Truth-telling Fiction in a Post-9/11 World: Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine*

Although this book focuses on a new kind of truth-telling historical fiction that emerged in the 1990s, I have suggested throughout that the dynamic of amnesia and truth telling, which grew out of that decade’s “turn towards truth,” continues to be a vital strain of the current cultural climate. Like the fiction itself that evokes this dynamic, the cultural work of the novels must be understood in relation to so many recent events that manifest it: the 2006 Iran Holocaust denial conference and the international criticism of it; the disclosure of the Japanese army’s use of “comfort women” during World War II and the ensuing documentary histories and victim testimonies that belie Japan’s half-century of denial; the surge of interest in the historically neglected Bataan Death March and in the Pacific theater of World War II; newly formed truth commissions to redress histories of mass violence in a number of countries; and the paradigmatic shift in American studies to a transnational perspective of history and a broader collective sensibility that reflects this. Positioning truth-telling historical fiction within this rich matrix reveals the many fields in which a paradox of denial and truth telling plays out.

To see this new form of the historical novel in light of a global climate of truth telling extending from the 1990s into the twenty-first century, it is helpful to address the post-9/11 cultural and literary landscape. Pursuant to a post-9/11 climate marked by a politics of fear and evisceration of American civil liberties, we have collectively begun to uncover what the *New York Times* journalist Jane Mayer calls “the dark side” of the War on Terror and to reflect critically...
on it: as a number of recent books by journalists and former members of the Bush administration and the military reveal, a good deal of truth telling about the event and its aftermath remains. In the wake of 9/11, the novel that attends to history continues to provide a psychological and empirical component to such official truth telling. By studying two important novels published since 9/11, Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002) and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), this final chapter identifies some facets of the post-9/11 literary imagination and begins to chart the evolution of truth-telling historical fiction in this context. By situating these texts in a contemporary fiction that—although it remains invested in fundamental aspects of the postmodern—differs from its postmodern predecessors, I hope to show the structural and ontological threads between postmodernism, truth-telling historical fiction of the 1990s, and fiction of the current moment. *Emperor* and *Falling Man* represent a plain shift away from a postmodern perspective marked by self-consciousness and formal fragmentation, instead treading an appreciably human psychological and emotional territory. In their narrative structures—which proceed according to the workings of memory—and in their recursive concerns with personal and cultural memory and forgetting, both *Falling Man* and *Emperor* write against the postmodern tendency of amnesia, extending the truth-telling project of the novels that inform this study. Yet these post-9/11 novels embrace neither the metahistorical scope and argument involved in *Americana*, *Underworld*, and *Paradise* nor the trenchant recasting of nationally ensconced historical periods such as the Civil War in *Free Enterprise* and the Puritan age in *Holder of the World*. Reflecting perhaps the humbling and ruminative effect of 9/11, *Falling Man* and *Emperor* work on a smaller scale: narrow and deep, private and utterly human. DeLillo and Otsuka write against amnesia, in part, by drawing on personal histories of their own families to focus 9/11 and Executive Order 9066 through a single New York and Japanese American family, respectively. Moreover, both novels tell their stories in short, episodic, loosely connected scenes—images, conversations, memories, interludes, and dreams—that shift between past and present and alternate points of view between different family members. With narratives, then, that work psychologically and evocative of visceral memory and trauma, *Falling Man* and *Emperor* trace the way the events of September 11 and the internment of Japanese Americans reconfigured the emotional landscape, memory, and perception of those directly affected. In this sense, these novels deepen our existing understanding of these