

Inhabited by Stories

Inhabited by Stories:
Critical Essays on Tales Retold

Edited by

Nancy A. Barta-Smith and Danette DiMarco

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INTRODUCTION

NANCY BARTA-SMITH
AND DANETTE DIMARCO

Intertextuality has signaled change, appropriation, adaptation, and derivation. It has focused us on irresolvable questions of influence and origination, progressive or regressive movement across continents, periods, and media. We take a different approach.

If intertextuality is taken temporally, rather than spatially, it is a question of reprise. As derivative, it brings with it the stigma of mere imitation or repetition. Whether this propensity to consider intertextuality within a temporal framework lies partly in the philosophical distinction that consigned the spatial to an eternal realm of abstract thought and earthly existence to the merely apparent march of history, or is to be found in the very nature of our intellectual *pursuits* seeking understanding, and ultimately control, of very real conditions we inhabit, we believe it belies the *experience* of intertextuality. Our model of inquiry has seemed a path, and to require displacement along that path as the condition for making progress, creating defensive relations between source text and adaptation.

The commonplace of an evolutionary framework, post Darwin's discoveries, has only intensified this determination to embrace temporality. For evolution eliminates the idea of species as abstract form or essential nature—as a fixed or stable entity. Species are reconceived as processes in flux and deviation. The solidity of the persons, places, and things that surround us remains etherealized as if those persons, places, and things were still mere shadows in Plato's cave. Such temporal framing privileges difference and change, event and process, motion and adaptation, and defines apparent similarity by negation as stasis or stagnation. If, within the study of intertextuality, temporal framing has fixated us on unproductive and irresolvable questions, within lived experience it has reduced spatiality to points along time's line, or worse, to a measure of gaps between them. In contrast, we see the echoing presence of other texts in terms of depth.

Are we as at home as we think in a world constantly in flux, or out of our element? Is the present merely a fleeting moment? What would a model of literary study look like that steps out of time's river and embraces not only the presence and proximity of the world to the senses, but also of the past and the future to the present here and now? What is the role of the imagination in extending the *presence* of the present, as if its doors opened out onto both past and future? What if memory re-replaces us and imagined futures are already with/in us? What if intertextuality adds depth to meaning rather than plunging us into questions of origin and influence? What if intertextual crossing of media boundaries deepens and colors our experience of stories, producing synesthesia?

While it is true that from the perspective of our mobility we may conceive of the past as over, and the future as what happens next, the present itself is born/e *here*—in the relation of the body to the earth, in the primacy of perception and the senses. Embodied flesh inhabits place and, as the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty tells us in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), the flesh of the world fills up the gaps between people and things. Through what is always *sensorimotor* exploration, we soon learn that what is occluded from sight is included in site. When stories inhabit us, imagination and memory extend our ability to *see* and *feel*, *here* as well as now. Phenomenological experience is lived, not just thought.

Such a perspective suggests that the past and future inhabit the present, increase the depth of sensory perception itself, and enrich the range of our affective and ethical responses to both life and literature. When we tell stories we take human life as prototype (Lakoff 1987, 137). Stories inhabit an embodied mind, giving us not only the “feeling of what happens,” as Antonio Damasio (1999) suggests, but the feeling of being here now—of the presence and proximity of our surroundings and our insertion in worlds. As Merleau-Ponty discusses in *L'Institution La Passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France 1954-1955* (2003), the cultural and literary traditions that inhabit us haunt this first “institution” in which we inhabit the flesh, being always already somewhere, no matter where we go—our lives already storied. Such a perspective differs substantially from an idea of imagination that projects us everywhere and nowhere at once or creates virtual worlds. It focuses on the expansion of experience created by telling and retelling stories, emphasizing, as Wendell Berry (1991) would say, their capacity not only to please, to instruct, and to console, but also to provoke readers to feel, to care, and to respond (30). In this sense, perhaps the highest form of both praise and critique is a tale retold, since such retellings attest to literature's instructive power and its perennial regeneration.

In “Narratology in the Twenty-First Century: The Cognitive Approach to Narrative” (2010), Monika Fludernik notes that among those embracing the “cognitive turn in literary departments,” the concept of “primacy effect” suggests that “what we encounter first in a text will decisively shape our subsequent conceptualization of the textual world” (926). She sees these trends as unremittingly constructivist, saying that “cognitive narratology demonstrates that readers do not see texts as *having* narrative features but read texts *as narrative* by imposing cognitive narrative frames on them” such as “interpreting animals as quasi-human protagonists” (926). But such an interpretation of narrative ignores embodiment and how from the outset what we know and name as story has its roots in the soil of lived experience. The “fatal flaw” of tragedy tells the tale of our own mortal wound. Aristotle’s declaration in the *Poetics* that plot is the “soul” of tragedy finds in it the enlivening breath that animates our bodies. What would it mean to embrace *this* primacy effect—the effect of what lies under and is expressed through language? What would it mean to read the relation between texts, and our relation to stories, recognizing their potential to move us not through space but into depths of relation? In responding to Heraclitus’s metaphor of time as a river, Merleau-Ponty remarks in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962):

Time is [. . .] not a real process, not an actual succession that I am content to record. It arises from *my* relation to things. Within things themselves, the future and the past are in a kind of eternal state of pre-existence and survival; the water which will flow by tomorrow *is* at this moment at its source, the water which has just passed *is* now a little further downstream in the valley. What is past or future for me is present in the world. (412)

He continues,

We say that there is time as we say that there is a fountain: the water changes while the fountain remains because its form is preserved; [. . .] Hence the justification for the metaphor of the river, not in so far as the river flows, but in so far as it is one with itself. (421)

This idea is echoed by the poet Wendell Berry in a 2005 Sabbath poem in *Leavings*:

XIII

Eternity is not infinity.

It is not a long time.

It does not begin at the end of time.

It does not run parallel to time.

In its entirety it always was.
 In its entirety it will always be.
 It is entirely present always. (47)

For Merleau-Ponty, as for Berry, it is *here* and now that the world and others spread out the senses in sympathy and attention and it is *here* and now that imagination and memory expand our capacity to *see* and *feel*.

In “The Future of Literary Criticism,” Richard Klein (2010) declares that the future “will be Derridean, or it will not be. And if it is not, it will have been Derridean, since it was he who first envisioned critically the possibility of a future from which literature, and, a fortiori, literary criticism—might be absent” (920). He states that “the fragility of literature, its susceptibility to being lost, is linked to its having no real referent [. . .] from which it could be reconstituted if its canons were lost [. . .] since it depends for its existence exclusively on the preservation of the archive” (921). We find in such a statement a denial of lived experience—that we inhabit a world, that its stories are our own, and that the stories we tell can console us in grief, move us to joy, and instruct us on how to live with one another.

In contrast, a look at the language used to describe and theorize intertextuality reveals the acceptance, if not naturalization, of temporality as the basis for study. Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams (2010) situate their edited collection *Beyond Adaptation: Essays on Radical Transformations of Original Works* within a framework desirous of something “beyond” current trends in intertextual studies. In their preface they speak of “transformation” and “the appearance of a new area of study” assumed to “move beyond adaptation and transform the source text into something new that works independently of its source” (vii, 3). They seek to diminish the lines of heredity by declaring the transformed text a new species, yet evolution’s temporal frame remains. Frus and Williams encourage this sort of reading further by turning to the analogy of Darwin’s study of finches in the Galapagos and his hypothesis

that over time, all of the different species of finch had common ancestors, and that the differences in the finches’ beaks were due to the way in which each species had adapted to the available food sources on its individual island. (3)

Literary adaptations accommodate themselves to changes in the environment. The hypotext becomes at best a recognizable ancestor; a transformation so “drastically different from its source text” that it “may not be recognizable as its cousin” (3). For Frus and Williams, transformation is metamorphosis;

the old form is necessary, but something new and distinct has emerged. No doubt this temporal focus—"beyond," "new," "transformation"—has its merits and is in keeping with a long tradition in intertextual studies. However, it devalues close attention to similarity and proximity. Why in their Darwinian example, for instance, do Frus and Williams only focus on the changes in the finches' beaks over time? Why not also consider another critical aspect in the evolutionary model, the place or habitat, that is, the "individual island"? To do so would allow texts to inhabit each other and stories to inhabit the reader. For where species are well adapted to the surrounding environment, they persist as relatively stable.

In *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006), Julie Sanders admits that the subfield of intertextuality needs to find better ways to elaborate upon relationships between and among hypotext and hypertext. In her estimation, "these labels at present" confine understanding of the relationship to the "linear" and "reductive." She also laments that in such readings the hypertext or "appropriation" is "always in the secondary, belated position, and the discussion will therefore always be, to a certain extent, about difference, lack or loss" (12). In other words, she notices how we have privileged time, as if critical judgments were necessarily sorting operations in which similarity and difference become proximity and distance, instead of acknowledging the inherence of both similarity and difference as we know them in the particularity of lived experience.

Linda Hutcheon (2006) echoes Sanders when she notices the historical trait in adaptation studies, especially with regard to nonliterary texts, where we expect "fidelity" but already assume derivation and inferiority (2). Regardless of a tradition of repeating stories—Hutcheon gives Aeschylus, Racine, Goethe as examples—too frequently adaptation has implied inherent parasitical relationship. Hutcheon cites Virginia Woolf's reactions to cinematic revisions of literary works (2-3). Hutcheon is more drawn to a "continuum" model, perhaps because her purpose is to prove that adaptations are products of "time and place, society and culture" and that adaptation "is the norm, not the exception" (xvi, 177). For Hutcheon, "[t]emporal precedence does not mean anything more than temporal priority" (177). Sanders, in the tradition of Genette, is more attracted to evolution's kinetic or dynamic process, to metaphors from horticulture like grafting or from musicology like "variation and sampling" (12-13). Still, such attention to kinesis is in keeping with temporality since it focuses on change and motion more than presence, proximity, and relation, which accommodate both similarity and difference when we think of them perceptually rather than as a categorical imperative.

In its very title, the volume *Reprising/Rewriting: Plural Intertextualities* (2009) follows a tradition of valuing process and motion, as well. Georges Letissier usefully argues that the purpose of the volume is to see intertextuality as a plural act that is not about the loss of the hypotext in the hypertext but about “pre-empting the possibilities of closure.” However, this model still emphasizes temporality by privileging the term reprise. Already influenced by Genette, whose palimpsestic notion of “second degree” art is inattentive to the interdependence of original and emerging properties, and actually assumes the original’s loss of properties, Letissier finds reprise useful. He claims that “the repetitive process implied by the word evokes other absorbing tasks that are taken up over and over again, and that have been going on, sometimes nearly unchanged, from time immemorial—namely [. . .] darning” (2). Certainly darning is a useful metaphor since it opens a space for discussions of embodiment and material circumstance: nonetheless, his goal is shedding light on the writing *process*, not the intertwining of space and time that inhabits the reader’s experience.

In *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (2005), Mary Orr looks to reevaluate the debates of canonical theorists of intertextuality in the context of those who did not write in the privileged theoretical languages of French or English (or who were not translated) and thus were sidelined or silenced. She regrets that the history of intertextual studies has so frequently returned to the same canon of theorists: Kristeva, Barthes, Riffaterre, Genette, and Bloom, thus leaving out other scholars who are potentially important in the subfield. In contrast, she studies “the interaction of intertextuality with its shadowlands” (15) and “windows” (181). Like earlier critics interested in adaptation who challenge any search for single meaning in favor of plurality (Cartmell 1999, 28), Orr understands her own study of intertextuality not as “simply rewinding the spool of time, or imagining a retrospective ‘progress’ towards some original or root term for intertextuality” but as a move “contrary to the mainly chronological and linear exposition of standard literary histories” by “look[ing] at evolution as also simultaneous development” (18). In emphasizing plurality and simultaneity—seen in her discussions of the metaphor of the web and honeycomb—she cuts across historical periods and national, linguistic, or cultural boundaries. Intertextuality becomes “a rich contribution to the filigree of a world of diverse cultures we all share because they are at our fingertips” (181).

While Orr’s work does not speak directly to the spatiality of the conception of intertextuality we advocate, her metaphor moves in that direction. For she writes,

To the end of both bio- and intercultural diversity, and knowing better how to put the human back into humanities and revelation back into re-evaluation, is where I *pass* this study to another *runner*. As Lear invited Cordelia, so the invitation *stands*, “Speak again!” (181-82, emphasis added)

Her language draws attention to what is always the *here* of “now,” just as Berry does when he reminds us that language is not inherently conceptual but rather inhabits our mouths and tongues. Like memory and imagination, it is wed to affective life, the body, and the earth:

At first glance, writing may seem not nearly so much an art of the body as, say, dancing or gardening or carpentry. And yet language is the most intimately physical of all artistic means. We have it palpably in our mouths; it is our *langue*, our tongue. (2002, “Feminism,” 76)

In *Inhabited by Stories*, we attempt to take up Orr’s invitation to reconceive intertextuality—through the depth and breadth of embodied, affective life.

In part one, “From Habitual Thoughts to Joint Attention: Refiguring Haunting and Trauma,” we will see that by custom we associate haunting and trauma with pathology, with repetitive, obsessive thoughts and compulsive disorder. Those suffering from such thoughts seem mired in stasis, stuck at the same place, as if the proper role of places were mere stopping points in a trajectory. Dwelling on the negative immobilizes the sufferer. But papers in this section reveal the active potential found in what only seem like mere repetition and stasis. For imitation is the vehicle of our first learning. Our habits are embodied neurologically long before we have developed the capacity for conscious memory and representation. We would not survive without habits. Moreover, imitation is unremittingly social and other-centered rather than isolating and defeating. It requires the presence of another who engages us in joint attention. In the essays by Magali Cornier Michael, Grant Bain, and Karen M. Cardozo, traumatic events inspire solidarity and response across texts, between texts and readers, and between teachers and students, avoiding a disabling grief. Their intertextuality “cures” us not by allowing us to “move forward” and forget the past, but by moving us laterally and emotionally in sympathy with others—enabling us to experience their pain, to question our own failure to respond, and to nourish not just individual, but cultural, recovery.

In part two, “When Airy Nothingness Descends to Local Habitation: The Double Mirror of Reflection,” we discover the troubled history of imitation and its effects on our understanding of imagination. For

psychologists of the early twentieth century, imitation lacked originality. It was set in contrast to “deferred” or “true” imitation in which the child could act in a new context and so perform without the disabling presence of a model. The role of the imagination in such a context is to create airy futures that must be brought into reality. For Piaget, the move to “true” imitation was an important step in understanding causality and developing individuality and subjectivity. But such an interpretation overlooks the continual presence of context in lived experience and the importance of fitting in with or accommodating new circumstances, even as we have celebrated imagination’s particularizing power as creation *ex nihilo*. Just as we have imagined survival of the fittest to imply individual strength rather than require adaptability, we have imagined imagination as empty space ready to be filled, constituted by the writer’s bravado. In real life, however, inhabitation is always local, and in this sense it continues to contain a model to which we must attend. The essays by Laura Keigan, Karley Adney, LaDelle Davenport, and Cheryl A. Wilson show that when stories inhabit new places, intertextuality creates disequilibrium to which both story and context mutually adapt. Like memory and imagination, stories open here and now onto a past and future made present within us. They engender interpretations unavailable to previous readers and force reflection on contemporary cultural conventions we might otherwise overlook or fear to acknowledge.

In part three, “The Difficulty of Breaking Habits: The Place of Change in the Matter of Adaptation,” we show how local habitation engenders change even as it remains grounded in a here and now. Essays by Valerie Estelle Frankel and Shannon L. Reed remind us that in adapting to local circumstances, stories are not inherently, temporally progressive. Rather than offering the possibility of adaptation to new circumstances, stories can reinforce existing relations. They can reinscribe and perpetuate even questionable practices. In our eagerness to embrace change and motion, we have acted as if evolution were guaranteed to move “forward,” whereas in reality species that are well adapted to environments endure. Moreover, powerful environments can redirect evolution in what might seem regressive ways. In the essays in this section, critics examine the role of visual media and the choices of directors to either reinscribe or question gender and racial stereotypes in retelling stories. Listening to their tales may temper our propensity to make temporality the emblem of not only intertextuality, but also evolution and life itself. For, if we acknowledge embodiment, the context of every action is being with/in a world. As is often remarked, the best way to break a habit is to change one’s

environment. Without re-placing ourselves, habits are almost impossible to break.

Part four, “Instituting Habits of Property and Propriety: The Affective Space of Ethical Relation,” reveals that if stories inhabit cultures, just as habits inform the body and structure behavior, property and propriety are founding institutions of Western storytelling, with profound ethical implications. On the one hand, property has legitimated ownership and use of people, places, and things—at least from the time of Aristotle’s *Politics*. Slavery was seen as the necessary condition for freeing first the mathematicians of the priestly class, and later artists and thinkers of every stripe, to pursue intellectual work that might eventually issue in the automation of, and therefore freedom from, manual labor. It is a mythic battle between contingency and necessity still with us today. To this way of thinking, slaves lose identity as persons; their work is deemed mindless, as they become merely the arm or instrument of another’s intention. The impropriety of this maneuver is hidden through the “logic” of instrumentality. In the section of *A Sand County Almanac* entitled “The Land Ethic,” Aldo Leopold notes that Penelope was spared the fate of the twelve maids in Homer’s *Odyssey* because she was covered by not the law of property, but propriety—the status of personhood she acquired as Ulysses’s wife. Leopold leaves relatively unquestioned the injustice to the maids, even as he works to extend ethical status to the environment as unworthy of exploitation. Essays by Debarati Bandyopadhyay and Vandana Saxena challenge this cultural story—both the trial and execution of the maids, and the understanding of ideals of matrimony and femininity that would confer ethical status on women only through their relation to men. They discuss writers working intertextually to question not only the “logic” of property and instrumentalism, but also a law of “propriety” that would *confer* ethical status rather than *feel* ethical concern—ignoring our affective relation to another.

Part five, “Inhabited by Stories: A Past Perfected in the Depth of Time, Ritual Retelling, and Citation as Circulation,” reminds us that it is never we who will complete our own stories. They are held in the memories of those who witness their completion and live on. They do not belong to us but allow for enrichment, correction, and revision, through what theorists of embodiment might call by extension, in contrast to Fludernick, the “primacy effect” not of prior reading but of other lives and stories. The circulation of these cyclical processes is quite at odds with a view of time in which the present simply displaces the past. Thus, in the essays by Gary Totten, Barbara Roche Rico, and Victor Velázquez, prolepsis becomes critical paradigm, migration ritual retelling of continual exile, and re-

authoring performance of what in reality is never capable of appropriation. What is past exists in a commonplace of circulation that staggers out in lateral transcendence, a present inhabited by stories perfected only in the depth, not passage, of time.

In part six, “Literary Habits and Commonplaces: The Particular Force of Enduring Personae to Teach and Delight,” to speak of literature “in general” seems, ironically, to rob it of its essence. For in order for stories to challenge or compel belief, to make us *see* and *feel*, they must have the force of the direct encounter we experience in life—in sensory perception, where what we “know” is not limited to what we can explain. In *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, Lakoff cites the work of Eleanor Rosch whose research demonstrated what are called “prototype effects” (42), that meaning is based on judgments of prototypicality based in human perception and interaction. In literature, as in life, we find compelling what we perceive with the vividness and particularity of the sensory and affective. Moreover, nearly all the terms for the senses evolve to refer not just to the sensory, but also to conceptual understanding. According to Lakoff, the most basic level of so-called categorization appears in Gestalt perception—where overall shape allows fast identification through a single mental image. Such categories are the first words learned by children and the first to enter the lexicon (47). It is not surprising, in such a context, that two enduring female literary personae, discussed by Nancy Ann Watanabe and Andrew Higgl, have taken on the status of central figures in a patriarchal literary tradition, coming to signify resistance and rebellion with particular force.

In part seven, the final section of this volume, entitled “Inhabited Lands: The Twin Dwelling Places of Lived Experience and Literary Tradition,” the threads of Orr’s invitation, the framing influence of *Lear*, and the intertextual web structuring the organization of *Inhabited by Stories* coalesce, as Wendell Berry says the forces of good are allowed to do after *Lear*’s banishment.

Along with Berry, we ask:

Why in our destructive and anxious age should not biologists, politicians, artists (and even professors of literature) interest themselves in the Bible’s understanding of life as a divine gift and sacred trust, or in the moral structure of the landscapes of Shakespeare and Andrew Marvell, or in Milton’s dealing with the problem of freedom and obedience? (2000, 185)

Berry calls this “practical reading,” surely recalling what he sees as literature’s instructive value and his conviction of its powerful affective force here and now. In other words, literature is relevant for what Merleau-

Ponty would call the lateral transcendence belonging to our earthly sphere, not just transcendence in the interest of securing an ideal hereafter. Margaret Atwood, in *The Year of the Flood*, figures this difference between lateral, earthly transcendence and the hereafter as focus on the journey rather than the destination. Like Berry, she recognizes that no matter where we go, we are still here in the flesh. Across Berry's work, and especially in his novel *Jayber Crow*, where Jayber is an Edgar figure, Lear's devoted son performs his role as "guide" to make Gloucester *see*. He cures Gloucester of both pride and despair, recalling him to his proper earthly estate as Raphael does the fallen Adam and Eve, themes that both Atwood and Berry continually address. He is not only a figure of our relation to the body and the earth—the fact that we are not gods, but humans, but also a figure of imagination and literary study itself with its ethical obligation to assert values not reducible to science or commerce. Our essays reflect this double focus on our inhabitation of the body and the earth, as well as by stories that teach us how to live responsive not only to each other, but to the land we inhabit.

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PART ONE

**FROM HABITUAL THOUGHTS
TO JOINT ATTENTION:
RE-FIGURING HAUNTING AND TRAUMA**

CHAPTER ONE

AN ANTI-WAR NOVEL
FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:
JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S
EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE
REWRITES KURT VONNEGUT'S
SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

MAGALI CORNIER MICHAEL

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) not only takes up the challenging task of representing the September 11, 2001 terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center in Manhattan and its aftermath, but also positions itself from a twenty-first century perspective within a tradition of American anti-war literature by rewriting Kurt Vonnegut's 1966 *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Foer borrows from Vonnegut's novel the paralleling of the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima with its refusal to view the United States only as victimized and blameless; the emphasis on first-person narrative and on writing and/or telling one's story as a means of facing up to traumatic individual and national experiences; and the backwards filmic sequence motif (bombs flying up to airplanes in Vonnegut and a falling man flying back up to the tower in Foer) that highlights an anti-war stance.¹ Because the events of 9/11 remain close in time, space, and memory to most Americans, and because the events' political and psychic repercussions continue to resonate within the current moment, attempts at literary representation prove fraught with difficulties. Given the centrality of 9/11 within the current Western cultural imagination (as a consequence of temporal, geographic, and psychic proximity as well as of affect), however, contemporary writers cannot choose to *not* represent the events. Yet, choosing a narrative form that can give voice to these recent historical events in terms of human experience, without overstepping the often unspoken ethical imperatives against exploiting

others' pain, poses a challenge.² By establishing an overt link with Vonnegut's disjointed, canonical, anti-war novel, Foer's text engages these challenges. As Todd Davis (2006) asserts, Vonnegut's text functions as "social protest," and as means "to speak out against the insanity of war" and "to affirm the value of life" (79). The linkage to *Slaughterhouse-Five* allows Foer's text to offer itself as post-9/11 literature, but within a tradition of post-World War II anti-war American novels. This linkage positions the events of 9/11 within a larger historical and cultural context that rejects viewing them simply as anomalies. In other words, Foer "takes risks" by creating a text that is both "aesthetic" and "ethical and pedagogical," as Michael Rothberg (2008) has suggested post-9/11 literature needs to do (141, 124).³

Although many reviewers castigated Foer's narrative strategies as engaged in a purely formal exercise—denouncing them as "gimmicky," "all artifice and no substance," "a stylistic exercise,"⁴ such criticism reflects an unstated assumption that representations of 9/11 should conform to the conventions of realism. It reveals a lack of complex analysis of the work that the various narrative pieces of Foer's novel perform in representing the unrepresentable within the context of an ethical stance that condemns war crimes against humanity. I argue that *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* deploys a collage of narratives to represent the traumatic events of 9/11, situating Foer's text alongside the disjointed narratives of many novels, including *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As Elizabeth Goldberg (2007) asserts, non-traditional narrative strategies

are better suited to sharing the stories of atrocity because, inasmuch as they are undertaken with the intent to pursue an ethic of witness issuing from the nature of a historical referent, they can meaningfully disrupt conventional narrative forms that reproduce fixed—predictable, and thereby intractable—identity positions of victim and oppressor. (16)

Foer's novel consists of interspersed pieces of diverse narratives that function to represent the disoriented post-9/11 cultural atmosphere. The narratives create a dialogue through spatial proximity, repetition, parallels, superimpositions, and affective resonances that cumulatively assert a sharp anti-war stance, as well as hope in the face of human trauma. Placing the *story* of the bombing of the World Trade Center next to the *stories* of the firebombing of Dresden by the Allied forces, and the bombing of Hiroshima by the United States, highlights the parallels between the events: the horrific civilian death toll, the incineration of bodies beyond recognition, and the devastating psychic effects on survivors and their descendents. Doing so echoes Vonnegut's novel, which also juxtaposes

the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, but with an additional parallel drawn to the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, further echoing Vonnegut's novel, the parallels drawn between the three historical events implicitly question the notion of "just cause" or "just war," given that all three events are presented as similarly inhumane, with the Allied forces and the United States positioned provocatively as perpetrators of atrocities alongside the 9/11 al-Qaeda operatives.

Like Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* offers the reader a narrative of narratives, although Foer multiplies them. Vonnegut's novel is structured as a framed text, with a first-person, narrator-author, figure. In the first section, the narrator ostensibly writes the third-person narrative about Billy Pilgrim that follows. Foer's novel oscillates between three first-person narratives. Nine-year-old Oskar Schell copes with his father's death in one of the towers on 9/11. His unnamed grandmother writes to Oskar a few years following 9/11 to explain her life in terms of the earlier deaths of her parents and sister Anna during the bombing of Dresden, as well as in terms of her vexed marriage to Anna's former lover Thomas, who cannot forget Anna. His grandfather, Thomas Schell, writes letters that remain unsent, save for one to the son he never knew (Oskar's father), explaining his inability to live after the loss of his pregnant lover Anna during the bombing of Dresden. The novel also includes, within Oskar's narrative, a fragment of an interview in which a female survivor of the bombing of Hiroshima describes the event, focusing on the death of her daughter. In addition, these written narratives are themselves interrupted and/or supplemented by photographs and drawings that can be viewed as other narratives, which find their way into the collage of narratives that makes up Foer's novel.

First-person narratives thus fill most of the pages of Foer's novel, deploying more elaborately the strategy Vonnegut's novel offers and highlighting to a greater degree personal stories that humanize and connect the events to each other and to the reader. Primal empathy, which philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1994) calls "the prior non-indifference of one for the other," characterizes and connects human beings. According to Martha Manning (2002), the personal stories allow readers "to 'feel into' someone else's experience" (33). Foer's novel thus makes use of what Martha Nussbaum (1990) refers to as the novel's ability to "speak to the reader as a human being" through the realm of the emotions, which have a "cognitive dimension in their very structure" and function as "intelligent parts of our ethical agency" (391, 41).⁵ As Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker (2008) emphasize, "emotions can be considered forms of insight

and judgment” (392). The novel elicits from the reader a visceral, bodily, empathetic response since all humans have bodies vulnerable to violence and death. As Judith Butler (2004) argues, “[t]he body implies mortality, vulnerability, [but also] agency” so that one means of addressing violence entails highlighting “an apprehension of a common human vulnerability,” which I am suggesting Foer’s novel strategically orchestrates (26, 30). Foer’s text unravels any clear distinction between “us” and “them,” through an insistence on shared humanity and empathy in the face of human suffering, and thus complicates facile constructions of the enemy “other” and of the “innocent victim.”

Moreover, the insistent use of the first-person within each of the novel’s written narratives, and the dialogue engendered by their spatial proximity, creates a dynamic text—what Steve Dowden (2006) calls “a work of art” that is both a “text” and “an act and an event and an experience” (124). For Dowden, “form in its direct appeal to the senses draws us [readers] into engagement” by “blur[ring] the boundary between text and performance” (133).⁶ The various first-person narratives do not simply exist as static separate texts but raise questions about the ethics of war. In all three bombing events, human beings, going about their ordinary lives in major cities across the globe, unexpectedly face atrocious deaths as a result of larger political forces. Moreover, the survivors of all three bombing events are similarly traumatized by the senseless, horrific, premature deaths of their loved ones.⁷

The first-person narratives never collapse into each other, however. They highlight the individuality of each narrator through their distinct voices and responses to the particular events through which they are forced to live, even as they assert a common humanity. Oskar’s reference to 9/11 as “the worst day” (11), for example, echoes each of his grandparents’ memories of the day the Allies bombed Dresden: his grandfather Thomas refers to the day “everything changed” (17), and his grandmother calls it the day she “lost everything” (80)—their own worst day. Furthermore, a direct link between 9/11 and the bombing of Dresden occurs when Thomas notes, “I was in Dresden’s train station when I lost everything for the second time” (272), as he watches the planes fly into the World Trade Center towers on television screens, and when the grandmother similarly recalls that when she lay down on Oskar’s bed the morning of 9/11 and stared up at the ceiling, she “thought about the walls of the house I grew up in” and how “the walls collapsed” during the Dresden bombing (226). Through the experiences of the grandparents, for whom the attacks on 9/11 become layered with their traumatic memories of the bombing of Dresden, the novel creates connections between the

events that move beyond the individuals at hand and point to what the events share—the merciless killing for political reasons of ordinary human beings pursuing their everyday lives.

All of the narratives emphasize the ordinariness of the people who perished and of the days upon which the traumatic bombings occurred. Furthermore, they emphasize the contingent quality of human existence in the face of the threat of unforeseen acts of violence. Many examples of this ordinariness and contingency occur within the text. Oskar had just arrived at school the morning of 9/11 and his Dad had gone to “a meeting” at “Windows on the World” (195); as Oskar recalls the previous evening, he laments, “I didn’t know it was the last time Dad would ever tuck me in, because you never know” (286). Thomas explains that the bombing of Dresden occurred in the evening but that, when “the air-raid sirens sounded,” families did not even hurry to the shelters because they were used to false alarms (210); he adds that, “only hours before I lost everything, I had everything” (215). In the same vein, the grandmother recalls, “The night before I lost everything was like any other night,” during which she and her sister Anna “kept each other awake very late” and “laughed” (313). Similarly, Tomoyasu tells her interviewer that she “was going to see a friend” and her daughter “was on her way to work” (187) when the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

None of the individuals had any forewarning that their lives would be irreparably shattered. Illustrating the resonances between the experiences of these characters, and crafting narratives of these experiences that elicit empathy from the reader, Foer’s text (much like its precursor *Slaughterhouse-Five*) emphasizes the equally horrific acts against all of the victims regardless of their nationality. It implicates all of the perpetrators of the bombings in inhumane actions. The novel offers what David Simpson (2006) calls “a dialectical understanding of violence and a recognition that there can be no convincing absolute distinction between us and them” and that “[w]e too are the torturers” (9, 138).⁸ While *not* equating or collapsing the Allies and al-Qaeda, which would be overly simplistic and historically inaccurate, the novel does indicate disturbing linkages and the physical and psychic damage to human beings produced by violence for political ends.

The novel develops its sharp anti-war stance by providing detailed graphic descriptions of the horrors inflicted upon civilians in Dresden, Hiroshima, and New York City, “enlisting the reader as a concerned participant” alongside the characters (Nussbaum 1990, 390). Thomas provides the most fully fleshed out depiction of the bombing of Dresden in a letter he writes to his son—the only letter he actually sends him, even

though he writes him one every day from “May 31, 1963” to after his death on September 11, 2001 (235). That he chooses to send that particular letter highlights Thomas’ recognition that the Dresden bombing affected his entire life after that point. His narrative explains his disappearance from his son’s life and demonstrates to the reader the devastating toll that large-scale attacks have not only on those who perish but also on those who survive. According to Thomas, “[o]ne hundred planes flew overhead” so that Dresden’s population “heard a horrible noise, rapid, approaching explosions” (210). When he and his family emerged from the cellar in which they had taken refuge during the first raid, they faced a scene of utter destruction that the text emphasizes through repetition and negation: “there was no stoop in front of no house on no street, only fire in every direction” (211). In the “second raid,” which he describes as a “firestorm,” “the bombs were like a waterfall”; he “saw terrible things” like “humans melted into thick pools of liquid” and “bodies crackling like embers” (211). Moreover, he notes that because “many of the bodies had been destroyed there was never a list of the dead” (215). The stress of the visceral consequences of the bombing enlists the reader as a witness and recognizes the horror and inhumanity of a military attack carried out by the “heroic” Allied forces.

The Japanese woman Tomyasu’s narration of her experiences following the bombing of Hiroshima echoes that of Thomas in its vivid details of the gruesome destruction of human bodies. Following what she describes as “a flash,” she recalls that “glass from the windows was shattering all around me” and that she saw a man whose “skin was peeling off all over his body” and a girl whose “skin was melting down her. Like wax” (187). As in Dresden, the state of many of the bodies made it virtually impossible “to tell who was who.” She was unable to locate her daughter until the following day, recognizing her only from “her voice” as she called out “Mother!” When the interviewer asks, “Can you describe the black rain?” (188), Tomyasu does so not in general terms, but rather in terms of the specific destructive effects on her own daughter’s physical body. As she explains, “I couldn’t wipe them [the maggots] off, or I would wipe off her skin and muscle,” so “I held her in my arms” until, “[n]ine hours later, she died” (189). Her further assertion, “That is what death is like. It doesn’t matter what uniforms the soldiers are wearing” (189), serves as an overt indictment of war. As Simpson notes, the United States’ “[. . .] apparent tolerance of avoidable deaths [. . .] suggest[s] that we have *not* after all learned to suffer with others by way of a common sensing of the vulnerable body,” and is a reminder that “the history of foreign policy is *not* the history of a concern for human rights” (8, 148).⁹ By focusing on

how the bombing affects the human body, through a first-person maternal narrative, Foer's novel enjoins the reader's empathy and troubles the idea of just cause that underlies the standard rationale for the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as necessary to ending World War II in the Pacific, and as saving lives in the long run.

Although direct depictions of the 9/11 attacks remain virtually absent from the novel, the grandmother describes watching one of the planes strike the World Trade Center and the subsequent collapse of the towers repeatedly on her television screen in ways that link her narrative to those of Thomas and Tomyasu. The image of fire returns, this time in the form of "[a] ball of fire [that] rolled out of the building and up" and "smoke [that] kept pouring from a hole in the building" (225). Her narrative presents the destruction in poetic form that breaks from her otherwise mostly traditional paragraph format. She writes,

Planes going into buildings.
 Bodies falling.
 Planes going into buildings.
 Buildings falling. (231)

The line breaks emphasize the absurdity and reality of each assertion. The shift to poetic form highlights the difficulty of representing in narrative what appears to be unrepresentable. In Thomas' own description of when he saw the first tower collapse on television, when "one hundred ceilings had become one hundred floors, which had become nothing," he notes that "I was the only one who could believe it" (272), precisely because he had survived the similarly unbelievable and horrific bombing of Dresden. Although none of the characters know exactly how Oskar's father died, since his body was never recovered, Oskar momentarily puts himself in his Dad's place (albeit hypothetically) when he goes up in the Empire State building and imagines what would happen if a plane hit: "there would be an enormous explosion, and the building would sway"; "there would be smoke coming up at me and people screaming all around me"; "It would be getting so hot that my skin would start to get blisters"; "I would jump" or "I would burn" (244-45). His ability to imagine the sequence of events and its material consequences derives from what he "read on the Internet" (244); from a whole history of similar documented deaths by bombings that include fire, burning or melting skin, and horrific death; and from a host of popular disaster films. Through first-person depictions of the parallel material effects on civilians among the bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima, and New York City, Foer's novel emphasizes that the three attacks are equally ghastly examples of inhumane actions, regardless of