged terrorist from the title of the novel. Yet, akin to Amis, Updike's narrator, too, inflates individuals to their universal counterparts or

[4] Däwes' six categories include "metonymic approaches" (those that "substitute the subject [...] by characteristics of that subject or something closely related to it"), "salvational approaches" (those that "explore various narrative methods of preservation from destruction or calamity"), "diagnostic approaches" (those that "contextualize 9/11 within larger historical and/or geographical frameworks"), "appropriative approaches" (those that transcend "the boundary to the Other by constructing the voice of the perpetrator"), "symbolic approaches" (those that use 9/11 "as a symbolic setting and event, which provides a parallel or contrastive background to tales of personal crisis, loss, or decline") and "writerly approaches" (namely those that transform "the representational challenges into semantic, structural or formal innovations, such as multiple perspectives, extensive allegories, non-linear forms of narration, visual elements, creative layouts, metafictional angles, and various other textual experiments") (Däwes 2011, 20–22).

their "hollow stereotype" (Hartnell 2011, 450). While describing Ahmad's thoughts in the third person, Updike's narrator seems to add mythical momentum to the protagonist's mental portrait. Updike's Ahmad perceives the world in social and political terms, a vision that extends well beyond that of a high-school student. "Ahmad feels his pride of isolation and willed identity," the narration explains, "to be threatened by the masses of ordinary, hard-pressed men and plain, practical women who are enrolled in Islam as a lazy matter of ethnic identity" (Updike 2007, 177). Although Ahmad is native-born, he sees the American reality around him as "a sprawling ferment for which he feels the mild pity owed a failed experiment" (2007, 177). His thoughts have the simplified cadence of an obsessive mind, or that of an arsonist, almost recalling that of the protagonist of Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988). Ahmad seems to move with the force of something which is much greater than him, a force akin to that of societal changes. Not your average high-school student for sure.

Despite these suspicious permutations that Updike's novel seems to operate at the level of post-9/11 discourse, *Terrorist* has been lauded for its bold take on the matter. The novel ostensibly goes against a post-9/11 taboo, namely that of sympathizing, or at least offering the possibility to the reader to sympathize, with the putative enemy other. At a time when most prominent fictional representations of 9/11 explored the subjectivity of the traumatized Western victim, which was, because of its status *as* victim, innocent, the novel, Anna Hartnell argues in "Violence and the Faithful in Post-9/11 America: Updike's *Terrorist*, Islam, and the Specter of Exceptionalism", "signals the attempt on the part of one of America's most well-known and prolific writers to confront the complexities of the relations between Islam and the United States in the wake of 9/11" by rejecting "the temptation to consolidate the presumption of American unity and innocence that has formed the popular horizon for understanding the 2001 attacks" (Hartnell 2011, 478). The novel also takes a huge step away from the common trope of representing the enemy other as sexually repressed individuals. Thus, while such authors as Jonathan Safran Foer and Don DeLillo have taken upon themselves the task to imagine ways of working through trauma, Updike's novel seems to do exactly the opposite by tackling directly "the unnamed source of America's post-9/11 fear: the Islamist enemy within" (Hartnell 2011, 480). And it does this in a way that somehow opens a safety net for both the novel as a cultural artifact and the author himself.

The reasons for this sympathy are noble at their core, or at least that is what they seem. The culture of the enemy other, when it is appropriated in the way Updike does it, opens the possibility for reconciliation. In times of conflict, presenting the culture of the alleged enemy in a version that is understandable, both linguistically (Updike's novel is in English after all) and culturally, is not only common but it is also *strategic*. Whoever performs this kind of appropriation strives to appease resentment over what has happened and somewhat build a bridge between the two cultures, soften the edges. To someone who might have become accustomed in the wake of 9/11 to the repetitiveness of the question "Why do they hate us?" and the series of answers from all colors of the American political spectrum, *Terrorist* might seem like the most elaborate answer one could give to it. "Updike does not," Hartnell suggests, "ask this question from the standpoint of American innocence, since his work long ago began to grapple with American exceptionalism *as* a problem. What emerges in *Terrorist* as the Islamist critique of American society is in many ways Updike's own" (Hartnell 2011, 484). They hate us, Updike seems to be saying, because of the way we are, and this is the way we are. Ahmad's critique of American society at large is thus somewhat legitimized because it is Updike's own, or at least a version of it.

Updike's safety net is thus set. *Terrorist* is, as Hartnell herself suggests in the first few pages of her article, "the daring product of a writer who, amid a literary landscape often overdetermined by caution, has never shied away from the risks of representation" (Hartnell 2011, 480). Yet, the problem with Hartnell's argument is that it does not acknowledge the fact that Updike does not "shy away" from the topic exactly *because* he was at a time in his career when he was permitted to do so by the literary establishment. Martin Amis, who had also dared to author a short story that centered on Mohamed Atta, one of the ringleaders of the 9/11 attacks, was not extended the same courtesy by literary reviewers and was excoriated for giving explanations that are "flat-footed" (Kumar 2006). Unlike Updike, Amis was not at a time in his career when he could fool around. Jem Poster begins his review of the novel for *The Guardian* by elegantly hinting at exactly this. "At a stage at which he might be forgiven for resting on his well-earned laurels," Poster writes almost ironically, "Updike has chosen to tackle a subject as risky as it is topical" (Poster 2006). In 2006, when *Terrorist* was published, Updike was simply too big to fail. And because Ahmad's critique of America is Updike's, America's own prolific writer, then that critique is

legitimized once again. It is almost as if Hartnell is trying to say that, considering all these aspects (the novel as the "daring product" of a writer who is just too big to fail) *Terrorist* should be analyzed in a vacuum where literary standards commonly applied should be suspended.

From this point of view, Hartnell's analysis is also somewhat paradoxical or, at least, pointing to a paradox that is perhaps inherent to Updike's novel, when she claims that the novel "enacts a fascinating reversal whereby the interiority of the potential perpetrator of trauma is penetrated and exposed" (Hartnell 2011, 483). Yet, the interiority that is seemingly so available to Updike, or at least some of its aspects, can be found on the internet. "John Updike is wary of the internet," Charles McGrath opens his review of the novel for *The New York Times*, however, for *Terrorist* "he ventured onto the Web to research bomb detonators" (Mcgrath 2006). He also had to linger around airport security checkpoints to learn that "the X-rays were not in black and white, as he had imagined." In the same review, Updike is quoted saying that he had to read the Koran as well while researching. Additionally, the novel includes Koran passages in Arabic transliteration, passages for which he had to ask the help of Shady Nasser, a graduate student. Even more revealingly in this sense is the fact that Updike admits that his "conscience was pricked by the notion that I was putting into the book something that I can't pronounce" (Mcgrath 2006). What is exposed, then, is Updike's vision and not that of the "potential perpetrator." Thus, when Hartnell argues that Updike's "attempt to understand the mind of a potential terrorist is drawn in strikingly religious terms, terms that threaten to reinstate, rather than transcend, the myth of hermetically sealed and timelessly opposed cultures" (2011, 484) she seems to ask us to believe that, despite the threatening religious terms, Updike has still somehow managed to transcend that myth. Which makes one wonder: if the internet can help us transcend that myth then maybe we should use it more often.

The apparent superficiality with which Updike tackles the topic might stem from our own lack of belief into the powers of cultural appropriation, but it might also come from the fact that Updike chooses to represent cultural difference by focusing, somewhat obsessively, on the physical sensations of his characters. In this sense, Däwes suggests that Updike relies on "metaphors of food and digestion" (2011, 250) to characterize otherness. The characters' "physical reactions to life in the United States, and particularly their bodies' incapabilities to process unfamiliar forms of

nourishment" (2011, 251) are what sets them apart from their American counterparts. They seem to be affected on an instinctual level by the gluttony that in Updike's vision defines the United States:

> Pitting the imageries of purity and contamination against each other on Atta's plate, the story draws a clear semantic demarcation line between vitality and strength on the one hand (the insurgent Arab), and weakness, degeneration, and toxicity (the American hegemon) on the other. This boundary not only upsets the Middle Eastern stomach but it dismantles the common perception of the United States as a potent superpower, and thus subtly foregrounds the relativity of viewpoints.(Däwes 2011, 251)

Mr. Levy's overweight wife is a symbol of that gluttony as well as her attempt at repairing the damage by depriving herself of real food and living only on baby carrots. She is the perfect example of the unbalanced life that Ahmad desires to suffocate in its crib by blowing up a heavily trafficked tunnel at rush hour. The novel ends with an attempt to level the differences between the two camps by invoking the good old American spirit cliché. "Hey, come on," Mr. Levy tells Ahmad, "we're all Americans here. That's the idea, didn't they tell you that at Central High? Irish-Americans, African-Americans, Jewish-Americans; there are even Arab-Americans" (Updike 2007, 301). This lecture on the inclusiveness of the United States comes after Mr. Levy's rant about the fact that America can offer that inclusiveness and the freedom that comes with it only up to a certain point. Mr. Levy's speech also has the rhythm and the fake positivism of a football coach who tries to convince his players they have to work together even when the odds are against them.

However, the paradox of *Terrorist* extends well beyond this act of cultural appropriation. While Foer's novel appears to represent and at the same time critique that narcissistic perspective on 9/11 by splitting the narrative between different and stylistically discernible narrators, Updike opts for a single narrator, which is another safety net, akin to, say, Faulkner's technique of splitting the narrative of his *Absalom, Absalom!* between different, somewhat unreliable, narrators. The voice of Updike's narrator travels, undisturbed, through multiple minds and situations, a technical gimmick that further reinforces the notion of a coercive integration operated by an omniscient narrator that holds the means of representation. The topic *Terrorist* addresses seems to require it. "Updike's narrative voice," Hartnell further adds, "is lent not only to Ahmad but also to a range of characters espousing contradictory and

conflicting view. In so doing the novel foregrounds a symbolic play on realist conventions; though the complexity of characterization is to an extent sacrificed in order for individual characters to act as mouthpieces for specific viewpoints, taken together they nonetheless present an America purged of moral authority" (Hartnell 2011, 496). Yet, Hartnell seems to tiptoe around the fact that the "moral authority" is embellished in the very choices that the narrator makes throughout the narrative, in the choice of characters that become mere ventriloquists, implied in the fact that these characters "act as mouthpieces."

Nguyen's "sympathizer" would have scoffed at the sound of this as he would have pointed out the contempt lurking behind a narrator as that of Updike's *Terrorist*. The only problem is that, akin to an excellent lawyer who is aware of all the loopholes in a state's laws, Updike has made sure that he will not bear the brunt of any accusations coming his way. Since the characters that his narrator inhabits maintain such opposing views, one can never tell which one is his own position. Yet, all this indecisiveness with regards to who claims what in the novel leads to at least one interesting result, which perhaps would not have been possible had it not been for the merging of Updike's vision with that of the "potential perpetrator." Somewhat obliquely, the novel is also about the pollution of ideas and about how inherently innocent ideals are prone to external intervention and as such to external exploitation. Hartnell puts it best:

> It is hard not to draw the conclusion that what emerges as sinister in Updike's novel are the consequences of a communal faith. Ahmad's attitudes toward Islam are comparable to the workings of a Protestant interiority that Updike can relate to and respect. However, it is the pollution of such interiority by external forces that leads to the assumption of violence. Clearly in this particular case there is every reason to critique and condemn the influence of these external forces; the social system influencing Ahmad here is a form of political Islam that equates acts of violence and the murder of innocents with sacred duty. (Hartnell 2011, 488)

The fact that Updike places Ahmad at the confluence of these forces and in an ethnic limbo where he feels out of place in both his American identity and his "increasingly militant Muslim identity" (Hartnell 2011, 492), turns Ahmad himself into a victim, and as such into someone with whom readers could sympathize. Readers cannot ask, Updike reportedly told *The New York Times*, "for a more sympathetic and, in a way, more loving portrait of a terrorist" (Mcgrath 2006). And perhaps that is the legacy

Updike wanted to leave to his readership. A well-written narrative that gives one the tools to sympathize with the enemy.

In Updike's novel, the alleged enemy is thus made *recognizable* both inwardly and outwardly, in a way that went against the prevalent enemy recognition techniques that proliferated in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Ahmad is "one of us" or "among us", which by extension implies that he goes unnoticed and as such could strike at any time, not because of the stealth that a multicultural society such as the American one provides him with, but rather because "we" can almost sympathize with and understand his plea. Ahmad's portrayal goes beyond any schematized version of the enemy. As Slavoj Žižek argues in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), "the enemy is by definition [...] invisible, he looks like one of us; he cannot be directly recognized – this is why the big problem and task of the political struggle is providing/constructing a recognizable image of the enemy" (2012, 138). With 9/11, Žižek explains, this creative force "regained its power by constructing the image of Osama bin Laden, the Islamic fundamentalist par excellence, and al-Qaeda, his 'invisible network'" (2012, 139). Such imaginative constructions work on at least two separate levels concomitantly. One the one hand, they engender a separation between what is visible, the enemy's bearing and physical appearance, and what is invisible, his alleged evil intentions, while at the same coupling a limited number of physical traits, such as the terrorist's beard, with a specific intention, that of hurting other people. It is no wonder that, when Mohsin Hamid's narrator encounters his supposedly American listener at the beginning of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez urges him not to be misled because of his appearance and consider him "a lover of America."

In aesthetic terms, to make it more recognizable and as such an object of hatred, the terrorist's appearance is made "ugly" akin to the way in which, in fairytales, for instance, the evil character often has a heinous appearance that matches its heinous intentions. The terrorists thus look the way they do *because* of their heinous intentions. "Embodying evil in a person's physical appearance," Colin McGinn argues in *Ethics, Evil and Fiction* (1997), "is simply a vivid way to convey the gruesomeness of their soul" (McGinn 1999, 100). Since violence must be repudiated because it is an inherently "ugly" act, those who inflict violence upon others express their ugliness by inflicting that very violence. "Evil," McGinn puts it bluntly, "is *expressed* in evil acts" (1999, 101). Someone capable of driving passenger planes into skyscrapers and of

nurturing such hate against "our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other" as Bush put it in his State of the Union address (*The Guardian* 2001), *must* be inherently ugly. And those who performed such acts of violence and nurtured such hate had distinctive physical traits, all unified into the figure of Osama bin Laden. However, Updike's portrayal of Ahmad back-engineers this process. It does so first by performing that same coupling between a set of specific physical traits and evil intentions, and then by undoing it. Ahmad thus cannot complete the task that he had been given, because he is inherently good, and as such he is given back his moral purity.

However, Updike goes even deeper into the issue at hand, particularly in the way he strategically puts his characters together. The person who convinces Ahmad to abort his mission of blowing up the Lincoln Tunnel under the Hudson River is none other than his sixty-three-years old guidance counselor Jack Levy, whose views are strangely similar to those of Ahmad himself. At times, the two minds seem to align. This is Mr. Levy brooding over the things he sees around himself:

> Corner grocery store have one by one dropped away, leaving the field to franchises whose standardized logos and decors are cheerfully garish, as are the gargantuan full-color images of their fattening fast food. As Jack Levy sees is, America is paved solid with fat and tar, a coast-to-coast tarbaby where we're all stuck. Ever our vaunted freedom is nothing much to be proud of, with the Commies out of the running; it just makes it easier for terrorists to move about, renting airplanes and vans and setting up websites. (Updike 2007, 27)

Ahmad sees the world around him through similar lenses. He sees the same "shabbiness in the streets, the fast-food trash and broken plastic toys, the unpainted steps and porches still dark from the morning's dampness, the windows cracked and not repaired" (2007, 281). Lurking beneath the shabbiness of the streets he sees a way of life that is "the way of infidels," one that is "headed for a terrible doom" (2007, 39). The terrible doom, Updike seems to suggest, is not where we expect it to be.

Despite the similarities in vision, only one of them, Ahmad, radicalizes and tries to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel. A setting that at first glance might suggest that specific categories of people such as Ahmad, coming from disrupted families and living in certain social environments, have a penchant for radicalization. This type of profiling was common in the wake of 9/11 as authorities were trying to come up with solutions

to the issue of terrorism by creating radicalization models that could explain why certain people turn to extremism and violence. These radicalization models, as Arun Kundnani argues in *The Muslims are Coming!* (2014), became "policing tools" that were used by police departments throughout the US to identify possible terrorists and prevent further attacks (Kundnani 2014, 133). Yet, the plot to blow up the tunnel turns out to have been merely a scheme concocted by the CIA, and Ahmad co-conspirators were CIA patsies, which might suggest quite the opposite interpretation. Ahmad's radicalization was essentially a fantasy put to the test of reality, which comes very close to suggesting that forces already existing within American society can turn against itself when given the opportunity. It is only Mr. Levy's cynicism regarding American society in general that stops him from wanting to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel. The enemy is "among us," Updike seems to be saying, but it is not where we think it is.

3.2. Permutations of Everything: The Strange Case of Paul A. Toth's *Airplane Novel*

Foer and Updike seem to have used up the options available to a post-9/11 writer, and not even Nguyen's protagonist could do more than just scoff. What else is there to do? A possible answer to this question is tentatively outlined in Paul A. Toth's *Airplane Novel* (2011). Described as "the Guernica of 9/11 novels" it tries to tell the story from the perspective of a category of "victims" that are often disregarded in the post-9/11 novel, namely *the Twin Towers themselves*. The narrator of the novel is none other than the South Tower, who at the very beginning of the narrative promises to make everything visible, even the cogs and seams of the narrative. "Every author," Cary Grant, the South Tower, complains, "tells my story from the outside-in and then pretends to be my friend. A court of skyscrapers convicts them all. Spider monkeys [human beings] see from every vantage-point but those of Gary Cooper and Cary Grant. How could they?" (Toth 2011, 13) The narration is thus in part born out of the desire to set the record straight once and for all by presenting a version of events that is in this sense more authoritative than any other possible version. Who is more entitled to tell the truth behind the events if not the towers themselves?

Toth's novel thus acts as a *payback narrative*, which also implies that conventional views must be rescinded. The unlikely narrator of the story presents his version of events in the shape of a violation of literary standards, thus obliquely portraying

himself as the anti-writer par excellence. "I am not a writer," Grant explains, "I am a tower. […] Cary Grant never sought prestige; Cary Grant sought Cary Grant" (2011, 123). He takes pleasure in defiling standards because of the nature of his existence and because he believes that he has been dealt an injustice by means of the many stories in which he comes to be represented. That is the reason why when he asks rhetorically whether he should have included footnotes and a bibliography for his claims, he exclaims that "[all] sources are my sources; they owe me. […] And here, in this case, no thanks from me will be provided to those who stole my information, every book and film about me an act of plagiarism" (2011, 149). The readers themselves seem to be criticized for having fallen for other narratives portraying what happened.

Cary Grant is also a totalizing narrator since he is permitted a view afforded to no other narrator. "My views from every perspective," the narrator explains at the beginning of the novel, "through windows narrowed to lessen the sense of height, formed a horizon of cubes. I saw permutations of everything, none stable, a floating metropolis of tints and hues in constant shift" (Toth 2011, 11). As readers, we are given front row seats to a show that is essentially about us and our shortcomings with regards to how things unfurled before and after the event. The narrator is also there to guide us through the events. "I will explain my life from the inside out," Cary Grant confesses, "I must possess a utilitarian reason for existing. I will help you" (2011, 13). The purpose of this benevolence on the part of the narrator is none other than helping us understand the true nature of the events.

The help comes, along with a series of useful tips. In the narrator's fragmented and fertile imagination, one which sometimes overlaps sounds and images for effect, 9/11 is not a singular event. On the contrary, Cary Grant places it in a long line of events that involved the two towers. Among them is the February 13, 1975, fire, which was set by Oswald Adorno, a 19-year-old cleaning man who was not "given proper recognition" (Treaster 1975) at his workplace. "If Oswald seemed to disappear after the fire," Grant narrates, "we towers remembered him as he was not, which is more than he became" (Toth 2011, 20). Some space in the narration is given to Owen J. Quinn, who successfully parachuted himself off one of the World Trade Center towers. At this point in the narration, as the crowds stop to look up at Quinn's leap of faith, the narrator casually introduces another moment in the history of the towers when people

stopped to look up at an entirely different spectacle, when others would "involuntarily jump" (2011, 26) to avoid being burned to death.

The comparison between the two moments, between Quinn pulling the ripcords of his parachute to land softly on the ground and those who chose to jump from the towers on 9/11, is disconcertingly provocative and very much akin to what Paul Virilio was suggesting when he was placing the event in a dialectics of media and art development. In the imagination of Toth's unusual narrator, if Quinn's gesture was a flight of fancy with an escape hatch built into it, those jumping from the towers on 9/11 were performing a similar kind of flight, one that was in itself an escape hatch. Instead of burning alive, the latter chose the exhilaration and the quick death of the fall. "Later," the narrator recalls, "many might have dived from me and North and pulled their ripcords – had they been equipped with parachutes – and they would have safely plunged, a sky of human sailboats, the world inverted and people falling upward or rising downward" (2011, 27). The two events overlap, one informing the other to the point where it seems as if, by building an escape hatch into his own leap, Quinn has transformed any subsequent leap into a version of the same artistic endeavor. Quinn's alleged suicidal gesture, the narrator argues, was "no more a suicide than those who would later leap" (2011, 27). Those who chose to burn by not jumping, Grant seems to suggest, were the ones who committed suicide.

In light of the final performance, namely the destruction of the towers, all of these spectacles become precursors to that final performance, and in the light of all these spectacles, the final performance acquires the qualities of a spectacle. In the eyes of this unusual narrator, that final performance was also the only one that genuinely involved the two towers. If those other failed spectacles featured the towers as mere props, or background, the September 11 attacks involved the two towers directly. However, within this narrative, the two towers are not seen as innocent victims. Instead, the collapse of the towers is seen as an event that interrupted something akin to a suicidal drive on the part of the towers. Along the years, the towers have gained the capacity to accumulate the information that circulates through them and store it into a collective consciousness. In light of this accrual of information, the end of the two towers also constitutes the end of a way of thinking and an invitation to compassion. "I cannot differentiate between one spider monkey and the next," the narrator says on the last page of the novel, "[they] shall raise and bring down new

towers that will become beams of light. In the end, your buildings are you. I respect neither claims of outrage nor innocence. But I am compassionate" (Toth 2011, 207). Not that everyone deserves the compassion prescribed by such events.

In Toth's novel, those who died engulfed by the debris of the falling towers never get their due solemnity. In this sense, the narrator dedicates one full chapter, entitled "The Blotting Out of Scatteredness," to a certain George Collins, who was supposedly an employee of an investment firm, which was among the first businesses to occupy one of the towers. The name and the story around it are both fictional since there is no George Collins on the list of 9/11 victims[5], yet the kind of inverted obituary the narrator creates in this case is telling. George Collins was in a failed marriage before 9/11 happened and for this reason, he had developed the habit of going to triple-X theaters to satisfy his sexual needs vicariously. His marriage to Muriel "consisted of trips to restaurants. They both turned fat. Eating provided an excuse not to talk. Lust had never been found in the usual dust of perfumes, dying with sweat never beaded, skin untouched by another, and a well-rested breathlessness" (2011, 37). In other words, George seems to be the stereotypical anti-hero with whom readers cannot sympathize easily, except when his life ends tragically. "George was an asshole," the narrator makes sure to note, "because later everyone would imagine that not one asshole worked and died in North and me. Plenty of assholes worked in us. To deny this is to diminish humanity in all its possibilities" (2011, 38). The narrator thus denies any fetishization of those who perished in the disaster.

Toth's inverted obituary comes into stark contrast with the "portraits of grief" presented in *The New York Times*, which bestowed upon the victims the aura of literary heroes. In those "portraits of grief," Thomas Collins, whose surname Toth uses in his novel, is presented as an infectiously vivacious man who was always organizing activities for the weekend. "[When] he wasn't trying to get a laugh out of someone," the obituary recounts, "Mr. Collins, 36, an avid skier and outdoorsman, was busy organizing weekend adventures for his friends and family" (*The New York Times* 2011). Suria Clarke, akin to Collins, is described as "sunny, vivacious, irreverent" with an untiring "appetite for life, for food, for wine", as the kind of person who would buy ninety liters of a local Tuscan wine during one of her trips to Italy (*The New York Times*

[5] The list, featured on the webpage of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, mentions only three people with this last name, yet none of those three are named George.

2011). Jeffrey Coale is remembered for his college dreams to own a restaurant. Leonard Castrianno is portrayed as an "enthusiastic socializer" who was "relentlessly positive" and always saw the glass half full.

Toth's portrayal of George Collins goes into the opposite direction. "Mr. George Collins," the South Tower explains, "'worked' at_____and was known for knowing nothing. He rocketed to the top of his department via certain erotic and pornographic fixations shared with his manager" (Toth 2011, 197). Mr. Hollander, another fictional victim, is described as someone who "saw more violence in his mind than he did in Vietnam, returning to marry his wife Emily and father two children, all of whom he often wished to murder" (2011, 197). Death, the narrator argues at this point, improves the image of the victims, "forgiven when they've been disallowed the courtesy of asking forgiveness" (2011, 196). In this light, even the tower's acerbic honesty seems to be begging for forgiveness because his own disappearance affects the way he is perceived.

Yet, despite the narrator's rebelliousness the novel still cannot escape the limitations of the genre as well as those of the publishing industry. The cover does not say that the author is Cary Grant but Paul A. Toth. Even we as readers cannot escape the knowledge that it is still Toth speaking and that the South Tower could not have written the novel for that matter. The novel does, however, theorize a possible exit strategy. "This book," the narrator explains, "is a natural resource of fading paper and disappearing ink, a constant *disintegration*" (2011, 13). This idea of the "disintegrating narrator" returns later in the novel as the cinematic moment of the towers' collapse approaches. As the novel draws near to its end the very structure of the novel, akin to the "disintegrating narrator" that is both already collapsed (9/11 has already occurred at the time the novel was written) and collapsing as it tells the story of its collapse, starts to unravel and disintegrate further, separates itself into different streams. It quotes newspaper headlines and editorials. It ends with a "denouement" that suggests the narrator was, in fact, a sort of conscience that continues to exist well after the collapse of the Twin Towers.

However, Toth's escape strategy also comes with a caveat. In the discourse surrounding 9/11, *Airplane Novel* occupies a somewhat privileged position. It comes well after the trials and errors of the early 9/11 novel and at a time when the discourse had already acquired some stability. The same process can be seen in the case of the discourse of the 'war on terror.' Mark Doten's novel *The Infernal* (2015) could have

come out only *after* the publication of several other fictional representations of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both these novels, with their outlandish narrative styles, seem to act as "discourse regulators" precisely by focusing on form rather than content. None of them offer solutions, but they shed some light on how the texts that surround them, spatially and temporally, ought to be read.

3.3. Carrying the Fire: Cultural Selfishness in Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*

Up to this point, I have argued that one of the main *signature moves* of the selfish event is that of signaling a rupture that opens a semiotic void, which subsequently creates the need to absorb other cultural artifacts until it finds or creates a stable discourse for itself. The "cultural stump" of a selfish event enters a dialogue with fully formed cultural artifacts, and it appropriates some of their features up to the point where it contaminates those artifacts. By extension, and due to this ethos of appropriation that ultimately becomes a symptom of that primary signature move of culturally selfish events, the cultural artifacts that further stem from this kind of events will tend to *replicate* that signature move. But cultural appropriation, as I have already shown in a previous subchapter, can be a tricky thing. To appropriate one cultural artifact or at least some of its features implies stepping away from one culture, shedding the characteristics that separate it from the others, and plunging into another. Such appropriation also infers that boundaries between cultures are always clearly set and accessible by intellectual means. Or simply by using Google, if one was to follow Updike's way of doing things.

This latter assumption, that otherness can be accessed by intellectual means, is probably what drove Elliot Ackerman, "whose five tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan left him highly decorated" (Bissell 2015), to write his first novel, titled suggestively *Green on Blue* (2015). Set in Afghanistan and told from the perspective of an Afghan soldier who desperately fights to maintain his wounded brother's manly dignity, Ackerman's novel has repeatedly been described by literary critics as performing an act of cultural appropriation, an audacious act unheard of at least in the genre of war writing. True, novels *about* the enemy are common in times of war, but Ackerman does more than that. *Green on Blue* lets readers linger, at least for the duration of the reading, in the very mind of the enemy, who, in the end, is not much

of an enemy after all, but the peon caught in the vicious whirlpool of a war in which money has become a "weapons system", to use a phrase from Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014). The purpose of the novel, much like that of Updike's *Terrorist* and Toth's *Airplane Novel*, is to help the readers understand the bigger picture by offering them access to those aspects that do not fit into the Manichean distinctions that took hold of political and cultural discourse in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

However, besides the typical reactions that a novel narrated from the perspective of the alleged enemy could ultimately trigger, and besides the ideology of the conqueror/winner lurking in the backstage of such denunciations of cultural appropriation, it is my contention that Ackerman's novel also offers precious insight precisely into how discourses surrounding such historical events as the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the 'war on terror' perform these interpretative intrusions by setting up a dialogue between two cultural artifacts. One way to assess the degree of this intrusion would be to bring two other cultural artifacts, one pertaining to and imbued with the culture of the one performing the cultural appropriation, namely Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian* (1985), and the other pertaining to the culture of the 'enemy', namely Hassan Blasim's collection of short stories *The Corpse Exhibition: And Other Stories of Iraq* (2014).

Though Ackerman explicitly stated that "while the American West wasn't 'front and center' in his mind while writing, 'the American counterinsurgency campaign was, and so by default, the Indian Wars became a layer in understanding how Americans behave in these types of war'" (Castner n.d.). Worth noting from this point of view are the novel's frequent covert references to the American West and the Indian Wars, which, besides being pertinent because of the similarities between the Afghan landscape and that of the American West, also attest to a cultural recognition of preexisting narratives. In fact, a significant number of vets identify McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* as the novel that best describes Afghanistan for several reasons that are not as striking as they look (Castner n.d.).

The resemblance is most visible in the way the landscape is described in Ackerman's and McCarthy's novels. On one of his first missions with the Special Lashkar, a military group supported with American money to maintain a balance of power and influence in the region, the narrator, Aziz, describes the Afghan mountains in animalistic terms, giving them the characteristics of a mouth that "swallows" the convoy, the ravine that

"rolled out like a sloppy tongue" (Ackerman 2015, 51), descriptions that recall some of those present in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*: "the cotton eye of the moon squatted at broad day in the throat of the mountains" (McCarthy 2015, 81). From this point of view, both Ackerman's *Green on Blue* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* seem to portray a geography whose constitution is imbued with fear, a feeling prompted by a nature that refuses to be something other than a stubborn force, that refuses to accommodate human presence. In both novels, nature has its own impenetrable rhythms; it follows cycles and unwritten rules.

Along the roads traveled by the protagonists of the two novels, one can almost hear the same sounds, the same barking dogs, see the same "low mud houses" (McCarthy 2015, 90), and sometimes even encounter the same characters. Consider, for instance, the old hermit whom "the kid" from *Blood Meridian* encounters towards the beginning of the novel, an old man who is so much like Mumtaz from *Green on Blue*, both offering comfort to the protagonists. "The family of itinerant musicians" who "were dressed in fools' costumes with stars and halfmoons embroidered on" (McCarthy 2015, 82) reemerge under a similar guise in Ackerman's novel as "traveling musicians looking for work" (Ackerman 2015, 96). There is even something in Aziz's demeanor that reflects the behavior of 'the kid' from *Blood Meridian*. Both protagonists are young and unknowing, and their education, or lack of it, is not aligned with the violently changing political environment, an aspect which in turn reinforces their malleability. Yet, the references to the American West are at their peak of visibility particularly when the narrator tells of how their military company had been divided into two groups with revealing names, the Tomahawks and the Comanches. The split, Aziz explains, had been done not only for strategic purposes but also because their American sponsor, the ghostly Mr. Jack, "had a great affection for the American West" (Ackerman 2015, 51).

Yet, I contend that this is the issue with Ackerman's attempt at cultural appropriation. Though the novel is written from the perspective of an Afghan soldier, Aziz is still the beholder of an American gaze, or, to put it more bluntly, an *Americanizing* gaze. Aziz inherits some parts of that myth of the self-made man. This is particularly visible towards the end of the novel, when Aziz emerges triumphant as a spy in an American spy movie, as someone who has reached a superior understanding, despite his limited education, of the very war he had been fighting in

and of the forces that come into play. His Americanizing gaze is also visible when he goes back to visit his maimed brother under the guise of deceit to tell him that he had been apprenticed to a merchant in Kabul and that he was doing the work of an honest man. Aziz acts like an American when, while still fighting for the Special Lashkar, he pounds on the top of the car to let the driver know that they are all ready to go. The gesture, somehow an awkward imitation of Hollywood action movies, has the same hollow ring as the scene in which 'the kid' from *Blood Meridian* enters a bar and all the men inside "quit talking when he entered" (McCarthy 2015, 21). Most importantly, that presence of spirit is there when he tells his imagined readers that Mr. Jack wrongly assumed that they, Afghans, "did not understand what it meant to be named after the Indians of his country, but we understood. To us, it seemed a small but misguided sort of insult. For our tribes had never been conquered"(Ackerman 2015, 51). For an uneducated Afghan soldier, Aziz seems to know an awful lot about Native Americans. It is almost as if it is not an Afghan soldier speaking but an American under the guise of an Afghan soldier.

Still, the novel's cultural appropriation works best particularly when members of the US occupation forces come to be portrayed throughout the novel. Besides the occasional American soldiers whose shape and size appear in stark contrast with that of the Afghan soldiers, the only instance of American presence that somewhat strikes a chord is that of Mr. Jack, whose ghostly presence matches in tone the almost carnivalesque appearance of the Comanches and the Apaches in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Mysterious, coming and going only during the night in a pitch-dark vehicle, Mr. Jack stands out chiefly because of his blinding white teeth, his ridiculous wardrobe, "his shalwar kameez [that] still held the creases from where it'd been folded in plastic packaging," (2015, 217) and his American way of speaking *Pashto*.

One way to test the accuracy of this instant of cultural appropriation would be to look for similar textual instances in narratives written by those within the culture that is being appropriated and see how they engage in dialogue with each other. The example that comes nearest to that of Mr. Jack is the representation of "the blonds" (Blasim and Wright 2014, 81) in Hassan Blasim's short story *The Madman of Freedom Square*, included in *The Corpse Exhibition*. Albeit the narrative does not specify overtly that the two blonds are American, their narrative seems to follow a prescribed structure: two blonds, most likely a reference to the color of their skin and hair, come

to town, and suddenly everyone is getting a raise, the town's infrastructure develops, the usual tropes of American financial support within the discourse of the 'war on terror'. Soon enough, akin to Mr. Jack with his blindingly white teeth and eyes drained of color, the blonds acquire a certain mythical aura around their presence. "The local women," the narrative goes,

> attributed to the baraka or spiritual power of the blonds the fact that their husbands, who worked sweeping the streets or as school janitors in the city center, had all received pay raises. The husbands, who had been skeptical about the baraka of the two men, soon stopped scoffing, when the government decided to install electricity at the beginning of winter. After all these signs of baraka, the women began a campaign to plant flowers outside their front doors so that the blonds could smell the fragrance as they made their angelic passage through the Darkness district. As for the men, they filled in the puddles so the blonds would not have to walk around them. (Blasim and Wright 2014, 82)

The very presence of these two men bears an uncanniness akin to the presence of Mr. Jack in Ackerman's *Green on Blue*. "The children would be even happier," the narrator explains the people's fascination with the blonds, "when the men would graciously bend down, without stopping walking, to let the children touch their blond hair" (2014, 84). Even Mr. Jack's obsession with the American West returns in one of Blasim's stories. In "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes", the protagonist, an Iraqi man who manages to escape Iraq and move to Amsterdam, keeps having weird dreams and one night "he painted his face like an American Indian, slept wearing diaphanous orange pajamas, and put under his pillow three feathers taken from various birds" (Blasim and Wright 2014, 194). In these stories, the Americans exert a spiritual rather than a physical force. When their presence is specified directly, namely without using oblique language such as the metaphor of the two blonds, it is more often than not to ridicule them.

This mode of describing American presence, however, has turned into a trope and is not limited to fictional representations. In *The Assassins' Gate*, while describing a formal meeting between American officials and Iraqi exiles that took place at the London Hilton Metropole in 2002, George Packer resorts to the same vocabulary. "Sprinkled among them," Packer notes the contrast, "palely lurking, were the Americans. [...] These Americans moved through the throng of Iraqi exiles with the glowing and watchful fervor of missionaries among the converted" (Packer 2007, 88).

These few Americans stand in stark contrast with their Iraqi counterparts, and while the faces of the former show fervor, the latter resemble "beefy apparatchiks from the old Soviet republics of Central Asia" and bring "to mind the words 'fatwa' and 'stoning'" (2007, 88). The Americans do not bring to mind anything, they resemble what they always resembled ever since they set foot on American shores, missionaries.

Going back to the notion of *selfish events* and trying to give an answer to the question as to why interpretative intrusions such as these occur, it is my contention that any such event, due to the immediate effects of its occurrence, does not have the time and the cultural resources to create a discourse that could explain the complexity of that event, and as such it resorts to cultural artifacts that happen to be in its proximity so as to sustain its cultural presence at least until a separate discourse, of its own, has been created and culturally reinforced. This appropriative move then translates into a cultural practice and is reflected, as I have shown up to this point, in narratives that perform a similar appropriative move.

This process is most visible for instance, in the kind of comparisons that politicians, and other figures that retain high amounts of cultural capital, make in the immediate aftermath of violent and sudden events. Such is the case, to give an example, of how the attacks of September 11 were frequently compared to the attacks on Pearl Harbor. At that point in time, 9/11 lacked an eloquent discourse that could make it culturally sustainable and therefore it needed another, more eloquent discourse, to act as *cultural scaffolding*. And until the 'war on terror' does not form its own eloquent discourse it will keep resorting to other discourses for cultural sustenance. For the time being, it thrives only within this constant dialogue between cultural artifacts, images, ideas, texts.

3.4. Reading Otherwise: Toward a Reparative Reading of *Self-ish Events*

A couple of months before the time of writing this, I was asked by a colleague of my supervisor to meet with a student of hers who was doing an undergraduate thesis on the topic of 9/11 and its representations in fiction. The purpose of the meeting was, of course, to exchange ideas and perhaps even suggest further readings that might shed a different light on the topic at hand. In the emails that we exchanged before the actual meeting, when I asked the student what texts he was considering he told me that he

was considering "four 9/11-novels": Paul Auster's *Brooklyn Follies* (2005), William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), and Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013). His take on the issue of 9/11 fiction was to examine, and by extension *reveal*, how these four authors, most of them if not all exponents of a postmodern poetics, write about the event and the end of postmodernism. In this equation, the student further explained, and I am paraphrasing, 9/11 marks the end of postmodernism because it has deeply affected our perception of reality. What I failed to ask the student at the time, and what I now resent not doing, was whether the label "9/11 fiction" that he so nonchalantly attached to these novels was based on another critic's definition or it was simply something he had invented. Besides DeLillo's *Falling Man*, which I discuss in one of the subchapters above, I knew the other novels only by rumors and the names of their authors.

In the time since that conversation I had with the student over coffee, I have brooded a lot over the label and the implications of its use in this context. Labeling a text as something rather than something else reduces and at the same time prescribes the kind of interpretation that can be attributed to that text. Were these texts "9/11-novels" merely because they were published after the event? Or was there something inherently salient in them as to make them be regarded as such? The problem is, of course, not with the novels themselves, but with defining the 9/11 genre, the first step to be taken when dealing with an emerging genre. A quick search on the internet reveals hundreds of lists of putatively 9/11 novels. *The Guardian*, for instance, solves this indecisiveness by asking an Iranian American writer, Porochista Khakpour, to make her list of 9/11 novels. Out of the ten novels that Khakpour lists only one, the most obvious, DeLillo's *Falling Man*, appears on both our lists. Yet, the fact that *The Guardian* attributes the list to a single person as opposed to an editorial board or at least a group of writers says something vital about the nature of the label that we so diligently applied to these novels. It is, in the end, a matter of personal choice.

Whether we like it or not, no authority could dictate a list that is ultimate. Such lists are also prone to revisions considering that novels which might fall within the 9/11-genre continue and will continue to be written. Take, for instance, the case of the Vietnam War. David Means' first novel *Hystopia*, which is essentially a counterfactual retelling of the war in Vietnam, was only published in 2016, namely approximately forty years after the end of the war. What is even more interesting in this sense is that

in the case of the fictional representations of the Vietnam War we do not speak of a Vietnam War *genre*. Generally, critics speak of war fiction and war film yet of nothing as specific as a *genre*, which somewhat reinforces the idea that there must be something specific, and as such definable, to the 9/11-genre.

Several critics, whom I consider and revise extensively in this section of my dissertation, have made their own lists. For instance, in his study entitled *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009), Kristiaan Versluys, being one of the earliest critics in the field, set out to create a preliminary 9/11 canon. In his view, there are four novels and one graphic narrative that have become the foundations of any critical consideration of 9/11 fiction: Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows of the World* (2003), John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), and Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004). Besides these, Versluys also mentions in passing Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008).

Birgit Däwes' *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel* (2011), which is supposedly the most comprehensive and the most systematic study of post-9/11 fiction, brings forth a list that goes well beyond that proposed by Versluys and other critics. "As of late June 2011," Däwes showcases, "at least 231 novels from around the world are available in print which can be classified as '9/11 novels' – that is, the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington provide the entire or a part of the setting, they feature more or less prominently as a historical context (establishing a particular atmosphere or set of themes), or they have a decisive function for the development of the plot, the characters, or the novel's symbolism" (Däwes 2011, 6). The criteria that Däwes uses to make her list of novels is "story-oriented," and it includes considerations on the spatial and/or temporal setting, "the thematic and/or symbolic relevance of the terrorist attacks", and "the characters' involvement with and/or perception of the event" (2011, 81). Däwes study thus provides a map of post-9/11 fiction by identifying six categories of novels, a categorization that could ultimately help the readers group the plethora of 9/11 novels.

Däwes' six categories include "metonymic approaches" (those that "substitute the subject [...] by characteristics of that subject or something closely related to it"), "salvational approaches" (those that "explore various narrative methods of preservation

from destruction or calamity"), "diagnostic approaches" (those that "contextualize 9/11 within larger historical and/or geographical frameworks"), "appropriative approaches" (those that transcend "the boundary to the Other by constructing the voice of the perpetrator"), "symbolic approaches" (those that use 9/11 "as a symbolic setting and event, which provides a parallel or contrastive background to tales of personal crisis, loss, or decline") and "writerly approaches" (namely those that transform "the representational challenges into semantic, structural or formal innovations, such as multiple perspectives, extensive allegories, non-linear forms of narration, visual elements, creative layouts, metafictional angles, and various other textual experiments") (2011, 20–22). Each of these categories, however wide-ranging and permissive, comes with a bevy of interpretations and, like all categories, with a series of prescriptions and provisos. Albeit the sheer magnitude of Däwes' study, with its almost obsessive attention to minutiae and its desire to include everyone's point of view, makes it acquire the authoritativeness of a Bible of Ground Zero Fiction, we still have to come to terms with the fact that Däwes also makes her own criteria and that there might be some novels that do not enter in any of the categories she explores so punctiliously.

We must also come to terms with the fact that some works of fiction might mention 9/11 in passing without making a big deal out of it. After all, the terrorist attacks of September 11, because they have been covered by media all around the world, are a part of a generation's mindset. I remember what I was doing when I saw the attacks on TV. Others have had a similar experience and recall parents telling them that it was "history being made." Should these works of fiction also count as Ground Zero Fiction? By mentioning the event in passing, are not these works of fiction making some sort of side comment on the events themselves? The line between what counts as Ground Zero Fiction and what does not is a thin line indeed, and it would require a particular attentiveness especially on the part of the reader or the literary critic. The mental effort required by this attentiveness is not substantial, but I believe it would make a huge difference.

Given the *permanence* that such selfish events as the terrorist attacks of September 11 have on the consciousness of those who witnessed it in some way or another, I contend that such events also engender a form of *paranoia* that populates any interpretative process, even those that seem innocuous from this point of view. Däwes notes this as well when she argues that in the aftermath of 9/11, "any sight of two aircrafts near

buildings, and especially of a plane so precariously tilted toward a vertical structure, summons the one association which iconically opened the twenty-first century: the World Trade Center's spectacular destruction" (Däwes 2011, 26). We are always prepared to assign the interpretation imposed by the selfish event on the things that have even the slightest resemblance with at least one of the elements of the event. In other words, that interpretation has become a mental shortcut which we take whenever we are cornered by the nebulous symbolism of a cultural artifact.

One way to test this would be to look at a couple of instances where this kind of paranoid reading occurs and see how it works and perhaps find some tools to combat it. Finding such instances is not easy since they can be basically anywhere. I stumbled across one such instance while reading Nell Zink's novel *Nicotine* (2016) and caught myself taking the same mental shortcut. The novel often makes temporal references by indicating the day or time of day when something occurs:

> SUNDAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 11, 2016.
> In Fort Lee, Matt kicks off his duvet. He picks up his phone, checks his mail and social media, and selects an old Funkadelic MP3 to pipe to the speakers in the kitchen. He picks his way downstairs. There are wineglasses on the open wooden staircase, and dust bunnies, some resting on the remains of the wine. He is thinner, with dark circles under his eyes.
> He dresses carefully, in indigo Levi's, a long-sleeved T-shirt, light fleece jacket, Timberlands, and a solar-powered Timex. It reads nine-thirty-three. (Zink 2016, 262)

That is how Matt spends his fifteenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. Yet the moment I read the date, I began expecting some reference to that anniversary, some side comment, the glimpse of a ceremony on television, the pompous rhythm of some speech on the radio commemorating those who perished in the attacks. I kept reading, but my expectations were never met. I checked the calendar to see whether September 11, 2016, was a Sunday and found that it had been indeed so and that Zink was not, in fact, referring to some other, parallel universe. It was almost as if Zink was denying me that kind of satisfaction and instead, she was giving me the frustration of a reader who has suddenly and unknowingly lost his trust in the writer. On the other hand, as my frustration continued, I also realized that perhaps it was what Zink intended by circumventing her readers' expectations. The reference, by means of its incompleteness, offered me the space needed to realize that I, too, was performing a paranoid reading,

one that involved bringing 9/11 into the picture. Zink does this throughout her novel; she builds expectations and then denies any resolution by creating characters that fall into the usual traps. Frustration on the part of the reader seems to be just her cup of tea.

Another, more blatant example of a text that engenders this type of paranoid reading is Steve Erickson's novel *Shadowbahn* (2017), which, unlike Nell Zink's *Nicotine*, can be considered a 9/11 novel, at least by Däwes' standards. In it, the Twin Towers magically reappear in the Badlands of South Dakota twenty years after their fall, and nobody knows why. The novel, written in chapters no longer than a page that sometimes read like poems, begins with a phone conversation about things that disappear into thin air:

> Things don't just disappear into thin–
> …but she hangs up on him before he finishes. "What the…?" he says, staring at his cell phone in dismay and trying to remember if she ever hung up on him before. As he finishes filling the tank of his truck and replaces the pump's nozzle, Aaron ponders how this became the kind of argument where his wife hangs up on him. He hauls himself back into the driver's seat thinking maybe this is really the kind of argument that's about something other than what it's about. (Erickson 2017, 3)

Given the context that is built around the novel, namely the information on the cover as well as the many reviews on the back of the book, my immediate reaction was to think that the things disappearing into thin air were, in fact, the two towers. Erickson is also playing around with the readers' expectations when he lets his protagonist, Aaron, ponder over whether the argument is about "something other than what it's about." Indeed, as I read on, I realized the argument is about something other than the two towers:

> *Is something else wrong?* He wonders. *Is there something else going on with her?* Can this fight actually be about something as trivial as his wallet gone missing, vanished from his jacket? Even if now he's a driver without an identity. […]
> *If I'm being honest*, Aaron admits to himself ruefully about the conversation with Cilla Ann, *I know it's not true that things don't just disappear into thin air. If I'm honest and I've learned anything in this life, it's that things disappear into thin air all the time*. (Erickson 2017, 5)

Erickson, again, moves back and forth between expectation and the denial to satisfy that expectation. In the following chapter the disappearance of the wallet and the disappearance of the two towers come together as Aaron wonders "how it is that on this morning of the argument about the wallet disappearing into thin air, he could have missed there on the flat plain before him the two skyscrapers each a quarter mile high: the breath of Aaron's country, exhaled from the nostrils of Aaron's century" (Erickson 2017, 6). By bringing the two acts of disappearance together, Erickson also builds a dialectics of our paranoid reading and provides us with the mental tool to become aware of it and at the same time perform a *reparative reading* of it. Akin to a cognitive behavioral therapy technique, the novel helps us spot any future reasoning errors with regards to the cultural potency of the selfish event.

The idea of a *reparative reading* of cultural artifacts is not new, and it goes all the way back to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writings on affect and method, in particular to the essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You", included in *Touching Feeling* (2002). In the essay, she argues that the "first imperative of paranoia is *There must be no bad surprises*" (Sedgwick and Frank 2003, 130) and that therefore paranoia is "at once anticipatory and retroactive" because it thinks about all the bad things that have happened so as to be ready for all the bad things that are still to come. In this sense, Sedgwick further argues, paranoia "seems to grow like a crystal in a hypersaturated solution, blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding or things to understand" (2003, 131). Paranoia is also a "strong theory" because it insists on the notion that "everything means one thing," which "permits a sharpened sense of all the ways there are of meaning it" (2003, 136). It is also a "theory of negative effects" since "it is only paranoid knowledge that has so thorough a practice of disavowing its affective motive and force and masquerading as the very stuff of truth" (2003, 138). Finally, "paranoia places its faith in exposure," in the sense that it places "an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se – knowledge in the form of exposure" (Sedgwick and Frank 2003, 138). To put it crudely, Sedgwick sees paranoid reading as a way of recanting affect to claim possession over the truth, and it is accordingly described in negative terms, as single-minded, self-defeating, hypervigilant, contemptuous, sneering, monopolistic, and last but not least, terrible. Paranoia is a creator of expectations, and by doing so, it denies the pleasure of discovery.

Taking into consideration all of these aspects, I cannot help but notice the similarities between what Sedgwick calls "paranoid reading" and my own reading of both Zink's *Nicotine* and Erickson's *Shadowbahn*. The moment I read the date in Zink's novel, which can be seen as a triggering element (much like seeing a plane flying dangerously close to a building), I began reading it in a paranoid way. Akin to the crystal in the hypersaturated solution, the selfish even tends to blot out, as Sedgwick argues, any sense of the possibility that Zink might wish to deviate from a reminder of the selfish event itself. It is September 11, 2016, and therefore Zink must make some reference to the event. However, Zink almost knowingly deviates from this path. Had she stayed on that path she would have reinforced the validity of a paranoid reading of her work. Her refusal to do that at once makes us aware of our paranoid tendencies and disarms that tendency. The same goes for Erickson's novel, which simultaneously builds up expectations and makes us aware of them.

In light of the way paranoid reading is described in Sedgwick's essay, as well as of my own experience with this type of reading, it seems clear that a more productive way to read any post-9/11 text is by reading it *reparatively*. To read *reparatively*, Sedgwick argues, or "to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise" (Sedgwick and Frank 2003, 146). Albeit Sedgwick's position might give one the impression of being overly sentimental, it also proposes hope as a way or reading reparatively:

> Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (Sedgwick and Frank 2003, 146)

I sense that Sedgwick is also professing an acceptance of the frustration that comes from unsatisfied expectations. If a paranoid reading practice is closely tied to the notion of *inevitability* (Zink *must* be referring to 9/11; Erickson *must* be talking about the Twin Towers when he refers to things that disappear into thin air) a reparative reading practice nurture the *hope* for things turning out differently from the way they actually

did. It nurtures the hope that Zink and Erickson can and do refer to something else, something that has nothing to do with what happened on September 11, 2001. Additionally, it would also nurture the hope that whatever happened on that day could not and will not define what comes after.

A reparative reading practice would also curtail the culturally expansive tendencies of a selfish event and save us the trouble of obsessively returning to it the way an anxious person clings to a stream of negative thoughts that lead to other negative thoughts, in a vicious circle. It would also save us the trouble of interpreting those cultural artifacts that have nothing to do with it from the perspective of the selfish event and as such unleash their potential to mean something else. Wallets, too, can disappear into thin air. "[Things] disappear into thin air all the time" (Erickson 2017, 5). Planes fly low all the time, inevitably, seen from below, they might appear they are flying into skyscrapers.

A reparative reading practice would also emancipate reality from the inevitability of another attack, not in the sense of keeping it safe from an actual attack, but rather in the sense of liberating that reality from the clutch of anxiety and unleashing its real potential. A reparative reading practice would also permit us to see two household objects in the Morandi paintings. It would also permit Changez's interlocutor from Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, to see in Changez a pursuer of the American dream instead of a possible terrorist, or a hater of America. Finally, perhaps a reparative reading practice would translate into a social practice that could help us see Otherness under a different light.

PART TWO. THE PROXIMAL-ANCILLARY COVERAGE CONTINUUM AND THE DISCOURSE OF THE AMERICAN "WAR ON TERROR"

> *A flute trilled and a path was illuminated, a narrow stair composed of thousands of trunks and suitcases and duffel bags heaved up in all directions, yet laid in mathematically precise rows and columns, briefcases, garment bags, and hatboxes arrayed in viaducts and ramps and retaining walls. The intensity of the light went up, then up again, and then down – down on Louis, Revo, and Lauren roller bags, until the selected, starred pathway [...] but I remembered. (Mark Doten, The Infernal)*

CHAPTER FOUR: MAPPING A WAY OUT OF THE *SELFISH EVENT*

In the first part of my dissertation I concluded by arguing that *selfish events* absorb and contaminate other cultural artifacts to sustain their own cultural presence until a discourse of their own has been created and reinforced. I also contended that a *reparatively positioned reader*, following Sedgwick's notions of *paranoid* and *reparative reading*, could emancipate texts and other cultural artifacts from the grip of the *selfish event* and I gave a series of ways in which this could be performed. In this chapter, I will focus on the other theoretical construct that my dissertation is proposing, namely, the *proximal-ancillary coverage continuum*. To this end, I shall start by defining the *continuum* and the two types of coverage, *proximal* and *ancillary*, on which the *continuum* is based. In particular, I shall focus on the *ancillary* and argue that this type of coverage permits an extension of Robert M. Entman's "cascading network activation", which limited the frame-modifying capacities of fictional representations. The text that I will discuss extensively in this chapter is Mark Doten's novel The Infernal (2015), and I will argue that, because of its position within the continuum, Doten's novel occupies a privileged position within the discourse of the "war on terror".

4.1. Theoretical Framework

"Canons and cannons", Lynne Hanley says in *Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory* (1991), "have more in common than the accident of sounding alike" (Hanley 1991, 18). Inherent to the notion of literary canon, Hanley suggests, is a sense of "belligerence and a project of cultural imperialism" (1991, 18). Yet, besides the discussions adjacent to such grand scale inquiries into *who* gets to decide *what* makes it into the top ten books about war, at the level of the war writer's choice of topic that sense of belligerence does not seem to wane. On the contrary, it seems to intensify and diversify in time. It is manifest when authors choose to go against the grain by producing alternative narratives, as it is manifest when they seem to challenge the expectations created by already established discourses, be they fictional or non-fictional. Finally, that same belligerence morphs into a masked hostility when fictional accounts are put side by side with non-fictional ones.

Kurt Vonnegut, for instance, in his take on the Second World War *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), goes against the expectations of linearity by imagining, in cinematic fashion, American airplanes taking off backwards from an airfield in England (Vonnegut 1991, 74). In a similarly playful vein, in *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968), Robert Coover chose to address the Vietnam War by refuting to engage overtly with it, and instead performing, in John Limon's words, "an exercise in mixed, but not mock, nostalgia" (Limon 1994, 165). As opposed to Coover and his novel's escapist tendencies, in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) Thomas Pynchon prompted his readers to think of war as mere "buying and selling", an exchange in which the "murdering and violence" are sheer matters of "self-policing" to be "entrusted to non-professionals". "The mass nature of wartime death", Pynchon's narrator says, "serves as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements of the War. It provides raw material to be recorded into History, so that children may be taught History as sequences of violence, battle after battle, and be more prepared for the adult world" (Pynchon 2014, 107). Emptied of its apparently didactic belligerent nature, in Pynchon's imagination war becomes a "celebration of markets" (2014, 107). By the same token, and as if adding ironic undertones to Dino Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe* (1940), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) envisions war in an equally existential fashion. In this same tradition, Mark Doten's *The Infernal* (2015) portrays the most recent American adventure in terms of warfare as a battle that is no longer fought on tangible battlefields, but at the level of information and how that

information affects the individuals caught in the whirlpool of the American "war on terror". In the same fashion, Elliot Ackerman's novel *Green on Blue* (2015) goes against the fetishization of the American soldier's war experience by giving an account of the Afghanistan war as seen by Aziz, a young Afghan orphan who joins a U.S. funded militia to provide for his mutilated brother.

However, before engaging with some of these texts and the ways in which they appear to pose a challenge to established discourses, it is worth noting that albeit these texts seem to set off on different discursive paths and highlight diverse aspects of the war experience, they are all anchored into the event of warfare itself. In this sense, one of the most prevalent issues in discussing war fiction, as well as one of the elements that lend it a special status in the ranks of literary fiction, is precisely the fact that war fiction is grounded in a set of facts that can be ideally verifiable first by a parallel reading with non-fictional accounts, and then by a comparison with other modes of representation of the same event. While, as Hanley suggests, we cannot challenge the authenticity of such fictional representations as H.G. Welles' novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898) "with the evidence of our own senses" (1991, 4) somehow the authenticity of war stories is prone to be questioned and perceived as lacking definitive answers regarding the war experience.

Taking these aspects into consideration, this chapter sets out to explore the notion of *ancillary coverage* and the ways in which it comes to be employed in the literature coming out of the American "war on terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan. This concept derives from the terminological necessity of differentiating between what I call *proximal/journalistic coverage* of a military event and its *ancillary/fictional coverage*, as well as from the logical necessity of rendering two corpora of texts into two operational categories that could be defined by a set of features. Considering that *proximal coverage* is governed by its own internal rules, chiefly dictated by the profession of journalism, this chapter strives to identify the rules and regulations that exercise control over *ancillary coverage*, as well as to define them in terms of how they operate within the fictional accounts I have chosen as primary sources. To this purpose, this chapter is divided into three parts. While the first part will set the stage for a methodological reconsideration of the truth-fiction dichotomy and lay out the premises for a *proximal-ancillary coverage continuum*, the second part will deal mainly with how *proximal coverage* "narrated" the "war on terror". Once these two aspects are in place, the third part

of this chapter will attempt to clarify the notion of *ancillary coverage* by trying to shed light on how it operates in Mark Doten's *The Infernal* and Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*, as well as some other texts.

4.2. Premises for a Proximal-Ancillary Coverage Continuum

Wars are prolific producers of purport. On this line of reasoning, military events tend to become *selfish events*, in the sense that the speed with which they occur is too high for a stable cultural discourse to take shape and maintain its stability, up to the point where they begin to absorb even those cultural artifacts that have no inherent connection to the events themselves. Recall, for instance, how in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the triggering event of the "war on terror", politicians began to compare it with Pearl Harbor, thus legitimizing a military response. At that time, the "war on terror" did not yet have a cultural frame of its own and consequently there was a felt need to bring in other cultural frames. Due to this necessity for meaning at times of social and political instability, as Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur argue in their *theory of media dependency*, there is a commonly held belief that in times of war textual and visual production increases exponentially primarily due to the pressure of circumstance. While the media apparatus is compelled to report on what is happening on the battle front, the public is even more compelled to look for additional sources of information. "[I]n societies with developed media systems", Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur argue, "audience dependency on media information increases as the level of structural conflict and change increases" (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976, 7).

In this context of heavy information exchange between the media and the public, military mavens, as well as a plethora of other specialists or former members of a state's political apparatus, are promptly called upon to analyze the situation as well as regulate to a certain extent that flow of information, if not to proffer further credibility to what is being reported. This form of *discourse regulation*, when an authoritative voice is invited to strengthen credibility, is akin to Medieval writers who mention holy texts to instantly inherit a degree of cogency from them.

Widespread in this sense is the emergence and circulation of written accounts authored by former members of the administration or people who had played strategic roles in the political unfolding of a military conflict. The strong impact these accounts

have on the public opinion stems chiefly from the overarching sense that they represent an insider's version of events and as such show some degree of disloyalty to a system that is reluctant to disclose such information in the first place. The insider's denial of complete allegiance to a system gives the illusion that the information included into an account *about* that system discloses things no longer under the control of that system.

However, regardless of the value these insider accounts have in portraying a military conflict and in further expanding its discursive outlets, and irrespective of the immediacy and alleged accuracy they provide under such strenuous circumstances, it is generally assumed that this kind of coverage does not exhaust the field of war narration, as it does not generically extend how the reader could experience the war vicariously. Perhaps the only written accounts that attempt to surpass this initial drawback are the ones centering on individual war experiences, both on the part of the authors themselves (who are mostly "embedded journalists"), and on the part of the soldiers/people whose "narratives" unfold in the accounts of those authors.

Halfway between fiction, because inherently subjective and as such at least structurally fabricated in terms of what is being brought to the attention of the reader and the way they offer a ready-made framing of perception, and journalism, due to their stated purpose, these accounts, akin to the special "interventions" of key members of the administration, act as *discourse regulators* promising to peter out their readers' need for both accurate information *and* emotional involvement. Their "delivery system", to use a phrase coined by David Palumbo-Liu to explain how the notion of *otherness* morphs into *sameness* in the process of reading (Palumbo-Liu 2012, 10), is expected to follow the rules dictated by the practice of journalism, its traditions, its clichés.

Such is the case, for instance, of Sebastian Junger's *War* (2010), which in an *Author's Note* promises its readers that the author of the account "was never asked – directly or indirectly – to alter [his] reporting in any way or to show the contents of [his] notebooks or [his] cameras" (Junger 2011, xiii). In the same author's note, Junger further explains that "many scenes" were even "captured on videotape", an affirmation which covertly acts as an open invitation to additional re-checking of the facts, as if his credentials as a journalist could not possibly satisfy a reader's craving for verisimilitude and trustworthiness. The reassurance of journalistic objectivity returns later in the

book when Junger reports on his refusal to put on a military uniform or carry a gun because his "objectivity" could be undermined and as such he would technically step out of his profession and be treated as a combatant.

An even more illustrative example in this sense is Michael V. Hayden's *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror* (2016), in whose *Foreword* the author, a former Director of the National Security Agency and of the Central Intelligence Agency, states that he had "pushed as hard as prudence and the law (and CIA's Publication Review Board) allow" (Hayden 2016, 6). Yet, although apparently General Hayden's best policy is his honesty, readers are never told about the amount of "pushing" involved in the process, or the kind of "prudence" that is at stake. An inquiry into that is swiftly dismissed with the all-encompassing generalization that the "labor" these agencies perform daily "deserves understanding, appreciation, and even occasional criticism" (2016, 6). Somehow, integral to his declaration of honesty is a sense of self-hijacking meant not to discredit the account itself or the author, but rather to cast the latter in the role of a hero akin to Prometheus offering fire to mankind.

Both Junger's and Hayden's diligence in displaying their honesty and in disclosing the circumstances under which their accounts were produced is well situated. Placed at the very beginning, as the custom is with such accounts, they are not only invitations to further reconsideration and re-checking, but they are also meant to stave off criticism and to bridge the accounts with the kind of feedback they are prone to receive. Considering their stated purpose, that is, of offering accurate information to their readers, these accounts are bound to trigger some sort of response, one that stems out of the comparison with a different version of events. Such is the case, for instance, of the response Hayden's book received in *The New York Review of Books* immediately after his book was published. Charlie Savage, the author of the review, argues that though Hayden "is good at projecting the impression that he is laying out everything you need to know about a topic" (2016, 8) he also concludes that the General's ultimate judgment might be clouded by the stated idealism of the state apparatus he is serving even in an account that promises to be as personal as possible. Additionally, though Hayden sees intelligence agencies as subject to "political winds" and "political elites" the readers might find reasons "to question whether he sometimes lets his defense of espionage agencies against such criticism [...] interfere with his candor" (Savage 2016, 8). Savage's comments on the trustworthiness of Hayden's account not

only affect the structural stability of the account but also attach a mental red tag to what is being told.

Bearing in mind this initial limitation, namely the inability of these accounts to use up the resources of war narration, another widespread postulation is that the exploration of the cultural significance of war entails also overstepping the sense of urgency and claim to authenticity that *proximal coverage* offers, and venturing outside the range of media reports into narratives produced in the aftermath of a military conflict. While such accounts offer facts, narratives are thought of as recreating an experience. What distinguishes fictional renditions of war, Catharine Savage Brosman argues in "The Functions of War Literature", from non-fictional portrayals of war, is their "emphasis upon the experiential dimension" (Brosman 1992, 85). These renditions, Brosman explains, record "not simply the causes and conduct of armed conflict or individual battles but the manner in which they are lived, felt, used, and transformed by participants" (1992, 86). The appeal of these narratives chiefly stands in their capacity to create a sense of authenticity that does not stem from satisfying the desire to know the facts accurately but from their readers' subsequent identification with the feelings of the characters through the exercise of the imagination:

> [The] impressions left by literature derive from shaping, which narrative histories, as opposed to mere records, also entail but which is usually more radical in poetry and fiction. In the case of poetry, rhythm, rhyme, stanza form, images, condensation, irony, and other means of formalizing experience, can create, from destruction, violence, and fear, psychological and aesthetic fulfillment. In fiction, the linear movement of plot – even if loose – and of prose itself, and the unavoidable interpretation of material that comes from selection and shaping, create a fictional rationality that tends to overcome formlessness and thus seems to ratify experience. (Brosman 1992, 86)

One does not need engage in overly assiduous research to uncover a significant amount of "objective" data apropos the Vietnam War, and even discover a generous quantity of written material that is indisputably far less heartfelt than, say, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, or Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*, to name just a few. Yet, despite the availability of all that allegedly objective data, culturally speaking one is far more likely to cement one's memory of a war's cultural significance through the filter of structured narratives rather than through newspaper reports and, nowadays, through the huge amounts of information circulating in the media and on the

Internet. This is chiefly because, as Hanley herself rightly explains, since we as readers are unable to question their "authenticity with the evidence of our own senses" narratives "shape our memories of the past and they create memories of pasts we have never had, of experiences not even remotely like anything that has ever happened to us" (Hanley 1991, 3–4).

Literary fiction, from this point of view, besides offering its consumers a sense of cultural closure and vicarious participation, proves to be invaluable in providing a broader spectrum of cultural reflections on war, and it has substantiated this claim on more than one occasion. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply that the presence of an *ancillary coverage* of war belittles in any shape or form the centrality and significance of *proximal coverage*. Albeit both feed on allegedly the same source (i.e. the military conflict itself), and as such place themselves on a continuum where substantially *ancillary coverage* attempts to tie the loose ends of *proximal coverage*, the paths they pursue in reaching their status as parts of a grander discourse are inherently different and as such revelatory with regards to the inherent nature of that discourse.

4.3. Proximal Coverage: Between Functional Forms of Truth and Spheres of Consensus

In *The Elements of Journalism* (2001), Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel set out to outline what they believe to be the ten key principles of journalism so as to provide a guideline for both newspeople and the public. At the top of their list stands the principle by which "journalism's first obligation is to the truth" (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 49), and the idea that its ultimate purpose is to offer a practical and functional form of truth that would fundamentally create "a map for citizens to navigate society" (2014, 242) irrespective of the fact that such truth might prove to be uncomfortable to the higher echelons of the political establishment. Journalism, the two authors further argue, must also be loyal to the citizens it seeks to inform, and as such it must simultaneously maintain a "discipline of verification" (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 98), and an "independence from those they cover" (2014, 142). Journalism must also "serve as an independent monitor of power" (2014, 171). Additionally, besides providing "a forum for public criticism and compromise" (2014, 197), the aspects that it covers must be significant and relevant, "comprehensive and in proportion" (2014, 242), as well as deriving from the journalist's "personal conscience" (2014, 272).

In theory, Kovach and Rosenstiel's principles appear to be as sturdy and as sound as principles can be, but in practice different situations require the use of these principles in different ways. Albeit the attacks of 9/11 and the "war on terror" could have constituted a great opportunity for a relaunch of American journalism after it had fallen into the throes of *infotainment*, they also marked a shift toward what Michael Schudson calls a "sphere of consensus" (Zelizer and Allan 2011, 48) within the American press, in the sense that American journalists "moved into what might even be called a priestly or pastoral mode" (2011, 48). What Kovach and Rosenstiel advocate as one of the strongest principles of good journalism was quickly abandoned for what Schudson perceives as a "quiet, solemn tone, as if speaking at a funeral" (2011, 48).

Thus, when it came to reporting on the "war on terror", the American media apparatus, as Robert W. McChesney argues, "proved to be a superior propaganda organ for militarism and war" (Zelizer and Allan 2011, 105). Journalists were no longer asking the tough questions nobody else was willing to address, just as they were no longer looking for scapegoats different from the ones they had been offered on a plate from "above". American journalists limited themselves to simply echoing the conceptions and views of the elite opinion by engaging in what Adam Hodges calls "a chain of authentication" (Hodges 2011, 98), a process through which key phrases uttered by those who have "symbolic capital" within a certain network (i.e. politicians) "enter into media circulation and provide inertia for the accrual of a shared cultural narrative" (2011, 98). Tethered to their alleged professionalism implicit in the notion of "reporting", and afraid of being accused of nurturing anti-American sentiments at a time when such sentiments were policed in an almost McCarthyite manner[6], journalism in the United States fell short when it came to exercising their "watchdog principle" (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 171).

A further proof of this curtailing comes from a study that explores the "war on terror" framing process through interviews with journalists at *USA Today*, a newspaper that not only has the widest circulation within the United States, but also "seeks to speak with a national voice". Conducted by Seth C. Lewis and Stephen D. Reese, the survey asked journalists "to define the War on Terror, reflect on the phrase's use in the

[6] In her account of post-9/11 discourse construction aptly titled *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11*, Sandra Silberstein speaks of a "New McCarthyism": "Along with increased patriotism, post-9/11 saw attacks on those who questioned U.S. policy" (Silberstein 2004, xiv).

news media, and offer thoughts on how such issues should be presented in the press" (Lewis and Reese 2009, 89). The results of the study, published in the *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* (Spring 2009), show that the great majority of the journalists interviewed "expressed frustration with the difficulty of defining the War on Terror" mainly because "the phrase had become a convenient (yet unfortunate) shorthand for Bush administration policies since 9/11" (2009, 90). Yet, despite this frustration, "the U.S. media not only transmitted President Bush's preferred phraseology, but also reified and naturalized the policy, making it an uncontested and unproblematic 'thing'" (2009, 90). Due to "sourcing patterns" that give primacy to "'official' accounts", Lewis and Reese conclude, "reporters tend to cast their work within a 'web of facticity' that lends particular gravity and validity to the words of authority figures; hence, the news is that the President said X, not whether X is empirically accurate" (2009, 88). Thus, whatever official figures said, it was echoed in and authenticated by the press.

At the root of this identification of the notion of reporting with the "words of authority figures" stand at least two factors worthy of being mentioned in this context. The first factor refers to the ways in which information, ideally akin to wealth in a capitalist system, trickles down within a system of knowledge. To explain the process, Robert M. Entman proposes the model of "cascading activation" (Entman 2003, 415), a model "designed to explain how thoroughly the thoughts and feelings that support a frame extend down from the White House through the rest of the system" (2003, 419) (Figure 1). Ideas that are produced at the level of the administration, argues Entman, "possess the greatest strength" (2003, 420). The administration, on the other hand, is distinguished within this model from the *other elite*, a network that comprises "insiders who do not work in the executive branch" (2003, 420) but still retain some framing abilities. Among these stand members of Congress and their staffs, former government officials, think tank denizens, university sages, interest groups, and public relations firms. "Elites", Entman argues, "heavily influence the media, which in turn significantly shape public opinion – that is why the public occupies the bottom level of the cascade after all" (Entman 2003, 421).

The interesting aspect in Entman's model of the modes in which ideas/frames circulate is that the media lacks the means to directly influence the other elites and, by extension, the administration. It can only do so by means of creating and reinforcing

news frames which, in turn, can have an impact on the upper levels including, indirectly, the administration. Thus, what Entman seems to be implying is that the media play a significant role in the *transmission* of frames coming from the upper levels of the knowledge system, while they cannot directly influence how those frames reverberate once they have reached the lower levels of that same system as imagined by Entman.

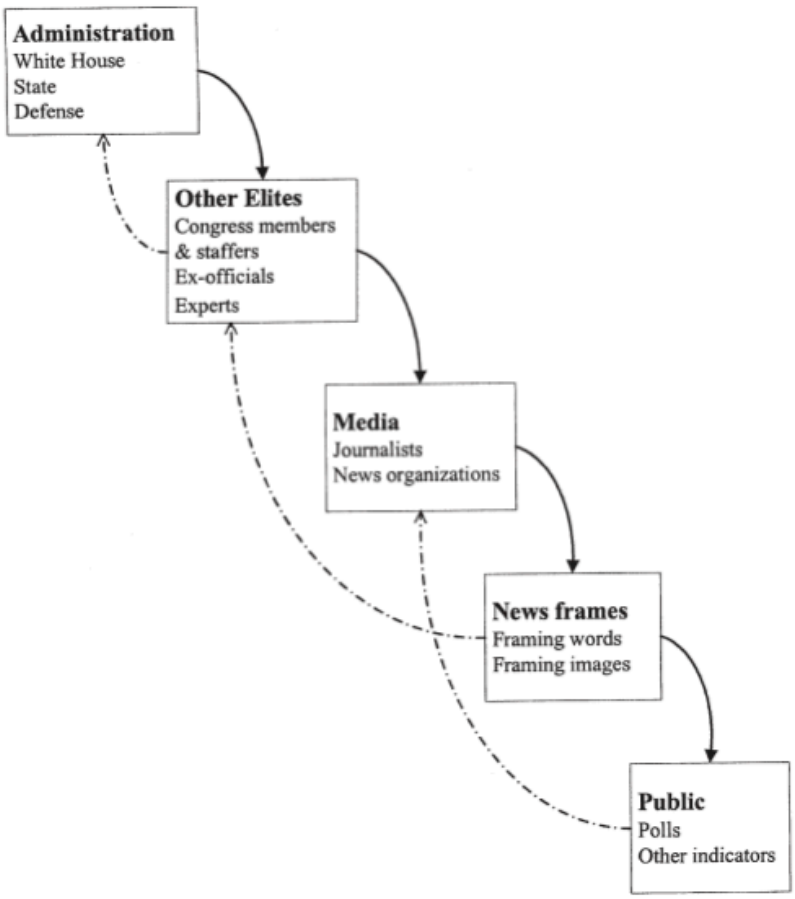

Figure 1 Robert M. Entman's "cascading network activation" (2003)

The second factor that stands at the root of this identification with the needs of those who fall within the upper levels of the system is, as Glenn Greenwald explains, socioeconomic. Leading American journalists, Greenwald says, "live in the same neighborhoods as the political figures and financial elites over which they ostensibly serve as watchdogs" (Greenwald 2014, 234). In Greenwald's view, American journalism has ceased to be an "outside force" and like all "courtiers" journalists are always "eager to defend the system that vests them with their privileges and contemptuous of anyone

who challenges that system" (2014, 235). In fact, this protective stance is so deeply ingrained within US establishment journalism that, in an interview with the *Guardian*, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Seymour Hersh harshly condemned "the timidity of journalists in America" as well as their "failure to challenge the White House" in matters of political and social significance. The solution, Hersh says, would be to endorse those editors who cannot be financially and politically manipulated and to dismiss those "chickenshit editors" who do the Administration's bidding (O'Carroll 2013). However, the kind of covert manipulation Greenwald is referring to goes well beyond the individual level and into the institutional one. As Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman point out in their well-known study on media bias *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, full identification also implies a "technical legal dependency" since "radio-TV companies and networks all require government licenses and franchises and are thus potentially subject to government control and harassment" (Herman and Chomsky 1994, 13).

Once caught within Hodges' "chain of authentication" that reuses soundbites taken from official sources and repeats them *ad infinitum* until they become naturalized and taken for granted, the American press proved to be incapable of getting out at least up to a certain point. Yet, this was chiefly due to the kind of structural rigidity journalism at large suffers from. At times, the need to *report* on a certain aspect comes to be translated into a need to *repeat*. Essentially, since the press is at least theoretically an intermediary between the political elites and the people, certain frames were readily accepted and transmitted further down. Essentially, one of the shortcomings of the American press was that it avoided institutionally to open a space for debate, a discussion that would have ultimately mapped out in moral terms a contested territory in the discourse surrounding the "war on terror".

4.4. Ancillary Coverage: Between Personal Truth and Narrative Necessity

Fiction, on the other hand, is traditionally perceived as the kind of textual production that does not necessarily fall within the range of institutional constraints that *proximal coverage* is subjected to repeatedly. On the contrary, along the centuries, fiction has acquired somewhat a reputation for steering clear of those constraints because, on the one hand, the span of time between the occurrence of an event and its so-called re-

interpretation within the realm of fiction is crucially longer as opposed to that afforded to *proximal coverage*, and, on the other hand, because of its reliance on literary conventions. "Narratives", Jerome Bruner argues in "The Narrative Construction of Reality" (1991), "are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and 'narrative necessity' rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness, although ironically we have no compunction about calling stories true or false" (Bruner 1991, 18). The novelist, as opposed to the historian and the journalist, has a different work ethos, as Jane Smiley explains in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel* (2005):

> The historian is required to give up dramatic interest in the pursuit of accuracy, but a novelist must give up accuracy in the pursuit of narrative drive and emotional impact. Even if the novel is based entirely on what the novelist himself has experienced, he will rework the experiences to make them more vivid and evocative, and, indeed, more logical and comprehensible. In reworking them, he will betray, or transcend, the original experience. (Smiley 2006, 21)

As opposed to *proximal coverage* a reviewer does not feel the need to comment on the honesty of the writer but rather on the quality of the narrative. On a more personal level, writers in general are thought to be the kind of "editors" that Hersh envisages, free of the type of financial and social pressures journalists are subjected to daily. Albeit the publishing industry does exert some powers of selection with regards to the process of sifting through the "slush pile" (Doten 2015, 275) of submitted manuscripts, it is worth noting that their allegiance is of a different nature than the one present in the case of *proximal coverage* in terms of the social consequence such coverage could trigger.

Fiction has always brought something different to the table and although at times the ideas it brought forth proved to be of consequence, its participation in discussions regarding universal human values, or morality to be precise, could always somehow be suspended, its consequences disregarded. One of the unique values of fiction is, as Wayne C. Booth explains, "its relatively cost-free offer of trial runs" (Booth 1988), and though these "trial runs" may at times be dangerous because they "deliver us out of our 'comfort zone'" (Palumbo-Liu 2012, 10), they also provide us with "both a relative freedom from consequence and, in their sheer multiplicity, a rich supply of antidotes" (Booth 1988, 485). Such is the case, for instance, of the literature produced under totalitarian regimes when the possibility to make oneself inconspicuous, withdraw from

one's writings by labelling them as fiction was widely exploited. Since literature constituted a means of escape from the mental and cultural homogeneity engendered by totalitarian regimes it is no wonder that so many books were banned under such circumstances. Somehow, the witch hunt that occurs under totalitarian regimes against writers and free thinkers has taught us that literature plays an important role in the ways in which we perceive reality.

In his *Author's Note* to *The Infernal* (2015), Mark Doten warns his readers that even though "real-world people and events" are rendered in the novel "to use a legal phrase, which also happens to be true – this is a work of fiction, and all incidents and characters are either fictional or used fictitiously". To put it differently, the only "truth" that the reader can fully give credence to is the fact that what they hold in their hands, physically, is nothing more than a work of fiction and that they should act accordingly with regards to it. Yet, the mere fact that a fictional representation such as this one does contain an "author's note" with legal undertones further signals that Doten's novel, as Linda Hutcheon notes in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), falls into the category of fictional representations that "install and then blur the line between fiction and history" (Hutcheon 1988, 113). Though they are both narratives, fiction and history are generally separated by their "frames [...], which historiographic metafiction first establishes and then crosses, positing both the generic contracts of fiction and of history" (Hutcheon 1988, 109–10).

As opposed to Junger and Hayden, who went to great lengths to make sure that they receive their due credit for their work, Doten further hints at the fact that what we get as readers are mere "omnosyne outputs", namely pages issued by a machine whose failings are not only inherent considering our own experience with technology but also made apparent by the random sequences of code that litter the pages of the book. This is, undoubtedly, an extra layer added to the author's *effacement* implying both the fact that since these pages are randomly printed by a machine the notion of selection and framing appears idiosyncratic, and the fact that the author somewhat takes no responsibility for whatever may be taken out from his work because he is merely the messenger who offers no moral judgment, no incriminations.

A similar type of *effacement* is present in Elliot Ackerman's Afghanistan war novel *Green on Blue* (2015) at the very beginning of the narrative when the protagonist overtly states that many of his peers and acquaintances would call him a "dishonest

man" (2015, 3) even though he has always kept faith with himself. This tendency towards dishonesty is further reinforced when the protagonist, who is initially nameless and only identifies himself as "Ali's brother" (2015, 3), tells his readers about how his mother entrusted him with the secret of her smoking habits. "The truth is", the narrator admits later, "she recognized in me her own ability to deceive" (2015, 4). Our initial reaction as readers would be to readily dismiss the narrator by labelling him as "unreliable", to use one of Booth's terms.

Yet, this is a warning on at least two levels. Considering that with *Green on Blue* Ackerman, an American writer, is performing an act of cultural appropriation by choosing to write from the perspective of an Afghan soldier, this could be an indication that signals an inherent failure in the case of such an appropriation. Cultural appropriations are often derogatory because they imply, on the one hand, that different cultures are accessible via intellectual effort, and, on the other hand, that anyone could objectify and turn that other culture into their own asset. On another level, it is my contention that, in fact, bearing in mind that the novel is written in the first person and as such what we are being offered is a one-sided account, we are being granted access to that part of the self toward which the protagonist has always been faithful. We are also reminded that the narrative does not strive to offer any ultimate truths about the war.

Additionally, and going back to that set of commonly held beliefs regarding war writing, the writer's lack of expertise regarding certain topics also plays an important role in the prevalence of this possibility of *effacement*. Albeit with regards to certain topics assiduous research is needed on the part of the writer, the findings of such research usually place that writer within the ranks of outcasts, who are never quite *there*, wherever that may be. The writer who has not taken part in a military event technically could not write "truthfully" about that event, which would place him/her in an "unreliable" position, just as a soldier is readily cast in an "unreliable" position due to his/her lack of writerly skills.

In the case of war literature, specifically, war veterans writing about their own experiences are, up to a certain point, part of an attempt to salvage that status and bring war literature as a genre closer to *proximal coverage* on the *proximal–ancillary continuum*. Such accounts of war experience, akin to those journalistic renderings and written accounts mentioned earlier, act as *discourse regulators*. On this line of reasoning,

somewhat a tradition has been formed with the great majority of military events. On an imaginary scale of literary worthiness and truthfulness, accounts of the war written by veterans or by those who have had direct contact with the war generally fall within the higher ranks, and this idea has taken hold particularly in the case of war literature. However, as Phil Klay, another war veteran turned writer, argues in the *Sunday Review* section of *The New York Times*, the very idea that "the veteran is an unassailable authority on the experience of war shuts down conversation", and "believing war is beyond words is an abrogation of responsibility – it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain" (Klay 2014b).

Klay is not the only one to point out this tendency that he sees as detrimental and limiting. "The difference with war literature," David A. Buchanan argues in *Going Scapegoat: Post-9/11 War Literature, Language and Culture* (2016), "may be that, unlike other subjects, strong voices (usually veterans) protect the field of war literature from being penetrated by the noncombatant voice when they argue about the distracting details and issues of authenticity and accuracy" (Buchanan 2016, 17). Following James Campbell's notion of "combat gnosticism" (Campbell 1999, 203), Buchanan further explains that when it comes to war literature both critics and readers tend to overlook or even to silence civilian voices because they do not constitute authorities in the field. For instance, Peter Molin's blog *Time Now: The Iraq and Afghanistan Wars in Art, Film, and Literature*, which makes a very comprehensive list of war writers and books at the end of each year, never mentions Mark Doten's novel *The Infernal*, albeit the novel has been repeatedly publicized as a war novel. Nathan Deuel, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, called Doten's novel "a darkly twisted take on Iraq war" (Deuel n.d.). Doten is, of course, not a war veteran turned writer and *The Infernal* seems to have been excluded from the canon.

Albeit almost seventeen years have passed since Campbell first spoke of "combat gnosticism" and of its effects on literary production and perception, the notion is still alive and kicking. Perhaps Molin's exclusion of Doten's novel from his canon of contemporary war literature is a symptom of this. Yet, on the other hand, there's also a strong movement towards abolishing it altogether, a movement based on the fact that, in the meantime, wars have changed. "[It] is becoming increasingly obvious," Buchanan argues in this sense, "that the very nature of the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan (and now Syria) denies anything we may try to call an experience of war" (2016,

29). The term, combat gnosticism, has also become increasingly uncomfortable among critics and readers alike. The reason for this is not only the collective realization that war literature as a genre has become increasingly permissive, but also the knowledge that using combat gnosticism as a sort of Occam's razor when it comes to deciding who makes it into the canon of war literature is rather undemocratic. On the one hand, Buchanan explains the issue further, the ideology behind it does not suggest, as one would expect, a definitive answer to questions of veracity and verisimilitude, and it refuses "to admit that the factual nature of the answer doesn't matter" (2016, 29). On the other hand, "combat gnosticism ignores the fact that many voices can speak fictionally about the facts of war and that they can come from any quarter of war's experience" (2016, 30). Its ideology manipulates the notion of authority, "one conferred by the dubious term 'combat' while the epistemology it puts forward as superlative is no less suspicious than the loudest and unadorned pro-war propaganda" (2016, 30).

Nevertheless, considering these aspects, it does not necessarily follow that *ancillary coverage* is thoroughly free of any kinds of constraints and/or failures, unless we imagine, as Noam Chomsky did with his journalist from Mars, a writer from some other planet (Chomsky 2002, 69), preferably a planet where writers dwell, as it does not mean that in the case of war literature non-veteran writers are less trustworthy, if one is to make use of the notion of trust. On the contrary, the latter have proven to go well beyond the war experience itself and problematize further issues related to war literature as a genre and to *proximal coverage*. And if those accounts of war written by war veterans are thought to provide their readers with the highest degree of verisimilitude, the ones produced by non-veteran writers challenge the ways in which that verisimilitude comes to be perceived as such.

Written mainly because the Iraq War "pissed the writer off", Mark Doten's novel *The Infernal* is an unconventional take on the "war on terror" that goes against both existing fictional representations of the American "war against terrorism" as well as those representations of the war that circulated in the media. One illustrative example in this sense is the novel's representation of war veterans and the ways in which its portrayal of them essentially avoids fetishization of war trauma. With the portrayal of Tom Pally, "soldier of the Gallant arms" (2015, 3), Doten is not imagining, as Brian Turner did in *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014), a war veteran haunted by the hordes of "the wounded, and the maimed, and the traumatized, and the frightened and the

shattered, and the shivering and the bruised, and the broken and the disfigured" (B. Turner 2014), but rather one whose most pressing issue is the fact that he is unable to secure dinner reservations on Valentine's Day at a restaurant that had been repeatedly mentioned by one of his comrades during their service in Iraq.

Matters turn even more uncanny when, while still on the phone with the manager of the restaurant, Pally realizes he cannot keep the conversation going because "a mass of pale maggots was churning behind [his] lips and teeth" (Doten 2015, 112). The cause or the source of the maggots is never fully explained but the narration seems to suggest that even though Pally indirectly blames it on his service in Iraq, the maggots might indicate either that he is dead and what the readers are seeing on the page are but the words of a ghost veteran, or that he is metaphorically rotting on the inside. The former suggestion however is somehow invalidated by the introductory "Dramatis Personæ", where Pally is described as "[a] soldier of the Gallant Arms; wife and son dead" (2015, 3), and where the fact that the author chooses to signal the death of Pally's wife and son seems to refute Pally's own death. The latter suggestion, on the contrary, is somewhat shyly supported by Pally's lifestyle and his way of relating to his family and friends. An alcoholic, and a keen consumer of internet pornography who sometimes forgets to wipe his Internet browser's history, as well as somebody who cannot take the blame for not making those dinner reservations in time, Pally discovers that his mother lives on with the belief that he had in fact died in combat. This final confession comes from his father who imagines a gradual comeback for the prodigal son into the bosom of the family, first as "a *door-to-door salesman of world classics*" (2015, 214) and then as a lost-and-found son to be rewarded with "[a] full meal" (2015, 216). On this line of reasoning, with Tom Pally, Doten seems to be singling out the tendency of war veterans toward self-aggrandizing by denying them the status of heroes and by demonizing them.

Essentially a remake of Dante's *Inferno* with characters taken from the Bush Administration, *The Infernal* is fragmented, disrupting, and substantially graphical in its representations. At the center of the multiple narratives of the novel stands a device called "the omnosyne", which was built to serve as a torture utensil meant to extract sensible information from whoever was thought to withhold such information. This information-hungry machine, which ultimately becomes a metaphor for the kind of intelligence gathering modern technology has permitted in the fight against global

terrorism, was created to "reverse the entropy that humans throw off with every word and every thought" and as such to produce "a new language – a superfluid new type of information, to speak as angels speak, in beams of light without friction or distortion, nothing lost, everything we have ever known living on forever" (Doten 2015, 184). Once a living body is connected to the omnosyne the machine then extracts a so-called "kernel of belief" (2015, 23), which is essentially information stored in the nerves and bones. It does so by inflicting "terrible pain" (2015, 282) and if that pain is turned into pleasure the threads of the machine then compensate, "they cut off the pleasure so that again it is pain" (2015, 282). Yet, just like a mad scientist who sees beauty even in the most gruesome experiments, Jimmy Wales, the inventor of the omnosyne, explains that the end of the process justifies the means: the subject ultimately reaches a point where "he is OK with himself at last" and "[a] look comes into the face, of such grace, such light – even with the mouth split open by the Jennings gag. That open mouth is no longer expressive of a demented rictus, but of something else – total understanding" (Doten 2015, 283).

But Doten's Jimmy Wales is not merely a mad scientist worthy of a solitary castle hidden within a dark forest, he is also the puppeteer in a "spectacle of power" (Scarry 27). As Elaine Scarry explains in her seminal work *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), through its very practice torture "bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer's body" (Scarry 1987, 27). The omnosyne, in its monstrous impersonality, takes this idea to its ultimate consequences by eliminating altogether the notion of consent. Once a body is connected there is no possibility to withhold information from being leaked, there is no mediating consciousness between the repository of information, namely the body of the prisoner, and the torturer. The body is not even permitted to die since the machine will keep it alive until all information has been acquired. What Wales describes in his notebooks as the transformations that the body undergoes under torture – "the eyes on the twisted-back head darting and squeezing shut, the mouth wide, tongue swelling, the body jittering madly as though touched by high-voltage wires" (Doten 2015, 283) – is essentially the rendition of an objectified "vision of suffering" that is further converted "into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing specta-

cle of power" (Scarry 1987, 27). Written in the first person, Wales' account of the omnosyne torture, as well as the whole range of narratives the novel comprises, have a further uncanny effect, in the sense that, at least for the duration of the reading, the readers find themselves in the mind of both the torturer and the tortured, and subsequently become representatives of that regime of power.

As extreme and as disturbing as these aspects portrayed in the novel might seem at a first glance it is worth pointing out that Doten's novel was published at a time when discussions on the ethics of torture had been rekindled by the release of the *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program* in late 2014. *The CIA Torture Report*, as it came to be called in the international press, contained information about the agency's use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" that included "rectal feeding and rehydration", "confinement in a box", "the use of cold water", "sleep deprivation", "beatings and threats", and "waterboarding" (Laughland 2015), to mention just a few. In this context, Doten's novel and the "theory of the omnosyne" (Doten 2015, 23) it brings to the whole discussion of torture appear as an extended annotation, a commentary that challenges the reader to imagine the ultimate consequences of the use of torture. Albeit a huge amount of information if obtained by means of torture, Doten's narrative seems to suggest that the information is of no use to those who participate in the process: the tortured dies, and the torturer/reader is still left with a chorus of voices that speak of different things and offer no meaningful closure. The kind of dialogue the novel performs with *The CIA Torture Report* does force a reconsideration of both texts up to the point where we are unable to see what text informs the other, and though we know which one is fictional and which one is not, both seem to strangely occupy the same space within our memory.

Yet, despite these disrupting tendencies that *The Infernal* operates within the discourse surrounding the "war on terror", Doten's novel also enjoys a somewhat privileged position in it. Freed from the kind of institutional responsibilities accorded to *proximal coverage*, *ancillary coverage* holds cumulative capabilities of a different degree and complexity, a process akin to a *snowballing effect*. While within the discourse *proximal coverage* tends to accumulate facts and the interpretation of those facts by those who hold a significant amount of "symbolic" as well as social and cultural capital (Hodges 2011, 97), *ancillary coverage* adds a further layer in this process by extending its analysis to include segments of *proximal coverage* as well, or at least some sort of

reaction to it, and Doten's novel is no exception to this rule of thumb. Included within the pages issued by the omnosyne is the account of Andrew Breitbart, labelled as a journalist in the introductory "Dramatis Personæ", an account that amounts to repeating the onomatopoeic "oink" interspersed among the usual random sequences of code for about three pages. Ironically, Breitbart's fifteen minutes of fame end with the virtual possibility to "EXPAND to see all 817 pages" (Doten 2015, 321), the implication of this last remark being that the account goes on to repeat the same "oink" for the remaining eight hundred or so pages. Yet, this is not merely the reproduction of a journalistic account, Breitbart is not even offered the benefit of the doubt, it is the textual reproduction of a reaction to something that the fictional journalist might have said and which is of no consequence, just as the sounds a pig makes are of no consequence in a discourse on the nature of war.

A further example of this *snowballing effect* is Doten's portrayal of Osama bin Laden, which gives the sense of having been taken out of a horror film. However, despite this apparent deviation from the "truth of the thing" (Jamison), as Charles D'Ambrosio would put it, this portrayal is being truthful to and critical of the kind of representations of Islamic fundamentalism that circulated in the media in the aftermath of September 11. In this sense, Doten is no longer portraying Osama bin Laden, the person whose figure appeared obsessively in the media, but rather how that figure came to be perceived and, by extension, those who had succumbed to the belief that bin Laden's actions were not driven by a sense of political/religious probity on the part of his organization, but by the inherent sadism of those who hold such views.

This *snowballing effect* operating within Doten's novel, as well as the macro-argument that fictional and non-fictional representations of the "war on terror" form a non-exclusionary continuum at least on the part of the reader, goes along the lines of Linda Hutcheon's definition of "historiographic metafiction". Just as the texts Hutcheon refers to in her definition, Doten's novel likewise makes extensive use of parodic intertextuality and is highly metafictional. With its references to "real people and events", and its parroting of media and political figures, Doten's novel does situate, as Hutcheon argues, "the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself" (Hutcheon 1988, 126) and as such on the relationship between reader and text and not on the one between author and text. Like the examples Hutcheon gives in her account,

The Infernal singles out and emphasizes "art's critical relation to the 'world' of discourse – and through that to society and politics" (Hutcheon 1988, 140) and as such takes on didactic overtones by trying to underline this relation.

An image is malleable, Doten seems to be suggesting, so malleable that we can do whatever we want with it. In fact, besides his occasional instances of prophetic madness, in Doten's infernal imagination bin Laden does appear as a sadist, like a vampire who needs to be fed daily with the fresh blood of his disciples who, in their turn, seem to be drawn out of a circus number. Doten's bin Laden goes even to the extent of imagining a world shaped along the labyrinthine structure of his own hiding place, a cave system where many of his followers get lost never to be found again. However, this does not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with the ways in which Islamic fundamentalists were portrayed in the media. "Prejudice against a group", Martha C. Nussbaum argues, "always involves fantasy" (Nussbaum 2012, 166), and in his portrayal of the founder of al-Qaeda, Doten is taking the demonization of the enemy that occurred in the aftermath of September 11 to its last consequences and excoriates it as nonsensical and derisible.

Though it might appear as excessively hyperbolic, Doten's description of Osama bin Laden follows closely and at the same time engages with the mores of portraying Muslims in the post-9/11 atmosphere. Over the past decade, Farish A. Noor argues, there has been an "inflation of the notion of the Muslim as a potential threat to society" up to the point where Muslims appears to acquire super-human characteristics. Because of these super-human characteristics that are imposed on the narrative of the scary "Muslim terrorist", the "creation, expansion and perpetuation of the military-industrial complex" gain the justification that they need:

> It would seem as if in the context of the 'war on terror' discourse Muslims have been endowed with a superhuman subjectivity that presents them with an extraordinary degree of agency, intelligence, endurance, the capacity to mobilize themselves and of course the super-human capability to withstand attack by conventional weaponry (which necessitates the purchase and use of greater weapons of destruction). Muslims have, in short, been re-invented as a super-human threat that can no longer be contained and defeated by conventional means alone. (Noor 2010)

This tendency to contain and defeat is particularly salient when one considers the heavy surveillance that Muslims around the United States, and particularly in New

York City, have undergone in the aftermath of 9/11. In *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror* (2015), Moustafa Bayoumi talks about how, following a series of leaks, it was revealed that "NYPD had placed confidential informants in seven Muslim student associations (MSAs) at local colleges and that Brooklyn College, [where Bayoumi teaches], and Baruch College had been listed as MSAs 'of concern'" (Bayoumi 2015). The leaks also include information regarding a list of 42 persons of interest who were considered to be highly dangerous due to their connections and personality. One of the leaked reports regards Mohammad Elshinawy, and affirms that the "'TIU [Terrorism Interdiction Unit] believes that [Mohammad] is a threat due to the fact that he is so highly regarded by so many young and impressionable individuals,' as if charm were a weapon" (Bayoumi 2015). Given their super-human capabilities, Noor would argue, charm could be indeed a weapon.

What is more, and to use the notion proposed by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* (2004) as well as in *Frames of War* (2009), Doten's portrayal of bin Laden performs a "differential distribution of precariousness and grievability" (Butler 2010, 31) in the sense that by attaching the label of "fictional character" the author gains even further control over the kind of distribution the media exploited in the aftermath of September 11. By downplaying the very existence of a figure such as that of bin Laden by means of fictionalizing it, Doten makes transparent the process through which, outside the fictional realm, the lives of those who have been framed as enemies "are not 'regarded' as potentially grievable, and hence valuable" and are consequently "made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death" (Butler 2010, 25).

The reader as such is no longer asked to sympathize with a human being embodied in a fictional character but rather with a *commonly held view of a human being* who has been demonized outside the realm of fiction. The novel's "delivery system" is oversaturated "by the task of delivering too much otherness" (Palumbo-Liu 2012, 10–15), a process which in turn forces the reader to be aware of and question his/her own position in relation to the text. It is my contention that by means of this falsified identification that no longer subscribes to the kind of empathizing fiction generally endorses, one is suddenly capable of gaining critical distance from another, previous reading-self, and repair somewhat that previous reading. "[L]iterature", Daniel O'Gorman argues in this sense, "can prompt its reader to think about the framing of contemporary

reality in ways that may help more radical 'new constellations' to begin to emerge" (2015, 22), and as such enable its reader to assume "a better position to make informed decisions about the ideas and interpretations of reality to which [they wish] to subscribe" (2015, 50). In the end, Doten seems to be asking his readers, have we not enjoyed the cruelty deriving from the "war on terror" simply because so-called terrorists have been portrayed in a certain way?

This displacement of the reader into the spotlight of interpretation is revealing in the case of war fiction, substantially because, as I have argued earlier, in the case of textual production with regards to certain real events (such as a military conflict) fiction does not hold a hegemonic status but is inherently placed within a constellation of additional sources of information. Yet, this dislodgment does not necessarily force an ideal reader to fall back upon the stated truthfulness of *proximal coverage*, especially if that ideal reader is aware of the shortcomings of that type of coverage.

Banished from these two realms of textual production the reader comes to witness a *parallax effect* brought about by the interplay of these two types of coverage, and this effect is particularly evident in the ways in which *ancillary coverage* echoes bits of information brought to the fore by *proximal coverage* and sets them against different backgrounds. It is evident in the ways in which, for instance, the image of the "thirsty dog that was lapping up a puddle of human blood" (2010, 3) from the opening of David Finkel's non-fiction book *The Good Soldiers* (2011) appears in the opening of Phil Klay's short story *Redeployment*, the image of the dog set against the fact that the protagonist of the short story must then shoot his own dying dog after his return from Iraq. It is evident in the ways in which grand political speeches regarding the nature of the "war on terror" and the so-called "clash of civilizations" are echoed and commented upon in Ben Fountain's novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012). "Dude," goes the commentary of one of the American soldiers fighting in Iraq, "maybe they don't hate our freedoms, maybe they hate our fat!" (Fountain 2012, 165) As it is evident in the ways in which the phrase "I'm the best friend you're ever going to have" (Fountain 2012, 178) takes on different meanings in both non-fictional accounts, such as Sebastian Junger's *War*, and fictional accounts such as Ben Fountain's novel.

Bearing in mind all these considerations, and were we to extend Entman's model of the "cascading network activation" to include even fictional accounts pertaining to the category of *ancillary coverage*, the latter would have to be placed on the same level

with the framing words and images that news frames extend to the public. While in the case of *proximal coverage* accounts such as those of Junger and Hayden triggered a *post-factum feedback* that was inherently critical and reparative by means of a comparison with a different version of events, in the case of *ancillary coverage* the feedback operates in an essentially different way. Since narratives cannot be held accountable for the accuracy of the events, they portray that comparison with a different version of events is no longer feasible. Their relation to the events and people that they do seem to portray is severed by that process of effacement the authors perform within the narratives they build. The *post-factum feedback* that these accounts envision for themselves is essentially concerned with their "narrative necessities" rather than with their relation to the real events, and these necessities might refer to linguistic means, coherence, cohesion, narrative structure (Figure 2).

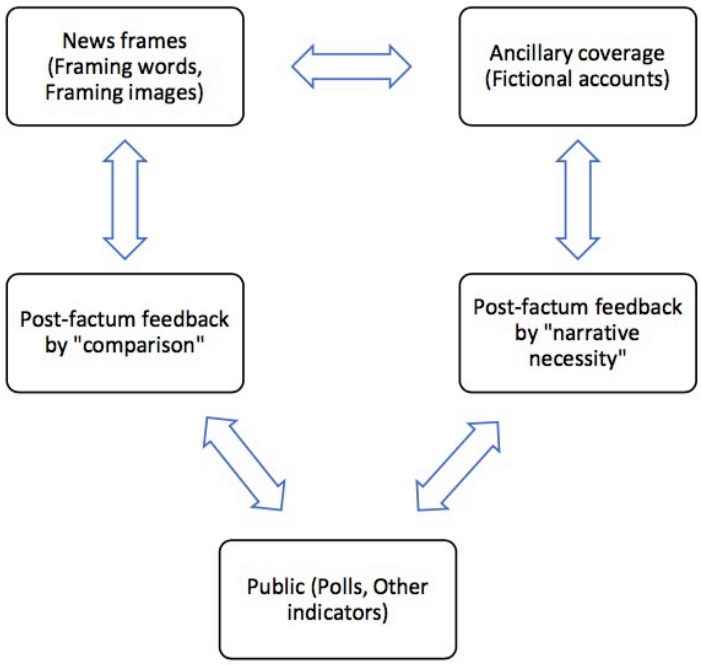

Figure 2 Extension of Entman's "cascading network activation"

Bearing in mind all these considerations, and returning to the initial question regarding the need to consider structured narratives in order to achieve a cultural understanding of a military conflict, it would be safe to assume that a differential approach to *proximal* and *ancillary coverage* should not possibly count among its objectives an extolment of *ancillary coverage* to the detriment of *proximal coverage*, and

that these two could be perceived as two points on a continuum rather than on separate levels. The need to go further down this continuum towards *ancillary coverage* does not stem from a downplaying of *proximal coverage*, on the contrary, it is only within this continuum that a truly comprehensive understanding of the event itself can occur. War fiction does break Hodges' "chain of authentication" (2011, 98) by placing those "soundbites" pertaining to different, non-fictional accounts, against different backgrounds, but it does so only to remind its readers of the malleability of the discourse and of the inaccessibility of the war itself both to war writers – be they direct participants or not – and their readers.

It is my contention that this process ultimately provides a tentative answer to two essential questions regarding war writing and war reading. To those who wonder how one should write about war it highlights the fact that certain sets of discourses already must be in place before the actual writing commences, while to those who read about the war it reveals the very trauma that participants in the war go through. Yet, having access to that trauma does not imply being aware of and knowing through textual accounts the horridness of war, its absurdity, the loss in human lives, namely the entire taxonomy of war sensations, but rather being aware of the combatant's impossibility to settle on meaningful linearity or closure. "Traumatic memory is not narrative", Jonathan Shay argues in *Achilles in Vietnam*, "it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory replay of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments" (Shay 2010, 172).

CHAPTER FIVE: THE PEACEFIGHTING NOVEL IS A WAR NOVEL – ANCILLARY COVERAGE OF THE "WAR ON TERROR" AS A FORM OF 'CULTURAL EUGENICS'

In the last chapter, I defined the *proximal-ancillary coverage continuum* and argued that the two types of coverage should be seen as contiguous rather than separate. I also argued, somewhat obliquely, that this could be much more productive from a hermeneutic point of view and it could reveal much more about the events they cover. In this chapter, I will examine how this type of hermeneutic practice could be applied to texts that have been identified by critics and the public alike as war narratives. To this purpose, I will start this chapter with a lengthy discussion on the war genre as well as on the difference between pacifist/peacefighting and belligerent war narratives. In this sense, I will argue that the narratives currently coming out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could not be categorized as war narratives *per se* because of how they choose to tackle the topic of war. The texts I will discuss in this chapter are Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), David Means' novel *Hystopia* (2016), Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* (2015), and Harry Parker's novel *Anatomy of a Soldier* (2016).

5.1. Men Against Roaches and Other Enemies

Stripe is the perfect soldier. Except for a recurring dream featuring a girl who whispers her love for him, repeatedly, Stripe is not given to excessive introspection or unwarranted emotions. When the platoon shrink asks him how it feels to pull the trigger, he replies that he does not feel anything. He is also a black soldier, in a team led by a "lily white" female soldier, but that does not seem to matter, since the war they are waging against enemies called "roaches," humanoid beings intent on weakening the human race, razes all differences. The relationship that the soldiers have with each other is almost utopian: none of the men tries to earn the status of the alpha male of the group and both men and women appear to be oddly uninterested in each other. There is not even a trace of any kind of romantic interest. Their only focus is the battle. The only difference between the protagonist and the other soldiers in his team is that Stripe is

a tyro, and he still has a lot of things to learn. And viewers of *Black Mirror*'s fifth episode (season 3), "Men Against Fire," will not give him the benefit of any doubt, because everything around him is built to sustain a specific view of his fellow combatants and the war in which they are fighting. These soldiers seem to be simply devoted to their cause, a devotion that, as the episode progresses, verges on the uncanny. The situation portrayed in the episode is also eerily familiar.

In that episode, as the soldiers are waking up, they are informed that Her Falls, one of the villages under their supervision, has been attacked again and that they need to investigate. It is Stripe's first time out, and except for the recurring dream, we know nothing about his past or his reasons for joining the army. However, as they discuss their mission, he does seem to be firmly opinionated with regards to the "roaches," who had raided on the village and contaminated food storages, and who were helped by a local man who has "some interesting view on roaches" (Verbruggen 2016). On their way to Mr. Heidekker's place, whose benevolence towards the "roaches" is blamed on some unidentified mental health issue, one of the soldiers argues that these benevolent locals only make their job more difficult. "Out here," the soldier explains, "you got rustic fucks throwing them scraps. No wonder it's taken so long to mop shit up" (Verbruggen 2016). Stripe is of the same opinion: "But how can anyone be dumb enough to help a fucking roach?" As we get a first glimpse of the "roaches" we can almost agree.

The "roaches," human-like but sharp-toothed and unable to use language except for guttural screams that resemble those of animals, are terrifying and grotesque. The first reaction they trigger is revulsion. Their faces are a mix of alien-like features, the skin on their faces tight as if to hide any sign of emotions, and human ones. As one of them runs away, it could be mistaken for a woman. "There's shit in their blood," the platoon commander tells Heidekker while she tries to squeeze information out of him, "that made them that way. The sickness they're carrying. That doesn't care about the sanctity of life or the pain, about who else is gonna suffer. We don't stop the roaches in five, ten, twenty years from now, you're still gonna get kids born that way, and then they're gonna breed" (Verbruggen 2016). They are the ideal scapegoats: physically identifiable and driven by evil motives that transcend their own physicality. Their appearance is a reflection of their character and as such killing them brings no feelings of remorse.

Mr. Heidekker, whose name sounds like a variation of Heidegger, is also terrifying and somewhat familiar. His bearded face seen against a white wall on which a cross is on display, and his almost religious stubbornness in cooperating with the soldiers recall those of Islamic fundamentalists seen on television in the aftermath of 9/11. And because we are not given access to his motives, except for the ones we believe he might have given the way he is portrayed, Heidekker becomes as evil as those he is trying to protect. The feeling is reinforced even further when the soldiers find a "roach nest" on the top floor of the house. The man is *obviously* lying about the whereabouts of the alleged "roaches."

The soldiers are equally terrifying in their machine-like perfection. An implant into their brains not only makes communication simple and more effective but also turns them into perfect killing machines. They can shoot accurately even from vast distances, and they do not seem to have emotions other than the desire to serve their purpose, that of purging the country of "roaches." "Hunting's in my blood," one of the female soldiers says when another soldier calls her "farm girl," "some of us are naturals." Later, the same farm girl says that if she manages to kill two "roaches" in one go she would want "to come for, like, an *hour*" (Verbruggen 2016). After detaining Heidekker and killing two of the roaches, the soldiers boast about their mission. Stripe in particular is the one with the beginner's luck: his first time out and he gets to kill two roaches. He is almost envied by the other members of his platoon. "You lucky motherfucker, man," one of the soldiers exclaims as they head out of Heidekker's house, "sweet dreams for this asshole" (Verbruggen 2016). When Stripe visits Arquette, the shrink, the latter tells him that he has done a big thing and that he should be proud of himself.

But then everything begins to unravel for Stripe. One of the "roaches" he manages to kill in action exposes him to a green light that seems to tamper with the system on which the soldiers operate. Following the exposure, his body begins to show signs of fatigue and loss of focus, and one night, as he wakes up from his idyllic dream, he has the sudden realization that all of the members of his team are doing the same thing, dreaming in unison. Then he begins to be affected by the sounds and smells around him, elements he had not even been aware of before. It is almost as if the machine is letting him be affected by emotions. Fear begins to creep into his bones as his commander is killed in action. Then, as Stripe's implant goes berserk, the "roaches" killed

so ruthlessly by the "farm girl" are suddenly human, and the "farm girl" begins to resemble a killing machine truly. The grunts and guttural sounds that seemed so threatening before turn into comprehensible language, and the language they speak is the language spoken by the villagers in Her Falls. Stripe attacks the "farm girl" who keeps telling him that they are "roaches" and therefore must be exterminated.

"The whole thing is a lie," Stripe tells Arquette towards the end of the episode, it was the "Mass implant" that made the soldiers perceive the "roaches" as mindless and diseased animals. The green light to which Stripe is exposed to at the beginning of the episode is in fact a virus that shuts down the implant from within. "Roaches," a battered Stripe tells Arquette, "they look just like us." Arquette's reply is as terrifying as Stripe's discovery: "Of course they do. That's why they're so dangerous" (Verbruggen 2016). In this final confrontation between the regular soldier and the mastermind of military tactics, Arquette also makes a brief history of the "Mass implant" and places it within a dialectics of war. In the two World Wars, Arquette explains, only fifteen percent of people fired to kill, while most of them missed on purpose. That percentage went up in the Vietnam War, but the soldiers who came back suffered from crippling mental health issues. The "Mass implant" makes it easier to kill because it controls what soldiers see and what they feel. "It's a lot easier," Arquette smugly explains, "to pull the trigger when you're aiming at the bogeyman" (Verbruggen 2016). And the "roaches" are the perfect embodiment of the bogeyman. They are repulsive, and it is impossible to set up a dialogue with them.

Besides these small revelations with regards to modern warfare, "Men Against Fire" is also about how the enemy is defined in discursive terms. The very word used to name them, "roaches," defines the relationship the soldiers have with these alleged enemies. According to the popular sense, roaches are always a nuisance and therefore must be exterminated, and that is what the "Mass implant" is conditioning soldiers to believe and do. When Stripe runs away from the "farm girl," who seems to have gone on a killing spree, he is saved by one of the "roaches" in an underground shelter. Catarina, the now humanized "roach," tells Stripe that even the civilians who do not have the "Mass implant" hate them "because it's what they've been told":

> Ten years ago, it began. Post-war. First the screening program, the DNA checks, then the register, the emergency measures. And soon everyone calls us creatures. Filthy creatures. Every voice. The TV. The computer. Say we

> have we have sickness in us. We have weakness. It's in our blood. They say that our blood cannot go on. That we cannot go on. My name was Catarina. He was Alec. Now we're just roach. (Verbruggen 2016)

The name brings with it a bevy of consequences that make the lives of those who bear that name impossible to live. They are hunted down akin to the deer the "farm girl" keeps referring to during their missions. Their very existence has been criminalized. They have been turned into scapegoats and albeit the war in "Men Against Fire" cannot be historically placed, the situation that is portrayed in it looks familiar. The term used to describe the enemy, "roach", recalls the "hajji" of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Akin to "roach", the term "hajji", which was used extensively to denote both civilians and combatants particularly in Iraq, is "another iteration of the American habit to devise a slur and use it to describe an enemy, particularly an enemy that is seldom seen or that is rarely identifiable as a martial unit of a recognized nation-state" (Buchanan 2016, 155). The terms "hajji" and "roach" have several precedents in this sense. "Similar to 'charlie' and 'gook' and 'kraut' and 'Jap'," Buchanan argues in this sense, "the word *hajji* has become the latest epithet for the United States' enemy Other" (2016, 155). It is not necessarily a cod name, meant to facilitate communication, it is, however, a term that implies a certain amount of contempt.

Thus, "Man Against Fire" is not merely a war film, but also a visual analysis of the discursive practices that surround war, practices that modify the way that war is perceived. It is also a discursive practice in itself, in the sense that in its dialectics of before-and-after it also performs a *relocation* of the enemy. The "roaches" are not the enemy but the war machine that has turned them into "roaches" in the first place. Once the functioning of that discursive machine is made apparent it defines the enemy as cunning enough, and as having the necessary means to dissuade the common soldier from believing that he is fighting against an imagined enemy, or that he is fighting for the wrong side of the war. The war that is portrayed is thus criticized not because of the carnage that it produces, but because it is fought for all the wrong reasons. "Men Against Fire" does not wage war on war, because the war in the movie does not exist yet, rather, it issues a warning about how a huge part of modern warfare is predicated upon advancements both in technology and discourse making. Modern warfare is not just about bigger and more efficient guns; it is also about creating consent with regards to who the enemy is.

5.2. The Peace Within War and the War Within Peace: A Literary Genealogy of the 'War on Terror'

War narratives, much akin to war films, often appear to wage war on the very wars they seek to portray, so much so that critics and readers alike define them as being anti-war. This feature is most salient particularly when these narratives do not seem to shy away from the gruesomeness of amputated limbs and the frailty of human lives and morals. Ultimately, there is not much choice when it comes to writing about war since, as Elaine Scarry puts it, the sole purpose of every war strategy is to "out-injure by injuring and disarming" the other (Scarry 1987, 69). However, despite their gruesomeness, and because of the literary contract that obliges readers to conceive of these texts as literary texts on account of their claims, war narratives also foster the sense that the reader can always opt out when matters become excessively gory. "The act itself of writing about war," Lynne Hanley argues in *Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory* (1991), "no doubt misrepresents war by promoting a false sense of security" (Hanley 1991, 5). If a war veteran wrote the work, then the reader is somewhat reassured that the author has lived to tell the tale and that once the book ends both reader and author will be alive and well. "However vivid and gripping the account," Hanley rightly suggests, "a reader's experience of war will never include one of war's most definitive emotions: the immediate and entirely legitimate fear of losing one's life, limbs, or sense, or of seeing the person next to one lose his" (1991, 5). Given this false sense of security, as well as the unexpurgated portrayal of death, defining war narratives as anti-war has almost become the default mode in literary criticism.

However, defining these narratives as being anti-war, besides being the easy way out of a theoretical quagmire, also brings forth a moral stance, one which, when taken for granted as it most often is, seems suspect. According to this moral position, since war narratives bring to the attention of their readers the physical and psychological damage wars can inflict, it is almost a moral duty on the part of the reader and the critic to believe that these narratives are anti-war. Additionally, since they depict that damage as absurd and unnecessary, they must be seen as denouncing the wars they portray. The more graphic in its descriptions a war novel is, the stronger its pacifist claim becomes. These narratives simply cannot be pro-war, because that would imply condoning the very destructiveness wars represent. Thus, reading war literature be-

comes a moral act in itself: one that fights against oblivion, one that seeks to memorialize the damage, to make it even more enduring as it is passed on to future generations. The harrowing iconography of the war, with its bloodshed and victims, thus calls into question the role of art and aesthetics by denying an aesthetic framing of itself. Albeit some of the imagery in these novels might appear awe-inspiring, it cannot "for reasons of piety and respect for the victims – be framed in aesthetic terms" (Däwes 2011, 3). Reading war literature acquires didactic overtones. Reading it otherwise would be seen as a symptom of moral dissoluteness.

The moral stance that lurks behind such pacifist readings of war literature is suspicious because it is limiting and because it reeks of propaganda. In this scheme of things, the trajectory of the war writer is set on inveigling the reader into believing that a pacifist stance can be separated from the idea that it seeks to reform, namely the aggressive nature of wars, and that the former is therefore definable and as such easily discernable. In theory, this differentiation would also permit categorizing war texts according to their stance, or at least according to the effects the narrative is seeking to trigger.

In practice, however, the difference between the two is not as sharp as one would wish it to be. In *Waging War on War* (2015), Giorgio Mariani suggests that the anti-war concept in literary studies remain poorly theorized because "[it] is largely a reactive, negative concept, whose lack of substance is implicit in its parasitical nature" (2015, 10). Unlike its opposite, war, the anti-war concept "does not point to something equally objective and ontologically consistent" and "is at best an effect which, through certain narrative and rhetorical strategies, the text aims to produce *in the reader*" (2015, 11). From this it would follow that, if an anti-war effect were to be desired, then war writers should not rescind from graphic details. The more violent the descriptions, the bloodier the pages, the better the chances to obtain that desired effect. The reader would then turn away, disgusted, from the book, believing that fighting wars goes against the dignity of human beings and as such is an inferior occupation. However, there is a fine line even in this case. Often enough, readers will blame authors for resorting to excessive violence, or perceive that violence as gratuitous. The anti-war concept, Mariani explains, "has something disruptive and dubious about it, as it constantly threatens to turn the complexity of the literary text into straightforward propaganda"

(2015, 7). For some strange reason, critics and readers alike are much more bothered when anti-war sentiments are blatant.

The concept is difficult to pin down also because "war literature, including literature commonly considered to be 'anti-war,' always entertains an ambivalent, contradictory, troubled relation with the violence it is asked to represent" (Mariani 2015, xi). "[All] war texts," Mariani adds, "are at risk of feeding on the very violence they purportedly wish to denounce" (2015, xi). This, in turn, leads to the widely circulated belief that war texts are not *intrinsically* anti-war, but it is their subsequent decoding that makes their pacifist essence salient. The context, be it cultural or political, in which such decoding takes places also plays an important role in the equation:

> Whether a poem, a novel, or a film may be said to be anti-war or not ultimately depends on the way they are decoded – and the way they are decoded, to a considerable extent, hang in turn on the protocols of reading sponsored by a given culture, whether hegemonic or resistant. Within pacifist circles, *The Iliad* may be read as an anti-war text; within an imperialist culture, it is a poem extolling the manly virtues of the warrior. (2015, 6)

This inherent simultaneity is what leads Mariani to conclude that "[war] novels should therefore always be read also as war-and-peace novels" (2015, 20). Which is yet another easy way out of the quagmire because it does not really solve the issue and instead pushes it into a different kind of discussion. If these narratives are simultaneously belligerent and pacifist, this would also mean that they are neither this nor that.

However, while this duplicity might be true for recent war narratives, or at least for recent interpretations of war narratives, it might not be so tenable for "older" narratives, such as *The Iliad*, among others. "There can be little doubt," Catharine Savage Brosman claims, "that older war narratives and chants had as one of their primary purposes – along with the collective one of memorializing great military deeds as part of the history of a people – the setting of standards of military conduct and the inspiring of a warlike spirit" (Brosman 1992, 86). While for some men family was one of the primary reasons for enlisting in the army, "for many of the most sensitive and reflective among young men, literary texts seem to have been a crucial factor in their love of the military and their enthusiasm for war" (1992, 87). The portrayal of "vital themes of self and manhood" these narratives perform, as well as their idealization of war, is akin to

"an invitation to the military life" (1992, 88). From this perspective, these texts might be seen as forms of indirect war propaganda.

As opposed to these older texts, and starting with the Vietnam War, contemporary war narratives seem to be moving in a different direction. "The purpose," Brosman argues in this sense, "of telling the war 'as it is' and not as it is supposed to be, may come from the desire to demystify a phenomenon that centuries of histories had glorified" and as such to support pacifism. Describing the war as "a phenomenon of half-organized, half-random destruction and death, is not necessarily anti-patriotic, but by doing so a writer can call into question vestiges of the heroic and patriotic traditions of the past" (Brosman 1992, 89). A manifestation of this tendency, one which Brosman does not mention or foreshadow, is the way contemporary war narratives seem to give even greater importance to a soldier's life after his return from the battlefield. And if the scenes from the battlefield might still appear to be instilling the same sense of grandeur as that of older war narratives, what follows those scenes, namely the soldier's return home, provide the necessary contrast to assuage or even neutralize those initial feelings. What is most salient in these narratives is not only the ignorance of the well-wishers at home who keep being thankful for these soldiers' service, but also the absence of meaning and existential dread that civilian life brings. It is almost as if, given the recurrent trope of soldiers returning to war because of their inability to revert to their life before deployment, it is that very bliss of civilian life that constitutes the most potent invitation to military life.

What is worth noting in both Brosman's and Mariani's arguments is the way they understand peacefighting/pacifism, which, to my view seem, at least theoretically, different, if not opposed. While Brosman suggests that war narratives are pacifist when they offer a reading of the conception of war as well as of its discursive practices, Mariani suggests that war narratives are pacifist when we read them that way, or when we are inclined, due to the cultural system in which we find ourselves at any given time, to read it that way. And while Brosman's model accepts at least a conceptual separation between pacifism and belligerence, in the sense that the two can exist without one another, Mariani's model sees the two as mutually constitutive, or at least existing along a continuum.

Brosman, as opposed to Mariani, identifies the issue at a conceptual level. When she argues that contemporary representations of war are demystifying and as such

have pacifist tendencies she is also implying that the demystification regards "the heroic and patriotic *traditions* of the past" (1992, 89) and not the wars themselves. Peacefighting, Brosman seems to imply, is about changing our *perception of the way wars are represented* and not of the wars themselves. From this point of view, war narratives are pacifist only insofar as they reveal the inconsistencies of a patriotic/heroic *view* of the wars they represent. Mariani, too, hints at this in his analysis, when he argues that some war novels, such as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, may well criticize "the emptiness of an older martial rhetoric", but they can only do so by "resorting to a new rhetoric that will inevitably be in a relation of both opposition and proximity to war" (Mariani 2015, 19). However, I contend that Brosman is in fact referring not to martial rhetoric *per se* but to how that rhetoric is employed to create the myth of war.

At first glance, Brosman seems to suggest that pacifist tendencies are always *retroactive*, and this is partly due to the changing functions of war literature. Modern war writing, Brosman argues in this sense, has morphed into "a way of resolving, or attempting to resolve, war experiences whose recurring drama must be relived, reexamined, and, through an apparent catharsis, accepted" (1992, 90). Thus, pacifism does not necessarily imply convincing readership that wars are bad, but rather that, since these wars are always already in the past, we need to invest more energy into resolving those war experiences. In a Brosmanian sense, peacefighting in fiction is not about preventing any future wars but rather about reeducating the reader about how war discourse is generated. Or, in a more practical sense, educating the reader about how to be more sympathetic with war veterans.

Even as modern writers strive to point out the emptiness of martial rhetoric, in Brosman's view that is still not enough. "[War] remains," Brosman explains, "an enduring cultural myth as well as a continuing human experience, and thus is still preeminently a topic for literature" (Brosman 1992, 95). To disrupt this continuity, however, as well as to dismantle this cultural mythology, does not necessarily imply a relocation of literary interests towards more pacifist topics. "Whether in the form of initiation," Brosman further explains, "metamorphosis, purification, sacrifice, or death and rebirth, the war experience is made up of other mythic patterns, sometimes in a powerful form; and it is hard to imagine that readers can be dissuaded from the pull of such experiences" (1992, 95). Irony does not solve the issue either because even in

irony the terminology of war continues to exist. The solution, Brosman seems to suggest, would be to demythify war, not only by recognizing the power of the myth, but also by creating a myth that could compete with the war myth itself.

5.3. The War Narrative Before the War: *The Things They Carried*, *Hystopia*, *The Sympathizer*, and *Anatomy of a Soldier*

Albeit it would be easy, if not appealing, to say that the 'true' pacifist novel, in Brosmanian terms, began with Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), I am afraid the issue cannot be resolved so easily. Nevertheless, it would be safe at least to suggest that representing the Vietnam War in fiction was one key development in this direction. It was perhaps the nature of the war that required a different kind of approach, or perhaps it was because developments in fiction in general had created the conditions for O'Brien's "fiction" to emerge. *The Things They Carried* not only demystified war experience per se, but it also constituted a cultural artifact that could be set, akin to an obstreperous dog, wherever ideas about war experience *and* war representation might come into the picture. Part of its achievements as a cultural artifact stem from its formal innovations. "Whether only a few pages long or spanning an entire book," Stefania Ciocia argues in *Vietnam and Beyond: Tim O'Brien and the Power of Storytelling*, "his stories frequently unfold through multiple, interweaving narrative strands, each covering a different temporal dimension or exploring the relationship between facts, memory and imagination, or even providing various perspectives on the same theme and separate accounts of the same events" (Ciocia 2012, 185). Yet, its greatest achievement perhaps comes from the ways in which O'Brien manages to imagine storytelling as a "viable epistemological tool" (2012, 185).

Going back to Elaine Scarry's definition of war, namely as an activity meant to "outinjure by injuring and disarming" the opponent (Scarry 1987, 69), as a discursive practice war is a non-viable epistemological tool because it does not seek the establishment of any kind of knowledge and because it is a negation of dialogue. Albeit wars might be seen as belligerent dialogues, given the "exchange" that stands at the basis of its functioning, the ultimate purpose of war is to establish, akin to a trial by combat, the hegemony of one interlocutor to the detriment of the other. "War is in the massive fact of itself," Scarry explains, "a huge structure for the derealization of cultural constructs and, simultaneously, for their eventual reconstitution. The purpose of the war

is to designate as an outcome which of the two compelling cultural constructs will by both sides be allowed to become real, which of the two will (after the war) hold sway in the shared space where the two (prior to war) collided" (Scarry 1987, 137). To undermine this structure of war, Brosman suggests, does not merely entail waging war against it, but building a parallel construction that could outdo the former. Which is what O'Brien is doing in *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien's collection of short stories, Mark A. Heberle argues in *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*, rewrites his earlier works, "but it also revises itself" in a continuous process of self-reflection "upon its own status and purpose as imaginative writing" (Heberle 2001, 181). If war, as a discursive practice, seeks to eradicate one of the interlocutors, *The Things They Carried* manages to imagine an interlocutor that has been both eradicated and reified.

Another narrative that discusses this aspect extensively, and which develops this argument further, is David Means' novel *Hystopia* (2016). Set in the late 1960s, the novel, which in Nabokovian fashion speaks of a manuscript found in a drawer, tells the story of a treatment called "enfolding", meant to suppress painful memories and as such to help war veterans cope with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. In one of the interviews included in the "Editor's Note", Markus Decourt mentions a drug called Tripizoid, which constituted a chemical catalyst for the whole enfolding process. "Pop one of those suckers," Decourt explains, "go through the reenactment of your original trauma – we're talking controlled, man, scripted, staged right down to the gestures, the whole show run by these Shakespearean motherfuckers – and you'd come out cured" (Means 2016, 11). Oddly enough, the reenactment does not involve each veteran's "original trauma" but rather a standard one. "We were doing scenes from the *Iliad*," Decourt further adds, "Hector and all that" (2016, 11). Eugene Allen, the alleged author of the manuscript found in the drawer, explains the process even better:

> The process of reenacting particulars of the causal/trauma events turns (enfolds) the drama/trauma inward. Confusion is undoubtedly an element of the curative process: a mysterious blurring of the line between what happened and what is reenacted. One folds into the other, and during the period of adjustment the patient typically experiences disjunction and bewilderment. He or she may vehemently reject the curative process, making statements to the effect of "This is pure bullshit. I remember everything. Nothing has been tucked away. I'm the same old screwup. You can't just yank me in here, make me reenact a bunch of the shit I went through, in a

> lame-assed way, not even close to what it was really like, and expect me to forget about it." But in most cases, the patient does forget about it, becoming fully immersed in the reenacted trauma's nullification of the real trauma. (Means 2016, 18)

Hidden between the many folds of Means' narrative, is a sharp critique of those narratives that Brosman sees as exploiting the heroic mode. In Means' view, the latter attempt to rewrite or reorder the experiences of those who have actually experienced wars, to the point where they blur the line between fact and fiction. In Eugene Allen's words, the reenactment of the trauma of those narratives nullifies the real trauma. Given this effect, Allen's narrative becomes one in which those who were subjected to enfolding seek to regain what is lost with the help of the treatment, namely their own war memories.

If we were to use Brosman's terminology, *Hystopia* would also be the perfect example of a narrative with pacifist tendencies. Published at about forty years after the end of the Vietnam War, the novel can almost afford to be a radical departure from other fictional renditions of the Vietnam War as well as from the factual elements surrounding that war. Yet, by depicting a parallel America, one in which President Kennedy is in his third term, the novel is also reenacting, in a somewhat thwarted manner akin to that of a pastiche, what those older narratives of war do with the wars they represent. Stewart Dunbar, one of the interviewees quoted in the "Editor's Note" puts it best:

> History has always had a hard time allying itself to the novel. [Eugene Allen's] creative effort, disturbed though it might be, is realistic to the extent that it captures the tension of history meeting the present moment. Is it not possible that someone looking back at the past, even the very recent past, and bending it this way and that [...] might actually rearrange the – No, I can't express the thought without getting Einsteinian and saying that retelling the past, as the young man does in this novel, might actually change the past. But perhaps that is exactly what I mean. (Means 2016, 15–16)

A similar, and perhaps even more developed "creative effort" meant to "change the past", or at least, our perception of the past, is Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* (2015), which is yet another novel about the Vietnam War and its aftermath, and which could be another example of a pacifist novel, in a Brosmanian sense. As was the case with Means' *Hystopia*, what makes Nguyen's novel interesting is its narrative strategy. Told from the perspective of a nameless narrator, who is half Vietnamese and

half French, the novel uses ever more extensive amounts of space to address issues that have to do with war representation and identity. The choice of narrator is an equally appealing aspect of the novel. As if to widen the split in his personality, he was also educated in the United States, another country for which he has developed a love-hate relationship. The narrator, as the title of the novel suggests, is a sympathizer, but, as the novel itself shows, sympathies are as transient as the weather. "I am simply able to see any issue," the narrator talks about himself as if he were a circus oddity, "from both sides" (Nguyen 2016b, 1). An attitude that also implies he is incapable of taking sides.

Given the narrator's two-sided nature, when he is offered a job as a consultant for a Hollywood film about the Vietnam War, he sees it as an opportunity to thwart American conceptions of the war and give more space to Vietnamese voices. "The more powerful a country is," Philip Caputo begins his review of the novel for *The New York Times*, "the more disposed its people will be to see it as the lead actor in the sometimes farcical, often tragic pageant of history" (Caputo 2015). The United States is a case in point, Caputo argues, because its citizens "have viewed the Vietnam War as a solely American drama in which the febrile land of tigers and elephants was mere backdrop and the Vietnamese mere extras" (Caputo 2015). Nguyen's narrator wants to correct this view but ends up almost dead when an explosion on set detonates too early. In this apparent war for cultural hegemony happening on the movie set, it is the Americans who hold the means of production, literally, and the means of representing the Vietnam War. To which they add a tinge of romanticism. Akin to the reenactments in David Means' *Hystopia*, the movie that is being made in *The Sympathizer* is seen, at least by the American side of the crew, as a surrogate experience of war. "It is the moment," the movie director pompously addresses the crew, "when we show that making this movie was going to war itself. When your grandchildren ask you what you did during the war, you can say, I made this movie" (Nguyen 2016b). A war is waged with every war movie being made.

The irony implied in the director's statement does not go unnoticed and it works on at least two levels. On the one hand, it derides the ease with which a "powerful country", to use Caputo's phrase, resorts to creating aestheticized images of wars that are believed to have the capacity to supplant the very experience of war. It also betrays

a certain inherent belief that aesthetically appealing narratives of war equal or supplant what James Campbell calls "combat gnosticism" (Campbell 1999), according to which only those "who have actively engaged in combat have access to certain experiences that are productive of, perhaps even constitutive of, an arcane knowledge" (1999, 204). On the other hand, the irony somewhat reveals the culturally formative role Hollywood plays in American culture in general. Its reference to the 1915 British recruitment poster, which strived to trigger feelings of guilt in those who did not volunteer for wartime services, almost implies that creating a cultural artifact about a real event can in fact alleviate or even remove any feelings of guilt one might experience. In the director's egomaniacal imagination, making a movie about the war is akin to making a war:

> The Movie was just a sequel to our war and a prequel to the next one that America was destined to wage. Killing the extras was either a reenactment of what had happened to us natives or a dress rehearsal for the next such episode, with the Movie the local anesthetic applied to the American mind, preparing it for any minor irritation before or after such a deed. Ultimately, the technology used to actually obliterate natives came from the military-industrial complex of which Hollywood was a part, doing its dutiful role in the artificial obliteration of natives. (Nguyen 2016b)

From this point of view, *The Sympathizer* is also an astute critique of the American way of seeing war as well as of the institutions that keenly participate in war image making. The Hollywood meaning machine is one of those institutions, and the narrator has no qualms about criticizing its penchant for grandiloquence. "Yes, art eventually survives war," the nameless narrator ruminates after listening to the director's sermon, "its artifacts still towering long after the diurnal rhythms of nature have ground the bodies of millions of warriors to powder, but I had no doubt that in the Auteur's egomaniacal imagination he meant that his work of art, now, was more important than the three or four or six million dead who composed the real meaning of the war. They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Nguyen 2016b). With its revelations regarding how the cultural war machine works, *The Sympathizer* is a novel that has strong pacifist tendencies. Albeit these tendencies are *retroactive*, in the sense that they return to past conflicts and seek to resolve any remaining conflicts, they also seek to immunize readers against any future war discourse making.

Harry Parker's *Anatomy of a Soldier* (2016) would also fall under this category of texts that try to emancipate the reader by creating an alternative discourse. Set for the most part in Afghanistan the novel is told from the perspective of various objects that come into contact with the protagonist, Tom Barnes, a British army captain. As opposed to O'Brien's short story "The Things They Carried", Parker chooses to recount through the "eyes" of these objects, a narrative technique akin to that of Dawkins when he speaks about the "selfish gene." The first three chapters of the novel, for instance, are narrated by a tourniquet, a bag of fertilizer, and a boot. In Parker's narration, each of these objects gets a voice, and the difference between these voices often resides in the poetic quality of their speech and the relationship they have with captain Barnes. A body armor, it seems, is much more poetic than a running shoe, and an explosion is also a matter of alliteration. Yet, this is all done for a good reason, since captain Barnes is himself an object throughout the story: he is first and foremost an object of war, and an object that goes through various medical procedures meant to save his life and limbs after he steps on an IED. If in O'Brien's "The Things They Carried", the soldiers are defined through the objects they carry with them on the battlefield, Parker takes a step forward and turns the soldiers themselves into objects thus breaking any kind of war hierarchy.

This leveling between soldiers and objects leads to other effects as well. On the one hand, it stays in line with the idea that in war, human lives often acquire the quality of objects, and that the objectification of human lives, or at least the suppression of their human characteristics as seen in "Men Against Fire", can lead to more "productive" wars in the way Scarry defines them. On the other hand, however, it can be helpful in defining what is anti-war/pacifist and what is belligerent, since it seems to be defining this dyad in terms of the relationship between objects and people and as such between intention and outcome.

One particular example of this relation can be found in the fourth chapter, where the story is narrated by an improvised explosive device. The short narration, at times poetic and strewn with snapshots of dialogue between its creators, follows the "life" of the IED from its inception to the fulfillment of its purpose, the explosion that sends captain Barnes into the hospital. As opposed to the other objects that come into contact with Barnes, the IED maintains a level of detachment towards the men on which it inflicts violence. The relationship between the explosive device and the soldiers that

step on it is akin to that of two substances meeting together, in nature, and producing a reaction:

> Eventually I felt vibrations – the rhythm of walking – that were faint at first but then converged towards me. A weight pressed down. The dry mud above me flexed, cracked down and pushed my metal strips together. A circuit was created that filled my wires instantly.
> I was alive.
> The metal rod at the heart of me detonated, a controlled high-explosive force that triggered the mix in me to react.
> I functioned. (Parker 2017, 19)

The device is akin to a force of nature, the result of a series of reactions, and the soldiers who step on it are mere cogs in a machine. They are not soldiers but merely the weight that presses down and pushes the metal strips together, one that is interchangeable. It could have been the weight of an animal, or the weight of a civilian.

Other objects define their relationship with captain Barnes in different ways. The fifth chapter, for instance, is narrated by a breathing tube and it describes the moments after the explosion of the IED. The relation between captain Barnes and the tube is almost one of respect:

> A man fed a laryngoscope into your mouth and another lifted your head back. Your tongue was held open and I was pushed into you. Your mouth had dirt in it and a blade of grass. I slid past the laryngoscope that directed me into you. I scraped down through you, grazing your voice box, past your glottis, down through your trachea, until I reached the top of your lungs. One of them was smaller and collapsed. A nurse inflated my balloon cuff that puffed out and held me inside you. (Parker 2017, 22)

The reaction between the two elements, the object and the soldier, is no longer violent in this case except for the minor scraping and grazing. There is almost a paternal feel to the breathing tube's narrative, and it fills what should have been a blind spot in the soldier's narrative. Given the fact that the soldier was unconscious at the time of the narrative, the breathing tube takes upon itself the duty to keep the narration going. The breathing tube is there to save both the soldier and the narrative.

By defining these objects in relationship with the people they come into contact, Parker seems to be elevating them above any discussion of good and evil. It is the intention of those who use these objects that makes them either good or bad; they are

mere extensions of an intention, the way the "unmanned aerial vehicle" that narrates chapter thirty-three is. These instruments are never instruments of war, in the same way that language cannot be of war. Or of peace for that matter. War literature, from this perspective, is never *of* war unless the social and political context in which it surfaces is marked by war.

Mariani's view of peacefighting in fiction is slightly different from that of Brosman. Following James Dawes' distinction between "the disciplinary model" of war texts, a model that sees violence and language "as mutually constitutive", and "the emancipatory model", which sees rhetoric and force as "mutually exclusive," (Dawes 2002, 1) Mariani suggests that we ought to see "war writings as ways to 'handle' the intractable reality of war, and that we distinguish them, like proverbs, on the basis of their prevalent rhetorical strategies. Some war novels have a therapeutic, cathartic function, similar to those of proverbs whose aim is to console. Others may instead have a more explicit admonitory tone and 'size up' the war situations in a different way" (Mariani 2015, 16). Peacefighting, in his view, has to do more with the rhetorical strategies employed to represent the reality of war, and it focuses on the relationship between language/representation and reality.

However, Mariani's suggestion is somewhat enervated by the simple fact that it sets up a system of measures that can tip the balance in either direction: if a particular war text's *prevalent* rhetorical strategy engenders a pacifist agenda, then that text is undoubtedly anti-war, and vice versa. Mariani's model, as well as that of Dawes, puts the onus on those who decide which is the prevalent rhetorical strategy of a war text. The "peace novel", as opposed to the "pacifist novel", which is blatantly propagandistic, "would be a war novel one reads with the intention of assessing not only its representation of war but also what image of 'war's other' (as Nick Mansfield aptly describes peace) the text either implicitly or explicitly constructs" (Mariani 2015, 20). The text itself, Mariani seems to be suggesting, is in fact devoid of any intentions, of whatever kind, and the peace novel is roughly the unread war novel. Something which, again, does not solve the problem. The question that remains unanswered is whether the term *prevalent* means the same for all of us. Are all war narratives latent peace narratives? Should one develop a computer program that identifies those rhetorical strategies and then weighs them and decides which one is prevalent? If one were to shed the

moral stance allegedly implied in the reading of war literature would the balance tip in another direction?

The short answer to this crucial question is that it would not tip the balance in either direction. It would instead throw the balance off balance altogether. While Mariani sees pacifist tendencies simultaneous, or existing "along a continuum" (2015, 63), with belligerent ones, thus permitting the reader to sway from one to the other in accordance with a text's prevalent narrative strategies, I argue that, in the case of the literature of the American 'war on terror', these two categories are in fact coterminous and need to be replaced by a third category, or at least to be redefined so as to accommodate these texts. This happens chiefly because of displacement at the level of how we traditionally perceive wars to be and how they are represented, and because of the "genre's incoherence [that] has never resolved the running battle that has long existed regarding experience, authenticity, and aesthetics" (Buchanan 2016, 21). Displacement and incoherence are in fact common tropes in the texts I shall discuss in this chapter.

5.4. The War at Hand and the War Literature that Is Not

In *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the* Iliad *to Iraq* (2011), Kate McLoughlin suggests a similar course of action when she claims that "the language of war can be *simultaneously* emancipatory and disciplinary, that it obfuscates even as it aims to illuminate, and vice versa" (McLoughlin 2011, 20). Yet, akin to many critics of war literature, she also succumbs to the default view. "While war literature may dazzle," she immediately adds, "with its technique and resourcefulness, its subject matter can – should – sadden and horrify" (2011, 20). Albeit she does add that the two elements are undoubtedly caught up in an "ethical-aesthetical nexus," it also seems that she is indirectly suggesting that the subject matter is what makes it a prevalently ethical matter. "The dazzlement's *raison d'être*," McLoughlin ends her introduction, "is to keep the horror in view" (2011, 20). Even humor and irony are permitted as long as a particular war text keeps the horror of war in view. "References to laughter in the war zone," McLoughlin argues later in her book, "strike a jarring note," and they might seem "not only callous, but inhuman, puerile and even in bad taste" (2011, 165). The only thing that saves such references from being perceived this way, according to McLoughlin, is when they point to the absurdity of war. Hidden beneath the laughter, the horror of war must lurk.

What renders this issue particularly toilsome is the difficult relationship that this type of narrative has with the reality is seeks to portray. The fact that it has strong ties with that reality to which it continuously refers to, the genre keeps both ethics and aesthetics at hand. It has to be ethical because it deals with human affairs and because it can have repercussions on the reality it seeks to portray or promote, and it has to adhere to certain aesthetic standards because of its literary status. If we were to try to resolve this conundrum by resorting to logic taken to the extreme, then the only way in which any of these narratives could be clearly pacifist or belligerent is to modify their relationship with the reality they represent. The absence of wars in "real life", or perhaps the absence of any knowledge of war, would make these war narratives pro-war, while the absence of peace, in whatever shape or form, would make these narratives anti-war. Or, to put the onus again on readers of war narratives, reading war narratives in a time of peace would make those war narratives pacifist, while reading them in a time of war would make them belligerent and hence pro-war.

Nevertheless, even this solution, however improbable, is problematic. To some critics of war literature, removing the "real war" from the equation would make these narratives lose their status of war narratives. If the novel would not exist without the war at hand, Wallis R. Sanborn argues in *The American Novel of War: A Critical Analysis and Classification System* (2012), then that novel is not a war novel. "A novel of war," Sanborn explains, "must have war and the physical, psychological, spiritual, social, and cultural effects, of war; otherwise, it is not a novel of war. A novel of war must be born of war; otherwise it is not a novel of war" (Sanborn 2012, 12). To a certain extent, Sanborn appears to be arguing that the war portrayed in these narratives is what gives them aesthetic value. The novels Sanborn chooses to analyze in his book, including but not limited to Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Thomas Alexander Boyd's *Through the Wheat* (1923), and Karl Marlantes' *Matterhorn* (2009), were picked for their "literary presentation of war, and while a number of texts here will not be historically noted for literariness – however that may be critically or popularly defined – all of the texts here present war in a literary fashion" (2012, 12). It is almost as if the violence they portray makes them worthy of consideration. "*The Red Badge of Courage* and *Through the Wheat*," Sanborn argues in this sense, "are seminal texts in that each work, early in the American canon, showed the violence – and bloody cost – of war realistically for a readership that, up to that particular time in history, had not

been exposed to war violence in such a realistic mode" (2012, 12). By extension, given that these narratives cannot exist without the war that gives them their aesthetic value and their status, it follows that, ultimately, these narratives are in fact perpetuating, albeit discursively, the very wars they represent, and as such cannot be pacifist.

However, I argue that the source of the quagmire, a cause that both Mariani and Sanborn somewhat avoid at least when they discuss contemporary war literature, is prior to any kind of discussions regarding the pacifist and/or belligerent nature of war texts themselves. The issue, I will argue, has to do with the very labels that have been applied to these texts, labels that ultimately have dictated the way these texts are analyzed and interpreted. Even as we speak of pacifist or belligerent tendencies in fiction, the existing theoretical framework, that of war literature, forces us to think in belligerent terms. Any kind of discussion about peacefighting must inevitably invoke the war that it refers to, just as any discussion about pacifist tendencies in literature must acknowledge the failure of those tendencies in the first place. If there are any traces of peacefighting in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), these did not stop the Vietnam War from happening, as they did not stop similar wars from happening. These texts are *war* narratives, first and foremost, and only afterwards they are separated into these two categories. It is as if we are saying they are *undoubtedly* belligerent, because we call them war novels, but they can *also* be pacifist. Finally, I will argue that in the absence of an appropriate label for these texts, we will have to rethink the very theoretical framework that is to be used for future interpretations, one that would remove any prior considerations.

Going down to the lowest common denominator, namely the label of war literature, which has been used so diligently with regards to these texts, punctilious readers might have noticed that the phrase war-on-terror is often put in between inverted commas. This is not incidental, and it signals a stance on the part of whoever makes use of it. The purpose of the inverted commas is to indicate a distancing from the context in which the phrase has been created as well as from those who coined it and continued using it without questioning its assumptions. "Captivated by a powerful master narrative after 9/11 and in the run-up to the Iraq war," Seth C. Lewis and Stephen D. Reese argue in "Framing the War on Terror: The Internalization of Policy in the US Press", "American journalists found it difficult to resist being drawn into the national anxiety and general pro-Bush patriotic fervor" (Reese and Lewis 2009, 778).

Those who chose to break away from this general tendency often used inverted commas or quotation marks to point out that it was a ready-made phrase.

The phrase 'war on terror,' which was not coined by George W. Bush when he addressed the nation ten days after the attacks of 9/11, as most of us would have expected, goes all the way back to the Reagan administration. In 1984, Reagan first employed the phrase to pass legislation aimed at countering terrorist groups in the wake of the 1983 Beirut barracks bombings. The attack killed 242 Americans, but what forced President Reagan's hand to sign the National Security Decision Directive 138 was the abduction and subsequent torture of the CIA's Beirut station chief, William Buckley, in March 1984. "The signal success of this war on terror," John Arquilla notes in an article for *Foreign Policy*, "came in a campaign against the Abu Nidal Organization [...] which was conducting terrorist hits for hire on behalf of Iraq, Libya, and Syria" (Arquilla n.d.). When parts of Reagan's directive were declassified, it was discovered that the directive called for the use of paramilitary squads to conduct *de facto* wars against guerrillas, an aspect that the umbrella term, war-on-terror, somewhat failed to specify.

Then, like now, the phrase contained within itself a bevy of military actions which were uncalled for considering the nature of the events that triggered it. Bush's phrase, very much akin to Reagan's, has "emerged as a powerful ideological frame" (Lewis and Reese 2009, 85). Its vagueness regarding who the enemy was or where the war was supposed to take place, as well as its "flexibility and good-versus-evil judgment provided the moral cover for pre-emptive military action" (2009, 86). "More broadly," Seth C. Lewis and Stephen D. Reese argue in "What is the War on Terror", the phrase "took on ideological dimensions, not only providing linguistic cover for widespread political change in the name of national security, but also offering an institutionalized way of seeing the world – a frame as influential as it was subtle" (2009, 85). Or rather, as influential as it was catchy.

The phrase was self-explanatory to an extent, the way the Death Star from the *Star Wars* franchise is. It simplified matters akin to a catchy advertisement, and it split the world into two oppositional forces. In the language of the Bush administration, Farish A. Noor argues in his analysis of the discourse of the 'war on terror', "the world was carved into two neat, oppositional blocs that could not possibly be engaged in any meaningful debate or dialogue with each other, simply because the constitutive Other

of 'terror' or the 'forces of terror' was something that one could not engage with rationally in the first place" (Noor 2010). Seen through the lenses of the 'war on terror', Noor explains, the world became monochromatic, and the line between the Muslim world and the West became a constantly shifting one. The phrase also imagined the Other, against whom a war was waged, as someone who is unreasonable and primordial in thinking and acting. "The irrationality of the Other," Noor further explains, "meant that the other also could not speak to and of itself, which allowed the 'West' to comment on the ontological state of the Other as the negative Other" (Noor 2010). As a discursive instrument the discourse of the 'war on terror' has only reinforced "the cultural and historical biases that have long since served as the obstacles to genuine intra-cultural and inter-cultural dialogue between the West and the Muslim world" (Noor 2010). Once it was put into place, the reality gathered around it, the way cultural artifacts gather around a selfish event.

As the phrase started to circulate in the media, it gained even more authenticity. It became, as Lewis and Reese argue, "a socially shared organizing principle" (2009, 86). With the help of the media, "the Bush administration effectively framed the march toward war in Iraq as an extension of the War on Terror, allowing the Iraq war to achieve levels of public support that were nearly as high as those for the war in Afghanistan" (2009, 87). Characterizing 9/11 as a declaration of war, Adam Hodges argues in *The "War on Terror" Narrative: Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction of Sociopolitical Reality* (2011), "and the response to terrorism as a 'war on terror' (rather than an investigation into terrorist crimes) is a discursive achievement [that] has naturalized one characterization of 9/11 and America's response to terrorism as the dominant way to talk about the issue" (Hodges 2011, 23). With each (re)use, the phrase gathered momentum.

Although the phrase began to be repudiated by the intellectual elite later on, the harm had been done and the phrase stuck. Additionally, the issues that such critics of the phrase raised were not so much directed at the phrase itself but at the kind of actions that it prescribed, some of which were highly contested. Though these issues were manifold, John Brenkman identifies four essential arguments that were advanced in the course of time. The first argument, which has been advanced repeatedly by Noam Chomsky on several occasions, is concerned with the fact that "[armed] force was an unnecessary and excessive reaction to the September 11 attack" (Brenkman

2007, 80). The most appropriate course of action, as proposed by Chomsky himself, would have been a trial similar to the Nuremberg trials, which would have brought the culprits to justice. The second argument, which almost overlaps with the first one, called for an intervention on the part of the United Nations, one which "would have been a more appropriate and/or more effective mechanism for responding to September 11 than a U.S.-led military and diplomatic offensive" (2007, 80). In a similar vein, in the January/February 2002 issue of Foreign Affairs, Michael Howard, an Anglo-American military historian, argues that instead of a "crusade against evil", as then President George W. Bush framed it, "many people would have preferred a police operation conducted under the auspices of the United Nations on behalf of the international community as a whole, against a criminal conspiracy whose members should be hunted down and brought before an international court, where they would receive a fair trial and, if found guilty, be awarded an appropriate sentence" (Howard 2002). An action to which the Americans would have never agreed.

Both arguments, Brenkman further argues, are faulty chiefly because there is a crucial difference between what happened on 9/11 and the conflict that such trials as the Nuremberg trial concluded. Those trials came full circle and they happened only after a "cessation of hostilities" on both sides of the conflict. As opposed to that situation, in the aftermath of 9/11 "the Islamic terrorists were still active, their planning of violent acts ongoing, and their leaders 'at large'" (Brenkman 2007, 81). In fact, hostilities continue, which makes the 'war on terror' still a pressing issue to this day. To be able to proceed with a trial such as the Nuremberg trial would have also implied capturing the alleged perpetrators and putting them on trial, a closure that could not be obtained in the case of the attacks of 9/11. "If they can be found – that of course was the question of the hour: not only whether they could be found, but how" (Brenkman, 91). Not even the killing of Osama bin Laden, the alleged mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks, brought that sense of closure.

Howard, akin to Brenkman, sees this course of action as unfit to the situation, not only by admitting that the United States has "little respect" for an international body such as the United Nations, but also by stating that the attacks were essentially injurious to American pride. "Such an insult to American honor was not to be dealt with by a long and meticulous police investigation conducted by international authorities, culminating in an even longer court case in some foreign capital, with sentences that

would then no doubt be suspended to allow for further appeals" (Howard 2002). The elusive perpetrators had to be brought to justice without further ado. Involvement of international agents was articulated, but only in vague, ideological terms. When George W. Bush addressed the nation ten days after the attacks, he stated that the U.S. would seek the support of police forces, intelligence services, and banking systems around the world as they see fit and framed this international togetherness as a clash of civilizations. "The civilized world," Bush stated halfway through his State of the Union address, "is rallying to America's side" (*The Guardian* Sep. 21, 2001).

The very nature of the event, with its undeniable immediacy, is again brought to the fore by both Howard and Brenkman. When the news media, Howard explains, demanded "immediate stories of derring-do, filling their pages with weapons, ingenious graphics, and contributions from service officers" merely suggesting another course of action is "dismissed as 'appeasement' by politicians whose knowledge of history is about on a par with their skill at political management" (Howard 2002). There was no time for a recollection of past events because the immediacy of the events required actions that could lead to decisive results. The imperative at the moment when the event occurred, Brenkman argues, was to debilitate the terrorist networks because "[the] dangers of the terrorist offensive were immediate, while the task of removing its causes or sources is the work of decades" (Brenkman 2007, 84).

The third argument that was brought up against the idea of a 'war on terrorism', an argument that was advanced not only by Chomsky but also by such prominent intellectuals as Susan Sontag in her short response to 9/11 published in *The New Yorker* and discussed in a different context in one of her essays included in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969), states that "U.S. actions past and present are the true cause of the terrorist attack, and, therefore, addressing the grievances in the Arab and Islamic world is the most appropriate (or only justifiable) course of action to take" (Brenkman 2007, 80). In a similar vein, the fourth argument places the root causes of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Therefore, the solution, which the United States should have imposed, would be a resolution of that conflict, "including the establishment of a Palestinian state rather than pursuing a military offensive against al Qaeda" (Brenkman 2007, 80). However, ideal as the solution would have been under the circumstances, it would have also turned what should have been an act of self-defense into a set of diplomatic actions dismissible, given the urgency of the

threat, as another form of 'appeasement'. It would have also required ages to obtain decisive results and Americans were eager to have their retribution as soon as possible.

Thus, the phrase, although lacking a definitive form, was akin to one of those mind training games where the name of a color is written in a different color and one has to repeat the name of the color in which it is written. Although it did not describe an actual "war", in a traditional sense, the phrase stuck. So much so that, by extension, when U.S. military intervention escalated in Iraq and Afghanistan, the literature coming out of those two battlefronts came to be seen as the literature of the 'war on terror' and ultimately, as war literature. The transfer feels natural. These are texts written mostly by American soldiers returning from an armed conflict overseas, they had seen bloodshed, they had post-traumatic stress disorder upon their return home, the then President of the United States, George W. Bush, had called it a war, so these texts had been labeled safely as war literature.

Labeling these texts as war narratives is not entirely mistaken. If one was to follow Sanborn's definition of war narratives, most of these would fit quite nicely into the category. Their central theme is "the war at hand" and the violence that they portray is "real", namely not symbolic, metaphorical, verbal, or imagined (Sanborn 2012, 12). These narratives also make extensive use of the rhetoric or war; their narrators and characters "continually use such rhetoric – war lingo, war slang, war clichés, war abbreviations and acronyms, and, of course, war propaganda and obfuscation" (Sanborn 2012, 13). In all of these narratives, the death of fighting peers as well as of noncombatants is omnipresent. Death and destruction are at home in these war narratives. The "dyad between occupying/invading forces and the indigenous/local people" is also clearly defined, as well as that between officers and the enlisted men" (2012, 16). And last but not least, these narratives make frequent references to prostitution, because there cannot be "war and warriors – and texts of war – without prostitution" (2012, 18). However, the ease with which we distribute such labels must make us pause and take a step back. Or, as Doctor House puts it, calling a bear a dog does not make it a dog.

What makes me pause is the very first element that Sanborn mentions in his definition of war literature, which goes hand in hand with my earlier argument with regards to the relationship these narratives have with the reality they represent. When Sanborn argues that the central topic of a war narrative is "the war at hand" he is also implying that these narratives cannot exist without the wars they represent. If one

were to sever the connection between the two, that is between war and text, the later would suffer most because it would lose its *raison d'être*. The connection is also the element that seems to be the *sine qua non* condition for a text to be a war text, or at least to be *the* war text of a specific war. *Hystopia*, albeit thematically a war narrative *about* the Vietnam War, transcends this thematic limitation and could become a more general meditation on the nature of wars. This does not necessarily imply that all wars have the same core and each war is a variation of that same core, but it can imply the notion that all war narratives, or even narratives in general, have the capacity to absorb events, be they military or social, in their vicinity, and vice versa. *Hystopia*, *can* work with the "war at hand", which is the 'war on terror'. *The Sympathizer* can do that as well. It is almost as if, following Brosman's historical view of the changing purposes of war literature, modern writers of war literature have understood that, the stronger the connection between a specific war and text, the sooner that text will become obsolete.

One solution to this apparent problem was to elasticize the war genre itself and to make it particularly responsive to a series of other genres. One compelling choice was investigative fiction. John Renehan's novel *The Valley* (2015) tells the story of Lieutenant Black, who is sent to an isolated combat outpost in Afghanistan to conduct an after-action report. Renehan's novel, Peter Molin argues in his review, "maps the highly structured form of a crime novel onto the equally structured form of a war novel," a combination that in Renehan's hands "feels harmonious and productive" (Molin 2015). The investigation uncovers a panoply of issues that are interfering with the normal course of action. Sergeants have gone rogue and divided the platoon, and there is a poppy growing and heroin distribution network in which some of the soldiers are involved. "The novel", Molin further explains, "reads as if Renehan had grafted J.K. Rowling's *The Cuckoo's Calling* onto Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya's *The Watch*, and then mixed elements of Aaron Gwyn's *Wynne's War*" (Molin 2015). All of these three novels, albeit different in style and approach, have Afghanistan as their background, and all of them tackle the crime genre. In fact, as we shall see, Afghanistan has been particularly fruitful in terms of this genre. And if one might think that these fictionalized investigations are concerned with the alleged "enemy", in this case the Taliban forces, one might be in for a surprise. As one begins to peruse the literature coming out of the 'war on terror' one might notice some slightly bizarre aspects that have to do not just with texts about the war in Afghanistan but also with the ones about the war in Iraq.

The first of those bizarre things, which makes me think of these novels as breaking away from the traditional war novel, is that the alleged enemy is *misplaced*, or out of place, in a way that is old and new at the same time. In war fiction, the enemy often appears as off-putting, very much akin to Mr. Hyde from Robert Louis Stevenson's well-known novella *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), who always triggers "a visible misgiving of the flesh" in those who come near him (Stevenson and Mighall 2002, 58). When American journalist Mary Douglas, the protagonist of Martha Gellhorn's novel *A Stricken Field* (1940), lands in the recently occupied Czech capital coming from Paris, one of the first things she notices when she gets off the plane is the boisterous swagger of a group of German tourists:

> The regular transport plane from Berlin had landed a few moments before their plane from Paris and the customs was crowded with German tourists, wearing belted suits and swastika lapel buttons. They carried cameras, by straps slung over their shoulders, and seemed very much at home. The people from the Paris plane stood apart and watched the Germans without friendliness. The Czech customs officials appeared to be embarrassed by the Germans who talked loudly with each other and argued about having to open their suitcases. Then the Germans drove from the airport in a special bus and the place became quieter. (Gellhorn 2011, 4)

In Gellhorn's narrative, the enemy's belligerent nature is often in a state of suspension, as if that nature is irreconcilable with a more general view of humanity. Yet, as the narration progresses, and as Douglas comes to realize the Germans mean serious business, one gets the sense that the "visible misgiving of the flesh" the people from the Paris plane experience while watching the German tourists is not groundless. Horrified by what she sees, Douglas takes the side of the Czech citizens and begins to smuggle a narrative about the Nazi atrocities in Czechoslovakia. What Gellhorn's narrative suggests, given the brutalities inflicted on the Czech population by the Nazi, is that any feeling of adversity against the Germans is ultimately legitimized.

In Ben Fountain's novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), the enemy against which the 'war on terror' had been waged is absent and only looms large in the memories of the soldiers from Bravo Squad. In fact, in the novel, the soldiers are not on a battlefield trying to avoid being killed, but they find themselves in Dallas, Texas, "deep within the sheltering womb of all things American – football, Thanksgiving, television,

about eight different kinds of police and security personnel, plus three hundred million well-wishing fellow citizens" (Fountain 2012, 21). They are there because back in Iraq they were involved in a firefight in which they tore apart a group of insurgents and were lucky enough to have been filmed by a journalist present in the area at the time. The tape went viral and made them famous and they were sent on a propaganda tour. They were even promised to be featured in a movie, a promise that in the end cannot be kept because "[movies] about Iraq had 'underperformed' at the box office" (2012, 6). The people they meet on their tour appear in stark contrast with the soldiers, their system of values somewhat askew when compared to that of the soldiers.

This *misplacement* of the enemy has led writers and critics such as Karl Marlantes to the conclusion that Fountain's novel is, in essence, a critique of "the American way of watching war" (Tait 2012). This is particularly evident not only from the fact that the soldiers are sent on a propaganda tour meant to boost the morale of a country that had already started to believe the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were a mistake, but also from the fact that the soldiers are then made to march next to cheerleaders and dancers during the halftime show of a football game. Akin to the cheerleaders, the soldiers become mere entertainers. When these two discourses – that of the soldiers and that of the entertainers on stage – are narrated simultaneously, the latter seems to prevail. In Fountain's novel, the enemy does not seem to be a group of menacing insurgents but the odious mass of well-wishers at home, those who hunger for entertainment. "They hate our freedoms?", the protagonist wonders, "Yo, they hate our actual guts! Billy suspects his fellow Americans secretly know better, but something in the land is stuck on teenage drama, on extravagant theatrics of ravaged innocence and soothing mud wallows of self-justifying pity" (Fountain 2012, 11). Bravo Squad is then redeployed to Iraq without the movie deal they so hoped to get.

CHAPTER SIX: FAMILIES AND THEIR SOLDIERS, SOLDIERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

In the previous chapter, I showed how the *proximal-ancillary coverage continuum* could be used as a tool in the interpretation of literary texts. I also argued that the narratives currently coming out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could not be categorized as war narratives *per se* because of how they choose to tackle the topic of war. One of the most recurrent techniques used in these narratives, I argued, is the relocation/misplacement of the enemy. In this chapter, I will focus primarily on this relocation of the enemy and analyze texts such as Phil Klay's short story "Redeployment", Elliot Ackerman's novel *Green on Blue* (2016), Michael Pitre's novel *Fives and Twenty-Fives* (2015), Matt Gallagher's *Youngblood* (2016), and Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016). By discussing how these texts engage with the notion of family and/or familial ties I will argue that ultimately these narratives perform a social function that could help develop ways to ease returning soldiers' reintegration into the fabric of society.

6.1. Now Survive the Homecoming: Phil Klay's "Redeployment"

This relocation of the enemy blurs the line between the safety of the homeland and the threat of the battlefront, and redefines peace as a form of belligerence, as the return home turns into another sort of war. This aspect is particularly evident in Phil Klay's short story "Redeployment" that opens his National Book Award winner collection of short stories with the same title. When Sergeant Price hands in his rifle on his return home he does not know what to do with his hands. "First I put them in my pockets," the narrator explains, "then I took them out and crossed my arms, and then I just let them hang, useless, at my sides" (Klay 2014a, 6). The feeling is akin to that of a phantom limb, whose memory and function keeps returning. Simple questions, such as those asking for a general and harmless assessment of the situation, become ominous. "How are you", becomes "how was it? Are you crazy now?" (Klay 2014a, 8). Each conversation is laden with an amount of suspiciousness that soldiers usually attribute to their "enemies". The things that were once embodiments of the notion of comfort have been *de*familiarized by the experience of war. Gestures and feelings have become

mechanical. "I moved in and kissed her", sergeant Price talks about his wife, Cheryl, "I figured that was what I was supposed to do. But it'd been too long and we were both too nervous and it felt like just lip on lip pushed together" (Klay 2014a, 8). To his wife, Sergeant Price becomes someone of whom she is afraid.

This display of silent sullenness between people who had once been as familiar with each other as they were with their own bodies, somewhat upends the belief that only foreign fronts are where war truly takes place. The reversal asks for a redefinition of the two fronts. The enemy is redefined as well, not as foreign and intent on killing but as equally menacing. In this sense, the narrative seems to suggest that the true enemy is the returned soldier's incapacity to build a world, however ideal, that does *not* contain within itself the knowledge of war. Or rather, the trained incapacity to regain, or to see any similarities between the homeland they dreamed of while on the battlefront and the homeland they get to when they return home. "And glad as I was to be in the States," sergeant Price explains, "and even though I hated the past seven months and the only thing that kept me going was the Marines I served with and the thought of coming home, I started feeling like I wanted to go back. Because fuck all this" (Klay 2014a, 11). The enemy is the realization that one cannot undo the violence that the war has inflicted not necessarily on the soldiers themselves but on their idealized version of the homeland. "We took my combat pay", Price says with contempt, "and did a lot of shopping. Which is how America fights back against the terrorists" (2014a, 11). Any idealized version of the war shattered in a matter of two sentences.

The relocation of the enemy goes hand in hand with the individualization of the soldier turned civilian when faced with this other enemy at home. If on the battlefront he had his fighting mates, he must now confront this enemy by himself. In battle, Sebastian Junger explains, each soldier has a duty for the group he or she is a member of, and "every soldier had a kind of de facto authority to reprimand others – in some cases even officers" because "[there] was no such thing as personal safety out there; what happened to you happened to everyone" (Junger 2011, 160). While shopping with his wife in Wilmington, Price relives the battlefront experience without his fighting mates, which makes the experience so much more threatening. Akin to the father in McCarthy's *The Road*, Price finds himself in the impossibility of imagining a world without the knowledge of what happened. Those who lack that knowledge bear an

ignorance that is disheartening and is almost a form of effrontery both to those who survived and those who perished in the war:

> In Wilmington, you don't have a squad, you don't have a battle buddy, you don't even have a weapon. You startle ten times checking for it and it's not there. You're safe, so your alertness should be at white, but it's not.
> Instead, you're stuck in an American Eagle Outfitters. Your wife gives you some clothes to try on and you walk into the tiny dressing room. You close the door, and you don't want to open it again.
> Outside, there're people walking around by the windows like it's no big deal. People who have no idea where Fallujah is, where three members of your platoon died. People who've spent their whole lives at white. (Klay 2014a, 12)

Reality is thus perceived at a different speed and intensity due to changes in the chemistry of a soldier's brain. "I could spot a dime in the street", Price explains, "twenty yards away. I had antennae out that stretched down the block" (2014a, 12). As opposed to the reality that the father and child in McCarthy's novel witness, a reality that is modified to the point of its almost erasure, the reality of Price's homeland does not change physically. It is only its characteristics that become more salient, or they become stranger. "Armed conflict", Dexter Filkins argues in his review of Klay's collection of short stories, "so fundamentally alters the environment it takes hold of that no aspect of life escapes undistorted: not love, not friendship, not sleep, not trust, not conversation" (Filkins 2014). What changes is the homeland's inability to stir feelings that could measure up to the ideals that not only made those soldiers enlist in the army in the first place but also kept them fighting.

However, Klay's relocation of the enemy, which runs parallel to a critique of American society at large, goes deeper than that, up to the point where the narrator's rancor turns against the reader in the closing paragraphs of the short story that opens the collection. On the surface of things, Price is taking his dog, Vicar, to a place where he could euthanize it because of an illness that turned the dog's life into a constant source of pain. Looking at his dog makes him think of an episode from his deployment when all the other Marines shoot at an insurgent who hid in "a big round container filled a quarter way with liquid shit" (2014a, 15) while he stood there, frozen. Nevertheless, as he aims his AR-15 at the ailing dog, his training kicks in and he is no longer thinking about the dog, but rather about a very specific "you", who is at both ends of the gun.

In fact, the narrator appears to be explaining how one's body would react when being shot at:

> The first two [shots] have to be fired quick, that's important. Your body is mostly water, so a bullet striking through is like a stone thrown in a pond. It creates ripples. Throw in a second stone soon after the first, and in between where they hit, the water gets choppy. That happens in your body, especially when it's two 5.56 rounds traveling at supersonic speeds. Those ripples can tear organs apart.
> If I were to shoot you on either side of your heart, one shot…and then another, you'd have two punctured lungs, two sucking chest wounds. Now you're good and fucked. But you'll still be alive long enough to feel your lungs fill up with blood.
> If I shoot you there with the shots coming fast, it's no problem. The ripples tear up your heart and lungs and you don't do the death rattle, you just die. There's shock, but no pain. (Klay 2014a, 15–16)

Albeit apparently harmless, this show of force provides the story with an anticlimactic closure as it breaks away from the kind of safety stories should provide at the end. The reader is almost trapped because he/she has been led into this closure akin to Price's dying dog. The story inevitably leads to this moment and the reader is thus coerced into watching a version of himself/herself being shot at. It is also the closest that the reader will get in terms of how it feels to actually go to war. On the other hand, it is also the narrator's bitter realization that the narration, however harrowing and threatening in this case, cannot inflict violence against the reader beyond a certain point. Once the story ends, the "attack" that is performed within the imagination of the reader will cease as well. Running parallel to this realization, there is also the belief that with every reading this looming violence will continue to have not a numbing effect but rather the opposite. The risk-free trial that this show of force displays is meant to provide the reader with a gnawing sensation.

War narratives, by virtue of their purpose, are essentially an exchange of information regarding the experience of war. By extension, it would be safe to assume that these narratives are intended for non-combatants since somebody who has experienced war directly rarely feels compelled to relive that experience or revisit any of the emotions or sensations connected to it. This exchange of information is also a prevalently male experience. With the exception of a few titles, most contemporary war narratives are written by men. Out of the fifty-four titles that Peter Molin mentions at the end of 2017, forty of those are authored by men, and while the advent of the "war

on terror" literature, traced back by Molin to the publication of Nadeem Aslam's novel *The Wasted Vigil* in 2008, was decidedly marked by female writers, 2013 being a particularly fruitful year for female war writers, the genre came to be populated almost exclusively by male figures in the years that followed. In particular, the year 2014, which saw the publication and the instant success of Atticus Lish's novel *Preparation for the Next Life* and Phil Klay's collection of short stories *Redeployment*, seemed to have opened the floodgates for male writers. What is more, the fact that Klay's collection of short stories, which also constituted his debut as a writer, won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2014 as well as the National Book Critics Circle's 2014 John Leonard Award, set it as a key text within the newly forged canon of literature.

However, it was not the prizes that made the difference. The recognition Klay got for his collection of short stories stemmed from something that was prior to any discussions about prizes and "official" recognition. It was Klay's narrative voice that made the difference. In fact, it was a series of factors that made Klay's short story become a key text: he served in Iraq as a Marine and he could write, in a voice that was not only compelling but also slightly personal, masculine, akin to that of an old war veteran who does not remember too much but can remember details that give the listener a whole picture within a couple of line. "It was Klay's story's immediately established voice," Donald Anderson writes in his review of the collection for *WLA; War, Literature and the Arts*, "that caught me" (D. Anderson 2014). It was also a voice that commanded attention, but not in a forceful way. It was almost the voice of a comrade.

Albeit it might sound trivial or obvious, in the case of war narratives the voice of the narrator plays a central role in the way that narrative is read. This does not imply that narrative voice does not play an important part in the case of any other type of narratives. Yet, with war narratives there is a very thin line between a narrator whose voice is boastful and superior, and as such closing any channels of communication that a narrative might open between the writer and the reader, and a narrator who takes into consideration both the importance of his/her story and the attention span and/or ego of the reader. Often enough, in war narratives it is the somberness of the topic that dictates the use of a certain etiquette when it comes to the relationship between reader and narrator. While in the case of other narratives the reader might grow accustomed to an unreliable narrator, war narratives require a degree of earnestness. Although one might argue that ironic takes on the topic of war exist, such as Joseph

Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) or David Abrams' *Fobbit* (2012), it is worth noting that even in those cases the absurdity of the situations portrayed in fact reflect the very absurdity of war. These ironic takes on the topic of war do not make fun of it nor do they desecrate in any way the earnestness of the topic, on the contrary, they exalt preexisting elements, such as bureaucratic operation and reasoning that both novels mentioned above typify. This earnestness, be it implied or specified, also requires the presence of a certain type of narrating voice.

Phil Klay's collection of short stories has often been compared to Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. In his review of Klay's *Redeployment*, Dexter Filkins argues that albeit Klay tackles a different war, he "aims for a similar effect: showing us the myriad human manifestations that result from the collision of young, heavily armed, Americans with a fractured and deeply foreign culture that very few of them even remotely understand" (Filkins 2014). However, it is not just the effect that both O'Brien and Klay aimed for in their writings that makes them so similar. It is also the voice of their narrators. This is the incipit of O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*:

> First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day's march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending. (O'Brien 1991, 3)

In a few lines, O'Brien's narrator creates a world that is credible both structurally and psychologically, and it defines both the homefront and the battlefront. In fact, these first few lines sketch a whole generation of American soldiers and their experience in Vietnam. In *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* (1994), Don Ringnalda argues that in Vietnam American soldiers discovered, akin to the happy citizens of Plato's cave, "two sets of shadows". One of those shadows regarded "the myth of the righteous warrior making the world safe for democracy", which "turned out to be a tautological reflection of a national lie", while the other one was rooted in "the assumption that America could make sense of and impose its will on Vietnam with a Western Positivist strategy", which ultimately "turned out to be a reflection of cultural arrogance" (Ringnalda 1994, 94). All of these elements are present in the first few lines of O'Brien's short story. One can see them in the way Lieutenant Cross holds the letters as if they

are the vestiges of a homeland that deserves the reverence of a soldier who, despite the physical requirements of the battle must perform this final ritual of washing his hands to touch and hold something that is not a promise of something but rather the illusion of something. Ruminating on this idyllic but illusory future, which is always under threat, in "the last hour of light" (O'Brien 1991, 3), becomes an experience akin to a religious one thus transforming the war in which it occurs into a crusade. Enclosed within this ritual, there is also Cross' belief that if he continues to pretend his imagined relationship with Martha will eventually become a reality.

An echo of this voice, as well as of its encapsulating capacities, can be seen in the very first few lines of Phil Klay's *Redeployment*:

> We shot dogs. Not by accident. We did it on purpose, and we called it Operation Scooby. I'm a dog person, so I thought about that a lot.
> First time was instinct. I hear O'Leary go, "Jesus," and there's a skinny brown dog lapping up blood the same way he's lap up water from a bowl. It wasn't American blood, but still, there's that dog, lapping it up. And that's the last straw, I guess, and then it's open season on dogs. (Klay 2014a, 1)

The entire American endeavor in Iraq is defined in a couple of lines, and though it seems ironic, with its combination of military language (operation) and the name of a famous American cartoon character (Scooby-Doo), it is a concise portrayal of the situation in Iraq. The enemy is nowhere to be seen and in the absence of the enemy the soldiers find something else to do. These first few lines also catapult the reader into the homeland, where such actions would be abhorred by the general public, and albeit the narrator does express his qualms with regards to such acts of gratuitous violence the rules that apply on the homefront are suspended on the battlefield.

However, these voices are as alluring and friendly as they are intent on forcing the reader into a conversation that is always morally colored and tends to criticize not what is happening on the battlefield, or the crooked morality of war for that matter, but what is happening on the homefront. The comparison with O'Brien's short story is, again, revelatory in this case:

> They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects, this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture. They carried their reputations. The carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were

> embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment. (O'Brien 1991, 18–19)

O'Brien not only debunks the notion that men go to war to become heroes but also makes a parallel between the soldier and the civilian, and although the two might seem somewhat similar, O'Brien also sets a small emotional trap within the parallelism. On a separate occasion, O'Brien himself had said that the only thing that kept him from running away to Canada to avoid being drafted was the notion that the people in his hometown would see him as a coward. This places the reader into a rather uncomfortable, if not morally questionable position, in the sense that given the relative safety in which he/she, as a reader, finds himself/herself, that reader will never be able to even fathom the kind of experience soldiers go through on the battlefield. In this equation, the burden of proof always falls on the reader. The shame that the soldier experiences, no matter how debasing it is, is justified by the soldier's status as a soldier. Those who succumbed to the safety of the embarrassment, the reader included, have no justification.

Klay chooses to prefigure the reader in the same way, and place him/her into a similarly uncomfortable position, particularly when he discusses the difference between soldiers and those "who have no idea where Fallujah is" (Klay 2014a, 12). In this case, albeit it might seem that the reader is being asked to sympathize with the soldier who goes out shopping with his wife, he is in fact cast into another role altogether. The reader is in fact asked to see the civilians as enemies. These people, the narrator explains, "walking around by the windows like it's no big deal" cannot even fathom the kind of dread every soldier experiences on the battlefield. Civilians, in the narrator's feverish voice, have "spent their whole lives at white" (2014a, 12). The color code that the narrator uses to explain the mental strain soldiers have to endure on a daily basis, places civilians and soldiers on a continuum, or at the opposite ends of a spectrum. Being at white, as civilians are, somewhat annuls any kind of preoccupation, or anxiety, they might have. Compared to the soldiers, who are always at orange, or even red, in the most extreme cases, civilians are the ones who have it the easiest, to the point where *civilianship* turns into this lumbering mammoth that has lost any notion of danger and as such is bound for extinction. Given all of these nuanced emotions regarding the reader/civilian, it almost comes as no surprise that Klay chooses to end his short

story with a mock killing. Reading the last few paragraphs of the story, it is almost as if the narrator is still considering whether he should opt for the excruciating pain of the two sucking chest wounds or the two quick shot that would tear organs apart and offer a quick death to the allusive "you" he keeps referring to. "That's how it should be done," the narrator explains after he applies the two quick shots that kill Vicar, the dog, "each shot coming quick after the last so you can't even try to recover, which is when it hurts" (Klay 2014a, 16). The parallelism is, again, equivocal, partly due to the ambiguity of the personal pronoun "you" that Klay exploits so masterfully throughout the short story. Who is supposed to recover in this case? Is it the victimized "you" who should become aware of his/her sudden death? Or is it the shooter, who should assist the victim while making this passage between a human being and a dead body?

Considering the title of the short story and the idea that Klay implies in his short story, namely that soldiers never truly return from the battlefield, the answers to all these questions might seem rather bleak but they contain within themselves perhaps the very key to understanding the kind of changes that wars inflict on the human psyche. The parallelisms that run through the short stories included in Klay's collection not only redefine wars as events that seep into civilian life by transforming it almost irreparably, but also gives new meaning to the notion of *enemy*. The enemy is not only the insurgent who, from an American perspective, fails to see the nobility lurking behind the American invasion, but also the American who fails to see beyond those professed noble intentions. In this scheme of things, both enemies are on an equal footing. The "you" that the narrator keeps referring to in the title story is ambiguous because it needs to refer to both civilians and combatants. In its ambiguity, the personal pronoun includes all entities, be them friendly or inimical. "It was another three weeks before I got home", the narrator of "Bodies", another short story included in the collection, explains at one point, "and everybody thanked me for my service. Nobody seemed to know exactly what they were thanking me for" (Klay 2014a, 63). The "service", by default driven by noble intentions, shuts down the kind of conversation that writers and soldiers like Klay wish to have with the members of their *civilianship*, that kingdom to which they never truly return.

6.2. The War Seen Through Somebody Else's Eyes: Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*

In a way, this relocation of the enemy might be part of the reason why the literature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had such an affinity with the investigative genre. Since the enemy is elusive, always on the move and morphing into different figures, these narratives become investigations into the nature of the enemy. Within the spectrum of war, these narratives seem to be implying, the division between enemy and friend is never as simple as we would have imagined it, and the enemy might be even closer to home. One particularly compelling narrative in this sense is Elliot Ackerman's novel *Green on Blue* (2015), which is not only written from the perspective of the alleged "enemy", but also makes the case that the war in Afghanistan is, as the title itself suggests, an inside job. Albeit Ackerman's novel is not really concerned with what happens after the war, the author takes Klay's idea of the return home as a form of redeployment to its extremes. In Ackerman's novel the war becomes a means of survival. However, the war is not a means of survival as perhaps Klay might have meant it, namely as a way of earning money that is then spent at a shopping mall in Wilmington, but rather as a way of maintaining human decency.

The first and most striking aspect that Ackerman emphasizes throughout the novel is the almost stubborn refusal, from the very first few pages of the novel, to associate any sense of belligerence on the part of the "enemy" to the alleged hate of American freedoms. The issue, Ackerman obliquely claims, is much more complex than that, and any kind of simplification, akin to the one George W. Bush made in his address to the nation immediately after the 9/11 attacks, does not fully account for what happened in Afghanistan. Aziz, the first-person narrator of the story, does not join the special Lashkar, a group that fights against the Taliban to uphold Pashtunwali (an unwritten ethical code followed by the indigenous Pashtun people), because he hates American freedom. In fact, when he is recruited, he does not have any idea about what American freedom is. He joins because of personal reasons rather than political ones, and because he is too young to know better. Aziz and his brother Ali become orphans after their parents are killed in a military raid and they are forced to beg in the streets of Orgun for a living. Subsequently, Ali, the oldest of the two, is crippled in an attack and is given intensive care in the hospital. Yet, the hospital bills are high and Aziz needs to provide for his maimed brother, and so he joins the special Lashkar on the promise

that as long as he keeps fighting his brother will be cared for in the hospital, and all expenses shall be paid by Taqbir, who is part of the special Lashkar and wears an American military uniform.

The American uniform worn by a non-American soldier is a telling element at this point in the story, and only twelve pages into the novel the narrator gives readers and inkling of what is happening on the Afghani battlefield. "Militants", the narrator explains in a moment of clarity, "accused men of being informants and beheaded them in front of their families" while "Americans accused men of being militants and disappeared them in the night on helicopters. The militants fought to protect us from the Americans and the Americans fought to protect us from the militants, and being so protected, life was very dangerous" (Ackerman 2015, 12). Soon enough, once Aziz joins the special Lashkar, the vicious circle of the American intervention in Afghanistan is brought to the surface, and the entire situation becomes a mise-en-abyme of the American 'war on terror'. The special Lashkar is fighting against a specific enemy, whose name is Gazan and whom the Americans wanted captured or killed, but whose figure is almost always receding behind a group of acolytes, different interests, and false information. Mr. Jack, the only noticeable American presence in the novel, is the one who supplies Sabir, the commander of the special Lashkar, to go after Gazan by "delivering new rifles and uniforms, and, it was whispered, increasing the special Lashkar's budget for this next fighting season" (2015, 40). It is also implied, albeit obliquely at the beginning of the novel, that it is in the special Lashkar's interest to delay their capture of Gazan so that the American money would keep pouring into the affair.

Within Afghanistan, the novel suggests, the Americans have created a miniature military-industrial complex, and once the enemy, Gazan, is cast into the role of a looming threat every action, no matter how costly, is performed in view of annihilating that enemy. Those who enrolled in the special Lashkar did it because they had been told, by some official figure wearing an American uniform, that their suffering would stop when they got their revenge on Gazan. But they also fought for money. Aziz clarifies the situation in one of his brooding moments:

> As long as I stayed a soldier and my pay went to the hospital, my brother would be cared for. My war was as simple and honest as that. There was no cause in it except the cause of survival. Had I killed for money? Perhaps. Perhaps it was a round from my machine gun that had killed the man on the ridge a few days ago. I had no feud with him. If I killed him I did it for

> money. Atal sold information to Mr. Jack for money, too, the money to care for Fareeda. What could be corrupt in that? Yet that money also paid for his large house, generator and Hilux. Still, the truly corrupt have unreliable motivations, and money is one of the most reliable. (Ackerman 2015, 85)

Chasing the enemy through the rocky terrain of Afghanistan becomes an end in itself and building the outpost that Commander Sabir desires so desperately is a way of ensuring that when the Americans are gone, everyone involved will still have a source of income. With the outpost, whose construction the villagers strongly oppose, Sabir "could extend his control over a large swath of the border, regulating anything and anyone who wished to cross" (2015, 99). Annihilating Gazan would also mean the loss of that control since the enemy was the threat that gave the special Lashkar power over the villagers. Even those soldiers who in one way or another have already taken their revenge choose to remain because the war sustains them. War, Sabir tells Aziz in a moment of unexpected frankness, "can be a life" because the revenge that Aziz seeks so diligently by endangering his own life will not matter unless he has "made a life in this war" (2015, 123–24), just as Atal did.

In this scheme of things, peace is always an option, but peace is unproductive, and so, to justify his outpost and as such his control over the area, "Sabir secretly supplies Gazan and keeps him on the attack, mortaring our village and mining our roads" (2015, 223). The vicious circle is thus revealed: Sabir gets his money from the Americans, who are paying him and the soldiers in the special Lashkar to fight against Gazan, who in turned is being supplied by Sabir to keep on fighting to keep the money flowing. Toward the end of the novel, when Aziz decides to kill Gazan, Mr. Jack, and Atal, while they are discussing peace terms, the significance of the title becomes fully comprehensible:

> No one would know this killing had been a green on blue.
> But as I thought about it, I felt uncertain it was. I no longer wore a uniform. Still, I'd been a member of the Special Lashkar, something the Americans made. I then recalled how Commander Sabir kept Gazan in business, and how the Americans kept Commander Sabir in business. And as I thought of all the ways one could be killed in this war, and of all those who could do it, I couldn't think of a single way to die which wasn't a green on blue. The Americans had a hand in creating all of it. (Ackerman 2015, 226)

However, Aziz does not break the vicious circle by killing the three men. He kills them because he does not want the circle to be broken. Akin to Sabir, Aziz has succumbed to the idea that war can be a form of employment, one that comes with a bevy of benefits, including the expensive medicine he will have to provide Fareeda with following the death of Atal. When Aziz tells Fareeda that he will find the medicine needed to keep her illness at bay, a disease that has deformed parts of her body, she looks at him hatefully. "The hate", Aziz explains to himself, "was in the need. She was a prisoner of her needs, and I'd become the master of them" (Ackerman 2015, 229). In the end, Aziz becomes another version of Gazan, yet one who is even more vicious because he has understood the logic of the war.

From this point of view, Ackerman's novel can be seen as a *bildungsroman* because the story follows Aziz and his brother from their childhood to adulthood. The *bildungsroman* is a trope war writers often resort to not only because of the age of their protagonists but also because of the transformative effect war has on these protagonists. More often than not, if one were to dismiss the age of the protagonists, war narratives would still have the sound and feel of a *bildungsroman*. No matter the age of the protagonist, he or she will acquire extra knowledge by the end of the story. At the end of Ackerman's novel, Aziz emerges stronger and smarter than the others not only because he has matured physically, but also because the way has had that effect on him. Akin to these protagonists, the reader, too, emerges a different person at the end of the story because he or she has come to know a side of the human psyche that was unfamiliar before, or at least was not as nuanced as it is at the end of the story. And akin to the war, war narratives strive to recreate this point of rupture between what was before and what came after.

In this equation, perhaps this could be one way of assessing a war narrative's belligerent or pacifist tendencies, namely by looking at the ways in which these narratives qualify the information that is being offered in the narrative. Do these narratives represent that information as valuable? If that information is indeed represented as valuable, namely as incomparable, unobtainable by other means, then those narratives could be seen as having belligerent tendencies. However, by the same token, when that information is represented as valuable then one could also conclude that by the virtue of its valuableness and its status as information that has already been obtained and shared with a wider public then that public will be dissuaded from engaging in

any kind of war. As I have already argued, with regards to Mariani's argument, every time the burden of proof is put on the reader the results always vacillate, depending on the context in which the reading takes place. A solution to this, as I will argue further in this chapter, might be in the ways in which these narratives look at the "physical" knowledge attained through war, namely in the ways they tackle the issue of the human bodies involved in war.

Both Fareeda's and Commander Sabir's bodies become symbols of the kind of conflict that Ackerman portrays in *Green on Blue*. Fareeda's body is deformed by some unseen disease. When Aziz sees her for the first time he notices her right hand, which "was grotesque, the thumb and index finger engorged as though they were about to burst, the fingernails yellow and brittle" (2015, 64). However, with its deformity, Fareeda's body becomes a symbol of Afghanistan. In an interview with Sean Purio for *WLA; War, Literature and the Arts*, Ackerman himself explains:

> Fareeda is a symbol of Afghanistan, at least that's how she developed in the book. One remarkable thing about the country is that is has been at war for thirty-seven years. The average life expectancy for an Afghan male is around sixty. That means the generation of Afghans who are currently dying were in their early twenties when the Soviets invaded in 1979. They are the last Afghans who can remember their country at peace, none of the young people can. For this reason, peace in Afghanistan is not an act of returning to a previous state, which everyone can remember. Instead, conjuring peace has become an act of sheer imagination. (Purio 2016)

When Aziz tells Fareeda that she should not speak of death and killing because she is "young and a woman", she snaps back by saying that survival is not only the attribute of a soldier and that she, too, fights for survival. "I fight every day to keep this from killing me", she says referring to the illness consuming her from the inside, "[it] spreads across me and without medicine it will consume me" (Ackerman 2015, 113). The obscure disease that afflicts Fareeda requires, much like the Special Lashkar in Afghanistan, constant alleviation, or a constant flow of financial resources that keep the disease at bay without putting an end to it.

Ackerman's *Green on Blue* is not the only novel to portray the body as the locus of a struggle of a different kind, one that is often seen as a metaphorical infirmity or weakness. Brian Van Reet's novel *Spoils* (2017) makes frequent references to this, to a point where the infirmity seems to point to a weakness deriving from national and

historical shortcomings. As Cassandra, one of the many protagonists of the novel, takes a quick look at a group of children playing, she notices that some of these children have congenital disabilities. "For the first time," the third person narrator explains, "Cassandra notices the defect in his other arm [...] shriveled and misshapen. Without a hand or fingers, it tapers to a diminutive paddle like a fleshy spoon" (Reet 2018, 76). Haider, the boy with the misshapen arm, also claims to have a sick sister in desperate need of medical attention, and for the sake of whom he will become an informant for the American forces. "In the short time since Haider has darted away," Cassandra spots another deformed child, "a girl with a stooped back who throws out one leg in an exaggerated circular motion with each step" (2018, 80). These deformed bodies come into stark contrast with the bodies of the American soldiers as if to point to an inherent flaw in the Iraqi system, one that the Americans cannot solve right away. They can help, but that does not free them from their deformities. As opposed to the Americans, who also benefit from military superiority, these *other* bodies appear incapacitated by something that is beyond anyone's control and confirms a tormented history. A military intervention, the novel seems to suggest, cannot cure congenital disabilities.

By the same token, Commander Sabir's disfigured body, much like Fareeda's, becomes another symbol of the situation in Afghanistan. However, as opposed to Fareeda, who is portrayed as the innocent victim, Sabir's disfigurement is a sign of recognition and respect. His "mangled bottom lip" that revealed the row of teeth behind it, "as well as the scars, paunches, and calluses of the other men gave the group an honest authority, one greater than shining medals and rank" (Ackerman 2015, 41). Sabir's description is akin to that of a drug addict who no longer makes the difference between what is real and his drug-induced hallucination. War is what gives him dignity and purpose, and any other occupation would be deemed worthless or, worse, undermining his masculinity.

The notion that war can be a form of occupation, just like any job, is reinforced through what seems like a disparaging parallelism. The job of war runs in Sabir's family, passed on akin to heirloom. Sabir's brother Jazeem, whom the Americans called James, was the founder of the Special Lashkar. Following Jazeem's death, Sabir joined to support his financially ailing family. Much like Sabir, Aziz assumes the position left

vacant by the death of Gazan, thus 'inheriting' his men and purpose in the plot construed by Sabir and his thirst for prosperity. On the other hand, those who fail to see war as a form of employment are portrayed as people who are unable to lift themselves up from their unfortunate circumstances. "These people have nothing", Tawas tells Aziz as they watch two boys begging for food, "[they] are ignorant even of their suffering. This is the worst poverty" (2015, 60). Those in the Special Lashkar, people such as Aziz, Tawas, and Mortaza, by extension, are superior, because being in the Special Lashkar is proof of their capacity to acknowledge their suffering and act against it. "You've done something to lift yourself up", Tawas tells Mortaza when the latter scorns his arrogance, "[these] people do nothing. […] Their indifference stares back at you. It is in their mud houses, overfilled sewers, and dirt-faced children who are stupid and unknowing" (2015, 60–61). Mortaza fails to realize that, much like the unknowing children who only "need an example of strength" and have been paralyzed by the charity of the Americans, he, too, is a victim of that charity.

Compared to those in the Special Lashkar, those men who continue to perform jobs that have no connection with the war are seen as men who have lost any sense of their manhood. Atal, who swings back and forth between American interests in the region and those of the locals, is portrayed as an effeminate man. "His dress was neat", the narrator describes Atal upon meeting him for the first time, "and his body perfumed so heavily that his scent caused in me a spinning moment of drunkenness. He extended his hand as though we should kiss it" (Ackerman 2015, 62). On another occasion, the soldiers in the Special Lashkar take considerable pleasure in belittling some of the locals. When a group of itinerant musicians is captured for no apparent reason except for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, they all seem very small when they stand eye to eye to the soldiers. When two of them present themselves before Yar, "their clothes filthy and hair now matted with fine dust", the latter laughs at them yet not at their appearance but at his power over them (2015, 96). Placed side by side with the soldiers from the Special Lashkar, their job does not engender any kind of respect on the part of the soldiers.

The war Ackerman portrays in his novel is not a conflict between two parties. The alleged enemy is not a hater of freedom but rather someone who has been cast into that role. In the novel, war is above the categories of friend and enemy. "War is a mother to men such as us", Sabir tells Aziz towards the end of the novel, "[it] is a

mother whose generosity brought you badal [revenge] and will bring me my outpost. Men who forget about her generosity wind up like the three you just left" (2015, 232). Akin to a goddess, war waits to be served, and those who serve it prosper. Those who do not, that is, those who are ready to succumb to the idea of peace end up as Atal, Gazan, and Mr. Jack. Those who are caught within the maelstrom, such as the villagers, ultimately end up as Fareeda, prisoners of their own needs, and ready to follow Aziz, ready to become 'enemies'. "They'll follow whoever clothes them", Sabir reminds Aziz, "feeds them, and arms them. I do all of this and you will do all this through me" (2015, 232). The enemy, Ackerman seems to be implying, is whoever those who have the financial means want them to be.

The emptiness of any kind of higher ideals that could constitute the basis of war is further underscored by Aziz final realization that "badal", the notion for which he fought so diligently, can change its meaning according to different situations. When Aziz kills, by mistake, the brother of one of his combatant peers during a shooting he realizes that the brother who survived might swear "badal" against him. "I fought to avenge my brother", Aziz broods over the situation, "but I'd just killed the brother of another man, a friend. I'd taken from him just what Gazan had taken from me" (Ackerman 2015, 143). Yet, Sabir somewhat dismisses the issue by assigning Aziz a mission that would take him away from the base, and given Sabir's record of moral corruption, it might even seem that the whole situation was merely a plot performed with the intent of forcing Aziz into accepting the difficult mission, that of annihilating Atal. Somebody else is once again recast into the role of the enemy.

6.3. Parallel Views: Michael Pitre's *Fives and Twenty-Fives*, Matt Gallagher's *Youngblood*, and Roy Scranton's *War Porn*

In other narratives, the enemy is at times high up in the chain of command. In Michael Pitre's novel *Fives and Twenty-Fives* (2015), Lieutenant Donovan and his team are sent to dispose of a series of barrels of chemical substances of unknown origins and purpose simply because no other team wants to do the job. After they are made to wait for more than six hours under the scorching Iraqi sun they are then escorted by a certain Mr. Moss, a "twentysomething kid with a pleasant smile" and an "upper-class Texas accent" (Pitre 2015, 279) who gives them a brief outline of their mission there, one that

does not correspond entirely to their initial briefing. When questioned about the real nature of the mission, Mr. Moss dismisses them by saying that they're "losing daylight. And air-conditioning, too" (2015, 279). The soldiers cannot abort the mission because they had received orders from above.

The location where the mission is supposed to unfold eerily resembles an American suburb. "The dirt road curved around a low bluff," Lieutenant Donovan describes as their cars move towards the location of their mission, "and a walled subdivision, like something out of the American Southwest complete with stucco tract housing and culs-de-sac, appeared in the windshield" (2015, 280). The illusion is so real that the lieutenant has to blink twice to make sure he was not imagining it. "I couldn't help felling," Donovan notes, "as if I were on my way to see a friend in Alabama. The sensation deepened when the Suburbans ahead of us wagon-wheeled into a loose perimeter at the end of a cul-de-sac and the Iraqi trucks parked in adjacent driveways" (2015, 281). Yet, the homely spell of the abandoned houses is soon broken when the soldiers realize they are unfit to deal with the mission they had been handed and that the chemicals they were supposed to transport took their toll on their physical wellness:

> Through my clouded vision, I could see the Marines on security standing against a backdrop of houses not dissimilar from the ones in which they might have grown up, and they appeared to me as the children they had been just a few years earlier. I pictured them passing footballs in the street. Walking up to front doors wearing tuxedos, carrying flowers for their homecoming dates. I even let myself picture the impossibility of Gomez coming to the door in a dress, accepting her corsage.
> I blinked the tears free, and they were Marines again, with eyes wide and jaws slack at the sight of the solid and impervious Zahn, broken by the mere smell of the chemicals in that backyard pool. (2015, 282–83)

Pitre's critique works on at least two levels here: at a micro level, at the level of the narrative *as* war narrative, it is based on the stark contrast between the orders coming from high up the administration and the actual field capacities of soldiers. At this level, Pitre makes it clear who the true enemy is here, and it is not a pack of bloodthirsty jihadists. The enemy at hand here is none other than Mr. Moss, who criticizes Donovan and his team for not being able to complete the mission. His aspersion, directed at Donovan and his team and delivered from the air-conditioned inside of his car, belies a somewhat idyllic view of the mission and the war at large. Recovering the barrels, Mr. Moss exclaims, was "an opportunity to win the war, just a little. To show the Iraqis

that we are here to help. To show them what Americans are all about. Hard work" (Pitre 2015, 284). There is also a degree of dramatic irony implied here as well as of hypocrisy. Albeit in Mr. Moss' view Americans were there to show Iraqis that they were all about the hard work he personally does not move a muscle.

At a macro level, at the level of the narrative as a critique of American society, it is based on the revealing parallel between the mock-American suburb and the idyllic memories it triggers in the soldiers' minds. In Pitre's subtle vision, the American suburb awakened in the soldiers' recollections is as toxic as the one in Iraq. And if the American suburb appears akin to a mirage in Iraq, baffling the soldiers, the sounds and sights of the battlefield accompany them when they return to the homeland. When hospitalman Lester Pleasant goes out to watch the fireworks with his girlfriend the sound of the fireworks eerily reminds him of gunfire. The enemy is both here, on the alleged battlefield of the 'war on terror,' and there, on American soil, up to the point where the two become coterminous and cancel each other out.

Yet, Pitre's narration also brings to the fore the notion that in this war the true battlefield is not the mock-American suburb, as it is not some distant city in a country overseas, but the soldiers' bodies, and their inner fight between comfort and discomfort. When the narrator of Phil Klay's short story "Redeployment" talks about the color codes that to a soldier's mind indicate the degree of alertness a soldier is when on duty, he is also obliquely referring to the amount of fear the soldier feels depending on their degree of alertness. That fear is inevitably a fear for one's body, and the war, as does any activity that jeopardizes one's life, exacerbates that fear to maddening levels. Pitre thus relocates the battlefield by emphasizing the centrality of the soldier's body and the relationship that it forms with the bodies of the other soldiers in the platoon. Lieutenant Donovan disobeys the orders coming from high up because the mission they have been given endangers the physical health of his marines. The decision matches in emotional tone and scope with that of a father or a friend that cares about the well-being of his fellow men.

The focus on the inner lives of the soldiers as well as on how they cope with the trauma of war, individually, as they return home, also distances the narrative from the pull of combat gnosticism. The author himself is a former US marine captain and a veteran of two tours in Iraq and the fact that he chose to divide his narrative into different points of view, including that of an Iraqi man, works as a system of checks

and balances against combat gnosticism. This preoccupation is also visible in the way the author tackles military jargon, which, in war fiction, is usually dealt with in two ways. It is either used sparingly so that it gets lost and the reader gets a little electric shock every time it comes up, or it is overused when one aims for dramatic effect (as Phil Klay does in "OIF", a short story included in *Redeployment*) and when one wishes to point out its dryness and absurdity.

In *Fives and Twenty-Fives* Pitre does something very noteworthy with both of these approaches. First, he breaks the story into separate points of view, and every breaking point is signaled by a short note, a letter, an official report, and the occasional comments Dodge/Kateb makes for his thesis on *Huck Finn*. Most of these separate narratives move back (to the war in Iraq) and forth (to the Marines trying to rebuild their lives after the end of their service), and abound in flashbacks usually triggered by something happening in the present (to the point where some of them become predictable): Doc Lester Pleasant thinks of "the machine-gun range" when he hears the fireworks on New Year's Eve; Donovan thinks of a difficult mission involving dangerous chemical substances while working on his "solid reports" for his job; the grass smell in Lizzy's room reminds Lester of the "grass down at Nasr Wal Salam. That's right. Thickest damn grass I ever saw" (Pitre 2015, 154). It is almost as if noticing certain aspects in the present is a reason to return to the realities of the battle, or, to be more precise, it is as if the present cannot be experienced without the knowledge of the battle. Each aspect of the present is thus charged with a significance that is alien to itself, but which rings true to the former marine.

Some of these flashbacks seem so absurd and ironic that they do not seem credible. Other are very funny, such as the episode when Dodge/Kateb first meets Lieutenant Pederson in "All Smiles, All Friendship" and the lieutenant's translator takes his job a little too seriously. "This guy? Pederson?", the interpreter says in Arabic during their encounter, "he is going to fuck your whole world. Fuck you hard up the ass. Tell him where you have the weapons hidden. He's Fifty Cent's cousin. I'm not lying" (Pitre 2015, 211). Pederson, of course, says nothing of the sort. There is no mention of Fifty Cent. This is also the episode in which Dodge starts to win the Americans' trust when he reveals himself to be a fluent speaker of English and unmasks the interpreter's jocular translations. Most of these stories appear to be extended comments on the notes that precede them as if to offer a background to whatever is being said and as such

facilitate understanding. And some of those notes are written in dry military jargon. Consider for instance the frequent reports and the "findings of fact" that are mere inventories of facts. The stories that follow go well beyond those inventories and show the emotions in between, the decisions taken on those emotions.

These stories provide a degree of openness towards the reader that could never be achieved by succumbing to the stubbornness of military jargon, and they show preoccupation for the reader, as if to signal that this kind of preoccupation should be one the reader could practice on a daily basis. At least for the duration of the reading, the reader is able to experience how the present is lived by those who have known battle in the past. This opens a space for dialogue, and it reinforces the notion that those aspects of reality that noncombatants might find harmless, such as hearing fireworks, are traumatic to those who have been to war. By the same token, this kind of dialogue forwards the idea that war veterans often find themselves in the impossibility or returning to a previous mental and physical state. To most of these soldiers, the return home is not a closing of the circle but a form of spiraling outwards and inwards.

In these narratives, often enough, for the grunts in the lower ranks, the orders coming from high up in the chain of command are as cruel as they are absurd. Other times, these orders clash with their own principles. In Matt Gallagher's *Youngblood*, a group of soldiers is sent to disperse a large gathering of angry locals in Ashuriyah "by any means necessary" (Gallagher 2016, 316). Upon arrival, the soldiers realize that they are not only outnumbered by the locals, who had built a bonfire and were armed with torches and assault rifles, but also that they had been asked to perform a mission as nebulous as the darkness of the desert that surrounds them:

> A small group had gathered in front of the crowd, under the eyes of the arch. They kept pointing to us and gesturing. After a minute or so, five of the men walked our way, carrying small torches and flashlights and assault rifles. The many locals behind them gathered around the bonfire and faced out, chanting with raised fists. I guessed them to be about four hundred meters or so away – definitely within distance of a decent shooter with a scope. (Gallagher 2016, 318)

Later in the novel, Lieutenant Porter, the leader of the squad is informed that the mob was in fact after him and that he had managed to get out of it alive by sheer luck. It was not sheer luck that saved them but rather Porter's and his men's cunning. Albeit they are cornered by the angry mob, the soldiers do not resort to violence and instead

choose to show their fragility. "I took of my helmet", Porter describes the scene, "and looked up at the bodies through the black of night, trying desperately to show neither fear nor aggression" (2016, 320). The other soldiers follow his gesture and the crowd backs off. Towards the end of the novel, when Porter questions a local woman, Alia, regarding the whereabouts of one of his intelligence sources, the woman tells the soldiers that they do not need help, they only want the Americans to leave.

Instances of discursive simultaneity blatantly populate Gallagher's novel. While brooding over the reasons why he and his brother, Will, had joined the army and thinking of his grandmother, Porter holds up his cigarette until it blots out a minaret he has a view of in Iraq. "A curl of smoke drifted from it," Porter narrates, "and I narrowed my eyes until the minaret fell out of focus and looked like a burning Twin Tower on a television screen" (2016, 149). The two images overlap, yet if 9/11 had pushed Porter to enlist to be able to fight for his country that reason seems distant and meaningless. Ominously enough, the burning Twin Tower appears on a television screen, which further distances Porter from the event that triggered the war in which he is fighting.

Gallagher's novel is also an extended comment on how the notion of combat and manhood intertwine. From its very title, *Youngblood*, the novel signals a visceral approach to the war and, in fact, the whole novel is based on the young soldiers' ways of constructing and asserting their masculinity through war, specifically on the tense relation between lieutenant Jack Porter, the narrator, and his staff sergeant Chambers. Besides being a bildungsroman, the novel is also a detective story about the protagonist's "efforts to investigate dark rumors about the past conduct of [...] Chambers, whom Jack worries will get his own platoon into trouble" (Kakutani 2016), and a love story. The tension between the two male characters is visible from the beginning of the novel when Chambers seems to be drawing everyone's attention in the platoon. The tension escalates even further when Chambers shoots the goat of the "Barbie Kid", an underage informer that sells goods to American soldiers and locals and wears a sweatshirt with a Barbie doll on it. At a first glance, the goat's death seems like an accident. "If that thing had been a suicide bomber," Chambers yells in the middle of the commotion, "you'd be explaining to Saint Peter why the fuck you're so stupid" (Gallagher 2016, 13). The goat was not a suicide bomber for sure, it was only the Barbie Kid's pet. It is the kid's femininity, "all ninety pounds of him" (2016, 12), that bothers

Chambers most, as well as the fact that there is no looming threat to keep him, and the other soldiers in the platoon, on edge. Additionally, the fact that Chambers pounds his chest and hoots is another clue that he was merely showing off to the soldiers who had asked him earlier about his tattoos and the rumor that he had a tattoo for every enemy he killed.

Chambers' need to assert his masculinity is also his way of showing that of all those in the group he is the one with most experience because of a previous deployment, which, supposedly was much tougher than the one he is in now. Chambers is also convinced that the standards in the army (i.e. the standards of manhood) are declining. This is particularly visible in a discussion he has with lieutenant Porter about their captain's alleged homosexuality:

> "So," he said. "It true our commander's a fag?"
> "I guess." I'd met Captain Vrettos' purported boyfriend many times before we left. A CrossFit coach, he'd come in and led physical training once, and could bench more than anyone, even Sipe. That'd stopped most of the gay jokes.
> Chambers shook his head. "What the fuck has happened to my army." (Gallagher 2016, 22)

However, Gallagher does not stop at this. His critique of all things American does not become salient only in the comments of the soldiers but it is also expressed by members of the Iraqi army. When Porter visits Saif for a briefing, the latter remarks that Iraqi soldiers in the higher ranks keep separate from those in the lower ranks because it is better for discipline. American soldiers, on the other hand, do not make that difference. "[We're] big on equality," Porter tells Saif, "[all] for one, one for all sort of thing. Goes back to George Washington, I think." Saif's reply is as acerbic as Porter's claim is grandiloquent: "'George Washington?' Saif raised an eyebrow. 'One of your slave-owner presidents, yes?'" (Gallagher 2016, 140) The subtleties of Saif's remark go unnoticed by the young American soldier.

An even more blatant critique of American society and of those who populate the higher ranks of the American army can be found in Phil Klay's short story "Money as a Weapons System," included in *Redeployment*. When the protagonist asks his translator why he is being called "the Professor" by the soldiers as well as the other members of the army staff, his reply is revelatory. "Because I was a professor," the man replies, "before [Americans] came and destroyed the country" (Klay 2014a, 85). A couple of

pages later, the protagonist is informed that Gene Goodwin, "the mattress king of northern Kansas," (2014a, 94) had sent a supply of baseball uniforms for the Iraqis to play baseball in, and that it was his job to introduce the Iraqis to their "soon to be national pastime" (2014a, 99). The absurdity of the situation is heightened even more when the protagonist has to take pictures of a group of malnourished kids wearing the baseball uniforms:

> The kid swung as though he were using the bat to beat someone to death, lifting it overhead and bringing it brutally down. I wanted to send that shot to [Gene Goodwin], but instead I showed the kid how to swing correctly and went back to taking photos. The timing was difficult, but after about twenty swings I got it perfect, the bat blurry, the batter's face pure concentration, and a look of worry from the catcher, as if the batter has just connected with a pitch. I turned the camera's display around and showed the picture to the Professor and the kids.
> 'Look at that,' I said.
> The Professor nodded. 'There you are,' he said. 'Success.' (Klay 2014a, 117)

To Gene Goodwin, who in Klay's short story becomes a symbol of American ignorance, it did not matter that the locals lacked a water plant that would provide them with running water, as it did not matter that local women needed a clinic that could provide them with the healthcare they lacked. At the macro level, American success in the 'war on terror' is akin to that picture of Iraqi children playing baseball. The enemies are not bloodthirsty insurgents but those exponents of the military-industrial complex at home.

Roy Scranton's novel *War Porn* makes an even more obvious point with regards to this issue and places the enemy in an even more unexpected position. When Aaron, freshly returned from Iraq, shows Matt, a civilian who has nothing to do with the army, pictures of tortured Iraqi men and women, who are then revealed to have been detained for no reasons, he keeps emphasizing the fact that he was merely holding the camera, and that all of those who participated in the gruesome acts were merely doing their jobs:

> We didn't *decide* to do this shit. We didn't *ask* for the torture detail. Staff Sergeant Cortázar told us to do this shit because Lieutenant Viers told *him* to do this shit, and Captain Weems, the company commander, told *him* to do this shit and so on up the fucking chain of command. [...] They say jump, we don't ask how high, we don't ask shit. We jump. [...] Think about this

> fact: if we decide to talk to somebody, show somebody pictures, we better damn well think about who exactly is going to be getting it in the ass. Bush? Rumsfeld? The general? The CO? Or your battle buddy? (Scranton 2016, 314)

There is a hierarchy when it comes to blame, but the final piece, or the one who bears the ultimate blame is never mentioned. Blame is thus distributed among those who participated in the act. The one that is truly guilty, Scranton seems to suggest, is the very mental damage that the battle inflicts on those who participate in it.

Yet, Scranton is also walking on thin ice when he chooses to tackle this topic. At times, the fact that he seems to be transferring the blame higher and higher up on the chain of command might appear misleading and a way of finding justification for acts that appear unjustifiable, or gratuitous. However, Aaron is a victim of what in psychology is called "groupthink", namely the inability of an individual to step out of a group's way of thinking and thus perform actions that one may not perform under different circumstances. "Conformity and loyalty", Susan David argues in *Emotional Agility* (2016), "are key concepts in military culture [but] under stressful conditions, members of tightly knit military units can fall prey to dangerous groupthink, exhibiting violent and dehumanizing behavior that in other contexts they would condemn as wrong" (David 2016, 124). Nevertheless, knowing that Aaron is a victim of a cognitive bias does not mollify the transgression against human dignity performed by the soldiers in his military unit, particularly because he is not the "whistleblower" in this case. Aaron is not showing Matt the pictures to condemn what happened, or to increase his awareness about the atrocities of war; he is merely showing off.

The context in which Aaron shows the pictures does not help his case at all, on the contrary, it further discredits Aaron. Wanting to play the good host, Matt invites Aaron inside the house and show him the project he has been working on. Aaron accepts and confesses to Matt that he has something to show him as well. "Some real war shit", Aaron tells Matt while waving a thumb drive, "[you] show me the future. I'll show you the past" (2016, 303). The future is Matt's project, a sophisticated computer program that can predict the weather by gathering weather data from multiple sources and creating visual patterns that could be easily interpreted by human beings. The idealism behind it is almost disarming. The past, or at least the past that Aaron wants to show Matt, is much darker, and is a version of Abu Ghraib:

> "We did a bunch of stuff in Iraq," Aaron said, "including working at several different internment camps. This is Camp Crawford. We called it the Pit. It was north of Baghdad, not far from Taji, and it was specifically for insurgents and intel targets. It's not like Cropper, or BIAP, which was high-value, or Abu G, which had a bunch of different shit. We were supposed to get hard cases from other assets in the north and northwest, a lot of hadjis from Fallujah and Tikrit and Baqubah, a lot of Sunni triangle shit."
> "Hadjis?"
> "Iraqis. You get real racist over there." (Scranton 2016, 307)

Aaron's choice of words does not help either. Albeit he obliquely claims that circumstances had forced him to act a certain way, his language does not indicate a change of attitude. Aaron is no longer "there," but he still uses the kind of language he sees as racist. Circumstances have changed in the meantime, but his attitude has not.

Incidentally, when Susan David talks about the dangers of groupthink she also mentions Abu Ghraib, but in a way that does not help Aaron's case at all. On the contrary, when David brings up the atrocities of those internment camps, she praises the "whistle-blower", Sergeant Joseph Darby, who, at only twenty-four years, was able to "make the dramatic switch by acting from a place of truth within himself. By staying aligned with his values, he was able to not only break from the group's behavior but also to muster the courage to make the abuse public" (David 2016, 124). By contrast, Aaron is the kind of soldier who does not stay aligned with his values and is prone to resort to groupthink the instant he is cornered or earns a place in the hierarchy of the group. As opposed to Sergeant Darby, who realizes that the abuses committed by the group which he was a part of went against his own principles and immediately hands over the CD containing the incriminatory photos to a superior, Aaron hands the thumb drive containing the photos in a playful exchange.

Aaron also confesses that most of those atrocities were performed because the soldiers were bored, and the fact that he mentions this aspect *after* complaining about the orders coming from high up further weakens his case. "[One] of our OGA dudes came from Abu G," Aaron presses on even when Matt shows signs of indignation, "and he gave us guidance on a bunch of shit he said worked really well over there. Naked Dog-Pile, Electric Wire Box, Fake Menstrual Wipe, shit like that. But a lot of shit we did 'cause we were bored" (Scranton 2016, 318). His familiarity with evil as well as his dismissiveness of its effects is so repulsive that it becomes grotesque. It is almost as if Scranton is trying to deny him any degree of sympathy coming from the reader. In this

respect, Aaron is much like Mark Doten's own veteran, Tom Pally, who cannot see a world without his suffering and whose ties to reality have been severely altered. Scranton's novel ends with another gruesome scene that is an echo of the things Matt sees in the pictures from Camp Crawford. Dahlia, Matt's wife, is tied to the bed with a phone cord and sexually abused by Aaron.

As Aaron heads out the house after having cut the phone cord that kept Dahlia tied to the bed, he seems to be remorseless, and with this, Scranton seems to have done his best to leave no room for any kind of forgiveness or sympathy for Aaron. With *War Porn*, Sarah Hoenicke argues in her review of the novel for the Los Angeles Review of Books, Scranton "defies the American cultural tenet that our military is lawful, moral, and organized, depicting it instead as it more probably is: needlessly brutal, a blunt instrument rather than a refined machine" (Hoenicke n.d.). The purpose of this, Hoenicke explains, is to force the reader into owning up history and "the choices they've made" (Hoenicke n.d.). However, it is my contention that Scranton, as a writer, is much smarter than Hoenicke, among others, wants to believe. *War Porn* is, as the title itself suggests, a provocation, and like all provocations, it seeks to make the reader uncomfortable not only with the notion of war and the havoc in wreaks but with how readers look at war. In other words, by coupling the idea of war with that of entertainment, Scranton is giving us what we, supposedly, came for: a novel about the gruesomeness of war written in a way that manages to maintain our levels of attention on the buoyant line.

The novel might also be the coronation of Scranton's frustration with the publishing industry. Albeit the novel was finished by 2011 it was only published five years later because Scranton could not find a publisher at the time. The cover of the hardback edition is as provocative as the title itself and it shows the tip of what looks like a bullet/missile whose lower half has been replaced by charred corn on the cob on a barbecue grill. Coupled with the title, the image oddly reminds of a phallus, and it does give the book the allure of a desperate attempt to catch the attention of the reader. I certainly had to give explanations every time somebody saw me reading the novel or whenever I had to include an image of the cover in slides for presentations. However, that might just be the point Scranton is trying to make with the novel with regards to the pressure exerted by the publishing industry and the subsequent readership of war narratives. Much like what happens in Ben Fountain's novel *Billy Lynn's*

Long Halftime Walk (2012) war must always share credit with entertainment in order to be accepted by the general public, and the fact that we sometimes ask for literary quality from a war writer, who is most often a war veteran, is indicative of how much value we put on the medium rather than on the message.

Besides the publishing industry, Scranton is also pointing his attack in the direction of a bigger agent that has a hold over how war literature is written and consumed: the myth of the trauma hero. In a lengthy article written for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Scranton argues that the myth of the trauma hero has dominated not only the interpretation of war literature, war movies, and the entire visual culture of the war, but also war writing itself, reinforcing itself akin to a perpetual motion machine. In Scranton's view, the myth also functions as a scapegoat mechanism by "discharging national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy", to the point where the myth is often read as the very definition of war literature itself (Scranton 2015). The myth is so endemic that it has "turned from being a frame for understanding reality into a mirroring surface that reflects back only our own expectations" (Scranton 2015). It has convinced us that the experience of war holds a special place in a universal hierarchy of experiences because it offers a special kind of truth, accessible only to those who have been there, who, by extension, obtain authority from it.

The myth of the trauma hero has a history and it goes all the way back, at least in Scranton's view, to British Lieutenant Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1920), which obliquely asserts that the truth of war is none other than the truth of a soldier's experience. In Scranton's history of the myth, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* follows in Owen's poem's footsteps and adds the idea that "the soldier's truth becomes a formal truth: it determines not only who can speak, but what words can be spoken" (Scranton 2015). O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, Scranton argues, somewhat dismisses the supremacy of the "soldier's truth" by claiming that it is a "mystic truth", one that cannot be discussed or understood but only felt. Kevin Power's *The Yellow Birds* (2012) reinforces the tenets of the myth by showing that "the conventional tropes of war lit are not a means of conveying truth, but the truth of war itself" (Scranton 2015). All of these texts, Scranton argues, have in one way or another added to this self-perpetuating myth.

However, if one thought that Scranton could not go harder on these war writers than he does on Powers, whose lyricism Scranton denounces as banal, he saves his best argument for last. "[The] most troubling consequence", Scranton explains, "of our faith in the revelatory truth of combat experience and our sanctification of the trauma hero [is] that by focusing so insistently on the psychological trauma American soldiers have had to endure, we allow ourselves to forget the death and destruction those very soldiers are responsible for" (Scranton 2015). Phil Klay's short story "Redeployment" is revelatory in this sense because it allows readers to ignore the unpleasant fact that, besides shooting dogs, the American soldiers portrayed in the story also, inevitably, shot people. The opening line of the story, "We shot dogs", akin to lines such as "We built schools" and "We brought democracy", foreground a peripheral detail and obfuscates the big-picture of the American intervention in Iraq. It is not wonder then, Scranton notes, that Sergeant Price's dog is named "Vicar", because "[a] vicar is a representative or substitute, as the Pope is the Vicar of Christ, and in 'Redeployment', the tumorous Vicar is a substitute for the narrator's trauma and guilt" (Scranton 2015). It is as if Klay is inviting his readers to care more about the dog and the trauma endured by Price than about all those Iraqi victims the war produced. All of these texts, in fact, make the gruesome experience of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan more palatable by using the emotional trauma of the soldier as a substitute for the complicity we all have in a war of aggression.

The problem, in Scranton's view, is not with the writers but with those who expect war writers to behave and write in a certain way. This inherent failure of war literature "belongs to all the readers and citizens who expect veterans to play out for them the ritual *fort-da* of trauma and recovery, and to carry for them the collective guilt of war" (Scranton 2015). In a way, Scranton's own novel, *War Porn*, refuses to give readers this form of surrogacy because it does not seek to substitute that complicity all readers have in a war with Aaron's emotional trauma from the war. Additionally, as I have argued above, absolving Aaron of his complicity in the gruesome acts shown in the pictures of detainees he carries on a thumb drive on the basis of a diffusion of responsibility does not work because he does not act as a whistleblower. He simply limits himself to blaming it on those in the higher ranks without any second thoughts. The end of the novel does not bring any absolution for Aaron, and the fact that he is a rapist further limits any kind of substitution or escape.

The soldiers portrayed in these texts become embodiments of a third morality, one that is neither pacifist, nor belligerent, but practicable/functional, one that is comfortable enough for the reader to inhabit. If survivors of the Holocaust spoke of how their experience in the Nazi concentration camps was unspeakable and of how those at home were unable, or unwilling, to listen to them, these war narratives speak of how those at home are unwilling to listen because their view of war is *prior* to any actual story of war. Those at home know what they wish to hear because they have already been bombarded with ready-made perceptions of war that leave little or no room for variations. These soldiers do not have the luxury to ponder upon the choices they are making simply because their choices have already been decided for them before any decision of their own or because those decisions are dictated by something so personal that it is almost undefinable.

These narratives seem to show that the most crippling affliction these soldiers suffer from does not stem from their exposure to battle and bloodshed, but from having to return to a system of values that is incapable of re-integrating them within itself, and that does not offer them the possibility to opt for pacifism or all-out belligerence. These soldiers' return home, as the title of Phil Klay's collection of short stories suggests, is akin to a "redeployment" to a different kind of battlefield, where battles of an unusual degree and order must be fought and where different moral standards are at work. Home is not peaceful. The battlefield is not belligerent. In this scheme of things, the literature of "war on terror" loses at least part of its literal meaning and can thus be defined as a set of simultaneous discursive practices meant to *reform* the very way we gaze at war.

Considering all of these aspects, perhaps it could be safe to assume that a discussion about whether these texts should be regarded as pacifist or belligerent is, if not fallacious, then at least blatantly suspect. Proof of this is the fact that these narratives, by narrating discursive simultaneity, create a third position, which is neither pacifist, nor belligerent, but practicable/functional, and the only way one could still resort to such notions as pacifist or belligerent is by altering the definition of those terms to accommodate such narratives. In this sense, perhaps a truly pacifist narrative is one that accounts for the damage that war inflicts on the bodies of those who participate in it, one that accounts for all bodies lost and still alive, and that makes the reader fear the damage that could be inflicted on his own body or his sense of self. Or, to use Judith

Butler's theoretical framework, pacifist narratives are those that try to apprehend "as living" those lives that are either injured or lost. "If certain lives", Butler explains, "do not qualify as lives, or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense" (Butler 2010, 1). And perhaps a truly belligerent narrative is one that accounts for that damage but sees it as a means to an end that exceeds the validity, the realness of those bodies. A belligerent narrative is not one that urges readers to participate in war just a pacifist narrative is not one that tries to do the opposite. A belligerent narrative accounts for the loss of those bodies but does not see their "ends" individually, instead, it crowds them into bundles. Belligerent narratives are akin to the Angel from Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1991), "too far off the earth to pick out the details" (Kushner 2013, 230). Truly belligerent narratives are those that stubbornly refuse to engage with the individual story and resort to visions of grandeur or become extended commentaries on humanity's martial spirit.

Additionally, because of their misplacement of the enemy, thus challenging traditional ways of representing war in literature, these narratives occupy a slightly different position than the one afforded to conventional war narratives. Their function within the larger discourse of the American "war on terror" is rather akin to the function that Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) has played within the Civil Rights movements, than akin to that of other war narratives such as Stephen Crane's 1895 novel *The Red Badge of Courage*. Much like those narratives, these "war" narratives seem to be intent on proving that peacefighting is ultimately not a political issue, or rather that the political can only be addressed through the personal. Peacefighting, these narratives seem to suggest, does not come down to convincing people that war is bad, but rather to creating a sense of fear, a heightened sense of anxiety into those who have not experienced war directly. The parallelisms these narratives create show the impossibility of returning to a previous state just as the return home is not a closing of the circle but a form of spiraling outwards and inwards. What these narratives show is the failure of any return home. What these narratives hope to accomplish is the creation of a point of no return into the consciousness of the readers. By the same token, perhaps the truly pacifist narrative, namely one that helps readers understand the complexities of war, is one that opens a space out of which the reader can return home with the same sense of unfamiliarity that returning soldiers experience.

While on the surface of things such novels as Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Michael Pitre's *Fives and Twenty-Fives*, and Roy Scranton's *War Porn* deal with the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, they seem to do so only because these wars offer them visibility and cultural capital that they would have lacked in the absence of that war. At their heart, more pressing matters lurk, matters that would have gone unnoticed otherwise. Even more importantly, these narratives seem to be preparing civilians for the return of the soldiers by defining, almost preemptively, the kind of dialogue that might occur between combatants and non-combatants. When Lieutenant Donovan, one of the protagonists of Michael Pitre's *Fives and Twenty-Fives*, refuses to discuss war with his friends and acquaintances it is not because he is a brooder or a bottler, masking his feelings, it is rather because they do not want to hear what he has or wants to say. "That's why", Donovan explains, "I always keep two or three stories on deck, harmless and cute, to distract and move the conversation elsewhere. The million dollars burning on the side of the road is a real winner. Fred the Scorpion works well, too" (Pitre 2015, 174–75). Albeit these "harmless and cute" stories *are* included into the bigger picture they always remain marginal to the bigger narrative. At the end of the novel, the reader might notice that he/she has not been given the story with the million dollars burning on the side of the road but rather that he/she had been armed, or inoculated, against that type of narratives, or against the need to expect such narratives in the first place.

6.4. The Enemy at Home: Families at War

In the previous sections, I have argued that at least some of the narratives coming out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan perform a *misplacement of the enemy*[7]. This *misplacement* is particularly evident in one of the key texts of the "war on terror", namely Phil Klay's short story "Redeployment", where the return home is perceived as a fort of "redeployment", and where, at times somewhat counterintuitively, family members are seen, if only for an instant, as "enemies". In this reversal between battlefield and homeland, the *family*, traditionally seen as the locus where recovery begins, is shown

[7] Albeit "displacement" might have been a better choice for the process that I describe, "misplacement" also implies the idea that these narratives are in fact reworking the expectations built by traditional war narratives (i.e. that the enemy is "out there", on the battlefield).

as the most problematic and in need of reform. The values that define the homeland are also put under close scrutiny, particularly in Ben Fountain's novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), as well as in some other texts I discuss in some of the previous subchapters. In all of these narratives, the return home is problematic for both soldiers and their families.

Another key text in this respect, which also emphasizes the sense of alienation soldiers experience on their return to the "safe haven" of their families, is George Saunders' short story "Home", included in *Tenth of December* (2013). In the short story, Mike returns home from a nameless war to find that everything about his family has changed. The reality he once knew has been remade into something unrecognizable. His church-going mother has changed boyfriends and is being evicted from her house because she has not paid rent in four months. Mike's former wife has changed her economic position and is raising his child with another man, whom Mike calls Asshole. Mike is also confronted with things he is not familiar with, such as a product called "MiiVOXmax", whose purpose is never explained. And these elements of confusion do not help with his post-traumatic stress disorder he's suffering from.

Mike is not the only one who is frustrated by the changes he is being bombarded with upon his return home. Reading Saunders' short stories, readers might often find themselves experiencing the same kind of frustration. Some of the elements of Mike's past, for instance, are never explained. We are never given a reason for his enrollment in the army or his decision to go to war as we are never given a reason as to why his girlfriend left him. We are also told that Mike has done something in Al-Raz (Saunders 2014, 192), we are never told about what happened exactly. The product sold by the two clerks, MiiVOXmax, is never explained. However, as absurd as this story might seem at a first reading, Saunders is in fact recreating the confusion soldiers experience on their return from the war. The contrast between the two worlds, that of the world and that of the family, Saunders said in an interview for *The New Yorker*, is there to create effect:

> So here's our affluent, materialistic culture buzzing along, everything branded and corporate and glossy, bankers running roughshod over the rest of us, wealth continuing to drift upward, the middle-class vanishing … and meanwhile this group of overworked and underpaid (mostly young) people are doing absolutely heroic labors in our name, while, in some small number of cases, doing horrific things in our name, to people who didn't ask for us

> to be there in the first place and to whom we must occasionally look completely otherworldly and Darth Vaderesque. (The New Yorker 2011)

In a way, by narrating the short story from the point of view of Mike, Saunders is trying to portray as accurately as possible the experiences of the returned soldier, and the kind of disappointment that stems from the fact that the homeland fails to measure up to the values professed by militarism.

One particular trope Saunders makes use of, and which is common in narratives dealing with the soldiers' return home, is the civilian obsession with thanking soldiers for their service. Whoever comes to know about Mike's participation in the war, repeats the phrase "thank you for your service" almost fanatically. When the landlord and the sheriff come to evict Mike's mother, the latter keeps repeating that her son is a war hero. "This is my son", she tells the landlord pointing to her son, "[who] served. Who just came home. And this is how you do us?" (Saunders 2014, 180) In typical fashion, the landlord and the sheriff thank Mike for his service *once again*. The mother's new boyfriend emphasizes the fact that they are being abused by the landlord who is *not* thankful enough for Mike's heroic service. The two young clerks who sell Mike the MiiVOXmax also thank him for his service without knowing what war Mike served in.

The issues that returning soldiers face, it seems, go beyond the experience of the battlefield. While on the battlefield they feel purposeful and their presence there is dictated by an objective that is often as simple as staying alive, at home, that feeling of purposefulness wanes until it vanishes. As these soldiers return home, one of their crudest experiences is the realization that the world that most often represents their reason for staying alive has changed in meaningful ways and they were not there to witness it. Girlfriends have found other boyfriends; wives have left or cheated on them. The worlds at the center of which these people stood have found other centers to revolve around. And that can be a harrowing experience for somebody who has returned from a place where their own lives were at stake.

This experience is in fact so common that Sebastian Junger dedicated an entire book, albeit a short one, to this topic. Entitled *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* (2016), the book argues that the soldier's return home is distressing particularly because "[modern] society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary" (Junger 2016, xvii), an element that makes mental health issues such as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) have even more disastrous effects on the mental wellbeing

of these soldiers. The solution to this problem, Junger argues, lies deep within our evolutionary past and in the ways we used to live as members of smaller communities that reinforced our sense of necessity.

To prove his point, Junger goes all the way back to the beginnings of the United States. In particular, he goes back to the writings of Benjamin Franklin, who noted in 1753 that Native American children who were brought up by whites refused to return to the white communities in which they had been raised and educated once they got a taste of the tribal life of their blood relatives. "The frontier", Junger further adds to his argument, "was full of men who joined Indian tribes, married Indian women, and lived their lives completely outside civilization" (2016, 9). It seemed that these people thought that the material benefits of Western civilization could not compete with the intensely communal nature of Native American tribes.

What drew these people most to the lifestyle of the natives was its "fundamental egalitarianism" that defined social status as something that was accessible to each and every member of the community. Personal property was also limited "so gross inequalities of wealth were difficult to accumulate" (Junger 2016, 14). Most importantly, Junger argues in this sense, advantages of any kind could not be inherited from parents, siblings or relatives, which helped people in the community enjoy much more freedom than in civilized societies, where private property is key. And while in many tribal societies, young people have "to prove themselves by undergoing initiation rites that demonstrated their readiness for adulthood", for the average American guy, whose family could afford an education, going to war is not so much an obligation "as a chance to be part of something bigger" (2016, 37). "To the extent that boys are drawn to war," Junger explains, "it may be less out of an interest in violence than a longing for the kind of maturity and respect that often come with it" (2016, 38). It may also be because the army and the war offer them a way out of troubled families or, on the contrary, because other men in the family, such as a father or an older brother, have served in the army as well.

From this vantage point, wars might be said to have a positive effect on mental health. As opposed to the modern peaceful society that more often than not makes its members feel worthless and unable to participate in the struggles of that society, wars give these soldiers a sense of purpose, which might also explain why so many white men preferred the tribal societies of the Native Americans. To this purpose, Junger

brings Charles Fritz into the picture, an American scientist who dedicated his life to disaster research during and after the Second World War. Fritz's theory, which basically posited the idea that large-scale disasters produce mentally healthy people, was that "modern society has gravely disrupted the social bonds that have always characterized the human experience, and that disasters thrust people back into a more ancient, organic way of relating" (2016, 53). Disasters, such as wars or even natural disasters, create what Fritz called "community of sufferers", which strengthened the individual connections to the other people in the community.

On the battlefield, in harsh conditions, a platoon or a military unit mimes that "community of sufferers" and strengthens the ties between the individual soldiers of that platoon or unit because what can happen to one of them it can happen for all of them. "Self-interest", Junger explains, "gets subsumed into group interest because there is no survival outside group survival, and that creates a social bond that many people sorely miss" (2016, 66). More often than not, soldiers who return to their families start to miss the war and the sort of adrenaline high that it offers, which also constitutes one of the reasons why they return to it. Modern society on the other hand, with its built in safety nets has eliminated "many of the situations that require people to demonstrate a commitment to the collective good" to the point were "an urban man might go through his entire life without having to come to the aid of someone in danger – or even give up his dinner" (Junger 2016, 59). The shock of passing from one to the other is, without doubt, a harrowing experience for soldiers.

Recovery from the trauma of war must take into consideration all of these aspects because that recovery is rooted in social factors. In fact, as studies show, the problem with recovery is not so much the trauma suffered on the battlefield, since even those who do not experience combat often suffer from PTSD, depression, and a bevy of other mental health issues, but rather "reentry into society" (2016, 90). "In the United States", Sharon Abramowitz of the Peace Corps tells Junger, "we valorize our vets with words and posters and signs, but we don't give them what's really important to Americans, what really sets you apart as someone who is valuable to society – we don't give them jobs. All the praise in the world doesn't mean anything if you're not recognized by society as someone who can contribute valuable labor" (Junger 2016, 100). When these soldiers return home they are most often seen as unable to function properly in society, and most often they cannot function properly, but that does not help their cause,

because they "need to feel that they're just as necessary and productive back in society as they were on the battlefield" (Junger 2016, 102).

This does not mean, however, that we need to engage in warlike activities to maintain our mental health. But it does say something crucial about treating mental health issues and the kind of society we must build for ourselves and for our war veterans. "Today's veterans", Junger concludes,

> often come home to find that, although they're willing to die for their country, they're not sure how to live for it. It's hard to know how to live for a country that regularly tears itself apart along every ethnic and demographic boundary. The income gap between rich and poor continues to widen, many people live in racially segregated communities, the elderly are mostly sequestered from public life, and rampage shootings happen so regularly that they only remain in the news cycle for a day or two. [...] In combat, soldiers all but ignore differences of race, religion, and politics within their platoon. It's no wonder many of them get so depressed when they come home. (Junger 2016, 124–25)

What this shows is that instead of waving our veterans, the way Mike's mother does in front of the sheriff and her landlord, as valuables that we can give in exchange to get social capital, and instead of *thanking them for their service*, we might start by giving them back the sense of purpose they got while on the battlefield. The prevalence of family narratives in the literature coming out of the American 'war on terror' in Iraq and Afghanistan – narratives that do not represent the family space as a safe haven – hints at the fact that the family should act as an *intermediary* between the battlefield and the society into which the war veteran seeks reentry. As these narratives show, the smaller the gap between wars and civilian life the better the transition. Coming to terms with the impact wars have on the psyche of those who take part in it can also help develop better ways to treat mental health issues such as PTSD and depression, as well as lead to the creation of a society that can respond adequately to the necessities, physical and emotional, or war veterans.

War narratives, too, point into this direction, and if they do not blatantly excoriate those who use the phrase "thank you for your service", then they at least create situations in which the phrase is obviously out of place. Additionally, they also point to how families could cope with the problems that come with a soldier's return home. With their trial runs, as Booth would put it, these narratives can sometimes function as practical guides because more often than not they are written by army wives, as is the case

of Siobhan Fallon's *You Know When the Men Are Gone* (2011), among others, which I will discuss in the following pages. However, before I go into that some theoretical considerations are necessary.

Most often, when we fathom a conjunction between the notions of *war* and *family* we unconsciously fall back upon the idea that it is always *war* that impinges on the *family*: military events that involve deployment overseas disrupt the fabric of the family with far-reaching implications with regards to its cohesiveness as an emotional and social unit. Wars are almost always regarded as intrusive events, invasively violent, up to the point where they tend to contaminate, or mutate, the notion of family. Families change in the process: they either lose one of their members, marriages break, children become alienated.

The idea that war impinges on the notion of family is rooted in in a series of beliefs that are not necessarily tenable. The first of those beliefs is inherently ethical and it predicates, by means of a stunt of availability heuristics, an oppositional division between the two notions: in the war–family dichotomy, one of those items is essentially in opposition to the other, and if we were to put the two notions on a spectrum going from comfort to discomfort, they would *naturally* be placed at opposite ends. Politically and socially they must remain so because without this opposition wars would lose their purpose. Wars are waged to protect the comfort and the reassurance that the family represents. That comfort is more often than not what pushes people to go to war.

Most of us are bound to succumb to the ethical argument because it is part and parcel of our civilian complex, one that engenders in us the compelling desire to thank veterans for their service, as well as the desire to know more about "what it was like" for them to be participants in an event whose primary purpose, as Elaine Scarry rightly puts it, is to "alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue" (Scarry 1985, 10). The means at our disposal to know "what it was like" are rather limited but readily available in the form of fictional and non-fictional accounts of the war. And this brings me to my second argument which, in a way, goes hand in hand with the first one, and which I will call the argument from *ancillary coverage*. And to simplify matters, I shall further divide this argument into two elements.

The first element is related to war literature as an institution that imposes certain limitations on textual production and its interpretation. Military events are delivered

to our doorsteps through image and text, a delivery that, going back to our spectrum of comfort and discomfort, is both intrusive and imperative. Wars are always *brought* to us. We consume those representations chiefly because we perceive it to be our ethical duty, as well as because of the principles that stand *behind* war representation. "The reasons that make war's representation imperative", Kate McLoughlin argues in *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (2011), "are as multitudinous as those which make it impossible" (McLoughlin 2011, 7). Besides imposing a discursive order "on the chaos of conflict and so to render it more comprehensible", war representation is also meant "to inform civilians of the nature of battle to facilitate the reintegration of veterans into peacetime society" (2011, 7). To understand war, and to facilitate that reintegration, we *must* read about war, which further translates into a popular demand that prescribes the kind of war representations that are acceptable. In the genre of war literature, David A. Buchanan argues in *Going Scapegoat: Post-9/11 War Literature, Language and Culture* (2016), "all such literature faces an aesthetic tension, one based on popular demands and expectations" (Buchanan 2016, 8). We are constantly bombarded with news about the war and we have to acknowledge them because a refusal to do that makes others question our moral integrity.

The second element, on the other hand, is related to *what* is being *delivered* to us as readers of war literature. What we *read* about military events is also conducive to that kind of intrusiveness that war operates on the notion of family. These accounts generally construct narratives that speak of families affected, disrupted by war, up to the point where we are presented with a *militarization* of family space.

One of the most symptomatic texts in this regard is Phil Klay's short story entitled "Redeployment" included in the collection with the same title, which I have discussed above and mentioned on several other occasions. It is symptomatic first and foremost because the "redeployment" in the title does not refer to a return to arms, on the contrary, the short story recounts a soldier's return home after serving in Iraq. The roles of war and family are suddenly reversed as the narrator gives ample space to the rites of passage the soldiers from Bravo Company must perform on their return home. In the military limbo that stretches in between boarding a plane in Kuwait and waking up in America, the soldiers are supposed to shed their military training as well as their rifles, the latter gesture always bringing them up short. "I didn't know where to rest

my hands", the narrator explains after having returned his combat rifle, "first I put them in my pocket, then I took them out and crossed my arms, and then I just let them hang, useless, at my sides" (Klay 2014a, 6). This transition is also where the first signs of inadequacy first appear: soldiers feel awkward in their bodies and reuniting with their family members reflects that same awkwardness.

Family members, on the other hand, seem utterly scared. Cheryl, the narrator's wife, handles it well, as opposed to Lance Corporal Curtis's wife, who spends "all his combat pay before he got back, and she was five months pregnant, which, for a Marine coming back from a seven-month deployment, is not pregnant enough" (2014a, 10). To alleviate the shock and embarrassment of the return, the narrator and his wife go out shopping, "which is how America fights back against the terrorists" (2014a, 11), but the shopping center where the soldier is somewhat ironically "redeployed" does not have the calming effects it should supposedly have. "You're safe", the narrator says, "so your alertness should be at white, but it's not" (2014a, 12). Military training is hard to shed, it takes "a fucking long time before you get down to white" (2014a, 13); it continues to permeate civilian family life well after a soldier's return. The soldiers who have survived the war must then survive the homecoming.

Which is also the recurrent motif that Siobhan Fallon, herself an army wife, makes extensive use of in her collection of short stories *You Know When the Men Are Gone* (2011). In "Leave", one of the short stories included in the collection, Fallon tells the story of Chief Warrant Officer Nick Cash who breaks into his own home and spends a couple of days living in his basement to see whether his wife was cheating on him. After having been informed by a friend of his that a certain Mark Rodell, the new gym teacher, had been spotted at his house, Nick's military training kicks in. He informs his wife he is going to skip one of his leaves in favor of a buddy of his only to be able to return home unannounced and catch his wife in the act.

While in the basement of his house, he sleeps in unsanitary conditions using his daughter's discarded toys as pillows; he listens to his wife's daily routine and eats unnoticeable amounts of food from the refrigerator. Albeit he knows he's 'investigating' his wife and daughter, at the back of his mind scenes of intelligence gathering from the war casually flash by. In Nick's eyes, Trish, his wife, becomes a suspect. "He knew from experience that the only way to prove anything beyond a reasonable doubt was to get inside the suspect's house, to find the sniper rifle under the bed, the Iranian

bomb-making electronics in a back shed, the sketches of the nearest U.S. military base in a hollow panel of the wall" (Fallon 2012, 169). This parallel between intelligence gathering missions in Iraq and the "mission" he is performing in his own home goes on for the rest of the short story even after he discovers his wife sleeping peacefully next to another man in their own bedroom. "Here it was", the protagonist thinks as he observes the scene, "after all this searching, after all the lies and lies and lies, the shifty informants with their misinformation and subtleties lost in translation. Here, in his own home, was a single and undeniable truth" (Fallon 2012, 186–87). Yet, Fallon leaves the ending of the short story open, so we never get to know what happens. What we are left with is the image of Nick's knife moving from hand to hand akin to a raised "judge's gavel" (2012, 187).

Still, in Fallon's short stories, the militarization of family and family space does not occur only through this transposition of military training into the family home. In most of the short stories included in *You Know When the Men Are Gone* the family space is *literally* a military space. Set in the American army base at Fort Hood, in Texas, another military limbo where soldiers bound for Iraq and Afghanistan prepare to fight, these short stories chronicle the lives of army wives as they desperately try to cope with their husbands' deployment overseas. In between the silence of their new homes in Fort Hood, food casseroles, and Family Readiness Group meetings, the life of these fragmented families are regulated by specific rules dictated by the army. When another army wife asks Meg, the protagonist of the opening short story, for some money to lend, Meg's army wife training kicks in:

> This was taboo. If a wife was in need, there were rules; you were supposed to call the rear detachment commander and he could approve an official Army Emergency Relief loan. Or, if you didn't want your husband or his command to find out, there were the shifty money shops on Rancier Avenue that let you borrow, at interest, until the next paycheck came through. (Fallon 2012, 7)

Like their husbands or boyfriends on the battlefield, these women know that they must stick together because each of them knows what the others are going through. "Mingling too often with the civilian world," the omniscient narrator explains, "so full of couples, of men nonchalantly paying bills, planning vacations, and picking kids up after ball games, those constant reminders of what life could be, would drive an army

spouse crazy" (Fallon 2012, 9). Seeing other army spouses going through the same things creates that "community of sufferers" Fritz refers to in his study and it makes everything much more bearable.

In "Remission", Fallon portrays another army wife, Ellen Roddy, fighting her own battle against the breast cancer that had already claimed one of her breasts. While she is waiting for a regular check-up in the hospital and doing her best to ignore a hysterical baby, she tries to resist "figuring out the rank of the woman's husband by her clothes or level of parenting skills" (Fallon 2012, 73). The army permeates all levels of family life through a system of checks and balances and the "ever-present chain of command" (Fallon 2012, 74). "Those waiting with wives", Ellen notes while still in the waiting room, "were usually better-looking than their spouses, which was the curse of an army base where women were scarce and the enticement to get laid all too often led to the altar" (2012, 75). Like a ghost in the shell, the army seems to have chosen for these soldiers.

The army trickles into their sexual lives as well. For these army wives, the threat of death that their husbands must face daily is not their only fear. In "Inside the Break", as these women watch their husbands depart they suddenly register another threat, casually getting on one of the supply trucks: "That supply bus held a threat that had never occurred to any of them when they thought of faraway insurgents and bombs and helicopters crashing. That supply bus with its fifteen women" (2012, 105). Some of these army wives, like Kailani Rodriguez, decide in the end that this *other* threat is not worth the trouble, even after she breaks into her husband's army email account and finds a stray message coming from a female soldier.

In another short story, included in *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* (2013) and entitled suggestively "Tips for a Smooth Transition", Fallon portrays another army wife who, in preparation for her husband's return from Afghanistan, reads from *Battle Spouses' Tips for a Smooth Transition*, a guide very much akin to "The Good Wife's Guide" published in the May 1955 issue of *Housekeeping Monthly*. "Typically," Fallon's imaginary guide explains, "a 'honeymoon' period follows in which couples reunite, but not necessarily emotionally. Sexual intimacy may take time. Be patient and communicate – you and your spouse may have expectations that are not met right away" (Scranton and Gallagher 2013, 25). The imaginary guide also offers advice on how to deal with jealousy and infidelity within a relationship, among other aspects.

Now, after having looked at these examples of how the notion of family is militarized, a legitimate question comes to mind. Could we also speak of a "familiarization" of the army and the war? Does the notion of family trickle into the army and the war? The short answer to these questions is, yes, we could. But the reassurance of this affirmative answer does not come from the *ancillary coverage* of the 'war on terror'. Most of the narratives that address this issue seem to point out that the "familiarization" does not usually go beyond a Forward Operating Base (or the FOB), another military limbo where soldiers get used to the battlefield and still maintain a connection with their families at home. Beyond the FOB, family ties are superseded by the bond combatants forge with the other combatants to survive the war. However, a more complete answer to this question comes from the *proximal coverage* of the war, and it essentially regards how the notion of family triggers institutional changes in the American military apparatus.

Some of the most significant institutional changes in the American military were brought about by none other than *the toddlers*. "In the decade that followed the Gulf War", Rachel Maddow argues in *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power* (2012), "preschool kids ended up being the most effective shock troops in the assault on the last remaining constraints keeping us from going to war all the time" (Maddow 2013, 157). The toddlers themselves had no clout in this issue, yet, since they are members of army families, the Army itself must take care of them, thus using enormous amounts of money. And soldiers were more than ready to go wherever they were deployed if their families were taken care of in the meantime.

To solve the problem, Maddow explains, the Army had two possible solutions: downsize or cut the costs. They opted for the latter: "Outsourcing. Privatization. Civilian Augmentation. In other words, can't we get someone in here who doesn't come with day care costs?" (2013, 159) In Maddow's view, on the long term, the privatization of the army that started soon after the Gulf War has had serious consequences on the way the U.S. has been fighting its wars ever since. It has led to a complete separation between war and civilian life, so much so that by 2001 "the spirit of the Abrams Doctrine – that the disruption of civilian life is the price of admission for war – was pretty much kaput" (2013, 187). Most Americans, David Zucchino and David S. Cloud argue in an article for Los Angeles Times, have "experiences little, if any personal impact from the longest era of war in U.S. history. But those in uniform have seen their lives

upended by repeated deployments to war zones, felt the pain of seeing family members and comrades killed and maimed, and endured psychological trauma that many will carry forever, often invisible to their civilian neighbors" (Zucchino and Cloud 2015). This separation has had a profound impact of how civilians perceive the army and the service that they provide.

Which brings us back, full circle, to the initial part of my argument. If the militarization of the family space is part and parcel of what Maddow calls the "disruption of family life", then that militarization becomes necessary in maintaining a system of checks and balances with regards to a nation's capacity and willingness to wage wars, an essential element in today's unstable times. As these narratives show, the smaller the gap between wars and civilian life the better the kind of dialogue that can happen between the two. Coming to terms with the kind of impact wars have on the psyche of those who participate in it can also lead to the development of better ways to treat mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, as well as to the creation of a society that can truly respond to the necessities, physical and emotional, of war veterans.

CONCLUSIONS

The field of literature this dissertation has tried to tackle is still expanding. As it happens with all events that leave an indelible mark on the lives of those who witness it either directly or indirectly, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as the subsequent military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, will continue to challenge our imagination and give way to new perspectives. This mental persistence of the events will inevitably lead to more books being published, more movies and even more documentaries being made, which will reflect not only on the events themselves but also on the ways we come to understand those events. These textual and visual outlets will also inevitably rework the events by transporting them into a realm that, although qualified by what happened, will also seek to redefine the social practices that aggregate around them. Even after all these years, the Vietnam War still resurfaces in works of fiction, and much like the Vietnam War, 9/11 will continue to fascinate us for years to come, and even the smallest thing will trigger a host of memories and ideas connected to it.

The sheer quantity of material also makes it very difficult to navigate the complexity of these events as well as the cultural ramifications they can have. Unless one decides to settle and discuss only one or a series of their many facets as many have done, it will become increasingly difficult to propose a totalizing view. For these reasons, among others, this dissertation has tried a different approach and has instead focused not on the quantity of material or how that material describes the events, but rather on reconstructing, akin to Richard Dawkins' gene's-eye view of evolution, an *event's-eye view of cultural production*. Additionally, instead of resorting to a categorization of these texts, as the one Birgit Däwes proposes, this dissertation has tried to argue that these texts are the way they are because of the *nature* of the events. These texts are akin to a layer of coating that the event uses to ensure its cultural survivability. And while Däwes focuses on the contributions that these fictional texts bring to "the shaping and installation of the cultural memory of 9/11" (2011, 6), I chose to focus on how 9/11 has shaped these fictional texts as well as the way they have been interpreted and consumed.

The notion of *selfish events* might prove to be a hard pill to swallow. Much like Dawkins' notion of selfish genes, it implies the idea that these events have agency, and that they have a consciousness of their own, when in fact we know that this is not so and it could never be so. Events are by definition the result of a series of actions performed over a long or a short period. They do not consciously decide to spring to life because that would be ludicrous even to conceive. However, even for the sake of intellectual curiosity, if we entertain the idea that an event such as 9/11 has an agency of its own we might shed some light on some of its paradoxes as well as on why it has come to be perceived as an event that changed everything. Additionally, that agency might simply be the result of actions undertaken by different actors such as intellectuals, politicians, and other figures who have a certain amount of social capital. Being able to identify it as an "agent," however improbable that might be, leads to identifying its inner workings and its mechanisms of perpetuation, which further leads to finding a way to *dismantle* it. The effects of this might be liberating to some, as they might look suspicious and dismissive to others. However, it might also emancipate those cultural artifacts that have nothing to do with it from the grip of that agency of the event. Most importantly, the notion of selfish events wants to be, much like Sedgwick's theory of affect, *enabling*.

The proximal-ancillary coverage continuum further emphasizes this fluidity between an event and its cultural ramifications, and it might constitute a blueprint for the analysis of the textual production of other events. Albeit the continuum might be seen as an extension of Marxist criticism or a reworking of the traditional distinction between fictional and non-fictional representations/renditions of an event, I contend that it does more than that. Most often, the literature connected to an event is confined to academic circles or worse, dismissed as a form of entertainment. Albeit entertainment does play a part, particularly with regards to what is published and what is not, it is still just one aspect of these works. In other words, "event literature" is something that should be read as an aside, as a commentary, when in fact it is part and parcel of our understanding of a particular event. The "non" in non-fictional draws a line in the sand and what is beyond that line is more often than not seen as a no man's land, governed by rules that are as fictional as the things they represent. Contrariwise, the proximal – ancillary coverage continuum sees these two types of texts as continuous, informing each other, making sense of each other.

The proximal-ancillary continuum also hints at the social function of texts. By refusing to admit of any clear-cut distinction between the fictional and the non-fictional, it argues that since discursive practices create social practices and vice versa, then texts can be used to correct social practices and even create new ones. This process is particularly evident in the case of the literature coming out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where specific texts can work not only as descriptions of the reality of war or its consequences but also as ways of engaging with social issues at home and abroad. These texts can also provide valuable insight into how we look at war and how that affects the way we fight wars. This is not to say that these texts can lead to political action, but rather that these texts can offer us the mental tools to be aware of how much impact discursive practices have on the way we experience reality.

The theoretical framework discussed in this dissertation is by no means complete, nor does it claim to be complete or exhaustive. Further work needs to be done on refining the framework as well as on giving it a definition that is not merely a series of observations based on a string of texts. Another interesting aspect would be to see whether these notions could be applied to other events such as the Second World War or the Vietnam War, or to the literature of events that are not necessarily connected to the United States. Additional work also needs to be done on what I call in my dissertation "foreign discourse regulators," namely texts written by Iraqi and Afghani authors about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to which I dedicated a tiny amount of space. Bringing these texts into discussion could enhance the theoretical framework because more often than not they challenge how the events come to be represented by the American press and publishing industry. The inclusion of these texts would also reinforce the idea that besides being firmly rooted in the real, an event's significance is always at the confluence of different streams of thought, always shifting, making and remaking itself, as if it has a life of its own.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abrams, M. H. 1999. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Ackerman, Elliot. 2015. *Green on Blue: A Novel*. First Scribner hardcover edition. New York: Scribner.

Alexander, Jeffrey C., ed. 2004. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press.

Althusser, Louis. 1984. *Essays on Ideology*. London: Verso.

Amis, Martin. 2009. *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom*. New York: Vintage International.

Anderson, Donald. 2014. "You Can't Come Home Again: Phil Klay's Redeployment." *WLA; War, Literature and the Arts*, January 1, 2014.

Anderson, Jack. 1982. "Lawsuit Forces CIA Confession on MK-ULTRA." *Washington Post*, August 28, 1982. CIA Electronic Reading Room.

Arquilla, John. n.d. "Three Wars on Terror." *Foreign Policy* (blog). Accessed January 9, 2018. https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/10/three-wars-on-terror/.

"Astoria Park Highlights - General Slocum Disaster : NYC Parks." n.d. Accessed October 17, 2017. https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/astoria-park/highlights/19029.

Badiou, Alain, and Cécile Winter. 2011. *Polemics*. Translated by Steve Corcoran. London ; New York: Verso.

Ball-Rokeach, S.J., and M.L. DeFleur. 1976. "A Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects." *Communication Research* 3 (1): 3–21.

Banita, Georgiana. 2012. *Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture after 9/11*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Baudrillard, Jean. 2012. *The Spirit of Terrorism: And, Other Essays*. Translated by Chris Turner. Radical Thinkers. London ; New York: Verso.

Bayoumi, Moustafa. 2015. *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror*. New York: New York University Press.

Berger, James. 2003. "There's No Backhand to This." In *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, edited by Judith Greenberg, 52–59. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Bissell, Tom. 2015. "Elliot Ackerman's 'Green on Blue.'" *The New York Times*, February 27, 2015, sec. Sunday Book Review. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/books/review/elliot-ackermans-green-on-blue.html.

Blasim, Ḥasan, and Jonathan Wright. 2014. *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq*. New York: Penguin Books.

Bleiker, Roland. 2006. "Art after 9/11." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 31 (1): 77.

Booth, Wayne C. 1988. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bottum, J. 23:01. "Sontagged." Weekly Standard. 23:01. http://www.weeklystandard.com/sontagged/article/1615.

Brenkman, John. 2007. *The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy: Political Thought since September 11*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Brosman, Catharine Savage. 1992. "The Functions of War Literature." *South Central Review* 9 (1): 85–98. https://doi.org/10.2307/3189388.

Bruner, Jerome. 1991. "The Narrative Construction of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1086/448619.

Buchanan, David A. 2016. *Going Scapegoat: Post-9/11 War Literature, Language and Culture*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Butler, Judith. 2010. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Pbk. ed. London ; New York: Verso.

Campbell, James. 1999. "Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism." *New Literary History* 30 (1): 203–15.

Caputo, Philip. 2015. "'The Sympathizer,' by Viet Thanh Nguyen." *The New York Times*, April 2, 2015, sec. Book Review. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/books/review/the-sympathizer-by-viet-thanh-nguyen.html.

Carter, Shan, AM, and A. Cox. 2011. "One 9/11 Tally: $3.3 Trillion." *The New York Times*, September 8, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/09/08/us/sept-11-reckoning/cost-graphic.html.

Castner, Brian. n.d. "Afghanistan: A Stage Without a Play." Los Angeles Review of Books. Accessed February 28, 2018. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/afghanistan-stage-without-play/.

Chabon, Michael. 2007. "After the Apocalypse." *The New York Review of Books*, February 15, 2007. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/02/15/after-the-apocalypse/.

Chomsky, Noam. 2002. *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. 2 ed. An Open Media Book. New York: Seven Stories Press.

———. 2011. *9-11: Was There an Alternative?* An Open Media Book. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Chossudovsky, Michel. 2008. "Al-Qaeda and the 'War on Terrorism.'" Global Policy Forum. January 20, 2008. https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/154/26821.html.

Cilano, Cara, ed. 2009. *From Solidarity to Schisms: 9/11 and after in Fiction and Film from Outside the US*. Internationale Forschungen Zur Allgemeinen & Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 126. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Ciocia, Stefania. 2012. *Vietnam and beyond: Tim O'Brien and the Power of Storytelling*. Liverpool . Liverpool University Press.

Colman, Andrew M. 2009. *A Dictionary of Psychology*. 3rd ed. Oxford Paperback Reference. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

Croft, Stuart. 2006. *Culture, Crisis and America's War on Terror*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Crouch, Ian. 2016. "George Carlin's Shocking Prescience on the Nights Before 9/11." *The New Yorker*, September 10, 2016. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/george-carlins-shocking-prescience-on-the-nights-before-911.

Cusk, Rachel. 2014. "The Blazing World by Siri Hustvedt – Review." *The Guardian*, March 15, 2014, sec. Books. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/15/blazing-world-siri-hustvedt-review.

D'Angelo, Paul, and Jim A. Kuypers, eds. 2010. *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*. Communication Series. New York ; London: Routledge.

David, Susan A. 2016. *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life*. http://www.myilibrary.com?id=949648.

Däwes, Birgit. 2011. *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel*. American Studies 208. Heidelberg: Winter.

Dawes, James. 2002. *The Language of War: Literature and Culture in the U.S. from the Civil War through World War II*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Dawkins, Richard. 2006. *The Selfish Gene*. 30th anniversary ed. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

DeLillo, Don. 2001. "In the Ruins of the Future." *Harper's Magazine*, December 2001. https://harpers.org/archive/2001/12/in-the-ruins-of-the-future/.

———. 2011. *Falling Man: A Novel*. London: Picador.

Deuel, Nathan. n.d. "Mark Doten's 'The Infernal' a Darkly Twisted Take on Iraq War." Latimes.Com. Accessed January 26, 2018. http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-mark-doten-20150308-story.html.

Didion, Joan. 2003. *Fixed Ideas: America since 9.11*. New York: New York Review Books.

———. 2007. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. 1st Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage International.

Doten, Mark. 2015. *The Infernal: A Novel*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press.

Douglas, Mary. 2002. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Drell, Cady. n.d. "'Stranger Things': The Secret CIA Programs That Inspired Hit Series." *Rolling Stone*. Accessed October 17, 2017. http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/stranger-things-inside-shows-real-life-cia-inspirations-w432945.

Eberstadt, Fernanda. 2014. "'The Blazing World,' by Siri Hustvedt." *The New York Times*, March 28, 2014, sec. Sunday Book Review. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/30/books/review/the-blazing-world-by-siri-hustvedt.html.

Edgers, Geoff. n.d. "Fifteen Years after 9/11, We Can Hear the Only Bit George Carlin Ever Cut for Taste." Washington Post. Accessed October 10, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/fifteen-years-after-911-we-can-hear-the-only-bit-george-carlin-ever-cut-for-taste/2016/09/07/40e0312c-745c-11e6-8149-b8d05321db62_story.html.

Einstein, Albert, Robert W Lawson, and Nigel Calder. 2006. *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory*. New York: Penguin Books.

Eleey, Peter. 2011. *September 11*. New York, NY: MoMA PS1.

Entman, Robert M. 2003. "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11." *Political Communication* 20 (4): 415–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600390244176.

Erickson, Steve. 2017. *Shadowbahn*. New York: Blue Rider Press.

Faber, Michel. 2005. "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer." *The Guardian*, June 3, 2005. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/04/featuresreviews.guardianreview22.

Fairclough, Norman. 2009. *Discourse and Social Change*. Reprinted. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fallon, Siobhan. 2012. *You Know When the Men Are Gone*. New York: New American Library.

Faludi, Susan. 2007. *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*. 1st ed. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Faulkner, William. 1995. *Absalom, Absalom!* Fiction. London: Vintage.

Filkins, Dexter. 2014. "'Redeployment,' by Phil Klay." *The New York Times*, March 6, 2014, sec. Sunday Book Review. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/09/books/review/redeployment-by-phil-klay.html.

Finkel, David. 2010. *The Good Soldiers*. Atlantic Books Ltd.

Foer, Jonathan Safran. 2006. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. London: Penguin Books.

Fountain, Ben. 2012. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. 1st ed. New York: Ecco.

Gallagher, Matt. 2016. *Youngblood: A Novel*. First Atria Books hardcover edition. New York: Atria Books.

Gellhorn, Martha. 2011. *A Stricken Field*. Chicago Press ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Gessen, Keith. 2005. "Horror Tour." *The New York Review of Books*, September 22, 2005. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2005/09/22/horror-tour/.

Gray, Richard J. 2011. *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*. 1st ed. Blackwell Manifestos. Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Greenberg, Paul. 2008. "Recipes for Disaster - Essay - World Made by Hand - James Howard Kunstler - Books - Review." *The New York Times*, April 20, 2008, sec. Sunday Book Review. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/books/review/Greenberg-t.html.

Greenwald, Glenn. 2014. *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Gross, David. 2000. *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture*. Univ of Massachusetts Press.

Habermas, Jürgen, and Jacques Derrida. 2003. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Edited by Giovanna Borradori. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hamid, Mohsin. 2008. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Boston; New York: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Hanley, Lynne. 1991. *Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Hartnell, Anna. 2011. "Violence and the Faithful in Post-9/11 America: Updike's Terrorist, Islam, and the Specter of Exceptionalism." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 57 (3): 477–502. https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2011.0066.

Hayden, Michael V. 2016. *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror*. New York: Penguin Press.

Heberle, Mark A. 2001. *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*. University of Iowa Press.

Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. 1994. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. A Vintage Original. London: Vintage.

Hodges, Adam. 2011. *The "War on Terror" Narrative: Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction and Contestation of Sociopolitical Reality*. Oxford Studies in Sociolinguistics. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hoenicke, Sarah. n.d. "When the Hurlyburly's Done: Roy Scranton's 'War Porn.'" Los Angeles Review of Books. Accessed February 23, 2018. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/when-the-hurlyburlys-done-roy-scrantons-war-porn/.

Holloway, David. 2008. *9/11 and the War on Terror*. Representing American Events. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Howard, Michael. 2002. "What's In A Name?: How to Fight Terrorism." *Foreign Affairs*, January 1, 2002. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2002-01-01/whats-name-how-fight-terrorism.

Huntington. 1993. "The Clash of Civilizations? | Foreign Affairs." *Foreign Affairs*, 1993. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations.

Hustvedt, Siri. 2014. *The Blazing World: A Novel*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Hutcheon, Linda. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge.

Jamison, Leslie. 2014. "Instead of Sobbing, You Write Sentences: An Interview with Charles D'Ambrosio." *The New Yorker*, November 26, 2014. https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/instead-sobbing-write-sentences-interview-charles-dambrosio.

Junger, Sebastian. 2011. *War*. Fourth Estate paperback edition. London: Fourth Estate.

———. 2016. *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*.

Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kakutani, Michiko. 2005. "A Boy's Epic Quest, Borough by Borough." *The New York Times*, March 22, 2005, sec. Books. https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/22/books/a-boys-epic-quest-borough-by-borough.html.

———. 2016. "'Youngblood,' an Urgent Novel About the Iraq War." *The New York Times*, January 21, 2016, sec. Books. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/22/books/review-youngblood-an-urgent-novel-about-the-iraq-war.html.

Keeble, Arin. n.d. "Why the 9/11 Novel Has Been Such a Contested and Troubled Genre." Accessed February 3, 2018. http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/911-novel-thomas-pynchon-twin-towers-september-11-don-delillo-a7236091.html.

Kelman, Mark. 2011. *The Heuristics Debate*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Klay, Phil. 2014a. *Redeployment*. New York: The Penguin Press.

———. 2014b. "After War, a Failure of the Imagination." *The New York Times*, February 8, 2014, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/opinion/sunday/after-war-a-failure-of-the-imagination.html.

Kovach, Bill, and Tom Rosenstiel. 2014. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. Revised and updated third edition. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Kumar, Amitava. 2006. "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta." *Amitava Kumar Blog* (blog). April 21, 2006. http://amitavakumar.blogsome.com/2006/04/21/the-last-days-of-muhammad-atta/.

Kundnani, Arun. 2014. *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*. London ; New York: Verso.

Kunstler, James Howard. 2009. *World Made by Hand*.

Kushner, Tony. 2013. *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. First Revised Combined edition. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Laughland, Oliver. 2015. "How the CIA Tortured Its Detainees." The Guardian. May 20, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/09/cia-torture-methods-waterboarding-sleep-deprivation.

Levithan, David. 2010. *Love Is the Higher Law*. New York, NY: Knopf.

Lewis, Seth C., and Stephen D. Reese. 2009. "What Is the War on Terror? Framing through the Eyes of Journalists." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86 (1): 85–102. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900908600106.

Limon, John. 1994. *Writing after War: American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

LUAG. n.d. "George Segal: Woman on Park Bench, 1998." *Lehigh University Art Galleries* (blog). Accessed October 17, 2017. http://www.luag.org/event/george-segal-woman-on-park-bench-1998/.

Maddow, Rachel. 2013. *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power*.

Mariani, Giorgio, ed. 1999. *Le parole e le armi. Saggi su guerra e violenza nella cultura e letteratura degli Stati Uniti d'America*. Milano: Marcos y Marcos.

———. 2015. *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature*. Global Studies of the United States. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

———. , ed. 2016. "Gli Stati Uniti e Le Guerre Del Nuovo Millennio." *Ácoma*, Nuova Serie, , no. 11. Accessed May 1, 2018. http://www.acoma.it/content/gli-stati-uniti-e-le-guerre-del-nuovo-millennio.

McCarthy, Cormac. 2010. *The Road*. London: Picador.

———. 2015. *Blood Meridian*.

McDougall, Christopher. 2010. *Born to Run: The Hidden Tribe, the Ultra-Runners, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen*. London: Profile Books.

McGinn, Colin. 1999. *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Mcgrath, Charles. 2006. "Updike Explores Mind of a Terrorist." *The New York Times*, May 31, 2006, sec. Arts. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/31/arts/31iht-updike.html.

McLoughlin, Catherine Mary. 2011. *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq*. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

McMahon, April. 2010. *An Introduction to English Phonology*. Reprinted. Edinburgh Textbooks on the English Language. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press.

Means, David. 2016. *Hystopia*. First edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Miller, Michael H. 2011. "An Associative Trip At MoMA PS1's 'September 11' Exhibition | Observer." Observer. September 9, 2011. http://observer.com/2011/09/an-associative-trip-at-moma-ps1s-september-11-exhibit/.

Mishra, Pankaj. 2007. "Pankaj Mishra on 9/11 Fiction." The Guardian. May 18, 2007. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/19/fiction.martinamis.

Molin, Peter. 2015. "War Crime: John Renehan's The Valley." *Time Now* (blog). September 22, 2015. https://acolytesofwar.com/2015/09/22/war-crime-john-renehans-the-valley/.

Naqvi, H. M. 2011. *Home Boy*.

New York Magazine. n.d. "Days of Terror: A September 11 Photo Gallery." Accessed October 20, 2017. http://nymag.com/news/articles/wtc/.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. 2016a. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: Harvard University Press.

———. 2016b. *The Sympathizer*.

———. 2017. *The Refugees*. First Grove Atlantic hardcover edition. New York: Grove Press.

Noor, Farish A. 2010. "Analysing the Discourse of the 'War on Terror' and Its Workings of Power." *Human Architecture* 8 (2): 47.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven. 2012. *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press.

O'Brien, Tim. 1991. *The Things They Carried*. London: Flamingo.

O'Carroll, Lisa. 2013. "Seymour Hersh on Obama, NSA and the 'pathetic' American Media." The Guardian. September 27, 2013. http://www.theguardian.com/media/media-blog/2013/sep/27/seymour-hersh-obama-nsa-american-media.

O'Gorman, D. 2015. *Fictions of the War on Terror: Difference and the Transnational 9/11 Novel*. Springer.

Packer, George. 2007. *The Assassins' Gate: American in Iraq*. London: Faber & Faber.

———. 2009. *Interesting Times: Writings from a Turbulent Decade*. http://rbdigital.oneclickdigital.com.

———. 2014. "Home Fires: How Soldiers Write Their Wars." *The New Yorker*, April 7, 2014. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/07/home-fires-2.

Palumbo-Liu, David. 2012. *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age*. Durham ; London: Duke University Press.

Parker, Harry. 2017. *Anatomy of a Soldier*. London: Faber & Faber.

Pinker, Steven. 2008. *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*. Penguin UK.

Pitre, Michael. 2015. *Fives and Twenty-Fives: A Novel*.

Poster, Jem. 2006. "Terrorist by John Updike." *The Guardian*, August 5, 2006. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/aug/05/shopping.fiction.

"Publications | Intelligence Committee." n.d. Accessed October 18, 2017. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/publications/committee-study-central-intelligence-agencys-detention-and-interrogation-program.

Purio, Sean. 2016. "Crossings and Connections: A Conversation with Elliot Ackerman." *WLA; War, Literature and the Arts*, 2016. https://www.questia.com/read/1P3-4296363761/crossings-and-connections-a-conversation-with-elliot.

Pynchon, Thomas. 2014. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: The Penguin Press. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1123618.

Randall, Martin. 2011. *9/11 and the Literature of Terror*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Rashid, Ahmed. 1999. "The Taliban: Exporting Extremism." *Foreign Affairs* 78 (6): 22–35.

Redfield, Marc. 2007. "Virtual Trauma: The Idiom of 9/11." *Diacritics* 37 (1): 55–80. https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.0.0020.

———. 2009. *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror*. 1st ed. New York: Fordham University Press.

Reese, Stephen D., and Seth C. Lewis. 2009. "Framing the War on Terror: The Internalization of Policy in the US Press." *Journalism* 10 (6): 777–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884909344480.

Reet, Brian Van. 2018. *Spoils*. London: Vintage.

Ringnalda, Don. 1994. *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Roman, David. n.d. "The Ethical Game: Morality in Postapocalyptic Fictions from Cormac McCarthy to Video Games." Los Angeles Review of Books. Accessed February 3, 2018. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-ethical-game-morality-in-postapocalyptic-fictions-from-cormac-mccarthy-to-video-games/.

Said, Edward. 2001. "Islam and the West Are Inadequate Banners." *The Guardian*, September 16, 2001. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/16/september11.terrorism3.

Sanborn, Wallis R. 2012. *The American Novel of War: A Critical Analysis and Classification System*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.

Saunders, George. 2014. *Tenth of December*. Paperback ed. London: Bloomsbury.

Savage, Charlie. 2016. "General Hayden's Offensive." *The New York Review of Books*, May 26, 2016. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/05/26/general-haydens-offensive/.

Scarry, Elaine. 1985. "Injury and the Structure of War." *Representations*, no. 10: 1–51. https://doi.org/10.2307/3043799.

———. 1987. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. First issued as paperback. Oxford Paperback. New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press.

Scranton, Roy. 2015. "The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to 'Redeployment' and 'American Sniper.'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 25, 2015. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/trauma-hero-wilfred-owen-redeployment-american-sniper/.

———. 2016. *War Porn*. New York, NY: Soho.

Scranton, Roy, and Matt Gallagher, eds. 2013. *Fire and Forget: Short Stories*. Boston: Da Capo Press.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Series Q. Durham: Duke University Press.

Shay, Jonathan. 2010. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. Simon and Schuster.

Silberstein, Sandra. 2004. *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11*. This paperback ed. 1. publ. London: Routledge.

Smiley, Jane. 2006. *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel*. New York: Anchor Books.

Staff, Guardian. 2017. "Truck Attack in New York City: What We Know so Far." *The Guardian*, November 1, 2017, sec. US news. http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/nov/01/truck-attack-in-new-york-city-what-we-know-so-far.

Stevenson, Robert Louis, and Robert Mighall. 2002. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror*. London: Penguin. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10006941.

Tait, Theo. 2012. "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk by Ben Fountain – Review." *The Guardian*, July 6, 2012, sec. Books. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/06/billy-lynn-ben-fountain-review.

Tal, Kalí. 1995. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press.

The Guardian. 2001. "Text of George Bush's Speech," September 21, 2001, sec. US news. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/21/september11.usa13.

The New York Times. 2011. "Portraits of Grief," August 10, 2011. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/us/sept-11-reckoning/portraits-of-grief.html.

The New Yorker. 2001. "Tuesday, and After," September 17, 2001. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/tuesday-and-after-talk-of-the-town.

———. 2011. "Summer Fiction: George Saunders." *The New Yorker*, June 9, 2011. https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/summer-fiction-george-saunders.

Toth, Paul A. 2011. *Airplane Novel*. First edition. Bowie, MD: Raw Dog Screaming Press.

Treaster, Joseph B. 1975. "Suspect, 19, Is Charged With Trade Center Fires." *The New York Times*, May 21, 1975, sec. Archives. https://www.nytimes.com/1975/05/21/archives/suspect-19-is-charged-with-trade-center-fires.html.

Turner, Brian. 2014. *My Life as a Foreign Country*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Updike, John. 2005. "Mixed Messages." *The New Yorker*, March 7, 2005. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/03/14/mixed-messages.

———. 2007. *Terrorist*. Paperback ed. London: Penguin Books.

Verbruggen, Jakob. 2016. *Men Against Fire*. Drama, Sci-Fi, Thriller. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5709234/.

Versluys, Kristiaan. 2009. *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Virilio, Paul. 2002. *Ground Zero*. London ; New York: Verso.

Vonnegut, Kurt. 1991. *Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*. New York, NY: Dell Publ.

Willis, Susan. 2005. *Portents of the Real: A Primer for Post-9/11 America*. London ; New York: Verso.

Wright, Robert. 2015. "The Clash of Civilizations That Isn't." *The New Yorker*, February 25, 2015. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/clash-civilizations-isnt.

Zelizer, Barbie, and Stuart Allan, eds. 2011. *Journalism after September 11*. 2nd ed. London ; New York: Routledge.

Zink, Nell. 2016. *Nicotine*. First edition. New York: Ecco, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2012. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. Radical Thinkers. London: Verso.

Zucchino, David, and David S. Cloud. 2015. "U.S. Military and Civilians Are Increasingly Divided." *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2015. http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-warrior-main-20150524-story.html.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A big THANK YOU to all those who have encouraged me and have given me the mental energy to keep going when I had convinced myself I could not take another step.
A special THANK YOU to my supervisor, Andrea Carosso, who trusted me and taught me
THANK YOU for the sushi and the hugs. THANK YOU for the patience.

GRAZIE.

You know who you are.