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Can the Wound Be Taken at Its Word?: Performed Trauma in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*

Brett Thomas Griffin
grifgrounder@gmail.com

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Can the Wound Be Taken at Its Word?: Performed Trauma in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*
and *Falling Man*

by

Brett Thomas Griffin

Under the Direction of Dr. Chris Kocela

ABSTRACT

Two of Don DeLillo's recently published novels, *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Falling Man* (2007), feature performance artists performing trauma. Through the bodies of these performers, DeLillo restates the central concern of trauma studies: if trauma is that which denies mediation, how may we speak about traumatic experience? DeLillo's stagings of traumatic (re)iterations illustrate how the missed originary moment of trauma precludes directly referential content in traumatic representation. But I propose that performed trauma – the knowledge of forgetting addressed to another – recapitulates the structure of traumatic experience itself, thereby revealing trauma to be wholly constituted in repetition, and providing a means of speaking about the unspeakable. I hope to illustrate how restoring trauma to language revives the ethical and political efficacy of traumatic representation.

INDEX WORDS: DeLillo, Trauma, Trauma studies, Performed trauma, Traumatic representation, The wound

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by

Brett Thomas Griffin

Department Chair: Dr. Matthew Roudané

Committee: Dr. Chris Kocela
Dr. Marilynn Richtarik
Dr. Nancy Chase

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
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DEDICATION

For Sam Kim, whose care and generosity made this work possible. Love you, babe. And for Dr. Marilyn Richtarik, who has given encouragement and support well beyond the requirements of the profession. Thank you for making my graduate experience so rewarding.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
CHAPTER	
1. An introduction: can the wound be taken at its word?	1
2. <i>The Body Artist</i> : the knowledge of forgetting addressed to another	9
3. <i>Falling Man</i> : “trying to find himself in the crowd”	36
4. A conclusion: "body come down among us all”	61
ENDNOTES	70
WORKS CITED	73
WORKS CONSULTED	75

1. An introduction: can the wound be taken at its word?

Over the course of his literary career, Don DeLillo has frequently depicted major public threats, either fabricated or based on real events, in order to explore subjectivity in contemporary America. Novels like *Underworld* and *White Noise* employ the unexpected and community-wide presence of death, whether in the form of looming nuclear annihilation or an “Airborne Toxic Event,” to illustrate the social construction of the postmodern American’s multivalent self. DeLillo’s most insightful critique may be his awareness of the role mediation plays in this process – his classic protagonists’ experience of the world increasingly filters through representations rather than direct sensorial experiences, and may be strangely inassimilable in the absence of a mediating presence. Indeed, a preeminent unifying factor of DeLillo’s major works is their analysis of the effect of mediated public trauma on the individual.

In recent years, however, DeLillo’s characters have found themselves inhabiting worlds whose dangers are less virtual. In *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*, the pain experienced by the protagonists is more than a looming possibility. Rather, these characters struggle to rearticulate the very real trauma that has already taken place in their lives. In a career so preoccupied with social and artistic representation, it is fascinating that DeLillo chose to feature in both of these novels performance artists performing trauma. Traditionally, traumatic experience is said to lie outside the parameters of symbolic exchange; is, in fact, an inexpressible irruption of the real¹. Through the bodies of these performers, I believe DeLillo restates a central concern of the growing field of literary criticism known as trauma studies: if trauma is that which denies mediation, how may we speak about traumatic experience? In the course of analyzing these two novels with the tools of psychoanalytic and trauma theory, I hope to illuminate the intersubjective production of truths embodied by DeLillo’s performance artists and their

audiences, including both fictional spectators and DeLillo's readers. Specifically, I believe trauma in performance recapitulates the structure of traumatic experience itself, and that its performance reveals the originary moment² to be wholly constituted in repetition. As such, performed trauma points to an iterable component of all traumatic experience, and a means of both working through trauma as an individual and communicating that trauma to others. Furthermore, I believe that placing traumatic experience back within reach of critical analysis restores the ethical and political function of traumatic representation.

Just after the turn of the millennium, DeLillo narrowed his focus from the sweeping studies of American life he had become known for and chose instead to write an intimate portrait of individual trauma that, while still reflecting on his classically public themes, shifted emphasis towards the personal. Published in the early months of 2001, *The Body Artist* centers on Lauren Hartke, a performance artist renowned for the physical extremes to which she is able to push herself. Laura has suddenly lost her husband to suicide, and while she is struggling with his death in the secluded rented house they shared only days ago, a mysterious man appears, seemingly out of the woodwork, and repeats in her lost husband's voice their final conversations. Near the end of *The Body Artist*, DeLillo provides a journalist's review of Laura's latest performance, *Body Time*, in which she mimics the temporal structure of trauma and embodies loss through a performance of the stranger. This slim novella sketches in brief the hollows that traumatic experience carves out of our psychic and social spaces, and, through the example of Lauren Hartke's art, proposes a means of bridging the gap between our pre- and post-traumatic lives.

Only months after the publication of *The Body Artist*, personal and public trauma tragically coincided for DeLillo: his hometown of New York City shook with the destruction of the World Trade Center. Once the smoke had cleared, order had been restored, and the

staggering clean up had begun, cultural and literary critics began to wonder, out loud and in print, when the world might receive DeLillo's novelistic response to September 11th. He had since given interviews and written one notable essay, published in *Harper's Magazine* and titled "In the ruins of the future" (December 2001). But the public wanted more, due perhaps to DeLillo's portrayal of other historic American events, such as the Kennedy assassination in *Libra* (1988) or "The Shot Heard Round the World" and Cold War in *Underworld*. Also, the eerily looming presence of the now-leveled Twin Towers on the covers of various editions of *Underworld* seemed almost prophetic. A novel, *Cosmopolis*, did arrive in 2003. But DeLillo had completed most of the initial draft before September 2001. Thus, it literally took place in the "pre-9/11" world (April 2000, to be exact); and while *Cosmopolis* muses on many of the global themes that precipitated the terrorist attacks, the novel did not satisfy the American public's desire for a "9/11 novel" from Don DeLillo. He would provide one, but not for another four years; and, most crucially for this study, DeLillo's "9/11 novel" would return to the notion of performed trauma first explored in *The Body Artist*.

One of the most striking novelistic responses to September 11th published to date is DeLillo's *Falling Man*. Released in 2007, *Falling Man* draws its title from a fictitious performance artist who reenacts one of the most memorable and disturbing televised images from the World Trade Center attacks. Harnessed to overpasses, bridges and balconies in and around Manhattan, artist David Janiak suspends himself in a manner that evokes the horrific scenes of trapped World Trade Center victims leaping from fatal heights to escape the spreading fire. Janiak's performance literally embodies the central dilemma facing any artist attempting to represent events or experiences that fundamentally reject representation; *Falling Man* forcefully dramatizes a gap in our understanding of, and language for representing, traumatic experience.

In the introduction to the collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth explains what separates more commonplace stressors or neuroses from traumatic experience. She writes of trauma: “the pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself...[or] defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event [by personal significances]” (4-5). She further describes traumatic memory’s unique constitution in the introduction to Part II of *Trauma*:

Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become, as Janet says, a ‘narrative memory’ that is integrated into a completed story of the past...[it is] a history that literally *has no place*.... (153)

This gap manifests itself communicatively and exists between the survivors of traumatic events and those who were not there – the latter encompassing family and friends of survivors as well as spectators to the event, as so many of us were on September 11th. Furthermore, this gap is psychic and exists within survivors themselves, and whether in its clinical manifestation as traumatic neurosis or as the subject of artistic representation, it has become the central focus of trauma studies.

Reflecting on Sigmund Freud’s foundational observations regarding the testimony of neurotic war veterans from nearly a century ago, Cathy Caruth provides a stirring poetic epithet for trauma studies scholars’ particular object of examination: “a human voice that cries out from the wound...that witnesses a truth that [the analysand] cannot fully know” (*UE* 3). What’s more, any potential meaning must be derived from traumatic experience retroactively. As Kai Erickson says in “Notes on Trauma and Community”:

...it is *how people react to them* rather than *what they are* that give events whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have. The most violent wrenchings in the world, that is to say, have no clinical standing unless they harm the workings of a mind or body, so it is the *damage done* that defines and gives shape to the initial event, *the damage done* that gives it its name. (184-5)

Axial historic moments like September 11th derive their symbolic and traumatic power at least in part from the tension created when an inexpressible moment runs headlong into the surviving culture's need to locate the "truth" it contains. I believe the means of arriving at and interpreting this truth cannot be separated from its content, and that in the cultural deployment of publicly shared trauma, whether in the service of political or aesthetic ideals, a greater understanding of how trauma produces truth will more effectively equip us, survivors all, to see these processes at work, and thereby to judge the veracity of claims made in this truth's name.

My argument that these truths are in fact productions agrees with Jacques Lacan's revisions to classic psychoanalytic theory that place trauma in the order of the real, which are stated most explicitly in the "Tuché and Automaton" portion of book XI of his Seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Trauma shares with the real the "character of impossibility and of resistance to symbolization," Dylan Evans summarizes, "because it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order" (160). When we, as a society, wake the day after a public trauma like September 11th, or live in the wake of decisions made in response to this trauma, it is of the highest importance that we understand exactly how representations of trauma impute symbolic meaning to inarticulate experience. If trauma is properly described as belonging to the order of the real, and if the unconscious repetition of traumatic neurosis is evidence of the individual's or society's incapacity to access the traumatic experience directly, from where does the individual who mediates or represents trauma in performance or in writing derive his or her content? Or, if it is the wound that speaks what the individual cannot, can the wound be taken at its word?

Since trauma's resistance to symbolization is one of its constitutive characteristics, its potential for catastrophic impact on the self derives from the subject's fundamental inability to

access the real and all that dwells there. As subjects in language, all of our experiences must be interpreted through a system of representation, and while the real delineates the outer limits of linguistic representation, “the failure of [trauma’s] inscription is registered in the symbolic” (Belau 32). Therefore, it is precisely through repetition that we may infuse traumatic experience with an “ethical³ dimension” precluded by its elevation to an ideal (Belau 2). Caruth, in her seminal book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, proposes a reevaluation of history that attempts to do just this; wading into the gulf between facts and truth, Caruth problematizes the “referential specificity” of history and illuminates within the communication of traumatic experience a measure of “forgetting” necessary for and prior to “understanding” (32). Linda Belau has argued very convincingly in her article “Trauma and the Material Signifier” that what needs to be ‘forgotten’ is, in a sense, the originary traumatic moment; and I would like to add that performed trauma, as a series of iterable marks or gestures, exposes the originary moment to be a fantasy, a restaging of the impossible desire to know that moment when it occurred. The victim struggling to work through his or her trauma cannot know the original because, in fact, *trauma comes to be wholly through repetition*.

DeLillo’s authorial choice to feature performance artists performing trauma, and, in *Falling Man*, to explore the effects of these performances on an unprepared audience, drives straight to the heart of a tantalizing avenue of critical inquiry left open in Caruth’s work – namely, the implications of truth’s production through the interaction of artist and audience. Should we follow the schematic mapped out by Caruth, truth comes into being only in the intersubjective space between stage and house, and the viewer/reader/listener of mediated trauma becomes “a participant in its action and...a part of the complex attempt to know” (*UE* 44). The

auditor or spectator of performed trauma becomes a vital and absolutely necessary component of any mediation's capacity to produce truth or potential to narrate history.

If a single event can inaugurate a new era in the life of a nation or its people, then surely September 11, 2001 will mark the beginning of the 21st century in America. And as with any historic day, the factors that precipitated its arrival were as many and as diverse as its consequences. As a student and critic of literature, I believe one of the primary functions of art is to help people make sense of moments in history, like September 11th, that irrevocably change the tenor and trajectory of a society in ways that may not become visible for years or decades to come. And I believe analysis of DeLillo's *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man* through the lens of trauma theory will articulate the performative nature of truths derived from representations of trauma, and thereby retroactively expose the complicity of artist and audience in the manufacture of traumatic content.

In the first chapter of this study, "the knowledge of forgetting addressed to another," I will closely read *The Body Artist* to illustrate how the unique temporal structure of trauma delimits an originary moment, how survivors of traumatic experience mistake the voice of their own loss as it speaks through the wound, and how Lauren Hartke's art demonstrates the means by which this voice can be reappropriated. In the second chapter of this study, "trying to find himself in the crowd," I argue that the struggle to work through and speak about traumatic survival shares much with more commonplace and day-to-day attempts to reconcile oneself to the looming presence of death, and that the characters of *Falling Man* create meaning out of loss in the same retroactive and fundamentally social process of reclaiming their bodies and voices proffered in *The Body Artist*. Finally, in the third chapter of this study, "body come down among us all," I attempt to synthesize the examples of traumatic representation offered in both novels

and to theorize about what performed trauma may offer to our understanding of traumatic experience and its effect on normative subjectivity.

2. *The Body Artist*: the knowledge of forgetting addressed to another

One of the most remarkable aspects of Don DeLillo's 2001 novella *The Body Artist* is its efficiency. In the space of only 126 pages, DeLillo is able to transmit viscerally the experience of traumatic loss and mourning. In fact, the opening pages of *The Body Artist* place us, as readers, in the position of the traumatized subject, but this is a fact we will not become aware of until later in the novel. The first chapter features Lauren Hartke and her husband Rey Robles sharing a quiet breakfast at home, absentmindedly reading the newspaper and talking to one another in the half-caught or incomplete speech of intimate familiarity. This was the last time Lauren saw Rey alive, for when he left the house that day, he traveled to New York City and committed suicide in the home of an ex-wife. Though impossible to know the first time through, Rey's suicide is already accomplished. It is not something that waits on the horizon or in a future the characters have yet to reach. Because the story is told retroactively, knowledge of the traumatic moment arrives belatedly. 'It' has already happened. A sort of epigraph lays the foundation for this startling effect. The narrative begins with a brief paragraph, separated from the rest of the text, that speaks in the present tense to address an unheralded "you":

Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments, and you stop to glance at a spider pressed to its web. There is a quickness of light and a sense of things outlined precisely and streaks of running luster on the bay. You know more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness. The wind makes a sound in the pines and the world comes into being, irreversibly, and the spider rides the wind-swayed web. (*BA* 9)

Beyond the practical uncertainty this paragraph stimulates (Who is speaking? Where are we located in time and space?), greater tension arises from the hypothetical tone used by the speaker to make such a sweeping ontological and epistemological claim. That time "seems to pass" or that we receive only a "sense of things" undermines the surety of "who you are," and the

“irreversibly” that accompanies the world’s becoming rings ominously, begging the questions – What would you change? Or, what would you have different?

Following a break in the text, the narrative gives “you” exactly that chance to go back, to reverse or ward off whatever looms on the horizon, by shifting to the past tense: “It happened this final morning that they were here at the same time...” (BA 9). Lauren’s anxiety is doubled; not only does she know that this is the “final morning,” that ‘it’ will happen today, but also that her ignorance of what ‘it’ is will leave her powerless to stop it. While the verb tense signals that ‘it’ has already happened, Lauren’s ignorance of what looms demands that ‘it’ be passed through again. The novel, like traumatic experience, demands both a retroactive telling and a retroactive reading. And as readers, we occupy the same impossible place from which Lauren speaks, unaware the first time through what will shape and give meaning to this simple breakfast scene.

Cathy Caruth recognizes that trauma’s unique effects stem from a fractured temporality visible both in the moment, as it were, and in its unconscious repetition. In *Unclaimed Experience*, she describes the originary moment as:

experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and [...] therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor....its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on. (4)

She goes on to say that traumatic narratives are “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (UE 7). Lauren’s narrative comes from the place or time after loss, but the novel mimics the structure and temporality of traumatic experience by taking us through the originary moment ‘again.’ The remainder of the novel will show Lauren caught between these crises and struggling to come to know the moment in retrospect.

Numerous delayed recognitions populate the first chapter of *The Body Artist*, all echoing an anxiety over having just missed ‘it’ or having not seen ‘it’ sooner. The first is worth analyzing closely because the prose itself mimics the process of recognizing belatedly:

“I want to say something but what.” She ran water from the tap and seemed to notice. It was the first time she’d ever noticed this. “About the house. This is what it is,” he said. “Something I meant to tell you.” She noticed how water from the tap turned opaque in seconds. It ran silvery and clear and then in seconds turned opaque and how curious it seemed that in all these months and all these times in which she’d run water from the kitchen tap she’d never noticed how the water ran clear at first and then went not murky exactly but opaque, or maybe it hadn’t happened before, or she’d noticed and forgotten. (BA 10)

More is at work here than DeLillo’s keen ear for the language of marital half-speak. Rey forgets what he is going to say and will not remember until near the end of the chapter. Rey also cannot know the import of this forgotten message, for it heralds his seeming return after death in the speech of Mr. Tuttle. Also, Lauren’s recognitions occur belatedly: “She ran water from the tap and seemed to notice.” Notice what? ‘It’ has been noticed, but Lauren is not yet aware. “It was the first time she’d ever noticed this,” the “this” still a pronoun without an antecedent, complicated further by Rey’s interruption that introduces still more ambiguous pronouns. The water’s transition from clarity to opacity need not be read symbolically to get a sense of the complex cognitive processes at work here, the quiet interplay of memory and forgetfulness. Lauren says as much herself, “how curious it seemed.”

Lauren then goes to the fridge and stands there “remembering something” while Rey says again “Yes exactly. I know what it is.” She then “reached in for the milk, realizing what it was he’d said that she hadn’t heard about eight seconds ago” (BA 11). Once back at the table, Lauren “took a bite of cereal and forgot to taste it. She lost the taste somewhere between the time she put the food in her mouth and the regretful second she swallowed it” (BA 21). Rey sits across from her with newspaper in hand, and Lauren realizes “[h]e was looking at it but not reading it and she

understood this retroactively, that he'd been looking at it all this time but not absorbing the words on the page" (BA 22). A radio squawks talk from the counter, and "[a] voice reported the weather but she missed it. She didn't know it was the weather until it was gone" (BA 26).

All of these recognitions, partial or mundane as they may be, occur after a delay, imbuing the entire scene and everything in it with an as-yet unquantifiable measure of prescience. But at the same time, we do not know how to read the signs and have no augur to tell us. It is only through a retroactive telling that meanings become clear. Similarly, it is only during a second reading that we may recognize a portent, "She picked a hair out of her mouth. She stood at the counter looking at it, a short pale strand that wasn't hers and wasn't his" (BA 12). In time, the novel will offer the possibility that this hair belongs to Mr. Tuttle, and Lauren will recognize – belatedly – the intrusive presence of death at the breakfast table. And again, a few pages later, Lauren notices that Rey has cut his chin while they both consume the events of the world after the fact:

She started to read a story in her part of the paper. It was an old newspaper, Sunday's, from town, because there were no deliveries here. "That's lately, I don't know, maybe you shouldn't shave first thing. Wake up first. Why shave at all? Let your mustache grow back. Grow a beard." "Why shave at all? There must be a reason," he said. "I want God to see my face." He looked up from the paper and laughed in the empty way she didn't like. (BA 16)

Lauren is disturbed by Rey's laugh, but not nearly enough to prevent his leaving. 'If only...' the narrative seems to wonder, 'if only Lauren had known this was the last time she would see his face, and that his meeting with God was so close at hand.' Like traumatic experience itself, this cry of 'if only...' will return more forcefully later in the novel when Lauren directs it towards Mr. Tuttle.

Because we hear of Lauren's loss second-hand by reading an obituary that places it 'off-stage,' the first chapter becomes, in effect, the originary moment, the original site of trauma. In

the moment, Lauren reflects on the scene's temporal and spatial circumscription while staring at a blue jay just outside the window:

When birds look into houses, what impossible worlds they see. Think. What a shedding of every knowable surface and process. She wanted to believe the bird was seeing her, a woman with a teacup in her hand, and never mind the folding back of day and night, the apparition of a space set off from time. She looked and took a careful breath. She was alert to the clarity of the moment but knew it was ending already. She felt it in the blue jay. Or maybe not. She was making it happen because she could not look any longer. This must be what it means to see if you've been near blind all your life. (*BA* 24)

The breakfast scene is set apart from the rest of the world, sequestered in “a space set off from time,” not in the tiny mind of the blue jay but in Lauren's telling. This scene, the only scene in the novel before traumatic loss, serves as a placeholder for the originary moment that DeLillo does not write and that Lauren cannot symbolize – Rey's suicide. The breakfast scene shows Lauren in her life before trauma, but it is narrated from the irrevocable position of the traumatized survivor. The breakfast scene stands in for the traumatic event that slips out of focus even while firmly held in sight, or that defies understanding even though its limits are so clearly demarcated.

The strange light of this “space set off from time” does not illuminate things as self-identical tautologies, does not imbue the world with the present tense self-awareness spoken of in the ‘epigraph.’ Rather, the survivor identifies with the lost lover, and the living subject comes to define itself through the dead object. From the vantage point ‘outside,’ or in the knowing future, everything in sight becomes an allusion to Rey's already accomplished suicide. For example:

[Lauren] let out a groan...that resembled a life lament. She was too trim and limber to feel the strain and was only echoing Rey, identifyingly, groaning his groan, but in a manner so seamless and deep it was her discomfort too. (*BA* 11)

Reading from the place we will soon come to be, that is, ‘in the know’ or after the fact, we can hear the full timbre of Lauren and Rey’s “life lament” and recognize in its early stages how the impact of his suicide will push her identification with Rey towards traumatic symptomatology. Furthermore, Lauren tries throughout the first chapter to find a language capable of describing the world. In one particularly evocative example, she thinks of the birds at a feeder as “a wing-whir that was all *b*’s and *r*’s, the letter *b* followed by a series of vibrato *r*’s. But that wasn’t it at all. That wasn’t anything like it” (BA 19). This ultimately insufficient attempt at mimesis foreshadows her later attempt to find a language for loss, for if she cannot trade places with Rey or join him in death, she must fill the empty space left by his suicide with something. And it is Rey himself who foretells this ‘return,’ remembering what he had wanted to say earlier, “The noise in the walls. Yes. You’ve read my mind” (BA 20). The noise in the walls will quite literally embody and quite audibly speak Lauren’s loss.

Tellingly, Rey’s obituary interrupts the novel’s temporal flow, wedging itself between chapters one and two. Having just left the intimate prose of the breakfast scene, which followed the meandering path of an unobserved couple at home, the bold font of the obituary’s headline announces death in a simple and publicly recognized way, a single number that speaks to the end of so much, “Rey Robles, 64...” (BA 29). What we discover of Rey in this piece is tantalizingly vague and illustrates the fundamental inadequacy of ink and newsprint to sum up a life. Of the little we do learn about him, the most telling fact may be the title of Rey’s third film, described as his most successful effort – *My Life for Yours*. This impossible exchange, her life for his, is the traumatic kernel at the heart of Lauren’s psychic struggle over the remainder of the novel – what she will describe as the “first days back” following Rey’s death.

It is this same incommensurability Lauren faces when the novel picks up where and when it left off, as chapter two also features introductory paragraphs in the present tense. But where the epigraph to chapter one spoke of a fixed and knowable identity, the paragraphs that begin the second chapter are about the self in flux. Driving down a highway familiar to any American, the speaker states:

All the cars including yours seem to flow in dissociated motion, giving the impression of or presenting the appearance of, and the highway runs in a white hum. Then the mood passes. The noise and rush and blur are back and you slide into your life again, feeling the painful weight in your chest. (*BA* 33)

In these prefatory lines, we have caught Lauren in transit, literally in between the “white hum” of shock that must have been the uncounted days since Rey’s death and the secluded house, the “space set off from time” wherein his phantasmal presence might still linger. In the final chapter of his book *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*, Peter Boxall proposes that this arrested temporality is the defining characteristic of DeLillo’s “post-millennial” novels, and says that the foundation of both *The Body Artist* and *Cosmopolis* is a “groundless ground, a ground zero.” He goes on to say that what Caruth might call referential history “has become obsolete, and...can only be registered through the work of mourning.” This “time of mourning” or “evacuated time” resembles the time after trauma because it “can neither inherit the legacy of the past, nor move towards the possibility of a new and undiscovered future. It is time which has lost its sense of identity” (Boxall 216).

I agree with Boxall’s characterization of the liminal space left to the survivor. Lauren is clearly preoccupied with stasis, as revealed in her obsessive viewing of a webcast fixed on a desolate stretch of Finnish highway. No longer able to distinguish between life and death, Lauren subsists in an interminable present. Following a break in the text, Lauren crosses a temporal threshold of sorts, and the prose returns to the past tense: “She thought of these as the first days

back” (BA 33). Once again, this shift in tense signals the place from which the narrative issues, that is, in the ‘knowing future;’ and it must be emphasized again that trauma demands a retroactive telling, an account of the past informed by experience that is nonetheless doomed to once again miss the originary moment.

During these “first days,” we see Lauren adrift, floating in that space between life and death left to the survivor of traumatic loss. Unable to tell the difference between life and death, her feelings for Rey slide into a desire to be Rey, or be with him in death: “She wanted to disappear in Rey’s smoke, be dead, be him” (BA 36). In an analysis of the film *Hiroshima mon amour*, Caruth reads this type of fatal commiseration as another symptom of traumatic survival. She might be speaking of Lauren Hartke when she says that “faithfulness to her lover’s death takes place through the mutilation of her [own] body....carried out in the body’s fragmentation....and [it is] only as a fragment that the body can become, for the woman, the faithful monument to a death” (UE 30-1).

This traumatic identification also splits Lauren from herself, or fractures her subjectivity such that she walks through the now unbearably empty home “hearing herself from other parts of the house” (BA 37). Trapped in this grey area between life and death, sequestered with her grief, Lauren can only think “to organize time until she could live again” (BA 39). Time is the enemy, each moment passed and each calendar day turned a reminder of the unchanging number next to Rey’s name in the obituary, the life that will grow no longer. Lauren’s desire to halt time is, in one sense, an attempt to hide from her knowledge of death, to return to an illusory prelapsarian state. Trauma has forced Lauren to break with the world:

At night the sky was very near, sprawled in star smoke and gamma cataclysms, but she didn’t see it the way she used to, as soul extension, dumb guttural wonder, a thing that lived outside language in the oldest part of her. (BA 39)

Like the narrative itself, which can only speak in the past tense from the knowing future, this is where Lauren cannot return, to the garden prior to knowledge.

But at the same time, this knowledge remains incomplete. Something from the tale is missing, something that can only be heard in the voice of loss itself. The novel invites us to recognize again “the noise” mentioned by Rey during the ‘last day,’ and which Lauren hears again near the end of chapter two:

It had a certain measured quality....It carried an effect that was nearly intimate, like something’s here and breathing the same air we breathe and it moves the way we move. The noise had this quality, of a body shedding space, but there was no one there when they looked. (*BA* 42)

Of course, only a page later Lauren makes the “inevitable” discovery of an unknown man in the otherwise empty house – the stranger she dubs Mr. Tuttle. In an “instant” Lauren “felt her way back in time,” and she finds that the “calculated stealth” she and Rey heard lurking in the walls for the past three months suddenly sits, literally, on the edge of a bed (*BA* 42-3).

We must keep in mind the sense of ‘seeming,’ as the noise that precedes Mr. Tuttle is the noise of a living, breathing person, a human subject who sheds space as he or she moves through the world and time, or who is differentiated from the world by being-in-language. Rather, Mr. Tuttle is an artifact of the real, or, as Lauren thinks later on, “He was from Kotka, Finland” (*BA* 47). He is a thing whose atemporal speech reveals an undifferentiated consciousness and whose body manifests, seemingly out of thin air, as a contiguous portion of the material world. Part of the pain Lauren feels stems from the knowledge that Rey is now an object, a cold dead thing that no longer breathes, speaks, or sheds space, but simply fills it. And over the remaining chapters, the novel’s authorial ambiguity regarding Mr. Tuttle and his origins forces us to question if everything is as it seems. Does Mr. Tuttle, in fact, breathe “the same air we breathe” and move “the way we move”?

He certainly does not speak the way we speak, as his speech reveals a fractured subject displaced in time. His first response to Lauren is “It is not able,” turning himself into an object rather than a speaking ‘I’ (BA 45). Standing outside later, Lauren asks Mr. Tuttle what he sees. He replies, “The trees are some of them,” and then “It rained very much.” Lauren replies, “It will rain. It is going to rain,” but Mr. Tuttle seems uninterested in the distinction between past and future tense, even when it begins to rain later that evening (BA 46-7). Lauren tells Mr. Tuttle that she is at the house to “be by herself,” though she knows the lease runs out in “six or seven weeks.” Mr. Tuttle responds, “But you did not leave.” She assures him that she will “When it’s time.” His response is cryptic, “But you do not” (BA 51). What Lauren does not know is that this shift in tense is actually to the future, for Mr. Tuttle is prophesizing that Lauren will remain in the house past the end of the lease. In time, he will be proven correct, and Lauren is left to ponder how this strange man can know such things.

Over the course of the novel, Lauren entertains numerous explanations for Mr. Tuttle’s sudden appearance. Similarly, critics writing about *The Body Artist* seem compelled to offer their own possibility or agree with one of hers: that he is an autistic savant, escaped mental patient, hallucination born of grief, ghost, etc. Laura Di Prete, in her article “Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*: Performing the Body, Narrating Trauma,” argues that DeLillo “imagines trauma as necessarily bound to the emergence of a ‘foreign body,’ a phantomlike figure in full flesh that makes the workings of traumatic memory accessible” (483), and that the voice that attends this “body” is “in touch with what the mind cannot know, will voice its unspoken truth” (484). I agree with Di Prete and those other critics who read Mr. Tuttle as an embodiment of Lauren’s traumatic experience and as a voice that speaks, however cryptically, her loss. Focusing on the circumstances, realistic or not, by which Mr. Tuttle came to be in Lauren’s life draws one away

from the novel's contribution to both fictional and theoretical understandings of trauma. Di Prete is also correct when she says:

Appropriating and distorting the subject's voice, this 'stranger' or 'foreign body' points to what the subject does not know but still unwillingly produces....If the simile of the phantom's ventriloquism suggests the self's inner division and fragmentation, it also points to the function of words...in making subjectivity heterogeneous. (485)

I would add that to try and give Mr. Tuttle a history is to gloss over his thing-ness, his resemblance to Rey not just in voice but also in his very state of being. Mr. Tuttle, I contend, is a dead thing that speaks, a wooden ventriloquist's dummy whose voice Lauren cannot recognize as her own.

To use the terminology of trauma studies, Mr. Tuttle is the wound made tangible. He is a perversion of Pinocchio, a living man who mimics the thing-ness of death. And his words are not his own, for in Mr. Tuttle's speech we hear the language of Lauren's grief. His much remarked-upon temporal disjunction – speaking in the past tense about things yet to happen, what David Cowart calls Mr. Tuttle's "arrhythmia" (208), is itself a symptom of Lauren's own traumatized mind. Mr. Tuttle is like a golem, the very air of this "space set off from time" the breath that animates him, vivified to disassociate and protect Lauren from the knowledge she has already seen but not realized. Mr. Tuttle's thing-ness comes through not only in his speech, but also in the way he moves, which is in fact not "the way we move":

He moved uneasily in space, indoors or out, as if the air had bends and warps. She watched him sidle into the house, walking with a slight shuffle. He feared levitation maybe. She could not stop watching him. It was always as if. He did this or that as if. She needed a reference elsewhere to get him placed. (*BA* 47)

Lauren requires an outside "reference" precisely because Mr. Tuttle has no history of his own; he is her loss, and she misrecognizes her speech as his own.

Other critics have remarked upon the way Mr. Tuttle ‘echoes’ Lauren, but the physics of their exchanges more closely resemble performers throwing their voices than simple parroting. I believe there is even something of a vaudeville tone to DeLillo’s physical descriptions of Mr. Tuttle. For example, the attention paid to his sunken chin evokes the hinged mechanism of a ventriloquist’s dummy, or the comedically shaped head of a character like Howdy Doody. In chapter three, Lauren describes Mr. Tuttle as sitting “with his legs awkwardly crossed, one trouser leg riding up his calf, and she could see that he’d knotted a length of string around the top of his sock to keep it from sagging. It made her think of someone” (BA 48). The language used to describe Mr. Tuttle emphasizes again and again his stiff and not entirely convincing mimicry. Like a wooden dummy, Mr. Tuttle only gives “the impression of” life. He does not exhibit understanding, but rather performs a motion that apes understanding, “He moved his hand in a manner that seemed to mean she didn’t have to say anything further. Of course he understood. But maybe not” (BA 49). He plays the other side of the comedy duo, delivering on lines fed to him by a straight man:

She whispered, “What are you doing?” “I am doing this. This yes that. Say some words.” “Did you ever? Look at me. Did you ever talk to Rey? The way we are talking now.” “We are talking now.” “Yes. Are you saying yes? Say yes. When did you know him.” “I know him where he was.” (BA 64)

Even his name is cartoonish, and Lauren explicitly sees him at one point as “a dummy in a red club chair, his head turned toward her” – the classic posture of a ventriloquist and his or her dummy, only *sans* a lap or knee. The crucial point is that Lauren and Mr. Tuttle’s dialogue, if it can be called that, is an illusion. Only one person speaks here, and the particular structure of traumatic experience precludes Lauren from recognizing herself as the source of this speech.

This misrecognition is another version of Lauren’s psychic dissociation and simultaneous refusal to reenter the world of normal time, for doing so would also require an acceptance of

death's inevitability. It is in just such a confluence of time and voice that Lauren realizes Mr. Tuttle is someone, or something, out of the ordinary – when he speaks for the first time in the present tense:

This shift from past tense to present had the sound of something overcome, an obstacle or restriction. He had to extend himself to get it out. And she heard something in his voice. She didn't know what it was but it made her get up and go to the window....It wasn't outright impersonation but she heard elements of her voice, the clipped delivery, the slight buzz deep in her throat, her pitch, her sound, and how difficult at first, unearthly almost, to detect her own voice coming from someone else, from him, and then how deeply disturbing. (*BA* 51-2)

This ventriloquist's act is raised to a higher power, as the dummy performs the ventriloquist who does not recognize the voice in the air as her own – thrown, as it is, through a ring of mediation and denial.

Lauren allows herself to fall deeper into this misrecognition because she cannot look squarely at Rey's absence. Instead, she has filled the empty space left by Rey with an impossibility, his return, in order to ward off death. When Mr. Tuttle begins to recite Rey's own stories, in what Lauren hears as Rey's own voice, she thinks, "This was not some communication with the dead. It was Rey alive in the course of a talk he'd had with her, in this room, not long after they'd come here" (*BA* 63). She realizes that what is taking place is not supernatural; but then a return of that sort is not what Lauren desires anyway. Lauren is trapped in her grief *not* by the wish to hear Rey from the beyond, since that would mean he was still dead. Instead, she is trapped by the impossible desire to see "Rey alive."

Lauren fulfills this dangerous fantasy by accepting Mr. Tuttle's performance of Rey as somehow real, even when she can clearly see the artifice in action:

She looked at him, a cartoon head and body, chinless, stick-figured, but he knew how to make her husband live in the air that rushed from his lungs into his vocal folds – air to sounds, sounds to words, words the man, shaped faithfully on his lips and tongue. (*BA* 64)

On the very next page, Lauren is disturbed by Mr. Tuttle's strange mode of conversation, noting, "He didn't register facial responses to things she said and this threw her off" (BA 68). Again, this is because Mr. Tuttle is a like a ventriloquist's dummy, flashing the same fixed grin and unblinking eyes throughout a performance. He even seems partially aware of this, saying to Lauren, "'But you know. I am living.' He half hit himself on the cheek, a little joke perhaps" (BA 71). The punchline is that he is, in fact, a blockhead, a wooden thing "presenting the appearance of" life. Ruth Leys, in her article "Death Masks: Kardiner and Ferenczi on Psychic Trauma," reads more into the type of fixed countenance Mr. Tuttle presents, and her observation is worth quoting at length:

The... stony mask and absence of facial mimicry here expresses the idea of a protective shield behind which the [victim of traumatic loss] attempts *antimimetically* to preserve his [or her] identity from the danger of annihilation: it is the perfect image of defense against the world, the asocial. But in its perfection and immobility the [victim's] rigid masklike expression represents the face of the dead man with whom he [or she] is sympathetically – mimetically – identified. The mask is thus also the image of the traumatic *failure* of defense, of the mimetic identification that defines the trauma: in short, the social. (62-3)

If Mr. Tuttle is the embodiment of Lauren's loss, then we can impute his 'death mask' to her traumatic symptomatology, and his physical mimesis of the dead to be another manifestation of her desire "to disappear in Rey's smoke."

Chapter four shows Lauren extending this misidentification to the wider world, as throughout things are mistaken for people and voices for life precisely because she cannot bear to know that Rey, too, is now a cold, dead thing who no longer speaks. She becomes fixated on her friend Mariella's answering machine:

A synthesized voice said, *Please / leave / a message / af/ter / the / tone*. The words were not spoken but generated and they were separated by brief but deep dimensions....How strange the discontinuity. It seemed a quantum hop, one word to the next. (BA 69)

In this case, Lauren recognizes the voice for what it is, another type of dummy that speaks “not [in] words so much as syllables but not that either.” The voice on the answering machine gives the impression of life, designed precisely to be misheard as a living person. Lauren makes a similar mistake while out on a drive, when she sees “a man sitting on his porch” and believes “in that small point in time...that she saw him complete.” But things are not what they seem:

When the car moved past the house, in the pull of the full second, she understood that she was not looking at a seated man but at a paint can placed on a board that was balanced between two chairs. The white and yellow can was his face, the board was his arms and the mind and heart of the man were in the air somewhere, already lost in the voice of the news reader on the radio. (*BA* 72)

The posture described evokes a scarecrow, which is yet another thing fashioned to mimic life and, it should be added, to ward off harbingers of death.

In chapter five, Lauren, too, attempts numerous impossible reconstructions meant to ward off death, but each of these proves flawed or inadequate. While pushing Mr. Tuttle to talk about Rey, Lauren discovers even her own memories are missing something, ““Who is Rey? A man. So tall. Look. So tall. This tall. And a mustache. A man with hair on his upper lip. Look at me, geek. How tall? This tall. A man with bushy hair on his upper lip. But then he shaved his mustache.’ He shaved his mustache. She’d forgotten this until now” (*BA* 77). Lauren literally cannot (re)member Rey correctly, cannot put his body back together in the right order. In light of this failure, Lauren begins to refashion herself, “to sand her body” (*BA* 78). This proves to be the first step in Lauren’s return to body artistry: “This was her work, to disappear from all her former venues of aspect and bearing and to become a blankness, a body slate erased of every past resemblance” (*BA* 86).

Through this self-effacement, Lauren creates an open space through which Rey might return, and simultaneously eradicates herself so as to become nothing like Rey. She also becomes

a thing like Mr. Tuttle, an embodiment of all-consuming grief that can only speak loss. Lauren even describes him as the physical boundary of an abyss, “She began to understand that she could not miss Rey, could not consider his absence, the loss of Rey, without thinking along the margins of Mr. Tuttle” (BA 84). And she teeters dangerously close to its edge, as her denial of time is both a rejection of death’s inevitability and a simultaneous attempt to commiserate from outside of death’s eternal stagnation. To fall out of time, or to remain in this “space set off from time,” is to entertain the (im)possibility of crossing “from one nameless state to another, except that it clearly isn’t” (BA 85).

Lauren comes closest to slipping irrevocably out of time and into irredeemable melancholia just when Mr. Tuttle begins to reconstruct the original site of trauma, the last exchange Lauren had with Rey before his suicide. But in her grief, Lauren mistakes this performance for the originary moment:

It was Rey’s voice all right, it was her husband’s tonal soul, but she didn’t think the man was remembering. It was happening now. This is what she thought. She watched him struggle in his utterance and thought it was happening, somehow, now, in his frame, in his fractured time, and he is only reporting, helplessly, what they say. (BA 89)

Lauren’s break is total when she thinks, “Rey is alive now in this man’s mind, in his mouth and body and cock.” In effect, the trauma is taking place again, even to another Lauren, as she watches herself:

crawling toward him. The image is there in front of her. She is crawling across the floor and it is nearly real to her. She feels something has separated, softly come unfixated, and she tried to pull him down to the floor with her, stop him, keep him here, or crawls up onto him or into him, dissolving, or only lies prone and sobs unstoppably, being watched by herself from above. (BA 89-90)

What has come unfixated is any tie Lauren held to normal time or temporal reality. In this moment, when a performance is mistaken for the originary moment, Lauren submits to an

unending present, an atemporal existence that mimics the thing-ness of death even while it denies death's finality.

It is this impossible originary moment that gives traumatic experience its structure and repetitious temporality, and it is only when Lauren recognizes, belatedly, that the originary moment does not, in fact, exist outside of its effects and repetitions – outside, that is, its performance, that she will be able to return to time and to life. Once again, chapter six begins with a paragraph voiced in the present tense, as Lauren thinks about the most mundane of accidents that yet shares much with the experience of trauma:

You stand at a table shuffling papers and you drop something. Only you don't know it. It takes a second or two before you know it and even then you know it only as a formless distortion of the teeming space around your body. But once you know you've dropped something, you hear it hit the floor, belatedly....Now that you know you dropped it, you remember how it happened, or half remember, or sort of see it maybe, or something else. The paperclip hits the floor with an end-to-end bounce, faint and weightless, a sound for which there is no imitative word, the sound of a paperclip falling, but when you bend to pick it up, it isn't there. (*BA* 91-2)

The process is what matters here, as the accident itself, the moment in which the paperclip is dropped, is neither acknowledged nor remembered as it was; rather, the originary moment of trauma is only recognized “belatedly” and revised in memory. And the paperclip itself goes missing, even as its sound continues to ring in one's ears. But one is impelled to search for the paperclip precisely because one is now the person who has dropped a paperclip. Or, in the case of traumatic loss, one now knows oneself as the survivor, an identity that is constituted in its relation to what has been lost. Survivors search for the originary moment because they are in a double bind, unable to return to life prior to loss yet incapable of accepting a life defined by the lost object.

For all intents and purposes, the originary moment is not there and never was. It is only through representations of the traumatic moment that trauma is constructed at all. Lauren cannot and will not find the cause of trauma, since:

She saw it mostly in retrospect because she didn't know what she was seeing at first and had to recreate the ghostly moment, write it like a line in a piece of fiction....and how would she ever know for sure unless it happened again, and even then, she thought, and even then again. (*BA* 93)

Tellingly, a break in the text immediately follows this realization, and we hear Lauren's thoughts, "It isn't true because it can't be true. Rey is not alive in this man's consciousness or in his palpable verb tense, his walking talking continuum" (*BA* 93). Mr. Tuttle's "continuum," Lauren now belatedly recognizes, is the eternally stagnant present, the thing-ness of death that is the end of time. Lauren's "body work" has changed, too, and is no longer work of pure destruction, the shearing and exfoliation of an external self being paved flat. Rather, Lauren's repeated stretches and breathing exercises push her back into time, back into the world of the living. She thinks in the midst of exertion, "Time is the only narrative that matters. It stretches events and makes it possible for us to suffer and come out of it." Mr. Tuttle, she realizes, "is in another structure, another culture, where time is something like itself, sheer and bare, empty of shelter" (*BA* 94).

When Peter Boxall states that "in the time of mourning" time itself "has lost its sense of identity," he misses the mark (216). Time has no narrative of its own, and is most "like itself" in the confluence of then and now audible in Mr. Tuttle's speech. To amend Boxall's statement, when the survivor of traumatic experience wakes in this evacuated time, it is the survivor who loses their sense of identity because the foundations of reference – past and future, life and death – are no longer there to provide "shelter." To remain herself, Lauren must escape the blankness of this all-time and resume forward temporal motion like that of sequential narrative. Not long

after she sees Mr. Tuttle as the impossibility that he is, denizen of what Boxall describes as “an unbroken time, a time that is not in process but that forms a kind of groundless ground,” Mr. Tuttle begins to fade away (219). First he stops eating and speaking, then goes missing for a time, and eventually vanishes altogether.

To escape her melancholia and return to life, Lauren must also reenter time and relinquish her desire for Rey’s impossible return. The sheer impossibility of Mr. Tuttle is dramatized most forcefully to Lauren by his apparent ability to speak the future. And while she walks alone, listening to his prophetic voice on a tape recorder, she oscillates between the fantasy of timelessness he offers and the reality of life-in-time:

He’d known this was going to happen. These were the words she would say. He’d been in there with her. I’ll clean it up later. She wanted to create her future, not enter a state already shaped to her outline....She listened to him say it, on the tape, in a voice that was probably hers. But she could have made it up, much of it. Not from scratch. But in retrospect, in memory. (*BA* 100-1)

As I pointed out earlier, Mr. Tuttle does not “shed space” the way living people do when they move through the world. He is not differentiated from the real. Rather, he is a seamless part of that world, and to “enter a state already shaped to her outline” would make Lauren a part of that indivisible thing as well. To make sense of traumatic loss is similarly to cut away the surrounding fabric of the originary moment, and to shape something “in retrospect [and] in memory” from the material that surrounds an unknowable center.

If meaning is also located only “in retrospect,” then life must pass through time, for “it makes and shapes you.” When Lauren, already shaken from her melancholia by the impossibility of Mr. Tuttle’s prophetic speech, thinks on what he may actually be (possibly “a retarded man sadly gifted in certain specialized areas”), her pronouns become ambiguous:

And in these nights since he’d left she sometimes sat with a book in her lap, eyes closed, and felt him living somewhere in the dark, and it is colder where he is, it is wintrier there,

and she wanted to take him in, try to know him in the spaces where his chaos lurks, in all the soft-cornered rooms and unraveling verbs, the parts of speech where he is meant to locate his existence, and in the material place where Rey lives in him, alive again, word for word, touch for touch, and she opened and closed her eyes and thought in a blink the world had changed. He violates the limits of the human. (*BA* 102)

In this passage, Lauren becomes aware of Mr. Tuttle's particular inhumanity, and this partial knowledge will allow her to begin the process of working through her traumatic experience.

Laura Di Prete explicates it as follows:

Put repeatedly in a position of witnessing herself from without, Lauren faces her internal divisions, struggling to confront the insistently ungraspable fact that Mr. Tuttle/Rey is a psychic formation within her own consciousness – is, indeed, herself speaking what she cannot know. (488)

Lauren must see Mr. Tuttle for what he is, an empty thing that embodies the death of Rey even while it apes life by mouthing along to her thrown voice. The paragraphs that close chapter six show Lauren reclaiming her voice by performing others, and reappropriating the right to speak her own loss by performing that which she had mistaken as the voice of another: “she started using his,” that is, Mr. Tuttle's voice (*BA* 103).

Once again, the text is interrupted by a stark headline, and its title arrests us just as the announcement of Rey's death did, “**Body Art In Extremis: Slow, Spare And Painful.**” The description of Lauren provided in the review arrests us, too, as she appears “colorless, bloodless and ageless” (*BA* 105). This is the first time we see Lauren outside of the isolated community she had retreated to, and in the space between chapter six and this she has transformed herself into something that does not live as we live, a thing apart from our time and our common end. The reviewer sums up Lauren's art, and this particular piece, titled *Body Time*, as follows, “Hartke's work is not self-strutting or self-lacerating. She is acting, always in the process of becoming another or exploring some root identity” (*BA* 107). These are curious assessments.

For one, the notion of “becoming another” has proven over the course of the novel to be a dead-end, a path that can only lead to stagnation. To allow one to become another, to accept Mr. Tuttle as Rey, would violate the specificity of Rey’s life and ignore the reality of his loss – would, in fact, be the loss of loss that precipitates melancholia. Instead, Lauren, like the protagonist of *Hiroshima mon amour* described by Caruth:

subsumes the event of death in the continuous history of her life. Seeing thus inaugurates the forgetting of the singularity of her lover by forgetting the referential specificity of his death....the story of her exit [from madness] comes to mean the emergence into a full, truer knowledge that forgetting is indeed a necessary part of understanding. (UE 32)

And the notion of a “root identity” is exactly what has been displaced by traumatic loss itself. To once again know “surely who you are,” you must work through the traumatic loss that has so forcefully fractured the body and psyche. That Mr. Tuttle or Lauren can become another inherently contradicts the claim to a root identity unless one accepts this identity to be a construction of repeatable gestures – to be, that is, a performance. The survivor of trauma recapitulates “in extremis” the process of becoming that constitutes normative subjectivity. And the structure of working through trauma is a distilled version of the structure that gives shape to the identities of those who have not experienced traumatic loss.

Lauren explores these possibilities in *Body Time* by performing others, like the Japanese woman encountered earlier in the novel and a businesswoman caught in a temporal loop. This sense of being out of time is reinforced by the projection of a video throughout the piece, the web-cam fixed on a stretch of highway in Kotka, Finland. Lauren herself believes time to be the central concern of the piece:

Maybe the idea is to think of time differently....Stop time or stretch it out, or open it up. Make a still life that’s living, not painted. When time stops, so do we. We don’t stop, we become stripped down, less self-assured. I don’t know. In dreams or high fevers or doped up or depressed. Doesn’t time slow down or seem to stop? What’s left? Who’s left? (BA 109)

And time surely is the piece's main theme, but only in its relationship with death, the end of time that death is or will be for us all. In order to escape the loop of unbearable loss, Lauren attempts to do what is impossible anywhere but in art: namely, to straddle the line between life and death, to fashion a "still life that's living." This is dramatized in *Body Time* when she performs loss itself.

The dissociative structure of traumatic experience leaves the survivor alone with the wound. And, trauma studies tell us, it is the wound that speaks loss. But the wound is also the embodiment of loss, a negative thing with no life of its own. The voice that issues from the wound is the survivor's own voice thrown across the room. As Laura Di Prete says of the case at hand, "the split of the relationship between Lauren and Rey into the triangle Lauren—Mr. Tuttle—Rey allows for the double formation of a teller—listener and sets in motion a process of internal testimony" (490). Furthermore, because trauma is not experienced the first time around, the originary moment only exists in repetition, in the retelling. These repetitions most often take the form of traumatic symptomatology, as the "high fevers" of irremedial grief or the night terrors of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. But there is an alternative.

If we are able to recognize the wound as a ventriloquist dummy that misappropriates our own voice, and trauma itself as inseparable from representations of it, then we may be able to work through trauma by reclaiming our voice and repossessing ourselves; indeed, we may be able to externalize this testimony. Lauren works toward this in *Body Time* by lip-syncing the wound, by performing Mr. Tuttle. Performing her own loss, Lauren exposes the performance at the heart of all traumatic repetition, as well as the repetition that constitutes all identity. And while her voice, thrown through the body of Mr. Tuttle and back again, remains "too small and

secluded and complicated” to undo traumatic loss, it does allow her to exit, however briefly, the “space set off from time” and the stagnation of a living death.

Performing the wound does not cure Lauren’s trauma any more than it brings back Rey, and Lauren returns to the secluded house in chapter seven because loss still lingers. This chapter, too, opens with an epigraph in the present tense, but this one is much briefer and more ominous:

The dead squirrel you see in the driveway, dead and decapitated, turns out to be a strip of curled burlap, but you look at it, you walk past it, even so, with a mild tinge of terror and pity. (*BA* 113)

The prose sounds precipitous, as if Lauren stands on the edge of a very high fall. But something has changed. Unlike earlier chapters in which things were mistaken for living people, here Lauren mistakes things for other dead things. We are closer, it would seem, to a normative stability, a return to reality in which the difference between life and death is clear.

But not quite, which is why the text must implicitly ask, ‘Why come back to the house?’ “Because it was lonely. Because smoke rolled out of the hollows in the wooded hills and the ferns were burnt brown by time....And because he’d said what he’d said, that she would be here in the end” (*BA* 113). Lauren refers to Mr. Tuttle’s prophecy that she would remain in the house past the lease; and to do so would be to “enter a state already shaped to her,” to become a thing that is a seamless and undifferentiated part of the world. This is the temptation Lauren faces, to join Rey and disappear in his smoke. But Lauren’s reclamation of her own voice has also placed her back in time, as well as reinstated her connection to the living world:

For five straight days she drove out to the point, the headland, because the standing gulls that look a little dumpy on stilt legs become in their flight the slant carriers of all this rockbound time, taking it out of geology, out of science and mind, and giving it soar and loft and body, bringing it into their flight muscles and blood-flow, into their sturdy hammering hearts, their metronomic heart, and because she knew this was the day it would happen. (*BA* 115)

Once again, we are faced with the disturbing foreknowledge that ‘it’ draws near, but this time we are not reading a retelling delivered from the position of the knowing future. Instead, Lauren is aware in advance of what ‘it’ is and anticipates that which will give meaning to the day rather than searches for it in retrospect.

The ‘it’ Lauren feels approaching is a last temptation of sorts, a final crisis of life and death. She asks herself:

Why not sink into it? Let death bring you down. Give death its sway....Why shouldn't his death bring you into some total scandal of garment-rending grief? Why should you accommodate his death? Or surrender to it in thin-lipped tasteful bereavement? Why give him up if you can walk along the hall and find a way to place him within reach? Sink lower, she thought. Let it bring you down. Go where it takes you. (*BA* 118)

Of course, placing Rey within reach is exactly what she did when she spoke her loss through the wooden dummy that was Mr. Tuttle. This is something she has already tried, and in doing so it risked her very life. To make the desired transaction, to “disappear in Rey’s smoke” would be a submission to Mr. Tuttle’s all-time and the stagnation of death and thing-ness. This possibility culminates in Lauren’s conflated vision of Rey and Mr. Tuttle sitting, once again, on the edge of the bed. And this is the precipice so nearby at the beginning of the chapter, the abandonment of reality Lauren leans over, “Take the risk. Believe what you see and hear. It’s the pulse of every secret incrimination you’ve ever felt around the edges of your life” (*BA* 124).

This is the break that leads to madness, that is a denial of time and life. It is a fantasy that, if entered, would be inescapable. It is also, strangely, thought of in a future perfect tense that cannot be:

They will have already slept and wakened and gone down to breakfast, where they muddle through their separate routines, pouring the milk and shaking the juice, a blue jay watching from the feeder....It is the simplest thing in the world when she goes out to his car and takes his car keys and hides them, hammers them, beats them, eats them, buries them in the bone soil on a strong bright day in late summer, after a roaring storm. (*BA* 125)

This is another cry for the impossible, to go back to the “last days” prior to loss, but with knowledge of that loss so that it can be made different. It is also a plea to return to the “self-awareness” that was fractured by loss, a desperate cry to return to that “strong bright day” in whose light things seem so clear. In the midst of this breakdown, Lauren stands outside of a room, the room she found Mr. Tuttle in, and sinks to the floor with “a moan that remained unsounded.” She has, it seems, stepped off the ledge. Rather than dive headlong into the abyss between life and death, she sits there, “thinking into the blankness of her decision” (*BA* 126).

What she has decided is not explicit, even to herself, but may be read as an acceptance of death and reaffirmation of life. Rising from the floor, she thinks, “Her mother died when she was nine. It wasn’t her fault. It had nothing to do with her” (*BA* 126). She has, it seems, come to terms with more than just the loss of Rey. She has come to terms with loss itself, has accepted its reality and accepted it as her own. Looking around, the room is empty. And she experiences another belated realization, as the light coming through the window is “so vibrant she could see the true colors of the walls and floors. She’d never seen the walls before. The bed was empty. She’d known it was empty all along but was only catching up” (*BA* 126). Lauren has worked through her traumatic loss by escaping the fantasy of ‘What would you have different?’ and reclaiming the voice of the wound as her own. In the final physical gesture that closes the novel, we can almost feel Lauren’s heart beating:

She threw the window open. She didn’t know why she did this. Then she knew. She wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and feel the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was. (*BA* 126)

Lauren can now return to an identity defined by its relation to the living world, rather than remain in stasis by desiring to be a dead object. Though Lauren cannot return to her life before

loss, she can return to a world that affirms her survival and in which she can differentiate her self.

By performing the wound, by lip-syncing the voice of loss as misheard through Mr. Tuttle, Lauren illustrates the performed nature of traumatic experience. The originary moment of trauma remains inaccessible, and we may see in Lauren's art how trauma itself is constituted in repetition, in the performance of trauma's effects through metaphorical symptoms and iterable gestures. She restores to her words and gestures their power to communicate her own identity. And though Lauren cannot find language that might replace Rey or restore him to life, she has managed to speak the unspeakable through "a language of bereavement, a language that in turning inward articulates the inaccessibility of knowledge in the aftermath of trauma" (Di Prete 496). But this language only becomes comprehensible when offered to others, as the movement of the inaccessible between performer and spectator or auditor illuminates the outer edge of loss, much as traumatic experience illuminates the outer edge of the symbolic order, language, and identity itself.

To paraphrase Caruth, I define performed trauma as the knowledge of forgetting addressed to another. And performing this loss for others recapitulates traumatic loss. In DeLillo's novel, the recapitulation allows Lauren to reintegrate the fractured pieces of both body and voice, as "the erasure of the event takes place in the historical and social situation of the integrated body" (*UE* 33). Lauren's "bodily life...has become an endless attempt to witness her lover's death" (*UE* 38). But by addressing this crisis of knowledge to an audience, she guarantees symbolic return through a social exchange. By always asking the same question – Do you understand? – the performer of trauma invites the listener to answer that which cannot be affirmed by experiential reality or traumatized memory. Rather, in the space between house and

stage a truth may be fashioned out of traumatic experience precisely because its history is not referential but intersubjective. Recognizing the performed content of trauma allows Lauren to work through the fantasy of the originary moment and reclaim her self through others, the Other of language, and the other that was her own voice issuing from the wound. Both identity and trauma arise from the repetition or performance of effects for which there is no fixed and stable ground. Lauren is only able to return to a normative stability by symbolizing previously inexpressible loss for others and returning to the vivifying flow of time.

3. *Falling Man*: “trying to find himself in the crowd”

Published in 2007, *Falling Man* is Don DeLillo’s much anticipated “9/11 novel,” a direct address to the events of that day. Like *The Body Artist*, it, too, features people struggling to understand the unbearable nature of their survival; but the length of *Falling Man* (nearly twice that of *The Body Artist*) allows DeLillo to follow many productive avenues in his exploration of traumatic experience and the limits it imposes on representation. The public nature of the event, as well as the global factors and players that precipitated it, also allow DeLillo to wrestle with trauma’s relation to history, a topic that could not be addressed in detail in the much more circumscribed setting of *The Body Artist*.

In *Falling Man*, the central protagonist is Keith Neudecker, a middle-aged man estranged from his wife and son and an employee in one of the World Trade Center towers struggling to understand his survival of the 9/11 attacks. As he did in *The Body Artist*, DeLillo immediately places readers in the position of the traumatized subject, as the novel opens in a place apart, “not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night.” But, in contrast to our first reading of *The Body Artist*, we recognize this place as Ground Zero. It is familiar to us, and we know that we, too, now live in its shadow, “The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now.” Like other traumatized subjects, the “he” of the narrative has lost his internal bearings and become dissociated from himself; the novel places him in a liminal position from which both his inner and outer world are visible, “Things inside were distant and still, where he was supposed to be. It happened everywhere around him...” (*FM* 3). Like the opening of *The Body Artist*, when *Falling Man* begins “it” has already happened and requires a second telling.

But *Falling Man* is different in that we do, in fact, know what “it” is, what will make this day different from all others – the destruction of the World Trade Center. The traumatic retelling – experiencing the traumatic moment again in an effort to locate the meaning missed the first time around – functions meta-narratively, that is, beyond the text, because every detail of the scene is liable to evoke personal memories within its readers. Every reader of *Falling Man* is also a citizen of the post-9/11 world, and more than likely a spectator to the event through its global television coverage. “Smoke and ash...with office paper flashing past...otherworldly things in the morning pall,” each of these may stir real visual memories of footage from Ground Zero. Furthermore, the man we read about becomes an archetypal figure of the victims. DeLillo describes him simply as one who “wore a suit and carried a briefcase.” He emerges slowly from the cloud and into the world after loss, no longer the man he was but now a survivor.

Survivors of trauma attempt to witness not only in the originary moment, during which ‘it’ is necessarily missed, but also through each repetition that misses again. As readers of a traumatic narrative, we share in these repeated attempts to witness retrospectively, alongside Keith and others who “were walking backwards, looking into the core of it all, all those writhing lives back there, and things kept falling, scorched objects trailing lines of fire” (*FM* 4). DeLillo provides a stirring visual image for the internal trauma done to the victims through the woman Keith sees “with police tape wrapped around her head and face, yellow caution tape that marks the limits of a crime scene” (*FM* 5). During this opening scene, Keith will experience other, smaller belated reactions that will return throughout the novel as he attempts to understand his survival, including the briefcase he unthinkingly takes from the building and the damage done to his arm (*FM* 5). In this, the originary moment that is simultaneously a retelling, his view of the world has become incomplete:

There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them (*FM 5*).

Like Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist*, traumatic experience has severed Keith from the world he knew.

Also (quite literally) dropped into this opening scene are the falling men and women, “figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space,” who will come to be the central symbol of the novel’s key theme, the struggle to understand (*FM 4*). Falling comes to be the action that most explicitly represents traumatic dissociation, and falling is not limited to the unfortunate people trapped in the towers. Keith, perhaps in unconscious mimetic recognition, genders one of the towers in a way that turns it into a falling man, “He heard the sound of the second fall, or felt it in the trembling air, the north tower coming down, a soft awe of voices in the distance. That was him coming down, the north tower” (*FM 5*). Like the breakfast scene in *The Body Artist*, the opening of *Falling Man* sets this particular day off from the rest of the text. Both novels speak primarily in the present tense, but this present is defined by its relation to the past and to the missed originary moment. Both narratives issue from the time after loss, and both dramatize the survivor’s attempt to understand his or her survival through repetitions of the traumatic experience. But because the trauma that shapes *Falling Man* is a real and public one, it allows DeLillo to employ images and repetitious structures that work on the reader’s individual experience of 9/11. The novel, then, functions dialogically to clear a space for readers to ask the same question posed by performers performing trauma: Do you understand?

As readers, we are like Keith, who cannot even begin to delineate the outside edge of this experience until he is leaving it, nor grasp where its impact will propel him: “It wasn’t until he got in the truck and shut the door that he understood where he’d been going all along” (*FM 6*).

He ends up at the home of Lianne, his estranged wife and mother of their son Justin. The family dynamic was missing from *The Body Artist*, and in *Falling Man*, DeLillo provides a view of how (particularly public) unexpected calamity can instigate what is known in trauma studies as “secondary trauma.” In the introductory essay to *Beyond Trauma: Cultural and Societal Dynamics*, a collection of essays by medical and mental health researchers and practitioners, editors Rolf J. Kleber, Charles R. Figley, and Berthold P. R. Gersons emphasize that trauma is a social phenomenon:

Trauma goes beyond the individual....Traumatic stress does not occur in a vacuum....Posttraumatic stress disorder is a syndrome that occurs following all types of extreme stressors. However, it is not only the event itself that causes the characteristic symptoms. The psychological atmosphere in a society is clearly a factor that facilitates or hinders the process of coping with stressful life events....[Cultural influences] determine how a traumatic experience may challenge an individual sense of identity, as well as the violation and disruption associated with the experience. (1-4)

Figley and Kleber further explain, in their article “Beyond the ‘Victim’: Secondary Traumatic Stress,” how traumatic experience can ‘contaminate’ beyond the reach of a discrete event and ‘infect’ those close to the victim of the event itself. They distinguish “primary stressors” as “confrontation with...an extreme event,” and go on to define a “secondary traumatic [or stressor]” as:

the knowledge of a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other. For people who are in some way close to a victim, the exposure to this knowledge may also be a confrontation with the powerlessness and disruption. *Secondary traumatic stress* refers to the behaviors and emotions resulting from this knowledge. It is the stress resulting from hearing about the event and/or helping or attempting to help a traumatized or suffering person. This conceptualization of primary and secondary traumatic stress describes the distinction between those “in harm’s way” and those who care for them and become impaired in the process. (78)

Further on, the authors say that “witnessing” encompasses not only observation of another’s traumatic experience, but also “merely having the knowledge that a loved one experienced

trauma” (84). The authors conclude the essay by describing secondary trauma as “a form of empathy” (93).

Lianne is a subject clearly afflicted by secondary trauma, and her shock is twofold because of the preexisting rift in her marriage. Keith’s sudden appearance at her door is surprising not only because she knew he worked in the towers and feared for his life, but also because he had been distant from the family for a lengthy time prior to the planes. She tells her mother Nina that when he arrives it is as an apparition, a thing from the other side, “It was not possible, up from the dead, there he was in the doorway. It was so lucky Justin was here with you. Because it would have been awful for him to see his father like that. Like gray soot head to toe. I don’t know, like smoke, standing there with blood on his face and clothes” (*FM* 8). As they are throughout the novel, smoke and ash serve as emblems of the dead, coming to stand in for the remains of those who didn’t escape the towers as well as those who did. This cloud also reminds us of Rey from *The Body Artist* and Lauren’s desire, as the traumatized survivor, to join Rey or trade places with him, to “disappear in Rey’s smoke.”

Due to the larger cast and scope of *Falling Man*, in this chapter I will first read Keith, Lianne, and another survivor, Florence, as traumatized subjects whose relationships explore secondary or public trauma. Their traumatic experiences run counter to what I’d like to call the process of dying, a much more familiar theme explored at length in DeLillo’s novels from the 20th century, and in this novel embodied in Lianne’s mother Nina and the Alzheimer’s patients in Lianne’s writing group. Protagonists in earlier works by DeLillo, for instance a novel like *White Noise* or a play like *Love Lies Bleeding*, struggle to assimilate their foreseen death over time. They struggle, that is, to come to terms with death’s constant presence and exert a measure of control by keeping death in view. This is the exact opposite of the sudden and unexpected nature

of traumatic experience, or the unforeseen eruption of the real. But the people who see death coming share with traumatized subjects those rituals and repetitious performances that attempt to master or impute meaning to death in life. I believe that for the victims in *Falling Man*, working through may hinge upon acting out, as Dominick LaCapra argues in *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. He says that acting out is, in the case of traumatic representation, “a mode of repetition offering a measure of critical purchase on problems and responsible control in action which would permit desirable change” (209). For Keith, this novel’s exemplar of traumatic experience, these ritualized performances take the form of physical therapy and his life as a professional poker player. All of these attempts to perform death speak to the recurring motif of *natura morta* that interrupts the text and characters’ thoughts throughout the novel. This aesthetic of ‘still-life’ is dramatized most forcefully through the explicit performance of death seen during the street theater or art happenings perpetrated by the Falling Man of the novel’s title, but I will reserve my direct analysis of these performances for the final chapter⁶.

Early in the novel, Lianne and her mother Nina point out the traumatic nature of Keith’s survival and return, as well as the repetitious circumstances of the WTC attack:

“I thought he was dead.” “So did I,” Nina said, “So many watching. Thinking he’s dead, she’s dead.” “I know.” “Watching the building fall.” “First one, then the other. I know,” her mother said (*FM* 11).

Keith remarks to Lianne on this repetitious structure again when he later sees rebroadcast footage of the planes:

“It still looks like an accident, the first one. Even from this distance, way outside the thing, how many days later. I’m standing here thinking it’s an accident.” “Because it has to be.” “It has to be,” he said. “The way the camera sort of shows surprise.” “But only the first one.” “Only the first,” she said. “The second plane, by the time the second plane appears,” he said, “we’re a little older and wiser.” (*FM* 135)

We are slightly older, by minutes, but no wiser, as the second plane is a unique trauma, despite its recapitulation of the first, and will not provide the comfort or illusion of understanding. That meaning, I argue, must be fashioned in repetition.

In the coming days, DeLillo uses Keith and Lianne to explore the interplay of psychic trauma, memory and forgetting in much the same language as in *The Body Artist*. One remarkably direct example of trauma's similar characterization is Keith's experience in an MRI machine as he receives treatment for his injured hand:

The noise was unbearable, alternating between the banging-shattering sound and an electronic pulse of varying pitch. He listened to the music and thought of what the radiologist had said, that once it's over, in her Russian accent, you forget instantly the whole experience so how bad can it be, she said and he thought this sounded like a description of dying. But that was another matter, wasn't it, in another kind of noise, and the trapped man does not come sliding out of his tube. (*FM* 19)

Here, the machine Keith occupies is meant to dispel exactly that traumatic uncertainty that is plaguing Keith – namely, the unbearable nature of his survival. As a medical device, the MRI verifies objectively Keith's life and health, which should limit the crisis he experiences as a traumatized victim struggling to understand the unbearable nature of his survival. But the stress it places on Keith, the close quarters and disturbing noises, as well as its diagnostic function, return Keith to his late trauma. When the technician proposes forgetting as an ameliorative measure, Keith associates forgetting with dying; similarly, when he reflects on the “trapped man” in his tube, he may metonymically associate the plastic and metal cylinder he lies in with the winged cylinders that crashed into the World Trade Center.

Lianne, too, has been traumatized, and will experience numerous belated realizations as she, over time, begins to recall “things she didn't know she'd absorbed” (*FM* 126). As one traumatized by secondary stressors, she feels a “selfish guardianship of the survivor,” that is, Keith, and is “determined to hold exclusive rights” (*FM* 20). Kai Erikson says that “trauma has

both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies” and that what DeLillo calls “guardianship” is common to the *ad hoc* communities born of traumatic events (186). This wagon-circling was clearly visible in the days after 9/11, as the nation rallied around cities like N.Y. and D.C.; but those directly hit – Manhattanites, widows, first responders, etc. – began to huddle in more closely knit groups. Erikson describes the process as follows:

The net effect is to set the afflicted apart....traumatic experiences work their way so thoroughly into the grain of the affected community that they come to supply its prevailing mood and temper, dominate its imagery and its sense of self, govern the way its members relate to one another. The point to be made here is not that calamity serves to strengthen the bonds linking people together – it does not, most of the time – but that the shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a source of kinship. (189-90)

Lianne feels palpably different from others because of her proximity to the calamity, and her reaction to the trauma is further colored by the troubled circumstances of her romance with Keith. As one half of a fractured marriage, Lianne desires to be that which Keith desires. And as one caring for a traumatized subject, Lianne hopes to be that which provides Keith knowledge of life, to be, with their son Justin, “those nearby who mattered” (*FM* 20).

She is also possessive of her status as a survivor, and dismisses outside attempts to understand her own half-understood traumatic knowledge as inadequate. Her friend Carol supportively tells Lianne to focus on having “him back,” but Lianne briskly tells her “You don’t know anything” (*FM* 141). Though clinically a secondary traumatic, Lianne’s experience is more visceral and direct than Carol’s. As such, she seeks affirmation through physical intimacy, visible in her admission to Keith that “I watched you. I felt I knew you in a way I’d never known you before. We were a family. That’s what it was. That’s how we did it” (*FM* 215). Of course, this community of survivors contains hierarchies of its own, most directly related to the primary/secondary traumatic stressor split. Though the effects of trauma will be completely unique to each, survivors may judge each other based on things like proximity to the event,

number of loved ones lost, or degree of physical damage sustained. This will affect Keith and Lianne's relationship such that it will not, and perhaps cannot, last, at least not without complications, because "[s]he wanted to be safe in the world and he did not" (*FM* 216). Keith cannot communicate with Lianne the way he does with another survivor like Florence precisely because of these factors and his sense that Lianne, too, 'doesn't know.'

Keith spends the novel searching for some knowledge amidst the ruins of his traumatic experience, trying to reach some understanding of the unbearable nature of his survival. He needs to reclaim his capacity to "shed space," to borrow a term from *The Body Artist*; while the traumatic event may be displaced in time, the survivor of traumatic experience struggles to relocate his or her place in the world. We can hear the searching in Keith's voice when he sneaks back to his apartment near Ground Zero and stands in the empty hallway, "He said, 'I'm standing here,' and then, louder, 'I'm standing here'" (*FM* 27).

His search also includes returning a lost object to its proper place, specifically the briefcase that he has unknowingly hidden from Lianne and only now sees for the "first time":

The briefcase was smaller than normal and reddish brown with brass hardware, sitting on the closet floor. He'd seen it there before but understood for the first time that it wasn't his. Wasn't his wife's, wasn't his. He'd seen it, even half placed it in some long-lost distance as an object in his hand, the right hand, an object pale with ash, but it wasn't until now that he knew why it was here. (*FM* 35)

Keith's desire to return the briefcase, an object formed of ash, the novel's material marking of death, to either its owner, who would be a fellow survivor, or to the owner's family, mark his attempt to illuminate the threshold between life and death, to come to terms with his survival and the death of so many others. Another lingering physical memorial to trauma that floats through the novel like ash is "organic shrapnel," what a triage medic calls "literally bits and pieces" of bombers or their victims that become lodged in survivors (*FM* 16). Organic shrapnel functions

much like the debris that floats all over the city in the days after the attacks, as both literally spread Ground Zero far and wide and place everyone in direct contact with the victims: “The dead were everywhere, in the air, in the rubble, on rooftops nearby, in the breezes that carried from the river. They were settled in ash and drizzled on windows all along the streets, in his hair and in his clothes” (*FM* 25).

Another manifestation of Keith’s attempt to reclaim his life are his rehabilitative hand exercises, the repetitive motions that he thinks of as

the true countermeasures to the damage he’d suffered in the tower, in the descending chaos. It was not the MRI and not the surgery that brought him closer to well-being. It was this modest home program, the counting of seconds, the counting of repetitions, the times of day he reserved for the exercises, the ice he applied following each set of exercises. (*FM* 40)

These motions are later called “extensions and flexions that resembled prayer,” and in this same paragraph we read Lianne’s thoughts while she watches Keith and Justin playing catch. The physical ease and grace Keith demonstrates show Lianne “a man she’d never known before,” once again emphasizing how trauma displaces the physical referents that conventionally ground subjectivity. Keith will become more attuned to these referents, these physical mannerisms that perform subjectivity as the novel progresses: “He began to think into the day, into the minute....He began to see what he was doing. He noticed things, all the small lost strokes of a day or minute, how he licked his thumb and used it to lift a bread crumb off the plate and put it idly in his mouth. Only it wasn’t so idle anymore” (*FM* 65).

As with Lauren in *The Body Artist*, the bodily experience of being in time is the purest affirmation of life Keith can experience as a traumatized survivor. Lianne, too, shares much with Lauren, including an internal dissociation that becomes manifest in the moment of looking into a mirror: “The moment seemed false to her, a scene in a movie when a character tries to

understand what is going on in her life by looking in the mirror” (FM 47). Like Lauren, Lianne’s specular image no longer provides a tautological affirmation of her identity or the world around her, and she perceives her identity to be split among multiple media. Later, she feels physical intimacy with Keith to be an unmediated instance of pure connection, outside of history, “a laying open of bodies but also of time, the only interval she’d known in these days and nights that was not forced or distorted, hemmed in by the press of events” (FM 69).

Lianne’s response to trauma also resembles Lauren Hartke’s in that its precedent is actually a loss much further removed in time from the present. While it is not revealed until the very last page of *The Body Artist* that Lauren struggles with the loss of her mother at the same time she mourns Rey, Lianne thinks of her father’s suicide very early. It is not until halfway through, though, that the narrator offers a metonymic link between that loss and the circumstances surrounding her experience on and after 9/11. Troubled throughout the novel by the ‘foreign-sounding’ music emanating from a neighbor’s apartment, Lianne angrily confronts the tenant because of the “ultrasensitive” circumstances, resulting in a minor physical assault (FM 119-20). Lianne’s reaction seems disproportionate to the nuisance, even if one forgives her the half-formed association between “the sound of a solo lute from Turkey or Egypt or Kurdistan” and the nineteen Islamic radicals who nearly murdered her husband. But there is another valence to her anger that remains unstated until page 130, when she sits on a cot in her mother’s apartment that used to reside in her father’s Mediterranean home:

Here on a hard cot, on a second visit, was where Lianne was conceived. Jack [her father] told her this when she was twelve years old and would not refer to it again until he called from New Hampshire, ten years later, saying the same things in the same words, the sea breeze, the hard cot, the music floating up from the waterfront, sort of Greek-Oriental. This was some minutes or hours, this phone call, before he gazed into the muzzle blast.

The “ultrasensitive” circumstances Lianne refers to when she confronts the neighbor are much deeper and more personal than a city or nationwide reaction to cultural products from the Near East. Lianne has placed this event, her father’s suicide, in the narrative of her life, and she says later in the novel that “that one memory at least is inescapably secure, the day that has marked her awareness of who she is and how she lives” (*FM* 218); Lianne, however, does not seem wholly aware that her reaction to the “Oriental” music is tied as much to the suicide of her father as it is to nearly losing Keith in the towers.

Interactions with third parties, missing almost entirely from *The Body Artist*, expand the representation of traumatic experience into the social. The most extended and fruitful result of these interactions occupies Keith throughout the middle portion of *Falling Man*, as he does find the owner of the briefcase, a woman named Florence Givens. Returning it to her results in a relationship that movingly dramatizes the effects of trauma, survivors’ attempt to communicate their trauma, and the separation between primarily and secondarily traumatized subjects. As a fellow survivor, Florence feels comfortable sharing her story of survival with Keith, though it too contains the holes and repetitions of any traumatic narrative. Both Florence and Keith feel as he does when he describes taking the briefcase, “See, what happened is I didn’t know I had it. It wasn’t even a case of forgetting. I don’t think I knew” (*FM* 53).

DeLillo mimics the repetition at the heart of trauma by interspersing within Florence’s retelling of her experience short paragraphs whose first phrases form a repeating pattern. The effect is nearly one of refraction, as the light of that day is split into many different rays, much as Florence’s consciousness is now split between then and now. Also, these short paragraphs contain their own internal repetitions or inverted phrases, as well as Florence’s own expressions of having just missed ‘it’ or having left something meaningful out, which illustrates her anxiety

over not knowing what would provide meaning in the first place, or, better said, the first time through.

On page 55, for example, the paragraphs alternate, with nearly every other starting with “She” or “She’d.” In the following block quote, the ellipses contain the sentences in between:

She was dazed and had no sense of time, she said....She saw a woman with burnt hair, hair burnt and smoking, but now she wasn’t sure she’d seen this or heard someone say it....She’d lost her shoes or kicked them off....“Someone said, Asthma. Now that I’m talking, it’s coming back a little bit.”

The narrator states, “She wanted to tell him everything,” and as Florence sinks into her narrative, she reconstructs the originary site of trauma. The openings of each paragraph take on a feeling of immediacy, eventually breaking into a retroactive present tense:

There were flames in elevator shafts. There was a man talking....There were dangling wires....This is where bottles of water were passed up....This is where the firemen went racing past....This is also where she saw someone she knew. (*FM 56-7*)

At this point in her retelling, Florence forgets the name of a tool the man she knew carried, “and she tried to think of the word for the thing” (*FM 57*). Keith provides it for her, “Crowbar,” and suddenly thinks he may have seen the same man rush past him on the stairs. His reaction contains every bit of the uncertainty at the heart of traumatic representation, and also speaks to the intersubjective production of meaning in retrospect:

No reason to ever remember this if she hadn’t mentioned it. Means nothing, he thought. But then it did. Whatever had happened to the man was situated outside the fact that they’d both seen him, at different points in the march down, but it was important, somehow, in some indeterminate way, that he’d been carried in these crossing memories, brought down out of the tower and into this room. (*FM 57*)

Florence says what Keith, too, feels, “If I live to be a hundred I’ll still be on those stairs” (*FM 57*). But the power of Florence’s representation is how it speaks to a fellow survivor. Florence begins to tell her story again, and in it Keith searches for proof of his unbearable survival, “He listened carefully, noting every detail, trying to find himself in the crowd” (*FM 59*). During a

later liaison, Florence comments on the “something about” Keith that manifests in the unique “way [he] holds space,” a remark that evokes Lauren Hartke’s reflections on the way Mr. Tuttle moves through the world. Once again, DeLillo’s characters perceive a physical displacement that accompanies traumatic experience or an effect on the survivor’s ability to ‘shed space’ (*FM* 88). In this same scene, Keith hears in Florence’s laugh “a memory of bearing injury or sustaining loss, possibly lifelong, and the laughter was a kind of shedding, a physical deliverance from old woe, dead skin, if only for a moment” (*FM* 90). DeLillo posits again and again how trauma speaks through the body and how that body moves through the world. Each physical act relates, as Florence says, “What we carry. This is the story in the end.” The survivor’s story seeks out in time and space that other person, or that person one used to be before the originary moment of trauma. In Florence’s case, as for any survivor, she seeks to find “some version of herself, a person who might confirm the grim familiarity of the moment” (*FM* 91).

Keith and Lianne have differing reactions to this dearth of meaning. Feeling “time pressing in,” Lianne attempts to locate specific meaning, and begins to “read everything they wrote about the attacks.” This attempt also girds her desire to edit a book about the run-up to the attacks, which Lianne hopes will allow her to “[s]tand apart. See things clinically, unemotionally....Learn something from the event. Make yourself equal to it” (*FM* 140). But meaning has also become too general, too diffuse. For example, “Keith stopped shaving for a time, whatever that means. Everything seemed to mean something. Their lives were in transition and she looked for signs” (*FM* 67). As in *The Body Artist*, DeLillo describes the survivor’s liminal state between life and death with the language of transit, evoking the particularly modern stasis experienced in a vehicle as it hurtles one towards a destination.

Both Keith and Lianne continue to search for this meaning in the world around them, in the physical places they occupy and the bodies of those they love. But, just as in *The Body Artist*, the light of the world has changed. Keith sees a woman on horseback riding towards Central Park, but his thoughts speak to the whole post-traumatic world he inhabits:

It was something that belonged to another landscape, something inserted, a conjuring that resembled for the briefest second some half-seen image half believed in the seeing, when the witness wonders what has happened to the meaning of things, to tree, stone, wind, simple words lost in the falling ash. (*FM* 103)

Tellingly, it is the sunlight filtered through ash, filtered through the literal remains of death, that robs the world of transparent meaning, that forces the witness into a state of partial sight and only marginal understanding. Lianne echoes Keith's feeling that the normal world has been displaced, but adds temporality to the equation:

But then she might be wrong about what was ordinary. Maybe nothing was. Maybe there was a deep fold in the grain of things, the way things pass through the mind, the way time swings in the mind, which is the only place it meaningfully exists. (*FM* 105)

Like Lauren Hartke, Lianne sees that the place where time is most like itself is completely foreign to us; it is only in our selves that time is able to impart meaning, or equip us with the ability to suffer and come through stronger. But when traumatic experience radically interrupts our experience of time and space, this capacity is crippled.

Florence, too, shares much with Lauren Hartke, and believes with the other survivors in *Falling Man* that “[t]hese are the days after. Everything is now measured by after” (138). Normal time allows one to place events into a meaningful narrative; but in the after-time of trauma, this meaning cannot be guaranteed by referring to the traumatic moment itself, the originary site of trauma, which is necessarily a missed moment. Instead, meaning must be guaranteed socially, that is, by other subjects in language. Florence says as much when she expresses her gratitude to Keith:

“I can’t explain it, but you saved my life. After what happened, so many gone, friends gone, people I worked with, I was nearly gone, nearly dead, in another way....Then you walked in the door. You ask yourself why you took the briefcase out of the building. That’s why. So you could bring it here. So we could get to know each other. That’s why you took it and that’s why you brought it here, to keep me alive.” He didn’t believe this but he believed her. She felt it and meant it. “You ask yourself what the story is that goes with the briefcase. I’m the story,” she said. (*FM* 108-9)

Florence has lost sight of her self and cannot locate that self in the originary moment of trauma. But with Keith as a third party, a survivor of the same trauma and a witness to her retelling, she is able to triangulate a new subjectivity as survivor. The only meaning to be found in traumatic representation necessarily stems from the converging testimonies of multiple witnesses.

Similarly, Florence provides a safe place in which Keith can know some version of himself, or at least the self that crosses the park unbeknownst to Lianne. For Keith, Florence’s body is “another kind of eternity, the stillness in her face and body, outside of time.” She serves as a reflective surface in which he can verify his life by seeing his double “coming and going, the walks across the park and back.” And by serving as witness to each other, both are able to see “the deep shared self, down through the smoke.” But this glimpse of life in the ashen light of death is trapped in stasis, in the unmoving all-time embodied in *The Body Artist* by Mr. Tuttle. This meaning is retrospective and cannot escape the “place set off from time,” nor can it provide “safety and family” because it remains a life in the midst of death, outside of time’s passing and “the implications of one’s conduct” (*FM* 157). And this is why Keith must leave Florence, because their relationship is like the future Mr. Tuttle prophecies for Lauren, a space fitted to her body, or, as Florence thinks of it, an existence “fated” (*FM* 158).

As another type of survivor, Lianne, too, “live[s] in the spirit of what is ever impending” (*FM* 212); but what impends in trauma is not the unknown future but rather the unknowable past, and the survivor’s inability to locate meaning in that past causes its repetition in the present⁶.

Because the originary moment is always and necessarily missed, any meaning it may provide is always revised by the days since. Keith feels this particular hollowness in representations of his trauma because it cannot contain or fully mimic the originary moment. Thinking back on his days with Florence, he points out how hard it is to locate the meaning that would restore himself then to himself now:

He saw her in the tower as she'd described it, in forced marches down the stairwell, and thought he saw himself at times, in split instants, unshaped, a false memory or too warped and fleeting to be false. (*FM* 228)

Memory alone will not restore Keith: the process of working through trauma must entail some measure of acting out.

Perhaps because she is a secondary survivor, Lianne is able to reconcile her dissociated selves in a way seemingly unavailable to Keith. Much like Lauren Hartke, Lianne works through by reattenuating herself to her body, wherein she sees proof of her life. She begins to frequent a church and doctor's office, seemingly to diagnose both her spiritual and physical health.

Ultimately, and somewhat abruptly in the text, she relocates herself through a transcendent physical self-awareness:

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

It is interesting to note that this is another belated recognition, "something she'd always known," that is also just on the verge of being lost again. Clearly, DeLillo proposes again, as he did in *The Body Artist*, some extra-linguistic body language or knowledge, a self-awareness carried in the

physical self that is interrupted by traumatic loss. Working through, for Lianne and Lauren, at least, is a return to immediate and physical self-awareness, a subjectivity felt in the skin.

Tellingly, the passage immediately before this shows Keith going through his hand exercises once again, though he no longer requires their rehabilitative effects. He, too, struggles to reclaim or reintegrate himself through physical repetitions, but these are not enough, and Keith is not afforded the sort of epiphany Lianne and Lauren experience. We wonder if Keith will ever come to meaning when DeLillo closes the novel by returning us to the originary moment, by taking us back to Keith's office in the towers just as the first plane hits. What we see here is Keith's attempt to save his friend Rumsey, who did not, as some had believed, go out a window. Rather, we see Keith attempting to carry the wounded Rumsey out of the office, and the prose circles back on itself to center on the belated witnessing of falling:

Things began to fall, one thing and then another, things singly at first, coming down out of the gap in the ceiling, and he tried lifting Rumsey out of the chair. Then something outside, going past the window. Something went past the window, then he saw it. First it went and was gone and then he saw it and had to stand a moment staring out at nothing, holding Rumsey under the arms. He could not stop seeing it, twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it. (*FM* 242)

This is the primary trauma that Keith cannot come to terms with, cannot impute meaning to on his own. At the exact moment that Rumsey dies in his arms, “[t]his is when he wondered what was happening here” (*FM* 243).

A few indescribable minutes later, now making his way without Rumsey, Keith experiences another dissociation:

Someone took his arm and led him forward for a few steps and then he walked on his own, in his sleep, and for an instant he saw it again, going past the window, and this time he thought it was Rumsey. He confused it with Rumsey, the man falling sideways, arm out and up, like pointed up, like why am I here instead of there. (*FM* 244)

Keith cannot tell the difference between the ‘it’ plunging to its death outside and Rumsey because he cannot accept that Rumsey, too, is now an ‘it,’ a dead thing left behind. The world Keith walks out into is cast in a light that confuses life and death: “The only light was vestigial now, the light of what comes after, carried in the residue of smashed matter, in the ash ruins of what was various and human, hovering in the air above” (*FM* 246). The novel closes with a line that sums up Keith’s traumatized confusion, his occupation of the liminal space between life and death. As he looks back, “[t]hen he sees a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life” (*FM* 246). Like nothing in this life, it is the shock of sudden and unexpected death.

So, why is Lianne able to work through when Keith cannot? I believe it is because of her exposure to the process of dying embodied in a subject very close to her, her mother Nina, as well as in the Alzheimer’s patients in Lianne’s writing group. Both reflect on DeLillo’s career-long exploration of post-modern American life that contains death at every moment, life being the attempt to reconcile oneself to death’s constant presence over time. Briefly, Nina’s mother performs dying. Lianne believes Nina has, however reluctantly, taken on age and infirmity like an actor takes on a role:

She was pale and thin, her mother, following knee-replacement surgery. She was finally and resolutely old. This is what she wanted, it seemed, to be old and tired, to embrace old age, take up old age, surround herself with it. There were the canes, there were the medications, there were the afternoon naps, the dietary restrictions, the doctors’ appointments. (*FM* 9)

All of these accoutrements are an attempt to master death, to control when and how it takes us, and to have it occur in full sight, anticipated if not scripted. Nina flouts Lianne’s concerns about her health by smoking, and Lianne is aware of the effort:

All of this was so alien to Lianne's sense of her mother that she thought there might be an element of performance. Nina was trying to accommodate the true encroachments of age by making drama of them, giving herself a certain degree of ironic distance. (*FM* 10)

This is exactly what Lianne does later with her own doctor's visits, allowing her to reclaim her body and its health as a symbolic guarantee of her subjectivity.

The same motivation, to perform control over death, underlies Lianne's work with an Alzheimer's patients writing group. Lianne sees in these people selves in danger of breaking down, sees the face of death:

They wrote for roughly twenty minutes and then each, in turn, read aloud what he or she had written. Sometimes it scared her, the first signs of halting response, the losses and failings, the grim prefigurings that issued now and then from a mind beginning to slide away from the adhesive friction that makes an individual possible. It was in the language....They worked into themselves, finding narratives that rolled and tumbled, and how natural it seemed to do this, tell stories about themselves....They summoned the force of final authority. No one knew what they knew, here in the last clear minute before it all closed down. (*FM* 30)

The subjectivity of these people is verified through narrative, time and language. Narrativizing robs death of its inherent shock by placing it into a legible continuum. Lianne clings to this process, and the process exhibited by her mother, in part because the alternative response is traumatic loss, unanticipated, as in the case of her father whose suicide was spurred by looming "senile dementia" (*FM* 40). As she thinks later in session, "[t]hese people were the living breath of the thing that killed her father" (*FM* 62). Loss will be steady and irreversible, but controlled.

As the doctor who consults with her writing group says to Lianne:

From this point on, you understand, it's all about loss. We're dealing inevitably here with diminishing returns. Their situation will grow increasingly delicate. These encounters need space around them....You want them to look forward to this, not feel pressed or threatened. (*FM* 60)

Of course, the “this” is more than the meeting, is in fact death itself. Whether in the writings of the Alzheimer’s patients, in looking at her mother, or in the readouts of her diagnostic health exams, Lianne hopes to dispel death by staring right at it.

Remarkably, the patients themselves argue about the effect of sight on the reality of a thing when talking about the WTC attacks:

“I wanted to see that, the ones that were holding hands.” “When you see something happening, it’s supposed to be real.” “But God. Did God do this or not?” “You’re looking right at it. But it’s not really happening.” (*FM 63*)

When they begin to speak of blame, it is a synonym for control:

If he has a heart attack, we blame him. Eats, overeats, no exercise, no common sense.... Or he dies of cancer. Smoked and couldn’t stop....If it’s cancer, then it’s lung cancer and we blame him. But this, what happened, it’s way too big, it’s outside someplace, on the other side of the world. (*FM 64*)

Kai Erikson is also very observant of the differences between anticipated and unprepared-for loss, seeing in communities hit by natural rather than technological (i.e. man-made) disasters different psychic responses stemming from this capacity to narrativize and to assign blame:

Natural disasters are experienced as acts of God or whims of nature.... Technological disasters, on the other hand, being of human manufacture, are at least in principle preventable, so there is always a story to be told about them, always a moral to be drawn from them, always a measure of blame to be assigned in respect to them. (191)

The point is that there are deaths you see coming, deaths people brings on themselves, and then there is 9/11. But in a way, the hijackers are engaged in the same attempt to take control of their deaths. When Anna, the patient who speaks above, begins to talk about the hijackers, she says, “But here, with these people, you can’t even think it. You don’t know what to do. Because they’re a million miles outside your life. Which besides, they’re dead” (*FM 64*). What she misses is how much the two groups have in common – performing death in order to narrativize it and place it in anticipatory time, make it a thing acted out and controlled or scripted.

Keith engages in a different attempt to master death, one colored by the survivor's algebra by which he lives – poker. Poker appeals to the nihilistic impulse born from traumatic survival that sees limits to what can be controlled. The narrative even describes Lianne and Keith's different attempts as "marked by a certain symmetry, the steadfast commitment each made to an equivalent group. He had his poker game, six players, downtown, one night a week. She had her storyline sessions, in East Harlem, also weekly, in the afternoon, a gathering of five or six or seven men and women..." (*FM* 29). In poker, life is reduced to the smallest measures of control, the most limited of decisions, "the one anticipation that was not marked by the bloodguilt tracings of severed connections. Call or fold. Felt or baize" (*FM* 27). Poker narrativizes identity in infinitely repeatable combinations of these minute actions. Lianne even reflects on this while watching poker on TV, "Wasn't there a soul struggle, a sense of continuing dilemma, even in the winner's little blink of winning?" (*FM* 117). Following his traumatic experience, Keith attempts to enter a place set apart from time in which the approach of death can be halted, in which death's imminence can be circumscribed into the eternity of another hand.

Exiled in Las Vegas, he finds cathartic repetition at both the poker table and the sports book:

There was no one else at the tables here. Races ended, other began, or they were the same races replayed on one or more of the screens. He wasn't watching closely....He checked his watch again. He knew time and day of week and wondered when such scraps of data would begin to feel disposable. (*FM* 189)

Keith tries to halt death in the closed space of a casino, believing "[t]here was nothing outside the game but faded space" (*FM* 189). His old poker buddy Terry Cheng, who Keith runs into at a tournament, sums up their sought-after sequestration:

“When you check in, they give you a map. I still need it, after all this time. I never know where I am....I tell them not to bring me a newspaper. If you don’t read a newspaper, you’re never a day behind.” They talked a minute longer, then went to their designated tables without making plans for later. The idea of later was elusive. (*FM* 199-200)

Back in the sports book, Keith sinks deeper into this timelessness:

There were times, in the sports book, when he glanced at one of the screens and wasn’t sure whether he was seeing a fragment of live action or of slow-motion replay. It was a lapse that should have unsettled him, an issue of basic brain function, one reality versus another, but it all seemed a matter of false distinctions, fast, slow, now, then, and he drank his beer and listened to the mingled sounds. He never bet on these events. It was the effect on the senses that drew him here....the action moves to the forefront, there to here, life or death.... Then it was over, gone in seconds, and he liked that too. (*FM* 211)

Poker and life in the casino allow Keith to live outside his traumatic experience by escaping into a static and empty place that language and history cannot touch. At the table, Keith feels “[t]hese were the times when there was nothing outside, no flash of history or memory that he might unknowingly summon in the routine run of cards” (*FM* 225). He says explicitly that his life as a poker player is not about money, but instead an effort to forget:

The point was one of invalidation. Nothing else pertained. Only this had binding force....These were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness. (*FM* 230)

Both Keith and Lianne (as well as other characters like Nina and the Alzheimer’s writers) attempt to stave off death by fixing it in place, whether out there, beyond the confines of self-imposed exile from time, or in the controlled and anticipated future. These efforts evoke Lianne’s thoughts, spurred by the Giorgino Morandi paintings in her mother’s home, on “*Natura morta*...[t]he Italian term for still life” (*FM* 12). Containing death in its name, as the paintings somehow contain the lost towers, *natura morta* is an aesthetic attempt to stop time, to create an impossible space wherein a dead thing may evoke life. In the course of a discussion between Martin, Nina and Lianne, Lianne and her mother say that the shapes they see within the paintings

are “about mortality....Being human, being mortal” (*FM* 111). When Lianne visits a gallery showing Morandi paintings sometime later, after her mother has died, she hovers over them:

She wasn't sure why she was looking so intently. She was passing beyond pleasure into some kind of assimilation. She was trying to absorb what she saw, take it home, wrap it around her, sleep in it. There was so much to see. Turn it into living tissue, who you are. (*FM* 210)

Rather than turn life into the paradoxical *natura morta* of classical art, Lianne hopes to turn dead art into “living tissue;” the traumatized subject’s desire to revivify the lost object must fashion life out of dead objects. Lianne’s attempt to absorb and assimilate resembles Nina’s performance of dying in that both efforts afford them a degree of “ironic distance,” and also speak to the possibility of public acts as a means of public mourning. Pondering the aporia of commensurate memorials, LaCapra says:

At the very least, one might point out that the idea of an appropriate language – indeed, an acceptable rhythm between language and silence – in attempting to render certain phenomenon depends on ritual as well as aesthetic criteria. (215)

While spectators like Lianne may not recognize it in the moments she sees him, this is exactly what the Falling Man attempts to do in performance – ritualize the trauma of the World Trade Center attacks through iterable gestures combined with the shock of street theater or art happenings in order to create an appropriate memorial. Peggy Phelan, in her book *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, argues that the impermanent nature of performed trauma makes it particularly suited to speak the unspeakable, because “[p]erformance and theatre are instances of enactments predicated on their own disappearance....theatre and performance respond to a psychic need to rehearse for loss, and especially for death” (2-3). And this performance is necessarily intersubjective, as “[t]ragic theatre dramatizes the impossibility of an isolated death” (14). In the conclusion that follows, I hope to draw out of the Falling Man’s performances a

different way of thinking about the veracity of traumatic representations, and reemphasize the social responsibility traumatic experience imposes on empathetic subjects.

4. A conclusion: “body come down among us all”

The Falling Man, like Mr. Tuttle, is a puppet that represents unspeakable traumatic experience. But rather than a ventriloquist’s dummy whose speech we cannot recognize as our own, and whose symbolic meaning fails at the liminal edge of the real that traumatic structure represents, the Falling Man is a marionette whose literal fall before others enacts the breach of the real into the symbolic, and whose interruption of the daily lives of others stages a second crisis of witnessing, a figurative repetition of the missed originary moment, that results in the social guarantee of symbolic meaning. Where Lauren Hartke reclaims her individual voice by reappropriating loss through a performance of the dummy, Falling Man’s performance creates a space for historical recognition or representation of the iterable mark that stands in for a public traumatic experience.

Lianne first encounters him, only days after the attack, hanging from an elevated roadway:

A man was dangling there, above the street, upside down. He wore a business suit, one leg bent up, arms at his sides. A safety harness was barely visible, emerging from his trousers at the straightened leg and fastened to the decorative rail of the viaduct. She’d heard of him, a performance artist known as Falling Man. He’d appeared several times in the last week, unannounced, in various parts of the city, suspended from one or another structure, always upside down, wearing a suit, a tie, and dress shoes. He brought it back, of course, those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump. (*FM* 33)

Falling Man’s generic appearance turns him into a symbol of all the victims in the towers who went to work with no idea of what approached that September morning, and his unannounced performance pieces in settings far removed from the demarcated space of a stage surprises spectators into traumatic recognition of his iterable and evocative gestures. But unlike Mr. Tuttle, whose performances of Rey, for example, contain a traumatic resonance recognizable only by

Lauren, Falling Man instigates a shock of sudden awareness in all who see him. The effect is immediate and severe:

Traffic was barely moving now. There were people shouting up at him, outraged at the spectacle, the puppetry of human desperation, a body's last fleeting breath and what it held. It held the gaze of the world, she thought. There was the awful openness of it, something we'd not seen, the single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all. (*FM* 33)

Perhaps the most telling phrase in Lianne's reaction is "the puppetry of human desperation," for Falling Man is indeed a puppet that performs trauma. The unexpectedness of his appearance and repetitive content of his performance speak to the originary moment of trauma in a manner that both retains its unique horror, and at the same time, becomes an utterly individualized experience for each onlooker.

Seeing him again weeks later, Lianne recoils because Falling Man is "too near and deep, too personal" (*FM* 163); his single gesture, that of falling, contains all the individuals lost that day, but also symbolizes each and every traumatized survivor's inability to arrive at some understanding of their survival. The fall is a physical referent for both the shock of traumatic sight in the moment and the knowledge of forgetting after the fact. Lianne thinks of his effect on those unprepared, those

who see him standing and those who see him jump, all jarred out of their reveries or their newspapers or muttering stunned into their cell phones. These people had not seen him attach the safety harness. They would only see him fall out of sight. Then, she thought, the ones already speaking into phones, the others groping for phones, all would try to describe what they've seen or what others nearby have seen and are now trying to describe to them. (*FM* 164-5)

Falling Man forces a crisis of understanding in all spectators by placing them in the position of a traumatized survivor who can no longer tell the difference between life and death. Falling Man forces others not just to watch, but to see. Lianne questions her own reasons for watching, "Because she saw her husband somewhere near. She saw his friend, the one she'd met, or the

other, maybe, or made him up and saw him, in a high window with smoke flowing out” (*FM* 167). Falling Man turns each spectator into “the photosensitive surface” on which trauma is registered, pushing trauma out of the place set apart from time and into the public square wherein the traumatic content of his representation, uncertain in isolation, is verified by the intersecting perspectives of numerous subjects (*FM* 223). A multiplicity of sight lines may confirm what the single witness cannot, even while he, like the originary moment, disappears:

All she knew was what she’d seen and felt that day near the schoolyard, a boy bouncing a basketball and a teacher with a whistle on a string. She could believe she knew these people, and all the others she’d seen and heard that afternoon, but not the man who’d stood above her, detailed and looming. (*FM* 224)

This is exactly the same method employed by DeLillo in the novels themselves, both *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*. But the structure of Falling Man’s performance, and the act performed – falling – say even more about our understanding of and capacity to communicate traumatic experience than Lianne may realize. Combined with the example of Lauren Hartke’s *Body Time*, DeLillo proposes a means of reinstating traumatic representation as an important aesthetic and political subject of inquiry.

In her book *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor succinctly describes how performance fulfills a vital social function through repetition:

Performances function as a vital act of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called “twice-behaved behavior.” (2)

Peggy Phelan adds another valence to the social function of performance, arguing that “[t]he psychic problem raised by theater is that it remains a perpetual rehearsal [for death]. The one for whom the theater maker makes the piece never arrives for the performance” (31). In the case of performed trauma or traumatic representation, what never arrives is the originary moment.

This perpetual delay engenders traumatic reiterations in the form of a symptomatology that attempts to understand. Paraphrasing the work of Freud and Pierre Janet, Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain the source of this repetition in traumatized individuals:

the crucial factor that determines the repetition of trauma is the presence of mute, unsymbolized, and unintegrated experiences: “a sudden and passively endured trauma is relived repeatedly, until a person learns to remember simultaneously the affect and cognition associated with the trauma through access to language” (van der Kolk and Ducey, 1989, 271). (167)

Whether or not there is an inherent prohibition against accessing trauma through language is the core debate between contemporary trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth and psychoanalytic theorists like Linda Belau. Both see the gap, but differ on whether or not it can be bridged.

In “The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference: de Man, Kant, Kleist,” Caruth argues that this gap encompasses theory’s struggle over the past century to reconcile the lessons of deconstruction with the inevitable “claim that language cannot refer adequately to the world and indeed may not truly refer to anything at all, leaving literature and language, and even consciousness in general, cut off from historical reality” (*UE* 74). Building on the inauguration of Newtonian physics and mathematics as a nonreferential language that can describe the world, Caruth sees that moment as the same problem undermining contemporary theory, “the recognition that direct or phenomenal reference to the world means, paradoxically, the production of a fiction” (*UE* 76).

She goes on to read in Paul de Man’s reading of Heinrich von Kleist’s marionettes that these puppets, perpetually falling, “are what they should be: dead, mere pendula, governed only by the law of gravity;” but in performance, “the gracefulness of the puppet body is the result of the union between the mechanical puppet and the particular agency who directs” (*UE* 80). “Gracefulness,” then, the attribution of form and beauty (i.e. meaning) to lifeless gyrations, is the

product of technologically mediated representation. In other words, meaning is fabricated, not inherent. At the same time, “the puppeteer is lost entirely in the movement of the puppets. The graceful image of the human body arises precisely here, in the *loss* of any referential particularity” (UE 82).

In the case of the Falling Man, the process is entirely reversed. The puppet is subsumed in the body of the puppeteer, and the graceful image is drowned out by the horror of the performance’s very clear “referential particularity.” The affront Lianne feels (stemming from her sensibility of “ultrasensitive” social circumstances) arises from the performance’s transformation of the inarticulable into an iterable gesture, which thereby decimates the utterly unique specificity of each individual life lost in the World Trade Center. Yet, as a public performance of public trauma, the performance enacts the social function from Taylor’s definition of performance – the Falling Man transmits social knowledge precisely because the historical content of the performance is concretely referential.

Caruth believes trauma’s resistance to representation is both “moral” and a difficulty “arising within the formal system, of incorporating dead limbs into its phenomenal geometry, of turning death into life as falling was turned into rising [by Newtonian physics]...reference...from the perspective of the system, can appear only as a disruption and mutilation” (UE 82-3). But Caruth’s assertion that the “formal system” of symbolic representation cannot accommodate traumatic experience is a product of what Linda Belau calls “a dangerous elevation of traumatic experience to the level of an ideal” (1). As a human experience, trauma is both “tied to a system of representation, to language” and “indelibly tied to the real beyond the signifier” (2). Belau argues that “we are responsible in the face of something

that exceeds symbolic guarantee” and that this “ethical dimension” is precisely what is lost when trauma is placed “beyond language and representation” (2).

Belau also sees this ethical dimension arising within the praxis of psychoanalysis, which is at heart “an act of staging (rather than solving) the mystery of the subject’s lost origins....there is more truth in the analytic scene’s repetition than in any so-called originary scene” (5-6). The originary scene of the subject’s coming-into-being is necessarily a lost moment, exactly like the originary site of trauma which, to be traumatic, must be missed the first time through. Reading the Oedipal myth, Belau speaks directly about the link between subjectivity and traumatic experience:

And it is only in the repetition of the event, after the fact and within the social realm of the Theban context, that Oedipus is able to read his terrible deed as the event it is: that is, as the missed event. It is precisely this miss that lends the traumatic, uncommemorable dimension to the tragic event. This is precisely why Lacan will say that only repetition can commemorate the trauma, which is, otherwise, unrecognizable in itself. (10)

Peggy Phelan, too, believes that the psychoanalytic situation is an opportunity or occasion for the analysand to transform “[his or her] private theater, the intimate space of [his or her] psychic secrets...into a social space” (58). In effect, DeLillo’s performance artists inject the psychoanalytic scene into the lives of their audience members. In the case of public trauma, or publicly performed trauma, the performer, in one sense, stands in as the victim for those watching from afar. But this is a somewhat false distinction, as the performer reenacting trauma is in fact representing the individual model of split subjectivity explored in the psychoanalytic setting; and just as psychoanalysis attempts to discover the originary gap at the heart of the individual self, performed trauma rediscovers for performer and audience alike the missed originary moment of trauma.

I propose that Belau's understanding of psychoanalytic practice is congruent with my conception of performed trauma; they are, in a sense, one and the same:

As a praxis that addresses the inassimilability of traumatic experience or the impossibility of a lost experience, psychoanalysis brings the truth of trauma to the scene of analysis the only way it is able: *it repeats it as an experience in the present.* (19)

Again, the Falling Man reverses the process described by Caruth, and instead turns his own life into the iterable mark of death; he turns traumatic loss into an “expressive act of repetition” (Belau 23). And though his performances stimulate the same moral objections Caruth sees in de Man's reading of Kleist's marionettes, his performance of death may be the only way to symbolize inexpressible loss and demonstrates how the formal system of symbolic representation may incorporate “dead limbs into its phenomenal geometry.”

Shoshana Felman describes testimony as “a discursive *practice*, as opposed to a pure *theory*....a *speech act*. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is *action* that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is *impact* that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations” (17). I would add that performed trauma is a mode of testimony that, in its dialogic structure of performer and spectator, recapitulates both the psychoanalytic encounter and the moment of traumatic witnessing that require two subjects to see loss. If, as Felman asserts, “conscious testimony...itself can only be grasped in the movement of its production,” performers performing trauma reproduce again and again the originary moment of trauma (25).

Judith Greenberg's remarkable reading of Ovid's Narcissus and Echo illuminates how both Lauren Hartke and the Falling Man's public performances of traumatic experience embody the therapeutic process of working through:

Beyond [their] role[s] as...ignored and isolated victim[s]...[they] can symbolize interactive dialogue. Through her repetition of others' words, Echo assumes the role not

only of the return of the trauma but the role of a listener who grants a survivor responsive witness....she manifests the transformation of a problem into a solution. The nymph's need for and absence of a response becomes endless, continued response for others. Echo's metamorphosis turns self-absorption, lack of dialogue, and trauma into a sense of dialogue and community, even in isolation. (332)

Through the examples of Lauren Hartke and the Falling Man, DeLillo finds a tenable space between the two exclusive grounds from which judgments of the veracity or efficacy of traumatic representation issue – what Greenberg describes as “a debate that posits two positions in the context of traumatic narratives – the conviction of the existence of a true meaning/event or the interpretation of all meaning as subjective projection” (340). As Felman says in her introductory remarks to a speech given by Claude Lanzmann, “Something happens in the present in speech, and this is what brings about a revelation of the past” (Lanzmann 202). This revelation also takes place in performed trauma, whether in the reappropriated speech of *Body Time* or the Falling Man's fall, an extra-linguistic communication of loss that produces truth from inexpressible trauma, as “there is no real knowledge before the transmission” (Lanzmann 211).

DeLillo's characters come to terms with traumatic loss by placing it in sequential time, by narrativizing it, or by performing death in order to see its approach and exercise some measure of control. All of these efforts are individual examples of what DeLillo argues is a wider social and ethical imperative to respond to death: “The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative” (Ruins 2). DeLillo recognizes that this counternarrative will contain “false memories and imagined loss....the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day. We need them...to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response” (Ruins 3).

Addressing the possibility of articulation, DeLillo says:

The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is. But living language is not diminished.... language is inseparable

from the world that provokes it...Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counternarrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel. (Ruins 6)

DeLillo literally grounds the counternarrative in the act of falling. Performance of that fall, and the witnessing of that fall again and again by others, “give[s] memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space” (Ruins 6).

And it is through these performances, particularly the Falling Man’s performance of public trauma, that we may restore what Ruth Leys calls “the redemptive authority of history.” We must learn to speak our trauma, whether through the surrogate voice of the wound or through our own living bodies that memorialize the dead, “because telling that truth has not merely a personal therapeutic value but a public or collective value as well. It is because personal testimony concerning the past is inherently political and collective that the narration of the remembered trauma is so important” (Leys 652). Because the symbolic order cannot guarantee traumatic speech, it is incumbent on the survivor of traumatic experience, as well as the auditor of such a survivor’s testimony, to guarantee the symbolic value of traumatic representation in the movement of its production. Performed trauma dramatizes this ethical responsibility in its very structure, as it makes demands on performer and spectator to draw truth from traumatic experience even while both must recognize its fundamental inadequacy. I believe the performed trauma of the Falling Man embodies a means of traumatic representation that can enable victims of both primary and secondary trauma to work through by acting out, and engages in an intersubjective production of truths out of inexpressible experience that is vital for historical understanding.

ENDNOTES

1. Tracing the evolution of the term over Lacan's career, Dylan Evans summarizes the real as one of the three fundamental categories of Lacanian psychoanalysis:

the real is henceforth one of the three orders according to which all psychoanalytic phenomena may be described, the other two being the symbolic order and the imaginary order....Whereas the symbolic is a set of differentiated, discrete elements called signifiers, the real is, in itself, undifferentiated....the real emerges as that which is outside language and inassimilable to symbolization. (159)

The real is also linked to the material world underlying the other orders. Evans provides an example: "the real father is the biological father, and the real phallus is the physical penis as opposed to the symbolic and imaginary functions of this organ" (160).

In contrast, the symbolic order is "essentially a linguistic dimension" that structures both the social world and individual subjectivity (Evans 201). Its fundamental units are signifiers, elements that "have no positive existence but which are constituted purely by virtue of their mutual differences" (Evans 202). The real lies outside this system of signification, but is only perceived by subjects through the symbolic. The real delimits the outer edge of the symbolic, and, to hazard an astronomical simile, becomes visible in much the same way the corona of the sun appears during the total phase of an eclipse.

2. Throughout this study, I use the phrase "originary moment" to refer to that part of a traumatic experience that is missed or remains unassimilated. This is to be distinguished from the tangible effects of trauma, such as bodily damage, police reports, video footage, etc. And this missed originary moment is what separates an accident from a traumatic encounter, or, say, a death in the family from a traumatizing loss. Factual content like date, time, type or duration may place the event in the world, but in the case of psychic trauma only serve to outline a gap in the victim's knowledge.

3. Belau argues that contemporary trauma theorists like Felman and Caruth have “invited a dangerous elevation of traumatic experience to the level of an ideal” (1). Because, like all experience, trauma is “tied to a system of representation, to language,” yet also “indelibly tied to the real beyond the signifier,” traumatic experience “drives the subject beyond the particular event of her suffering to a failed encounter with the very possibility of knowing that suffering completely” (2). Belau further argues that the failed encounter to know trauma is at heart the same failed encounter to know the origins of the self that is revealed in the psychoanalytic setting. I believe her use of the word “ethical” is an appeal to scholars within the field to maintain “rules or standards for right conduct or practice, especially the standards of a profession” (from *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 665). In this case, any literary criticism that draws primarily on psychoanalytic theory, as trauma studies does, would require a concomitant adherence to the ethical praxis that “will not privilege the object of its attention,” be it traumatic experience or the ego, “over the method of engagement with that object” (Belau 18).

4. Even if Mr. Tuttle is not directly modeled after an iconic dummy, the awkward posture evokes any number of variety show acts, while the string recalls the fact that Howdy Doody was actually a marionette. I think of the home-crafts method of fashioning Waldorf dolls from cloth and string, or sock puppets like Shari Lewis’s Lambchop. During another exchange, Lauren thinks that Mr. Tuttle moves with “a mechanical wag, a tick and a tock, like the first toy ever built with moving parts” (BA 64). It’s also worth noting that ventriloquism has historically played a part in divinations and necromancy, and that “ventriloquists” appear in numerous books of the Old Testament as mediums between the living and the dead (see Dubray).

5. The novel also contains digressions on trauma's relationship with global history, most clearly seen in the ruminations of Nina's lover Martin and the (to my mind) unexpected 'episodes' that narrate the 'lead hijacker' Mohammed Atta's training for and implementation of the terrorist's attack on 9/11. In a later study, I hope to measure DeLillo's view of traumatic history (as expressed in this novel and in his much-reprinted essay, "In the Ruins of the Future") against prevailing claims and counterarguments made in contemporary theory about the referential capacity of history.

6. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud posited that subjects repeat what they have forgotten the origin of. Because the traumatized subject is now defined by loss but has forgotten the origin of that loss (i.e. does not have access to the originary moment), he or she is compelled to repeat the trauma through metaphorical symptoms. In "Freud, Lacan, and the Ethics of Memory," Caruth says that for the victim of trauma, the "act of survival" is "in itself a pure repetition compulsion, a repeated nightmare" (UE 108). She further argues that working through trauma entails a "performance" of awakening from this repeated nightmare, and that this awakening is a transmission that "consists not in seeing but in handing over the seeing it does not and cannot contain to another (and another future)" (UE 111). I expand on what Caruth calls an "ethical imperative" in the final chapter of this study.

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