THIS IS THE WORLD NOW: TRAUMA, PTSD, AND 9/11 IN DON DELILLO’S FALLING MAN

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ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes that Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* addresses trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a way to look at what 9/11 meant not just to the world in terms of social, cultural, and political implications, but what it meant to the victims on a personal, microcosmic level. First, I explain the different types of novels that deal with trauma, eventually asserting that *Falling Man* is a hybridized form that combines aspects of literature of trauma, trauma novels, and literary testimony. I then proceed to look at current scholarship regarding DeLillo and trauma, 9/11 and trauma, and the scholarly discourse pertaining to *Falling Man*. By doing this, it becomes apparent that although looking at trauma and PTSD has become a popular approach to 9/11 novels, this aspect of *Falling Man* has been ignored by other scholars. Finally, I take a look at each of the main characters, Keith and Lianne, and analyze their different traumatic reactions to 9/11. I consider the differences in their physical proximity to the event, how they were affected, and how they are coping by the end of the novel.

In Keith’s chapter, I examine his traumatic experience of losing his friend and narrowly escaping his own death in the towers, how that trauma affected his concept of self—both metaphorically and physically—and how he is trapped in a state of melancholia. As for Lianne, I look at how watching what happened on TV made her a vicarious victim, allowing the traumatic event to seep into her daily life, causing the trauma of her father’s suicide to resurface, while also demonstrating how traumatic flashbacks can occur externally. Finally, I explore how she eventually moves into mourning, a way of coping much different than Keith’s, allowing her to recover, rather than remaining in melancholia. Ultimately, this thesis concludes that *Falling Man* allows for a more intimate look at PTSD and what 9/11 means to the individual, while examining and complicating what it means to be a victim and a witness.
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my brilliant and loving husband, Aaron, who has always been my biggest fan.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It has been nearly nine years since the attacks on September 11th, and yet the discussions regarding the repercussions are still only emerging. In a way, it seems that the world is still traumatized. It is not clear yet what to make of it, or what to say about it. Many would say that it is still “too soon.” Yet, gradually theorists and academics have begun to analyze and interpret what Jurgen Habermas calls the “first historic world event” (Borradori 28). With this influx of academic discourse regarding 9/11, we are also seeing an influx of literature about it, as well. In fact, there has been a recent rise in the last few years of what is being referred to as 9/11 literature. According to Michael Rothberg, “literature has provided one of the most effective sites for reflection on the meanings of American life after 9/11” (124).

At present, most of what has been written about 9/11 explores what it means globally, socially, culturally, and politically, but few focus primarily on the personal and psychological repercussions. While something so significant as to be considered a “world event” obviously has wide ranging implications, the events of 9/11 still impact others on a more personal level. What about this microcosmic perspective, then? While it is important to theorize about what such a huge historical event means on a macrocosmic level, how do we come to understand what it can mean to a person? This, I suggest, is what Don DeLillo is hoping to explore in Falling Man. Beyond what the novel says about how the world has changed politically, socially, and culturally, DeLillo’s narrative explores the actual, literal repercussions on a personal level through the characters of Keith and Lianne. The attacks on September 11th may have been a warning to the world, but it was also a traumatic event that affected not only the thousands of people who were in the towers that day, but also the countless others who watched it, both in person and via the media, primarily television.
DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) is unique not only because it is different than what most would consider traditional DeLillo writing, but also because the emphasis is almost exclusively put on the daily lives of two characters who are affected by the events of September 11th. While most of DeLillo’s previous writing focuses on broader concepts of post-modernity, this novel is more intimate, focusing on the day-to-day struggle of an American couple as they grapple with the trauma of September 11th. It is through this exploration that the reader is able to see not just what 9/11 meant to the world, to America, or even to New Yorkers, but specifically to the individual psyche.

*Falling Man* begins with one of the two central characters, Keith Neudecker, walking down the street shortly after the planes hit the World Trade Center. The reader soon finds out that Keith was actually in the towers, but was able to escape. In a daze, Keith continues walking, trying to make sense of what is going on around him, eventually finding himself at the apartment of his estranged wife, the second main character, Lianne. Throughout the rest of the novel, we follow these two characters, Keith and Lianne, and watch as they cope and accept that “this [is] the world now” (DeLillo 3). By the end of the novel, both Keith and Lianne’s lives are transformed as a result of their trauma, and indeed there is no return to normalcy. We come understand how different their lives are now that they have moved out of the initial shock of the event, and into long term suffering from the aftermath.

What is interesting about DeLillo’s approach is that we do not get just a look at Keith, the direct survivor of the 9/11 attacks, but we get an equal emphasis on his wife Lianne, who was not near the attacks when they happened. Unlike Keith, we do not see Lianne immediately after the attacks. In fact, we do not see her until three days later; however, she does mention “watching” the towers fall. It is not clear if she saw anything in person, but she is watching it on television
when Keith arrives. Whether she witnessed the event first hand or not, the implication is that it does not make a difference; the consequences are the same. Although these two characters have separate and different interactions with the event, they both suffer from what has happened. Both Keith and Lianne exhibit symptoms of trauma, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). “No two people have identical reactions, even to the same event” (Herman 58), yet DeLillo’s equal emphasis on both characters throughout the novel indicates that he wants to explore the consequences for both victims.

It is this multi-faceted look at not just one aspect of trauma, but an in-depth exploration of the myriad ways in which trauma can affect the individual psyche, the many ways it affects people’s interaction with the outside world, and the unique complexity of what constitutes a “victim” of trauma that will be explored in this thesis. In order to support my analysis, I will first provide some history and background information regarding the psychological concept of trauma and how trauma studies has emerged into mainstream discourse beyond the psychiatric field, particularly in literature of the 20th and now 21st centuries. I will also demonstrate where my analysis fits into the current discourse of trauma studies by explaining the different types of literature about trauma, while specifically noting where Falling Man fits among them.

After all of the relevant background information is provided, I will then discuss Keith and Lianne individually in order to explain the different aspects of trauma and PTSD that DeLillo represents. This analysis will take into account their situations and their proximity to the towers in order to fully comprehend the complexity of their reactions as DeLillo attempts to represent the various 9/11 victims and their shared journey towards recovery.

By doing this, I hope to demonstrate several things. I will first reveal the significant role that trauma plays in Falling Man by engaging with the timely issues associated with trauma
studies coupled with that which is discussed concerning trauma literature. It will then become abundantly clear how *Falling Man* not only demonstrates the complexity of trauma, but also what it adds to 9/11 literature, and how it complicates the extent of the impact of 9/11 on our psyches.
CHAPTER 2: A BACKGROUND IN TRAUMA STUDIES

Before exploring the role of trauma and how it affects the characters of DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, it is important to know the history of trauma as a psychological and theoretical concept. More importantly, it is essential to understand the origin and definition of the word “trauma.” In addition, it is also crucial to look at the significance of trauma studies in psychology and the humanities.

First, let us look at the psychological side of trauma. The term trauma, originally a Greek word meaning “wound,” was first popularized by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Caruth Unclaimed Experience 3). After studying affected soldiers post WWI, Freud explains, “A condition has long been known and described which occurs after severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life; it has been given the name of ‘traumatic neurosis’” (12). What occurs when someone experiences one of these events differs from the previous concept of “hysteria” that was often associated with these patients:

The symptomatic picture presented by traumatic neurosis approaches that of hysteria in the wealth of its similar motor symptoms, but surpasses it as a rule in its strongly marked signs of subjective ailment (in which it resembles hypochondria or melancholia) as well as in the evidence it gives of a far more comprehensive general enfeeblement and disturbance of the mental capacities.

(Freud 12)

More specifically, Freud claims that what makes trauma different is that “the chief weight in… causation seems to rest upon the factor of surprise, of fright” (12), which he explains is the “state a person gets into when he runs into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise” (12). It is here, with fright and surprise, where the reaction to trauma hinges.
Because the mind is unable to immediately process what happens during the traumatic event, the psyche must learn to incorporate the events at a later time.

This Freudian concept of trauma, and its history, is explored further by the psychiatrist Judith Herman. In her influential text *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, she explains that “[p]sychoical trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force…Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (33). This definition not only helps to define what psychological trauma means, but also the sense of powerlessness it creates. In addition, Herman’s text provides a comprehensive look at the history of trauma and how it was often overlooked as a faked disease, and those who suffered from it were often seen as weak or cowardly. Although there had been many cases reported and explored before then, it was not until an influx of victims surfaced after the Vietnam War that the legitimacy of this disorder was solidified (Herman 27). Herman writes: “In 1980, for the first time, the characteristic syndrome of psychological trauma became a ‘real’ diagnosis. In that year the American Psychiatric Association included in its official manual of mental disorders a new category, called ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’” (27-28). This acceptance by the APA legitimized the afflictions of countless people who were previously seen as weak-minded or hysterical.

The rest of Herman’s book carefully explains the complexity and consequences of PTSD. She explains exactly what happens to the human psyche after trauma:

*Traumatic events produce profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory. Moreover, traumatic events may sever these normally integrated functions from one another. The traumatized person may*
experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion. She may find herself in a constant state of vigilance and irritability without knowing why. Traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take on a life of their own. This kind of fragmentation, whereby trauma tears apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions together in an integrated fashion, is central to the historic observations on post-traumatic stress disorder. (34)

This explanation is supplemented by her description of the symptoms of PTSD. Although not all victims react the same, Herman is able to categorize the symptoms exhibited by PTSD victims. She writes, “The many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder fall into three main categories. These are called ‘hyperarousal,’ ‘intrusion,’ and ‘constriction.’ Hyperarousal reflects the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment; constriction reflects the numbing response of surrender” (35). The text also explains the different types of trauma and the different ways in which trauma can affect an individual’s life, from disconnection to captivity. This text, though written for other psychological professionals to better understand and treat trauma, provides information that has also influenced the theory of trauma, which especially sparked an interest in the literary world.

Cathy Caruth, a leading scholar in trauma theory and studies, was influenced by both Herman and Freud, and wrote two of the seminal texts in trauma studies: *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. These texts take the psychological aspects of trauma and translate them into a theoretical framework that can be used to explicate forms of art, specifically literature.
In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, a compilation of essays from various authors on memory and trauma, Caruth explains her inspiration and the key questions that trauma theorists are attempting to understand. She explains that her interest in trauma comes from her wanting “to understand its surprising impact: to examine how trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience, and of communication, in therapy, in the classroom, and in literature, as well as in psychoanalytic theory” (4). Her interest led her to write *Unclaimed Experience*, which explores trauma and its relationship to literature, and is one of the most significant texts in trauma studies.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth makes the connection between Freudian trauma and its role in literary theory. In the beginning, Caruth discusses a Tasso poem previously discussed by Freud to explain trauma. In the poem, a man named Tancred accidentally kills his love, only to find himself repeating that same action when he stabs a tree, which speaks to him in the voice of his lost love, thereby repeating the scene of the initial traumatic event. Caruth makes the connection for us: “The actions of Tancred, wounding his beloved in a battle and then, unknowingly, seemingly by chance, wounding her again, evocatively represent in Freud’s text the way that the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (2). According to Caruth, it is Freud’s attempt to illuminate his theories through metaphor that solidifies the connections that can be made between trauma and literature. She writes:

> But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, like Tancred’s first infliction…is experienced too soon, too
unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (4)

The connection is then made to literature:

What the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us, and what is at the heart of Freud’s writing on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or a simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (4)

Freud’s example sparked the exploration of the connection of trauma with literature, specifically how the narration of trauma helps us make sense of what is known and yet not known.

Caruth’s insights are developed and expanded by writers who use psychology to look at how trauma is portrayed through literature, including, Kali Tal’s Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma, Ronald Granofsky’s The Trauma Novel: Contemporary Symbolic Depictions of Collective Disaster, and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History. These texts explore and explain the complexity of representing trauma, both historical and personal, through literature. More specifically, these texts distinguish between the different types of novels that deal with trauma and their distinct roles. However, Falling Man does not seem to fit into just one of these narrow categories. Instead, specific concepts discussed in these texts will be used to look at DeLillo’s
text as a hybridized novel that combines their three main concepts: literature of trauma, trauma novels, and literary testimony. While each of the theorists above provide information about distinct aspects of writing about trauma, DeLillo’s novel combines aspects of all three, demonstrating the complexity of writing about 9/11 specifically, and the complexity of DeLillo’s novel in particular.

For example, Kali Tal’s *Worlds of Hurt* specifically examines the issues associated with literature written by trauma victims as a way of working through the trauma (which she calls literature of trauma). She writes: “The writings of trauma survivors comprise a distinct ‘literature of trauma.’ Literature of trauma is defined by the identity of its author...[and] holds at its center the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience” (17). This is important to *Falling Man* because DeLillo is himself a survivor of 9/11 both a New Yorker and as an American, although his proximity to the event when it happened is unclear. Yet, unlike the works that Tal describes, DeLillo is not writing of his own experience in order to work through it; instead, he is writing about a fictionalized set of characters who are working through trauma. So, although he is speaking from the point of view of a victim, he is using these characters as symbolic representations of all victims of 9/11. This type of trauma literature that pertains to symbolic and fictionalized aspects of trauma is distinguished as a “trauma novel.”

In *The Trauma Novel*, Ronald Granofsky outlines what he believes to be the specific sub-genre of “trauma novels.” He states: “What distinguishes the trauma novel from other novels is the exploration through the agency of literary symbolism of the individual experiences of collective trauma, either actual events of the past, alarming tendencies of the present, or imagined horrors of the future” (5). He later adds to that definition when he writes, “The depiction of trauma in the trauma novel has some resemblance to what psychiatrists call ‘post-
traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD)” (10). Yet, he makes a clear distinction between a trauma novel and other novels that are centered on trauma when he states that, “not all novels dealing with trauma are symbolic, nor do all symbolic novels deal centrally with collective trauma. I reserve the term ‘trauma novel’ for those contemporary novels which deal symbolically with a collective trauma. (I use the more general term ‘literature of trauma’ for works of any genre and any period which deal centrally with trauma.)” (5). By these criteria, *Falling Man* does not quite fit into the specific genre of trauma novel. Granofsky’s book discusses several texts where a symbolic, fictional scenario is created in order to represent the actual collective trauma. Yet, we know that *Falling Man* does no such thing. There is no symbolic or metaphorical scenario used to represent the collective trauma. DeLillo represents the attack on the towers explicitly. Also, DeLillo’s depiction of trauma does not “resemble” PTSD, but instead explicitly portrays PTSD in the two main characters.

However, there is another distinction that Granofsky makes that does relate to *Falling Man*: “The collective disaster will, of course, leave its traces on the individual, and the nature of fiction is such that the collective will be portrayed in individual terms” (5). This, I propose, is the one way that DeLillo is mimicking that of the “trauma novel” in that Keith and Lianne are meant to represent different types of 9/11 victims. Keith represents that of the actual survivors that were in the Trade Center, and Lianne represents those that were a witness to the trauma.

The third book mentioned, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, discusses yet another type of writing: literary testimony. Felman describes what this means in a chapter about Camus’ *The Plague*: “The specific task of the literary testimony is, in other words, to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capability of perceiving history—
what is happening to others—in one’s own body, with the power of sight (or insight) usually afforded only by one’s own immediate physical involvement” (108). In a way, this is also what DeLillo is doing in *Falling Man*. However, the goal of literary testimony is to make the readers belated witnesses through reading. I propose that DeLillo is actually demonstrating to readers that they are already witnesses. This is especially true through the character of Lianne, who struggles with her own PTSD after the towers fall. Her experience is used to open the reader up to realizing the role of witnessing trauma within themselves, through their body, as Lianne has, in order to gain insight to the trauma.

This discussion then leads to comments on what Felman calls “The Age of Testimony.” Felman describes this as “an age whose writing task (and reading task) is to confront the horror of its own destructiveness, to attest to the unthinkable disaster of culture’s breakdown, and to attempt to assimilate the massive trauma, and the cataclysmic shift in being that resulted, within some reworked frame of culture or within some revolutionized order of consciousness” (114). This, too, can be related to *Falling Man*. In our reading of DeLillo’s text, I propose that we are confronting the horrors of what has happened to us, and are attempting to create a new consciousness that allows us to see how affected the “witnesses” of 9/11 really are.

Finally, there are two essential texts in trauma studies that focus specifically on different traumas that will relate to each of the main characters of *Falling Man* specifically: Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* and E. Ann Kaplan’s *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. Each of these texts offer insight into the specific types of coping associated with trauma that is unique to each of the characters. While LaCapra’s book synthesizes Freud’s ideas of melancholia and mourning in relation to historical trauma,
Kaplan’s book explains the different relationships to trauma, in terms of proximity and experience, in relation to second-hand witnessing or vicarious trauma.

First, LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* outlines the complexity of Freud’s ideas of dealing with trauma, specifically that of melancholia and mourning. LaCapra explains:

[M]ourning might be seen as a form of working through, and melancholia as a form of acting out. Freud, in comparing melancholia with mourning, saw melancholia as a characteristic of an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object. (65-66)

It is these concepts, melancholia and mourning, that will be explored through the characters of Keith and Lianne. Though both express symptoms of PTSD, they both cope with their symptoms on the opposite sides of the spectrum, with Keith stuck in a state of melancholia, while Lianne is able to move into mourning.

In the second text, *Trauma Culture*, Kaplan explores the complexity of trauma and those who are affected by it. She explains the different types of victims/witnesses when she writes:

Equally important to trauma is one’s specific positioning vis-à-vis an event. For this reason, it is necessary to distinguish the different positions and contexts of encounters with trauma. At one extreme there is the direct trauma victim while at the other we find a person geographically far away, having no personal connection to the victim. In between are a series of positions….People encounter trauma by being a bystander, by living near to where the catastrophe happened, or
by hearing about a crisis from a friend. But most people encounter trauma through
the media, which is why focusing on so-called mediatized trauma is important. (2)

She further explains “mediatized trauma” and what she calls vicarious trauma, explaining that
the ways in which traumas are “witnessed” has changed and that the effects of trauma are thus
expanding: “The phenomenon of 9/11 was perhaps the supreme example of a catastrophe that
was experienced globally via digital technologies (Internet, cell phone) as well as by television
and radio, and responded to in a myriad of ways depending on peoples’ national and local
contexts” (2). Though her text does not primarily focus on the effects of witnessing trauma
specifically through television and the bombardment of images and videos of the event, she does
make the distinction concerning what type of victims they are, while also pointing out that those
who witness trauma in this way respond and react similarly to “direct victims.” It is this
vicarious witnessing that will be applied later to the character of Lianne to explain why she, too,
exemplifies symptoms of PTSD.
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Now that trauma has been explained, and an overview of seminal texts and ideas has been discussed, it is important to see where this particular thesis discussion fits among literary scholarship. In order to understand DeLillo’s purpose, it is important to know what has been discussed previously regarding trauma in order to see where this discussion fits. My intent is to demonstrate not only that trauma and PTSD have not been fully explored in any of DeLillo’s texts, but also in what ways trauma and 9/11 have been explored in other texts, thus making this thesis a new and important contribution to the current discourse. Through this short chapter, I will provide a literature review of trauma and other DeLillo works, trauma and PTSD in other September 11th literature, and what has already been written about DeLillo’s *Falling Man.*

Trauma and Other DeLillo Novels

Although there has not been particular attention to DeLillo’s portrayal of individual victims and PTSD in his previous works, *Falling Man* is not the first time DeLillo has confronted trauma in his fiction. Before writing *Falling Man,* DeLillo wrote two specific texts that have received particular attention by scholars investigating trauma: *Libra* (1988) and *The Body Artist* (2001). *Libra,* a novel about the John F. Kennedy assassination, explores the relationship between representation and historical trauma. *The Body Artist,* on the other hand, explores the toll that a traumatic loss of a loved one has on the individual psyche, but focuses primarily on the corporeality of working through trauma.

In the article “Don DeLillo’s *Libra:* History as Text, History as Trauma,” Leonard Wilcox discusses the relationship between trauma and representation regarding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. His discussion primarily focuses on the historical aspects of the
trauma and how representation and its relationship to traumatic history demonstrates the unique problems with presenting history itself. Although similar to my discussion of **Falling Man** in that it addresses a historical trauma that was witnessed by many via media images, this article only focuses on the larger concepts of history and representation without paying any attention to the effects on the individual psyches of those who witnessed the trauma.

Moving on to **The Body Artist**, Laura Di Prete’s, “Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*: Performing the Body, Narrating Trauma,” discusses the personal aspect of trauma in ways somewhat similar to my own analysis, but not as expansively. Instead, this article focuses on how the main character, Lauren Hartke, works through the traumatic loss of her husband by interacting with a spectral character who serves as a corporeal representation of the trauma. According to Di Prete, “*The Body Artist*, as a narrative that stages a scenario of traumatic loss and return through the phantasmatic figure of a ‘madman in the attic,’ explores dynamics of psychic intrusion (of an unassimilable presence) and interconnectedness as the consequence of traumatic experience” (87). This article explores trauma caused by the death of a loved one, which is different than a historical, collective trauma. Instead of focusing on the psychological ramifications of PTSD, *The Body Artist* focuses more on literary technique as a character works through the trauma via a corporeal representation of that trauma. Although the topics of lost loved ones and corporeal representations of trauma will appear in my own analysis, these are not my main focus, but merely two of the several concepts I will discuss to create a larger picture of PTSD.
9/11 Literature and Trauma

Moving on from trauma in DeLillo novels, we now look at trauma in 9/11 literature. In the last few years, there has been an increase of literature and scholarship regarding 9/11. Among the different novels discussed, two texts stand out: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Interestingly enough, both have had scholarship written about their examination of trauma and PTSD, which demonstrates a new interest in this particular aspect of trauma in literature, especially in relation to 9/11.

Regarding Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Sien Uytterschout and Kristiaan Versluys’ article “Melancholy and Mourning in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*” focuses on the process of working through the trauma of losing someone in the 9/11 attacks. Uytterschout and Versluys distinguish the difference between the issues of melancholia and mourning, terms mentioned earlier by LaCapra. Similar to my discussion, Uytterschout and Versluys breakdown each of the three main characters and discuss where each of them fit in the spectrum of melancholia and mourning. They also address the concept of second-time victims, and how 9/11 triggered memories from a previous, similar trauma, while also explaining how that original trauma influences how these victims cope with 9/11. I will also address second-time victims in my analysis of Lianne, who was previously traumatized by the suicide of her father.

The second article that discusses similar aspects of my own analysis is also by Kristiaan Versluys. In this article, “Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*: 9/11 and the Representation of Trauma,” Versluys once again examines the effects of 9/11 on the individual psyche. Versluys discusses how Spiegelman’s graphic novel helps the narrator/author work
through his trauma: “It records his fear and panic and stages the see-saw between melancholia or acting-out, on the one hand, and mourning or working-through, on the other…It is the record of a psychologically wounded survivor, trying to make sense of an event that overwhelmed and destroyed all his normal psychic defenses” (982). Similar to his previous discussion of Foer’s novel, Versluys discusses the ways in which Spiegelman explores individual trauma. Unlike *Falling Man* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, In the Shadow of No Towers* distinctly fits into the category labeled literature of trauma since it is about a victim testifying and working through trauma via the fictionalization of his own experience.

*Falling Man* Explored

Now that we know how trauma and PTSD have been discussed regarding other DeLillo and 9/11 works, let us briefly look at how my discussion of trauma and PTSD in *Falling Man* fills a gap in both areas of scholarship. To date, only two pieces of scholarship have been published that focus specifically on *Falling Man*. The first is “The Wake of Terror: Don DeLillo’s ‘In the Ruins of the Future,’ ‘Baader-Meinhof,’ and *Falling Man*” by Linda S. Kaufman, which briefly explores aspects of *Falling Man*, DeLillo’s previous essay about 9/11, and the tale of Baader-Meinhof. Kaufmann’s article focuses on the “social, economic, and psychic fallout from the attacks” (353). Though she does mention the psychological outcomes of such an attack, her article does not attempt to examine the specific traumatization of the individuals in the novel. Instead, the article reviews the main themes without providing any analysis.

*Falling Man* is also discussed in Kristiaan Versluys’ newest book *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. In his chapter “American Melancholia: Don DeLillo’s *Falling*
Man,” Versluys claims that DeLillo’s exploration of trauma demonstrates how September 11th has forced American society into a perpetual state of melancholia. Versluys investigates how the trauma of September 11th has affected American society as a whole. Instead of focusing on individual characters and their struggle with PTSD, Versluys looks more at how the characters in the novel demonstrate a cultural change that has occurred in America. In fact, he proposes that Falling Man “describes pure melancholia without the possibility of mourning” (20) and then later adds that “[t]he terrorist attacks punctuate an era characterized by brokenness and unrelieved melancholia” (21). But Versluys fails to address how Keith and Lianne complicate and illuminate what it means to be a witness and a victim. Versluys claims that “[Lianne] has no firsthand knowledge of the trauma that Keith suffered and, for that reason, she cannot begin to understand what he went through” (25). I disagree, maintaining that Lianne does have an understanding of what Keith is going through. Versluys fails to recognize that Lianne, too, is a victim of trauma. Although their experience of and proximity to 9/11 were different, they are both equally traumatized and suffering, and, I argue, Lianne is capable of understanding Keith. Finally, Versluys’ ignores the difference in coping between Keith and Lianne specifically, and in doing so, he fails to recognize how Lianne exhibits signs of mourning, as opposed to melancholia, and how she does attempt to reconcile her traumatization.

Versluys claims that the effects of September 11th affected everyone, and his discussion of Falling Man conflates all individual reactions to represent a larger societal one. My analysis will pay closer attention to the effect on the individual psyche in order to explore how complex trauma is, not just for a society as whole, but also for an individual.

Other than those two instances, there have been a few published reviews of Falling Man in magazines and newspapers, and it has been mentioned a few times in a couple of other books
pertaining to Don DeLillo, such as Marc Shuster’s *Don DeLillo, Jean Baudrillard, and the Consumer Conundrum* and *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Both quickly summarize the plot and themes, as did Kaufmann’s article. Shuster provides an extended summary/review of *Falling Man* in a postscript, discussing, in brief, the intertextuality of *Falling Man* with other DeLillo novels while pointing out its Baudrillardian concepts, such as consumerism, hyperreality, and simulacra.

Similar in its brevity, *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* mentions *Falling Man* sparingly. In the introduction, John Duvall mentions that *Falling Man* “examines the psychological trauma experienced by New Yorkers in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11” (9), but then goes on to focus on the novel’s portrayal of the “role of the artist in contemporary society” (9). The only other time that *Falling Man* is mentioned is in Joseph Conte’s conclusion where he briefly mentions the novel in two of his endnotes. One mentions the novel’s portrayal of terrorism, while the other states: “DeLillo examines the traumatic experience and personal restitution of one man, Keith Neudecker” (191), ignoring Lianne.

The significance of trauma and PTSD has been underdeveloped in the discourse surrounding DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, and deserves closer attention. Not only is it important to explore PTSD because it is a major theme in a major novel that has yet to be discussed, but also because this is a particularly important and timely topic in the current discussion regarding 9/11 literature, to which *Falling Man* and DeLillo have a good deal to contribute.
DeLillo presents Keith Neudecker as a complex trauma survivor. More than just showing Keith’s melancholia, DeLillo demonstrates several aspects of PTSD that become manifest as a result of Keith’s traumatization. This chapter will address Keith as a direct victim/witness by examining what traumatized him in the towers, followed by a look at how that trauma affects him more specifically by altering his identity, and how that identity is further complicated by the corporeality of the trauma. I will end by examining his struggle with melancholia.

Direct Victim and Witness

First, let us look at the events that traumatized Keith. At the beginning of the novel, we find out that he has just escaped the World Trade Center towers after the planes hit. DeLillo shows us the chaotic scene of “people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads…[with] [s]moke and ash…rolling down streets and turning corners…seismic tides of smoke” (3). It becomes clear that Keith himself was in the towers when we find out that he, too, is wounded: “There was glass in his hair and face, marbled bolls of blood and light” (DeLillo 3). As Keith walks away, we learn: “He heard the sound of the second fall, or felt it in the trembling air, the north tower coming down, a soft awe of voices in the distance. That was him coming down, the north tower” (DeLillo 5). This passage indicates that Keith has a particular connection with the north tower, which is most likely the tower he himself was in. This moment reveals Keith’s proximity to the trauma, and how he is a direct, first-hand victim and witness.

Yet, it is not until the end of the novel that we get a clearer picture of what Keith goes through before he escapes and how that traumatizes him. Not only is Keith present when the collision occurs in the towers, and not only does he witness thousands of people fleeing for their
lives, but he also witnesses the death of his close friend, Rumsey. Once Keith realizes something has happened, he immediately goes in search of Rumsey. When he finds him, it is clear that he is in bad shape: “He [Keith] squatted alongside and took his [Rumsey] arm and looked at the man, talking to him. Something came trickling from the corner of Rumsey’s mouth, like bile…He saw the mark on his head, an indentation, a gouge mark, deep, exposing raw tissue and nerve” (DeLillo 241). Still, Keith tries to get him up to take him down the stairs with everyone else, but he soon realizes that his efforts are fruitless. DeLillo writes: “The whole business of being Rumsey was in shambles now. Keith held tight to the belt buckle. He stood and looked at him and the man opened his eyes and died. This was when he [Keith] wondered what was happening here” (243). Keith’s confusion is evidence of his traumatization. He cannot fully comprehend the events that are occurring around him.

Trauma victims are not fully conscious during traumatic events, and do not fully realize what has happened until much later. Cathy Caruth explains this Freudian concept: “Yet what is truly striking about the accident victim’s experience of the event… is not so much the period of forgetting that occurs after the accident, but rather the fact that the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the accident itself: the person gets away, Freud says, ‘apparently unharmed’” (“Introduction” 7). Witnessing death, and the panic of others, contributes to a break in the psyche. Keith demonstrates a state of “unconsciousness” when he remembers himself leaving the towers. DeLillo writes: “They walked down, thousands, and he [Keith] was in there with them. He walked in a long sleep, one step and then the next” (243). Note here that Keith is walking “in a long sleep” that mimics that of an out-of-body experience. Although he is physically present, he is psychologically removed. This psychological split creates a problem for the psyche and causes Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.
The trauma of the event and its toll on Keith is then further demonstrated when Keith is trying to flee the scene. Caruth explains that “What causes trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (Unclaimed Experience 61), which we see with Keith as he leaves the towers: “Someone took his arm and led him forward for a few steps and then he walked on his own, in his sleep, and for an instant he saw it again, going past the window, and this time he thought it was Rumsey. He confused it with Rumsey, the man falling sideways, arm out and up, like pointed up, like why am I here instead of there” (DeLillo 244). Keith has already left Rumsey in his office after witnessing his death, but he is not fully aware or conscious of what is occurring around him. His sense of time and place is skewed, and he does not know what he sees, as he is “in his sleep.”

Keith does not fully comprehend everything because he has become psychologically affected by Rumsey’s death and by seeing the falling man. His behavior clearly exhibits that of someone who has not only been traumatized, but someone who will most likely suffer the long-lasting effects of PTSD.

Fragmented Identity

It is important to examine how DeLillo shows the repercussions of what Keith endured. One of the main ways this is addressed is through his struggles with identity. After the initial shock of 9/11 wears off, Keith goes through several identity crises, each one connected to symptoms of PTSD. First, Keith questions the concept of self, not quite feeling or knowing who he is inside of his own body. We then see a two-fold doubling of identity. First, we see Keith distinguishing between who he was before 9/11 and who he is now, as well as creating a different self to accommodate his relationship with another survivor, Florence.
To begin, let us look at Keith’s lost sense of self. Herman explains this response when she writes, “Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships…They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others…They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis” (51). This questioning or shattering of self is demonstrated in Keith when he goes back to get his things out of his old apartment. DeLillo writes, “A single suitcase, that was all, and his passport, checkbooks, birth certificate and a few other documents, the state papers of identity. He stood and looked and felt something so lonely he could touch it with his hand” (27). Here, looking at the items that establish his “identity,” Keith feels lonely. He feels no connection to the person those artifacts identify. In fact, he feels like someone else completely. DeLillo writes: “He looked in the refrigerator. Maybe he was thinking of the man who used to live here and he checked the bottles and cartons for clues” (27). Keith does not make the connection between his new self and the person who lived there pre-9/11. To him, he is in a stranger’s home.

In addition, there are times when Keith does not even feel human. DeLillo writes: “He [Keith] wondered if he was becoming a self-operating mechanism, like a humanoid robot that understands two hundred voice commands, far-seeing, touch-sensitive but totally, rigidly controllable” (226). Keith’s trauma has clearly changed the way he experiences his surroundings. He no longer knows who he is as a person, or if he is a person at all.

However, this is not the only way that the trauma affects Keith’s sense of self. He not only questions who he is, or if he is, but at times he also feels like he is many selves. In an interview with Cathy Caruth, Robert Jay Lifton explains that “extreme trauma creates a second self…in extreme trauma, one’s sense of self is radically altered. And there is a traumatized self that is created…It’s a form of doubling in the traumatized person” (Caruth “Interview” 128).
DeLillo shows us this in two ways: Keith pre-9/11 vs post-9/11 and his relationship with Florence.

Soon after Keith returns from getting his things from his apartment, he tries to re-establish a life with Lianne and his son, Justin. Yet, Keith does not feel as though he is the same man he was when he was living with them before. At one point, Keith thinks, “Nothing seemed familiar, being here, in a family again, and he felt strange to himself” (DeLillo 5). Here we see Keith more self-aware of who he now is in the family, and how he does not feel the way he used to. He reiterates this when he discusses a previous family trip with Lianne: “‘We saw [falcons] perched on power lines, mile after mile, when we were somewhere out west, back in the other life.’ ‘The other life,’ she said, and laughed, and pushed up off the chair, headed for the bathroom” (DeLillo 131). Once again, Keith makes the distinction between his life then, and his life now. Although he is technically the same man, psychologically, he is not. That was a lifetime ago for him, and this life and self are new and different.

We again see this different self/life when he starts a new career as a semi-professional poker player, becoming more of a part-time husband and father: “He was also going home periodically, three or four days, love, sex, fatherhood, home-cooked food, but was lost at times for something to say. There was no language, it seemed, to tell them how he spent his days and nights” (DeLillo 197). Even though Keith is technically back with his wife and son, he is not the same man he was before 9/11, or the man he was before they originally became estranged. He is someone new, someone aloof, someone who is home for a few days at a time, someone who feels disconnected from his family. Lianne also sees that he is a different person: “When Keith did a kind of ball trick, using the right hand, the undamaged one, to flip the ball onto the back of the hand and then jerk the arm forward propelling the ball backwards along the forearm before
knocking it into the air with his elbow and then catching it backhanded, she saw a man she’d never known before” (DeLillo 59). Keith is not just a different man; he is completely new, a man that she has never known. This is similar to how Keith feels about himself.

DeLillo also shows Keith’s new multiple identities when Keith sets up simultaneous relationships with both his estranged wife Lianne and a fellow 9/11 survivor, Florence. Florence also escaped the WTC towers and also lost a friend. Keith somehow ends up with her briefcase as he leaves the scene on 9/11, and days later he remembers that he has it and seeks her out to return it. Once they meet, they immediately begin to talk about the incident. Talking initiates their affair.

This type of relationship is very common among trauma survivors; many victims seek each other out to tell each other their stories. Caruth explains that many trauma victims seek out others who have gone through the same trauma in order to hear their stories as a means of healing. She writes, “the wound that speaks is… but the wound, the trauma, of another… the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (Unclaimed Experience 8). Keith needs to listen to Florence’s story: “This was the second time he’d walked across the park. He knew why he was here but could not have explained it to someone and did not have to explain it to her. It didn’t matter whether they spoke or not. It would be fine, not speaking, breathing the same air, or she speaks, he listens, or day is night” (DeLillo 89). Keith wants to listen to Florence’s wound, or even feel her wound without words. He explains:

She talked about the tower, going over it again, claustrophobically, the smoke, the fold of the bodies, and he understood that they could talk about these things only with each other, in minute and dullest detail, but it would never be dull or too
detailed because it was inside of them now and because he needed to hear what he’d lost in the tracings of memory. This was their pitch of delirium, the dazed reality they’d shared in the stairwells, the deep shafts of spiraling men and women. (DeLillo 91)

Even though Keith and Florence have nothing in common but trauma, and Keith is back with his wife, he cannot help but feel deeply connected to Florence. As Kai Erikson explains, “Indeed, it can happen that otherwise unconnected persons who share a traumatic experience seek one another out and develop a form of fellowship on the strength of that common tie” (186). Keith develops another identity in order to have this relationship with Florence. DeLillo writes: “They took erotic pleasure from each other but this is not what sent him back there. It was what they knew together, in the timeless drift of the long spiral down, and he went back again even if these meetings contradicted what he’d lately taken to be the truth of his life, that it was meant to be lived seriously and responsibly, not snatched in clumsy fistfuls” (137). This relationship is something Keith needs, even though the affair goes against everything he believes he wants in his new life with Lianne.

In fact, Keith is able to recognize the fragmentation he has suffered. At one point, when he is walking with his son Justin, he reflects on his relationship with Florence: “He was speaking into the breeze, not quite to Justin. He was still back there, with Florence, double in himself, coming and going, the walks across the park and back, the deep shared self, down through the smoke, and then here again to safety and family, to the implications of one’s conduct” (DeLillo 157). Not long after this reflection, Keith realizes that he must stop seeing Florence if he wants to stay with his wife. He thinks this will be “a way to stop being double in himself, trailing the taut shadow of what is unsaid” (DeLillo 161). Keith acknowledges that he does not want this
new self; yet he is many contradictory, conflicted selves, some of which are working against what it is that he wants for “himself” in his new post-9/11 life.

DeLillo demonstrates how a severe trauma can change and complicate one’s identity. Trauma challenges and complicates the very threads that make us who we are. PTSD is not just a matter of feeling “different.” Selfhood is complicated by tormenting fragmentation and conflicting selves. Trauma victims question not only who they are, but if they are.

The Corporeality of Trauma

Another way that DeLillo demonstrates how trauma affects the psyche is through his attention to the corporeality of trauma. In her book “Foreign Bodies”: Trauma, Corporeality, and Textuality in Contemporary American Culture, Di Prete explains that often psychological trauma is worked out through a corporeal representation of that trauma, especially in contemporary fiction. She states: “In displacing the traumatic referent to its imagined and imaginary counterpart…the symbol also mimics psychic dynamics of repression and dissociation, which rise to protect the mind from an experience too intense and devastating to be accommodated from within” (5). Keith’s trauma is corporeally represented in two ways. First, Keith takes on physical manifestations of 9/11 as a way for Lianne to work through her trauma. Also, Keith’s persistent and intense focus on his physical therapy demonstrates his attempt to physically work through his own psychological trauma.

For example, DeLillo first introduces physically represented trauma when a doctor tells Keith about “organic shrapnel”:

In those places where it happens, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of a better term,
and it turns out this is caused by small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber’s body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who’s in striking range. Do you believe it? A student is sitting in a café. She survives the attack. Then, months later, they find these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin. They call this organic shrapnel. (16)

And although we do not witness Keith having “bumps,” we do see that his body has taken on the physical aspects of the trauma when Lianne is cleaning him off immediately after the disaster:

She [Lianne] poured water on a dishcloth and wiped dust and ash from his hands, face and head, careful not to disturb the glass fragments. There was more blood than she’d realized at first and then she began to realize something else, that his cuts and abrasions were not severe enough or numerous enough to account for all this blood. It was not his blood. Most of it came from somebody else. (DeLillo 88)

Here, Keith physically represents the trauma. He is covered in the dust, ash, and blood of the objects and people destroyed in the towers. In this one scene, he becomes the physical embodiment of 9/11, displaying and representing all that was lost in the chaos. And as we already know, Keith was physically present, although psychologically absent. Di Prete describes this as “a body that knows about loss before the mind does is a foreign body, a body the traumatic experience has taken away” (101). Therefore, in this way, Keith has become that foreign body, the corporeality of the trauma.
Although Keith physically represents the trauma for Lianne, he, too, attempts to work through the trauma corporeally. Keith injures his arm while escaping the towers and has to have surgery on it. After the surgery, Keith becomes obsessed with the arm. He starts to over-treat in an attempt to work through the trauma physically. Since this is the arm that was affected by 9/11, it makes sense that he would use that arm to work through what happened to him psychologically. Di Prete explains: “this body—turned foreign, alien, unfamiliar as the result of traumatic experience—becomes the vehicle through which trauma is told and, possibly, worked through” (2). We then see this working through when DeLillo writes, “He found these sessions restorative, four times a day, the wrist extensions, the ulnar deviations. These were the true countermeasures to the damage he’d suffered in the tower, in the descending chaos” (40). Not only does this show Keith working on his arm, but also that he connects it to the towers. Keith’s physical therapy is his way of trying to work through and counteract trauma.

It becomes even clearer that working on his arm is more about working through the psychological trauma rather than fixing it when Keith continues his physical therapy regimen long after the hand is healed:

> There was no problem with the wrist. The wrist was fine. But he sat in his hotel room, facing the window, hand curled into a gentle fist, thumb up in certain setups. He recalled phrases from the instruction sheet and recited them quietly, working on the hand shapes, the bend of the wrist toward the floor, the bend of the wrist toward the ceiling. He used the uninvolved hand to apply pressure to the involved hand. (DeLillo 235)

Even though there is no longer anything wrong with Keith physically, he feels the need to continue his routine. This obsession takes on another meaning altogether. Since we know that
Keith associates his physical therapy with his coping with 9/11, it becomes clear that Keith has continued his obsession with his wrist as a way to continue to work through the psychological trauma and that he is nowhere near recovering.

Not only is Keith suffering from PTSD, but his symptoms have challenged the ways he sees himself both mentally and physically. Everything has changed for him, and everything about his mental and physical being becomes directly related to the trauma and his attempt to make sense of it and regain a sense of control. Yet, although this may help to heal his arm, trauma victims cannot heal PTSD through self-discipline or self-control.

Melancholia and Recreating the Past

Keith is not really coping with the trauma, and with his examples, DeLillo shows how many of the survivors of 9/11 have been unable to recover and are instead stuck in a perpetual state of alienation and melancholia. Their minds are focused on the past, not fully committed to the present or the future. It is this melancholia that causes them to recreate or reinvent the past in order to continue repeating the trauma, rather than moving on to mourning.

LaCapra explains why many trauma victims are stuck in melancholia:

Those traumatized by extreme events…may resist working through because of what might almost be termed a fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it. Part of this feeling may be the melancholic sentiment that, in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by the traumatic past. One’s bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but
necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound. This situation may create a more or less unconscious desire to remain within trauma. (22-23)

LaCapra emphasizes that those suffering from melancholia may have a connection to a dead intimate, which keeps them from recovery. Keith witnesses the death of a close friend, and so it makes sense that he might remain within trauma. In fact, there are several instances throughout the narrative that demonstrate Keith’s preoccupation with death.

For example, Keith’s view of his post-9/11 world is haunted by the feeling that “they would all be dead one day” (DeLillo 228). For him, “[t]hese are the days after. Everything now is measured by after” (DeLillo 138). He no longer commits and participates in life the way that he used to. The things that were important to him, the things that he wanted for himself, they no longer matter: “Keith used to want more of the world than there was time and means to acquire. He didn’t want this anymore, whatever it was he’d wanted, in real terms, real things, because he’d never truly known” (DeLillo 128). Essentially, his fixation on 9/11 consumes him, calling into question all that he thought was “real” and valuable. Instead of being the active, ambitious man he once was, he is now much more detached and passive:

It was Keith as well who was going slow, easing inward. He used to want to fly out of self-awareness, day and night, a body in raw motion. Now he finds himself drifting into spells of reflection, thinking not in clear units, hard and linked, but only absorbing what comes, drawing things out of time and memory and into some dim space that bears his collected experience. Or he stands and looks. He stands at the window and sees what’s happening in the street. Something is
always happening, even on the quietest days and deep into night, if you stand a while and look. (DeLillo 66)

This passage clearly demonstrates the severity of his fixations and stagnation. They become more apparent in his reflections about his future and his life now. DeLillo describes Keith’s psyche: “These were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness” (230). These images—of trapped men, fixed limbs, a gasping man—all reflect what he saw and experienced in those towers. He is haunted by what he saw and what he could not do for Rumsey.

In fact, it seems that it is hard for Keith to even understand that he is really alive, a common reaction by trauma survivors. Many are unable to reconcile the idea that they survived when others did not. Herman explains: “Feelings of guilt are especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people. To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience. Survivors of disaster and war are haunted by images of the dying whom they could not rescue” (54). DeLillo demonstrates Keith’s confusion and guilt in several ways.

For example, “He [Keith] tried to tell himself he was alive but the idea was too obscure to take hold” (DeLillo 6). After witnessing so much chaos, death, and destruction, Keith finds it hard to accept that he was lucky enough to make it out alive. We also see Keith’s persistent thoughts regarding death when he is being treated for his hurt arm: “He listened to the music and thought of what the radiologist had said, that once it’s over, in her Russian accent, you forget instantly the whole experience so how bad can it be, she said, and he thought this sounded like a
description of dying” (DeLillo 19). Not surprisingly, immediately after thinking of his own death, he quickly moves on to thinking about Rumsey:

On the table he thought of his buddy Rumsey, briefly, just before or after he lost sensation. The doctor, the anesthetist, injected him with a heavy sedative or other agent, a substance containing a memory suppressant, or maybe there were two shots, but there was Rumsey in his chair by the window, which meant the memory was not suppressed or the substance hadn’t taken effect yet, a dream, a waking image, whatever it was, Rumsey in the smoke, things coming down. (DeLillo 22)

Because of his melancholia, Keith is unable to stop thinking about Rumsey’s death. To Keith “[t]he dead were everywhere, in the air, in the rubble, on the rooftops nearby, in the breezes that carried from the river. They were settled in ash and drizzled on windows all along the streets, in his hair and on his clothes” (DeLillo 25). If death remains everywhere, all around him, how can he recover? How can he stop the traumatic event from always intruding on his present?

For Keith, recovery seems impossible. Therefore, he is compelled to create an alternative reality where his memories of the past, the memories that he associates with 9/11, are recreated so that he is constantly being reminded, and reliving, his feelings and experiences. Freud, discussing a patient of his, explains: “At the outset he was in a passive situation—he was overwhelmed by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was…he took on an active part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery that was acting independently of whether or not the memory was in itself pleasurable or not” (16). Freud explains what subconsciously compels trauma victims to reenact scenarios in their life that mirror or mimic past events that remind them of the trauma. As Freud states, “Indeed, in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse,
including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realizes in the here and now with future possibilities” (46-47). Keith exemplifies this distinctive collapse between the past and the present throughout the novel, but most clearly with his new career as a semi-professional poker player.

One of the most revealing ways that Keith recreates the past in his present is through his career change. No longer interested in his usual work, Keith travels the country, participating in gambling tournaments. In a life full of disconnection and disorder, Keith finds comfort in the rules of the poker game. Much like the rules he made with his friends (including Rumsey) during their (pre-9/11) weekly poker games, playing poker now gives him the psychological stability that he had lost. DeLillo writes:

But the game had structure, guiding principles, sweet and easy interludes of dream logic when the player knows that the card he needs is the card that’s sure to fall. Then, always, in the crucial instant ever repeated hand after hand, the choice of yes or no. Call or raise, call or fold, the little binary pulse located behind the eyes, the choices that reminds you who you are. It belonged to him, this yes or no, not to a horse running in the mud somewhere in New Jersey. (212)

Keith seeks out a world that makes sense to him. Binaries, a simple yes or no world, is what he is lacking. His life after 9/11 is a chaotic world of “horses running in the mud in New Jersey.” He is disoriented and distraught. He seeks an uncomplicated world without connections or feelings, but rather “the mingling of countless lives that had no stories attached” (DeLillo 204). DeLillo writes: “He [Keith] didn’t wonder who she [a fellow poker player] was or where she’d go when this was over, to what sort of room somewhere, to think what kind of thoughts. This was never
over. That was the point. There was nothing outside the game but faded space” (189). Keith is not interested in those playing the game with him, or in what exists outside the game.

Yet, it is more than just the structure and discipline of playing these games. The connections and reflections he makes to his life as a poker player reveal conscious and subconscious connections that allow him to relive, or recreate, the past in the present. Rumsey was just one of several poker buddies Keith lost on 9/11, which explains why he now surrounds himself with things that remind him of that day and what he lost.

The connection between his new career/lifestyle and 9/11 is solidified when Keith notes that “every time he boarded a flight he glanced at faces on both sides of the aisle, trying to spot the man or men who might be a danger to them all” (DeLillo 198). The fact that Keith continues to put himself into situations that not only remind him of the attacks on 9/11, but also heighten his sense of anxiety, shows a fixation on the traumatic event and the emotions attached. He continues to put himself in a place where he can repeat the trauma rather than resolve it.

This connection between poker and anxiety, death and 9/11 surfaces again during a visit home when Keith is watching poker on television with his son. DeLillo writes: “He reached over and knocked on Justin’s head, knock knock, to alert him to a revelation in the making as the camera located the hole cards of a player who didn’t know he was dead. ‘He’s dead,’ he told his son, and the kid sat without comment in his makeshift diagonal, half in the chair, half on the floor, semi-mesmerized” (117-18). Although Keith was speaking technically about the poker game, the wording and sentiment could not be more poignant. Keith, at home, is watching a poker game, the very poker games that he used to play with his friends, telling his son that the man is “dead.” And much like Keith himself, that player does not know he is dead, just as Keith’s subconscious does not accept that his friends are dead, or that he is not, hence the
compulsion to continually replay the trauma in order to get his psyche to accept what really happened to him and his friends.

This connection becomes even more apparent with the emergence of Terry Cheng, the only other player from Keith’s pre-9/11 poker games who made it out of the towers unscathed. When Keith first sees Terry Cheng at one of his poker tournaments, we can see the immediate connection Keith makes between the new and the old poker games. DeLillo writes: “It had to be Terry Cheng, easing back into his chair now, dropping out of Keith’s line of vision, and of course this is who it was because how could any of this be happening, the poker circuit, the thunderous runs of money, the comped hotel rooms and high competition, without the presence of Terry Cheng” (198). By looking at this quote more carefully, the subconscious connections become clear. Of course there are no poker games without the presence of Terry Cheng because every time Keith plays poker, his mind makes the connection with his former friends. Keith would not be engaging in this lifestyle if the “presence” of Terry Cheng, the presence of his previous life, and his lost friends, were not always being conjured up. In this way, Keith is able to continuously repeat the past, repeat the trauma, as a way to hold on to that which has traumatized him and not betray his lost friends.

And even though Keith may not completely understand why he continues in this repetitive cycle, he does recognize that it is not healthy. This is the reason why he does not want Lianne to visit him while he is at tournaments: “Because thinking about it is one thing. Seeing it would put me [Keith] in depression. People sitting around a table going shuffle shuffle. Week after week. I mean catching planes to go play cards. I mean aside from the absurdity, the total psychotic folly, isn’t there something very sad about this?” (DeLillo 216). It is his recognition of the miserable circumstances he has put himself into, his inability to understand why he is
doing it, and his inability to move out of the past that demonstrates his continued state of melancholia.

Keith exhibits the various consequences of trauma and PTSD. Not only does he represent the victims that survived, but he also represents the witnesses and those who were psychologically traumatized. Through the exploration of Keith’s PTSD symptoms, the significance of trauma in a person’s life is revealed. Almost every decision that Keith makes is a direct result of trauma.
CHAPTER 5: LIANNE

Now that we have seen how DeLillo represents trauma and PTSD in Keith, this thesis will now explore the other main character who is also suffering from PTSD: Lianne. Lianne, Keith’s estranged wife, does not seem like the typical trauma victim. She was not in the WTC that day, and she did not directly witness the event. Instead, she was at home, watching it happen on her television. Yet, her distance from the actual event did not lessen her reaction to it, and she, too, experiences symptoms of PTSD. Kai Erikson acknowledges the validity of this type of traumatization when he writes, “it only makes sense to insist that trauma can issue from a sustained exposure to battle as well as from a moment of numbing shock, from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single searing assault, from a period of severe attenuation and erosion as well as from a sudden flash of fear. The effects are the same, and that, after all, should be our focus” (185). This chapter will not only acknowledge Lianne’s trauma, but also demonstrate how that trauma affects her, and how she ultimately deals with it.

DeLillo expands and complicates the idea of trauma “victim” by way of Lianne, a second-hand witness who is suffering from PTSD. Her suffering as witness and victim is valid. Lianne’s trauma symptoms are triggered by normal things she comes across in her everyday life, such as art and music. The trauma of 9/11 reopens the previous trauma of her father’s suicide, and one particular form of art, the performance artist “Falling Man,” particularly affects her; but finally she copes differently than Keith by eventually moving into mourning rather than being consumed by melancholia.
“Witness” as Second-Hand or Vicarious Victim

First, it is important to look at the role of Lianne and how she is traumatized by 9/11, especially in comparison to Keith. When Keith first arrives at Lianne’s apartment after he escapes from the World Trade Center, “[s]he turn[s] off the TV set…protecting him from the news” (DeLillo 87). It is this immediate and simultaneous witnessing of the event that makes Lianne a trauma victim. As Keith was living through the event, Lianne was watching it happen. Television makes 9/11, as Jurgen Habermas calls it, the “first historical world event.” Borradori explains:

And yet, as Habermas points out, never before did anyone get as much reality from a TV screen as people worldwide got on 9/11. The footage of 9/11 wasn’t edited or even produced for its own media coverage, and this renders it, in his words, the “first historic world event”…The Gulf War exposed the public to a minimal amount of footage of what happened on the ground. While in 1991, providing the old saying that “Truth is the first casualty of war,” the global public was given a media construction; in 2001 that same global public became a “universal eyewitness.” This very fact, for Habermas, makes 9/11 the “first historic world event.” (49)

As Borradori makes clear, the footage of 9/11 was not edited, nor created, but instead was the actual event as it happened, thus creating an entire group of global witnesses privy to the same scene, the same chaos, as those who were actually experiencing the events first-hand.

The significance of this type of trauma is a new concept that deserves further exploring, especially regarding other 9/11 literature. As Michael Rothberg explains,
For most of us, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were experienced as something we saw—as a spectacle—and what we saw had an immediate impact on what we felt. The passage from seeing to feeling associated with terrorism in the age of instantaneous communications technology—and its effect on more traditional forms of media, such as literature—is an important point to hold on to in our discussion of 9/11. (125-26)

Lianne, like most of us, experienced 9/11 through the media. She becomes, as E. Ann Kaplan calls it, a vicarious trauma victim. Kaplan explains: “Vicarious traumatization may be a component of witnessing, but instead of only intensifying the desire to help an individual in front of one, witnessing leads to a broader understanding of the meaning of what has been done to victims, of the politics of trauma being possible” (123). Kaplan is stating that those who have access to the trauma via witnessing can come to understand what the direct victims are going through, which can lead to their own development of PTSD symptoms. Kaplan explains the significance of this type of trauma in her book Trauma Culture:

Studying vicarious trauma is especially important in an era when global media project images of catastrophes all over the world as they are happening. Most of us generally encounter trauma vicariously through the media rather than directly. Since such exposure may result in symptoms of secondary trauma, we need to know as much as possible about the process. (87)

Herman also discusses vicarious trauma and explains how it is possible using the example of a traumatized therapist:

Trauma is contagious. In the role of witness to disaster or atrocity, the therapist at times is emotionally overwhelmed. She experiences, to a lesser degree, the same
terror, rage, and despair as the patient. This phenomenon is known as “traumatic countertransference” or “vicarious traumatization.” The therapist may begin to experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. (140)

Vicarious trauma is real, and can result in similar symptoms to those who experienced the trauma directly. DeLillo comments on the significant role of witnessing: “It was something that belonged to another landscape, something inserted, a conjuring that resembled for the briefest second some half-seen image only half believed in the seeing, when the witness wonders what has happened to the meaning of things, to tree, street, stone, wind, simple words lost in the falling ash” (103). It is this questioning of meaning, this change in perception, that alters the witnesses’ view of the world, which in turn affects their psyches.

Lianne, a vicarious trauma victim, does in fact demonstrate symptoms of PTSD. For example, Lianne comments on the way she felt watching the towers fall in a conversation with her mother, Nina:

“But when the towers fell.”

“I know.”

“I thought he was dead.”

“So did I,” Nina said. “So many watching.”

“Thinking he’s dead, she’s dead.”

“I know.”

“Watching those buildings fall.”

“First one, then the other. I know,” her mother said. (DeLillo 11)
Lianne and Nina’s exchange clearly articulates the thoughts of millions who watched in horror. Both women note specifically that so many people knew that they were watching people die. They both understand the impact of witnessing and what that did to them.

Yet, this is not the only time we see or hear about witnessing from Lianne. The attacks, specifically when the planes flew into the World Trade Center, are played repeatedly. Each time, Lianne watches in horror, reliving that painful experience. DeLillo writes: “Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching. The second plane coming out of that ice blue sky, this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin, the fleeting spirit that carried lives and histories, theirs and hers, everyone’s, into some other distance, out beyond the towers” (134). Like Keith, Lianne has a similar obsession to re-witnessing or re-living the scene again and again. She cannot bring herself to not watch it, even though it brings back her initial thoughts and fears: “She bit her lip and watched. They would all be dead, passengers and crew, and thousands in the towers dead, and she felt it in her body, a deep pause, and thought there he is, unbelievably, in one of those towers, and now his hand on hers, in pale light, as though to console her for his dying” (DeLillo 134-35). We can see the extent of Lianne’s reaction to watching the attacks. She feels it in her body. It has become a part of her and has changed the way she feels, the way she views life. She feels compelled to re-witness, to bear witness. We see this again when DeLillo writes, “She read newspaper profiles of the dead, every one that was printed. Not to read them, every one, was an offense, a violation of responsibility and trust. But she also read them because she had to, out of some need she did not try to interpret” (106). This clearly demonstrates not only a fascination with what happened, but a need to repeat it, for reasons that are beyond her understanding. These thoughts, these feelings, are indicative of
someone deeply connected, on a subconscious level, to the 9/11 trauma. Like Keith, she feels the need to pay tribute to those who died as penance for the guilt of surviving.

The psychological changes she experiences afterwards also demonstrate how affected she was by 9/11. Witnessing people die deeply changes the way she looks at life. Her entire frame of reference shifts. DeLillo writes: “Everything seemed to mean something. Their lives were in transition and she looked for signs. Even when she was barely aware of an incident it came to mind later, with meaning attached, in sleepless episodes that lasted minutes or hours, she wasn’t sure” (67). Lianne is desperately trying to find something that will make sense of it all. She is emotionally out of control, and she begins to exhibit signs of a trauma victim.

Lianne is fixated on 9/11. She is constantly anxious and agitated, and she feels like she is not herself. Lianne tells Keith, “I wake up at some point every night. Mind running non-stop. Can’t stop it” (DeLillo 124). She is losing sleep and is unable to stop thinking about what has happened, very similar to the way that 9/11 is dictating Keith’s everyday life. Also like Keith, Lianne does not recognize herself or the way she feels and thinks. She tells Keith that she does not understand her thoughts, nor does she feel like they are hers at all. She states that they are “[t]houghts I can’t identify, thoughts I can’t claim as mine” (DeLillo 125). Her inability to make sense of the world, and to identify her thoughts and feelings as her own, demonstrates Lianne’s affliction.

In addition, we also see Lianne sharing her experience with others:

She tried to follow the sequence of events, seeing him as she spoke, a figure floating in reflected light, Keith in pieces, in small strokes. The words came fast. She recalled things she didn’t know she’d absorbed, the fragment of spangled glass on the lid of his eye, as if sewn there, and how they’d walked to the hospital,
nine or ten blocks, in near deserted streets, in halting steps and deepest silence, and the young man who assisted, a deliveryman, a kid, helping support Keith with one hand and holding a pizza carton with the other. (DeLillo 126-27) Lianne wants others to bear witness to what she went through, much like trauma victims need to tell their stories to others. Also, in telling her story, she starts to remember things that she had blocked out, demonstrating that she was not fully conscious of all the details when the attacks first happened. She wants to tell more of her story, but she stops herself. She “[w]anted to tell them but did not. Tell them everything, say everything. She needed them to listen” (DeLillo 128). This compulsion to make others bear witness to her trauma shows the impact of 9/11. Her behavior, her mental stability, her affect are all changed and complicated.

Trauma, Art, and Music

One of the most obvious ways that DeLillo shows Lianne’s vulnerability and anxiety is through her reaction to art and music. The daughter of an art history professor whose partner is an art dealer, Lianne has a deep admiration for art. Yet, ever since 9/11, everything reminds her of that day. No longer something to enjoy, art has become just one of the many thing she used to love that now reminds her of how unsure and anxious she feels.

Di Prete explains the role art can play with trauma victims: “Art can bring out this transformation: It externalizes what is internal, opens it to public consumption and to witnessing, and brings it back, once shared, as something one can re-appropriate and safely place within the self” (107). Di Prete is commenting on how creating art can help to work through trauma, but this also explains the close connection art has to emotions and how emotions are especially
heightened for trauma victims. Art has the ability to represent what the mind wants to block and to trigger memories.

Lianne first realizes her new perspective on art when she and Martin (her mother’s partner) are looking at artwork in her mother’s home. DeLillo writes: “Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-neck bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to. ‘What do you see?’ he said. She saw what he saw. She saw the towers” (49). Lianne’s mind recreates the traumatizing image, and she imagines it in everything she sees. She cannot escape the images, which unsettles Lianne. Her reaction to her neighbor Elena’s music demonstrates how fragile Lianne’s psyche is.

We are introduced to Elena’s music when Lianne hears it in her apartment:

They lived on the top floor of a redbrick building, four-storied, and often now, these past days, she walked down the stairs and heard a certain kind of music, wailing music, lutes and tambourines and chanting voices sometimes, coming from the apartment on the second floor, the same CD, she thought, over and over, and it was beginning to make her angry…A woman named Elena lived in that apartment. Maybe Elena was Greek, she thought. But the music wasn’t Greek. She was hearing another set of traditions, Middle Eastern, North African, Bedouin songs perhaps of Sufi dances, music located in Islamic tradition, and she thought of knocking on the door and saying something. (DeLillo 67)

The music is not necessarily related to Islam, but to Lianne, the music is foreign, and anything foreign is automatically attached to Islam and terrorists. That someone would even play this type of music angers her because it is reminds her of painful memories of 9/11.
The music persists, and every time she hears it, she becomes increasingly more agitated: “She wanted to knock on the door and say something to Elena. Ask her what the point is. Adopt a posture. This is retaliation in itself. Ask her why she’s playing this particular music at this highly sensitive time” (DeLillo 68). She feels that is Elena forcing her to remember and relive her trauma. To Lianne, playing this type of music is paying tribute to, or in some way showing support for, the “foreigners” who attacked them.

All of Lianne’s anger comes into play when she finally confronts Elena. The conversation between the two of them is revealing:

“What is it? Music, that’s all. I like it. It’s beautiful. It gives me peace. I like it, I play it.”

“Why now? This particular time?”

“Now, later, what’s the difference? It’s music.”

“But why now and why so loud?”

“Nobody ever complained. This is the first time I’m hearing loud. It’s not so loud.”

“It’s loud.”

“It’s music. You want to take it personally, what can I tell you?”

“Of course it’s personal. Anybody would take it personally. Under these circumstances. There are circumstances. You acknowledge this, don’t you?”

“There are no circumstances. It’s music,” she said. “It gives me peace.”

“But why now?”
“The music has nothing to do with now or then or any other time. And nobody ever said it was loud.”

“It’s fucking loud.”

“You must be ultrasensitive, which I would never think from hearing the language you use.”

“The whole city is ultrasensitive right now. Where have you been hiding?”

(DeLillo 119-120).

This conversation shows how personally Lianne is taking the music, thinking Elena has an agenda. Elena insists that it is just music, just something that she likes to listen to. However, to Lianne, the music is a message, a catalyst for flashbacks of memories and feelings that cause her anxiety and pain. Lianne keeps referring to “circumstances,” which reveals the magnitude of her PTSD. She cannot escape the trauma, but instead finds it in everything she sees and hears. What happens after this discussion shows the extent of Lianne’s illness.

After the conversation with Elena, Lianne is even angrier than before. Not only is she angry because of the music, but she is also angry at Elena’s dismissive attitude. Her anger eventually causes a violent reaction. Herman explains: “Because of their difficulty in modulating intense anger, survivors oscillate between uncontrolled expressions of rage and intolerance of aggression in any form” (56). We see this uncontrolled rage soon after Lianne’s first nonproductive exchange with Elena:

She [Lianne] twisted her open hand in Elena’s face, under the left eye, and pushed her back into the entranceway…Lianne mashed the hand into the eye and the woman took a swing at her, a blind right that caught the edge of the door. Lianne knew she was going crazy even as she turned and walked out, slamming the door
behind her and hearing the dog bark over the sound of a solo lute from Turkey or Egypt or Kurdistan. (DeLillo 120)

Even Liane thinks that she is “going crazy.” Her irrational anger is yet another sign of her PTSD.

Awakening a Previous Trauma

Another result of PTSD can be the triggering of a previous trauma. In Lianne’s case, 9/11 triggers the trauma she experienced from the unexpected suicide of her father: “Jack Glenn, her father, did not want to submit to the long course of senile dementia. He made a couple of phone calls from his cabin in northern New Hampshire and then used an old sporting rifle to kill himself” (DeLillo 40). Re-emerging traumas are especially common in those who suffer from vicarious trauma. Kaplan states, “the difficulty of fully distinguishing trauma from vicarious traumas emerges; one can see the way that symptoms of prior traumatic events are triggered by new ones” (2). The triggering of previous traumas contributes vicarious trauma victims’ strong reactions. As Herman explains, “While specific, trauma-related symptoms seem to fade over time, they can be revived, even years after the event, by reminders of the original trauma” (48). Even though Lianne may have recovered from her father’s suicide, 9/11 retriggered the original trauma. And even though the trauma of 9/11 is not similar to the trauma of her father’s suicide, Irene Kacandes notes that “[r]adically different traumas can be experienced as similar by those who have already been traumatized” (168). Even though the suicide of her father was not a collective, historical trauma like 9/11, what she witnessed still triggered the previous trauma.

Herman reiterates her point about awakening old traumas when discussing the example of a traumatized therapist: “Hearing the patient’s trauma story is bound to revive any personal traumatic experiences that the therapist may have suffered in the past. She may also notice
imagery associated with the patient’s story intruding into her own waking fantasies or dreams” (140). Instead of merely hearing Keith’s story, though, she witnesses it herself, and it reactivates the earlier trauma.

For example, Lianne needs to read everything concerning 9/11. While reading responses written about 9/11 by the Alzheimer’s group she facilitates, she again experiences intrusive thoughts about her father: “She read everything they wrote about the attacks. She thought of her father. She saw him coming down an escalator, in an airport maybe” (DeLillo 67). These constant reminders and thoughts of her father and not only intrusive, but persistent. For her, 9/11 and her father are wired together, especially reading about 9/11 from the point of view of Alzheimer’s patients.

Also, when she tells Keith about her trouble sleeping, he tells her that perhaps she should take some medicine. Even he can see how deeply affected she is. Yet her response implies how traumatic the loss of her father was: “I have a history with the things people take. They make me crazier. They make me stupid, make me forget” (DeLillo 125). Here we can see that Lianne’s problems in the past dealing with her father’s death have not been resolved. It makes sense then that 9/11 would retrigger that trauma.

We again see the connection between Lianne’s two traumas during a scene when she thinks of her father while watching television with Keith. Lianne randomly says to Keith, “My father shot himself so I would never have to face the day when he failed to know who I was” (DeLillo 130). Lianne makes this seemingly random statement while watching TV: “They were watching a late-night newscast…as a correspondent in a desolate landscape, Afghanistan or Pakistan, pointed over his shoulder to mountains in the distance…There was stock footage on the screen of fighter planes lifting off the deck of a carrier” (DeLillo 130-31). The fact that they were
watching images connected to the terrorist attacks shows once again how Lianne connects the trauma of 9/11 with the trauma of her father. Every time she is confronted with images connected to 9/11, she reflects on his death. In fact, the loss of her father has become a new focal point in her life once again, and she is confronted by it in other aspects as well.

A prime example of her trauma occurs during her Alzheimer’s group, which triggers her previous anxieties about her father’s affliction and death. It is not clear what originally motivated Lianne to work with this group, since it began before 9/11. There is no indication if facilitating the group was an attempt to aid in her recovery after her father’s death, or if it was a mechanism she used to compulsively repeat the trauma. However, it is clear that after 9/11, regardless of her original motivation, facilitating the group only contributes to furthering her anxiety and traumatic symptoms. As she looks at some of the participants, she cannot help but fear her own predisposition for developing Alzheimer’s: “Lianne herself, bearing her father’s mark, the potential toll of plaque and twisted filaments, had to look at this woman and see the crime of it, the loss of memory, personality and identity, the lapse into eventual protein stupor” (DeLillo 125). Although being a part of this group may once have served as a way for her to work through the trauma of her father’s death, now her participation is harmful because it plays into her fears of suffering from the same disease as her father.

“Falling Man”

Next, let us examine the performance artist “Falling Man,” and his role in Lianne’s suffering. DeLillo writes:

She’d [Lianne] heard of him, a performance artist known as Falling Man. He’d appeared several times in the last week, unannounced, in various parts of the city,
suspended from one or another structure, always upside down, wearing a suit, a
tie and dress shoes. He brought it back, of course, those stark moments in the
burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump. He’d been seen dangling
from a balcony in a hotel atrium and police had escorted him out of a concert hall
and two or three apartment buildings with terraces or accessible rooftops. (33)

Lianne is the only character to encounter the performance artist first-hand, and it disturbs her to
be around him. Since it reminds her of 9/11, seeing “Falling Man” is like having a traumatic
flashback. Freud explains: “dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of
repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he
wakes up in another fright” (13). This is exactly what “Falling Man” does to unsuspecting
onlookers such as Lianne. He brings her back to the disaster, creating a sort of living daydream
that causes her to once again feel terror. Caruth writes: “The returning traumatic dream…is,
purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits”
(Unclaimed Experience 59). The image of “Falling Man” recreates the event against the will of
the witnesses. He does not perform in places where the viewers are willing participants. Instead,
he surprises them and shows up all over the city, in places where people are going about their
daily lives, thus forcing people to watch him whether they want to or not. It is no wonder, then,
that many are disturbed by his performance. He is causing everyone who encounters him,
including Lianne, to have traumatic flashbacks, a key characteristic of PTSD.

Besides the recreation of a post-traumatic flashback, the very concept of falling bodies is
disturbing in its own right. Judith Greenberg comments that “[p]erhaps the most wrenching
image from the attacks is that of the falling bodies and the accompanying realization that people
selected such gruesome fate over remaining in horror” (25-26). Laura Frost adds, “Disturbing as
they are, images of 9/11’s falling bodies have emerged as a significant concern in art and literature…The falling people represent the national trauma of 9/11 in ways that are particularly difficult to understand, mourn, and assimilate” (182-83). It is not surprising that DeLillo includes this image and its artistic recreation as a focal point for the novel. Not only does the “Falling Man” represent the tragedy itself, but he represents the very thing DeLillo is trying to present in his novel: the individuality of trauma. By isolating that one character, DeLillo makes a distinction between a vague number of victims and one specific person.

Through Lianne’s encounters with his performance, “Falling Man” unknowingly reinforces the trauma: “She wished she could believe this was some kind of antic street theater, an absurdist drama that provokes onlookers to share a comic understanding of what is irrational in the great schemes of being or in the next small footstep. This was too near and deep, too personal” (DeLillo 163). This figure forces Lianne to relive the trauma she endured when she watched people jump from the World Trade Center. This painful recreation compels her to re-experience the anxiety of that day: “But why was she standing here watching? Because she saw her husband somewhere near. She saw his friend, the one she’d met, or the other, maybe, or made him up and saw him, in a high window with smoke flowing out. Because she felt compelled, or only helpless, gripping the strap of her shoulder bag” (DeLillo 167). Once again, Lianne is brought back to September 11th and those emotions she felt watching others die, not knowing if her husband was one of them. Lianne is forced to relive her trauma, not through her subconscious via flashbacks and dreams, but instead through the images she encounters in her everyday life. Like a survivor, she is unable to escape the reoccurrence of her terror.

“Falling Man” also reminds her of her father’s suicide. While watching “Falling Man,” Lianne thinks of something that directly relates to the death of her father. DeLillo writes: “She
thought, Died by his own hand” (169). In this instance, she is talking about the people who jumped to their death. They were taking their death into their own hands rather than endure an inevitable death by fire that was engulfing them. Their suicides repeat the trauma of her father’s death. Lianne’s father killed himself before his Alzheimer’s could progress. In this way, he, too, chose his own death, rather than to wait for the inevitable deterioration. Lianne later reveals something that shows the definite connection she makes between “Falling Man” and her father: “Died by his own hand. For nineteen years, since he fired the shot that killed him, she’d [Lianne] said these words to herself periodically, in memoriam” (DeLillo 218). This phrase, “died by his own hand,” is precisely what Lianne previously thought during one of her encounters with “Falling Man.” The reoccurrence of this phrase twice, in relation to the “Falling Man” and to her father, solidifies their connection.

Lianne is dealing with trauma to the same extent that Keith is. The trauma, for Lianne, triggers different aspects of her psyche, which causes her to react in a different way than Keith. However, her reactions and connections to the things she encounters clearly indicates that she is acting and reacting to something in particular. She did more than just see the attacks. She absorbed the events into her psyche, and she is suffering because of it.

Coping and Mourning

Yet, unlike Keith, by the end of the novel, Lianne is coping with the trauma in a much different way. Keith is suffering from melancholia, a perpetual living in the trauma, rather than working through and recovering from it. However, that is not the case for Lianne. Although she struggles, she starts to change in positive ways and attempts to work through the trauma. Eventually, Lianne sees the difference between the two of them when she states, “You [Keith]
were the one in the tower but I was the berserk. Now, damn it, I don’t know” (DeLillo 215).

Here we see that Lianne is acknowledging how she may have had a tougher time in the beginning, but now it is Keith who is struggling. She is beginning to work through it, and he is still stagnant. As Lianne puts it, “She wanted to be safe in the world and he did not” (DeLillo 216). In other words, by the end of the book, Lianne is in mourning, not melancholia.

LaCapra explains the difference between melancholia and mourning when he writes,

Mourning involves a different inflection of performativity: a relation to the past which involves recognizing its difference from the present—simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life…By contrast, to the extent someone is possessed by the past and acting out a repetition compulsion, he or she may be incapable of ethically responsible behavior. Still, with respect to traumatic losses, acting out may well be a necessary condition of working through, at least for victims. Possession by the past may never be fully overcome or transcended, and working through may at best enable some distance or critical perspective that is acquired with extreme difficulty and not achieved once and for all. In some disconcertingly ambivalent form, trauma and one’s (more or less symbolic) repetition of it may even be valorized, notably when leaving it seems to mean betraying lost loved ones who were consumed by it. (70)

In other words, mourning is different than melancholia in that those who are mourning attempt to make sense of their new world. They accept that what happened is in the past, and they look to the future. They no longer put themselves in the position to reenact the past; they take leave of the past and make positive changes. Although those in mourning may still suffer from some post-
traumatic symptoms, what is different between mourning and melancholia is the critical perspective the victim can achieve.

Kali Tal writes: “In contemporary, institutionalized forms of treatment for PTSD, the crucial components of ‘recovery’ are the decision to relinquish anger and to accept the status quo. Making ‘peace’ is learning to accept the world as it is” (145). This form of “recovery” that Tal speaks of is similar to LaCapra’s idea of mourning. In a sense, the only way to recover from trauma is to learn to accept the world as it is, to take control of one’s life, and to learn to look forward, instead of dwelling on the past. By the end of the novel, this is precisely what Lianne is doing.

One of the ways Lianne copes with her trauma productively is revealed in her discussion with her boss about a new job prospect. Her boss tells her that there is a “book detailing a series of interlocking global forces that appeared to converge at an explosive point in time and space that might be said to represent the locus of Boston, New York and Washington on a late-summer morning early in the twenty-first century” (DeLillo 139). She goes on to explain that “[i]t contains a long sort of treatise on plane hijacking. It contains many documents concerning the vulnerability of certain airports. It names Dulles and Logan. It names many things that actually happened or are happening now. Wall Street, Afghanistan, this thing, that thing. Afghanistan is happening” (DeLillo 139). When Lianne hears this, she immediately wants to work on the book, but her boss does not think it would be appropriate for her, considering her circumstances. Although this sudden urge to edit a book about the attacks on 9/11 may seem as though Lianne is still making choices to repeat the trauma, her attitude and reasons speak to the contrary.

Lianne wants to make a positive step towards mourning: “Lianne didn’t care how dense, raveled and intimidating the material might be or how finally unprophetic. This is what she
wanted. She didn’t know she wanted this until Carol mentioned the book, derisively, in passing…The only book Carol mentioned was precisely the one not intended for Lianne and precisely the one that Lianne needed to edit” (DeLillo 139-40). Lianne takes an active role in approaching something that will remind her of 9/11. She thinks, “Stand apart. See things clinically, unemotionally. This is what Martin had told her. Measure the elements. Work the elements together. Learn something from the event. Make yourself equal to it” (DeLillo 140).

By looking at it in this way, Lianne can use this book as a way to move forward in her life. This is a book that reveals facts, figures, and information about 9/11, which will help her take control of her fears and help her make sense of all that she still does not understand.

We also see a turning point for Lianne and her fixation on terrorism and Islam when she goes to pick up her son Justin from his friends’ house. While she is there, Lianne speaks to one of Justin’s friends about watching for more men in the sky: “‘Maybe just maybe. This is what I think. Maybe it’s time for him to disappear. The man whose name we all know…Maybe just maybe it’s time to stop searching the skies, time to stop talking about the man I’m talking about. What do you think? Yes or no?’” (DeLillo 153). Although this passage only shows Lianne questioning whether or not to move on, it is still a step in a healing direction. She is at least acknowledging the fact that it is perhaps time to stop looking to the skies, to stop worrying about what could happen, and to live with less anxiety. Lianne is ready to be “[c]ut free from rage and foreboding. Cut free from nights that sprawl through endless waking chains of self-hell” (DeLillo 182).

Moreover, we also see Lianne coming to terms with the dead, in regards to 9/11 and her father. She finds this peace one day while sitting in church:
It was not something godlike she felt but only a sense of others. Others bring us closer. Church brings us closer. What did she feel here? She felt the dead, hers and unknown others…She felt the dead in the walls, over decades and centuries. There was no dispiriting chill in this. It was a comfort, feeling their presence, the dead she’d loved and all the faceless others who’d filled a thousand churches. They brought intimacy and ease, the human ruins that lie in crypts and vaults or buried in churchyard plots. (DeLillo 233-34)

DeLillo makes sure to note that Lianne does not feel sad or upset when thinking about the dead. Instead, she finds comfort and relief. Lianne makes peace with her losses, makes peace with the memories and faces that have haunted her. By going to church, she finds a way to honor and remember those who died without it affecting her negatively.

Lianne starts to take control of her life, including her fears. She was terrified of getting Alzheimer’s. Now she decides to do something productive to put her fears at rest. She eventually goes to the doctor to find out how her brain is functioning, and finds out that “[s]he was troubled by memory lapses, steeped in family history. She was also fine. Brain normal for age. She was forty-one years old and within the limited protocols of the imaging process, pretty much everything seemed to be unremarkable” (DeLillo 187). Lianne is taking control of her life. All of the things that were troubling her before have now become manageable, and she has found a way to address those issues positively to aid in mourning.

It is not until the very end, however, that Lianne reveals to the reader just how far along she has come, and just how ready she is to move forward with her life. At the end of the novel, we find out that Lianne’s mother, Nina, dies. Even though Nina’s death was not a surprise like her father’s, the loss of a parent can be traumatic for anyone, especially someone in the midst of
recovery from a previous trauma. In Lianne’s case, she was in such a fragile state because of 9/11 and the resurfacing of her father’s suicide that she could have very easily regressed. Yet, Lianne handles her mother’s death well, and it does not hinder her recovery. She continues to make progress, and in the last scene, she has an epiphany. DeLillo writes:

She had normal morphology. Then one late night, undressing, she yanked a clear green T-shirt over her head and it wasn’t sweat she smelled or maybe just a faint trace but not the sour reek of the morning run. It was just her, the body through and through. It was the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat. It wasn’t even something she smelled so much as knew. It was something she’d always known. The child was in it, the girl who wanted to be other people, and obscure things she could not name. It was a small moment, already passing, the kind of moment that is always only seconds from forgetting. She was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue. (236)

For the first time in the novel, Lianne is feeling comfortable in her own skin. All of the fragmented pieces of her psyche have come together in a way that feels whole. She is no longer obsessed with the past, and no longer needs Keith around to make her feel safe in the world. He is something from her past that she was grasping onto in order to have a footing in a world that was slipping away from her. That is no longer the case. Lianne has officially made peace with her trauma and is ready to move on with Justin. It is crucial that she move on without Keith, though, because he is still suffering from melancholia. He is not ready to move forward, and if Lianne stays with him, he will only hold her back. The fact that she recognizes this ultimately shows the clear difference with her reconciliation with 9/11.
In the end, Lianne’s character is just as important as Keith’s in *Falling Man*. Lianne represents the people who were traumatized by witnessing the events of 9/11. Through the inclusion and exploration of Lianne’s struggles with PTSD, it is clear that DeLillo deliberately included her character to complicate our ideas of trauma and victim. Witnessing someone else’s encounter with death and destruction was enough to affect her, causing her to confront many of the same fears and symptoms that Keith and other direct WTC survivors confronted.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a major theme of *Falling Man*. By looking at both Keith and Lianne separately, a new outlook on what it means to be a trauma victim has emerged. DeLillo has demonstrated just how complicated trauma can be, and how much could be at stake for everyone involved. Moreover, by looking at each of the characters separately, and examining their private struggles, a clearer picture of PTSD also emerges.

First, through Keith, DeLillo is able to demonstrate the reality of what happened to those who were fortunate enough to make it out of the World Trade Center. By creating a character and telling the story of a direct victim, DeLillo is able to put a face to the tragedy. Often we hear 9/11 talked about in terms of what it means for the collective whole, but not enough of the personal stories. What happened on 9/11 changed the world. It certainly changed things politically, socially, economically, and culturally. But more than that, it changed the lives of so many people who were actually there. Their personal stories are just as compelling, and just as important.

For Keith, every aspect of his life has been changed, both internally and externally. Internally, Keith has lost his stable conception of himself. He sees his life in double, putting himself in a perpetual limbo between who he was and who he is becoming. Moreover, he is divided between his life with Lianne and his life with Florence. Both his relationship with Florence and his new life as a semi-professional poker player are temporary selves that he has resorted to in an attempt to keep himself constantly revisiting 9/11, thus preventing him from healing. In addition, his physical body has become a living reminder, both to himself and others, of the lives lost. His body no longer belongs to him; instead, it is merely a symbol of the trauma
and a tool to work through it. Both his connections to his inner and outer self are severed, and he is essentially thrown listlessly into the world.

Keith’s inability to move forward with his life is the most poignant aspect of his role in the novel. He is surrounded by a world that does not allow him to get over his experiences. He cannot go without thinking about Rumsey, without thinking about his own confrontation with death, and the witnessing of so many others dying, or fleeing. These images haunt him, and in the end, he chooses a profession that keeps him away from his family and offers him no stability.

As for Lianne, her role proved to be an interesting addition to DeLillo’s exploration of 9/11 victims. As someone who was at home and witnessed only what the media projected, she represents all of us who were also at home, watching those same images. This exploration of Lianne and her struggle with PTSD only further complicates not only what it means to be a trauma victim, but it also expands the idea of how many victims 9/11 created, while calling into question our idea of “reality TV,” and what projecting these images across the world can mean to us. It complicates how we think about what it means to be traumatized.

More specifically, Lianne’s reaction to art and music demonstrates the invasive quality of trauma. Even the things that seem normal, or that we love, can seem sinister. All that we know becomes suspect and our sense of meaning and purpose is skewed. What is known before the trauma no longer holds; everything is up for interpretation. The littlest thing can trigger anxiety.

Lianne’s reaction to the performer “Falling Man” demonstrates how she connects the trauma of 9/11, specifically those who jumped to their death, with the death of her father. This connection only makes coping with the trauma that much more difficult. In addition, “Falling Man” proves the power of the image. By inflicting an image that recreates the scene of 9/11 without the spectator’s consent or knowledge, “Falling Man” reveals how these images resemble
post-traumatic flashbacks. By not knowing when or where these images will appear, DeLillo is able to show us how everything in the world to a trauma victim can result in danger and alarm. Trauma victims live in a heightened sense of anxiety, and images contribute to their stasis and suffering.

Lianne’s ability to cope with the tragedy of 9/11, and to make amends with the death of her father in a healthy way, is the only real promise of healing we see. Not only does Lianne learn to take control of her life and fears, but she also tries to make sense of and move forward from all that she has witnessed and endured. More importantly, Lianne is able to see value in the world again, and is ready to move on with her life without Keith. Keith was a security blanket in an unrecognizable and senseless world. Lianne’s ability to mourn the trauma leaves hope for Keith and countless others who are still suffering, trying to make sense of a suddenly unpredictable world.

Ultimately, this thesis reveals several things. First, exploring the intricate ways both Keith and Lianne suffer and cope with PTSD demonstrates the significance of both characters to the central narrative. Keith can no longer be considered the only trauma survivor of this novel. Instead, both Keith and Lianne are separate individuals who both suffer in their own ways.

Second, by looking at the suffering and coping of Keith and Lianne, this thesis reveals how DeLillo explores the complexity of trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Being traumatized essentially turns their world upside down, leaving them with no anchor and no bearing to make sense of anything, including themselves. Nothing is safe, little is familiar.

Finally, DeLillo makes trauma a key theme of his 9/11 novel and shows just how significant this field is. In terms of 9/11, trauma has been applied holistically, rather than on the intimate, personal level. But DeLillo puts faces and names to the trauma of 9/11. He expands and
complicates what it means to be traumatized, and what it means to be a trauma victim. *Falling Man* contributes significantly to our knowledge and understanding of trauma and PTSD in literature, and it also provides a glimpse into the unique and timely issues that surround the newly-emerging genre of 9/11 literature.
Works Cited


