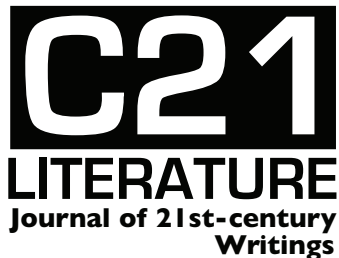




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ARTICLE

Chasing Death's Memory: Representational Space in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

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Jonathan Safran Foer's 2005 novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, approaches the emotional complexities of death and mourning within New York City in wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Set after the death of young Oskar Schell's father in the World Trade Center, the narrative follows Oskar on a quest for an understanding of loss. Situated in the confines of the city, the novel is an urban exploration for self-identity while faced with the unrecoverable loss of both human life and the iconic image of the city: the Twin Towers. Due to the absence of a physical body, Oskar perceives his father's gravesite as a meaningless memorial, and he searches the metropolis for an alternative sense of resolution to his mourning. Foer's narrative proffers an analysis of modern man and the shifting urban territory, where the complexity of place-identity, the individuals interaction with persons and locations, becomes embroiled in the post-9/11 memories and an altered urban fabric. Foer augments the story with photographs, including the iconic 'falling man' image that starkly silhouettes an imminent death against the tower. Oskar blends the falling man into a semblance of his father; in doing so, he places his father's body at a temporal and identifiable place—although now shattered—within the metropolis and moving toward a more conscious engagement with the real, determinedly preserving remembrance of his father. Within this context, I utilize Foer's novel to argue that our post-9/11 world has altered our cognitive understanding of space in the metropolis, demonstrating the continuing shift in the psychological mindset for coping with both urban life and death.

Keywords: New York City; 9/11; Representational space; Urban space; Death

Introduction

The 2011 publication of *The Police Chief* magazine contained an article detailing technological advancements in methods used to identify bodily remains of mass fatalities. Many of these developments emerged as a direct outcome of the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center terrorist attacks and have resulted in significant strides for body identification (Desire 2011: 26). Of the 2,753 victims in the attack, 1,641 bodies (or 60 percent) have been identified through various techniques ('Remains' 2017).¹ The complete destruction of the two towers meant that the people trapped inside became entombed within the rubble—disintegrating within the collapse of the towers. Consequently, the loss of each individual life would be visually reflected through the physical absence from the New York skyline. Not since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has one specific tragedy involving human life seared itself into modern memory. Certainly, the ushering into the post-atomic age came with radical transformations to modernist and postmodernist thought. Now, arguments are being made suggesting the events of September 11th mark the transition into a new era of modern thinking, one that demonstrates a stronger bond to both self-identity and community in the urban environment.

Literary representations of New York have inevitably included the Twin Towers throughout the three decades in which they stood.² With the immensity of the attack and the time needed for the grief to become less painful, it was not until Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) that a novelist attempted to grapple with the emotional and physical aftermath of the disaster. Foer's work uses the destruction of the towers as a framework for exploring spatial representation in the wake of a traumatic experience. The storyline follows nine-year old Oskar

¹ In August 2017, identification of a victim was determined through advanced DNA testing. This discovery was the first since March 2015 ('Remains' 2017).

² For instance, Don DeLillo's *Players* (1977) has been described as portraying 'the World Trade Center as an accomplished spatial project of colossal size that thwarted any natural emotional response, apart from boredom and an impression of useless magnificence' (Neculai 2014: 91). Post-9/11, DeLillo again returns to the towers in the wake of their destruction, beginning the novel *Falling Man* (2007), amidst 'the buckling rumble of the fall' (DeLillo 2007: 3).

Schnell, roughly one year after his father's death in the World Trade Center attack. Oskar's personal development progresses as he searches for an unknown lock that fits a mysterious key in what might appear as a 'disappointing quest' (Codde 2007: 244). He interacts with a multitude of people, including his aged neighbor with whom he travels around 'navigating the altered metropolis' (Golimowska 2016: 27), while suffering from topophobia; he also forms a bond with his unknown grandfather, who poses as a renter in his grandmother's apartment. A recurring aspect of the novel, and the specific focus of my argument, is Oskar's preoccupation with the barrenness of his father's resting place, as the body was never recovered. Oskar's hypersensitivity to his urban environment and his perception of reality do not allow him to forget the empty space of his father's grave, and subsequently, in Oskar's mind, it is devoid of meaning. Through the first half of the novel, one grounding responsibility in Oskar's life is his role in the school production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; significantly, Oskar is assigned the role of Yorick, the skull of the court jester, a bodiless representation of death. His unique part in the play, I contend, is symbolic his father's empty grave. Another key element for my focus is a scrapbook, entitled *Stuff That Happened to Me*, wherein Oskar places the photograph of the Falling Man—photographer Richard Drew's agonizing image of a man forced to jump to his death from the North Tower—and onto this photograph Oskar imposes the identity of his father. Both Yorick's grave and the image of the man falling merge in the text, contrasting the conception of the city and the reality of urban death. During the final moments of the novel, Oskar's mourning is revealed to have evolved through an awareness of a larger community that is grappling with life and death within the city.

The Towers on the Page

An initial literary method by which to best depict this attack on the United States proved tenuous for many authors, as there had been 'no real precedent and thus incorporating them into conventional realist fictional structures represent[ed] a challenge' (Randall 2011: 6). Uncertainty existed for many writers over which way to best present the events (Keeble 2014: 41); as a result, not all readers have enthusiastically welcomed Foer's thematic backdrop of 9/11. Harry Siegel, editor-in-chief of the

former *New York Press*, lambasted Foer as villainous, as a borrower of more than one author's ideas,³ and for concocting a narrative that actually has 'nothing to do with the attack on the towers' (Siegel 2005). Siegel's argument asserts that Foer incorporates the tragedy as a means for promoting the novel's significance, without actually fully addressing the impact of 9/11. A closer analysis of Foer's novel, however, reveals a specific pretext for shifting the towers to the background while foregrounding the individual's task of adjusting to the changing urban environment. As one critic has noted concerning post-9/11 fiction and Foer's narrative, 'the desire to regain control over the metropolis is linked to the hope that it would bring back a lost structure to the characters' lives' (Golimowskia 2016: 25), and thus, shifting the towers out of the expected focus allows us to concentrate on Oskar's present struggle to restructure his life. Following in this vein, and in contrast to Seigel, I use *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to argue that, in the post-9/11 world, the removal of the towers has brought about a transformation in the cognitive comprehension of the metropolis, in many senses initiating the rehumanization of the urban space—demonstrating the continuing shift in our psychological mindset of spatial representation in urban events of life and death.

An architectural loss to New York City's iconic skyline, rebuilding was not a simple matter, for as much as their destruction was lamented the two towers' very existence had often been criticized. In a compilation of essays by various authors entitled *After the World Trade Center* (2002), the author of *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1982), Marshall Berman, describes his first recollections of the destruction of the towers. His observations are helpful in understanding the shifting relationship between human beings and the architecture we have built around us. The towers were constructed, as Berman observes, under the impress of Le Corbusier's '*We must kill the street*'; they became 'the most hated buildings in town [...]. They were overbearing, designed on the scale of monuments [...]. They were expressions of an

³ Siegel demarcates previously published works showing apparent overlap in themes, character resemblances, narrative plots, and symbols. Elsewhere, Sien Uytterschout has extensively written about thematic encroachment between Foer's novel and a Günter Grass novel, *The Tin Drum*, written in 1959 (see Uytterschout 2010).

urbanism that disdained the city and its people. They loomed over Downtown and blotted out the sky' (Berman 2002: 6–7). The loss of life and destruction of the towers, then, ushers both the identity New York City and its architectural cityscape into a new era, an era that can re-humanize the urban space. When architecture is transformed into expressions of identity, Leslie Sklair argues, it is rightly considered iconic architecture (2011: 179), and to a great extent the Twin Towers assumed such stature after their destruction (Sklair 2011: 187). In the post-9/11 aftermath, the immensity of the towers appear to have mythically increased in our memories, as 'their absence has spoken more loudly, and with more resonance, than their presence ever could have' (Sturken 2004: 319). As I will show, it is for such reasons that Foer purposefully avoids directly confronting the tragedy of the towers in his novel in order to put emphasis on a shifting focus of identity within the urban metropolis.

The appellation 'Ground Zero' is permanently attached to the symbolic memory of the towers, generating a cognizance of the space that existed both below and before the World Trade Center construction. In his oft cited essay, 'In the Ruins of the Future,' Don DeLillo highlights a forced regression of space after the attacks: 'The World Trade towers were not only an emblem of advanced technology but a justification, in a sense, for technology's irresistible will to realize in solid form whatever becomes theoretically allowable [...]. Now a small group of men have literally altered our skyline. We have fallen back in time and space' (2001: 38). DeLillo's interplay of words with 'fallen' and 'time and space' codifies the loss of the buildings as regressive; the architectural space has been forcefully devolved. Looking back, Sharon Zukin highlights that the land on which the towers were constructed had been in some cases an unwelcome buyout for the inhabitants once living there in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as 'those people and stores, wharves and markets, [...] were fixtures on the Lower West Side before the World Trade Center pushed them out and away' (2002: 14). The memory of the ground that provided livelihood for those former residents is as important, in Zukin's opinion, as the '25 million square feet of office space' (2002: 17) built out of a capitalist demand of financial firms and real estate development that displaced local businesses and communities.

Defining how I employ the word 'space' is important for laying the groundwork of my argument and stems from the well-known scholars of spatial theory. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre observes that 'space' is a lexicon seldom classified by scholars engaging with the word. I envisage space as part of the social environment, in line with some scholars who consider that 'society is necessarily constructed spatially,' which in turn leads to the conclusion that 'the spatial organization of society—makes a difference to how it works' (Massey 2005: 146). Following the ideas of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, who held 'a conception of space as reciprocally interdependent with society' (Vidler 2001: 66), space is not impartial of its surroundings but is intricately linked with identity, social relations, locations, and memory. Objects, such as structures, generate location and in turn engender spaces, as Heidegger postulates (1971: 154), and therefore space is not merely a conscious-generated conception. Continuing with Lefebvre's line of thought, he postulates that 'space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things (objects and products)' (1992: 83); in this sense, space can be physical, symbolic, and even metaphorical. It should be noted, however, that there is a difference between space and place, and that place identity separates itself from space identity by providing a more concrete locational setting; Foer is using the towers to establish a specific place, whereby I believe Foer, as one critic has noted of urban authors, "broadly distinguishes between an alienating sense of the city as an abstract space and a more attached belonging to particular places" (Thacker 2017: 30), in this case, the Twin Towers. Construing social significance from spatial representations—in a multitude of forms, both physical and metaphorical—often leads to a broader understanding of our environment and social condition. In its complexity, I avoid what is sometimes perceived as the 'naively assumed sense of space as emptiness' (Smith and Katz 2005: 75), and I will explore the interconnections to a larger, and I believe, more fruitful analysis of location and representational space in Foer's novel.

In her major work, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, Zukin examines the social impact of the towers' destruction and how a focus on their reconstruction should be shifted to the urban community. The battle between rebuilding the Twin Towers or creating open space as public memorial represented a

new struggle in cognitive understanding of the metropolis, demonstrating an unsettling mindset for coping with both urban life and death. Such serious questions, Zukin recalls, led to division in the direction to proceed and the '[f]ragmentation became dysfunctional as soon as people started to think of how, when, and in what form the World Trade Center site would be rebuilt' (2009: 151). Elsewhere, Andreas Huyssen (2002), in his powerful essay, 'Twin Memories: Afterimages of Nine/Eleven,' touches on rumors and fears circulating the city in the traumatic aftermath, ruminating that 'we hear talk of the end of the skyscraper, coupled with the renewed fears about the end of urban life and public space' (2003: 160). After 9/11, it became clear that a new type of space was required, a space that opens doors, a space that brings people together.

Approaching Foer's novel with awareness to the backdrop of trauma and emotions surrounding 9/11 helps provide a larger understanding of why the towers are purposefully absent from the text, elucidating how the interplay within urban awareness unfolds so crucially in the novel.⁴ Foer, I argue, goes to specific lengths to keep the literal disappearance of the towers and the tragedy in the background—exactly why Seigel attacks the novel. As such, Foer shifts the narrative emphasis from the postmodern conception of '[t]he modern city, which brought the individual into being, then destroyed individualism' (Lehan 1998: 274), to transcend into a more integrated post-9/11 depiction of the city. Here we might recall Jameson's thought on the postmodern, and the 'waning of affect in postmodern culture' (Jameson 1991: 10), or the loss of feeling and emotion in our individualism brought about by capitalist development—epitomized in the image of the Twin Towers. Moving beyond the postmodern, the narrative should be perceived as an analysis of a new urban identity. While Oskar is merely a nine-year old boy, he conceivably represents the emerging, post-9/11 man. That Oskar appears too old for his age has been both a critique

⁴ Numerous scholars of both memory studies as well as trauma studies have been attracted to Foer's novel. While outside the scope of this article, there are several worthwhile articles that have examined the presence of memory and trauma in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. In addition to the articles cited in this work, see the following: Mitchum Huehls (2008); Elisabeth Siegel (2009); Todd Atchison (2010); Ilka Saal (2011); Brittany Hirth (2014); Audrey Bardizbanian (2014); S. Gwen Le Cor (2015).

against Foer's fiction, but also instils an added depth for complex character analysis. Critics have observed that 'the boy embodies most of the symptoms of trauma, those normally attributed to adults as well as those specific to children' (Uytterschout and Versluys 2008: 229). Contrastingly, one writer for *The Washington Post* has sharply pegged Oskar as an American embodiment: 'The problem is that Oskar is less a fully developed character than an obvious and cringe-worthy stand-in for America [...]. His quest, with its lonely key and missing lock, is [a] blunt metaphor for America's collective search for meaning in the aftermath of 9/11' (Suderman 2012). That Foer chooses an adolescent for the lead protagonist is significant for emerging post-post-modernist⁵ literature. The absence or death of children in postmodernist literature and movies of the 1980s through present day highlights the loss of forward thinking positiveness in postmodern thought. Indeed, in Amir Eshel's opinion, '[t]he figure of the threatened child reveals a sense that the catastrophes of the twentieth century will re-emerge in the twenty-first century with a yet-unknown destructive thrust' (2013: 233). An attribute of post-postmodernist literature, one that I see as key to Foer's narrative on the irrevocably altered 21 st Century, 'is the recognition that the world as we perceive it is constructed by a complex interweaving of representations and the need to write and live one's way out of representation and into something more real' (McLaughlin 2012: 218). The narrative shows us how Oskar moves from the unreal world of his imaginations into one of comprehension of the real. Ultimately, Oskar's mental state at the end of the novel leaves him more secure within his post 9/11 urban situation and he has demonstrated an ability to shift from the environment of his past and to come to terms with the memory of how his father died.

Uniquely, Foer invokes a visual element to compliment the narrative with the inclusion of multiple photographs, remarking in an interview that "[w]hen we think

⁵ I use this term with reference to Jeffrey Nealon's explanation that, "post-postmodernism" is a preferred term for suggesting just such a super-postmodernism, hyper-postmodernism, or maybe a "late postmodernism," as opposed to the overcoming or rendering obsolete of postmodernism that would be implied by a phrase like "after postmodernism" (2012: x). It seems relatively accepted now that the period labeled 'postmodern' has elapsed, as Pansy Duncan demonstrates in the leading sentence of a 2014 *PMLA* article, by pondering, 'What was postmodernism?' (2014: 204).

of those events [of 9/11], we remember certain images, planes going into the buildings, people falling, the towers collapsing. [...] I really wanted to explicitly look at those things [...], not only through the writing [...] but also through these images" (Mudge 2015). By inserting into the novel a variety of images, Foer appropriates 'photographs of cats and birds' as softened representations 'for those of falling people' (Baelo-Allué 2011: 190). Particularly harrowing is the inclusion of the Falling Man image, which became the subject of a documentary entitled *9/11: The Falling Man*, based on Tom Junod's September 2003, *Esquire* article. Speaking in the documentary, Junod considers the photo of the Falling Man to be a symbolic embodiment 'that really stood as the tomb of the unknown [...] for that day. [...]. The image didn't insult those who died; rather, it was a fitting and just memorial to them' (Singer 2006). In the *Esquire* article, Junod has more specifically contrasted the image with its architectural backdrop: 'he is the essential element in the creation of a new flag, a banner composed entirely of steel bars shining in the sun' (2003: 178). In the wake of the tragedy, the space where the towers once stood was quickly transformed. 'The buildings were not buildings anymore,' observes one critic, 'and the place where they fell had become a blank slate for the United States. Among the ruins now, an unscripted experiment in American life had gotten under way' (Langewiesche 2010: 11). American life had abruptly shifted to an unexpected direction. Something irreversible—even with the possible reconstruction of the towers—had transpired. The photographic element of the novel, then, attempts to expand beyond that which a narrative is equipped to provide. Others have noted 'Foer's selection and sequencing of word and image purposefully creates a space in which readers are invited to construct their own interpretive meaning; meaning made with respect to both the narrative context and the context which the narrative has been written out of and into: New York on 11 September 2001' (Watkins 2012: 11). Additionally, Kathryn Milun argues in *Pathologies of Modern Space*, the novel format has struggled to encompass the rapid developments in everyday life of the modern city. Diversifying the medium allows Foer to expand his narrative to enhance what can be considered 'the aesthetic task of describing urban experience' (Milun 2007: 11). With the shift in everyday life brought about by the transforming events of September 11th, the image of the falling

man becomes directly linked for readers with both a time and a place, a concrete geographical tag that is impossible to misconstrue with any other location on earth.

Yorick and the Open Grave

Not coincidentally, one of the photos within the novel includes an image of Laurence Olivier, in his 1948 role as Hamlet, staring intently at the skull of Yorick while in a graveyard. Hamlet is looking at death. Likewise, as Oskar stares at the falling man, he knows he is visualizing the immanency of death. The photo of Olivier intently staring at the skull is juxtaposed with Oskar's intense examination of the falling man, and Oskar goes so far as to enlarge the picture to get closer to the image of death. Both are holding the signs of death in their hands, one a skull, the other an image of a man seconds away from death. In what becomes a crucial referent in the novel, Oskar's role in the school play—as the skull of Yorick—serves briefly to transpose Oskar into a similar state of his deceased father. To accept the role of Yorick, Oskar's teacher encourages him by explaining, 'It'll be terrific. [...] the costume crew will create some sort of a papier-mâché skull for you to wear over your head. It'll really give the illusion that you don't have a body' (Foer 2005: 142). Assuming the theatrical role of an absent body correlates with the absence of his father's body in the destruction of the towers. This acting part then becomes a pivotal moment for Oskar, as his non-existent role as Yorick's skull relegates Oskar to the position of living while simultaneously masked by a bodiless state of death.

Before we examine the events of the play in more detail, a little background is needed concerning Oskar's obsession with graves. Even with the passing of more than a year, Oskar cannot accept the unfilled state of his father's coffin. Multiple times throughout the novel, Oskar considers the empty space in the ground and he becomes obsessed with burial methods. One of Oskar's first whimsical inventions mentioned early in the novel concerns the extensive geographic space required for burying people. The following scene epitomizes how Oskar's place-identity—or the conglomeration of places, experiences, and people that continually influence him—is directly linked to his environmental past,⁶ demonstrating how a "person's actual

⁶ Here I draw from the work of Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff (1983) and their important definition for self- and place-identity.

experience is modified by the cognitive process of memory and interpretation and such others as fantasy and imagination" (Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff 1983: 62). With this in mind, we perceive that Oskar's whimsy indirectly recalls the simultaneous disappearance of his father and the towers, as he invents a method by which the dead and modern architecture are joined and placed underground. Oskar muses:

Isn't it so weird how the number of dead people is increasing even though the earth stays the same size, so that one day there isn't going to be room to bury anyone anymore? [...]. So what about skyscrapers for dead people that were built down? They could be underneath the skyscrapers for living people that are built up. You could bury people one hundred floors down, and a whole dead world could be underneath the living one. (Foer 2005: 3)

The scene of the collapsing towers repeatedly played on media channels is recalled here with the conception of a 100-story skyscraper built underground. The rapid rate at which the towers fell—roughly 20 seconds, slightly slower than free fall—gives the impression they simply vanished directly into the ground. Oskar also holds a serious phobia concerning how he will be entombed for the underworld. This fear is demonstrated through his aversion of subways as well as his panic attack at the thought of being buried underground. At one point, Oskar anxiously shouts to his mother, 'I need a mausoleum!' followed more calmly by, 'I don't need anything fancy, Mom. Just something above ground' (Foer 2005: 169–70). Oskar's fear is connected with the irreversibility of death, and the 'graveyard' scene in *Hamlet* causes him to contemplate the permanence of death. For Oskar, the thought of his body eventually being buried in the ground results in painful consciousness of his father's physical body being destroyed and obliterated in the towers.

The *Hamlet* graveyard scene and the Falling Man photo conjoin Oskar's trauma in the post-9/11 environment just as the locational setting of the two photos contrast the metropolis and the graveyard. The photograph of Hamlet holding Yorick's skull is antithetical to the image of the unknown falling man, suspended in air next to the tower in 'the act of death' (Birdsall 2015: 48), in that Yorick, we presume,

was given a proper burial and is 'an individualized skull, the recognizable remains of someone known and loved' (Holderness 2007: 226). The two photos also emphasize the individual's insignificance within both geographical realms: the prominence of the tower and the subterranean, hidden realm of the grave. Yorick's skull assimilates '[t]he issue of time and its relationship to memory' (Hammersmith 1978: 597) and thus emphasizes the symbolism of the physical that Oskar associates with his father's grave. Hamlet, while looking at the skull, is recalling his past experience with Yorick; likewise, Oskar, by holding onto and possessing what might be the last photograph of his father, is attempting to retain a moment in time before his entire self-identity is altered. Time and memory develop into greater subconscious motivators for Oskar's gradual development beyond his trauma. By the time the play is ready for performance, twelve weeks have passed since he undertook his quest of seeking the unknown lock by exploring the very city that swallowed his father. On the night of the third production, Oskar commences his resurrection, observing, while wearing the skull mask with Hamlet looking down on him, that '[m]aybe it was because of everything that had happened in those twelve weeks. [...] I just couldn't be dead any longer' (Foer 2005: 145). Oskar's contemplation over his role as the non-character of Yorick draws him out of his preoccupation with death, and propels him toward the final undertaking of bringing significance to his father's grave. By incorporating the Shakespearian tragedy, Foer utilizes what I. A. Richards believed true of this theatrical genre: it is "the form under which the mind may most clearly and freely contemplate the human situation, its issues unclouded, its possibilities revealed" (Wallace 2016: 1496). The photo of Hamlet holding Yorick's skull in the graveyard and the image of the falling man within the urban environment are not inconsequential, as the setting for each image overlaps in the presence of death.

Identifiable Towers, Unidentifiable People

Due to the catastrophic level of destruction of the Towers, many of the bodies were never recovered or identified. It is as if '[a] whole part of Manhattan had been turned into a cemetery, but a cemetery without identifiable bodies and without graves—a death zone' (Huyssen 2003: 158). The profitable real estate of downtown Manhattan became transformed into the unimaginable: an open tomb. The symbolic and well-

known appellation, 'Ground Zero', emphasizes the shifted perspective from the towers reigning high above the city to the earth under which they once stood. The image of the towers, more often than not, overshadowed the ground upon which they were built, and there is the need 'to remember that the skyline's lofty peaks derive from the strength of the lowly ground' (Boyer 2002: 120). Eric Darton, in his updated *Divided We Stand: A Biography of the World Trade Center*, has emphasized the ground on which the Towers were built by recalling the former buildings, such as the famous Radio Row warehouse district, that previously stood on that specific plot (see Darton 2011: 141, 162). The ground is the crucial and often overlooked foundation for the architectural capacity of a city.

By blending the falling man into a semblance of his father, Oskar is able to visualize his father's body at a temporal and identifiable place—although now shattered—within the metropolis. While consciously preserving remembrance of his father, Oskar laments that his father 'died the most horrible death that anyone ever could invent' (Foer 2005: 201), and therefore Oskar views his own suffering to be beyond curable. Even though he cannot positively identify the falling man as his father, knowing the location of his father's body in reference to the physicality of the towers is crucial for his comprehension of the events. At one point, Oskar reveals how preoccupied he has become, not only with the manner by which his father perished, but also the location:

If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn't have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors, which happened to some people, and I wouldn't have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building, which I saw a video of one person doing [...], or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute, like some of the people who were in Windows on the World actually did. There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his. (Foer 2005: 256)

It is for this need that Oskar attempts to suppress his anxiety by latching onto the image of the man falling alongside the tower. The spatiotemporal recognition provides Oskar the means to differentiate his father and his father's death from the

other individuals who perished in the attack. As Heidegger posits in 'Building Dwelling Thinking,' space is generated from place (see Casey 1997: 275), and the façade of the tower in the photograph represents a spatial location onto which Oskar can grasp. Upset over his inability to satisfactorily determine how his father died, Oskar vents, saying, '[i]t makes me incredibly angry that people all over the world can know things that I can't, because it happened *here*, and happened to *me*, so shouldn't it be *mine*?' (Foer 2005: 256). Location (*here*) and connection (*me, mine*) cause Oskar to internalize the events without realizing that it is far larger than his personal sphere. As the novel progresses, this sense of being the only victim of the events decreases, as he begins to see the impact on the larger community around him.

In one of the novel's most indelible moments, Oskar's Grandmother sits watching the news coverage on the destruction of the towers. As she watches, the contrast between the inanimate buildings and the innocent victims of the attack are starkly displayed. She woefully observes the 'Planes going into buildings. Bodies falling. Planes going into buildings. People covered in gray dust. People waving shirts out of high windows. Planes going into buildings. Bodies falling. Buildings falling' (Foer 2005: 230). The repetition occurs several times in this section of the text, but placing the phrases of 'bodies falling' and 'buildings falling' sequentially suggests the dehumanizing impress of the buildings: identifiable towers, unidentifiable people. The passage illustrates a dichotomized spatial movement of 'into' and 'out of' buildings, with the reoccurring images serving as a 'written transcript' (Gleich 2014: 170) of the media's propensity for repetition. Additionally, Foer's phrasing reveals the towers for what some believed they truly were. In *The Edifice Complex: The Architecture of Power*, Deyan Sudjic (2005: 398) recalls that the towers 'were described as pieces of minimal sculpture, inflated to an absurdly monstrous scale. They were said to be dehumanizing, because they reduced the individual to visual insignificance.' And indeed, in the final moments, the towers seemed to temper the value of the human life of those who were stranded in the upper floors, as they were too distant to be individualized and identified: 'They are made puny by the backdrop of the towers, which loom like colossi' (Kroes, Orvell & Nadel 2011: 6). Foer's depiction emphasizes the lost identity of the people trapped inside, waving shirts from high above, or staggering away

from the buildings, covered in the dust of destruction. In both situations, identity is masked by the sheer architectural magnitude—both standing and collapsing—of the towers.

The Grave as Representable Space

Despite Oskar's efforts to come closer to his father with the search for the lock, it is not the lock and key that ultimately initiate the closure for his grief. Instead, it is the definable space of the coffin: remaining empty it is therefore culturally transgressing. The vacuity of the coffin becomes a pivot point in the novel, around which Oskar cannot transcend until the complicated condition of its emptiness is addressed. Therefore, filling the coffin becomes the catalyst for generating traumatic relief. His father's grave is meaningless, incapable of being a representative space due to its emptiness, and illustrating the 'active role of objects and spaces in anxiety and phobia' (Vidler 2001: 13). Spaces are attributed with powerful significance, as Lefebvre evinces, and we attempt to categorize and delineate meaning for each definable space (1992: 107). For Oskar, this particular space is only definable as nothingness until it becomes occupied by something. It is no surprise then that after completing the mission of finding the lock for the strange key that Oskar turns his focus to the empty grave and engages in the taboo action of digging up the coffin. Clearly, for Oskar, the empty space is inextricably linked with the destruction of the towers and the inability to claim a body from the destruction. He forcefully voices these beliefs to his mother when she suggests, if he were to die, he could be buried next to his father: 'Dad isn't even there!' he shouts, 'His body was destroyed. [...] I don't understand why everyone pretends he's there. [...] It's just an empty box. [...] Why would I want to spend eternity next to an empty box?' (Foer 2005: 169). Oskar's trauma over his father's absent body belies how families had to deal with the physical and emotional loss of their loved ones.

What Oskar struggles to come to terms with is the reality of our age: 'It is one of the ongoing shocks of modernity that bodies can be simply obliterated through modern technological violence, that they can be vaporized, leaving nothing behind' (Sturken 2004: 313). Regardless of his mother's effort to delineate the grave as signifier for the father's 'memory', the emptiness of the space is more momentous in

Oskar's mind. After uncovering the coffin, Oskar admits, 'I was surprised that Dad wasn't there. In my brain I knew he wouldn't be, obviously, but I guess my heart believed something else. Or maybe I was surprised by how incredibly empty it was. I felt like I was looking into the dictionary definition of emptiness' (Foer 2005: 321). This gaping emptiness must, Oskar believes, be eradicated through pouring into the coffin's space some form of meaning.

Symbolically filling the empty coffin in order to transpose representational meaning to the space provides Oskar the culturally imbued importance of the gravesite for which he is longing. The grave can be thus transformed into 'Representational space,' which Lefebvre claims 'is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time. [...] it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic' (1992: 42). Even the graveyard, Lefebvre posits, can be reconstructed in space and time to achieve a transformation. In Foer's narrative, due to the unrecovered human remains, Oskar and his grandfather devise a plan to deposit personal items into the empty coffin. Pointedly, the grandfather determines to deposit within the coffin the unsent letters he wrote his son over the course of several decades. The grave is a representational space, and filling it with the letters transforms the emptiness—physically and symbolically—through the unspoken, written words.

The novel's penultimate scene of filling the coffin parallels the reconstruction plans for Ground Zero. The public discussion emphasized the need to best represent those who perished while also considering rebuilding, or leaving the location empty as a memorial to those lost. As Sudjic summarizes, the architects questioned their approach to possible reconstruction of these 'hopelessly outmoded [towers] that created a monoculture of office space cut off from the surrounding streets' while simultaneously being faced with the harsh 'fact that this site is [now] a mass grave' (2005: 412). To rebuild was the final decision and, just as Oskar ponders the particular contents with which to fill his father's grave, the spacial significance behind the reconstruction for ground zero was of paramount concern. Ground Zero was occasionally viewed as needing to be filled to heal the empty space—in both the ground and the

skyline. News titles such as, 'New Designs Fill In the Remaining Blanks at Ground Zero' (Post 2006) discuss the designs for the space. Additionally, urban anthropologist Elizabeth Greenspan has observed in her research on Ground Zero that it is "really important to people to have a space that's filled" (Hobson 2013). Perhaps most fitting for my argument is Marita Sturken's appraisal of the architectural plans: 'one can read in the numerous designs proposed for the site an almost obsessive desire to fill it up, to imagine it as something other than it is, a wound in the cityscape' (2004: 320). As Oskar and his grandfather full in the empty grave they soothe their pain, allowing them to move on to the next stage of their emotional recovery.

Stuff that Happened to 'Us'

The final scene of the novel reveals that Oskar has come to a larger understanding of his father's death within the context of the city. Realizing that he cannot know for sure that the photograph of the man is his father, the image comes to symbolize a more significant spectrum of human identity. Indeed, in the final moments of the novel, Oskar finds the picture within *Stuff That Happened to Me* and displays an altered conceptualization concerning its significance: 'I found the pictures of the falling body. Was it Dad? Maybe. Whoever it was, it was somebody' (Foer 2005: 325). The 'somebody' forces an emphasis on humanity, not revealing identity but rather value in existence. Immediately after his observation, Oskar rips the pages out of *Stuff That Happened to Me*, thereby further freeing the image from his self-obsessed memories and allowing it to represent its broader and more expansive impact. In a final act, Oskar reverses several images of the falling man—and for a last time imposes the identity of his father—so that he is no longer falling down, but falling up, and he says that 'if I'd had more pictures, he would've flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would've poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of' (Foer 2005: 325). Oskar retraces his father's steps all the way back to his bedside the night before the disaster and the novel ends invoking an impression of impregnability in a prelapsarian condition, with the final line, 'We would have been safe' (Foer 2005: 326). As readers, we are left with a post-postmodern shift in perspective for the future; the collective "we" moves us away from architecturally

defined identity and toward a community and human-based connection within the urban environment.

The kaleidoscope reversal of the Falling Man image connotes the sense of the man falling away from his grave. The final line of the novel and the subsequent photographic array envisions an architectural utopia, to borrow from Ernst Bloch, as the photographs transform the tower into a form of 'wishful architecture' through a media form (see Bloch 1995: 709), thereby reversing the disaster, if only in fanciful thinking. The narrative encourages a shift away from a focus on the architecture of the city and perceiving cities as vast voids of unknowable humans. Tom Junod, who in 2003 wrote about the identity of the Falling Man, returned to the image again in 2016; he had this to say concerning the growing symbolism of the image: 'the Falling Man is falling through more than the blank blue sky. He is falling through the vast spaces of memory and picking up speed' (Junod 2016). Foer, like Junod, recognized the power of this striking image and has made the image a centerpiece to his narrative on urban identity for all individuals. Overall, we can surmise that while the towers may be absent from the narrative, it is precisely because the towers had removed human identity through their massive architectural prowess that Foer seems intent on focusing more on the post-9/11 sense of identity and representational space for society. As Jean-Paul Sartre noted when observing American cities, 'an [American] city is a moving landscape for its inhabitants' (1962: 117), and for the populace of the American city, the city represents future possibilities. Sartre further muses that 'what [Americans] like in the city is everything it has not yet become and everything it can be' (1962: 119). An indirect message of *Incredibly Loud and Extremely Close* imbues the sense that the reconstruction of Ground Zero needed to be filled with significance, with buildings that encourage meaningful interaction between individuals while simultaneously providing a gravesite to those departed.

With the completion of the One World Trade Center in 2013, the effort to move on continues, without forgetting the events of 9/11. The absence of the Twin Towers and their architectural connection with the loss of human life, however, is still very much present in our memories. Nearing the end of the construction period, three base jumpers were arrested for vandalizing One World Trade Center, jumping off the top of the 104-story building for purposes of enjoyment

in September 2013. On August 11, 2015, they were fined and sentenced to community service. The presiding judge, Juan Merchan, made this singular remark: 'These defendants tarnished the building [...] and sullied the memories of those who jumped on 9/11, not for sport but because they had to [jump]' ('World Trade' 2015). Through a conscious effort to focus on a human aspect of urban design, the new architectural space of One World Trade Center represents a significantly more human embodiment, as many who died were never recovered and are now symbolically buried under the foundation of the new structure. Jumping 'off' the building, as did the base jumpers, belittles the 'bodies falling' out of the building. Many who plunged to their death that fateful day are, like the falling man, photographically memorialized against the backdrop of the buildings that had become so elemental to New York architectural identity. The image of the man that Foer has incorporated into his novel is '[f]rozen and falling—eternally caught in a Gorgon-induced terror—the figure languishes and is unable to be saved, though saved forever [in the photograph]' (Mauro 2011: 587). By contrasting the falling man with the image of Hamlet holding Yorick's skull, we come to realize that both images represent the grave. With the image of the falling man, we can better understand—without Foer directly addressing the absence of the towers—that our post-9/11 urban space has been irrevocably altered. As such, Foer transforms this frozen image and reorients our association with the unknown man and the tower through the indirect narrative of the towers and the direct narrative of young Oskar within New York City.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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