***Writing the 9/11 Decade: Reportage and the Evolution of the Novel*. By Charlie Lee-Potter. New York: Bloomsbury. 2016. 252 pp. Cloth, $110.00; paper, $29.95; e-book, $26.95.**

***American Autobiography after 9/11*. By Megan Brown. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press. 2017. x, 155 pp. Cloth, $64.95.**

Almost immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans were urged to "never forget." The phrase was a rallying cry for national unity at first and a rhetorical commonplace soon after. Today it seems almost absurd to think that anyone could forget, not while we continue to struggle with the social, economic, and geopolitical ramifications of 9/11. At the same time, memory is always in flux, always rewritten as new facts come to light, new intellectual currents emerge to challenge our interpretations of the past, and new events arise to test our sense of how the present moment links the past with possible futures. Even under ordinary circumstances, the memories that we collectively construct remain partial and subjective, and in the case of a national trauma like the September 11 attacks, the acts of writing and remembrance are incredibly fraught.

Two engaging new books tackle the problems of memory and interpretation in a post-9/11 landscape. In *Writing the 9/11 Decade: Reportage and the Evolution of the Novel*, Charlie Lee-Potter examines the connections between journalism and literary fiction devoted to understanding 9/11. She grapples with the ways the September 11 attacks were made meaningful by a number of our most talented authors, while paying keen attention to the various gaps and limitations of their efforts. Meanwhile, in *American Autobiography after 9/11*, Megan Brown focuses on the cultural work done by memoir and other forms of life writing, analyzing the way that autobiographical texts reflect the problems and possibilities for living a meaningful life in the post-9/11 era.

Lee-Potter's wide-ranging book traces the collective memory of September 11 through journalism, personal essays, and, eventually, novels. Early chapters examine the 9/11-related writing of authors like Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Richard Ford. Lee-Potter questions whether these novelists, or any artists, were up to the task of confronting the complexities of this particular tragedy—one that was witnessed in real time by most of the nation and a good part of the world. How can any writer claim the authority to craft a narrative out of an event that traumatized not only survivors but millions of distant spectators? What are the ethics of meaning making when Americans' trauma would soon be revisited on the globe in the form of an endless war on terror? Lee-Potter suggests early on that the horrors of 9/11 "made it

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newly necessary to produce art that is both reassuring and salving and therefore, by extension, misleading" (86). Although it "has always been the novel's virtue . . . that it can mean many things concurrently" (98), Lee-Potter finds well-meaning novelists struggling somewhat unsuccessfully in the early years after 9/11 to do more than simply comfort their readers. At a time when truly disruptive art like Eric Fischl's *Tumbling Woman* sculpture was quickly ushered out of public view, 9/11 novelists experimented with time, abstraction, and scale in order to confront what Lee-Potter calls "fiction's apparently diminishing capacity to adequately reflect the extreme dystopia of the new millennium" (31).

What Lee-Potter finds lacking in early 9/11 novels begins to emerge later in the work of writers like Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid, and Kamila Shamsie. The "conscious myopia of novelists who focused their gaze on the day of the attacks would not do" for these novelists, who instead "shook their material out of the imprisoning grip of the traumatized present, so often the territory of the journalist, while at the same time eschewing the limitations of the sentimentalized past, or the alarums of dystopic predictions" (151). With Muslim protagonists and novels set in places like Pakistan and Afghanistan, these writers were able to situate 9/11 in a global context and explore the traumas not just of the attacks themselves but of the war on terror more generally. Decentering the United States in this way enables authors and their readers to confront ideas about victimhood that are "undemocratically dished out to some" (158) in the West to the detriment and erasure of global others. But for Lee-Potter this is not merely a matter of adding non-Western perspectives; it is about the perspective that comes with time. She covers extensively journalist Amy Waldman's novel *The Submission* (2011), published almost a decade after the 9/11 attacks. *The Submission* "attempted to say what people had not dared think yet: that possibly after ten years, far from being unable to move on, according to Waldman 'of course we already have'" (216).

The sense of possibly having moved on from 9/11 is more pronounced in Brown's *American Autobiography after 9/11*, inasmuch as most of the main works she examines are not centrally about 9/11 or its impact. Instead, Brown interrogates many of the most popular life writings of the decade after September 11—from Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) to James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) to Tucker Max's *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell* (2006) to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) to Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013)—in order to understand how they reflect a host of post-9/11 fears and aspirations. As Brown puts it, "American memoir is a technology contributing to the management of subjects by circulating norms of self-presentation and self-actualization while negotiating with post-9/11 anxieties about individual and national identity" (5). Brown illuminates the commonalities among her diverse collection of autobiographical works such that issues of personal authenticity, individual self-management, and neoliberal governance are constantly overlapping in her analysis. For example, the spiritual quest at the

center of *Eat, Pray, Love* tells us that a balanced life is simply a profitable form of self-optimization. The fraudulent memoirs of James Frey or Nasdijj speak to the simultaneous value of authenticity and its inherently shaky foundations, especially in the anxious post-9/11 age. Brown's book thus explores "the problem of selfhood in a 'self-centric' society" (119) and the need for life writing that helps readers move beyond the parochial and individualistic. Ultimately, she finds in autobiographical works both the possibility of challenging conventional ways of living under neoliberalism and "the risk of perpetuating retrograde, rather than progressive, thinking" (11).

Writing the 9/11 Decade takes a unique approach by situating 9/11 novels within the larger contexts provided by journalism, art, and popular culture and supplementing its nuanced analysis of those novels with in-depth interviews from authors and other figures who played a significant role in interpreting the September 11 attacks for the American public. *American Autobiography after 9/11* contains a similarly impressive array of primary source material and a similarly sharp yet sympathetic critical eye. Both works will be of value to scholars who study collective memory and popular culture, as well as any readers interested in better understanding the ways that meaning gets made in the aftermath of collective trauma. At their best, both works push us to look skeptically at any narratives that foreground the comfort or self-fulfillment of individual Americans when, for many in the United States and especially across the globe, the consequences of 9/11 are ever present.

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