

Time for Grief and Remembrance after 9/11 in David Foster Wallace's "The View from Mrs. Thompson's"

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Abstract

When discussing the events of 9/11, time is a key factor. How much time passed between the two hits? How long did it take for the towers to fall? How long should we wait to share criticism about America when talking about 9/11? The phrase *too soon* is used often to shut down any negative opinions or controversial jokes about the terror attack, which also stifles discussion about the topic. While 9/11 is the most photographed terror attack yet, it is also surprisingly censored. As Joan Didion puts it, "the entire event has been seized," and critical voices were silenced or ostracized. The earliest works of literature about the terrorist attacks were essays. In these works of nonfiction, the authors question the official narrative set by the government, and focus on the experiences and attitudes of the people who witnessed the tragedy in some capacity. In my paper, I aim to investigate the way American writers process the events of September 11 in these essays, with a focus on the motifs of time and memory. While official reporting allowed no time to think about the events and incentivized people to retaliate, these texts question the way the United States grieved, provided space to mourn, and blamed strictly outside sources for the attacks. The goal of this paper is to analyze the ways in which David Foster Wallace explores time and memory on the day of and after 9/11, when the world stopped in its tracks for a day.

Keywords: American essay, 9/11 terror attacks, David Foster Wallace, trauma, memory

Introduction

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a massive event shook the United States and the world. As two planes hit the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the whole world watched live on television, suspended in disbelief. Part of it felt similar, not unlike the disaster movies of the time, such as *Independence Day* (1996)

or *Armageddon* (1998), seen on big and small screens before. However, this was real, as evidenced by the confusion followed by the horror of realization: this was no mere accident, it was a deliberate attack, purposeful and planned. As the attacks unfolded, one of the most common topics of discussion became time: how much time would it take to evacuate the buildings? How long would it take for the towers to fall? What will happen next? The other question—"Why?"—was even more difficult to answer.

While 9/11 and its follow-up memorials, policy changes, and even wars are politically charged and largely defined by the US government, the literature, media, and art that followed these events showcase different ways for the country (and the world) to grieve, to cope, and to possibly move on from what happened on that day. Richard Gray claims that directly after the events, "[n]othing to say became a refrain" (2011, p. 15) because there were no words to capture the magnitude and sheer shock of what was unfolding around them. The words *nothing to say* are a nod to Toni Morrison's poem, *The Dead of September 11*, in which she claims that there are no words she could share with the people who lost their lives in this attack.

To speak to you, the dead of September 11, I must not claim
false intimacy or summon an overheated heart glazed
just in time for a camera. I must be steady and I must be clear,
knowing all the time that I have nothing to say—no words
stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture
older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you
have become. (Morrison, 2001, pp. 48–49)

Morrison's poem was one of the first pieces of literature which followed the 9/11 terror attacks, encapsulating the shock and horror of the situation. It was written a couple of days after the tragedy and published in a special November issue of *Vanity Fair*, which stood to commemorate the dead and the efforts of the people who were still working at Ground Zero, trying to clean up the remains, identify bodies, or search for possible miracle survivors. The special issue has a photo of firefighters on the cover, articles and photos about the tragedy, and Morrison's poem which is referenced as a eulogy on the cover of the magazine.

The earliest works of literature about 9/11 were short-form texts: many authors shared their thoughts in magazines, special commemorative issues, or in interviews; the longer novels came a few years later. Noteworthy are *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo, *The Emperor's Children*

by Claire Messud, etc. However, there is considerable criticism levied against these works because they keep 9/11 itself in the background of their respective narratives and rely on populist ideals and platitudes. For example, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* follows Oskar, a 9-year-old boy who lost his father in the terror attacks. Much of the story is about him coming to terms with the loss of his father, which leads him to reinterpret regular, everyday objects to find meaning and understanding in a place that is surreal and seemingly meaningless. The absurdity of his father's passing is showcased during his funeral where Oskar is keenly aware of the fact that the coffin is empty and the grave will be as well. The reader follows Oskar through his journey of mourning, sees his thoughts about "the worst day" (Foer, 2012, p. 68), which is his euphemism for 9/11. He draws a parallel between his father's passing and the fall of the Twin Towers, wondering whether skyscrapers were built down, "[t]hey could be underneath the skyscrapers for living people that are built up" (2012, p. 3). Oskar creates a mirror image between the living and the dead, the surface, the mass grave at Ground Zero signals that there is a shift, a difference in the mirrored images. As Alexandru Oravițan observes, "[l]ife in the aftermath of 9/11 is permanently relatable to those who have been lost" (2019, p. 166).

In the simplest terms, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story that features an overly mature and anxious boy who went through a terribly traumatic event and lost a parent, and who is trying to find meaning in the madness of such tragedy. But it is also a rather simple and well-known literary genre. As Gray points out, "[t]he 'worst day' becomes [...] the occasion for rehearsing and replaying a deeply traditional narrative, in this case a sly but slight variation on the classic form of the initiation novel" (2011, p. 53).

9/11 is only represented as individual trauma for a child narrator who does not truly understand the complicated geopolitical environment, so the author reduces the main character's perceivable environment to that of the domestic and the personal. Furthermore, the only direct representation of the suffering during September 11 are the fifteen photos of a falling body placed at the end of the novel. These photos show the same person falling but the image is edited so with every turn of the page, the person is placed higher up on the same background. This way, as the reader flips through the pages, it appears as though the person is not falling, but ascending towards the sky in what Richard Gray calls a "redemptive gesture" (2011, p. 52). This ending not only further mystifies the tragedy but also offers a solution to Oskar's problem.

The boy is transfixed on the falling people's images, he is set on finding his father among these photos to finally be able to have closure after burying an empty casket, so he invents a solution. As Laura Frost explains,

Oskar's flip-book substitutes a photograph for narrative explanation, a fantasy of wish fulfillment for coming to terms with the falling people. This act of 'invention' is a fiction-making that not only ultimately steers around the trauma at its center but also reinstates the trauma in the novel's conclusion. (2008, p. 194)

The idea of collective trauma is wholly ignored by Foer even though he creates parallels between other traumatic events in history as well, such as Oskar's grandparents' trauma during World War II, and an excerpt from a Hiroshima survivor's interview. While there seem to be textual references to such topics, Foer's protagonist only focuses on his own individual, personal account and the images of the falling people are merely illustrative, and "what they illustrate is a deeply conventional if occasionally touching account of a young man growing up, coming to terms with and perhaps even transcending, ascending above loss" (Gray, 2011, pp. 52–53).

A similar tendency can be observed in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* as well. The story begins moments after the terror attack when Keith Neudecker, who works in the World Trade Center, is aimlessly walking down the destroyed and dusty road after narrowly making it out of the tower. He is barely responsive to his environment, "[t]hings inside him were distant and still, where he was supposed to be" (DeLillo, 2011, p. 4). Without really considering his decisions, Keith ends up going to his estranged wife's home instead of a hospital. After the first chapter, the reader gains insight into the lives of Keith's family members: Lianne, his estranged wife, their son, Justin, Lianne's mother and her German art dealer boyfriend. The basic premise of *Falling Man* is similar to *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the reader watches a family deal with the aftermath of 9/11 and the way it disrupted their lives.

While Jonathan Safran Foer utilizes an image of a falling person to create the conclusion to his novel, DeLillo's inspiration for his novel's title is a photo taken by Richard Drew, titled *The Falling Man*. This image is part of a sequence in which Drew's camera follows a falling male figure, showing him helplessly flailing, rolling, and tumbling through the air, but *The Falling Man* freezes him in a moment where his body is perfectly parallel with the tower in the background, he is facing down towards the ground, his arms are pressed to his sides and one of his legs is bent. Without the context of the other images in this sequence, the falling man's pose seems deliberate

and purposeful, as though he is in control of the way he will undoubtedly die once the camera is unable to follow him further. Drew's photo inspired many people, even though the photos of those who fell or jumped out of the towers on 9/11 were at first hidden from the public as they were considered too graphic (cf. Junod, 2003).

The cultural output in the years after the attacks (e.g. Eric Fischl's *Tumbling Woman* statues, similar imagery of people falling from skyscrapers in TV shows such as *Mad Men*, etc.) proves that for most onlookers these images are representative of the tragedy. DeLillo does not use a visual representation in *Falling Man*, he creates a character, a performance artist called David Janiak, who is known as the Falling Man in New York City. The artist jumps from various places around the city, recreating the pose captured by Richard Drew, "one leg bent up, arms at his sides" (DeLillo, 2011, p. 33) and hangs in this position for a while, which elicits a reaction from those who watch him. Lianne meets Janiak on multiple occasions and her reactions vary from shock and surprise to panic, which chases her out of the area where the artist is suspended. Lianne has her own trauma about suicide, separate from the trauma caused by 9/11. Her father took his life not long after finding out that he had Alzheimer's disease. Seeing Janiak's performance helps Lianne come to terms with her father's decision.

DeLillo's artist and the reactions to his performance showcase "the gap between the artistically mediated response to trauma and the individual reception of such a work of art" (Duvall, 2012, p. 186). Lianne's reaction underlines that the collective trauma cannot be discussed because there is a temporal shift between what happened that caused the trauma and what one might take in from viewing a piece of art or media relevant to their trauma. While Foer uses photos and artwork to illustrate Oskar's trauma, DeLillo's focus moves to the role of the artist and the viewer or reader who experiences the art not only as something they can behold, but as a witness too. For Lianne, "Falling Man's performance is not a representation of the horror of 9/11, it is the horror of 9/11 itself" (Duvall, 2012, p. 186).

Richard Gray claims that while the text is structured well, it is also "too clearly foregrounded, the style excessively mannered; and the characters fall into postures of survival after 9/11 that are too familiar to invite much more than a gesture of recognition from the reader" (2011, p. 27). The polish the writer inadvertently applies over his work turns Keith and Lianne's trauma and coping into familiar and cliché moments, which in turn "adds next to nothing to our understanding of the trauma at the heart of the action. In fact, it evades that trauma, it suppresses its urgency and disguises its difference by inserting it in a series of familiar tropes" (Gray, 2011, p. 28).

Post-9/11 novels are often critiqued this way. Gray claims that instead of more imaginative ways of confronting such tragedy, a large portion of 9/11 fiction “betrays a response to crisis that is eerily analogous to the reaction of many politicians and the mainstream American media after 9/11: a desperate retreat into the old sureties” (2011, p. 16). Pankaj Mishra views post-9/11 novels this way as well, criticizing the writers for using imagery such as domestic discord “as a metaphor for post-9/11 America” (2007). He notes that there are plenty of more successful genres and forms of writing that discuss the terror attack in a way that offers more insight and reflection if the reader chooses to seek that out. One of his examples is nonfiction: “Writers of narrative non-fiction continue to illuminate how the country’s ruling class took the country into a suicidal war in Iraq” (Mishra, 2007).

Nonfiction, namely essays about 9/11 appeared closer to the attacks than long-form fiction, and, by the genre’s definition, they usually offer a more introspective, analytical approach, discussing the terror attack for what it is. By its nature, nonfiction is supposed to be embedded into reality, therefore more realistic and less fictionalized accounts can be found in an essay than in a novel. However, one must tread carefully when reading these texts because while they are considered nonfiction, they are works of literature, not barebones reports. So, the reader interacts with a stylized, polished, and edited text whose aim is not necessarily to offer correct details, but to analyze, discuss, and offer a more introspective account about what the author witnessed. More truthfulness is expected from a work of nonfiction than a fictitious text, as Lee Gutkind defines such texts as *true stories, told well*. However, 9/11 is rooted in our experienced reality, so even fiction about the topic stems from the real.

It raises the question of whether this transposition of the author of fiction into the realm of non-fiction is an attempt to bring fiction closer to reality, or whether it hints at the reversal of their roles through fiction’s coming into the domain of the real. (Gheorghiu, 2018, p. 12)

This is not to say that fiction about 9/11 is not good literature, but the difference between the above-mentioned novels and the essays discussed in this paper is in their approach to the topic. Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn note that

literary works reframe and focus the meaning of 9/11 by employing representational strategies that emphasize the desire for (and construction of) meaning, and that dramatize the continuing resonance of 9/11 in the collective life of the United States and beyond. (2008, p. 2)

In the book edited by Keniston and Quinn, *Literature after 9/11*, the various writers mostly focus on fiction, poetry, and theater, and some articles discuss visual media, comics, and graphic novels. Nonfiction is only mentioned, even though there is an abundance of essays, opinion pieces, and what are called *responses* as early as the first few weeks after September 11. This paper aims to examine one of the neglected essays about 9/11, focusing on the author's descriptions of time and memory. Nonfiction about 9/11 is incredibly extensive, but under-researched. Authors known mostly for their fiction such as Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace, writers of creative nonfiction like Joan Didion, and journalists, namely Tom Junod, contributed essays, but they are not canonized or even discussed in books about post-9/11 literature. This paper will focus only on one representative text, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" by David Foster Wallace.

Wallace's essay was first published in the press: the piece appeared in the October 24, 2001 issue of *Rolling Stone*, then he added it to *Consider the Lobster*, a volume of essays published in 2005. "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" is a hasty report about 11–13 September, 2001, in which Wallace seems to jut down his feelings and the events around him as a way to preserve his own memories about 9/11. The text will be analyzed with the tools of trauma theory and memory studies, particularly with reference to Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* and Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma as a double wound.

Trauma, Memory, and Grief

When discussing the events of 9/11, it is impossible to avoid the concept of trauma, be it personal, collective, national, or even international. The concept of trauma stems from medicine, as it used to refer to physical injury, but today the more widespread and colloquial use of the word is in reference to a psychological hurt.

Rather than simply referring to a specific event, trauma cuts across two scenes, consisting of an event too overwhelming to be experienced at the time of its arrival, followed by the delayed onslaught of repetitive symptoms that return the survivor to the initial traumatic event. (Pedersen, 2019, p. 26)

In the briefest terms, trauma can be defined as belated temporality and repetition, which were first introduced by Sigmund Freud whilst he was discussing the concept of hysteria (cf. Freud, 1991, p. 278). He coined the term *Nachträglichkeit* to explain this temporal shift. The word does not have an adequate English translation, but it has been translated as *afterwardsness*, *latency*, *retroactive temporality*, etc. It was also further developed by French psychoanalysts Jacques Lacan and Jean Laplanche.

Cathy Caruth uses a variation of *Nachträglichkeit* within her trauma theory to explain that a traumatic event “occurs too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth, 2016, p. 4). She calls this the double wound, as

trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (2016, p. 4)

Trauma and memory are closely intertwined since a traumatic event is remembered, relived, and, in the case of 9/11 specifically, it becomes a monument and a defining moment within a nation's history. The September 11 terror attacks established a *lieu de mémoire* or a site of memory surprisingly fast, even though the attacks took place in multiple locations. Four planes were hijacked that day, two hit the twin towers of the World Trade Center, one hit the Pentagon, and one was deterred by the passengers and crashed into a field, instead of its intended target. The site of memory became New York City's missing skyscrapers, which crumbled in front of our eyes live on television.

Before I further reflect on this *lieu de mémoire*, I will briefly discuss Pierre Nora's concepts of memory. He defines *lieu de mémoire* as “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora, 1996, p. xvii). It is important to note that a site of memory may be tangible or intangible, it does not have to be a physical space, and the only requirement is that it holds some symbolic meaning for a community. These *lieux de mémoire* act as placeholders in contemporary society because, in Nora's view, there are no longer any *milieux de mémoire*, “settings in which memory is a real part of everyday history” (1996, p. 1). He believes that the acceleration of life, globalization, and mass culture are behind this loss, so there is a need for *lieu de mémoire*. “[M]oments of history are plucked out of the flow of history, then returned to it—no longer quite alive but not yet entirely dead, like shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded” (Nora, 1996, p. 7). Richard Stamelman points out that

[u]sually it takes time for a milieu de mémoire (the very moment of the event itself in the historical here and now) to undergo the sea of change that makes it into a lieu de mémoire. Battlefields like Gettysburg, or Verdun, for example, became memory sites once the actual even had been ‘replaced’ and rearticulated through commemorative monuments that had literally occupied—if not symbolically taken over—the site.

Statues, obelisks, cenotaphs, *arc de triomphes*, and memorial events add to the historical site their own history (of design, construction, political debate, public reaction, controversy) as motivated and shaped by the ideologies and symbols inherent to the act of commemoration itself. (Stamelman, 2003, p. 14)

But the World Trade Center's ruin, called Ground Zero, became a site of memory very quickly because, in Stamelman's opinion, there was a push from the very beginning to make something out of the nothing that was left in the place of the Twin Towers (2003, p. 15). And, while authors struggle to find words to grasp what happened, politicians, mass media, the 24-hour news cycle, and even advertising is hard at work to make a statement. People's collective trauma is weaponized by the government to justify waging wars, notions of patriotism fill the television screens quickly. As Alan Gibbs observes, "trauma theory sets an ideal foundation for tendencies which, in these circumstances, enabled a sense of victimhood and false innocence to take root and deflect attention from America's complicity in actions both before and after 9/11" (2014, p. 121). The visual grandness of the event also serves to mystify Ground Zero, while the constant replays of the events on news stations help crystallize the image as an icon, the billowing smoke, the fire, the rubble turns into the symbol of a nation wounded, the Western way of living attacked, the emblems of American capitalism shattered, etc. The constant, involuntary reliving of this traumatic event via news, the increasingly present internet, and the genuinely shocking nature of September 11 helped solidify Ground Zero as the *lieu de mémoire* it is even today, when the Pile is cleaned up, a new tower is built, there is a memorial monument in its place, and the disaster is no longer viewable in real time.

In the following section, I will analyze "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" by David Foster Wallace with the theoretical concepts of trauma studies and memory studies.

"The View from Mrs. Thompson's"—Tragedy through TV Screens

David Foster Wallace's "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" is featured in *Consider the Lobster*, a volume of essays which came out in 2005. The text was written much closer to the events, it first appeared in *Rolling Stone* over a month after September 11, 2001, and it captures Wallace's accounts of 11–13 September, from Bloomington, Illinois. Its close proximity to the events of 9/11 places the essay in an interesting time period, in which Americans are uncertain about what just happened, the situation is ongoing, reports are constant, but sometimes wrong, sometimes simply uncertain, and people are seeing the second plane hit the South Tower, the towers fall after one another, rescue efforts, and the general mayhem on television.

The essay is sectioned into four different sections: “Synecdoche”, “Wednesday”, “Aerial & Ground Views”, and “Tuesday”, in a non-chronological order. Even though Wallace recounts events from Tuesday, September 11, and the following two days, he opts not to follow the order of events, instead he starts out with an interaction he overheard at a convenience store, after 9/11. Wallace gives some insight about Midwesterners and their resentment of chitchat, claiming that while they can offer a friendly smile, they are not looking for conversation in such a setting. He notes that this distant behavior changed since the “Horror” (Wallace, 2006, p. 128), as he overhears shoppers discussing the tragedy, a mother claiming that “[w]ith my boys they thought it was all some movie like that *Independence Day*, till they then started to notice how it was the same movie on all channels” (Wallace, 2006, pp. 128–29).

Wallace calls the events of 9/11 the Horror, while in the overheard conversation the woman just references it as “it,” but it is clear to the writer what the two people are talking about. The event is so grand and shocking that it is on everyone’s mind and impossible to avoid. Even though idioms and names such as Ground Zero and 9/11 did not become crystallized yet, Wallace offers a name to use for the situation, for the time being it is just called the Horror. He introduces the text by naming the time, location, and subject, and simply calls the subject obvious as the magnitude of such an attack does not necessitate further explanation, everyone is thinking about it, which is confirmed in the overheard conversation.

LOCATION: BLOOMINGTON, ILLINOIS

DATES: 11–13 SEPTEMBER 2001

SUBJECT: OBVIOUS (Wallace, 2006, p. 128)

He titles this short first part of the essay synecdoche, which is defined by the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* as “a figure of speech by which a more comprehensive term is used for a less comprehensive or vice versa, as whole for part or part for whole” (2006, p. 990). An example of synecdoche would be to say “England won the cup” but it is clear from context that we are talking about the English football team. In Wallace’s case the word *horror* is a placeholder for everything that happened on September 11, it is a simplified one-word reference to the trauma, shock, and utter chaos experienced by him and the people around him.

9/11, Ground Zero, and even September 11 act similarly today. Marc Redfield points out that these idioms started getting used mostly in the media and they stuck because they were repeated constantly; however, these names also put distance between

what happened and what is remembered. The name date especially is not descriptive at all,

for on the one hand the formal emptiness of the phrase 'September 11' imposes knowledge and amnesia, knowledge as amnesia—a memory projected against the ground zero of hyperbolic forgetting—on the other hand this same formal emptiness registers and even loudly proclaims a trauma, a wound beyond words: an inability to say what this violence, this spectacle, this 'everything changing' means. (Redfield, 2007, p. 59)

Compared to this, Wallace's "Horror" expresses more emotion, it focuses not on just the date or place, it expresses a specific feeling that defined those few days he discusses in "The View from Mrs. Thompson's." There is a need to name such an event, to find a synecdoche or a placeholder that expresses the traumatic nature of the event.

The second part of the essay focuses on September 12, the day after 9/11, and Wallace notes that every single house in his area has displayed one or more American flags, seemingly overnight.

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. A lot of homeowners here have those special angled flag-holders by their front door, the kind whose brace takes four Phillips screws. Plus thousands of the little hand-held 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. 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. Some upscale people have actual poles; their flags are at half-mast. 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. It's a total mystery where people can buy flags this big or how they got them up there, or when. (Wallace, 2006, p. 129)

The flags represent a first response to the trauma of the day before, the Midwesterners—removed from New York City, but part of the same country which is under attack—react by finding reassuring gestures, common positive symbols, and sureties such as national pride, unity in the fact that everyone has these flags out, and reassurance that the United States has not crumbled. Wallace observes 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 statement if you *don't* have a flag out. (2006, p. 130)

Catharina Donn explains that collective trauma

is not the permeation of the collective with elements of shared displacement that Freud envisaged, but a discursive phenomenon in which key features of trauma—premediated authenticity, its incommensurate impact, the impossibility of adequate response—transform from symptoms into discursive concepts (2017, p. 43)

thus symbols and placeholders appear immediately, “the cultural dimension of trauma is inherently mediated and dependent on symbolization” (p. 43). In the case of the citizens of Bloomington, the flags become a symbol, a placeholder for the already emerging *lieu de mémoire* they only see on television. Wallace asks his neighbor, “Say, Mr. N---, suppose somebody like a foreign person or a TV reporter or something were to come by and ask you what the purpose of all these flags after what happened yesterday was, exactly—what do you think you’d say?” (2006, p. 130). Even the question is formulated carefully, to show that the asker is in agreement with his peers. Mr. N--- simply says “to show support towards what’s going on, as Americans” (p. 130). The need to get a flag and show this supposed support transfers to Wallace as well, so he tries to find one in the small town, without much luck, but on his quest, he asks a few more people to explain why they think the flags are necessary, and they mostly express the same opinion:

Plus: Selected other responses from various times during the day’s flag-hunt when circumstances permitted the question to be asked without one seeming like a smartass or loon:

‘To show we’re Americans and we’re not going to bow down to nobody’;

‘It’s a classic pseudo-archetype, a reflexive semion designed to preempt and negate the critical function’ (grad student);

‘For pride.’

‘What they do is symbolize unity and that we’re all together behind the victims in this war and they’ve fucked with the wrong people this time, amigo.’ (Wallace, 2006, p. 130)

The answers range from simple to the almost incomprehensible, but they express similar feelings: it is a symbol, but it is not yet crystallized, it is a panicked response to something too large, too heavy, and too complicated to understand, but it is an eminent symbol, one known and easily recognized by everyone. Slavoj Žižek notes that the first few days to months between a traumatic event and its symbolic impact is an interesting time

because it is not clear yet “what would be symbolized, what their symbolic efficiency will be, what acts will be evoked to justify” (2002, p. 44). He remarks that many Americans rediscovered their national pride in the following days after the attacks, resorting to the simplest common denominator, “taking refuge in the innocence of firm ideological identification” (2002, p. 45). Žižek also recognizes that these first innocent steps do not remain so, “there is nothing ‘innocent about this rediscovery of American innocence, about getting rid of historical guilt or irony which prevented many Americans from fully assuming their national identity” (p. 45).

When Wallace asks these questions, he is still looking at the more innocent, unifying gestures of Americans in distress, reaching towards each other. The official narrative and the us vs. them mentality has not set in yet, especially on Tuesday, when the events are still unfolding. In the third part, “Aerial & Ground Views,” he characterizes the town, with not much community organization other than the many churches, a low-quality local newspaper, and the TV, which is omnipresent in the lives of the townsfolk, and which is their number one connection to the events of 9/11. In the last part of the essay, titled “Tuesday,” Wallace finally recounts what he did on September 11: he watched the news live with people from his congregation, gathered in front of the TV at Mrs. Thompson’s house. Mrs. Thompson is an elderly woman who is considered a community leader in Wallace’s church, and the writer recalls that people just kept coming to her house to watch the TV there, seemingly seeking out community.

Bloomington is far from New York City, so there is some time difference:

Time-wise, we’re an hour behind the East Coast. By 8:00, everybody with a job is at it, and just about everybody else is home drinking coffee and blowing their nose and watching Today or one of the other network AM shows that all broadcast (it goes without saying) from New York. At 8:00 on Tuesday I personally was in the shower, trying to listen to a Bears post-mortem on WSCR Sports Radio in Chicago. (Wallace, 2006, p. 134)

He watches the events unfold with shampoo in his hair, in Mrs. Thompson’s house, and absorbs what is happening in New York as a person who is familiar with the city and knows its layout. Shock envelops the entire community gathered in the house, which he recognizes by the fact that he entered Mrs. Thompson’s house without knocking, the old lady did not offer to serve coffee to her guests but told them to just take some, and she did not rock in her chair as she normally would. He recounts that he came in the house

to find people already there, watching CBS, the preferred news network of the town, and as he approached the TV set, they zoomed in, which revealed

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 wriggling as they fell and one couple almost seeming (unverifiable) to be hugging each other as they fell several stories and shrank back to dots and the camera then all of a sudden pulled back to the long view—I have no idea how long the clip took—after which Dan Rather’s mouth seemed to move for a second before the sound emerged, and everyone in the room sat back and looked at one another with expressions that seemed somehow both childlike and terribly old. (Wallace, 2006, p. 136)

Already with this small observation, Wallace is aware of the way the news cycle and media is in control of the memories that will be formed, a quick act of censorship takes place when the cameraperson realizes that the death of human beings is on full display and zooms out, so it would not be so obvious. In the center of the broadcast are the two towers, bleeding smoke and fire before they crumble, but this way, they neatly tuck in and hide the human suffering. It also became common practice in the US to hide the footage and images of the falling people, due to questions of sensitivity. Joan Didion observes that as time passed, she “found that what had happened was being processed, obscured, systematically leached of history and so of meaning, finally rendered less readable than it had seemed on the morning it happened” (2003, pp. 8–9).

Wallace recognized that he was traumatized in that moment:

I’m not sure what else to say. It seems grotesque to talk about being traumatized by a piece of video when the people in the video were dying. Something about the shoes also falling made it worse. I think the older ladies took it better than I did. (2006, p. 136)

He also questions his ability to recall the events of that day:

Is it normal not to 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 moving his lawn, which seemed totally bizarre, but I don’t remember if anybody remarked on it. (p. 137)

Although they are not in the space where the tragedy is taking place, the spectators are still bearing witness to the event. It is filtered through the television, which offers its own agenda and displays censorship efforts, even though the broadcast is live.

Wallace even remarks that the “innocent” women who watch the live feed with him seem to not reflect on the fact that the newscaster’s hair is mussed just perfectly, or that “it’s maybe a little odd that *all three* network anchors are in shirtsleeves” (2006, p. 139), and that the same few clips of the towers getting hit are replayed constantly on TV, for no particular reason. Wallace stresses that the people watching the broadcast are mostly well educated, smart, and make some observations, but they lack the cynicism to critique the event, or to draw connections which might reflect negatively on the United States. “Instead, what they do is all sit together and feel really bad, and pray” (2006, p. 140). These women are not familiar with New York City, so Wallace explains to them where the World Trade Center is located compared to the Statue of Liberty and Broadway, giving them more context about the financial district and Manhattan’s layout. It is a particular characteristic of the twenty-first century that a *lieu de mémoire* is formed and recognized by most of the world, but for those who have not visited New York before, the place of memory is suspended in the TV feed, instead of taking up material space. For this reason, a lesser-known consequence of 9/11 is that not only the towers were destroyed, but many buildings around it too. Without the spatial awareness and specific knowledge of the Towers’ location, many viewers, including those who were watching with Wallace, are unaware of significant details and their *lieu de mémoire* is unreal. The TV’s relentless repetition of the image of the towers being hit and collapsing already establishes Ground Zero as a *lieu de mémoire*, but the viewers know it through the filter of the television, they do not see it as two buildings within a neighborhood, they are not aware of the other buildings that were crushed by the falling towers. Their perception is dictated by the TV screen, so the towers, and later, their absence, is what they think of, in the air, as part of the New York City skyline.

“The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” is an especially interesting text because it was published so close to the event; there is no real space for reflection from the author, he is still mostly suspended in the role of witness, of spectator. Henceforth, the text perfectly captures the moments when some people in Bloomington, Illinois experience trauma. Wallace is able to show what those ladies looked like and could feel, according to his own account, on the day of September 11, and he could capture the first few glimmers of retaliation, the feelings of patriotism arising, etc.

The text plays with time and illustrates the author’s perception of it closely: the first parts about the days after are longer, more drawn out, but the reader can follow him along his journey to the store, then to multiple stores to try and find a flag to hang in his own yard.

On Tuesday, however, time is at a halt, people only watch the TV, and there is no movement, no interaction outside of Mrs. Thompson's house. Wallace is unable to recall when things happened specifically or what reactions the women and other guests had. His inability to recall underlines the temporal divide between witnessing a traumatic event and then recalling it, discussing it, and making it into a story. It feels unimportant to think about when the neighbor was mowing his lawn, or when someone left or arrived to the house.

Time is also distorted by the TV itself: "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" (Wallace, 2006, p. 136). The historically significant elements, the ones that become *lieux de mémoire*, and are selected as acceptable by news crews and politicians, would go on to be featured in museums and become part of monuments. Wallace's essay captures the beginning of this process, the making of Ground Zero, the *lieu de mémoire*, which is not yet filled with meaning, it is not yet "filled with words, stories, anecdotes, testimonies, biographies, images, photographs, documentaries, objects, mementos, and icons; that it becomes a site of memory and of remembrance, a place of disaster made meaningful by the representation" (Stamelman, p. 15).

Conclusion

Wallace's text may be defined as a personal essay, "a form particularly suited to testimony, witness, and stirring anecdote" (Roche & Stuckey-French, 1997, p. 44), as it offers insight into what it was like to experience 9/11 on a TV screen in a small town in Illinois. It is important to note that it is a text which was clearly edited and literary devices were used; aesthetic choices were made to create a good essay. For example, Michael W. Cox notes that there are few, minor alterations between the first draft and the typed text, he believes that the neighbor with the impressive flag post knew he was interviewed etc. (cf. Cox, 2018, p. 19). Even so, the text captures a very specific moment in time, suspended in timelessness. Wallace illustrates the very beginning of the mystification of 9/11, he recognizes the first building blocks of the *lieu de mémoire* that is Ground Zero, and reflects on the way even a spectator of the event can become traumatized by the magnitude and force of it. The essay stands as a witness statement to what happened that day, it serves a similar purpose to the countless images—the ones that were shown and then never shown again of the people jumping or falling out of the towers—the human suffering, and the trauma people experienced on site, and through their TV sets. "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" echoes feelings of trauma, confusion, and helplessness,

which are familiar topics in most post-9/11 texts, be it poetry, fiction, or drama. The essay captures the moments which would later define the discourse about 9/11: Wallace captures the sprouting symbols and topics of nationalism that overtook the country in the upcoming years, as evidenced by the sudden urge to post flags outside of houses. The text also gives insight into the formation of the place of memory not only for those who were present in New York on September 11, but those who were watching the events unfold on TV as well. While the *lieu de mémoire* remains Ground Zero, the disconnect between those who are familiar with New York City and those who are not is noteworthy. The women viewing the tragedy do not know where the World Trade Center exactly is, but it does not seem to affect their reactions and the traumatic experiences they all have (e.g., calling loved ones in New York). Wallace's text was drafted shortly after the attacks, so even with the editing and polishing process kept in mind, the essay captures a specific time and space during and right after the tragedy, a moment where ideologies and political angles were not yet developed. Even though "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" does not supply the reader with an in-depth analysis of 9/11 the way Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower* does, it also does not attempt to solve or equate the "Horror" to an artistic interpretation. Wallace's essay acts as a—stylized and edited—witness account, followed by timid introspective questions by an author who did not yet have enough time to truly understand the what and the why surrounding the events of 9/11.

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