



## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Conjuring September 11, 2001: Midwest Narratives in the Time of Death

Abstract approved:

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Over the past fourteen years since the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Americans of varied political persuasions have continually identified the day as a defining moment in the history of the nation, which caused a rupture in the cultural rhythm and psyche. This sensibility is present in many narratives that considered the uniqueness of the day, with the majority of these set in New York City. However, for most Americans, the attacks were experienced in a non-local manner mediated through various technologies as well as reactionary policies of the Bush administration and retrospective accounts that followed from critics and authors. Given the disparity between narratives that surround eye-witness of the event and those perceived from afar, this thesis attempts to explore and reconcile these geographical and psychological differences by examining fictive works often described as “September 11”, which are set in the Midwest. Through this investigation of place, technologies, and difference, we can trace the development of the cultural memory of these events from catastrophe to commemoration as the analysis moves through nationalism, terrorism, and what might be defined as heartland American conservatism. Ultimately, I argue that though September 11

functioned as a catastrophic event, Americans moved to restore normalcy shortly after the attacks. That is not to say that Americans forgot September 11; instead, pre-September 11 normalcy coexisted within post-September 11 uncertainty.

To support this argument, this thesis examines four texts that offer several different perspectives on the event, from the incident itself to the ways in which the attack was ordered. These pieces are, respectively, David Foster Wallace's non-fiction essay "The View from Mrs. Thompson's", Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom*, and Richard Powers' novel *The Echo Maker*. Despite their differing subject matter and approaches, each of these works ultimately rejects the common notion that September 11 caused an irrevocable break in the cultural rhythm of American ideology in the second half of the twentieth century. If we select Midwestern narratives as representative of September 11 experience, then instead of unique commemoration, we find an American culture of misidentification.

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Conjuring September 11, 2001: Midwest Narratives in the Time of Death

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Jonathon M. Josten, Author

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This thesis is dedicated to Lillian Josten.

## Introduction

### Ground Zero to Ground 899: David Foster Wallace and September 11, 2001

For the past fourteen years, people of varied political aims have defined September 11, 2001 as an unnatural and unique event, despite the common notion that the attacks seemed familiar. According to Daniel Heischman, “Watching the two planes crash into tall skyscrapers, then seeing those towers of commerce and enterprise collapse, I found myself pulled in two different directions. I could not imagine that such things were happening; it was all like a very bad dream. However, the events felt eerily similar in some small way.”<sup>1</sup> Likewise, as Jürgen Habermas claims, “Perhaps September 11 could be called the first world-historical event in a strict sense: the impact, the explosion, the slow collapse – all of which was unfortunately no longer Hollywood but a horrific reality – literally unfolded before the eyes of a global public.”<sup>2</sup> The attacks became linked to one location but were observed by local and non-local viewers. It is unsurprising that authors and critics of the event focus on Manhattan or consider this a necessary place to begin, but for many people, the attacks have always been mediated through camera lenses. At first glance, it would seem true that only those geographically separate from the attacks would have the events mediated through camera lenses; however, those within New York City experienced the attacks similarly to those outside the city as Ingrid Sischy describes in “The Triumph of the Still”:

Like many others in downtown New York, I saw it with all my own eyes – my office window, 20 blocks north, is like a camera lens pointing toward the World Trade Center site. When the first tower was hit, it seemed unconceivable that such a thing could

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<sup>1</sup> Heischman, “The Uncanniness of September 11”, 197.

<sup>2</sup> Habermas, *The Divided West*, 7.

happen – and impossible that the other tower could be hit. It was. There was no way I could imagine the buildings would come down. They did. I saw the glass and metal fill the sky, and the people jumping...After all, this was a plot familiar from so many Hollywood movies, which now looked tame compared with what I was witnessing through my windows.<sup>3</sup>

In essence, Sischy's statement operates as a simile; however, the experience – a type of eye-witnessing – suggests that it was framed in a similar manner to the television coverage. That is why the viewer witnesses the attacks and is close enough to see material 'fill the sky', but the importance placed on those geographically close to the attacks – twenty blocks away from the attacks – loses its privilege: the experience is similar to those elsewhere in the United States. Sischy resides in Manhattan, but her view becomes comparable to the television coverage in that no matter where a person viewed the attacks it was impossible to gather a complete account of the event. Sischy's testimony provides a type of eye-witnessing that aligns itself with Slavoj Žižek's perspective, namely the mention of Hollywood and effect of footage. Žižek argues in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*: "While the number of victims – 3,000 – is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the carnage we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people."<sup>4</sup> Sischy and Žižek imply a distinction between those who experienced the attacks from a street view and from a distanced view. Nonetheless, the attacks were spun onto a crime against all Americans and not simply New York City, which in turn compelled many to provide testimony of the attacks regardless of being eye-witness or not.

Whereas eye-witness testimony became fairly typical, David Foster Wallace's essay, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" became a September 11 testimony despite being set in the

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<sup>3</sup> Sischy, "Triumph of the Still", 193.

<sup>4</sup> Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 15.

Midwest. One of Wallace's biographers, D.T. Max, writes that Wallace "did not know whether he had feelings about the attacks beyond the ordinary, but when *Rolling Stone* approached him for a piece on his response, he felt drawn to try."<sup>5</sup> The editors at *Rolling Stone* felt that a 'view' from the Midwest would be a productive addition to the emerging September 11 testimony. For Max, Wallace's essay is "a piece of oblique social analysis, a tribute both to the heartland and recovery."<sup>6</sup> Although events associated with September 11 became linked to specific locations, the testimonies considered the attempts at commemoration across the nation since the events were considered attacks on all Americans. To illuminate this tension, Wallace documents his experience within Bloomington, Illinois in order to provide a different type of witness to the attacks as well as the recovery.

To clarify the structure of this type of witnessing, this thesis addresses three properties – *memory*, *geography*, and *nationalism* – that emerge within Wallace's text and will be the foundation for all subsequent analyses of September 11 narratives set in the Midwest. The *memory* subchapter considers the form of the narrative as well as commemoration of September 11, 2001, in particular how the initial hyperbolic language – 'a hole in civilization' – may have faded, making the uniqueness of the event fade as well. The *geography* subchapter details the ways technology bridges gaps between geographically separate people or experience and the local acts of commemoration, making connections between those located in Manhattan and those located in the Midwest. The *nationalism* subchapter considers the ways the characters struggle, and in many cases fail, to commemorate the event and the policies of the Bush administration. In effect, the properties show how Midwestern authors conjure September 11, 2001 and consider an experience that was not a culture of successful commemoration.

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<sup>5</sup> Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, 262.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

## I- Memory

While according to Thomas Friedman, September 11 was a “hole in the fabric of civilization”<sup>7</sup>, Wallace undermines this common notion by beginning his essay after the attacks. In September 11’s aftermath, Americans were compelled to commemorate the attacks in a manner that was simultaneously collective and individual. Wallace confronts an issue of cultural memory of the attacks while describing Midwest sensibilities, specifically Bloomington, Illinois, in order to commemorate the attack yet critique the cultural memory. One typical memory of the attacks became a group of people viewing the attacks; however, Wallace suggests that memory may not be trusted, especially in terms of memory of September 11. Wallace describes Bloomington’s citizens as generally isolated, yet the attacks provide a unique opportunity for community:

In true Midwest fashion, people in Bloomington aren’t unfriendly but do tend to be reserved. A stranger will smile warmly at you, but there normally won’t be any of that stangerly chitchat in waiting areas or checkout lines. But now, thanks to the Horror, there’s something to talk about that overrides all inhibition, as if we were all standing right there and just saw the same traffic accident.<sup>8</sup>

Wallace implies that a traffic accident may form a group to witness the accident; however those relationships come together briefly and then break apart. If September 11 becomes similar to a traffic accident, then Americans unify only temporarily. Further, Wallace suggests that in the communal relation the citizens attempt to order a solid narrative. In the original version of the

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<sup>7</sup> Friedman, *Searching for the Roots of 9/11*, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace, “The View”, 128.

essay, Wallace states: “*Caveat: Written very fast in what would probably qualify as shock.*”<sup>9</sup> In effect, his selection and memory of events may not be complete because of the shock of September 11. Wallace asks:

Is it normal to not remember things very well after only a couple days, or at any rate the order of things? I know at some point for a while there was the sound outside of some neighbor mowing his lawn, which seemed totally bizarre, but I don’t remember if anybody remarked on it. Sometimes it seemed like nobody said anything and sometimes it seemed like everybody was talking at once.<sup>10</sup>

Similar to any other testimony, Wallace questions what the viewer remembers, how the news is broadcast, and how the viewer reacts. Wallace states: “From the door of the kitchen I remember seeing the second tower fall and being confused about whether it was a replay of the first tower falling.”<sup>11</sup> One prominent reaction at this moment was to call loved ones, which Wallace describes, though “not all the calls made logical sense.”<sup>12</sup> With relation to Sischy’s quote that began this introduction, Wallace offers a similar view of the attack, despite being geographically separate from New York City:

I remember when I came in everybody was staring transfixed at one of the very few pieces of video CBS never reran, which was a distant wide-angle shot of the North Tower and its top floors’ exposed steel lattice in flames, and of dots detaching from the building and moving through the smoke down the screen, which then a sudden jerky tightening of the shot revealed to be actual people in coats and ties and skirts with their shoes falling off as they fell, some hanging onto ledges or girders and then letting go, upside-down or

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<sup>9</sup> Wallace, “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s”, *Rolling Stone*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

wriggling as they fell and one couple almost seeming (unverifiable) to be hugging each other as they fell those several stories and shrank back to dots as the camera then all of a sudden pulled back to the long view – I have no idea how long the clip took.<sup>13</sup>

The clip unsettles Wallace for a variety of reasons, some of which are a result of a break in geography. Bloomington is one hour behind New York; as such, many of the citizens were getting ready for work or already at work. Wallace continues, “then the hideous beauty of the rerun clip of the second plane hitting the tower, the blue and silver and black and spectacular orange of it, as more little moving dots fell.”<sup>14</sup> The ‘Dots’ could have been any piece of inorganic matter but when the camera lens zooms in the wonder is replaced by horror—those dots are actual people, as such, once the camera pulled back, the people are referenced again as dots by Wallace. As the clips are rerun it becomes difficult for Wallace to remember what is in real-time and what has been replayed; as such, the facts become hard to verify, which in turn suggests that each view has a felt sense of the attacks yet remains apart from the carnage. Despite this, Wallace’s memory of the attacks becomes palpable as he describes that “it seems grotesque to talk about being traumatized by a piece of video when the people in the video were dying.”<sup>15</sup> Wallace becomes unsettled by the view of the attacks, in part because the carnage he sees does not fully seem filmic or fictive; thus the part of the attacks he can witness from his geographic location frustrates his memory of the attacks.

## **II- Geography**

Wallace argues that the people of Bloomington use television inordinately; however their concept of reality may not be all that different from other Americans. Within “The View,”

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>14</sup> Wallace, “The View”, 136.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 136.

Wallace describes Bloomington as normal, “as Midwest cities go, the only remarkable thing about Bloomington is its prosperity.”<sup>16</sup> Bloomington seems to offer a unique perspective of the September 11 attacks, namely the ways the town becomes aware of the attacks and the recovery. In order to describe this awareness, Wallace suggests that the people of Bloomington “watch massive, staggering amounts of TV...Something that’s obvious but important to keep in mind re Bloomington and the Horror is that reality – any felt sense of a larger world – is mainly televisual. New York’s skyline, for instance, is as recognizable here as anyplace else, but what it’s recognized from is TV.”<sup>17</sup> Through his description of Bloomington and New York City, Wallace argues that what seems specific to Bloomington – excessive television viewing – actually informs his sense of reality of Bloomington, which, in turn, informs the reader’s experience of Bloomington by describing certain qualities through television allusions.

For many Americans, their felt sense of reality with regard to September 11, 2001 has always been mediated through the newspaper and television. Wallace documents this mediation by beginning the section “Aerial & Ground Views” with a series of headlines from the local newspaper, the *Pantagraph*, from September 12, 2001: “Everyone here gets the local news organ...which is roundly loathed by most of the natives I know. Imagine, let’s say, a well-funded college newspaper co-edited by Bill O’Reilly and Martha Stewart.”<sup>18</sup> Wallace could have stated the name of the newspaper and cited the headlines but he needed the allusions to move toward a *felt* sense of reality of Bloomington’s newspaper. Ultimately, Wallace implies the newspaper is superficial and loathed which, in turn, further explains the excessive television viewing within Bloomington, by suggesting that the newspaper is poorly composed and the television is widely

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 133-134.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 132.

trusted. Similar to television providing a felt sense for Bloomingtonians, the allusions throughout Wallace's piece offer a connection between reader and the characters. More important still, Wallace uses the newspaper headlines to suggest a town struggling to contextualize the attacks within commemoration and retaliation:

Attacked! After two pages of AP stuff, you get to the real *Pantagraph*. Everything to follow is *sic*...Stunned citizens run through many emotions; clergy open arms to help people deal with tragedy; ISU professor: B-N not a likely target; Prices rocket at gas pumps; Amputee gives inspiration speech... The Op-Ed column for 9/12 starts out: 'The carnage we have seen through the eyes of lenses in New York City and Washington, D.C., still seems like an R-rated movie out of Hollywood.'<sup>19</sup>

By way of this context, Wallace illuminates two qualities about Bloomington in relation to the September 11 attacks. First, the information regarding the attacks becomes known through the Associated Press reporting. More important still, this mention suggests that the Bloomingtonians could be open to the framework that will be offered by the Bush administration in how to deal with the attacks.

To support this argument, Wallace mentions that Bloomington and the smaller city, Normal – signaled by B-N – are not 'likely targets.' While Bloomington was not directly impacted by the attacks, the *Pantagraph* reported on a general paranoia that the terrorists might attack again. Nevertheless, the mention of the op-ed signals the necessity for the televisual and filmic within Bloomington. Wallace posits that "TV's also more of a social phenomenon than on the East Coast, where in my experience people are almost constantly leaving home to go meet other people face-to-face in public places."<sup>20</sup> As such, it would seem fairly typical for

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 134.

Bloomingtonians to relate to September 11 through the television coverage. Wallace states “what you do in Bloomington is all get together at somebody’s house and watch something. In Bloomington, therefore, to have a home without a TV is to become a kind of constant and Kramer- like presence in others’ homes.”<sup>21</sup> Wallace uses a *Seinfeld* reference to compare the presence in Bloomington to a character that would likely be known regardless of geographic location, making what would seem specific to a show set in New York City apparent, through a simile, in Bloomington. Wallace notes the unusual quantity of television viewing, yet with regard to September 11 many found connection through television viewing, allowing for a place to gather and watch the unfolding news coverage. Given this community, how might a character reconcile personal political views after the community of the day recedes when the impending war effort emerges? Ultimately, Wallace suggests that the cultural memory of September 11 will fade once the nation responds to the reactionary policies of the Bush administration, resulting in complicated questions about permanent and temporary nationalism.

### **III- Nationalism**

Through the description of flags in Bloomington, Wallace suggests the community formed post-September 11 might not last. Wallace begins the section ‘Wednesday’ – September 12, 2001 – with “Everyone has flags out. Homes. Businesses. It’s odd: you never see anybody putting out a flag, but by Wednesday morning there they all are: Big flags, small, regular flag-sized flags.”<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, the emergence of flags signals a national unity as a result of September 11. On the other hand, Wallace positions permanent flags against temporary flags that are in place only because of September 11. In this manner, Wallace describes the variety of flags in Bloomington: “A lot of homeowners here have those special angled flag-holders by their

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 129.

front door, the kind whose brace takes four Phillips screws. Plus thousands of the little handheld flags-on-a-stick you normally see at parades – some yards have dozens of these stuck in the ground all over, as if they’d somehow all just sprouted overnight”<sup>23</sup> The flags that are placed in the angled holders by the front door suggests that the residents’ displays are not as a result of September 11. In other words, the flag would be flown pre-September 11 and continue to do so well after the initial unity. The alternative to the flags by the doors are the flags that ‘sprouted overnight.’ The verb ‘sprouted’ signals a natural cycle in which the national unity and patriotism flourishing in the days after September 11 may wane in the coming months, in particular as President Bush prepares the nation for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Wallace describes a sense of unity that has affected the entirety of Bloomington, in particular the appearance of flags despite economic class:

Rural-road people attach the little flags to their mailboxes out by the street. A good number of vehicles have them wedged in their grille or attached to the antenna. More than a few large homes around Franklin Park or out on the east side even have enormous multistory flags hanging gonfalon-style down over their facades.<sup>24</sup>

The rural people attach the flags to a mailbox where any number of forces could remove the flag whereas several vehicles simply wedge the flag into the grille, which suggests several motives for the person. First, the driver merely wanted to feel part of the collective mourning as a result of September 11, which was best signified by the flag. Second, rather than attach the flag permanently to their home, the driver wanted their sense of patriotism to be seen wherever they traveled in the day. Third, in conjunction with the first statement, the person felt a sense of duty

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Wallace, “The View”, 129.

to show support for the victims, though did it hastily. Wallace's neighbor, Mr. N—, provides the counter to the various temporary flags in Bloomington. Wallace states:

My own next door neighbor, a retired bookkeeper and USAF vet who home- and lawn-care are nothing short of phenomenal, has a regulation-size anodized flagpole secured in eighteen inches of reinforced cement that none of the other neighbors like very much because they feel it draws lighting...His flag is out straight and popping smartly in the wind. It's far and away the biggest flag on our street...Mr. N—'s pole's halyard has metal elements that clank against the pole when it's windy, which is something else the neighbors don't much care for.<sup>25</sup>

Rather than place the flag in the grille of a truck or on top of a mailbox, Mr. N—'s flagpole is in eighteen inches of cement, making his sense of patriotism appear permanent. Wallace subtly references the neighbors' conflicted allegiance to the flag in two ways. *First*, they are worried about the flagpole attracting lightning. This statement seems to be used for a dual purpose as it could be read as literal lightning to the metal, or, that the obnoxious flagpole may attract criticism or aggression from those who resist American nationalism. According to Wallace, the flagpole shines "like God's own wrath."<sup>26</sup> *Second*, the halyard clanks against the pole which makes a repetitive noise that would be constant reminder to the neighbors of Mr. N—'s impressive, obnoxious flag. Despite the conflicted feeling toward Mr. N— and his flagpole, the third statement seems probable as Wallace states "The overall point being that on Wednesday here there's a weird accretive pressure to have a flag out. If the purpose of displaying a flag is to make a statement, it seems like at a certain point of density of flags you're making more of a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 130.

statement if you *don't* have a flag out.”<sup>27</sup> The statement could be two-fold. First, if the person doesn't have a flag they don't support the victims. Second, they lack American pride. Wallace finds himself without a flag and sent on a frantic search throughout Bloomington to find a flag, which in the space of his testimony becomes an abreaction: “The cold reality is that there is not a flag to be had in this town...All those people dead and I'm sent to the edge by a plastic flag.”<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, Wallace finds himself alienated from the commemoration in Bloomington and finds community in an unlikely place at a convenience store:

In one more of the Horror's weird twists of fate and circumstance, it's the KWIK-N-EZ proprietor himself (a Pakistani, by the way) who offers solace and a shoulder and a strange kind of unspoken understanding, and who lets me go back and sit in the stockroom amid every conceivable petty vice and indulgence America has to offer and compose myself, and who only slightly later, over Styrofoam cups of a strange kind of perfumey tea with a great deal of milk in it, suggests construction paper and ‘Magical Markers’ which explains my now-beloved and proudly displayed homemade flag.<sup>29</sup>

Wallace's homemade flag provokes a contrast between the temporary flags and permanent flags within “The View;” in particular, it seems to ask, was it more important to commemorate the attacks with typical responses – a traditional American flag – or is the sense of unity enough: Wallace's construction paper flag? In September 11's wake there was a framework put in place for the response to the attacks, however, after a few months, the framework dissolved for some. Throughout “The View”, Wallace considers moments of authentic community as well as moments of failed community. Wallace ends the essay with a feeling of connection and

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<sup>27</sup> Wallace, “The View”, 130.

<sup>28</sup> Wallace, “The View”, 131.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 131-132.

alienation from Bloomington, in particular between the ladies and Wallace's best friend in Bloomington, F—, and Mrs. Thompson's son, Duane:

It forces you to think and do things you most likely wouldn't alone...you're wrong about the president, that your view of him is maybe distorted and he's actually far smarter and more substantial than you believe, not just some soulless golem or nexus of corporate interests dressed up in a suit but a statesman of courage...and it's good...Truly decent, innocent people can be taxing to be around. I'm not for a moment trying to suggest that everyone I know in Bloomington is like Mrs. Thompson...I'm trying, rather, to explain how some part of the horror of the Horror was knowing, deep in my heart, that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my America, and F—'s, and poor old loathsome Duane's, than it was these ladies.<sup>30</sup>

While Wallace resists outright stating that America got what it deserved, he seems to argue that September 11 may have been the result of systemic issues with the American psyche. Ultimately, Wallace assists President George W. Bush's claim that "Each of us will remember what happened that day, and to whom it happened. We'll remember the moment the news came — where we were and what we were doing. Some will remember the image of a fire, or a story of rescue. Some will carry memories of a face and voice gone forever."<sup>31</sup> Wallace seems in line with Bush in many ways; more important still, Wallace seems to be along the lines of David Simpson's argument in *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* that "if there was on September 12, 2001, and for some time thereafter such a potential for the making of a common cause, has it been lost forever by the invasion of Iraq and the ongoing brutalities it has perpetuated on both

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<sup>30</sup> Wallace, "The View", 140.

<sup>31</sup> Bush, "Address to Congress and the American People", September 20, 2001.

the enemy and the homeland?”<sup>32</sup> The memory of the attacks were simultaneously collective and individual, fixed on Manhattan and on Americans, at once focused on commemoration and on retaliation.

To provide a brief overview of the remainder of the thesis, there are two questions that will be analyzed:

*First: did the attacks constitute a break from the previous timeline?* In Chapter 1, I examine Don DeLillo’s novel *Falling Man* and his essay “In the Ruins of the Future” and then pivot toward Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Freedom*. DeLillo focuses on a fixed geographic and temporal spaces, while Franzen suggests that it is possible to tell a September 11 story without remaining tied to Manhattan.

*Second: have the attacks moved from a rupture in time to a return to normal?* Having laid the foundation for how September 11 might have changed the world in chapter one, in the second chapter September 11 transitioned from catastrophe to normal in the few months after the attacks. I begin with Jules and Gedeon Naudet’s documentary, *9/11*, which yoked together the traumatic events of September 11 and a Hollywood-style, coming-of-age-drama. Then, I turn to *The Echo Maker*, a novel by Richard Powers that suggests September 11, 2001 was real and everything afterwards is unreal.

For the past fourteen years, people of varied political persuasions identified September 11, 2001 as a unique and monumental moment in the American cultural rhythm and psyche. Critics and authors followed the attacks with efforts to provide meaning to the attacks, remaining tied to New York City, despite the ways the attacks became non-local through technology and policy. This thesis argues that if we select Midwestern narratives like *Freedom* and *The Echo*

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<sup>32</sup> Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, 167.

*Maker* then we conjure a September 11 experience that is not merely a culture of commemoration, rather a culture of misidentification, loneliness, and failed commemoration.

## Chapter 1

### A View from Somewhere: *Freedom* and Experience in the Time of Death

In *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, David Simpson asked: “Has the world changed since September 11? If it has, then in what ways? If it has not changed, then who has an interest in claiming it has?”<sup>33</sup> Don DeLillo provides a conflicted answer. Both his 2007 novel *Falling Man* and his 2001 essay “In the Ruins of the Future” signal September 11 as a defining moment in the cultural rhythm and psyche. In his essay, DeLillo suggests “in its destruction of every basis of comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space.”<sup>34</sup> *Falling Man* begins with a man standing amidst rubble and debris, having just emerged from the World Trade Center in Manhattan: “The streets and cars were surfaced in ash and there were garbage bags stacked high at curbstones and against the sides of buildings. He walked slowly, watching for something he could not identify. Everything was gray, it was limp and failed...a city somewhere else, under permanent siege.”<sup>35</sup> DeLillo compels his readers to consider the world immediately following the attacks as a world broken from pre-September 11, 2001. He begins:

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<sup>33</sup> Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, 1.

<sup>34</sup> DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future”, *Harpers Magazine*, December 2001.

<sup>35</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 24-25.

The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, busting around corners, seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall.<sup>36</sup>

DeLillo suggests September 11 constitutes a full rupture from any sense of a cultural rhythm, making the attacks unique to other events. He joins a group of various writers that characterize September 11 as the day everything changed. As David Simpson suggests, “Many of us who were addressing even the most circumscribed of publics...felt the urge in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, to make a statement, to testify, to register a response, to initiate some sort of commemoration.”<sup>37</sup> Jenny Edkins suggests that September 11, 2001 was the moment when “trauma time collided with the time of the state” which produced “a curious unknown time, a time with no end in sight.”<sup>38</sup> In effect, the attacks marked an interruption in the cultural rhythm and psyche. DeLillo, Simpson, and Edkins each obsess over the uniqueness of the attacks while also initiating conversations about the possibility of a return to normal, resulting in the most troubling question: what if nothing changed? If September 11 constitutes a full break, an interruption of a cultural rhythm, what if the cultural rhythm was restored? In line with Edkins remarks, DeLillo marks the conflict between trauma time and capitalist time:

In the past decade the surge of capital markets has dominated discourse and shaped global consciousness. Multinational corporations have come to seem more vital and influential than governments...All this changed on September 11. Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 233.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

While DeLillo signals a palpable force from September 11, his use of ‘today, again’ responds to the question of a break/non-break from a previous timeline. This repetition allows for the possibility that September 11 was not a break from earlier events, suggesting the terrorists secured the world narrative previously as they did on September 11, for instance, the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center or the 1998 bombing of the U.S.S. Cole. *Falling Man* considers a ruptured timeline where the American cultural rhythm and psyche was irrevocably damaged by the attacks. DeLillo states, “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night.”<sup>40</sup> Even considerations of a street signals a rupture from other streets in New York City. The geographic description departs from prior knowledge of the street. Despite DeLillo’s analysis of post-September 11 life, his novel does not showcase September 11 experience for some. Michiko Kakutani’s *New York Times* review of *Falling Man* states, “the novel feels tired and brittle . . . small and unsatisfying and inadequate.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, Kakutani seems to suggest that to comprehend all of September 11, the narrative should move outside the narrow focus of one man’s life in Manhattan.

To correct these problems, Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Freedom* takes up the brutal decade of the 2000s, to show how September 11 might be understood as a significant event but not a history-changing one. Unlike other September 11 narratives, *Freedom* does not situate the characters within the World Trade Center, or in Manhattan in September, or other normative September 11 plot structures. In so doing, Franzen recognizes the importance of the event and recovery, yet he shows a different scene than DeLillo’s permanent siege:

This was still the pinch point of the world, this neighborhood. Here was the World Trade Center’s floodlit cicatrix, here the gold hoard of the Federal Reserve, here the Tombs and

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<sup>40</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Kakutani, “A Man, a Woman and a Day of Terror.”

the Stock Exchange and City Hall, here Morgan Stanley and American Express and the windowless monoliths of Verizon, here stirring views across the harbor toward distant Liberty in her skin of green oxide.<sup>42</sup>

While DeLillo confines September 11 experience to the street, Franzen expands the world toward a neighborhood, a Federal Reserve, and a global economy. Franzen links two “skins” – the Statue of Liberty and the World Trade Center’s cicatrix – in order to show how New York City had emblems of global capitalism pre-September 11 and will post-September 11. The neighborhood commemorates the attacks while returning to normal, thus suggesting a pre-September 11 world that endures. Franzen compels the reader to consider the geographical importance of viewing this scene, in particular how the New York City neighborhood has changed, yet what remains is idyllic America: the Statue of Liberty. Despite the devastation, Americans could locate a monument that signals that American liberty and prosperity still exists. The attacks conjured fear within the streets of New York City, yet Franzen seems to suggest that September 11 may not be the unique, monumental event that irrevocably interrupted the cultural rhythm and psyche.

I make this claim because Franzen uses recursive subchapters to detail how memory *persists* within current time. Further, some September 11 experiences were driven by technology, thus, Franzen incorporates moments of technology use to condense geographical distance into screens or telephone calls, allowing for connection despite geographical distance in a similar way that the events of September 11 unfolded for and connected with people despite their distance from Manhattan. Thus, September 11 becomes both continuous and discontinuous. Lastly, September 11 has been defined as a time of death where many became painfully aware of America’s role in

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<sup>42</sup> Franzen, 198.

the world. Franzen describes failed moments of commemoration and isolation from the culture of commemoration and retaliation that spread in the years post-September 11.

### **I – Memory**

While the majority of September 11 narratives occur around the World Trade Center, Jonathan Franzen pivots away from New York City in favor of experience in St. Paul, Minnesota and Washington, D.C. Throughout *Freedom*, Franzen details how the past persists within the present for his characters, namely Walter and Patty Berglund, the pioneers of a newly gentrified neighborhood. Franzen compels the reader to consider a world leading up to the 2000s that includes gentrification, city sprawl, and sordid histories of the local government, families, and citizens of St. Paul, specifically Ramsey Hill, as the neighbors navigate questions about the emerging new cars, efficacy of cloth diapers, and other questions of families. Throughout this discussion, Franzen details the ways a neighborhood may respond to the emerging American exceptionalism in the latter half of the twentieth century against the emerging fears post-September 11:

...let the house stand empty evening after evening, let the flower beds go to seed and the hedges go unclipped and the windows go unwashed, let the dirty urban snow engulf the warped GORE LIEBERMAN sign still stuck in the front yard...Patty spent all of the following summer away at Nameless Lake, and soon after her return--a month after Joey went off to the University of Virginia...and two weeks after the great national tragedy--a FOR SALE sign went up in the front of the Victorian into which she and Walter had poured fully half their lives. Walter had begun commuting to a new job in Washington.

Though housing prices would soon be rebounding to unprecedented heights, the local market was still near the bottom of its post 9/11 slump.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike DeLillo's work with a complete rupture, Franzen posits a pre-September 11 world within post-September 11, 2001, particularly the shift from American prosperity of the second half of the twentieth century and the uncertainty after the attacks. In this manner, the 'GORE LIEBERMAN' sign signals a time prior to George W. Bush's election; the provided timeline of two weeks shows the 'FOR SALE' sign occurring in a world since September 11. This passage offers a troubling image of the world. The Victorian, newly refurbished, stands alone with a tattered political sign in the wake of September 11. *Freedom* attempts to capture the post-September 11 world and the attempts of the Berglund family to navigate the threats in this world. The threats consist of everything from ubiquitous terrorists, to global companies profiteering off contracts, to marital issues, to even seemingly benign memories. *Freedom's* form returns to plot points as Franzen shows the core characters' movement from comfortable living to a series of personal traumas, to a semblance of calm and contentment.

To illustrate this point, Franzen creates a timeline that does not progress linearly: each plot point becomes a coordinate for the reader to connect with a moment later in the text. For instance, the opening section closes with the Berglund's leaving St. Paul in 2001 and the next section begins with a discussion of Patty Berglund's early life titled "Mistakes were Made: Autobiography of Patty Berglund by Patty Berglund (Composed at Her Therapist's Suggestion)."<sup>44</sup> Patty composes the autobiography in 2004 while recounting her life from the late 1970s forward. The ending of the previous section and the autobiography provides a foundation for the remainder of the novel while concealing the moments that led to the autobiography.

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<sup>43</sup> Franzen, *Freedom*, 26.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

Ultimately, Franzen compels the reader to consider, through heavy use of flashbacks, the ways in which the past persists within current experience and relationships.

If Franzen considers *Freedom* a post-September 11 novel, then the decision to describe a world pre-September 11, 2001 and then direct the narrative to 2004 without mentioning the attacks makes two statements about the event. First, the common notion that September 11 was the unique event does not apply because the Franzen purposefully skips the event. Second, the experience pre-September 11, 2001 and post-September 11, 2001 are similar enough that focusing on the date is impractical for his narrative. The reader notes a jump to 2004 which informs their memory of 2001-2004. Whereas normative responses to the memory of September 11 elevate the date, Franzen's proposed contribution ignores the date, making the attacks unnecessary to tell a September 11 story.

Despite subtle references to September 11, Franzen never directly states September 11, 2001, rather he expresses the event through a series of euphemisms used for a variety of situations, which suggests an unquantified meaning. In the passage that ends the opening section, Franzen uses "the two weeks after the great national tragedy"<sup>45</sup> to situate the world Walter and Patty Berglund would leave Ramsey Hill. While Franzen mentions the national tragedy, the definitional act in this moment is not September 11; instead, Franzen places the focus on the individual trauma of those characters. September 11 named the 'great national tragedy' supposes the event as more traumatic and ruptured from previous tragedy. The event as the great 'national' tragedy imposes a holistic approach where every reader everywhere will know that the event meant here is September 11, 2001. The message depends on the reader's memory of September 11 that informs their current psyche. In the passage that ends the opening section, Franzen

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<sup>45</sup> Franzen, *Freedom*, 26.

references the “post-9/11 slump.”<sup>46</sup> The slump refers to terrible housing prices, which Franzen concedes were imposed by September 11, yet they will rebound to pre-September 11 standards. Further, September 11 became an adjective which signals a temporary change, in particular September 11 registers a response for this era that might not withstand the test of time, similar to other widespread phenomenon, a phrase useful to describe the moment at hand but not anything that follows. According to Mary Kalantzis, September 11 became “another world-changing phenomenon reduced to mundane metaphor: clanging, mixed, ambiguous, double speaking”<sup>47</sup> and it “seemed that all people, of all ideological persuasions, were using September 11 as the touchstone for any interpretation that suited them.”<sup>48</sup> The use of ‘9/11’ evokes a collective memory for American citizens, a memory that often conjures images of the World Trade Center. In terms of memory, ‘9/11’ both elevates a particular place – the World Trade Center – and resists a specific year in the timeline. Even naming the event as “September 11” would impart a full rupture. To elevate either “9/11” or “September 11” suggests a hole in the timeline and a new era without end. In Franzen’s treatment of September 11, 2001, the narratives arrive at a coordinate closer to that suggested by David Simpson: “The event we call 9/11 has a past that we can rediscover, a present that we must monitor, and a future we can project.”<sup>49</sup> Franzen answers Simpson’s statement by writing a narrative that does not begin and end with Manhattan, thus suggesting that we have a past that persists, a present that we must endure, and a future that is possible.

## II- Geography

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Kalantzis, September 11: Mixed Metaphor”, 582.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 583.

<sup>49</sup> Simpson, *9/11 Culture of Commemoration*, 13.

Franzen details a continuation of a pre-September 11 timeline by positioning pastoral and urban settings against each other, while showing how technology may assist those geographically separate from each other feel collective mourning. At this point, Franzen illustrates the effect different geographical locations may have in determining September 11 as the definitional event. Whereas New York City condenses September 11 to several buildings, Franzen describes experiences of September 11 in places outside New York City where the attacks may have been incorporated into daily life. Franzen begins the first section that focuses on Joey Berglund, Walter and Patty's often precocious son, with the sentence, "Growing up in St. Paul, Joey Berglund had received numberless assurances that his life was destined to be a lucky one."<sup>50</sup> For the majority of Joey's life any interaction was handled with determination and an awareness of how to benefit from the deal. Joey's relationships are often mediated by a telephone or the television screen. While watching the September 11 coverage, Joey separates the horror on the screen from the attacks on the World Trade Center – the coverage becomes merely something on television:

For two and half weeks, college looked like it would be an extension of the world as he had always known it, only better. He was so convinced of this—took it so much for granted—that on the morning of September 11 he actually left his roommate, Jonathan, to monitor the burning World Trade Center and Pentagon while he hurried off to his Econ 201 lecture. Not until he reached the big auditorium and found it all but empty did he understand that a really serious glitch had occurred.<sup>51</sup>

Joey does not incorporate the trauma of September 11 into his life initially; instead, he attempts to continue his life as if the event never happened. Joey believes that his world, a world deemed

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<sup>50</sup> Franzen, *Freedom*, 232.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

a lucky one, would continue to bend to his will. After Joey's error in going to the lecture hall, Franzen describes Joey's mood as follows:

In the days after 9/11, everything seemed extremely stupid to Joey. It was stupid that a 'Vigil of Concern' was held for no practical reason, it was stupid that people kept watching the same disaster footage over and over...it was stupid that so many kids left Grounds to be with their families...A stupidly big fuss was made about the students who'd lost relatives or family friends in the attacks."<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, the collective mourning seemed useless to Joey.

Though Joey moves closer to those affected by the attacks and acts of commemoration, he fails to commemorate the attacks as he ignores the 'Vigil of Concern' and the endlessly looping news coverage because the attacks seems to not personally affect him. Joey wanted his university, his life, and his country to continue living life, and not be defined by September 11. Many of his classmates traveled home to be with their families in the days after September 11, yet Joey used the telephone to bridge a geographical gap between himself and the past he had worked to break:

There had been a brief spate of familial phoning after 9/11, but the talk had mostly been impersonal, his mom amusingly ranting about how she couldn't stop watching CNN even though she was convinced that watching so much CNN was harming her, his dad taking the opportunity to vent his longstanding hostility to organized religion, and Jessica flaunting her knowledge of non-Western cultures and explaining the legitimacy of their beef with US imperialism.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Franzen, *Freedom*, 233.

<sup>53</sup> Franzen, *Freedom*, 241.

Although the Berglund family use phones after September 11, their conversations do not function as a vigil for those affected by the attacks; instead, each family member changes the subject to peripheral ideas. His mom viewed her TV time as both harmful and necessary to feel part of a collective (though separated spatially) mourning. His father spent their conversation venting about organized religion, though resisting an urge to pin the blame on one religion. His sister espoused knowledge of the Other while also seeming outside of, at least at the time, the normative response to September 11, 2001. Ultimately, the three opinions from Joey's family offers a glimpse into the ways people were incorporating or resisting the framework presented by the Bush administration.

Along these lines, Jessica and Walter's feigned interest in September 11 suggests how the attacks may have been a response to decades of United States foreign policy in or regional beliefs of the Middle East. In their conjecture, the attacks are not anomalous but a response to the American cultural rhythm of the latter half of the twentieth century. While Walter and Jessica's response remains on a cultural level, Patty's response hints at the normative experience of watching September 11 unfold on the television screen, namely a sense of catharsis and shame for watching. While many used the telephone to express their September 11 induced depression freely, Joey rejects this collective mourning. Joey does call his parents though the phone call was not under the same concern as his classmates. Despite Joey's penchant for resisting the culture of commemoration, Franzen counters Joey's emotional state during September 11 with several moments of Joey within New York City as the city street provides a scene where Joey connects with people, yet the scene describes an American psyche fearful of those believed to be dangerous as well as unnamed terrorists who might attack:

His first days in the city...were like hyper-vivid continuations of the urban dreams he was having all night. Humanity coming at him from every direction. Andean musicians piping and drumming in Union Square. Solemn firefighters nodding to the crowd assembled by a 9/11 shrine outside a station house. A pair of fur-coated ladies ballsily appropriating a cab that Casey had hailed outside Bloomingdale's. Très hot middle-school girls wearing jeans under their miniskirts and slouching on the subway with their legs wide open. Cornrowed ghetto kids in ominous jumbo parkas, National Guard troops patrolling Grand Central with highly advanced weapons. And a Chinese grandmother hawking DVDs of films that hadn't even opened yet...each encounter was like a poem he instantly memorized.<sup>54</sup>

While Joey ignored New York City on the television screen, the view of a New York City street compels him to consider a pre-September 11 world within a post-September 11 world, while not privileging one experience over the other. Unlike DeLillo's city street covered in dust and determined to remain so, Franzen offers a vibrant city street that signals an American psyche attempting to commemorate the attacks while returning to normal. The street contains people that would be present without September 11 – the middle school girls, a Chinese grandmother, Andean musicians – with experiences contingent on September 11 – the firefighters nodding to the crowd and the National Guard troops. Yet, the street does not show a post-September 11 experience over a pre-September 11 experience, or vice versa; instead, the pre- and post-September 11 coexist within the city street. Therefore, September 11, 2001 did not constitute a break from the previous timeline. Despite his tendency to control his emotions, this passage presents Joey as receptive to humanity and in a dreamlike state. The whole of New York City

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<sup>54</sup> Franzen, *Freedom*, 279.

besieged Joey and each encounter had become a poem. Though the presence of the September 11 memorial and the National Guard troops reminds the reader of the timeline of events, the general feeling of this street is one of unity and ordinary life. Heretofore, Joey craves individuality yet in his first days in New York City, he hopes for a group connection.

One unusual form of connection that Franzen describes is the way some received contracts as a form of retaliation instead of commemoration. Franzen writes that some attempted to “exploit this unique historical moment to resolve an intractable geopolitical deadlock and radically expand the sphere of freedom.”<sup>55</sup> Many consider September 11 inherently destructive; however, the exploitation of ‘this unique historical moment’ brought a flurry of economic growth, as Walter explains: “As for job security, it was enough to point to the declarations, issued by various members of the Bush administration, that America would be defending itself in the Middle East for generations to come. There was no foreseeable end to the war on terror and ergo, no end to the demand for body armor.”<sup>56</sup> Now that the country had moved to retaliation for the attacks, both economically and militarily, Franzen uses Joey as a stand-in for those who sought to profit off the endless economic potential.

With such a negative depiction of economics since September 11, 2001, Franzen uses Joey as a stand-in for those who used the situation to further their personal gains. Joey states, “People are getting killed over there because their economy... We’re trying to fix their economy.”<sup>57</sup> Given these claims, the involvement in the Middle East was not solely to retaliate for September 11; instead, the United States worked to fix their economy. The tension between

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<sup>55</sup> Franzen, *Freedom*, 266.

<sup>56</sup> Franzen, *Freedom*, 301.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

failed economy “over there” and the systemic oppression of the United States is a question throughout Franzen’s work.

Though Joey resisted the culture of commemoration after September 11, his economic gain forced him to feel isolated from this unique community. The sum freed him from his last financial ties to St. Paul yet it had led to the same depression that plagues his mother and girlfriend, thus linking him back to his past. Unlike previous experience, Joey could not separate himself from the collective news coverage:

And then one night, on CNN, he saw the news of an ambush outside Fallujah in which several American trucks had broken down, leaving their contract drivers to be butchered by insurgents. Although he didn’t see any A10s in the CNN footage, he became so anxious that he had to drink himself to sleep.<sup>58</sup>

The above passage becomes pivotal to Joey’s character development within the novel in three ways, each one important to the understanding of September 11’s function in *Freedom*. *First*, with the September 11 footage, Joey had connection – his roommate, Jonathan – yet Joey found the commemoration post-September 11 to be useless. *Second*, with the September 11 footage in real time, Joey left the room in order to soften the force of the video; with the taped footage, Joey became anxious despite the lack of straightforward knowledge about the attacks. More important still, he becomes ‘anxious’ in this passage whereas prior to this moment he had handled tragedy with extreme calm and he seeks confirmation that the Fallujah attacks were not his fault. The incredible payday and the ascension into the business world had offered Joey a chance to separate from his geographical birthplace, his familial stricture, and to be incorporated into the powerful elite. Yet, the experience of watching CNN in this instance left Joey needing to assuage

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<sup>58</sup> Franzen, *Freedom*, 442.

the guilt of being responsible, even partially responsible for the parts that may have led to the tanks malfunctioning in Iraq. In effect, Joey sought community – a sense of connection he experienced in the city streets of New York City – yet he was isolated and was forced to drink himself to sleep, resulting in a trauma not present, as Joey “woke up some hours later, in a sweat, mostly sober...he knew he had to call his father in the morning...he could see now that nobody else could advise him what to do...and that nobody could absolve him...It was to his strict, principled father that a full accounting need to be made.”<sup>59</sup> Ironically, the event known as September 11 did not cause this change within Joey, rather, the subsequent economic opportunities led to this change, thus the events after September 11 sutured together family relation for Joey. *Lastly*, the collective television viewing in the days after September 11 gave way to far more isolated experiences with the war effort, in particular ways that people were excluded as the nation moved from commemoration to retaliation.

### III- Nationalism

Throughout the novel, Franzen describes the cultural rhythm of global capitalism and the ways the culture of commemoration was hijacked in order to serve Americans of various political persuasions. According to President Bush, the United States’s “responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and to rid the world of evil. War has been waged against us by stealth and deceit and murder. This nation is peaceful, but fierce when stirred with anger. This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others. It will end in a way, and at an hour, of our choosing.”<sup>60</sup> In effect, the attacks seemed spontaneous, the retaliation seemed calculated. Baudrillard argues, “Terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere. There is a global perfusion of

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<sup>59</sup> Franzen, *Freedom*, 442.

<sup>60</sup> Bush, “National Prayer Service”, September 14, 2001.

terrorism, which accompanies any system of domination as though it were its shadow, ready to activate itself anywhere, like a double agent.”<sup>61</sup> Given the claim made by Bush and by Baudrillard, Franzen describes a post-September 11 experience informed by the fear of terrorists as well as paranoia of misidentifying someone as a terrorist

In effect, the Bush administration policies deftly argued there was inherent good within the United States and inherent evil outside the United States, suggesting a need to preserve the country while keeping others out. Through Franzen’s investigation of post-September 11 experience he details the development of cultural memory of the attacks through patriotism and global capitalism. With the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Joey saw the United States claiming its place in history, similar to the ways Joey hoped for individual success. While in the previous section Joey was enamored with a metropolitan city, Franzen uses Richard Katz as a stand-in for paranoia as a result of a metropolitan city. Franzen states:

Although he’d played D.C. often enough over the years, its horizontality and vexing diagonal avenues never ceased to freak him out. He felt like a rat in a government maze here. For all he could tell from the back seat of his taxi, the driver was taking him not to Georgetown but to the Israeli embassy for enhanced interrogation.<sup>62</sup>

Katz is an American citizen, born in Yonkers, New York, and besides attending the same Midwestern college as Walter and Patty would be clearly identified as a product of the East Coast. Yet, in a striking decision by Franzen, Katz resembles the former Libyan dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi. While the fear of the Other could be associated with post-September 11 life, Franzen argues that fear of the Other was present pre-September 11. Within the city streets, Katz becomes fearful of interrogation or being accused of being an imposter. With Joey and

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<sup>61</sup> Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

Katz, Franzen describes two different aspects of the banality of American life. *First*, Joey feels safe and secure moving around the country. *Second*, Katz feels suspect and alienated from the country. Along these lines, Franzen signals a fear best described by Jean Baudrillard in *The Spirit of Terrorism*:

They have even – and this is the height of cunning – used the banality of American everyday life as cover and camouflage. Sleeping in their suburbs, reading and studying with their families, before activating themselves suddenly like time bombs. The faultless mastery of this clandestine style of operation is almost as terroristic as the spectacular act of September 11, since it casts suspicion on any and every individual. Might not any inoffensive person be a potential terrorist?<sup>63</sup>

When President Bush addressed Congress and the nation on September 20, 2001 the move to a different mode became clear: “Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to freedom. Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.”<sup>64</sup> Franzen describes a post-September 11 experience that questions if it would be possible to accurately identify the enemy in a world where the culture of commemoration has been spun into a culture of suspicion and fear. According to Jean Baudrillard:

And the maximum result was precisely what the terrorists obtained in the Manhattan attack, which might be presented as quite a good illustration of chaos theory: an initial impact causing incalculable consequences; whereas the Americans’ massive

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<sup>63</sup> Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Bush, “Address to Congress and the Nation”, September 20, 2001.

deployment...achieved only derisory effects – the hurricane ending, so to speak, in the beating of a butterfly’s wing.<sup>65</sup>

Whereas DeLillo focused on the immediate aftermath for a man in Manhattan and Franzen detailed a systemic approach to September 11, 2001, various questions remain about the experience outside Manhattan in those years after the attacks when the United States became involved in military response to September 11 and how individuals respond to the national pressure, in particular the effects of living at a time of war and peace. To return to David Simpson’s question that begins *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*: “Has the world changed since September 11? If it has, then in what ways?”<sup>66</sup> The novel resides in line with Simpson in that September 11 has “a past we can rediscover, a present we must monitor, and a future we can project.”<sup>67</sup> Franzen offers a potentially complete rendering of the American cultural rhythm and psyche pre- and post-September 11, 2001. Ultimately, Franzen incorporates a past that persists within our current time, an experience often mediated through technology, and a nationalism informed by informal commemoration and a renewed sense of patriotism and paranoia, as Simpson suggests, a cultural rhythm that developed quickly from commemoration to retaliation, a retaliation that was fostered by economic and militaristic actions.

## Chapter 2

### **Migratory Feeling: September 11, 2001 and Richard Powers’ *The Echo Maker***

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<sup>65</sup> Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 17-18.

<sup>66</sup> Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

In September 11's wake many texts discuss the ways individuals struggle to incorporate the attacks into daily life, in a manner that is not aligned with the reactionary Bush administration policy decisions. In July 2001, Jules and Gedeon Naudet began filming a documentary about Engine 7, Ladder 1, a company of firefighters in Lower Manhattan, with the intention of following a rookie firefighter, Tony Benetatos, through his probationary period, thus detailing the process of "a kid becoming a man in nine months."<sup>68</sup> The first part of the documentary describes the company's daily routine as well as Benetatos' frustration because he had not encountered his first real fire. After September 11, the coming-of-age drama becomes a narrative about the response on the day and after the attacks. A review of the film by Mark Peyser notes that *9/11* with "its richly drawn characters, its plot twists and its raw emotion...often plays out like a three-act Hollywood movie. The only problem is, it's all real."<sup>69</sup> In effect, a viewer may misidentify *9/11* as a typical film since the horror of September 11 was ordered under film structures. Similar to the eye witness account in the previous chapter, Peyser views the broadcast of the documentary in 2002 as a shift from merely atrocity or news footage to notions of a historical document that suggests a controlled presentation of September 11 that commemorates the attacks while also describing moments of failed commemoration.

The traumatic footage of September 11 was ordered under the style of a Hollywood film; the viewer focuses on Benetatos and the resiliency of Engine 7, Ladder 1 instead of the traumatic footage. Robert De Niro, who narrated the documentary, suggests that "the moment in history is not a moment of terror but one of strength, when good men did great things. Tens of thousands were saved by simple acts of courage. We hope that will be the true legacy of the men of Engine

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<sup>68</sup> Naudet and Naudet, *9/11*.

<sup>69</sup> Peyser, "If it Were Only Just a Movie", March 8, 2002.

7, Ladder 1.”<sup>70</sup> In effect, the first responders showed strength and resiliency; as such the narrative became restorative. Despite this claim, Jules Naudet comments “every now and then I still wonder: is it really true, you know? I know it happened, but I don’t know: how do you deal with something like this? It’s the eleventh every day for me when I wake up.”<sup>71</sup> If September 11 persists – ‘It’s the eleventh every day for me when I wake up’ – then at times the event phases in and out of our awareness as such we must commemorate the events while living our life.

In September 11’s wake many texts discuss the ways individuals struggle to incorporate the attacks into daily life, ultimately resisting the reactionary policy decisions of the Bush administration. Benetatos states, “I know it’s either this or the army now. And I like saving lives, I don’t like taking them. But after what I saw, if my country decides to send me to go kill, I’ll do it now.”<sup>72</sup> Benetatos seems frustrated by the ways in which the country will retaliate to the attacks as well as simply returning back to normal life, which suggests a failed commemoration and a return to normal. Žižek considers this tension between post-September 11 commemoration and retaliation in the following statement:

If nothing else, we can clearly experience yet again the limitations of our democracy: decisions are being made which will affect the fate of all of us, and all of us just wait, aware that we are utterly powerless. In the aftermath of September 11 the Americans *en masse* rediscovered their American pride, displaying flags and singing together in public... In the traumatic aftermath of September 11, when the old security seemed to be momentarily shattered, what could be more ‘natural’ than taking refuge in the innocence of a firm ideological identification?<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>71</sup> Naudet and Naudet, *9/11*.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 56-57

In September 11's wake, Americans' sense of security was shattered, which allows for the filmic structure of *9/11* to offer a familiar, firm identification of the horror.

The Naudet documentary yokes the horror of September 11 with a coming-of-age drama in a similar way that Richard Powers sutures together the years immediately after September 11 with Mark Schluter's accident. On a February night in 2002, Mark Schluter flipped his truck on a deserted highway in rural Nebraska, consequently, he suffers from Capgras a rare neurological disorder that makes the sufferer believe that loved ones are imposters or doubles. Mark occupies a frustrated position where his world seems entirely false and normal simultaneously. According to Powers, "I suppose that something vaguely like that loss of recognition has happened to me and many people that I care about, since the attacks and America's subsequent response"<sup>74</sup> and "the familiar seems strange, and the strange becomes familiar. We still live in precisely the same country. But nothing about it will ever feel familiar again, in the way it once did."<sup>75</sup> In other words, Powers argues that if September 11 was a break from previous events, experience, and understanding, the unfamiliar world becomes familiar in the same way that memory of the pre-September 11 world becomes strange. In effect, Powers uses an individual car accident as a stand-in for the widespread effect of September 11. If we select *The Echo Maker* as an exemplar post-September 11 novel, then post-September 11 experience becomes not simply a culture of commemoration, as David Simpson suggests, rather an American culture of loneliness, isolation, and misidentification.

## **I – Memory**

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<sup>74</sup> NPR, "Powers, Egan Win National Book Awards", 2006.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

Whereas many September 11 narratives focus on a specific place – World Trade Center – Powers compels the reader to consider the effect of September 11 outside New York City. In an effort to understand the political and emotional effect of September 11, Powers takes up the way Americans commemorate the attacks as well as the continuation of life after the attacks. According to James Gibbons’ review of the novel, “Powers views *The Echo Maker* as a post-9/11 book and [the] interweaving of public events with the fictional narrative...the political climate of the first Bush term is quietly insistent and impossible to ignore.”<sup>76</sup> With subtle references to post-September 11 life, *The Echo Maker* becomes not nostalgic for a pre-September 11 world or a containment of emotions; instead, Powers writes “stories of how even shattered brains might narrate disaster back into a livable sense.”<sup>77</sup> The common notion has been that September 11 irrevocably damaged the American cultural rhythm and psyche, yet Powers argues that a subject can successfully recover. If *The Echo Maker* becomes a description of post-September 11 then the following quote showcases the move from a chaos to normal:

September came and then the attacks...the endlessly looping, slow-motion, cinematic insanity. From the Central Plains, New York was a black plume on the farthest horizon. Troops were securing the Golden Gate Bridge. Anthrax started turning up in the nation’s sugar bowls. Then the bombs began to fall in Afghanistan. A broadcaster in Omaha declared, *It’s payback time*, and all along the river became stony, unanimous assent.<sup>78</sup>

At first glance this passage offers a condensed timeline beginning with the attacks through the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, making the events appear logical and ordered. At the same time, Powers places weight on ‘September came and then the attacks’ which implies that the

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<sup>76</sup> Gibbons, “Beyond Recognition”, 2006.

<sup>77</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 414.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

force of September 11 needs only to refer to a month and the larger meaning becomes clear. The passage implies that Nebraska, though not directly affected by the attacks, sought redemption for the attacks. The connection of ‘It’s payback time’ and ‘stony, unanimous assent’ reflects the need of President Bush and others to evoke the memory of September 11 to build the coalition for the response. According to President Bush, September 11 was an act of war that will “require our country to unite in steadfast determination and resolve. Freedom and democracy are under attack.”<sup>79</sup> In effect, the Bush administration framed the attacks as not simply attacks on New York City, but on all Americans. As David Ryan put it: “In the days that followed September 11, Washington and US culture more generally created the framework within which the United States would respond to these monumental crimes committed in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania.”<sup>80</sup> For the framework to succeed, the memory of September 11 was evoked to claim the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq was a direct response to the attacks.

Powers signals one response in the wake of September 11 through Mark’s sister, Karin, who attempts to reconcile the accident with some larger plan. Karin tries to understand the accident by focusing on its date: “It made no sense: Mark a near professional driver rolling off an arrow-straight country road that was as familiar to him as breathing. Driving off the road in central Nebraska – like falling off a wooden horse. She toyed with the date: 02/20/2002. Did it mean anything?”<sup>81</sup> The date suggests a reoccurrence that will inform the rest of the narrative as the other characters recount the events of the day – the accident, the call on the edge of the town by an anonymous source, the unknown note – but the date itself would mean nothing. In *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, David Simpson states, “Take the date itself. There is now

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<sup>79</sup> Bush, “Remarks to Cabinet and Advisors”, September 13, 2001.

<sup>80</sup> Ryan, “September 11: Rhetorical Device and Photographic Opinion”, 7.

<sup>81</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 5.

evidence that it was not selected with absolute foresight as both the national emergency telephone number (911) and the anniversary of momentous other events in the history of the West...but fastened on late in the planning process as the best conjunction of all sorts of pressures and conditions, some of them short term.”<sup>82</sup> For Karin, ordering the accident as linked to a specific date with meaning removes randomness from the equation. Karin’s wish for order becomes in line with a larger phenomenon post-September 11: the date of the attacks must mean something. If the date means something, it becomes possible to order the event and not leave it to randomness.

Within *The Echo Maker*, multiple characters – Mark, Karin, Weber – feel that Kearney<sup>83</sup> was a fake which seems to offer the truth about their character: a certain level of alienation from the ‘normal’ way of life. In the aftermath of September 11, many Americans became fearful that terrorists would strike again; thus day-to-day experience was a state of emergency and peace. Anthrax began turning up in a variety of buildings across the United States while reports of weapons filtered through the media, all while for most Americans, the experience was peaceful and normal. At one point, Mark Schluter talks with Gerald Weber about current threats: “Mark leaned way from him, astonished. ‘New York? What and have some airplane slam me?’ Weber told him there would be no danger. Mark just scoffed, well past conning. ‘You guys are big on anthrax out there, too, right?’ ... ‘I’m telling you, Doc. It’s a weird world. They can hit you, wherever you are.’”<sup>84</sup> Mark’s concern suggests both an uncertainty about the safety in New York; more important still is his paranoia that ‘they’ can strike anywhere. Along these lines, Slavoj Žižek details the paranoid fantasy associated with September 11. Žižek argues “the ultimate

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<sup>82</sup> Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, 13-14.

<sup>83</sup> Kearney, Nebraska. The hometown of Mark and Karin Schluter.

<sup>84</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 303-304.

American paranoid fantasy is that of an individual...who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he is living in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he is living in a real world, while all the people around him are in fact actors and extras in a gigantic show.”<sup>85</sup> A popular example of this claim, as Žižek states, is the film *The Truman Show*. The film shows the protagonist’s eventual realization that the small town he inhabits is actually a large set for a twenty-four hour television show. Žižek uses this claim as proof of the power of September 11. Upon release from the hospital Mark and Karin walk toward his home, he considers the town a duplicate, Mark states “They got almost everything right, Jesus! How much did this cost? It’s like some billion-dollar film of my life. *The Harry Truman Story*.”<sup>86</sup> The fantasy shows a world beyond what an individual claims as normal, yet if that world becomes normal this might speak to something the individual desired. According to Jean Baudrillard, “does reality actually outstrip fiction? If it seems to do so, this is because it has absorbed fiction’s energy and has itself become fiction.”<sup>87</sup> Within *The Echo Maker*, multiple characters – Mark, Karin, Weber – feel that Kearney was a fake which seems to offer the truth about their character: a certain level of alienation from the ‘normal’ way of life. Many tried to remember the pre-September 11 world though whatever fiction of that time they construct will become more real than the actual memory of pre-September 11. Daniel Heischman argues that “for some event to take on such a primary role in our lives – as September 11 has – there must be more to it than total surprise: it must touch something very deep, something, perhaps, long neglected within us.”<sup>88</sup> This becomes where Powers diverges from DeLillo and other critics that view September 11, 2001 as the

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<sup>85</sup> Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 194-195.

<sup>87</sup> Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 21-22.

<sup>88</sup> Heischman, “The Uncanniness of September 11”, 198.

ultimate unique event; Powers believes that to be true, yet this strange new world has become familiar and ordinary.

While President Bush compelled the American citizens to unite and remember the attacks on September 11, a central tension occurred between what the citizens remembered and what the Bush administration presented. As Maja Zehfuss argues “What was it that happened?...we do not really seem to know. And this is not surprising as memory plays tricks on the idea of straightforward knowledge.”<sup>89</sup> For Žižek’s scenario as well as Mark’s Capgras, the trouble occurs not because everything is false, rather certain qualities remain known but not as straightforward knowledge. In *The Truman Show* example, the revelation that the protagonist’s life is a television show was contingent on his recall of his life prior to the moment of discovery. In *The Echo Maker*, Mark considers his sister an imposter, yet this recognition depends on a certain memory of his sister, though Mark does not feel connection. In other words as Dr. Gerald Weber says to Karin, “the loved one’s face elicits memory, but no feeling. Lack of emotional ratification overrides the rational assembly of memory. Or put this way: reason invents elaborately unreasonable explanations to explain a deficit in emotion. Logic depends upon feeling.”<sup>90</sup> If *The Echo Maker* becomes an exemplary post-September 11 novel, Powers’ use of Capgras signals a comparison to the widespread panic after the attacks. Žižek contends:

The lesson to be learned...is that the divide friend/enemy is never just the representation of a factual difference: the enemy is by definition, always – up to a point, at least – *invisible*; he looks like one of us; he cannot be directly recognized – this is why the big

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<sup>89</sup> Zehfuss, “Forget September 11”, 518.

<sup>90</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 106.

problem and task of the political struggle is providing/constructing a recognizable *image* of the enemy.<sup>91</sup>

The above passage mirrors the connection and estrangement between Mark and Karin, specifically the ways Mark never outright accepts or rejects Karin. Rather, Mark uses a series of names to describe Karin's familiarity and estrangement: "He [Mark] overhears the Special Sister Agent talking to Bonnie"<sup>92</sup>, "He [Mark] looks at Karin's substitute."<sup>93</sup> For every familiar effect something causes further strain. Furthermore, Mark is concerned about the ability of this substitute in that "She knows everything, and she brings it all back with such hypnotic pain that she's either the greatest actress who ever lived, or there's truly something of his sister's brain transplanted in her."<sup>94</sup> Mark orders the familiarity and estrangement under the possibility that a conspiracy aided in the plan: "They couldn't possibly have trained her in all this. There has to be some kind of direct synapse transfer. Which means that something of his sister is actually downloaded inside this woman. Something essential. Some part of her brain, her soul."<sup>95</sup> The 'they' in the quote resists specific naming in a similar way that the terrorist threats post-September 11 were both specific and vague. As George W. Bush stated "It was us versus them, and it was clear who the them were. Today we're not so sure who the they are, but we know they are there."<sup>96</sup>

In the wake of September 11, many attempted to provide meaning and testimony to the attacks and, as a result, the event became difficult to fully comprehend, which led to a feeling of failed commemoration. According to David Ryan, after September 11 "it was soon established

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<sup>91</sup> Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 138.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>96</sup> Ryan, "Framing September 11", 11.

that the attacks were on both the geographical territory, but also on its ideological territory.

American freedoms and ultimately, the American ‘way of life’ were attacked. It was a short step to the rhetoric of war.”<sup>97</sup> Richard Powers illuminates the ways that similar ordering devices were attempted for personal trauma as national trauma.

## II – Geography

If a character fails to commemorate the attacks, then he or she feels alienated from the community, resulting in a feeling that the experience is ultimately false and a return to normal has failed. Along the lines of Žižek’s paranoiac fantasy, several characters claim Nebraska as a fake or a dreamed space and those characters are ones that did not flip their truck on a cold Nebraska night. Karen quips “Kearney, Nebraska: a colossal fake, a life-sized, hollow replica. She’d thought as much herself, all while growing up”<sup>98</sup> while Dr. Gerald Weber states “the virgin prairies of Nebraska were a dream, after the minefields of Long Island and Manhattan.”<sup>99</sup> Weber’s relationship with Kearney and Manhattan will provide the foundation for an analysis of the effect of geography on a person, in particular how Weber does not fully recognize himself in the commemoration in Manhattan nor in the lack of commemoration in Kearney. Whereas many September 11 narratives focus on the attacks or the days shortly after the event, Powers describes a different perspective of the fallen World Trade Center, particularly the ways the towers provided orienting devices and now Lower Manhattan seems false. Powers describes Weber’s experience walking through Manhattan:

The shadows were all wrong: still disorienting, more than eight months on. A patch of

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<sup>97</sup> Ryan, “Framing September 11”, 12.

<sup>98</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 197.

<sup>99</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 159.

sky where there should be none. Weber hadn't been in since early spring, when witnessing the unnerving light show – two massive banks of spotlights pointing into the air, like something out of his book's chapter on phantom limbs. The images flared up in him again, the ones that had slowly extinguished over three-quarters of a year. That one, unthinkable morning was real; everything since had been a narcoleptic lie. He walked south through the unbearably normal streets, thinking he might get by just fine without ever seeing this city again.<sup>100</sup>

The above passage signals Weber's failed commemoration, resulting in his alienation from New York City, which could be read as further comparison between Capgras and post-September 11 experience, in particular ways that an individual may misidentify reality. The fallen World Trade Center described as a phantom limb serves as a metaphor for Powers' rendering of September 11. Powers states, "More disconcerting still were the phantom limbs. Nothing worse than excruciating pain in a limb that no longer existed, pain dismissed by the rest of the world as purely imaginary – *all in your head* – as if there were another kind. A person could suffer persistent tenderness in any removed part."<sup>101</sup> For many Americans, including Jules Naudet as well as Weber, the pain of September 11 persists within experience despite attempts at incorporating the attacks into daily life. Whereas most writers locate the pain within Manhattan, Powers suggests the pain transcends geographical location.

Weber attempts to control his memory of the attacks because the cultural memory of the attacks developed from catastrophe to commemoration. Weber becomes unsettled by how unbearably normal the streets are because the images of the attacks still occupy his psyche. Powers details the effect of time – eight months on and three-quarters of year – on Weber's

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<sup>100</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 99.

<sup>101</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 259.

imagining of September 11, Weber's sentiment at the one year anniversary is telling: "September came, that bleak first anniversary...He tried to recall the public dread of the year before, turning on the radio to find the world blown away. The force was intact, though the details were gone."<sup>102</sup> For Weber, the anniversary signaled the move from public dread and unfamiliarity to the current state of the world. In this way, he inadvertently echoes President Bush: "None of us will forget this day. Yet, we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in the world."<sup>103</sup> Ultimately, for Weber and Bush, the force of the attacks should be ever present; however, the nation has moved to retaliation. The widespread footage of the attacks has been replaced by short clips of the war in Afghanistan, suggesting that the events associated with September 11 have been moved to the background. Powers details a return to normal in the following passage:

The arid chain stores along the strip gave way, in a handful of blocks, to gingerbread Victorians with wraparound porches. Just past these lay the core of an old downtown. The ghost of a prairie outpost, circa 1890, still looked out from the high, squared-off brick storefront facades...He could now read the posters in the shop windows: Celebrate Freedom Rally; Corvette Show; Faith In Bloom Garden Tour...He [Weber] passed a monument to the local dead of the two world wars. The whole tableau left him uneasy.<sup>104</sup>

Weber seems to worry that September 11 may fade from view instead of remaining the preeminent event that defies all comparison and understanding, in part because the similarly catastrophic events of the two world wars are condensed to the local monuments which Weber hardly responds to. Although the tableau signals a typical day in Kearney, the posters in the

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<sup>102</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 271.

<sup>103</sup> Bush, "Address to the Nation", September 11, 2001.

<sup>104</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 166.

windows function in two ways. First, the “Celebrate Freedom Rally” offers one type of reaction to September 11. After September 11, Americans showed defiance by organizing a rally. As Bush put it: “When we fight terror, we fight tyranny; and so we remember”<sup>105</sup> and “We will remember the dead and what we owe them.”<sup>106</sup> Second, if the residents attend the Corvette Show or the Faith in Bloom Tour, they will balance commemoration with the continuation of their lives. Kearney offered commemoration and normalcy which became what troubled Weber. President Bush asked the American people to live their lives and if they do, they would fight terror and remember the dead. President Bush promised, “I will not forget this wound to our country or those who inflicted it; I will not yield; I will not rest; I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people.”<sup>107</sup> Despite President Bush’s promise, Weber worries that September 11 may fade from view instead of remaining the unique event, in part because the similarly catastrophic events of the two world wars are condensed to the local monuments which Weber hardly responds to. So then will he forget September 11 with enough time as well? Powers creates a peaceful city which troubles Weber because the United States was in a time of war, yet he failed to offer an alternative. How then should the events associated with September 11 be remembered? According to President Bush, “I ask you to live your lives, and hug your children.”<sup>108</sup> For Bush, the best way to commemorate September 11 is by celebrating freedom and allowing your life to return to normal, even when that is difficult as it is for Weber, in particular how the simplified ‘live your life’ becomes impossible for Weber in Manhattan and Kearney as a result of commemoration being hijacked by retaliation. If *The Echo Maker* became the preeminent post-September 11 novel, then experience would comprise of

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<sup>105</sup> Bush, “The World Will Always Remember”, December 11, 2001.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Bush, “Address to Congress and the American People”, September 20, 2001.

misrecognition, loneliness, and alienation, instead of the common notion of a culture of commemoration.

### **III – Nationalism**

On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush addressed the nation from the United States Capitol and began his speech with “In the normal course of events, Presidents come to this chamber to report on the state of the Union.”<sup>109</sup> The remarks were given as a result of an atypical event. The substance of Bush’s address was to define the events that took place on September 11 as themselves exceedingly rare and atypical, an interruption of the routine course of daily events. Even within the context of previous wars and surprise attacks, September 11 was different:

Americans have known wars – but for the past 136 years, they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war – but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. Americans have known surprise attacks – but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day – and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.<sup>110</sup>

Bush provided a description of the attacks that would claim September 11 as a unique event while contextualizing the event against other catastrophic events, suggesting the resiliency of the American psyche. Powers situates the personal Schluter event against the first anniversary, the escalation of the war in Iraq, footage of Afghanistan, and domestic manifestations of these effects in order to show the reactionary policy decisions had failed to completely take hold in Nebraska. As Kurt Jacobsen states “despite a robust government campaign since September 11

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<sup>110</sup> Bush, “Address to Congress and the American People,” September 20, 2001.

to silence any whisper of dissent, the US shows healthy signs of restoring a semblance of democratic give-and-take.”<sup>111</sup> Throughout *The Echo Maker*, Powers underpins the central narrative with mentions of September 11, the war in Afghanistan, and the escalation leading to the war in Iraq. Despite the initial claims about the unnaturalness of September 11, Bush evoked the memory of other catastrophic events, thus navigating a fine line between speaking about the event as anomaly and we had seen this before. Powers mirrors this feeling when Weber is in a restaurant and a television catches his attention:

A television suspended above their corner booth breaks the news. Operation Iraqi Freedom has begun. War had been so long in coming Weber feels only mild déjà vu. They watch the cycling, impenetrable footage, the president, looping over and over: *May God bless our country and all who defend her.*<sup>112</sup>

Along the lines of the Bush speech on September 20, Weber feels ‘mild déjà vu’ in this moment because the footage is unique, yet the declaration feels similar to those made in films or in war. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq repeatedly appear within the narrative, yet the experience is primarily tangential. One moment occurs early in the novel when Karin enters the hospital waiting room. Powers writes “in the corner, a muted television beamed images of a mountain wasteland scattered with guerrillas. Afghanistan, winter, 2002. After a while, she noticed a thread of blood wicking down her right index finger, where she’d bitten through her cuticle.”<sup>113</sup> In line with September 11 experience, Karin experiences the war in Afghanistan through the television. The television placed in the corner implies a peripheral existence for the war. The contrast between the blood on the cuticle and the violence on the screen signals a privileging of

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<sup>111</sup> Jacobsen, “US after September 11”, July 13, 2002.

<sup>112</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 432.

<sup>113</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 8.

the personal trauma instead of the cultural trauma. For Karin, the blood on the cuticle becomes easily identified as a wound against her, while the violence on the screen undoubtedly affects her however those wounds are unknown. Along these lines, the people in the waiting room do not acknowledge the television. Rather the people focus on their individual trauma instead of the conflict occurring in Afghanistan. Thus, Powers infers the response to September 11 was constituted by people ignoring its effects and attempting to go on with their pre-September 11 lives.

Mark's life began to spiral out of control as he learns information about the accident and begins to distrust those closest to him even more, which could be read as a stand-in for the feeling isolation some Americans may have felt with regard to the reactionary policies of the Bush administration. Now in 2003, Mark believes those around him continually lie to him, one of which becomes Tommy Rupp who then arrives at Mark's home to bid farewell. Rupp has been deployed for the Iraq War. The following dialogue suggests the impending war in Iraq was a 'Round Two', that is, a continuation of a prior conflict – the Gulf War of the 1990s – and not a response to September 11:

Round two, Rupp said. The real thing this time. Going after the bastards who brought down the Towers.

They're dead, Mark said, more to the dog than to Rupp. Died on impact in a flaming fireball.<sup>114</sup>

The fact that Powers incorporates this plot line suggests the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan affect life in Nebraska, yet Rupp is the only character deployed. On the one hand, Powers may have believed that the wars were outside his central narrative aims, as such, he did not need to deploy

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<sup>114</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 386.

several characters; however, Powers may have felt the political climate was such that it would seem unlikely to not have someone affected by the military operations. On the other hand, Powers may have considered the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to be on the periphery to the characters. Thus, September 11 and the response became background to the day-to-day life of the characters.

Despite the attempts at unity, Powers describes failed commemoration, particularly the ways certain characters respond to the policy decisions of the Bush administration, resulting in isolation from a sense of national unity. One moment of connection and estrangement between characters occurs in a scene for the Fourth of July. The scene occurs after Mark's release from the hospital and within tense moments of Mark and Karin's relationship. Mark and his friends talk about where America would strike next<sup>115</sup> while Bonnie, Mark's girlfriend, offers that the Iraq War was predicted in the Bible<sup>116</sup> and Karin suggests that every dropped bomb could be creating more terrorists.<sup>117</sup> The variety of responses provides a useful comparison between those willing to consent to the war (the boys), those believing it was predicted (Bonnie), and those who objected to the war effort early on (Karin). In effect, the series of responses illuminates tensions between the meaning of the attacks from the Bush administration and the individual citizens. More important still, the citizens in *The Echo Maker* do not fully identify with the official commemoration or retaliation. Despite the ways the characters become isolated, Powers offers the Fourth of July party as moment of connection for the group:

Groups of neighbors, camped over their own scattered cookouts, called out holiday greetings. The sun set and the bugs came out and the first tentative sprigs of fireworks

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<sup>115</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 216.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

tested the dark. The first Independence Day since the attacks, and the indolently exploding colored missiles felt both helpless and defiant. Tommy Rupp shot off a dozen ‘Exploding Terror Heads’ he’d picked up at a roadside tent near Plattsmouth: colorful figures of Hussein and bin Laden that whistled skyward and burst into streamers.<sup>118</sup>

The neighborhood resists a total collective feeling – each group of neighbors are at their own cookout – yet Powers compels the reader to view the Fourth of July party as restorative for Mark and Karin’s relationship and the American spirit. Mark states “The Fourth of July is my sister’s all-time favorite. Let’s dedicate this one to her, wherever she is. Her, and all the missing Americans.”<sup>119</sup> At this point, Mark could refer to those lost on September 11 or those who have perished while fighting overseas. After a series of fireworks, Mark and Karin catch each other’s eye and a moment of connection supersedes all trauma from the past several months: “She saw him look around, trying to catch the attention of his friends, searching for confirmation none of them could give...And brief as that flash, his eyes finding hers, the slightest sign of kinship issued from him: *You’re alone here, too, aren’t you?*”<sup>120</sup> While Capgras could undoubtedly be a lonely endeavor, in this moment, Powers suggests that this loneliness and misidentification occurred to a majority of the country post-September 11, in particular how a person may not identify with the country’s move to retaliation. In effect, the collective grief and commemoration failed for the individual as a result of the urgency to return to normal. Thus, with the impending war efforts, September 11 has moved to commemoration and many deal with day-to-day survival after the trauma.

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<sup>118</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 217.

<sup>119</sup> Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 215.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

Ultimately, Powers describes an experience that does not unnecessarily heighten September 11 experience nor ignore the subsequent effects of the attacks. Rather *The Echo Maker* details the ‘liveable sense’ in 2002 and 2003. In line with Powers description of post-September 11 life comparable to Capgras, Barbara, Mark’s nurse’s aide, states “Mark is right, you know. The whole place, a substitute. I mean: Is this country anyplace you recognize?”<sup>121</sup> Perhaps the world was changed because of September 11, yet Powers shows a world more complacent than other narratives – the characters are not seen as catatonic as a result of September 11. As Žižek suggests “The ‘war on terrorism’ thus functions as an act whose true aim is to lull us into the falsely secure conviction that nothing has really changed.”<sup>122</sup> If *The Echo Maker* became a preminent post-September 11 novel, then experience would be characterized by misrecognition, loneliness, and alienation, instead of the common notion of a culture of commemoration.

### **Conclusion**

One central question of this thesis has been: has the world changed since September 11, 2001? Each Midwest narrative conjures September 11 in different ways: David Foster Wallace’s text focuses on experience within Bloomington, Illinois. In Chapter 1, I argued that Franzen pivots away from DeLillo’s indictment that September 11 became a break from a previous timeline. In Chapter 2, I argued that Powers presents an individual accident in Kearney, Nebraska as a stand-in for a widespread paranoia in the post-September 11 American experience. Powers posits a world where if September 11 was a definitional event, Americans were firmly rooted in everyday life within a few short months after the attacks. If Americans began to commemorate the attacks, this community became hijacked by retaliation and frustrated by the

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 44.

question: how might the attacks be remembered? David Simpson describes the tension in the reconstruction of the tower in relation to the commemoration of the attacks:

They will be workplaces and objects of attention and distraction...for generations to come who do not have living memory of 9/11. Their coming into being will, like the culture commemoration in general, draw selectively upon the traditions of the past and represent someone's notion of the present. The buildings that go up on the World Trade Center site are especially recollective in that they will be inevitably memorial, founded in death and in remembrance.<sup>123</sup>

This thesis examined how September 11 functioned as a catastrophic event and how Americans moved to restore normalcy shortly post-September 11. That is not to say that Americans forgot September 11, rather, the pre-September 11 normalcy coexisted in the post-September 11 threats and uncertainty. Maja Zehfuss argues that “we forget...who we were and indeed who we are. If the memory of September 11 is so overpowering that we agree to have our own lives overturned, our freedom *vis-à-vis* the state undermined, our values mocked by our own states' policies, then I think we should forget September 11.”<sup>124</sup> The One World Trade Center was constructed on the World Trade Center site and the memorial yet Simpson's and Zehfuss' arguments present interesting questions for further study. Namely, how many anniversaries will include television reports and special programs? How many years will a channel request comment from President George W. Bush? A week long program was presented at the ten year anniversary mark, but what about subsequent anniversaries? In effect, when will we the memory of September 11 lack emotion? Along these lines, Simpson argues that, “in the wake of 9/11, commemoration has been hijacked by revenge, there has been a visibly commodified national

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Zehfuss, “Forget September 11”, 526.

mourning, the image of death has been taken over by the image of falling towers, and those who are still dying accrue no images.”<sup>125</sup>

This thesis resisted focusing solely on narratives linked to Manhattan; instead, the central aim was to show images of post-September 11 linked to the Midwest. I worked to establish three properties – *memory*, *geography*, *nationalism* – that would assist in the analysis of these texts. As a result, texts that had been defined as post-September 11 narratives were placed against texts linked to September 11. Through the analysis of Midwestern texts, I illuminated ways in which narratives not geographically proximate to the attack sites details the attacks as well as the aftermath, in an effort to show ways we may provide testimony to events. If we conjure September 11 by including atypical texts, we may have a more comprehensive map of the experience. Ultimately, I argue that if we select these texts as the preeminent narratives to describe post-September 11 experience, then the experience was not a culture of commemoration; instead, the American cultural rhythm and psyche became linked to failed commemoration, resulting in pervasive isolation and misidentification.

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<sup>125</sup> Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, 170.

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