The City After: Crises in Contemporary New York Narratives

Rachel Peri Papert
Bard College, rp0422@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2017

Part of the American Studies Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2017/250

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.
The City After: Crises in Contemporary New York Narratives

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Rachel Peri Papert

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2017
Dedication & Acknowledgements

This project is dedicated to the two people I lost in my time at Bard: my late Aunt Marilyn for being one of my favorite people ever in my life and my late Grandpa Mel for insisting I know every president by number or obscure fact (though I still don’t) and for all your mirth.

Huge thank you to my senior project advisor Pete L’Offcial and my academic advisor Alex Benson. Thanks to Alex for persuading me to pursue American Studies in the first place. To Pete, thank you for working with me this whole year, especially for listening to me ramble and providing insight every week. Without your help I don’t know how I could have done this project.

Another big thanks to my whole family for always supporting me in any way they could, as well as to all my friends—there are too many names to mention. And I have to say an extra special thank you to my mom for your unending support and insistence on being “willing to do it all again.”
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: September 11, 9/11, Nine-Eleven</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Time and Memory, <em>Exploded</em></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Kinship in Crisis</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Alienation and New Boundaries</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction: September 11, 9/11, Nine-Eleven

The day of September 11, 2001 was the most horrific day in recent memory for New York City, when two planes crashed into the Twin Towers in New York, destroying the World Trade Center along with the lives of nearly three thousand people. The consequences of this day continue to effect the present. The cultural consequences of 9/11 are so far reaching a list here would not suffice to encompass them all.

The date itself is thrown around in conversation quite a bit. Although it has come to the point where a 9/11 plot based Seinfeld spec script can proliferate throughout the internet and it is not offensive, but rather darkly hilarious, there is still a great deal of power and weight to the idea of 9/11. Bombs and wars are justified by the terror that lurks in the minds of Americans—the possibility of another 9/11. Philosopher Jacques Derrida, in Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides—A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida, ruminates on what the day has come to mean: “this very thing, the place and meaning of this “event,” remains ineffable…out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation.” The date pronounced repeatedly, as a reduction, does not mean so much as the idea of 9/11. But the words are meaningless, it is only a date. There is no way to phrase the concept that really packs all the layers of meaning that come with saying nine-eleven. It becomes a “ritual incantation,” as it is reiterated more and more it roots itself into language without coming to terms with what it is in its incomprehensibility.

---

1 Jacques Derrida, Giovanna Borradori, and Jürgen Habermas, Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 86.
The full scope of what September 11 comes to stand for, I will not be able to encompass in this project. However, I will analyze six works of post-9/11 literature, literature that comes out after a tremendous tragedy, unlike anything New York City has experienced before. The category of post-9/11 literature is not necessarily containable to a specific timespan. It definitely comes after the moment the first plane hit the North Tower, but where it ends I could not say that it has. The effects of that day are still with us today—there are bomb-sniffing dogs in many subway stations throughout Manhattan, hate-crimes are committed against people from the Middle East and Southeast Asia, lines for airplane security go out the door at large airports, the “War on Terror” continues to this day. It is the cultural consequences of which I am interested in finding in the literature considered part of this period.

In my first chapter, I explore changes in narrative time and memory from the effects of trauma. Looking through a narratological lens, the fragmentation of time and memory is especially important in considering the structures and themes of *Falling Man* and *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Both of these works renegotiate the experience of time when existing in traumatic circumstances. I will investigate how time, which is generally understood to progress linearly, is corrupted by trauma, as well as the effects of shared memories and stories of the event. Collective memory takes the place of the narrative of history and shared experience warps understanding into new forms.

In my second chapter, I discuss the ways in which kinship networks change following tragedy, and the particularities of kin networks created in *Netherland* by Joseph O’Neill and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer. Both the novels’ protagonists break away from their traditional family structures to explore new possibilities when negotiating
their places in the transformed city. The highly emotional space of the family does not allow for its members to express their grief in individualized manners without judgement. Moving outside of this space there are greater possibilities for the protagonists to process their emotions. The communities they develop are merely temporary, but they explore some of the possibilities for communities in the wake of tragedy.

In my final chapter, I look at how the multicultural ethos of a nation after tragedy become less tolerant, effectively alienating certain cultural members. Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* both explore themes of alienation and investigate the problems with tolerance after crisis exposes its limits. These novels are both written from the perspective of non-white immigrants to the United States. In their positions as racially marked outsiders, the structures of multiculturalism particularly in this moment of uncertainty, when many New Yorkers take up patriotism in the extremely exclusionary sense. In particular, the question of what it means to exist in a society when one does not fit that society’s ideal image.

The different interpretations and invocations of the event and the ideologies it lends itself to, the atmosphere of its aftermath are all important in understanding what it is that September 11, 2001 has come to represent. This final thing, the atmosphere of it is what this project is concerned with understanding. The purpose of this project is to find insight into what changes occur in the aftermath of September 11. The destruction of the World Trade Center is more than a reconfiguration of the New York skyline. It reconfigures engagements between people, the relation between time and memory, and cultural norms.
Chapter One: Narrative & Memory, *Exploded*

In *Falling Man*, a novel by Don DeLillo, and Art Spiegelman’s comics collection *In the Shadow of No Towers* deal with experiences on September 11 which create conflict with life afterwards. Art Spiegelman’s comic persona of himself has trouble reckoning with the fact that time is moving forward, as he gets stuck in the month of September 2001 and finds the past infiltrating present, the progression of time has stopped. The Neudecker family in *Falling Man* has a wide array of experiences following the fall of the Twin Towers. Keith, the protagonist and patriarch of the family, must reconcile with his survival from the North Tower. Before getting into the works I will discuss, I must look at a theory of time and narrative. And, from there, I will define the idea of trauma time. In investigating these theoretical topics beforehand, I am attempting to set a framework in order to investigate the way time is corrupted following the trauma of September 11: the ways in which time lacks a sense of linearity and how collective memory and myths change perceptions of events.

Time as a fact can be taken for granted. Wai-chee Dimock in *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* analyzes the average conception of time: “It seems to come all in one piece, in one flavor. It is an ontological given, a cosmic metric that dictates a fixed sequence of intervals. It is present everywhere, the same everywhere, independent of anything we do.”\(^2\) The question of what is time is not so easily answerable when assuming time as a fact. It is a “given,” a fact without the need of proof. The measure is “cosmic” because it has

the intangibility of the cosmos, far away in the distance—an idea one cannot so simply pin down. The perception of time’s forward progression she elaborates: “Time is imagined here as if it were a kind of measuring tape. There is of course no physical evidence of such a tape. Still, we assume it is there.” Imagining time as a measuring tape that has specific points that signify something, it is time that is always moving forward and being measured. Paul Ricoeur in his essay *Narrative Time* grounds these ideas in terms of fictional and historical narratives: “it is always a time laid out chronologically, a linear time, defined by the succession of instants.” This succession of instants in turn contributes to a plot. Ricoeur makes this case for narrative, that time is “the succession of instants” which become linear, as “the analysis of time is rooted in that of ‘care,’ particularly as care reflecting on itself as mortal.” The care of time is to look towards death, mortality, so by considering time the future is what we look towards, “The primary direction of care is toward the future.” The primary direction of the analysis of time is rooted in care and that is moving forward, to the future. Time and narrative are concerned with representing reality and time as it is perceived. This is all in terms of narrative in a typical structure.

This theory of time as perceived linearly, looking towards the future and an end is not so sustainable when mortality is no longer a future thought. As Art Spiegelman calls it, “the end of the world,” has already happened. On September 11, mortality was close enough to a present reality that the forward moving line upends. Now the direction of care is uncertain, mortality was

---


4 Ibid., 124.


6 Ibid., 181.

possible and the possibility of a mass scale tragedy is all too real. Time after trauma breaks into another realm. Cathy Caruth investigates “the story of trauma” in Unclaimed Experience, which she defines as “the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force.” Trauma does not remove the narrative from reality, “but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.” Therefore, trauma is a ghostly time, it is haunting after the “first instance” of experience, but not readily accessible at the instance, it is not one time but it is “unassimilated.” The instance of the trauma exists in the time of narrative as the narrative is elsewhere in time. They are two acting as if the narrative is Dimock’s measuring tape, and the trauma weaves its way in, out, and around the tape rather than being only a mark along its progression.

Trauma time manifests itself particularly clearly in *Slaughterhouse Five*, Kurt Vonnegut’s 1969 novel. The protagonist Billy Pilgrim experiences forays in time after his traumatic experience during World War II. Time becomes “unstuck” for Billy Pilgrim in 1944 when he is in the army during the second World War, only a year before the war ends. Billy does not control where he goes in time or when, but often these moments of being unstuck, on experiencing moments as other moments are happening. In the first instance, Billy is utterly pathetic. He is sick, has been shot at, threatened with death, about to be captured by the Nazis, all while never having received his official military gear. “His attention began to swing grandly through the full

---


9 Ibid., 4.

10 Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (New York: Dial Press Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 38.
arc of his life, passing into death, which was violet light… And then Billy swung into life again, going backwards until he was in pre-birth, which was red light and bubbling sounds. And then he swung into life again and stopped. He was a little boy taking a shower with his hairy father at Ilium Y.M.C.A.”

Billy’s desperation, he wills what is left of his troop to leave him to rest and perhaps die, is the first trauma, the first near end of his world. At a later time, when the plane Billy is aboard begins to crash, Billy gets unstuck. He “closed his eyes, traveled back in time to 1944. He was back in the forest in Luxembourg again.” Avoiding the crisis he claims to know he will survive, this new trauma sends Billy back to the one that first unstuck him in time. His destitution in Luxembourg and Germany are the moments he returns to most frequently. Another time, when the alien Tralfmadorians abduct him, he leaves them, “The terrific acceleration of the saucer as it left Earth twisted Billy’s slumbering body, distorted his face, dislodged him in time, sent him back to the war.”

Billy, moving throughout the arc of his life finds himself living different moments of World War II again and again. Time is unassimilated. It has not come together into the historical narrative of clear forward progression due to the breaking off, the unsticking, Billy has in 1944.

The trauma of September 11, much like the trauma Billy Pilgrim experiences in World War II, changes the worlds of Art Spiegelman’s In the Shadow of No Towers and Don DeLillo’s Falling Man in the way past time and present time are muddled and confused, future time suspended. They are not “in time” in this way. The structure of time has been corrupted, so that they exist in the “trauma time.” Keith and Art, unlike Billy Pilgrim, are not so much unstuck in

11 Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, 54-55.
12 Ibid., 198.
13 Ibid., 98.
time as they are trying to stick themselves somewhere and are very much stuck in a particular experience which in its monumental impact has unstuck them from the present to make multiple times take over the one.

Art Spiegelman structures the comics of *In the Shadow of No Towers* in a corrupted time in which past intertwines with his stunted present. *No Towers* has all time at once in its layer and layers: recollections of historic political cartoons, old daily comics, and the realities of the time during as well as after September 11. It’s a shattered time drawing itself in many different directions. Cartoonist Scott McCloud goes in depth to the structure of time in comics in his theoretical comic work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. McCloud lays out the development of time in the Western tradition of comics. Panels are typically read from left to right and down the page: “Comics readers are also conditioned by other media and the *real time* of everyday life to expect a very linear
progression. Just a straight line from Point A to Point B.”¹⁴ The way time functions in comics is relative to the framing of the images, the way we perceive images as moving, and the structure of the panels. Like Dimock’s measuring tape, McCloud uses the image of a rope moving through a long panel to demonstrate time moving through a comic, with twists and turns but still marked out in a forward progression (Figure 1). He goes into further depth, exploring the shapes of panels, the sizes and how they affect the reader’s perception of different lengths of time. While this is pertinent to “understanding comics,” it all gets unraveled in No Towers because of the irreconcilable nature of the time.

The trauma time which Spiegelman experiences disregards the rigid structures typical of comics. Nonetheless, the nonlinear progression of the panels and pages hold the narrative. There is no single way to progress in reading the page—there are things happening across up and down, across the page from one set of panels following left to right, to a set going down the page, with interweaving with interruptions, and background images. Martha Kuhlman in her analysis of No Towers uses the term “comix collage” to describe the layering that takes place on the pages.¹⁵ The visual structure and the experience of the reading in such a deconstructed form allow time experimentation, it need not be firmly linear in its expression because the development of the narrator, Spiegelman’s, thoughts is not in the shape of one line.¹⁶ For one example, the third comic (Figure 2) has multiple narratives occurring at once on the broadside

---


¹⁶ Kuhlman, in her analysis, draws lines on top of the comics to demonstrate the different narratives taking place simultaneously on the page. I have chosen not to reproduce these images or do so in my own way so as to avoid inscribing my own method of reading onto the pages as I think this detracts from experiencing it in the reader’s own way.
Figure 2: Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 3
page. Spiegelman goes in and out of the story of what he and Nadja, his wife, did to find their
daughter once the second plane hit the South Tower. A panel with a Topps trading card interrupts,
depicted a “Mars Attacks” scene reminiscent of Art’s childhood, as well as a fake advertisement
with children wearing anachronistic World War II gas masks.17 Underneath these interrupting
panels there are visibly cut off panels and dialogue. This layering is similar to Richard
McGuire’s 2014 graphic novel Here, incredibly influential to the way comics represent time and
space when the original six page version was published in a 1989 issue of Raw, a comics journal
edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly.18 The way he represents time, as layers in a
single space (Figure 3) is much like what Spiegelman does in No Towers, but without the focus
of a single event—September 11—rather the focus is on a single space as it is titled, Here. What
is more important to the layers of No Towers is the confusion of infiltrating times. In the end,
time starts to realign for Spiegelman, as in the final set of panels, the Towers fade into the
background and “seem to get smaller everyday…,” time is moving him away from the images
which though they are still “larger than life.”19

Marking time in Falling Man also comes to the question of linearity and interruptions.
The very last pages take place only moments before the first pages in the timespan of the novel.
Throughout the novel there are two timelines: the first focuses on Keith and Lianne Neudecker’s
family in New York City, the second on soon-to-be plane hijackers Mohamed (Amir) Atta and
Hammad, at the end of each section. This structure creates a narrative that folds or even collapses
into itself. The narrative does not stick to strict linearity, it leads Keith’s narrative line forward

17 Spiegelman, No Towers, 3.
19 Spiegelman, No Towers, 10.
but then backwards to the starting point, with questions of memory which I will discuss later in this chapter. The Atta and Hammad chapters are unnumbered, unlike the main chapters. They only have the designation of location. With the specific setting, there is a definite forward progression. An intersection of the two timelines finally takes place at the crash in the North Tower, in the last Atta chapter entitled “In The Hudson Corridor,” when Keith finds Rumsey across the office, no longer alive. This maneuver affects the tone of the narrative around Keith and his family. He had come out seemingly unscathed, his wrist in need of minor care, but the narration has held out on this up until now. He tries to save Rumsey, talks to him as if he isn’t visibly dead and attempts to carry him to the stairway. Outside of his immediate assessment of
the situation, i.e., my friend is hurt, I must help him; there is not a real sense of comprehension. On his way down the stairs, without Rumsey’s body, he picks up a discarded briefcase, saving an object in his helplessness to save his friend, but unconsciously so: “I didn’t know I had it. It wasn’t even a case of forgetting. I don’t think I knew.” He is not in the moment. It happened, but he was not present for it, he did not know it as he could not understand what is happening when in this traumatic moment.

Time flowing in strange rhythms, where the past infiltrates the present. Keith sees a woman on a horse as she is entering Central Park: “It was something that belonged to another landscape, something inserted, a conjuring that resembled for the briefest second some half-seen image only half believed in the seeing, when the witness wonders what has happened to the meaning of things, to tree, street, stone, wind, simple words lost in the falling ash.” Much like the moments as Keith walked out of the Trade Center, tangible things have lost their meaning, they are “half-seen” and “half believed” not something full of reality, but on the precipice of unbelievable. The past invades the present, but it is all “lost in the falling ash” Lost in one day that mediates the time. It has changed what past and present mean.

This moment for Keith is akin to what Hillary Chute calls the “serial space of the past” which Spiegelman’s comic persona exists within. The form of his representation changes from a realistic human Spiegelman, to his Maus presentation, to nineteenth century comics characters

---


21 DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 53.

22 Ibid., 103.

e.g. the Happy Hooligan. The representation takes place in all of these zones of being, fusing multiple times into one. From this fusion comes confusion. Who is Spiegelman? What time are the comic panels taking place in? The past invades a more recent past which is under scrutiny in the now of the pages. Spiegelman’s interest in the daily comics of the past—they were made for the specific day, meant for a particular time, they assert their present, assert now, but he reads them in the future, his own present. This combination reflects the paradoxical experience Spiegelman is in on his traumatic time, but in a way that does not have the same depth of emotion attached to their existence as Spiegelman’s own experiences. The image of the burning frame of the WTC is inescapable for Spiegelman and so it appears on every page of *No Towers*. In the introduction, Spiegelman proposes a discrepancy between New Yorkers and the rest of the country in the months following: “Only when I traveled to a university in the Midwest in early October 2001 did I realize that all New Yorkers were out of their minds compared to those for whom the attack was an abstraction.”

There is a marked difference in Spiegelman’s view of the response Americans have, a duality between New Yorkers and the farther regions of the country. Their understanding, their experience is “an abstraction” it is tentatively real for those who didn’t have any physical relation to New York City, who were not there, who are safely away from the coast in the Midwest, who participated in the day through their television screens and radios. The reality does not translate so well outside the Northeast, it is something hyper-personal. The screen literally puts a wall between the viewer and the image. The eye is seeing it as a set of images progressing rather than seeing, smelling, tasting what is happening.

---


25 Ibid., 3. He finally understands why his father was so fixated on the smell of Auschwitz. He compares the smell of downtown Manhattan to that of what his parents must have experienced.
There is a process of telling, of experiencing, of myth creating in comprehending what it is to come out after September 11 alive and well. This work must be done in order to process what has happened. Engaging in the dialogue between experiences and understandings moves the trauma time forward.

Keith and Lianne’s son, Justin, creates an alternative reality with his friends in which a man named Bill Lawton, the children’s interpretation of bin Laden, is going to crash planes into buildings. “‘He says things about the planes… He says this time the towers will fall.'” The children misinterpret what is happening, has happened. The make out as it wrong as if there are two worlds. Lianne’s perspective on the matter is Justin has created a “failed fairy tale.” Fairy tales are timeless, in that the time they exist in is not the time of “reality” but of an imagined reality, a “time reversal” It is not so much a reversal as a twisting of reality, a “myth” in which the Towers are still standing and they will fall again and other crashes will happen. His imagination and fatalism trouble his mother, the impending view of apocalypse. Her worry is in part a symptom of the cultural expectation of childhood innocence. Justin’s understanding of the events, though flawed in their unreality brings himself and the children out of the space of innocence or ignorance and into that of knowing, of understanding. His fatalist fantasy even further removes him from innocence. Justin has seen destruction and expects it will occur yet again. However, Lianne herself is involved in the process of making fairy tales when she tries to

---

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 74
make the conversation about Utah, a family trip that will never happen. Nevertheless, her dreaming is more grounded in reality it is as much a dream as is Bill Lawton. The family never goes to Utah, she uses the discussion as a distraction, an escape from the child’s fairy tale into her own less morbid imagined time.

The children’s imagination of a world in which destruction is inevitable is not unlike Martin, Lianne’s mother’s long time lover’s, understanding of what happened to the World Trade Center: “But that’s why you built the towers, isn’t it? Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down.” Martin’s imaginative capacity puts the blame onto the society which put into place the conditions which allowed for such destruction to take place. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard in his essay *The Spirit of Terrorism* takes the same critical view, “no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree…it is a fact, and one which can be measured by the emotive violence of all that has been said and written in the effort to dispel it.” The towers are the fantasy of capitalist domination, “wealth and power,” creating the world’s tallest structures (at the time), costing millions of dollars and taking up its own zip code. From this fantasy of its creation, Baudrillard suggests there must also be a fantasy of its destruction because of the extent of the power within these structures. Martin aligns with the children; the Towers would always have come down.

Spiegelman also imagines a mythical world come to take over that of the present. A panel interrupts Spiegelman in the sixth comic as he surveys his neighborhood the afternoon of the

---


eleventh and the next morning (Figure 4). The homeless, antisemitic woman disappeared only until the next morning. The panel in between his noticing her disappearance and then reappearance is chaotic: “Her inner demons had broken loose and taken over out shared reality…”32 It is as if her absence was part of the construction and destruction of the day. Everything she had been screeching about in the streets, all the horrors haunting her, came to their realization on the eleventh. The invented demons roam through the streets, her face shouting has taken over and is larger than life. This fantasy soon fades as she finds words for her anger in English and yells at Spiegelman, blaming the Jews for the attacks.33 Her demons are still with her and Spiegelman brings reality to her when he shouts at her to stop blaming the Jews, “People are gonna think you’re crazy.”34 She is even more removed from reality than Spiegelman himself. Only his imagination of her inner demons is acceptable. The two imaginaries are not in line with each other as hers is one of a madwoman, outside of the general collective in which Spiegelman exists.

Florence Givens, the woman whose briefcase Keith rescues from the North Tower, upon receiving her property starts telling Keith her own narrative of what happened that day in the Tower. “She wanted to tell him everything. This was clear to him. Maybe she’d forgotten he was there, in the tower, or maybe he was the one she needed to tell for precisely that reason. He knew she hadn’t talked about this, not so intensely, to anyone else.”35 Her retelling of the events as they occurred, although experienced by both herself and Keith are a way of making them true, of

33 Ibid.
34 Spiegelman, No Towers, 6.
35 DeLillo, Falling Man, 55.
Figure 4: Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 6
affirming the fact that yes, these things did happen and yes, others did experience this and are living with it, even it is only her imagination of what happened, as Keith has a different perspective and can only try “to place himself” in her story. And it is a narrative, his existence in it and in the real world, the non-narrative now. The double experience, in the already happened and the retelling confirms what he has gone through. Literary criticism historian, Hayden White, proposes the “value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.” Florence’s retelling of September 11, 2001 to Keith is her way of creating “closure” between her “image of life” and reality as she perceives it.

Participation in a collective memory of September 11 drives both the narrator Art Spiegelman and Lianne into a frenzied imagination and obsession with images of the day. Lianne cannot remove the images of Towers falling, the second plane crashing. Her history merges with everyone else’s who is watching it. “Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching. The second plane coming out of that ice blue sky, this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin, the fleeting sprint that carried lives and histories, theirs and hers, everyone’s, into some other distance, out beyond the towers.”, she has some sort of deranged concentration on the images, but finds herself in them As opposed to Keith’s lived experience, she participates in the collective memory of those at home watching the buildings on television.

37 DeLillo, Falling Man, 134.
The Falling Man, he is a paradox—he dies over and over again but has not died, his performance in its repetition is like living and reliving the trauma for Lianne. He commits death in a process of revision. Each death is different in its performance, its location shifting, the details are never the exact same for each death. By dying in different places, without a pre-set time, permit, etc Falling Man brings death to more of the public. Falling Man recreates the imagery of those who fell from the towers for new locations, extending the first hand experience outside the confines of the television screen and Downtown Manhattan.

Lianne’s second witnessing of the Falling Man’s performance brings her closer to Keith’s position. His experience of being in the tower as the plane crashed and his failure to save his friend Rumsey from death. Lianne, much like Keith, can only do so much as participate in the spectacle: “But why was she standing here watching? She saw his friend, the one she’d met, or the other maybe, or made him up and saw him, in a high window with smoke flowing out. Because she felt compelled, or only helpless, gripping the strap of her shoulder bag.” When wondering why she stays here watching, she thinks back to Rumsey and the other friends Keith has that were also in the towers, whose names she can never remember. Lianne understands what it is like to feel “helpless,” to wonder why am I watching this unfold? In her helplessness, she looks for the woman who she had seen watching with her, “She looked directly overhead and saw no sign of the woman in the window.” She wants a co-conspirator in witnessing, someone to see what she sees, to confirm its reality. The artist himself is actively instilling a greater collective experience in the public of New York City by simulating death. This is similar to the


39 Ibid., 168.
Figure 5: Art Spiegelman, In the Shadow of No Towers, 10
relationship between Florence and Keith, the confirmation of being in the same narrative makes it more real. It is not just something unique to the self, but a collective experience.

Spiegelman gives himself a performance as a falling man as well. In a long panel the comic representation of himself tumbles, in a continuous panel, behind him an ashen and askew tower (Figure 4): “He is haunted now by the images he didn’t witness…images of people tumbling to the streets below…especially one man (according to a neighbor) who executed a graceful Olympic dive as his last living act.”\(^{40}\) The same falling witnessed by another, he replicates on the page as he feels himself falling over and over again in his own reliving of the images, even those he did not see. Spiegelman participates in the collective memory, of hearing the experiences of others and finding himself in them.

The structure of the final page of *No Towers* commits a rebuilding. The structure of the comic narrative on this final page occupies that which was once in disarray. There are two large panels, the North and South Towers, with two separate narratives. This gives the impression of structure but it is superficial. They both start with Spiegelman’s character introducing his thoughts. In the North Tower panel, Spiegelman turns into his Happy Hooligan alter ego. Chute recognizes, “While comics are structurally about moving forward in time, this page [comic 10] makes overt the symptoms of traumatic temporality: time as both frozen, and time as ‘aiming backwards instead of forwards’, as Spiegelman puts it.”\(^ {41}\) Time aiming backwards, but time is about forward progression. Bringing the Towers back to the moments before, as the small jet plane in the center of the page is a moment away from penetrating the wall of the North Tower.


\(^{41}\) Chute, ”Temporality and Seriality,” 238.
The phenomenological experience of New York City is so essential to In The Shadow of No Towers and Falling Man. The most minute is Terry Chang’s understanding of the spatial difference: “I worked in midtown. I didn’t experience the impact that others felt, down there, where you were,’ he said.”\(^{42}\) It’s not the same even on the little eleven mile island of Manhattan, something like Keith’s experience does not translate across arbitrary zip codes. Chang has a distance from the event, emotionally and physically: “I used to tell people. People talked about where they were, where they worked. I said midtown. The word sounded naked. It sounded neutral, like it was nowhere. I head he went out a window, Rumsey.”\(^{43}\) Midtown, the middle section of Manhattan a largely business district of the island, is far enough away that Terry Chang is disconnected to the point that he finds out details from rumors and cites them offhand. He is much more an outsider than even Lianne who has more emotional investment, particularly as part of the collective of New York, and even comes back to thinking about Rumsey. Keith knows what happened to Rumsey, but does not bother to correct his friend. He cannot even make eye contact: “Keith looked into the waterfall. This was better than closing his eyes. If he closed his eyes he’d see something.”\(^{44}\) There’s something that Keith is avoiding in not closing his eyes, but instead staring into the waterfall. He is holding something in, the narrator holding out for it has already happened until it is happening for Mohammad. He can’t conjure his own relationship to the day up, it is too raw even now, years later. To return to it is to relive it just as Florence finds herself stuck: “If I live to be a hundred I’ll still be on the stairs.”\(^{45}\) The memory so potent

\(^{42}\) DeLillo, Falling Man, 214.

\(^{43}\) DeLillo, Falling Man, 214.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 205.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 57.
in both its freshness, but in the way that Florence believes it will last her lifetime. She will exist there on the now phantom stairs for as long as she lives. The trauma is living in her existence, a timeless existence that she has come to inhabit.
Chapter Two: Kinship in Crisis

The protagonists of *Netherland* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* are able to move past the trauma of September 11 by leaving family spaces and seeking out other less rigid kinship structures. *Netherland*’s Hans van den Broek is a Dutch transplant to New York City via London. His family is displaced after September 2001, when they move from TriBeCa to the Chelsea Hotel, until his wife and child leave him there. Oskar Schell in *Extremely Loud* actively moves away from his family, dealing with the death of his father who was in the World Trade Center on that fatal morning. Their situations are markedly different, yet both novels confront the difficulty of living in a traumatic time, like that which I discussed in the previous chapter. Kin structures before the attack were changing, as culture evolves always. The difference in this particular moment is the temporary bonds that form and deform. The fragmentation of the landscape and the loss suffered in terms of human lives. The period contained in this time is one of reactionary emotional response. With all the emotional tension, the drama and desolation at home, the protagonists remove themselves from their homes and seek out other communities, other networks. For Hans this means cancelling his weekend trips to London and spending more time with his cricket teammate Chuck Ramkissoon. For Oskar, this means traveling around the city meeting various people on his quest to find the lock which fits the key he found in his father’s closet. I see *Netherland* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as two texts that deal with fear and anxiety through changes in the domestic kin space as well as in their community.
networks. In leaving the circles in which they typically find themselves, they escape from the sense that everything is as it was, from the life in New York City was once normal.

The family is an overtly emotional space, which can be constricting for each of its members as they with trauma. Both novels have the foundations of the nuclear patriarchal family. The space of the family comes with certain conventions: “By the nineteenth century, the family had become idealized as an intimate refuge with a higher moral value than the public realm (Sennett, 1977: 20). Family relationships were expected to provide enduring and continuing emotional support.”46 I define emotional capital as this expectation to “provide enduring… support” as well as the long history of emotions within a family structure. The mutable emotional capital in the family creates the divergence between Oskar and his mother and grandmother, between Hans and Rachel. Rachel protects Hans from the emotional strain of what she feels in their relationship by talking about the impending Iraq War, Oskar lies to his mother about what he is doing during his days and she does not bother him about it. The unsaid keeps them from delving deeper into each other’s lives and maintaining their relationships. By not talking and protecting each other from strain, they grow a part in order to discover other connections.

In a city of over eight million people, spread out across just under three hundred three square miles, the possibilities for connection in New York City are seemingly endless.47 Often sticking to neighborhoods, workforce, and familial communities is enough for people. But, when the entire city is stricken by something traumatic and horrendous, the World Trade Center’s


collapse and the death of more than three thousand people in a single day, something is not as it was. The feeling of something larger consuming those in proximity to such tragedy, in effect, creates a larger community feeling in the traumatic after-time.

A century earlier tragedy, 1906 earthquake which destroyed San Francisco, one of the disasters which Rebecca Solnit explores in *Paradise Built on Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disasters*, completely destroyed a whole city. Solnit considers the aftermath of various disasters which in tragedy produce strong communal reactions. One of the women Solnit discuss, wrote about the sense of community she feels after the quake:

> The joys of disaster are not ubiquitous. But they are often widespread, and they are profound… And [Pauline] Jacobson gets at something essential when she talks about walking through the ruins at dusk when a man asked, “May I walk with you? It’s lonesome walking alone.” She says, “We smiled and nodded and took him in as if we had known him all our lives,” a bold welcome in those days of strict boundaries for women.48

While she makes note that many people were devastated in the wake of the earthquake, Pauline Jacobson and many others find positive moments to connect with others. The taboo of single men and women spending time together is no longer respected, but instead everyone welcomes one another as if they are old friends. Their shared experience of the earthquake has given them a common ground to break across social barriers.

Two distinct differences between the 1906 earthquake and September 1 are, firstly, an earthquake is a natural disaster and second, different technologies exist today. San Francisco was a modern city for its time but New York is different. There are photographs of what San

Francisco was, what was left afterwards, what has become of the city since then. The testimonies of people from that time are a part of the archive. With September 11, the scale of archival material is enormously larger. Not only are there numerous testimonies available (the New York Times has a whole archive of transcribed oral histories), there is live footage of the Towers as the second plane hits, as they collapse, as well photographs as it is happening. Most famously The Falling Man photograph whose image is so influential across many texts, not just the ones I discuss in this project (Figure 6). It’s the particular locality of New York City in the twenty-first century that allows for such a widespread emotional impact. These two novels in particular do not approach the physical location, but they have the cultural situation of being in New York at this particular time. The protagonists much like Pauline Jacobson reap the benefits of the paradise out of tragedy.

Figure 6: Richard Drew, The Falling Man, September 11, 2001
The emotional disparity between Hans and Rachel, his wife, becomes too much for their relationship to be sustainable. She leaves him in the aftermath of 9/11, moving herself and her son back to her parent’s home in London while Hans stays in their Chelsea Hotel apartment. According to Hans: “we had lost the ability to speak to each other. The attack on New York had removed any doubt about this. She’d never felt herself so alone, so comfortless, so far from home, as during these last weeks.”\(^49\) Though Hans, as her partner, is supposed to be comforting and there for her, they are unable to communicate. Rachel, instead moves back to London, where her parents live. Hans offers his observation “the catastrophe had instilled in many—though not me—a state of elation”\(^50\) and believes that his wife’s separation from him is part of a “euphoria,” but not a permanent state.\(^51\) When Rachel reveals to him that she wants to leave him he is unable to defend their marriage, or “ to tell her she could be speaking out of shock or some other temporary condition”\(^52\) rather than an inability to be together any longer. One of Hans’ problems is not only lack of a response, but also his lack of inquiry into Rachel’s emotional state, instead choosing to blame himself for not telling her why she is leaving him. Even in retrospect, Hans does not fully grasp his communicative disjuncture with his wife.

The emptying of their apartment in the Hotel Chelsea, Rachel and Jacob’s migration to London, leaves Hans desolate and lonely. However, he is unable to reconcile with the guilt he feels for his family’s separation. Instead, he becomes distant. His lack of emotion enrages Rachel when she tries to talk to him about the Iraq War. He doesn’t find anything compelling to say in


\(^{50}\) Ibid., 77.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 78.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 29-30.
response to Rachel’s intense rage against the United States and President Bush as they sent
troops into Iraq. “Ordinarily, I would have said nothing; but it seemed to me that my dealings
with my son were at stake. So I said, ‘Rach, pleases let’s try to keep things in perspective.’”53
Instead of being sympathetic and understanding, Hans is condescending with his own interests in
mind eschewing Rachel’s intense feelings. His own emotional distance from September 11,
causes him to doubt Rachel: “Let’s not forget that when it happened I was a rubbernecker in
Midtown, watching the same television images I’d have watched in Madagascar.”54 Rachel’s
outspoken fear and anger, therefore do not translate in Hans’ mind as the legitimate reason for
her leaving. Their separation, rather than the tragedy leaves Hans in a state: “Life itself had
become disembodied. My family, the spine of my days, had crumbled.”55 What was once the
“spine of his days” is now across the Atlantic, living without the patriarch of their family unit.
His life crumbles as did the Twin Towers. All that is left is ruins. The lack of any emotion, the
want to “keep things in perspective,” instead of fulfilling this discussion of what is best for their
child or Hans hearing out what is truly troubling Rachel, leaves him impotent, what was once his
life is no longer his.

This same distance affects Oskar and his mother in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close.
There is a vast gap between their experiences of Oskar’s father’s death. She does not perform her
emotions in a way that Oskar understands. His mother spends a lot of time with a new friend,
Ron: “Mom and Ron were hanging out in the family room, even though he wasn’t a part of our

53 O'Neill, Netherland, 96.
54 Ibid., 182.
55 Ibid., 30.
Defensive, Oskar makes it known that he considers Ron an outsider. He does this through his narration and by directly telling Ron, “‘You’re not my dad, and you never will be.’”\textsuperscript{57} By attempting to connect with another man, Ron, Oskar sees her as attempting to replace his father and return to their once nucleic family state. This also leads him to believe his mother does not care about his father’s death, “‘I hear you laughing.’ ‘You hear me laughing?’ ‘In the living room. With Ron.’ ‘You think because I laugh every now and then and then I don’t miss Dad?’”\textsuperscript{58} He poses another accusatory statement to his mother, “‘I don’t see you cry a lot.’ ‘Maybe that’s because I don’t want you to see me cry a lot.’”\textsuperscript{59} Her hidden emotional toil she is experiencing makes Oskar suspicious as to the depth of her grieving. He becomes upset enough to proclaim to her “If I could have chosen, I would have chosen you!”\textsuperscript{60} Oskar takes this back immediately, realizing he has said something terrible. His outburst reveals the deep tension between him and his mother. Oskar resents his mother only because she chooses to hide her grieving and finds solace in recreating the heteronormative nuclear structure that their home once provided. Since, in his point of view, this is not a correct method of grieving he develops a lack of trust.

With all the emotional uncertainty towards his mother, Oskar also feels a need to protect his family. This leads him to trust others with whom less emotional capital is at stake. Oskar brings the answering machine with the messages his father left on 9/11 before he died to show to the renter, whom he still does not know is his grandfather: “‘No one else has ever heard that,’ I


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 170.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 171.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
said. ‘What about your mother?’ he wrote. ‘Especially not her.’” He can trust the stranger in his grandmother’s apartment more than he can his mother or grandmother to hear his story and to hear the messages on the answering machine without upsetting him or receiving judgment. If he had known that this man is his grandfather, there would be the family obligations to navigate, but the renter’s ambiguous identity gives Oskar the freedom to share his secret. Oskar does not play the messages for his mother or grandmother because he is protecting them from hearing what has caused him so much pain and guilt. The voicemails that Oskar has of his father allow him to re-experience the moments when he arrived home to such an extent that he can hear again the final messages from his father, not only the words as they are written on the page, as they are in the novel, but the character is going through the auditory experience again and again when he pushes play. This particular technology captures a moment, film captures the falling of the towers, the man in his descent which Oskar imagines could be his father, but this is without the certainty of the voice, the very personal remembrance akin to the lock of hair Little Eva gives to Uncle Tom as she dies, but he can only remember her in his dreams. The tangible voice, the memory is set. It is not so much a memory as an artifact.

At the heart of much of this emotional tension is the need for safety and protection. His mom does not cry in front of Oskar in order to protect him from seeing her pain. In a similar way, Oskar lies to his mother because, as he says, “Protecting her is one of my most important raisons d’être.” The main purpose of his quest is gathering knowledge to find some closure following his father’s death, however he cannot reveal his actions to his mother if he is

61 Foer, Extremely Loud, 255.
62 Ibid., 68.
protecting her, saving her from knowing that he is going out into the unprotected world and hiding his obsession with his father. They have both misunderstood each other as to the extent they are willing to go to protect each other. This explains why his mother is so upset when Oskar tells her he wishes she was the one who had perished.

Whereas his mother tries to move forward with the support of others who have experienced loss, such as Ron, Oskar chooses a path of knowledge gathering. Traversing the boroughs of New York City, he attempts to visit every person with the last name Black, in alphabetical order on his search for the lock to a key he found inside an envelope with the name Black written on it. Not all the people named Black accept Oskar into their lives. His first attempt, Aaron Black in Queens, is unwilling to open up to a stranger and turns Oskar away from behind his door. When Oskar persisted and “told him everything” about his father’s death on September 11, Aaron Black reveals his own personal issues, he is “hooked up to all sorts of machines.” The pain they both experience opens up the possibility for exchange and connection. Aaron pleads with Oskar to come up to the ninth floor. Oskar instead runs away, ashamed of having guilted Aaron into speaking to him and lying about his age to make Aaron feel worse. Oskar knows how powerful guilt is, he feels it so deeply about his father’s death and not answering his final phone calls, making this moment even more heavily emotional. Oskar’s manipulation comes from an internal sense of guilt and redoubles this by manipulating Aaron. It is also an important interaction for Oskar realizes that the task he has set out upon will not be like one of his idealistic inventions. Others experience pain in ways not immediately evident, just

---


64 Ibid., 90.
as his pain is not evident, and his own purposes may not be as tantamount to those who are not
him.

Rather than find solace in their homes, Oskar and Hans find something more by
investigating the other areas of New York City that they may not have had their lives not been so
affected by September 11. The protagonists of both novels exist in zones of privilege. The
neighborhoods they live in, Oskar in the Upper West Side and Hans in Chelsea are both in
Manhattan, the borough with the highest rents in the city. Chelsea is strewn with art galleries
and Hans lives in an apartment in the notorious Chelsea Hotel, whose hallways are filled with the
art of residents past. The Upper West Side has Zabar’s, Lincoln Center, Riverside Park, walking
around midday there are numerous children being pushed in their carriages by foreign nannies.
To stress the point, a term some Manhattanites use for those outside the island is “bridge and
tunnel” as anyone who travels to Manhattan must use one or the other structure. The term is
rarely used the other way around, though a Queens resident could say the same of a Manhattanite
who travels to their borough. Even using the subway, one would have to go through Manhattan
to reach any other borough. Manhattan is an elite circle itself—Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens,
and Staten Island are merely the outer-boroughs.

Hans finds a place among the cricketing community at the Staten Island Cricket Club, the
most isolated borough from the rest of the city, accessible only by ferry from Manhattan or via
the Verrazano Bridge from Brooklyn. Having grown up playing cricket in Holland, Hans


redisCOVERs his interest in cricket after attempting golf with his coworker Rivera, a failure as he “swung twice and missed,” and on another afternoon inquires about his cab driver’s cricket bat. He does not get anything out of the businessman’s sport, but takes the cab drivers invitation to play with the Staten Island team. “That summer of 2002, when out of loneliness I played after years of not playing, and in the summer that followed, I was the only white man I saw on the cricket fields of New York.”

Hans has the ability to transcend ethnic, cultural, and class boundaries. His “teammates variously originated from Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka,” this neither stops them from playing together nor from welcoming a Dutchman to their team. C. L. R. James’s Beyond A Boundary looks at James’ own experience with the “racialism” in cricket within his home of Trinidad for him it was “Thus the cricket field was a stage on which selected individuals played representative roles which were charged with social significance.” The social significance for James is in terms of color and colonial history, whereas this is muted at the Staten Island Cricket Club. Cricket, considered an “immigrant sport” due to its lack of popularity in the United States, is a shared culture between the players, no matter their status in society—they are equalized to some extent.

Hans rides the line between immigrant and not. Chuck sends Hans a gift “Dutch Nursery Rhymes in Colonial Times” along with the note, “Dear Hans, You know that you are a member of

---

67 O’Neill, Netherland, 41.
68 Ibid., 10.
69 Ibid.
70 C. L. R James, Beyond a Boundary (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 58.
71 Ibid., 66
72 O’Neill, Netherland, 103.
the first tribe of New York, excepting of course the Red Indians.” Chuck playfully recognizes
Hans’ heritage, an inheritor of the Dutch colonial presence in New York and elsewhere, of which
Hans “knows next to nothing about the ancient Dutch presence in America.” Chuck, ever
interested in American history, chooses this collection which includes the rhyme: “‘Down to the
riverbank, Mijnheer, his guest, and all the slaves / went trooping, while a war whoop came from
all the Indian braves… / The slaves with their whale lanterns were passing to and fro, / Casting
fantastic shadows on hills of ice and snow.’” Hans is “a member of this tribe,” whether he
knows its colonial history or not. Hans cannot shed this position, as he recognizes himself as the
only white man on the team. It does not have the otherizing effect on Hans or his teammates that
he is a white Dutch man, in opposition to James who must navigate which team to place for
along minute color lines. The limits of cricket’s equalizing force come out when Hans runs into
a teammate in Manhattan, “It was rare for club members to have dealings that went beyond the
game we played… When I accidentally ran into one of the guys working a till at a gas station on
Fourteenth Street, there was awkwardness beneath the slapping of hands.” The private life and
the cricket life are kept separate. The men play on this team together every summer weekend,
however, after their matches, everyone returns home to their lives. It is awkward to see each
other in their own lives, or at least it is for Hans, as the most privileged person in the group. He is
still an equities analyst with an apartment at the Chelsea Hotel. His own class status and then the

74 Ibid., 61.
75 Ibid.
76 Chapter 4 of *Beyond a Boundary*, “The Light and the Dark”, discusses the history of Trinidadian teams
color discrimination and James’ process in deciding which team to join.
comparison to the “one of the guys working a till at a gas station” portrays the incredible
distance between the actual lived experiences of the two. It is not complete integration into a
social group— there are limits to their cricket kinship. It extends only so far outside into the non-
cricketing sphere.

Even with the constructed intimacy of the cricket field, the team is a network of care. One
member, Shiv, turns up drunk because his wife has left him. The players make sure he gets home
safe and is not alone. Hans takes a PATH train to Shiv’s house and upon surveying the
circumstances, he realizes what values they develop in his life: “these people, who in themselves
were no better or worse than average, mattered because they happened to be the ones, should
anything happen to me, whom I could prevail on to look after me…It was only after the fact that
I figured out they’d already been looking after me.”\(^78\) Although they do not go over to his hotel
apartment, his teammates have given him something through the community of cricket to forget
the despair of his separation. During his final cricket game, Hans bats “like an American
cricketeer” and feels he is “at last naturalized.”\(^79\) He is able to feel some connection, some sense
of home in New York City, something he does not find elsewhere, with other people he interacts
with around the city.

Less intimate bonds are all Hans can find in his other attempts to join communities in
New York. Hans spends time with Vinay, someone he met in a poker group. Vinay takes Hans on
a trip following taxi drivers to their favorite eateries throughout the city. Hans goes along with
Vinay as they try out different cheap eats, but Vinay is disdainful of the task: “‘I told my editor,


\(^79\) Ibid., 176.
Dude, I’m from fucking India. You think in India we take our fucking dining cues from cabdrivers? And then I’m like’—Vinay laughed furiously—‘Yo, Mark, the name’s not Vinnie, OK? It’s Vinay.’”80 Vinay is claiming knowledge as to the culture of Indians through his name and his upbringing and at the same time he reveals the actuality of his immersion into globalized American culture. He takes offense at having to explore the opinions of those who are lesser in social strata to himself. His repeated usage of the interjection “fuck” as well as Vinay’s usage of the colloquialism “yo” are a way of Vinay attempting to elide his status of a food critic and therefore a proponent of high culture, not that of the masses, as is his assignment. He seeks to confirm his definitive knowledge of cuisine, at the same time shedding his privileged position.

Chuck, unlike Vinay, allows for no pretenses. Vinay and Hans run in to Chuck at their last stop on the tour of cabdriver’s fare and upon learning Hans’ profession, he immediately tells him, “I have a business opportunity that might interest you,” and hands Hans his card.81 This is only in the initial phase of the relationship that builds between them, Hans meets Chuck’s wife and mistress as well as his business associate Mike Abelsky. They pay a visit to the baths, the banya, after the raucous night of the Annual Gala of the Association of New York Cricket Leaguers where they run into Abelsky, “He wanted me to see the kind of man he had to deal with. It’s possible, too, that he wanted to show me off to Abelsky—indeed that the whole encounter had been orchestrated. Chuck had this idea I was a catch.”82 Although Chuck brings Hans to the banya under the pretense of sweating off the previous night, it is to show off Hans as a prize to Abelsky. At once companion and benefactor of Hans, Chuck does not try too hard to pass of the

---

80 O’Neill, Netherland, 53.
81 Ibid., 58.
82 Ibid., 143.
interaction as a mere coincidence. The two exist in a symbiotic relationship. Chuck wants Hans for his prowess as an equities analyst, and Hans has “Chuck’s companionship [which] functioned as an asylum,” from his problems.\(^83\)

The lack of opacity to Chuck’s interest in Hans is a rare find, as compared to some of Hans’ business associates who only find jealousy in his success. “Rivera was my only true work buddy,”\(^84\) Hans says in retrospect. He puts in effort to stay in touch with him, but even Rivera “joined those who had disappeared from [Hans’] life.”\(^85\) The people he works with are not more than that, they come and they go. He is only left with a rumor that, “he’d gone down to San Antonio to work for an oil company.”\(^86\) Rivera left after an unfavorable ranking, mirroring an earlier situation when Hans is named number four in his sector. Hans goes out for drinks with his co-workers, including Rivera who disparages Hans’ success: “‘I hate drinking this shit,’ Rivera told me as he emptied into his glass the fifth bottle of champagne I’d bought, ‘but seeing as you’ll be getting most of my year-end-fucking-bonus, it gives me satisfaction on a wealth distribution basis.’”\(^87\) Even though it is a celebratory affair, Rivera is bitter that Hans has been raised in rank while he does not get recognition. The others proceed to tell a racist joke which they need to contextualize for Hans, as he is the non-American cultural outsider among their group: “‘Somebody tell Hans about Password.’ ‘Somebody tell Hans about nigger-cocks,’”

\(^{83}\)O’Neill, *Netherland*, 135

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 105.

\(^{85}\) Ibid.

\(^{86}\) Ibid.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 26.
Hans leaves immediately out of panic.\footnote{88 O’Neill, Netherland, 27.} Their idea of fun is not the same as Hans’, both as an assumed cultural outsider and as someone who passively decides not to participate in what they consider humor. Out with Appleby, another coworker who Hans tries to connect with following the disappearance of Rivera, Hans leaves Appleby to his friends and their night. “He passed the evening telling jokes I couldn’t quite hear or get, and from time to time they stepped out to the sidewalk to smoke cigarettes and make calls to carousers elsewhere in the city, returning with reports of parties in Williamsburg and SoHo and, as the night whirlled away, leaving me on the rim of things. I drank up and left them to it.”\footnote{89 Ibid., 105.} There is nothing for Hans, his disinterest in their jokes yet again and the parties throughout the city. There is no connection between them. Hans wanted to have a conversation with Appleby but he misconstrued the situation, it was a night for debauchery not discussion. These connections are not more than superficial. No one cares that Rivera is gone without a trace. Unlike the cricket field, these men do not commit to each other.

There is something in particular about the situation of a city after a tragedy that lends itself to the creation of community networks. Chuck Ramkissoon drives Hans past Pier 40, a recreational sports facility on the Hudson River, on their way to Brooklyn. Chuck retells his experience at the pier when it was turned into a refuge for animals in the wake of 9/11. “Cats, dogs, guinea pigs, rabbits, pigs, lizards, you name it they were all here. Cockatoos. Monkeys. I saw a lemur with a corneal inflammation.”\footnote{90 Ibid., 77} Just as the diversity of human life affected there is the diversity of animal life. No one, nothing escapes destruction. This coming together of volunteers strengthens citizenship across borders, removes the New York and rest of the country...
divide “‘I made friends with people from Idaho, Wisconsin, New Jersey, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ireland, Portugal, South Africa.’”91 The tragic circumstance creates a national and international community. Even those passing through get to see what has happened and become a part of the rebuilding. A city like New York has never ending possibilities for cross-cultural community and friendship, in this particular circumstance the coming together is as wide reaching as the multiculturalism in the city. Everyone wants or feels the need to help, “People from out of state came for a couple of days and ended up spending weeks here. Tourist that were vets, even regular tourists gave up their holidays to help.”92 The urge to help supersedes the desire to enjoy a city, now that it is in a time of great need, whether it be the animals in need or those working for days unending as rescue personnel. Chuck’s pronouncement, “I think for many of us it was one of the happiest times of our life”93 is in contradiction to the larger picture of New York in the post-September 11th days. The emotional attitude is similar to how Hans views his wife’s return to London. He re-frames Chuck’s statement calling it “a state of elation”94 and “euphoria”95 a short-lived high that is not unlike the happiness Chuck felt in finding a purpose during a time of chaos.

In the same way Hans goes off to Staten Island to play cricket, in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Oskar cancels lessons with his French tutor, an expense his parents can afford, to meet those in the further reaches of New York—those who exist on the margins of society, the

---

91 O’Neill, Netherland, 77
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 78.
ill, the shut-ins, the non-English speaking, the soon-to-be-divorcees, the widowers. Oskar’s traveling to find the lock to the key in an envelope inscribed with the name Black, literally brings him to meeting “the Blacks.” The name in itself evokes marginalized people in society, those who are marked, outside the predominate anglophone society. On his quest to find the lock, he walks for miles to reach his destination, too afraid to take trains that use the tunnels, scared to use the bridges. “Almost the whole ride to the Bronx was underground, which made me incredibly panicky.”

Oskar has no choice in the matter if he wants a companion. Mr. Black, the shut-in upstairs neighbor who joins Oskar for much of is travels, is too old to walk from Manhattan to the Bronx. Each step towards finding the lock opens up Oskar to new experiences and helps him shed his anxieties. The autonomy of feet on the ground and the open space around Oskar are the only places he does not feel fear—he is even afraid to take the elevator to his apartment. “I walked through Long Island City, Woodside, Elmhurst, and Jackson Heights… When I finally got to the building, I couldn’t figure out where the doorman was… I waited around for a few minutes and he didn’t come. I looked through the door and saw that there was no desk for him. I thought, Weird.”

Oskar is thoroughly unaware that his upbringing is unlike others in the city, that not everyone has so much as he has had. He is naïve in his expectation for the luxury of a doorman in every building. He has Stan who runs errands for him, knows his name, is his friend. It isn’t until Oskar takes these journeys outside his closed childhood sphere into the world to find that his world is very different. He does not even consider that there is no

---


97 Ibid., 88.
doorman at all, only that he is out and will return soon. It is strange, “weird,” rather than different in its unlikeness.

Oskar gains confidence and loses many of his anxieties when he leaves his zone of comfort to visit all the boroughs of New York. However, his he was being protected by his mother throughout. He was too blind to see this, in his naïvety. His guilt about the voicemails makes him develop an aversion to the phone “since the worst day” because of his father’s messages, “The new phone…Whenever it would ring, I’d scream, ‘The phone’s ringing!’ because I didn’t want to touch it. I didn’t even want to be in the same room with it.” When he finally gets the courage to check the voicemails, he discovers Abby Black, the second person Oskar visited, had called and the message cut off meaning his mother had answered the phone and spoken to her:

All of a sudden I understood why, when Mom asked where I was going, and I said, ‘Out,’ she didn’t ask any more questions. She didn’t have to because she knew. It made sense that Ada knew I lived on the Upper West Side, and that Carol had hot cookies waiting when I knocked on her door, and that doorman215@hotmail.com said, “Good luck, Oskar” when I left, even though I was ninety-nine-percent sure I hadn’t told him that my name was Oskar. They knew I was coming. Mom had talked to them all before I had.  

As he seeks a sense of independence, he was in fact being watched over. Oskar’s mother’s actions delegitimize his escape from the careful zone of his family’s protection, as well as demonstrates her trust in her son. She allows him to go on with his quest, without being a roadblock. Simultaneously he goes out as a child through New York City and, although they have

---

98 Foer, *Extremely Loud*, 288

99 Ibid., 291.
been forewarned of his arrival and have no obligation to him, they end up becoming a support
network for Oskar. A handful of Blacks attend Oskar’s school production of Hamlet. On opening
night, Oskar sees many familiar faces in the crowd aside from his mother and grandmother: “A
lot of the Blacks I had met in those twelve weekends were there… Abby and Agnes were there.
(They were actually sitting next to each other, although they didn’t realize it.)… They must have
been half the audience. But what was weird was that they didn’t know what they had in
common.”¹⁰⁰ He becomes a uniting force to create ties, known and unknown, between those in
the city who otherwise would not interact, while they are a force of healing for Oskar.

The networks that Hans and Oskar develop over the course of their respective novels are
temporary in the end. Cricket provides an activity to occupy his time outside of work, Chuck
distracts him from his all but failed marriage, but in the end Hans cannot leave behind his family:
“There is no describing the wretchedness I felt, which persisted, in one form or another,
throughout my association with Chuck Ramkissoon.”¹⁰¹ Hans’ “wretchedness” from being away
from his family supersedes any other priorities. He capitulates to his desire to return to a state of
normalcy, relocates to London, and reconstructs his family. Oskar likewise opens up to his
mother’s care and the presence of Ron in their family sphere once he learns that Ron has suffered
a tragic loss similar to his own.¹⁰² Though unstated, it is most likely Chuck who once told him
the definition, as someone who was firmly grounded in the world of facts and knowledge. Chuck
and Hans grow closest during Hans’ tenure on the cricket team, but it ends when Hans starts to
know Chuck’s illegal activities too well. As the novel begins, Hans only gets notice of Chuck’s

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 143.
¹⁰² Ibid., 315.
disappearance and murder when a reporter calls him in England to inquire about Chuck after his body is recovered from the Gowanus Canal.\textsuperscript{103} Hans still looks back fondly on his forlorn time:

“Now that I, too, have left that city, I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody once told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you’re the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory’s repetitive mower—on the sort of purposeful postmortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course.”\textsuperscript{104} Although this is only Hans speaking of his own experience, I think it is applicable to both the novels. The peculiarity of New York is such that it always grows over even as it is cut down, it returns whether in terms of community or memory.

\textsuperscript{103} O’Neill, \textit{Netherland}, 5.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 4.
Chapter Three: Alienation, New Boundaries

I argued in the previous two chapters that time and kinship are corrupted following the event of September 11. Here, I will look at Mohsin Hamad’s novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Teju Cole’s *Open City* as they both reckon with the experience of multiculturalism in crisis. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* explores the protagonist, Changez's, evolving relationship to America through the story of early twenties as he tells it to an unnamed American at a café in Lahore, Pakistan. Julius, a flâneur in NYC (much like Hans in *Netherland*), experiences various connections throughout the city and a month that he spends in Brussels. Julian’s experiences in *Open City*, with those on the margins of society, with other immigrants in New York contextualize his own place in the city. Both protagonists, as New Yorkers, come to points of tension with others in the city. Changez becomes ostracized from his work and his friends, choosing to move back to Pakistan. Julian looks at the American situation in New York and from a distance in Belgium, finding people more radically opposed to American exceptionalism and cultural hegemony than his own musing self. They get excluded from the American identity, which supersedes the city attachment for many in the wake of September 11. Something about their positions, as immigrants, as non-white people, as cultural elite, makes the ground they stand on rumble with uncertainty.

Acceptance as an American is not so much as a stamp of approval upon entering the country. A common metaphor used in describing the United States is the image of a melting pot, put in whatever you have to the pot and out comes a uniform stew. The ingredients for the
American soup are immigrants who, by becoming American, they leave behind what ethnic character they had that set them a part from a prevailing idea of what it is to be American. The melting pot has been used a number of ways, gone through revisions, but still persists as a representation of American cultural assimilation. The image originates in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) by J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, a French aristocrat who spent much of his life in New York State as a farmer. In the third letter of the publication, titled “What is an American?”, Crèvecoeur states on the topic of European emigrants to the budding country: “Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.” This configuration, of racialized differentiation between the nations persists, the minute details changing with changes in cultural conceptions of race and ethnicity. Nonetheless, it sets the foundation of difference which does not divide, but rather melts away into a uniformity.

Crèvecoeur gives the earliest description of American society as a place of melting, but the image was not brought into common usage until the 1908 Israel Zangwill play *The Melting Pot*. The four-act play caused a great deal of controversy whether it was critic’s disdain for losing cultural heritage or a fear of America changing. Nonetheless, Zangwill’s play was performed throughout the country to large audiences and coined the metaphor so easy rolled off the tongues of Americans today: the melting pot immigrant nation.

The precedent of assimilation in actual American policy goes back the founding of the United States. In the 1790 Treaty of New York, Article 12 states, “That the Creek nation may be

---

105 Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer: describing certain provincial situations, manners, and customs not generally known; and conveying some idea of the late and present interior circumstances of the British colonies in North America* (Franklin Center, PA: The Franklin Library, 1982), 44.

led to a greater degree of civilization, and to become herdsmen and cultivators, instead of
remaining in a state of hunters.”107 The treaty set a condition of a “civilizing,” or assimilation,
process of the Creek nation agreeing to leave behind traditional hunting practices in order to
become more identifiably anglophone herdsmen, to leave the “state” of their difference from what
was considered a proper occupation of time. This was the same year the first naturalization law
was enacted, opening naturalization up to “any alien being a free white person.”108 With the
inclusion of citizenship there comes an exclusion of all those who were not accepted under the
definition of “white.” The Native Americans were still even more robustly forced to assimilate as
with the boarding schools founded by the Bureau for Indian Affairs, modeled directly on the
Carlisle Indian Industrial School “whose mission was to civilize, assimilate, and ‘kill the Indian
to save the man.’”109 The death of Native American culture was the stated goal of these boarding
schools, a policy in place through the early 1900s. Although the Native Americans are considered
sovereign nations within the United States according to Article 1 of the Constitution, this did not
preclude American policy from doing as much as possible to anglicize the population.

The definition of whiteness itself was not always as inclusive of everyone with white skin
as it is more so in current political discourse. Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson maps the cultural
and political understanding of whiteness in the US in Whiteness of a Different Color, something
that culturally evolved with different waves of immigration. The US Census has accounted for

treaties/cre0025.htm.


109 Jacqueline Fear-Segal and Susan D. Rose, Carlisle Indian Industrial School: Indigenous Histories,
Memories, and Reclamations (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 107.
population in terms of white and others since the first census in 1790, with more categories added with each iteration, the 2010 census having more than 15 racial categories, the fifteenth being “Some Other Race.” Even with this block of “white” covering the whole of ethnic diversity within that category, the cultural understanding of whiteness is much more nuanced.

The nation’s first naturalization law in 1790 (limiting naturalized citizenship to “free white persons”) demonstrates the republican convergence of race and “fitness for self government”; the law’s wording denotes an unconflicted view of the presumed character and unambiguous boundaries of whiteness. Fifty years later, beginning with the massive influx of highly undesirable but nonetheless ‘white’ persons from Ireland, whiteness was subject to new interpretations.110

This term is not fixed. Whiteness is mutable and this creates fear of uncertainty. Even though the 1790 law was exclusionary, it was not enough so, as Jacobson points to the rise of nativist thinking: “nativism was a response to the political crisis created by the 1790 naturalization law—the over-inclusivity of the category ‘white persons.’”111 If all white people are included, this breaks the racial hierarchies used to create dominance among white peoples. Coming to terms with this larger understanding of whiteness leads to a unifying of discrimination towards non-whites: “the presence of racially marked Others reified and further united the ‘white persons’ of the 1790 naturalization law.”112 In including more, the marked non-white Others become even more of outsiders next to an increasingly homogenous unmarked whiteness. White solidarity


111 Ibid., 68.

112 Ibid., 74.
brings together those who have culturally inscribed differences and melt them down from the divisions of Alpine, Irish, Slav, etc. to the category of white, melt them into Americans.

As whiteness reifies into a more solid identity, there is still color discrimination which is especially prevalent in the United States. The 1790 naturalization law made it clear that it was “white persons” who the legislators include in citizenship, non-white persons were not. Earlier migrants from Europe have it in their favor for the color of their skin allows them to pass easier as a full-bred citizen if they lose their accent and dress appropriately. They can become the white Anglophone norm without a second guess, with only one or two generations until their kin is completely assimilated, and without someone asking them the question: but where are you really from? For those who were forcibly or coercively migrated to America and immigrants that do not pass as “white” the cultural status quo works against them.

Jeffrey Eugenides’ 2002 novel *Middlesex*, explores the protagonist, Cal’s, family’s relation to American whiteness and the process of assimilation. Upon Cal’s grandparent’s arrival on Ellis Island from Greece in 1922, Desdemona, his grandmother, enters a station run by the YWCA, her first experience of American assimilation: “She’d gone in, shawled and kerchiefed, and had emerged fifteen minutes later in a dropwaisted dress and a floppy hat shaped like a chamber pot… As part of the makeover, the YWCA ladies had cut off Desdemona’s immigrant braids.”

In the YWCA’s efforts to make the transition to America easier for immigrants, they offer makeovers for women. By cutting off Desdemona’s “immigrant braids,” they have attempted to cut her past away from her. However, it is much harder than just a simple change of hair and dress. The entrance through Ellis Island itself is within the grand narrative of

---

immigration from Europe to the United States, a rite of passage into joining the nation. Her husband, Lefty, goes through his own assimilatory procedure at his job in the Ford Motors Factory. The non-fictional Henry Ford would not allow his employees to work for him if they had not been properly assimilated according to his own vision of what it was to be American, or, rather, what it is to be the right kind of white. In order to prove his integration, Lefty must participate in Americanization at the Ford English School after his shift on the assembly line is over. The graduation ceremony consists of the students walking into “a giant gray cauldron emblazoned with the words Ford English School Melting Pot” dressed in their traditional clothes and emerging from it, “Dressed in blue and gray suits, they climb out, waving American flags.”\footnote{Eugenides, Middlesex, 182.} What should be his proudest moment of becoming melted into the stew of America ends instead with a pink slip, fired due to his cousin-in-law’s criminal record. Lefty has forsaken his Greek culture only to be turned away from Henry Ford’s American Dream.

The question gets asked over and over again. What allows America to exist as it does despite the diversity of its citizens? Political philosopher Will Kymlicka asks in \textit{Multicultural Citizenship}: “What would bind people together when they came from such different backgrounds?” and finds that, “The answer, of course, was that immigrants would have to integrate into the existing anglophone society, rather than forming separate and distinct nations with their own homelands inside the United States.”\footnote{Will Kymlicka, \textit{Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 61.} Incorporating the diversity that came with the founding of a nation of non-native people, there needed to be hegemonic cultural organization, rather than a fractured polity. Or at least, it has seemed to work that way so far.
Who gets included under the label of whiteness is a fraught concept through the twentieth century, perhaps culminating in the Nazi’s rhetoric of racial purity which they used to justify the genocide of millions. The long history of openly systematized assimilation comes into question with the advent of WWII and “the case of assimilated German Jewry” which “shows that racism can be exacerbated by the threat of the margins infiltrating the centre and the extreme consequences of hatred. (Bauman 1991)”\(^\text{116}\) The assimilating process had failed to create acceptance, but instead uncertainty and hatred leading to genocide. In the post-war era, liberal democracies became the leading model of statehood which lean towards the multicultural doctrine of tolerance. There is trouble with tolerance as a model; it is unsustainable. Tolerance says it accepts the “Other” into its dominance, but still keeps an Us and Them formulation alive and favors assimilation without such a straightforward approach. Jacques Derrida cuts to the core in *Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides* of the problem with tolerance:

> Tolerance is actually the opposite of hospitality. Or at least its limit. If I think I am being hospitable because I am tolerant, it is because I wish to maintain control over the limits of my “home,” my sovereignty, my “I can” (my territory, my house, my language, my culture, my religion, and so on)… Tolerance is a conditional, circumspect, careful hospitality.\(^\text{117}\)

Whenever there is tolerance, there is someone in control and actively working to define the “limits” of how far this tolerance will go. This control is exerted both in the personal and the


\(^\text{117}\) Derrida, Borradori, and Habermas, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, 127-128.
political spheres, as Derrida uses the word “house” but also “territory.” The state as well as the citizen can actively decide what goes and who is welcome.

Muslim immigrants and Muslim-Americans in particular have had the disadvantage of underlying resentment from the 1970s (the Iran Hostage Crisis, gas shortages, the Iranian Revolution) and then with September 11, Islamophobia rears it ugly head again and with great force. Not only does the mask of multiculturalism’s tolerance face a crisis in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the culture starts to reject the idea of an integrated Islamic immigrant population. I would like to think of this as a time post-assimilation, after the time in which assimilation is possible too much becomes at stake. I use this term in the sense that Khalil Gibran Muhammad does in a January 2017 New York Times article, where he states, “We now live in a post-assimilation America.” Muhammad says this in relation to the situation of black people in America and the need to confront structural racism, but it could be applied in the case of rejection of Arab peoples’ identification as Americans as well. They are forced out of their assimilation, accused of radicalism. During his campaign, Donald Trump touted his experience of September 11 as a tool to manipulate voters, bringing up the fears already perpetuated about Muslim people. He claimed at one of his rallies, “I watched in Jersey City, N.J., where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as the World Trade Center collapsed.” When the validity of this statement was contested, Trump responded “There were people over in New Jersey that were watching it, a heavy Arab population, that were cheering as the buildings came down.”

---


So not only does he start with the image of terrorist sympathizers but then brings the Arab-American population in particular under suspicion. Even though this statement was disproven, the fact that the person who now holds the highest elected office in the country speaks to how pervasive this discomfort with the validity of Arab-Americans as true citizens of the United States.

What happens when society rejects certain ethnic groups as worthy of integration? Or accuses them of being hostile to the predominant culture? Before the 9/11 attacks, it was easy enough to assimilate into American culture for Changez. He starts off his American life studying at Princeton University, gets a job straight from Princeton at a top tier consulting firm which moves him to the multicultural haven of NYC, essentially on the path to the American Dream. “I was in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker… It still occupies a place of great fondness in my heart.”

There is very little distance between being a New Yorker and being an outsider. As a city where over half the population identifies as non-white and cultures from all over the world present in the five boroughs, Changez has an easier time fitting in than he might have in an overwhelmingly white city where he would be in the extreme minority. The community of New York is different from the corporate world he joins at Underwood Samson. In his incoming class of consulting associates, he is one of only two non-white employees. This does not affect the way he is treated until he begins to present in a less

120 Carroll, "Fact-checking Trump," PolitiFact.


122 US Census Data 2000. It must be noted that the US Census does not give a category for Middle Eastern or South Asian identifying people, not including the “Asian Indian” identifier. Instead Middle Eastern and non-Indian South Asian identities are lumped into “Some Other Race” comprising 13% of New York City’s population as of the 2000 census.
corporate fashion. A slight change in appearance, as in Changez’s case when he grows a beard, defying the corporate culture he has joined in New York, changes the way others react to him: “More than once, traveling on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares.” From integration, acceptance to abuse, whispers and stares all over a change in facial hair. Changez is noticed, he has become a spectacle, “It is remarkable, given its physical insignificance…the impact a beard worn by a man of my complexion has on your fellow countrymen.” When Changez was clean shaven, and presented as the model image of corporate culture, there was no attention paid to his appearance, just another man in a suit. But once he starts to shave, a beard forming, obscuring some of his features, a whole new side of American intolerance.

Throughout the novel, Changez, at a cafe in Lahore, introduces his companion, an unnamed and silent American, to Pakistani cultural traditions. The American is the outsider looking into a different world. The frame narrative of the conversation between Changez and the American, referred to only as “you,” is an overt layout of the themes of the American Middle Eastern cultural divide. Changez must explain certain actions at the café and in the surrounding square that Changez notices make the American uncomfortable. The American is the other in regard to this milieu due to a lack of understanding, cultural blinders. The perceptive Changez recognizes these tendencies in the American, who is in Pakistan, but still suspicious of the Pakistani people in the square. “You seem worried. Do not be; this burly fellow is merely our

123 Hamid, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, 130.
124 Ibid.
waiter, and there is no need to reach under your jacket, I assume to grasp your wallet, as we will pay him later, when we are done.”

The tone of instruction, and the second person point of view, telling the American, as a stand in for the audience, how to react, sets Changez as the teacher, someone introducing the audience into a different world view. His speech is instructive and unassuming as to the knowledge of the other party participating in his story. “There. He has gone. I must admit, he is a rather intimidating chap. But irreproachably polite: you would have been surprised by the sweetness of his speech, if only you understood Urdu.”

This American, had he known the language of the country they were in would not be so on edge about the manner of speech of the waiter, according to Changez’s instruction. His preemptive response to the American’s body language demonstrates the ease in which Changez can move between American and Pakistani culture. The binary of Western norm and Eastern other is completely inverted, where in conversational setting of the novel—Changez introduces his companion/the audience to Pakistani cultural traditions, the American is the outsider looking into a different world Changez is acutely aware of the differences between an American and non-American perspective of culture. When he addresses the concerns of the American at the café he is also speaking to the inherent biases that exist in American culture as a whole. Changez’s name also has the quality of non-specificity. When pronounced in an Americanized way, as the word changes, the denotation is clear as to his fundamental place as the ever shifting protagonist, never ending his search for who he is or where he belongs. The entire frame narrative consists of two

---


126 Ibid., 6.
men who are out of place, the American out of his comfort zone and Changez forever floating between homes, between social classes.

Patriotism and national pride starts to subvert city pride, for New Yorkers, there is a disjuncture between their “Americanness” and their “New York-ness” with the latter heavier until the scales are shifted and it becomes more important to have a nationalist support system and to exclude those outside of the nationalist identity, nationalism in itself a process of exclusion of out-groups. Changez notices the increase in American flags hanging throughout New York: “They all seemed to proclaim: We are America—not New York, which, in my opinion, means something quite different—the mightiest civilization the world has ever know; you have slighted us; beware our wrath.”\(^{127}\) The destruction experienced on September 11 gives rise to this symbol’s proliferation, the basic symbol of nationalism, the nation’s flag. The rhetoric it pushes is “beware our wrath,” this is a nation that represents something mighty, an empire without saying as much. E. Ann Kaplan, in the introduction to Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature, presents photographs she took around Union Square and Lower Manhattan in the days after the eleventh. Flags hang from buildings, in store windows next to advertisements; American flag iconography dominated the visual culture of New York and the country.\(^{128}\) This display of national and patriotic pride while propping up the idea of a united American civility, “United We Stand” being one of the more popular slogans proliferated in the aftermath, does not translate to Changez’s situation as a Muslim man from a country whose neighbors are under attack by a nation which claims victimhood. “The sight of what I

\(^{127}\) Hamid, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, 79.

took to be the beginning of its invasion by your countrymen caused me to tremble with fury.”

When human lives close to his birthplace are at stake, Changez does not take the American sensibility of ignoring what is happening outside the country’s borders if it is not a threat to their daily lives. Military success, at the expense of non-white lives, is success. While time leaves him less enraged, he cannot go back to the friendly ignorance of America: “My fury had ebbed, but much though I wished to pretend I had imagined it entirely, I was no longer capable of so thorough a self-deception.” The United States has sent the clear message to Changez that the lives of his country-people and those that look like them do not count so much as the ones on the military conquest.

Discovering a similar disappointment in adopted countries, in Belgium, Julian meets the autodidact Farouq and his friend and boss Khalil, Moroccan leftists. They tired of the injustices they have found upon coming to Europe, their dreams of the great liberal continent crushed. The conversation between the three of them demonstrates the differences between European leftists and Americans. The American issues seem “tawdry” in comparison to Julian, whereas immigration in Europe has created tension on the subject of Islamic customs and assimilation. “When we were young, he said, or I should say, when I was young, Europe was a dream. Not just a dream, it was the dream: it represented the freedom of thought. We wanted to come here, and exercise our minds in this free space.” These dreams of freedoms are broken for Farouq as he is not one of the people that society has decided to give “free space” to, as he is a North African

131 Cole, *Open City*, 118.
132 Ibid., 122.
Muslim and intellectual radical. Julian asks Dr. Maillotte, a Belgian woman he met on his flight to Brussels, for her perspective on Farouq’s feeling of alienation from Belgian society, to which Dr. Maillotte takes a defensive position: “Look, I know this type, she said, these young men who go around as if the world is an offense to them. It is dangerous… Our society has made itself open for such people, but when they come in, all you hear is complaints.”133 This understanding of a society, “our society,” welcoming in “such people,” at the first starts with a clear divide, an us and them, and finds that the them in this case are given opportunity to join the open society, a favor, but they are ungrateful in their complaining, as if they should just take it for what it is. They have looked the gift horse in the mouth and found rotten teeth. Kymlicka explains this phenomenon of liberal democracies: “[immigrants] had come voluntarily, knowing that integration was expected of them.”134 There is a contract between the immigrant and the host country, that they will integrate, “leave their culture behind,”135 in order to join the nation they now occupy, and “relinquish their national membership” of the nation they came from. Liberals emphasize the voluntary nature of the immigrants move to the United States, to join the established anglophone cultural traditions. Julian has to stop himself from participating in this kind of rhetoric, that these so-called liberal democracies are welcome to all, after Farouq tells him he has “no desire to visit America, and certainly not as an Arab.”136 Farouq recognizes that he would not be comfortable in America as it is a bad environment for Arab people like himself.

Islamophobia, hate crimes become more commonplace. If he is not satisfied with liberal Europe,
the United States will have nothing better. Julian thinks back on the interaction and his own
response: “I could have told him I had Arab friends, that they were fine, that his fears were
baseless. But it would have been a lie. I, too, would not have wanted to visit the United States as
a solitary North African with leftist beliefs.” In stopping himself from spreading the friendly
lie that America is welcoming, even though he wants to be reassuring by bringing up his Arab
friends, “that they were fine,” he is actively resisting the disingenuous politeness that would call
for him to shove aside the very real issues in the American cultural climate.

Even though Islamophobia and racism were nothing new to American culture, the focus
sharpened on Muslim and perceived Muslim people, e.g., the misconception that Sikhs were
Muslim because of the turban stereotype and thus hate crimes were committed against them, “at
least 200 post-Sept. 11 hate crimes directed at other Sikhs” reported as of October 31, 2001. The
facade faded, it was only tolerance in the first place. Anyone with features deemed Arab or
Muslim, not black not white are suspected by the authorities as well as by citizens of sinister
intentions. There is no discerning of bigotry in ignorance. A man who verbally, and nearly
physically, attacks Changez is the model ignorant American.

He made a series of unintelligible noises—‘akhala-malakhala,’ perhaps,
or ‘khalapal-khalapala’—and pressed his face alarmingly close to
mine…; I thought he might be mad, or drunk; I thought also that he might
be a mugger, and I prepared to defend myself or to strike. Just then
another man appeared; he, too, glared at me, but he took his friend by the

137 Cole, Open City, 126.
138 “Under attack, Sikhs defend their religious liberties,” Christian Science Monitor, October 31, 2001, 2,
ezproxy01.bard.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?
direct=true&db=nfh&AN=5429529&site=eds-live&scope=site.
arm and tugged at him, saying it was not worth it. Reluctantly, the first allowed himself to be led away. “Fucking Arab,” he said.139

The stranger wants to let out his anger and frustration, his fear, and only leaves “reluctantly.” Something in him is pushing him to confront Changez even though they have never met. The sight of a man with Changez’s complexion alone is provocation for this person’s verbal and near physical abuse. The man’s interjection as he walks away, “Fucking Arab,” sums up the entire interaction. There is nothing more to this man’s anger than the fact that he sees Changez as an Arab, he puts this identity onto Changez. (Much like in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*: “Look! A Negro!”140) To observers he is an immigrant, a Muslim, an Arab, therefore a terrorist, or at the very least a sympathizer. After the interaction is through, there is no longer a way for Changez to ignore the difference in the way he is treated as an outsider insider—his split between immigrant and New Yorker has come to a point of tension. “I realized how deep was the suspicion I had engendered in my colleagues over these past few—bearded and resentful—weeks; only Wainwright came over to shake my hand and say farewell; the others, if they bothered to look at me at all, did so with evident unease and, in some cases, a fear which would not have been inappropriate had I been convicted of plotting to kill them rather than of abandoning my post in mid-assignment.”141 Changez’s status has completed a total inversion at the time of his leaving. From the once top new hire at Underwood Samson, to an ostracized suspect, a bearded outsider. It is not only his relinquishing of responsibility that has led the others to turn away, physically averting their eyes from the disgraced man, but not because of his


disgrace, due to “an evident unease...a fear” as if Changez had “plot[ted] to kill them.” This image of an attempted murder, the tone of fear filtering through the office evokes the sense that they are actually afraid of him. As if maybe they should never have trusted this foreigner, after all he is a Muslim, and now he has grown a beard. Changez becomes even more aware of his appearance in the street: “I imagine I was a rather odd sight—a distraught and hirsute Pakistani carrying an unmarked box through the center of Manhattan—but I do not recall any untoward comments from passersby; then again, I was in all likelihood too preoccupied to have noticed.” Changez’s identification as a New Yorker gets rejected by others.

In *Open City*, Julian has a similar insight about his friend from the internet cafe: “He was still just a man in a shop... To Mayken and to countless others like her in this city, he would be just another Arab subject to a quick suspicious glance on the tram.” The unfamiliarity of Farouq to others makes him a threat, an unidentified Arab on the tram, “suspicious,” because of his appearance as an Other—as a North African in a largely homogeneously white city. He realizes this is more nuanced, “What Farouq got on the trams wasn’t a quick suspicious glance. It was a simmering, barely contained fear.” It’s more than suspicion, of the racism that ingrains a stereotype in Farouq’s appearance, of a maybe he is strange and not trustworthy, rather it is fear. Fear that he is very possibly an agent of terror. This fear is so potent here in Europe is almost more potent than in the United States. They seem to be newer to the conditions of The conditions of rejection and suspicion are universal in Eurocentric culture, it is not only a condition of American culture. In terms of politics, there was not much of a policy push for regulations of


144 Ibid.
Muslim immigrant customs on the federal level in the United States such as there was in France with the ban of facial covering in 2010, the amount of hate crimes and other regulations speaks to the discomfort of Americans with the Muslim neighbors. It was only in January 2017 did the US Army begin to permit turbans, hijabs, and beards worn for religious reasons, as well as dreadlocks, after years of petitioning by Sikhs who wished to keep their religious dress when actively serving in the military.145

What Changez experiences on the subway in New York and what Julian imagines Farouq is subject to on the trams of Brussels are part of the same insecurity regarding Muslim members of their societies. Julian, a Nigerian-German non-Muslim, himself begins to identify with these issues: “My presentation—the dark, unsmiling, solitary stranger—made me a target for the inchoate rage of the defenders of Vlaanderen.”146 There is an acute sense of self-awareness, a Du Boisian double-consciousness, in Julian after realizing Farouq is a target of suspicion, and no matter how welcoming society is: “the stranger had remained strange, and had become a foil for new discontents.”147 Julian does not see himself as the stranger until viewing the public from Farouq’s disposition, until now, in Belgium, he is experiencing Otherness to the extreme. His choice to avoid “all-white bars or family restaurants”148 and shorten the walks he takes at night demonstrates his own fear of being caught, of being identified as the stranger and thus condemned.


146 Hamid, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, 106.

147 Ibid.

148 Ibid.
The erasure committed by the American public and the military actions in Pakistan which so enrage Changez plague one of Julian’s patients as well. “V.’s depression was partly due to the emotional toll of these studies, which she once described as looking out across a river on a day of heavy rain, so that she couldn’t be sure whether the activity on the opposite bank had anything to do with her or whether, in fact, there was any activity there at all.”149 V. has developed a mental illness due to her research into the treatment of Native Americans in New York City when it was the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam: “the horrors Native Americans had to endure at the hands of white settlers, the horrors, in her view, that they continued to suffer, affected her on a profound personal level.”150 Julian himself picks up a copy of her book only to read a few pages and decide he cannot handle the subject matter. These little known histories that get shoved aside are all over the city. “And, before that? What Lenape paths lay buried beneath the rubble? The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten.”151 New York City is layered with histories, Julian perceives in the obliterated World Trade Center site. Over and over again, there is the destruction and a recolonization of the site, each reign attempting to lay claim to the space, but getting overtaken by another.

This [the destruction of the World Trade Center] was not the first erasure on the site. Before the towers had gone up, there had been a bustling network of little streets traversing this part of town…all of them had been obliterated in the 1960s to make way for the World Trade Center buildings, and all were forgotten now. Gone, too, was the old Washington

149 Cole, Open City, 26-27.  
150 Ibid., 27.  
151 Ibid., 59.
Market, the active piers, the fishwives, the Christian Syrian enclave that was established in the 1800s.¹⁵²

These pasts are not erased only because they are past and no longer visible without peeling back the layers, they are erased because to remember them is not in the favor of the powers who destroy the networks that existed. To recognized the Syrian enclave that existed on the Trade Center site, introducing Middle Eastern people’s history to the narrative of the area is specifically avoided by the curators of the museum that would commemorate the history of the Trade Center. A spokesperson for 9/11 Memorial Museum commented in a Daily News article that the curators would not include “the area’s Arab American history in the museum’s permanent collection.”¹⁵³ Museums are cultural institutions that are in positions of control of the dissemination of knowledge. By not including this particular span of history in which a group of Arab-Americans existed in the specific locale whose history is commemorated, they are writing them out. These erasures take place not only in recent memory, but from the moment Europeans arrive on the site. And surely, not only in Lower Manhattan, it is the whole of New York City that is constantly being covered over. The site of the World Trade Center just happens to be the most visibly volatile destruction, with rubble still scattered on the grounds years later.

Julian muses on the issues with the Other gaining any ground in a society that is unaccepting: “There’s always the expectation that the victimized Other is the one that covers the distance, that has the noble ideas… It’s an expectation that works sometimes, I said, but only if

¹⁵² Cole, Open City, 58-59.

your enemy is not a psychopath. You need an enemy with a capacity for shame… Dignified
refusal can only take you so far. Ask the Congolese.”154 So when the enemy, the hegemonic
culture, has no capacity for shame then it becomes the time for revolution, for intervention.
When there is no shame, as in Julian’s example of the Congolese and their colonizers—moral
imperative fails to decolonize the country, it falls to the oppressed to do the work. In the case of
September 11 and the American response, there is only a continuance of antagonization: “But
atrocity is nothing new, not to humans, not to animals. The difference is that in our time it is
uniquely well organized, carried out with pens, train carriages, ledgers, barbed wire, work camps,
gas. And this late contribution, the absence of bodies. No bodies were visible, except the falling
ones, on the day America’s ticker stopped.”155 The day America’s ticker stopped, Julian sees
advertised by the Museum of American Finance. The news ticker stopped, stood still, the day the
planes crashed into the Twin Towers, destroying the World Trade Center, at the heart of the
Financial District. There were bodies visible, but only to those in the vicinity. The greatest
tragedies no longer require visibility in terms of physical dead when “atrocity” may be carried
out systematically, “with pens…train carriages…gas.” These images recall the devastation that
was the Holocaust, but it can still be a meditation on the more current state of affairs where
warfare is carried out from rooms far away from the actual destruction. So instead of facing the
true consequences of destruction, of disasters like this one instance on American soil, they are
outside the frame, leaving the question of shame to be dealt with in the invisibility.

154 Cole, Open City, 105.

155 Ibid., 58.
In a world with, as Ian Crouch put it his March 3, 2017 *New Yorker* article, “an ever-narrowing conception of what it means to be an American, what it means to belong, who gets to be counted as ‘us’ and who as ‘other,’” the facade of multicultural liberalism has receded, and in its wake we have the bigotry that was disguised as tolerance all the while. Ėžižek welcomed us to the “desert of the real” following 9/11, but when does the reality of the American situation as deeply flawed come to real reckoning with itself? The forty-fifth president can ignore or delegitimize hate crimes as people are killed, mosques burned, gravestones defaced, then who are we now counting into multiculturalism?

Conclusion

The instance in *Open City*, when Kenneth, a security guard from the American Folk Museum, recognizes Julian a week after his museum visit at a bar, and he strikes up a conversation with Julian reminds me very much of my own experience writing this project. Kenneth after a short introduction launches into the following: “You know Littleton, right? The massacre happened just after I arrived there. Terrible thing. Same thing happened with New York, I got here in July 2001. Crazy, right? Completely crazy, so I don’t know whether to warn the next city I move to!”¹⁵⁷ This is one stranger talking to another, a random man in a bar. Kenneth is trying to have something in common with Julius. There is a want to have this connection no matter the level of intimacy between two people, they have this moment to connect them. The commonality he seeks out, other than what others see as the shared “hey I’m African just like you,”¹⁵⁸ is the recognizable experience of having gone through September 11. As they are both New Yorkers and residents of the United States, it is a shared point of reference. More or less anyone who was conscious can recall where they were on the day it happened, how they found out.

Nearly every time I mentioned what I was writing this project about, the person or I was talking to felt compelled to share their experience. It did not matter whether they were in six-years old in New York City, like myself, or forty-eight in the middle of Idaho, they still felt

---


¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 53.
compelled to share it, to claim some slice of the day. There is a power in claiming your own place in this huge event and each of the works I have looked at has claimed a space in the narrative of September 11. The focus is not so that September 11 is necessarily the locus of all the works, *Netherland* and *Open City* it is less so than the others, but what connects them is the New York that they inhabit. These works are concerned with the experience of New Yorkers as they figure out what to do in the aftermath. These are not the distant suburban or rural writings concerned with this period. Oftentimes reading these works it felt as if they are speaking to each other, as one great meta-novel of New York City as the city adjusted to its new skyline.

I have only discussed a paucity of the depth of each of these novel in themselves and in the conversations I see between them. For example, I did not have a chance to look at the place of women, who are mostly absent from nearly all of the works I have looked at, save *Falling Man*, though the predominant emphasis is on Keith. This is only one of the many many conversations that can come out of these books.

There are many other novels, poems, films, artworks that deal with the subject matter and give further insights into the cultural significance of the time after September 11, 2001. It has, of course, been nearly sixteen full years since the attacks occurred in the time I am writing this. The significance of the myths we create, the communities we build, and the exclusionary structures in our society are no less important in our present state, whether it is still under the umbrella of post-9/11 or not. The effects still lingering in American culture that which came out of this singular moment in history.
Bibliography


