

“The Howling Space”: 9/11 in the Contemporary American Essay

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The title of this thesis identifies two separate aims. Firstly, it focuses on the contemporary American essay, which is a difficult genre to define. The essay is an elusive form, resistant to generic boundaries, so a thorough investigation is required to delimit its characteristics. The second part of the title refers to the common theme of the essays examined in the thesis. The topic of each of these essays is the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and their aftermath. This choice is supported by the noticeable lack of research about the post-9/11 essays. Although multiple anthologies examine the fiction, poetry, and drama written about 9/11, nonfiction is only briefly mentioned or not present in such books at all. For example, seminal works about post-9/11 literature, such as *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* (2011) by Richard Gray, *Literature after 9/11* (2008), edited by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, and *British and American Representations of 9/11: Literature, Politics, and Media* (2018) by Oana-Celia Gheorghiu, do not delve into the territory of nonfiction at all. Due to this omission, there is a gap in the knowledge base about post-9/11 writing in the United States. Although the term nonfiction covers many different genres, I chose to focus on the essay because it is a defining genre of the United States, following the history of the country. As pointed out by Phillip Lopate in *The Glorious American Essay*, “it is possible to see the dual histories of the country and the literary form as running on parallel tracks, the essay mulling current issues and thereby reflecting the story of the United States in each succeeding period” (ix). Due to the essay’s tendency to follow current events, the first few years following the September 11 terror attacks are the most fruitful when it comes to publishing essays about 9/11. For this reason, the texts I chose to analyze in the thesis were published between 2001 and 2003. The essays are analyzed with the tools of trauma studies and memory studies, as most of them focus on dealing with grief, questions of memorialization, and possibilities of healing from trauma.

Due to the complexities of the essay genre, the first two chapters of the thesis examine its characteristics. As the American essay is largely based on the British tradition, I dedicate the first chapter to a brief presentation of the essay, born in France and viewed differently in many countries

and cultures. Other essay traditions (e.g., the German essay, the French essay) are mentioned succinctly, while the British essay is provided with a more in-depth analysis because it constitutes the basis of the American essay as well. The British essay is the trendsetter for the American essay until the early twentieth century. After the birth of the American nation, many writers used the British model of high society, newspapers, magazines, and writing styles to express themselves in the United States as well. This is observable in the writings of Benjamin Franklin, who was inspired by magazines such as *The Spectator* by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele and the *Tatler* by Richard Steele. While the inspiration for many American writers in this early period is found in the British essay tradition, the Americans slowly define their own identity through these texts.

As observed in Chapter 2, with the twentieth century, the American essay develops a more separate identity. This change is due to manifold reasons. The print industry picked up speed, the invention of cars provided quicker transportation, magazines became widely available to the general public, and less confined to the ivory tower of wealthy educated people. These economic and industrial changes ended the so-called genteel tradition and moved the essay closer to what Virginia Woolf calls the common reader, in this case the average middle-class American. By the 1920s, iconic American magazines such as *The New Yorker* appeared. Phillip Lopate highlights the period between 1945 and 1970 as the golden age of the American essay. This era is politically tumultuous, the United States is defining itself as a global superpower while dealing with conflicts both internally and externally (e.g., the Red Scare, the Cold War, the civil rights movement, the second wave of feminism, etc.). This is a period of change and innovation. Essayists are intentionally trying to change the style and definition of the essay, whose name is associated with the more rigid European, and specifically British style. This period launched the popular personal essay, the protest essay, and the prevalence of the essay in magazines. For this reason, the essay is found in many journalistic publications in the United States. As we approach current times, the personal essay is still the most popular type of essay, defined by the strong presence of the writer. These essays cannot be separated from the author, his presence is a requirement because it aims to provide the reader with the author's own opinions and insight. The essay is prevalent in the 21st century, it shifts and changes with American culture, moving into online spaces and mixed media (e.g., video essays become popular). The essays about 9/11 are most commonly personal essays, a subgenre that still defines the essay today.

As the topic of the essays analyzed in this thesis is 9/11, it is important to provide cultural and literary context. Thus, Chapter 3 focuses on the aftermath of 9/11 in media, entertainment, and the visual arts. This chapter is significant because September 11 is defined by its visual aspects. It happened in one of the biggest cities in the world, it was covered live on television as it unfolded, and amateur photos and videos were available on the internet for anyone to see. Although four separate planes were hijacked on September 11, the most well-known imagery comes from New York due to the magnitude of the attacks, from the two planes hitting the two towers of the World Trade Center. As many artists and scholars pointed out, the fall of the towers is reminiscent of a scene from an action movie, horrible and cinematic at the same time. This sequence of events captured the imagination of most writers and artists who tried to commemorate the terror attack, so the most common memorialization attempts are those that depict the towers or their absence in the New York City skyline. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the way 9/11 is talked about in various artistic and journalistic resources, because the attacks cannot be separated from their visuality. In this chapter, I analyze the image of the towers and their absence, memorialization attempts that also revolve around this void, and the media that oftentimes creates a similar void through censorship. This chapter is vital because both fiction and essays about 9/11 are reliant on this imagery and since the essays analyzed in this thesis are rooted in a historical event, it is important to understand the cultural and historical context of the time.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to a brief overview of post-9/11 literature. I inspect poetry, drama, and prose fiction as well in order to outline the characteristics of what many scholars call “post-9/11 literature.” After the events of September 11, there was an expectation from scholars and writers alike that literature will never be the same. Many believed that 9/11 was a defining moment in American literature because suddenly words seemed inadequate and insignificant to discuss such a terrible tragedy. As Richard Gray explains it in *After the Fall*, “nothing to say became the refrain,” something that every writer echoed after 9/11. Still, they began writing soon after the attacks. At first, short-form writing such as poems and essays appeared, soon followed by plays and novels as well. Scholars view the outpouring of poetry (much of it was written by amateur poets) as a form of therapeutical writing. Many of the first poems simply focused on how the writer was feeling, steering clear of political discourse completely. This tendency was also observable in plays. The first ones only focused on the people of New York who were affected by the terror attacks. Plays were written from the perspectives of firefighters, people who lost their loved ones

in the towers, etc. As more time passed, more plays became political in nature, focusing on the bigger picture.

The novels about 9/11 appeared a few years after the attacks, to varying degrees of success. Although works such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safran Foer and *Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo are popular, they were met with mixed opinions. Many critics claim that fictionalizing the events of 9/11 does not work because it reduces the terror attack to a background event that acts as a catalyst to set the protagonist on a journey. Many of the post-9/11 novels follow this formula. Paul Petrovic distinguishes two waves of novels about 9/11. The first wave is characterized by a protagonist who was affected by 9/11 in some way (e.g., lost a loved one) and tries to deal with the aftermath. The second wave of novels is more experimental and self-aware, focusing on the political landscape and providing space to deconstruct nationalistic ideologies that became prevalent after 9/11.

Finally, Chapter 5 examines the post-9/11 essay, a genre that is missing from the anthologies that discuss literature about the terror attack. While every other genre has room to explore the events of 9/11 in more abstract terms (e.g., through the eyes of a character in fiction and drama, or with metaphoric language in poetry), the essay is rooted in reality. The genre offers the author's introspection and opinions to the reader, so the subject of the essay is discussed concretely. Since the essay is a literary form, there is space for stylistic choices for the pleasure of the reader, but there is no fictional character to channel the writer's thoughts. Although the essay is resistant to definitions and varies from culture to culture, it is still a nonfiction genre, which Lee Gutkind defines as "true stories, told well" in *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*. Due to its tether to current times, it is not surprising that the post-9/11 essay is most prevalent in the first few years after 9/11. The essays analyzed in this thesis were published between 2001 and 2003. In order to limit the corpus, I focused on essays written by American authors only, although there are plenty of texts published all over the world about 9/11. Due to the essay's vague definitions, some of the texts are as short as a few pages, while others are over forty pages in length. The essays are grouped thematically and analyzed with the tools of trauma studies and memory studies. Subchapter 5.1 focuses on a collaborative project titled "Tuesday, and After" in which multiple authors share their thoughts about 9/11. The essays were published in *The New Yorker* on September 24, 2001. They showcase various perspectives, such as those of New Yorkers who were present in the city when the terror attacks took place or had to live with the aftermath (John Updike, Jonathan Franzen,

Denis Johnson, Roger Angell). The collection features an essay by Aharon Appelfeld, an Israeli writer who expresses sympathy and shock that the United States, a paternal liberator figure for the Israeli people, could be attacked so viciously. “Tuesday, and After” also includes essays by immigrants Amitav Ghosh and Rebecca Mead, and an American who was abroad when the attacks took place and followed the news obsessively on TV (Donald Antrim). The best-known essay that was included in the “Tuesday, and After” collection was written by Susan Sontag who harshly criticized the Bush administration’s tactics to justify war. Sontag was attacked publicly for the essay, she was called a traitor and accused of hating her country, even though many of her peers agreed with her opinions. Sontag further explores her views in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, where she uses war photography to examine the way people can interpret a simple fact. Although *Regarding the Pain of Others* is not only about 9/11, I included it in the thesis because Sontag utilizes the way 9/11 was handled in the media to deconstruct how big narratives are created in a country.

Subchapter 5.2 examines “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” by David Foster Wallace and “I Took Pictures” by Marianne Hirsch. These essays focus on the visual aspect of 9/11, on television and in images. While Wallace watches the attacks on TV from Bloomington, Illinois, Hirsch visits Ground Zero and takes pictures, expressing a need to document and memorialize as much as possible. Subchapter 5.3 is dedicated to essays about the jumpers, the people whose deaths were visible outside of the towers. One of the most censored events of 9/11 was the people who either jumped or fell out of the Twin Towers. While these images were broadcast and printed widely the day after 9/11, soon they disappeared for multiple reasons (e.g., shame, horror, etc.). In “The Falling Man,” Tom Junod examines a specific photograph taken by Richard Drew and urges his readers not to change reality and bear witness to what happened on 9/11. In “Leap,” Brian Doyle highlights the humanity of the people whose last moments of life were caught on camera. He removes them from the horror and points out that some held hands and tried to reach for comfort in their last moments. Subchapter 5.4 is dedicated to survivor Adam Mayblum, who worked in the World Trade Center and survived the stressful descent down countless stairs before the buildings collapsed. Mayblum sets out to document his journey to safety, with the goal of memorializing the events that were confined in the tower and not visible from the outside. Subchapter 5.5 showcases essays that dissect language and narrative-building techniques in the wake of 9/11. Writers such as Don DeLillo, Judith Butler, and Joan Didion examine how nationalism and warmongering became

popular in media and politics, while dissenting voices calling for peace were shunned and ridiculed. Don DeLillo's "In the Ruins of the Future" urges readers to build counter-narratives that resist jingoism because he sees the value of the United States in its diversity. DeLillo publishes his essay only a few months after 9/11, so his tone is almost hopeful for the future. However, Joan Didion's *Fixed Ideas* showcases a much bleaker view of current political narratives after 9/11. Didion observes with despair that the language people use to discuss the intricate geopolitical conflicts after September 11 is simplistic and forceful, to the point where even the people who were resistant to such political narratives are starting to forget what was real and what was not. Judith Butler's "Explanation and Exoneration" explores the rise of anti-intellectualism and the shunning of individuals who raise concerns about war and wish for peace. Subchapter 5.6 is a continuation of this topic, but with a more concrete symbol. After 9/11, American flags sprouted everywhere across the country. While the flag stands for many things, after the terror attacks, it became a hostile symbol as well. People who did not put out flags were attacked, migrants flew the flag as protection to show that they were no threat, etc. Katha Pollitt's "Put Out No Flags" and Barbara Kingsolver's "And Our Flag Was Still There" examine this strange relationship with the American flag that followed 9/11. Finally, Subchapter 5.7 contains essays that were written as love letters to New York and the Twin Towers. These essays tend to stay away from political discourse and focus on the city and the World Trade Center. "Lost and Found" by Colson Whitehead explores the way people remember New York's ever-changing streets. He writes the fall of the towers into the process of change in the city, noting that the World Trade Center will always take up space in the memories of New Yorkers. "Turning Point" by Rudolph Chelminski describes the time when highwire artist Philippe Petit crossed a wire between the two towers of the World Trade Center. Chelminski reminds his readers that there was a time when people looked up toward the top of the towers not in terror but in awe, celebrating the incredible feat of the French artist.

To conclude, the American post-9/11 essay follows the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, working as an alternate history that showcases the personal struggles and analysis of the authors. These texts are mostly personal essays, so they do not move away from the popular subgenre. The form of the essay is not particularly versatile, but the themes and topics analyzed encompass mourning, trauma, memorialization, language, political analysis, and media scrutiny. Due to the nonfiction's requirement that the elements of reality be not modified, the post-9/11 essays allow readers to feel the helplessness of onlookers, the trauma and guilt of survivors, and the struggle of

writers to even attempt to understand what took place on the 11th of September, 2001, and what followed it.

Keywords: American essay, 9/11, post-9/11 literature, nonfiction, Don DeLillo, Joan Didion, David Foster Wallace

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