

VÉRONIQUE BRAGARD, CHRISTOPHE DONY, and WARREN ROSENBERG, eds., *Portraying 9/11: Essays on Representations in Comics, Literature, Film and Theatre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 176 pp.

MICHAEL C. FRANK and EVA GRUBER, eds., *Literature and Terrorism: Comparative Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 276 pp.

On September 11, 2013, the official memorial ceremonies in New York had found a quiet routine. Laura Petrecca noted in *USA Today* that the anniversary had “diminished” over the years: “The news coverage is less. The sadness and anxiety aren’t as palpable;” and Marc Santora wrote in *The New York Times* that the memorial ceremony at the World Trade Center site “has taken on the familiarity of ritual.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, academics continue to engage in the effort of locating 9/11 within history, both nationally and transnationally. In spite of many recurrent themes and topoi (such as the exceptionalist discourse on ‘national trauma,’ or the tacit correlation between mourning and patriotism, or even military action), the debates about the role and relevancy of 9/11 continue to evolve into new directions and to unearth original or previously unnoticed trends of discourse. The recent academic book market mirrors this trend, with publications such as Christian Kloeckner’s, Simone Knewitz’s and Sabine Sielke’s encyclopedic and rewardingly diverse collection, *Beyond 9/11: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Twenty-First Century U.S. American Culture* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2013), or Georgiana Banita’s insightful monograph study *Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture after 9/11* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2012). If these and the two volumes to be addressed here are any indicator, the public interest in the attacks and their long-term reverberations is far from being exhausted.

The memorialization of 9/11 in contemporary forms of fiction, poetry, graphic novels and comics, film, theater, performance, and the visual arts has become a widely transnational venture, and especially a transatlantic one, as these two collections also illustrate. *Portraying 9/11*, edited by a Belgian and American team of editors, features eleven articles from the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, and *Literature and Terrorism*, edited by two scholars based at Konstanz, brings together eleven German and two

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Petrecca, “New York City mourns September 11 Victims,” *USA TODAY* 11 Sep. 2013: 3; Marc Santora, “On 9/11 Anniversary, Paying Tribute and Taking Stock Amid New Turmoil Abroad,” *The New York Times*. Web. 11 Sep. 2013.

U.S.-American perspectives. In the introduction to *Portraying 9/11*, the editors briefly address current paradigms of approaching the events—e.g., of the “domestication” of 9/11 (Žižek) or the “semiotic greed” (Packard) by which it expands into other discursive fields—and emphasize the continuing relevance and scope of their exploration: “[i]f one can conceive the existence of a so-called ‘9/11 literature,’ one must therefore acknowledge that it is vast, entails many permutations, and continues to expand. Whether approaching the calamities directly or via metonymy, in terms of trauma, culture or geopolitics, a multitude of artists, scholars and commentators are still engaged by these events” (4). The book is subdivided into three parts that address different genres: comics, literature, and performance.

The first three articles of *Portraying 9/11* address visual representations of the attacks, from Timothy Krause’s analysis of popular memory in *New Yorker* cover images (from September to December 2001) to Stephan Packard’s argument that comics such as Mark Millar’s *Civil War* provide a “large-scale allegorization” (45) of the attacks. Krause places the *New Yorker* covers between “trauma kitsch,” on the one hand—a term leaning on Marita Sturken’s previous research—and “for lack of a better term,” as he concedes, “‘legitimate’ memorialization” (14). Looking at a broad selection of contemporary superhero comics, Matthew Krause argues that comics such as *Captain America* or *Coup d’Etat* move away from dichotomous distinctions between villains and victims and reveal skepticism toward nationalist exceptionalism. Propelled by an underlying “anxiety in the definition of an American self” (42), these texts are far removed from the moral certainty of Nazi or Cold War comics. In a republished translation of an article previously published in 2009, Packard then focuses on the Marvel series *Civil War* in the context of the semiotic implications of “caesura,” concluding that the comics’ narrative “inscribes the aesthetic treatment of 9/11 into a continued discourse by superimposing a mediating regularity based in popular genre conventions” (45).

In the section entitled “Literature,” the following four contributions almost exclusively address fiction as a viable medium for a critical rewriting of common 9/11 codes and discourses (reinforcing the conspicuous absence of poetry from many analyses of 9/11 literature). Aaron de Rosa is concerned with the ways in which the attacks are seen through the lens of previous historical events, especially of World War II. Looking at the pervasive phenomenon of “atomic fear,” he expands Alan Nadel’s concept of the “containment culture” (59) to novels by Don DeLillo, Ken Kalfus, and Jonathan Safran Foer. *Falling Man, A*

*Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* thus not only correlate in interesting ways with previous works by the same authors, but they “reconstruct post-9/11 America in terms recognizable as Cold War culture” (59). Magali Cornier Michael also addresses *Falling Man*—which may well be the most frequently analyzed novel in post-9/11 literary criticism—and looks particularly at the reemerging discourses of heroic masculinity that Susan Faludi has famously diagnosed. *Falling Man*, however, develops more complex strategies of “recreating a sense of self” (86) without resorting to the easily available patterns of militaristic power. Ulrike Tancke then critically engages the question of trauma and spectacularity and, in a detailed and nuanced analysis, reads Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* as an artistically crafted example of undermining the numbingly widespread notions of trauma, exceptionalism, and victimhood: through symbolic “red herrings” (93), she argues, the novel moves away from the “atmosphere of collective fear” and rather “explores the unexpected [...] intrusion of violence into personal lives, independent of world historical events” (95). This way of operating by implication, allegory, and narrative detours—which characterizes large parts of twenty-first century American literature—is also identified as a strategy by Marc Oxoby’s approach to William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* and David Foster Wallace’s “The Suffering Channel.” While the terrorist attacks play a marginal role for the plot in these texts, Oxoby argues, Gibson and Wallace dissect the deceptive spectacle of 9/11 by “delv[ing] beneath the surface” (15) of the images and by ultimately offering—as only fiction can—“a fuller representation of singular events than televised images and mass media productions” (116).

It is particularly this insight that casts an ambiguous light on the editors’ decision to group the following four articles under the descriptive heading of “performance,” since only one of them—James Cherry’s “Connecting in the Aftermath”—is actually concerned with the staging of theatrical texts. The other three examine films (*United 93*, *World Trade Center*, *Superman Returns*, and *Batman Begins*) as reinforcing or complicating mainstream conceptualizations of 9/11. In “Terror and Mismemory,” Gerry Canavan convincingly describes the “mandatory cultural amnesia” (124) that comes with the self-censorship and sanitizing of 9/11 imagery, such as the omission from mediatized memories of the people jumping to their deaths on September 11. Through the reductive fantasies of universal death and universal salvation, films such as *United 93* and *World Trade Center* contribute to “the respectaclization of September 11 to create a new, mythologized ‘9/11’ that replaces both the actual event and the original mediated experience of it by the TV-watching population” (129-

30). Similarly, in the reprint of an article originally published in 2009, Frances Pheasant-Kelly looks at how *United 93* works both as a tribute and as “a mode of catharsis” (147) through its visually conservative form. Using Baudrillard as a reference point, she concludes that the film illustrates the third order of simulation, “where the image is self-sustaining and autonomous of the original, while its re-narrativization provokes a sense of the original distress” (157). The volume then concludes its wide array of approaches with James Cherry’s look at Ann Nelson’s plays *The Guys* (2001) and *Savages* (2007).

One may wonder about the asymmetrical layout of the corpus, with only one of the texts addressed being British-authored; and the editors’ decision to subsume Canadian novelist William Gibson under the category of “American authors” (6) suggests a rather hasty policy of compilation. However, since these national affiliations become less important in the transnational effort to memorialize the events, such categories are also less problematic than the editors’ unquestioned belief (convincingly contested by many of their contributors) that 9/11 marked a traumatic “rupture” or a “threshold event in world history” (6).

*Literature and Terrorism* is not only the more comprehensive volume, but it also presents a greater diversity of theoretical angles. The proceedings of a conference that took place at Konstanz, Germany, in 2009, these thirteen articles illuminate literary responses to terrorism in general, from Henry James’s *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) to Andre Dubus III’s *The Garden of Last Days* (2008). The volume is subdivided into four parts, starting out with historical perspectives (part I), then illuminating ruptures and continuities before and after 9/11 (part II), before engaging with issues of media and representation (part III) and finally addressing the question of genre (part IV). Only one of the articles, the concluding one by Herbert Grabes, examines drama—all other contributions continue the contemporary trend of analyzing fiction, which indicates once more that the novel may well be the most widely used (if not the most aptly suited) genre to negotiate questions of terrorism today. Whereas most of the recent scholarly engagements with the literature of terrorism limit their scope to texts published in English or German, this volume allows for a wider comparative angle with a refreshingly diverse canon, including Russian and Argentinian texts alongside with American, British, and German sources from the 1870s to the present.

In part I, Gudrun Braunsperger traces the modern terrorist to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s fictionalization of Sergey Nechaev; Michael Frank investigates various “Plots on London” in

texts by Robert Louis Stevenson and Edward Douglas Fawcett, among others; and Hendrik Blumentrath follows the “specific history of enmity, a history [...] that is bound to the imaginary of dynamite and the infernal machine; to the notion of risk and the concept of the ‘dangerous individual’ in criminal anthropology, and to the ever-expanding networks of communication” (69) from Victorian England to literary negotiations of the RAF in Germany in the 1970s.

Eva Gruber then opens part II with an analysis of Ann Patchett’s *Bel Canto*, a pre-9/11 text that depicts terrorists in sympathetic ways and still serves—in the logic of Cold War politics—as “a projection screen for American exceptionalism” (99). Martina Wolff looks at Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* and John Updike’s *Terrorist* to show how terrorism is used as a site of identity construction in western surroundings increasingly perceived as uncertain and superficial. One may wonder about the reasons for Roy Scranton’s emotional involvement in his critique of what he terms social and literary narcissism, especially in his angry attack on Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as a “hook on which to hang personal conceits,” which he reads as composed “with all the subtlety of an attention-starved kindergartner” (127). In a much less subjectively tinted and more nuanced analysis based on Baudrillard and Žižek, Margaret Scanlan argues that Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*—while never explicitly drawing that connection—is concerned in rather effective ways with the reverberations of 9/11, and with the relationship between literature and terrorism in general. In the final article of this section, Michael König shows how German fiction after 9/11 gradually shifts from self-reflexive and autobiographical modes to narrative approaches to terrorism’s effects (in novels by Ulrich Peltzer or Christoph Peters) but without actually “seek[ing] to understand the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (171).

Part III is concerned with issues of plot/ting and representation; beginning with Ulrich Meurer’s reading of Don DeLillo’s “Baader-Meinhof” through a visual lens. Looking at the gaps in Gerhard Richter’s series of paintings *October 18, 1977*, in which the artist translates the legacy of the German terrorist group RAF into blurred images, and tracing these gaps in DeLillo’s story, Meurer argues that these self-reflexive reproductions of medial representations of terrorism ultimately serve the ethical purpose also pursued by Greek tragedy: “to expel violence through its depiction in order to allow for the utopia of the *polis*” (193). Since Kirsten Mahlke’s essay is also concerned with questions of representability and the possibilities of fiction to convey and undermine discourses of terror, it nicely

complements this section of the book. In her close and convincing reading of Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar's short story "Second Time Round," she looks at the victims of state violence for a change; a topic often overlooked in the wake of 9/11. Similarly, Georgiana Banita's intriguing analysis of one of the lesser-known 9/11 novels, Andre Dubus III's *The Garden of Last Days*, calls attention to discourses that have been widely missing from the dominant engagements with the September 11 attacks: in Dubus's case, issues of class and poverty. Eruditely locating this novel in a broad field of fictional texts of "plotting terror" (216) (Scanlan), Banita argues that it "not only engages with post-9/11 discourses of closure" (in narrative ways that the author calls "closure-repellant") but also "presents its own performative critique" (216).

It is a large selection of texts, and especially of texts that have gone widely unnoticed in the media chatter about terrorist novels, that allow for an assessment of the actual developments of post-9/11 literature. Opening part IV with the question of whether post-9/11 novels marked a "new paradigm" (235) in terms of genre, Marie-Luise Egbert answers in the negative, using DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Patrick Neate's *City of Tiny Lights* (2005) as points of reference. *Falling Man* is then also used as a comparative example by Herbert Grabes in his investigation of post-9/11 drama. Next to plays such as Lavonne Mueller's *Voices from September 11*, Ann Nelson's *The Guys*, and Craig Wright's *Recent Tragic Events*, Grabes argues, the novel (and DeLillo's novel in particular) seems more aptly suited—at least in the case of 9/11—to resolve the tension between the recency of historical events and the necessity of aesthetic distance to them. "None of the dramatic treatments of 9/11 discussed here," he concludes, "even comes near the intellectual scope and emotive power of novels like DeLillo's *Falling Man* or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*" (262).

In its entirety, *Literature and Terrorism* is clearly the more comprehensive and more nuanced of the two volumes, with a broader scope, a larger extent of theoretical groundwork, and a more diversified and critical approach to the phenomenon that "9/11" has become over the past thirteen years. One might have wished for more lucid and practical bibliographies after each article instead of footnotes with references (a readerly inconvenience owed to Rodopi's house style rather than to the editors), but this does not diminish the scholarly pleasures of the volume's diverse and comparative scope. While both collections testify to an ongoing need to assess the impact of 9/11 in contemporary literature and culture, it is clearly

*Literature and Terrorism* that keeps its promise of “map[ping] the complex field of literature and terrorism without imposing preconceived notions or hypotheses” (Frank and Gruber 22). In both volumes, Arab American perspectives could play a larger role (and it is to the credit of Bragard et al. that they recognize this lack). In all, however, both volumes unanimously demonstrate that we have still not “reached September 12,” as Gerry Canavan put it in 2011. The events of 9/11—contested as they are in their mediated transformations—continue to play an important role for the ways in which American culture, and western culture at large, tends to reflect upon itself, and analyses of these ways have not forfeited any of their relevance just yet.

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