

**Trauma Transfer & the Incapability of
Language in Jonathan Safran Foer's
*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close***

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Abstract

This paper explores how the traumatic experience of 9/11 is featured in post-9/11 fiction by focusing on Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. American post-9/11 authors have often been criticized for their focus on the domestic, mostly ignoring the global intricacies that 9/11 has spawned. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* engages the domestic by chronicling the life of young Oskar Schell in post-9/11 New York City and actively links his traumatic experiences with those of his grandparents, crossing generational and national boundaries, questioning conceived notions of victimhood and empathy. This strategy of transferring trauma is shown to be ineffective in aiding the characters in their quests to cope with their individual traumas, but when considered in conjunction with Foer's distinct heterogeneous compositional style, could potentially help the reader with processing (9/11) trauma.

I. Introduction

On 11 September 2001, Al-Qaida terrorists hijacked four American airliners mid-flight and set out for a collision course with several targets in New York City and Washington D.C. One airplane was flown into the Pentagon, America's headquarters for national defense, resulting in a death toll of over 180. A second plane was headed for the United States Capitol, home of the United States congress, but did not reach its target when the passengers revolted against the attackers and caused the plane to crash into a field in Pennsylvania, at the cost of all lives of those on board. Although these attacks were horrifying, it were the devastating results of two other captured airliners' flights that went on to define the September 11 attacks visually and psychologically. Within twenty minutes of one another, American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175 swooped low over Manhattan in broad daylight and crashed into the two towers of the World Trade Center in the heart of New York, reducing the buildings and their surroundings in a smoldering wasteland covered in ash, killing nearly three thousand people. Destructive as the attacks on the towers were, the true effects of the September 11 attacks stretched far beyond the immediate horrible results. As a matter of fact, the impact 9/11 had on American and western culture and politics can hardly be overstated. The attacks are arguably the most significant historical events of the twenty-first century, with the images and video footage of the destruction, desolation and despair firmly lodged into collective memory and the cultural and military aftermaths still appearing in the news daily more than a decade later.

In the wake of the traumatic day, 9/11 and its implications dominated American news, politics and conversation. The attacks exposed how the supposedly impregnable fortress America was not only vulnerable to physical violence, but also deeply “hated, and hated intelligibly” (Martin Amis 8) by those outside of its borders. After the attacks, contemplating such realizations and attempting to process what had happened and its possible consequences were the primary occupations of many writers. During these months, many novelists “were playing for time”, Amis noted, choosing “to write some journalism” instead of fiction (12). Many prominent American writers felt that “the tools of their trade seem[ed] absurd” (Richard Gray 1) and insufficient to capture the destruction and tragedy of what had occurred. If a novel should be considered “a work of the imagination”, a novel about 9/11 was an impossibility, for “the imagination, that day, was ... fully commandeered, and to no purpose” (Amis 11-12). Still, dozens of works of fiction that deal either explicitly or implicitly with the September 11 attacks and its results have been published in the years following 2001. While some of such novels were critically acclaimed, virtually all of them have been heavily debated, discussed and subject to heightened scrutiny. The significance as well as the lingering horrific memories of 9/11 make the writing and researching of post-9/11 novels a sensitive undertaking.

Catherine Morley observes that many critics have been vocal in condemning the approach of American authors to writing after 11 September 2011. She summarizes Richard Gray’s and Michael Rothberg’s main points of criticism to be that “much American writing produced in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 has been immersed in the domestic sphere” (717), “[failing] to deal with the outward movement of American power, the ways in which American foreign policy is entangled in global networks” (718). Similarly, Aaron DeRosa describes how Gray “rejects the national impulse ... in order to promote a more inclusive narrative of 9/11” and adds how Kristiaan Versluys thinks “traumatic healing comes when we recognize our poethic responsibility toward the Other” (617). In other words, American authors are supposedly too stubbornly gazing inwards, whereas 9/11 and its aftermath require a global approach. While such observations are quite astute, it is vital to realize that while fiction certainly has the power to influence thinking, one should avoid regarding “fiction [as] no more than a political tool” (Morley 720). Morley identifies a trend at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century: writers like Adam Haslett and Jonathan Franzen have published “broader, more ambitious state-of-the-nation novels, explicitly addressing the United States’ relationship with the Middle East

and the impact of globalization” (717). Although this observation might indicate that American authors are moving towards creating a broader, more outward type of American literature, Morley emphasizes that the domestic has always been the main ingredient of great American literature, even though the global has never actually been denied or ignored. Consequently, the critics’ equivocal call for adopting a more global approach to dealing with 9/11 and its consequences, in fact means they are “asking writers to write about what they don’t really know” (720).

In this context, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is an intriguing post-9/11 novel, as it not only deals with the twenty-first century domestic American trauma of 9/11 but engages with older and, in a sense more established, non-American traumatic events as well. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is a novel consisting of three largely separate narratives, each contained by their own chapters and told with the distinct voice of their respective protagonist. The primary story is the narrative of nine-year-old Oskar, which provides a first-person account of Oskar describing his journeys through New York City in search of the lock that goes with a key he found on top of his father’s old closet. Oskar’s father died during the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Oskar is determined to discover the meaning and purpose of the key as he embarks on a quest that takes him to every corner of the city. It’s an absurd but endearing effort, seeing as the only clue Oskar has about the key is that he found it in an envelope marked with the word “Black”, which prompts him to look up every New York resident with the surname Black to question them about their knowledge of either the key, the lock or his father. The other two narrators of the novel are Oskar’s grandparents, Grandfather and Grandmother Schell, both survivors of the Dresden bombing during the second World War. The chapters in which the grandparents tell their stories are interlaced with those of Oskar, and consist of letters, both sent and unsent, revealing their traumatic experiences during the bombing and how their lives have been inescapably tainted by it ever since.

While the main focus lies on the personal traumatic experience of Oskar having lost his father in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and his attempts to cope with it, the novel actively connects his experiences with the traumas of others—mostly those of his grandparents. By invoking the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima during World War II, Foer places 9/11 in a larger context. While the novel does not deal directly with the issues of globalization in terms of politics, technology and power relations, it certainly does have an outward gaze that engages the ideas of

sharing and transferring trauma and global identity and community. Keeping Morley's analysis of post-9/11 novels in mind, the novel, published in 2005, could be considered firmly grounded in the American domestic while already attempting to actively maintain a global perspective.

Furthermore, if asking authors to write about 9/11 in a global sense indeed means they would have to "write about what they don't really know" (Morley 720), the invocation of the Dresden and Hiroshima bombings might prove useful. After all, the writer's, the reader's and the critic's ability to grasp the painful essence of those events likely exceed our ability to do the same with 9/11.

II. Trauma Transfer

While the three narrators are clearly linked to each other by blood, the more poignant connection Foer establishes between them is that they have all been severely traumatized in the past and (as is the case with traumatized individuals) are affected by it every day since. However, the problem of coping with trauma is more complex than merely continuously remembering or reliving the past. As Cathy Caruth puts it, "trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also the continual leaving of its site" (qtd. in S. Todd Atchison 360). The paradoxical nature of trauma is precisely what makes it so difficult for the victim to cope with. The "victim's memory fails to register the event at the moment of its occurrence", rendering a true understanding of what has happened to them utterly impossible. The result is that trauma "at the same time resists integration into and erasure from the mind" (Uytterschout & Versluys 217). At the very core of dealing with trauma, lies that complete access to the experience is impossible for the victim, which is problematic because for a person to deal with trauma, access to the event is required (219).

Saal identifies a trend in US literature post-9/11 to read "current trauma through the lens of a previous one," a narrative strategy she refers to as "trauma transfer" (454). In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Foer uses this strategy by evoking the bombing of Dresden as well as the nuclear attack on Hiroshima during World War II, consciously drawing parallels between those destructive events and those of 9/11. Whereas the bombing of Dresden is an integral part of the stories of Grandfather and Grandmother, the atomic attack on Hiroshima becomes relevant when Oskar gives a talk to his class about the event (Jonathan Safran Foer 187-190). Foer's

decision to explicitly allude to both of these tragedies in his 9/11 novel is poignant. The term used to refer to the area where the World Trade Center was destroyed during the attacks, was the same one used to describe Hiroshima when it was bombed. Walter Davis observes that the term ground-zero was coined to indicate the area where the first atomic bomb was detonated in New Mexico, before it was applied to the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which were both utterly destroyed by nuclear bombs in 1945 (127). While the discussion whether the adoption of that specific designator was suitable to describe the affected part of New York City after 9/11 is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that the connection between 9/11 and Hiroshima was part of the general post-9/11 discourse and not just the literary. In that sense, trauma transfer can be regarded as not just a literary phenomenon, but as a strategy to frame trauma in societies in general. The foremost conclusion to draw from Foer's invocation of Hiroshima would simply be that both attacks were devastating and had, despite the entirely different circumstances, consequences beyond the cruelest of imaginations; when Oskar plays an interview with a Japanese victim out loud during his presentation on the attacks, we learn how she "saw a young girl coming toward [her]. Her skin was melting down her. It was like wax" (Foer 187). However, the Japanese had nothing to do with the attacks in New York and seeing as the destruction of Hiroshima was inflicted by the United States, Foer appears to point out the complexity of America's victimhood on a global scale. While there is no doubt that the United States were victims during the terrorist attacks of 11 September—nor does Foer give any impression that he wants to challenge this notion—9/11 is complicated precisely because the political and military causes and results of the attacks challenge the oversimplified notion that in any conflict one party is indisputably right, while the other is downright evil. Davis suggests that "healing and renewal" can be derived "from an awareness of the tragic complexities of 9-11 and its aftermath" but that any "responsible reply must begin with the recognition that it was through us [the United States] that terror on global scale first came into the world [by bombing Hiroshima]; and that we remain its primary global practitioner" (136). Although Foer's writing does not necessarily suggest he would agree with the statement itself, it does seem to capture the global disposition that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* conveys. In that sense, the inclusion of Dresden and Hiroshima seems a conscious move to kindle the notion of a solidarity that transcends the national and cultural borders of the United States, if not just by connecting the two events on grounds of their traumatic destructiveness, then by calling into question America's

identification as solitary victim of extreme violence. As Matthew Mullins puts it, the novel “contests an ‘us versus them’ reaction to trauma”, inviting its readers to consider trauma as “a unifying experience” (299) instead.

The novel does not only promote these “alternative conceptions of identity” (298) through trauma transfer, but also does so on a smaller scale in Oskar’s quest. The calls for community, Mullins argues, can be observed from the very nature of Oskar’s journey through New York. In order to find the lock that belongs to his key, a nine-year-old boy—who admits that many things make him “panicky, like ... germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though [he is] not racist)” (Foer 36)—travels through one of the largest and most diverse cities in the world to visit absolute strangers who have no connection to Oskar. He even manages to bring “Ada and Agnes [and] Albert and Alice and Allen and Arnold and Barbara and Barry” Black together under the roof of his school after he had invited them to see his play, though “they didn’t know what they had in common” (143). These examples indeed seem to call for empathy in the wake of trauma.

Nevertheless, while these moments in which empathy and sociality with regards to trauma are promoted certainly exist in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, it must be questioned whether such attempts at transferring and relating trauma are ultimately effective for Foer’s characters and his audience. First, however, the relevance of the reader’s experience and its legitimacy should be addressed. In her analysis of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Naomi Mandel aptly writes that the “assumption that the work mirrors the world” is “naïve” and “disavows the novel’s status as fiction” (243). A novel, in its very essence, is a work of fiction, which entails that the author does not necessarily carry the responsibility of representing reality to its full extent. Still, it would be equally naïve to look at a novel so specifically focused on the traumatic events of 9/11 and World War II and pretend it is not inextricably based on events that can hardly be triumphed in terms of realness. When authors write about traumatic experiences stemming from historical events and as such purposely engage with historical reality, a certain degree of fidelity “to the facts” is expected to be maintained “in order to safeguard the reality of violence from representation and protect history from denial”. Yet, it is precisely in the creation of such fiction that “the demand in question is not for truth but for additional, revisionary narratives: not telling but retelling” (240). What to take away from this is, is that fiction based in reality cannot avoid interaction with that reality; it draws from it but also writes it. As such,

Foer's explicit and consistent connecting (and transferring) of one traumatic event to another in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, means that he is actively participating in rewriting and interacting with the historically factual realities of Dresden and 9/11. Furthermore, it has already been established how trauma transfer functions in contextualizing the trauma of 9/11 in connection to the second world war in public discourse—i.e. ground-zero—and so it becomes clear that trauma transfer has the similar function of framing the attacks from inside the novel, into that same public discourse. The importance of this function has already been illustrated by the critics' calls for "a more inclusive narrative of 9/11" and their realization that "traumatic healing comes when we recognize our poethic responsibility toward the Other" (DeRosa 617). The suggestion that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* can be considered to be, at least partly, an attempt at healing the traumatic wounds of its audience is perhaps bolstered most significantly by Foer's stylistic decisions regarding the form of the novel, which will be discussed later.

However, drawing the conclusion that Foer's incorporation of trauma transfer merely serves to underscore the salving effects of transcending identity lines and establishing communities is too one-dimensional. Some of Mullins' examples could be considered questionable in whether they effectively portray trauma transfer. When Oskar gives an in-class talk about the nuclear explosion at Hiroshima, he plays a tape recording of an interview held with one of the survivors (Foer 187-189). Oskar's decision to share with his class the trauma "of another victim, from another trauma, in another country, ... inflicted by the United States" (Mullins 312) fits Mullins' argument, but does not address Oskar's lack of empathy. Strikingly, Saal posits that Oskar's stoic attitude during his presentation stands in stark contrast with his frustrated response when he reads "the dispassionate account of the events of 9/11" on foreign websites (Saal 461). Similarly, the *Hamlet* schoolplay might bring together many different "Blacks" in the audience, but it is chiefly a source of frustration for Oskar, as witnessed by his remark that "Shakespeare doesn't make sense" (Foer 147). While it would be understandable for a regular nine-year-old to not possess a deep understanding and appreciation of a Shakespeare play, it is remarkable that despite Oskar's at least basic interest in and knowledge of *Hamlet*—he has read the "the famous "to be or not to be" speech" in his "*Collected Shakespeare set*" (142)—he still utterly rejects the play as "an analogical representation of trauma" (Saal 460), indicating that trauma transfer might not be useful to Oskar.

Moreover, the way in which not only the Oskar's narrative, but also those of Grandfather and Grandmother unfold, not only suggests the incredible difficulty of transferring trauma, but the impossibility of communicating trauma in general. Out of all the characters, Thomas Schell, Oskar's grandfather, is the least able to communicate—not just trauma but virtually anything. His trauma stems from having survived the Dresden firebombs while his lover, Anna, with whom he was expecting a child (Foer 210), died in the flames. The pain he experiences after having lost Anna, while having survived himself, cannot be coped with, which results in him marrying the “woman who comes as close to the real Anna as possible: Anna's younger sister” (Uytterschout & Versluys 223), in an attempt to be with Anna despite her being dead. Although the marriage already indicates that Grandfather is unable to let go of the past, his “inability or refusal to speak” emphasizes his “unwillingness to cope with his traumatic past” (222) even more. His trauma has rendered him so unable to communicate, that he has literally lost the ability to communicate via spoken words. Instead, he communicates by showing messages written down in notebooks and has the words “yes” and “no” tattooed on the palms of his hands (Foer 17). While this allows him to get by in everyday life, it clearly inhibits him from sharing his trauma with other people, which he reckons might be helpful: “[s]ometimes I think if I could tell you what happened to me that night, I could leave that night behind me,” although ultimately “that night has no beginning or end, it started before I was born and it's still happening” (208). In other words, even if Grandfather could speak, trauma transfer or communication would likely be out of the question for him.

While Grandmother has suffered a trauma very similar to that of her husband, namely losing her beloved Anna during the Dresden bombings, she, at first glance, seems to cope with her traumatic experiences more successfully and has fewer issues communicating. Most significantly, as Sien Uytterschout & Versluys point out, she at the very least makes an attempt to cope with the past (226-227), as can be discerned from her conversation with her husband when she discovers he might leave her, in which he tells her he “do[es] not know how to live.” Grandma replies “I do not know either, but I am trying” (Foer 181). Still, she undeniably has problems living life “post-Dresden”, which can be observed from her low self-esteem (Uytterschout & Versluys 226), attempt(s) at suicide (225) and recurrent nightmares (226). Most importantly, although she clearly has a tendency to talk—which becomes clear from the first scene we meet her, where she rambles on about tuna and the weather to end with asking

Grandfather to marry her (Foer 28-33)—she does not speak about Dresden. Whereas Grandfather gives a detailed account of his traumatic experiences during and after the bombing—although he keeps it almost exclusively to himself, removing the vital role of the receiver from the chain of communication—Grandma does not share anything about her trauma aside from a few sentences from which we can deduce that her father died buried in rubble after the bombing (308-309).

If the main characters all display a failure to properly communicate their traumas, it comes as no surprise that the communication between these characters and their narratives is poor or practically non-existent, rendering the notion of successful trauma transfer nearly utopian. Still, it is peculiar how the reader is confronted with three protagonists who “talk (or write) incessantly” (Saal 463), yet cannot reach out to anyone about what is truly important. A key realization in that perspective is that on the rare occasions they do reach out, the communication is painfully one-sided. Oskar, in his inability to speak about the voice messages his father left minutes before he died in the World Trade Center, creates a bead bracelet out of his father’s final words and gives it to his mother (Foer 35), “with the vague hope” that she will understand (Philippe Codde 247). Codde continues by stating that Grandfather does something similar in his attempts to talk to Grandma over the phone, in which he punches in numbers that represent letters, creating long codes of undecipherable beeps. Another vital manifestation of the one-sided communication is the large number of Grandfather’s letters, of which he only actually sends one to his son, which prompts him to travel to Dresden and meet his father, only to pretend to be a journalist and have a “terrible” conversation filled with “things [they] couldn’t share” (Foer 277-278).

It is puzzling that Foer on the nondiegetic “level of composition, narrative structure, and tropology” (Saal 456) interweaves transnational and transgenerational traumas, suggesting “the emergence of a shared, cosmopolitan ethics of vulnerability” (264), while the diegetic “level of character perception and plot development” (456) is characterized so evidently by the complete antithesis of that very thought. The ambiguity of seemingly offering both the reader and the characters the redemptive strength of trauma transfer and sharing, only to snatch away any hope at succeeding at it, seems nearly villainous. However, as grim as the situation might appear to be for Foer’s characters in terms of moving on, his compositional technique reveals that the message for the reader might differ.

III. Form

While the diegetic level has shown to prominently display the impossibility to sufficiently communicate trauma—largely in opposition to the non-diegetic level—the failure of communication can be discerned from the heterogeneous compositional style of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* as well, even though it, ultimately and paradoxically, also allows for potentially successful trauma transfer after all.

Hayden White describes the core traumatic events of the twentieth century—which include two world wars, nuclear explosions and the holocaust—not only as having been impossible to have happened in the centuries before but also as sheer unimaginable (69). Keeping White’s assessment in mind, the events of September 11, 2001 started off the twenty-first century in the same fashion as the century before it; with transnational aggression and violent destruction. The reasons for the suggested impossibility of pre-twentieth century generations to imagine the horrors of the world wars, are the technological advancements that enabled not only greater and swifter destruction of people and property, but also on a greater, global scale. These wars saw the introduction of machineguns, tanks, bio-chemical weaponry and so on, forever changing the ways in which humans fought each other. The inconceivable, shocking nature of 9/11, however, did not stem from the use of modernized weapons but from how “a score or so of Stanley knives” enabled terrorists to capture airplanes as if they were “missiles, each of them primed and cocked,” producing “two million tons of rubble,” making “Manhattan [look] as though it had taken ten megatons” (Amis 4-5); a bizarre mixture of simple knives in the age of warfare over distance and a modern way of transportation. Such an attack was in fact unthinkable to occur in reality, as it would have even “embarrassed a studio executive’s storyboard or a thriller-writer’s notebook” in its extravagance (Amis 3-4).

The “violent and disruptive ... nature” of such a traumatic event means “that it cannot be fitted into existing frameworks” by its victims (Uytterschout & Versluys 217), even if such frameworks theoretically already exist. As mentioned above, the notion of reading “current trauma through the lens of a previous one” (Saal 454) can be discerned from *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* as well as general discourse. So while trauma transfer is used as a strategy, it is clearly not a universal remedy that solves the issue of trauma. In order to cope with trauma, frameworks need to be created through which trauma can be observed and analyzed. This

process, like mourning, requires time, of which relatively little has passed since the attacks. In search of ways to cope with and understand trauma, authors explore different representational methods, which can be observed in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Although the use of language is the primary representational method of the novel, Foer utilizes photographic elements too, including pictures of a man falling out of one of the World Trade Center towers (Foer 327). Consequently, a more detailed look at similar 9/11 photography can offer crucial insights into the workings of the novel. In their three-way discussion on the iconicity of Richard Drew's well-known photograph of the Falling Man—capturing an airborne man seemingly calmly and graciously heading towards his death after he has jumped out of one of the World Trade Center towers during the attacks—Rob Kroes, Miles Orvell and Alan Nadel touch upon some of the issues that plague all representations of trauma and 9/11 in particular. Orvell challenges Kroes' argument that the Falling Man photograph is the iconic image of 9/11, as he argues that “its meaning is [not] singular and fixed,” just like “the meaning of 9/11 is itself not singular and fixed” (15). Like the traumatic event itself, its meaning is inaccessible and consequently cannot be defined. To define it, would mean to let it rest, which is precisely what cannot be accomplished. Arguably, the photograph is the camera's and photographer's representation of what the human eye has witnessed during and after trauma, similar to how the post-9/11 novel is the writer's representation of what the human mind has thought and felt during and after that same traumatic experience. Seen that way, the novel is the representational medium that tries to put traumatic familiarity into written words. However, as the visual medium of a photograph is unable to capture the essence of trauma because there is no singular, fixed essence, so can language not successfully represent the meaning and suffering of 9/11, Dresden and Hiroshima. As Atchison aptly puts it in the context of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the search for meaning is complex as “the chaos of life remains too loud or too close for full representation” (359). The problem of searching for meaning, becomes the problem of representation.

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close mirrors this search by employing a heterogeneous compositional style to signify how purely linguistic means fail to communicate and represent trauma. As words cannot represent trauma in the wake of trauma, other means need to be utilized by Foer. Caruth says it would make sense to use visual elements to represent trauma, as “be[ing] traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (qtd. in Codde 248-249), which is exactly what Foer does. The novel contains a significant amount of visual elements that reinforce

the idea that the human experience of trauma is too complex to be put into words. The most prominent of these elements are the many pictures shown in the book. The Penguin 2006 edition's first three pages are pictures of a lock, a flock of birds and what is presumably Grandma's window, while the last pages function as a flipbook showing a man falling out of one of the World Trade Center towers in reversed order, supposedly returning the man to safety. This final section mirrors Grandma's dream about the bombs dropped on Dresden flying back into the airplanes to undo the destruction—"In my dream, all of the collapsed ceilings re-formed above us. The fire went back into the bombs, which rose up into the bellies of planes whose propellers turned backward" (Foer 306-307)—and visually accompanies Oskar's final words after describing what his father would have done if he had still been alive: "[w]e would have been safe" (326).

The way in which these pictures and last words bookend *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, evokes the idea of a palindrome. The photographs of the flock of birds and Grandmother's window mirror the pictures at the end that display the man appearing to fly back towards the window he jumped from, while Oskar's last words clearly show he misses his father as much as he did when the novel began. Peter Brooks defines a palindrome as "a repetitive text without variation or point of fixity" condemning the reader "to repetition, rereading, in the knowledge that what we discover will always be that there was nothing to be discovered" (qtd. in Mandel 251). Mandel notes that "*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is structured by precisely such shuttling back and forth" (251), seeing as Oskar does not only discover nothing related to his father on his quest, but ultimately encounters William Black, "a mirror image of himself: another bereaved son" (252). Additionally, the two characters whose deaths have caused so much suffering and pain throughout the novel, Anna and Dad, are in fact palindromes as Oskar notices on the final page: "I'd have said 'Dad?'" backward, which would have sounded the same as "Dad" forward" (Foer 326). Again, there seems to be no way out for the novel's characters, as they are trapped within the confines of the palindrome that is the novel, condemned to repetition.

Whereas the end shows how the implementation of visual elements can bolster the representational strength of text, the entirely white (121-123) and black (284) pages featured in Grandfather and Grandma's narratives illustrate the enhanced representational value when the verbal is eclipsed entirely by the visual. After Grandfather suggests to Grandmother that she should write her life story, he sets her up with a typewriter, but does so in a "Nothing Place"

(119)—one of the designated spaces in their shared apartment where one can escape existence—which foregrounds the eventual result of her writings. When she proudly announces she is done writing, Grandfather looks at the pages only to discover, like the reader, that they were left completely white (120-23). The silence and emptiness of these pages is powerful, as they “represent [Grandma] speaking the unspeakable” (Atchison 364). It is later revealed that she did not even attempt to actually write something: “I hit the space bar again and again and again. My life story was spaces” (176). The absence of language reveals the incapability of language to communicate trauma. Grandfather’s writings convey the same message, but create absence of language in the overabundance of language. In the chapter “Why I’m Not Where You Are 9/11/03”, Grandfather’s stream of words slowly becomes illegible as the typesetting gradually changes to fit more words on the page but ultimately cannot keep up with the bombardment of language (262-284). The last three pages of the segment are completely illegible, circumscribing once again the futility of trying to put suffering into words as language cannot fully capture the essence of trauma, not even in either of its extremities.

Another crucial effect of Foer’s compositional style is that it forces the reader to engage with the text, creating a line of communication between the novel and its characters and the reader, setting up the ideal circumstances for successful trauma transfer. The central problem of the novel’s characters has been argued to be their inability to communicate, share and transfer trauma between one another, resulting in nearly all forms of communication being one-sided. Normally speaking, a novel would encounter the same issue in communicating with its readers—as they clearly cannot have a conversation with a book—but because of Foer’s compositional choices, the audience is forced—or at the very least cordially invited—to experience the novel and interact with it. In contrast to the novel’s characters, the reader *is* able to connect the different narratives, since the reader has the overview. Obviously, the limitations of language, which despite all visual elements remains the main ingredient of the representational form that is the novel, as a means to communicate trauma still remain. However, by employing visual aids and multiple narratives from different traumas and times, Foer at the very least offers the reader a better chance at successfully transferring and coping with trauma than his characters.

IV. Conclusion

The terrorist attacks on 11 September, 2001 left behind a devastated Manhattan laid to waste and traumatized not only those people directly affected by the attacks, but the United States as a whole. The literary reaction to 9/11 was initially stifled, as writers were unable to put into words what had occurred, but as time passed and the rubble and ashes had disappeared from New York City, post-9/11 fiction appeared in increasing numbers. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was amongst those novels and perhaps stood out because of its invocation of the Dresden and Hiroshima bombings in conjunction with 9/11, drawing parallels between these traumatic events of entirely different natures and times, suggesting themes of a shared, possibly global solidarity in the wake of trauma. As this paper has demonstrated however, all three narratives indicate that successful communication of traumatic experiences is incredibly difficult, signifying that the notion of trauma transfer might be useful in some cases—such as on a community level. This idea is amplified by the heterogeneous structure of the novel, which emphasizes the shortcomings of language when dealing with trauma and allows the reader an overview of the situation that might enable one to learn from the characters' traumas and behaviors.

If anything, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* shows, frankly, how the issue of trauma cannot be solved. The final chapter perhaps most poignantly encapsulates this by showing how Oskar, after completing his journey to discover the lock, does not appear a single step closer to letting go of his father. Even though we learn how his mother knew about his every step and even though we witness how the two are reunited, the story inevitably ends with one of Oskar's imaginations. If only he could reverse time to before the planes hit the towers, "[w]e would have been safe" (Foer 326). However, Oskar's fantasy is not just utopian, but misguided, for the feeling of safety and of justice would have been misplaced; the bombs dropped on Dresden should be returned to the bellies of the planes as well. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* shows how violent destruction and human trauma transcend the demarcations of nations and generations and challenges the simplistic but prevalent notions of victimhood to provide its reader with the little comforting fact that we are globally united in our misery.

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