

### Reenacting Trauma in the Wake of 9/11: Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to analyze the way in which Don DeLillo portrays the trauma experienced by 9/11 survivors in his novel *Falling Man*, focusing on the main character. In my analysis I begin with the definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and employ trauma theory, mainly Dominick LaCapra's concepts of "acting out" and "working through" trauma, to show how the novel portrays the main character, Keith Neudecker, as being frozen in a state of perpetually reliving the traumatic experience; his thoughts, actions, and even the structure of the novel reflect this. Furthermore, I analyze the way in which DeLillo's representations of both 9/11 and the trauma caused by the event are problematic. By presenting the attacks as a unique occurrence and by making his main character a white, educated, middle-class American man, DeLillo fails to give recognition to the suffering of other categories of people who might have been harmed by 9/11 or by any other traumatic event. Through Keith Neudecker, DeLillo presents a model of behavior in which trauma cannot be overcome and progress is impossible, as being representative, while discounting the fact that people have different levels of resilience.

Published in 2007, Don DeLillo's fourteenth novel comes in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Often considered "the pre-eminent analyst of the age of the spectacle, the poet laureate of the simulacrum, of the depthless image floating above a social vacuum" (Evans 104), DeLillo focuses on the "days after," allowing him to follow many avenues in his exploration of traumatic experience and the limits it imposes on representation (Griffin

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36). On September 11, 2001 the entire world watched as the World Trade Center towers were hit by airplanes. An hour later, when every news station around the world was broadcasting live feeds from New York, the world witnessed the towers coming down. Due to the widespread coverage, many have written, documented, drawn or sung about the trauma caused by the attacks, both domestically and internationally. European novels such as David Llwelllyn's *Eleven* or Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* portray the traumatic effects the 9/11 attacks had across the Atlantic while films such as *September 11* explore the reactions to 9/11 from all around the world, including countries like Iran, Egypt, India or Israel. Many documentaries and movies strived to convey the impact of 9/11 from both an individual and collective standpoint, either focusing on the political and social magnitude (*9/11: The Twin Towers*, 2006) or highlighting the individual's response to the events (*9/11*, 2002).

Domestically, many writers have tried to transmit through their work the impact experienced in the aftermath of the attacks. From John Updike's analysis of the motivations of religious fundamentalists in his 2006 novel *Terrorist* to Alissa Torres's 2008 graphic novel *American Widow* that portrays the grief and frustration of a pregnant widow, 9/11 emerges as an incredibly complex phenomenon that "fits in nowhere" (Laub 204) and is "unpossessable" (Versluys 1).

In the midst of all these diverse representations, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* reenacts the events of 9/11 through the eyes of the survivors, portraying the struggle with their own sense of impotency and the inability to move forward. In this essay, my aim is to show how Don DeLillo represents individual trauma in *Falling Man* but also to analyze how his representation of 9/11 is problematic. I will do this by analyzing the symptoms of PTSD by using trauma theory and

discussing how different aspects of trauma are represented in the novel, how the main character copes with the traumatic experience or, on the contrary, how he fails to do so.

Trauma managed to gain official disease status in 1980, when it was included in the third edition of the (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, most commonly known as PTSD. In the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM 5, PTSD is included under “Trauma and Stress or Related Disorders” and is defined as a condition which can occur “after you have been through a traumatic event” that can consist of instances of actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation. The condition can occur to direct victims, witnesses, work-related situations or from hearing about the event from a close person. Among the events listed as possible causes for PTSD are combat exposure, sexual or physical abuse, terrorist attacks, serious accidents and natural disasters such as hurricanes or earthquakes. The symptoms of PTSD exemplified by the US Department of Veteran Affairs are: reliving the event, avoidance, negative changes in beliefs and feelings (such as guilt, estrangement, loss of memory pertaining to the event), hyperarousal (reckless or destructive behavior, sleep disturbance), but also depression and substance abuse problems (drugs, alcohol, etc). All in all, PTSD is presented as a “timeless, acultural, psychological phenomenon” that is set apart from what are called “Culture-Bound Syndromes” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 23). Stef Craps argues that, although broad, the spectrum of instances the DSM covers for PTSD could be expanded, since there are many other traumatic experiences that could result in post-traumatic symptoms (*Postcolonial Witnessing* 5).

Trauma theory has devoted the most attention to events that took place in Europe and the United States, with particular emphasis on the Holocaust and, more recently, on 9/11 (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 9). Due to this “Eurocentric bias” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 9),

the work of leading trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra has focused on such events. However, these “hegemonic definitions of trauma” that focus on the “white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 21) have been challenged in recent years, and theoreticians have been moving towards the conclusion that the sufferings of non-Western or minority cultures should be given due recognition within trauma theory, if it is to “adhere to its ethical aspirations” (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 13).

This “Eurocentric bias” has also led to, as Ethan Watters puts it, the “Americanizing of the world’s understanding of the human mind”(1), meaning that American ideas about mental health and illness have been applied throughout the world, with no regard to cultural differences, creating an international standard of treatment (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 22). This instance is problematic because trauma is not experienced in the same way by everyone and this is closely related to each culture’s view on how trauma and suffering are dealt with.

In her definition of individual trauma, Cathy Caruth presents it as “a wound inflicted upon the mind that breaks the victim’s experience of time, self and the world” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3-4). In other words, the traumatic experience skews the individual’s perception of the world. However, this generalized definition does not encompass the complexity of trauma nor does it acknowledge how trauma affects victims differently. It is not the event itself but the mental experiencing of it is that constitutes psychological trauma; thus, the traumatic experience of one individual is not necessarily shared by another, even in identical situations (Craps, “The Holocaust and Comparative Genocide in the Poetry of Sherman Alexie”).

Psychiatrist Judith Herman, whose work focuses on the treatment of traumatic stress, has tried to develop concepts that are applicable equally to various groups of trauma victims, from rape survivors to combat veterans and from battered women to political prisoners (3). Thus, her

interpretation of trauma offers a broader spectrum: “At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force [...]. Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (24). In other words, whatever the force that inflicts the trauma, the individual is affected, albeit in different ways, because of the disruption to everyday life caused by the experience. According to her research, traumatic events “call into question the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others” (51) and lead to a lost sense of self or an existential crisis. This crisis can make the victims see themselves as separate both from themselves and from those around them. As Robert Jay Lifton explains, it can create a fragmentation of identity that manifests itself through the creation of a “second self” (Caruth, “An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton” 128). This second self—that is created in order to escape the traumatic experience can be seen as a form of denial (LaCapra, *Writing History 2*)—is safe since the traumatic experience did not occur to it.

The trauma of 9/11 was, for a time, elevated to unique status. Even its naming—9/11 or September 11—was an expression of this idea that, as Jacques Derrida points out, was not a spontaneous construct but was perpetuated by the “techno-socio-political machine” (Borradori 86). Certain forms of suffering, like the Holocaust or 9/11, have been deemed worthy of national and international public attention, while others have been left to minority groups to handle on their own (Cvetkovich 61). Michael Rothberg points out that the “uniqueness discourse” has its dangers, for it creates a hierarchy of suffering which is offensive from a moral perspective towards those whose suffering is deemed second-best. It also works as a distraction with regard to other tragedies, and may serve as a deterrent to the recognition of past or present genocides, by placing undue stress on the singularity of one event and negating its similarities to others (*Multidirectional Memory* 9-10). Dominick LaCapra also sees the problem of uniqueness as a

“cause for concern,” preferring to use the term distinctive in his analysis of the Holocaust (LaCapra, “‘Acting-out’ and ‘Working-through’ Trauma”).

In his work on multidirectional memory, Michael Rothberg presents collective memory as a phenomenon of ongoing cross-referencing and borrowing. In other words, by creating walls around an event and seeing it as unique, we negate the interactions that take place among collective memories (*Multidirectional Memory* 4-7). In order to work through the trauma and to address the social and political contexts that lead to traumatic events, we need to be able to move both forward and backward from it (Rothberg, “Writing, Trauma, and Home” 151), and attributing it with unique status, would prevent this process. Regarding September 11, Michael Rothberg attributes its traumatic impact not to the sheer violence it exhibited or its unique status, but to “the way that the events surprised us, took us unawares” (“Writing, Trauma, and Home” 149).

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between three ways of dealing with trauma: denial, acting out, and working through. While denial ranges from definitive denial to intricate forms of evasion, acting out consists of the compulsive reliving of the trauma’s catalytic event. Working through however, is the stage in which the trauma victim becomes capable of distinguishing between past and present by gaining critical distance from the traumatic experience (2). In other words, it is the stage of acknowledging the trauma without the compulsion of reenacting it. However, he also posits that the critical distance necessary in the working through stage is “acquired with extreme difficulty and not achieved once and for all” (*Writing History* 70). Acting out, he states, is related to repetition, being for victims of traumatic experiences “the tendency to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the

past, with no distance from it” but also a necessary condition of working through (“Acting-out’ and ‘Working-through’ Trauma”).

LaCapra also analyzes the concepts of melancholia and mourning which Freud established in a 1917 essay. Freud characterized melancholia as a state of inertia and self-hatred and mourning as actively working through a traumatic loss (206). LaCapra, describes melancholia, which at a certain level resembles acting out, as a certain “fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must keep faith” with the trauma (*Writing History* 22). The reasoning is that by remaining within trauma, one commemorates those who were lost. Judith Herman sheds more light on this concept: “To be spared oneself in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate creates a severe burden of conscience. Survivors of disaster and war are haunted by images of the dying whom they could not rescue” (39). Those who witness someone else’s suffering are plagued by severe feeling of guilt, therefore, in order to assuage their guilt they might choose to resist working through the trauma, feeling that it would be a betrayal of those they have lost. Mourning on the other hand resembles LaCapra’s working through, being a reaction to the past that involves recognizing the distinction between past and present (*Writing History* 70). It requires that “critical distance” from the event in order to allow positive changes to occur.

If trauma is the collapse of the network of significations (Versluys 4) and traumatic memory cannot be consciously recalled then, in order to reestablish this broken link between what was before and what is after and to counteract the impact of trauma, it must be turned into narrative memory (Janet 23-24). DeLillo attempts to make this transformation but does not strive to write the truth of 9/11. He does not put forth a unified voice but only gives voice to a few of the “hundred thousand” stories, creating a model of generalized traumatic behavior (DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future”).

As he stated in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” in *Falling Man*, DeLillo “begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment desperately. Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror.” The novel begins with Keith trying to make his way through the debris that covered the streets and the chaos that had ensued when the first plane hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center. The first chapter does not establish the identity of the character, a fact that helps the reader identify with him; it positions the reader in the middle of the chaos with no temporal or spatial references. Both the character and the reader are mere observers of the deluge around them. This narrative tool serves to convey the awe and, as Michael Rothberg states, the surprise the attacks caused (“Writing, Trauma, and Home” 149).

Although narrated in the third person, the point of view in the novel shifts mostly between Keith Neudecker and his estranged wife, Lianne. However, each of the three parts of the novel contains a vignette that is from the point of view of Hammad, one of the terrorists. Through this fragmented structure, the novel creates a disrupted chronology, jumping from post to pre-9/11 sequences of time. Together with the constant shift between characters, the disrupted chronology of the storyline conveys the confusion and disorientation that were prevalent in the wake of the attacks. While fragmented narratives may encumber an emphatic response to suffering, they also prevent over identification with the victim and challenge the reader to think outside normative ways of being. Even though the novel exhibits a fragmentary narrative, zeroing in on mundane things such as Lianne’s everyday errands and Keith’s hospitalizations without solution or continuity, the tone of the novel is objective and elusive at once, making the effect of 9/11 on the American domestic life similar to being catapulted in a dream-like world of ruins, forcing the characters to reassess their identity. DeLillo justifies his use of “the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day” through the need to set them



“against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response” (“In the Ruins of the Future”). In other words, his use of the mundane is an affirmation of the “uniqueness” with which 9/11 had been endowed in the aftermath of the attacks.

The circular structure of *Falling Man* indicates that the trauma of 9/11 is still being lived over and over, the characters being locked into traumatic repetition. For Keith the boundaries between past and present are virtually nonexistent; he is stuck in a timeless loop. He is trapped between past and future, trapped in time, in an endless acting out without any hope for a different future. Trauma is an ever present phenomenon and the novel’s structure mimics the mental development of the main character, who remains tethered in his reenactment of the original event: “They walked down, thousands, and he was in there with them. He walked in a long sleep, one step, and then the next ... He thought his eyes and mouth were sinking into his skin. Things came back to him in hazy visions, like half an eye staring. These were moments he’d lost as they were happening and he had to stop walking in order to stop seeing them” (311-312). The “long sleep” state in which Keith finds himself mimics an out-of-body experience. His body and mind are split, allowing him to recall things in “hazy visions,” triggered by the action he was engaged in when the memories, albeit fragmented, were created; if he stops walking, he stops remembering. Furthermore, Keith’s sense of time and space are severely distorted. He is not conscious of what is happening around him nor does he fully comprehend the effect the events he is part of have on him: “Someone took his arm and led him forward for a few steps and then he walked in his own, in his sleep and for an instant he saw it again, going past the window, and this time he thought it was Rumsey. He confused it with Rumsey, the man falling sideways, arm out and up, like pointed up, like why am I here instead of there” (312). Keith’s “sleep” continues

as his senses are bombarded with stimuli he cannot begin to comprehend. “He thought it was Rumsey,” forgetting that he had left Rumsey in his office after seeing him die. He was confronted with an experience beyond human understanding and is, consequently, altered by the traumatic experience.

His mundane, safe, work environment becomes, in an instant, hell on Earth: colleagues dead, blood everywhere, debris, smoke, ashes, people falling to their deaths. New York becomes otherworldly if not literally another world:


It was not a street anymore, but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads ... they ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars. (3)

In lieu of narrative, DeLillo focuses on the visual images which are, according to Luckhurst where “the psychic registration of trauma truly resides” (147), making them the very foundation of traumatic memory. The total devastation in the wake of the attacks, a world of “falling ash and near night,” the desolate landscape of “rubble and mud” and the despair that permeated the air, with “people running past” are reenacted in the novel’s opening lines. There is almost no emotional or cognitive response to these impressions. Keith does not appear to have the ability to fit them in a framework of understanding. The way in which the events are presented in the first chapter, as well as his apparent lack of identity are indicative of his limited consciousness during the moment.

Mundane objects lose their significance and become symbols of scenes of terror: “He saw people shedding water as they ran, clothes and bodies drenched from sprinkler systems. There were shoes discarded in the street, handbags and laptops, a man seated on the sidewalk coughing up blood. Paper cups went bouncing oddly by” (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 4). “Shoes,” “handbags,” “laptops,” and “paper cups” acquire the meaning of the disaster and are warranted the same meaning as the man “coughing up blood” (4). They lose their status of everyday, mundane object and are infused with the devastation they are part of. This change of perspective with regards to the mundane persists in Keith’s case for years after the attacks. Reality itself changes its meaning and becomes foreign: “It was something that belonged to another landscape, something inserted, a conjuring that resembled for the briefest second some half seen image only half believed in the seeing, when the witness wonders what has happened to the meaning of things, to tree, street, stone, wind, simple words lost in the falling ash” (130). Much as the handbags and laptops acquire new meaning, “tree,” “street,” “stone,” and “wind” lose their original significance and become artificial, like something “inserted,” their meaning being infected by the “falling ash” that dominated the landscape before the collapse of the towers.

In order to reach his apartment near the towers, Keith needs to pass several checkpoints, in a militarized, almost dystopian, landscape. The city, so vibrant and lively prior to the towers’ collapse, has been stripped of excitement and has become desolate. When he reaches his apartment, Keith feels estranged from his pre-9/11 self and despite his efforts, has trouble in identifying with who he was before the attacks:

A single suitcase, that was all, and his passport, checkbooks, birth certificate and a few other documents, the state papers of identity. He stood and looked and felt something so



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lonely he could touch it with his hand ... Maybe he was thinking of the man who used to live here and he checked the bottles and cartons for a clue ... He went about fifteen paces into the corridor away from the stairwell and spoke in a voice slightly above a whisper. He said, 'I'm standing here', and then, louder, 'I'm standing here.' (33-34)

Keith's suitcase encompasses his whole pre-9/11 identity, the proof of who he was before the attacks, "the man who used to live here." In spite of all the proof contained in the suitcase, he no longer feels any connection to the person he was before the attacks and he searches for "clues" in order to establish who that was exactly. His loneliness and isolation are so severe that "he could touch it with his hand," prompting him to reaffirm his own existence, to bear witness to his own presence: "I'm standing here." A part of Keith seems to have been left in the wreckage of the towers and an altered version of him emerges. Not only does the place where he used to live feel strange but the person he used to be while living there is unfamiliar to Keith. This is also evident to Lianne, who observes how far removed Keith seems, like "a dim figure far away inside the plexiglass" (28). She sees him as "a hovering presence" and, similarly to his state of absence during the attacks, and a man "not quite returned to his body yet" (74); he is a blur, someone who cannot be defined or understood, who no longer resembles the man she married, "a man she'd never known before" (75).

Keith exhibits yet another aspect of trauma, namely, the fragmentation of his identity. We have two Keiths: the pre-9/11 Keith and the post 9/11 Keith. Keith sees his pre-9/11 self as a different person, who lived a different life: "We saw falcons perched on power lines, mile after mile, when we were somewhere out west, back *in the other life*" (131, emphasis mine). Keith is talking to Lianne when he makes this definitive distinction between his pre and post 9/11 self.

Another instance of this dichotomy is in his relationship with Lianne and the one he starts with his fellow 9/11 survivor Florence. Keith is in possession of Florence's briefcase when he exits the tower and, days later, he seeks her out in order to return it. In her, he finds a sort of kindred spirit, someone to whom he need not explain what he went through for she, herself, experienced it firsthand. They begin talking about the attacks and their long talks and mutual understanding lead to the affair:

She talked about the tower, going over it again, claustrophobically, the smoke, the fold of the bodies, and he understood that they could talk about these things only with each other, in minute and dullest detail, but it would never be dull or too detailed because it was inside of them now and because he needed to hear what he'd lost in the tracings of memory. (113-114)

In his attempt to gain a measure of control over the traumatic experience, Keith begins seeing Florence. For her, the event was not traumatic in the sense that it was for Keith: while he is unable to consciously recall it, she keeps "going over it again" in order to grasp the event, explicitly voicing her recollections. They each experienced the traumatic event in different ways and exhibit different symptoms. Even in her presence Keith is unable to verbalize his own experience. He needs to hear her retelling because he needs to know what "he'd lost" in his inability to consciously recall his own memories. As Linda Kauffman points out, Keith "needs to absorb her experience to comprehend his own" (371). Since his recollection of the event is fragmented, through her retelling he can learn more in order to reintroduce the event in a network of signification and create a narrative. For him, Florence provides the solidarity that he

cannot find in his wife, while for her, he is a sounding board (Versluys 25): “She was talking to the room, to herself, he thought, talking back in time to some version of herself ... She wanted her feelings to register, officially, and needed to say the actual words, if not necessarily to him” (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 115). Although they relate to each other’s suffering, they cannot truly communicate with each other. Keith fails to voice his own experience, and to Florence he is a mere spectator, someone to hear “her feelings” and “the actual words.” The affair they eventually engage in can be seen as an attempt to master the traumatic event but neither that nor their talks manage to do any healing. Although at first an unconscious act, Keith eventually becomes aware of the fragmentation of his identity and concludes that in order to maintain his relationship with Lianne he must end the one with Florence, hoping that at the same time this would put an end to him being “double in himself”: “He was speaking into the breeze, not quite to Justin. He was still back there, with Florence, double in himself, coming and going, the walks across the park and back, the deep shared self, down through the smoke, and then here again to safety and family, to the implications of one’s conduct” (198). His self is split, “shared” between his family life and Florence, but also between who he was while experiencing the attacks, “down through the smoke” and who he is with his family in “safety.”


Keith attempts to work through his own trauma by using his body. After having surgery on one of his wrists (injured in the attacks), he becomes obsessive in his rehabilitation. He is given a regimen of exercises meant to heal and strengthen his wrist, a regimen which becomes more of a coping mechanism, a form of counteracting trauma. Laura Di Prete offers an explanation for Keith’s behavior: “This body—turned foreign, alien, unfamiliar as the result of traumatic experience, becomes the vehicle through which trauma is told and possibly, worked through” (2). In other words, the body becomes an instrument of healing for the mind. Further

evidence that his exercise regimen is more a form of coping with psychological trauma than a physical healing process is the fact that Keith, even years later, when his injury is no longer an issue, feels compelled to continue doing his exercises, showing that he is still acting out the trauma and his healing is not only incomplete but it might not happen at all:

There was no problem with the wrist. The wrist was fine. But he sat in his hotel room, facing the window, hand curled into a gentle fist, thumb up in a certain setup. He recalled phrases from his instruction sheet and recited them quietly, working on the hand shapes, the bend of the wrist toward the floor, the bend of the wrist toward the ceiling. He used the uninvolved hand to apply pressure to the involved hand. He sat in deep concentration. He recalled the setups, every one, and the number of seconds for each, and the number of repetitions ... Mornings without fail, every night when he returned. (300)

We see Keith obsessively and rigorously repeat his exercises, reciting “phrases from his instruction sheet” even though “the wrist was fine,” suggesting that this, “morning” and “night” ritual has become both a form of coping and a form of persisting in his traumatic state. Even years later, the exercises are still the only thing providing him with a sense of stability and structure serving as a counterproductive attempt to work through trauma. He attributes significance to the performing of those small gestures:

He found these sessions restorative, four times a day, the wrist extensions, the ulnar deviations. These were the true countermeasures to the damage he’s suffered in the tower, in the descending chaos. It was not the MRI and not the surgery that brought him



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closer to well-being. It was this modest home program, the counting of seconds, the counting of repetitions, the times of day he reserved for the exercises, the ice he applied following each set of exercises ... There were the dead and maimed. His injury was slight but it wasn't the torn cartilage that was the subject of this effort. It was the chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors, the voices choking in smoke. (49-50)

The sessions are “restorative” for Keith, a “countermeasure” to his suffering, not only physically but also psychologically. Keith attempts to work through his own trauma by making “the dead and maimed,” the other victims, “the subject of his effort.” He marks time with these exercise sessions, counting “seconds” and “repetitions” that can lead him on a path towards healing but that also keep him stuck in his reenactment of his own traumatic experience, in a perpetual state of alienation and melancholia. The constant repetition of his exercises stems from his desire for control and gives him a form of psychological support. The focus on the physical wound reduces the seriousness of the psychological trauma; a fixed set of rituals helps create a feeling of structure and meaning; it is his only stable crutch.

Also a manifestation of the effects of trauma is Keith's new career as a semi-professional poker player. Keith loses his grip on all societal structures that give meaning to human life, therefore he distances himself from his family and has no contact with friends. In his new career Keith not only recreates his past, but finds comfort in the game of poker, much like the weekly poker games he used to have with Rumsey and their other friends prior to the attacks. The rules of the game and this link between past and present offer him a form of psychological stability, at the same time allowing him a type of escapism. By adopting an almost nomadic lifestyle, flying around the country for poker tournaments, he manages to remain detached from his surroundings



and from his own thoughts, the game allowing him to distance himself from his own consciousness and from those around him: “He didn’t wonder who she [a poker player] was or where she’d go when this was over, to what sort of room somewhere, to think what kind of thoughts. This was never over. That was the point. There was nothing outside the game but faded space” (242-243). The “never over,” continuous nature of the world in which he now exists allows him maintain himself cut off from any form of structure and consistency. The hyperreal world of the casinos where one can never tell whether it is day or night, a simulacrum of the real world that exceeds reality and is a closed world, allows Keith to perceive the outside world as “faded space,” with which he has virtually no contact. The casinos are also a world that is suspended in time allowing Keith to persist in his sense of numbness. Although Keith becoming a poker player can be seen as a form of escape from the constant remembering of the traumatic experience, it is also a way of persisting in trauma, by commemorating his friend Rumsey and creating the illusion of control. By maintaining this connection to the past, Keith continuously repeats the trauma as a way to hold on to the traumatic event so as not to betray the friends he lost, thus persisting in his state of melancholia:

There were no days or times except for the tournament schedule. He wasn’t making enough money to justify this life on a practical basis. But there was no such need. There should have been but there wasn’t and that was the point. The point was one of invalidation. Nothing else pertained. Only this had binding force ... There were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness. A fresh deck rose to the tabletop. (293-294)

He keeps time with the “times” and “days” of the “tournament schedule.” It is the only thing that has “binding force,” which manages to keep Keith involved and not allow him to fade. He is constantly reliving the traumatic experience in “a thousand heaving dreams,” stuck in this timeless loop in a state of “paralysis” and “helplessness,” perpetually acting out his trauma. Only the “fresh deck” permits him to function and offers a soothing ritual to which he can relate. He finds comfort and solace in the routine of the tournaments but is stuck in a state of suspension and repetition. According to Joseph Conte, “Neudecker’s failed recovery measures the depth of his traumatism ... Irrevocably touched by 9/11 he cannot be made whole ...” (576).

By creating Keith, Don DeLillo gives a face to the tragedy, a character who was a direct victim of 9/11. The way in which DeLillo presents the event itself however, is somewhat problematic. He presents the trauma of 9/11 as a unique and representative event and as an “enduring condition for which there is no remedy” (Versluys 47). As Michael Rothberg points out in his work, this is a dangerous position, as it negates the validity of other traumas. Usually, 9/11 is talked about as a collective tragedy and, without a doubt, the attacks have had many social, economic and cultural effects, but what DeLillo shows is the extent of the effect the attacks had on the individual lives of those who were directly traumatized. The problem here is that he shows the effect of trauma as something that cannot be surpassed. This model of traumatic behavior presented by DeLillo, expanded to “include the whole human condition” (Versluys 47) is somewhat problematic. As an influential writer, DeLillo’s readers might perceive his representation of trauma as the only valid one and allow their reactions to be influenced by it. The construction of this model is especially problematic since not everyone

responds to trauma in the same way. People exhibit different degrees of resilience that allows them to deal with and experience an event (even the same one) in completely distinct ways.

DeLillo paints a very bleak picture of his characters' development that lacks any measure of hope, stuck in a timeless circle with little room for working through and finding control. His focus on individual trauma and his use of gaps, breaks in linear time and unconnected images of traumatic memory in building his narrative, give voice to the horrific events, turning readers into witnesses of the traumatic process. By tethering his characters in their "future denying traumas", DeLillo not only counters the "basic narrative schemata" but also the "basic human need to work through grief" (Versluys 47).

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