Post 9/11 Literature
Communicability of Trauma

- Many writers and critics see the event as “unrepresentable.”
- James Berger: “Nothing adequate, nothing corresponding in language could stand in for it” (from the collection of essays, *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*).
- Philosopher Jacques Derrida: “What is terrible about “September 11,” what remains “infinite” in this wound, is that we do not even *know* what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify, and even name it.”
Toni Morrison in her poem “The Dead of September 11”: “Knowing all the time that I have nothing to say—no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you have become.”
In fact, some quite negative critical reactions to the literature

- Everyone cringed when he learned that Foer’s sophomore effort was to be a 9/11 novel…Foer … fails to understand tragedy—it wasn’t invented or perfected on 9/11, and those who have experienced it, say, over a span of decades do not see it as an occasion for cute workshop projects or snarky media culture commentary”

--from a review in *New Criterion*
In striving to come to terms with evil, *Extremely Loud* falls back on that most convenient of crutches, a child’s suffering; in the process, it reduces the attack on the Twin Towers—an event filled with black intent—to a mere symbol, a conceptual shorthand.

--from a review in *Commentary*
Negative Reactions

- Controversy over Richard Drew’s famous photograph
- “Living with the photographed images of the suffering…does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate… Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize.”

--Susan Sontag, from Regarding the Pain of Others
Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, musing on the words “sacred,” “glorious,” “sacrifice,” and “in vain”:

“We had heard them…and had read them…and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had real dignity.”
Vonnegut and WWII

“There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.”
Links even to earliest versions of American literature

- Back to vision of America as “new Eden”
- John Winthrop and the “City on a Hill”
Constant stories of innocence lost

- Civil War
- Kennedy Assassination
- Vietnam War, etc.
Along with incommunicability, problem of voyeuristic appeal

- David Foster Wallace and “The Suffering Channel”
- Oskar’s notebooks
Media Exploitation
Jess Walter’s: *The Zero*: Firefighters/Policemen used to sell breakfast cereal
Also, general suspicion of history in Postmodern age

- We like to think of history as a self-evident concept: a record of things that have happened in the past.
- We tend to think of history as a *reconstruction* of actual events as they unfolded in time, as distinct from a poet’s or novelist’s *construction* of a historical past.
History itself must always be interpreted
Historians assign order and coherence to events and determine their significance
We have no access to the past that is unmediated; we have no access to a past reality that is not already a representation
Suspicion of History

Tim O’Brien, from *The Things They Carried*:

- “Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (from “How to Tell a True War Story”)

16
So, how do we know anything? Who can we trust?

- Culture of skepticism and paranoia
- Dates back at least as far as Vietnam era, Watergate
- X-Files: Trust no one
- Legions of conspiracy theories
- Reactions to the 9/11 Commission Report even
Suspicions about language as well

- Disjuncture between language and reality in postmodern thought

Older Model

- Presupposed that there is a real world external to our sensory perceptions
- We apprehend this world with our physical senses and we can comprehend it with our rational minds.
- Language is fundamentally representational; words can (more or less) accurately depict the real world and our experiences of it.
Postmodern View of Language

- Postmodern model, by contrast, assumes that the structure of language itself produces “reality.” We can only think through language.

- The linguist Frederic de Saussure conceptualized thought alone as a kind of shapeless mass, which is only ordered by the structure of language.

- Acc. to Saussure, no ideas pre-exist language; language itself gives shape to ideas and makes them expressible, and thought cannot exist without language.
So, language doesn’t merely describe reality, but SHAPES reality!

New cognitive research suggests language profoundly shapes the way people think about and perceive the world.

Who broke the vase?
Also, dominance of the visual during 9/11

- Event unfolded on television
- Commission report, for example, says Cheney and others found out about the attacks by watching the second plane crash into the tower on CNN
So, emphasis on blanks, emptiness
More blank image examples

- *The Zero* and blank spaces in memory
Springsteen

- Song “Empty Sky”
Yet, Power of Language

- If language shapes reality, this makes language VERY powerful.
- Thus, postmodern books are often books about books themselves.
- Postmodern literature often METAFICTIVE—books about narrative, about language, about how language shapes and interacts with reality.
The possibility that narrative itself can be healing?

“If trauma is the collapse of the network of significations, a narrative is needed to restore the broken link. Even if according to some theories trauma is unrepresentable, there is the need on the part of the traumatized to relieve anxiety through telling, a feeling on the part of the victims that they have the duty to testify and the desire on the part of the listener to learn more about trauma in order to reintroduce it into a network of signification.

--Kristiann Versluys
Psychotherapists such as Jonathan Shay, who works with Vietnam veterans, agree

Shay argues that narrative can be healing

But it must be listened to and commemorated properly
“But this, too, is true. Stories can save us.” (From “The Lives of the Dead”—final story of *The Things They Carried.*)
Immediate outpouring of narrative after 9/11

- Flyers
- Portraits of grief
- Spontaneous outpouring of poetry on websites, etc.
Narrative also provides an imaginative entry into the mind of the “Other”

- Commission report claims the biggest problem leading up to 9/11 was “a failure of the imagination”
- In books like *Terrorist* and portions of *Falling Man*, etc, western writers imagine the mindset of the terrorist
Hybrid, experimental forms?

- Often the case after any traumatic incident
- WWI, the Modernists and Ezra Pound
- WWII, Heller, Vonnegut and black humor
- Vietnam, O’Brien and metafiction

“Make it new.”
—Ezra Pound
General postmodern blurring of the lines between high and low culture
9/11 Commission Report

- Itself a hybrid form—according to critic Randall Martin, has “novelistic features”
- Finalist in 2004 National Book Award non-fiction category
- Highly praised in reviews for literary style
Summary

A few big questions we’ll consider throughout the course:

- Can we represent trauma?
  - Problems
    - Danger of exploiting trauma
    - Danger of becoming numb or “anesthetized” to atrocity
    - Inability to get at “real” history—things we cannot know

- Is language adequate to convey what happened? Must new forms be invented?
  - Disjuncture between language and reality
  - Dominance of the visual

- Is 9/11 literature unique or tied to other literatures of trauma?