

Remembering 9/11: personal and political narratives in post-traumatic memoirs

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Abstract: Whether personal or political, the memoirs of 9/11 explore trauma, shape identities, and contribute to collective memory. This article examines how narratives by survivors, those who lost family members, and political decision-makers express the fragmented experiences of that day, offering a broad range of voices that tell the story of 9/11 in their own way. Alissa Torres’s graphic memoir, *American Widow* (2008) and Lauren Manning’s *Unmeasured Strength* (2011) are poignant personal accounts of resilience and overcoming trauma. Vice President Dick Cheney’s political memoir *In My Time* (2012) provides an official, objective description of the day that changed the world in September 2001. The memoir presents a political framing of 9/11 as a justification for subsequent policies, including the War on Terror, the invasion of Iraq and the USA Patriot Act. While engaged with the national tragedy, Cheney’s writing lacks the personal stakes found in Torres’s or Manning’s trauma-filled narratives. The three texts will be analysed contrastively, using an interdisciplinary approach that combines trauma theory, cultural studies, and narrative theory.

Keywords: 9/11 memoirs; trauma narratives; collective memory; resilience; political testimony; cultural memory.



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Introduction: 9/11, fiction and cultural memory

In the very first year of the new millennium, the world witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on 11 September. We all watched it numbly on television, as if it had been an action film or an apocalyptic dystopia. This event has remained in the collective consciousness as the most tragic terrorist attack on American soil, with over 3,000 deaths and geopolitical consequences that have changed the world. Entering the realm of media representation and fictionalisation as soon as CNN went live from the disaster scene, 9/11, “a fiction surpassing fiction” (Baudrillard 29), sparked a very real series of military actions, an unprecedented tightening of immigration controls, surveillance under the USA Patriot Act, and a dramatic increase in Islamophobia across the West.



Fig. 1. 9/11 worldwide media (Torres 8)¹

¹ The images reproduced from Alicia Torres's *American Widow* (2008) are utilised as “visual quotations” in accordance with the fair use principles, solely for academic purposes. They function as part of the narrative discourse, and their inclusion is necessary to support the argument of the multimodal representation of trauma.

In an article titled “Lost in the Rhetorical Fog of War”, published in *The Independent* about a month after the event (October 2001)², commenting on the discourse that aimed to justify the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq – inaptly called the War on Terror – British journalist Robert Fisk questioned whether we have convinced ourselves that wars – our wars – are ‘movies’. He remarked that the only Hollywood film ever made about Afghanistan was a Rambo epic in which Sylvester Stallone taught the Afghan mujahideen how to fight the Russian occupation, helped to defeat Soviet troops, and earned the admiration of an Afghan boy. Fisk pondered if the Americans were “somehow trying to bring the movie to life” (3), shifting the events triggered by the 9/11 attacks into the realm of unreality and fiction. This quickly led to the development of a literary subgenre known as post-9/11 fiction (or simply 9/11 fiction, as some critics consider the prefix unnecessary), as well as poetry, drama, memoirs, and other literary works. Simultaneously, films, TV series, art installations, performances, graphic novels, comics, and other elements of contemporary pop culture addressing 9/11 and the War on Terror also proliferated. Whether engaging with trauma, politics, or conspiracy theories (further fictionalised, as in Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge*) or, in later years, with memorialisation and remembrance of the tragedy, *lest we forget*, these cultural products related to these events fall into a category resembling the ‘war genre’.

At the personal level, witnessing the attacks on TV, on a quiet afternoon in Eastern Europe, had an unexpectedly significant impact on my academic career. I was prompted by the revelation that literature was being written very shortly after the events happening in the immediate reality, an example being Iain Banks’s *Dead Air*, a novel whose incipit is, in fact, the televised news of the attacks – this time in the UK – and which features on the cover a plane heading to a stylised tower. More importantly, this novel was published in 2002, so, very close to the events themselves. The publication of my book on the matter, *British and American Representations of 9/11. Literature, Politics and the Media* (2018) exhausted me psychologically to the point where I had to put the topic on hold for a while to heal my mind from the wounds left by close readings that exposed collective and personal trauma.

In the meantime, however, the world had continued to spin, and the epochal event that marked the beginning of the millennium was followed by other events of the same category and impact, which gradually faded into the background, into the realm of memory and remembrance. When I felt the urge to revisit 9/11 fiction, I wondered whether it would stand the test of time, becoming a fully-fledged subgenre, like Holocaust or Gulag literature. The paradigm had shifted. Some novels had indeed remained mainstays – DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Updike’s *Terrorist*, McEwan’s *Saturday*, Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, or even Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. However, as Tim Gauthier stated in his presentation delivered during the “Writing in a World on Fire: Perspectives on War and Climate Change” conference in Bucharest (2025), more recent 9/11 fiction focuses more on an affective heritage, relegating the event to the background. I believed I was at a safe distance that

² <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2001/10/09/lost-rhetorical-fog-war>. Accessed 21 Aug. 2005.

allowed me to explore more straightforward and personal testimonies of 9/11, which led me to an area previously unexplored – memoirs, filtered through the lens of Memory Studies.

Playing a crucial role in the people's perception and recounting of traumatic events, such as 9/11, memory attracts a significant amount of discussion in relation to fictional narratives. For example, Gander et al, who do not address 9/11 directly, note that memories included in fictional accounts may resemble autobiographical memories to a certain extent. Nonetheless, they require attention due to their construction (Gander et al. 308-324). 9/11 fiction often blends real-life trauma with fictional elements in order to intensify emotional impact (see Versluys 2009; Gray 2011; Gauthier 2015). Psychologically, it has been proven that fictional and autobiographical memories are strikingly similar in terms of phenomenological qualities, although they stem from different cognitive processes (Yang et al. 1093). As Versluys (24-27) and Gray (34-38) have argued, the boundary between memory and imagination is blurred in hybrid narratives which weave factual detail with fictional representation. According to these critics, such narratives support grappling with trauma, loss and resilience, and preserve the experiences of individuals and communities, thus contributing to cultural memory and historical testimony.

Another highly relevant element is narrative form, which, if fragmented, nonlinear and disjointed, may reflect trauma's resistance to coherent narration, according to Penderson (*Trauma and Narrative* 97-109). However, the article "Trauma Narratives: It's What You Say, Not How You Say It" (2014) argues that fragmentation is not necessarily linked to PTSD, depression, anxiety, etc. "In summary, what individuals say during their trauma narratives (e.g., positive emotion words, negative emotion words, pronoun usage) and not the manner in which they say it (e.g., fragmentation, disorganisation) may be a more powerful associate of PTSD symptoms and other trauma-related reactions." (Jaeger 478). In the specific case of 9/11 fiction, narrative complexity evokes disorientation, rupture, and discontinuity, which are markers for both personal and collective trauma. In *9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness*, Tim Gauthier notes that disruptive narrative forms in 9/11 fiction also serve to cultivate empathy and the recognition of otherness, besides registering trauma (Gauthier 45-52).

The dynamics of storytelling in post-9/11 fiction also echo psychological accounts of trauma representation. Memory research suggests that traumatic recollections are rarely fixed; rather, they are reshaped through narrative over time. Gander et al. also note that the memory characteristics of fictional and factual accounts often overlap (308-324). Traumatic events like 9/11 are perceived and remembered through a combination of the two, which underscores the need to examine fictional representations as essential contributions to the collective memory of 9/11, a claim I also made throughout my study. (see Gheorghiu)

Autobiographical narratives and psychological well-being

Integrating (9/11) autobiographical narratives is crucial for understanding how individuals process trauma and its impact on psychological well-being. Unlike fictional

and media accounts, which reveal to a greater extent how trauma and cultural memory are constructed and perceived at a collective level, autobiographies offer additional insights into individual psychological processing of lived experiences. The intimate perspective they provide requires approaching such testimonies with the tools of psychological research on trauma recovery through self-narrative. In this way, they become more than personal documents: they become contributions to collective memory and remembrance. A highly relevant study in this respect, incidentally, referring specifically to 9/11, is Adler and Poulin’s “The Political Is Personal: Narrating 9/11 and Psychological Well-Being” (2009). The psychologists categorise the themes included in narratives of 9/11 into closure, redemption and contamination, and argue that authors who connect their personal experience to the broader national narrative attain redemption and well-being more easily, finding meaning in trauma and securing strengthened social bonds. Additionally, they claim (315), inscribing their personal narratives into collective/national memory also contributes to community healing.

Rubin et al provide complementary insights (63-75), examining the concept of self-narrative focus, which is the manner in which people insert significant, epochal events into their life narrative (63). Also valid is the other way round, how their *petites histoires* acquire coherence within a collective traumatic experience, and how they inscribe themselves into a broader, collective identity. Thus, narrative construction becomes a coping strategy – psychologically speaking – and a means of identity formation – sociologically speaking. Rubin et al.’s concept can be relevantly applied to 9/11 autobiographical accounts, which, as will be shown later, in all case studies selected, embed memories of the attacks with longer arcs in time: before, during and after September 11.

One cannot disregard the linguistic dimension of trauma narratives either, especially when they carry strong *personal* implications, as in the first two cases below. In “Linguistic Predictors of Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms Following 11 September 2001”, D’Andrea et al. investigate the correlation between linguistic features and trauma symptoms. According to their study, richer emotional vocabulary and cognitive processing markers indicate lower levels of PTSD. An immediate result of this finding would be that the act of narrating trauma can help psychological recovery; in other words, that narrative expression of trauma has a therapeutic potential (D’Andrea et al. 1048). At least one of the three texts below, namely Manning’s, seems to justify this assumption. Similar findings have been identified in the study “Narratives of 9/11: Relations among Personal Involvement, Narrative Content, and Memory of the Emotional Impact over Time”, whose authors claim that people directly affected by the tragedy produce narratives marked by intense emotion and lower cognitive elaboration. Conversely, the cognitive process is more developed, and the emotional content is underdeveloped (or completely lacking) in the case of more detached storytelling (Fivush et al. 1104-1106).

Along these lines, this paper examines three memoirs reflecting different *personal* experiences of 9/11: *American Widow* (2008) by Alissa Torres, illustrated by Sungyoon Choi; *Unmeasured Strength* (2011) by survivor Lauren Manning; and *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (2011) by former Vice President Dick Cheney and

Elizabeth Cheney. Due to space limitations, it focuses solely on the initial reactions and thoughts of the three authors to the news of the attacks on the World Trade Centre in two cases, and on the physical reactions of a person experiencing them directly in the third.

American Widow: visual testimony and the politics of loss

The theoretical framework outlined above highlights how narrative form, linguistic expression, and thematic structures mediate the relationship between trauma and identity in writings. Graphic memoirs, through their interplay of image and text, capture both the immediacy of trauma and the processes of memory and mourning. Alissa Torres's *American Widow* (2008) exemplifies this hybrid form. Combining minimalist, repetitive illustrations with raw text, Torres documents her life in the aftermath of her husband's death in the attacks. Her use of visual storytelling conveys the dissonance of mourning, torn between despair and resilience, grief and spiritual reflection. In addition, however, it also exposes systemic inequities faced by survivors and victims' families in post-9/11 America. The memoir invites readers to 'participate' in the kaleidoscopic nature of loss, devastation and tentative renewal. Everything is two-sided in this memoir: while describing her grief and desperation, as she was also pregnant when the attacks occurred (personal), Torres also recounts the bureaucratic nightmare surrounding victim compensation, the media's treatment of grieving families, and the broader implications of her immigrant husband's death in a fearsome, prejudiced and traumatised society, which proves inequitable to immigrants when it comes to providing support (political). In feminist terms, Torres presents a first-person, emotionally charged account of a profoundly personal rupture, but also a manifesto of her independence as she is faced with single parenthood and systemic failures.

The memoir begins with the media portrayal of the attacks (see Fig.1), then employs analepsis to create a framework of everyday family life (which supports Rubin et al.'s assumption above): the wedding in 1998, the joyful news that Alicia was pregnant, then, in August, the unfortunate news that Eduardo had been dismissed, followed shortly afterwards by him securing a job with a company located in the World Trade Center. Remarkably, September 11 was only his second day at work. The images below show the moment when Alicia was informed about the attacks. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2. Torres 34-35

The visuals from this point onwards depict both hope and despair. The hope that her husband might still be found alive – searching for clues, speaking to survivors, wandering the hospitals – clashing with the growing desperation and certainty that he is gone. All these persist until the final confirmation on September 22. (Fig. 3) Once the hope has gone, the tone shifts to determination, and the general tenor is much more political than personal.



Fig. 3. Torres 54

Torres's *American Widow* serves both as a personal testimony and a cultural record. By merging raw confession with stark visual imagery, the intimate grief evolves into a multimodal narrative that echoes collective trauma.

Survival and resilience in *Unmeasured Strength*

Unmeasured Strength by Lauren Manning, published in 2011, is another piece of feminine writing, namely an autobiographical account of 9/11, this time from the perspective of a survivor who escaped the North Tower with burns covering 82% of her body. One can infer from the title that the focus is on resilience, rebuilding one's life after a tragedy, and strength in refusing to be overcome by trauma. Both Torres and Manning highlight the physical and emotional toll on women, whether through widowhood or survival. However, while the former merely sketches it, without revealing too much – which may be part of a defence mechanism for coping with loss – Manning's memoir is a long, intricate, chronologically disrupted story to which the reader is directly linked. As if she said, 'I lived through this; you can at least be brave enough to read through the same thing.' (As a side note, a similar account was published by a survivor of the Colectiv fire in Bucharest, 2015, Alexandra Furnea's *Diary of 66: The Night I Burned Alive*, 2022, Humanitas, in Romanian; English edition 2024). Reading through tears is difficult, but the writers deserve it lest we forget.

As I veer left toward my elevators, I suddenly feel an incredible sense of otherworldliness. It's an odd, tremendous, quaking feeling, and everything... moves. The entire 110-story tower is trembling.

Then I hear a huge, whistling rush of air, an incredibly loud sound: shshoooooooooooooooooooo. My adversary is racing toward me, howling in fury at its containment as it plummets to meet me from above the 90th floor.

This is the moment and place of our introduction.

With an enormous, screeching exhalation, the fire explodes from the elevator banks into the lobby and engulfs me, its tentacles of flame hungrily latching on. An immense weight pushes down on me, and I can barely breathe. I'm whipped around. Looking to my right toward where the two women were talking, I see people lying on the floor covered in flames, burning alive.

Like them, I am on fire. (Manning 3)

As in Torres's case, the narrative revisits the past to describe the background story, then abruptly returns to the moment of impact: "The flames were consuming me, and as the first searing pain hit, I thought, this can't be happening to me" (Manning 56). The description is fast-paced, evocative, and nearly cinematic due to the intensive use of the present participles. The reader can almost feel her sensations.

The fire embraced my body tighter than any suitor, touching every inch of my flesh, clawing through my clothes to spread its hands over me, grabbing left and right, rifling over my shoulder blades, down my back, wrapping my legs in agony,

gripping my left arm, and taking hold of both my hands. I covered my face, but I could not scream. My voice was powerless. I was in a vacuum, the air depleted of oxygen, and everything was muffled. The screams, the roar of the fire, the shattering sound of breaking glass—all that was very far away. I was suspended in space. (Manning 56)

From the perspective of trauma theory, Manning’s writing style exemplifies what Cathy Caruth describes as *belatedness*: trauma resists assimilation into consciousness, emerging later in fragmented recollections that translate shock into narrative form (Caruth 4). The abrupt temporal shifts from the moment of impact back into memories of ordinary life, then fast-forward into the hospital, enact this disjunction between (lived) experience and (time-mediated) narration.

Beyond its harrowing scenes, Manning’s memoir is also a meditation on recovery and the rebuilding of identity. She traces the long passage through surgeries, grafts, rehabilitation, and psychological strain, but insists on presenting survival as a victory of will. In this respect, she illustrates what trauma theory describes as the transformation of catastrophe into a narrative of endurance (Caruth 3-8; McAdams 6-23; Penderson 97-99). Manning frames survival as agency, a deliberate decision to fight for her life against all odds. Her account also aligns with a broader cultural context: the national rhetoric of resilience that took shape in the United States after 9/11. Her focus on perseverance and strength mirrors the national focus on recovery. Even the paratextual elements point in this direction: the subtitle announces that we are going to read “a memoir of survival, hope and transformation,” while the cover artwork presents a woman (presumably the author herself) in a red dress, standing steadily in front of a building that appears to be in ruins, which is blurred, because the survivor is central. Bridging the individual and the collective prepares the ground for a very different kind of testimony: the objective and detached political memoir.

Power and political testimony in *In My Time*

In contrast to the two memoirs above, Vice President Dick Cheney’s political account, *In My Time*, follows a chronological, linear structure, particularly in its treatment of 9/11. Thus, Cheney avoids any connection with the usually disjointed and fragmented trauma narratives, providing a sample of memory politics in “trauma time” (Edkins 15), which is not meant to dwell on remembrance but to insist on threat, security and retaliation. The tone is strategic and retrospective, designed to reinforce Cheney’s political decisions. The memoir rarely (if ever) delves into emotional introspection, favouring clarity and resolve. It is a self-legitimising, not a confessional writing proper. The attacks justify a series of political decisions: the War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq, enhanced interrogation, and expanded surveillance. The representation of 9/11 is viewed through a national security lens, with little exploration of the human cost. While the accounts written (or drawn) by the two women-authors are personal, sometimes *also* dwelling on the political aspects of their experiences, Cheney’s extremely long memoir (over 600 pages), despite being subtitled *A Personal and Political Memoir*, is purely

political regarding 9/11. The events of the day are featured in the Prologue, which is tellingly subtitled “11 September 2001”:

In those first hours, we were living in the fog of war. We had reports of six domestic flights that were possibly hijacked, a number that later resolved to four. We had conflicting reports about whether the Pentagon had been hit by a plane, a helicopter, or a car bomb. We started getting reports of explosions across Washington, at the Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol, and the State Department. We heard there was an unidentified, nonresponsive plane headed for Camp David and another headed for Crawford, Texas; we also received word of a threat against Air Force One (Cheney and Cheney 3).

With the later justification that “We had many achievements to our credit, but the big test of our administration was yet to come. Our time in office would be largely defined by the unprecedented attacks of September 11, 2001” (Cheney and Cheney 328), the attacks are otherwise overlooked. It is only just before and after the attacks that Cheney’s interest is truly captured. This quote concludes a chapter, and the next, titled “A Nation at War”, begins with:

On the night of September 11, 2001, the Secret Service evacuated Lynne and me to Camp David, a secure location apart from the president, in case there were further attacks. On Wednesday morning, September 12, we flew back to Washington, now a wartime capital, so that I could attend a National Security Council meeting at 9:30 a.m.

I took newspapers with me on the helicopter. The *Washington Post’s* banner headlines read, “Terrorists Hijack 4 Airliners; 2 Destroy World Trade Center; 1 Hits Pentagon; 4th Crashes”. The *Washington Times’* headline was a single word: “Infamy” (Cheney and Cheney 329).

Nothing in between, nothing further. *In My Time* defends institutional authority, reinforcing confidence in the political system. Cheney presents himself as a stabilising force, asserting that his leadership decisions were justified and necessary. Emotion and grief do not sway this stance. The attacks serve as a moment of validation for the Bush–Cheney administration’s political actions. Cheney does not join the American citizens in collective trauma and shock; instead, he defends controversial policies like the USA Patriot Act and enhanced interrogation. He depicts these as vital, writing that “we had to do whatever was necessary to prevent another attack” (Cheney & Cheney 349). As Butler notes in *Prekarious Lives* (2004), “President Bush announced on September 21 that we have finished grieving and that *now* it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief” (29) and consequently, grief and vulnerability are banned or cancelled and made “into a resource for politics” (30). Cheney follows his President’s advice closely, his strategy transforming a private recollection into an extensive rationale for the War on Terror.

Closing remarks

The treatment of the precise moment of the 9/11 attacks in these three memoirs reveals fundamentally different relationships to trauma and memory. In *American Widow*, Alissa Torres portrays the moment of the attack through mediated perception: a phone call, confusion, and an anxious journey to the World Trade Center. Her experience involves delayed revelation and emotional displacement, capturing the profound disorientation felt by those outside the towers. Lauren Manning’s *Unmeasured Strength* provides a visceral encounter with catastrophe: she is physically engulfed in flames, and the memoir intensely focuses on the sensory shock of impact. By contrast, *In My Time* by Dick Cheney largely bypasses the moment of the attacks, moving quickly from a factual summary to a strategic response. This narrative choice reflects a different purpose: the memoir is not about bearing witness to trauma but about asserting control and authority in its aftermath. Thus, while Torres and Manning dwell on the attack as a personal and transformative rupture, Cheney utilises it as a political inflexion point. Taken together, these representations emphasise the divergent roles of the memoirist (mourner, survivor, or policymaker) and demonstrate how the act of narrating 9/11 becomes a means of constructing memory, meaning, agency, and power.

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