

# Mosaic of Ashes: Poetic Responses to 9/11

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**Abstract:** By challenging and problematizing the definition of 9/11 as ‘the event,’ the article examines the extent to which the official discourse on the attacks, exemplified in speeches given by government representatives and based on preestablished binary symbolism, shaped poetic representations of 9/11. This article, by focusing on three anthologies of poetry, analyzes the diversity of poetic responses to 9/11 and the ways in which they engage with and respond to the government’s interpretation of the event and its impact on the redefinition of the sense of belonging to the national collective. The poetic heterogeneity testifies to the multiplicity of nonconsensual interpretations of the event, demonstrates its impact, and unveils the impossibility of providing any stable and shared definition of ‘the national collective.’ The attacks do not contribute to the creation of one uniting national narrative but signify multiple subjective experiences and, thus, elicit numerous distinct and discordant responses and memories of them.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, encapsulated in the word-symbol ‘9/11,’ transformed national and international politics. In the immediate aftermath, “[they] were widely described as a moment of historical rupture [...] that drew a clear line through world history, dividing what came after 9/11 from what went before” (Holloway 1). Similarly, in “The Spirit of Terrorism,” Jean Baudrillard argues for a redefinition of the term ‘the event’ in order to outline and respond to the scale and nature of the attacks. In a highly metaphorical way, he describes 9/11 as “the ‘mother’ of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place” (4). The exceptionality of 9/11, as emphasized by Baudrillard, can, however, have problematic political implications, which are not sufficiently dealt with in his essay. Apart from an open condemnation of the “mindlessly military, technological war” (34), his text does not suggest any alternative state response.

Yet, it is precisely the insistence on the exceptionality of ‘the event’ that warranted subsequent political measures and military invasions; therefore, a number of scholars have highlighted the problematic nature of interpreting 9/11 as ‘the event.’ Firstly, it perpetuates what Amy Kaplan calls the “narrative of historical exceptionalism [...] that claims that the event was so unique and unprecedented as to transcend time and defy comparison or historical analysis” (56). Secondly, as Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley emphasize, the imagination of 9/11

tends to reduce complex historical forces to a mechanistic theory of cause and effect, or privileges catastrophic events at the expense of more subterranean political, social and cultural currents that might turn out to have more profound effects on shaping the future. (3)

David Holloway, too, sees 9/11 as directly linked to earlier political developments: “9/11 and the war on terror [...] [derived] from a plurality of existing conflicts and contexts that converged during the 1990s,” including the Cold War and the Gulf War (11).

The reading of 9/11 as a unique historical moment, as employed by US government officials immediately after the attacks, was politically and strategically motivated. According to Mary L. Dudziak, the attacks of September 11 became a justification for the ever-increasing state control in domestic policy in the name of the ‘war on terror,’ serving as “a site for reinforcement of a preexisting U.S. unilateralism” (Introduction 3). Holloway agrees with this assessment and insists that the “[r]epresentation of 9/11 as the moment when everything changed became the ideological lynchpin of the ‘war on terror’” (4). Jacques Rancière also emphasizes how the US government was able to “register the event through a certain symbolization of American togetherness and of the state of the world” soon after the attacks (98). He refuses to interpret 9/11 as “a symbolic event” (97), underlining how it was immediately “characterize[d] [...] in religious and ethnic terms as a combat between good and evil, and therefore as one that is as everlasting as the opposition between them” (99). 9/11 did not mark a moment of rupture but instead was quickly interpreted within a preestablished patriotic and religious diction.

In the aftermath of the attacks, literature faced the challenge of positioning itself between the urge to testify to the event’s traumatic nature, the difficulty of finding means of aesthetic expression, and the US government’s limiting discourse on 9/11. For Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, and Jay McInerney, “literary endeavours [were rendered] futile” (Houen 2) and language seemed inadequate to represent the attacks. Despite these challenges, however, there was an outpouring of literary responses—both in prose and poetry—which attempted to engage with the sense of confusion, disorientation, and personal as well as collective grief and loss. Whether in print, on

the Internet, or as attachments to lampposts or photos of missing loved ones in the urban space, short forms of poetry proved to be an extremely popular and effective way of expressing these sentiments. Although poetic responses often focused on 9/11's impact on the individual, they were, according to Karen Alkalay-Gut, also showing how "in writing an original poem [...] one was simultaneously participating in a universal event and contributing to the understanding of a communal trauma" (259).

In addition, poetic works were reacting to what Peter Brooks called the "*political* failure of [...] mourning" (49). The term further refines Sigmund Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia and denotes the immediate seizure of 9/11 in order to justify the political and strategic decisions as well as the resulting impossibility of collective mourning. Freud defines mourning as a process that "involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life" (243). Once completed, however, the mourning enables "the ego [to become] free and uninhibited again" (245). As such, mourning is necessary for both the individual and society to be able to move away from the past and form a new attachment to an existing object in the present. The highly controversial decision of the US government to intervene militarily was presented as the only possible response to 9/11. Instead of contributing to successfully overcoming the traumatic experience, the military interventions only prolonged its duration and impact on an individual and collective level.

In comparison to the extensive critical treatment of representations of 9/11 in prose,<sup>1</sup> few studies have attempted to survey and present the extent and diversity of poetic responses. The sheer proliferation of poems, in print and online, renders the task of a systematic analysis rather difficult. Being aware of their constantly growing number, none of the existing studies on 9/11 poetry claims to provide a definitive record of the poetic outpouring in response to the attacks. As Moberley Luger points out, "multiple websites [and poetry forums] emerged that were entirely devoted to 9/11 poetry, and one site, poetry.com, houses over fifty-five thousand entries" (2). The Library of Congress guide to "Poetry of September 11," compiled by Peter Armenti, also highlights the impossibility of providing a definite record of the works composed in the aftermath of the attacks.

Extremely diverse and often controversial, the poetic responses to 9/11 escape easy characterization. Billy Collins characterizes poetry as "the original grief counseling

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1 Among the key studies of prose written in response to 9/11 are: Birgit Däwes's *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel*; Richard Gray's *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11; Literature after 9/11*, edited by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn; Kristiaan Versluys's *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*; Martin Randall's *9/11 and the Literature of Terror*; chapter five in David Holloway's *9/11 and the War on Terror*; Don DeLillo's essay "In The Ruins of the Future"; and most recently Lucy Bond's doctoral thesis "Retracing Rupture: Remembering 9/11 in Theory and Practice."

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center,” and, likewise, Dinitia Smith underlines its potential “to [c]onsole.” Stressing their immediacy and emotional intensity, Alkalay-Gut remarks that poems are also able to voice grief. According to her, a lack of formal complexity and a simplicity of ideas characterize poetic responses to 9/11. Although “[d]irect statements of grief, anger, or outrage characterize these writings” (258), she asserts that

it was clear that a certain kind of censorship prevailed: no graphic details of horror, no complex political and moral analysis, and above all no polished, ‘poetic’ poetry. The style expected is generally conventional and the treatment of the subject ‘positive’—patriotic, elegiac, heroic. (268)

In contrast, Pavla Veselá points out that many of the poems published directly after the attacks were complex, carefully crafted poetic engagements (237-38). In fact, a whole spectrum of political attitudes, interpretations, and varying levels of poetic complexity can be found among poetic treatments of 9/11. However, by focusing only on the works by authors belonging to ethnic, social, and sexual minorities, Veselá’s original inquiry does not fully reflect the heterogeneity of poetic responses to 9/11. My paper adopts a radically different methodological approach, and its scope of inquiry emphasizes precisely the diversity and the nonconsensual nature of poetic engagements with the event.

My inquiry, although building on previous analyses, does not limit itself to the works by poets from social, religious, or ethnic minorities as such an approach misrepresents the creative diversity of 9/11 poetry. Also, adopting an angle that differs from the one employed in Luger’s thesis, I do not aim to focus on “[h]ow [...] poetry, a genre often associated with the private realm, receive[s] and produce[s] public memory” (3), but rather, I aim to explore how the notions and concepts used in public discourse shaped poetic responses to 9/11. Instead of subscribing to the generalizing tendencies of previous interpretative approaches, which stress poetry’s consoling nature and its potential to provide a sense of closure, my analysis explores to what extent poetic works, representing varying levels of complexity and diverse ideological viewpoints, succeed in overcoming the trauma of 9/11. Focusing on the diverse uses and shifting definitions of the concepts of patriotism and multiculturalism, I investigate the ways in which works from *9-11 Remembered* (2011), *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind* (2002), and *9/11/2001* (2002) envisage the possibilities of defining oneself in relation to a collectivity in the aftermath of September 11. After my preliminary research, consisting of reading hundreds of poems, written by amateur and nonamateur poets, published online and in print, these three poem collections seemed to capture best not only the radical heterogeneity of responses but also the unprecedented popular outpouring of poetic creativity, which testifies to the truly global and universal impact of the attacks. Apart from Laurence Goldstein’s article

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“The Response of American Poets to 9/11: A Provisional Report,” which briefly mentions and quickly dismisses the poets included in Cohen and Matson’s anthology as “vehemently ideological,” there is no extensive study of the three chosen publications.

This article, adopting a thematic rather than formal division of inquiry, brings to the fore the creative and political diversity of poetic responses to 9/11 and exposes the poems’ often contrasting visions of the national collective in the aftermath of the attacks. Rather than demonstrating a unified and single reaction to 9/11, I seek to tease out the discords and tensions within the varied responses as well as the ways in which they position themselves in relation to the presentation of 9/11 as ‘the event’ and as a unifying moment necessitating an extraordinary response. My work commences with an examination of patriotic responses to the attacks, which is followed by presenting poems directly opposing such a patriotic reaction. Finally, I examine poetic responses that refuse to subscribe to any of the extreme positions but instead ponder the possibility of a hybrid national identity. I argue that the heterogeneity of 9/11 poetry testifies to the multiplicity of nonconsensual interpretations of the attacks and unveils the impossibility of providing a stable and shared definition of ‘the national collective.’ The attacks do not contribute to the creation of one uniting national narrative but signify multiple subjective experiences and elicit numerous distinct and discordant responses and memories of 9/11. The critical effort of bridging the varied and often contrasting American memories of ‘the event’ marks an attempt to represent and commemorate Ground Zero’s mosaic of ashes.

### PATRIOTIC RESPONSES TO 9/11

Among the poetic responses to 9/11, many evoke the concepts of patriotism and national unity. However, these complex notions are in no way self-explanatory; their meaning is continually redefined by the different discourses on the incident. *9-11 Remembered*, edited by Daveda Gruber, employs these terms alongside national and religious symbolism as well as highly emotional and patriotic diction to create a very specific vision of the national collective in the wake of the attacks. As stated in its foreword, the anthology “with pride for The United States of America and its brave men and women [...] honors them with the extraordinary pieces of work inside this [...] book” (Gruber ix). “Towers of 9/11” by Joree Williams, “September Eleventh!” by Jim Elwood Davis, and “Stand Together” by Helen VanEck Holub bring together the themes and imagery permeating the anthology. Through the use of hostile rhetoric and simplistic imagery, the poems—to a varying extent—imagine the nation as an ethnically, religiously, and ideologically homogenous space and seem to embrace what

Steven Salaita calls “*imperative patriotism*” (154). The term describes an attitude that welcomes American domestic and international hegemony and “assumes (or demands) that dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs [...] [as well as] nonconformity to whatever at the time is considered to be ‘the national interest’ is unpatriotic” (154).

Williams’s poem “Towers of 9/11,” published in *9-11 Remembered*, attempts to establish itself as an authoritative text that represents a widely embraced attitude in the aftermath of September 11. The use of collective pronouns marks the speaker’s place within the community and his/her identification with the national collective. S/he is a part of “our country” (Williams 12), “our homeland” (16), and with pride celebrates the nation’s unity in response to the attacks. Although national identity is initially heterogeneous, in the second stanza it quickly becomes an exclusive category that presupposes ideological uniformity. The speaker rejoices that “the people of our country / Come together in their anger” (12-13) targeted against “our enemies” (19), the terrorists and those dissenting from zealous patriotism. Asserting that “our adversity had brought out / The true character of our homeland” (15-16), the speaker stresses the extent of this hostility as a comforting source of reassurance that “America will survive whatever / Comes her way and grow stronger / With every trial and tribulation!” (20-22).

The poem’s understanding of the attacks and the problematic definition of the national collective it exposes do not, however, diverge greatly from the US government’s interpretation of 9/11. A critical analysis of the text can highlight the dangerous implications of simplistic rhetoric used by US officials and the media. Exemplified in speeches by George W. Bush and Colin L. Powell as well as related newspaper headlines,<sup>2</sup> this rhetoric “strove to reaffirm a vision of a unified American nation [...] [and] employed strategies typical of community building, such as delineating boundaries and focusing around symbols” (Veselá 217). In one of his immediate reactions to 9/11, Powell provided a very clear interpretation of the attacks, outlined the response it necessitates, and presented the military intervention as an effort to save the United States and human civilization as a whole. On September 13, 2001, he stated: “[T]errorism is a crime against all civilization. Terrorism is a crime against all humanity. It knows no ethnic, religious or other national or geographic boundaries. And we must see it in that context and that’s why we are calling it a war.” By celebrating military strength as an expression of the country’s greatness, “Towers of 9/11” subscribes to

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2 Veselá states: “[T]he corporate television reports and newspaper headlines spouted extracts from the president’s speeches, including ‘Attack on America’ (e.g., *Charlotte Observer*, *Cape Cod Times*, *Chattanooga Times*, all September 12), ‘War on America’ (*Boston Herald*, September 11), ‘The People Who Knocked These Buildings Down Will Hear All of Us Soon’ (*New York Daily News*, September 15), ‘Our Purpose as a Nation Is Firm’ (*San Jose Mercury News*, September 15), and ‘One Nation, Indivisible’ (*Daily Mississippian*, September 12)” (222).

the interpretation of the conflict in terms of a universal battle between good and evil. The poem's definition of national identity seems to dangerously conflate homogeneity with patriotism and an unconditional support for the US government's actions.

The unquestioning patriotism of "Towers of 9/11" is also embraced in the respective poems by Davis and VanEck Holub, likewise published in Gruber's anthology. Both poetic works aim to link one's belonging to the national community to religious and ideological homogeneity. Regularly rhymed stanzas, exclamation marks, and collective pronouns are used to evoke a strong national collective and reaffirm the opposition between the homogenous nation and the threat of diversity. The poems intertwine the rhetoric of military intervention with religious symbolism and conflate terrorists with Muslims and Arab Americans. In so doing, they ignore, in a xenophobic manner, the diversity of the Arab American community, which contains "over twenty national backgrounds, a multitude of linguistic dialects, and numerous religions" (Salaita 150). In Davis' "September Eleventh!" anyone of Middle Eastern origin or Muslim faith is presented as a potential terrorist and a threat to the nation. Uncritically equating religious affiliation with terrorism, the speaker declares:

The Eleventh of September,  
We caught a glimpse of Holy Hell!  
Although I'd rather not remember,  
The day the Towers fell!  
An act witnessed by millions,  
Murder in the name of God!  
Three Thousand Civilians,  
Died for some insane Jihad! (1-8)

S/he depicts Jihad as "insane" (8), uses 'terrorists' and 'religious fanatics' synonymously, and describes 9/11 simply as "[an] evil deed [which] did not succeed" (31) but has only strengthened the national collective. In the closing lines of the poem the speaker confidently asserts: "There will be no repeat! / We'll be secure, and that's for sure" (28-29).

By pairing religious and national symbolism, VanEck Holub's "Stand Together" establishes an even stronger connection between national identity and religious as well as ideological uniformity than Davis's poem. The US Constitution is placed alongside "[t]he Eagle," "our flag," and the image of "our hands / folded in prayer" (22-23). The speaker asserts that "[w]e are a Nation that needs to stand strong and courageous / remembering our beginnings and that God gave us / everything there" (24-26). In contrast to the other poems, "Stand Together" presents a vision of the national collective that also presupposes an embrace of capitalism and an opposition to communism. In the closing stanza, the speaker warns the reader:

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Don't ever forget Sept. 11th, the day that disaster struck  
If we do, then we will be Americans no more  
Except puppets on a string pulled by a Communistic floor. (27-29)

According to the speaker, one has to remain forever vigilant and attentive to any signs of internal dissent and departure from the zealous affirmation of national sentiment.<sup>3</sup> By connecting patriotism with the support for military intervention and ideological uniformity, the poems by Williams, Davis, and VanEck Holub present a highly problematic vision of the post-9/11 national collective. Willingly or not, they subscribe to and proclaim the US government's rhetoric and the image of a homogenous nation.

Johana Smith's poem collection *9/11/2001* also attempts to portray a strong national collective, an effort that is, however, undermined by the structure, diction, imagery, and peritexts of the poems. The link between patriotism and military intervention and the interpretation of 9/11 as 'the event' is even more explicit in this collection. Moreover, the poems reveal the overpowering and traumatic impact that the witnessing of the attacks had on the poems' speakers. The first section—consisting of two poems responding to 9/11, entitled "9-11-2001 or 19 Crazy Men" and "A Year Later"—defines the anthology as a whole and overshadows all the other experiences depicted therein. The peritexts of the collection—its front cover, opening dedication, and preface—also reveal the traumatizing impact of the attacks. The front cover shows the skyline of New York City, including the beam of light from Ground Zero, and the opening dedication claims: "The world will never be the same again."

While the diction of Smith's "9-11-2001 or 19 Crazy Men" and "A Year Later" echo the US government's rhetoric of rupture and victory, the poems also reveal the impossibility of achieving a sense of closure following 9/11. In the opening two stanzas of "9-11-2001," the speaker voices his/her anger in diction almost identical to that used by Powell in his aforementioned speech. According to him/her:

This heinous crime  
Was not against the United States  
Or the Americans,  
It was a crime  
Against the FREE WORLD (14-18)

The closing stanza, addressing "all the terrorists" (210), reiterates the sentiments and views expressed earlier. By repeatedly using the collective pronouns 'we' and 'us,' it

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3 Elaine Tyler May emphasizes the similarity between portrayals of terrorists in the aftermath of September 11 and the anti-Communist rhetoric during and after the Cold War. According to her, "[the terrorists] seemed to personify the characteristics of the Communist threat: foreigners who infiltrated the nation, studied our technology, and used our own power against us" (42).

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reasserts the vision of a nation united in the struggle between good and evil. The speaker, certain of America's victory, proclaims:

There is no place  
On Earth  
Or the nearest galaxy,  
Far enough  
To stop us,  
The people of the Free World. (216-21)

His/her vision, however, is continually undermined by the use of biblical and apocalyptic imagery and diction, revealing the speaker's disorientation, confusion, and altered perception of the world. Responding to the news coverage on September 11, s/he notes:

Apocalyptic vision,  
Inferno on Earth,  
The Beast has awoken,  
It is the end  
Of the World we know. (111-15)

The subsequent stanzas reinforce the previous sentiments of chaos and horror and the speaker's perception of him-/herself as a "useless witness" (178). Struggling to accept his/her position as a survivor and a television witness, s/he admits:

I was powerless  
To stop it,  
And furthermore,  
I am alive. (179-82)

The sense of trauma and guilt permeates "9-11-2001" and undermines the speaker's attempts to reaffirm a strong national collective in the aftermath of the attacks.

The overwhelming sense of trauma and the impossibility to achieve a sense of closure is also revealed in the anthology's second 9/11 poem, Johana Smith's "A Year Later." The brief, fractured lines and the capitalization of entire words reveal a haunted speaker, who unsuccessfully tries to deny the continual and omnipresent feelings of fear and threat. This tension, marking an awareness of self-contradiction, permeates the poem; the imagery in each stanza exposes individual and collective insecurity. In the opening lines, the speaker admits that "[a] year later, / Nothing has been resolved" (1-2), "the fear / Is still around" (5-6). The speaker rhetorically asks: "How can anyone / Forget?" (7-8), which reveals the impossibility of simply overcoming the impact of the attacks. S/he continues:

Some of us  
Still jump

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At the sound  
Of a jumbo-jet. (10-13)

The lines immediately bring back the image of the so-called falling man captured in a photograph, ever present as a haunting memory in the speaker's mind.<sup>4</sup> The initial claim that "[p]eople have learned / To laugh again" (18-19) is undermined by the subsequent statement, which reveals that they have also learned "[n]ot to think about / TOMORROW" (23-24). Here the capitalization is a way of reassuring the speaker that 'tomorrow' exists. It unveils, at the same time, a deep-seated incertitude and anxiety about the future. Also, the speaker's address to the imaginary 'you,' as in "You, / Cowards / Terrorists" (27-29), further asserts the existence of the omnipresent threat and danger. Again, a subsequent capitalization accompanied by an exclamation mark, "YOU FAILED!" (30), contrary to the speaker's intentions, reveals the emotional distress, instability, and uncertainty s/he finds him-/herself in. Equating terrorists with cowards, the speaker aims to present the attacks almost as a foolish act of cowardice and not as a complex, preplanned belligerent action. The equation of terrorists with cowards emphasizes the superiority of the United States, implies a certainty about its victory in case of military confrontation, and aims to facilitate the overcoming of the traumatizing impact of 9/11.

Although the poem's imagery and diction echo the US government's rhetoric, it only reveals that the "narratives [...] about the strength and invulnerability of the state [...] cannot prevent catastrophe" (Edkins 253). The speaker's closing address, expressed in future tense, only confirms his/her deep-seated anxiety about what is to come. The revenge s/he hopes for will happen in an unspecified future—"soon" (J. Smith, "A Year Later" 38). Likewise, any change to the current sense of fear and threat remains temporally undefined:

And soon,  
You can be sure,  
You'll have  
Nowhere to hide.  
Then,  
The Free World  
Will rejoice. (38-44)

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4 The 'falling man' refers to Richard Drew's controversial photograph of a man falling from one of the Twin Towers. It was published in newspapers around the world but soon replaced in the media by more heroic and patriotic images celebrating the effort of civil servants as well as sentiments of national pride. In his article "The Falling Man" for *Esquire*, Tom Junod provides an extensive analysis of the image.

The seemingly confident and vengeful tone of the lines is undermined by indefinite deictic markers, which reveal that the speaker is uncertain whether and when the change s/he hopes for will occur.

Both Gruber's *9-11 Remembered* and Johana Smith's *9/11/2001* attempt to present a strong nation, unanimous in their acceptance of the government's response to the attacks of September 11. Defining patriotism as an opposition to heterogeneity, inseparable from the support for the strategic hegemony and military intervention of the United States, they embrace imperative patriotism as a way of defining one's belonging to the national community. However, neither of the publications manages to present and reassert a vision of a united national collective. Instead, they both reveal the impossibility of overcoming trauma and of achieving a sense of closure.

### **PATRIOTISM CHALLENGED**

Patriotism—understood as an embrace of military intervention, the US government's rhetoric, and homogeneity—was not the only response to 9/11. Poets and intellectuals attempted to challenge the dangerously limiting official view of 9/11 as 'the event' as well as the equally problematic interpretations of the attacks as a government-led action. Susan Sontag, in her contentious contribution to a collaborative piece in the *New Yorker*, challenges the tone of US government officials. She claims that "[o]ur leaders are bent on convincing us that everything is O.K. America is not afraid. Our spirit is unbroken, although this was a day that will live in infamy and America is now at war. But everything is not O.K." (Updike et al.). According to her, the goal of the language employed by government officials is to depoliticize the discussions on 9/11 as it aims to replace "[p]olitics, the politics of a democracy—which entails disagreement, which promotes candor—[...] by psychotherapy." In so doing, the US government's rhetoric is "a manipulative one: [intending] confidence-building and grief management."

Sontag's analysis becomes all the more relevant with subsequent 9/11 anniversaries, which homogenize the commemorative discourse on the attacks. Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt from the *New York Times* analyze the US government's set of national and international guidelines issued on the tenth anniversary of the attacks, which clearly outlines "a positive, forward-looking narrative." They point out that "[o]fficials [were] instructed to memorialize those who died in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and thank those in the military, law enforcement, intelligence or homeland security for their contributions since." This imposes an interpretation of 9/11 as 'the event' and greatly limits alternative readings and reactions to it and its consequences.

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The rejection of the ‘patriotic’ and ‘forward-looking’ interpretation of 9/11 is intertwined with a refusal to view the attacks as ‘the event’ and as an opportunity to reassert the greatness of the United States. Dudziak’s article, published shortly before the attacks’ tenth anniversary, stresses again the problematic continuous categorization of 9/11 “as a day that ‘changed everything’” (“When We Say”). Underlining the US government’s responsibility for the response to the attacks, she asserts that “if we see 9/11 as causing the politics, culture and military actions that followed, then we are giving the airplanes that slammed into buildings a powerful determinism” (“When We Say”). According to her, “[e]ven if 9/11 changed the way Americans thought about the world, it could not determine the actions we would take in its aftermath. It did not deprive American leaders of choices” (“When We Say”). She conceptualizes what the poets contributing to the anthology *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind* attempted to express shortly after the attacks. The anthology’s opening dedication states that the political stance the collection intends to embrace opposes military intervention and, instead, emphasizes diversity and multiculturalism. Thus, *An Eye for an Eye* embraces a notion of solidarity as a moment of coming together, without subscribing to the military extension of that sentiment, i.e., solidarity defined as an expression of simplistic strategic oppositions that is, “at its base, about Us and Them” (Alpers).

Through the use of juxtapositions, repetition, and anaphora, A. D. Winans’s poem “A Front Row Seat in Heaven” expresses its unwillingness to embrace patriotic rhetoric and goes as far as to oppose any commemoration of September 11. The speaker states in a controversial manner:

No eulogy for New York City  
No eulogy for Bin Laden  
No eulogy for Israel  
No eulogy for suicide bombers (34-37)

S/he not only refuses to commemorate the attacks and their victims but also doubts their transformative impact. In his/her view, 9/11 does not inspire national unity but, on the contrary, unveils deep-rooted sentiments of animosity within society and exposes the dangers of religious fanaticism. The speaker affirms:

When the truth is that  
people are not good  
to each other,  
[...]  
and suicide comes easy  
when your lot in life  
is such that you  
have nothing to lose

and are promised  
a front row seat  
in heaven (51-62)

Thus, “A Front Row Seat in Heaven” does not rejoice in diversity but disapproves of all religious traditions, which, according to the speaker, can be misused as a means for political manipulation. S/he highlights his/her view in a highly expressive way:

Promise a terrorist  
a front row seat in heaven  
Jews, Arabs, Catholics  
and Protestants guided  
by God’s pointed finger (17-21)

In its refusal to commemorate 9/11, the poem also rejects the simplifying interpretation of the attacks. Through the use of imagery and ironic juxtaposition in the third and fourth stanzas, “A Front Row Seat in Heaven” deconstructs the diction used both to express the uniqueness of the attacks and to convey patriotic sentiments. By employing irony, the speaker refers to September 11, 2001, as the day when “America’s heart [was] severed” (22) and depicts it as the

Day of death  
Day of rich women walking  
poodle dogs  
Day of stockbrokers crying  
Day of the innocent dying (25-29)

The speaker critically observes that “[f]lags [are] unfurling” (30) and “Old Glory [is] about to be prostituted / by pimp politicians” (31-32). The ironic diction of the lines exposes the ways in which language fraught with religious imagery and simplistic sentimentality contributes to the problematic presentation of 9/11 as ‘the event’ and how it is misused to define patriotism as an unconditional support of military intervention. Thus, if poetry is not critical enough, it can reaffirm the US government’s rhetoric on 9/11.

Offering a meta-commentary on the outpouring of poetic creativity in the aftermath of the attacks, the speaker of “A Front Row Seat in Heaven” highlights the danger of appropriating the attacks and objectifying the suffering of their victims. S/he remarks that “[p]oets [were] flooding internet pages / with wounded words / dressed in dark shrouds” (7-9). The lines point to the potentially depoliticizing and decontextualizing effect of reading the attacks as only a traumatic rupture outside time and context. In doing so, the poem stands in direct opposition to the type of poetic responses collected in Gruber’s *9-11 Remembered*. By commenting on the ways art can

be employed to work through traumatic grief, “A Front Row Seat in Heaven” also warns of the appropriation of trauma for political means.

The poem’s commentary on the nature of poetic responses to the attacks is intertwined with a reflection on the impact of cinematic representations on one’s perception of 9/11. In the opening image of the poem, “King Kong’s balls cut off / but erection still firm” (5-6), the speaker highlights the link between earlier film productions and the cinematic comparisons employed to explain what happened on September 11. Although the poem’s preference to choose, in Kevin Higgins’s words, “rhetorical straightforwardness over nuance” can sometimes be problematic, it is particularly effective in voicing opposition to the US government’s understanding of 9/11 and the rhetoric of military intervention. In his analysis of the use of cinematic references to describe the attacks, Baudrillard notes that “countless disaster movies bear witness to this fantasy [the symbolic destruction of the World Trade Center], which they clearly attempt to exorcize with images, drowning out the whole thing with special effects” (7). What seems to be unreal becomes accessible through the film metaphor. The speaker’s depiction of New York as “bathed in blood / and screams” (Winans 40-41) recalls scenes from a thriller or horror film. Despite the distancing potential that the film metaphor has, it could also help to assimilate and comprehend the events of the day. As such, the metaphor could help link the past to the overwhelming present and, as Vieda Skultans explains, “[bring] to life similarities and patterns which would otherwise not be perceived. Metaphor enables some people to reconcile themselves to the past [...] [and] attributes an underlying unity of life and in doing so binds together past and present” (31). The poem’s meta-commentary and its awareness of the potential misuses of 9/11 distinguish it from uncritical poetic responses, which often employ a vocabulary of rupture, loss, and grief.

Instead of refusing to commemorate 9/11 or embracing conspiracy theories, John Sinclair’s “Ask Me Now” from *An Eye for an Eye* attempts to redefine the meaning of patriotism by emphasizing the inclusive nature of the nation’s founding principles. For the poem’s speaker, homogeneity is a departure from the ideals of “freedom & justice / our ancestors intended” (16-17). By referring to key events of US history and paraphrasing the Declaration of Independence and the Pledge of Allegiance, the poem advocates plurality instead. The speaker implores:

o let these truths be self-evident,  
that we shall be free to worship  
as we see fit, that there are many people  
& they have many different gods (25-28)

Not one God but “many different gods” (28) and not “one people” (“Declaration”) but “many people” (Sinclair 27) constitute the United States. The stanza’s final lines are

a reference to the phrase *E pluribus unum* ‘out of many, one,’ which is used on the Great Seal of the United States. The maxim was considered “as a de facto national motto” (Foster) until the more controversial “In God We Trust” was passed by Congress as the country’s official motto in 1956. The poem’s reference to the two mottoes is a way of engaging with their historical significance and their current controversial nature, and it signals the speaker’s preference for an inclusive, heterogeneous nation in which all religious traditions are equal.

The speaker’s call for heterogeneity is paralleled with his/her plea for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. S/he celebrates the enriching ethnic and cultural diversity of “this great nation” (Sinclair 78) and pleads: “let us live in peace together, / & let us share our riches” (31-32). The speaker is aware “that what may be fit for you / may not work for me” (29-30); the collective ‘we’ can rather be defined by a shared “commitment of our people / to the future of humanity itself” (37-38). However, the repeated use of the pronouns ‘our’ and ‘us’ and the phrases “our people” (37) and “true americans” (66) is in itself exclusive and signals a defined and closed group. Also, the poem’s emphasis on the equality of opportunities and freedom accessible to all fails to acknowledge the increasing economic disparity that greatly limits social mobility and increases the structural inequality of ethnic minorities. The speaker urges:

let us re-  
dedicate ourselves  
to the freedom & justice  
our ancestors intended  
when they founded this great nation (74-78)

The stanzas, instead of challenging, evoke the ideals of the American Dream and do not engage critically with the presentation of national identity as a fixed, defined entity. The disavowal of economic inequality and the lack of critical engagement with the vision of the national community temper the poem’s uncritical celebratory tone and optimistic vision.

The poem’s attempt to problematize the limiting reading of the nation’s founding documents is also reflected in Carroll’s “Peace Studies at the Rhode Island Avenue Barbershop,” which opposes the appropriation of national symbols—the flag and the anthem—for political purposes. Two epigraphs, one by Mose Allison and one by James Baldwin, clearly signal the poem’s pacifist stance and its highly critical approach to national symbols. By intertwining standard and nonstandard English, “Peace Studies at the Rhode Island Avenue Barbershop” emphasizes the United States’ diversity and the varying ways of expressing one’s national identity. The barber’s assertion that “this ain’t the time for flag wavin’ / time for thinkin beyond killin’ & revenge” (14-15) is contrasted by his client’s insistence: “But we is americans, goddamnit” (27). To the

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speaker waiting in the barbershop and overhearing the conversation, their comments are “more eloquent than hitchens or chomsky” (18).

The two intellectuals Christopher Hitchens and Noam Chomsky represent radically different viewpoints on the attacks and the following intervention in Iraq. Hitchens, expressing his full support for the US military involvement, claims that “[w]e were never, if we are honest with ourselves, ‘lied into war.’” He asserts that “March 2003 happens to mark the only time that we decided to intervene, after a protracted and open public debate, on the right side and for the right reasons.” For Chomsky, however, “[h]alf-truths, misinformation and hidden agendas have characterised official pronouncements about US war motives in Iraq from the very beginning.”

To the speaker of “Peace Studies at the Rhode Island Avenue Barbershop” it is the discussion in the barbershop and not the intellectual debate that proves to be more valuable. S/he agrees with the barber’s view and refuses to identify him-/herself with the “battle hymns & cacophonous anthems” (55) that distort the nation’s democratic ideals. Even the barber’s apron, resembling the American flag, painfully reminds the speaker of the discrepancy between the nation’s ideals and political reality. Disappointed, s/he states:

it [the apron] has never been to war  
never waved to mock the democracy it represents  
never decorated a flag pole used  
to lance a black man in boston. (62-65)

The poem’s attempt to display contrasting attitudes and to highlight their equal importance is undermined by its clear preference of one side of the argument over the other. The second client’s voice is not accorded equal importance. He quickly loses the argument and the views embraced by the speaker and barber dominate the poem.

The poems of *An Eye for an Eye*, to a varied extent, succeed in challenging the definition of patriotism and national belonging as an affirmation of homogeneity and expression of support for the military invasion. In so doing, they add to the diversity of poetic engagements with 9/11. Instead of attempting to provide consolation, they stress the difficulty of reaching a consensus over the interpretation of 9/11, thus revealing the impossibility of achieving a sense of closure.

## MULTICULTURAL AMERICA

The questions of patriotism and national identity, whether defined by an embrace or rejection of the US government’s rhetoric of national unity and military intervention,

cannot be fully analyzed without a consideration of its impact on ethnic and religious minorities. The poems in *An Eye for an Eye* explore the different ways in which 9/11 affected the process of acculturation, determined the place of minorities within US society, and presented the possibility of reaffirming a multicultural state. By giving voice to underrepresented minority groups, these poetic responses attempt to reclaim their presence in the public sphere. Jenny Edkins describes this “arena where the setting up of particular systems of power and their maintenance on a day-to-day basis is contested” as “the political” (256). According to her, the concept is distinct and has to be separated from “the depoliticized practices that we call ‘politics,’” that is, “elections, governments, policy, institutions, political parties” (256).

Instead of treating minorities as one among many other subjects, the poems by Neeli Cherkovski, by Michael McLaughlin, and by Thea Hillman from *An Eye for an Eye* highlight the minority experience by depicting it from a first-person perspective. Cherkovski’s and McLaughlin’s poems emphasize the multicultural character of the United States, expose the increased ostracism of the Arab American community, and, alongside Hillman’s “The Blessing of Terror,” examine the possibility of sustaining one’s hybrid sense of identity and belonging. As such, these poems contest the possibility of an inclusive national space in the aftermath of 9/11. They expose the ways in which the representation of US identity as uniform and homogenous negates the multicultural heritage of the nation and dangerously excludes ethnic and religious minorities.

Both Cherkovski’s “On Reports of Threats against Arab-Americans” and McLaughlin’s “I Don’t Know” expose how 9/11 determines the representation of and attitudes toward Arab American minorities. The opening stanza of Cherkovski’s poem challenges the concept of otherness and, using enjambments, historical references, and associations inspired by the city space, emphasizes the interconnectedness of diverse ethnic groups. The speaker lists the things he observes while walking through New York and the often surprising and defamiliarizing associations and images they inspire. The “news kiosk owner from / Palestine” (1-2) becomes the “rabbi’s son out of / Brooklyn” (2-3) and then the “Puerto Rican / poet new to the city” (3-4). As the speaker’s focus shifts from particular individuals to detached body parts, markers of ethnic difference are challenged. “[C]osmic dreamer” (9) turns into “bodies, body / parts” (9-10) and then into “American eyes” (10), which are quickly paired with “Afghanistan” (11) in the subsequent line and thus become a reminder of the military opposition. Both countries, however, are equally affected by the war, and the enjambments “body / parts” (9-10) and “body / bags” (10-11) suggest the shared fate of soldiers on both sides of the conflict.

The image of the war inspires the speaker of “On Reports of Threats against Arab-Americans” to further reflect on the questions of national identity and belonging. In the opening lines of the last stanza, he simultaneously becomes “Ibn Arabi” (43), a “Jew” (40), and a “Palestinian poet / Adonis” (44-45) and explores the possibility of being American while retaining affiliations with one’s country of origin; he affirms having “subway dreams / and islands in my [his] head” (55-56). Instead of abandoning his cultural heritage in the process of acculturation and homogenization, the speaker creates a unique identity that combines traditions and customs with the sense of belonging to contemporary US society. He compares himself to the Algerian citadel “casbah” (47), “rooted to the streets” (59) “here in America” (58), where his “hopes / are” (57-58). Yet, as the poem concludes, the optimistic vision of a hybrid identity is undermined, and the earlier hopefulness is replaced by anxiety over the future. The speaker experiences “emptiness at the heart / of what we face tomorrow” (61-62) and can no longer envisage a multicultural, hybrid national space.

McLaughlin’s “I Don’t Know” also explores the difficulty of combating social divisions after 9/11 but puts more emphasis than Cherkovski’s poem on the ways in which discourse is used to alienate the Other and negate his/her social place. The poem, adopting a first-person perspective, depicts a post-9/11 conversation between an employee of undetermined Arab origin and his/her boss. The employer’s statement “You are Arabic / You are Muslim” (13-14) is not a neutral acknowledgment of ethnic and religious affiliation but becomes a qualifying and judgmental comment unveiling discrimination and inequality. It also illustrates the prevailing essentialist view of distinct and highly diverse Arab and Muslim identities, as analyzed by Michelle D. Byng. In her study she explains:

Even though *Muslim* is a religious label and not a racial one, since 9/11 Muslim American identity has been restructured to reflect the systemic inequality that is readily associated with racial minorities. It is reorganized along essentialist, structural, and experiential dimensions of inequality. (662)

Any internal heterogeneity of Arab and Muslim communities was ignored in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11. Instead, a new essentialist identity was imposed in order to separate members of these groups from the national collective. As Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram highlight, “a new category of identity in the U.S. [emerged] that perceives Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Eastern men as disloyal and nonpatriotic citizens or as individuals who are part of terrorist networks” (146). They remark that “there has been a conflation of South Asian Muslims and Arabs with terrorism and ‘Islamic Fundamentalism’” (146).

“I Don’t Know” effectively illustrates how one’s otherness becomes a marker of disloyalty and hostility. The employer’s accusatory questions,

You don’t see what happened in New York  
Washington?  
You don’t see how many people  
your people killed? (15-18)

immediately reduce the speaker to one of the members of the terrorist groups and negate his/her place within the national community. The employee, faced with the charges of disloyalty, attempts to reclaim his/her belonging to US society and asserts: “I have been here for fifteen years” (20). Yet, the manager, Mr. Tim, continues to negate the possibility of peaceful coexistence within the workplace. He threatens the speaker: “If you don’t go, I get the / police for you” (27-28). The comment reasserts the employer’s superiority and reveals the increasing hostility toward ethnic and religious minorities. The employee, unable to reaffirm his/her belonging to the community, acknowledges his/her marginal position and admits: “if I go there / he do something I / don’t know” (34-36). Objectified and reduced to a representative of a terrorist group, the member of the ethnic minority can no longer find a place for him-/herself in post-9/11 US society. A sense of uncertainty permeates the poem; as it concludes, the speaker is inhibited by anxiety and incertitude as to what the future holds.

Hillman’s “The Blessing of Terror,” written from a Jewish American perspective, also doubts the possibility of a permanent, inclusive, and diverse national collective following the attacks. The poem’s celebration of the speaker’s hybrid identity is replaced by his/her inability to reach beyond the strict religious and ethnic divisions to reassert an inclusive national space. The speaker admits being “scared to be white and Jewish” (18-19) and testifies to the increased hostility s/he experienced as a member of a religious and ethnic minority.<sup>5</sup> Using a highly problematic allusion, s/he links the perceived hostility to the historical persecution of the Jewish people and “wonder[s] if [...] it wouldn’t be easier to tell us apart from others if we wore / armbands” (19-21). The traumatic experience of the past is juxtaposed with openness and hospitality celebrated each year during Passover. As the speaker explains, “[w]e prepare for the unexpected and welcome the / uninvited. Elijah, the stranger, the wanderer is included and embraced / and fed” (32-34). Although the “we” denotes a Jewish community, the speaker demonstrates that tolerance and openness to diversity can be values shared universally. Using the grammatical conjunction “and,” which emphasizes continuity

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5 As the Anti-Defamation League points out, immediately after September 11 multiple websites emerged and presented elaborate conspiracy theories as to the causes of the attacks, the government’s involvement in it, and even Israel’s foreknowledge of it.

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and presents noncontrasting items, s/he links the Passover celebrations with an appraisal of his/her American identity. In the subsequent stanza s/he celebrates the United States' heterogeneity (35-36) and openness, claiming that "there is no us and no them" (36), and affirms his/her unique Jewish American identity. In two consecutive sentences s/he reasserts: "I am American, but I will not be blindfolded / by the American flag. I am American, but I will not turn Elijah away when he / comes knocking at my door" (41-43).

Similarly to Cherkovski's poem, "The Blessing of Terror" redefines national identity as a hybrid category committed to universally shared values and ideals but does not recognize the problematic nature of such assumptions, which could also mask an ideology. The speaker is, however, aware of the difficulty of the task; as the poem concludes, instability and anxiety replace the earlier optimism. S/he admits: "I have survived being human yet / one more day. I don't know how long I have left. I am blessed" (47-48). The separation of the speaker from the national community introduces a tension and undermines his/her earlier attempts to create an inclusive space.

By giving voice to the members of ethnic and religious minorities, Cherkovski's, McLaughlin's, and Hillman's poems challenge the idea of a stable, homogenous national collective. They succeed in demonstrating how immigration, integration, and acculturation have defined national identity. At the same time, these poems reveal the increasingly homogeneous understanding of the category. *An Eye for an Eye* demonstrates that the lasting impact of the attacks of September 11 manifests itself not in displays of zealous patriotism, strengthened national unity, or accomplishment of military aims but rather in the ever-increasing fragmentation and deepening division of the United States.

## CONCLUSION

A polarized post-9/11 atmosphere in the United States has set the tone for poetic engagements with 9/11. In speeches by US government officials, media representations, and commemorative practices, 9/11 was presented as 'the event.' This portrayal of September 11, 2001, as a moment of rupture, an opportunity to reassert US strategic hegemony, and a force capable of uniting the nation continually shapes the varied and often contrasting artistic responses to 9/11. Poetry, instead of simply providing emotional consolation and enabling an expression of the personal sentiments of grief and loss, exposes deepening societal fragmentation and rethinks the highly political categories of patriotism, multiculturalism, and belonging. Whether

they oppose or endorse the prevailing understandings and responses to the attacks, poetic works do so explicitly by using emotive diction as well as rich imagery, and they often employ historical and political references, repetition, and anaphora to convey their stance. The temporal remove from the attacks does not have a major impact on the emotional intensity and the level of support for the military intervention expressed in some poems; surprisingly, the most openly zealous anthology, *9-11 Remembered*, was published in 2011. The poetic heterogeneity exposes fragmentation, discord, and the impossibility of providing any stable and shared definition of ‘the national collective,’ which in itself masks ideological presumptions. 9/11 does not contribute to the creation of one uniting national narrative but signifies multiple subjective experiences and elicits numerous distinct and discordant responses.

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