THE RUPTURE OF SYMBOLIC IMMORTALITY: DON DELILLO AND 9/11

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ABSTRACT

I argue that the terrorist events of 9/11 constitute a rupture in the American consciousness. I predicate this argument on the idea of symbolic immortality – an idea that I take from Jean Baudrillard. Simply put, symbolic immortality is a system in which the subject offers up her autonomy to an authority (say the State or a religion) in exchange for protection which symbolically guarantees immortality or invulnerability – an idea which I link to American Exceptionalism. I show how this idea works in White Noise and how DeLillo shows its vulnerability or hollowness. I then move on to Mao II and argue how this novel and the pre-9/11 culture of hostage-taking complicates the fluidity of this exchange but how ultimately the American government was able to sustain the narrative in light of minor counter-demonstrations. This argument, however, leaves me susceptible to Michael Rothberg’s claim that a pre-9/11 discourse on terrorism works against the idea of rupture. I cannot deny that this discourse exists and that it gives us partial access to the events of 9/11, but I argue using DeLillo’s novel Falling Man and essay “In the Ruins of the Future” that Rothberg misreads DeLillo’s understanding of the profound impact the events. I conclude with an argument that the images of the group of people known as ‘the jumpers’ are immune to the essential symptom of a postmodern culture; these images thus deny Bradley Butterfield’s and other’s assertions that the impact of the events has been absorbed into the greater codes of capitalism and simulation.
INTRODUCTION

What was 9/11? It was a day which included a horrific attack on the United States. It involved the highly coordinated use of airplanes as means to destroy. It involved the deaths of thousands of innocent lives. It was all of these things, and more. It was 15 hours of destruction and unknowing – for 9/11 did not become “9/11” until just after 9:00 in the morning.

What is 9/11? This is a different question. It has now become an iconic event – terrorism’s “mother-event” (“Spirit” 403). The signifier 9/11 adds a dimension of interpretation ineluctably attached to the attacks. We could say in our discipline’s fetishism of binaries that 9/11 represents a new postmodern binary – the ironic recreation of a binary in an age that is supposed to dissolve this cognitive reductivism. However, the numbers reflect the rhetoric we are often so unconsciously accustomed to, symbolically recreating the division between this side and that, good and evil, West and East.

The reality doesn’t appear as simple as this, though. Jacques Derrida comments, “The brevity of this appellation (September 11, 9/11) stems not only from an economic or rhetorical necessity. The telegram of this metonymy – a name, a number – points out the unqualifiable by recognizing that we do not recognize or even cognize, that we do not yet know how to qualify, that we do not know what we are talking about” (Borradori 86). Derrida believes that the employment of the pithy designation 9/11 demonstrates our human inability to understand pure events. Later, he adds, “Better, the event is first of all that I do not comprehend. It consists in that, that I do not comprehend: that which I do not comprehend and first of all that I do not comprehend, the fact that I do not comprehend: my incomprehension” (90). Not only is our understanding of the attacks a misinterpretation, but the events themselves are a reminder of our
inability to understand. Wading through what seems like a circuitous way of saying, “I do not comprehend,” is the idea that the terrorist attacks of September 11th were unprecedented. Jean Baudrillard, similarly, writes, “The terrorist attack corresponds to the precession of the event over any of its interpretive models …” (“Spirit” 415). There is no frame of reference, no category into which we might conveniently place this “event” so that our need for comprehension may be satisfied. In short, this event is unparalleled and does not permit us the ability to bridge its profound nature with anything in the past; it creates a rupture.

Bradley Butterfield, working with Baudrillard’s texts, however, argues that “Despite the terrorists’ successful attempt to put death back on stage in a symbolic exchange with ‘the system,’ the majority of Americans have by now assimilated its violence into the broader narrative of a war against terrorism and Evil, one of the many things on TV” (11). Essentially, Butterfield is asserting that although the terror of death created a scare for a period, the world of mass-media and simulation has since incorporated any true visceral and permanent reaction. Similarly, Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe argue that for a time the physically present void in downtown Manhattan demonstrated “a rupture in the perceptual field” (349). However, the rapid historicization of the location, signified by the construction of the viewing platform over the crater, created what they sarcastically name “Groundzeroland” – a museum that gives the appearance of the “reality” of the event but is actually a systematically constructed narrative. In their conclusion, they begrudgingly concede that simulation culture was able to mediate and reabsorb any psychological damage: “The sublime power of American consumer culture to absorb and commodify even such a devastating blow as this transgressive act of destruction and murder is final proof of that culture’s fundamental indestructibility” (359). Lentricchia and McAuliffe believe the event possessed transgressive powers, but the possibility for a “new
world” was commodified and thus returned to the old system. None of these scholars would deny that there was an element of incomprehension about the event but, they argue, that imperceptibility has since been interpreted and framed in a capitalist model.

Michael Rothberg takes a more moderate approach than the other scholars – although I think if he were forced to choose between defining 9/11 as a rupture or not, he would choose that it was not. In his article “Seeing Terror, Feeling Art: Public and Private in Post-9/11 Literature,” Rothberg argues Don DeLillo’s novel Mao II provides evidence of DeLillo’s prescience of large-scale, international terrorism – demonstrating that the global culture already possessed a discourse for terrorism: “DeLillo’s work suggests that we should not separate the discourse on terrorism after 9/11 from the discourse before 9/11” (123). His argument pragmatically adopts a practice of “bridging” – an idea on which many other scholars have relied. The event most readily available for comparison is Pearl Harbor, but Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Reichstag fires, hostage-taking and airline hijackings have all been used in comparison. The attacks then could be argued to be a culmination, but, paradoxically, one that does not carry with it finality. The attacks were the point of eruption of the subaltern’s building energy, but they give no reason to suspect anything but intensification; as Derrida believes, “It is the future that determines the unappropriability of the event, not the present or the past. Or at least, if it is the present or the past, it is only insofar as it bears in its body the terrible sign of what might or perhaps will take place, which will be worse than anything that has ever taken place” (97).

Adopting Rothberg’s practice, I believe that through two of DeLillo’s texts, White Noise and Mao II, we can detect the germination for the event of international terrorism that occurred on September 11th, 2001. Using DeLillo’s latest novel, Falling Man, I believe that we can detect
the presence of a localized rupture. I cannot argue that those attacks were wholly a rupture on
the world scale, or even here in America. As I was trying to explain my research to a friend the
other night, he immediately relied on the 1983 terrorist attack of the American Marine base in
Lebanon; he said certainly you are going to discuss that. I was curious why he had latched on
that particular event, but I couldn’t deny that there have been terrorist attacks on American
interests before; admittedly, this was not even the first attack on the WTC. But, as Mary Louise
Pratt writes, “The towers were something different” (883). I believe the towers were something
different; the attacks demonstrated a postmodern deconstruction of modernity’s metanarratives.
The concept of American Exceptionalism was attacked and shown to be vulnerable. The attacks
destroyed an implied system of exchange between the American governmental authorities and
their subjects – an exchange which was supposed to guarantee the subject symbolic immortality.
Using DeLillo’s three novels, I will establish how western society establishes an economy of
symbolic immortality, how this idea of rupture might be susceptible to Butterfield’s and
Rothberg’s claim, and how, ultimately, the system of exchange is ruptured by the symbolic
dimension of the terrorists’ sacrificial death.
AN ECONOMY OF SYMBOLIC IMMORTALITY: “LIFE AFTER DEATH GUARANTEED WITH BONUS COUPONS”

The second half of this subtitle may appear like some farcical headline from a supermarket tabloid. Who would delude themselves enough to be interested in this kind of futile promise? But, the line does seem appealing. Don’t most of us hop onto to some trendy diet or exercise plan, no matter how normal or obscure it may be, because of its healthy benefits? If it can help me live longer, why not try it? We all have that curiosity. Western cultures have been searching for the fountain of youth for centuries – supposedly, it is in America.

Unfortunately, the title is only a line out of a tabloid – at least a tabloid in DeLillo’s *White Noise*: “Scientists at Princeton’s famed Institute for Advanced Studies have stunned the world by presenting absolute and undeniable proof of life after death” (137). This begs the question, “So if there is life after death, is there any death?” That would depend upon who and when you ask. A definition of death produces the following line, “the final cessation of the vital functions of an animal or plant – of an individual” (*OED* “death”). Most dictionaries have similar definitions. My personal favorite is, however, Wikipedia’s: “Death is the permanent termination of the biological functions that define a living organism. It refers both to a particular event and to the continuing condition that results thereby.” The operative words are permanent and define. Death, in the western consciousness, is imagined as permanent – it is the total cessation of life. It is also the total cessation of that which “defines” an organism, or an individual – life. According to this definition, humans are only human while alive; they are something wholly other when dead.
No wonder we search for the fountain of youth in America. The culture is constructed on the narratives of individuality and mobility. There is no room for permanence, including the permanence of death; it doesn’t fit into the culture. It must be eradicated; death must die. Thankfully, a psychiatrist at Princeton’s world renowned laboratories proved death isn’t permanent. Through the use of hypnosis, he was able to hear patients recite unique historical facts of their famous past lives absolutely and objectively proving that life after death exists. So what’s all the fear about? Death is dead; problem solved – you’re immortal!

All of this is, of course, DeLillian fun. But, it does introduce a central anxiety in American life – one that has been increasingly present since the September 11th attacks in New York and Washington, DC. One of DeLillo’s characters in White Noise admits catastrophes are important “as long as they happen somewhere else” (66). Nobody told the terrorists this. The destruction didn’t happen anywhere else; it happened here, on American soil, in violation of the “life-style.” True, America is built upon mobility and individuality, but it is also built upon “life-style.” The framers of the Declaration of Independence made an important split with their Lockean roots when they choose to change the phrase “life, liberty and the pursuit of property” to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” It is an ideological change that offers happiness as an end to be gained through a consumerist mentality; of course, only the “pursuit” is guaranteed. In a symbolic system of exchange, citizens are given “life” as a means of procuring this end.

But if we are given life, we must be returning something in exchange, right? That is how the system works. The reverse of being given life is the loss of death – or at least, the knowledge of death. Jean Baudrillard argues that, “At the very core of the ‘rationality’ of our culture, however, is an exclusion that precedes every other, more radical than the exclusion of madmen,
children or inferior races, an exclusion preceding all these and serving as their model: the exclusion of the dead and of death” (Symbolic Exchange 126). Death is the original other; the origin of this exclusion can be seen in the Declaration, but the system of exclusion has ancient roots: “Historically, inequality before death served as a paradigm of inequality in societies such as that of Egypt, in which only the kings and nobility were accorded honors of immortality” (Kellner 104). The promise of immortality, or the removal of death from life, was originally the honor of only the elite in ancient cultures; those who could afford burials or preservation, whether through wealth or rank, were considered central and privileged; those who could not afford these rights were peripheral. The opportunity for preservation spread to lower classes over the years, but the case for alterity remains; Baudrillard develops this by interpreting the cemetery as “the first ghetto” which is “thrown further and further from the centre towards the periphery, finally having nowhere to go at all, as in the new town or the contemporary metropolis, where there are no longer any provisions for the dead …” (Symbolic Exchange 126).

We see this in White Noise and Falling Man alike: Jack, coming back from dropping off Bee at the airport, stops at “The Old Burying Ground,” and observes “The headstones were small, tilted, pockmarked, sported with fungus or moss, the names and dates barely legible […] Embedded in the dirt before one of the markers was a narrow vase containing three small American flags, the only sign that someone had preceded me to this place in this century […] I was beyond the traffic noise, the intermittent stir of factories across the river. So at least in this they’d been correct, placing the graveyard here, a silence that had stood its ground” (White Noise 97; my emphasis); “Her (Liane’s) father wasn’t buried in a windy churchyard under bare trees. Jack was in a marble vault high on a wall in a mausoleum complex outside Boston with several hundred others” (Falling Man 218). Both of these descriptions demonstrate the “natural” process of
alienation with regards to our dead. The ritual is to cordon off our dead into a separate realm of existence – a location steadfast in its silence and untouched by the everyday.

This separation, this alterity causes the western subject to fear death. According to Douglas Kellner, “Baudrillard suggests that repression of death is the fundamental mechanism which produces an unconscious rooted not in sexual guilt or inhibition but in a socially mandated fear of death” (104). America is a death culture because of the way in which it socially represses death – the fear of death and its exclusion from normality makes its absence that much more present and haunting. DeLillo works this subtly into White Noise; Babette mentions during her Dylar confession, “This is not a story about your disappointment at my silence. The theme of this story is my pain and my attempts to end it” (183; my emphasis). Babette’s pain is her fear of death, and her “attempts to end it” is her guaranteed, unalienable right. Until this point in the novel, both Babette and Jack hide their experiences with death from the family hoping that the silence will improve the situation: Jack hides his SIMUVAC death sentence, Babette her Dylar tablets and the information/books she collects before starting the Dylar experimentation; however Babette, and Jack similarly, admits, “All this energy, this research, study and concealment, but I was getting nowhere. The condition would not yield. It hung over my life, gave me no rest” (183). Although Babette tries to clandestinely understand her “condition” (mortality), the silent efforts only invigorate her fear of death: “Modernity itself is thus characterized in part by … the production of an individual subject who, haunted by the thought of his or her own death, takes refuge in the Church, the State, the accumulation of goods and wealth, or his or her own anxious inner life as fundamental protector and guarantor of survival. Such refuge weakens social life, subjects the individual to control by external power …” (Kellner 106). The socially produced alterity of death causes the western subject to surrender her
subjectivity to a greater authority; but the transaction is meant to be an exchange: subjectivity for protection or “immortality.” The function of religion and/or government is to ensure this symbolic immortality and to maintain the illusion of death as the “imaginary.” Of course, this is impossible, and we all (un)consciously know that death is inevitable. But it’s the hope derivative of the illusion that we really seek.

This fear of death, and hope of immortality, is the all-too-visible invisible hand at work in *White Noise*. Early in “Dylarama,” Jack corners Babette and forces her to account for the mysterious pills that she has been taking. In the previous section, Babette had denied any such activities, creating a ruse in which she cleverly claims the tablets are the breath-mints “Life-Savers.” Jack is not so gullible this time. Babette eases into the explanation of her “condition:” “You know how I am. I think everything is correctable. Given the right attitude and the proper effort, a person can change a harmful condition by reducing it to its simplest parts” (182). This approach is the result of American/Enlightenment positivism and relates to the “pursuit of happiness.” Babette realizes, as Jack notices, that she has been “depressed” about the oncoming realization of her mortality; her culturally instilled response is to fix it – an attitude given to her from her father (perhaps someone we can see as allusive to the founding fathers), Vernon Dickey, whom she helped “sand and finish old oak, heave radiators up from floorboards” (236). So, Babette began to “make lists, invent categories, devise charts and graphs” (182) all in an effort to help her understand what kind of condition she is dealing with. However, her illness is death – an American unknown, according to Baudrillard. Similarly, Chi-ming Chang working with *White Noise* quotes Emmanuel Levinas, “It is a confrontation with the Other in terms of Levinas’s (sic) ethics as he contends that ‘[t]he approach of death indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other.’” Death is peculiarly recognized as something with
absolute alterity which is neither thematizable nor subsumable to any understanding” (151).
Babette’s reliance on creating charts and graphs will necessarily end in failure because death is beyond comprehension; there are no existent cultural frameworks with which she may construct a concrete category in which to situate death.

If the situation cannot be individually corrected, what can Babette do? Returning to Baudrillard’s observations, “Deprived of the intimate relation with death …, the modern individual lives haunted by the fear of death, and readily submits to social authorities (the Church, the State) which promise immortality or protection from death” (Kellner 104). The fear of death forces the modern individual to seek out any means available by which she may prolong life. So, out of DeLillo’s tabloid and into Babette’s life, comes Gray Research. The company was a “composite” of psychobiologists conducting research on a “top-secret drug, code-name Dylar” (184) and was seeking to expand its testing beyond laboratory mice. So, Babette and other immortals-elect underwent screening to prove their worthiness as test-subjects for the Dylar experiments – once again returning to the paradigm of exclusion Baudrillard theorizes; “Mr. Gray said there were three finalists and I was one of them” (184). Although the company soon withdraws its interest in human subjects, Babette refuses this denial and strikes a deal with Mr. Gray. Originally a “composite” of “three or four or more people” (183), Mr. Gray quickly becomes just one person with whom Babette has an affair: “I did what I had to do. I was remote. I was operating outside of myself. It was a capitalist transaction” (185; my emphasis).
Babette’s fear causes her to offer up her subjectivity, to remotely operate, and become an object in a system of exchange: her body for Dylar.
Babette’s ability to see this relation as a “capitalist transaction” is vitally important. She recognizes the fact that there is a system of exchange. Babette quite literally gives up her body, her self, to the authority that promises a return of symbolic immortality. This is the essential exchange on which the culture is based. Once the subject generates the fear of death, she is at the mercy of whatever social institution to which she submits; thus, she is at the mercy of the arbitrary standards it commands will ensure her protection, and she must exclude those activities which are not conducive to this symbolic immortality. From here, the fiction generates and regenerates itself in what becomes a dizzying spiral of simulacra.

But, in order for the system of hegemony to function properly, the authority must make good on the return. This is the function for the material presence of the German shepherds and men in Mylex suits during and after the “Airborne Toxic Event” – to symbolize a conscious effort of return by the authority. Jack reflects after the event is over, “German shepherds still patrolled the town, accompanied by men in Mylex suits. We welcomed the dogs, got used to them, fed and petted them, but did not adjust well to the sight of costumed men with padded boots, hoses attached to their masks. We associated these outfits with the source of our trouble and fear” (165). Jack obviously is disconcerted about the presence of the toxic clean-up teams, but he realizes the profound connection between his fear and their being there. Relate this situation to the presence of armed guards and military patrols in downtown Manhattan after the 9/11 attacks. What would 100 (or any number really) armed guards do to prevent another jumbo-jet from crashing into the middle of the city? As a person who was living in Baltimore at the time of the attacks, I can remember feeling somehow relieved yet comically entertained by the presence of dump-trucks acting as a barricade outside of the city hall.
With Babette, however, DeLillo is presenting an extreme case of this transaction. In our
day-to-day lives, thoughts don’t always center on our inevitable deaths, but you would be hard-
pressed to find a person that hasn’t contemplated this reality at some point. Nevertheless, the
point is to illustrate how DeLillo perceives this system of exchange to develop; the American
narrative is based on this system of symbolic immortality in which we volunteer our
subjectivities in exchange for the silencing of death’s omnipresence (a theme developed in the
words of the title – “white noise” being “both the background noise that constantly bombards us
and a way for us to avoid that bombardment”).

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1 For more on the theme of “white noise,” see “Consuming and Dying: Meaning and the Marketplace in Don
THE AMERICAN CREDITIBILITY: MATERIAL IMMORTALITY AND THE VESTIGES OF VULNERABILITY

So, I am willing to concede that, perhaps, the system of exchange sounds too theoretical or literary to be practical. Okay, perhaps the system is evident in DeLillo’s work, but do we really submit to the government to ensure “immortality”? The short answer is “Yes;” the long answer is “No, but …” Recall the Bush administration’s appeal to the American people that war in Afghanistan, and later Iraq, was necessary to protect “our way of life.” The effort at home was to be supported by mass consumerism; Bush implored us to go out and shop – resume the American way of life by populating malls and restaurants. These shopping expeditions would show the terrorists that their efforts were in vain and that the old America persisted – implicitly denying the interpretation of the event as a rupture. Bush’s plea for mass consumerism, however, was a crafty trick to reestablish faith, to put credit back into the system (of symbolic immortality).

However, the craftiness of Bush’s appeal may not be immediately perceptible. How does shopping place our faith back in the government’s ability to protect us? For this, I will return to White Noise. A particularly relevant scene is the family’s excursion to the Mid-Village Mall – a trip which turns into an aggressive shopping spree. The cause of Jack’s unchecked spending is a chance encounter with a colleague from school, Eric Massingale. As the two enter a hardware store, Massingale mentions that he had never seen Jack off campus before specifically noting that Jack wasn’t wearing the dark glasses which are a part of his on-campus persona. The significance of the moment is, perhaps, not immediately revealing to Massingale who makes no further mention of Jack’s regularity until they reconvene at the registers – “where we wait
together, regardless of age” (310) and prestige. Massingale begins to read the imagery of Jack’s clothing: all items that he, Massingale, recognizes as ordinary. Massingale finishes the encounter with the conclusion, “You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (83; my emphasis). Jack has been fully realized by Massingale as nothing extraordinary - exceptional. Massingale realizes that J.A.K. Gladney is a performative role – one of seeming profundity and depth but truly only shallow and imaginary. Returning this metaphor to the campus of College-on-the-Hill, Massingale is only able to see the imaginary or spectral figure of J.A.K. Gladney – head of the Department of Hitler Studies and influential man. However off campus, the veil is lifted, and Massingale is able to view Jack Gladney in a “real” sense.

The connection to the September 11th attacks hinges on Massingale’s description of Jack as harmless and indistinct. On campus, Jack is seen as a powerful figure – as the professor who put “College-on-the-Hill” on the map and is thus linked with the relative American narrative. However, this event in the mall causes his colleague to realize Jack’s non-exceptionalism, and Jacks feels threatened and vulnerable by this. This feeling of vulnerability relates to America and the American people just after the 9/11 attacks; we were anxious that any day would bring the next attack. We needed a distraction. To alleviate our anxiety and to cover the mortality of America’s Exceptionalism, Bush endorsed a consumerist response at home doubled with a military strike overseas.

Coincidentally, Jack’s response to his loss of identity is a consumerist response: “The encounter put me in the mood to shop” (83). Jack takes his family to the boundless mall and throws money whimsically at constructive items. The whole episode appears as an elaboration
on a thought found earlier in the novel; speaking of supermarkets and their relation to the Tibetan view of death, Murray says, “This place recharges us spiritually...” (37). The Tibetan view of death that Murray discusses is one where death is an intermediary stage between two lives – one which recharges the soul that has been sullied by human existence. Supermarkets (or malls in Jack’s case) offer consumers the opportunity to recharge themselves, to reassert “self-definition through an excessive amount of material goods” (Billy 129) – to express themselves in products. Jack can, simply, go to The Sunglass Hut and purchase a pair of dark sunglasses, place them on his face, and resume his iconic appearance – or at least part of it. This act would more or less suture his wounded pride. And this, more or less, is what happens in the ensuing action.

Jack, however, is happy to perform his role and interprets the episode, perhaps through a veil of ignorance: “I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed. […] The more I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. […] These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit” (84). The idea of existential credit returns to Murray’s thought of “psychic data” recharging our spirits. The more Jack purchases the more he ensures his existence. Karen Weeke writes, “This credit helps to insulate Jack from both dying and his fear of dying” (294). Ted Billy argues, “the closest DeLillo’s characters come to the sacred is when they make ritualistic trips to the supermarket, America’s secular cathedral. Consuming is their attempt to fill an inner void. They equate an overloaded grocery cart with personal fulfillment” (129). This becomes all the more astounding in a day-to-day pragmatics in light of Bush’s plea to mass consumerism. The strike on America caused the President to use this logic of “existential credit” – of security through the personal realization found in products – to bolster the American spirit. And it worked; discount department stores, such as Walmart, witnessed
dramatically increased sales in flags and other symbols of nationality (Ryan 8) demonstrating the need to assert the resiliency or indestructibility of the American narrative through its iconic simulacra but based on the logic of material immortality.

This argument would then seem to confirm Butterfield’s and, separately, Lentrichhia and McAuliffe’s claims that simulation/capitalist culture reabsorbed any loosened energies that were shaken loose by the attacks; the attacks were horrific, they agree, but the strength of the national narrative won out in the end. DeLillo quite rightly, however, perceives the shallowness of this logic. “Despite the euphoria of this purchasing orgy, Jack’s unity with his family is only temporary: on returning home, the Gladneys withdraw to separate rooms as isolated monads” (Billy 132). Ted Billy’s observation is correct; Billy perceives the shopping excursion as an act of communal strengthening. This is exactly what the increase in sales of national symbols denotes; through the sales of items such as the American flag, Americans were able to recognize the collective resiliency and strength of the nation. This sense of collectivity, however, is temporal and fleeting, as Billy notes. But his emphasis on collectivity misses DeLillo’s full point; Billy omits the importance of material immortality. The more we consume, the more products we can amass or potentially amass, the more impotent death is, as Jack observes early in the novel: “I have trouble imagining death at that income level” (6). The more Jack purchases, the more he attempts to deny his transience and ephemeral nature.

Before Jack’s loss of self occurs at the hardware store, he observes, “We went our separate ways into the store’s deep interior. A great echoing din, as of the extinction of a species of beast, filled the vast space” (82). This thought directly links consumerism with death. Perhaps, it is the hum of fluorescent bulbs which marks this denial; perhaps, it is the repetitive
“beeps” issuing from the checkout scanners; it is probably an amalgamation of both and more. All this “white noise” is symbolic of permanence yet intimately linked to a denial of transience, temporality, and death. And we can see how this may be abstracted to the national narrative; the more flags we sell/purchase, the more we boast the invulnerability of our narrative, the more we attempt to deny its vulnerability.

However, by excluding death from the American narrative, by adopting the persona of “the city on the hill,” America grounds itself on the ideas of invulnerability, immortality, and perfection. In 1976, Jean Baudrillard predicted, “This [death] is the fatality of every system committed by its own logic to total perfection and therefore to a total defectiveness, to absolute infallibility and therefore breakdown: the aim of all bound energies is their own death” (Symbolic Exchange 4). Any social system which decrees (implicitly or explicitly) itself a perfect and closed system simultaneously destroys itself “since it fails to inscribe its own death” (4). Critics, including Baudrillard himself, will later claim that the United States’ downfall was self-inflicted – hubris – caused by “an obscenity of form, a confirmed perfection, a solidification of arrogance” (Morrione 158) which was semiotically embodied in the Twin Towers – the nexus of capitalistic exchange and consumerism. The United States, by declaring itself as “the city on the hill” and assuming this description as a persona, blindly dug its own grave.

In White Noise, DeLillo wants to break down this idea of perfection and Exceptionalism and emphasize just how close to death we truly are. Jack’s establishment as a central figure in the parodic “College-on-the-Hill” with his simultaneous death anxiety highlights the proximity to death and the fragility of the system. At the beginning of “The Airborne Toxic Event,” Jack refuses to evacuate claiming, “These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas.
Society is set up in such a way that it’s the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. […] I’m a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods?” (112). Jack quite literally believes that society has established a plan to make death exclusive; this time, however, it is the peripheral, “the poor and uneducated” as Jack puts it, who are inside the pale. Those who have greater spending abilities due to substantial employment, like Jack’s position as head of an academic department, are guaranteed protection and a front row seat in Disaster Home Theater.

No matter what Jack’s theoretical understanding might be, ultimately the Gladneys are forced to evacuate. This leads to the eventual conclusion by Murray that, “This is the nature of modern death … It has a life independent of us. It is growing in prestige and dimension. […] We know it intimately. But it continues to grow, to acquire breadth and scope, new outlets, new passages and means. […] Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain. Death adapts, like a viral agent” (144 – 5). Death is neither mortal nor containable; it is able to adapt to the scientific advances that are supposed to protect us from it. But the system wants this fragility to be invisible and unrecognizable, so it must feign composure. Thus DeLillo writes in “The Airborne Toxic Event,” “It was said that the governor was on his way from the capitol in an executive helicopter. It would probably set down in a bean field outside a deserted town, allowing the governor to emerge, square-jawed and confident, in a bush jacket, within camera range, for ten or fifteen seconds, as a demonstration of his imperishability” (126; my emphasis). Just like the German shepherds and the men in Mylex suits that worry Jack, the governor’s appearance works as a symbolic gesture that the system is returning its end of the exchange, maintaining control and composure. However, DeLillo’s
 parody continues; the governor’s helicopter crashes into a shopping mall killing the governor and once again reasserting the vulnerability of the system.

Returning to the modern context, Bush’s consumerist appeal demonstrates this vulnerability of the authority. By petitioning the people to resume normalcy, to return to the malls and restaurants, to continue “our way of life,” Bush invoked the logic of material immortality to suture the national wounds – symbolically enacted at the Pentagon when military personnel and rescue workers draped an extremely large American flag next to the destruction in the south face. Nevertheless, as DeLillo shows through Jack’s shopping spree, this logic is hollow and, ultimately, heightens the unconscious anxiety over the truth of invulnerability.

Jacques Derrida interprets the September 11th attacks in a similar fashion. In an interview with Giovanna Borradori, Derrida argues that the terrorist attack

… violates the territory of a country that, even in the eyes of its enemies and especially since the so-called ‘end of the Cold War,’ plays a virtually sovereign role among sovereign states. And thus the role of guarantor or guardian of the entire world order, the one that, in principle and in the last resort, is supposed to assure credit in general, credit in the sense of financial transactions but also the credit granted to languages, laws, political or diplomatic transactions […] … it [the United States] represents the ultimate presumed unity of force and law, of the greatest force and the discourse of law. (94 – 5)

Derrida, here, is claiming that the United States acts as the standard, or base, by which a majority of international cultural productions are substantiated. The United States is the symbolic creditor to the world; the “force” which authenticates law or, perhaps more interestingly, discourse in
general. The United States is the agency which creates commonality and thus supports meaning in the world. By localizing this thought, the attacks then directly question the narrative of American Exceptionalism and the opportunity of Jack’s shopping excursion to “lend meaning” to his life (Weekes 193) – to develop his personal narrative of material immortality.

But, the United States is only able to perform this privileged duty, as Derrida sees it, because it is perceived as the most sovereign of sovereign states – as something exceptional. The attacks violate this whole system of invulnerability and thus invigorate a latent sense of skepticism toward such a narrative. This is the point at which I contend the rupture occurs. The establishment of America as invulnerable through the creation of Exceptionalism implicitly constructs individual consciousnesses that endorse these narratives as authentic. As subjects, we expect the government to return the exchange of immortality. But how can we believe in this narrative with such a blaring counterdemonstration as the 9/11 attacks provide? How can that symbolic system embody any meaning?
HOSTAGE-TAKING: THE PRE-9/11 DISCOURSE OF VULNERABILITY

Declaring the 9/11 attacks a rupture becomes problematic in several ways because it implies some sort of discontinuity or lack of progress. The first hurdle to contend with is Michael Rothberg’s observation of the presence of a common discourse on international terrorism pre-9/11. In fact, this observation is irrefutable; a layer of discourse able to articulate terrorist events certainly existed pre-9/11. In *Mao II*, DeLillo worries over the impact of terrorism and hostage-taking, and their relation to meaning; this novel has previously been explored for DeLillo’s statement on the relation between terrorists and novelists and their ability to affect mass consciousness, especially in the post-9/11 world.

However, *Mao II* can also be used to explore the relation between hostage-taking, terrorism, and the pact of symbolic immortality. Jean-Claude Julien is a minor character who is taken hostage by an obscure terrorist sect based in Lebanon. Reflecting on a political discussion with George Haddad, the group’s public relations spokesperson, Bill Gray thinks, “He could have told George he was writing about the hostage to bring him back, to return a meaning that had been lost to the world when they locked him in that room” (200). Given that Jean-Claude and Bill are both writers, we can see how scholars could build an argument discussing the balance of meaning on a spectrum with opposite poles marked by terrorists and novelists respectively. However, Bill continues, “When you inflict punishment on someone who is not guilty, when you fill rooms with innocent victims, you begin to empty the world of meaning and erect a separate mental state …” (200). Bill’s concern, and DeLillo’s as well, is that terrorism and the act of hostage-taking destroys tradition and meaning, and creates a new consciousness.

Compounding each discrete incident of terrorism, these acts could potentially trigger a rupture
(localized over the exchange of symbolic immortality). I contend that hostage-taking is a micro-demonstration of national vulnerability, but one that pre-9/11 was absorbed by the greater culture.

Chapter 8, the first chapter in the second section of *Mao II*, provides insight into the importance of Jean-Claude Julien’s role and his relation to the narrative of symbolic immortality. This is the first time that we directly experience his consciousness and mind-set as a hostage. The second paragraph of the chapter begins, “Time became peculiar, the original thing that is always there. It seeped into his fever and delirium, into the question of who he was” (107).

DeLillo, here, as we would expect or anticipate, creates a character who is entering into a world of instability and vulnerability as he is subjected to torture and violent isolation – and as foreigners to the culture of abduction, we can certainly accept these emotions. However, his questioning of time adds another dimension. Time is the “original thing” on which westerners (and perhaps most cultures) can always rely on to support organization and understanding; time is the consummate narrative, the basis for narrative – the meta-narrative which defies sundering and skepticism in the western consciousness. Time, for Jean-Claude, however, is beginning to “quiver” as he watches his blood swirl down a drain – literally his vitality being drained (pardon the pun).

But a different narrative remains stronger for Jean-Claude: “Be alert and note the details said the conscientious tape running in his head, the voice that whispers you are smarter than your captors” (107). This “conscientious tape” is an ingrained ideology that supports the western subject’s expectation of protection based on the exchange of symbolic immortality. That protection is expected to be supplied initially by the “cultural supremacy” of the western subject
(I might also add Exceptionalism although Jean-Claude is Swiss), by being “smarter than your captors.” And at this point, Jean-Claude is strongly willed and confident in his cultural advantages: “The prisoner was full of plans. With time and tools he would learn Arabic and impress his captors and greet them in their language and have basic conversations, once they gave him the tools to teach himself” (108). Jean-Claude believes that his ability to learn the language will furnish the opportunity to establish a system of exchange: he will learn the language and converse with his captors in their tongue (conversation an exchange in itself) while they might extend a limited status of subjectivity – which would prolong his life in a fashion similar to the way in which western cultures establish the system of symbolic immortality.

This protection Jean-Claude is assured through cultural supremacy, however, is further guaranteed through a material demonstration of physical strength (per military forces and intelligence networks). Jean-Claude thinks to himself, “And there were authorities to impress as well. At his release they would take him to a secret place and recite their questions in the same voice he heard on the instruction tape and he would impress the authorities with his recall of detail and his analysis of facets and aspects and they would quickly determine the location of the building and the identity of the group that held him” (108). Due to the system of symbolic immortality, Jean-Claude maintains hope that his government is actively searching for him and will soon find him. His drive to learn as much as he can about his location and his captors is built upon this hope and the additional hope that this information will prevent future abductions – furthering the narrative of immortality. Jean-Claude’s ability to store information about his captors and location of detainment is actually a unique manifestation of material immortality (as evident in White Noise through Jack’s demonstration of our cultural push to dispose of death through the accumulation of material goods). The collection of intelligence (the act itself and the
accumulated product) creates an imaginary safeguard; the more we know about “our enemies” the more we can predict their movements and deter their aggressions (and we can see how this slippery logic can lead to the inhumane treatment of detainees in our military prisons).

At this point, Jean-Claude is fully in line with the western cultural system. As he contemplates his situation more fully through the span of his time with the terrorists, he thinks:

In the beginning there were people in many cities who had his name on their breath. He knew they were out there, the intelligence network, the diplomatic back-channel, technicians, military men. He had tumbled into the new culture, the system of world terror, and they’d given him a second self, an immortality, the spirit of Jean-Claude Julien. He was a digital mosaic in the processing grid, lines of ghostly type on microfilm. They were putting him together, storing his data in starfish satellites, bouncing his image off the moon. He saw himself floating to the far shores of space, past his own death and back again. (112)

Leonard Wilcox interprets this scene in light of postmodern sign proliferation. For him and his inspiration Baudrillard, hostages represent terrorism’s ability to generate the proliferation of “disembodied signs” integral to the understanding of a postmodern collapse of meaning; “Indeed, the hostage-poet, Jean-Claude Julien, achieves precisely this ‘spectacular anonymity,’ becoming a captive to a dissemination of signs that ultimately eclipses the self and transforms reality into models and information grids” (“Terrorism” 96). Jean-Claude’s “spectacular anonymity” comes from his and other hostage’s image-saturation of the media market whereby particular instances of hostage-taking are relieved of the burden of meaning and generically categorized. Wilcox writes, “Thus, ‘having tumbled into the new culture, the system of world
terror,’ the hostage is given a ‘second-self,’ a hyperreal identity and ironic immortality, his very being reconstituted and preserved, ‘cryogenized’ in digital codes and wavebands” (96). For Wilcox and Baudrillard, hostages are consumed and absorbed by the world of simulation – eventually lost, adrift, or “floating” beyond the realm of pragmatic epistemology.

Wilcox, however, overlooks any possible underlying intentions of this image proliferation, which is indeed purposefully driven. The rapid circulation of Jean-Claude’s image produces the narrative of immortality and demonstrates the conscious return of the authority in the system of exchange. All the “intelligence networks” and diplomats collecting data and ensuring Jean-Claude’s return home, as reported by the media, give Jean-Claude his “immortality” and pacify the death-anxiety in the public landscape. Jean-Claude was “hopeful of the rescue as they say on the instruction tape of Western man” (Mao II 110); this instruction tape is a naturalized discourse (pre)establishing that the authority will work to return the exchange of symbolic immortality. This tape runs simultaneously in Jean-Claude’s isolation (demonstrating its naturalization) and is repeated in the general discourse, reassuring the public of this naturalization. Wilcox’s (and Baudrillard’s) absorption of any particular hostage’s image by the world of simulation only happens when the public no longer fears (the hostage’s) death; it is as if the public executes the hostage through apathy and the compulsion of exclusion.

This “public execution” is the grim reality of Jean-Claude’s situation. Later in the chapter, George lectures Bill and Charlie, “Certainly they (Jean-Claude’s captors) understand that this man’s release depends completely on the (media) coverage. His freedom is tied to the public announcement of his freedom” (129). George realizes the saving power of the collected
and attuned western consciousness. Unfortunately, Jean-Claude’s despair no longer pulls many
primetime viewers:

But he sensed that they’d forgotten his body now. He was lost in the wavebands,
one more code for the computer mesh, for the memory of crimes too pointless to be solved.

Who knew him now?

There was no one who knew him now but the boy [his guard]. First his
government abandoned him, then his employer, then his family. And now the
men who’d abducted him and kept him sealed in a basement room had also
forgotten he was here. It was hard to say whose neglect troubled him the most.

(112)

It is hard to say whose neglect is more troubling. But this is what the process of abduction
“naturally” leads to – neglect and death (“We do not negotiate with terrorists”). Baudrillard
writes, “Neither dead nor alive, hostages are suspended in an incalculable term of expiry” (qtd. in
“Terrorism” 95). The suspension places hostages in some intermediary stage that is not life.
Since western culture is based on the exclusion of death, Jean-Claude must be sacrificed:

Unanimously condemned, it [hostage-taking] inspires profound terror and joy. It
is also on the verge of becoming a political ritual of the first order at a time when
politics is collapsing into indifference. The hostage has a symbolic yield a
hundred times superior to that of the automobile death, which is itself a hundred
times superior to natural death. This is because we rediscover here a time of the
sacrifice, of the ritual of execution, in the immanence of the collectively expected
death. This death, totally undeserved, therefore totally artificial, is therefore
perfect from the sacrificial point of view, for which the officiating priest or
‘criminal’ is expected to die in return, according to the rules of symbolic
exchange to which we adhere so much more profoundly than we do to the
economic order. (Symbolic Exchange 165)

Baudrillard’s “rules of symbolic exchange” have roots in the “primitive order” or society as he
sees it. Societies of the symbolic order would give death, through sacrifice or other means, to the
gods in exchange for protection. By appeasing the gods’ bloodlust, society was protected from
random death. The hostage works in a similar fashion in the modern context; since the hostage
isn’t “alive,” the public must “sacrifice” this person in order to maintain the system of symbolic
immortality.

However, Jean-Claude’s treatment and Baudrillard’s theory don’t quite match the reality
of the decade of hostage-taking prior to Mao II’s publication in 1991. Jean-Claude Julien’s
significance and the way in which his situation relates to a rupture in the pact of symbolic
immortality can be seen through a brief elucidation of the terrorism that occurs before and while
DeLillo is writing the novel.

Perhaps, the one event which ushers in the 1980s and the American culture of
Islamaphobia is not the earlier rise to power of the Ayatollah Khomeini but his endorsement of
the student-led capture of the American embassy in Tehran. Although before the storming
American-Iranian relationships were becoming tense, this event was seen as an all out act of
Iranian aggression. Originally, Khomeini was unaware of the plan to seize the embassy.
However, shortly after the seizure, he declared in a public broadcast, “Our young people have taken over this nest of corruption. They have captured the Americans there. America can’t do a damn thing about it” (“The Man Who Changed the World” 37:09). The Carter administration made several attempts to reclaim the hostages – including a failed special operations military strike which ended in disaster. Commenting on the overall impact, Walter Mondale reflected, “It was seen around the world as an America no longer capable of dealing with her real problems. It humbled the administration in dealing with problems at home. It had a profound, prevailing, devastating, paralyzing impact upon our government” (41:30). The crucial sentiment here is that the American government, in its role of creditor and insurer of the symbolic exchange, was exposed to be vulnerable and mortal. It no longer possessed the steely demeanor intrinsic to an “exceptional” culture.

After losing his incumbency, Carter decided to focus all of his attention on freeing the hostages. A deal was finally in place just days before the Reagan inauguration. On the day Reagan was to take the oath of office, the hostages were loaded onto an airplane at the Tehran airport – fifteen months after their initial capture. However, the plane sat on the runway for a couple of hours. To further emphasize his control and implicitly America’s weakness, Ayatollah Khomeini delayed the takeoff of the airplane until just after Reagan had been sworn in as president. Jimmy Carter remembers, “Roughly five minutes after I was no longer President, a secret service agent came in and whispered in my ear that the hostages were free” (“The Man Who Changed the World” 57:45). Walter Mondale adds, “They deliberately delayed its release until, maybe, twenty seconds after Reagan had been sworn in” (57:54).
The affair was a bitter pill to swallow for the Carter administration. But the symbolic loss of strength would only become reconstituted with the advent of a more hard-lined administration. However, this process was not easy. In 1982, Iran helped to generate a militant faction that today still has much importance in the Middle East: Hezbollah. Originally, Hezbollah was created to rid Lebanon of any foreign (non-Islamic) presence. In 1983, the American and French barracks in Beirut were attacked leading to the eventual withdrawal of both military forces. America believed that Iran was behind the attacks and so consequently imposed sanctions on Iran. These sanctions caused Iran’s funds to wan and forced them to limit their support of groups like Hezbollah. So, in the mid-1980s, westerners began to be abducted by Islamic militant groups – or terrorists. Hostages, like DeLillo’s Jean-Claude Julien, were taken by terrorist sects who hoped to exchange the hostages for funds to support more military efforts. In 1991, Terry Anderson was the last of the western hostages to be released. Brent Scowcroft commented, “When Terry Anderson was released, the president said, you know, it lifts a huge burden, not only the human part of the hostage, but it overshadowed everything we did on the Middle East; suddenly, that cloud was lifted” (“The Pariah State” 30:29). This is a telling statement; Scowcroft virtually admits that the release of Terry Anderson wasn’t the main cause for celebration; the first Bush administration’s rapture was caused by the event’s muting of all the shame and symbolic weakness that had accumulated over the past decade.

So unlike Baudrillard’s 1976 prediction that hostages must undergo “public execution,” the presidential administrations from Carter to Bush wanted to maintain or, perhaps, regain the narrative of invulnerability through the acquisition of the hostages. It is important to note that the public and the authority were not in favor of sacrifice and death; the public wanted the return to be actualized, maintaining life and immortality all the more powerfully than the “public
execution” caused by the compulsion of exclusion could. Through this effort, the country was able to absorb the shame and weakness that tainted the American narrative. The presidential administrations, particularly Bush’s, eliminated the possibility of the compounded hostage-incidents from taking on the scale of a cultural rupture, and they sutured any minor wounds in the narrative of symbolic immortality.
ROTHBERG’S PRE-9/11 DISCOURSE AS COUNTERFORCE

The demonstration of DeLillo’s prescience and its relation to actual events of terrorism, however, only supports Rothberg’s claim that a pre-9/11 discourse existed and persisted through adversity. So, I suppose I should qualify my incorporation of Rothberg’s argument as a counterforce to my own. He does not call for the all out exclusion of the idea of rupture from 9/11 discourses and actually seems to hold a rather moderate perspective. In fact, he admits the case remains open as to whether or not the attacks created such an impact. What he does call for is an ease in the rush to periodize. Rothberg introduces his essay by saying, “DeLillo’s work suggests that we should not separate the discourse on terrorism after 9/11 from the discourse before 9/11” (123). I believe that this is a fair request. The discourse of a pre-9/11 world certainly does help us to understand the full significance of a post-9/11 world; most critics who support the idea of rupture cannot do so without reflecting back to a pre-9/11 context – as with my argument. Later in the essay, Rothberg writes,

The two texts by DeLillo that I have discussed so far have a series of implications for our attempts to understand literature and terrorism before and after September 11. While I don’t think that we can assert based on two documents that nothing has changed since September 11, I do think that DeLillo helps us to see that not everything has changed. Mao II reveals a fact that should be obvious but that is easy to forget or overlook in the immediacy of our current concerns: a discourse on terrorism (as well as the political tactic of terrorism) long preexisted 9/11 and continues to play a role in how we think about terror today. (131)
I agree that “not everything” has changed since September 11th. However, some things certainly have. Rothberg points to a section in Mao II where Brita concedes that terrorists affect her consciousness as an international traveler: “Yes, I travel. Which means there is no moment on certain days when I’m not thinking terror. They have us in their power. In boarding areas I never sit near windows in case of flying glass” (qtd. in Rothberg 125). Brita continues on to explain how she attempts to remain as nondescript as possible by wearing inoffensive clothing and “nothing religious” (41). Certainly, this is the case for most travelers now, wrapped in a sort of last rites anxiety from the time we begin packing (what kind of liquids can I bring?) until finally setting foot again on solid ground. And think how much more so this has been amplified since the attacks. Before 9/11, people might half-heartedly concede the thought of a hijacking, or more likely that an engine would fail; but post-9/11, every traveler is a potential hijacker. The terrorists’ ability to infiltrate the American suburbs and live here as any other nondescript citizen creates the possibility for any traveler to be part of a sleeper-cell.

However, an intensification of a pre-existent anxiety does not support the case of a rupture. The presence of an identifiable date, I believe, changes the topography more dramatically. The pre-9/11 situation was judged not by the fact that a past event had been so terrible but that a future event might be catastrophic. People could not point out one specific incident as the source of a communal terror. The post-9/11 situation is different and in the most obvious way: the signifier 9/11.

Deems D. Morrione presents an interesting take on the cultural responses of September 11th and the power of the appellation. He forwards the idea that events of large proportion, or fatal events such as the death of Princess Diana, are characterized by “an ‘obesity’ of presence.
The characteristic that makes them ‘fatal’ is what affords them an intense discursive gravity: they are catastrophic semiotic ruptures that come to be sutured to particular objects and/or events” (162). In the time after the event, a culture or a cult rushes to understand, to find meaning; the result is a deluge of cultural productions linking the event to anything that may produce meaning – a multiplicity of “banal discourses.” Morrione proposes that the attacks, however, reached a higher level of fatality than this; the events developed into a “semiotic black hole.” “Unlike the fatal object/event, which refracts its banalities ‘into the void’ while still sutured to them, the semiotic black hole has the power to reconfigure the geopolitical universe while leaving little or no trace of its influence” (162). The fatal event dies away with its banal discourses whereas the semiotic black hole persists with its event horizon sucking in all other comparable events.

The appellation 9/11 works much in the same way by incorporating other tragic airline incidents. Who thinks of the 1977 Pan Am Flight 583, the second deadliest airline crash in history, when boarding a plane now? Who thinks of American Airlines Flight 587 – which occurred two months after the 9/11 hijackings and at the time was thought to be the next 9/11? Or the recent crash landing of US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson? These flights have become sutured to the “mother-event” that occurred on September 11th. The flight numbers we don’t want to hear, and especially see, are 11, 175, 93, and 77.

The fear of these numbers results from a past which gives precedence to a catastrophic future; but it is the past which dictates the terror. Rothberg notes this idea of temporality as he discusses the essay entitled “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September” that DeLillo published in Harper’s Magazine shortly after September 11th. Rothberg quotes a long passage from the essay:
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. The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the Internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there is no memory there and this is where markets are uncontrolled and investment potential has no limit.

All this changed on September 11. Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists … Terror’s response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable. It is our lives and minds that are occupied now … Our world, parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs, which means we are living in a place of danger and rage. (qtd. in Rothberg 128)

Rothberg interprets this through his interest of “who and what shapes collective consciousness.” But he can’t help to notice the “periodization involved here: DeLillo does not say 9/11 is unprecedented; he says it has changed the world of the last decade and has returned us to an earlier moment when terrorists also shaped the world narrative, apparently the moment he recounted a decade earlier in Mao II” (128 – 129). Rothberg is right that there is a drive towards periodization evident in DeLillo’s passage. Rothberg writes that this periodization is driven by a recycling of the dominance of terrorism in the media during the 1980s about which DeLillo writes his novel Mao II. However, Rothberg overlooks how DeLillo relates markets/capitalism to time. Certainly, DeLillo mentions that over the past decade globalization and multinational corporations have been the focus of mass consciousness. And, yes, a decade before the attacks, DeLillo published his novel on the impact of terrorism. But that was not the most profound
event of that year. 1991 also saw the final collapse of the Soviet Union – a moment significant enough for Francis Fukuyama to declare “The End of History.”

That year marked the victory of western capitalism and the narrative of American Exceptionalism. The result, as DeLillo perceived it in his essay, was ten years of a capitalist’s utopia full of limitless potential, but it was also a realization of those past years of looking toward the future – those past years of capitalist teleology. He writes, “With the end of Communism, the ideas and principles of modern democracy were clearly seen to prevail, whatever the inequalities of the system itself” (40). The American dream, the American narrative is predicated on the future: “We like to think America invented the future; we are comfortable with the future, intimate with it” (39). To write an article about the “ruins of the future” is to write an obituary for the teleology of this dream. A line Rothberg conveniently omits reads, “This catastrophic event changes the way we think and act, moment to moment, week to week, for unknown weeks and months to come, and steely years” (“In the Ruins” 33). DeLillo is quite clear that it is this moment that has such a profound impact on our consciousness; this moment changed who we are: “For many people, the event has changed the grain of the most routine moment” (39). We are a culture no longer gleefully celebrating the possibility of the future but mourning the wounds of the past.

This is a central theme in Falling Man: “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night;” a little further down the page, DeLillo writes, “This was the world now” (3). DeLillo quite literally invokes a new world – a beginning – within the first two paragraphs. The first chapter contains no references to anything in the past. All attention is focused on the moment; the past, it seems, is the falling ash – destroyed. DeLillo’s use of the
past tense throughout this chapter precludes any connection with the historical past – as if this world of destruction is already the past yet simultaneously the present. Our protagonist Keith wanders tortuously through the streets of downtown Manhattan dazed, stupefied, overloaded with an incredulity of the moment. The whole purpose of the first chapter is to create the aura of a new beginning while simultaneously destroying the past in literary act demonstrative of a cultural rupture.

After the first chapter, DeLillo creates glimpses of the past; yet they are all haunted by the “Shadow of September.” Early in the novel, Martin and Lianne are admiring a couple of still life paintings by Giorgio Morandi in Nina’s apartment (the incorporation of “still life” paintings supports a theme of stagnation – a theme further supported given that DeLillo published part of Falling Man as a short story under the title “Still-Life”). Both had seen these paintings before, and Nina had lectured on them extensively – giving them a past narrative life. But Martin and Lianne both mourn that they “… keep seeing the towers in this still life” (49). Similarly, DeLillo writes in his Harper’s essay, “We may find that the ruin of the towers is implicit in other things. The new PalmPilot at fingertip’s reach, the stretch limousine parked outside the hotel, the midtown skyscraper in midtown under construction, carrying the name of a major investment bank – all haunted in a way by what has happened, less assured in their authority, in the prerogatives they offer” (39). Almost anything is open to being interpreted with a consciousness lamenting the attacks – even half-a-century-old, Italian paintings with kitchen utensils as subjects.

Our consciousness automatically returns to that moment – a theme which DeLillo enforces in the overall structure of the novel. The final chapter puts the reader right back into the
middle of the initial destruction. DeLillo, in fact, ends *Falling Man* with an image of a falling shirt – an image I found uncanny in its familiarity: “Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life” (246). In the first chapter, DeLillo writes, “There was something else then, outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft. He watched it coming down. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river” (4). There could be any number of sources for the shirt, but it is likely a metonym for one of the “jumpers” – the shirt having been ripped off by the force of terminal velocity. Nonetheless, DeLillo does not finish his novel with the same image we find in the beginning because of whim. He wants the audience to see a certain inertia.

In his article, Morrione details the significance symbolized in the temporal labeling of the WTC attacks. He writes that attacks such as Pearl Harbor are given a spatial dimension in localizing the appellation of the attack. This provides the sufferers “access to a mourning, which acknowledges the passing of a dream, a realization that a crisis can be overcome” (170). The WTC attacks, however, are given a temporal dimension: “Temporality is constant motion; to mark a point in time is to freeze only that moment, to celebrate impression and deny expression” (170). This freezing of the moment is what DeLillo’s structure embodies; the novel begins and ends with the attack as if strangulated and ingested by that instant. It, thus, denies the possibility of progression beyond that moment while simultaneously destroying a connection to the past as the past was – signifying a rupture.
DeLillo supports this idea with the spectral character of the Falling Man. Toward the end of the novel, Lianne ruminates on the significance of the performance artist. In the middle of her mental wanderings, it seems that DeLillo steps into the novel himself to say:

There is some dispute over the issue of the position he assumed during the fall, the position he maintained in his suspended state. Was this position intended to reflect the body posture of a particular man who was photographed falling from the north tower of the World Trade Center, headfirst, arms at his sides, one leg bent, a man set forever in free fall against the looming background of the column panels in the tower?

Free fall is the fall of a body within the atmosphere without a drag-producing device such as a parachute. It is the ideal falling motion of a body that is subject only to the earth’s gravitational field. (221)

With the idea of free-fall, DeLillo constructs a perpetually incomplete moment – a moment of pure motion. The body never lands; it is forever free-falling giving us this idea of chronological inertia – stuck in the moment of collapse. The figure of the Falling Man in his novel embodies this idea; he suspends himself in mid-air, in mid-jump. He is caught between two worlds halted in his linear progression, forever lingering in the instability. The attack has removed the base from which he jumps (capitalism signified by the towers) and erases any destination. As DeLillo wrote, the attacks have changed our consciousness in the day to day so that we now have to recreate a capitalist teleology that we thought had been realized.
So although DeLillo presents us with a pre-9/11 discourse articulating “the culture of world terror” in *Mao II*, Rothberg’s claim does not hold strong in light of DeLillo’s latest novel. Rothberg’s caveat that “not everything changed” is quite right. But some things did change; most importantly, the narrative of symbolic immortality was proven to be simulacral in its formation. This hollowness, however, has deep impact on the narrative of invulnerability and Exceptionalism – a point which I must now clarify.
WHAT HAPPENED TO THE JUMPERS?

I want to return for a minute to the section that I wrote earlier on hostages and Jean-Claude Julien. I argued that hostages, according to Baudrillard’s model, were given a “public execution” in a rather insidious way – as sort of a culturally coerced homicide. I also argued how American history played out differently from Baudrillard’s model and that the American government was able to appropriate the hostages and repair any damage done to the narrative of symbolic immortality. However, perhaps most importantly, I concluded that the synthesis of these two observances images a public and an authority not in favor of sacrifice and death (probably a rather obvious point); the hostage-taking situations demonstrated a public that wanted to maintain the narrative of immortality by returning the hostages to life instead of leaving them suspended unappropriated in “an incalculable term of expiry.” These are important ideas to consider when debating how the September 11th attacks constituted a rupture.

In my introduction, I stated Bradley Butterfield would be the last force that I work against in supporting my thesis that the attacks constituted a cultural rupture. He writes, “Despite the terrorists’ successful attempt to put death back on stage in a symbolic exchange with ‘the system,’ the majority of Americans have by now assimilated its violence into the broader narrative of a war against terrorism and Evil, one of the many things on TV” (11). Butterfield believes that simulation culture reabsorbed any “freed energies” that were shaken loose by the potentially transgressive forces of terrorism – thus denying the possibility for a rupture. And, in many ways, he is right.

The capitalist drive of American culture demonstrated its resiliency post-9/11. Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe argue how the rapid historicization and commodification which
turned the destroyed WTC plaza into a museum/theme park (“Groundzeroland”) demonstrates this resiliency and the “fundamental indestructibility” of American consumer culture (359). Additionally, the sales of the American flag increased after the attacks, demonstrating the commodification of our national narrative, our readiness to consume it, and the strength of our cultural-economic system. These flags were representative of a heightened sense of universal mourning and increased nationalism/patriotism, emotions which primed us for a long military campaign in the Middle East. This campaign, as Butterfield argues, is what returns our system of invulnerability to us. By taking the fight back to the “terrorists,” the presidential administration boasted its superiority, its efficiency, and its return/security of our immortality – “Mission Accomplished.” Certainly, there were strains of skepticism, dissent, and disapproval; but, it would be hard to argue that by the end of 2003 we did not feel more secure than we did at the end of 2001 (even for those of us who were against the war effort).

DeLillo picks up on the currency of this sentiment in Falling Man. Lianne and Keith “were watching a late-night newscast and he thought of hitting the sound button when the commercials ended but then did not and they watched in silence as a correspondent in a desolate landscape, Afghanistan or Pakistan, pointed over his shoulder to mountains in the distance” (130–31). The importance of this scene is rather subtle; Keith, himself an “archetype” for those who were directly affected by the attacks, disinterestedly watches a reporter who is most likely pointing to some mountain hideout of Taliban fighters – perhaps reporting that bin Laden himself is thought to be nearby. The television then runs “stock footage … of fighter planes lifting off the deck of a carrier” (131); they continue to watch without sound. The availability of stock footage supports Butterfield’s assertion that this war effort is fighting on two fronts – in Afghanistan and at home. Stock footage signifies a lack of reference to the “real” action of the
bombing campaign – the ultimate symptom of a simulation culture. But this removal of meaning, this distancing of reality is the fight at home; the simulated war feeds us a pacifying nostalgia demonstrative of control and redemption and allows the viewer to resume everyday living – to move past the violence of the attacks. This is exactly what Keith and Lianne do; they discuss the need to buy Justin an ornithology reference manual as they are watching the coverage.

However, it might be possible to argue that a sentiment of rupture exists within this scene, which ends with Lianne asking what a kestrel is. Keith replies, “It’s a small falcon. We saw them perched on power lines, mile after mile, when we were somewhere out west, back in the other life” (131). Lianne laughs about Keith’s phrase “the other life,” but the statement seems to have a more profound sentiment for Keith who seems rooted in a mesmerized uncertainty. However, I admit that this is not a solid argument and is based only on my perception of Keith’s mood in the scene. So, I would be willing to concede Butterfield’s assertion that the war effort has calmed our sense of vulnerability given the evidence here. But this is not a scene of central importance. As I argued in the last section, the most profound and lingering image that DeLillo provides for us is the white shirt falling from the sky – the metonym for the jumpers. So although somewhere in the middle of the novel DeLillo entertains Butterfield’s (and others’) assertion of the dominance of simulation culture, he ultimately transgresses this trend and returns to the impact of the jumpers linking them with a new consciousness – “like nothing in this life” (246).

The jumpers are an extremely important case for understanding (or attempting to) the full impact of the 9/11 attacks. One of the more interesting essays written on the relation of “the
jumpers” to post-9/11 culture and literature is Laura Frost’s “Still Life: 9/11’s Falling Bodies.” Her predominant concern is the relation between photography (photographs of fallings bodies and their importance in literature dealing with the attacks), literature, and the event itself. How do photography and literature help us understand what happened that day? Her answer is that their only addition to the knowledge of what happened is a glaring reminder of our inability to know what happened – to possess a full account; the pictures of the falling bodies are “monuments to epistemological failure” (191). This idea is not new to scholars; in fact, the idea of rupture requires that the events of 9/11 exceed our ability to comprehend in some way.

While Frost argues for this idea of incomprehension, she writes, “The need to locate a particular death in this field of visual information underscores the fact that the falling people are individuals and also that they are an anonymous group: ‘the jumpers.’ The photographs produce the awful intimacy of witnessing a public death that is also anonymous” (191). The paradox of simultaneous anonymity and publicity is essential for understanding how the jumpers relate to the idea of rupture. Recall the situation with Jean-Claude Julien and Leonard Wilcox’s interpretation of the impact of media saturation: “Indeed, the hostage-poet, Jean-Claude Julien, achieves precisely this ‘spectacular anonymity,’ becoming a captive to a dissemination of signs that ultimately eclipses the self and transforms reality into models and information grids” (“Terrorism” 96). In another essay, Wilcox writes in a similar manner, “Like the Baudrillardian hostage, the passengers on the fated flights of 9/11 were ‘frozen in a state of disappearance […] in their own way cryogenized’ at the zero degree of meaning. What was most uncanny and frightening was the ‘unrepresentability’ of their deaths, the way in which they exemplified the quintessential condition of Baudrillard’s postmodern hostage, existing only as signs in potentially boundless transmissions” (“Baudrillard” par. 20). For Wilcox, the glut of
representation of the hostage assumes the same paradox that Frost perceives in the deaths of the jumpers: public anonymity.

The phrasing and ordering of those two words, “public anonymity,” is done with full intention. The relation suggests at least two interpretations: a public that is aware of an individual’s anonymity (since we are unaware of the identity of the jumpers) but also an anonymity that is public or collective – anonymity as a shared condition. This collective identification is picked up by Tom Junod in his discussion of Richard Drew’s photograph “The Falling Man” – perhaps the best known photographic representation of the jumpers. He writes,

Richard Drew’s photograph is all we know of him, and yet all we know of him becomes a measure of what we know of ourselves. The picture is his cenotaph, and like the monuments dedicated to the memory of unknown soldiers everywhere, it asks that we look at it, and make one simple acknowledgment.

That we have known who the Falling Man is all along. (par. 55 – 56)

Junod ends his essay with these lines and the sentiment that we are all the falling man; we are all unknown. To witness the falling man’s death, his public execution, is to witness that execution in ourselves and to identify some commonality. Wilcox pursues and abstracts this idea more fully:

What was so chilling about the events of 9/11 was that they mirrored, in some palpable way, the “blindness” of an anonymous society that is ours. If the hostages could be said to “represent” anything, it is the degree to which power in the contemporary period is decentralized and anonymous, the degree to which power
in postmodernity becomes a simulacrum constructed on the basis of signs. As Baudrillard puts it, ‘through the death of no matter whom, [terrorism] executes the sentence of anonymity which is already ours, that of the anonymous system, the anonymous power, the anonymous terror of our real lives.’ (“Baudrillard” par. 21)

The power of the postmodern hostages is that they act as a reminder of Baudrillard’s idea that “we are all hostages” (qtd. in “Baudrillard” par. 21) held by some anonymous power with anonymous power – a power which we may only assume holds the control over life and death. However, Wilcox writes that this power is simulacral – existent only within sign culture and therefore non-existent. In the chapter of Falling Man detailing the 9/11 terrorists’ lives in Florida, DeLillo suggests this interpretation by often repeating the terrorists’ notion of preconceived defeat at the hands of the intelligence networks: “But don’t forget, we are being stopped any minute by the CIA …” (177). This idea returns to the hope that Jean-Claude possessed while being held as a hostage – that the intelligence networks were in control and would soon save him. DeLillo continues on, “He says this and then he laughs. Maybe it’s not true anymore. Maybe it’s a story they’ve told themselves so many times that they’ve stopped believing it. Or maybe they didn’t believe it then and only begin to believe it now, nearing the time” (177). The perceived protection of the CIA, one of the supposed guarantors of symbolic immortality, exists as only a myth – an immaterial narrative repeated to the point of emptiness or hollowness.

If the photographs of the jumpers symbolize the essential postmodern condition, how do they and their symbolic dimension interact with and refute Butterfield’s assertion of the
dominance of the code of simulation? For this, I turn to an essay written by Claudia Egerer on the relation of images and terrorism. Condensing Baudrillard’s argument on the fictionality of the Gulf War, she writes:

The informational event consists of a real event mediated and portrayed by selected images, hence it becomes infected by what Baudrillard calls “the structural unreality of images and proud indifference to the truth.” A typical example would be the televised Gulf War … Although all viewers know that what they are watching is happening, has been happening, the images they are presented with bear strong overtones of the fictional, the fabricated. […] The “real” event remains beyond our reach; what we see is merely the informational coating. For the general public the “real” war is accessible only through media images, its primetime cocktail of serious events interspersed with trivialities where the surface is all – war as “infotainment.” Hence an informational event gives rise to endless speculation and interpretations. Like Baudrillard’s example of the image “of that blind sea bird stranded on the beach in the Gulf,” we cannot ascertain where the image was shot and what oil spill caused it – we are left with a degree of uncertainty. (101 – 102)

The situation that Egerer lays out here is the essential symptom of simulation culture – the loss of meaning through the erasure of origins. We are uncertain of what to believe to be true because we are unable to ascertain the source of the images. The lack of the origin denies the possibility of stability in language, and thus meaning, by severing the relationship between signifier and signified. Thus the culture is left in a state of uncertainty. DeLillo is fully aware of
this interpretation of mass media; in his 2001 Harper’s essay, he writes, “Nearly eleven years ago, during the engagement in the Persian Gulf, people had trouble separating the war from coverage of the war. After the first euphoric days, coverage became limited … it became hard to honor the fact that the war was still going on, untelevised. A layer of consciousness had been stripped away” (“In the Ruins” 38).

However, he sees a difference in the coverage of the 9/11 attacks: “The events of September 11 were covered unstintingly. […] The event dominated the medium. It was bright and totalizing, and some of us said it was unreal. When some of us say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can’t tilt it to the slant of our perceptions” (38). The case for the images of the 9/11 and the jumpers is different than the case for the Gulf War images because, through the images of the jumpers, we are presented with the tragically “real.” Unlike the images of the Gulf War(s) which were presented to us in a fictional manner leaving us uncertain of the origin and of reality, we know that these images are true – that they document a truth; we know where they came from and we know what caused them. They escape the essential symptom of a simulation culture and refuse the invitation of absorption.

However, through this refusal and through this glaring objectivity, these images offer us a tormenting paradox. David Simpson writes about another series of dramatic photographs that reached the public a few years after the terrorist attacks: the photographs of the tortured inmates of Abu Ghraib prison. Simpson presents an interesting take on them:

The most common response has not been one of skepticism or fatigue … but one of acceptance and difficult recognition. In this respect they stand in for all the
images we are not seeing that might have similar effects … they occupy the place that we are otherwise being aggressively refused: the place of the real.

They take us, in other words, beyond or around the sublime and the spectacular, into some interior zone of ongoing confusion and obscure identification. They do not disprove or discredit the role of the spectacle in the unfolding encounter with death that those in the homeland have been experiencing since 9/11, but they impose an added dimension and demand a different response. (133)

The images of the jumpers stand on a different level from the glut of images presented to us as “the war.” The images of the jumpers demonstrate the paradox of these two levels: they present the images of what really happened (although we attempt to repress that) and they present us with an incomplete narrative (as Frost argues); they represent the fact that we cannot know what actually occurred in the buildings and on those floors from which the people jumped; they represent Derrida’s idea: “that which I do not comprehend and first of all that I do not comprehend, the fact that I do not comprehend: my incomprehension” (Borradori 90). They are a symbol of our limits.

DeLillo brings this sentiment of incomprehension and anonymity into the figure of his falling man – the performance artist. Reading the paper one day, Lianne learns of his death. While reading the obituary, Lianne “tried to connect this man to the moment when she’d stood beneath the elevated tracks, nearly three years ago, watching someone prepare to fall from a maintenance platform as the train went past. There were no photographs of that fall. She was the photograph, the photosensitive surface. That nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb” (Falling Man 223). Lianne’s role as the photographic surface demonstrates
the strength of the image of the falling man – one glance and the image becomes permanently part of her; his fall and death become part of her identity. Referring to the Richard Drew photograph that the performance artist impersonates, Lianne thinks, “It hit her hard when she first saw it, the day after, in the newspaper. […] Headlong, free fall … and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart …” (221 – 22). Although the photograph was immediately removed from the public consciousness the day after it was printed, the image and its impact remained. Returning to the significance of the performance artist, Lianne reflects, “The man eluded her. All she knew was what she’d seen and felt that day near the schoolyard, a boy bouncing a basketball and a teacher with a whistle on a string. She could believe she knew these people, and all the others she’d seen and heard that afternoon, but not the man who’d stood above her, detailed and looming” (224). The man all of her attention was focused on in full detail continues to elude her comprehension; she cannot know him or his motives.

But the jumpers’ narrative extends further than this anonymity and incomprehension. They represent our inability to understand how we were not protected from this event; they represent the authority’s inability to ensure the exchange of symbolic immortality. The very public nature of the jumpers’ deaths, the public executions of these hostages, breaks off from the narrative of immortality that was sustained during the previous two decades of hostage scenarios. In the immediacy of the event, in its proximity, we weren’t given the time or the opportunity to appropriate their deaths and satisfy our yearning for immortality that is proffered by the Baudrillardian model of the hostage’s “public execution.” No matter what response the second Bush administration could/would/did muster, the photographs of these deaths would be a constant reminder of the failure to exclude death from the public consciousness. Frost perceives the same idea: that “the falling bodies call into question” “the myth of American invulnerability”
(200). The photographs represent our lack of control; they wake us up into “the place of the real” and tear us away from our promised illusion of safety – our simulation culture and our Exceptionalism.

Similarly, in “The Spirit of Terrorism,” Baudrillard writes:

> After the fact, one tries to impose a meaning, any meaning on the event, to find any interpretation of it, but there is none. One finds instead the radicality of the spectacle, the brutality of the spectacle, which alone is original and irreducible. The spectacle of terrorism imposes the terrorism of the spectacle. And against this immoral fascination (even if it engenders a universal moral reaction) the political order is powerless. (413 – 14)

Baudrillard theorizes that the perfection of the attack consisted of its total reversal of the American system; its success lies in the ability of the terrorists to use the system as a means for its own destruction. Through the destruction of the towers, the terrorists were able to create and satisfy our cultural yearning for spectacle (a word that Junod uses to directly describe the event). Thus, we are haunted by the images, but our culture forces a fascination upon us. Junod even reports, “it was, at last, the sight of the jumpers that provided the corrective to those who insisted on saying that what they were witnessing was ‘like a movie…’” (par. 8). Against this moment of aporia, the government is powerless and can only struggle to appear in control.

One of the most startling images of the first chapter of Falling Man speaks to this idea of contradiction: “There was a woman behind it, facing him, with police tape wrapped around her head and face, yellow caution tape that marks the limits of a crime scene” (5). The woman
sitting on the street, hysterical; she is grasping a shopping cart – any kind of stability – as she
blankly stares up toward the smoking towers, perhaps viewing bodies falling from the sky. But,
the most striking part of the image, what DeLillo finds necessary to emphasize, is the police tape
used as a makeshift tourniquet. Given the destruction everywhere, it is possible that this woman
was physically injured and needed the tape for a medical purpose; in times of chaos, we use what
we can. However, he specifically tells us that this tape is the type “that marks the limits of a
crime scene.” He could have chosen to place this tape around the woman’s torso or leg, but
DeLillo intentionally selects the woman’s head as the scene of the “crime.” He is showing us
that something inside of her – something inside of us all – has either been victimized or is the
scene of some victimization – an act that takes away a thing that a person once possessed.

The idea of feigning is what is so horrific in Richard Drew’s photograph “The Falling
Man.” The man is dressed as if he is going to work – another day at the office. Turn the
photograph around and he could almost be walking there. The image resembles the exchange
that we unconsciously accept in the day-to-day: work for our way of life. But we know that the
man is not going to his job; we know that the system failed in maintaining this exchange. The
photograph not only records the image of a (soon to be) dead man but also the image of a broken
promise. There is no doubt that America changed on September 11th, 2001. The guarantee of
symbolic immortality was shown to be a hollow and solely symbolic promise. A cultural system
once understood to be stable, impregnable, and complete was shown to be just the opposite –
reversed. “The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the Internet summoned us all to live
permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there is no memory there
… All this changed on September 11” (“In the Ruins” 33). The limitless potential of the future
that was once so culturally entrancing has disappeared; we are now a culture that mourns the memories of the past: “Even in New York—I long for New York” (Falling Man 34).

One of the most revealing lines of Falling Man comes just at the close of the opening chapter, “He tried to tell himself he was alive but the idea was too obscure to take hold” (6). Keith’s thought that life was “too obscure” an idea to understand implies that its opposition is no longer distinct enough to produce two clearly and oppositely defined concepts; life and death are coalescing. Baudrillard’s argument that the exclusion of the dead from subjectivity marks the base for any other alterity now becomes profound. The commingling of life and death then represents the dissolution of all other binary relations. The sadness for the characters of DeLillo’s novel, and for the audience, is that one of Martin Ridnour’s opinions now comes true: “For all the careless power of this country, let me say this, for all the danger it makes in the world, America is going to become irrelevant” (191). The falling man is a eulogy for American Exceptionalism.
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