

POETRY AFTER 9/11: CONSTRUCTING THE MEMORY OF CRISIS

by

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## **Abstract**

My dissertation examines the cultural functions of poetry in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. After 9/11, poems could be found in many and unexpected places: they were posted on the internet in the tens of thousands; published in newspapers, magazines, and single-author books; read aloud on television and on radio and collected in at least ten anthologies. Seeking to explain this surge in poetry's popularity, many critics have discussed the genre's ability to provide comfort. I suggest that poems after 9/11 be seen also as examples of memory scholar Marita Sturken's "technologies of memory": politically-charged objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning. I argue that poetry can be held accountable for its production of the memory of 9/11 and that it can be investigated for the *multiple* functions it serves in the aftermath of crisis. Using the resources of memory studies, and of cultural studies of poetry, my dissertation makes a case for poetry's political, memorial, witness, and public-discourse functions.

My chapters explore (1) the popularity of W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" after 9/11 and the contemporary politics of the poem's circulation; (2) the memorial function of poetry as that function is negotiated in a text installation in the newly-built 7 World Trade Centre; (3) the function of poetry as witness and the way the mediation of 9/11 invites a reconsideration of the witness position itself; and (4) the public-discourse function of poetry found, for example, at *poetry.com*, where 55,031 people have uploaded their 9/11 poems. By studying poetry's national presence after 9/11, I challenge the idea, dominant especially since the mid-twentieth century, that poetry is a marginal genre in literature and culture. I also challenge the mid-twentieth century notion that poetry's value can best be found in its timelessness. Poetry had many timely functions after 9/11 and can be read as a set of discursive practices integrated in our everyday lives.

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
Dedication.....	vi
Introduction: Reading Poetry after 9/11.....	1
Responding to the Archive.....	5
Remembering 9/11 .....	14
Critical Contexts .....	17
Chapter Overview.....	28
Concluding the Introduction .....	31
Chapter One: “September 1, 1939” on September 11, 2001.....	34
Critical Conversations: Auden as Timely.....	41
A Record of World War Two.....	47
“September 1, 1939” on September 11, 2001 .....	57
Poetry as Kitsch .....	65
The Politics of Quotation .....	69
Chapter Two: “For 7 World Trade”: Poetry as Forgetting, Poetry as Memory.....	76
A History of Memorials .....	84
Poetry as Memorial .....	92
“For 7 World Trade”.....	100
The Politics of Forgetting .....	107
Chapter Three: Rachel Vigier and Juliana Spahr: Toward a New Poetics of Witness .....	116
Constructing the Witness .....	124
Reconstructing the Witness after 9/11.....	131
Rachel Vigier: “The Poet was There”.....	139
Juliana Spahr’s Connective Politics.....	147
Witness Poetry after 9/11 .....	158
Chapter Four: Lyric as Public Discourse at Poetry.com .....	162
Poetry Studies and the Cultural Work of Poetries.....	170
Poetic Voice, Public Voice.....	173

Apostrophe and/as Lyric .....	183
Readers and/as Writers.....	192
Conclusion: The Functions of Poetry.....	197
Notes .....	206
Works Cited.....	235

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For S.

## Introduction: Reading Poetry after 9/11

Poetry is not a healing lotion, an emotional massage, a kind of linguistic aromatherapy.

—Adrienne Rich

In the years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, artists have responded to, and represented, almost every element of that traumatic day.<sup>1</sup> Many of their representations have been controversial: for example, heated debates have centred on depictions of people jumping from the burning World Trade Center towers. When the photograph, “Falling Man,” by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew, was published in the *New York Times* and several other newspapers on September 12, readers complained that the photograph, which showed a man plunging to his death, was an invasion of privacy and an exploitation that turned tragedy into pornography. In 2002, a bronze sculpture, “Tumbling Woman,” by artist Eric Fischl, was erected in the Rockefeller Center concourse, but removed a week later after similar complaints; the organizer of the exhibit received repeated bomb threats from victims’ families.<sup>2</sup> Two *New York Times*-bestselling novels—*Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2005)—also caused a stir for references to the falling bodies: DeLillo writes of a performance artist who re-enacts the fateful jumps and Foer ends his novel with a visual “flip book” that makes the bodies appear to be flying *upwards*, instead of tumbling down. Most reviews, and many internet forums, have had something to say about these references. One review takes offense to DeLillo’s depiction of the falling man, stating that it simply “doesn’t work” (Yardley); another says that Foer’s flip-book “lends to the story a horrific and unearned gravity” (Barbash). Even positive reviews struggled to make sense of representations of the falling bodies, and of the events of 9/11 overall.

I begin with examples of controversies that have surrounded these representations in order to note a discrepancy within them: while photographic, sculptural, and fictional representations have caused many public debates, another form—poetry—has caused very few. In fact, a poem by Polish Nobel laureate Wisława Szymborska “Photograph of September 11,” also depicting the falling bodies, was widely praised. Szymborska writes starkly, “They jumped from the burning floors—/ one, two a few more,/ higher, lower” (69). One might think that Szymborska’s poem was less controversial because poetry tends to be less widely attended to: it does not, for example, typically appear in mainstream venues like the *New York Times* or in prominent public spaces like the concourse of a major building. That explanation, however, would not apply in this case. “Photograph of September 11” appeared not only on the front page of Poland’s national newspaper and in Szymborska’s widely reviewed collection *Monologue of a Dog* but also in *Entertainment Weekly*, the Everyman’s Library *Poems of New York* (2002), and on countless websites in the first year after 9/11. It was read on BBC radio, and at a public reading in March 2002 organized by *New Yorker* poetry editor, Alice Quinn. Furthermore, when the poem was left out of a text installation in the lobby of a major building at the World Trade Center site (as part of its mandate, the installation excluded poems directly about 9/11), critics’ denunciation of the exclusion was covered by the *New York Times*.

Not only Szymborska’s poem, but poetry in general, as I will show in the coming chapters, found unprecedented popularity in the aftermath of the attacks. At least ten different poetry anthologies have been published in response to 9/11; multiple websites emerged that were entirely devoted to 9/11 poetry, and one site, poetry.com, houses over fifty-five thousand entries. Poems circulated in newspapers and magazines, and were read on the radio and on television. Yet despite the range of poetry written after the attacks, and its wide circulation across the United States, there is, in general, not controversy but *consensus* among critics who discuss 9/11 poems.

That consensus is, simply, that after the shock of the attacks, as people worked through their grief, poetry provided comfort. As then-poet laureate Billy Collins explained in *USA Today* in September 2001, poetry is “the original grief-counseling center” (“Poetry and Tragedy”). It seems that poetry’s comfort-role made the difficult images in Szymborska’s poem palatable to its readers.

This dissertation discusses the poetry of 9/11 and the popularity and functions of that poetry. Its aim is not to say that poetry is *like*, or should be *treated like*, other representational forms; photography, sculpture, and fiction, for example, all have their own economic, formal, and emotional concerns.<sup>3</sup> Rather, its aim is to understand what those concerns are for contemporary poetry—particularly in times of crisis—beyond the explanation that poetry provides comfort. This is a study of how poetry dwells in the world in the twenty-first century, how people understand it and use it, and how, in particular, it participated in constructing the memory of 9/11. I argue that poetry can, like other discursive forms, be held accountable for its production of the memory of 9/11 and that it can be investigated for the multiple functions it serves in the aftermath of crisis. How does poetry, a genre often associated with the private realm, receive and produce public memory? How does poetry further mediate images of destruction that were mediated for most people, in the first instance, through television? Which subjects are explored by poems after 9/11, and which subjects are passed over? Through what figurative language can poems describe events that were so often called “indescribable”? How do the poems engage or neglect the event’s politics? How do they memorialize or elegize the dead—and how are these two different functions? Who are the witnesses of 9/11 and who can write its witness poetry? How does poetry construct the memory of 9/11?

In the following chapters, I take up these questions to suggest four functions, beyond the comfort function of poetry after 9/11. These are political, memorial, witness, and public-

discourse functions. In exploring these additional functions of poetry, I fill a gap left by critics who mainly wish to praise poetry's ability to provide comfort while I also investigate the nature of the gap itself. My dissertation is novel in offering a sustained analysis of 9/11 poetry and considering its multiple functions, not only in the context of the 2001 terrorist attacks but also in the larger context of contemporary American poetics. Recently, some scholars have begun to consider poetry after 9/11 apart from a discussion of comfort, but their essays have, in general, focused on individual poems (see Gwiazda on Baraka, Rothberg on Hammad, Gray on Kinnell); my study aims to frame the larger debates to which these scholars have contributed.<sup>4</sup> These are debates about the relations of poetry, politics, and memory. After 9/11, I argue, poems function as an example of what memory scholar Marita Sturken calls "technologies of memory"—"objects through which memories are shared, produced and given meaning" (*Tangled* 9). Poems construct and give meaning to the memory of 9/11 in their subject, their vocabulary, their imagery, and their voices. Our understanding of the 9/11 attacks is shaped by poetry, and our understanding of poetry is shaped by the terrorist attacks.

The poetry that was produced and circulated in such surprising numbers in the aftermath of 9/11 can be read not only for how it contributes to the memory of the day but also for how it contributes to our understanding of poetry's place in the twenty-first century. In the following introductory pages, I lay the groundwork for my four central chapters. I start by detailing the popularity of 9/11 poetry; from there I pursue the idea that poetry provided comfort after 9/11, suggesting the limits of that idea. I consider the events of 9/11 themselves, beginning with that very term, "9/11." I introduce the critical frameworks that guide the dissertation—memory studies and cultural studies of poetry—and show how they converge in discussions of poetry after 9/11. Finally, I outline the major arguments of my four chapters.

## **Responding to the Archive**

Poetry appeared in abundance after 9/11—and it appeared immediately. As Ulrich Baer writes in his introduction to one 9/11 anthology, after the attacks, “[t]he poets . . . went straight from their rooftops to their writing pads” (8). In September 2001, poems appeared in the *New York Times* and *USA Today*; in the *New Yorker* and *Slate*; on PBS television and National Public Radio; in emails and on blogs. As the editors of another 9/11 anthology describe it,

There were, in the immediate aftermath, poems everywhere. Walking around [New York City] you would see them—stuck on light posts and phone stalls, plastered on the shelters at bus stops and the walls of subway stations . . . Downtown, people scrawled poems in the ash that covered everything. And on the brick walls of police stations and firehouses, behind the mountains of flowers and between photos of the dead, poetry dominated.

(Johnson and Merians ix)

Some of the earliest poems to circulate after the attacks were familiar ones, poems written *before* the attacks, that found new resonance after them. For example, in its first issue after 9/11, on September 24, the *New Yorker* published a poem, instead of the usual cartoon or parody, on its back page. The poem was “Try to Praise the Mutilated World” by Polish poet and part-time U.S. resident Adam Zagajewski. Written in the winter of 2000, the poem is obviously not about the events of 9/11; instead it remembers Zagajewski’s post-World War Two childhood in Poland. It encourages readers in the face of difficulty to “[r]emember June’s long days/and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew.” The poem is both urgent (it repeats imperatives: “Try to praise . . ./ . . You must praise . . ./ . . You should praise . . ./ . . Praise . . .”) and lackadaisical. The long lines drift, inviting readers to drift back through memory (“Remember the moments when we were together/ in a white room and the curtain fluttered”). With its insistence on the positive, through a subdued, nostalgic tone, the poem appears to have spoken to readers

searching, in September 2001, for both ways to grieve and ways to find hope. Poems by Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska, Paul Celan, and W.H. Auden, written in similar tones, and circulated as well.<sup>5</sup>

Other poems, those written in the first days after the attacks, also spread quickly across the country. After publication in *Vanity Fair*, a poem by Toni Morrison, “The Dead of September 11,” was reprinted and recited in many other venues. The poem reads, in long prose-like lines, as notes toward an elegy: “I would like to speak directly to the dead,” she writes (1). The poem can be found on numerous websites, in three print collections, and was read aloud at a concert of the Nashville Chamber Orchestra.<sup>6</sup> Another poem, its author less well-known, found similar popularity: “first writing since,” a poem by Palestinian-American poet and activist Suheir Hammad, was circulated in emails and on listservs and eventually found its way to over 150 websites, including msnbc.com and merip.com (Middle East Report). Hammad read her poem at several college campuses across the U.S. and on cable television (HBO).<sup>7</sup> The poem spans several pages; it is full of questions as it shifts from anger, to sadness, to confusion. In its shifting, the poem reads like a stream-of-consciousness reaction to shock. At times, Hammad is grateful: “thank you to the woman who saw me brinking my cool”; at other times, she is cynical: “the future holds little light” (139).

Poems like Morrison’s and Hammad’s are remarkable for how they traveled across the country, finding a growing audience, and for how they articulated the early confusion that followed the attacks. More poems after 9/11 were collected—sometimes also very quickly—in topical anthologies. The online anthology “Poetic Voices,” for example, made its call for submissions the day after the attacks. Editors of these anthologies spoke of their search for “guidance, explanations, new points of view” from the poets (Meyers 20). From 2001 to 2006, anthologies of 9/11 poetry were published at a fast pace. These anthologies (some include prose

as well as poetry) are typically organized by the national, racial, or gender identities of their contributors. There are two anthologies that collect the perspectives of New York writers (Johnson and Merians, eds; Baer, ed); and one that collects the perspectives of Latino/a writers (Joysmith and Lomas, eds); two more bring together work by American writers in general (Heyen, ed) and West Coast Americans more specifically (Meyers, ed); one collects work by women writers (Agosin and Craig, eds); two feature political writing more explicitly (Cohen and Matson, eds; Hamill, ed),<sup>8</sup> and one, published five years after 9/11, takes a retrospective view (Swift, ed). Together these anthologies collect hundreds of poems that range widely: many are personal poems, “Carla and I would sometimes sip coffee/ in the diner window seat . . . .” Many speak of a collective grief, “The Days of Awe/ are upon us. Our feelings are carried,/ bleeding and raw.” Many grapple with how such a poem can be written in the first place: “First: Don’t use the word *souls*. Don’t use the word *fire* . . . . The rules have changed.”<sup>9</sup>

Poetry websites also hosted poems about 9/11 right away. Websites like poetry.com began receiving submissions on September 11, and almost ten years later, the site hosts 55,013 poems. The poems posted online are often emotional, sometimes angry. Many people use poetry to articulate their confusion in the wake of the attacks; they direct pleading questions to God, or their fellow citizens, or the terrorists. Other poems are elegiac, memorial, describing the loss of a family member or friend or, often, of the Twin Towers themselves. The first anniversary of the attacks brought many memorial poems—not only by semi-anonymous poets online but also by some of the most prominent poets in the country. Billy Collins (poet laureate in 2001), Galway Kinnell, and Martin Espada were among those who published memorial poems in September 2002. Their poems appeared in the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Nation*, respectively; Collins’ poem was read at a joint session of Congress.

The large archive of poetry written in response to 9/11 also includes several single-author collections that have appeared intermittently over the last nine years. Two examples are Canadian poet Rachel Vigier's *The Book of Skeletons* and American language poet-critic Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, both published in 2003. Poetry collections devoted to 9/11 or featuring poems that respond in some ways to 9/11 are too many to list, or even, exhaustively, to find.<sup>10</sup> Some of the most famous examples of these single poems are Amiri Baraka's heated "Somebody Blew up America" (read aloud at the 2002 Dodge Poetry Festival);<sup>11</sup> Maya Angelou's more sentimental "Extravagant Spirits" (published in *Life* in 2004); and Charles Bernstein's "Some of these Daze" (circulated on the SUNY Buffalo Poetics Listserv and subsequently published in his collection *Girly Man*), a quiet prose poem that stands out from the poet's other work. Each poem has been published and/or performed multiple times.

Over the years, poetry has persisted, appearing also in non-print venues. At the first major league baseball game after the attacks, St. Louis Cardinals announcer Jack Buck read a poem he had written, "For America." A video of Buck's performance, posted on Youtube, has been viewed over forty thousand times. The "Sonic Memorial" audio walking tour of Lower Manhattan includes the poem "How my Life has Changed" by a woman who worked in the World Trade Center.<sup>12</sup>

There are multiple narratives through which one could order this large inventory of poetry. I have charted an account that highlights the way that people first turned to older poems in the initial aftermath of the attacks. When they wrote their own poems in the fall of 2001 they shared them on websites or (for the more established poets) in newspapers and on the radio. Later, memorial poems were written and collections, memorials themselves in some way, began to take shape. That this list of poetic responses is far from exhaustive—that it has been culled

from newspapers, magazines, email listservs, websites, public readings, congress sessions, and baseball games—is further proof of the surge in poetry’s popularity after 9/11.

As poems began to appear in such large numbers, many commentators attempted to explain why a genre so often relegated to the margins of literature and culture was so urgently called upon, and produced, after 9/11. They suggested primarily, as I have noted, that poetry offered *comfort* to readers who were shocked and in mourning after the attacks. The poet-critic Mary Karr, writing in the *New York Times*, echoed the sentiments of Billy Collins when she explained that, after 9/11, poetry “dispensed a kind of relief” (E1). Critics explaining the popularity of W.H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939” after 9/11, suggested that it, in particular, provided comfort. Peter Steinfels wrote in the *New York Times* that “many found solace” in Auden’s poem; Dinitia Smith wrote, also in the *Times*, that “people have been consoling themselves—and one another—with poetry in an almost unprecedented way,” and the poet Eric McHenry, writing on *Slate.com*, described Auden’s poem as “emotional nourishment.”

Academic critics also, in large part, asserted a connection between poetry and comfort. A post-9/11 forum on poetryfoundation.org in December 2006, hosted by the feminist literary critic Sandra M. Gilbert, invited poets and critics to discuss whether and how poetry can “console a grieving public.” The forum’s contributors (including Eavan Boland, Alicia Ostriker, and Jahan Ramazani) gave diverse answers to this question, but few questioned the terms on which it was asked. Karen Alkalay-Gut, writing in *Poetics Today*, suggested that, after 9/11, “poetry has acquired a long lost social purpose—to order, inform, unite, and console a confused and grieving people” (257). Liedeke Plate, in *Gender Studies*, wrote that “poems functioned [after 9/11] as objects offered for consolation and reassurance” (3). There is a shared vocabulary among these explanations: poetry *consoles*; it offers *counseling, solace, relief, emotional nourishment, and reassurance*.

Discussed in these terms, the major function of poetry is to respond to grief, to address personal loss and uncertainty, and to heal the emotional wounds the attacks caused. This isn't the first time that poetry has been praised for its power to heal. In his recent monograph, *The Healing Art*, for example, poet and physician Rafael Campo explains poetry's therapeutic qualities. He praises poetry as a form that facilitates non-judgmental communication, offering its writers a position of authority and its readers a point of identification. In his contribution to Sandra Gilbert's online forum, Campo writes that after 9/11, while he "could prescribe any of a dozen antibiotics to cure endocarditis," what he really "yearned for was the elixir of poetry, which could heal the otherwise untreatable condition of [his] broken heart." "Poetry Therapy" is a national organization of practicing therapists.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, poetry can provide comfort, and it makes sense for critics to explore this. Because it often uses the first-person point of view, heightened emotion, and a range of private and public modes, poetry is an appropriate form for those in distress. The elegy in particular has, for centuries, offered its writers a space to express grief and its readers a space of identification with others who grieve. Scholars of the elegy have turned to Freud's discussion of mourning and melancholia to frame the elegist's work. Freud differentiated between the process of mourning, after which the patient returns to full health, and the state of melancholia in which the patient remains unhealed and tormented. Peter Sacks, for example, argues that early English elegists (e.g. Spenser, Milton, Shelley) do the productive work of mourning by offering the finished poem in place of the lost loved one. Following Sacks, Jahan Ramazani shows how several modern poets (e.g. Stevens, Hughes, Auden) are, instead, melancholic in their ambivalent, unresolved elegies. In recent years, the terrain of the elegy has expanded, as losses have accrued on the historical landscape. As poet-critic Stanley Plumly observes, "In contemporary American poetry almost all emotion is equated with loss" (32). This redefining of the boundaries of elegy marks the way in

which the genre has become both form and content in much of contemporary poetry; it marks poetry's implicit relation to comfort. As my chapter on memorialization will show, poetry can offer time and space for remembering and working through grief.

Despite the strong and historical connection of poetry and comfort, however, poetry serves important additional functions after crisis. Some poems are political; they speak angrily about the suicide bombers, the failures of the U.S. government, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hammad, quoted earlier, writes “[w]e did not vilify all white men when mcveigh bombed Oklahoma . . ./ and when we talk about holy books and hooded men and death,/ why do we/ never mention the kkk?” (141). Some poems commemorate lost lives, not as consolation for those grieving, but in memory of the grieved. Martin Espada’s poem, “Alabanza (Praise),” gives praise for “the cook with the shaven head/ and a tattoo on his shoulder . . .” to remember the lives of those who worked in the World Trade Center’s restaurant, Windows on the World. Some poems after 9/11 witness the events, recording their (at times unbearable) details. Rachel Vigier, for example, writes, “I knew the exact place I was standing when I knew/ I would die” (50). As all of these examples show, poetry also functions as the discourse through which 9/11 is remembered. In the chapters that follow, I will explore these other functions of poetry after 9/11. To understand verse primarily as consoling in times of crisis is to neglect a large body of writing produced and circulated after 9/11 that performs these other functions. In arguing that poetry is a “technology of memory,” I am suggesting that what a poem says, how it is circulated, and how it is read, *matter* to the memory of 9/11.

To consider poetry only in terms of comfort and therapy is not only to limit discussions of poetry’s other functions but also to limit the terms on which we talk about 9/11. When critics describe poetry in terms of “consolation,” “emotional nourishment,” and “solace,” they shape the memory of the attacks in terms of personal loss and suffering. The 9/11 attacks, however, had

other consequences as well: for example the attacks revealed the unpreparedness of the U.S. government to respond to the threat of Al Qaeda; they ignited wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; they prompted heightened “homeland security” measures that affected rights to privacy. These other consequences make it clear that the attacks might also prompt other types of discourse—on government policy, war, privacy, and security, for example.

While poetry critics almost unanimously praise (or simply, assume) the ability of poetry to provide comfort, critics in fields other than literature have objected to what they see as a problematically dominant discourse of comfort after 9/11. For example, less than two weeks after 9/11, Susan Sontag suggested that the language of consolation that pervaded the media coverage was “a campaign to infantilize the public” (“Talk of the Town”). She argued that conversations about the attacks needed to go beyond grief to consider also the ways in which the attacks were a “consequence of specific American alliances and actions,” the product of large ideological rifts among cultures, and the inciting incident for impending war. In September 2001, Sontag’s suggestions were alienating to many people. Not only did they fail to participate in a discourse of patriotism and consolation, but they went further, to suggest the dangerous consequences of that very kind of discourse.<sup>14</sup> Sontag continues as follows:

Those in public office have let us know that they consider their task to be a manipulative one: confidence-building and grief management. Politics, the politics of a democracy—which entails disagreement, which promotes candor—has been replaced by psychotherapy. Let’s by all means grieve together. But let’s not be stupid together.

Sontag’s critical comments were controversial coming so soon after 9/11, but they have been echoed by several critics since—although not by critics of poetry. Marita Sturken argues, for example, in her most recent book, *Tourists of History* (2007) that the “culture of comfort,” a focus on the personal (on “confidence-building and grief management,” in Sontag’s terms), has

political consequences. Using the figure of the tourist, Sturken suggests that the American public relates to history as outsiders or passive observers, taking license to think uncritically (10). Sturken's topic is consumerism, and she understands consumer practices as a type of therapy. Sturken studies the citizen who purchases a Fire Department of New York (FDNY) teddy bear as a "souvenir" of the 9/11 attacks, or who stocks up on duct tape to seal his or her home. These consumer behaviours, which highlight American grief or anxiety, offer, Sturken argues, a narrative of victimization that subsequently can perpetuate violence (29). Kitsch objects like the teddy bear play a crucial role in this narrative: the government and media encourage consumers to feel sad, but not to consider *why* they feel that way. The role of the citizen-in-need overwrites the role of the aggressor. "The teddy bear," Sturken writes, "says, We are innocent, and, by extension, the nation is innocent too" (25).

As the following chapters will show, several other critics have, like Sontag and Sturken, questioned the "public discourse of victimhood" (Taylor 260) that emerged after 9/11 (Taylor, Klein, Bauman, Krueger), yet discussions of poetry, in both popular and academic venues, have remained separate from this conversation. The purpose of my dissertation is to bring poetry and poetry studies into this conversation and to advance these three goals: (1) to explore the multiple functions that poetry served after 9/11; (2) to consider the poetry of 9/11 in a historical context that includes poetry written in response to other modern atrocities, especially the European Holocaust; and (3) to suggest the ways in which the surge in poetry's popularity after 9/11 changes how we can talk about poetry's vitality. As the proliferation of poetry after 9/11 indicates, poetry has an important part to play in contemporary American life.

In suggesting that understanding poetry as a "grief-counseling center" is problematically apolitical, I argue, above all, for the value of poetry as public discourse. As I noted above, photographic, sculptural, and fictional depictions of the falling bodies on 9/11 prompted heated

public debates—while poetic depictions did not. Understood as comforting, poetry did not ignite questions about its motives and morality. Indeed, post-romantic poetry has often been understood as a private mode (J.S. Mill famously wrote that the lyric is not heard but overheard [348]).<sup>15</sup> However, as the archive I detailed earlier suggests, poetry after 9/11 plays more than a comfort role and complicates distinctions between public and private modes. In his oft-cited study of nationalism, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an “imagined political community” (6). He cites the novel and the newspaper as ideal-typical forms that constitute a reading public of strangers. Poetry is another form that constitutes such a public.

## **Remembering 9/11**

The primary focus of my study is poetry—its form, meanings, and circulation. Yet, the events that produced this particular poetry, and that the poetry in turn produces, are central to every page. I use the conventional term “9/11” throughout the dissertation, but I am aware of the term itself as problematic. Specifically, referring to the September 11 attacks as “9/11” focuses attention on the *day* of the attacks themselves and permits a cultural neglect of the pre-history and consequences of that day. I aim to counteract this focus by being as inclusive as possible in my discussion of the events of 9/11. That is, I recognize that there were three sites of attack, not only the “symbolic” Ground Zero but also sites in D.C. and Pennsylvania. (In the first chapter, I discuss the term “Ground Zero” further as it is taken up by Amy Kaplan and David Simpson). I consider the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as integral to the meaning of the day and the related deaths *after* that Tuesday morning as part as of its death toll.

The events of “9/11” are, specifically, the coordinated series of terrorist attacks on the United States by nineteen men, later identified as part of the terrorist group, Al Qaeda. These men hijacked four commercial American airplanes, crashing two into the World Trade Center towers

in New York, one into the Pentagon, and one into a field in Shanksville, PA (its intended target was the White House). There were no survivors on any of the flights and the death toll that morning, including the nineteen hijackers, came to 2,995 people. Secondary deaths from the attacks exceed that number. Thousands of people, especially rescue workers in Lower Manhattan, have suffered debilitating illness from breathing in the debris at the site of the Towers' collapse. Several deaths have been linked directly to dust inhalation and those deaths will be memorialized as part of the National World Trade Center Memorial (currently under construction). The "War on Terror" that the United States launched in the years after 9/11 has also had a death toll in the tens of thousands, including American soldiers, soldiers from allied countries, and, in higher numbers, citizens and soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Indeed, the terrorist attacks can be considered, not only in terms of the deaths caused by the four planes and the destruction of the iconic World Trade Center but also within a larger context of war. Several newspaper headlines on September 12, including the headline of the national paper *USA Today*, read "Act of War." The war in Afghanistan began less than a month after the attacks. Major victories against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, Afghanistan's ruling body, were declared won in the first months of the war, but fighting against insurgent groups continues today. Fighting also continues in Iraq, in a war that began on March 20, 2003. The direct links between Iraq and the September 11 attacks are now generally understood as tenuous, although the United States accused Iraq of a longstanding involvement with terrorism and of harboring weapons of mass destruction.<sup>16</sup> President George W. Bush declared that he was fighting not just Al Qaeda but a "global war on terror." With the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2009, the phrase "war on terror" and the polarizing rhetoric of "good" and "evil" have been retired, but the wars continue.<sup>17</sup>

Most narratives of the 9/11 attacks or the subsequent wars begin at 8:46 a.m. on September 11, with the first plane crash; however, the hostilities of Al Qaeda against the United States, and the complex relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan have a history that begins years before that date. A decade of conflict (with the Soviet Union, 1979-1989) in Afghanistan was a prime breeding ground for extremists; these were the formative years for terrorist leaders like Osama bin Laden and organizations like Al Qaeda. During those years, the United States supplied billions of dollars in secret assistance to rebel groups in Afghanistan fighting Soviet occupation. This money may never have reached bin Laden directly, but it implicates the United States in the affairs of a country that would become its enemy in 2001. To discuss a prehistory of the relations among the U.S., the Taliban, and Al Qaeda is not to lay blame on the U.S. government for the 9/11 attacks or absolve the terrorists of their actions. However, a historical view reveals that “9/11” was not a singular surprise attack, but the most brutal day in the ongoing work of Islamic extremists already known to the U.S..

Indeed, there were several indicators of a terrorist threat before September 11, 2001. The *9/11 Commission Report* indicates failures in U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies—above all their collective failure to *imagine* such massive attacks—in the oversights that enabled Al Qaeda to succeed on 9/11.<sup>18</sup> However, Osama bin Laden declared his intentions of violence against the United States as early as 1992. In 1993, a group of men with links to Al Qaeda had detonated a truck bomb in the parking lot below the North Tower with intention to destroy the entire World Trade Center. Only six people were killed, but the failed bomb prompted new security measures and evacuation procedures in the Twin Towers. In 1998, bin Laden issued a *fatwa* in an Arabic newspaper in England that called for the murder of all Americans. And in 2000, members of Al Qaeda destroyed the USS Cole, a military vessel, while it was in port, killing seventeen crew members and wounding at least forty.

Throughout my dissertation, I stress the importance of considering these larger contexts of the 9/11 attacks, including the conflicts that preceded and followed them. This is, in part, a strategy to counter the narrative of victimization that emerges when 9/11 is only remembered in terms of the American lives lost on the day. This is, of course, not to condone murder or to devalue the lost lives; yet I resist the narrative of victimization that emerges from a focus *restricted* to lives lost on that single day. This may reflect my own politics, but, more than that, I hope it reflects my investment in seeking, from its poetry, a nuanced memory of 9/11. The memory of the attacks may also include the following: the U.S. foreign policies that contributed to a world of enemies and superpowers; the decoupling of nation and violence that terrorists groups like Al Qaeda represent increasingly with globalized politics; threats of terrorist and bioterrorist attacks; the extreme American patriotism that emerged after 9/11; equally extreme conspiracy theories; the creation of the USA PATRIOT Act and the Department of Homeland Security, and the questions over security and privacy that accompany them; the management of new fears of flying and of mass death on American soil, through security measures that aim to keep air travelers safe from suicide bombers; the global relationships that were formed, or had the potential to be formed after 9/11, after the world watched and sympathized (or identified) with America's injury. These are further contexts for the deaths of 2,995 people on 9/11 to include in memories of the day.

## Critical Contexts

My project approaches the poetry of 9/11 through two critical lenses. The first is memory studies, which relates to studies of trauma and the Holocaust and offers a framework for considering how texts convey the memory of traumatic pasts. The second is poetry studies, specifically recent work on poetry's social and historical contexts. I model my inquiry on

previous criticism of poetry after atrocity, and I aim to contribute to the larger—and rapidly growing—discussion among critics concerned with the public functions of poetry. I read poetry through memory studies and memory studies through poetry.

### *Memory Studies*

While not a cohesive field or discipline, memory studies constitutes a “transdiscipline” (Antze and Lambeck viii), involving scholars of literature, history, law, sociology, philosophy, political theory, psychology, and cognitive science. Memory studies does not itself suggest a methodology; rather, a set of questions and problems brings scholars of memory together. These scholars explore how memory is tempered with forgetting, how memories are carried through space and time, and how events are commemorated (sometimes through memorials and monuments). These explorations are often tied to studies of trauma, including historical trauma, with much attention focussed on the Holocaust.<sup>19</sup> A recent surge of scholarly interest in memory prompted the creation of the first reader, *Theories of Memory*, in 2007, and *Memory Studies*, the first journal in the field, in 2008. There has been a proliferation, especially in the last five years, of books on memory, and of conferences and symposia on the topic.<sup>20</sup> My dissertation emerges from and contributes to this growing transdiscipline: I read poetry as a “technology of memory” that, like a memorial, is a record of what we choose to remember. I take up the poetry of 9/11 through a memory studies vocabulary that includes remembering, testimony, commemoration, witness, public culture, and forgetting.

The first social science and humanities researchers to take up questions of memory were psychologists. For many psychologists, remembering is a process of retrieving distant experiences. Most notably, Freud described the unconscious as a site of repressed memories and desires, suggesting that memories are constitutive of individual identities. My own interest is, however, more social than psychological: I am interested in *collective* memory—and studies of

collective memory are conducted mainly by historians and scholars of cultural or literary studies. Evidence of critical interest in collective memory began in the late 1980s, alongside a proliferation of work on the Holocaust (Friedlander; Hartman; LaCapra), the creation of the historiography journal *History and Memory*, the publication in *Representations* of Pierre Nora's landmark essay "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*" (1989), and the translation into English (by Lewis Coser in 1992) of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs's *On Collective Memory*. Earlier figures such as Henri Bergson (*Matter and Memory*, 1912), Fred Bartlett (*Remembering*, 1932), Frances Yates (*Art of Memory*, 1966) and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (*Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, 1980) had not been read together until this time. In a 1995 essay, Barbie Zelizer maps the move memory studies made from "individualized to collective action," explaining how this shift gave "the act of remembering an all-new cast of characters, activities, and issues" (214). By 2000, memory studies had become so widespread that historian Kerwin Lee Klein could write that "[w]here we once spoke of folk history or popular history or oral history or public history or even myth we now employ memory as a metahistorical category that subsumes all these various terms" (128).

Traditionally "telling stories of the past," as Zelizer calls it (216), was the job of historians. Early memory scholars used memory as a way to interrogate the claim of historians to accuracy and objectivity. Through these interrogations, memory-studies scholars came to frame their own work in opposition to the work of historians. For Halbwachs, memory inquiry was a kind of *solution* to historical inquiry; while historical accounts were bound to goals of accuracy and objectivity, he saw memory as diverse, multiple, and fluid (78). Nora likewise pitted memory *against* history: "Memory is life," Nora writes, ". . . history on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (8). For Nora, memory is preserved through ritual and through a dialectic with forgetting. To pit memory against history,

however, is to make limiting assumptions about both modes of inquiry. Later scholars, such as Sturken, Andreas Huyssen, and James E. Young, have disagreed with Halbwachs and Nora. Young dismisses the memory/history debate as a “zero-sum game” (“At Memory’s Edge” 2). These later critics encourage a dialogue between the two modes—one that imbues history with the malleable qualities of memory and memory with the legitimacy of history. The “memory/history” debate gets at the very heart of the work that memory scholars do: they work both to unearth “the stories of the past” and investigate how, for whom, and by whom those stories are produced.

My project on poetry and memory has been influenced by Marita Sturken’s work on “cultural memory.” Sturken speaks directly to *how* stories of the past are conveyed and her work (both in *Tourists of History* and in her 1997 monograph *Tangled Memories*) has substantially influenced my own. In *Tangled Memories*, Sturken studies the relation between memory and media technologies. Specifically, she explores the production of American cultural memory of the Vietnam War and the American AIDS epidemic through memorials (like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall and the NAMES Project AIDS memorial quilt), film, photographs, and other media. Cultural memory, as Sturken defines it, “is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history” (1). It both defines a culture and reveals the culture’s divisions and conflicting agendas (1). Cultural memory is memory that extends past the individual, without neglecting the personal, and past the collective, without disregarding shared experience. Sturken uses the metaphor of entanglement to discuss not only the relationship between memory and history but also the relationship between memory and its technologies.

Sturken’s “technologies of memory” include objects that *mediate* experience (the television is an obvious example, but even a body, Sturken claims, changed or scarred in some way, conveys experience) and objects that *commemorate* experience (such as memorials, monuments, written

texts). She investigates how these technologies produce and respond to memories of traumatic events. Technologies of memory, then, are more than just mnemonic; more than functioning as reminders of trauma, they can actually produce a traumatic memory. My claim that poetry is an example of Sturken’s “technologies of memory” is meant to contribute both to conversations about the study of memory and to poetry scholarship that considers poetry in terms of its cultural and historical contexts.

### *Poetry Studies*

Such poetry scholarship is the second lens through which I read 9/11 poetry. My inquiry is modeled, in part, on the work of scholars who have taken as their subject the poetry of historical crisis. The work of these scholars does not necessarily constitute a coherent field, but I situate it within the larger field of poetry scholarship invested in—as the study of poetry of crisis necessarily is—the cultural and historical functions of poetry. In *Poetry after Auschwitz*, Susan Gubar writes that, in studying poetry written about the Holocaust after 1945, she is mapping out new scholarly terrain and “has no safety net of others’ criticisms” (xvii). Like Gubar, I have also worked without a net at times: with rare exception, the texts studied in my dissertation have received no previous attention.

Gubar outlines some of the features of poetry that make the genre fitting in times of crisis. According to Gubar, poetry conveys both a “mysterious reluctance to illuminate” and “flickering, fitful bursts of meaning” (xvi). She notes that in its tendencies to abrogate narrative coherence, poetry does psychological, political, aesthetic, and ethical work without laying claim to experience or comprehension in its totality. Gubar suggests that the poet is not obligated to offer a sensible story, but can provide “spurts of vision, moments of truth, baffling but nevertheless powerful pictures of scenes unassimilated into an explanatory plot” (7). The tension between describing an event and conveying the impossibility of its description emerges specifically as a

topic of study in Holocaust poetry, but is also relevant to studies of poetry and atrocity after the Holocaust.

My own study is heavily influenced by scholarship on the Holocaust. In his study of modernist poetry of the Holocaust (as well as of other twentieth-century traumas), Walter Kalaidjian similarly notes several of the poet's resources that make poetry a "salutary medium for staging traumatic histories" (11). They include figurative language, engagement of mixed and contradictory metaphors (catachresis), inclusion of absence and silence (aposiopesis, often signalled through blank space or ellipses), the use of non sequiturs or shifting syntax (anacoluthon), and a special dispensation for grammatical irregularity and spatial arrangement on the page (11). The formal qualities that Gubar and Kaladjian outline constitute a guide for beginning to understand why poetry was such a hospitable form for communication after 9/11.

Studies of Holocaust poetry model methods for working through the challenges posed by poetry of later historical crises. Andres Nadre, Gary Mole, and Antony Rowland have published monographs focussed on Holocaust poetry, and a 2008 special issue of *Critical Survey* on "Holocaust Poetry and Testimony" (Rowland and Eaglestone, eds) takes up several aspects of the topic.<sup>21</sup> Nader studies poems about the Holocaust written in German, the language of the poets' oppressor. Mole studies French poetry of the Holocaust and he engages the poems critically; that is, he reads them not simply as "human document[s]" (10) but for their thematic and formal features. Rowland distinguishes between poetry by Holocaust survivors and poetry about the Holocaust by those not involved in the events of 1933-1945. These studies have modeled answers to questions that arise in relation to the poetry of 9/11: how do I reconcile poetry—an aesthetic form—with the atrocity it attempts to describe? How do I treat poems about suffering critically as poems? How do I compare poems written by those who were "there" at the site of atrocity to poems written by those who wrote after?

There is another reason to take studies of Holocaust poetry as a model for this one. Like critics writing about “poetry after Auschwitz,” I too have had to consider Theodor Adorno’s famous injunction against writing after atrocity. In 1949, Adorno wrote that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (“Cultural Criticism” 34), in part referring to Walter Benjamin’s earlier comment that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (qtd. in Rothberg 25). As Irving Howe later noted, it is difficult to “think of another area of literary discourse in which a single writer exerted so strong, if diffused, an influence as Theodor Adorno has on discussions of literature and the Holocaust” (187). As Howe also points out, Adorno’s statement has been influential in conflicting ways. Some have questioned whether Adorno speaks only of poetry, or whether he takes poetry to represent literature as a whole. Michael Rothberg notes that Adorno’s sentence has even been translated differently to support different readings. It has been translated as “After Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems” and as “No poetry after Auschwitz” (see Rothberg 25). Some have taken it to mean that it would be impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz, that it cannot be done; others have interpreted the statement as a directive against attempting to write such poetry, as though it *should* not be done. In any case, what is most astonishing is not the claim itself, but the profusion of responses to it. Countless poets and critics have responded to Adorno as though his statement were a threat against which they must defend the value of poetic expression.

I will not defend poetry in this way here, but my study has been influenced by the conversation Adorno incited and by the amendments he made to his initial statement in later years. As Rothberg explains, Adorno calls for “a self-reflexivity of the *bystander* of the extreme” (22 emphasis in original). That is, Rothberg reminds readers and writers that, for Adorno, there is no “after Auschwitz,” since we continue to live within the material conditions that make genocide

possible. Adorno reiterates this call for self-reflexivity in later comments. In 1966 he writes that “[i]f thinking is to be true . . . it must be thinking against itself” (“Meditations” 365) and in 1973, he responds specifically to the controversy of his original statement:

I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric . . .  
. . . But [German author Hans Magnus] Enzensberger’s retort also remains true, that  
*literature must resist this verdict . . .* (“Commitment” 779-80)

Adorno’s notions of “thinking against itself” and resistance return us to what is most important about his original statement—that, in discussions of the Holocaust (and, I would add, discussions of other atrocities), poetry must express suffering without condoning that suffering. It must constantly work against itself and resist complicity in the crimes of the atrocity. It must resist, in Adorno’s words, being something like “the musical accompaniment with which the SS [the Nazi Guard] liked to drown out the screams of its victims” (“Meditations” 365). There are countless differences between the events of 9/11 and the Holocaust, but reading poetry as resistance, as a genre grappling with the ethics of describing the indescribable, is key to this project.<sup>22</sup> My title, *Poetry after 9/11*, means to invoke the conversation that has taken place among poets and critics in response to Adorno.

I place my study not only in the context of scholarship on the poetry of atrocity but also within a larger context of scholarship on poetry and cultural studies.<sup>23</sup> In particular, my method is “social-formalist,” as social formalism is theorized by Joseph Harrington in his 2002 book *Poetry and the Public*. I read poetry as a social form in order to contextualize the historical production of reading strategies and consider the production and circulation of poetry in a specific moment. Harrington describes a scholarly focus that is less concerned with the workings of particular poems and more concerned with the life of poetry *as a form*. He reads both texts and paratexts, pursuing an understanding of (in his case) modernist poetry not only through its canonical poets

(for example, Wallace Stevens) but also through its lesser known poets (for example, Arturo Giovannitti, Anna Louise Strong) and through journalistic writing on poetry. Harrington understands poetry as a “conversation” taking place in multiple textual and institutional sites (20).

Harrington is not alone in undertaking a social-formalist approach to poetry reading, as he himself makes clear. Rather, he names a method that goes against “the usual conception of textual analysis in literary criticism and history,” but that is practiced by a growing number of scholars (4). Mark van Weinen, Maria Damon, Walter Kaladjian, Christopher Beach, Philip Metres, Michael Dowdy, and (an important precursor) Cary Nelson read poetry with and against its historical and cultural contexts. Following these critics, my reading method combines attention to language, image, and address, with attention to the cultural context of a poem. I value the context of a poem (when and where it was written, when and where it was circulated?) alongside its content. I respond to Maria Damon and Ira Livingston’s suggestion in their 2009 reader, *Poetry and Cultural Studies*, that “the time has come to revisit poetry’s relevance to considerations of public culture” (5).

In fact, Damon and Livingston’s collection marks, as readers tend to mark, an “arrival” for a type of poetry scholarship that has been developing since the mid-1980s—and as they point out, has taken place in some capacity since Wordsworth’s *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. In their introduction, Damon and Livingston argue that “[t]he poetic is inseparable from its context, against and with which it constitutes itself” and they lay out the goal of their reader:

[w]hile much intellectual energy has been spent on explicating what makes poetic language different, the task of this volume is to reintegrate it—without obliterating claims to difference—with its social matrix in ways that mutually illuminate poetics and poesis.

(11)

My decision to open this introduction with a discussion of a photograph, a sculpture, and two novels—and of the public controversy they have caused—is a first attempt to “reintegrate” poetry into larger conversations of representation, memory, and history. I am indebted to critics like those in *Poetry and Cultural Studies* who have turned toward studies of history, politics, philosophy, ideology, and culture; they reject both the New Critical practice of the mid-twentieth century and its lingering legacy.

I respond to the legacy of the New Critics throughout my dissertation. “New Criticism” proper is, in 2010, a dated set of methods. Major debates on poetry among John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks (among others) came to a climax in the 1950s, and scholars have since sought out new terms on which to conduct literary analysis. In the 1980s, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism began to offer concrete antidotes to the exclusively formalist methods of New Criticism, as critics developed reading strategies that rejected the conception of literature as merely a set of autonomous aesthetic texts. Scholars began to approach poetry through the lenses of theories and positions such as feminism, deconstruction, and post-colonialism. Nonetheless, the remnants of New Critical practice are evident in the work of some contemporary English scholars, especially those who study poetry. As the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* defines it, New Criticism was not only a method of reading, but “an epochal project to create the curricular and pedagogical institutions by which the study of literature moved from the genteel cultivation of taste to an emerging professional academic discipline” (Searle 691). The legacy of New Criticism is evident in dominant conceptions of poems as timeless and transcendent, as closed objects, and in rituals of their canonization—and, especially, in the close-reading skills that are used to develop and enforce those conceptions.

Without departing entirely from close-reading practices, which themselves may be useful and revealing, the following chapters work to complicate and sometimes contradict New Critical

conceptions of poetry. In my first chapter, on the popularity of W.H. Auden's poem after 9/11, I challenge the idea of poetry's timelessness and transcendence by tracing the historical and political context in which Auden wrote "September 1, 1939." I suggest that to understand the function of the poem fully in 2001, we must remember its function in its own time. In my second and third chapters, on poetry's memorial and witness functions after 9/11, I argue for a consideration of poems, not as closed objects, but as a set of practices integrated into our everyday lives. These chapters demonstrate how poetry can memorialize the 9/11 dead and witness trauma. It can function and have value in our lives, not only from the distance of a classroom or anthology but also as we mourn our personal losses and record our history. In the fourth chapter, I look at poetry's function as public discourse and, in the process, I confront the limits of canon formation. I follow Nelson's suggestion that we not limit our study of poetry to the poems that past generations have sanctified as "worth reading"; Nelson encourages a re-evaluation of works that were previously marked as mediocre (51). I value poetry as a technology of memory and find value in how poems reflect the particular conditions of their historical moment.

The sheer volume itself of poetry written and circulated after 9/11 makes an exhaustive study impossible. My chapters are focused not on portions of the archive (on groups of poems or collections), but rather on moments when questions of the private and public, the personal and political, the memorial and historical, converge in conversations around poetry. My focus in chapter one, for example, is the popularity of Auden's poem after 9/11; my focus in chapter two is a memorial installation by conceptual artist Jenny Holzer. These are not parallel foci. Instead the dissertation is organized around the parallel observations the chapters produce: in each, I suggest a function of poetry after 9/11. Auden's poem draws out poetry's political function; Holzer's installation draws out its memorial function.

I have primarily focused on poetry in English by U.S. authors (with some exceptions, including Vigier, a Canadian living in New York in September 2001; Szymborska, a Polish poet; and non-U.S. contributors to the website “poetry.com”). I have focused on western English-speaking writers because my topic is not only the poetry of 9/11 but also the surprising phenomenon of that poetry. A different kind of analysis might have included poems by Middle Eastern writers—which have also proliferated since 9/11 and the concerns of which are crucial to the memory of the event.<sup>24</sup> However, while poetry is generally a marginalized genre in North America, this is not the case in the Middle East. As Steven Caton demonstrates in his study of Yemeni poetry, poetry has always been and still is a “key cultural event in [Middle Eastern] society, a part of its central political, social and religious institutions” and this, he says, is “entirely different” from poetry in the United States (5). The Saudi Arabian television show, *The Million’s Poet* [sic], for example, now in its fourth season, has a format and popularity comparable to the American pop music show, *American Idol*. It has a studio audience of 2000, awards a first prize of 1.3 million USD, and chooses forty-eight contestants from tens of thousands of applicants to recite original poetry. The poets often achieve the fame of rock stars. Thus, although my dissertation must omit strong international voices, it does so in order to focus on the phenomenon of poetry’s popularity in the U.S. in particular, after 9/11.

## Chapter Overview

Poetry has been studied primarily in its function as providing comfort; there are other things poetry can do. Using the resources of trauma theory and memory studies—as well as the resources of poetics, my dissertation suggests four of them: poetry can be political; it can be memorial; it can be a mode of witness, and it can be a mode of public conversation. I have

gestured toward the concerns of the individual chapters above, but will outline them in more detail here.

The first chapter, “‘September 1, 1939’ on September 11, 2001,” attends to the role of poetry *readers* after 9/11. As I have noted, Auden’s poem, written on the eve of the Second World War, was said to provide comfort to readers after the 2001 terrorist attacks; but what are the implications of reading the poem solely for comfort? I suggest that, when it comes to poetry of crisis (the poem was written at the start of one violent historical period, and read at the start of another), our reading practices can be about more than comfort; they can also be about politics. To reveal the politics in “September 1, 1939,” I read it as witness poetry of the Second World War and suggest that reading it mainly as a poem about 9/11 problematically transposes the memory of that war onto the memory of 9/11.

In the second chapter, “‘For 7 World Trade’: Poetry as Forgetting, Poetry as Memory,” I pursue my inquiry into the relation of poetry and comfort by investigating the memorial function of poetry. The ideas of this chapter converge at a physical site: the installation by conceptual artist Jenny Holzer erected in the lobby of the new 7 World Trade Center, built in 2006. The installation consists of thirty-six hours of hopeful, optimistic poetry, written by various poets throughout the twentieth century (but excluding Szymborska), scrolling across a large LED screen. The poetry was selected on the premise that there should only be positive images at this historic site. The installation’s mandate to provide a quick dose of “emotional nourishment”—to quote McHenry again—reflects a larger shift in American commemoration practices: increasingly, memorials are built, not as places to reflect and remember, but as places to move on from loss. Here I differentiate between an *aesthetic* of healing (apparent, for example, in the ubiquitous reflecting pools in recent memorials, as well as the positive poetry that scrolls

soothingly in Holzer's installation) and the more difficult *work* of healing. I suggest ways in which memorial poetry can facilitate the latter.

The second half of my dissertation turns to poetry written directly in response to 9/11. In the third chapter, "Rachel Vigier and Juliana Spahr: Toward a New Poetics of Witness," I focus on two single-author collections, both published in 2003. Vigier, a Canadian, was at Ground Zero when the Twin Towers fell. Spahr, a resident of Hawai'i in 2001, was temporarily living in Brooklyn during the attacks, but writes most of her collection from Hawai'i in 2002 and 2003. I argue that, in both of their collections, these two poets revise definitions of what it means to witness 9/11 and to write its witness poetry. While witness poetry has long been understood as "trace" or "evidence" of an event (as articulated by Carolyn Forché in her landmark 1993 anthology), the witness poetry of 9/11 is written, for the most part, after the events and away from the sites of violence; the mediation of the attacks complicate the authenticity of the witness position. Here I suggest the important role of poetry as a mode of record and witness.

In the last chapter, "Lyric as Public Discourse at Poetry.com," I move out from a discussion of two poet-witnesses to a discussion of the large number of poet-witnesses that can be found on the internet. I focus on one site in particular: the "September 11 Dedication Page" at poetry.com, which houses 55,031 poems. While critics have, in general, ignored or dismissed these poems, I identify what is lyrical about them (in particular, their emphasis on the apostrophic address) and what is importantly public about them (they can be understood in the context of recent revisions of the theories of Jürgen Habermas). As lyrics, they compose a vital public sphere of poetry; they are a testament both to poetry's function after crisis and to its longevity despite perennial premature pronouncements of its death. My argument in this chapter, that the entries on poetry.com constitute a form of public conversation, speaks to the larger argument of the dissertation: that poetry is integral to the making of the memory of 9/11.

## **Concluding the Introduction**

Analyzing poetry written and read in the wake of suffering requires special attention on the part of the scholar. As I consider the 9/11 attacks and their consequences, I have had also to consider my role as a student who takes death and pain as an object of study. In her essay, “Consuming Trauma,” Patricia Yaeger discusses the role of the scholar who studies other peoples’ deaths, reminding us to question our responsibilities when we write about the dead (29). Yaeger’s essay is addressed to anthropologists, but it has been important to my thinking. Yaeger suggests that “nervous” writing or writing that “stutters” in its analyses is the only way to approach discussions of the dead; critics must always remain self-conscious about their relation to those about whom they write.<sup>25</sup> Susan Gubar, discussing her position as a scholar of Holocaust poetry, enacts this kind of stuttering when she tests not only poetry but also her own writing against Adorno’s famous caution. Gubar asks, “am I converting grievous suffering into rhetorical pleasure or professional profit?” (4). As a student, submitting this study to receive my doctorate, I must also ask myself whether I may have profited from others’ suffering. It has been difficult at times to read about the destruction of 9/11 and the pain its poets convey. I hope that in calling attention to this poetry, my work does not simply profit from it but, more importantly, illuminates its complexities and its value as expression and record.

After 9/11, the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti declared that from then on, poetry would be known as “BS” and “AS”—before and after September 11. Ferlinghetti made this statement in October 2001, and it resonated with similar comments made by others who felt, in the wake of the attacks, irrevocably shocked and changed. Nearly ten years later, however, Ferlinghetti’s words sound less like a wise prediction and more like another example of the investment in poetry in the fall of that year. It reflects, in its comparison of 9/11 and the birth of Christ, the somewhat myopic way in which 9/11 was, in the fall of 2001, thought to have “changed

everything.”<sup>26</sup> While that particular view has come to seem, by some, too U.S.-centric in the passing years, it raises a question that undergirds my dissertation as a whole: does the proliferation of poetry after 9/11 represent the particular functions of poetry in times of crisis—or does it represent the functions of poetry in the first crisis of a new age, one in which poetry has an unusually vital role? In 2010, we can begin to ask whether the poetry produced before 9/11 is markedly different than the poetry produced after it, and we can ask about the influence of 9/11 on both the poetry that directly responds to the day and the poetry that is produced in its more distant wake.

If Ferlinghetti’s statement signals its own nature as history, however, my dissertation has also become historical as 9/11 recedes in time. I began this project around the fifth anniversary of the attacks and am completing it as the tenth anniversary approaches. I must now ask, as the philosopher Susan Buck-Morss has asked of her own work on 9/11, “When history recedes, what is left standing?” Buck-Morss questions the value of her book, *Thinking Past Terror*, as the terrorist attacks become more distant memory (vii). Buck-Morss asks these questions in a preface to the 2006 re-publication of her 2003 book—so the republication itself speaks to her study’s continued relevance. My own work changed from a “contemporary study” to an increasingly historical one before it was even complete. My conclusions about poetry’s vitality in contemporary life are based on texts produced mainly between 2001 and 2006—dates that now are (albeit recent) history. Indeed, my study on the cultural memory of 9/11 may become part of the cultural memory itself.

As I have worked on this project, the study of 9/11 literature has moved from taking place hastily in afterwards and post-scripts (see, for example, Metres; Schultz) to being the subject of special journal issues (forthcoming in *Modern Fiction Studies* and *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*) and edited collections (Keniston and Follansbee Quinn, eds). My hope is that, in 2010,

my dissertation makes a contribution to a growing body of scholarly work that has something to say about the life of poetry in contemporary America. It is based on a historical, cultural study of poetry written and circulated in response to the events of 9/11—events that ushered in a remarkable time for poetry.

## **Chapter One: ‘September 1, 1939’ on September 11, 2001**

In the days after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, many of the poems that circulated widely were new, having been written immediately and laid at makeshift memorials, posted on the Internet, or collected in swiftly-printed anthologies. However, certain familiar poems, published throughout the twentieth century, were also circulating, taking on new significance and finding new readers. This chapter is concerned with the popularity of these previously published poems, with poetry *reading* practices after 9/11. Long-known poems were found in newspapers and periodicals, and they could be read on websites and in emails. The poet Mark Doty reports that the staff at Barnes and Noble told him that “[t]he store was entirely empty in the days immediately following the fall of the towers, save for the poetry section,” which was teeming with people. In particular, one poem—“September 1, 1939” by W.H. Auden, written on the eve of the Second World War—found unprecedented popularity in the first days after the attacks. This chapter addresses the popularity of Auden’s poem and questions what it means for a poem about the Second World War to be read as representing the events of 9/11.

“September 1, 1939” appeared in at least a half-dozen major American newspapers immediately after 9/11, including *The New York Post*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Baltimore Sun*. Poets Dana Gioia, Paul Muldoon, and Adrienne Rich all recited it at different memorials that month.<sup>27</sup> Students at Stuyvesant High in Lower Manhattan reprinted it in a special issue of their school newspaper that was distributed free with the *New York Times*. In his comic, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Art Spiegelman notes that he “must have heard W.H. Auden’s ‘September 1, 1939’ a dozen times in those weeks” (n. pag). On September 20, 2001, in *Slate*, the poet Eric McHenry wrote about his own experience with the poem:

Last Wednesday, I emailed W.H. Auden's poem "September 1, 1939" to members of my family. Two days later a friend e-mailed it to me, having received it from another friend who was circulating it. On Saturday my mother told me that Scott Simon had read portions of it on NPR. And on Monday my wife, a prep school teacher, saw it lying on the faculty photocopy machine.

Several newspaper and scholarly articles have commented on the poem's sudden popularity.<sup>28</sup> In October 2001, Daniel Swift noted in the *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, "[I]f you could invest in literary capital, I would have put all my money in W.H. Auden's stocks. As New York explains the bombing to itself, Auden's words are everywhere" (17). Readers in 2001 identified with Auden's voice and with the New York he evokes in the poem—a city of "skyscrapers" and "dense commuters," where "[t]he unmentionable odour of death/ offends the September night."<sup>29</sup> There are also crucial *differences*, however, between the events that Auden describes and the events that his poem was read as representing in 2001. "September 1, 1939" is, as we will see, firmly rooted in its time and place.

In nine trimetered stanzas of eleven lines each, Auden documents Hitler's invasion of Poland and anticipates the violence of the Second World War. The poem begins with a reference to the First World War (to the "clever hopes" of the Munich Agreement) and represents the wearied citizens steeling themselves for another war only twenty years after the last one has ended. As in many of his other 1930s poems—"Spain 1937" and "In a Time of War" for example—Auden's subject here is a blurring of war and peace, rendered in a tone suffused with a sense of crisis. The decade of Hitler's rise to power is "low and dishonest" and the war is built on "imperialism's wrong." Auden speaks for the citizens who face the daily life of war (although the U.S. won't enter the war until 1941): "mismanagement and grief/ we must suffer them all again." While the particularities of Auden's poem clearly root it in 1939, it is not hard to see why so

many people identified with its references after 9/11. When the poem opens, the speaker is sitting “in one of the dives/ On Fifty-second street.” Auden’s vocabulary in New York, 1939 is also the vocabulary of New York 2001: Auden writes of “blind skyscrapers,” “a psychopathic god,” “the lie of authority,” and “helpless governors.” These words resonated in 2001 as two skyscrapers became victims of another kind of psychopathic god (terrorism, Osama bin Laden); in late September 2001, the American government was alternately viewed as a fellow “helpless” victim, or, by some conspiracy theorists, as “the lie of authority.” The mid-century poet’s emotions are also the emotions felt after 9/11: Auden expresses fear of impending war, anger toward that “psychopathic god,” and a hesitant hope for humanity. Notably, he portrays the innocence of the citizen—through a language of uncertainty, fear, helplessness, and defencelessness.

Most broadly, this chapter argues that our poetry reading practices, arguably always politically-inflected, are more so at times of crisis and it teases out the political consequences of discussing “September 1, 1939” as a poem about 9/11. To identify with Auden’s poem after 9/11 is to lend meaning both to the poem and, through it, to the terrorist attacks. When, after the attacks, critics considered the popularity of “September 1, 1939,” they mainly remarked on, as I have noted, its ability to provide comfort. McHenry described the poem as “emotional nourishment.” Smith wrote that “people have been consoling themselves . . . [with Auden’s poem] in an almost unprecedented way.” Steinfels wrote that “many found solace” in Auden’s poem. And Auden scholar Nicholas Jenkins described the poem as functioning, temporarily, as elegy (“Historical” 14). These observations echoed ones made more generally about poetry’s role after 9/11. Karr wrote that many poems “dispensed a kind of relief” (E1), and Collins described poetry as the “original grief counseling center” (“Poetry and Tragedy”). My purpose here, which differs from the purposes of these writers, is to go beyond the relation of poetry and comfort to discover the politics that might complicate that association. If Auden’s subject was the onset of

World War Two, then reading his poem in the context of 9/11 maps the meanings of that war onto the impending wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. That, I believe, is problematic and worth reconsidering. It offers American readers after 9/11 a way of positioning themselves alongside Auden as innocent citizens whose country will eventually fight a “good war.” It maps the war against fascism onto the war against terror.

Certain poems may indeed offer grief-counseling to some readers—but when it comes to poems that record historical crisis (such as Auden’s does on the eve of war), or that speak in public during crisis (such as Auden’s does in 2001, on the eve of another war), there is more at stake than personal comfort. Attention must be paid not only to a poem’s consoling tone or elegiac form but also to its content and to the historical and political contexts its words speak *from* and *to*. Certainly, poetry does, and even should, offer solace in times of crisis. I agree with Dana Gioia when he writes that after 9/11 Auden’s “clear expression and careful observation” was a necessary antidote to the “avalanche of platitudes and slogans” offered in much of the news media (*Disappearing* 163). Indeed, poetry has long offered comfort to its readers and that comfort has come through identification: spurned lovers find solace in the sonnet’s themes of unrequited love; mourners find solace in the elegy’s articulation of loss. There are special stakes, however, when we read poems about a time of public crisis or when we circulate poems during such a time of crisis.

I define “the poetry of crisis” in relation to Carolyn Forché’s discussion of the poetry of historical “dark times” in her anthology of witness poetry, *Against Forgetting*: Forché discusses poetry that emerges from times of “historical and social extremity during the twentieth century . . . exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare and assassination” (29). Public circulation brings these poems to bear not only on questions of personal heartache or loss but also on questions of warfare, national

security, and foreign policy. Auden's poem is a document of witness to the crisis of the Second World War: it sets down a record of the first days of the war. The days after 9/11 were another time of crisis: people were reeling from the shock of the attacks, mourning the losses of friends and family, and adjusting to the new landscape of their city and to a new national climate of insecurity. If "September 1, 1939" is a witness poem of the onset of the Second World War, what are the consequences of reading it, publicly, in the contexts of the 2001 attacks?

In the days and months after 9/11, the meaning of the attacks was in flux, especially as the United States government negotiated how it would respond. Circulating Auden's poem during that time meant that its vocabulary and images influenced the meaning and memory of the attacks—and its circulation suggests concerns with public quotation more generally. Critics have commented, in other contexts, on the politics of such public quotation. For example, on the first anniversary of 9/11, New York Governor George Pataki quoted the Gettysburg address to commemorate lives lost, implicitly comparing those who died fighting for the Union in the Civil War and those who were killed by terrorists without knowing why on 9/11; several critics condemned this choice (Kakutani, Sherman, Lewis, Haberman). In my chapter's conclusion, I will detail the speeches by Pataki and other politicians and the responses those speeches drew, but the analogy is useful here: if there is a politics of using a historical speech to remember a contemporary event, then there is a politics too of using a historical poem to represent that event. When we ask a poem written about one historical crisis to speak on behalf of another, we risk conflating the histories of the moments themselves and thus eliding the political complexities of each.

Another instance of elision makes the case further for the special stakes of poetry in times of crisis. At a 9/11 benefit hosted by the *New Yorker* in October 2001, the poet Mary Karr read Paul Celan's poem, "There was Earth Inside Them," which speaks to Celan's experience as a

forced labourer during the Holocaust, digging mass graves. Karr writes in the *New York Times* about the ambivalence she felt over her reading a poem about the Holocaust at an event about 9/11. Initially she feared that the poem was “too dark.” “The digging at Ground Zero was only blocks away,” she writes, “and perhaps the poem would fall on the audience like another blow” (E2). In the end, Karr went ahead with the choice, believing that listeners would be able to identify with the subject of digging in Celan’s poem and would be encouraged by its themes of, in her words, “salvation” and “awakening.”<sup>30</sup> The cadence of “There was Earth Inside Them” is haunting as the poem relentlessly repeats how prisoners “dug and they dug, so their day went by for them, their night.” The poem’s hopelessness emerges in its impossibilities: “Where did the way lead when it led nowhere?” (382). Several critics, including the poem’s translator Michael Hamburger, have noted that the poem’s central concerns are theological: it is about finding God’s presence only in His absence (“And they did not praise God,/ who, so they heard, wanted all this,/ who, so they heard, knew all this”).

While some city workers in New York may, in some ways, have identified with the difficult work that Celan describes, there are vast differences between Celan’s forced labour in a Holocaust work camp and the digging done by paid city workers at Ground Zero. To recognize this difference is not to hierarchize these atrocious experiences, but to remember them each distinctly. Karr’s attempts to bridge these two instances of digging and glean from the poem the message of “how one person in despair and loneliness digs toward the salvation of someone else” glosses over the poem’s more insistent themes of absurdity and futility. Slave labourers like those whom Celan describes dug their own graves. Celan’s poem is more than a meditation on digging; it is a record of the camps. In excerpting the poem for her *Times* article, Karr excludes the lines that most evoke what one of Celan’s critics calls its “dialogue with the absurd” (Friedman 52): “I dig, you dig,” Celan writes, “and the worm digs too.” When poems like Celan’s and Auden’s are

read and circulated on occasions of public crisis, there is meaning in the experience of reading more than only comfort itself—and when poems are read in public, there is more meaning in the experience still. To compare the *forced* digging during the Holocaust to the *necessary* digging after 9/11 is to remember the former as, in some way, purposeful (which it was not) and the latter (the dedicated, important work of New York city workers) as slavery. Similarly, when we read “September 1, 1939” as a poem about the experience of September 11, 2001, we not only *write* the memory of 9/11 but also we *write over* the memory of Auden’s own time.

What about Auden’s topic (the onset of World War Two) or his tone (anxious, ironic, yet tipped toward hope) rang true with readers in 2001? What does the recent popularity of “September 1, 1939” tell us about our understanding of certain twentieth-century events and our place in the twenty-first? And what does it mean to consider September 2001 in the context of September 1939? As a poem that lent meaning to the memory of 9/11, “September 1, 1939” stands as an example, for my dissertation as a whole, of the political function of poetry in times of crisis. Subsequent chapters will explore how poetry written after 9/11 mediates the events and aftermath of the day: these poems are, by turns, memorial tributes, witness testimonials, and public conversation. In every case, however, they prompt questions about how poetry both informs experience and acts as an informing record of experience.

In what follows, I outline the critical conversation that supports reading poetry as, in Maria Damon’s words, “context-specific” (“Poetries” 92). Reading “September 1, 1939” in its specific context not only illuminates the meaning of the poem but also exposes the meanings that it lends to the events of 9/11. Recent studies of American poetry have focused, more and more, on poetry’s participation in everyday life (Nelson; van Weinen; Barrett and Miller) and the specific historical contexts of poetry, especially crisis poetry (Kalaidjian; Damon and Livingston; Burt). I argue that “September 1, 1939” is what Forché has called a poem of witness. I then turn to

Auden's poem itself—to its complicated publication history (Auden edited the poem over several years and, for a time, denied permission to publish it at all) and to the ways it records the history of the Second World War. Since the poem, I argue, means differently in different contexts, I follow this section with a section on the poem's life in 2001. I consider the poem's popularity after 9/11 on the common idea that people are drawn to poems that seem to describe their own experiences. From there, I consider how de-contextualizing a poem puts it at risk of becoming a kitsch object that, like the teddy bears or commemorative snow globes that Marita Sturken discusses, reads apolitically, as a trinket of tragedy. I position Auden's poem here as an example of Sturken's suggestion in *Tourists of History* that kitsch plays a central role in the creation of a post-9/11 culture of comfort. Just as Auden was quoted after 9/11—the poem in its entirety, and some of its most famous lines—I conclude this chapter by questioning the moral equivalencies implicit in quotation practices more generally.

### Critical Conversations: Auden as Timely

Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Auden's birth, Auden scholar Nicholas Jenkins suggests that "if we want to know who Auden will be in his second century," we need to look back at what influenced his voice, "*then on that island*" ("Historical" 15). Importantly, poetry's function *then* (the late 1930s) on that island (Manhattan) was different from poetry's function today. While poetry has often been understood as a transcendent medium, a great deal of poetry, especially in the United States, and especially during wartime, also had a quotidian, public function. Such poetry could, in fact, commonly be found in the daily press: in pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers. Auden's important and transatlantic career may not usually be associated with this poetic culture, but "September 1, 1939"

exemplifies it exactly. In the fall of 1939, Auden's poem participated in the mediation of the beginnings of the Second World War. It stands now as witness to that time.

Increasingly, scholarship on American poetry has begun to foreground poetry's quotidian function and has studied the poetry of pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers alongside the poetry of anthologies and collections. Much of this scholarship focuses on poetry written during times of war or political turmoil, times when poetry finds special relevance, like it did after 9/11, as a mode of expression and witness. Studies of poetry (and the other literature) of historical crisis uncover the ways in which poetry participates in the events it describes. For example, Cary Nelson argues that American poets not only responded to the Spanish Civil War through their poetry but also became, through it, part of the conflict (*Revolutionary* 191). Poems were published daily, alongside other quotidian texts: recipes, advertisements, and notices of events. These poems were written quickly and published in direct response to each other. They were printed and reprinted in daily newspapers; troops read poems in the trenches and tacked them up in the battlefields. Mark Van Wieren explains that, during the First World War, poems were published in the newspaper everyday; they were written not only by professional poets but also by ordinary citizens, expressing their politics and ideas through verse. Van Weinen invites readers to engage these poems not as literary gems but as political texts and "agents of ideological production" (3). He describes them as ephemeral, topical, timely—and values them as such. Similarly, Faith Barrett and Cristanne Miller's anthology of poetry from the American Civil War is premised on the idea that poetry played a crucial cultural role during the Civil War: "American poets [were] responding not only to momentous historical changes but also to one another" (4). Barrett and Miller also argue for reading poetry as timely.

Studies by Nelson, Van Weinen, and Barrett and Miller enable my argument here. By suggesting that poetry—especially poetry of historical crisis—be valued for its timely

interventions in daily life, these studies suggest alternative methods for studying poetry, methods that stand in contradistinction to still-lingering New Critical reading strategies and to an entrenched understanding of poetry as, most importantly, a transcendent form. As Joseph Harrington writes, “the transcendence of poetry goes back a long way”; he argues against the idea of poetry as an “objectified...reified text” (*Poetry* 160). Harrington quotes Alan Golding who succinctly describes (as he objects to) the ways in which poetry has been identified, contra the novel, as a closed space. As Golding states,

much New Americanist work implicitly perpetuates the historical essentializing of poetry as the least “social,” most “transcendent” of genres, treating it by default as a private aesthetic space untouched by the material and historical determinations shaping literary production in other genres. (qtd. in Harrington 160)

Golding is writing in 1993 and Harrington in 2002, but the assumption that poetry is the “least ‘social,’ most ‘transcendent’ of genres” stretches back before the turn of the last century and continues today. For example, one of the most prolific poetry critics today is Robert von Hallberg, who believes that all lyric poetry “aspires to general truth” (*Lyric Powers* 186). Another, Helen Vendler, writes that in “lyric, the human being becomes a set of warring passions independent of time and space” (qtd. in Burt “Portability” 24-5).

Historically, poets themselves have perpetuated this assumption of the genre’s transcendence by taking it as their subject; they praise poetry for its ability timelessly to evoke the general human condition. Samuel Johnson praises Shakespeare for holding up “to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life” (470). Wordsworth writes in his “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* that the “object” of poetry “is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative” (14). In Shelley’s defense of poetry, he writes both of poetry’s transcendence (its existence outside historical time) and its immortality (resistance to physical destruction): “A poet

participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not” (112). The modernists ushered in a drastically new poetic style, one valuing innovation—new forms, new ideas, and new forms for old ideas—yet the sense that a good poem is one that can transcend its time and place remained largely unchallenged. The modernist poet Archibald MacLeish praised Amy Lowell’s work for being “secure in that kernel of poetry which . . . escapes for its handful of generations the familiarities of time” (qtd. in Harrington *Poetry* 160). Ezra Pound’s famous dictum, “poetry is news that stays news” (29) maintains the distinction between a newspaper (so ephemeral it is rewritten every day) and a poem (written once to last through time).<sup>31</sup> These authors are persuasive, and their points are proven by the fact that we still read the poetry they speak of—but a poem can be valued for its “context-specificity” too.

Poetry is not only commonly understood as transcendent, but it is also understood as immortal: poetry outlives its poets. At the end of his *Odes*, Horace writes that, with them, he has “raised a monument more permanent than bronze” (“*Exegi monumentum aere perennius*”) (217). Several of Shakespeare’s sonnets cite the permanence of the poetic text. Sonnet 55 begins, “Not marble nor the gilded monuments/ Of princes shall outlive this pow’rful rhyme” (49). In Sonnet 65, the speaker asks what “strong hand” can hold back the “swift foot” of time; the answer is the “black ink” of the poem itself, which will live on while “time decays” (56). Edmund Spenser’s sonnet, “One day I wrote her name upon the sand,” declares that only verse can immortalize a mortal (“my verse your virtues rare shall eternize”) (16). In a 2002 essay on poetry’s “portability,” his own term for the way a poem retains its “integrity, uses, and function” over time (24), poetry critic Stephen Burt gives examples of poets from Walt Whitman to Lyn Hejinian who understand their poems to be objects that will outlive them.<sup>32</sup> As one example, Burt quotes Whitman’s famous lines from “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”: “It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,/

I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence" (28).

Whitman's poem here is both immortal and transcendent.

Taken together, these examples highlight more than a theme of poetry—but a way of *valuing* it. Horace *boasts* of the permanence of his poem. Johnson *praises* Shakespeare. Shelley *defends* poetry by explaining that it has no obligation to its historical time or place. Anthologizing and canonizing practices reinforce these values of transcendence and permanence: they preserve poems in durable forms and signal their importance for future readers.<sup>33</sup> When New Critical methods emerged in the 1930s, in essays by T.S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, they were so appealing as a pedagogical strategy, in part, because they also reinforced these values. They offered reading methods that could be undertaken in class time, or as an evening's homework, or in the length of an academic article. And by focusing on how a poem evokes the truths or paradoxes of human nature, they offered ways of accounting for poetry's value. However, to understand "September 1, 1939" as transcendent, as having "general" value instead of "local" value, is to divest ourselves of the obligation to consider the historical circumstances Auden was responding to and the historical circumstances of our contemporary reading position. I suggest, in the footsteps of scholars like Nelson and van Weinen that poetry, especially poetry of historical crisis, can be valued not only for its "portability" but also for its context-specificity

One dissenting critic in the conversation about poetry's general or local value, Stephen Burt, should especially be noted here because he engages not only the question of poetry's "portability," but also, in a later essay, the popularity of Auden's poem after 9/11. In all of his work, Burt shares with Vendler (his professor and now colleague) a tendency to value poetry, as Vendler does above, as "independent of time and space." In the latter essay, Burt writes disapprovingly of what he sees as the increasing move from "formal and theoretical analyses of individual poems" toward "social, cultural, or economic contexts and consequences" (533). He

argues that critics such as Nelson and van Weinen too easily locate a poem's value in its public role or in its ability to speak to "prominent social issues" (533). He attributes the popularity of "September 1, 1939" after 9/11 to the "clearly public concerns" (535) the poem takes up. In fact, Burt returns to a kind of New Criticism when he laments Auden's popularity and instead champions poems that can be read without reference to history or to contexts of public discourse. Notably, the two poems he cites neither emerge from, nor speak to, times of public crisis. While I understand Burt's hesitation to value a poem only for its public voice—to "reduce value to public value" (545)—I disagree that Auden's popularity after 9/11 was due to the poem's "design" or to Auden's deliberate "public voice." In fact, the popularity of "September 1, 1939" after 9/11 seems due to the very thing Burt praises—its ability to be read apart from historical context.

While critics like Burt, von Hallberg, and Vendler insist on valuing poetry for its transcending qualities, I value poetry for its context-specificity. The argument for context-specificity can best be made in the context of crisis where a poem functions not as "a faithful mirror" but as witness. Carolyn Forché frames "September 1, 1939" as a witness poem by including it, along with Auden's poems "Spain" and "Epitaph on a Tyrant," in her anthology of witness poetry. In her introduction, Forché lays out her criteria for inclusion; she specifies who counts as a "witness poet": "poets must have personally endured [extremity]," she writes (30). In her short preface to Auden's poems, Forché cites the poet's work as an ambulance driver during the Spanish Civil War and his emigration to the United States at the outbreak of World War Two. Poetry, Forché writes, can bear "traces" of catastrophe; it acts as "evidence of what has occurred" (30). For example, we preserve poems of the Holocaust to tell future generations, "*this happened.*" Her introduction begins with the prototypical example of Hungarian poet, Miklós Radnóti, who died in a labour camp in 1944 but who was survived by his poetry, which was found in his back pocket after his death. Radnoti's words remain, Forché writes, "as poetic

witness to the dark times in which [he] lived” (29). For Radnoti, and for Auden too, a poem is not inherently permanent; it is a record of events, but that record is fragile. It may never be recovered from one’s pocket; it may be (as Auden’s poem was) edited, excised from books.

Poetry has historically been understood, as critics like Harrington and Golding have noted, as the “least ‘social,’ most ‘transcendent’ of genres,” but the term “social” is exactly the one Forché recovers to describe the poetry in her anthology. Searching for a term to bridge the established categories of “personal” and “political,” Forché suggests the “social” as a term to describe “the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal” (31). A social poem, like Radnoti’s or like “September 1, 1939,” has been written neither for overtly political reasons nor for simply personal ones. Like Forché, I make a case for the value of witness poetry. This is a case that will move from Auden as poetic witness to (at the end of this chapter, and in more detail, in the last two chapters) to the poet witnesses of 9/11.<sup>34</sup> As his placement in Forché’s anthology suggests, Auden was a poet-witness, writing from his own “dark time.” It is important to understand that particular dark time: that understanding will honour both Auden’s experience and the experiences of those who live, and write, after him.

## A Record of World War Two

The historical situation that Auden witnesses is the onset of the Second World War. The poem’s title, “September 1, 1939,” is emphatic about this: on this day, Germany invaded Poland, setting off the chain of events that would begin the war. The history that the poem records, the formal ways in which it records it, and the publication history of “September 1, 1939” all speak to the importance of considering the poem as a record of a certain moment in Auden’s life and in history. According to Nicholas Jenkins, Auden finished the poem quickly—by the time Britain and France invaded Germany on September 3, 1939 (“Either” 22). It was published just over a

month later, on October 18, in *The New Republic*. “Almost immediately,” Jenkins notes, “[the poem] was circulating in the Anglo-American cultural bloodstream” (“Historical” 14). In the *New Republic*, Auden’s poem was published alongside articles and editorials that exhibited similar anxieties about the onset of war. Headlines in that issue included “Hitler Proposes,” “How Not to Save Democracy,” and “How Long Can Germany Hold Out?” These headlines convey, as Auden’s poem does, the anxiety that preceded the Second World War. Attention to the poem’s voice, tone, images, and intertexts, and to its publication history, will reveal what contemporary readings that are focused only on comfort have not valued: the ways in which “September 1, 1939” is a record of a particular historical crisis.

In the contemporary American imagination, Auden is celebrated as an influential national poet—and this is, in part, why he became a fitting voice for the nation after 9/11. *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* describes Auden, along with T.S. Eliot, as one of the “primary poetic models” for “the poetic mainstream” of mid-century American poetry (189). Auden is described as an important influence on “an emerging generation of American poets” including Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and James Merrill (144). Auden was indeed a major influence on American poetry (and he did become an American citizen in 1946), but his national identification was, as many of his critics make clear, always in flux. Born and raised in Britain, Auden was thirty-two when he came to New York, and his later life was spent in continental Europe. According to Auden scholar Stan Smith, the poet was always playing the “Double Man”—the title of his first collection of American poems in 1941. His national identity was always performed. As Smith writes, “Auden played self-consciously at being an English ‘metic’ in New York and an ‘America abroad’ in Europe, enjoying a double expatriation, in which each less than absolute allegiance simultaneously reinforced and yet relativised the other” (10). Auden’s performance of different national identities can be understood as part of a project of the

“de-linking of poetry from authentication by nationality” (Jenkins “Auden in America” 40) and in the context of the larger modernist tendency to value cosmopolitanism above nationalism.<sup>35</sup> As Jenkins writes, Auden departed from Yeats and other poets before him by challenging the idea that a poet’s work represented his nation. Instead, Auden explored the belief “that a new kind of [globalized] world demanded a new kind of poem” (“Auden in America” 40). Remembered this way, Auden is a slippery candidate for national spokesperson—whether in 1939 or in 2001, two moments at which patriotism was at a fever pitch.

Just as the more complex elements of Auden’s national identification have been simplified in time, the war that he takes as his subject in “September 1, 1939” has had its memory simplified as well. World War Two is commonly remembered as the last “good war” and as a necessary fight for democracy. The World War Two National Memorial, erected on the Washington National Mall in 2004, reads “Here we mark the price of freedom.” In his 1998 bestselling tribute to World War Two war veterans, Tom Brokaw frames the war on this clear moral ground:

When Pearl Harbor made it irrefutably clear that America was not a fortress, this generation was summoned to the parade ground and told to train for war . . . They answered the call to help save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled, instruments of conquest in the hands of fascist maniacs. (xix)

In popular culture, the story of World War Two as “the good war” fought by “the greatest generation any society has ever produced” (Brokaw xxx) is perpetuated, for example, by filmmaker Steven Spielberg (in *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers*); historian Stephen Ambrose (who wrote *Band of Brothers* along with several other World War Two histories); author James Bradley (who wrote *Flags of our Fathers*, later made into a movie by Clint Eastwood) among others. In these accounts, World War Two was America’s finest hour, when the country fought on the side of good and won.

But the narrative is not so simple. It is complicated by the United States' late entry into the war and its neutrality in the Spanish Civil War; its own violent history of imperialism; the brutal losses incurred by the American army; racism both at home (with the internment of Japanese Americans) and abroad (in the army ranks); and the way in which moral interests often took second place to economic ones.<sup>36</sup> As the cultural historian Paul Fussell writes, accounts of the war have been "systematically sanitized, Norman Rockwellized, and Disneyfied" (267). Nonetheless, the "good war" narrative dominates. Even this brief look at Auden in relation to his country and at the memory of the Second World War suggests the importance of reading crisis poetry in its situation—or missing a great deal of its significance, as a singular poem and as an instantiation of poetic function. The poem is not most importantly a comforting talisman—a reminder, by "a great American poet" of the innocence and unease that preceded the "last good war"; it is a *participant* in the conversation taking place in the fall of 1939.

"September 1, 1939" was written on the occasion of the German invasion of Poland, and can be considered in the tradition of occasional poems. Auden begins the poem by tracing his location. He writes: "I sit in one of the dives/ on Fifty-second Street." He is, as Joseph Brodsky notes, "in the thick of things," a reporter, speaking from what is thought to be the Dizzy Club, a crowded jazz bar (39). This positioning accords with the circumstances of the poem's initial publication—how, as I have said, Auden wrote it in two days, titled it with the date, and published it in a weekly periodical soon afterward. Several critics have noted the poem's echoes of Yeats' occasional poem, "Easter 1916" (881).<sup>37</sup> Through its title and its trimeter, "September 1, 1939" invites this comparison. Like Yeats, Auden carefully walks a line between public and private utterance: Auden refers to his own voice speaking (his spondaic "All I have is a voice" echoes, and almost rhymes with, Yeats' "I write it out in verse"), and the grandeur of the poem's tone contrasts with its smaller moments (Auden's intimate confession of being "uncertain and

afraid”). As an occasional poem published in a weekly magazine, “September 1, 1939” is a kind of journalistic ephemera, and its ephemeral nature can also be recognized by tracing Auden’s references to ephemera inside the poem itself. In the first stanza Auden refers to radio waves “of anger and fear” that circulate over his head. Later, he cites “a folded lie,” which, as previous critics have also noted, can be read as an allusion to the folded newspaper found under the arm of Auden’s “man on the street.”<sup>38</sup> These references to radio and newspaper demonstrate the influences of Auden’s time and his recording of those influences. Auden also emphasizes the everyday through references to the “dense commuters” who daily repeat their morning vow and to the always quotidian “man-in-the-street.”

As an occasional poem, “September 1, 1939” records for posterity ephemeral media like the radio and newspaper; yet the poem also troubles its “occasional” role by shifting between public and private registers. Attention to this shifting reveals that the poem can be read not only for how it “speaks to public concerns” (as Burt suggested, above) but also for how it speaks to specific and personal concerns as well. The first two lines invite a reader to wonder whether the speaker is whispering to his diary or filing a news story. The shift from public to private is epitomized in the break between the fourth and fifth stanzas: Auden switches to a quieter voice—moving from the “international wrong” at the end of the fourth stanza, to the “faces along the bar/[who] cling to their average day” at the beginning of the fifth. Slowly, a few lines later, the bar, a public space, moves further inward: it “assume[s]/ the furniture of home.” This is an image of becoming un-homed: as the bar takes on the furniture of home, the citizens in the poem realize that they do not know where they are. They are not “homeless” per se, but they find their homes, suddenly, in public space, directly affected by the “international wrongs” all around them. They become “[l]ost in a haunted wood/ Children afraid of the night/ Who have never been happy or good.”<sup>39</sup> Later in the poem, Auden’s voice oscillates between public announcement and private

meditation. When the speaker says, “All I have is a voice,” the line can be read alternately as a public rally cry or as quiet insecurity.

While Auden is perhaps most famous for his line, in his elegy to Yeats, that “poetry makes nothing happen” (198), he speaks elsewhere about the power of his poetic voice. He describes the arts as something that can “get the neighbours talking” (qtd. in Mendelsohn *Later Auden* xvii). In his *Times Literary Supplement* article, Jenkins quotes Auden’s pleasure upon hearing that a friend had invoked a poem the poet had recently published in a political march. “When I heard this,” Auden declared, “I knew I hadn’t written in vain!” (14). Here one hears Auden speaking from his historical moment—if not *making* something happen, writing *as* something happens.

Indeed, “September 1, 1939” is saturated in the politics of the late 1930s and the details Auden includes reward a reading of the poem as witness to that time. The pessimistic tone of the poem’s opening stanzas evokes the exhaustion of a citizen who grew up during the First World War and faces more violence only twenty years later.<sup>40</sup> The speaker sees war as inevitable and frightening. In the fourth stanza, Auden expresses this inevitability:

But who can live for long

In an euphoric dream:

Out of the mirror they stare,

Imperialism’s face

And the international wrong.

Even in the “neutral air” of the United States (the image that begins that stanza), one must accept the insistent drive of imperialism, must wake from the dream of peacetime. Like the image of the “euphoric dream,” many of the other images in the poem evoke temporariness and hesitation. Auden ends the poem on a hopeful note, but even his affirmation is hesitant. The speaker hopes

to show “an affirming flame”—but flames flicker. The image of the flame here, can contrast with the poets quoted above whose images are not flickering but are, as Horace writes, “more permanent than bronze.”

Auden’s own hesitations—his shifting politics and shifting presence on the political landscapes of Europe and America—are also reflected in the poem. In England, Auden was a public figure, a celebrity spokesperson for the left, whose comings and goings were tracked in the press. He traveled to Spain in 1937 and worked as a broadcaster for the Republican government and in Spain he developed his social views and methods for combining journalism and art. (These methods would also be evident in his 1939 book, with Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War*, written after time spent witnessing the Sino-Japanese war in 1938.) When he moved to the United States in early 1939, his critics accused Auden of giving up on his leftist allegiances and deserting the Spanish cause. Auden’s anti-Fascist views are evident in “September 1, 1939,” but through its shifting public and private registers, the poem also reflects his reluctance to be a public figure and his withdrawal inward in the late 1930s. The poem exemplifies another kind of “double man”—one who desired to speak in public as orator or preacher but also desired to live a more private life. While Auden is said to have moved to the United States to “[seek] anonymous solitude” (Davenport-Hines 18), his transatlantic fame made this impossible: his poems had already been published in the U.S. and he was well-known there; he was immediately a public figure in America as well.<sup>41</sup>

“September 1, 1939” is a witness to its particular crisis moment, in part through a complex web of historical references and quotations. These references help produce the poem’s politics and they deserve consideration. References to Hitler are made obliquely through gestures to “Linz” and a “psychopathic god.” Hitler is never named outright, but the reference to Luther early in the poem brings the theme of anti-Semitism to the fore immediately. The theme of

hypocrisy that permeates the poem can be traced by finding out what “mad Nijinsky” (the Russian dancer) “wrote/about Diaghilev” (his patron and lover). Nijinsky wrote: “some politicians are hypocrites like Diaghilev who does not want universal love but to be loved alone” (qtd. in Mendelsohn *Later Auden* 74). Tracing the course of that quotation relocates the theme of “love” in the poem from a space of yearning to a space of deception. References to Luther’s anti-semitism, Diaghilev’s hypocrisy—and Thucydides’ “political realism” in the third stanza—are all intertextual evocations of the poem’s main theme: fascism.

Auden refers to historical figures like Luther and Thucydides, and quotes literary sources as well. It has been suggested that the poem’s opening lines are after Dashiell Hammett’s *Thin Man* (“I was leaning against the bar in a speakeasy on Fifty Second Street” [Fuller 291]) or Ogden Nash’s “Spring Comes to Murray Hill” (“I sit in an office at 244 Madison Avenue” [Jenkins “Auden in America” 43]). In any case, the mix of historical, classical, and popular references, quotations, along with the mix of high and low tones, produces a poem that resists simple coherence. To quote Auden is often to quote his interlocutors. Smith writes that “Auden’s use of pastiche and parody, his sleeping-around with poetic forms and his plagiarizing of other poets’ voices, constitute a deliberate assault on the idea if the autonomous authentic self, speaking with its own unique accents” (9). Auden is not unique for including intertexts in his poem; the work I have done here in tracing his references is the mainstay of literary criticism. The problem I wish to highlight is that attention to the time and place in which the poem was written was not paid when it was circulated so widely in September 2001.

It is ironic, given Auden’s own tendency toward quotation, that he would object to his poem being quoted and republished. But he did object and “September 1, 1939” has a complicated publication history. Considering this history is another way of considering the poem’s relation to its own time. “September 1, 1939” did not simply arrive in 2001 with its

“integrity, uses, and function” intact (Burt 24). Auden attempted to limit the poem’s portability and its function importantly changed over the next sixty years. After publishing “September 1, 1939” in his 1940 collection, *Another Time*, Auden omitted it from future collections. In 1966, his *Collected Shorter Poems* was published without the poem. In the introduction to the collection, Auden wrote, “Some poems which I wrote and, unfortunately, published, I have thrown out because they were dishonest, or bad mannered or boring” (15). While eventually he did allow the poem to be reprinted in anthologies, he made sure it was always accompanied by careful disclaimers. When, in 1964, Robin Skelton got permission to reprint a handful of Auden’s poems for his anthology, *Poetry of the Thirties*, Skelton was instructed to write that he “agreed to make it absolutely clear that ‘Mr. W. H. Auden considers these five poems to be trash which he is ashamed to have written’” (41).<sup>42</sup> In 1971, when his executor asked Auden for instructions on the future of the poem, Auden replied, “I don’t want it reprinted again in my lifetime” (qtd. in Jenkins, “Either” 24). Remembering Auden’s editorial choices is another way of remembering the poem as a process (situated) instead of as an object (portable).

Auden’s retrospective dislike of “September 1, 1939” seems to stem from one line in particular. The line comes at the end of the penultimate stanza:

All I have is a voice  
To undo the folded lie,  
The romantic lie in the brain  
Of the sensual man-in-the-street  
And the lie of Authority  
Whose buildings grope the sky:  
There is no such thing as the State  
And no one exists alone;

Hunger allows no choice  
To the citizen or the police;  
We must love one another or die.

Even by 1944, Auden had begun to dislike the final line, “We must love one another or die,” and he published the poem without the whole stanza in his *Collected Poetry* in 1945. His hatred for the line grew over the years, as the poem became more and more popular. In the foreword to his 1964 *Bibliography*, Auden referred to that line when he wrote, “[t]hat’s a damned lie! We must die anyway” (viii). In his essay, “Either *Or* or *And*,” Nicholas Jenkins details the chronology of Auden’s changes to this line in order to discover what motivated his revision of “or” to “and”; my interest in the poem’s print history is mainly in the fact that Auden made these changes at all.<sup>43</sup> It was this particular line that turned Auden against the poem; he felt that, since “we must die anyway,” it was dishonest. When the poem was reprinted in 1955 in Oscar Williams’ *New Pocket Anthology*, Auden changed the line to “we must love one another *and* die” (emphasis added). The changes Auden made to the poem demonstrate that he regretted recording certain thoughts hastily, his thoughts of the moment.<sup>44</sup>

Auden’s executor has said that the intensification of Auden’s regret over “we must love one another or die” can be traced to 1964 when Lyndon Johnson quoted it in a television spot for his pro-Vietnam War presidential campaign (Mendelsohn “Celebrating”). In Johnson’s promotion, a little girl evaporates into a mushroom cloud as the voiceover says, “we must love one another or die.” Auden’s words would continue to be excerpted over the next forty years. At least six books take their names from lines of this poem. A 1977 study of Hitler, for example, entitled *The Psychopathic God*, quotes the second stanza in which Auden claims that “accurate scholarship can/ . . . unearth . . . / . . . what huge imago made/ a psychopathic god.” *Folded Lies*, a 1979 novel, takes its title from the line in the penultimate stanza, “All I have is a voice, to undo

the folded lie.”<sup>45</sup> After 9/11, lines from Auden’s poem also took on new lives. “Missing” posters quoted his observation that “[t]he unmentionable odor of death/ Offends the September night.” At peace rallies, protestors marched with signs that implicated the U.S. in the actions of the terrorists. Their signs explained that “those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return.”<sup>46</sup>

Despite his own regrets about the various lines then, Auden saw his poem survive in quotable phrases and in several historical anthologies. He never reprinted it in his own selected or collected works, but he did allow the poem to appear in other publications, including, for example, Penguin’s *Poetry of the Thirties*. The publication venues themselves indicate that, while Auden may have been embarrassed about having written the poem, he nonetheless was willing to have it appear in public as an artifact of its age. Jenkins speculates that although Auden was “ostentatious” in his dislike of the poem, he was careful to place it in the canon as, for example, “a period piece in an anthology of work from the 1930s, an anthology that he perhaps guesses, as a mass-market Penguin, was likely to have a long life and wide visibility” (36). As Jenkins notes, the Penguin is still in print today. Auden’s poem can, and should, be read as a document of witness to the first hours of the Second World War—a “period piece.” It bears witness to both an important function of poetry in the 1930s, and to the historical events of that time.

### **“September 1, 1939” on September 11, 2001**

Auden’s poem represents sentiments in New York in the late 1930’s—and yet the poem was also called upon, after 9/11, to speak for events in the early twenty-first century. In the *New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik explains the poem’s post-9/11 popularity by focusing on its tone. “Auden’s emotional tone is our tone,” he writes, “even if his meanings are not always our meanings” (2). Gopnik’s claim is just where my argument intervenes. What are the implications of overlooking a poem’s content, or meaning, or context, in favour of its “emotional tone”? In the next sections, I

consider Auden's popularity in 2001 and the political implications of writing a contemporary meaning over a poem that documents historical crisis.

The renewed popularity of "September 1, 1939" was due, in the first instance, to the way in which Auden describes, in images that seemed almost uncanny, what many people saw and felt after 9/11. He describes the images of contemporary New York, of skyscrapers and commuters. Most eerily, he writes of that "unmentionable odor of death," an odor that became more than a metaphor in September 2001. The buildings in his poem "groped the sky" just as the Twin Towers metaphorically did, and the world lies in stupor, "Defenceless under the night." In the first days after 9/11, Auden's observations about war-torn Europe in 1939 seemed almost prophetic of the later trauma in the U.S. (One blogger noted that the poem was "literally" prophetic, noting that it has 9 stanzas of 11 lines each.)<sup>47</sup> That the 9/11 attacks may have in some way been prophesied by a poet writing over sixty years ago was a comfort when Americans were tempted to imagine their experiences as unprecedented. New Yorkers saw themselves reflected in Auden's "man-in-the-street," carrying the newspaper under his arm. Americans could imagine Osama bin Laden, like Hitler, as a "psychopathic god." At the end of the poem, when Auden glimpses hope—he desires to show, in the face of upcoming disaster, "an affirming flame"—readers after 9/11 tried to glimpse hope as well. When Auden writes of feeling scared, displaced, and lost, people felt he was expressing how they felt after such frightening attacks. Ultimately, readers were drawn to this representation of an experience parallel to that which they struggled themselves, even in conversations, to articulate.

Despite his best efforts, then, Auden failed in his attempts to bury "September 1, 1939." As Jenkins writes in 2002, with a tongue-in-cheek reference to Freud, the poem is a "beautiful example of the return of the suppressed" ("Either" 23). Indeed, Auden's poem has survived as one of the most oft-read of the twentieth century. Dana Gioia circulated the poem, in part because he

felt it exemplified the ability of a poet's voice to speak clearly in times of crisis. In an essay reprinted in his *Disappearing Ink*, Gioia documents his experience reciting the poem to attentive listeners while on a reading tour in California that began on September 12, 2001. Gioia suggests that, after 9/11, people were searching for, as I quoted earlier, "clear expression and careful observation" to counter the conversations taking place on talk shows and twenty-four hour news channels. He reads "September 1, 1939" as a poem about the artist's role in crisis, a reaffirmation of the importance of poetry and the imagination. In his brief essay, Gioia provides a respectful analysis of the poem, acknowledging the poem's history and Auden's dislike of its infamous phrase, but he finds the poem's climax in the very stanza that Auden regretted. And while Gioia acknowledges the poem's history, he does not acknowledge the differences between that history and the moment of September 2001. To say that the poem is a "clear expression" is to leave uninvestigated the intricacies of its own quoting practices, its references to historical and classical figures, and its coded representation of Hitler. It was enough, in Gioia's view, to read the poem as one that described, in a general way, what people were feeling after 9/11. As I continue to consider the poem's popularity in 2001, I explore further the idea that we are drawn to poems that appear to describe us to ourselves.

People are often drawn to poetry that they take to articulate their personal experiences. In 1997, U.S. poet laureate Robert Pinsky invited Americans to send him their favourite poems with an explanation of why they were their favourites. The "Favorite Poem Project" received nearly 18,000 responses; it produced 1000 community readings across the United States, fifty short films (available for viewing on the project's website) and three anthologies (edited by Pinsky and Maggie Dietz). The first anthology is currently in its twentieth printing. Two patterns emerge through the anthologies and online videos. The first is that many people consider poems to be comfort objects; numerous poems were selected for having helped people in times of grief. The

second is that poems were often selected as a reader's favourite because she or he felt it spoke on his or her behalf. This second theme, like the first one, speaks of comfort—here the comfort of identification.

When Pov Chin, a 19-year old Cambodian student submitted Langston Hughes's "Minstrel Man" as her favourite, she wrote, "a poem is what I choose to make of it and this one is a description of me" (131); a 60-year-old salesman wrote that John Ashbery's "The Improvement" is "my life re-created." "How did you write it [John,]" he says, "without having met me?" (Smith 11). This type of claim, in which a reader identifies closely with a poem's writer, is repeated so often throughout the anthologies and videos that the project has been criticized for promoting, as critic Troy Jollimore says, the "assumption that a poem can only matter to me if it is in some way about me." In the *Boston Book Review*, Jollimore points out how few people seem to appreciate a poem because it exposes them to something they *didn't* already know about. Instead, Jollimore suggests that "rather than letting poems draw us out of ourselves, making us larger and broader, we are encouraged to make the poems smaller so that we can take them inside us and, in a literal sense, comprehend them."

Jollimore accuses these American readers of a kind of narcissism here. In her own analysis of the "Favorites" project, the historian Joan Shelley Rubin rejects this interpretation—as does Pinsky himself in his published lectures, *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*. For Rubin and Pinsky, there is a clear distinction between the narcissistic and the "personal." When Pov Chin says that "The Minstrel Man" is a "description of me," she is, according to Pinsky and Rubin, "connecting" with Hughes, through a shared memory of personal struggle. This latter argument is compelling: it suggests that poetry can, especially in times of crisis, offer points of connection among its writers and readers. In her poem written immediately after 9/11, for example, Toni Morrison writes that her words are a "thread thrown between your humanity and

mine” (49). Indeed, words are often the only and crucial connection between experience and record, or between victims and witnesses. One of the founding principles of Pinsky’s project is that poetry always includes a “social realm,” that meaning is formed in public, at the particular sites of reading. Rubin agrees with this. She is a historian, and Pinsky a poet; both are inherently concerned with reception. Though neither takes up any sort of Reader Response or Reception theory, they both locate meaning beyond the site of the text, at the site of the reader’s particular experience. There is certainly value in poetry’s social role and the reading experience, and my attempt here is not to take on the methods of Reader Response theory at large. However, we cannot ignore the way in which the context of the site of reading can efface the context of the site of writing—a particular problem in the context of historical crisis.

Pov Chin’s choice of Hughes’ “The Minstrel Man” is instructive here. She may identify “personally” with the poem, but her own experience with the Cambodian genocide—distinct from Hughes’ experience of racism in America—complicates a simple person-to-person identification. Here is a further excerpt from Chin’s submission:

I may be living in America but I am raised in the old-fashioned Cambodian ways. Asian tradition for daughters is very strict. It is so hard for me to see my friends having a sleep over and the only person missing is me. I walk around school with a big smile on my face but inside I am a caged bird just waiting to be free. Life has never been easy for me especially with my parents’ problems. Their problems started during the Khmer Rouge Genocide in the early ‘70s. (131)

It is not necessarily problematic that a young student identifies with the masked person in Hughes’ poem (though Jollimore may maintain it is). Read alone, without context, the poem could indeed easily be describing the contemporary teenager’s experience. This is Hughes’ first stanza:

Because my mouth

Is wide with laughter

And my throat

Is deep with song,

You do not think

I suffer after

I have held my pain

So long? (131)

The difficulty, however, is that Hughes' poem, prefaced with Pov Chin's identification, risks losing its own historical context. As a poem about a mask, it becomes just that—a mask. When Pinsky republishes the poem, prefaced with a teenager's thoughts about life in the aftermath of her parents' experience in the Khmer Rouge genocide, this republication writes over, to some degree, Hughes' own experience with racism in America. The danger here is the neglect of one of the poem's crucial functions: the ability to speak from the time and place of the Harlem Renaissance to the particular issues of race and identity that Hughes was recording. Put another way, the danger is, in fact, the enactment of the poem's very theme: minstrelsy or masked misrepresentation itself. Hughes' poem is an attempt to take off the minstrel man's mask—to record, to *witness*, his suffering. If the poem serves mainly to represent someone else's suffering, then the minstrel man continues to go unheard and unseen. In Pinsky's repackaging, the poem is reified and divested of its historical context. It is hard to *object* to Chin's relationship with Hughes' poem. Nonetheless, Jollimore reminds us, as readers, to look outside our own experience at the experience the poem articulates. Some poems—"The Minstrel Man" is one example, "September 1, 1939" another—require us to make this distinction and do the work of considering an author's social and historical position.

Like Pinsky and Rubin, Michel de Certeau makes a compelling case for emphasizing the context of the reader, but the special circumstance of the crisis poem must still be kept in mind. In “Reading as Poaching,” an essay in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau objects to the notion of reader as consumer. He argues against the traditional binary of writers as active agents and readers as passive consumers—against the assumption that a book *affects* a reader while a reader cannot *affect* a book. De Certeau’s aim is to restore to the reader his/her creative agency. He writes, “[R]eaders are travellers. They move across lands belonging to some else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves” (174). De Certeau’s project in this essay exemplifies the larger project of his book. That project is to work out, as he explains in the Introduction, a “science of singularity” (ix), a logic of ordinary circumstances that occupy the everyday. He seeks out the extraordinary in the repetition of daily life, and the politics that *emerge* from (instead of control) daily life. De Certeau’s “poaching” metaphor is relevant not only to reading but also to his whole political project. “Everyday life invents itself,” he writes, “by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others” (emphasis in orginal xii). The poacher is not only the reader but also the empowered consumer, assembly line, or office worker. The poacher is the inventor, the maker, the “bricoleur” who makes “innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (xiv).<sup>48</sup> In the most famous essay of the collection, “Walking in the City,” de Certeau’s pedestrian is the poacher, the practitioner, the body that writes “[t]he long poem of walking” (101) as it moves through the city.

De Certeau celebrates the reader’s use of a text and, like Rubin and Pinsky after him, he does not distinguish the text from the act of reading.<sup>49</sup> In the case of poetry of crisis, however—the case, specifically of Auden—this distinction becomes necessary. We may read about World War Two and think of whatever we, as readers, choose (this power is exactly what deCerteau

discusses). There are, however, also good reasons to remember what the poet asks us to. Certain poems necessarily convey more than a “tone” (to recall Gopnik) or a theme. In particular, Auden’s poem conveys the politics of its particular moment: when the moment is lost, so are the politics. Is there not agency too in learning about something you have not, personally, experienced? As I have been arguing, reconsidering Auden’s popularity after 9/11 is an opportunity to think critically about what happens when we transpose a poem out of one context and into another.

I have been arguing that extricating a poem from its context incurs losses (to both poem and reader), but, in the case of “September 1, 1939,” that sort of reading creates certain political problems as well. As I have noted, World War Two is commonly remembered as “the good war,” in which the United States fought valiantly for democracy and freedom, liberating those imprisoned in Hitler’s concentration camps. In 2004, during the building of the World War Two memorial, the chair of the National Commission of Fine Arts described the war as America’s “finest hour, the moment when this country emerged as the leading nation of the world” (qtd. in Doss “Memorial” 244). After 9/11, many politicians and newscasters took up this same language: the attacks were described as an assault on democracy, freedom, and the American way of life. The fall of September 2001—when many Americans gave blood, made donations, and worked to clean up Ground Zero—was once again called “America’s finest hour.”<sup>50</sup>

The height of popularity of Auden’s poem also came in the fall of September 2001, while the language of war was still being formed. Gioia recited it as part of his reading tour on September 12<sup>th</sup>; Eric McHenry’s observations about the poem’s massive circulation was written just over a week after the attacks. In those first days, as the death toll continued to climb, and the United States lived in a heightened state of fear, it was still unclear how to understand the attacks that had just taken place, or how the United States would respond. While many Americans

instantly saw the attacks as an act of war, the relationship between the United States and other countries in the world was still being negotiated. Auden's poem offered one possible language through which to think about the new crisis of 9/11 in terms of the vocabulary and moral certainty of a historical war.

We can see the narrative that "September 1, 1939" carries out of its original context. To mobilize Auden's poem as a response to 9/11 is to invite in 2001 an imagination of impending war in Afghanistan and Iraq in the same terms as World War Two. In fact, the mapping of one war experience onto another seemed to naturalize a discourse of war at a time when Americans were still struggling to make political meaning of the 9/11 attacks. In poetic transposition, Hitler stands in for terrorists, and the tens of millions of victims of a brutal war that included the Nazi Genocide stand in for the victims of 9/11. This is one consequence of reading "September 1, 1939" in the context of September 11, 2001 and one reason to resist that idea that poetry, above all, "dispenses relief."

### **Poetry as Kitsch**

So far I have established that readers are typically drawn to poems that they consider to be about their own experiences, and with reference to crisis, I have suggested that there are political consequences to reading certain poems ahistorically—for example, reading "September 1, 1939" as a poem that describes September 2001. I have attempted to complicate the idea that a main function of poetry is to dispense relief. One of the correlatives of believing that poetry primarily dispenses relief is that a poem becomes commodified, taken as a closed object that can be put in one's pocket and pulled out when one needs a hug. One particular danger of this commodification, I would like now to suggest, is that we turn poems into kitsch objects. As

kitsch, Auden's poem offers a simple formula for understanding the 9/11 attacks, and forecloses a more complex engagement with its meaning and context.

Several scholars and poets have written about poetry as object or commodity. In *Economy of the Unlost*, Anne Carson questions the human tendency toward economy—in mathematics, architecture, and poetry. “What exactly is lost when words are wasted?” she asks, questioning the familiar cliché of “don’t waste words”(3). Carson discusses ancient practices of gift exchange in which poets used their poems as currency, trading them for hospitality or food. In *Sentimental Collaborations*, Mary Louise Kete investigates poetry and the anthropology of gift-giving. She reads poetry as a gift exchange, an economy that establishes shared national and political ground. Ellen Gruber Garvey’s work on nineteenth-century scrapbooking provides numerous examples of poems being cut from the newspaper, preserved individually in personal albums. Joan Shelley Rubin’s historical account of poetry-reading practices reminds us that, in the 1920s, the Poet’s Guild printed and sold poems individually in a format called the “Unbound Anthology,” and then later, “Looseleaf Poetry.” The idea here, as Rubin explains, is that the poetry was made affordable, easy both to produce and to purchase. The result of such practices is the concept of a poem as collectable, as treasure. Indeed, our favourite poems are often collected in “treasuries.” Many poems fit on one page. They can be folded up, passed along, framed on the wall, kept in one’s pocket.<sup>51</sup> The work of these scholars demonstrates that the relation of poetry and object is not new or entirely negative; however, in the case of “September 1, 1939” that relation begins to shut out the meaning of the poem.

Another example from the Favorite Poem Project reveals a contemporary instance of poem as object—one that, while quite moving in itself, suggests the terms on which poetry can begin to be understood as kitsch. In one of the project videos, Stephen Murphy, an Irish-American financial consultant from Massachusetts, says that his parents kept Eavan Boland’s poem “The

Emigrant Irish” framed on their wall. He explains that after the death of his nephew, he kept a copy in his wallet, with the prayer of St. Francis typed up on the other side of the page. In the short video, Murphy describes how the poem came to be so central in his life. He confesses that he is “not a poetry buff” and that it took him years to appreciate Boland’s poem. It wasn’t until after his nephew died that he returned to the poem on his parents’ wall and found that it helped, for a moment, to make him feel better. In the video, Murphy takes out his wallet to show the small piece of paper he keeps with him. At the end of the video, facing the camera, and appearing to speak from memory, he recites the poem.

I noted earlier that, after 9/11, many people posted poems, alongside candles and photographs, in the makeshift memorials that appeared across the United States. Robert Pinsky writes of this phenomenon that, “by the singular nature of the art, [poems] share that quality of personal scale with teddy bears and photographs pinned to chain-link fences surrounding the disaster site” (“Poetry and Sept. 11”). Pinsky’s argument recalls Marita Sturken’s extended commentary on comforting kitsch objects after 9/11. In *Tourists of History*, Sturken warns that the comfort derived from objects such as snow globes and teddy bears is disturbingly apolitical and uncritical. She connects this comfort culture “to the renewed investment in the notion of American innocence” (7). After 9/11, she points out, Americans were encouraged to “consume” as a kind of therapy; the objects they purchased—not only teddy bears and snowglobes but also t-shirts and American flags—offered them a narrative of victimization that paved the way to the wars the United States is still engaged in. Sturken demands that her readers examine the meaning of actions as seemingly “innocent” as the purchase of an FDNY teddy bear at Ground Zero.<sup>52</sup> Discussions of kitsch employ the language that I have already used to discuss Auden’s poem.<sup>53</sup> In his 1939 essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg contrasts kitsch and art when he writes that “[k]itsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and

fake sensations” (12). In 2001, Auden’s poem offered a kind of “vicarious experience” of 1939. Indeed, kitsch is often made when an object from the past takes on new meaning in the context of the present. Sturken notes the way in which Cold War posters promoting duck-and-cover drills get “recoded as home decoration” (21).

Like holding a teddy bear, reading Auden’s poem offered a position of innocence to American citizens in September 2001, by aligning them with Americans in 1939 who were facing war (albeit in a more distant future). The consequence of asking Auden to speak for the experience of 9/11 is that in the ventriloquism, his poem becomes what Sturken would call a “commodity of grief” (6), apolitical and uncritical. This reading practice forgets, in the name of remembering, the particularities of the Second World War and the complexities of good and evil both in that time and in our own. As Auden’s poem demonstrates, to recognize a poem as timely is to recognize it as a record of the situation it documents.

“September 1, 1939” facilitates a position of innocence, both through its circulation as object, and through the theme of innocence that the poem itself evokes. If readers do not trace the intertexts that produce the poem’s more complex engagement with hypocrisy, betrayal, and imperialism, and if they read the poem *with* the stanza that Auden regretted, the poem produces a simplified portrait of the innocent citizen. In the first stanza, the speaker is “uncertain and afraid” and that line carries extra weight as it rhymes with the line two below it (the “low dishonest decade”). The poem speaks of “helpless governors” and citizens who are “[d]efenceless under the night.” The poem offers salvation when it declares that “[w]e must love one another or die.”<sup>54</sup> These are the images that convey what Gopnik called the “emotional tone” of the poem and that facilitate its role as comforting object. Read only for these images, Auden’s “period piece” transcends its time and place to become a kitsch representation of the innocent American.

## The Politics of Quotation

Poetry as comfort—and “September 1, 1939” as a prime example of that relation—is part of the discourse of innocence that shapes the memory of 9/11. Many people quoted Auden in their anxiety and shock after 9/11; acts of quotation, however, took place at other times as well, and were understood, in these times, as importantly political. Writing the day after the 9/11 memorial service in 2002, *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani notes that during the service, some politicians in New York delivered speeches primarily composed of quotations from famous speeches of the past. Mayor Michael Bloomberg quoted Franklin Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech; Governor George E. Pataki read “The Gettysburg Address”; and New Jersey Governor James McGreevey read excerpts from “The Declaration of Independence.” These historical speeches about freedom of speech and religion, the consecration of a battlefield, and the birth of a new nation, reminded Americans in 2001 of moments of their history that have produced their most democratic and nationalistic values. Critics like Kakutani note the troubling politics of comparing the events of 9/11 to these earlier, quite different, moments in U.S. history. Like a speech, a poem can be critiqued for the politics its quotations convey.<sup>55</sup>

Memorial speeches after 9/11 celebrated a discourse of freedom and democracy, and emphasized the power of the United States, especially in wartime. For example, the “Four Freedoms” that Mayor Bloomberg referred to came from the closing passages of President Roosevelt’s “State of the Union” address in 1941. At the end of 1941, the U.S. would enter the Second World War. Money for war bonds was raised through a tour of paintings by Norman Rockwell that represented the four freedoms: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. As Roosevelt was moving the country toward war, Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” quoted by Pataki, justified the lives lost in a war already fought. Lincoln consecrated the ground on which Civil War soldiers died and asked that

“these dead shall not have died in vain.” Governor Pataki would later echo this sentiment when he consecrated “Ground Zero” and similarly declared that the nearly 3,000 dead on 9/11 need not to have died in vain. By reading the preamble and introduction to Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence,” Governor McGreevey reminded Americans of their victories in struggle. The lines that open “The Declaration” are so well-known that they easily and immediately signal freedom, victory, and unreserved patriotism.

In quoting these iconic speeches from American history, politicians like Bloomberg, Pataki, and McGreevey frame 9/11, not as a unique historical event, but as an episode in a continuing American struggle for its ideals; they use tried discourses of patriotism and war to rally the American people. Kakutani writes that by “recycling” famous words, the politicians treated the terrible deaths on 9/11 as “oddly generic and interchangeable.” This is a particularly surprising treatment given how often the attacks were discussed as unprecedented, and as having “changed the world.” Kakutani suggests that speakers after 9/11 chose to quote from speakers before them in order *avoid* politicizing the ceremonies. The politicians themselves boast about those very motives. In 2002, Mayor Bloomberg told the *New York Times*, “One thing I’ve tried to do in the ceremonies for 9/11 is keep politics out of it.”<sup>56</sup> Bloomberg’s comment notwithstanding, it is clear that these quotation practices are deeply political: the important differences between the civilians who died in buildings and on planes on 9/11 and the soldiers who died fighting at Gettysburg produce quite a political friction indeed. In fact, Bloomberg made that comment in a dispute over where and when it is appropriate to quote Lincoln’s address. Bloomberg saw his own use of the speech as non-partisan, but he told the *Times* that he objected to the Democrats’ use of it in an advertisement they had planned to run to mark the start of the 2002 New York gubernatorial primary.

Like Kakutani, other critics have noted how the 2002 memorial, and other memorials since, contained “recycled” speeches. Historian Daniel J. Sherman points to the political significance of this move: it is a significance so obvious, he says, that it requires “little elucidation” (123). Writing in *Commentary* in 2002, Michael J. Lewis calls the invocation of “The Gettysburg Address” after 9/11 “an act of dishonesty” (58). *New York Times* critic, Clyde Haberman made a similar point after the 2007 memorial service, when this time, politicians quoted from William Blake, Elie Wiesel, and Herman Melville. When it comes to public speeches, the significance of mapping one event onto another is considered overtly political. Still, many critics have dismissed the invocation of Auden after 9/11 as simply a way for people to come to terms with their grief.

Literary critics Amy Kaplan and David Simpson have each written about the political significance of another instance of appropriation—when the phrase “Ground Zero” was mapped from its origins in nuclear war onto the ruins of the World Trade Center site. Kaplan, in a 2003 essay, and Simpson, in a 2006 monograph, call for the importance of examining the language used to talk about 9/11. Each traces the term “Ground Zero” to the *OED*, where it denotes an atomic explosion such as the ones that occurred at the Trinity site in New Mexico or at Hiroshima and Nagasaki (the term first appeared in the *OED* in 1946). As both critics note, to call the site of the destroyed Twin Towers “Ground Zero” is to gesture toward two conflicting claims: the term “Ground Zero” both names Lower Manhattan as a site of “cataclysmic change” (Kaplan 56) and names the United States as a victimized nation alongside other victimized nations. That is, it maintains the exceptionalism of the attacks while it also assimilates them as one of “many instances of nuclear explosions” (Simpson 43).

Kaplan further argues that while the impetus for the term may have come from a desire to understand the events as unprecedented, it nonetheless locates the United States *in* world history

rather than as exception to it. She writes that “[t]he historical exceptionalism implicit in the appellation ‘Ground Zero’ is belied by the history of the term itself that started with the first use of the nuclear bomb” (56). While he would not disagree with Kaplan (they argue a similar politics, though to different ends, although Simpson, the later critic, does not cite Kaplan), Simpson is troubled by the implications of this conclusion. He strongly objects to the way in which the history of the term “Ground Zero” offers the United States a way to equate the 9/11 attacks with the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He writes that “Lower Manhattan, in complex and recursive ways, may have a connection to it, but the most urgent point to be made is that it is *not* Hiroshima, not *our* Hiroshima, not our full price of admission into the community of global suffering” (44). Simpson is careful not to “diminish the scope of the 9/11 tragedy” (43) but he is adamant about the differences between the suffering of Americans on September 11, 2001 and that of the Japanese on August 6 and 9, 1945. He specifically fears that by comparing these occasions of suffering, Americans gain absolution for their part in the violence inflicted on Japan and on other places around the world. Simpson writes that the use of the term “Ground Zero” to describe Lower Manhattan is an “implicit declaration of moral equivalence” (43). He is concerned with how the language we use to describe an event dictates our moral understanding of it. Reading Auden’s poem as a poem about 9/11 also creates a problematic moral equivalence between the memory of the “good war” that would follow it and the future wars that were brewing in 2001. The phrase “moral equivalence” relates back to both the discussion of the recycled speeches on 9/11 and to my reading of Auden’s poem. The phrase points to the ways in which metaphorical language—such as calling the Twin Towers site “Ground Zero” or reciting “The Gettysburg Address” at a 9/11 memorial—has real consequences for the way events are remembered and discussed.

In his article on the recycled speeches at the 2007 September 11 memorial, Clyde Haberman proposes that “it is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation.” The same point can be made in the case of Auden. When we leave Auden to speak for his own generation, we become better able to acknowledge those who speak of 2001—with their own anxiety equal to, and different from, Auden’s. In Chapter Four, I will explore what happens when *readers* after 9/11 become *writers*. I will examine the poems produced in response to 9/11 and posted, in the tens of thousands, on the internet. In advocating a historicized reading of Auden’s poem, then, I am also advocating an appreciation of poems written in 2001. Most of these poems will not be quoted for the next sixty years, but they can be valued for the way that they say, *this happened too.*

I will conclude this chapter with one of these poems—not found on the internet, but in the anthology, *Poetry after 9/11*. In “Silent Room,” Aaron Smith’s speaker, paralyzed by fear, twitches, blinks his eyes, stares at the lock on the door. Short lines, staggered on the page, convey an anxious speaker, debilitated after the shock of 9/11. The lines appear clipped, almost in point-form, and resemble a doctor’s case report. In fact, the speaker self-reports: he can barely drink a glass of water and has stopped eating. The poem begins, “Take a drink of water/ hold the cup to my lips/ for 8 counts . . .” In the next stanza, another attempt: “Twitch my arm/ twitch my arm, only 5 more times . . .” The refrain of the penultimate verse-paragraph is, “I am wearing dirty underwear/ I am wearing dirty socks/ I am wearing a dirty T-shirt . . .” This quotidian vocabulary suggests a poetry of the twenty-first century everyday that can be read in contrast to the everyday of Auden’s “September 1, 1939.”

“Silent Room” and “September 1, 1939” are too different to merit close comparison, but if Auden’s speaker reflects someone wearied from years of violence, attempting in brave moments to “reach the deaf . . ./ speak for the dumb,” Smith’s speaker is, by contrast, young, inexperienced,

prostrate (if not quite deaf and dumb) after the shock of the terrorist attacks. Auden writes as a British expatriate who has grown up during World War One and has watched Hitler's power rise since 1933; he writes as a public figure whose work will be published immediately in a political weekly magazine. Smith, by contrast, represents someone inexperienced with war (as most young Americans are in the twenty-first century); he writes a quiet poem that appeared in an anthology alongside other poems by New York writers after 9/11. The poem closes with these lines:

I'm taking  
that damn iron with me tomorrow  
when I leave the apartment.

Its snake-like cord on the floor  
not enough  
to convince me  
it isn't plugged in,  
that everything I am isn't burning. (5)

Smith's poem offers a vocabulary for the trauma of 9/11 and it stands as a record of response. It is a *trace* of the anxious days after 9/11. Smith, like Auden in 1939, personally endured the conditions he relates. With this last verse-paragraph, Smith speaks for a person in the twenty-first century who can no longer do his laundry or his dishes and eats only at McDonald's. He suggests the trauma of the burning towers through the small details of the everyday. And he demonstrates, as Auden does, how intricately poetry can mediate the experience of crisis.

To invite a reading of Auden that places him as a witness to a particular traumatic event and values his timely contribution to poetry is to enact a critical practice of our poetry-reading habits, specifically in relation to historical crisis. If it is "an act of dishonesty" to quote historical speeches on the anniversary of the attacks, then asking Auden to speak for the experiences of 9/11

(and thus, less the experience of 1939) is similarly dishonest. To recognize this is not to deny the reader seeking comfort in poetry, but to recognize poetry's political function.

## **Chapter Two: “For 7 World Trade”: Poetry as Forgetting, Poetry as Memory**

The first building to be re-constructed in Lower Manhattan after the destruction of 9/11 was 7 World Trade Center, an office tower just west of the Twin Towers, that collapsed on the afternoon of September 11, 2001. The new building, opened in the spring of 2006, is a 52-storey office tower made almost entirely of glass and promoted as the “safest skyscraper in America.” Because no one died in the original building, and its site was therefore clear of bodily remains, the tower’s rebuilding process was not stalled by the memorial debates that have delayed other reconstruction efforts in Lower Manhattan. Nonetheless, the finished product reflects an acute awareness of the historical significance of its location. The new tower was designed, in the first instance, to protect future inhabitants from attack. Its safety features include a concrete base and reinforced concrete floor, wide exit stairwells with venting fans to clear smoke, thick fireproofed steel columns, and a fireproofed elevator.

The building also includes, in its lobby, an LED screen, fourteen feet high and sixty-five feet wide, that functions as a blast wall, shielding the elevator banks from the main entrance. Integral to the design of this wall is a continuous loop of text that scrolls across it in five-foot-high letters. The text resembles an oversized news crawl or stock market ticker; it comprises an electronic anthology, designed and compiled by American conceptual artist Jenny Holzer. Including selections of poetry from major American poets like Walt Whitman, Alan Ginsberg, Langston Hughes, and Elizabeth Bishop, Holzer’s installation displays thirty-six hours of poetry on the subject of the city of New York.<sup>57</sup> A poetic monument to the city, it is a site upon which to continue to explore questions of poetry and therapeutic responses to trauma.

This chapter argues for poetry's memorial function as it charts a shift in therapeutic commemoration practices. In the late twentieth century, therapeutic memorials were spaces of contemplation, built to facilitate the difficult process of healing. But while an aesthetic of healing still dominates physical memorials, that aesthetic is increasingly associated with optimism for the future rather than with contemplation of the past. How are both poetry and memorials mobilized as comfort for a grieving public, and how do they respond as such to American anxieties of the early twenty-first century? As I have been arguing, poetry is mainly understood as functioning as a genre of comfort. After 9/11, Auden's poem served as a "grief-counseling center" (Collins) for readers who identified with the fear and uncertainty that "September 1, 1939" articulated. At 7 World Trade Center, poetry again offers comfort—this time, by emphasizing optimism—to passersby in Lower Manhattan.

Surprisingly, despite its proximity to Ground Zero and its connection to the attacks, Holzer's installation does not itself engage with the history of that site. Instead, through poetry, the installation emphasizes the spirit and beauty of New York City, showing, as poet and critic John Yau writes, that "renewal is integral to history." The poetry for the installation was selected on the premise that there should be positive images at this historic site. The building developer, Larry Silverstein, insisted on "positive stuff, good stuff" (qtd. in Collins "At Ground Zero"). Indeed, the installation's mandate to be both safe and positive reflects what scholars have observed about recent memorials more generally—namely, that more and more memorials value renewal over remembrance. As art historian Erika Doss notes, "Terrorism's looming, anxious threat to self and nation is managed in [contemporary] memorials through design elements and textual references that stress security, stability and heroism" ("Memorial" 3). Like Holzer's installation, many contemporary memorials (for example, the Oklahoma City National Memorial [2001], the World War Two National Memorial [2004] and the in-progress 9/11 memorials),

focus on hope for the future, and on moving on from loss, not on contemplating how those losses occurred.

This chapter continues my inquiry into the functions of poetry after 9/11; it considers the relation of poetry and comfort against larger structures of national mourning by suggesting the limits and possibilities of poetry's memorial function. I read poetry as a memorial practice in order to query the habit of invoking healing narratives in response to recent traumatic events. When the function of *both* memorials and poetry is mainly to bolster a grieving public—in this case, through a focus on being safe from future attacks and moving on toward a positive future—what alternative functions and what alternative discourses are excluded? These alternative and often excluded discourses are those of process, contemplation, and remembering. On September 11, nearly 3,000 people were killed, but their deaths did not occur in isolation. Their deaths have a complex political prehistory and they were the catalyst for two ongoing wars. To remember the September 11 dead only in terms of personal loss and healing from loss and to encourage, above all else, increased optimism after that loss is to limit the memory of the day. To engage the larger context of the terrorist attacks at their memorial sites is not, as Judith Butler writes in relation to her own work on 9/11, to discuss *causes* or to shift blame onto the American government or way of life (*Precarious* 11); such engagement, however, is necessary for a nuanced memory of the events of 9/11.

Holzer's installation is emblematic of contemporary memorials in its dedication to both safety and optimism. Holzer herself has claimed that she never intended to create "memorial text, but text about the joy of being in New York City" ("Interview" 17), yet she and her commentators rarely refer to the site *without* referring to memorialization. This is one warrant for my claim that the installation is a memorial. Historically, definitions of the terms "memorial" and "monument" have delineated the two, and Holzer's installation may have been left to slip

between the categories; however, recent shifts in commemoration practices and their study have enabled an examination of her piece as an example of both.

Until the late twentieth century, “monument” often described a triumphant structure, while “memorial” denoted the remembrance of loss. However, as Andreas Huyssen writes in 1994, “Boundaries between museum, memorial, and monument have . . . become fluid in the past decade in ways that make the old interpretation[s] . . . strangely obsolete” (12). James E. Young, who has written extensively on memorialization of the Holocaust, also notes the problems in delineating these conceptual objects; a gravestone, for example, often called a monument, remembers loss; it has a memorial function. Young defines a monument as a *type* of memorial. While a memorial can take many forms—as a moment of silence or a collection of flowers at the side of the road—a monument is a built structure. Following Young, I use the term “monument” to refer to specific, material examples of memorialization (*Texture 4*). Holzer’s installation is a monument, a physical memorial.

When Holzer was commissioned by Larry Silverstein to contribute a lobby installation that would engage the building’s glass and light, she proposed this LED panel with continuous words scrolling across it. When it came time to select the text for the project, Holzer worked closely with Klara Silverstein, the developer’s wife, to select poems that conveyed an optimistic message. Klara Silverstein’s responsibility, it seems, was to enforce her husband’s desire for a work of art that was positive and did not engage the “miseries of 9/11” (qtd. in Collins “At Ground Zero”). The Silversteins vetoed any choices that directly referred to the 9/11 attacks. In fact, they chose texts that would write *over* rather than *about* the trauma that took place at the site.

To write *over* the trauma of the attacks is to produce a kind of forgetting. Yet, the emphasis on optimism at 7 World Trade Center is not simply a forgetting of the 9/11 attacks but a

shaping of their memory—one that encourages the practice of positive thinking over a more difficult engagement with the attacks. As Marita Sturken writes, “the forgetting of the past in a culture is often highly organized and strategic” and, indeed it seems that way in Holzer’s piece. As Sturken also notes, however, “[a]ll memories are created in tandem with forgetting” (*Tangled* 7). Forgetting, then, is not memory’s opposite, but a crucial aspect of its creation. Pierre Nora, in his foundational article on sites of memory, defines memory “in a dialectic with forgetting” (8). Huyssen offers the reminder that “Freud already taught us that memory and forgetting are indissolubly linked to each other, that memory is but another form of forgetting, and forgetting a form of hidden memory” (17).<sup>58</sup> Recent studies on forgetting itself (Mayer-Schönberger, Vivian) argue that forgetting is necessary for us to live fully and positively in the present.<sup>59</sup> To argue for “more memory” at contemporary memorial sites, then, is not simply to argue for “less forgetting”; it is to recognize that memorial work done on the principle of moving forward itself shapes how we remember the event memorialized.

How do poetic practices, like monument/memorial practices, participate in shaping memory? Poetry, especially in the last half of the twentieth century, has occupied a place on the margins of American literature and culture. Yet the proliferation of memorial poetry after 9/11 demonstrates that as a “social form” (Harrington’s term, per my Introduction), poetry is playing an increasingly active cultural role. Joseph Harrington uses “social form” to describe a scholarly focus that is concerned less with readings of specific poems and more with the life of poetry as a genre. “Bereft of inherent properties,” Harrington writes, “the conversation called poetry instead stages literary ideologies” (*Poetry* 5). What ideology does “the conversation called poetry” stage after 9/11? If we are going to be interested in poetry after 9/11, we ought, according to Harrington and like-minded critics, to attend not only to individual poems but also to poetry itself, as genre, as “social form,” with social function.

As I have noted, comfort and optimism increasingly constitute the contemporary ideology—and the presumed contemporary function—of poetry. Poetry, especially lyric poetry, is understood to express thought and feeling. It holds emotion or experience and holds it, at times, in fragments and questions. Poetry can be cathartic for both writer and reader. It has multiple forms and uses, from the didactic to the political. It is not surprising, then, that after 9/11 poetry gained a national presence as a form that offered ways for citizens to communicate and, in particular, to identify with each other's suffering. As I argued, however, in my discussion of Auden's poem, poetry can offer *more* than comfort in the aftermath of crisis. This potential is related to poetry's memorial function. A poem can carry the dead into our present lives, make space for grief, and offer a vocabulary for the process of mourning. It can articulate synchronic and diachronic relationships (between Americans and Iraqis, for example, or among Americans through history). It can call for political change, and look backward as well as forward. Harrington has said that poetry can be integral to social life; poetry after 9/11 exemplifies just that function and opportunity.

Harrington notes that poetry played a central role in both literature and culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. He supports Mark van Weinen's evidence (see my Chapter One) for the popularity of poetry during World War One.<sup>60</sup> Harrington writes that during the war, poetry was circulated in newspapers, kept in personal scrapbooks, and considered to be "ameliorative of social ills" ("Why" 499). It was much written and much read. In fact, according to Harrington, during World War One, poetry was considered so crucial to "uplifting the hearts or stiffening the courage of thousands of readers," that poets were classified as part of an "essential industry" and were legally protected from the draft ("Why" 498). Poetry as a form Harrington argues, was an integral part, socially and politically, of the experience of the war itself.

Harrington documents poetry's movement from a central place in American literature and culture at the beginning of the century to a more marginal place at the end of it. This is, by now, a well known story: modernists like Pound and Eliot gained cultural legitimacy by distancing their poetry from mass-market readership. New Criticism helped push poetry out of newspapers and into classrooms. The dense formal play in which modernist poets engaged, and which the New Critics cultivated, made poetry increasingly inaccessible to the general reading public. (In his *Genealogy of Modernism*, Michael Levenson quotes an extreme example of Pound's dismissal of the reading public as "the mass, the half-educated simpering general, the semi-connoisseur, the sometimes collector . . . the readers of the 'Spectator' and the 'English Review'" [219]).<sup>61</sup> At the time of Harrington's writing, near the end of the twentieth century, poetry as a social form was still recovering from the separation of poetry from the public. Harrington argues, in particular, against the way scholars have ignored the fact that "poetry does cultural work" ("Why" 509) and have tended to see only "fiction as having a privileged access to history" ("Why" 508). Near the end of his essay, however, and again in his 2002 monograph, *Poetry and the Public*, Harrington remarks on a current, renewed, popularity of poetry. He cites, for example, a growing interest in public poetry readings and slams. In the previous chapter, I noted historical instances in which poetry had a vital and quotidian function (for example, during the Spanish Civil War); the U.S. in the aftermath of 9/11 was another one of those instances. Harrington tell us that, in 1910, it was said that poets bound "an unstable liberal society together" ("Why" 498)—and those social bonds did more than provide comfort. They were, as memorial poems might again be after 9/11, part of the cultural fabric of the time.

In its memorial function, poetry can participate in documenting, remembering, and shaping a nation's history. How, then, might poetry contribute to memorializing the events in all of their emotional, historical, and political complexity?<sup>62</sup> If an increase in public anxiety has, as

Doss suggests, increased the demand for monuments that are soothing, safe places for moving on from loss and steeling the self for future attacks, then, more and more, monuments are becoming like poetry in its most limited (poetry mainly as soothing) function. Notably, monuments make this shift just as poetry itself finds an increasing role in public life. There are many examples of poetry as *part* of commemoration practices; that is not a new idea. Poems are embroidered in the AIDS memorial quilt, tacked to the “Memory Fence” in Oklahoma City, and carved in stone monuments all over the world. I am interested, however, in the functions that the forms of poetry and memorialization share. Memorial poems—poems written not to express a personal experience of 9/11 but to set down, in public, a memory of it—were written by several poets after 9/11. Investigating the memorial function of poetry is a means of investigating twenty-first century memorial strategies and, ultimately, beginning to reveal the cultural anxieties—fear of future terrorist attacks, for example—that produce them.

In the next section, I trace a genealogy of memorials from the nineteenth century to the present, in order then to argue that Holzer’s installation is a product of key shifts in memorial design: from celebrating heroism, to mourning grief, and then to encouraging optimism. I go on to further theorize what I have described as poetry’s memorial function. Studies of the elegy have taken up Freud’s work on mourning and melancholia by suggesting ways in which poetry acts out the mourning process (Sacks) or, more recently, acts out against it with melancholic ambivalence (Ramazani); I move beyond an assertion of the relation of elegy and personal grief to discuss the public function of memorial poetry. Through readings of two memorial poems (by Billy Collins and Martin Espada in turn), I illustrate how poems live in the world as monuments do, providing time and space for memory. A study of Jenny Holzer’s installation follows. “For 7 World Trade” is a material example of the convergence of poetry, memorial, and a post-9/11 rhetoric of optimism and preparedness. As I suggest in the chapter’s conclusion, the installation

silences the political and historical conversations that might otherwise, and should, be taking place at that site.

## A History of Memorials

Shifting memorial practices represent shifting ideas about death, the body, and the nation, as much as they represent ideas about the particular event being commemorated.<sup>63</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, monuments in the United States were typically built primarily for high-ranking war heroes. By the end of the century, however, the purpose and structure of monuments was redefined and the 1980s and 1990s produced less didactic, more therapeutic sites. Twenty-first century memorials maintain an emphasis on the therapeutic, but that emphasis has become increasingly aesthetic and rhetorical; memorials are less frequently spaces to contemplate the past and more commonly places to embrace the future.

The end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century was a time of change for American monument makers. Until then, monuments primarily celebrated presidents and army generals and taught future generations to acknowledge the victories and sacrifices of heroes. These early American monuments were didactic, teaching the moral lessons of war.<sup>64</sup> Their message, like the message of the structures themselves, was permanence, a gesture to future triumphs. As art historian Kirk Savage explains, “[t]he impulse behind the public monument was an impulse to mould history into its rightful pattern” (*Standing* 4). However, in 1863, after the Civil War battle of Gettysburg, citizen soldiers were identified for the first time; they were buried in marked graves, and their names were included, alongside their marshals and generals, in major monumental structures.

The individuation of the dead soldier represented a shift in monument-making. In writing a pre-history of the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial, Kristin Ann Hass explains that the American

Civil War, which ushered in a growing nationalism, marked the beginning of the understanding of the individual soldier as an emblem of the nation (35). The men who fought in the Civil War were for the most part civilians, not hired mercenaries, and increasingly, with the introduction of the draft, soldiers needed to be persuaded of the honour in fighting for a set of beliefs. Hass notes that modes of remembering the dead were tied to modes of recruiting the living to fight for, or simply believe in, American patriotism (38). The practice of remembering the dead in order to recruit the living to war still takes place, as does the conflation of home and homeland, citizen and soldier. After 9/11, many venues described the dead as “heroes” and the home was figured as “the homeland.” The citizen, the soldier, and the nation all became one. Marita Sturken writes that marketing for products that sell the militarism of domestic life, products such as duct tape, alarm systems, or SUVs, “effectively bridges home and homeland in its rhetoric and aesthetics” (*Tourists* 72). Citizens are recruited to believe that their home—and then, by extension, the nation—needs protecting.

Monuments to the American Civil War demonstrated, for the first time, the idea of nation expressed in terms of the individual, and this idea has been retained in commemoration practices since.<sup>65</sup> In 1924, the first memorial to World War One casualties on Washington’s National Mall, listed the names of the dead. The effect of having a monument overflow with names is twofold. Names remind us that individual citizens are the victims of war. They also remind us, with the presentation of thousands of names at once, that mass losses are incurred in war. Tombs that remember the “unknown soldier” also came to be a large part of World War One commemorations.<sup>66</sup> Like the structures covered in names, tributes to an anonymous soldier highlight both the individuality of each lost life and the sheer number of lives that were lost.

The first war monument in the United States to include the names of every dead American soldier is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial built in 1982, and that memorial marks

another important shift in American memorial history.<sup>67</sup> Designed by Maya Lin (then an architecture undergraduate at Yale), the memorial consists of two black granite walls sunk into the ground, inscribed with more than fifty-eight thousand names of dead and missing soldiers. Constructed in the Constitutional Gardens on Washington's National Mall, the memorial was designed, not to celebrate military triumph, but "expressly to heal a collective psychological injury" (*Savage Monument* 267). It is thus the first model of a therapeutic memorial. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial stands in stark contrast to almost every memorial before it. Where the Washington monument, for example, is a tall obelisk, Lin's monument sinks into the ground; where the former is white, the latter is black; where the former celebrates the strength of the nation, the latter invites visitors to grieve and heal; where the former can be seen from more than thirty miles away, the latter is more intimate rewarding those who approach and touch it. At first, these attributes of Lin's design made it controversial—some veterans called it "the black gash of shame"—but when the memorial opened, its success was evident in its popularity: four million people visit each year. Some visitors to the site have said they feel closer to their lost loved ones at the memorial wall than they do at their gravesites.<sup>68</sup>

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a therapeutic memorial because it provides a space of contemplation. That is, the goal of healing a psychological injury is integral to the memorial's design: the space is expansive and quiet; visitors can stand privately along the wall and take rubbings of the names; they can see their reflections in the black granite. Perhaps most importantly, visitors can bring letters, flowers, and other personal objects, and leave them along the wall; the National Park Service will preserve and archive them. That the memorial welcomes these additions means it welcomes an engagement with those in the process of grieving. The wall facilitates a dialogue among its visitors, the messages they leave the dead, and the controversial history itself of the Vietnam War. Lin's design demonstrates that a memorial can be a site for

difficult contemplation and memory and it became a model for a new kind of commemoration.<sup>69</sup> The Veterans Memorial is a therapeutic memorial, but it is also a site of memory and of political engagement.

As the functions of monuments have changed, from essentially didactic to primarily therapeutic, the public—from whom the monuments arise and whom they serve—has changed as well. For example, Savage notes that the turn toward the therapeutic monument in the 1980s coincided, not accidentally, with the addition of “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders (“Trauma” 106). The first classification of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the DSM came in 1980, after soldiers had returned from Vietnam and as the women’s movement became more vocal about the long-lasting effects of sexual and physical abuse. James E. Young notes that Holocaust countermonuments emerging in the 1990s reflect the “national ambivalence and uncertainty of late twentieth-century postmodernism” (“Germany’s” 85). Countermonuments respond to the paradox that so often destruction is commemorated through *construction*: they are monuments that aim to reverse the basic understanding of a monument as an immovable structure, and they generally take unexpected forms.<sup>70</sup> The recent shift in memorials, in the early 2000s, toward an emphasis on the future—on moving forward through positive thinking—is developing alongside a general anxiety growing among Americans around terrorist attacks. As citizens consider the possibility of attacks on their cities not during wartime but, for example, while at the office one morning, so the anxieties develop that twenty-first century memorials aim to quell.

In an essay on memorial responses to 9/11, Erika Doss usefully suggests the term “memorial mania” to describe a current “national obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent, excessive desire to claim—and secure—those issues in public culture.” She notes that recent trends in memorials promote “sociotherapeutic notions that trauma can be represented

and must be cured” (“Memorial” 3). She points to features of these recent memorials that reflect anxieties over safety and security by offering spaces of a particular kind of engagement: they offer opportunities to reflect (in a reflecting pool), feel soothed (by the rush of the waterfall), feel calmed (by the manicured lawns), or be made optimistic (by the light of the beacons of hope). Doss notes that memorials that incorporate these calming features reflect current anxieties over personal and national safety. These anxieties are also played out in the consumer acts—the increased sales in duct tape and SUVs—that Sturken discusses. Memorials like the ones Doss describes package anxiety in the rhetoric of optimism with words like “hope” and “renewal.” The Oklahoma City National Memorial, discussed below, aims to offer “peace, hope and serenity”; “renewal” has been used to describe the effect of Holzer’s piece. Holzer’s installation does not include waterfalls or trees and may not be a memorial proper; nonetheless, it functions as this kind of memorial structure.

If the early twentieth century saw a shift toward the therapeutic monument, the twenty-first century is seeing the function of memorials shift again: fewer monuments are built as spaces to mourn the past; more are built as spaces to look toward the future instead. The distinction here is that, while recent monuments retain an aesthetic of therapy and healing (the waterfalls and reflecting pools described above), they turn away from a *process* of grieving and focus on security against harm and optimism about the future in general. Several twenty-first-century memorials exemplify this shift. Among them are the memorial erected in Oklahoma City (2000), the World War Two memorial in Washington (2004), and the memorials currently being built at the three sites of the 9/11 attacks. These memorials offer the aesthetics of therapeutic memorials but limit engagement with the events they commemorate, often delegating the work of remembering to adjacent memorial museums.<sup>71</sup>

The Oklahoma City National Memorial (2000) and the World War Two National Memorial (2004) are both important precedents for the memorialization of 9/11. The main feature of the Oklahoma City memorial is the “Field of Empty Chairs,” in which one hundred and sixty-eight chairs engraved with names represent lives lost in the bombing. However, unlike Lin’s memorial, which encourages visitors to approach the names on the wall, the Oklahoma City memorial cordons off the named chairs and visitors must view them from a distance. Instead of detailing the past, the Oklahoma City memorial looks to the future. The mission statement at the entrance to the memorial announces that its goal is not only to provide “comfort and strength,” to its visitors but also “peace, hope and serenity.” The memorial project also includes an interpretive centre, adjacent to the field of chairs, and a non-profit organization that sponsors conferences and research on terrorism prevention. These features of the memorial signal that if an imperative to remember the past still drives American culture, remembering itself is, more and more, taking place *away* from designated memorial space. At the space, a rhetoric of healing veils emerging values of safety (terrorism prevention) and optimism (“peace, hope and serenity”). Doss notes that the memorial in Oklahoma City omits the story of the events it commemorates:

[here] commemoration of the dead actually commemorates national healing. The memorial . . . encourage[s] forgiving and forgetting, rather than the urgency of facing the cause of bereavement . . . The historical and political context of why these deaths occurred has been effaced. (“Death” 78)

The World War Two National Memorial also commemorates national healing: its design compels visitors to have brief and structured stays; it encourages them to heal from loss without first grieving for it. The memorial’s design features, including a name wall and reflecting pool, hint at therapeutic memorialization, but as Savage notes in his writing on that memorial, it is not a space for reflection but “a space for acclamation, pure and simple” (*Monument* 300). Because it

features an imposing water fountain, the memorial is not quiet but loud. Visitors are discouraged from leaving personal objects. And like Holzer's installation, the memorial is designed to be safe. A grassy path spirals around the memorial, protecting it from a possible truck bomb. Construction of the monument began in September 2001 and, while it was built to remember the war against fascism, it reflects current anxieties over the war against terrorism.<sup>72</sup>

Memorials to the September 11 attacks similarly emphasize moving forward through a discourse of healing and have been built with high security in mind. The permanent memorial currently under construction in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, "Crescent of Embrace," invites visitors to have an "intimate experience" (Murdoch and Murdoch) at the site of the Flight 93 crash. The memorial consists of the expansive "Field of Honor" surrounding the "Sacred Ground" of the actual crash site. In the memorial's mission statement, co-architect Paul Murdoch writes that the memorial is designed to be "[t]imeless in its simplicity and beauty, like its landscape, both stark and serene." He continues, "We want to restore life here, to heal the land and nourish our souls." The vocabulary Murdoch uses to promote the memorial design—timeless, serene, restore, heal, nourish—contributes to the larger post-9/11 narrative of personal loss. Here the memory of the event (a terrorist attack, a plane crash, forty people dead here, along with nearly 3,000 others at other sites) is replaced with an aesthetic of restoration and nourishment for the future. Murdoch's choice of the word "timeless" particularly contrasts with the idea that a memorial might also function to remind visitors of a specific event in history. Like the Shanksville memorial, the memorial in Arlington, Virginia to commemorate the 184 people killed at the Pentagon on September 11, is promoted as something to "be experienced on a ... personal level" ("The Pentagon Memorial"). At the memorial's website, its design is described as having "an emphasis on life"; one hundred and eighty-four benches are surrounded by trees with exfoliating bark that will "register their growth into the future" ("Pentagon memorial").

Finally, the World Trade Center memorial, currently under construction, similarly focuses on renewal, with rows of deciduous trees that symbolize an “annual cycle of rebirth” (“World Trade Center Site”). “Reflecting Absence” is the design of architects Michael Arad and Peter Walker, who won the competition involving 5,201 other contestants for the chance to design the sixteen-acre memorial space. When finished, the memorial will consist of a field of trees containing the two large footprints of the Twin Towers. Cascades of water will surround the perimeter of each void. An underground interpretative center—adjacent to, but not integral to the memorial site—will record the history of the World Trade Center attacks. Indeed, according to its website, the memorial’s primary mandate is “to resonate with the feelings of loss and absence that were generated by the destruction of the World Trade Center” (“World Trade Center Site”). Arad was recently quoted in the *New Yorker*, saying that he hoped people would feel “removed from the city” as though they were “turning their backs to it” while visiting the 9/11 memorial (qtd. in Goldberger 43). Arad’s motive, like the Silversteins’, is to encourage tranquility and offer distraction from the disturbing memory of the attacks. Again, Arad’s memorial focuses on loss, and moving forward from it; it relegates the history of the event and its detailed remembrance to a space underground.<sup>73</sup>

This story of shifting memorial practices is also a story about the memorial function of poetry. The changes that have taken place in memorialization over the past hundred and fifty years have correlatives in poetry as well. Just as monuments have started to remember individual lost lives and help individuals heal from those losses, so does poetry often speak from or to an individual. And just as monuments can be sites of healing, so does poetry have a healing function. Maya Lin has said that she wanted the memorial wall all to read like “an epic Greek poem” and to “return the vets to the time frame of the war” (qtd. in Sturken *Tangled* 61). Both poetry and memorials produce and are produced by memory.

Both forms are also examples of Marita Sturken's "technologies of memory." They both embody and produce memory. The history traced here suggests that the desire for poetry to give comfort takes place within larger practices of mourning. Both memorials and poetry have the further ability to record events in their complexity and to point back to a place in history. They can be physical sites where mourners take time to grieve. They can hold a place of absence for the dead and confront the present with that loss. Studies of twentieth-century poetry have discussed verse *about* memorials (North, Rotella).<sup>74</sup> A specific case can now be made for the ways in which poems function *as* memorial. Making this distinction, between poems *about* and poems *as* memorial, is a way of thinking about poetry's relation to mourning and about the active public role poetry can play after disaster.

### Poetry as Memorial

Studies of the elegy have shown how poetry takes up the work of mourning. Indeed, a growing body of work focused on elegy as a genre has shown that poets importantly participate in grieving and mourning both in private and in public life. The framework of elegy offers a way to investigate the function of the "poetry of mourning" (the title of one study, by Jahan Ramazani); I wish, however, to shift from the study of one poetic genre to the study of the role of poetry in public mourning and memorialization practices. This shift affords an opportunity to suggest the ways in which poetry, through its material presence, does the work of physical monuments and memorials. While my concerns do not exclude elegiac poetry, they are focused on the social form of the memorial poem. The memorial poem includes non-elegies as well. It focuses less on the feeling of "being left behind" (Cavitch 1) than on remembering what is gone.

In the past twenty-five years, scholars have increasingly considered the concerns of elegy against larger structures of mourning, and these concerns do have useful intersections with my

own. Peter Sacks' 1985 monograph was a landmark study that importantly identified the primary and secondary conventions of elegy.<sup>75</sup> As I have already begun to note, Sacks argues that elegy is literary "work" in the way that Freud describes mourning as "work"—that is, it is a productive, healthy process by which a person works through grief. Jahan Ramazani responded to Sacks (1994), pointing to the ways in which modern poets (his book is subtitled, *The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, outlines his scope) revise elegiac conventions and leave both themselves and their readers inconsolable. Modern elegists, Ramazani suggests, participate in "melancholic mourning"; their mourning work is not productive, but instead "unresolved, violent, and ambivalent" (4).

Critics after Sacks and Ramazani have taken the study of elegy into contexts that suggest more ways in which its conventions and processes are expanding. In her feminist critique of elegy (1997), Melissa F. Zeiger studies elegies for those who have died from breast cancer and AIDS. She suggests how such poems take up *shared* grief—that is, how they speak not only to the interests of one poet but also to those of a group. Max Cavitch, in a monograph on early American elegy (2007), extends the definition of the "poetry of mourning" to include poems of multiple forms, including sonnets, acrostics and ballads (86). Cavitch argues that early American elegies, in multiple forms, connect communities both synchronically (as documents that promote, for instance, patriotism) and diachronically (as national historical documents). In his overview of elegy and its critical study (2007), David Kennedy suggests that all poetry has become increasingly elegiac as societal attitudes toward death change and national identity becomes synonymous with mourning (7-8).<sup>76</sup>

The range of work on elegy illustrates the difficulty of delineating the form's borders and functions. Elegies can be private as well as public texts; they can be texts of mourning or of melancholia; they can reflect personal or collective loss. In the twenty-first century it is perhaps

only safe to say that an elegy is a poem claimed as such—just as Damon and Livingston have defined poetry as “all that is claimed as poetry” (3). A poem may be claimed as an elegy by its author or by its reader/critic. In either case, the claim depends on an intertextual relation with other elegies and with what has become a dominant understanding of the, albeit elastic, features of the genre. What unites the studies cited here is a common interest in the relationships among poems within the genre of elegy itself. What has become clear now is that poetry, elegies and other poems, is an integral part of practices of public memorialization, especially after 9/11.

Memorial poems written to commemorate 9/11 are examples of the convergence of the forms of memorial and poetry. Two poems in particular, by Billy Collins and Martin Espada, both written on the first anniversary of the attacks, show how a poem can create a physical and temporal space for mourning. Collins, as poet laureate in 2001, wrote the poem “The Names” to mark the first anniversary of the attacks. Collins is one of the best-selling poets in the United States and has been at the centre of many controversies over the years. His mainstream popularity—accounted for by the largely accessible poetry he has written to gain it—has alienated him from many circles of poets and critics.<sup>77</sup> In the initial aftermath of 9/11, Collins resisted publishing a poetic response. “You can’t approach something like this frontally in a poem,” he said, “at least I can’t. It will knock you over. It is like walking into a big wave. You will fall on your bathing suit” (“Introduction” xii). The first poetic response that Collins produced was a memorial poem for the first anniversary of the attacks. “The Names” was first published in the *New York Times* on September 6, 2002; it was read aloud at a joint session of Congress later that month.

The poem is, in the first instance, an alphabetical list of names. It looks, feels, and reads like a memorial wall. The speaker in Collins’ poem sees the names of the 9/11 dead materialize

in front of him. They appear written under photographs, monogrammed on t-shirts, spelled out by the twisted twigs of trees:

Fiori inscribed on a yellow petal

Then Gonzalez and Han, Ishikawa and Jenkins.

Names written in the air

And stitched into the cloth of the day.

The dead haunt the speaker of this poem. Their ghostly bodies are represented by their names, just as names have spoken for bodies at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and at many other monuments all over the world. Readers might hold the poem in their hands as mourners at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial hold rubbings made from names on the wall. Collins' stitched names are also reminiscent of the stitching of names into the NAMES Project AIDS memorial quilt. Collins materializes these twenty-six names. The use of exactly this many names exhibits a limit so artificial—defined only by how many letters make up the alphabet—that it speaks to how long the list of the dead actually is. By the same token, in making the alphabet so central to his poem, Collins also allows each letter, and its illustrative name, to stand in for all of the other names that also begin with that letter. By organizing the poem around names, and by titling it “The Names,” Collins foregrounds the way in which entire lives, bodies, families are always represented, and can only inadequately be remembered, in one or two words. (One might compare Collins’ poem to the “Portraits of Grief” obituary series that ran in the *New York Times* after 9/11. The *Times* commemorated the September dead individually, through the small details of their daily lives. As the series was published, more names and faces appeared everyday, and readers were confronted with, as David Simpson writes, “just how many lives constitute approximately three thousand” [23]).

Many of Collins' images and structural features also enact the contradiction of how something as small as a poem or a name can convey such massive loss. Instead of offering one name to represent the letter "X", Collins writes the line "(let X stand, if it can, for the ones unfound)." This line stands out: it is the only line in parentheses, the only line to begin with a lowercase letter, and the only line with such a clear internal rhyme ("stand/can"). Here the multitude of the unfound—an amorphous, unknowable, possibly growing, group—is contained, made small with parentheses, with the lowercase letter, within the space of one line. The internal rhyme produces this brevity in sound, as it makes the line unfold more quickly than some of the other lines. In other parts of the poem, Collins' images address this same problem of scale. After reaching "z," and having exhausted the alphabet, he begins to conclude with the image of "[n]ames etched on the head of a pin." This image, of something crowding an impossibly small space, will echo again in the last line: "So many names, there is barely room on the walls of the heart." In both cases, small objects (a pin, a heart) overflow with the impossible list of names. Neither object is suitable for writing on in the first place.

The poem's material presence is figured both spatially, in its resemblance to a memorial wall, and temporally. The poem, that is, takes up both space and time. It does not move quickly through its inventory, but reviews each name slowly, methodically, with an image to distract the imagination after each one. Long lines slow the reader's pace (reading aloud or silently), performing the poem's lengthy catalogue. With the exception of a few jarring short lines, most of the lines extend across the whole page and the poem itself, written in one verse paragraph, feels long. Although the alphabet has twenty-six letters and may be recited quickly, the poem has fifty-four lines and digresses into an image at almost every one.

Some of these digressions are similes that evoke the speaker's sense of loss ("I see a thick tangle [of names] where letters are hidden/ As in a puzzle concocted for children"). Some,

however, resist imagining: names “slipping around a watery bend,” or names among flowers “[h]eavy with the dew like the eyes of tears,” confound readers, keeping them stuck in the imaginary world. Similes offer a way into reality (they say: this imaginary thing is “like” something in reality), but many images in “The Names” refuse this simple translation. And all of this imagining takes time. Collins’ long lines last even longer when they refuse to release the reader from their imaginary world. Moreover, the poem spans an entire day: in the first line, the speaker lies “awake in the palm of the night”; later it is the morning, and later still it is evening, with its “weakening light, the last swallows.” By offering the reader both time and space to grieve, “The Names” imitates a memorial wall of names. The poem does not reference the terrorist attacks specifically, but the context in which it appeared and circulated identifies it as a site of memory for the attacks.

Other commemorative poems written after 9/11 take on variations of this memorial form. Martin Espada published his poem “Alabanza (Praise)” in the *Nation* on September 23, 2002. Espada is an award-winning poet, as well as a lawyer, an activist, and a professor of poetry at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. “Alabanza (‘Praise’)” has perhaps become his most famous poem: it can be found in the collection *Alabanza: New and Selected Poems* (2002), on Espada’s website, and on numerous other internet sites. Like Collins, Espada catalogues the 9/11 dead. He details the characteristics of individual victims. The poem is written especially for the predominantly Hispanic employees of Windows on the World, the restaurant in the World Trade Center’s North Tower, and Espada speaks of them in their particularity. He “praises” the cook with “a shaven head and tattoo on his shoulder” and “the blue-eyed Puerto Rican”; he praises the details of their kitchen, “where hands cracked eggs with quick thumbs.” While Collins’ poem represents the 9/11 dead metonymically, Espada represents the dead through synecdoche, further pointing to the individuality of each lost life. That is, while Collins’ uses names as representative

substitutes for the dead, Espada uses parts of the dead, their body parts, to represent their whole lives. For Collins, one person's name represents the multitude dead; for Espada, that one dead person is him or herself a multitude. Each lost life is the loss of multiple characteristics and relationships. Both poets use figuration to access the greater losses that their poems can only briefly suggest. Neither poem takes a personal approach—that is, neither speaker describes his own relation to the dead, as a more traditional elegist might—but the losses enumerated here are personal, individual.

Like "The Names," "Alabanza (Praise)" meanders. It offers both time and space for the mourning the dead restaurant employees. Espada's descriptions of the dead root them in a history and invite readers into that history. Here are the poem's first six lines:

*Alabanza.* Praise the cook with a shaven head  
and a tattoo on his shoulder that said *Oye*,  
a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo,  
the harbor of pirates centuries ago.

Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, a candle  
glimmering white to worship the dark saint of the sea.

The poem unravels histories synecdochally as well: from a pair of blue eyes, the reader is led to a Puerto Rican body, to that body's roots in Fajardo, to Fajardo's history of pirates, and then to the city's lighthouse. Background on the Puerto Rican worker expands, builds, like a meditation (somewhat like the hypnotic meditation strategy that Juliana Spahr uses in *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, discussed in the next chapter). Indeed, the poem, full of repetition, reads like an incantation or prayer. Repetition is found among sequential lines ("After the thunder . . ./ after the shudder . . ./ after the radio . . ./ after the night . . .") and reverberating across the poem: images of pirates and terrified frogs repeat; and the refrain *alabanza* recurs throughout.

Unlike “The Names,” Espada’s poem has breaks between its verse paragraphs, yet the poems are similar in line lengths and number of lines. They both take up an entire page and, read aloud, they take about the same amount of time; both offer serial descriptions and repetitions, like catalogues. The effect of the catalogues of bodies in these two poems is like the effect of the engraved names on memorial walls. The poems, like the walls, individuate lost lives, remembering an historical event through its victims; conversely, the poems reflect the insufficiency of individuation when so many have been killed. Indeed, the emphasis on the individual that has occupied memorial practice since the late nineteenth century is a lyric practice: the lyric is the poem of the mourner and the lover. Both write about their yearning—for what their community has lost or what it will never have. Collins and Espada speak about a collective loss, but they enumerate the individuals that make up that collective. Neither speaks overtly of his own losses, but they both say “I”: “Yesterday, I lay awake,” Collins writes; “Soul, I say,” Espada writes.

In sum, then, poetry’s re-emergent cultural role is evident in its formal relation to memorialization. Collins’ and Espada’s poems written for, and circulated widely, in the public, illustrate how the structural elements of a memorial can build a poem as well. Like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for example, “The Names” and “Alabanza” offer time and space for the process of mourning. They trace a history and identify a set of losses. They demonstrate that both monuments *and* poetry offer places to respond to and remember historical crisis. The poems by Collins and Espada show the potential of poetry as memorial. Holzer’s installation might have been such a memorial as well.

## **“For 7 World Trade”**

Jenny Holzer’s LED screen in the lobby of 7 World Trade Center provides an opportunity to consider the function of poetry in public space; memorialization strategies in contemporary America; and the relationship between remembering and forgetting. Holzer has often been called a memorial artist. In the course of Holzer’s career, she has created memorials proper, and she takes a memorialist stance in even her most abstract work. However, in “For 7 World Trade,” Holzer resists remembering: the installation carries out its response to loss through encouraging, positive poems; indeed its positive attitude limits other kinds of conversations that could otherwise take place at the site. In this section I consider “For 7 World Trade” in the context of some of Holzer’s previous work, and as a product of the unique moves memorializers are making in the twenty-first century culture of commemoration.

Holzer has long been known as a monument artist. Ramazani describes Holzer’s early art, along with the prose of such writers as Paul Monette, Toni Morrison, and Primo Levi, as work that, like an elegy, makes “visible the darkness of contemporary death and grief” (361). By memorializing losses with public art, Holzer has forced her audiences to visually confront historical atrocities. In 1993, Holzer began work on “Lustmord,” a project influenced by violent events in the former Yugoslavia; the piece is made of bones and text written in blood. In 2006, she developed a project that represents redacted government documents; paintings and silkscreens tell stories of U.S. government strategies for war in Iraq and of the experience of American soldiers in captivity. They draw attention to deaths in war caused by abuses of power. Holzer has also worked on memorials proper by designing a counter-monumental black garden in Nordhorn, Germany (1994), a peace monument in Erlauf, Austria (1995), a war memorial in the city of Leipzig, Germany (1999), and a recent gallery piece, made of moving electronic bands of her own text, provocatively titled “Monument” (2008). In all her work, of which these projects

are only a selection, Holzer deals with injustice and loss, politics, and the public. In some ways, “For 7 World Trade” is a representative sample of Holzer’s work: it uses text to respond to the losses incurred in New York City on 9/11, and it responds in public, intervening in the everyday lives of its viewers. And yet, in this project, questions of government secrecy, violence, racism, and memory are notably absent.

Before major projects like “Lustmord,” and “Redacted,” Holzer was best known for her breakout work, “Truisms,” begun in 1977. “Truisms” was a collection of commercially printed one-liners that Holzer handed out on small cards and posted on large signs around New York City. These one-liners were sound bites, unique aphorisms such as “abuse of power comes as no surprise” or “protect me from what I want.” The cards were presented to passers-by without author or context, and they brought attention to what, according to Holzer, is an increasingly media-saturated discourse, in the U.S. and across the world, lacking dialogic engagement and discussion. They catapulted Holzer onto the international stage of conceptual art.

Holzer’s exhibits are almost always made of text—and in this way, “For 7 World Trade” is emblematic of her style. She generally writes the texts herself (as she did for “Truisms” or the recent “Monument”), although she insists that she is not a poet per se, and has recently opted, more and more, to use words written by other people (see “Interview” 17). Holzer’s work is typically politically engaged, daring, and often controversial, and yet she usually finds a balance that allows her work to remain supported by both corporate and political sponsors.<sup>78</sup> Unlike many artists, Holzer often works with governments, city planners, or developers, and she balances their constraints with her provocative style. Despite how politically active Holzer has been in her decades-long career, she has always worked well with those who commission her projects. And yet, at 7 World Trade Center, those who commissioned her work almost become—problematically, I think—the co-authors of her project.

The location of the tower and its connection to the events of 9/11 influenced the rebuilding project from the beginning. Even though 7 World Trade Center was not officially “sacred ground,” Holzer has said that she explored the space physically and considered the building’s history as she created her installation comprising text about New York (see Yau). The building’s lobby is almost entirely surrounded by glass, so the words on the screen reflect across its walls and ceiling and can be read easily from the street. The words have been described as a “ghostly” white (Jackson) and as passing along the screen at a “processional pace” (Jacobs). They move to the left, toward the site where the Twin Towers fell, and then fade away. Each excerpt is preceded by its author’s name. Holzer selected the texts, and Klara Silverstein had the final say about which ones were included.

Although Holzer has said in interviews that she did not intend to create a memorial to 9/11—and although the official memorial *is* under construction across the street—she has nonetheless created an installation that works like a memorial structure might. Neither Holzer, nor any critics writing about the project, can speak of it *without* referring to memorialization. Even the dedicatory name that Holzer gave her piece, “For 7 World Trade” suggests a memorial tone. In addressing the building itself, the title positions the piece as a tribute or elegy—as though the installation were a song written for a loved one, or a poem with an opening gloss. There is a way, in fact, in which the new building stands as a tribute to the old one. By abbreviating the building’s name, Holzer demonstrates a familiarity with it, almost an affection for it. Holzer has claimed, as I noted earlier, that the selections for the installation do not comprise “memorial text, but text about the joy of being in New York City” (“Interview” 17). She also notes, however, that the piece would not have been built if it were not for the 9/11 attacks. She told an interviewer that she thought “a longing should be there—hoping to understand, hoping to have more, wishing to have more time” (qtd. in Jackson). Holzer has also said that she wanted to represent—in another

move that acknowledges 9/11 as crucial to the piece—“New York before, during and after 9/11” (qtd. in Jackson). Thus, while Holzer may not have *intended* for the project to be *strictly* a memorial, there is evidence that its location and history were impossible to overcome and that the piece is memorial to the events of 9/11.

Larry Silverstein may not have commissioned a memorial, but he did commission something that would serve a memorial function. In fact, it is this very tension between Holzer’s in-depth engagement with the location of her installation and her exclusion of any reference to the events that happened there that make “For 7 World Trade” so emblematic of the twenty-first century memorial ambivalence that I have been discussing: the text at the site encourages renewal and positivity, and yet the installation effaces the historical events that might be the reason why visitors have come in search of such renewal in the first place. In telling the *New York Times* that he did not, as I’ve said, want the poetry to remind readers of “the miseries of 9/11,” Silverstein makes clear that the events of 9/11 were both the motivation for the installation and the very thing the piece was to turn away from. With its built-in security features, Holzer’s installation reflects, then, the increasing anxiety over terrorism in the United States and the desire to understand 9/11 not as connected, even imaginatively, to other events, but as the first day of a new era in which buildings are suddenly required to be, as this one has been called, “bunker[s] in the sky” (Bruinius).

Klara Silverstein, enforcing her husband’s desire for “positive stuff” around Ground Zero, was quick to tell Holzer when she felt the artist’s text choices were “too graphic” (qtd. in Collins, “At Ground Zero”). One of the included selections, David Lehman’s “The World Trade Center,” written in 1996 after the first bombing of the Twin Towers, does hint at violence, but it is mainly a tribute to the iconic buildings. Many selections pay tribute to New York City—for example, Elizabeth Bishop’s “An Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” (“Manhattan/ is all awash with

morals this fine morning”), and E.B. White’s “Here is New York,” (“The city . . . is indestructible”). Indeed, as other critics have pointed out, the poem that the Silversteins’ editorial attitude rendered most noticeably absent is Nobel Laureate Wisława Szymborska’s “Photograph from September 11” published on the first anniversary of the attacks.<sup>79</sup> The poem, describing bodies falling from the towers, is one of the most arresting poems to be written about 9/11.

Speaking about her decision not to include poems that, like Szymborska’s, directly referenced the events of 9/11, Klara Silverstein has said, “I felt that they would bring back images that people might want to *forget*” (qtd. in Collins, “At Ground Zero,” emphasis added).<sup>80</sup> The mandate of the installation, it seems, was, in fact, to foster a kind of forgetfulness. But forgetting takes place “in tandem” with memory (to quote Sturken, above): forgetting *shapes* memory.

There has always been, in memorial practices, a balance between past and future, between remembering and forgetting. As Art Spiegelman writes, there is “[n]othing like commemorating an event to help you forget it” (10). With this, Speigelman echoes James E. Young who has written that “assigning monumental form to memory divests us to some degree of the obligation to remember” (“Germany’s” 855). Yet, while Spiegelman and Young are troubled by the relation between monuments and forgetting, Holzer and Silverstein mobilize forgetting as a deliberate occlusion; it is a key function of their installation at 7 World Trade Center.

When it was first installed, the poet-critic Shelley Jackson hailed Holzer’s piece as a site of “civic reading” that would involve the participation of many citizens.<sup>81</sup> Jackson writes that “[o]ver time, every phrase in those thirty-plus hours of text will be read by someone, so that whole will be read, collectively, in a civic reading made up hundreds of partial and overlapping readings.” Holzer intended the design to engage both those who work in the building and those visiting or passing by it. She was deliberate about choosing thirty-six hours of text, instead of twenty-four, so that employees arriving each day to work at the same time would not always see

the same poem. As a site of “civic reading,” “For 7 World Trade” recalls the collective voice that speaks on the AIDS memorial quilt, or the shared authorship of “Memorial Fence” (the spontaneous memorial where people have left notes, poems and flowers) in Oklahoma City. I visited Holzer’s installation in 2008, and my experience there, as I attempted to participate in the reading, contradicts the therapeutic or, at least, civic one that I had expected. My own experience visiting Holzer’s installation has encouraged my reading that “For 7 World Trade” is not a site of memory, but a site that, in its use of poetry, represents this shift from mourning to moving on, from “lest we forget” to “peace, hope and serenity.”

When I pushed open the doors at 7 World Trade, I was immediately faced with a row of security guards lined up along the length of the counter that runs across the entire lobby. The lobby is wide but shallow, so the security desk in front of Holzer’s LED screen approaches sooner than one might expect. There is nowhere to sit and nowhere comfortably to stand: entrants must immediately swipe their keycards through the turnstiles on the right, if they work in the building, or approach the security desk and announce their presence. I stood in the lobby for a few minutes, attempting to appear innocently preoccupied by the screen and to avoid the gaze of the security guards at the desk. When I reached for my camera, several guards called out immediately. I felt that it was best if I, not having an official purpose in the building, exited. (I am reminded, now, of Kirk Savage’s account of his visit to the World War Two National Memorial. Savage writes that although it is possible to approach the memorial directly, “by climbing the three-foot-high walls and ducking under the ropes that surround the monument’s circular plaza, the experience is discouraging to say the least” [*Monument 305*]).

There is a small plaza in front of 7 World Trade Center and Holzer’s installation can be easily viewed from there, through the lobby’s doors and windows. It was from that vantage point that I noticed its other features. I noticed that not one of the employees entering the building

looked up or seemed to notice the poems streaming through the lobby—despite Holzer’s effort to vary what the building’s employees would see. In fact, even a man with a large briefcase who stood in the lobby for fifteen minutes seemingly waiting to be announced or retrieved did not once look past the desk he was in front of to read.

Like that man, and despite having come with the sole intention of reading the poetry myself, I did not take much of it in either: the text moves so slowly across the screen, it is nearly impossible to piece together a whole poem or excerpt. Five or six words are visible on the screen at a time, and, once I had read them, I found myself trying to hold them in memory as I waited for the next few words to appear. Holzer was surely deliberate about this pace, and yet the pacing itself seems to defy other comments she has made about the project. Holzer said she considered her text choices very carefully; however, the text moves so slowly across the screen that it is difficult to decipher what those choices were. At a memorial, one might take the opportunity to let one’s mind wander, remember back to lives lost, or consider a historical event experienced, witnessed, or heard about. The memorial poems by Collins and Espada discussed earlier were notable for the way they occupied time and space, made room for the memory of the 9/11 dead. At 7 World Trade Center, I struggled to remember the words of poetry as they went by; I had to concentrate on making them mean something in relation to the next few words, and I had little opportunity or time to think about anything else. Here, the memorial *obstructs* the process of remembering.

Certainly the words were beautiful. I remember, for example, an image of “tulips” in a “glass.” The fragmentation that the slow pace produced made the poems feel, fittingly, fractured and incomplete. I felt a frustrating yearning for cohesion—surely an appropriate affect just steps away from the World Trade Center site. Nonetheless, I continued to wonder, given the location of

the poems and the activist artist who assembled them, whether a fragmented list of aesthetically pleasing, opaque, words can produce a productive site of memory.

I outline my experience at/outside 7 World Trade Center to suggest that, although Holzer's piece may seem, if a memorial, a therapeutic one—it is in a public place that invites a “civic reading” and it is made of poetry—it may instead mark the shift toward *another* kind of memorial. This memorial, like others with which it is contemporary, does not invite visitors to sit down and consider the past. For the most part, it responds to the desire, palpable after 9/11, especially in New York, for a heightened form of security—physically and metaphorically.

### **The Politics of Forgetting**

Holzer's installation, especially without Syzmborska's poem or others like it, represents memorials built in many contexts after 9/11, and, more generally, in the twenty-first century. The installation comes after a history of memorials that has, over the last hundred and fifty years, begun to focus more on the grieving than the grieved-for. What are other possible functions of memorials and poetry? How can poetry play a memorial role in mourning itself? If memorials do not represent the material history of 9/11 or prompt the memory of its events, they contribute to what Sturken has called a post-9/11 “political acquiescence” (*Tourists* 292). In sidelining the very traumas that called for them in the first place, 9/11 poetry and memorials risk collapsing the historical details of the events into a single story of personal loss and healing. Particularly, they risk offering a quick exit from the initial shock of the attacks to optimism after them—one that bypasses both the prehistory of the attacks and the violent wars that the United States is still fighting in their name. Several economists, sociologists, political theorists, and cultural and media critics have addressed the topic of political acquiescence after 9/11 (Kreuger, Bauman,

Giroux, Klein, Sturken, Taylor, Butler). These critics might look also to forms like memorials and poetry as they continue their conversations.

The exclusion of Szymborska's poem from the lobby of 7 World Trade Center can be compared to the abrupt removal, briefly noted in my introduction, of artist Eric Fischl's bronze sculpture, "Tumbling Woman" from the lobby of Rockefeller Center a few years earlier. Both the poem and the sculpture depict the people who jumped from the towers, and both have been censored from public view. Fischl's statue, depicting a naked woman falling through the air, was removed for being too shocking, too painful for passersby in the Rockefeller concourse. Writing in the *New York Times*, Fischl responds to the controversy his sculpture caused. He acknowledges that the sculpture is graphic, but says that he fears that the memorial plans for remembering 9/11 will not "reflect the tragedy of that day or inspire us to confront it." Fischl writes of the several designs proposed for the World Trade Center site, including the winning "Reflecting Absence," that "[i]n fact, these sanitized designs could be memorials to almost anything almost anywhere." Fischl's comments resonate with Doss' argument that the Oklahoma City National Memorial merely "commemorates national healing" and with my own claims about Holzer's installation as a monument to forgetting. "If we cannot face what happened," Fischl writes, "how can we move past it?" Fischl's question speaks directly to the purpose of my chapter. If memorials are built, at least in part, so that the past won't be forgotten, what happens when they focus so much on the future that they fail to acknowledge the past at all?

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman expresses a concern similar to Fischl's; he notes the general refusal of Americans, in the aftermath of 9/11, to ask "why" the attacks took place. In his 2007 book, *Liquid Times*, Bauman suggests that justice has become a "planetary" issue, not only a national one, and he objects to the limited parameters within which the United States government and media have framed the 9/11 attacks. Bauman quotes Michael Meacher in the *Guardian*, who

accuses the governments responsible for the “war on terrorism” of being “unwilling to contemplate what lies behind the hatred”:

*why* scores of young people are prepared to blow themselves up, *why* nineteen highly educated young men were ready to destroy themselves and thousands of others in the 9/11 hijacking, and *why* resistance [in Iraq] is growing despite the likelihood of insurgents being killed. (21, emphasis added)

Bauman insists on a shift from a local to a global politics, speaking to the importance of considering the safety of Americans in a larger global context. He says that asking “why” the 9/11 attacks occurred is one way to begin. Known for his term “liquid modernity,” Bauman has theorized the modern condition as something mobile, flexible, ambivalent, and he is often concerned with the “liquid” exchanges of freedom and security. In *Liquid Times*, he defines local security in terms of global security. He corrects former U.S. defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who, before sending troops to Iraq, said that “the war will be won when Americans feel secure again” (26). No one, Bauman argues, will feel safe in one country if others do not feel safe in theirs.<sup>82</sup> The emphasis on “reflecting absence” at the World Trade Center National Memorial can be seen as another refusal to engage with difficult “why” questions. My argument that the 9/11 attacks be commemorated as a complex set of actions (that is, not only for the losses it incurred) can be understood in the context of Bauman’s call for an expansion of the parameters within which we talk about security, safety, and terrorism.

None of this is to say that memorials should not look—and have never before productively looked—to a hopeful future. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is so named to commemorate both those soldiers who died in the war and those veterans who returned home to the United States. In his introduction to *Commemorations*, John Gillis notes how in the United States, the Fourth of July is celebrated both to remember the triumphs of the past and to build

nationalism for the future. However, more than simply looking to a hopeful future, memorial ceremonies and projects after 9/11 have, for the most part, isolated the events of 9/11 from its past. The very name we have given to these events, “9/11,” denotes events understood as happening on one day; similarly, “Ground Zero” focuses attention on one particular site even though there were three sites of violence that day. The fact that the attacks have pre-9/11 roots and post-9/11 consequences and that they created victims of multiple nationalities at multiple locations across and outside of America have often been ignored.<sup>83</sup> The focus on a single day and a single place positions America as singular—indeed, a singular bystanding—victim in an event that, understood more broadly, has taken many victims all over the world. Certainly the 2,970 people murdered on 9/11 should not be ignored in the name of an essentially political version of events; I am calling for opposite response: we can remember those lost lives as imbued with meaning, as lost in the course of a complex historical narrative still being formed.

The emphasis on the individual in commemoration practices—on particular people killed at particular times and places—was part of a larger discourse after 9/11. Judith Butler notes the pervasive emphasis on individual experience after 9/11 and her work situates my argument about memorial and poetry within a larger political context. She suggests some consequences of emphasizing only the personal and individual experience on 9/11. In her most recent books (*Precarious Life* [2004] and *Frames of War* [2009]), she argues that such an emphasis precludes a connection between the United States and the global community:

In order to condemn [the 9/11 attacks] as inexcusable, absolutely wrong, in order to sustain the affective structure in which we are, on the one hand, victimized and, on the other, engaged in a righteous cause of rooting out terror, we have to begin the story with the experience of violence we suffered. We have to shore up the first-person point of

view, and preclude from the telling accounts that might involve a decentering of the narrative ‘I’ within the international political domain. (*Precarious* 6-7)

Butler argues against privileging the first-person view, noting that a “self” is not only an individual agent but also a being formed by its social and global context. She notes that after 9/11, the United States had the opportunity to connect to a larger community through shared experiences of loss (“Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ out of us all” [*Precarious* 20]), but that the country instead rejected that opportunity to focus on *individual* loss. Butler rejects the popular idea that “grief is privatizing,” explaining instead that it can “[furnish] a sense of political community” (21). She argues that by understanding its grief as private and its losses as exceptional, the United States perpetuated binaries of good and evil (that George W. Bush fueled with his famous “you are either with us, or you are with the terrorists” in his address to Congress in September 2001).<sup>84</sup> The “precariousness” of life, for Butler, is life understood along an axis of good and evil, where some (American) lives “qualify as lives,” and are therefore grievable when lost, while some (Iraqi, Afghani) do not.

As Butler notes, the commonly-heard statement in the fall of 2001 that “there is no excuse for September 11” silenced critical conversation that might have taken place around the event. Butler does not deny that the U.S. suffered violence on September 11, but she takes issue with how the permissible narrative for the events of 9/11 is one that starts on that day with the familiar question, “where were you when the towers fell?”, and that always remains in the realm of the personal. “Isolating the individuals,” she writes, “absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events” (*Precarious* 5). This isolation of the individual—seeking explanation through the individual, mourning for the individual—is congruent with the poetic/memorial work taking place at 7 World Trade Center.

We can begin to see how poetry operates in this negotiation of innocence and personal loss. Associated with feeling and consolation, with pleasing, rhythmic words, poetry is seen as (to recall Adrienne Rich) “linguistic aromatherapy.” Seen this way, poetry can also be pushed outside the boundaries of critical conversation. The poems at 7 World Trade Center appear fragmented, beautiful, personal. They invite the reader to feel curious, calm, or joyful about the pleasing text rolling along. Like the memorials to terrorism discussed above, they exist apart from historical background.

The idea that there is currently a “memorial mania” taking place speaks both to the proliferation of memorials across the United States and to the cultural anxiety these memorials respond to. Memorial mania runs alongside “a poetry mania” that has also participated in soothing an anxious public. Both poetry and memorials are social forms that respond to and permit certain sets of memories and feelings. They are both forms, however, that have the potential to do more than offer optimism for the future. The rising profile of poetry in public life and the integration of poetry in contemporary memorial practices suggest the possibility of a promising public engagement with a previously marginalized form.

Szymborska’s anniversary poem, excluded from Holzer’s installation, serves as an example of poetry’s ability to witness, record, and intervene in, its historical moment—and I’ll conclude the chapter by making that case. “Photograph from September 11” is a spare, evocative poem. Szymborska’s speaker watches bodies fall from the Twin Towers:

They jumped from the burning floors—

one, two, a few more,

higher, lower.

...

There’s enough time

for hair to come loose

for keys and coins

to fall from pockets. (69)

By contrasting the extraordinary freefall of these bodies with such mundane objects as keys and coins, Szymborska represents one of the most disturbing aspects of the 9/11 attacks: how such a terrifying event could disrupt what had been the most normal, quotidian morning. Her lines are short, staggered. The poem both describes a photograph and is, itself, a kind of photograph or portrait. The short lines keep the poem's taut shape, and many of Szymborska's words lend the poem a tone of utter stillness. Szymborska writes that “[t]he photograph *halted* them in life,” that it “*keeps* them/ above the earth” (emphasis added), and the word “still” itself appears twice. In its second appearance, in the penultimate verse, the line reads, “[t]hey're still within the air's reach,” and that stillness has two meanings. The bodies continue to be in the air (they are “still” there; they have not yet fallen to the ground) and they are unmoving in the air (the photograph “stills” them and halts their downward motion).

Like a photograph, the poem both reveals and conceals its subject: it displays the falling bodies while also rendering them inanimate. Throughout the poem, the bodies are evoked in their particularities. Szymborska gestures toward their “particular face[s]” and offers details of hair, coins, keys, pockets. Yet, she also leaves the bodies as anonymous and unknowable. They remain ungendered, referred to as “they” and “them” and “each.” Szymborska counts them (“one, two, a few more”); but ultimately it is their flight she describes and not their selves. As was the case in the controversial newspaper photograph that appeared in September 2001, those selves are nearly impossible to identify.

At the end of the poem, Szymborska turns inward, asks what there is for a poet to do after such a horrifying event. In fact, she does find something:

I can only do two things for them—  
describe this flight  
and not add a last line”

This ending—where a poet’s words intervene, attempt a small act of salvation—suggests the poet’s valuable role as a witness to trauma. A poet can describe an event, remember it, record it so others will always know what happened. She can also shape it and, by so doing, perhaps ease the suffering of those who must remember what happened. By not adding a last line to her poem, Szymborska suspends the bodies in midair. They hover there where they can be remembered in motion, not stopped in death. The em-dashes that jut from the first lines of both the opening and closing verse-paragraphs (which appear both in the translated version and the original Polish) physically trap the bodies within the space of the poem.

Szymborska’s poem is, for the purposes of my argument, an exemplary memorial poem: it attempts an optimism, gesturing away from death, yet it does not shy away from describing the details of its subject. In its “stillness” it clears space and time for mourning. It is poetry as memorial that incorporates the possibilities inherent in both of these forms. The omission of this poem from Holzer’s installation underscores part of what may be problematic in recent memorials. Visitors to Holzer’s site are given the opportunity to feel positive about New York City and, at the same time, are encouraged to gloss over the history that took place there. While positivity is surely needed in the aftermath of the attacks, it is also necessary to think further how 9/11 will be remembered. Memorials like Holzer’s perpetuate the understanding that security and preparedness are priorities, while remembering and confronting the details of an event are not. This shift in commemoration practices is not separate from—rather, it is complicit with—the position of innocence that the United States assembled after 9/11, noted by critics like Sturken, Bauman, and Butler. Both poetry and memorials can—and should—ask “why” they are being

called upon and what memory work they can do. As Szymborska's poem begins to show, poetry can bear witness to history. Poetry's witness function is the subject of the next chapter.

## **Chapter Three: Rachel Vigier and Juliana Spahr: Toward a New Poetics of Witness**

I didn't know the man in black pants  
who plunged headfirst  
from the top of the north tower

or the young mother trapped  
behind a locked door  
on the eighty-seventh floor . . .

Yet I have felt the sun on their skin  
and tasted wine on their lips.

I have run using the long muscles

of their legs and felt air  
rush into their lungs, their hearts  
pumping in my chest . . . (88)

The poem “Strangers,” excerpted here, by California poet Lucille Lang Day illustrates poetry’s witness function, as it also complicates the very idea of the witness. The poem begins with Day’s admission that she did not personally know anyone who died in the towers. She describes their frightening, and ultimately fatal, experiences as having almost nothing to do with her, her own experiences, her inner circle, or her daily life on or after 9/11.

When the poem turns, however, with “yet” (in the ninth stanza), Day begins to meld the identities of the dead victims with her own identity. She feels how they felt—in the sun, drinking wine, breathing, living—not in the moments of their death, but in the moments of their lives. At the end of the poem, Day writes that while the dead have “all returned/ to earth and air,”

I still feel them  
stirring inside me, walking  
the long corridors of my brain,  
searching for something . . .

Day describes the dead as restless, yet it seems more likely that *she* is the one who is restless, searching. Ending the poem this way, Day conveys her own post-9/11 confusion through an identification with those who died that morning. She articulates both her disconnection from and her connection to the people who died in the September, and suggests, as I will further, the difficulty in delineating what it means to have “witnessed” 9/11.

As I have been arguing, poetry can serve—and after 9/11 does serve—social functions of public remembering and discourse. In this chapter, I add a claim about poetry’s social function as witness. Here, I argue for the importance of poetry’s witness function after 9/11 and I suggest that the events of 9/11, and their mediation, changed what it means to witness trauma and to write witness poetry. If Day writes her poem from California, does she count as a witness to the events of 9/11, or as a spectator, or as a distant viewer? What exactly is her connection to the events of 9/11 and to its dead? Unlike a witness, a spectator is one who “looks,” not one who sees or knows; the spectator sits in bleachers or theatre seats. She looks *on*. It seems wrong somehow to describe Day as an onlooker in a poem that is about erasing the very idea of removal, that aims metaphorically to convey connection and produce mobility. But how can Day’s own act of witnessing, taking place so physically far from the site of the attacks, be identified, validated,

recorded? Can she have “witnessed” the 9/11 attacks, *known* them, from such a distance? Is “Strangers” a witness poem and, if it is, what kind of witness poem is it?

Day, the author of seven books of poetry, published “Strangers” in William Heyen’s edited collection, *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*. She brings to life some of the most difficult memories of the attacks: memories of the people who jumped from the towers and the people who died on the four planes. Day begins by distancing herself from those people and a position of conventional witness. The poem starts with a clear assertion: “I didn’t know the man in black pants.” But as the man “plunge[s] headfirst,” the poem does too, with narrow tercets descending quickly down the page. The speaker does not remain simply apart from the tumbling man, but moves with him throughout the poem. Day forges her connection to the events of 9/11 by placing herself poetically in situations that she did not know physically: she writes her witness position. She cannot have known, for instance, that “the blond woman/ who called her husband” asked him “what she should tell the pilot/ standing beside her” or what “the six-foot-four executive” said on the same doomed plane—but she evokes these scenes anyway. She renders them in fragments; the “I” ventures in, but the short lines disrupt her engagement. The speaker’s ambivalence is produced through this venturing, mobile “I” (“I didn’t know” is followed also by “I never met.../ I never shared.../ I have felt.../ I have run.../ I have felt.../ I still feel”). Day’s mobile, ambivalent “I” prompts these questions: who can speak about 9/11—those who were in California, Brooklyn, Lower Manhattan, or the Twin Towers themselves? Those who were on the planes (but who, then, *cannot* speak)? If a key function of poetry is, as I have been suggesting, a *witness* function, then who are the witness poets of 9/11?

The origin of the word “witness” is in knowing and understanding: according to the *OED*, “wit” is “the seat of consciousness or thought, the mind.” However, what the witness knows or gains authority from knowing is, as Andrea Frisch argues in *The Invention of the Eyewitness*,

historically constructed. The modern witness is, Frisch writes, “the one who *sees*” (131, emphasis in original), the one who can testify from firsthand experience. This definition—which is reinforced in writing on the Holocaust (and which I will discuss further)—is founded in legal conceptions of witness testimony.<sup>85</sup> In court, the witness gains authority from his or her actual proximity to an event. “Hearsay” is dismissed as such because it does not reflect firsthand knowledge (see Coady 28). However, if *proximity* is understood as the defining feature of the witness position, what happens when proximity becomes complicated—when “the one who *sees*” an event sees it on television or when a “firsthand” experience of pain, shock, or loss is felt from a distance? These are some questions that complicate the witness position as it is reconstructed after the events of 9/11.

The events of 9/11 produced a spectrum—that is, an array or broad range—of witness positions. Many people across the United States and around the world watched on television or the internet as the planes hit the World Trade Center; many watched the second crash as it happened. Distant viewers were traumatized by what they saw, and they felt connected to the destruction. For some, that connection was through a family member or friend in physical danger, for some it was a national connection, as people feared for their safety across the U.S.; for others, it was simply, as Day describes, a human one. Terms like “spectator” and “compassionate onlooker” seem insufficient to describe the experience of witnessing, even from afar; they imply passivity and *disconnection* that belie many people’s engagement with the events of 9/11 despite physical distance. Marjorie Garber explains, in Lauren Berlant’s edited collection *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, that compassion implies a “fellow feeling,” composed from the roots *com* (together) and *pati* (suffer). And yet, as Berlant suggests, in everyday use, the term implies not a togetherness but a distinction between those who suffer immediately and directly and those who do not. “[C]ompassion is a term denoting privilege,” Berlant writes.

“[T]he sufferer is *over there*” (4, emphasis in original). The term implies, then, according to Berlant, that the compassionate person desires distance from the sufferer. After 9/11, however, many people across the U.S. desired, or simply felt, connection with people physically at the sites of attack. A discursive shift is required in order to consider several types of experience and expression (in this case, poetry) under the rubric of witnessing.<sup>86</sup>

In part, this discursive shift is required because “witness” was such a contested position after 9/11. According to data collected by the World Trade Centre Memorial Museum, anywhere from 15,000 to 250,000 people can be understood to have witnessed the attacks (Greenwald). Those numbers do not include those who died that day or those who died fighting in the wars that followed. The range in these official figures invites questions about what it means to have witnessed the attacks and what the value is in designating the position of the witness. Scholars in the social sciences have attempted to quantify how many people felt implicated in the attacks or were clinically traumatized after them. For example, the economist (and current Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Treasury) Alan B. Krueger measures the psychological effects of terrorism by citing several psychiatric studies. One study finds, for example, that alcohol consumption in New York increased by 25% after 9/11 as did doctor’s visits; another study finds that the closer people lived to New York, the more likely they were to report symptoms of stress after 9/11 (Krueger 121-29). However, as Day’s poem indicates, experience of violence is difficult to quantify: traumatic reactions were also produced indirectly, through mediated images of trauma, and complex—and various—processes of identification.

Day, through her consciously luminal voice in “Strangers,” helps to foreground questions about the figure of the witness; two other poets provide opportunities to study these questions in more detail. Canadian poet Rachel Vigier was at the World Trade Center site when the buildings were attacked. The experience she describes in her poetry collection *The Book of Skeletons* is

visceral. “I snapped the stranger’s mask into place, she writes, “then we climbed, single file/...It was impossible to stay in the building” (8). American Language poet Juliana Spahr was on a street corner in Brooklyn when the planes hit, but she wrote most of her collection, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* from her then-home in Hawai’i. Her book contains two long poems: one responds to 9/11 directly and one responds to the subsequent war in Iraq; Spahr connects these events and articulates her connection to them both. In a prose note between the book’s two long poems, she writes, “the disconnection that Hawai’i claims at moments with the continental United States, felt suddenly unhelpful” (13). She writes about both her distance from Ground Zero and her proximity to it.

Focussing on two poets in this chapter grounds an argument that will extend into the next chapter. Here, I home in on two collections as I shift my focus from poetry read and circulated after 9/11 to poetry written in response to 9/11. In my first two chapters, I argued that poetry can do more in times of crisis than provide comfort and that it can look backward deliberatively instead of only forward optimistically. In this chapter and the next, I continue to be interested in possible roles for poetry after crisis. The current chapter examines poetry as a mode of witness; my fourth chapter will further specify poetry as a mode of public conversation. The online poetry discussed there plays a special role in creating a forum for public discussion. Many of the poems at poetry.com blur the lines, as Day’s “Strangers” blurs them between proximate witness and “compassionate” onlooker.

Scholars have long been troubled by the oxymoronic nature of the term “witness literature.” Literature—and poetry, especially—is associated with fantasy, abstraction, and affect, while a witness account, a testimony, is held to a standard of truth and evidence. This paradox can be traced back to Plato, who banishes poets from his ideal republic. In Book X of *The Republic*, Plato accuses poets of, among other things, pretending to know about things they do

not and producing deceptive images far removed from truth. Literary critic and Nobel Prize administrator Horace Engdahl also points to a section in Plato's *Apology* in which Socrates pits "flowery language . . . decked out with fine words and phrases," against "the truth" in "straightforward speech." In Engdahl's analysis, Plato has, here, laid out "a tradition of anti-literature: the struggle for literature's point zero, the uncoloured word, the speech of the truthful witness" (7). If, in Socrates' terms, truth must be accessed independent of aesthetics, then literature and testimony must occupy different worlds.<sup>87</sup>

As Engdahl also notes, however, literature and witness testimony also have a *shared* purpose. Like the writer of literature or poetry, "the witness talks of something that is incomprehensible" (10). According to Jacques Derrida, furthermore, the fiction writer and the witness both rely on the willingness of their audiences to believe them ("Self-Unsealing" 189). Both writer and witness use language to evoke experience and feeling that might otherwise go unspoken and unheard.<sup>88</sup> Poetry has long been identified as the genre most suited to convey the unthinkable. Adrienne Rich, for instance, has written that poetry's form "is like gloves allowing you to handle difficult material" (qtd. in Gubar xvi). Robert Antelme, the French Holocaust survivor, writes specifically about poetry's ability to handle the difficult material of the Holocaust. In a 1948 essay, Antelme writes that, of all of the genres, it is poetry that best speaks to the impossibility of comprehension. While prose testimony can only be "descriptive," like a shocking photograph, poetry, he writes, is "the evocation of one's [impossible] situation" . . . and "an expression of [the concentration camps'] meaning" (33). It is, then, the tendency toward abstraction and feeling—an ability to evoke the impossible outside the confines of description—that allows the poet to access the truth and evidence of a witness testimony. The authenticity of the poetic account comes in its *disregard* for narrative order. As Shoshana Felman writes about Paul Celan's poetry of the Holocaust, "*The breakage of the verse enacts the breakage of the*

*world*" (25 emphasis in original). A poem can be fragmented; it can be short or long; it can offer similes or sometimes demonstrate the inadequacy of similes. It does not always purport to convey a complete story and its evidence is often the evidence of feeling.

The shared work of poetry and testimony has become an object of study for several scholars since the late twentieth century, especially in relation to the Holocaust.<sup>89</sup> Holocaust survivor Elie Weisel has written that testimony is the literary invention of our time: "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony" (9). Poetic testimony has been studied less than its prose counterpart, but that has recently started to change. In *Poetry After Auschwitz* (2003), for example, Susan Gubar objects to what she calls an "academic disregard of verse"; she argues that poetry, in fact, is able to offer crucial "spurts of vision, moments of truth" about the Holocaust (7). In their introduction to a 2008 *Critical Survey* special issue on Holocaust poetry, Antony Rowland and Robert Eaglestone make a case for the range of work still to be done in the field. Rowland (in another essay published that same year) calls for an "unraveling" of the opposition between poetry and testimony, arguing that not only Primo Levi's prose but also his poems, can be read "productively as testimonial acts" (487). Scholars in Holocaust studies have begun to discuss the relation of poetry and witness testimony; I wish to consider the relation of these forms in the context of 9/11 and its particular modes of mediation. In the twenty-first century, September 11 is, for many people, especially many Americans, the day they were the most shocked, the most scared, the most confused. Poetry produced in response to 9/11 is a record not only of their trauma but also of a new place for, and a new understanding of, witness poetry.

One of the social roles that poetry can play, then, especially after historical crises, is the role of witness. In attempts to characterize various forms of participation in traumatic events, Susan Gubar has offered the term "proxy-witness" (xvii); E. Ann Kaplan suggests the term

“vicarious witness” (90); Dori Laub proposes the role of “outside-witness” (81); and Robert J. Lifton writes about the position of “distant survivor” (352). And yet, despite the work of these scholars, Kaplan in particular has noted a paucity of attention to this topic; she observes that “the distinction between traumatic situations *per se* and vicarious ones [has not been] written about much in literary or cultural studies.” “Why,” she asks, “has the fact that most of us encounter vicarious, rather than direct, trauma not received more attention?” (89). The remainder of this chapter is a response to Kaplan’s call. First, I outline the ways that witness poetry and the witness position have been theorized in the twentieth century; I then explore the many witness positions that seemed to emerge on 9/11. In the following two sections I illuminate how the poetries of Rachel Vigier and Juliana Spahr take their place within what I have called a *spectrum of witnessing*. Finally, I suggest a reconsideration of witness poetry that de-privileges proximity as the defining authority of the witness.

## **Constructing the Witness**

Discussions of witness poetry have mainly understood the witness as someone writing from a position close to a traumatic event. Carolyn Forché’s anthology, *Against Forgetting*, collects nearly eight hundred pages of witness poetry written over the course of the twentieth century. Forché’s criteria for selection included, emphatically, that the poet must have personally “endured conditions of historical and social extremity.” These, Forché said, may include “exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare, and assassination” (29). Poets in Forché’s anthology physically experienced, for example, World Wars One and Two, the Spanish Civil War, the Korean and Vietnam Wars; the Armenian Genocide; the European Holocaust; or periods of revolution and repression in the Soviet Union, Latin America, or Africa. While most scholarship on witness poetry has centred on

the Holocaust, Forché's anthology reveals the wide range of traumatic events that are recorded in verse. *Against Forgetting*, which begins by laying out a definition of witness poetry, is a standard reference for subsequent discussions of the poetry of witness. Importantly, Forché argues that a witness poet is someone who was present at the site of trauma (30). This is the argument that I wish to revise.

Forché understands witness poetry to be written by someone with first-hand experience of a “dark time” (29). In her introduction, she quotes the poet Ariel Dorfman who asks, in his poem, “ . . . how can I tell their story/ if I was not there?” Dorfman ends with a decision *not* to tell a story he considers to be someone else’s. “Let them speak for themselves,” he writes, and Forché endorses this conclusion: “It is not callousness that prompts Dorfman to write this line, but a sense that the story belongs to those who have undergone extremity . . .” (37).<sup>90</sup> Hungarian poet Miklós Radnoti, whom I mentioned briefly in the first chapter, is Forché’s prototypical witness poet: his poems, written while he was a slave-labourer in Yugoslavian mines, were found in his back pocket more than a year after his death, and they serve in Forché’s terms “as trace . . . as evidence” of his experience (30).

Other critics since Forché have also used Radnoti’s poems as a base upon which to establish “poetry of witness” as a genre. Sue Vice calls Radnoti’s poetry “a message in a bottle” cast from the site of atrocity (7). Vice is indebted to Shoshana Felman for the description of poetry as “message in a bottle”; Felman, in turn, has taken the phrase from Paul Celan who suggests that “[a] poem . . . as a manifest form of language and thus inherently dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the (not always greatly hopeful) belief that it may somewhere and sometime wash up on land, on heartland perhaps” (qtd. in Felman 37). Indeed, Radnoti’s poems are remarkable for the way they affirm life while also conveying atrocious suffering. In “Letter to my Wife,” Radnoti writes, “It’s turning fall. Will fall forget me here?/ The memory of our kisses

is all the clearer”; his poem about changing seasons is a love poem written to the memory of his lover. Yet the poem’s hope reads as hopelessness when it ends by recording the poet’s location, “Lager [camp] Heidenau, above Zagubica in the mountains, August-September 1944” (370). The poem records individual, meaningful life in a place where lives were not recognized as individual or meaningful. Radnoti’s poetry can be valued not only for having found its way from his back pocket but also for being, as Forché writes, “an exhortation and a plea against despair” (32). Radnoti was *there*, in extremity; the importance of that to the status and the meaning of his poem is unquestionable. However, it makes sense to question the *requirement* of “being there” for witness poetry. To do so is not to forget or to diminish those witnesses who underwent physical hardship and who dispatched messages of life as they faced death.

To raise that question, and so to begin to untangle notions of witness and proximity, is the central task of this chapter. To posit a spectrum of positions, based on proximity, is neither to conflate types of witnesses nor to hierarchize them; it is only to isolate witness positions in order better to consider them as different and valid. This is not to imply that everyone affected by the 9/11 attacks was “witness” to them, nor that all poetry about 9/11 is witness poetry. It is, however, possible to witness from a distance, and there is value (poetic, historical, and community value) in recognizing a range of participant experiences on and after 9/11 through a range of poetic voices. I have already suggested that the witness position is historically constructed and is understood in relation to legal definitions of witnessing and testimony. Now, before I suggest how the events of 9/11 reconstruct witnessing for our time, I will offer a brief overview of scholarship on witnessing, providing some context for Forché’s position as I’ve presented it. My purpose is not to provide an intellectual history of the witness but rather to give an account of the dominance of the idea of the witness as someone who has “been there” at the site of trauma.

The definition of the witness as someone who was “there” is, as Frisch suggests, distinctly modern. She goes back to medieval France to contrast the modern witness with what she calls the pre-modern or the “ethical” witness. As Frisch explains, while modern witnessing involves someone “‘being there’ to see something [s/he] subsequently reports on,” pre-modern witnessing was concerned only with the importance of “‘being here’ to testify” (114). Frisch’s paradigmatic example of the “ethical witness” comes from an account of a trial in which the Merovingian ruler Chilperic had accused his wife of adultery: “Accused of adultery by her husband Chilperic, Fredegonde had three bishops and three hundred lords of her court swear that they believed the child born of her was legitimate” (24).<sup>91</sup> As Frisch describes it, the medieval court was not concerned with what the bishops and lords had seen, what they knew from first-hand observation; the court simply valued their commitment to Fredegonde and their implicit willingness to die on her behalf. Using this example, Frisch argues that medieval witnessing was not “an epistemic commitment” but an “ethical relationship” (24); it was a performative act in which authenticity emerged in the moment of giving testimony, not *after* something was seen or experienced firsthand.<sup>92</sup>

The authority of the epistemic witness—of the witness who testifies to prior experience—was solidified in the sixteenth century with the first written depositions. Frisch explains how documentation began to overtake oral performance as witness testimony:

As the witness deposition becomes more and more explicitly mediated by writing, the notion of authenticity, which had formerly derived from the moment in which the witness gave his testimony . . . now derives from the fidelity of the written text to something beyond itself. Instead of being seen and recognized, [the witness] is the one who *sees*.  
(131)

The written deposition has continued to dominate into the twenty-first century.<sup>93</sup> It is the document itself that acts as, to recall Forché, “trace . . . as evidence.”

In some cases, oral witnessing is still valued; nevertheless, the authority of the oral witness, too, comes from historical experience. As Frisch notes, recent work on Holocaust testimony restores to prominence the oral performative mode of witness. Felman writes about Holocaust testimony not as historical evidence but as a “performative speech act” (5). Yet, as Felman also writes, “The testimony will . . . be understood . . . not as a mode of *statement of*, but rather as a mode of *access to [truth]*” (16). In the same volume, psychiatrist Dori Laub writes, “A witness is a witness to the truth of what happens during an event” (80). Felman and Laub are concerned with the veracity of testimony, with whether a witness’ testimony can be understood as historically “true”; nonetheless their comments in their important 1993 book *Testimony* also implicitly show that the witness is one who speaks from firsthand experience.<sup>94</sup>

Contemporary theorization of the witness position has mainly focused on the Holocaust, an event that problematizes—as it privileges—what it means to have *been there* at the original site of trauma. In two essays about Holocaust witnessing (one on Maurice Blanchot, the other on Paul Celan), Derrida argues that “pure testimony is impossible testimony” (*Demeure* 100), yet he nonetheless defines the witness as the person who testifies to “the sharable and unsharable secret of what happened to me, to me alone, the absolute secret of what I was in a position to live, see, hear, touch, sense, feel” (*Demeure* 43). In his essay on Celan’s poem “Aschenglorie,” Derrida argues for the fictional nature of witness testimony—for the witness’ reliance on belief; but that belief is always in the truth of a firsthand experience. It is, in Frisch’s terms, always an “epistemic” truth, not an “ethical” truth. “What do I mean,” Derrida writes, when I say “I bear witness” (for one only bears witness in the first person)? I mean not “I prove,” but “I swear that I have seen, I have heard, I have touched, I have felt, I have been

*present . . .*" I *bear witness*—that means: "I affirm (rightly or wrongly, but in all good faith, sincerely) that that was or is present to me, in space and time (thus perceptible), and although you do not have access to it, not the same access, you, my addressees, *you have to believe me . . .*" ("Self-Unsealing" 189 emphasis in original)

Derrida destabilizes the idea of presence even as he privileges it. The witness testifies to his or her past *presence* but that presence for Derrida is also an absence: the witness can neither be present at the moment of the event (as per Caruth's definition of trauma that I have already noted: "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time" [4]); nor can the witness be present at the event in the moment of testifying to it. Absent presence, as we will see, is a significant trope for discussions of the Holocaust but it is one that notes the impossibility of presence even as it values it in definitions of the witness.

Several theorists have, like Derrida, written about the impossibility of witnessing the Holocaust; they share his vocabulary of absent presence and his interest in the proximate witness. Jean-François Lyotard argues for the logical impossibility of testifying to the existence of the gas chambers at Auschwitz: "either you were not there, and you cannot bear witness; or else you were there, you could not have therefore seen everything, and you cannot bear witness about everything" (102). Laub (with Felman) writes that the Holocaust is an event without witnesses, an aporia where the witness can only bear witness to the breakdown of witnessing (80). While critical of those who argue for the unspeakability of the Holocaust, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben makes his case in similar terms. He argues that testimony is only produced in a "zone of indistinction," where the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human speak together. Agamben's inhuman are the *Muselmann* of the Holocaust; the *Muselmann* is the figure, discussed by Jean Améry, Primo Levi, and others who has lost all sense of self in the concentration camps and, rendered speechless, has become a kind of walking corpse (see

Agamben 41). Agamben suggests the impossibility of witnessing the Holocaust by saying that only the *Muselmann*—the inhuman, the speechless—can bear its witness (82). As Dominick LaCapra has written, these critics—Lyotard, Felman and Laub, and Agamben—while not always in agreement, “compulsively . . . return to [or presuppose] the paradox or aporia . . . like moth[s] to the flame” (*Writing History* 171).

The Holocaust may indeed be unspeakable, but discussions of whether it is demonstrate the advantaged role of proximity in contemporary theories of witnessing. The aporia in which witnessing cannot take place is, in part, physical; it is the space between the impossible situation of “being there” in a Holocaust concentration camp and the impossibility of witnessing if one has not been there. Discussions by Lyotard, Felman and Laub, and particularly Agamben are indebted to Primo Levi who writes about his own impossible witness position as an inmate at Auschwitz. “I must repeat,” Levi writes in his last book, “we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses.” For Levi, as for Agamben after him, the only true or complete witness is the *Muselmann*, the one who “touch[ed] bottom,” the “submerged.” “They are the rule,” he says, “we [the survivors] are the exception.” Levi’s own witness testimony is, he says, a “discourse ‘on behalf of third parties,’ the story of things seen at close hand, not experienced personally” (83-4). Agamben seizes on the paradox that Levi’s description evokes: the only true witnesses are those who cannot bear witness. For Levi, witnessing is defined by true and complete proximity—by submersion.

Although recent scholarship on witnessing has mainly focussed on the Holocaust, other witness accounts have also been discussed in terms of a witness’ physical proximity to trauma. Psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton has written on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the wake of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; focusing on proximity itself, he explains that “generally speaking the nearer one was to the attack, the greater one’s anxiety about death” (2). Historian

Edward T. Linenthal writes that after the Oklahoma City Bombing, the city devised its list of “survivors” (those who would have their names engraved on the survivor wall) by marking out a physical “zone of danger.” Originally, the “zone of danger” was a two-block radius around the bombed Murrah building, but the size of the zone was repeatedly contested by people who had lost relatives in the bombing or owned damaged buildings nearby. Nonetheless, as Linenthal writes, “The key [in defining survivorship] was physical proximity to the danger, not an emotional bond with the victim” (200). Linenthal cites legal precedents that influenced the committee’s decisions about the zone of danger. On 9/11, however, post-traumatic stress reactions—particularly, instances of increased anxiety levels—were common in those who had (only) witnessed the events on television; this fact makes us query the possibility itself of drawing geographical borders for trauma.

### ***Reconstructing the Witness after 9/11***

It is, in part, the work of literary critic Susan Gubar that enables my claim that geographical proximity is not the defining feature of the witness to trauma. Gubar also discusses poet Miklós Radnoti’s “privileged place in the Holocaust canon” (54). However, her study focuses on poets writing *after* the Holocaust. That is, she studies poems that are not messages in a bottle but that speak on behalf of those whose messages have been lost. The poets of the Holocaust that Forché includes in her anthology are not only those who “personally endured” life in a concentration camp (Radnoti, Celan); Gubar studies poets who wrote about the Holocaust in its wake (Sylvia Plath, William Heyen). Gubar rejects the idea of “unique authorial license”; instead she values poetry with “artistic achievement,” poetry that makes events vivid for readers who would not otherwise have access to them (22). She coins the term “proxy-witness” to describe these poets. She cites the “complicated ongoingness” of the Holocaust (56), interested in

the way that even after 1945 the Holocaust goes on, continuing to produce new kinds of witnesses in its wake. For Gubar, the Holocaust moves in time and makes witnesses out of those who live *after* it is over.

Some people bear witness to 9/11 not only despite temporal remoteness from the site of extremity but also despite physical remoteness from it; 9/11 makes witnesses even of those who were far away from the attacks at Ground Zero, or the sites in Washington or Pennsylvania. Although they did not personally endure extremity, these onlookers became witnesses to the extremity of that day. Gubar praises the inconsistencies that come from proxy-witnesses' distance from the Holocaust. The works of these witnesses, she writes, "constitute especially forceful acts of remembering because [like all acts of remembering] they are belated, partial, flawed, and yet necessary" (24). Her poets write about what they do not know (21) and mistrust their own right to speak (30), and while their poetry is differently motivated from those who wrote of their personal experiences of the concentration camps, they produce, in similar ways, an affecting *type* of witness poetry. Like the poets Gubar studies, many of the poets who write about 9/11 do so from non-traditional witness positions. The events of 9/11 move in space—across the United States and the world.

The idea of a spectrum of witnesses emerges from prose descriptions by several authors who question their own witness position after 9/11 and search for new terms in which to understand their experiences. Performance scholar and New York City resident Diana Taylor, for example, has written eloquently about her experiences on 9/11 and her struggle to engage with the events as an "ethical participant" (243). Taylor describes the way her relation to the events of 9/11 changed according to how she was addressed by various politicians and media outlets. Living so close to the Towers, Taylor describes smelling the wreckage, tasting ash, and getting ash in her eyes—and yet she finds herself positioned by outside forces as a spectator to her own

experience. Taylor was “there” in Lower Manhattan. She ran back and forth between her window and her television, watching the Towers collapse in both views. She writes about how the media made her feel like a “background participant” and was not interested in hearing from witnesses but in celebrating “victims” and “heroes” (243). As she notes, the latter terms became interchangeable as victims were called heroes for their “sacrifice,” and heroes—that is, first responders—often became victims (243).

Taylor’s struggle to find a suitable term for her status on 9/11 points to the need to reimagine the witness of the twenty-first century. While she felt like a witness on 9/11, Taylor writes about how she was made to occupy, first, a spectator position, and then, later, a position of victimhood. When Mayor Rudy Giuliani cordoned off the area around Ground Zero, he accused those in the area of “gawking” (Taylor 258) and he prohibited photography. Yet even as Taylor and others were made to feel like voyeurs, they were also invoked as victims to the trauma. According to Taylor, the *New York Times* included in one edition a brochure “New York Needs Us Strong: Coping After Sept. 11.” The brochure, funded by “Project Liberty: feel free to feel better,” was addressed to “those who saw it happen from the street, or from their window, or over and over again on television” (Taylor 260). Taylor does not want to wear the label of spectator, one that implies a passive remove from an event with which she had a deep connection—nor does she wish to be considered a victim who needs help coping after September 11. But “witness,” she writes, was unavailable to her: “The role of witness, as responsible, ethical participant rather than spectator to crisis, collapsed in the rubble of talk of victims, heroes, and the rest of us” (243). After 9/11, as Taylor notes, it was unclear how to (re)define victim, hero, or witness.

Taylor was not the only one who, despite distance from the violence on 9/11, felt like a participant in it. In the first issue of the *New Yorker* to appear after 9/11, author and Brooklyn

resident Donald Antrim writes about watching the events unfold from Salzburg, Austria: “I was removed from the situation. I was in no way removed from the situation.” Antrim may have been far away from New York geographically, but his affective connection to the city creates his witness position as he watched the towers fall on television. With those two sentences (“I was removed/ I was in no way removed”) he articulates what many people felt watching the 9/11 attacks on television: simultaneous absence and presence, disconnection and connection.

Poet-critic Alicia Ostriker gives a similar account of disconnection and connection. A native New Yorker, Ostriker was in Cambridge, England, having just arrived that morning. She writes,

We made it to our room at Clare Hall, took a nap, went down to the front desk to get a second key, and the World Trade Center Building #1 was on the television, burning, emitting rollers of dark smoke. We and the Brits watched, like everyone else, for days, seeing the same shots over and over, and hearing the same solemn voices . . . It was very strange to be so far away. It felt wrong. (xi)

Ostriker narrates her personal experience, identifies where she was during the attacks, how she came to encounter the images, and how she felt afterwards. The chronological details—of the nap, the second key—are her witness account: her narrative recreates the day as she experienced it.<sup>95</sup> Her own life was not threatened, but she experienced the attacks as traumatic. Medical anthropologist Allan Young, author of a history of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, notes that while television images are not included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* as a cause for the Disorder, criteria do leave a space for distant traumatic effects. Young argues that distant traumatic experiences are also traumatogenic (“PTSD”); that is, images viewed on television are capable of producing a psychic wound or injury—as they did for Ostriker.

These accounts begin to show how people in various locations on 9/11 felt like witnesses to the events and searched for terms to describe their experience. In *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Art Spiegelman also expresses his confusion as someone who was both traumatized witness and distant observer on 9/11. Spiegelman was at home in Lower Manhattan on the morning of 9/11 and he claims a position for himself as a witness implicated in the terror and fear first hand. He writes, “Those crumbling towers burned their way into every brain, but I live on the outskirts of Ground Zero and first saw it all *live—unmediated*” (1, emphasis added). He describes the panic of running through the streets with his wife trying to find his daughter at her Lower Manhattan school and smelling the toxic smell in the air. A few pages later, however, Spiegelman represents himself as a remote observer. He admits to “only [seeing] the second tower crash on tv” (2). Importantly, however, Spiegelman admits that he cannot tell the difference between what he saw “live” and what he saw on television. He writes that, in fact, he is “haunted now by the images he *didn’t* witness . . . images of people tumbling to the streets below” (6). A man tumbles slowly down the vertical length of Spiegelman’s oversized pages.

In his review of Spiegelman’s book in the *New York Observer*, Adam Begley contests Spiegelman’s claim to have witnessed 9/11. Spiegelman is not a witness, Begley writes, since “he had no access to the desperate terror of the people actually *in* the towers” (2). Indeed, Spiegelman’s experience on 9/11 was different from that of the people in the Towers, but his position—illustrated in his comic—is a valuable position of witness. In fact, Spiegelman experienced, as Taylor did running back and forth between her window and television, one of the key elements of 9/11: its mediation. Like Taylor, Spiegelman was both “there” and “not there” at Ground Zero. It is not strictly proximity, but that very liminality, that creates Spiegelman’s witness position and invites us to read his book as a kind of testimony.

Witness accounts by Taylor, Antrim, Ostriker, and Spiegelman offer an opportunity to reconsider the relations of witnessing and proximity—one that Vigier and Spahr, below, will develop in verse. In her recent monograph, *The Age of Anxiety*, social historian Andrea Tone writes that “[a]nxiety levels are reportedly higher among Americans who did *not* live in Manhattan but experienced the catastrophe through ‘immediate, graphic and pervasive’ television coverage” (228-9 emphasis in original). Tone’s description of the television coverage as “immediate, graphic and pervasive” comes from a *New York Times* article that reported the results of a study of how many school-children were suffering increased anxiety and agoraphobia, both possibly symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, after 9/11. The study, conducted by the New York City Board of Education, showed that 75,000 children in grades four through twelve were diagnosed with the disorder. Proximity did, in part, produce these children’s reactions—many would have lived close enough to the site of the attacks to smell the toxic air or have their daily routines disrupted—but there was more than proximity involved. Their traumatic reactions were also produced by their personal connections to injured or dead victims, their changed sense of safety, or, in many cases, the images they saw on television.

Tone specifies what many commentators have discussed in relation to 9/11: our understanding of what it means to be traumatized by an event changes when we consider the effects of immediate and repeated television coverage. She writes:

A study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in November 2001 reported that graphic video footage of the plane attacks, the collapsing towers, and the desperate and often futile efforts to evade death had unexpectedly rattled a large part of the population. In a technologically sophisticated world where media technologies have blurred geographic boundaries, television, radio, and the Internet may have redefined what it means to experience trauma. (229)

Indeed, the events of 9/11 traumatized even those who only saw them on television. Young concurs, writing that the televised images of the World Trade Center attack “eroded boundaries between what was direct and indirect exposure” (“Review” 1030). It is, specifically, the erosion of these boundaries that authors like Taylor and Spiegelman describe.<sup>96</sup>

9/11 was, of course, not the first instance of televised violence but the event was singular for the immediacy and magnitude of the violence on display. The second attack was seen by many viewers as it happened, and appeared repeatedly before any real meaning or understanding could be attached. In her 1977 book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes about how a photograph can induce a traumatic reaction.<sup>97</sup> Sontag writes about her first experience of seeing photographs of World War Two concentration camps. “When I looked at those photographs, something broke,” Sontag writes. “Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irretrievably grieved, wounded . . .” (91). Sontag articulates a traumatic reaction here. Her role as spectator did not prohibit a witness response.<sup>98</sup> More than functioning as an illustration of trauma, media (television, photographs, and other mediating forms) can actually create a traumatic wound.

Other catastrophes have been photographed and filmed, but the shocking and repeated footage of the 9/11 attacks was something new. In her 2003 follow up to *On Photography*, Sontag gives a brief history of war photography, leading up to the September 2001 turn in that history. Photographs of the First World War were mostly of its aftermath, Sontag writes, featuring destroyed buildings and desolate fields (20). It was not until the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s that advances in photography brought lighter-weight cameras and film capable of thirty-six exposures that could be taken onto the battlefield (20-21). Professional photographers caught the live action of the Spanish Civil War, although those photographs would only be viewed later, upon the photographers’ return home. Scenes from the Second World War were

mainly captured on highly-edited newsreels produced by the Office of War Information. Sontag does not include these newsreels in her brief history, but other critics have noted the melodramatic roots of sentimental portrayals of soldiers training or nurses making their way to a hospital (see, for example, Higashi). The Vietnam War, especially after the US involvement in 1963, was the first to be filmed by television cameras, and this, Sontag writes, “[i]ntroduced the home front to new tele-intimacy with death and destruction” (21).

The idea of “tele-intimacy” is important for thinking about the changing witness position after 9/11. In an essay on Holocaust testimonies in the Yale Video Archives, Geoffrey Hartman writes that television “brings us images from far away while making itself as invisible as possible” (1). According to Hartman, television is a “hyperbolic form of visuality,” that actually makes things “more present (than they are or can be)” (1). This is precisely what happened on 9/11. Television cameras and other recording devices such as camera phones made people at distant locations feel present at the sites of the attacks. They were not only given the opportunity, belatedly, to empathize or sympathize, but in the moments of chaos they were called on to identify and participate. Indeed, the question of “where you were on 9/11” has come to define our understanding of the day. Most adults, especially in North America, can recall where they were on that Tuesday morning and have likely been part of conversations in which their experiences were discussed. The “where you were” story has supplanted the previous version of that story for Americans: where you were when you heard JFK was shot. These questions invite people across the country to give their own witness testimony and write their own witness literature.

Sontag and Hartman indicate not only the way in which the public was slowly introduced to the real action of war through television but also the way in which increased television viewing began to make live events seem increasingly *unreal* to viewers so accustomed to what Hartman describes as television’s “invisibility.” Hartman calls this the “unreality effect.” Television

viewers have so completely suspended their disbelief that real events begin to look as fake as the events seen on television (4). Sontag also notes the blurring between the real and unreal: “Something becomes real—to those who are elsewhere, following it as ‘news’—by being photographed. But a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation” (21). Many people who watched the Towers fall on television said it looked like a movie. As Sontag notes, the same observation—that life images seemed like movie ones—was made by those who escaped from the Towers or watched them fall from close range (22).

The blurring of witness positions produces not a conflation of them but rather a multitude of witness types to be reckoned with. So from her Lower Manhattan apartment, Diana Taylor can be a witness. Juliana Spahr, watching from Brooklyn and later writing in Hawai’i, can also be a witness. Rachel Vigier, though physically injured in the attacks, also takes a position on the spectrum of witnesses; Vigier positions herself not at the epicentre of the attacks but among the crowd.

### **Rachel Vigier: “The Poet was There”**

Rachel Vigier, author of two poetry collections and a book of non-fiction, occupies the position of the proximate poet-witness that Carolyn Forché is most interested in. The poems in Vigier’s collection *The Book of Skeletons* are all based on her firsthand experience on 9/11 and they each “give evidence of what occurred” (Forché 30). Vigier was living in New York in 2001 and was at Ground Zero when the planes hit: She is a witness who, as Forché writes, “personally endured extremity” (30); her position is complicated, however, and her collection is a starting place to revise the relation of witness and proximity. While Vigier’s connection to the site of the World Trade Center attacks is apparent throughout the book, the poems stress connection to other people over connection to the physical site. Vigier does not relinquish the authority of her

proximity but she moves past it to negotiate a position that is both intimate with and distant from the attacks. Vigier is a Canadian and we can read her distance as a national one, although the collection does not dwell on nationality as much as it does on personal relations.

My interest in Vigier's distance from Ground Zero departs from the interest of other critics who have focussed on her first-hand witness position on 9/11. Canadian poet George Elliott Clarke, for example, sanctifies this position on the book's back cover:

The magisterial beauty of this poetry originates in Rachel Vigier's respect for the tragedy of 9/11. Like the classical poets, she knows that apocalypse demands austere reverence.

These elegiac poems resonate with the authority of witness, or survival, because *the poet was there*. (back cover, emphasis in original)

Clarke grants Vigier the authority of a witness whose proximity to the disaster provides her authority to testify about it. He echoes Derrida who wrote (as I quoted earlier) that the witness attests, "I have seen, I have heard, I have touched, I have felt, I have been *present*." However, what is striking about Vigier's collection is that the poems themselves are not preoccupied with author's authority or proximity to trauma. In fact, many of the poems discuss feelings of distance from the events and of a connection not to any epicenter of trauma but to the larger cohort with whom Vigier shared her experience. By emphasizing the variety of connections formed on 9/11, Vigier sets the stage for a reviewing of witness positions.

Although Vigier's poems are wide-ranging in their perspective, Vigier was close to events and her poems are indeed testimony to first-hand experience. Several of her poems reproduce the traumatic structure of delay as it has been theorized by Cathy Caruth (and other scholars of trauma who begin with the theories of Freud; see also Felman and Laub; and Herman). As Caruth explains, one does not witness the trauma as it takes place (6); instead, the traumatic event is experienced only after the initial shock is over. Caruth's explanation of trauma's delay is

indebted to Freud's theory of "traumatic neurosis," in which he explains the pattern of an event, its repression—something like the "latency period" he describes in adolescent sexuality—and its return (see Caruth 7). Allan Young has described Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a "memory logic" that occurs in four related stages: the first is the event that threatens the individual with death; the second is the memory of the event and its persistence in dreams, images or mimetic behaviors; the final two stages occur when the person begins to avoid stimuli that might trigger these dreams or memories and, consequently, symptoms of anxiety or panic ("PTSD" 23). We can find this structure of trauma in several of Vigier's poems.

The poem "Explosion" evokes this structure poetically (34). It begins with the "explosion" of the Towers. Vigier's lines enjamb urgently into each other as her body is "lifted and flung like a strip of sheeting torn from scaffolding." She does not speak specifically about the experience but her simile maps the destruction of the World Trade Center onto the threat of her own bodily destruction. A few lines later, Vigier experiences the second stage, the memory of the event: "slivers of fear appear/ in a familiar room before anyone arises or stirs." The eerie rhyme of "fear/appear" produces a haunting, mimicking her haunted memory. As the poem closes, Vigier articulates the final two stages of trauma by writing of her efforts to stave off this haunting: "I have to make myself/ notice," she writes, "the warmth of a body deep in sleep." Here, a familiar phrase "deep in sleep" and a warm body (contrasted, perhaps, with a cold corpse) produce comfort, her defense against the traumatic memory.

Throughout the collection Vigier accesses the trauma of the events through this "memory logic." The final poem "How to Speak," a ten-page prose poem with short verse paragraphs, is the one in which Vigier writes about the attacks most directly. It is notable as well that she shifts to prose here, as if believing herself that, as some critics have pointed out, "the poetic and the testimonial [are] somehow incompatible" (Mole 18-19).<sup>99</sup> Yet Vigier is only able to describe the

events by describing their memory. The poem begins with a description of a photograph: “A few days after September 11, 2001, my husband took a picture of me with our younger daughter.” The photograph triggers memory, returns Vigier to the day itself: “Whenever I look at this picture I can feel how carefully she [the poet’s daughter] worked around the injuries on my face.” In turn, that initial memory triggers others. The next paragraph, which seems to come after a deep breath has been taken, is the beginning of Vigier’s most direct and detailed explanation of what happened to her, and where she was, on 9/11. After the paragraph break, she begins “On September 11, my husband left early for work . . .” (49).

Other poems in the collection access experiences on 9/11 through triggers in Vigier’s later life. In the poem “Foolish History,” a thunderstorm causes a traumatic flashback for both her and her husband:

You jump to the window  
shouting at a flash in the sky  
as I scramble through the room  
. . . tensed for the next blast. (29)

The short lines move quickly, creating a tense scene of traumatic memory; tension is heightened by the prickly “xt” and “st” sounds of “tensed,” “next,” and “blast.” In “How to Speak,” memories also generate other memories. Vigier does, then, testify to her own traumatic experience on 9/11. Her collection’s investment in connection does not deny her first-hand witness experience but it makes space for the experience to be shared—with the reader and with others who also have a traumatic memory of 9/11.

That is, proximity still matters in Vigier’s collection, but it is not the only source of authority for the 9/11 witness. The right to speak about trauma comes also from connection. Vigier prefaces her book with a quotation from Søren Kierkegaard: “we human beings need each

other, and in that there is already directness.” In his *Journals and Papers*, Kierkegaard theorizes need and human communication, describing the elemental relation between humans as one based on need, in opposition to humans’ (more one-sided) relation with a God figure. Dominick LaCapra reads Kierkegaard’s statement in contrast to Derrida’s later discussion in *The Gift of Death* of the inaccessibility of all people to God and equally to each other. Where Derrida, in his preoccupation with absence, writes that “every other is totally other” (“*tout autre est tout autre*”), Kierkegaard suggests the opposite: that relations among people in society are, in LaCapra’s words, “based on a variable combination of distance or strangeness and intimacy, solidarity, or proximity” (*Writing History* 56). This dialectic is at work in Vigier’s collection. While the poems themselves are mediated—through memory, through allusions like this one to Kierkegaard, through simile and metaphor—they take human need and relation as their subject.

Vigier’s experience on 9/11 and her testimony to that experience are tied to her connections with other people and her interest in the interplay of strangeness and intimacy, separateness and solidarity, that characterizes 9/11. In an early poem “Aubade,” Vigier describes how on 9/11 she suddenly becomes “with other others a great herd/ circling away from burnt grassland” (8). Running uptown, away from the smoke and ash, she becomes part of the herd, “puffs of ash and dust rising from our feet.” She concludes the poem by saying that the hardest thing to imagine when travelling among all of these people is that, earlier that day, she had been alone in bed with her husband—“a man and a woman/ reaching out of sleep.”

Vigier’s experience of being part of a group is portrayed in several poems as encounters between strangers. The poem “Sanctuary” records her exchange with “a stranger/ leading me up the steps” (9)—the man who noticed her bleeding and led her to the nearby church to be looked after. At thirteen short lines, the poem is a clipped sonnet. The sonnet gesture focuses attention on the interplay between a “you” and an “I” in the poem; a connection is made between the two

that can be seen historically against centuries of brief sonnet encounters. In the first part of the poem, the man urges the woman to take his help. Half way through, the poem turns when “the church . . . opened its doors” and the two go inside together. Here, need rather than romantic love is requited. The poem records the brief encounter and offers it as an example of Kierkegaard’s directness.

In “Apparition,” Vigier “accepts a stranger’s hand,” as she joins the crowd streaming over the Brooklyn Bridge (14). In “Notes Toward the Other,” she describes her difficulty in deciphering her own state, in knowing whether, amongst the rubble, smoke, and her own pain, she is still alive. At the end of the poem, she reaches out “not for the hand of a god/ painted against a cracked blue dome—but for a shirt, yellow and soft, the back of a stranger” (17). Kierkegaard echoes here too: humans may have a one-sided relation with God but they “need each other, and in that there is already directness.” Vigier searches not for a higher power but for another human, one who needs her as well. “I was searching for an *us*,” she writes (17). Her own experience, her subjectivity, the way she knew that she herself was still alive, was through contact with this stranger. These examples of connection convey more than simply the “kindness of strangers.” It is true that on 9/11 people reached out to strangers and felt part of a collective, but Vigier’s evocation of connection is not as much about community as it is about her own subjectivity. She recognizes, through her traumatic experience, that she is part of an “*us*.”

Questions about self-recognition especially drive the poem “Natural History” (12). The poem is set in the waiting room of a New York hospital, on September 11 or perhaps just after, and Vigier begins with an attribution: her poem is “after Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘In the Waiting Room.’” Vigier’s poem both echoes and rewrites Bishop’s: in each, the speaker sits in a medical waiting room. In Bishop’s poem, the young speaker waits while her aunt visits the dentist; in Vigier’s, the speaker herself waits to be seen by the doctor. Both poems open by stating their

location in waiting rooms and both, after long, narrow, column-like verse paragraphs, close with a gesture toward the world outside the waiting room. For Bishop, that world is Worcester, Massachusetts, during the First World War, where there is “night and slush and cold,/ and it was still the fifth of February, 1918” (160). For Vigier, outside is “New York City; light and ash and warmth” (13). Vigier imitates the rhythm of Bishop’s description, providing opposite nouns: Bishop’s “night” is Vigier’s “light”; “slush” becomes, a half-rhyme later, “ash”; “cold” becomes “warmth.” Vigier enacts her connection to Bishop through these formal echoes yet her poem ultimately suggests an alternate, more positive, view of shared subjectivity.

In Bishop’s poem, the young speaker is appalled to realize that she, “Elizabeth,” is “one of them,” that she is “held . . . together,” “just one” with the others in the waiting room (159). The poem turns when young Elizabeth discovers that she has let out a scream. She assumes it is “Aunt Consuelo’s voice,” only realizing later that it was her own: “What took me/ completely by surprise/ was that it was me: my voice, in my mouth.” However, in the same moment that she recognizes her voice, her mouth, her self, she also finds herself constituted among other selves. Bishop continues, “How had I come to be here,/ like them . . .”. Robert Pinsky describes Bishop’s voice in the poem as one that is “both imagined and actual; both inner and social; both mine and someone else’s; that separates me and includes me” (42). “In the Waiting Room” beautifully articulates this moment of realization: as the speaker feels connected to the humanity around her, she at once feels utterly alone, dismayed that she could be grouped in with others at all. As Bishop comes into her selfhood in the waiting room, she also becomes increasingly aware of difference and disconnection. Sitting among the others, she realizes, not “I am an I” but “*you* are an I” (emphasis added). Her voice comes, by surprise, from a “mouth,” not a whole self, and the other people in the waiting room are disembodied too. They are “shadowy gray knees,/ trousers and skirts and boots/ and different pairs of hands.” As she discovers that she is “like them,” she

simultaneously sees them—the people around her—as dismembered parts. People are scientifically rendered like the pictures in her *National Geographic* magazine; they are a species that is both foreign and familiar.

Vigier's poem endorses shared subjectivity in its deliberate distancing from Bishop's. This distancing is evident in the first few lines of "Natural History," when Vigier writes that "[n]o one/ is speaking and no one/ is reading *National Geographic*." Vigier's poem about her own experience in the waiting room—watching a man search desperately for a missing person, then seeing her mother arrive in the waiting room, and going toward her—becomes a poem about being alone and connected to others at the same time. As several of Bishop's critics have argued, "In the Waiting Room" speaks about the "burden" of connectedness (Costello 119), as Bishop resists the idea of "a unified whole, a common humanity" (Dennis 161). Where Bishop found a burden, however, Vigier finds possibility.

Whereas the young girl in Bishop's poem moves into a new kind of new maturity (she constitutes herself among adults: "I was my foolish aunt"), the woman in Vigier's poem regresses to childhood: when her mother enters the waiting room, at the end of the poem, Vigier writes, "I stand and wobble/ toward her reaching, a child /on her first legs . . ." Vigier reverses many of the moves in Bishop's poem. For Bishop, bodies are dismembered; people become catalogues of knees and hands. Vigier dismembers bodies too (she describes the waiting room, in homage to Bishop it would seem, as "full of bent heads/ and loose hands"), but the more sustained image in the poem is of a man entirely embodied. The eyes of a man bulge as he searches; they are a synecdoche of his whole self. Through the extended metaphor of a deep-sea creature—another homage to Bishop since the description reads as though from *National Geographic*—Vigier compares the man to creatures "with parts grown so large, the organ/ dwarfs the body in its drive/ for survival."<sup>100</sup> The man's eyes are not separate from the man: they have dwarfed him; they are

all of him; and his search, his desire to locate his missing person, is his whole self. Read against the larger themes of Vigier's collection, especially the epigraph about human need, this searching man and the woman/child who wobbles toward her mother are not burdened by their connections with others but necessarily constituted by them.

Throughout the collection, Vigier speaks as both an individual and a member of a group. *The Book of Skeletons* represents her singular witness position on 9/11 and it also represents her experience within a collective. Although Vigier was "there," at Ground Zero on 9/11, she nonetheless writes of her own remove from the experience. Her speaker feels both alone in her fear and connected to others, producing a distance that allows for various degrees of ownership of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Her remove, that is, leaves a space for other witness positions on 9/11 to emerge. Juliana Spahr, who was not at Ground Zero on the day of the attacks, also uses metaphors of connection—of shared air, common cells—to make a space of witness for herself.

### **Juliana Spahr's Connective Politics**

While Vigier experienced the Twin Towers falling right around her, Juliana Spahr watched the collapse of the World Trade Center from across the river, in Brooklyn. She was standing in a crowd, on a street corner, watching live, but from a distance (see her "Poetry in a Time of Crisis"). In *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2003), Spahr writes two long poems; one responds to the terrorist attacks and the other to the impending war in Iraq. The first, "Poem Written after September 11, 2001," was written while Spahr was spending a year in New York and it responds directly to the attacks. The second, "Poem Written from November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003," was written upon return to her then-home in Hawai'i and takes the war in Iraq as its main subject. In both poems of the collection, Spahr acknowledges her varying distance from the events she writes about. She writes about distance while insisting on the

connections among people in the world. She is interpellated, hailed, as both an American and a global citizen, by 9/11 and the wars that followed.<sup>101</sup> Spahr describes the world as “a series of isolated burning fires” (56), but she insists that the fires are *not* isolated; together they make up “this dirty air we breathe together” (57). Throughout the collection, Spahr collapses distance between people and places. Through a politics of connection she creates a space for herself on the spectrum of witnesses.

Spahr is a graduate of the State University of New York-Buffalo’s English Department—the home of the Electronic Poetry Center and the Poetics Listserv, two electronic epicentres of experimental poetry. She cites Barrett Watten and Ron Silliman as major poetic influences, and most of her poetry comes out of the Language movement (“Interview”).<sup>102</sup> She is the author of several poetry collections and the critical monograph, *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (2001). Currently a professor at Mills College in Oakland, California, Spahr is an active writer, editor, and scholar. Her poetry, always anchored in her intellectual interests and activist politics, is spontaneous and visceral, and always concerned, both before and after 9/11, with questions of collectivity and connection.

Connective writing and reading practices have been a feature of Spahr’s work for many years and, in *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, Spahr enacts, almost *scats*, a poetics of connection. She writes across racial and geographic divides, divides of experience, and divides of reader and writer. In a 2001 critical essay “Poetry in a Time of Crisis,” Spahr rejects the notion that the main purpose of poetry is to provide comfort. She takes issue, specifically, with Billy Collins’ September 2001 essay in *USA Today*, “Poetry and Tragedy”—the essay I have cited in earlier chapters, in which Collins talks about poetry as “grief-counselling center.” Collins writes that “poetry by its nature moves us inward, not outward to the public and collective.” Spahr disagrees. Her essay calls for poems that “look outward.” She challenges Collins by developing a

poetics that is, in her words, “attentive to collective possibilities.” She calls for “models of intimacy” that are *also* “declarations of collective culture and connective agency.” Her poems in *This Connection* explore intimate details of beds and sleep, breath and cells, but these “inward” moves are never moves toward privacy—beds, sleep, breath, and cells are the common entities found within a global public.

Like Vigier’s but executed quite differently, Spahr’s 9/11 witness poetry is a poetry of connection. Sharing a world view, the poets differ primarily in matters of form: Vigier writes more traditional “lyric” poetry, while Spahr has long been identified with the Language movement. The distinction between lyric poetry on the one hand and the alternative Language poetry that emerged in the 1960’s on the other, has, arguably, become less useful today. As Hank Lazar notes, the field of poetry has become increasingly “atomized, decentralized, and multifaceted” (qtd. in Sewell 2); nevertheless, the projects of lyric and Language poets have long been described in opposing terms. In a 2007 anthology of contemporary American poets, editor Lisa Sewell refers to “a sense of conflict in contemporary American poetry during the 1990s, and to the so-called turf wars between conventional voice-centered verse and the language-focused avant-garde” (2). Today, Language poets still tend to understand their work to be *more* connective, more inclusive than lyric, which tends to focus on the individual voice. As we will see, however, in *This Connection*, Spahr takes up a strong lyric “I.”

Before writing *This Connection*, Spahr generally found Language poetry more formally congenial to her project of connectivity. Language poetry uses patterns and systems to convey details, where conversely a lyric poem might use detail to represent patterns or systems (“After Language Poetry”):

I found value in the retreat from individualism and idiosyncrasy and in works that instead pointed to heady and unexpected and yet intimate pluralisms. And in writing that helped

me to think of culture as large and connective. And in writing that comments on community and that moves poetry away from individualism to shared, connective spaces. (“After Language Poetry”)

In an essay on Spahr’s poetics, Kimberly Lamm positions Spahr’s writing as emerging from Language poetry’s claim that “poetry can be a means for creating collectivities rather than solidifying the particularities of the individual voice” (136). In *This Connection*, however, Spahr notes that the poems in this collection, more than those in her previous work, tend toward the lyrical. In her preface to the collection’s second poem, she writes, “This feeling [of being far away, geographically, from the events of 9/11] suddenly made lyric—with its attention to connection, with its dwelling on the beloved and on the afar—somewhat poignant, somewhat apt, even somewhat more useful than I usually find it” (13). While Spahr’s “yous and mes” [sic] may seem opposed to Vigier’s “I,” the poems in *This Connection* deliberately blur the line between lyric and Language poetry.

Spahr borrows from both traditions to invoke the collective as a kind of individual. As Lamm writes, Spahr asks, “who constitutes the ‘we’ of collectivities and what role do poems play in opening or policing the gates of ‘we’?” (133). Spahr’s poetry, then, moves the witness position from a fixed place in individual identity to a shared space of collectivity. Her collection does not speak as one witness to one listener; rather, through an emphasis on connection, Spahr questions what it means to speak and listen *en masse*, and she insists on the shared nature of experience. Spahr’s project not only expands a definition of witness but it also suggests that witnessing disaster is part of everyday living in the globalized world.<sup>103</sup> In an interview at Mills College, she explains how her poetry is not “anti-war” or “activist” in the way the work of a poet like Alan Ginsberg was, for example. Instead, her poetry is about war, about terror, but also about everyday

life—and entirely about how they all co-exist. She says “this [war, terror] is a part of our daily lives, how do we negotiate it?” (“Interview”).

The first poem in the collection begins this negotiation. “Poem Written after September 11, 2001” was written while Spahr was spending a year in Brooklyn. She was scheduled to read in Soho on September 12, and when that reading had to be rescheduled for later in the month, Spahr wrote this poem. At the time, Spahr was taking a course in Ericksonian Hypnosis, a technique that attempts to induce behavioural changes as elemental as quitting smoking (“Interview”). Some lines in the poem come directly from Ericksonian techniques. In hypnosis, for example, the suggestion is made to “see the space around the hands,” to see blank spaces, what is not there; this becomes a major trope of Spahr’s poem. An early line in the poem states, “There is a space between the hands” (4) and this catalyzes the lines that follow: “There is a space between the hands and space around the hands./ There is a space around the hands and space in the room” (4). The poem builds through repetition as hypnosis does and, like a hypnotist, the poet has the goal of change: here, the change being induced is change in our social world.

As a poem of witness, “Poem Written after September 11, 2001” negates the question of physical proximity, instead describing shared experiences across distance. The poem begins with the line, “There are these things: cells, the movement of cells and the division of cells” (3). Its development is metastatic: it builds momentum, repeating itself and growing, until the cells are in space, in the mesosphere, in the stratosphere and beyond, growing and growing, until the last lines announce the fate of the connections of people with these cells: “How lovely and how doomed this connection of everyone with/ lungs” (10). (This image of doomed air is especially pertinent to 9/11. In the days and months after the attack, the air in Lower Manhattan was clouded with the remains of both the buildings and the people who died in them. This is the air to

which Vigier refers in a poem published separately from her collection when she asks “whose dust is this/ blowing across burnt ground?” (“Burnt Ground” 389]). Spahr’s poem is about the connection among everyone—everyone with lungs. This is not an “I”-centred lyric, but a poem that de-privileges that subject position.

Early in the long poem, Spahr declares, “Everyone with lungs breathes the space in and out as everyone/ with lungs breathes the space between the hands in and out” (4). The poem spirals from there, as the spaces that “everyone with lungs” breathes grow, beginning, as I’ve described, with the “space between the hands.” As the spaces get larger, the poem builds, each verse paragraph repeating words from the one before, accruing words as they go. These growing paragraphs lead the reader to read faster and faster: the first single lines read easily, but as the paragraphs get longer and the spaces get bigger (from cities to continents to the mesosphere, and so on), the growing paragraphs force the reader to rush to complete them as one would complete the reading of a long sentence. There are no commas or line breaks that suggest a place to pause.

Finally, once the lungs have breathed in the whole mesosphere, Spahr stops. A short two-line paragraph is followed by a blank half page. The reader catches her breath in this space. And then, in the longest paragraph of the poem, Spahr reverses the order of the spaces. The breath out moves faster than the breath in, unravelling quickly back through the mesosphere, stratosphere, troposphere, continents, nations, regions, cities, neighbourhoods, buildings, until we breathe out the “space between the hands.” Spahr brings attention to our breath both by writing about it (people are troped as lungs throughout the poem) and by controlling the breathing of her readers during the poem. The collective breaths she both writes about and forces suggest a shared subjectivity. If the air in Lower Manhattan is toxic after the terrorist destruction, then it is not just New Yorkers who breathe in the toxicity but, metaphorically, *everyone* with lungs.<sup>104</sup>

The tropes of hypnosis and change are more subtle in the collection's second poem, "Poem Written from November, 2002, to March 27, 2003." Spahr has spoken about the "technique" of this poem, calling it "process-oriented" ("Interview"). Spahr explains that when the bombing of Iraq began she started to write a poem every day. She calls her process a "listing, charting, inventory" ("Interview"). She wrote, she says, to keep a record of events and, if one day she didn't write, she didn't allow herself to go back and fill anything in. The poem has a forward momentum; it is urgent like a fast-breaking news story. She was writing through, thinking through, the war that America would soon be fighting. Spahr herself describes the poem's repetition as the repeating steps of foot-soldiers, cavalry, the "endless expansion of the military industrial complex" ("Interview"). This is hypnosis writ large; Spahr's repetition is aimed at mesmerizing the whole world.

The main work of the poem is the conflation of disparate spaces and contexts. Spahr brings the war into our beds. The poem moves quickly among "the British Embassy being closed in Kenya," "the US urging more aggressive Iraq inspections," and "the curve of your cheeks, their soft down" (31). It unites big and small, near and far. "In bed," she writes near the very end of the poem, "when I stroke the down on yours [sic] cheeks, I stroke also the/ carrier battle group ships, the guided missile cruisers, and the/ guided missile destroyers" (74). In the poem's prefatory note, Spahr explains how her distance from the "Ground Zero" of her country created her connection to the sites of the attacks. Living in Hawai'i, she was "living off the fat" of the military-industrial complex. She writes, "I had to think about my intimacy with things I would rather not be intimate with even as (because?) I was very far away from all of those things geographically" (13). Spahr is not claiming a personal or singular witness position; rather, in the poem, she does away with proximity markers like "near" and "far," "here" and "there," in order to suggest the connections among all of the places and experiences in the world. Even

conventionally singular words like “me” and the intimate forms of “you” and “your” become pluralized (as in the line above, the “down on yours cheeks”). Like Vigier, Spahr is not describing a utopia or ideal community; everyone is implicated in the dystopic events Spahr’s poem describes.

Spahr’s repeated references to sleeping and beds can be connected to similar references by Vigier. Both poets return to the warm, sleeping body as a contrast to the violence rendered in other parts of their poems. Sleep is not only a symbol of home, safety, and comfort, but for Spahr especially, sleep symbolizes our global connections: in every country, people make a kind of bed for themselves; there is always morning and night and the idea of home. Emphasizing the globality of sleep, Spahr and Vigier echo Walt Whitman’s famous poem “The Sleepers” in which, as American literary critic Philip Fisher has written, “Sleep cancels all differences, all identities” (70). In the first section of his poem, Whitman catalogues sleepers as Spahr also does:

The married couple sleep calmly in their bed, he with his palm on  
the hip of his wife, and she with her palm on the hip of the husband,

The sisters sleep lovingly side by side in their bed,

The men sleep lovingly side by side in theirs,

And the mother sleeps with her little child carefully wrapt.

The blind sleep, and the deaf and dumb sleep,

The prisoner sleeps well in the prison, the runaway son sleeps . . . (qtd. in Fisher 71)

Both Spahr and Whitman allude to the shared humanity in sleep through their cataloguing lines. Whitman lists the sleepers serially, equalizing them. As Fisher also writes, for Whitman, “[t]o be asleep is no longer to be male or female; no longer deaf or a prisoner; no longer a runaway or unloved” (71). Spahr’s sleepers are not listed but are dispersed throughout the poem, yet her

syntax often echoes Whitman's here. Where he writes, "The sisters sleep . . ./ The men sleep . . ./ And the mother sleeps . . .," Spahr writes—and this is only one example of many—"Thalidomide exists./ Zoe Ball exists./ And Fatboy Slim exists..." (51-2).

The Whitman-esque catalogues throughout Spahr's poem juxtapose people, places, and situations. Not only does she describe the way everyone exists equally or everyone sleeps equally, but she also evokes these connections through repetitive syntactical structures. Spahr calls for a "we" over an "I" by engaging the lyric form and then pushing it to speak for a "we." Her poem on the Iraq war relies heavily on apostrophe (the lyric's calling card, as I will discuss in Chapter Four). It begins with an invocation: "Beloveds". But the bodies of Spahr's "Beloveds" are never alone, even in their beds. As Lamm writes, the bodies of Spahr's beloveds are "the figurative sites of destruction" (146). Spahr links "the doomed beauty of global politics to a lover's discourse" (Lamm 135). Spahr always takes the global view over the local one: "Perhaps it isn't lovers in our beds that matter, perhaps it is the earth" (34). Spahr decentres the personal "I/eye" witness position by revealing how all people are connected, even when they do not know it or do not wish to be. The poem makes the intimate public and the public intimate. The word "I" repeats constantly throughout the poem but it is, like Day's mobile "I", impossible to pin down. The poem is a catalogue without a table of contents; it traverses time and space through a mobile "I."

This public intimacy is also rendered through the trope of skin that Spahr develops in one section, "December 1, 2002." Skin colour can be a metonym for racial difference and conflict. It is also a sign of our nakedness. Spahr engages skin on several levels. She also invokes Kierkegaard's directness; here, through images of skin in contact. The section begins, "Beloveds, yours skins is a boundary separating yous from the rest of yous," making plural what is usually singular. Moreover, skin is the largest organ; it both seals bodies off from each other and acts as

their first point of contact. Skin, then, represents both separation and unity. Spahr writes about how separate bodies are together in atrocity: “I speak of the forty-seven dead in Caracas./ And I speak of the four dead in Palestine./ And of the three dead in Israel” (19). By repeating the connecting word “and” she forces a syntactical relation among the events while also noting their differences. Skin represents Spahr’s subject here: “Boundaries and connections, locals and globals, butterfly wings and hurricanes” (20). Some of our skins are clean and soft, she notes, but by following that description with one of mass atrocity, she metaphorically dirties that clean skin; she does not allow skin to contain the individual body.

The poems themselves are crowded with plural forms, descriptions of multiple horrors, news events, and crowds themselves. Spahr writes these crowds, it seems, so that skins will be forced to gather “all together to meet each other” (22). Appearing as simple sentences (not spaced apart in any conspicuous way), Spahr’s lines appear spare on the page. In fact, the poet presents discrete sentences and paragraphs that, in their simplicity, contrast with the weighty and difficult news they convey. The crowding is not evoked spatially but descriptively and metaphorically.

Spahr undoes oppositions—near/far, local/global, butterfly wings/hurricanes, to name just a few—everywhere in this poem. Several other tropes do the sort of work that I have described for beds and skin. Our cells (as in “Poem written after September 11”) make us individual entities and also constitute our shared biology: “Embedded deep in our cells is ourselves and everyone else” (31). The media too, streaming directly into our homes, alongside the homes of others, is another trope through which Spahr explores connection. This example is crucial, reinforcing the idea that the mediation of 9/11 produced many people’s experience on the day. Spahr relied, in particular, on Google News to find the facts that populate the poem. Google News is notable for its global reach; the webpage/search engine is organized by news *story* instead of news source. Below each topic heading (e.g., “Times Square Bomb Attempt”), the site provides links to every

major news outlet that has covered it. A reader may easily choose to follow the story on the *Globe and Mail* website, or the *New York Times*, or the *Hindustan Times*. Someone in the United States may read the news in India while someone from India reads an American version. Google News is crowded news, global news. It facilitates what Spahr's poem enacts—people all over the world sharing (in) current events. Spahr's poems, with their dated titles and streaming syntax, read at times like the Google News feed itself. Whether or not Spahr is deliberately recreating the form of Google News in the poem, readers can recognize its influence in the global quality of the poem.

The indebtedness to current events and the dated titles of the collection's two long poems identify them, at first glance, as a kind of witness poetry. In addition, both poems speak directly to the crisis of those dates (the first being the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; the second, the Iraq war that began when Spahr's poem ends in late March 2003). The poems call for "outward turns" and everyone "all together," and they push the limits of the traditional, first-person witness poem. Vigier's poetry may read as more traditionally lyric, with its singular "I" experiences intact, but both poets speak the collectivity of the witness act and show how a single experience is connected to other experiences. Vigier explores her connective subjectivity quietly, through, for example, intertextual relations with Bishop. Spahr states more directly, "I cannot understand our insistence on separations" (21). Vigier and Spahr articulate their own witness positions after 9/11 and, in doing so, expand our understanding of what it means to "witness" an event and to write its poetry. Their two collections suggest a new poetics of witness.

### **Witness Poetry after 9/11**

The modern witness act importantly comprises both *seeing* and *telling*. Engdahl writes:

One does not become a witness only by observing an event with one's own eyes. A witness is a person who speaks out and says "I was there, I saw it, I can tell people!" As an act of speech, testimony is inseparable from this kind of self-reference and from the accompanying claim to immediate credence. (3)

Engdahl's comments accord with Frisch's definition, discussed earlier, of the "epistemic" witness who testifies to knowledge of an event seen first-hand. After 9/11, a witness is still someone who sees an event, knows it, and tells about it, but the conditions of seeing and knowing are importantly different. This difference is evident in, and, in part, emerges from, poetry.

Scholarship on witnessing and witness poetry has centred mainly on the Holocaust. However, 9/11 poetry by Vigier and Spahr—and by tens of thousands of others—suggests new directions for studying the poetry of witness. I have suggested that the mediation of 9/11 was crucial to the witness experience. As I continue to depart from Holocaust scholarship, it is important to note the way the Holocaust itself was (differently) mediated. Scholars of the Holocaust have emphasized how witness accounts emerged slowly from a silence that shrouded the concentration camps both during the war and after it. Most critics, in fact, attribute public awareness of the Holocaust in the U.S. to the television miniseries, *Holocaust*, broadcast on NBC in 1978. One of the largest repositories of witness accounts, the Fortunoff Archive at Yale, was assembled by a grassroots organization in 1979. For the most part, then, Holocaust testimonies came long after 1945. Dori Laub has called the Holocaust "an event [that] produced no witnesses" because "[n]ot only, in effect, did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims" (80). Laub's comments address not only the "unspeakability" of the Holocaust (that the circumstances were too awful to put into words) but also the design of that unspeakability: as the survivor Simon Wiesenthal has written,

an SS militiaman told him, “[h]owever this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him” (qtd. in Levi 11-12). The Holocaust witness tells his or her story to undo, in small part, some of the Nazis’ design and to remember those who were killed in a project of total annihilation—and against those who continue to deny that the Holocaust ever happened.

If, however, (poetic) witness accounts of the Holocaust emerged from silence, witness accounts of 9/11 emerge from noise: the noise of television commentators, politicians, radio hosts, people gathering in bars and offices and the constant replay of the collapsing towers and the audible screams of those nearby. I have noted that Holocaust witnesses testify in order to say “this happened,” but on 9/11 there were few who did not know what had happened. What was unclear then—especially after the media coverage had implicated so many people—was *to whom the events had happened*.<sup>105</sup>

Poetry renders a witness position that emerges not only from noise but also from distance. Distance is a condition of the 9/11 witness and is a subject that the witness addresses in poetry. Vigier’s claim to her traumatic experience is her emotional *distance* from her first-hand experience. Even though she was present at Ground Zero on 9/11, she is distanced by her shock and disbelief. She represents the attack with ellipses, in incomplete sentences. She hears “the voice of a stranger urgently repeating, ‘This/ woman needs help. This woman needs help’” and then she realizes “I am this woman” (54). Her connection to the events is not only produced through proximity to the site but also through proximity to others around her, like the stranger who helps her. Spahr’s connection to 9/11 is also negotiated by distance; hers is geographical but she extends connection across hemispheres, stating explicitly that all experiences are in some ways shared. It is true that Vigier was physically injured on 9/11 while Spahr was not. Their

positions as witness poets should not be collapsed; we should, however, reconsider proximity as a necessary condition of witnessing.

Poetry is an appropriate form through which to begin this reconsideration, in part because a genre of witness poetry already exists and has already begun to shift its borders. I have shown in this chapter how poets attempt to understand their witness positions on 9/11 within the conventions of verse. By taking up a position of witness—by telling what they have seen—poets suggest new ways to consider modes of witnessing. A spectrum of witnesses was created by the geographical reach of the 9/11 attacks, a reach made possible in large part through television and the internet. Poetry itself becomes a way of engaging with—or in Diana Taylor’s words “participating in”—the event. This new form of participation became evident on 9/11 but it speaks to a larger shift taking place in the twenty-first century toward a globalization of our suffering through shared media.

Claims about large cultural shifts are necessarily risky. In fact, this chapter has circled many questions whose answers are beyond its scope. How is the Holocaust a necessary and yet problematic paradigm for understanding consequent subsequent traumas? What is a “real” experience in a hyper-mediated world—what is a mediated experience in the real world? Who has the right to talk about a traumatic event, 9/11 or any other? How can we measure trauma in relation to the witness experience? These remain open questions, but they suggest the importance of one particular revision to our understanding of the modern witness position: a de-privileging of proximity in defining the authority of the witness. One function of poetry after 9/11 was a witness function, but we can only see that fully when we expand our understanding of who writes as a witness. In the previous chapter, I commented on the way that contemporary memorials limit the memory of the events they commemorate by emphasizing looking forward over looking back. The poets of this chapter, and of the next, look back; they record what happened on 9/11 and take

up witness positions in relation to the attack and each other. Their poetic testimony is, itself, memorial to the events.

## Chapter Four: Lyric as Public Discourse at Poetry.com

How could it happen? How can it be?

How can we associate what we see?

Past wars were not with others on our soil.

It gives us heartache, hurts like a boil.

What do they expect to be able to gain?

By causing such vast sorrow and pain?

We must trust in our God in Heaven above,

To heal our hearts, and heal the wounded with love. (Connie Ludolff)<sup>106</sup>

As I have already demonstrated, a surprisingly large amount of poetry circulated after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Over a dozen anthologies were published in the wake of the attacks—collections of New York poets, West Coast poets, Latino/a poets, and more. Poetry was published in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and in other major newspapers all over the world; it was reprinted in magazines like the *New Yorker* and at websites like *Slate.com*. As we saw, it was displayed in a conceptual art installation near the World Trade Center site. However, the largest amount of poetry written in response to 9/11 was not written by professional writers whose works are featured in the *New Yorker* or *Slate*, or by poets who win prizes or teach in creative-writing programs; it was not published in anthologies or reprinted in national papers and magazines. Instead, it was written by people who do not primarily identify as poets and it was found tacked to subway walls and chain link fences; in the largest numbers, it was posted on the internet. One website, poetry.com, houses over fifty-five thousand poems. In this chapter, I study these poems—their commonalities, their public role, and their poetic technique—in order to argue for their role in promoting, fomenting, and exhibiting public conversation in a time of national crisis.

While “much intellectual energy has been spent,” as Maria Damon and Ira Livingston have noted, “on explicating what makes poetic language different [ . . . and separable from] its social matrix” (11), the poems at poetry.com are important precisely because they take place in the context of larger public conversations that inform the memory of the September 11 attacks.

These public poems deserve examination, beginning with an overview of the poems themselves and the conditions of their circulation. Poems written in response to 9/11 appear on several kinds of websites: some are poetry websites, primarily; some are 9/11 memorial sites; and some are personal websites in which people have chosen to include their own “9/11 poem.” I will focus here on poems posted on the “September 11 Dedication Page” at poetry.com. Currently (as of December 15, 2010), poetry.com hosts 55,013 poems about 9/11. It is the first link to appear in results from a Google search of “9/11 poetry,” indicating that it is the most visited and the most often linked-to among sites containing 9/11 poems. The site was recently taken over by the self-publishing internet company Lulu, although its URL remains “poetry.com” (I refer to the site mainly as “poetry.com” here). Other sites—for example, “9-11heroes.us”; the “American Terror page” at About.com; and the “September 11 page” at poetryamerica.com—house similar types of poems, usually a few hundred each, but poetry.com holds the largest repository of submissions. It is also the most easily accessible; the site, for instance, has an effective search function.

Some of the other sites I have listed are primarily memorial or discussion pages in which poems appear alongside other forms of tribute. Poetry.com is unique for being, in the first instance, a forum for *poets*. The site encourages people to share their poems, to comment on other people’s poems, and to use the various available poetry resources (like “Poetic Techniques” and “Need Help Rhyming?”); it encourages people newly interested in poetry to form a community. The homepage reads, “Whether you’re quietly writing poems in the northern woods, or are part of an English class studying or learning poetry, you can use Lulu to compile your works for your

audience.” The 9/11 poems are grouped together on a webpage, and that webpage is listed alongside some of the poetry resource pages. The poems themselves become a resource for emerging poets. They have been posted by their writers as contributions to this growing, unedited collection, and are available to people who are just beginning to see themselves as poets. (The site is “unedited” but it is not unmonitored: members must agree to terms and conditions that include the website’s right to remove offensive content.) Like the print anthologies devoted to representing and remembering 9/11—but including more poems than all of those anthologies put together—this online collection hosts poetic accounts of personal grief and mourning. And like the witness poems by Rachel Vigier and Juliana Spahr, these poems too function as engaged memorials to 9/11. They look back to the details of the day and remember its worst suffering, even as many of them also encourage personal healing.

The poems at the “September 11 Dedication Page” take up different aspects of the 9/11 attacks, but they are also quite similar to one another. My chapter’s epigraph, an excerpt from a poem by contributor Connie Ludolff, formally represents many poems on the site. It makes several conspicuous poetic moves: it rhymes; it *looks* like a poem with its deliberate line breaks; it employs elevated language (“vast sorrow and pain”); and it uses simile (“hurts like a boil”) and alliteration (“through fire and flood”). It represents subject matter common to the site when it expresses confusion, trust in God, faith in the strength of America, and a desire for comfort and healing. The discourse of war and the sentimental vocabulary (“sorrow,” “pain,” “wound,” “heal”) also make the poem typical of others at the site. Perhaps the greatest similarity among the poems is their tendency toward apostrophic questions. Ludolff asks, for example, “How could it happen? How could it be?” Through apostrophe, the poems not only echo but also, as we will see, *speak to*, one another.

I am interested primarily in two key features of the 9/11 poems at poetry.com: first, the way in which they engage lyric conventions, especially apostrophe, and second, the way that, in doing so, they produce public conversations. Beyond their use of such conspicuous poetic tropes as rhyme, the poems use apostrophe to construct a public discussion and, also importantly, construct the lyric form itself. A basic definition of apostrophe can be found in the *Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*: it is “a figure of speech which consists of addressing the dead or absent person, an animal, a thing, or an abstract quality of idea as if it were alive, present, and capable of understanding” (14). Apostrophe has come to be seen, however, as more than simply a figure of speech; it has become, rather, a term synonymous with the lyric itself. Jonathan Culler, author of the germinal 1977 essay “Apostrophe,” suggests that “if we would know something of the poetics of the lyric we should study apostrophe, its form and meanings” (6).<sup>107</sup> Culler claims that poetry critics for too long “systematically repressed or excluded” (5) the essential relation of the lyric and its common mode of address, and that his essay recovers that relation as a central topic for study. In a 1986 essay on apostrophe and poems about abortion, fellow-Yale School critic Barbara Johnson writes that apostrophe is more than a *mode* of a poem; it can be its very theme; through apostrophe, a poem exists as an answer to a difficult question about the efficacy of linguistic communication (31). Since Culler and Johnson published their influential essays, scholars have increasingly studied the function of apostrophe in the lyric (Waters, Hollander, Keniston, Kneale, Findlay). Since Culler accused scholars of finding apostrophe “embarrassing” and avoiding its study (2), apostrophe has come to be seen, in an almost common-sense way, as the calling card of the lyric poem. In many ways, apostrophe is the device that turns lyric poetry outward toward a public.

My second interest, then, is with poetry.com as a public space in which citizens exchange feelings and ideas and in which they forge connections both with one another and with the events

of 9/11. The abundance of apostrophe itself makes it possible for the poems to work as turns in a public conversation. The authors of these poems use apostrophe to create their speaker position, invoke a listening audience, and demand answers to difficult questions. In doing so, they exhibit how the lyric, figured as the apostrophic address, can fill an urgent need for communication in times of crisis. Recent discussions of the contemporary public sphere (Rheingold, Dean) understand the internet, in relation to the theories of Jürgen Habermas, as a place that enables public exchange, or as a “public of publics” (Bohman 140); poetry.com can be considered in these terms. Many of the poems speak from the point of view of a collective “we” to an infinite “you.” Ludolff, for example, writes, “How can we associate what we see?” and, later, “God bless those who donated care and blood.” Lines such as these exemplify the way conversations at poetry.com blur the roles of reader and writer, “I” and “we,” “you” and “us,” to create a space of public dialogue through poetry. They draw attention to the crucial exchanges among the speaker, addressee, and reader that are at the heart of lyric poetics. At poetry.com, lyric poetry is exchanged in a public conversation.<sup>108</sup>

Ludolff’s poem, then, characterizes a type of poetry found at poetry.com, and the website itself characterizes a type of public space on the internet. Social networking sites like Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter are evidence of a culture in which individuals readily make many aspects their personal lives public: their up-to-date emotions, favourite songs, family photos, daily schedules. At poetry.com, users also share their personal lives in some way. The website states, “We want Lulu Poetry to be the best and most popular *social network* for poets of all types, everywhere” (emphasis added). While poetry.com is not as interactive a space as typical social-networking sites are, it is nonetheless designed as a “place” (the website insists that “Lulu poetry is the place for poets like you”) where visitors can post their emotions, reveal their personal secrets, and contribute to a larger conversation. And like Facebook’s daily “status updates” or

Twitter's 140-character limit, Lulu's verse entries are concise. Moreover, as they would at a social-networking site or chatroom, contributors at poetry.com appear to have accepted a certain kind of "netiquette"<sup>109</sup>: they conform to the norms of the site and make their contributions according to its established conventions.

As a social-networking site, poetry.com hosts conversations among its members. Everything users post—their poems, their reviews of other poems, and others' reviews of their poems—all link back to the unique profile page that represents them on the site. Many users leave the details of their profile blank (few, for example, post a picture), but their relative anonymity is tempered when they submit multiple poems or comment on other people's poems; all of their actions on the site route to the profile page.<sup>110</sup> Sections for "reviews" and "rating" that follow each poem reveal some of the modes through which users of the site interact. A poem called "The Tuesday from Hell" by Peter Lundstrom has received forty-eight reviews: "Sonny" writes, for example, "Very Creative. Please read mine and tell me what you think." A user called "ladybugz13601" writes, "That was REALLY good. Keep up the good work. I just created an account. Please read my poem. Rate and Review. Thank you." Another writes, "I just started bursting into tears I love it keep up the good work!! read mine please tell me what you think!" These comments are brief, but their brevity itself makes an important point: the main conversation is taking place, not in the comments, but in the poetry itself.

The fact that responses to 9/11 on poetry.com are made in public, and that they are made in lyric suggests that poetry resides in contemporary culture in a particularly contemporary way. Many concerns have been expressed about poetry's vitality—with critics from Edmund Wilson (1934) to Jay Parini (2008) bemoaning its death. Yet the debates of these critics have previously taken place with circumscribed roles of writer and reader in mind, where a writer is someone with an established poetic career publishing in *Poetry* or the *New Yorker*, and a reader is a member of

the demographic that reads those publications. To understand poetry's vitality currently, we will need to expand our definitions of "reader" and "writer" to consider poetry in the public sphere, operating beyond the limits of those terms. At poetry.com, people use lyric poetry to express, in public, their emotions, thoughts, and fears.

With this reconsideration of "writer" and "reader," I do not mean to open up the larger, and by now somewhat tired, discussion of the definition of "poetry" itself. In fact, my discussion of poetry's writers and readers is made possible by the broad definition of poetry already in place. In the 2005 special poetry issue of *PMLA*, the genre was defined according to Aristotle's loose definition in his *Poetics*, as a "thing made out of speech and rhythm" (Smith 9). I have already quoted an even more expansive definition provided by Maria Damon and Ira Livingston in their poetry and cultural studies reader: their definition includes "all that is claimed as poetry at any given time" (3). I assume, then, that work found at poetry.com is *poetry*, and that it is submitted by people who take up the role of poet. To exclude these authors and their work from a discussion of poetry after 9/11 would be to engage in an elitist critical practice and to call the importantly expansive definition of poetry into question.

The poetry I have been discussing has, for the most part, been ignored by both journalists and academic critics; it is acknowledged rarely, and then, in passing, dismissively.<sup>111</sup> In a recent essay, feminist scholar Liedeke Plate writes that "poetry forums [after 9/11] are full of clumsy, unrestrained, or otherwise bad poems" (5). Not only scholars but also published poets turn up their noses at this work. The poet Daisy Fried, writing at poetryfoundation.org, "sniff[s] the air" at these poems for "lack[ing] that rich ambiguity which Keats called negative capability." Fried terms these online poems "solace poetry" and suggests the analogy that "solace poetry is to serious poetry as pornography is to serious art."<sup>112</sup> She takes issue with the way much of the solace poetry she has read supports, "however indirectly and unintentionally, the Bush

administration.” Fried also argues that poetry “written to make us *feel better*” is “pro-establishment falsification,” because it does not provoke its readers, instead allowing them to ignore their socio-political surroundings while blindly following their president into war (emphasis in original). She dismisses such 9/11 solace poems for both their form and their content, for lacking stylistic complexity and, at times, for promoting pro-war agendas.

I share some of Fried’s political concerns. I have also criticized limited readings that insist that poetry’s primary role is to “make us feel better.” Ludolff’s poem, for example, represents the position of American victimization that I have troubled in previous chapters. For example, when Ludolff’s speaker asks, after the 9/11 attacks, “How could it happen? How could it be?” she reinforces a narrative of innocence that helped pave the way to the American wars with Iraq and Afghanistan. I disagree, however, with Fried’s implication that we should not study that which we do not endorse politically. Poetry.com does not promote hate speech. It features poems that, *qua* poems, merit critical attention. While, as I have said, the poems have much in common in style and subject matter, they also mobilize their commonalities to different ends. Some poems do attempt to provide solace, but some are angry, some are bitter, some—many—articulate confusion. When Fried refers to tens of thousands of poems as “solace poetry” she limits the multiple ways they can, in their multitude, be read.

Throughout my study of post-9/11 poetry, I have made a case for acknowledging poetry’s multiple social functions. Those include political, memorial, and witness functions. In fact, all of these functions converge in the case of this online poetry. These poems, taken together, constitute a public forum, and they can profitably be read for how they are politically engaged, how they memorialize the dead, and how they witness personal experiences of 9/11. That is, again, there are good reasons to go beyond the view that poetry provides only a soothing role in times of crisis, and explore, beyond that limited explanation, its more complex functions in everyday life.

In the next section, I trace the larger debate about popular poetries that is the critical context for this chapter. A growing number of critics in the field have begun to write about poetry that comes from the margins of the canon, and I wish to situate my study alongside theirs. After that account, I consider the notion of a public sphere of poetry in terms of Jürgen Habermas' theory of the transformation of the public sphere and later revisions of his influential ideas. For example, I read the collective voice spoken in many of the online poems as a voice that speaks from and to an infinite public. In the section that follows, I look in more detail at how apostrophe functions in the poems; it is the invocations in these poems that demonstrate, in part, how they are an essential form of communication and connection in a time of national crisis. I conclude by applying my analysis of lyric poetry in the public sphere to the larger discussion of poetry's life and death. I argue that poetry, especially after crisis, becomes more vital when we expand our definitions of who constitutes its readers and writers.

### **Poetry Studies and the Cultural Work of Poetries**

Recently, poetry scholarship has begun to move away from the term “poetry,” and toward the more expansive and inclusive term, “poetries.” This shift allows questions of whether a poem is “good” to be replaced by investigations of the kind of cultural work a poem might do. In their introduction to a special “poetries” issue of the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* (2006), editors Mike Chasar, Heidi R. Bean, and Adelaide Morris use “poetries” as an umbrella term to cover, without conflating or obliterating, the overlapping realms of high, low and subculture(s); in so doing, they attempt to reveal the robustness and the flexibility of poetries. Chasar, Bean, and Morris’ special issue is influenced (as I have been influenced) by Cary Nelson’s call, in his 1989 *Repression and Recovery*, for a “widening” of our understanding of various poetries and their cultural positions. Nelson’s book invited a rethinking of how we understand not only modern

poetry but also the literary history that created our understanding of what “modern poetry” is. Nelson’s topic is modernism, but his goal—to reveal “the range of voices, styles, and discourses at work in the period” (19)—has prompted my own. Poetry in the twenty-first century is not only written by poets who identify as such, those who publish books, win prizes, and contribute to anthologies; it is also written, as the work at poetry.com shows, by people with a range of professions and self-identifications and thus a range of “voices, styles and discourses.”

Several scholars have taken up Nelson’s call for a “general reconsideration of the relations between poetry and the rest of social life” (19). These are scholars whom I have discussed in previous chapters: Joseph Harrington, Mark van Weinen, and Maria Damon have each written about powerful historical instances of those relations.<sup>113</sup> Harrington’s *Poetry and the Public* openly disputes the assumption that poetry resides outside of (or above) conversations about “‘America,’ ‘literature,’ and ‘culture’” (166). Mark van Weinen’s study of the popular and political poetry of the First World War uncovers the cultural function of newspaper poetry during the war. He reads poems written by people who do not identify as poets and who are mainly interested in the politics of their verse. Like Nelson, he disrupts a literary history that would exclude this popular poetry: “We cannot pretend,” he writes, “to offer a literary history of modern American poetry when we treat those poems that seem to us unreadable as if they had never been written” (23). His book recovers a popular genre that served as an important site for the production of ideology during the war, but that has since disappeared from memory. Maria Damon similarly attends to poetry outside the margins of the canon. In her 1997 monograph, for instance, she writes about poetry written by contemporary young women in South Boston. Recorded in diaries, theirs is a poetry of street aphorisms, ballads, tabloid-speak, and teen magazine verse (97). Damon describes how the young women wrote poems themselves, and in

collaboration with each other, and how they kept them in their scrapbooks alongside poems clipped from magazines.<sup>114</sup>

Notwithstanding the efforts of these critics and editors, poetry studies, as a field, remains dominated by critical works that perpetuate traditional aesthetic hierarchies. Some of the work of Robert von Hallberg, an esteemed and prolific critic, serves as an example here. Von Hallberg writes about poetry's public life, most notably in *American Poetry and Culture* (1985), *Politics and Poetic Value* (ed., 1987) and a recent essay in the *Boston Review*, "Poets and the People" (2008)—and yet as he makes clear in all of his work, his arguments are always based on a firm belief in the necessity of having a literary canon. In fact, he argues in *American Poetry and Culture* that the role of the contemporary critic is to "attempt to formulate a canon" (35).<sup>115</sup> In his most recent monograph, *Lyric Powers* (2008), von Hallberg writes about the poems that give him "pleasure"; he studies such mainstream poets as Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass, Jorie Graham and Louise Glück. Von Hallberg introduces his investigation by declaring that the value of his argument lies in the quality of the poems he uses to exemplify that argument: "if I have the better poems," he writes, "I probably have the better argument too . . . Even a clever argument supported by routine art should hold no authority among literary critics" (6). Here, then, von Hallberg reiterates a dominant mode of poetry inquiry: he discusses the pleasure, interest, and complexity that can be found in a "great" poem by an established author. In doing so, he also reiterates the value of a dominant mode of poetry.

The entries at poetry.com may not necessarily provide the form of aesthetic pleasure that a literary scholar such as von Hallberg would value. When I read them, my first affective response is not necessarily pleasure. Initially, I feel sadness, anger, frustration; I feel sad for the losses the poets express; I feel anger, as the poets do, toward the "terrorists"; I also feel frustrated both with the pro-war sentiments the poets espouse and with the formal and intellectual

limitations of the poems themselves. Many poems are full of errors in typography and word choice (“The steaks in this world are way to high”). If there is pleasure in these poems, it is more likely experienced by the writer than the reader. The writer can access the cathartic pleasure of recording his or her feelings or the pleasure of publication, or the pleasure of communal values shared. Nonetheless, while the affective life of a poem is key to its very nature as a poem, pleasure is not the only emotion worth considering. I do not consider pleasure to be the primary measure of a poem; nor do I consider the aesthetic quality of a poem the only determinant of the quality of an argument about it. And I aim to refute von Hallberg’s logic as I contribute to a growing, though not yet dominant, body of poetry scholarship concerned not only in finding aesthetic pleasure in poetry but also in finding the cultural function in poetry that may provide very little pleasure at all.

### **Poetic Voice, Public Voice**

Why do we have to do all this?

More people will die that we’re going to miss.

Why do we have to start a war?

Why don’t we talk instead of closing the door?

Why does everyone have to blow up places?

It only means more kids with lonely faces

We all don't have to act this way

Because you don't agree with what they say. (Obie Kyle Shook)

To speak about the cultural function of poetry, in this case, is to speak also of the role poetry plays in public life and in the lives of the public. In the poem excerpted above, a contributor to poetry.com invokes a collective “we” to speak to an indefinite “you.” As I will

argue in this section—first by outlining debate around and conditions for internet publicity, and then by returning to the example of this poem—poetry.com is a space of public conversation that contributes to the production of the memory of 9/11.

Contemporary discussions of publicity, or the public sphere, are importantly indebted to Habermas, whose germinal study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962; English translation 1989) theorizes an ideal space in which reasoned public debate among private citizens provides the basis for democratic political action. The poets at poetry.com do not constitute a public sphere in exactly this way: their poems do not produce a consensus of rational public opinion that will push productively against the rule of the state. Nonetheless, critical reassessments of Habermas' work—especially recent criticism that considers the internet as a type of contemporary public sphere—offer a framework for considering general conditions for public engagement. Habermas and the critics inspired by his formulation supply a vocabulary for discussing poetic voices as public voices, despite the commonly-held view that a lyric poet is someone who “speaks to himself or to nobody” (Eliot *On Poetry* 89).

As the feminist critic Nancy Fraser explains, Habermas' concept of the public sphere provides a politically and theoretically important way to circumvent confusions that plague progressive political theories and social movements (56). She notes that the public sphere, in the Habermasian sense, is useful for being conceptually and politically distinct from both the state and the official economy: “[Habermas'public sphere] is not an arena of market relations, but one of discursive relations, a theatre for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling” (57). Her observation prompts me to ask: can poetry.com, a poetry website, be understood as a theatre of debate and deliberation in this sense? Just as literary critics have lamented the decline of poetry's public presence in America, Habermas laments the decline of an ideal public sphere. In his vision, coffee houses and salons in the late eighteenth century provided a forum for private

citizens to come together on equal footing and debate public politics, but beginning in the twentieth century, mass media culture and advertising caused the decline of this ideal sphere. The rise of a welfare state began to blur distinctions between public and private domains. Influenced by the Frankfurt School's critical assessments of the impact of mass culture, Habermas in part blames an increasingly mediated and consumer-oriented culture for the disintegration of the public sphere. However, in discussing contemporary instances of the public sphere, recent studies have turned their attention to mediated forms themselves—some of the very entities that Habermas blames for the destruction for the public sphere.<sup>116</sup>

Contemporary critics who discuss the potential of the internet as a public sphere (Buchstein, Dahlgren, Bohman, Dean, Rheingold) emphasize the multiplicity of subject positions available to internet users and the plurality of interactions they engage. This vocabulary of multiplicity and plurality emerges from the earliest and strongest critics of Habermas' public sphere; these are Marxist and feminist critics who propose ideas of competing publics, subaltern publics, counter publics, and plural publics to supplement the monolithic public sphere Habermas imagined. These critics question the legitimacy of Habermas' constructed "citizen" and the coherence and singularity of his public sphere. For example, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972; English translation 1993) suggest an alternate proletarian public sphere. Fraser (1990) points to the gender inequality in Habermas' initial conceptualization and argues that there never was, nor should ever be, one ideal public; instead she argues for a nexus of multiple, competing publics. Seyla Benhabib (1995) offers an alternate, feminist version of Habermas' ideal salon; her conceptualization of the salon emphasizes civic friendship over rational discourse. In his own contribution to *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1992) and his monograph *Between Facts and Norms* (1992; English translation 1996), Habermas himself revises his initial 1962 formulation. He admits, for example, to an earlier pessimism "about the resisting power and above all the

critical potential of a pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public whose cultural usages have begun to shake off the constraints of class” (“Further Reflections” 438). More recently, queer theorist Michael Warner (2002) poses the question “what is a public?” anew, as he also identifies the limits of a public sphere that understands only literate, white, propertied males to be its actors.<sup>117</sup>

Revisions of the Habermasian public sphere(s) are important for discussions of the world wide web for several reasons: they locate possible spaces of conversation (sites for “debate and deliberation”); they question who occupies these spaces and participates in these conversations; and they question how these conversations contribute to larger (national or possibly global) discursive activities. Some critics argue that the internet does not in fact function as a public space: Hubertus Buchstein writes that the internet encourages “privatistic judgments on public issues and thus erode[s] public oriented citizenship” (259); and Peter Dahlgren fears that “cyber ghettos threaten to undercut a shared public culture and the integrative societal function of the public sphere” (152).<sup>118</sup> Other critics, though, and more of them, are optimistic about the ability of the internet to constitute a proper public sphere. James Bohman describes websites as forums for ideas addressed to indefinite audiences and for dialogues where interlocutors take turns—and take turns as both speaker and audience. Jodi Dean suggests that online chat rooms, like the discussion forums at Salon.com, offer possibilities for interactions that mimic the interactions of a coffee shop or party space. In just the way these critics suggest, poetry.com can facilitate public conversation on the internet.

The work of Bohman, a philosopher, suits my study of poetry.com because it begins with an open question: “What are the requirements for publicity, and how might the internet fulfill them?” (135). He argues that if we relax the requirements of the traditional public sphere as a forum for face-to-face communication, we will see that the internet can constitute an ideal social

space in which ideas are freely expressed and discussed. Discursive acts on the internet are public, he suggests, if they a) are directed at an indefinite audience and offered with an expectation of response, b) use spatial metaphors to invoke an open space or “commons” (Bohman does not give examples, but “cyberspace” and “chat room” are two examples one could name) and c) emerge from a normative concern for publicity itself (135-136). The internet, he argues, “preserves and extends the dialogical character of the public sphere in a potentially cosmopolitan form” (152). Bohman does not see the internet as an automatic or inherently dialogical public sphere, but as a space for publics to emerge when certain measures are in place.

Bohman argues against detractors who say that the central features of the internet undermine its ability for genuine democratic deliberation—that it is and can only be a marketplace. (Dahlgren, for instance, argues that the internet’s nature as a market “diminishes its potential as a properly civic communicative space” [151]). Bohman notes that the internet’s egalitarian structure removes some of the potentially problematic distinctions between audience and participants that radio or television broadcasts, for example, amplify. It is, then, in Habermasian terms, a space of circulation, not transmission. Bohman sees the potential that the internet offers for a public sphere in which both speaker and hearer range across social positions and identities (136). He does not simply state that the internet is an ideal community; rather he sees it as hosting a disparate and disconnected set of publics and argues that work will need to be done to bring them together in a relation of mutual obligation (152). Bohman’s main concern is dialogic politics in the European Union; however, the steps he takes toward a revised definition of the Habermasian public sphere provide a vocabulary with which to discuss poetry.com as a public sphere of poetry.

Poetry.com is a virtual public sphere. The shift from the speaker/hearer dynamic of the coffee house or salon to the writer-reader dynamic of the internet is addressed in detail by

political theorist Jodi Dean. Dean argues that formulations of the “salon” by Habermas, and later Seyla Benhabib, are inadequate for dealing with the complexities of the information age. Dean wants to jettison the idea of the public sphere altogether and “adopt a more complex model of civil society,” yet her work is deeply entrenched in a Habermasian vocabulary, even as she focuses on internet technologies. For Dean, the Salon.com chat rooms are a model for the way civil society promotes “political connection and contestation” (258). In the chat rooms, people can choose to communicate in real time or not; they can choose to be recognized or not; they can choose at any point to leave the site. This situation resembles that of a coffee shop or large party, Dean suggests, in which there are multiple possibilities for interactivity. Dean describes internet users as *embodied* users. She cites the popularity of internet pornography as an example of how we respond to the internet with our bodies, not apart from them.<sup>119</sup>

Poetry.com’s “September 11 Dedication Page” meets the criteria that Bohman and Dean lay out for a public sphere on the internet. The site does not require rational conversation and does not produce consensus or citizen-based democracy, but it can be recognized, after Habermas, as a space of public exchange. The poems are addressed to an indefinite audience: anyone can post to or access the site, and many of the poems themselves are actually addressed to this indefinite audience, from whom they seek answers. For example, contributor Heather Nicole Dunn writes, “To you, whoever you are/ make sense of this to me.” The reviews and ratings pages are further evidence of exchange among participants. Like many websites, poetry.com enacts a spatial metaphor as it is a “space” for poets to post their poems, to read other poems, and to get ideas and tips for writing poetry. The site’s homepage encourages new visitors to become “part of the poetry community.” As Dean suggests, some contributors at poetry.com reveal more about themselves than others or desire more recognition than others. Importantly, the poems at poetry.com share a concern with publicity. They often take up a collective voice and speak to a

collective; they begin, “Together we have been through a monstrosity” (Jennifer Kay Tracy), or “I wish, only peace and comfort,/ To those left behind” (R.H. Silverstein). This collective is generally evoked as national, although it can be transnational as well. Some entries by non-Americans invoke a global collective after 9/11, offering pity for, or solidarity with, the American injury.<sup>120</sup>

The conversation among poets taking place at poetry.com is an example of a public sphere of poetry—yet, the poems themselves complicate their publicness through lyrical, often personal, tones. In this collision of the public and private, the poems resemble many types of discourse found on the internet: a poem, like a blog, is a sort of personal reportage. These online poems are public, as they speak on behalf of a collective, to a collective, and on a website of collected poetry. And, at the same time, they are intensely private, taking place in bedrooms and at breakfast tables, spoken through tears, addressing lost loved ones. However, just as the internet encompasses public and private modes, the poems at poetry.com can be valued for how they speak private words in a public forum. This meeting of public and private domains is, in fact, integral to the poetics of the lyric.

The lyric is often described as a private utterance, yet it is also an utterance read and heard in public. Although T.S. Eliot famously wrote that the lyric poet “speaks to himself or to nobody” (*On Poetry* 89), in his poem “A Dedication to My Wife,” he complicates this statement. He writes, after praising her, “But this dedication is for others to read:/ These are private words addressed to you in public” (*Complete* 206). Eliot explains this sentiment in prose as well; the readers’ enjoyment of the lyric is the “enjoyment of overhearing words which are not addressed to us” (“The Three Voices of Poetry” 33). Here Eliot echoes John Stuart Mill’s famous phrase that the lyric is not heard but overheard (348). Indeed, much of the history of the lyric is a history of “private words” spoken in public. Northrop Frye writes that “[t]he lyric poet normally pretends

to be talking to himself or to someone else: a spirit of nature, a Muse . . . a personal friend, a lover, a god, a personified abstraction, or a natural object" (248). In Frye's terms, the lyric poet never talks directly to the reader, but offers a conversation for him or her to overhear. This definition of the lyric invokes the apostrophic address I discuss next. The image of the overhearer is an image of the way language spoken privately can be received and circulated publicly. That image is especially apt for poetry on the internet that will be circulated indirectly via email, posted on multiple sites, or read over another person's shoulder.<sup>121</sup>

The elegy, in particular, is a form that is both private and public. It expresses grief, often personal grief, but it is printed, published, spoken, sometimes engraved in public. Peter Sacks writes that the poet overcomes grief by installing a poem as the substitute for his or her loss, by "creating a fabric in the place of a void" (18). After 9/11, many poems were posted on fences and subway walls; intimate thoughts, here, served as public conversation and memorial. In these cases, just as online, private conversations with the dead are written to be (over)heard by the public.

Taken together, these private conversations tell a public story about the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath. As poetry in public, they can be read not only as personal lyrics posted online but also as a public record of the events of 9/11. They can be studied for how they speak the terms and attitudes that emerged on that day. In their discussions of computer democracy, the political theorists I have discussed move beyond defining the internet as a public sphere to ask how, as a public sphere, the internet promotes or obstructs democracy. A second phase of inquiry is also necessary here: if a public sphere of poetry can indeed be found on the internet, what are the effects of such a space? What is being promoted or obstructed at poetry.com? Some answers to these questions can be found in the poems themselves. The voices in the poems speak to the way poetry promotes a community sharing their grief and confusion after the 9/11 attacks. The poems

also raise questions, however, about who is and who is not an acceptable member of that community.

Many of the poems create a community forum through their mode of address. This community emerges from the poets' overflowing use of apostrophic questions, and the frequent use of collective pronouns. Poetry offers a mobile subject position—"I" can become "we," "me" can become "us." Single speakers form a collective voice through their poems. (While this is somewhat true for any circulated poetry, immediacy is key here. The move from the individual to the collective is quick, as a poem can be written, posted, read, and responded to in one day). On the afternoon of September 11, many people chose to watch the news in restaurants and bars instead of at home. They did not necessarily know each other or interact, but many have said that it felt better to be in a crowd instead of alone at home as the news of the day sank in. Poetry.com creates a similar collective environment, where people are alone and yet, in some way, together. Poetry.com is not a uniform community or a fully global collective, but it is a vital public sphere.

Obie Kyle Shook's poem, "Why," excerpted at the beginning of this section, serves as an example of this collective voice. When Shook asks, "Why do we have to do all this?" he implicates himself in a group taking action. His speaker is not questioning an autonomous government body or a remote group of people (he does not write, "why do you . . . ?" or "why do they . . . ?"); instead, he identifies with a collective. Shook's poem is one example of many in which speakers also pose questions to their fellow citizens, and urge them to support or boycott the war. Here is another example of a poem that uses similar language: a collective "we" and a series of questions.

Why so much hatred?

Why so much anguish?

Can't we all make peace?

Can't we all live in peace? (Caroline S. Quinanola)

Like Shook, Quinanola speaks as a pluralized “we” and directs questions to an infinite “you.”

These questions merge into each other, almost creating a long poem authored by a group of confused and angry citizens. While many of the “why” poems (there are numerous poems with that same title, and many more with questioning titles such as “Was it a Dream?”, “Where Does it End?”, “What Does the Future Hold?” and “For What?”) are addressed specifically to God or to the figure of Death, many of the poems address their questions to no one in particular, and, thus, to everyone. They are private; Shook insinuates, for example, that someone will personally be missed. And the poems are public; they invoke a collective and make up a collection of other poems.

Who counts as a part of this collective? The poems suggest answers to this question as well. The poems negotiate a “we” position that speaks to the relation of the poets to their audience. When Shook asks “Why do we have to do all this?” he includes himself as a citizen of a country that is steeling itself for war. He speaks out against war (presumably the war in Afghanistan), yet he uses the very us/them polarity through which war is framed. His poem invites us to ask, who is the “we” who does “all of this”? Who is the opposing “they”? How are these divisions formed or broken down? When he writes, “Why don’t we talk instead of closing the door?”, Shook invokes opposing sides. He may not want the door to be closed, but he understands that there is, indeed, a separation between “us” and “them.” It is unclear who exactly stands on the other side of the door; it may be the terrorists, the Taliban, or the entire country of Afghanistan. A comment responding to Shook’s poem is telling here. It reads: “they do it because they want us to have freedom; if we weren’t over there theyd come over here!”. While Shook never overtly identifies the opposing “they,” his reader infers an enemy from the position of pronouns in the poem. Quinanola’s poem reads as an echo of Shook’s, yet hers is a different sort

of “we.” She asks, “Can’t we all make peace?,” speaking to both sides at once. While Shook invites Americans to make peace with an “other,” Quinanola speaks about a more global peace.

These poems offer critics an opportunity to consider how an American “we” is constructed by the memory of 9/11. The events of September 11 were discussed, across many forms of media, in terms of binaries such as “we/you,” “us/them,” and “good/evil.” The poems at poetry.com illustrate ways in which questions about the nation can emerge from poetry in public space. These poems can be read, not only as evidence of a grieving people after 9/11, or as private verse but also as evidence of the terms on which the event that caused that grief is remembered and discussed.

### **Apostrophe and/as Lyric**

Where are you, my friend?

When I call,

all I hear is a monotonous

doot-doot-doot-doot-doot

of the busy signal...

Madness engulfs my mind!

Where are you my friend?

Are you safe,

or lying beneath twisted wreckage

and dusty rubble?

If you're injured, dear friend

how, HOW can I help you?

Where are you my friend?

Dearest friend. (Brenda Anna)

My argument in this chapter hinges on the fact that the contributions to poetry.com not only constitute vital public exchange, but, in particular, an exchange of lyric poetry. In this section, I consider how these public poems use apostrophe—how they position speaker, audience, and listener through abstract address—to participate in the lyric form in public.

The frequency of apostrophe as a figure in online 9/11 poetry is evidence of its lyric quality and of the important function that poetry, whether satisfying or not to some readers, serves in public life. A majority of the poems at poetry.com address an absent or abstract figure, many asking the question “why” to God or another being. Through apostrophe, poets summon the lyric and produce the language of their fear, isolation, and confusion. The lyric is the poem of the lover and the mourner; both figures yearn for someone (or something) beyond their grasp. As Ann Keniston writes in an essay on 1990s lyric poetry, apostrophe “both articulates desire and acknowledges it cannot be fulfilled” (301). Apostrophe articulates absence by imagining presence. When poets at poetry.com ask questions they cannot answer, or speak to an absent presence, they take up apostrophe and speak in public through the lyric itself.

Apostrophe, as Jonathan Culler explains it in 1977, was historically dismissed as “artificial” and “insignificant” (5), and these are the same justifications that critics have recently used to dismiss the poems themselves on sites like poetry.com. Such poems have been called artificial for displaying emotions “derived from watching tv” (Fried) or insignificant because they are “clumsy, unrestrained, or otherwise bad” (Plate 5). Since the publication of Culler’s essay, however, apostrophe has come to be understood as a defining feature of the lyric. Nearly ten years after Culler, Barbara Johnson writes that the figure of apostrophe is “a rhetorical device that has come to seem almost synonymous with the lyric voice” (29). More than ten years after that,

William Waters' monograph, *Poetry's Touch*, studies apostrophe as a kind of lyric address that "suggest[s] a way of talking about poetry as a form of contact" (1). In 2007, J. Mark Smith writes, in an essay on apostrophe in lyric poetry, that "where there is lyric there is apostrophe" (411). Apostrophe is no longer dismissed as insignificant, but understood as essential to the lyric form.

It has long been said that the lyric is a poem of desire, of personal expression, of longing. Juliana Spahr, as we saw in the previous chapter, defines the lyric as poetry that "dwell[s] . . . on the afar" (13). Nonetheless, while many poets and critics associate lyric and longing, it is only recently that they have come to see apostrophe as the figure through which that association is produced.<sup>122</sup> The dance involving the poet, speaker, subject and reader (or listener) is key to a lyric poem. We make meaning from these poems by asking who speaks them, whom they speak of, or to, or for. When we read a poem, we wonder who the author is—and who he or she is to us, as readers, whether he or she speaks for us or against us, includes or excludes us. Apostrophe is a figure of speech that both invokes a subject or reader and positions a speaker; it is thus an important way into thinking through that poem. Apostrophe is a mode through which the speaker constitutes an identity, specifically, an identity as a poet.

The etymology of "apostrophe" is in the classical rhetorical term, *aversio*, "turning away."<sup>123</sup> The speaker turns away from the listener to address, instead, an absent being. Culler opens his essay by quoting Quintilian who defines apostrophe (in rhetorical address) as "a diversion of our words to address some person other than the judge" (1). This is the diversionary method through which the lyric speaker addresses the reader. S/he addresses some person other than the judge—and the judge (the listener)—overhears the poem indirectly. Apostrophe is a means through which a lyric utters private words in public. When, in her poem, "?", above, Brenda Anna writes, "Are you safe/ or lying beneath twisted wreckage/ and dusty rubble?" she

produces a personal lyric line. She makes an emotional plea to a friend in poetic language: through near-consonance (“twisted wreckage”), she enacts a twisting, as the “w” and “wr” sounds crowd each other; through assonance (“dusty rubble”), she emphasizes an emptiness through the hollow “uh”’s. Yet, in diverting the question from her friend to a larger audience, the poet submits her plea in a larger conversation taking place at poetry.com.

Considering the use of apostrophe in these online poems is also key to understanding how the private voice of a poem after 9/11 functions in a public sphere on the internet. Some speakers constitute a community themselves, as in the poem title, “We Survived” by Marivic Wyman; some speak to a community, as in the many “Why?” poems. Apostrophe enables a poem to do the double work of directing a personal address to one individual, and yet targeting it at, in Water’s terms, “non addressed bystanders” (19) in the form of a poem. (The shift from Mill’s “overhearer” to Waters’ “bystander” is also a shift in public engagement; a bystander, like a witness, is not only privy to, but provides a record of, the events nearby). The poetry published online after 9/11 speaks from the community and to the community, indirectly and directly. Although they speak to absent beings, apostrophe enables these poets to invoke their writing community as the judge who will actually hear their plea.<sup>124</sup>

By so frequently employing apostrophe in their poems, the contributors to poetry.com constitute both their identities as poets and their positions in relation to the events of 9/11. “Invocation,” Culler writes, “is a figure of vocation” (5). That is, in invoking a “you,” apostrophe makes material a speaking “I.” To speak to nature, for example, is to figure oneself as someone to whom nature might speak back. By questioning God, or the victims of the attacks, or even the terrorists, these poets figure themselves as beings deserving response. This self re-figuring may be a small move, but it is importantly empowering for those who felt helpless, at times speechless, after the attacks. The 9/11 attacks targeted not only those who died at work that

morning but also the security of every working person in the U.S.. The attacks caused people to fear their own daily routines. In their writing, the poets at poetry.com assume voices that have the authority to question what happened. By speaking directly to God, the victims, and the assailants, these poets figure themselves as participants in an event that they feel implicated in as Americans, as humans, although some of them are removed from the scene geographically.

When Brenda Anna speaks to a missing friend, her poem is both specific and general in its address. While the poet may have attempted to reach a particular person that day, the poem also functions on a more general level: it enacts a scene that transpired all over the world in which friends and family searched for their loved ones. The poet here is expressing her desire to connect to this friend—and to the event itself—through apostrophe. The reader overhears a direct plea to the missing friend. Brenda Anna’s speaker is unsure *how* to address her friend; she does not know if she is addressing someone dead or alive, injured or safe. She does not know how to help this friend, though the poem itself is offered as a gesture in that direction. By speaking through apostrophe (instead of telling a story in the third person), the speaker enacts the very conversation she desires. In the beginning of the poem, she expresses frustration that when she calls her friend, she only gets a busy signal in return. The act of writing the poem, then, serves as a step toward a conversation that has yet taken, or may never take place. Because it does not address anyone by name, Anna’s poem also connects her to strangers who went missing on 9/11 and the friends who tried to call them.

Like Anna’s poem that addresses one missing person, poems that address the September dead *en masse* also connect the speaker to the events of 9/11 and bring the dead into the speakers’ lives. In her prose poem, “Why Should I Care?” Laura Woloshyn asks, “Why, though? Why should I care? I didn’t know these people, I didn’t give them Christmas presents and chocolate cupcakes for their birthdays . . .” Woloshyn’s questions are to herself, perhaps, or to God. Yet,

one might ask these same questions of her poem: why does she write about an event she is not personally connected to? What can a poem do for the dead? She answers these questions in the poem itself, explaining that love and a connection to humanity make her care (because, she answers, “we ALL loved cupcakes and Christmas”). Woloshyn also uses apostrophe to speak to the victims: “Goodbye to those I never knew and please know I will never forget you.” By addressing them here, Woloshyn does not *describe* a relationship to the dead; rather, she *creates* one. There are perhaps thousands of other poems on the website in which writers speak directly to the dead. There is often a lack of clarity—as there was in Brenda Anna’s poem—over whether the poets themselves have indeed lost someone close to them or whether they are mourning a more general loss. Regardless, the poems stake a claim of connection with the 9/11 attacks. It becomes clear that this mode of address is inherent in the popular understanding of what one can do in a poem. By using apostrophic address, these poets participate in the catastrophe that is their subject.<sup>125</sup>

Through their poetry, online poets articulate otherwise impossible relationships. Indeed, as I argued in the previous chapter, many people in the United States and across the world felt deeply connected to the events of the day despite having no physical or personal connection to the events of 9/11. During the attacks and after them, when people around the world watched the Towers fall—again and again—on television, they experienced what scholars have since called “vicarious witnessing” (Kaplan 90) or “traumatized spectatorship” (Lurie 51). These witnesses were wounded, that is, by something they saw from a distance. Their witness experience was provoked, not by direct experience, but, in large part, by identification, shock, and shared fear. While some of the poets who write after 9/11 may have experienced the events first-hand, most write on the spectrum of witness positions I have theorized. They are not connected to the attacks through physical experience or geography, but through emotion—and that connection is realized

through their poetry. The nation is Benedict Anderson's "imagined political community" (6) constituted by the poetry writing and reading public.

For the most part, the contributors to poetry.com experienced the events through the media, through broadcast images. These images made the events seem utterly real, as audiences were able to see and hear what was far away from them. It also made them seem *unreal*—as evidenced in the commonly-heard phrase, "it looked like a movie." The entries on poetry.com reflect the thoughts of people who are disconnected from the events, but traumatized by them, and who were trying to decipher the real from the unreal. By using apostrophic address, they are able not only to describe the events, or describe their reactions to them but also to *interact* with the physical catastrophe.

Apostrophe figures not only in the work of poets who have posted their pleas online but also in the work of some of the most prominent poets in the U.S.. September 11 poems by Billy Collins, Robert Pinsky and Toni Morrison (two former U.S. poet laureates and a Nobel laureate) were some of the most widely circulated after the attacks. I have mentioned all three in previous chapters, but I have not yet noted the ways in which all three foreground the apostrophic address. My purpose here is not to validate the work of online poets by comparing it to the work of poets acknowledged to be great: my position has been that no such validation is needed. I mean only to illustrate how integral apostrophe is to the lyric, especially to lyric poetry written after an event as bewildering as the 9/11 attacks.

Billy Collins' commemorative poem "The Names," discussed in the second chapter, inventories the lives lost on 9/11. His poem is a seemingly endless list of names; the dead appear, ghostlike, all around him. "I see you," he writes, addressing one person in the endless list, "spelled out on storefront windows." Here, through apostrophe, he addresses the American public in their grief—but he does so indirectly, by speaking to those for whom they grieve. In Robert

Pinsky's poem "9/11" the speaker is a collective American "we" addressing its fellow citizens. Like many of the poets at poetry.com, Pinsky seeks help from the people around him to answer questions that he cannot. He writes, "O Americans—as Marianne Moore would say,/ Whence is our courage? Is what holds us together/ a gluttonous dreamy thriving? Whence our being?". Pinsky's reference to Moore, specifically to her poem "What Are Years?", makes his question a double one. In her own poem, Moore defines courage itself as a question: "And whence/ is courage: the unanswered question, the resolute doubt—" (95). After 9/11, when he was asked to appear on PBS' *Newshour*, Pinsky read that poem by Moore. By invoking her poem a year later in his own, Pinsky reinforces his apostrophe with the echo of Moore's; his uncertainty is doubled, as is the scope of his question.

One of the poems circulated most frequently after 9/11 was Toni Morrison's "The Dead of September 11." The long lines of this poem often enjamb like prose paragraphs; the poem resembles both common speech and lofty poetry. Morrison not only uses apostrophe here but also takes as her subject the act of address itself. The speaker prepares to address the September dead in the first part of the poem, then speaks to them directly in the last three verse paragraphs. Morrison's poem presents a subject that can speak and uses that subject to communicate with absent others. Like many other post-9/11 poems, this poem demonstrates that speaking and being heard are necessary and rewarding in the chaotic aftermath of the attacks. Morrison begins her poem by figuring poetry, specifically apostrophe within poetry, alongside prayer and song, as a mode for speaking with the dead:

Some have God's words; others have songs of comfort for the bereaved. If I can pluck  
courage here, I would like to speak directly to the dead—the September dead. (1)

Morrison doesn't speak to the dead directly at first, but instead asks her audience to witness the difficulty she finds in speaking to such an absence. (Indeed, perhaps it is her experience as a poet

that forces her to confront the limits of language—where a newer poet trusts the poetic form more completely.) When she begins, her reader is the absent present, while the dead take the place of the targeted overhearer: Quintilian’s judge. Two thirds of the poem are spent in this preparation. The preparation, and the act of speaking itself, then, become the only form of address. There is nothing to say, the speaker tells us, but she still attempts to say something. She enacts Barbara Johnson’s argument here. Apostrophe becomes more than Morrison’s *mode*; it is the very *theme* of the poem. It is both a question about the efficacy of communication and a suggestion of its answer. In Keniston’s earlier words, apostrophe “both articulates desire and acknowledges it cannot be fulfilled” (301); it is a reminder of the absent presence of language.

Near the end of the poem, Morrison’s speaker admits that she knows she has “nothing to say” to the dead and “nothing to give.” What she does have is her poem, which she calls “a gesture, a thread thrown between your humanity and mine.” She has the apostrophe, the address itself; she has an attempt at communication, even if not a received and returned transmission. Here, when she turns to address the dead, the overhearer or judge becomes the reader, and the poem itself emerges from that speaker-reader exchange. By concluding here, Morrison validates apostrophe as a lyric mode, suggesting that a question sent even without the expectation of an answer is necessary in times of crisis. Morrison uses apostrophe (ultimately, she writes, “To speak to you, the dead of September . . .”) to create a speaking position for herself and to attempt to communicate at a time when contact feels most necessary. She makes it clear that what is most important is not the words—she can only say what should not be said, she can never say what *should*—but the gesture of communication. While the poems posted on poetry.com and other 9/11 poetry websites perhaps do not explain, as masterfully as Morrison does, how the poem’s address creates its subject, they echo the moves she makes and use apostrophe to create their own connections to the events of 9/11.

## **Readers and/as Writers**

If the entries at poetry.com can be read as lyric poems, then the writers of those poems can be understood as poets. While that statement is, in a sense, tautological, it is important if we are to revise our sense of poetry's vitality in contemporary culture. We know, in 2010, that while Edmund Wilson was writing about poetry's decline in the first part of the twentieth century, more people than ever were writing poetry and submitting verse to newspapers. In the twenty-first century, as we continue to discuss poetry's popularity—the loss or gain of it—we might look at poetry.com and websites like it to understand the particular ways in which poetry resides in public. To discover these arenas of poetry's popularity is also to understand better the function of poetry in times of crisis. The contributors to poetry.com were not only reading poetry for comfort (as readers of Auden in 2001 were said to be doing); they were also using poetry to work through their own responses to 9/11—responses of fear, loss, anger, or confusion—and to share those responses with each other.

Poetry's vitality has long been measured by the popularity of its most established authors, by a count of how many people are “reading” what the “writers” have written. In his famous 1992 essay, “Can Poetry Matter?”, Dana Gioia argues that “poetry’s diminished stature” can be attributed to the fact that “poets and the common reader are no longer on speaking terms” (10). The common reader, in this case, is someone who buys anthologies, has favourite poems or poets, and states his or her interest in poetry on an National Endowment of the Arts survey of reading habits.<sup>126</sup> A writer, on this model, is, ideally, an award-winning author of several books. Gioia suggests, for example, that Adrienne Rich is “a major poet by any standard” (11). However, as the websites housing tens of thousands of post-9/11 poetry prove, the “common reader” has been doing a lot of writing and we might look to *that* writing for evidence of poetry’s cultural status.<sup>127</sup>

Gioia's essay was, in part, a response to Joseph Epstein's 1988 polemic, "Who Killed Poetry?", and Epstein also ordains the poet figure. He begins by quoting Delmore Schwartz, for whom the poet is "a kind of priest," and calls Eliot, Stevens, Frost, Williams, cummings, and Auden (although, somewhat with tongue in cheek) the "high priest of the cults" (13). "There is," Epstein declares, foreshadowing Gioia's argument, a "broken connection between poets and readers" (17). "Writer," for Epstein, is synonymous with "artist" or "professional"; an "artist" is a genius-poet like William Carlos Williams who held a day-job, while a "professional" is a poet who supports him or herself with teaching jobs or fellowships. "Reader" is synonymous with "audience." Indeed, Epstein does not speak once of the reader; poetry in this view has writers and those who do not so much read, as *receive*, their poetry.

Critics before Gioia and Epstein, as well as critics after them, reinforce these circumscribed roles. Edmund Wilson, writing in 1948, also feared for the life of poetry, basing his fear on the decline in popularity of several canonical writers. Numerous critics took issue with Wilson's negative forecast for poetry. The poet Donald Hall, for example, points out that Wilson knew more about prose than poetry anyway, and attempts to discredit him (in a highly elitist jab) for preferring Edna St. Vincent Millay to T.S. Eliot. Yet, Wilson's conflation of "poetry" with "the writings of great poets" has largely gone unexamined. In fact, while Hall's own essay, "Death to the Death of Poetry" (1989), argues for the genre's vitality, like the critics he opposes, Hall still measures poetry's vitality by the general popularity of its most established authors. "More people read poetry now in the United States," he writes, "than ever did before" (77). He makes the point that "[r]ecently, a dozen or more American poets have sold at least some of their books by the tens of thousands" (77). His first example of a best-selling author is Adrienne Rich. While Hall is more optimistic than Wilson, Epstein, or Gioia, he speaks in the same terms.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, due to certain shifts in the academy, especially on questions of canonization, the debate over poetry's vitality has shifted. Yet, while some critics have expanded their understanding of poetry—including what Gioia calls “popular poetry”—few have expanded any definition of the poet. In his 2004 essay collection, *Disappearing Ink*, something of a follow-up to *Can Poetry Matter?*, Gioia suggests that the biggest event in poetry over the last thirty years is the rise of popular poetry such as rap, cowboy poetry, and poetry slams. These forms, he says, “reassuringly demonstrate the abiding human need for poetry” (7). Gioia’s outlook in this essay is more positive than his title might initially indicate, and yet, even as he makes room for popular forms, he discredits them with the very terms he uses to describe them. He distinguishes between what he calls “high and low” (19) forms and calls these low, albeit popular, forms “undistinguished or worse” (7). Moreover, he does not explore any specific characteristics of popular verse (who write, reads, and produces it?). Instead, he names three exemplary forms—rap, cowboy, and slam—and gives evidence of the popularity of each. Thus, he continues to exclude verse outside of these three genres, perpetuating the limited parameters around the ideas of poetry, poet, and reader.<sup>128</sup>

The debate about poetry’s life and death continues after Gioia’s second book, and it continues on those same terms. A 2009 *Newsweek* article proclaiming “the end of verse” also measures poetry’s popularity by measuring the numbers of its readership.<sup>129</sup> In 2008, poet and critic Jay Parini, writing about “why poetry matters,” outlines the historical defenses of poetry, and while his narrative is comprehensive and convincing, it does nothing to open up the conversation about poetry’s readers and writers. In his discussion of lyric voice, Parini maintains problematic distinctions between public and private voices. He asks the following:

To what extent does the unusually unheard voice of poetry matter in a world where public and private realms always appear in conflict, where mass culture threatens to overwhelm the personal voice of the poet with its big-throated booming? (44)

Parini contrasts the “unheard voice of poetry” with the “big-throated booming” voice of mass culture. However, the poems at poetry.com complicate these distinctions. They suggest that poetry may not be an “unheard voice” and that the booming of fifty-five thousand poems may, in fact, offer personal ways to address public issues. That is, the poems at the site suggest that public and private realms may be understood not as opposites but as a space of productive conversation. These poems ask intimate questions in a public setting. They are the “voice of poetry,” spoken by what he might call the “big-throated masses.” They are written by poets who do not generally identify as such (who would not consider themselves, in Epstein’s terms, “artists” or “professionals”) and who, nonetheless have written verse that provokes the very questions about voice that critics like Parini discuss.

Studying this poetry we can ask not only how a poet’s voice locates him or her individually but also how anonymity might productively mobilize collectivity, and how private poems function in a public setting. These sorts of questions themselves help to dispute the easy correlation between the measurement of “poetry’s readership” and conclusions about the vitality of verse in contemporary culture. The poems posted online after 9/11 are dynamic examples of poetry in public life. They do more than settle a dispute over whether poetry is dead or alive. Beyond that, they demonstrate the ways in which poetry contributes to a larger public conversation—one that shapes the memory of 9/11 in the vocabulary it uses, images it offers, and values it reflects. The poems at poetry.com are a vital memorial both to the lives they grieve and to the ideas and fears that the 9/11 attacks provoked.

Popular poetry has often been understood as poetry written *for* the people instead of *by* the people. As Michael Dowdy writes in a recent study of political poetry and hip-hop in America, “[p]oets are often seen as charged with speaking on behalf of their people” (6). Dowdy notes that this understanding of poets problematically assumes their superiority, while it also assumes a consensus among the people they speak for. His critique is more evidence that studies of poetry and the public continue to conform to a model in which poetry’s vitality is measured by how “popular” the poet-spokesperson is, and how many people listen to his or her call. To measure poetry this way is to neglect a large population of poets and to overlook a vital poetry culture. Many journalists and academic critics have noted the popularity of poetry in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Their studies have, however, for the most part, overlooked the verse that comes from the populace itself. I have been interested in not only what large amounts of the population *read* but also what they *write*. This shift from a focus on reading to a focus on writing is a shift, in Habermasian terms, from transmission to circulation. Discussions of poetry in times of crisis—and, in particular, discussions of poetry’s popularity after 9/11—are incomplete without a consideration of the tens of thousands of poems posted online. The poets of this chapter are evidence of individual voices speaking for themselves. They are speaking in public and speaking in poetry. Now it is up to everyone else to listen.

## Conclusion: The Functions of Poetry

It is important to realize that poetry, like all other writing, *is* written in the moment; it partakes very strongly in that moment.

– Alice Quinn, Poetry Editor, *The New Yorker*

In this dissertation, I have argued that poetry has multiple functions after 9/11. As poetry reached new heights of public circulation in September 2001, critics suggested that it offered comfort to a grieving public. I have attempted to suggest additional ways of thinking about what poetry can offer in times of crisis. In Chapter One, I argued that poetry after 9/11 had a *political* function; many people used Auden's "September 1, 1939" as a way to understand the post-9/11 wars in terms of the "good war" narrative that had emerged from World War Two. In Chapter Two, I discussed poetry's *memorial* function; I investigated that function by analyzing a public intersection of monument and poetry at 7 World Trade Center. If, as I argued, poetry's memorial function is limited at that site, the site nonetheless demonstrates—as poems by Billy Collins and Martin Espada also do—that poetry offers time and space for remembering. Chapter Three focused on poetry's *witness* function. Collections by Rachel Vigier and Juliana Spahr were examples not only of witness poems written after 9/11 but also of the way that 9/11 changed what it means to write witness poetry. The function I explored in Chapter Four, poetry as occasion for *public conversation*, is both additional to, and inseparable from, the other functions I described. Poems that have been the least studied may offer the most insight into poetry's role in times of crisis. The entries at poetry.com construct the memory of 9/11 by producing the event's politics, witnessing its circumstances, and memorializing its dead.

In describing the many functions of poetry after crisis, I have not simply suggested that we recognize a surge in poetry's popularity in the early twenty-first century. Indeed, poetry's popularity after 9/11 is both obvious (apparent in the first pages of my introduction) and only another instance of the genre's popularity. Scholars have noted poetry's popularity during the American Civil War (Miller and Barrett), World War One (van Weinen; Harrington), and the Spanish Civil War (Nelson). Claims have also been made for poetry's more general popularity in the 1980s (Hall) and the 1990s (Harrington). Rubin concludes her history of poetry-reading in America with examples of poetry's rising popularity in the 2000s; she cites the excitement over Ruth Lilly's enormous bequest to the Poetry Foundation,<sup>130</sup> the rise in attendance at the Dodge Poetry Festival in New Jersey and at poetry slams, and the post-9/11 phenomenon of "grieving Americans [posting] 'huge numbers' of poems online" (383). All of these scholars note surges in poetry's popularity as they also make larger arguments about the social uses of poetry. My dissertation investigating the functions of poetry in the aftermath of 9/11 has also done more than celebrate poetry's popularity: I have attempted to offer new terms with which we might approach other instances of poetry's engagement with public life.

Before finally concluding I will briefly consider one last poem that, as it performs all of the functions of poetry I have discussed, helps me to re-approach, reassess, and challenge the arguments of my dissertation. This poem—"The Day" by American conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith—supports my arguments as it also leaves the purview of my project and suggests new questions for the study of poetry and memory. Goldsmith describes his poem, still a work in progress, as his most political work to date ("Interview"). As we will see, "The Day" can be read not only for its political function but also for how it witnesses and memorializes 9/11, and participates in conversation about it. I hope that the arguments I have developed in the dissertation can suggest new directions for reading poetry written in response to historical crisis.

Both Goldsmith and “The Day” require further introduction.<sup>131</sup> On the back cover of Goldsmith’s 2005 collection, *The Weather*, Juliana Spahr writes that Goldsmith is “without a doubt the leading conceptual poet of his time.” Goldsmith himself has written that he is “the most boring writer that has ever lived” (“Being Boring”). These two statements make sense together in the context of Goldsmith’s *oeuvre*: nearly all of his publications are lengthy transcriptions. *The Weather*, for instance, is a transcription of an entire year of radio weather reports. Here is an excerpt from the one hundred and twenty-page book: “Couple of showers around tomorrow night, er, tomorrow evening, into early tomorrow night, otherwise partly cloudy later on, low thirty”(3). His book *Soliloquy* is a transcription, unedited, of every word Goldsmith spoke for a week.

“The Day” is a transcription, or text-to-text translation, of the September 11, 2001 issue of the *New York Times*. It has not been published yet in its entirety, but selections have appeared in *Poetry* magazine, and Goldsmith has read and discussed parts of the poem at presentations across the United States. To create “The Day,” Goldsmith is repeating a transcription process he developed in an earlier project: in his 2003 book, simply called “Day,” he transcribed the September 1, 2000 edition of the *Times*. “Day,” an 840-page volume, is poetic record of an uneventful Friday in America. In both books, Goldsmith copies the content of the entire newspaper as it appeared on the page, finishing a page in full before proceeding to the next. He reproduces the text from left to right, disregarding column breaks, and including the text of advertisements as he goes. This method is, for the most part, what transforms the daily news into avant-garde poetry: news stories, advertising, stock quotes, and the weather follow and interrupt each other and produce surprising juxtapositions and new meanings.

In a 2009 issue of *Poetry*, Goldsmith excerpted two sections from his long work-in-progress. For the purposes of that publication, he titled the excerpts. The first has been given the title, “Islam”:

E2 THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

ARTS ABROAD

Continued From First Arts Page

On Islam, Mr. Houllebecq went still further, deriding his estranged mother for converting to Islam and proclaiming that, while all monotheistic religions were “cretinous,” “the most stupid religion is Islam.” And he added: “When you read the Koran, you give up. At least the Bible is

Sexual tourism

and inflammatory

remarks about

Palestinians

very beautiful because Jews have an extraordinary literary talent.” And later,

noting that “Islam is a dangerous religion,” he said it was condemned to

disappear, not only because God does not exist but also because it was being

undermined by capitalism.

In this excerpt, pulled from the longer transcription, Goldsmith’s rendering of the newspaper produces both a *new* newspaper and an experimental poem.<sup>132</sup> Few people remember what the paper’s headlines said that Tuesday morning before the terrorist attacks made those headlines seem irrelevant. Goldsmith provides the lost record, but he renders that record, as it would be in our minds, somewhat illegible. The juxtapositions here are disorienting (“Bible”/ “Sexual Tourism”; “Palestinians/ very beautiful because Jews . . .”), and they evoke the disorientation

produced on a much larger scale by the terrorist attacks. The tangle of multiple articles and contexts reproduces the tangle of thoughts and images in people's minds on 9/11 as they tried to comprehend what they were seeing.

"The Day," a poetic document of 9/11, both enacts and challenges the arguments of my dissertation. In Chapter One I discussed poetry's ephemerality. I discussed how poems appeared in newspapers after 9/11 and argued that poems themselves can be read like a newspaper, as timely records of their moment. I complicated Ezra Pound's idea that "poetry is news that stays news" (29) by suggesting that poetry is not so different from the news after all; poetry can be valued not only as permanent record but also as timely intervention. Goldsmith renders the newspaper *as* poetry; the affinities between the two forms are suggested visually. In the excerpt of "The Day" above, the news becomes poetic: the bible is described, alliteratively, as beautiful, and the content is lineated in parts; readers are forced to read quickly with short breaths. The poetry also becomes news. "The Day" gains meaning, as Auden's "September 1, 1939" does, from its historical context: a short article about one man's anger toward Islam is especially poignant when readers know that Islamic extremists would kill nearly 3,000 people later that day.<sup>133</sup> The editors of *Poetry* write that, in "The Day," "innocuous news reports and weather are loaded with fact, fear, and emotion, making us aware that language is never simply an innocent carrier of meaning but is wildly variable depending upon context and framing" ("Two Poems from 'The Day'"). This comment echoes my epigraph for this conclusion and one of the major arguments of the dissertation: poetry, particularly poetry of crisis, is a product of its moment and gains meaning in that moment.

"The Day" can also be read as memorial to our innocence before the terrorist attacks and as witness to the day, September 11, 2001, itself. A nine-hundred page, three-pound tome (when completed it will likely resemble 2003's "Day" in its size), it will be a reminder of the day's

atrocity. The attacks interrupted what the *Times* had recorded, an ordinary day for America. Goldsmith has noted that one of the things that makes the September 11 edition of the newspaper so poignant is that it highlights sales that would soon be cancelled, listings for events that would never take place, headlines that would quickly become old news, and stock prices that would soon dive (“Being Boring”). In fact, the distance we have from our pre-9/11 lives imbues the poem with meaning. Every word feels weighted with significance and prophesy. For example, in another excerpt published in *Poetry*, “Metropolitan Forecast,” Goldsmith writes, “Brisk winds from the northwest. High pressure building east from the Great Lakes.” Wind has never seemed so ominous. The poem, like other memorial poems I have discussed, remembers the losses of the day. In this case, what has been lost is the time when “brisk winds” and “high pressure” signified nothing more than a cold fall day. Like the witness poetry I have discussed, it also provides a record of the day, September 11, 2001, itself.

“The Day” also functions as public discourse: Goldsmith renders the weather and other topical concerns as poetry. “The Day” makes explicit the particular interest of my last chapter by bringing together “low” and “high” forms of discourse. In that chapter I wrote about poetry by first-time writers and about poetry by Nobel laureates. Throughout my dissertation, I cited newspaper reviews and blogs alongside the writings of scholars such as Habermas and Derrida. Goldsmith uses “the detritus of mass culture” (Schmidt 25) to create avant-garde poetry.<sup>134</sup> In that final chapter, I noted as well how Jay Parini contrasts the “unheard voice of poetry” with the “big-throated booming” of mass culture (44), and suggested that the poets at poetry.com dispute this contrast. Goldsmith disputes it as well. “The Day” is a cacophony of voices—the weather reporter, the newspaper editor, and Mr. Houllebecq all speak together. Goldsmith called his previous work “Day,” “a really great novel, filled with stories of love, jealousy, murder, competition, sex, passion, and so forth” (“Being Boring”). As another instance of a

poem/newspaper/novel, “The Day” is full of excess. We have seen other instances of poetic excess in the dissertation: the surprisingly excessive circulation of Auden’s poem after 9/11, the 24-hour electronic stream of words at 7 World Trade Center, the tens of thousands of entries at poetry.com. “The Day” is a further example of poetry as “big-throated booming.” It corroborates my argument that poetry is not, as Parini suggests, always “unheard.”

I have chosen to weave my concluding remarks through this example of “The Day” not only because the poem corroborates many of my arguments about poetry after 9/11 but also because it challenges them, suggesting possibilities for future study. I have said, for instance, that “The Day” reveals the affinities between poetry and newspaper as forms. However, it also shows the differences between them. By transposing the newspaper into a poem, Goldsmith demonstrates how the two forms work differently; readers bring different expectations to a poem than they do to a newspaper; they react differently to the two forms and consume them differently. Read as a poem, the *New York Times* becomes a collectible; “Day,” for instance, sells for an average of eighty-five dollars at amazon.com. The newspaper becomes an object we can hold, no longer the unruly mass of pages one struggles to control on the subway. It becomes something we keep, not something we use to line a bird cage. Goldsmith challenges my argument when he reproduces the newspaper as a poetic collectible, and challenges it further when he says, “You don’t need to read my books to get the idea of what they’re like; you just need to know the general concept” (“Being Boring”). I have called for in-depth engagement with the poetry of 9/11. I have asked that we read Auden’s poem closely and that we piece together the words in Holzer’s installation. I have argued against poetry as (kitsch) object or “general concept.” The disjunction between my argument and Goldsmith’s leaves space to ask, “What counts as poetic engagement?”.

My dissertation has argued that poetry does work in a time of crisis. Goldsmith's conceptual poem, however, suggests that more questions can be posed about how poetry does this work. In the case of "September 1, 1939," for example, a particular politics emerged from reading the poem only for its general concept. I attempted to wrest the poem from contemporary interpretations that effaced its historical context. In the case of Holzer's installation, I expressed concern that the historical context of 9/11 would itself be effaced if poetry only served a general, conceptual function—if it was asked only to signify optimism. For Goldsmith's readers, however, there is much to be gained from his concept alone. The contours of poetry as a form are made visible through the transcription process itself. Moreover a reader's distance from "The Day" (from the pre-9/11 world that produced the *Times* that Tuesday) creates the poem's changing meaning. There is room, as we can see, for continued study of the relation between crisis poetry and its readers, and of both the problems and the possibilities of poetry as object.

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This reading of Goldsmith's poem means to demonstrate the reach of my dissertation's work. While my focus has been on specific poems circulated and written in the first years after 9/11, I hope my arguments about poetry's functions can be applied even as 9/11 becomes more distant history. In my introduction I listed my dissertation's three main goals, and all three hinted at my desire to consider the poetry of 9/11 in a larger context of crisis poetry. Those goals were (1) to explore the multiple functions poetry served after 9/11; (2) to historicize the poetry of 9/11 in the context of poetry written in response to other modern atrocities; and (3) to suggest the ways in which the surge in poetry's popularity after 9/11 changes how we talk about poetry's vitality. In my first chapter I studied a poem begun just two days after September 1, 1939, and in my conclusion I have studied a poem that has yet to be finished (and which, perhaps not coincidentally, is a version of a poem entitled "September 1, 2000"). I hope the range of poetry

studied here, and my analyses of it, have demonstrated that the poetry of 9/11 is unique in some ways—certainly in its proliferation—while it is also part of the larger story of public engagement with poetry in America.

In the years that it has taken to complete this project I have had many casual conversations about the events of 9/11—with professors, friends, and acquaintances. In these conversations, as I begin to describe the work of my dissertation, I am often interrupted with the explanation of *where* my interlocutors *were* when they first knew of the September 11 attacks. It seems that people not only remember where they were but also that they urgently want to tell others about their experiences. I know that one of my first-year students was in New York that day and his mother was at the World Trade Center site. I know that one of my professors was teaching in a college in Michigan when the news interrupted his class. What I often hear as I am being told these stories is a desire to be located in some relation to the 9/11 attacks. I hear the many ways in which people have drawn their connections to the memory of the day. Working on this project, I have come to understand that what I hear is, in part, the call for poetry that will serve the very functions I have been discussing. People needed comfort in the aftermath of the attacks, but they also needed to connect with what happened—to assert their positions of witness, remember their shock and, in some cases, their loss, and to discuss the consequences of the terrorists' actions. I have attempted to show how poetry responds to those needs. Poetry is, to quote Toni Morrison's "The Dead of September 11" one last time, a "thread thrown" between the unbelievable attacks on 9/11 and the people who were called upon to believe them.

## Notes

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### Introduction: Reading Poetry after 9/11

<sup>1</sup> Throughout these chapters I refer to the events of 9/11 as a trauma, and, alternatively, as a disaster or crisis. Both disaster and crisis refer to the event's felt suddenness, its importance as an event that signaled change, and its calamitous effects on thousands of people. Trauma, the Greek for "wound," is the term that places 9/11 within a larger body of scholarship. It is defined by Cathy Caruth in her field-establishing work, *Trauma: Explorations of Memory*, not by the event itself, its magnitude or its effects, but by its structure: According to Caruth, "The pathology consists . . . solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" (4). I resist the terms "catastrophe" and "tragedy"; catastrophe refers primarily to a final event when 9/11 was, in many ways, also a beginning. Tragedy refers, in the first instance, to the plot of a play or literary work.

<sup>2</sup> On the controversies surrounding the pictures of the bodies, see Junod; Singer.

<sup>3</sup> The list of creative responses to 9/11 is too long to include here. Other notable entries include novels (McInerny; Updike); graphica (Spiegelman; Jacobsen & Colón); plays (Nelson; Shepard; LaBute); and film (*World Trade Center*; *United 93*; *Fahrenheit 9/11*).

<sup>4</sup> On 9/11 poetry, see also Alkalay-Gut; Plate; Burt; Gilbert, ed.. Juliana Spahr is one critic who notes the problem of limiting poetry to a comfort role after 9/11. In a short essay, "Poetry in a Time of Crisis," she objects to the way in which, after 911, "[t]he mainstream press seemed intent on defining poetry's somewhat limited social role for us."

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Boxer notes, in *The New York Times*, that “[p]ostwar Polish poetry became eerily pertinent” after 9/11. She suggests that this pertinence may come from the way Polish poetry is motivated by “the idea that words are the only good refuge from a world spun out of control.”

<sup>6</sup> See *9/11: Witnessing the World Trade Center 1974-2001; To Mend the World: Women Reflect on 9/11*; and *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*. My page number refers to the last of the three.

<sup>7</sup> See Rothberg, “There is No Poetry in This,” for a detailed analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Hamill’s anthology merits further explanation. In January 2003, First Lady Laura Bush invited Hamill and other poets to a White House symposium, “Poetry and the American Voice.” The symposium coincided with George Bush’s initial “shock and awe” attack on Iraq, and Hamill, a pacifist, declined the invitation. Instead, Hamill invited his fellow poets to send him protest poems that he would forward to the White House. He received 1,500 poems within four days and went on to found the website *poetsagainstthewar.org*. The website currently hosts more than 20,000 poems.

<sup>9</sup> See Hahn 164; Borenstein 59; Moustaki 95. All in Heyen.

<sup>10</sup> Some of the most affecting in this long list are C.K. Williams’ long poem that makes up the fourth section of his *The Singing* (2003); multiple sections of Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let me be Lonely* (2004); “september song,” in Lucille Clifton’s *Mercy* (2004); Anne Simpson’s sonnet sequence “Seven Paintings by Brueghel” in *Loop* (2003); “Twinned Towers” and “Ground Zero” in John Pass’ *Stumbling in the Bloom* (2005); “How Post 9/11 the Mystery of Love Became the Mysterious Mr. Love” in Sharon Thesen’s *The Good Bacteria* (2005); several poems in Sophie Cabot Black’s *The Descent* (2004); and “9/11” in Fanny Howe’s *On the Ground* (2004).

<sup>11</sup> Baraka’s poem is an exception to my argument that poetry was not met with controversy after 9/11. His poem takes up the evils of imperialism and racism, but has been widely accused of

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promoting racist sentiments itself. Baraka was New Jersey's poet laureate when he wrote "Somebody Blew Up America," and some of its lines caused significant controversy. In the most troubling passage, Baraka writes, "Who know the World Trade Center was gonna get/ bombed/ Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers/ To stay home that day . . . ?" Baraka was asked to resign from his position as poet laureate, but he refused. He was interviewed by CNN and Fox News and was featured in every major American newspaper in late 2002 and early 2003. For details of the controversy and a thoughtful reading of the poem, see Gwiazda.

<sup>12</sup> Several popular songs were also written about 9/11, including Bruce Springsteen's "The Rising"; Neil Young's "Let's Roll"; Paul McCartney's "Freedom"; and Michael Jackson's, "What More Can I Give?" The song "There's an Eagle," by a lesser known artist, Steve Vaus, was downloaded from the internet 100,000 times. The song's popularity inspired Vaus to run for City Council in California.

<sup>13</sup> See the *Journal of Poetry Therapy* or poetrytherapy.org.

<sup>14</sup> Sontag's most contentious remark came a few lines later, when she wrote, "Whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards."

<sup>15</sup> I use the term "lyric" broadly, but I do not equate it with the term "poetry." Several scholars have noted that the lyric has, since modernism, become the "poetic norm" (to paraphrase the title of a 1953 essay by M.H. Abrams). Virginia Jackson calls this conflation of poetry and lyric, the "lyricization" of verse: she quotes Mark Jeffreys who explains that "lyric did not conquer poetry: poetry was reduced to lyric. Lyric became the dominant form of poetry only as poetry's authority was reduced to the cramped margins of culture" (8). Jackson reads the lyric historically, arguing that "history has made the lyric in its image" (15). I differentiate the lyric from narrative and dramatic poetry, and also from Language poetry. Read against those forms, lyric denotes

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attributes of “brevity, metrical coherence, subjectivity, passion, sensuality, and particularity of image” (W. J. Johnson 173). While there are countless exceptions (the modernist imagist lyrics are brief, but rarely passionate or sensual), the lyric can denote a rhythmic association with song, and the centrality of a figurative voice.

<sup>16</sup> On the tenuous links between Iraq and Al Qaeda, see for example, Pillar; Kull et al. Numerous articles in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* from 2001 to 2003 also addressed this issue. See for example, Benjamin; Stern.

<sup>17</sup> On August 31, 2010, as I made final revisions to this work, the American combat mission in Iraq officially came to an end. However, American troops remain in Iraq in non-combat roles.

<sup>18</sup> I am aware of the controversy surrounding the Commission Report as a source. Even John Farmer, senior counsel to the Commission, debunks elements of the report in his recent book, *The Ground Truth*. Farmer suggests, for instance, that despite the common refrain that the attacks were “unimaginable,” (a comment made for example, by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice), a similar attack had been proposed as the basis for a NORAD exercise in 2000.

<sup>19</sup> This project intersects with work in the field of Trauma Studies, especially Cathy Caruth’s collection of essays, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma: Narrative, History*; Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*; Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*; Paul Antze and Michael Lambek’s edited collection, *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*; Ruth Leys’ *Trauma: A Genealogy*; and Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler’s edited collection collection, *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*.

<sup>20</sup> Some exciting new monographs in the field are Kirk Savage’s *Monument Wars: Washington D.C., the National Mall and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (2009); Bradford

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Vivian's *Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again* (2010); and Erika Doss' *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (2010). The New School for Social Research has now hosted its 3<sup>rd</sup> annual interdisciplinary memory conference. Washington University in St. Louis now offers two degree programs in memory studies.

<sup>21</sup> While the study of Holocaust poetry is still emerging, Holocaust literature and testimony have received much attention. See Berel Lang; Dominick LaCapra; and Michael Rothberg on literary representations of the Holocaust. For studies on poetry and other historical traumas, see Philip Metres on American resistance poetry after 1941; Carolyn Forché on 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry of witness in general; John Whittier Treat on poetry after Hiroshima; Cary Nelson on poetry and the Spanish Civil War; Faith Barrett and Cristanne Miller on American Civil War poetry.

<sup>22</sup> I refer, throughout the dissertation, to the Holocaust and other events that have caused massive suffering. In doing so, I do not intend to compare types of suffering. Nor do I intend to create a hierarchy of suffering, or delineate which suffering is like or unlike other suffering. However, while it is difficult and often unproductive to compare 9/11 to other historical traumas, it is both important and productive to compare the literatures they have produced. This is a dissertation primarily concerned with poetry—with literature and representation—and the comparisons among trauma literatures does not imply comparisons among the subjects themselves of those literatures.

<sup>23</sup> The term “Cultural Studies” refers to the methodologies that emerged from Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded in 1964. Damon and Livingston provide an excellent account of the evolving relationship of poetry and Cultural Studies. My own references to “cultural studies of poetry,” includes, more broadly, the study of the culture surrounding a

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poem or poet, not the more specific field that has emerged from the writings of Stuart Hall or the Marxist theorists of the Frankfurt school.

<sup>24</sup> See anthologies edited by Chang, Handal and Shankar; Nye; Charara. And single-author collections by Hammad; Joseph.

<sup>25</sup> For the term “nervous” writing, Yeager cites anthropologist, E. Valentine Daniel’s *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in Anthropography of Violences* (see Yeager 48).

<sup>26</sup> In the fall of 2001, the editor of the *Weekly Standard* wrote, “We in America think of September 11<sup>th</sup> as an event that changed the world, but Europeans seem to regard it as an event that changed America” (qtd. in Toope 236). The question of whether 9/11 “changed everything” has been much discussed. See, for example, the collection, *September 11 in History: A Watershed Moment?* (Dudziak, ed.).

## **Chapter One: “September 1, 1939” on September 11, 2001**

<sup>27</sup> See Jenkins, “Historical,” 14. Gioia discusses his experience with the poem in his essay, “‘All I have is a Voice,’ September 11 and American Poetry”; my own discussion of that essay is below.

<sup>28</sup> Other critics who cite Auden’s popularity after 9/11 include Cavanaugh; and Quinn.

<sup>29</sup> All quotations of “September 1, 1939” refer to Robin Skelton’s anthology, *Poetry of the Thirties* (280-283).

<sup>30</sup> Karr writes that she was ultimately persuaded to recite the poem by the editor of the *New Yorker*, David Remnick: “He reminded me that its conclusion suggests not just a digging toward the lost, but also a collective digging into history, how one person in despair and loneliness digs toward the salvation of someone else.”

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<sup>31</sup> Harrington writes that the “modernist conception of poetry was more hermetic than the genteel, but every bit as sacralized” (*Poetry* 160).

<sup>32</sup> While developing this argument and its examples, I discovered (late in the process) Stephen Burt’s article about poetry’s portability. I am indebted to Burt for the examples of Shelley and Whitman. His essay takes up those authors in further detail. Burt delineates, through a range of examples, the ways in which poets themselves see their poems as extricated from historical context. Burt mainly lets the poets speak for themselves here, but it is clear that he favours the idea that a poem “can begin in one place and time and arrive at other places and times, where they retain (at least some of) their coherence and their effect” (25).

<sup>33</sup> Anthologies function as both timely records and timeless references. For instance, Robyn Skelton’s *Poetry of the 30s*, first published in 1964, is a snapshot of both the contemporary writing in the 1930s and the way in which poetry was valued in the 1960s. Anthologies with broader and more academic mandates (*the Norton Anthology of English Literature*, for example) collect verse that will last through time and live on in multiple classrooms through multiple editions. They also received timely edits, however, and reflect a shifting canon.

<sup>34</sup> While I write about “September 1, 1939” as a witness poem to the onset of Second World War, I am not, at the same time, trying to implicate Auden’s own biography in the analysis. This is an important distinction since my analysis does stretch out of the “formal” bounds of textual inquiry into contextual inquiry as well. Nonetheless, even as it does, I heed the words of Auden himself when he writes that “[a] great deal of what passes today for scholarly research is an activity no different from reading somebody’s private correspondence when he is out of the room, and it doesn’t really make it morally any better if he is out of the room because he is in his grave” (qtd. in Bozoroth 178).

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<sup>35</sup> Jenkins suggests that “September 1, 1939” particularly expresses Auden’s critique of nationality as personal identity. He notes that the poem is a hybrid that stylistically joins “Old World’ clarity and restraint and . . . ‘New World’ inwardness and liberation” (“Auden in America” 44).

<sup>36</sup> By remaining “neutral” during the Spanish Civil War, the U.S., in effect, enabled a Fascist victory and bolstered Germany’s power. As historian Howard Zinn writes, “For the United States to step forward as a defender of helpless countries matched its image in American high school history textbooks, but not its record in world affairs” (408). Zinn reminds readers that the United States’ long and violent history of imperialism belies its popular image as the protector of non-interventionist policies.

<sup>37</sup> For more on the connection between the two poems, see Fuller; Mendelsohn; Brodsky; MacDiarmid; and Burt.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Brodsky (352).

<sup>39</sup> Freud’s “uncanny” arises here (from *unheimlich*, unhomely), the idea of the familiar suddenly becoming strange. Freud describes the uncanny as “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (241).

<sup>40</sup> The U.S. did not enter the war until 1941, but for Auden, a poet with British roots (Auden grew up in England during World War One and left friends and family there), the war was made more immediate when Britain declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939.

<sup>41</sup> Some critics have also pointed to Auden’s homosexuality as the reason for his desire for privacy. For example, James Miller in the *Explicator* reads “September 1, 1939” as encoded with references to Auden’s sexuality. He suggests that the opening lines show Auden to be hiding in a

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shabby bar, ostracized by his sexuality, and argues that the references to the relationship between Nijinsky and Diaghilev suggests themes of homosexuality alongside those of fascism and dictatorship in the poem.

<sup>42</sup> The other four poems that Auden felt “ashamed” of were “Sir, No Man’s Enemy,” A Communist to Others,” “To a Writer on his Birthday,” and “Spain.”

<sup>43</sup> A few more details, however. After appearing in *Another Time* (1940), the line “We must love one another *or die*” (emphasis added) appeared in no other book. The poem continued to be anthologized but was not included in any book of Auden’s after 1950. In his *Collected Poetry* (1945), Auden published the poem with the problematic stanza excised. The poem was first anthologized in *A Little Treasure of Great Poetry, English and American, from Chaucer to the Present Day* (ed. Oscar Williams, 1946). In 1950, the poem appeared in Auden’s British collection, *Collected Shorter Poems 1930-1944* (it appeared as the eight-stanza version; the title was ‘Britishized’ to “1<sup>st</sup> September 1939”). The poem appeared—with the “and” having replaced the “or” for the first time—in *The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse from Colonial Days to the Present* (Williams, ed, 1955). It appeared in its original form (with disclaimer) in Skelton’s *Poetry of the Thirties* (1955). Auden’s *Collected Shorter Poems* was published in 1966 without the poem at all.

<sup>44</sup> When the poem was reprinted after 9/11, it was almost always in its original version, retaining the line Auden regretted, “We must love one another or die.”

<sup>45</sup> For further examples of titles excerpted from Auden’s poem, see Jenkins, “Historical,” 14.

<sup>46</sup> See Jenkins, “Historical,” 14.

<sup>47</sup> See plagiarist.com/poetry/1682/comments/.

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<sup>48</sup> De Certeau also gives the example of *la perruque*. *La perruque* is a kind of poaching in the sense that it is a type of resistance. In this case, the resistance is not total opposition, but hindrance; *La Perruque* (“the wig”) “is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer” (25). The term is used, for example, to describe someone who uses her employers tools to make her own furniture or, on a more abstract scale, when someone maintains their sense of individuality while working on an assembly line.

<sup>49</sup> Like the methods of Rubin and Pinsky, de Certeau’s approach should be distinguished from Reader Response criticism. Reader Response critics (e.g. Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser) study the meaning that a reader finds in a text, focusing on the semantic meaning s/he produces as the text’s co-author. De Certeau is interested more in power appropriation than in meaning-making. The reader as poacher actively resists the dominant meanings a text imposes. Consumption then moves from being a typically passive mode to being an active form of resistance.

<sup>50</sup> On CBS television news, around the fifth anniversary of the attacks, Washington chief correspondent Bob Schieffer made this connection. He said that after 9/11, “[p]eople went back to work, they opened their homes to those without homes; Congress passed emergency legislation unanimously; partisan differences faded; road rage vanished, as the country came together *as it had not come together since World War Two*. . . . We must never forget the dark day that was 9/11, but we must always remember it led to *America’s finest hour*” (emphasis added).

<sup>51</sup> Harrington notes that in the 1910s one reader of the magazine *Poetry* complained that “[t]he paper of the magazine has been poor, the type of the newspapers, the cover and form inadequate to the dignity of the cause” (*Poetry* 163). According to this view, something as special as a poem *should* be kept in a treasury—not printed on newsprint like the daily papers which will soon become fish-wrap.

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<sup>52</sup> I do not wish to impose a binary here between Sturken who is “against” consumerism and de Certeau who is “for” it. De Certeau advocates consumerism “against the grain,” consumerism as a form of resistance. I am not advocating a polarization of writing and reading or production and consumption, but rather exploring the connections among these practices. Yet another (relevant, although perhaps obvious) distinction should be made between these critics’ comments about consumerism and President George W. Bush’s call for consumerism after 9/11. Bush encouraged Americans to go shopping after 9/11 to maintain both their American values and the economy. “Get down to Disneyworld in Florida,” he famously said.

<sup>53</sup> The term “kitsch” emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in Germany and described a negative aesthetic (as Sturken writes, it was seen as “banal, trite, predictable and in bad taste” [19]). In the early twentieth century, kitsch was defined as an outcome of mass culture and associated with cheapness. Early debates about kitsch focused on the distinction between high and low culture and between art and mass culture/kitsch (see Greenberg). I do not follow those distinctions here. My mistrust of kitsch is not a mistrust of mass culture.

<sup>54</sup> Despite Auden’s dislike of the line, most versions of the poem that circulated after 9/11 included it.

<sup>55</sup> In an essay on quotation, Marjorie Garber suggests that quotation can imply either authority or doubt. She quotes Edward Said who notes that quotation “is a reminder that other writing serves to displace present writing” (10).

<sup>56</sup> Bradford Vivian also writes about these recycled speeches in his 2010 monograph, *Public Forgetting*. Vivian argues that when the politicians quote these famous speeches at the 9/11 memorial, they reveal a form of collective forgetting—even as the memorial ceremonies encourage citizens to “never forget.”

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## **Chapter Two: “For 7 World Trade”: Poetry as Forgetting, Poetry as Memory**

<sup>57</sup> There is some prose as well—the installation includes the entirety of E.B. White’s essay meditation on the city, *Here is New York*—although because it appears line by line, it also reads like verse.

<sup>58</sup> See Jorge Luis Borges’s story, “Funes the Memorious,” in which Funes suffers from the inability to forget. After an injury, Funes is condemned to remember every detail of his life; burdened by details of the past, he becomes unable to live fully in the present.

<sup>59</sup> Mayer-Schönberger warns that internet technologies dangerously prohibit forgetting; Vivian’s is a rhetorical study of forgetting in contemporary discourse. Friedrich Nietzsche also praises forgetting when he writes that we must “employ the past for purposes of life” (64) and not let it stifle the creative possibilities of the present.

<sup>60</sup> Poetry has often found its greatest popularity during times of crisis. Max Cavitch writes about the proliferation of poetry that appeared after the death of George Washington. Van Weinen quotes an editor at the *New York Times* who makes this point about the connection between poetry and crisis clearly: “Not since the loss of the Titanic have the mails brought to The Times office such numbers of metrical offerings as they have since Europe took up arms”(2).

<sup>61</sup> Levenson distinguishes between the roles that Eliot and Pound played in the development of modernism, noting that Eliot facilitated modernism’s institutionalization (218). Nevertheless, Levenson’s reading of *The Waste Land* demonstrates that, like Pound, Eliot wrote for an intellectual audience, not fireside or newspaper readers. For instance, Levenson notes three changes Eliot made to *The Wasteland*, among them the change in title from “He do the police in different voices” (a line from Dicken’s *Our Mutual Friend*) to *The Waste Land* (which refers to a

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pre-Christian vegetation ritual). He notes that “[i]n each instance, a more recent reference has given way to a reference more remote . . .” (203).

<sup>62</sup> America does have a long tradition of political poetry and many political poems were written after 9/11, especially about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The collection *Poets Against the War*, edited by Sam Hamill, and the project’s website poetsagainstthewar.org feature hundreds of contributors. Nonetheless, these poems do not have the public profile of the commemorative poems that I discuss.

<sup>63</sup> Shifting memorial practices parallel shifting attitudes toward death in the U.S.. Until recently, death and the mourning rituals associated with it, have been considered “taboo,” and have existed on the periphery of public life. See Aries; Mitford; Gilbert; and Doss (“Death”). Aries argues in 1974 that in the mid and late twentieth century, sorrow is looked upon with repugnance, not with pity (90), and this changes after 9/11: sorrow (and pity for sorrow) play a large part in contemporary commemoration.

<sup>64</sup> There is a correlation with didactic poetry here also. In the mid-nineteenth century, poets like Emerson and Whitman were considered to have perceptual gifts (in part, Emerson makes this claim himself when he describes poets as “liberating gods” [qtd. in Rubin 20]). As historian Joan Shelley Rubin tells it, the nineteenth-century poet held the authoritative position of “transmitter of the moral laws” (22). At the end of that century, the “Schoolroom poets,” such as William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Greenleaf Whittier, were popular. Such classroom readers as *Poems for Memorizing* (1892) were used to teach patriotism and other cherished values from such classroom readers as (see Rubin 118).

<sup>65</sup> Contemporary memorials have foregrounded the individuation of the dead—and not just the individuation of soldiers but of civilians as well. Sturken points out how the chairs at the

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Oklahoma City National Memorial commemorate ordinary citizens (*Tourists* 105). In the *Boston Phoenix*, Michael Bronski calls the phenomenon of commemorating civilians after 9/11 a further “democratization of death.” He points to posters of missing persons posted around Manhattan and the *New York Times* “Portraits of Grief” obituary series as evidence of how memorialization has become concerned less with the “war hero” and more with the ordinary citizen.

<sup>66</sup> The most famous monument to the unknown soldier is Lutyen’s Cenotaph built at Whitehall in London. Initially intended to be a temporary centrepiece for an army victory parade in July 1919, the Cenotaph spontaneously became a site of pilgrimage for British citizens grieving their lost loved ones. People, especially mothers mourning sons, came by the thousands to mourn at the empty tomb (See Lloyd on memorial pilgrimage). In 1920, the Cenotaph was made permanent. It can be considered a precursor to the therapeutic monument because it became a pilgrimage destination for mourners.

<sup>67</sup> While the Vietnam Veterans Memorial attempts to include the names of every dead and missing soldier, exact records have been difficult to keep. In fact, some people with names on the wall have been found alive. Moreover, there have been debates over whether soldiers who died upon their homecoming (by suicide or the effects of agent orange) should also have their names on the wall.

<sup>68</sup> See Palmer. On the “black gash of shame,” see Scruggs and Swerdlow.

<sup>69</sup> The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, begun in 1987, also encouraged a public mourning process: the AIDS quilt consists of a still-growing number of panels, each of which remembers a person who died from of HIV-AIDS. Anyone can make a quilt panel and panels generally show the name of the dead and personal details from their lives. As Sturken writes, “Both the AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial . . . attempt to create a community of

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shared loss” (*Tangled* 184). The American Holocaust Memorial Museum, opened in Washington in 1993, is also a memorial that promotes remembering as a process. The Museum is a space for exhibition, teaching, and researching of the Holocaust. Less a space of healing, it is a space of contemplation.

<sup>70</sup> This history of twentieth-century memorial practices would be incomplete without a further note on countermonuments and, in particular, their development in Germany after World War Two. Young offers a definition. Their purpose is,

not to console but to provoke, not to remain fixed but to change, not to be everlasting but to disappear, not to be ignored by passersby but to demand interaction, not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation, and not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to drop it at the town’s feet. (“Germany’s” 859)

<sup>71</sup> Increasingly, the interpretive center has become an important component of memorials, and one that has a lot to say about how an event is remembered. In 2006, The National Capital Planning Commission approved the addition of an underground interpretative center at the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial site. The *Washington Post* reports that many veterans “troubled by the understated nature of the [wall]” championed the project as a way to provide “history and context” to Lin’s otherwise abstract memorial. The *Post* also quotes a source from the National Trust for Historic Preservation who fears that “[e]ach memorial will ask for their own visitor center” (Dvorak).

<sup>72</sup> As Savage notes, the connection of terrorism to fascism is also implied through the prominent display of George W. Bush’ name on the World War Two Memorial (297).

<sup>73</sup> I have emphasized, throughout this brief history, that memorials serve to remind visitors of past atrocities. Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert query the inherent pedagogical assumptions in

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memorial construction as I have described it. They distinguish between remembrance as “strategic practice” and remembrance as “difficult return.” The former refers to an institutionalized practice where moral lessons are learned from past atrocities. The latter marks a way we might learn to live with memory, not through redemption or consolation but with an ever-present reminder of what has been lost.

<sup>74</sup> Literary critics Michael North (1985) and Guy Rotella (2004) have written book-length arguments on how poems about particular monuments, or poems about the “monumental impulse,” reflect how a poet, or a poetic movement, understands monumentality. North studies the ambivalence that modern poets felt about poetry while Rotella studies the poetry of later poets such as Bishop, Lowell, and Heaney. Although Rotella points to some ideological connections between poetry and monuments, both he and North are concerned, mainly, with matters of content.

<sup>75</sup> Primary characteristics include, for example:

the use of pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetation deity (particularly the sexual elements of such myths, and their relation to the sexuality of the mourner), the use of repetition and refrains, the reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation, and the traditional images of resurrection. (Sacks 2)

<sup>76</sup> See also Uppal; Watkin.

<sup>77</sup> Collins has often received critical wrath for his populist poetry. A recent post to the SUNY Buffalo Poetics Listserv referred to him as the “Phil Collins” of poetry (Conrad). I have been, overall, sympathetic to Collins, and the work he did as poet laureate. However, after listening to a recent interview with him on National Public Radio, and reading the response to that interview on

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the Poetics Listserv, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with my own relative neutrality toward him and his work. Collins discusses Emily Dickinson and, although he praises her, condescends to her for writing “the same little songs over and over again.” He reads a 1998 poem he wrote, “Undressing Emily Dickinson,” in which he describes seducing her: “So I could plainly hear her inhale when I undid the very top hook-and-eye fastener of her corset” (“Billy Collins: A Poet’s Affection”). The poem is a posthumous violation of Dickinson’s body and her body of work. Collins says, dismissively, that he wrote the poem “to put [the question of Dickinson’s sexuality] at rest by having sex with her.” While my topic is Collins’ 9/11 poetry, not his biography, I cannot be sanguine about positions he has taken.

<sup>78</sup> See Gellee for further discussion of Holzer’s relationship with corporate sponsors. These comments can be compared with Waldman’s observation of the “pseudo-official voice” in so many of Holzer’s pieces (32).

<sup>79</sup> Shelley Jackson also discusses this omission. Holzer has used poetry by Szymborska in more recent projections in Chicago and London.

<sup>80</sup> Holzer has said that she hopes to “feed” new texts into her installation and she has expressed a desire to add Szymborska’s poem at a later date (see Jackson).

<sup>81</sup> Shelley Jackson’s own project, “Skin,” seems better to fit the description of a civic reading. In 2003, Jackson began writing a story consisting of 2,095 words, each one tattooed on a different person’s body. The story will only appear on the bodies, never in print. She has received over 10,000 “word volunteers” and approximately six hundred people have received their tattoos so far. Volunteers from all over the world come in contact with each other and with Jackson through the project. See <http://ineradicableskin.com>.

<sup>82</sup> Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups are “post-national” in that they do not constitute a state

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enemy of the United States but private enemy. Bauman quotes Benjamin R. Barber who writes that, “no American child may feel safe in its bed if in Karachi or Baghdad children don’t feel safe in theirs” (26). In his speech in Cairo, in June 2009, President Obama also takes up the language of the globalization of peace. He says, “When a new flu infects one human being, all are at risk. When one nation pursues a nuclear weapon, the risk of nuclear attack rises for all nations . . . . That is the responsibility we have to one another as human beings.”

<sup>83</sup> There have been many deaths—past the 2,970 on September 11, 2001—caused by the terrorist attacks that day. In fact, the losses incurred through the two wars that followed 9/11, have been met with what we might call *anti-memorial* practices. Bodies arrive in “transfer cases” and their homecoming is carried out in secret, off limits to the media and public. Government spokespeople claim that the secrecy around these bodies is meant to give privacy to soldiers’ families, but such secrecy also maintains a sanitary image of the war. Little is heard in the United States about the non-American deaths in war.

<sup>84</sup> In his speech in Cairo in June 2009, President Obama took a step toward ending hostile relations between the United States and the countries of George W. Bush’s “axis of evil,”—and, importantly, a step toward ending the type of oppositional discourse that “axis of evil” exemplifies. “I have come here,” he said, “to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and respect.” Obama has begun, in campaign speeches, his Cairo speech, and elsewhere, a discursive shift that critics like Sturken, Bauman and Butler are calling for.

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### **Chapter Three: Rachel Vigier and Juliana Spahr: Towards a New Poetics of Witness**

<sup>85</sup> In some ways, the legal term “eye-witness” is redundant when “witness” so often means “the one who sees.” However, as the philosopher C.A.J. Coady notes, a witness can also be blind (27). I therefore prefer to describe a witness as one who has firsthand knowledge or experience of an event.

<sup>86</sup> The terms “survivor” and “victim” are also problematic here: to speak of “survival” is to imply that an event was finite and has concluded. As Gubar makes clear, however, a traumatic event outlives its recognized time span. Primo Levi, too, notes that the idea of “liberation” from the camps implies an impossible closure: there is no “quiet after the storm,” he writes, no survival (70). I also avoid the word “victim” in this discussion because it is not my place to comment on who was hurt on 9/11 or who felt victimized. The witness role is the role from which testimony is given and testimony is my concern here.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Sprat, in *The History of the Royal Society* (1667) also argued against flowery language, which he took to be the enemy of truth. He had rhetoric in mind more than poetry, but, in fact, rhetoric and poetry had much in common in that century:

[The ornaments of speaking] are in open defiance against Reason; professing not to hold much correspondence with that; but with its slaves, the Passions: they give the mind a motion too changeable, and bewitching to consist with right practice. Who can behold, without indignation, how many mists and uncertainties, these specious Tropes and Figures have brought on our knowledge? How many rewards, which are due to more profitable, and difficult arts, have been snatch'd away by the easie vanity of fine speaking (111-113).

<sup>88</sup> Literary critic James Dawes notes that the belief that testifying to violence may prevent future

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violence also has an opposite. Violence also harms language: “it imposes silence upon groups and, through trauma and injury, disables the capacity of the individual to speak effectively” (2). Dawes is indebted to Elaine Scarry who has written about the ways in which violence not only resists but destroys language. Here is Scarry: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4).

<sup>89</sup> I have relied in this chapter on scholarship on Holocaust testimony, but it is important to underline my recognition of the differences between the Holocaust and 9/11 as events. Most of the work done on literature and testimony has centred on the Holocaust. One goal of my project is to move forward from that important work to consider testimony in other contexts of trauma.

<sup>90</sup> As Forché also notes, Dorfman’s question speaks to a larger one about who can speak for the dead when they cannot speak for themselves.

<sup>91</sup> Frisch importantly distinguishes the medieval witness from the modern character witness. The main difference is that while character witnesses *support* evidence, the “ethical witness” often gave the “sole evidence upon which juridical verdicts were based in medieval folklaw” (25).

<sup>92</sup> Witnessing—and the status of testimony—has a long intellectual history, dating back at least as far as Aristotle, and traceable through the scientific revolution, when observation and evidence overtook deductive reasoning as more persuasive warrant for claims. See, for example, Steven Shapin, *Social History of Truth*.

<sup>93</sup> In the seventeenth century, for example, most reports of experiments were records that they had taken place and were witnessed. In his account of the rise of the experimental article as a genre, Charles Bazerman writes that the scientific article emerged as an account that would, by proxy, “stand in place of the witness” (74).

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<sup>94</sup> The distinction between “the” truth and “a” truth is crucial to Felman and Laub’s definition of testimony. Felman writes, “Psychoanalysis . . . profoundly rethinks and radically renews the very concept of testimony, by submitting, and by recognizing for the first time in the history of culture, that one does not have to *possess* or *own* the truth, in order to collectively *bear witness* to it” (15).

<sup>95</sup> I define testimony within certain limits that differentiate it from other discursive forms. The philosopher Ernest Sosa defines witness testimony broadly as “a statement of someone’s thoughts or beliefs, which they might direct to the world at large and to no one in particular” (219). In his theorization of *testimonio*, the testimonial narratives of Latin America, John Beverly limits that definition further by adding intentionality: “the intentionality of the narrator . . . is paramount” (14).

<sup>96</sup> In a remarkable 2002 *Harper’s* essay, Thomas de Zengotita addresses the blurring of these boundaries, writing about what he calls the “numbing of the American mind.” “[T]here is no important difference,” de Zengotita writes, “between fabrication and reality, between a chemical a pill introduces and one your body produces, between role-playing in marital therapy and playing your role as a spouse” (34). He addresses 9/11 specifically. While people were certainly “moved” on 9/11, “never more so, perhaps,” they are “so used to being moved by footage, by stories, by representations of all kinds” that they were, numbed as always, and thus able to move on after the shock (36).

<sup>97</sup> Kaplan also references this example in her discussion of “vicarious witnessing.” French sociologist Luc Boltanski has also coined the term “distant suffering” (“*souffrance à distance*”). His discussion, however, takes up the morality of the viewer’s relation to distant suffering.

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<sup>98</sup> Similarly Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldua writes of her experience watching the attacks on television:

Each violent image of the towers collapsing . . . sucked the breath out of me, each image etched on my mind's eye. Wounded, I fell into shock, cold and clammy. The moment fragmented me, disassociating me from myself . . . What occurred on September 11 2001 to the people in the four hijacked airplanes, the twin World Trade Center towers of NYC, and the Pentagon happened to us, too. I couldn't detach from the victims and survivors and their pain. This wounding opened like a gash. (92)

<sup>99</sup> It should be noted that Mole, in his study of French Holocaust poetry, is actually developing a case *against* this presumed incompatibility.

<sup>100</sup> Vigier is also possibly referencing another widely-anthologized Bishop poem, “The Fish”: “I looked into his eyes/ which were far larger than mine/ but shallower, and yellowed” (42).

<sup>101</sup> Althusser uses interpellation to describe the process of inscribing subjects into ideologies—and, in this case, the ideologies of citizenship; subjects are thus called forth, as if hailed (118).

<sup>102</sup> My spelling refers to the group as “Language” poets. After Spahr and her critics, I have chosen not to spell the term, “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,” as some do, for the journal that bears that name. Spahr’s Iraq war poem could bear a fruitful reading against fellow-Language poet Watten’s *Bad History*, which Philip Metres has called a counter-epic of the Persian Gulf War (“Barrett Watten” n. pag).

<sup>103</sup> Spahr makes connections across space that other authors I have discussed make across time. Adorno notes, for example, that there is no “after Auschwitz” if we continue to live in a world in which such genocide is possible. Spiegelman’s experience on 9/11 notably connects him to his parents’ experience in the Holocaust. He places 9/11 on a continuum of catastrophe when he

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writes in his preface that 9/11 left him “reeling . . . on that faultline where World History and Personal History collide—the intersection my parents, Auschwitz survivors, had warned me about when they taught me to always keep my bags packed” (n. pag). Throughout *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Spiegelman alludes several times to the Holocaust and to his Holocaust comic, *Maus*.

<sup>104</sup> Spahr’s emphasis on breath can also be read as a traditional troping of inspiration as breath (from the root of the word) in opposition to expiration or death.

<sup>105</sup> This is not to say that there are no questions about what it means to be called a witness of the Holocaust. See, as an extreme example, the controversy over Benjamin Wilkomirski’s Holocaust “memoir” *Fragments* (1995). Wilkomirski was found to have used a pseudonym and to have entirely made up his experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust. Nonetheless, as several critics, including Michael Donal-Williams, have argued, Wilkomirski’s “false testimony . . . can still produce an effect on readers that induces them to witness” (1303).

#### **Chapter Four: Lyric as Public Discourse at Poetry.com**

<sup>106</sup> All quotations from poetry.com can be traced by entering the author’s name and/or lines from the poem in the search function provided at [www.poetry.com/category/911](http://www.poetry.com/category/911).

<sup>107</sup> The essay first appeared in a 1977 issue of *Diacritics*. Culler reprinted it in his 1981 collection, *The Pursuit of Signs*, and my page numbers refer to that version of the essay.

<sup>108</sup> I am indebted to, although do not respond directly to, Antony Easthope’s 1983 book, *Poetry as Discourse*. Easthope argues that poetic discourse, as discourse, is ideological and has an obligation both to its “nature” as poetry and to its historical position (20-21).

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<sup>109</sup> See [www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules](http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules) for a list of rules of proper conduct in internet chat rooms and forums. They are excerpted from the book *Netiquette*, by Virginia Shea.

<sup>110</sup> That is, of course, if they use a consistent username. The “username” itself does promote a kind of anonymity, and anonymity can, as James Bohman notes, pose problems for a public sphere. Bohman suggests that a truly global mass audience may in fact cause sites to lose their sense of publicness as audiences become unstructured and uncommitted (137-8).

<sup>111</sup> The one exception is Karen Alkalay-Gut, who, in an essay on the “testimonial imperative” of 9/11 poetry, looks to the internet as a place where “narratives and emotions were collected” (257). Her essay has useful intersections with my work, although she does not read any of the internet poems closely and her examples also include songs, and poetry published in more traditional formats.

<sup>112</sup> I suspect that the term “solace poetry,” in this case, refers to more than these semi-anonymous online poems. Fried likely also refers to the many poems by professional poets published in anthologies and newspapers that similarly seem reactionary and sentimental. In fact, it is a particular trait of poetry after 9/11 that solace poetry is produced by authors who might usually write challenging or innovative verse. I have marveled how Language poet Charles Bernstein’s response to September 11 is a lyrical prose poem that begins, “What I can’t describe is how beautiful the day is in New York” (17).

<sup>113</sup> These critics are indebted, in part, to Jane Tompkins’ study of fiction, *Sensational Designs* (1986). Tompkins replaces the question of whether a piece of literature is good with the question of *what* it is good *for*. “Twentieth-century critics,” she writes, “have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with effectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality . . .” (123). While Tompkins is writing about fiction by women,

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she speaks, surprisingly, to my thesis as well. She continues, “Consequently, works whose stated purpose is to influence the course of history, and which therefore employ a language that is not only not unique but common and accessible to everyone, do not qualify as works of art” (125).

<sup>114</sup> Other collections and monographs have also taken a cultural studies approach to poetry. Some of these include A.M. Roberts and J. Allison, eds (2002); Philip Metres (2007); Michael Dowdy (2007); and Joan Shelley Rubin (2007).

<sup>115</sup> John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* suggests that the popular novel that emerged in the eighteenth century was responsible for the category of literature itself, since “literature” emerged as a reaction to the popular novel. The popular novel was also responsible (somewhat ironically) for literature’s first crisis—the “problem of assimilating new vernacular genres such as the novel” (xi). My goal is not to instigate a similar kind of crisis; however, answers to the question I have posed—what are the functions of poetry after 9/11?—will need to be answered outside the confines of the canon as we know it.

<sup>116</sup> On this ironic turn see Knapp 181.

<sup>117</sup> In three monographs on what she has called “national sentimentality,” Lauren Berlant (1991, 1997, 2008) argues that there is no public sphere in the contemporary United States; she suggests instead that an “intimate public sphere” has placed matters of abortion, reproduction, marriage, family values at the centre of public politics (see, for example, *The Queen* 3). Berlant’s work provides an alternate (if less hopeful) framework for thinking about poetry.com. In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, she describes an “amorphous opinion culture, characterized by strong patriotic identification mixed with feelings of practical political powerlessness” (3).

<sup>118</sup> See also Dean, “Webs of Conspiracy,” in which she is less positive than in the other essay of hers I quote below. She suggests that because publicity relies on the idea of secrecy—because the

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public must believe that something hidden can be uncovered—the internet, where nothing is secret, cannot be a public sphere.

<sup>119</sup> One of the earliest advocates for the potential of the internet as a public sphere is Harold Rheingold, who writes that “[p]eople in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind” (274). Rheingold is writing in the early days of the internet (1993), yet his definition of “virtual community” remains oft-cited. I agree with Dean that we do *not* leave our bodies behind when we go online. Rheingold belies his own argument when he differentiates between “real” life and how people live on the internet. As Dean notes, our bodies and real lives often facilitate multiple personas and we may, any of us, connected to or apart from our computers, act one way in one situation and another way in the next.

<sup>120</sup> In a recent essay, Nancy Fraser notes that, although several recent critics have begun to consider a “transnational public sphere,” the concept of the public sphere was developed specifically as a way of considering *national* democracy. She suggests that a “transnational public sphere” is an oxymoron, but suggests the need for—and begins the work of—theorizing a public sphere that realizes the way in which contemporary issues (such as global terrorism, global warming) are post-national. See “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere.”

<sup>121</sup> In part, the brevity of the lyric makes it so appropriate for these modes of circulation and consumption. A poem can be pasted into the body of an email; it can be posted as an entry on a blog; it can be read on a coffee break.

<sup>122</sup> At the 2010 meeting of the Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture since 1900, I attended a panel on Susan Howe’s “Melville’s Marginalia.” In an offhand remark, a panelist suggested that Howe’s use of apostrophe was an ironic, comedic dig at the lyric. This landed in

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the room (a room filled with poetry critics like Lynn Keller and Adelaide Morris) like common sense. It seemed, then, that thirty years after Culler's essay, apostrophe had arrived.

<sup>123</sup> For a more detailed discussion of classical definitions of apostrophe, see Kneale. Kneale challenges Culler, arguing that classical definitions of apostrophe (specifically its origins in the root, *aversio*) prove that Culler is writing about prosopopoeia (in which a dead or inanimate being is given voice to speak a poem), not apostrophe.

<sup>124</sup> Paul de Man makes the point that there is an intimate connection between apostrophe and prosopopoeia. De Man argues that the voices of the dead threaten, and thus strike dumb, the living, as they anticipate their own deaths (928). Susan Gubar writes about the ethics of prosopopoeia in her study of post-war Holocaust poetry, noting that prosopopoeia is the most notorious and decried phenomenon in the poetry she studies (as in Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" where Plath appropriates voices of Holocaust victims). Gubar quotes Holocaust survivor Elie Weisel, who suggests both that "no one has the right to speak on [the Holocaust victims'] behalf" and that it is the job of the living to speak the epitaphs of those victims who have no cemeteries to be buried in (178). Many of the poets at poetry.com take up the voices of those who died on September 11, many of whom also had no recoverable bodies to be buried under gravestones.

<sup>125</sup> Many poems also address the fallen Twin Towers. Sue M. Bolick writes, for example, "You once stood tall, big and bold,/ Your walls held thousands, young and old." Just as many writers play out conversations with missing or dead people, thus filling their absence with presence, others describe the missing buildings and in doing so, re-erect them, if only temporarily in the moment of the poem.

<sup>126</sup> In her collection of essays, *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf paraphrases Samuel Johnson in *Life of Gray* when she writes, "The common reader . . . differs from the critic and the scholar.

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He is worse educated, and nature has not gifted him so generously. He reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinion of others.” For Johnson, the common reader is someone who is neither educated nor smart. A Google search for the term turned up the blog, “A Common Reader” in which a British retiree reads “for my own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or to correct the opinions of others.” See <http://www.acommonreader.org.uk>. This reader uses the term not to cover a lack of education but to boast about his choice to read books purely for pleasure.

<sup>127</sup> Gioia also calls poetry a “subculture” (*Can* 1), as does Jonathan Culler who similarly writes that “poetry is alive in our culture, but it is in its own world” (“Why Lyric” 201).

<sup>128</sup> Increasingly, rap and hip hop are popular and productive sites of critical study; however, including them in the study of poetry does not solve the problems I have described. See Dowdy; see also Adam Bradley who discusses rap in terms similar to mine: “Rap is public art, and rappers are perhaps greatest public poets, extending a tradition of lyricism that spans continents and stretches back thousands of years” (xiii).

<sup>129</sup> In fact, the findings of the most recent reading study by the National Endowment for the Arts (“To Read or Not To Read,” 2007) are that, in general, Americans are reading less in *all* genres. Teens and young adults were found to be reading less since 2004, and for shorter periods of time. See <http://www.nea.gov/news/news07/TRNR.html>. A September 2010 article in the *New York Times* reports that only half of all American adults report reading one work of fiction, drama, or poetry a year (Schuessler).

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## Conclusion: The Functions of Poetry

<sup>130</sup> In 2002, when pharmaceutical heiress Ruth Lilly died, she made a bequest to *Poetry* magazine worth more than one hundred million dollars. Lilly's relationship with the magazine started when, after submitting some of her poems in 1972, she was pleased to receive handwritten rejection notes from the editors.

<sup>131</sup> Goldsmith's poetry has received increasing critical attention. See, in particular, a recent special issue of *Open Letter* with contributors such as Marjorie Perloff and Christian Bök.

<sup>132</sup> Goldsmith's work resembles found poetry. Poet-critic Jason Christie argues, however, that Goldsmith's work differs from found poetry because "[f]ound poetry appropriates previously conceived material into new arrangements but is still dependent upon the final product as a product" (78). Christie describes Goldsmith's work as "a more general praxis that situates words in a new context where they are charged by their trans-formation into an entirely different context than that of their original one (78).

<sup>133</sup> It is especially poignant again now as controversy over the "Ground Zero Mosque" uncovers deep-seated anti-Islamic sentiment in the U.S. in the fall of 2010. As I write this conclusion, there has been much controversy over the building of an Islamic center and mosque in Lower Manhattan. Debates dominated the ninth anniversary memorial coverage. For analysis of the controversy, see, for example, Amira Hertzberg.

<sup>134</sup> Christopher Schmidt notes connections between Goldsmith and Andy Warhol. We may also question, however, whether *The New York Times* truly counts as the "detritus of mass culture" when its readership is, in large part, the intellectual elite of the U.S..

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