

Falling Bodies: The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, 9/11, and Creative Nonfiction

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*Everything depends on the dense entanglement of affect, attention, the senses
and matter.*

—Kathleen Stewart, “Afterword: Worlding Refrains”¹

SITTING IN A LECTURE THEATER IN MELBOURNE, Australia in 2003, the lecturer played a section from filmmaker Ric Burns’s *New York: A Documentary Film*.² It presented a reenactment of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 using a range of contemporary photos, a voice-over by actor David Ogden Stiers, actors reading testimony from witnesses, extradiegetic music, sound effects, and academic talking heads. It was the story, largely, of immigrant workers who died after a fire broke out in their locked workroom. The lecture theater was womb-like in its dark warmth, silent save for the occasional sobbing of a student. The huge screen played out the story as a kind of film noir; only it was real.

Responding to an event in New York that took place about seventy years before I was born, I typified “the person geographically far away, having no personal connection to the victim(s),” whom E. Ann Kaplan discusses in her description of vicarious trauma.³ The victims were anonymous to me, yet somehow I was grieving for them. I was especially drawn to the approximately fifty-five young

¹ Kathleen Stewart, “Afterword: Worlding Refrains,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 340.

² *American Experience: New York— A Documentary Film*, episode 4, “New York: The Power and the People (1898–1914),” directed by Rick Burns, aired November 17, 1999, on PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/new-york/>.

³ E. Ann Kaplan, “Empathy and Trauma Culture: Imaging Catastrophe,” in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, eds. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 256.



women who jumped from the burning building to their deaths. Perhaps it was their last moment of liberation that affected me, the act of jumping. If “affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon,”⁴ these women were literally in between life and death.

I began researching the tragedy, focusing on my vicarious trauma. Images from the event published by newspapers and online didn’t affect me in the same way as the video reenactment. At the time, I didn’t realize that the images were staged, “mediatized”; I only discovered this after reading an essay on photojournalism by Ellen Wiley Todd and then going back to look at the photographs she analyzed in her essay.⁵ In the very act of posing scenes and cropping images to connect with their readership, newspapers had eliminated the story. I was looking for the narrative. Kaplan states that the effect of trauma is about “the need to share and ‘translate’ such traumatic impact.”⁶ I needed to write the narrative, I needed to share the trauma to translate this tragedy:

A girl jumps from the ninth floor of the Asch building. People on the sidewalk are screaming at her not to jump. But she has to jump. As she stands on the ledge, her back against the open window, the fire is burning the clothes off her back. Her head is bent forward so her hair doesn’t catch alight as she waves a handkerchief at the crowd. The windows on the floor beneath her start to explode. Tongues of flame lick at her feet. So she jumps. It’s a definite jump, as she bends her knees before she leaps over the edge. It’s not a graceful jump. Her arms begin to flail as she struggles to stay upright. There are gasps from the crowd, a few screams. Some people turn away. Others are transfixed, watching her as she falls. Suddenly, her dress catches on a hook jutting out of the wall below and she is suspended in the air, mid-fall. But the ladders still can’t reach her and so it is just a cruel pause before her inevitable death. She hangs there like a ragdoll until her dress burns itself free from her body and she resumes her fall. She lands on the pavement. Thud-dead.⁷

The excerpt above forms part of my creative reconstruction of the fire, *Raining Blood and Money*, for which I drew upon photographs, media reports, and eyewitness testimony. My choice to use creative nonfiction to share and translate my experience of trauma is significant; creative nonfiction focuses on the story behind the facts. My piece was published in the journal *Southerly* and reprinted in Delys Bird’s *Fire Anthology* in 2013. It is also reproduced here. Reviewers’ comments included the following: “Some stories need to be told and retold, and Atherton’s telling feels as fresh and visceral as if it happened yesterday”⁸ and “nothing could have prepared me for the impact of Cassandra Atherton’s [piece].... [It brings] the scene to life in all its unimaginable horror.”⁹ These quotes suggest that my work brought the Triangle fire back into public consciousness. I wasn’t the first writer to contribute to this resurgence of interest, however, but one of many focused on trauma and its reconstruction for new audiences. Indeed, the Triangle

⁴ Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–29.

⁵ Ellen Wiley Todd, “Photojournalism, Visual Culture, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2, no. 2, (2005): 9–28.

⁶ Kaplan, “Empathy and Trauma Culture,” 256.

⁷ Cassandra Atherton, “Raining Blood and Money,” *Southerly* 72, no. 2 (2012): 50.

⁸ Jonathan Shaw, “Southerly 72/2: True Crime.” *Me Fail? I Fly* (blog), April 18, 2013, shawjonathan.wordpress.com/tag/cassandra-atherton/.

⁹ Karenlee Thompson, “*Fire: A Collection of Stories, Poems and Visual Images*, Edited by Delys Bird: Book Review.” *Karenlee Thompson* (blog), March 9, 2013, karenleethompson.wordpress.com/2013/03/09/fire-a-collection-of-stories-poems-and-visual-images-edited-by-delys-bird-book-review/.

fire's connection to 9/11 was not lost on journalist Joshua Brown, who was arguably one of the first to bring it back to public awareness in 2001: "The people who jumped from the towers, bodies silhouetted against the blue sky in their terrible plummet to earth, evoked to me the desperate falls of the young women and men in the . . . Triangle Shirtwaist fire who, trapped on unreachable floors, leapt to their deaths to escape the flames."¹⁰ In an affective and relational moment, Brown's memory of the 9/11 jumpers "evoked" memories of the victims of the Triangle fire. It is significant that Brown's reporting incorporates the language of the creative nonfiction writer because it demonstrates the way that imaginative language can heighten emotion and responses to tragedy.

In this essay, I argue that the collective memories of the Triangle and 9/11 fires are mediated recollections. In this way, significant media staging of the affective aftermath of both disasters has led to the overriding image of corpses lining the sidewalk with police officers and bystanders in the case of the Triangle fire and 9/11's iconic photograph by Richard Drew of *The Falling Man*.¹¹ Both visuals encourage a vicarious trauma, but more important, the first ends with the moments after death, while the second defers death by suspending in time the moments before it takes place. Canadian affect theorist Brian Massumi's theory of future menace lends a deeper meaning to a reading of these deaths. His scholarship on the ontology of threat and, more specifically, discussions of our enslavement to constant and future threat is essential to an understanding of 9/11, in particular. This is because Massumi is concerned with the fear and expression of future panic, its connection to existence and the possibility of extinction. The "future reality of threat" is impending on both a physical and metaphorical level: the viewer anticipates the falling man hitting the pavement, just as the threat of terrorism has become "an impending reality" after the World Trade Center attacks.¹² This extension beyond the frame of immediate threat mirrors my approach to writing about what exists beyond the bounds of the frame: the infinite threat.

Creative nonfiction, or "the literature of reality," allows for extension beyond the frames of a photograph or video, a kind of reanimation of history.¹³ In writing my piece on the Triangle fire, my aim was to create a picture in the reader's mind by using literary techniques to illuminate the facts. With a piece of creative fiction, there is no visual material image; rather, the reader must create everything afresh. As the "godfather" of this genre, Lee Gutkind explains that the aim of creative nonfiction is "not only to communicate but to affect . . . a reader. The different pictures that we draw must make an impact upon our readers."¹⁴ In this way, the punctum in a piece of creative nonfiction takes the reader beyond the frame of the narrative, to an individualized disturbance.

THE STAGING OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN THE TRIANGLE FIRE

While researching my creative nonfiction narrative, I discovered that until 9/11, the Triangle fire had all but disappeared from public consciousness. New York University acquired the Asch building in 1929, and while a plaque and annual commemorations attracting locals memorialized the deaths of the Triangle Waist Factory workers, the event had ceased to be a significant topic of

¹⁰ Joshua Brown, "THE FRAGILE CITY; 'Orderly Lines of Jittery New Yorkers,'" *New York Times*, September 16, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/16/nyregion/the-fragile-city-orderly-lines-of-jittery-new-yorkers.html>.

¹¹ Richard Drew, *The Falling Man*, 2001, photograph, *New York Times*, September 12, 2001.

¹² Brian Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 54.

¹³ Lee Gutkind, *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

public discussion. Perhaps it was simply forgotten as time passed, or perhaps this was because the public believed the tragedy had received closure with its legacy of improved sanitation and fire safety laws. These new regulations included a “call to increase emergency exits, installation of fire walls, and easy accessibility to fire extinguishers, alarm systems, and automated sprinklers.”¹⁵ The tragedy was apparently laid to rest, until post-9/11 when it was resurrected by journalists, in their commentary on fire and falling victims, as an important point of comparison to the 9/11 tragedy.

Collective memories of the Triangle fire are based on the media’s representation of the tragedy in 1911, largely the Brown Brothers’ photographs published in William Randolph Hearst’s *New York American* newspaper, which are now available on the internet.¹⁶ Journalist Joshua Brown’s connection of this fire with the events of 9/11, only a few days after the collapse of the Twin Towers, demonstrates Lauren Berlant’s argument that “[a] situation usually gets its shape from the way that it resonates strongly with previous episodes.”¹⁷ September 11 overtook the Triangle as the deadliest fire in the history of New York, and criticism of emergency egress routes in the aftermath of the disaster echoed the safety concerns raised in the wake of the Triangle fire. It could be argued that the Triangle legacy of increasing emergency exits was not fulfilled in the construction of the Twin Towers. Indeed, people who jumped from this building “provided powerful testimony on . . . the adequacy of the exits. Each floor had three exits to serve an acre of space—or roughly the area occupied by a football field By building fewer staircases, it could make more of each floor available for rent.”¹⁸ With its relational connections, the Triangle fire returned to public consciousness and this “media-orchestrated collective experience”¹⁹ was reignited. After close scrutiny of the photos taken of the Triangle fire, many scholars agree that several of the aftermath photos were staged both on-site and in postproduction. As Tina Margolis, Karen Keller, and Julie Rones assert, “If we place Triangle Fire as the final photograph in the sequence of photos identified as taken after the fire, it becomes apparent that it is the culmination of the actions seen in the preceding photographs presented here and that it has been staged. The scene suggests the men are gazing at the unfolding calamity, but logistically this is improbable.”²⁰

Similarly, Wiley Todd notes “the figure of a male victim whose awkward twisted right leg has been straightened in later photos.”²¹ In fact, the iconic photograph from the tragedy, identified by Wiley Todd as “[p]oliceman and bystanders stand near the bodies of Triangle Fire victims on the Greene Street sidewalk,” had been manipulated for newspaper readers. Appearing on the front page of the *New York American* the day after the fire, the staging encourages the gaze in its composition. Wiley Todd argues that it is the “surreptitious gaze of the liminal male [bystander

¹⁵ “Laws and Rise of Unions,” *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire* (blog), accessed 5 May, 2021. drexelengl102winter.blogspot.com.au/p/laws-and-rise-of-unions.html.

¹⁶ The Brown Brothers were early compilers and proprietors of stock photos. Images can be found here: “Photos & Illustrations,” Remembering the 1911 Triangle Factory Fire, Kheel Center, Cornell University, accessed March 18, 2021, www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/primary/photosIllustrations/index.html.

¹⁷ Lauren Berlant, “Affect in the End Times: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant,” interview by Jordan Greenwald, *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 20, no. 2 (2012): 71.

¹⁸ Kevin Flynn and Jim Dwyer, “Falling Bodies, a 9/11 Image Etched in Pain,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/09/10/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/falling-bodies-a-911-image-etched-in-pain.html?_r=0.

¹⁹ Berlant, “Affect in the End Times,” 71.

²⁰ Tina Margolis, Karen Keller, and Julie Rones, “Constructed Memory and the Paradox of Empathy: Reconsidering an Image of the Triangle Fire,” *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* 39, no. 1–2 (2011): 25.

²¹ Todd, “Photojournalism,” 15.

that] marks the bodies as being on display, if only for a kind of troubled or furtive look that he engages in."²² This experience is intensified with the postproduction editing of the photographs. Cropping tightens and simplifies the photo's composition by getting closer to the subject and eliminating extraneous details. In the instance of the Triangle fire photo, it removes everything but the corpses in the foreground and the posed police officers and bystanders near the bodies. This "intense proximity" brings readers "closer to victims, in some cases to observe uncovered faces."²³ This invitation to look encourages the newspaper reader as voyeur. And in the words of Matthew Ryan Smith, "[L]ooking at images of others who have fully lost their agency represents a crisis of morality."²⁴

While witnesses of the Triangle tragedy reported that "the images of death were seared deeply in their mind's eyes,"²⁵ photos in newspapers courted even more intense scrutiny. Repeated staring and intense inspection and examination are made easier when staged photographs are published in newspapers and read in the privacy of one's home. In public, approaching corpses and staring into their faces is considered inappropriate, whereas many of the Triangle photos have been manipulated to encourage this level of scrutiny. This fact is particularly significant in light of Kaplan's assertion that "most people encounter trauma through the media."²⁶ However, mediated trauma manipulates the viewer, and therefore any form of vicarious trauma experienced is due to the staged aftermath and postproduction editing. It is a response to the artificial and creates a further barrier between the immediacy of the tragedy, the on-site witness, and the newspaper reader. Linda S. Kauffman, drawing on Frederic Jameson's *The Dialectics of Disaster*, declares that "we no longer have any way of feeling, outside the media's framing of [disasters]."²⁷ In applying this idea to the collective memory of the Triangle fire, the iconic posed, cropped photo works to create a similar response and image in readers' minds. However, the staging of the tragedy and the editor's searing of the same iconic photo into the collective memory creates only empty empathy in the reader. The photo is "still-life . . . not actual life as lived."²⁸

Kaplan identifies two forms of empty empathy. The first is based on "brief exposure to . . . images,"²⁹ a reference to modern media saturation. The second is defined as

fragmentation . . . [where] the array of separate images of suffering without any context or background information provided, and focusing on the pain of strange individuals whom we see at a distance cannot elicit more than a fleeting empathy. There is then a rapid diminution of the affect. There is no socio-political context for actually putting ourselves in the situation of those suffering from the catastrophe, for experiencing it deeply and enduringly. Succession and fragmentation usually involve either close-ups of suffering individuals or images of an anonymous mass of people.³⁰

²² Ibid., 14.

²³ Ibid., 8, 16.

²⁴ Matthew Ryan Smith, "Relational Viewing: Affect, Trauma and the Viewer in Contemporary Autobiographical Art," (PhD thesis, University of Western Canada, 2012), 41.

²⁵ "About the Triangle Fire," *Modern American Poetry* (Framingham: Modern American Poetry), www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pinsky/triangle.htm. Accessed May 15, 2021.

²⁶ Kaplan, "Empathy and Trauma Culture," 255.

²⁷ Linda S. Kauffman, "World Trauma Center," *American Literary History* 21, no. 3 (2009): 647.

²⁸ Margolis, Keller, and Rones, "Constructed Memory," 25.

²⁹ Kaplan, "Empathy and Trauma Culture," 268.

³⁰ Ibid., 264.

This second definition sums up the staged photos of the Triangle fire. The lack of context and the tightness of the frame work against empathy and base any vicarious trauma of the reader on a flawed and artificial experience. While it might seem ironic that in attempting to elicit a reaction, the posed, cropped photos trigger only hollow responses, Kauffman argues that America has an “addiction . . . to media-driven empty empathy.”³¹ In this way, photographers and editors can author collective memories by framing a tragedy and encouraging voyeurism.

RICHARD DREW’S THE FALLING MAN, BRIAN MASSUMI’S FUTURE MENACE, AND 9/11

The photograph *The Falling Man* was taken at fifteen seconds past 9:41 A.M. on September 11, 2001. It ran on page seven of the *New York Times* the following day, as well as in other newspapers nationally and internationally. Outrage from members of the public who deemed the image “an obscene representation of a man’s death” resulted in many newspapers printing apologies and ending the publication or broadcasting of photos and footage of falling victims until 2007 when the photograph was reprinted in the *New York Times Book Review*.³² On the second anniversary of 9/11, Tom Junod wrote about Drew’s infamous photograph, arguing that it wasn’t so much the picture but “the story behind [that] single image from September 11 that struck such a raw and terrifying nerve that it was almost immediately banished from public view.”³³ The photo was clearly manipulated in postproduction, with its extreme close-up limiting its clarity. The processing and fragmentation of this image actually curtails its intensity; the image relies on the context to viscerally affect the viewer. As Denisa Krausova declares, “The lack of scale and perspective in the frame disorients the viewers and prevents them from understanding the extent of trauma which directly affected most of the city. The composition excludes all signs of destruction. It isolates the man from the fire, smoke, damaged structure or anything disturbing and lets him fall completely taken out of context.”³⁴ The fragmentation gives the viewer a sense that he or she is “peeking in on the action . . . [without any] context through which to organise empathic feelings,” and this is perhaps why the photo proliferated on “the more obscure channels such as Internet sites that traffic in sensational and pornographic material.”³⁵ These images “became, by consensus, taboo—the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes.”³⁶ Writer Frank Rich quotes Drew calling *The Falling Man* “the most famous picture nobody has ever seen.”³⁷ The labeling of this picture as taboo served only to encourage voyeurism. People publicly discredited the image, yet were privately riveted by it. If, in the case of the Triangle fire, people could scrutinize photos in the newspaper in the privacy of their homes, 9/11 took this private viewing to a whole new level. With the ability to zoom in on images and to replay YouTube clips repeatedly, viewing

³¹ Kauffman, “World Trauma Center,” 647.

³² Aaron Mauro, “The Languishing of the Falling Man: Don DeLillo and Jonathan Safran Foer’s Photographic History of 9/11,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 3 (2011): 585.

³³ Tom Junod, “The Falling Man,” *Esquire Magazine*, September 1, 2003, <https://classic.esquire.com/article/2003/9/1/the-falling-man>.

³⁴ Denisa Krausova, “September 11 and the Falling Man: The Legacy of the Most Famous Picture Nobody Has Ever Seen” (self-published paper, 2011), www.academia.edu/1968317/September_11_And_The_Falling_Man_The_Legacy_Of_The_Most_Famous_Picture_Nobody_Has_Ever_Seen.

³⁵ E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 95.

³⁶ Krausova, “September 11,” 3. Krausova quotes Tom Junod and Frank Rich here.

³⁷ Frank Rich, “Whatever Happened to the America of 9/11,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2006.

The Falling Man was, for some, like watching a still from a peep show. Without the context of 9/11, *The Falling Man* is, simply, an anonymous figure, upside down against a striped background. Given the tight frame, the image is little more than “a businessman, . . . upside down in what seems uncannily like a pose of normalcy. The photograph’s composition is highly symmetrical; the man’s body is perfectly parallel to the vertical girders on the WTC, and his legs are lifted as if marching to work.”³⁸ Separated from 9/11 and imminent death, this photo loses much of its ability to elicit empathy.

The Triangle fire photograph depicts corpses as its central focus, while the 9/11 image presents a man in his “about-to-die moment.”³⁹ What both tragedies have in common is victims jumping to their deaths, rather than being consumed by flames. In the Triangle fire, approximately fifty-five people jumped to their deaths, while in the 9/11 tragedy there may have been as many as two hundred. It is this aspect of the tragedies to which I was first drawn and which “stuck” to me and “drove” me—to use the terms of Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg⁴⁰—to focus on “the jumpers” as the protagonists of my narrative. Quite significantly, the term “jump” was replaced with “fall” in the literature and reportage surrounding 9/11 in an attempt to convey the lack of choice behind the victims’ deaths. Although many commentators romanticized this final act of jumping as a brave decision, “witness accounts suggest that some people were blown out. Others fell in the crush at the windows as they struggled for air. Still others simply recoiled, reflexively, from the intense heat.”⁴¹ A former New York City chief fire marshal, Louis Garcia, made this clear in his statement: “This should not be really thought of as a choice. . . . If you put people at a window and introduce that kind of heat, there’s a good chance most people would feel compelled to jump.”⁴² The replacement of the term “jumping” with the word “falling” as a descriptor of this final act was made in the media to avoid any suggestion of suicide and to more fully describe the probable events leading up to the moments of death. The more chaotic term “fall” and the lack of control over the environment that it denotes intensifies the shock of response while also emphasizing the unexpectedness of death. In addition, scholars such as Aimee Pozorski, Joanne Faulkner, and Özden Sözalán point out that the word *fall* also connotes the loss of innocence;⁴³ in this case, the lost innocence is America’s, which post-9/11 becomes a “collective narrative.”⁴⁴ Massumi’s theory of “self-renewing menace” further illuminates this fall from grace.⁴⁵

³⁸ Laura Frost, “Still Life: 9/11’s Falling Bodies,” in *Literature After 9/11*, eds. Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (New York: Routledge, 2013), 191.

³⁹ Joseph M. Conte, “Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and the Age of Terror,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 3 (2011): 557.

⁴⁰ Seigworth and Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” 1.

⁴¹ Flynn and Dwyer, “Falling Bodies.”

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Scholars, including these three, associate the biblical “fall” with a loss of innocence. In this way, the literal falling of victims to their death in 9/11 is equated to the American nation’s loss of innocence, possibly extending this to the Western world. See Aimee Pozorski, *Falling After 9/11: Crisis in American Art and Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Joanne Faulkner, “Terror, Trauma, and the Ethics of Innocence,” in *Trauma, History, Philosophy (With Feature Essays by Agnes Heller and György Márkus)*, eds. Matthew Sharpe, Murray Noonan, and Jason Freddi (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 122–41; and Özden Sözalán, *The American Nightmare: Don DeLillo’s Falling Man and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011).

⁴⁴ Cheryl Lynn Duckworth, *9/11 And Collective Memory in US Classrooms: Teaching About Terror* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

⁴⁵ Massumi, “Future Birth,” 53.



I am not alone in being haunted by these specific victims of 9/11. Anthony Lane wrote in *The New Yorker*: “The most important, if distressing, images to emerge from those hours are not of the raging towers, or of the vacuum where they once stood; it is the shots of people falling from ledges.”⁴⁶ These falling people are in limbo with no firm foothold anywhere. Photography suspends them forever in time; “they freeze frame a calamity so great that the mind struggles, even months later, to comprehend the data being sent by the eyes.”⁴⁷

My own visceral response to *The Falling Man* comes not from the image itself, even though I can contextualize it as a man jumping from the North Tower of the World Trade Center after a terrorist attack, but from my response to infinite “future threat.” When the images from the Triangle fire and 9/11 are exposed as constructed and mediatized, the viewer’s focus is directed beyond the frame and context, prompting the question, “What happens next?” Massumi’s notion of preemptive threat is particularly pertinent because it considers not only the deferral of threat but also how it signals the possibility of extinction from future threats: “Threat is from the future. It is what might come next. Its eventual location and ultimate extent are undefined. Its nature is open-ended. It is not just that it is not: it is not in a way that is never over. We can never be done with it. Even if a clear and present danger materializes in the present, it is still not over. There is always nagging potential of the next after being even worse, and of a still worse next again after that.”⁴⁸

In photographic representations, *The Falling Man*’s plummet will never end, just as Western fears of the next tragedy and the one after that are endless. From a personal perspective, this future threat culminates in my panic that one day I might be forced to jump and end my life to escape an inferno. There is no evidence that this will ever happen, but I am overwhelmed with the thought that it might; that it’s possible. Just as the protagonist, Henry Perowne, in Ian McEwan’s novel *Saturday* demonstrates that living in the aftermath of trauma only intensifies the expectation of future threat, I cannot board a plane or see a plane in distress without fearing the possibility of an imminent terrorist attack. As Perowne states, “Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed.”⁴⁹ Milena Owens, who saw American Airlines Flight 587 crash in 2001, two months after 9/11, stated, “I heard the explosion and I looked out the window and saw the flames and the smoke and I just thought, ‘Oh no, not again’”; another witness Phyllis Paul stated, “[B]ecause of what happened on 11 September, it gave me a chill.”⁵⁰ Indeed, “[s]elf-renewing menace potential is the future reality of threat. . . . The future of threat is forever.”⁵¹ My reality is affective and continues to renew itself with the fear of impending threat. For me, when the iconic photos of the Triangle and 9/11 fires are contextualized, they are “threat-o-genic”—they become part of the process whereby these images are both “a present

⁴⁶ Quoted in Frost, “Still Life,” 180.

⁴⁷ Andy Grundberg, “Photography,” *New York Times Book Review*, December 2, 2001, 35, quoted in Barbie Zelizer, “The Voice of the Visual in Memory,” in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 170.

⁴⁸ Massumi, “Future Birth,” 52.

⁴⁹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 50.

⁵⁰ “Jet ‘Exploded’ Into Pieces,” *BBC News*, November 12, 2001, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1652158.stm.

⁵¹ Massumi, “Future Birth,” 53.

sign of a future event that may or may not come to pass.⁵² They are reminders of the threats that eventuate, and they feed the feeling of ominousness for the future. Everyone has a story about what they were doing when the Twin Towers were destroyed; in the hours before they became part of what the former mayor of New York Rudolph Giuliani labeled “the 9/11 generation.”⁵³ September 11 is a trigger, it “marks a threshold... [and] can be considered a turning point at which threat-environment took on an ambient thickness.”⁵⁴

Everybody wants to tell his or her personal 9/11 narrative; it’s cathartic. It’s a way of coping with the future menace. It is similar to the way people are able to remember what they were doing when JFK was assassinated or Princess Diana died. I was marking student work when the image of one smoking tower filled the television screen. Naively, I initially assumed that a pilot must have made a fatal error in judgement. I did not see it coming; even though I had watched the coverage of the first war in Iraq and had understood the possibility of retaliation against the West, I was shocked. This kind of moment is partly illuminated by Massumi’s theory of future threat when he states, “In today’s complex ‘threat environment,’ threat is ever present but never clearly present. . . . So that even if you sense it coming, it still always comes as a surprise.”⁵⁵ In addition, this element of surprise essential to any experience of fear is heightened when the future threat is fueled by our past experiences. Kaplan emphasizes this when she discusses how after 9/11 she began to flash back to her experience living through the London Blitz.⁵⁶ She demonstrates how past and present trauma can integrate; that trauma is fluid. This, on some level, substantiates our ongoing fear of future threat, as our personal histories of fear are fused with our unfolding reactions.

In the months after 9/11, after an oversaturation of media coverage and even conspiracy theories flooding new media, I found myself traveling to New York for work commitments. While 9/11 was a terrible tragedy, it was in the past. What interested me was how, as Massumi expresses it, the security at airports “pre-emptively produce[d] the threat environment it respond[ed] to,” while paradoxically seeking to reassure its customers.⁵⁷ Never before had I been asked to take off my shoes before I passed through metal detectors. Never before had liquid in carry-on luggage been limited to protect passengers from the threat of liquid explosives.⁵⁸ Even taking my computer out of its case was new to me. These changes to the usual routine at airports, coupled with notices and voice-overs about being “alert but not alarmed” “brought threat from its looming future into the space of the present.”⁵⁹ As I boarded the plane, all these safety measures that had been put in place to make me feel safe had only served to undermine any feeling of security I might have had; they had intensified my fear of the future.

As Kaplan did in her intriguing story of “wander[ing] around [her] neighborhood between Union Square and SoHo, trying to absorb what had happened,”⁶⁰ I tried to understand my reaction

⁵² Brian Massumi, “The Space-Time of Pre-emption: An Interview with Brian Massumi,” interview by Charles Rice, *Architectural Design* 80, no. 5 (2010): 34.

⁵³ Massumi, “Future Birth,” 60.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵⁵ Massumi, “Space-Time of Pre-emption,” 34.

⁵⁶ Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 13.

⁵⁷ Massumi, “Space-Time of Pre-emption,” 34.

⁵⁸ “Liquids, Aerosols and Gels,” Regulation Impact Statement Updates, Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, August 28, 2015, <https://ris.pmc.gov.au/2015/08/28/liquids-aerosols-and-gels>.

⁵⁹ Massumi, “Space-Time of Pre-emption,” 34.

⁶⁰ Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 2.

to *The Falling Man* and lingering fear by going to Ground Zero. I needed to put *The Falling Man* back into his context. Kaplan recalls, “My camera was my only companion. I snapped pictures (sometimes feeling guilty—was I invading people’s privacy?) in an attempt, I think, to make ‘real’ what I could barely comprehend.”⁶¹ Wandering around with her camera, she was “gradually able to attain a perspective on the media reporting, and to distinguish the different levels through which the catastrophe was being managed.”⁶² As a film scholar, Kaplan was able to analyze rather than be manipulated by representations of the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy. However, it required her to move away from televised live reporting and to wander around Union Square on her own. Kaplan made sense of the tragedy through her own eyes and in her own time. It took her weeks to go downtown and photograph Ground Zero. When she did, she found that there was a gap between what she witnessed and what was being reported, the “official position.”⁶³ Furthermore, Kaplan points out that responses to the attacks on 9/11 often differed depending on the literal closeness or distance from Ground Zero.⁶⁴

In July 2002 when I visited Ground Zero, I felt like an interloper; as an Australian, I guess I was. I had to acknowledge to myself that prior to this point, I had only noticed the Twin Towers on my way to the huge discount store, Century 21, across the road. Unlike Kaplan, I didn’t take photos as I wandered around Ground Zero. I took my camera, but when I reached the site, any intention I had of taking pictures evaporated; it was simply too voyeuristic and too sad. In the moment, I felt that so many had already been taken that the place seemed eerily familiar. In public, I felt uncomfortable scrutinizing what was the final resting place of so many victims. Even looking at the images in Kaplan’s book actually makes me feel uneasy. Noticing that I wasn’t using my camera, hawkers with commemorative books of photographs approached me. I had been warned by the concierge at my hotel that I shouldn’t purchase these books because none of the proceeds went to the victims’ families, and, accordingly, I didn’t buy any. However, it struck me that no one was saying this about the intense media coverage and the way newspapers and televised news services were effectively making their money in the same way.

The experience of traveling to Ground Zero contextualized the 9/11 disaster for me in a way that media images could not. I was exploring genius loci and finding that this place reanimated the past danger and heightened my sense of the ominous. This was a sensory overload, and I wanted to find a way to move past the empty empathy of fragmented, staged images to create a narrative that would move readers. I could never hope to “capture” the tragedy; I could only hope that a reader would be “captured by it,” and that this, in turn, would be accompanied by “a sense of being more alive.”⁶⁵ Indeed, as a writer, the Triangle and 9/11 tragedies had “drive[n] me towards movement, towards thought and extension.”⁶⁶ In short, these events had mobilized me creatively. The capacity to be affected and to affect someone else, as emphasized by Seigworth and Gregg, had moved me to contribute to the palimpsest of writing on the Triangle and 9/11 disasters.

⁶¹ Ibid., 10.

⁶² Ibid., 5.

⁶³ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁵ Brian Massumi, “Interview with Brian Massumi,” interview by Mary Zournazi, Assembly International: A Debate on Micro-politics, Self-Organization and International Affairs, accessed May 15, 2021. <http://www.assembly-international.net/Interviews/html/brian%20massumi.html>.

⁶⁶ Seigworth and Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” 2.

Creative nonfiction can return its reader to the moment of a tragedy by recontextualizing and reanimating the facts with literary creativity and techniques. In the composing a narrative about the Triangle and 9/11 fires, the “larger filmic perspective of the conflagration” is essential:

To understand this fire in context, a perception of the entire environment must be envisioned in one’s sensory and intellectual imagination, including the flames and smoke emanating from the building; the streets congested with panicked witnesses; the press, first responders, neighboring office workers, survivors, inconsolable family members, and the dead; the smell of the horses, smoke, burning fabric, charred hair, and incinerated flesh; the cries, the screams, the thuds on the ground; and the overwhelming and simultaneous action.⁶⁷

However, in addition to reconstructing the affective environment, it is important that the narrative triggers the reader to find his or her own individualized disturbance at the heart of the narrative. The punctum works to puncture the readers and move them beyond a return to the original tragedy to confront their own lingering fears. It encourages readers to “feel” threat because that is what makes threat “real.”⁶⁸

As for me, I am still in the thick of exploring my specific fears of future threat. My next piece of creative nonfiction begins here:

A man is forced towards the windows on the 106th floor of the World Trade Center. The heat is fierce, and behind him, Windows on the World restaurant is an inferno. He sticks his head out of the window as the smoke starts to choke him. He can’t see the apertures focused on the building. He edges his body out and then, suddenly, he is falling. Parallel to the North Tower of the World Trade Center, people will say that he appears to be walking to work. Only, he is upside down and his feet are walking on air, rather than the pavement. It’s 9:41:15 A.M. The architectural stripes of the building look like Hitchcockian wallpaper as he falls with seeming symmetry. But this is no *Vertigo*. As his shirt billows out at the back, pulled from the waistband of his trousers, he looks stork-like, on one foot. He never hits the ground; forever suspended in his final moment . . .

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⁶⁷ Margolis, Keller, and Roness, “Constructed Memory,” 25.

⁶⁸ Massumi, “Future Birth,” 53.