“I’m OK”: Levels of Communication and Trauma Recovery in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

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Abstract

Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* stands out from the nationalistic-toned American “9/11 novels”. It depicts the story of a young boy and his grandparents who are left with the aftermath of losing a loved one in the attack on the twin towers. However, the complexity of the three main characters and the depth of their individual and common traumas make the novel go beyond the usual nationalistic 9/11 narrative and focus on the personal and, consequently, the national trauma. This essay analyses the possibility of coping with and recovering from trauma through communication. Dominick LaCapra’s trauma theory notions of “working through” and “acting out”, as well as other traumatic memory research highlight the necessity of utterance in order to overcome trauma and to attempt an existence beyond it. In the instance of the three traumatized characters of the novel, the confessional language is entangled, broken and sometimes muted. This makes the recovery difficult in the case of the grandparents, almost impossible for the character of Grandpa. When it comes to the young boy, Oskar Schell, a more successful communication seems to open up the possibility of mental healing. These personal traumas are a reflection of a broader American trauma where an obsessive “rememoration” of the September 11 events and one-sided, revenge loaded public discourse do not seem to facilitate the national healing process. On all these levels, personal and community, the need and the difficult attempt to communicate the trauma of 9/11 does not necessarily grant recovery from it, but it facilitates a desired “working though” process.

**Keywords:** Jonathan Safran Foer, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, trauma, trauma theory, 9/11, coping, recovery, “acting out”, “working through”
The events of September 11, 2001 marked the beginning of the 21st century. Live news made anyone watching a TV screen that day – anywhere in the world – a witness to and, to some extent, an indirect victim of this atrocious event. Obviously, it quickly became a theme for many literary works, especially in the United States. In his article in the literary magazine *Commentary*, D.G. Myers notes that while it had taken more than a decade to incorporate the Holocaust into “American fiction”, the tragedy of 9/11 started appearing in novels only a couple of years following the attack. Any attempt to compare the two events would undoubtedly be inappropriate; however a parallel is often drawn in most of the scholarly discussions on the representation of 9/11 trauma in literature. The main reason for this would be the fact that both mass murders left behind individuals and communities bearing deep psychological traumas that need to be “told” in order to be remembered and overcome. Kristiaan Versluys discusses the difficulty of successfully tackling 9/11 as a subject of literary works because writing about it would “provide a context for [something so atrocious that it] seems to be without context”, as in the case of the Holocaust (“Novel” 142). This contextual emptiness could constitute the main reason why contemporary writers chose to represent it by focusing apparently on the tragedy’s impact on individuals and their families as a reflection of collective, national trauma. After extensive studies on trauma and numerous interviews with mainly Holocaust survivors, psychoanalyst Dori Laub concluded that it is crucial for someone having gone through life-altering tragic events to *tell and thus to come to know* one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past [...] in order to be able to live one’s life” (63). A similar necessity arose post 9/11 and several authors were quick to pick up on it and transform this necessity into trauma narratives.
Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (Extremely Loud)* is one of the few ‘9/11 novels’ that manages to present the trauma in a credible and nuanced way, thus achieving what Versluys calls “integrating what happened into a meaningful narrative” (*Blue* 14). Oskar Schell, the novel’s nine year-old protagonist who loses his father in the North Tower, his Grandma, and his estranged Grandpa (Thomas Schell) take turns in uttering their painful experiences. The child character, with hints of an autistic disorder or at least precocious articulateness and behaviour, is deeply affected by the loss of his parent. He sets off on a quest to find the lock to a key he discovers in his father’s closet – a metaphorical attempt to find closure. On the other hand, his grandparents carry the old and deep psychological wounds caused by the attack on their native Dresden during WW II, wounds which in the novel are juxtaposed with the loss of their son on 9/11.

These three main characters of the novel are desperately trying to “come to terms” with their past and present traumas by talking or writing about the past. Post-trauma specialist Dominick LaCapra talks about this process in terms of “writing trauma”, as opposed to the objectivity of “writing about trauma” (not done by the actual victim). By “writing [their] traumas”, the subjects ‘‘give a voice’ to their past’, “intimately bound with trauma” only to be able to subsequently take a step back from what has happened and not relive it obsessively (LaCapra 186). Bringing up one’s trauma from a state of “latency” and being able to talk about it is what LaCapra calls “working through”. The other phenomenon that is characteristic to traumatized subjects is the “acting out”: an inclination to “relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it” (LaCapra 142-43). The two psychological phenomena are often present in trauma victims and manifest themselves simultaneously. However the more these victims make the distinction between the past traumatic event and their present lives, the higher the chances of recovery.

In this essay I analyse the novelistic characters’ ability and limitations in revisiting and communicating individual¹ and, respectively, common, national traumatic memories in order to “come to terms” with them and find closure. I question the efficiency of the confessional language, bent and challenged in the novel.

¹ Writers like Foer construct characters with implied psychological depth for which the language is the process of self-revelation. It is important to acknowledge that the characters in the novel are fictional, yet for the purpose of this analysis, they offer the psychological model of real-life traumatized people.
in all three cases of traumatic rememoration and reflecting post-traumatic discourse at larger level, American society. As Versluys argues, “in a time of globalized witnessing and shared vicarious experience, an event like 9/11 is a rupture for everybody. As a consequence, there is a globalized need to comprehend, to explain, and to restore”. Thus, Foer creates a narrative that allows an entire community of survivor readers, direct “victims and mere bystanders” to go through a similar process along with the characters in the novel (*Blue 4*). Praised as often as criticized for the use of images, broken texts and even the overly precocious child protagonist, *Extremely Loud* might be “the 9/11 story we need” (Mullins 312) in order to attain a common closure. Grandpa, Grandma and Oskar find a way to recall and utter their painful past, but closure is not obvious in all three cases. Simultaneously, national victimization and the obsessive discourse on 9/11 has brought along anything but closure. Therefore, the “interwoven narratives” (Uytterschout 66) in *Extremely Loud* allow an analogical discussion on the multi-levelled communication as recovery from trauma.

**An “extremely loud” silence**

The communication of trauma, for the novelist, the readers and the traumatised characters is not always a straightforward, easily achievable endeavour. Birgit Däwes’ discussion on *Extremely Loud* centers on the “dynamic, multilaterally structured and complex” narrative structure. The chapters representing the voices of the three main characters complete or “foreshadow” each other (Däwes 538). Accompanied by other meta-textual, “visual devices” (Siegel pars.1-3) – pictures, drawings, altered texts, white or black spaces – the narrated passages show that the process of communication in the ensemble of the novel is arduous.

Foer sends the reader on a “Reconnaissance Expedition”2 (Foer 8) to detect and understand the broken voices of the characters. Of the seventeen chapters of the novel, nine are occupied by Oskar’s narrator voice directed towards the reader. Oskar actually *talks* to other people during his lock-finding expedition, to many people, even if they are strangers. He does not only resort to writing, and when he does, his letters are actually sent and their receivers reply to him. On the other hand, Grandma only

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2 Oskar’s Dad sets up games of discoveries in order to stimulate his son’s thirst for knowledge and social skills. Oskar recalls this as “looking for something that might tell me something” (Foer 8).
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talks to Oskar and his Mom, while Grandpa does not *speak* at all. Grandma and Thomas Schell senior (i.e. Grandpa) get to “write their trauma” in four chapters each, all in the form of letters. She addresses the letters to Oskar, while Grandpa addresses them to his son(s). Hence, the “*telling*” that Laub and other trauma scholars find so necessary for recovery, comes in different forms and it is heard by diverse witnesses.

Grandma and Grandpa are both the subjects of a recent common trauma: the loss of Thomas Schell in the 9/11 attacks. However, they also share an older trauma after they both had witnessed and barely survived the attacks on Dresden during the Second World War. In that attack, Grandma lost her sister, who was none other than Grandpa’s pregnant fiancée. Seven years after this attack, the two of them accidentally run into each other in a bakery in New York. In their respective letters, they give an account to this reunion which shows the additional layer of emotionally scarred experience. Not only do they have to deal with their dark past in Germany, but they also face the challenge of adapting as new immigrants in the US. Grandma recalls the moment they meet in that bakery: “The seven years were not seven years. They were not seven hundred years. Their length could not be measured in years just as an ocean could not explain the distance we had travelled, just as the dead can never be counted” (Foer 81). This shows the Schells’ difficulty to even fathom and process the impact the disaster events had on them as first-hand witnesses and victims. Both the Dresden bombings and 9/11 were events which resulted in such destruction that bodies of people were lost without a trace, including their parents, siblings and their son.

Their survivors’ guilt is what brings them together and at the same time makes their relationship impossible. They decide to stay together because they could be each other’s trauma memory “audience”. “Audience” is the term used by LaCapra when he discusses the importance of having someone to listen to the accounts of (Holocaust) trauma victims after the Second World War: “In the United States, the survivors didn’t have an audience [...]. To oversimplify, it was almost like going from Auschwitz to Disney World – and in Disney World, people don’t want to hear about Auschwitz. It’s a very different context” (158). In this new world that for so many immigrants meant freedom and the possibility to express themselves, Thomas Schell goes irremediably silent. He loses the ability to speak all the words of all the languages he has ever spoken. The language of his adoptive country gives him a physical pain as his “back ached with English” (Foer 109). This aphasia settles in
gradually. As Versluys also highlights, it is noteworthy that the first word he stops pronouncing is “Anna”, the name of his lost girlfriend, thus “suppressing his memory” of her instead of “coming to terms” with her death. Thomas admits at one moment in his epistolary confession that whenever he was left without her, the very essence of who he was got lost: “[Anna] went home with her father, the centre of me followed her, but I was left with the shell of me” (Foer 113, my emphasis). The second word that disappears from his vocabulary is “and”, a word that he considers “simple [yet] a profound word to lose” (Foer 16). The loss of this connector not only shows the loss of his “faculty of aggregation” words (Blue 87), but it consequently predicts the continuation of an illogical existence. The very human ability of speaking disappears because his traumatic experience took away his human essence, as even his surname – Schell – symbolically suggests. Uytterschout and Versluys mark this detail as well, in the context of Thomas Schell’s physical survival that does not necessarily involve an emotional one (222). Thus prior to 9/11 and the loss he shares with the other protagonists of the novel, Grandpa is already dead on the inside.

Speaking away his trauma fails, but writing it does not really succeed either in helping Grandpa restore meaning to his life. He writes a series of exactly dated letters, all revealed throughout the novel under the heading “WHY I’M NOT WHERE YOU ARE”. In the first letter, he states who the recipient would be: “To my unborn child” (Foer 16). This is an important detail that “contextualizes” and “foreshadows” something before it is revealed to the reader (Daëwes 538) as we will later find out that the recipient could be both Oskar’s father and Anna’s unborn child, yet the letters are never sent. As one of the leading scholars on Foer’s novel points out, this narrative technique only highlights the futility of the therapeutic act of written communication because his letters lack a recipient (Versluys, Blue 91). There is a need to share the event with someone that Laub, for instance, calls “listener”, someone that could help carry to the surface a part of the traumatic burden (69). However, Grandpa lacks such support. Except for one letter dated 4/12/78, all the letters end up buried in Oskar’s father’s empty coffin. In that one letter that Thomas Schell receives, Grandpa explains his failure to bounce back from his trauma into his own life: “And here I am, instead of there. I’m sitting in this library, thousands of miles from my life, writing another letter I know I won’t be able to send, no matter how hard I try and how much I want to” (Foer 216). “The letters contain the load of memory, misery, and guilt from which Grandpa cannot unburden himself because there is nobody to unburden to” (Versluys,
Blue 91). Even though he is willing to have his son as a listener and sends him one of the many letters, he is unable to establish a relationship with him.

All of Grandpa’s reunions seem to lead to a dead end. Even if he contemplates the fact that meeting Anna’s sister might help him recover from his loss, he quickly realizes this is not the case either. He writes “I think this will be good” (my emphasis) and uses the word “acceptable” as if to convince himself to try to “compromise” between grieving after Anna and trying to start a new life with her sister.

I thought we could run to each other, I thought we could have a beautiful reunion, although we had hardly known each other in Dresden. It didn’t work. We’ve wandered in place, our arms outstretched, but not toward each other, they’re marking off distance, everything between us has been a rule to govern our life together, everything a measurement, a marriage of millimetres, of rules, when she gets up to go to the shower, I feed the animals – that’s a rule – so she doesn’t have to be self-conscious, she finds things to keep herself busy when I undress at night – rule. (109)

The memory of his fiancée from Dresden is too strong to allow him to embrace a new relationship. One could argue that this is also because the marriage to his once future sister-in-law is a peculiar situation, therefore the need of space and rules between them. There is a certain arrangement between them to make possible each other’s existence in common spaces as comfortable as possible. They gradually make up “something” and “nothing” spaces in their shared apartment so that they can escape each other’s presence and avoid communication. At the end of their marriage, almost the whole apartment becomes a “nothing” place. Their attempt to cope as a couple fails and becoming each other’s confidant ends up in “nothing”. Yet again, communicating his trauma is not possible. It is not surprising that Thomas leaves his wife once she tells him she’s pregnant. In the one sent letter, he expresses his regret of not having admitted his fears: “Maybe if had said, ‘I lost a baby,’ if I’d said ‘I’m so afraid of losing something I love that I refuse to love anything’” (Foer 216). The fear of losing another child, or maybe the fear that a child might bring him into the present and make him forget his dead son drives him away. He exhibits obvious “acting out” behaviour as he “exist[s] in the present as if [he] were still fully in the past, with no distance from it. Victims of trauma tend to relive occurrences, or at least find that those occurrences intrude in their present existence” (LaCapra 143). He ends up in the airport. It is neither a “something” nor a “nothing” zone, it is where “planes bring people and take people away”, but also an area of reunion. “Do I expect Anna”, he
asks himself in his internal monologue (Foer 109), proving that he does not have sane expectations of a reunion. In a communication hub like an airport, where people begin new journeys or end journeys to return home, Thomas cannot be part of any future life journey, nor can he return home to his living wife because he is unable to communicate with her or anyone else.

Thomas’s written discourse is fast-paced and as shown earlier, even if it is meant to be epistolary, it eventually becomes a monologue. There is a sense of urgency to utter and transmit his confessions, but this urgency harms the communication. Uytterschout remarks that in these instances Grandpa is showing an “overpowering inability to put his feelings into comprehensible communication” (“Incomprehensibility” 61). He writes the letters in an attempt to face his ghosts, but thoughts just flow into each other and there is no proper punctuation to separate his words from other people’s words, except for commas, and main clauses ensue one after the other: “The next morning I was woken up by a tapping on the window, I told your mother I was going for a walk, she didn’t ask anything. what did she know, why did she let me out of her sight? Oskar was waiting for me under the streetlamp, he said, ‘I want to dig up his grave’” (Foer 281). There is a “breathlessness” in the discourse (Versluys, Blue 92). The reading process becomes a mental dive into one idea, without having time to fully grasp it, before another idea draws the attention until, suddenly – as if to gasp for air from an endless tirade of apologies, explanations, confused feelings – non-textual passages interrupt the text. The picture of a door comes up several times, on pages 29, 134, 265, suggesting his attempt to escape beyond the text he is writing. Another example of broken communications shows on pages 19 to 27 which only have short sentences, words or onomatopoeia: “I want two rolls” (Foer 19). “Ha ha ha!” (Foer 27). The last page of Grandpa’s first letter is also almost blank, except for one word: “Help” (Foer 26). On page 281, the text gradually becomes unreadable, up to page 284 which is only a black coloured sheet of paper.

It is not by chance that page 284 is the last page of the last chapter belonging to the character of Grandpa. It shows that his trauma is keeping him in a solitary darkness, and all his efforts to communicate end up being white noise. This is how even his written attempt to “tell” the past fails, leaving the reader in the dark about a possible recovery.
“Raison d’être”

Unlike Grandpa, Grandma shows the willpower to adapt and start a new life, constantly adding more words to the vocabulary of her newly adopted language, English. She wants to learn “more slang, more figures of speech […] to talk like she was born [in the US], like she never came from anywhere else” (Foer 108). Even though this obsession with English could be seen as an act of repressing her German-speaking past, Grandma is able to somehow move on. She tries, and partially succeeds, to cope with the loss of her family in Dresden and attempts establishing a new family in the new world in which she finds refuge from her past. LaCapra highlights that this is essential to the “working through” alternative of the post-trauma behaviour, “allow[ing] one to engage in life in the present, to assume responsibility” (148). Grandma hopes that by being close to Thomas, she would have someone to grieve with, without focusing on her own pain. In the most instinctual and responsible, almost maternal, way she believes that being with Thomas would allow her to heal. Years later she pens the mental process she was going through: “I did not need to tell him my story, but I needed to listen to his. I wanted to protect him, which I was sure I could do, even if I could not protect myself” (Foer 81). This unilateral affection does not pay off and Thomas leaves her. She ends up being a single mother, struggling to live solely for her son. Years later, when Thomas comes back, she is angry at him for having left her in the situation of keeping up the appearances of a family through the years, for her son’s sake: “Every Thanksgiving I made a turkey and pumpkin pie. I would go to the schoolyard and ask the children what toys they liked. I bought those for him” (Foer 277). This shows how she invented strategies of coping with her difficulties, communicating with strangers when stuck in indecision, and she was successful to a certain extent, but the loss of her son brought about a trauma that may seem unsurmountable.

Even though there is a clear trace of sadness, guilt and urge to confess in her letters, Grandma’s discourse makes sense as soon as the reader comes into contact with it. It shows continuity even if it is broken into bits. The chapters called “MY FEELINGS” could almost become a story on their own, as they are a series of letters that Grandma writes Oskar from the airport, two years and one day after 9/11.

12 September 2003
Dear Oskar
I am writing this to you from the airport. I have so much to say to you. I want to begin at the beginning, because that is what you deserve. I want to tell you everything, without leaving out a single detail. But where is the beginning? And what is everything. (75)

She writes these letters as if she was speaking. Ideas are broken down into short lines, one idea becomes one sentence or one speaker and there is proper punctuation. The text gives the reader the feeling that it is an aforethought testimony. There is a confession to Oskar and an inner dialogue the reader is witnessing. When the text is not broken down into one-line confessions, there are still unusual spaces between words, as if Grandma was hitting the space key at least three times between each sentence. However, her letters are far more articulated than those Grandpa writes. They do not contain any images, any blank or black pages which could interrupt her speech. The blank pages attributed to her (121 to 123) are actually found in one of the chapters belonging to Grandpa. This happens when he insists on her writing her “life story” (Foer 119). She gives Thomas the false impression that she is typing, but she only hits the space bar. However, she eventually “tells” Oskar the entire story of her life, being one step closer to healing than Grandpa.

Still, she also loses track of who the listener is at one point. This happens when she recalls her recent trauma and it becomes too painful to even write it. In her recalling of the day she lost her only child in the 9/11 attack, she recreates her conversation with Oskar. She is supposed to keep him company, prevent him from seeing more of the atrocities on the news, but Oskar already knows everything and he is aware that his father might be in danger. She finds him in his room, under his bed, and tries to engage in casual conversation, but the shock and the pain in which they both find themselves make it impossible. This is when, from talking directly to Oskar, she shifts to talking about Oskar in the 3rd person. The rubble of 9/11 becomes that of Dresden and the “face” she writes about could mean a recollection of her father under the rubble left by the 1945 bombing: “I wanted to turn to face him, but I couldn’t. I moved my hand to touch his hand” (Foer 227, my emphasis). In the darkness under the boy’s bed, the depth of the loss they have been submitted to, casual conversation is just not possible anymore. The claustrophobic space brings on the other collapse of buildings that made Grandma “lose everything” and everyone she loved as a young girl: “Sometimes I felt like the space was collapsing onto us. Someone was on the bed. Mary jumping. Your father sleeping. Anna kissing me. I felt buried. Anna
holding the sides of my face. My father pinching my cheeks. Everything on top of me” (Foer 228). She does not tell Oskar that she has just “lost everything” for a second time, but her trauma is reoccurring. She feels that it is about to “bury” her right there, under the boy’s bed and she becomes numb and silent because she cannot utter everything to Oskar. Grandma realizes that she needs to be there for Oskar and not the other way round. Thus, in this crucial moment when one trauma brings about an older one, Grandma does not have “listener” to turn to, until several months later when she admits everything to Oskar in the letters she writes.

Uytterschout remarks that “Grandma Schell’s life story […] amounts to nothing but empty pages” as Thomas recalls of her writing attempts. The pages 121-123 in the novel are indeed blank, which could suggest, according to Uytterschout that she is “emotionally empty” (67). However, she is still able to communicate her trauma, despite the fact that she is unable to utter it, she is still able to make sense of everything in writing eventually: to remember her childhood best friend, Mary, the happy moments with her sister, her son in a moment of serenity and her father showing her affection. These happy moments are the ones that come to her mind when she tries to fathom that she has just lost her son, because as she says in another letter, “you cannot protect yourself from sadness without protecting yourself from happiness” (Foer 180). It seems to be a protection mechanism that helps her cope with the moment.

There is something remarkable in the construction of Grandma’s character: she does not have a name. She is ‘just’ grandma, defined by her role in relation to Oskar. However, from Grandpa’s final letter, the reader finally gets to know one small, but significant, detail about her name. When Thomas Schell comes back to New York immediately after 9/11, he tries to contact her and to apologize. He “rip[s] a page from the daybook” which says “I’m sorry” and tries giving it to the doorman. He tells the doorman that it is for “Mrs. Schell” but the reaction is that “there is no Mrs. Schell” in that particular building. Only after establishing the apartment number, “3D”, does the doorman reveal that Grandma’s last name is “Schmidt”, which Thomas explains as being her “maiden name” (Foer 274). The inexistence of a “Mrs. Schell” is meaningful. After everything she has been through, Grandma is no longer defined as being Thomas Schell’s abandoned wife. Nor is she only a bereaved mother,
daughter and sister. If Mr. Black – Oskar’s neighbour who kept cards with people’s names and roles on them – had a card for her, it would say ‘… Schmidt – Grandmother’. Even though she is broken down several times in her life, and she wishes for it “to have been her under the rubble” that killed her family and her son (Foer 232), her love for Oskar saves her. In those moments when the loss makes her life seem meaningless, being the grandmother of “that beautiful person”, i.e. her grandson, gives her life an ultimate “sense” or, as Oskar would say – “raison d’être” (Foer 232). Däwes also sustains the idea of Grandma’s rather positive conclusion by considering that the character “arrive[s] at a secure sense of identity” when she writes Oskar that she would rather be herself than her former husband (Däwes 539; Foer 313). Despite the fact that his name is known to the reader – Thomas Schell – he is defined by his silence and by his absence from his family, while Grandma, an anonymous “Mrs. Schmidt” finds an ultimate reason to continue living.

The last airport scene is a case in point. In her conversation with Thomas she tells him that she could stay in the airport with him as long as it takes, but she would need to call her grandson: “There are pay phones, so I could call Oskar and let him know I’m OK” (Foer 312). “Being OK” is part of Grandma and Oskar’s complicity of taking care for each other. It seems that she “trained” Oskar to respond every time she calls his name, to the point where Oskar says “I’m OK” every time someone calls his name. Now that she finally writes her entire life story, liberating herself at great extent, she wants to make sure that she explicitly tells Oskar that she is fine, that she somehow overcame her trauma. Grandpa is for ever stuck in between “something” and “nothing”, at the airport, between departing and arriving, unable to speak and having a hard time communicating through other means. Grandma does not stay quiet. She stops hitting the space bar and actually writes her life’s letters to Oskar. This act of communication could mean that she finds again the strength live in the present, but yet again, Foer never tells the reader what happens beyond the time in the airport.

“‘Oskar?’ ‘I’m OK.’ ”

Oskar’s malleability as a child and his ability to successfully communicate with those around him seem to be the reasons why the novel’s main denouement seems to be a

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3 Mr. Black keeps a “biographical index” of “everyone that seemed biographically significant” (Foer 156-59)
positive one, with Oskar reaching “some kind of closure” or healing (Versluys, Blue 119). Just like Grandma, Oskar has a “hole” of guilt and sadness after his father’s death in the attack and his inability to have a last conversation before the collapse of the tower: “That secret was a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into” (Foer 71). The recent painful experience seems to have propelled Oskar into an early maturation marked by metaphysical questions unlikely to usually concern children: “I wondered for the first time in my life, if life was worth all the work it took to live. [...] I just couldn’t be dead any longer” (Foer 145). Still, he also childishly calls his grief “heavy boots” (Foer 2). However, by becoming aware of his trauma and naming it very creatively, Oskar succeeds in transposing feelings into language. This way, he avoids a post-traumatic state of “absolute numbing”, “be[ing] dead”, which would take his trauma into a state that Caruth – in the tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis – calls “belatedness” (6). By not becoming aware of and express trauma, it would haunt him even more and he would go into a behavior of continuous “acting out”. Nonetheless, according to a number of critics, Oskar “clearly ‘works through’ his trauma” (Uytterschout and Versluys 234). Unlike his grandparents who are unable to voice and share their traumatic experience, Oskar decides to “be honest about it” and “tell everything” to other people, while visiting them in order to find the lock to his father’s mysterious key (Foer 87). On his quest for the lock, which lasts several months, he overcomes his fears and makes many new social acquaintances, which is a humane, rather positive outcome to the terrible loss he had suffered. At the very beginning of his account, Oskar remembers something his father said, a sentence that a posteriori, the reader can identify as premonitory, “foreshadowing” the events narrated later on: “We’ll open something” (Foer 7). Dad was referring to a possible family business or career path for Oskar, other than his in jewelry retail, but little did he know that Oskar would literally open a lock that allows him to live his life. Despite some signs of autistic-like behavior, communication would eventually be the essential key to Oskar’s post-traumatic rehabilitation.

At the end of the novel, Oskar cries “so much that everything blur[s] into everything else”, meaning his thoughts about grieving and moving on are confusing to him, but until then nothing in his narrative language is ambiguous. His discourse throughout the novel is syntactically clear, while that of his grandparents sometimes becomes one in which “everything [literally, graphically] blur[s] into everything else” (Foer 324). Even the headings of those chapters in which he is the narrator are
diversified and communicate the gist of the mental states he goes through: “WHAT THE”, “GOOGOLPLEX”, “THE ONLY ANIMAL”, “HAPPINESS, HAPPINESS”, “A SIMPLE SOLUTION TO AND IMPOSSIBLE PROBLEM”, “BEAUTIFUL AND TRUE” (Foer 1, 35, 86, 187, 285, 315). This is a relevant contrast to the chapters narrated by Grandma which all have the same heading and those narrated by Grandpa which also have identical headings accompanied by different dates. Oskar’s narration shows a clear evolution from the first chapter mirroring confusion, to the last chapter with a heading made up of two positive adjectives. There is an emotional development clearly reflected by language, while the other two characters are stuck in the same traumatic past reflected by a repetitive linguistic framework. In Oskar’s narration, there are not any empty spaces when it is him “talking” away his trauma, there is proper quoting for dialogues and there is a clear demarcation between Oskar’s thoughts and his dialogues with others. Even if his chapters are disrupted by images, these images do not interfere with the text. They complement the language, they do not impede communication, but enrich and mediate it.

Oskar keeps a visual diary that he calls “Stuff That Happened to Me”, a scrapbook containing images related to his experiences, pictures that he takes during his quest and most importantly, images related to 9/11, like the picture of a person falling from the WTC tower, pages 53-67. Ross Watkins sees the use of images as “a narrative form able to articulate the experience or witnessing of disaster via the creation of spaces […] between words and images.” (11). These spaces are not gaps that need to be filled, but they act as fillings for the memory in order to facilitate the expression of trauma. Foer himself explains the crucial importance of 9/11 imagery: “September 11 was the most visually documented event in human history. When we think of those events, we remember certain images planes going into the buildings, people falling, the towers collapsing. That's how we experience it; that's how we remember it” (qtd. in Mudge). For children in particular, images play an even more important role in the process of expressing feelings and implicitly traumas. Philippe

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4 A study investigating the psychopathology of school children about six months after 9/11 shows an unexpected result: “going to school near the place of the attack was associated with lower rates of probable mental disorder” (Hoven et al. 551). Researchers believe that this was possible because traumatized children were subject to “immediate intervention” programs. An example of such a program is the CMCE New York 9/11 Trauma Relief. Within the program, children conducted creative activities like drawing (people falling from skyscrapers), writing and learning about the history and culture of Afghans and Iraqis. These children showed significantly lower levels of PTSD (Children’s Movement for Creative Education, New York 9/11 Trauma Relief program).
Codde also argues that “children traumatized by war, for example, cannot possibly testify about their experiences, except in the form of drawings” (249). Oskar goes through a similar process as he does extensive research on visual details about 9/11 and particularly about all the possible ways his father could have died, because he “need[s] to know”. Todd Atchison calls this a “patchwork of remembrance”, as Oskar tries to put together as many details as possible in order to remember that day (361). The boy eventually confesses that “if [he] could know how [his father] died, exactly how he died”, it would give him a better understanding of the past and a possible break from the constant obsession with his father’s death (Foer 256-57, my emphasis). LaCapra defines this as an essential part of the post traumatic process of “working through”, “coming to terms with the trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past” (144). For Oskar, images speak about his experience as loudly as the many words he says.

The constant inventing is a sign of what LaCapra categorizes as “acting out”, compulsive repetition, because Oskar’s inventions are mostly related to his father’s death (143). Whenever Oskar feels scared, alone, overwhelmed by memories of his father, he starts thinking about inventions that could have altered past events.

All I wanted was to fall asleep that night, but all I could do was invent. What about frozen planes which could be safe from heat-seeking missiles? […] What about incredibly long ambulances that connect every building to a hospital? […] What about skyscrapers made with moving parts, so they could rearrange themselves when they had to, and even open holes in their middles for planes to fly through? What about… What about… (258-259)

For Oskar this constant inventing seems to be a mental shield from the invading irreversible past, a sort of mental self-healing. He explains this himself, in his precocious childish way, that he is acting like a “beaver [whose] teeth never stop growing” and therefore they have a physiological need to “cut down trees”. The alternative is that the animal would die from the overgrowth of their own body parts. Similarly, his inventing is paramount to his survival, “especially at night” when painful thoughts would otherwise “overgrow” and take over what he candidly calls his “brain” (Foer 36). Airplanes, ambulances, skyscrapers, emergency interventions seem to be his favorite invention areas because they are related to his trauma. Still, there is a hint that his inventions announce not only a recovery after his own 9/11 loss, but a
bright future in a possible science career. Similarly to his grandparents, Oskar also writes letters, some of which describe inventions or express his will to explore a wide area of knowledge. Yet again, unlike the letters of his grandparents, which have only one (Grandma to Oskar) or no recipient (Grandpa’s case), Oskar’s letters receive an answer, even the one from his idol, Stephen Hawking, who invites him to Cambridge to get acquainted with his circle of astrophysicists (Foer 304-5). Oskar’s Dad was probably right when he “constantly told [him] that [he] was too smart for retail” letting him think that he can “open something” as remote as the mysteries of astrophysics (Foer 7). Thus, Oskar manages to transform the trauma-related inventions into a subject of communication and possibly into future occupational endeavors.

Despite his efforts to communicate and reveal his trauma, the process of Oskar’s recovery is as difficult as the one of any other trauma survivor. The boy has “the tendency to compulsively repeat traumatic scenes” in parallel with “working through” and living in the present, a “distinction, not a dichotomy” that characterizes most post-traumatic processes (LaCapra 143-44). Oskar’s best kept secret and the source of his guilt is the telephone that recorded his father’s last call from the burning towers. For almost a year after “the worst day”, he does not share the secret of the voice messages with anyone, especially not with his mother or grandmother as he attempts to protect them. However, he does not manage to avoid it himself; he takes out the phone from its hiding place and makeshift camouflage and listens to the messages again and again blaming himself for not being able to pick up. Caruth identifies such post-traumatic behavior as “increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (4). Oskar finds it impossible to listen to this message that means reliving that day, but at the same time he needs to hear the voice of his father that “filled the room, like how a light fills a room when it’s dim” (Foer 68-9). Therefore, the boy goes back to this voiced communication that his father attempted in his last moments alive in order to face those moments, distinguish them from the present and attempt to mentally process what had happened. He will finally manage to somehow put the guilt behind him and move on when he finishes his expedition through New York and when he confronts his mother about the “most terrible day”.

The search for the lock comes to an end when he finds William Black, the real owner of the key the boy finds in his father’s closet. The scene of their encounter is of paramount importance in Oskar’s post-traumatic recovery attempt because in the heat
of the moment he confuses William Black with his father and utters an apology that the man accepts pretending to be his father:

“I’ve never told that to anyone.”
He squeezed me, almost like a hug, and I could feel him shaking his head.
I asked him, “Do you forgive me?”
“Do I forgive you?”
“Yeah.”
“For not being able to pick up?”
“For not being able to tell anyone”
He said “I do.” (302)

Even though Oskar was hoping to find his father at the end of his search or at least “stay close to him for a little while longer”, he finds a stranger whose only connection to the young Thomas Schell is having sold him a vase with a key in it (Foer 304). Still, Mr. Black, this “surrogate father figure”, allows some sort of communication between the boy and his dead father (Troy et al. 114). This man is the closest Oskar will ever come to his father’s last days in a desperate attempt to undo his sudden disappearance. This way, William Black becomes the “audience” for Oskar’s unuttered past, allowing him to share his closeted ghosts. Oskar becomes a victim that “overtime, […] manages to incorporate and master what has happened” as what he finds is the ultimate truth of his father’s death (Uytterschout and Versluys 222). He concludes his meeting with William Black with a certain resignation, wondering whether “now [he] can stop looking” (Foer 302). However, the truth he now knows is upsetting and painful, but nonetheless more valuable to his healing than all the scenarios he had been making up (Foer 304). This ultimate confession and the accepted apology bring the boy one step closer to coming to terms with his trauma, but does not bring him the expected complete healing.

The consequence of this half-done, unfinished closure is that Oskar comes up with the idea of digging up his father’s grave as an ultimate effort to understand what happened to him. But the empty coffin does not offer too many answers either. In exchange, the one parent that is still alive and taking care of him behind the scenes is what helps Oskar take a step towards a future where he can take off his “heavy boots”. Oskar’s communication and relationship with his mother is crucial to his recovery. I would argue against Versluys’ point of view according to which Oskar is “alienated” from his mother and he sets off for his expedition because she is not present enough to show him affection (Blue 107). Both Oskar and the reader find out
towards the end of the novel that Mom had been aware of Oskar’s search all along because she had spoken to Abby Black, the first person Oskar visited. Even though Oskar and the reader get hints of this throughout the search, as for example Ada Black knows that the boy “lives on the Upper West Side” (Foer 150), the truth stays hidden in the “interwoven narrative” of the novel. Oskar realizes that his trauma-healing adventure “was a play that Mom had written, and she knew the ending when [he] was at the beginning” (Foer 292). Moms, and implicitly Grandma, understand Oskar’s need to go through the process of wondering and seeking answers after the tragedy that hit the entire family. Uytterschout and Versluys call it a “psychological need to do detective work to unravel what happened to him and attribute meaning to it” (230). This allows the boy to explain to all those people he meets the reasons of his visit, thus repeatedly communicating his feelings and mourning.

Ultimately, it is the love, the confidence and the security offered by his mother that help Oskar reach a positive conclusion after the loss he suffered and all the painstaking search he conducted. Mom as a “role model of calm and emotional strength” indirectly facilitates Oskar’s psychological evolution and understands his behavior even if she does not often communicate with him directly about the events of 9/11 (Berk 518). The novel culminates with a first honest and therapeutic discussion between Oskar and his mother during which they both confess to each other the difficulty of losing a father and respectively, a husband.

At some point she was carrying me to my room. Then I was in bed. She was looking over me. I don’t believe in God, but I believe that things are extremely complicated, and her looking over me was as complicated as anything could ever be. But it was also incredibly simple. In my only life, she was my mom, and I was her son.

I told her, “It’s OK if you fall in love again.”
She said, “I won’t fall in love again.”
I told her, “I want you to.”

This helps Oskar understand that despite having lost his father, he can always share this loss with his mother and even find some hope for a positive future. This is the first time Oskar allows himself and his Mom be defined by open possibilities for the future without obsessively hanging on to the past. In LaCapra’s terms, the boy “works through” his trauma by showing “the ability to rebuild a life” (145). This is the ultimate sign that Oskar, a trauma victim, has accepted do detach himself from the traumatizing event. Admitting their sadness and mutual affection helps both Mom and Oskar come as close to closure as possible. By reestablishing the communication with
his mother, Oskar becomes “a mourning child who heals adults, who in turn help him to heal” (Holmgren et al. 115). He indirectly does the same for Grandma and many of the Blacks he comes in contact with during his search. Even though Oskar is depicted as a relatively independent and unusually unsupervised child, it is his relationship with adults, family or befriended strangers that facilitates a possible recovery.

Oskar understands that bringing his father back is impossible, no matter how creative he is in rearranging the pictures of the falling man in his scrapbook, the very last pages of the novel. That makes “things complicated”, meaning that the traumatic loss is always going to be a part of who he is, but unlike Grandma and Grandpa, he manages to utter his trauma on several levels and not remain stuck between the past and the present. Moreover, Oskar is the common denominator for all the other characters and for their attempts to overcome their traumas. They all start communicating thanks to him, with him and through him, giving a voice to a trauma that goes beyond his family and 9/11 stricken New York City.

#### Beyond the boroughs

The personal traumas of the three Schells and their respective attempts to recover from them, open an analogical dimension of a broader community of post 9/11 trauma victims. As Cathy Caruth observes, “history, like trauma is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (qtd. in Codde 244). Similarly to the problematic communication attempts in the case of the characters, communicating about 9/11 on a broader level proves to be difficult and repetitive. American culture has shown numerous instances of LaCaprian “acting out”, like several “slavishly literal reenactments of the physical attack” in different artistic and media contexts (Faludi 2). *Extremely Loud* manages to avoid these graphic descriptions in the text, but through the characters’ personal experience related to 9/11, it captures the obsessive repetition of the 9/11 events as a collective post-traumatic behavior. For instance, one of Grandma’s passages in the novel suggests the insistence of the media to broadcast the attack:

[...] I turned on the television.  
I lowered the volume until it was silent.  
The same pictures over and over.  
Planes going into buildings.
Bodies falling.
People waving shirts out of high windows.
Planes going into buildings.
Bodies falling.
Planes going into buildings.
People covered in gray dust.
Bodies falling.
Buildings falling. (230)

Just like Oskar, Grandma and Grandpa are psychologically trapped in the tragic events from their past unable to utter them, there is a metonymical difficulty of transposing the trauma of 9/11 into a coherent language at a national level. Grandma watches the images shown on TV, but she realizes the futility of showing them again and again. Her lowering the volume until everything is muted is similar to Grandpa’s aphasia, where the events leave such deep wounds that sounds and words are not able to contain them. Any other type of communication fails for Thomas Schell, tattooed words, images and flows of ink do not succeed in detaching him from his past. Thus, the use of graphic images seems to give the public, the generic American 9/11 victim only the illusion of communication about the event, while everyone seems to be listening to and making white noise because this trauma is too difficult to comprehend and utter in non-repetitive way.

The impossibility to fathom such an event as 9/11 leads to the creation of alternative discourses. Similar to Oskar prior to his quest and attempted closure, American society comes off as suffering from self-victimization. The things that describe some of Oskar’s childish “panicky” feelings are part of a general public fear that is still present several years after 9/11: “[…] suspension bridges, […] airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway […], Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops, […] bags without owners, […] people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans” (Foer 36). As Judith Greenberg reflects, “9/11 became part of a nexus of ongoing traumatic events” (11) and to an ideological isolation that sees different cultures as a threat. The only efficient communication to counteract this effect of the national trauma would be a communication that goes beyond the enemy versus victim dichotomy. This task should be assigned to different creative fields, but as Susan Faludi remarks, in the aftermath of 9/11 it was impossible to “plumb what the trauma meant for [America’s] psyche” (2). Foer’s novel should not be seen as an attempt to fix the general discourse, but by having a child character describe so
childishly the panic many Americans were unable to put in the right words, it is certainly drawing attention to the failed public communication.

Critics of post 9/11 fictional literature observe that most of the novels take advantage of and offer a platform for the political aspects that emerged from the attacks. Versluys makes a clear distinction within the “substantial body of 9/11 fiction” between those literary works that promote a “jingoistic”, “raw outrage and revanchist” discourse as they exploit the events for political and “ideological and propaganda purposes” (“Novel” 142). Those would be the religious, dispensationalist type of novels or those which focus solely on the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, like Martin Amis’, The Second Plane. Extremely Loud, along with some other novels like Don DeLillo’s Falling Man offers an analogical reading of the characters’ personal attempts to overcome trauma that can be applied to the public sphere.

Mullins suggests that Extremely Loud manages to “contest[] an ‘us versus them’ reaction to [the 9/11] trauma” by incorporating the Dresden and the Hiroshima attack that puts the US in the position of the civilian-destructive force (299). Even though the recent trauma of 9/11 is the one the characters are dealing with in the “present” of the narration, the interruptions brought on by the Dresden and Hiroshima episodes bring about a “sharp anti-war stance” (Michael 15). Oskar’s grandfather, gives a very graphic account of the attack on Dresden: “I walked over children […] and saw terrible things: legs and necks […] humans melted into thick pools of liquid” (Foer 211). Similarly, under the pretext of a presentation that Oskar makes in front of his class, the reader is exposed to another human catastrophe, the bombing of Hiroshima. Oskar makes his classmates listen to the testimony of a mother from Hiroshima who lost her daughter: “She died in my arms, saying ‘I don’t want to die’. That is what death is like. It doesn’t matter what uniforms the soldiers are wearing […]. I thought if everyone could see what I saw, we would never have war anymore” (Foer 198, my emphasis). These apparently remote human tragedies speak as loudly as the imagery of 9/11 to an American public that seems completely focused on the national level and on finding a punishable “them”, thus opening an ideological gap between cultures which only differ in the color of the “uniforms [their] soldiers are wearing”, forgetting the human aspect of suffering.

Extremely loud combats such views through characters such as Oskar who acts as a social connector in his inventive attempt to unlock his trauma. He helps other people overcome loss and traumas of their own. Mullins calls this “traumatic
solidarity” and argues that “the novel proposes alternative conceptions of identity that encourage global community” (298). One example of Oskar’s social encounters which allow the expression of “alternative” and progressive political views is the passage where he meets A.R. Black, his neighbor. Besides having an impressive collection of biographical index cards, his apartment contains many artifacts from all over the world. Mr. Black also seems to be the incarnation of the entire history of the 20th century as he was born on “January 1, 1900 [and actually] lived every day of [that] century” (Foer 152). Despite all that historical and encyclopedic experience, and despite having once been a war correspondent, a journalist whose purpose is to communicate about war, he decides to turn off his hearing aids for more than two decades. Just as Grandpa is too affected by wounds of war and gives up speaking, Mr. Black breaks his communication with the world by an elective deafness. The reason for which he refuses to stay in touch with anyone seems to be that human behavior throughout the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century is defined by violence, materialism and double standard charged discourse. When Oskar starts asking what exactly gives the people on the index cards the right to be “biographically significant”, Mr. Black replies that “being significant is not necessarily “good”: “Nine out of ten significant people have to do with money or war” (Foer 159). When it comes to Mahatma Gandhi, Oskar protests saying: “But he was a pacifist”. Mr. Black’s replies shortly but very significantly: “Right! War!” (Foer 157). This encounter is not only important for Oskar’s intellectual evolution, but the very interesting character of Mr. Black allows Foer to express the necessity of reassessing years, even centuries of history and renounce the ready-made discourses which only lead to more “war”. Oskar eventually helps Mr. Black to turn on his hearing aids, and the man accompanies the child on his post 9/11 quest, but he disappears before they find the lock. His apartment is emptied, but not before leaving Oskar with an essential index card that says “Oskar Schell – son”, which probably helps the boy reconnect with his mother (Foer 286).

Thus, the novel’s characters follow what LaCapra sees as the trauma victims’ ideal path: “working through” to live their lives in the present and evolving from a traumatized person to one creatively engaged in the present and even eventually able to become a “political agent” (144). Even though they are still struggling with their own past, they manage to offer an alternative to the national trauma-echoing voices. Through the very complex characters that apparently focus on their personal traumas,
*Extremely Loud* emanates a message on a meta-level of communication in order to facilitate a possible recovery from the 9/11 national trauma. Just as Oskar is unable to change the past by rearranging the pictures of the person falling from the tower, 9/11 is undoubtedly forever part of the national American experience and history. However, being able to nuance it and utter it in such literary contexts as Foer’s novel, it can represent an alternative to the national quest for a possible ideological closure.

**Conclusion: the necessity to “tell”**

In conclusion, Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel is a therapeutic and revelatory communication attempt on multiple levels. First, the novelistic characters are given a voice and a chance to “write”, “talk” or even “scrapbook” their traumatic past into a story that could bring recovery or at least bring on an existential stability.

The efficiency of these communicational acts is debatable, as communicating trauma does not a guarantee a clear-cut healing. However, it is a process of “working through”, a much needed distinction between the haunting past, the present that requires living, and a doubtful but open future. Grandpa is literally stuck between his past and the present, unable to say a word, while his epistolary attempt to come clean with his past ends up filling only the empty space of his son’s empty coffin. Grandma is haunted by her past, but manages to cling to life because she finds her ultimate reason to exist in her grandson. Her confessional letters do find the ideal recipient in Oskar and she manages to come to a rather positive conclusion to her trial-burdened life. However, the last described location of both Grandma and Grandpa is as being physically immovable, between “arrival” and “departure”, not knowing exactly which one they will choose. As for Oskar, he finds the lock to his father’s mysterious key, metaphorically unlocks his traumatic past, but at the end of his quest, he realizes that he cannot bring back his dead father and the best possible recovery is reinforcing his relationship with the only living parent he has left.

Echoing these fictional characters, partial recovery can be also achieved at the national, cultural level by the communication of an alternative to the victimized and politically loaded discourse.

The uncertainty of recovery that the novel suggests may cast doubt on the very necessity of a communication process at all the analysed levels. Nonetheless, the novel was most likely born out of a necessity to talk about the personal trauma of 9/11
victims, bring it up from the rubble at Ground Zero in order to fathom it, but also to stop it from becoming the communicational sword trying to impose hatred-filled discourses. As Mr. Black tells Oskar, a pen “[i]s mightier than a sword”, provided that it is balanced and it “writes” stories from all their perspectives (Foer 153). Thus, this colorful and multi-leveled expression of trauma manages to fill the “contextual emptiness” that 9/11 had left with a meaningful discourse. *Extremely Loud* is definitely a 9/11 novel which attempts suggesting that while the traumatic event is irreversible, it does not mean that it’s impossible to be at least “OK” in its aftermath and stop reliving it obsessively, both at personal and community levels.
Works Cited


