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9/11, Hyperreality, and the Global Body Politic: Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*

Abstract

This essay argues that the success of Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* is due to Beigbeder's use of the seemingly contradictory genres of autofiction and hyperrealism in the depiction of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. By positioning himself in the text alongside his fictionalized American counterpoint, Beigbeder configures 9/11 as a lived-body experience that models the ways in which the post-9/11 subject was formed within specific political, cultural, and national conditions. The effect of the novel's hyperrealism is such that Beigbeder simultaneously posits and deconstructs the notion of national identity within the greater contexts of postmodernism and globalization.

Keywords

autofiction, 9/11, transnationalism, globalization, hyperrealism, contemporary French literature, Frédéric Beigbeder, *Windows on the World*

Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to Alain-Phillipe Durand for his continued mentorship and engagement with my work, as well as for his help and suggestions in preparing this essay.

9/11, Hyperreality, and the Global Body Politic:
Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*

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To a certain extent, the events of September 11, 2001 are a tragedy centered on bodies. From the bodies on the planes, victimized as they became weapons, to the “bodies” of the towers, taking thousands of lives with them as they crumbled to their deaths, bodies played a pivotal role in the disaster and horror of that day. Although the overwhelming majority of casualties resulting from the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 were United States citizens, close to four hundred of those who perished (including the hijackers) were foreign nationals who represented over forty different countries. Thus, while 9/11 was certainly an attack on the United States, its global impact cannot be ignored. When considering the body's relationship to 9/11 alongside narrative models for political and subjective agency, it is necessary to examine literature that articulates questions of history, nation, and identity that are not only prescient in helping to understand certain cultural and nationalistic forces leading up to 9/11, but are also useful in making sense of identities that surfaced—ethnic, nationalized, and otherwise—in the immediate wake of the attacks. This type of literary inquiry is seen in Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*, where through a contemporary mash-up of autofiction and hyperrealism, Beigbeder uses physical bodies and the metaphor of the body politic to suggest the potential for a post-9/11 “transnational body” that transcends limited subject positions inherent within bounded nations.

The ways in which 9/11 was streamed globally via video and photographic images places it within the realm of Jean Baudrillard's hyperreal: “the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising and photography” (Baudrillard *Symbolic Exchange* 71). By means of repetition and mediated simulations, the terrorist attacks became “9/11,” the perverse and uncanny global reality of a localized event. Given the preponderance and over-production of images, alongside the fictions of reality, the question for contemporary novelists becomes, “why write novels in this world?” (Beigbeder “Pour un nouveau nouveau roman” 48).¹ For Beigbeder, the answer to this question can be found in the “intervention of the self,” with the novel becoming a space for the author to “enter into physically, dive body and soul into the game of ‘I’” (47-8). *Windows on the World* becomes such a space, and through autofiction, Beigbeder explores the postmodern tensions of physical embodiment and symbolic representation in response to the rupture of globalization by national tragedy.

In stressing the physicality of 9/11 in *Windows on the World*, Beigbeder draws comparisons to the metaphor of the body politic. The dual narrators, “Frédéric Beigbeder”² and Carthew Yorston, serve as representations of their individual nations. Through them, autofiction blurs not only the self, but also their respective nations as political entities. Further, the anthropomorphizing of the Twin Towers as “David” and “Nelson” (as in David and Nelson Rockefeller) draws attention to the legal notion of the body politic, where the nation is regarded as a corporate entity, likened to the human body. Through the dual lenses of transnationalism and globalization, Beigbeder re-animates 9/11 in *Windows on the World*, creating a space for examining the borders of personal and political identity. The notion of hyperrealism supports this literary interpretation by drawing attention to the ways in which “through reproduction from one medium into another the real becomes volatile, it becomes the allegory of death, but it also draws strength from its own destruction, becoming the real for its own sake” (Baudriallard *Symbolic Exchange* 72).

Windows on the World was an instant bestseller upon its publication in 2003, winning France’s *Prix Interallié* that same year. In alternating chapters, the novel tells the story of American Carthew Yorston at the restaurant Windows on the World on September 11, 2001, alongside Beigbeder’s musings on 9/11 and his writing process. The short chapters are titled from 8:30 a.m. – 10:29 a.m., representing the time Carthew and his sons David and Jerry begin their breakfast until just after the North Tower collapses. In 2005 Frank Wynne’s English translation was released, making it the first of Beigbeder’s novels to be published in the United States.³ Although *Windows on the World* was not a bestseller stateside as it was in France (and later the United Kingdom), it did receive mostly positive reviews.⁴ One of the first novels written in response to the terrorist attacks, *Windows on the World* is one of few that take place inside the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001.

It may seem surprising that Beigbeder, known as much for his outlandish persona as for his postmodern texts and pop culture reflections, would choose to address the magnitude of 9/11. The shallow, superficial protagonists of his novels *Vacances dans le coma* (*Holiday in a Coma*), *L’amour dure trois ans* (*Love Lasts Three Years*), *99 Francs* (*9.99: A Novel*), and *Au secours, pardon* (‘Help, forgiveness’) work in the advertising industry and love nightclubs, cocaine, and the accompanying lifestyle—all things with which Beigbeder himself has been publicly known to dabble.⁵ Hence, Beigbeder’s works tend to be a mix of autobiography and cultural commentary, infused heavily with sex, drugs, and sarcasm. While these elements may seem at odds with the trauma and tragedy of 9/11, in actuality, *Windows on the World* succeeds due to Beigbeder’s use of the apparently contradictory genres of autofiction and hyperrealism in the depiction of the terrorist attacks. By positioning himself in the text alongside his

fictionalized American counterpoint, Beigbeder creates a narrative of 9/11 where truth and fiction are artfully blurred in a way that draws attention to the “spectacle” of the event. The double narrative of Carthew Yorston and “Frédéric Beigbeder” represents a global hybridity, where the physical bodies of the dual protagonists represent national bodies, while Carthew and his sons also demonstrate that “terrorism does not destroy symbols, it hacks people of flesh and blood to pieces” (Beigbeder 162). As a result, *Windows on the World* configures 9/11 as a lived-body experience that models the ways in which the post-9/11 subject was formed within specific political, cultural, and national conditions. The effect of the novel’s hyperrealism is such that Beigbeder simultaneously posits and deconstructs the notion of national identity within the greater contexts of postmodernism and globalization.

As a journalist, media personality, and postmodern writer, Beigbeder tends to situate his work within Baudrillard’s notion of the hyperreal, commenting on this cultural condition while simultaneously adding to the simulacra. *Windows on the World* is no different, with Beigbeder declaring early in the novel, “Writing this hyperrealist novel is made more difficult by reality itself. Since 11 September 2001, reality has not only outstripped fiction, it’s destroying it” (8). Here Beigbeder’s words echo Baudrillard, who, writing about 9/11, asks, “What happens then to the real event, if everywhere the image, the fiction, the virtual, infuses reality?” (“The Spirit of Terrorism”). Beigbeder takes up this notion, and through his text uses hyperrealism and autofiction to humanize the event, arguing, “at the end of the day, those who scream, who plead, who bleed, are real” (62).

Whereas Beigbeder’s previous protagonists may have been based on his own personality and experiences, he does not explicitly write himself into the narrative and, therefore, his early works do not fit the accepted definition of autofiction. Autofiction is a fictionalized narrative of factual events, typically focusing on a particular time or incident in an author’s life. The term “autofiction” was first used in 1977 by French author Serge Doubrovsky on the book jacket for his novel *Fils*, and autofiction has since come to be known as a literary form and style that challenges the nature of truth, self, and identity in its fictionalization of autobiography. While authors have more recently adopted this style globally, it is traditionally associated with contemporary French literature:

Many contemporary French novelists work with this idea of duality between fiction and reality while establishing a very close link to aspects of their contemporary environment, by examining and reacting to the social, political, and cultural events of their time, or even anticipating such major events. (Durand “Beyond the Extreme” 110)

In *Windows on the World*, autofiction, thus, becomes a means for Beigbeder to make sense not only of the terrorist attacks of September 11, but also of himself within the social, political, and cultural contexts of the time. Durand argues that Beigbeder “overcomes” autofiction through “more flexibility and repositioning of the function of the writer’s relationship to reality and to current events” (“Frédéric Beigbeder and the French Pop Novel” 184). Given the tensions between the national and global implications of 9/11, Beigbeder’s dual protagonists in *Windows on the World* serve to expose the relationship between collective identity politics and personal identity within times of national crisis.

In the transition from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 to the event globally known as “9/11,” emphasis shifted from what happened on that day (an occurrence with a fixed beginning and end point) to a preoccupation with the unknowability of the future and a sense that somehow the worst was yet to come. Therefore, 9/11 became a temporal marker for a site of transition, with the outcome of events unclear, but given weight alongside the actual incidence of the terrorist attacks. In considering the liminality of 9/11, here it is useful to consider Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994), which posits that in-between spaces “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). While Bhabha’s theories emanate from a postcolonial discourse that predates 9/11, his concept of *nationness* is useful in post-9/11 contexts as well.⁶ In the liminality of “unknowns” that emerged post-9/11, new “strategies of selfhood” were employed on the individual and collective level that resulted in a rewriting of both the subject and the nation.⁷ Autofiction is key to this rewriting since it, too, resides in a liminal space between fact and fiction. As Thomas C. Spear notes in “Autofiction and National Identity,”

A study of all writers’ identity politics will include considerations of community and nation; just as authors choose diverse levels of autobiographical and autofictional identification, their self-characterization is always more complex than that which would be limited to a singular portrait of the self or nation. (104)

Rather than the us/them binary that dominated the immediate post-9/11 rhetoric of the US government, *Windows on the World* locates itself, and by generic default its dual narrators, in the in-between spaces where identity and nation are defined through temporality and transition.⁸ Therefore, as opposed to mere response to 9/11, the novel operates through autofiction as a mode of articulation of author, nation, and the event itself.

Physical bodies are important to the narrative of 9/11 with respect to the victims and the terrorists, contributing to the resultant binaries of “good versus evil” (tangibly coded as “white versus brown”). Taking a firm stand, then-President Bush quickly declared there was no gray area in between; you were either with “us” or with “them.” This type of rhetoric was instrumental in the formation of the initial narrative of 9/11 put forth by the US government and American news media, dictating that Americans must unite in taking this stand, while sending the message to nations around the globe that they would be wise to see things from the US point of view. Framed in this way, the “us versus them” narrative becomes “pro-US versus terrorist” and oversimplifies both the circumstances that led up to 9/11 as well as its fallout. It also helps to create the body fictions that code individuals as terrorists or suspicious based on superficial characteristics and physical features. After the attack, once the hijackers were identified, their likenesses became publicly known through security and passport photos. The hijackers were subject to a type of “body fiction,” a racialized and religious social construction that promotes a stereotyped group identity in place of individual agency or action.⁹ Alongside this hyper-focus on “terrorist bodies” was the simultaneous censoring of victims’ bodies by the US government and American news media. Carthew comments on this hypocrisy at the end of *Windows on the World*:

This carnage of human flesh is disgusting? It’s reality that is disgusting—and refusing to look at it, more so. Why did you see no pictures of our dislocated legs and arms, our severed torsos, our spilled entrails? Why did the dead go unseen? Knee-jerk patriotism made the American press swagger about, censor our suffering, edit out shots of the jumpers, the photographs of those burn victims, the body parts. (262)

Physical bodies are an important component not only of 9/11, but also of Beigbeder’s fictional account of the event. His textual use of character bodies works to push back against the censorship of the American media and to re-situate the event in the “real” as a lived-body experience. Further, Scott M. Powers argues that physical bodies work in the novel to remind readers of the “moral imperative not to ignore extreme human suffering” (136), and that “Beigbeder underscores the evil phenomenon of 9-11 through the description of suffering bodies” (138).

It is important to note that Beigbeder himself is not immune to a degree of censorship. In his “Author’s Note” at the end of the English edition of *Windows on the World*, he writes:

[M]erging fiction with truth—and with tragedy—risks hurting those who have already suffered, something of which I was intensely aware when rereading the novel in English [...] There were, I felt, moments when it was starker and perhaps more likely to wound than I intended.¹⁰ Consequently some scenes have been revised for this edition. (307)

The scenes that were “revised” included references relating 9/11 to the Holocaust, and a graphic scene of anal sex between two bankers who are trapped in Windows on the World with Carthew and his sons. Beigbender comments on his surprise at being asked by English-language editors to revise the references to the Holocaust, remarking,

Yeah, I didn’t understand why they refused to make that comparison ... I am not saying that Auschwitz and September 11th are the same thing. I’m just saying that the people who died that morning in that restaurant died being gassed because toxic fumes had stifled the majority....We recovered bodies stacked near the emergency exits like those in the gas chambers at Auschwitz If that shocks people it’s because it’s shocking, necessarily. I am not here to embellish reality. (*Frédéric Beigbender et ses doubles* 29)¹¹

As for the sex scene, chapter “10:15” in the English edition devotes a mere half page to it, and the description of the bankers’ intercourse is limited to: “They clambered onto the oval, ebony, 30-foot conference table. He dropped his pants and she took off her blouse. Their bodies are salon tanned; despite the stench of death and the unbearable heat, it’s really hot to watch them” (281). The French version, however, more viscerally and graphically details their sexual encounter. Their exchange includes the following:

- *Je vais t’avalier, je veux sentir tes giclées brûlantes sur mes amygdales, dit la blonde en Ralph Lauren.*
- *Tire bien la langue que je sente ton piercing sur mon gland, dit le brun en Kenneth Cole ...*
- *Tu sens mes trois doigts dans ton cul? dit la blonde en Ralph Lauren.*
- *Relève ta jupe et empale ton anus sur ma queue bien à fond, dit le brun en Kenneth Cole...*
- *Je vais te torturer à mort, te tuer, t’éventrer pour baiser tes entrailles, élargir ton vagin pour rentrer tout mon corps à l’intérieur et mourir à l’endroit où je suis né. (343 – 344)*

- “I’m going to swallow you, I want to feel your fiery cum on my tonsils,” said the blonde in Ralph Lauren.¹²

- “Stick out your tongue so I can feel your piercing on my tip,” said the guy in Kenneth Cole ...
- “Can you feel my three fingers in your ass?” asked the blonde in Ralph Lauren.
- “Raise your skirt and impale your anus on my hard-on,” said the guy in Kenneth Cole ...
- “I’m going to torture you to death, kill you, disembowel you so I can fuck your insides, stretch your vagina so I can put all of my body inside you and die right where I was born.”

Displacing the horror of their imminent death through sexual intercourse becomes a way in which these bodies resist and rewrite their circumstances. They know the inevitability of their deaths, yet reframe their own narrative in order to see themselves “dying of happiness ... dying of loving you,” rather than dying as helpless victims (281). Their interaction mimics the phenomenon of “terror sex” that occurred in the hours and days immediately after the attacks on the morning of September 11.¹³ The bankers’ intercourse—expressed through their graphic discussion and description of their bodies—becomes the ultimate lived-body experience as it mimics the violence and vulnerability implicit with the bodies inside the towers on the morning of September 11. At the same time, it is a very real description of bodies living, as opposed to succumbing to their inevitable death, as the characters momentarily wrest the situation out of the hands of the terrorists and in to their own bodily control. The editorial decision to remove this scene from the English translation so as to not offend US readers resembles the very censorship of bodies that Carthew criticizes in the novel.

This contradiction is an example of what Lawrence R. Schehr discusses in his essay on *Windows on the World*, where the effect of the literary double on the narrators is such that

The writer—the writing—is caught in a double bind of not being able to write and having to write, of not being able to write about anything else and being incapable of writing about what is happening ... while telling his tale—a tale we all know—he [Beigbeder] increasingly puts the possibilities of representation into question. (133)

The question of representation is taken up in the novel as Beigbeder attempts to distinguish a fictionalized version of himself as the character “Frédéric Beigbeder” from Carthew Yorston, his fictional double in the novel. The chapters alternate between the two narratives: that of Carthew in the North Tower on the morning of September 11 and the narrative of “Frédéric Beigbeder” writing the novel. The physical body becomes the element of the text that allows Beigbeder

to explore authorial and character bodies as stand-ins for both nation and 9/11. This doubling is achieved through descriptions of how embodiment is experienced in a post-9/11 construct of space and how *nationness* is expressed through Carthew and Beigbeder. While Beigbeder's decision to include himself in the narrative may seem unorthodox given that he was in France on September 11, 2001, the technique serves a variety of purposes both thematically and structurally. By inserting himself as a character in the novel, detailing mundane and important parts of his life alongside the memories of his past and the difficulties of his present, Beigbeder affirms his position as outside the event. While Carthew's narrative takes place inside *Windows on the World* on September 11, Beigbeder's chapters serve to distance Beigbeder and the reader. This narrative split, along with Beigbeder's constant self-reflection, allows 9/11 to function as it did for many who watched from the outside: as a mirror. This effect speaks to Beigbeder's personal response to 9/11 while simultaneously demonstrating the global reach of the event and its ability to touch and shape the reality of a wide range of individuals. Although readers may not be able to identify with Beigbeder as a character, they can recognize his desire as an author to understand not only the events of September 11, 2001, but also himself in relation to them. Blurring fact and fiction through autofiction, Beigbeder's mix of ego and self-loathing distances him from others and provides a built-in safeguard from critique. Autofiction and the textual admissions of his own shortcomings give Beigbeder the ability to anticipate and attempt to sidestep negative reactions to himself and the novel.

Beigbeder's use of two fictional doubles demonstrates the cultural and political liminality of nation and the ways in which bodies—and by extension literature—cannot be *transnational* without being national. Thus, Beigbeder expresses the narrative practice of transnationalism through the narration of his own story and that of his fictional American counterpart, Carthew. Beigbeder indirectly comments on this concern when he writes,

We live in strange times; war has shifted. The battlefield is the media: in this new war Good and Evil are difficult to tell apart. Difficult to know who the good guys and the bad guys are: they change sides when we change channels. Television makes the world jealous. In the past, the poor, the colonized, didn't spend their nights in their shanty towns staring at wealth on a screen. They didn't realize that some countries had everything while they slogged their guts out for nothing. (110-11)

Here Beigbeder's concern is with the ways in which globalization has brought countries and individuals together in a manner that makes it difficult to distinguish between "good and evil" through manipulations of various media.

The individual must recognize his/her subjectivity in relation to a much larger context of underlying political, economic, cultural, and historical differences that divide nations and result in a global inequality of resources. It is often in between this divide, or through the accumulation of difference, that global identities are formed.

In attempting to understand 9/11 in a global context, Beigbeder associates the authorial body with other bodies in a variety of ways. Despite his final verdict of “solitary for life,” *Windows on the World* is Beigbeder’s attempt at making connections with others—both personally and nationally (206).¹⁴ In his own narrative, this is seen in Beigbeder’s reflections on his relationships with his daughter and fiancée. Structurally, the novel demonstrates this notion of connectivity via Beigbeder’s relationship with his fictional counterpart, Carthew. In both narratives, Beigbeder is continuously self-referential. Even when Carthew is narrating, it is impossible not to see references to Beigbeder as author, such as when Carthew ponders how Kafka could “so accurately describe something he never saw,” in relation to New York City (31). Carthew’s musings on an author’s ability to write as an observer of something he has never experienced recall the position of Beigbeder writing about the terrorist attacks of September 11, an event he did not personally witness.

Beigbeder takes this hyperrealistic blurring of narratives a step further when he has his fictional counterparts address each other directly. This takes place in the middle of the novel as both Beigbeder and Carthew discuss the imagined intentions of those who jumped from the towers on 9/11. Here, bodies, or specifically the absence of them, become an access point for Beigbeder and his fictional counterpoints to explore a counternarrative to the master narrative of the event supplied by mainstream American media. By focusing on the “jumpers” whose images were conspicuously absent and censored in the immediate wake of the attacks, Beigbeder gives voice to bodies that were removed from the “official” narrative of 9/11. In turn, these bodies provide Beigbeder a way to represent September 11. Thus, Carthew and Beigbeder’s discussion of the “void” initially represents the space into which the jumpers enter, but quickly takes on metafictional significance: “The void is a way out. The void is welcoming. The void stretches out its arms to you” (149). Beigbeder as author uses this void to represent the narrative space he and his characters (both “Beigbeder” and Carthew) must enter if they are to get closer to the event. An emerging conversation between author as character and fictional character further demonstrates the hyperrealistic nature of *Windows on the World* as a self-conscious display of the process of understanding 9/11 and the self through writing. Thus, “Beigbeder” responds to Carthew in the next chapter, “Ok, Carthew, if you’re going to be like that, I’ll go to New York” (150). This conversation also demonstrates the way in which opposing views of the jumpers,

and of 9/11 as a whole, coexisted not only among different individuals, but also internally within oneself.¹⁵

Beigbeder explores this duality in consciousness by drawing comparisons to himself and his fictional counterparts. Just as Carthew's thoughts and remarks are often indirect references to Beigbeder, "Beigbeder" as character also describes himself in ways that relate to Carthew. "Beigbeder" laments, "I can't stick at anything. I got married, I got divorced. I had a kid, but I don't parent. I'm in love, I run away to New York. I'm handicapped, and I'm not the only one. I live in a no-man's-land: neither an INTERNATIONAL PLAYBOY nor MARRIED AND PROUD OF IT" (175). Carthew's narrative is filled with similar thoughts in which, faced with his own mortality, he is forced to examine his roles as husband, father, and lover. Like "Beigbeder," he feels that he has failed those around him—his ex-wife, his sons, his girlfriend—and he suggests that this feeling is not singular to him, but rather reflects a current crisis of masculinity that finds men uncomfortably straddling the line between happy husband and swinging single. Both "Beigbeder" and Carthew characterize this condition as a direct consequence of modernity and Western capitalist ideals of success.

This crisis, experienced by both "Beigbeder" and Carthew, suggests an international camaraderie that Beigbeder as author stresses throughout the novel. At the end of the narrative when "Beigbeder" as character has come to New York, he finds himself asking everyone he can about 9/11. Most New Yorkers express weariness, a mistrust of "Beigbeder" as a foreigner, and a desire to move on. "Beigbeder" lies at one point, telling a waiter that his "cousin" from Texas (Carthew) was killed on 9/11, and is able to get the waiter to join him in singing the Dionne Warwick song "Windows on the World": "And there we are, two citizens of planet earth, humming 'The windows of the world are covered with rain,' at first we feel like fools, the customers think we're drunk, we don't sing very loudly, then the chorus comes and we are howling like piglets, like tramps, like brothers" (299). Although this encounter is predicated on a lie and fueled by Beigbeder's ever-present narcissism, "Beigbeder" is able, for a moment, to bridge the gap he sees between himself and others, becoming "two citizens of planet earth ... like brothers." While only temporary, this moment does suggest the possibility for overcoming otherness and the recuperative necessity of individuals coming together despite initial difference. This idea is not revolutionary. Beigbeder's technique of expressing it through autofiction, however, coupled with the international dualism of his fictional counterpart(s), demonstrates how narrative can be used in the creation of a global community in moments of transition.

The ways in which bodies function as stand-ins for nation is manifest in *Windows on the World* through the nationalization of physical bodies. In *Windows on the World*, autofiction provides a necessary fictionalizing narrative, giving the

novel a certain critical distance while still engaging in a discourse of 9/11. This is accomplished in two distinct modes. The first is a dramatic personalization of the narrative, since Carthew and “Beigbeder”’s reflections on 9/11 become solely the product of Beigbeder as author. The second mode is the characterization of Carthew as a personification of the US and “Beigbeder” as a personification of France. The primary element of Beigbeder’s characterization of Carthew, and by extension the US, is immaturity. The entire explication of Carthew’s character functions as an exercise in global stereotypes of American infantilism. Carthew is greedy, domineering, selfish, impatient, and grandiose; his first lines in the text exemplify his views: “That morning, we were at the top of the world, and I was the center of the universe” (3). Eating at Windows on the World, Carthew is on one level referring to his literal location, but more importantly, he speaks metaphorically for America’s stance on the morning of 9/11. His use of “we” refers to the national body, and as Americans, he and his countrymen were “at the top of the world”—the self-proclaimed global leaders of the “free world.” Carthew, embodying this American exceptionalism, refers to himself as “the center of the universe.” This reflects the stereotype of the self-centered, obnoxious American who thinks only of himself and privileges his experience over all others. Carthew is a loud, culturally illiterate autodidact. A Texan and a born-again Christian, he embodies many of the global stereotypes of the US and its president at the time of the terrorist attacks.

Carthew’s discussion of France is no less clichéd than Beigbeder’s characterization of Carthew and, by extension, the US. In discussing France with his children, Carthew explains: “France is a small European country that helped America to free itself from the yoke of English oppression between 1776 and 1783 and that, to show our appreciation, our soldiers liberated them from the Nazis in 1944” (13). Here Carthew’s response is both simplistic and jingoistic as he conflates two hundred years of history, reducing it to anecdote. He goes on to point out the Statue of Liberty as a gift from France, but admits, “The kids don’t give a damn, even though they’re big fans of ‘French fries’ and ‘French toast.’ Right now, I’m more interested in ‘French kissing’ and ‘French letters.’ And *The French Connection*, with the famous car chase under the El” (13). After condensing history to mere triviality, Carthew relies on popular culture to reveal his limited and juvenile understanding of France. This superficial characterization speaks to the belief that Americans are boorish, with no cultural appreciation or knowledge of history or foreign policy.

Beigbeder’s infantilization of Carthew and the US is also evident in Beigbeder’s narration. “Beigbeder” continually professes to love the US despite his European attitudes and relentless condescending to cultural stereotypes, all the while demonstrating the superiority of his intellect to that of Carthew (and his country, by extension). As author, Beigbeder allows himself the power of

metaphor and critical analysis. More often than not, Carthew is reduced to his impulses, folk sayings, and preconceptions, representing the US as a state of simplistic childhood. But Beigbeder does not stop there; he also allows this mode of thought to describe his own character as inescapably stereotypically French, and upon coming to New York embodies a certain type of “Eurotrash” sensibility, partying at clubs and making inappropriate jokes about Osama bin Laden. France also falls victim to the characterization, with Beigbeder writing that as a “cultural exception,” France’s recent production “consists in churning out exceptionally tedious movies, exceptionally slapdash books, and, all in all, works of art that are exceptionally pedantic and self-satisfied. It goes without saying that I include my own work in this sorry assessment” (19). Here Beigbeder manages to bash not only France’s current popular culture, but himself as well. The self-referential inclusion of himself and his works also reminds readers that *Windows on the World* is a piece of fiction, removing the novel to a certain critical extent from political discourses of nation and 9/11.

Embodying the stereotypes of both France and the US in the characters of “Beigbeder” and Carthew, Beigbeder as author demonstrates the crisis in national signification. He exploits stereotype through his double narrative in order to expose popular cultural and global rhetoric, and uses autofiction to transcend these tropes. Beigbeder as author continues this rhetorical strategy through his narration of himself as a metaphor for France. The tension between these two stereotypes of the US and France is a literary delineation of Europe’s reaction to 9/11. By setting up the narratives of the novel as at once intensely personal through autofiction and extremely general through stereotype, Beigbeder can recount the enormity of what happened and its resounding effects for Americans and Europeans without being beholden to a narrative reconstruction of the “known” facts (i.e., what it was actually like to be in *Windows on the World* that morning).

The relationship between community, nation, and space is important in *Windows on the World*, where, through its innovative structure, the novel attempts to live beyond linear borders of time and space in order to disrupt the temporality of post-9/11 discourse. Early in *Windows on the World* Beigbeder writes, “Hell lasts an hour and three quarters. So does this book” (6). While the minutes represent the time Carthew and his sons spend in the tower, the text itself moves back and forth from the past of 9/11 to the “present” of Beigbeder writing the novel. The hyperreality of *Windows on the World* enables Carthew not only to speak from the dead, but also to cross a void and be placed in dialogue with Beigbeder as author/character.

After September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center became a forbidden, inaccessible space. Literally, after its collapse, it could no longer be physically occupied. Figuratively, this was manifest in the ways in which 9/11 came to be

characterized as indescribable and unspeakable. Beigbender enters these literal and metaphorical territories through the creative process in *Windows on the World*. As previously noted, Beigbender structures his chapters as a narrative construct of the time that his characters spend in the North Tower. In this way, his text becomes the tower. He visually mimics this representation in the chapter “10:34,” where the text runs down the page in two columns shaped to resemble the towers, the chapter title written vertically in the appearance of the antennae atop the North Tower.

Beigbender also gives “life” to the towers when, early in the novel, Carthew refers to them as “David” and “Nelson,” reminding readers of their capitalist connotations pre-9/11. Beigbender carries this line of thought when he references another popular allusion to the towers—the Tower of Babel: “The luxury of skyscrapers is that they allow human beings to rise above themselves. Every skyscraper is a utopia. The age-old fantasy of man has been to build his own mountains. In building towers into the clouds, man is proving to himself that he is above nature” (15). In this incarnation, the towers are not only symbols of capitalist greed, but they become the means by which man asserts his authority over other men and nature. As such, they become god-like, serving as temples to decadence.

Toward the end of the novel, however, after the towers have been hit, Beigbender reveals the reality of what happens when symbols become vulnerable. He points out the hypocrisy in the reaction to the towers’ collapse: “Don’t show the blood, I can’t bear to look at it. When a building collapses, feel free to show the footage endlessly. But whatever you do, don’t show what was inside: our bodies” (262). This statement references US media censorship of physical bodies falling from the towers and images of bodies in the rubble, and preference for showing the collapse of the towers on a seemingly endless loop.¹⁶ The irony, of course, is that the collapse of the towers caused the majority of deaths that day, and in airing the destruction of the “bodies” of the towers, in reality the media provided a global screening of the death of thousands of human bodies. Beigbender hits this point home when he inextricably joins these bodies together, describing them as “a heap of thousands of tons of smoldering bodies and melted steel in which are fused man and stone, computers and severed arms, elevators and charred legs, believers and atheists, fire and the sword” (293). He brings together all of the elements of the event, demonstrating that despite their functions and differences in life, both the living and the non-living are reduced to the same fate in the end.

Ultimately these bodies and towers reside in a “void”, and *Windows on the World* attempts to reclaim that forbidden territory and give it personal, political, and cultural shape. In doing so, the novel operates in a present that offers the confluence of autofiction and hyperrealism as a new mode of representation in the

global discourse of 9/11. Through autofiction, *Windows on the World* suggests one way in which subjectivity is understood and lived as a physical body in a particular moment in history. The global implications of 9/11 are constituted as a time and space for reconfiguring nation through the writing of one's life. As a result, the body becomes a site for new forms of personal and political signification. This doubling, demonstrated in the content and form of *Windows on the World*, demonstrates an overlapping of voices, themes, and ideas representative of the complexity and nuances of 9/11 and the ways in which new identities are formed in the spaces of temporal transition. In its use of autofiction and hyperrealism in the creation of a post-9/11 transnational body, the novel becomes a self-conscious display of the ideological relationship of artistic and cultural expression in relation to the political use of narrative.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Alain-Philippe Durand and Michael Weiss for the translation of this article.
2. To distinguish between Beigbeder as author and Beigbeder as character, all references to Beigbeder's fictional representation of himself will be noted in quotation marks as "Frédéric Beigbeder" or "Beigbeder."
3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *Windows on the World* in this article refer to Wynne's 2005 English translation of the novel.
4. It should be noted that *Windows on the World* was quite a success for a contemporary French novel published in the United States. Along with Michel Houellebecq, Beigbeder is the only contemporary French novelist to be translated into English by major US publishing houses. Other contemporary French authors are rarely translated, and when they are, it is mainly via academic publishers or smaller, more obscure, presses
5. As Alain-Philippe Durand has noted, "The work of Frédéric Beigbeder, taken together with his personality and multiple occupations (writer, critic, editor, columnist, television host, jet-setter, disc jockey, former advertising executive, and now filmmaker), illustrates his vision of contemporary society" ("Frédéric Beigbeder and the French Pop Novel" 183). Beigbeder's reputation as an *enfant terrible* was only confirmed by his January 2008 arrest outside of a Parisian nightclub, the result of being caught snorting cocaine off the hood of a car. This event inspired Beigbeder's 2009 novel *Un roman français*.

6. Early in *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha asserts: “What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of ordinary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (2). Although it is important to note that Bhabha was writing from a different theoretical perspective that predates 9/11, many of his ideas are helpful when considering the relationships between narrative, nationality, and 9/11.

7. “There are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns; there are things we do not know we don’t know” (Rumsfeld).

8. Addressing the US on the evening of September 11, President Bush deemed the day’s events an “attack,” “evil” acts that forced America into war. A dichotomy was established, with Bush declaring, “America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world and we stand together to win the war against terrorism.”

9. See Debra Walker King’s *Body Politics and the Fictional Double*.

10. Even in this postscript, Beigbeder cannot help but discuss 9/11 in terms of physicality.

11. Many thanks to Alain-Phillipe Durand and Hannah Read for the translation of this interview.

12. Page numbers as in original French edition. The translation of this passage is my own.

13. The term “terror sex” was coined in Cole Kazdin’s September 21, 2001 *Salon.com* article “Sex in a Time of Terror.”

14. Chapter “9:36” details Beigbeder’s self-accusations and list of personal “crimes” with the final verdict: “I sentence myself to solitary for life” (206).

15. The term “9/11 Jumpers” refers to individuals who died on September 11, 2001 as a result of falling from the World Trade Center. Richard Drew’s iconic photograph “Falling Man” captured the image of one of the “jumpers” and immediately caused controversy upon its publication. Images of the jumpers were

quickly censored in the wake of 9/11, with many arguing that the individuals fell rather than jumped. Further controversy surrounded whether the act was cowardly, suicidal, or heroic.

16. Slavoj Žižek makes similar comments on the censorship of bodies in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*: “[T]he same ‘derealization’ of the horror went on after the WTC collapse: while the number of victims—3,000—is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see—no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people . . . in clear contrast to reporting on Third World catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail: Somalis dying of hunger, raped Bosnian women, men with their throats cut” (13).

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