

**RICE UNIVERSITY**  
**Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality**

**THE POLITICS OF VULNERABILITY: SUBJECTS, BODIES, COMMUNITIES**

**Friday, February 19, 2010**  
**4pm - 6pm, HUM 115**

**Feminist Reading Group (open to Rice faculty, fellows, and advanced graduate students):**

**Susan Lurie**, Associate Professor of English

*9/11 Cultures and Political Knowledge*

The essay we will read for February's FRG, on DeLillo's *Falling Man*, is part of my book project, "9/11 Cultures and Political Knowledge," which explores the relation between the experience of unprecedented loss of state protections in the U.S., the formations of protected citizenship that respond to it, and the possibilities opened up for rethinking the relation between such protection and political community both within and across national boundaries. One way I do this is by analyzing the discourses—photography, journalism, novels, political writing and political theory—that frame both the censorship and the return to visibility of 9/11's most iconic images: those of figures falling from the towers.

These discourses, I argue, point to how the images resonate with an egregious vulnerability not only to terrorist attack but also to losses and potential losses of state protection that inform U.S. everyday life and are perpetrated by the state itself. As such they contribute to opportunities for new political knowledge and new political subjectivities to emerge, ones that make visible how the disavowal of our vulnerability to the sovereign state precludes an ethics grounded in recognizing (as we are able to do in other contexts) a fundamental precariousness shared with victims, both foreign and domestic, of state violence.

DeLillo's *Falling Man* explores similar themes. Written, moreover, at a moment when the images have been effectively framed by nation-building discourses or otherwise evacuated of their radical impact and/or are disappearing from public view and discussion, the novel seeks to revitalize them precisely for the purpose of exposing how the state seeks to frame bodily exposure and the protection of it for U.S. citizens. In doing so, it points instructively to how opportunities for new political knowledge that emerge in the wake of the attacks yield to a subject's refusal to know, a refusal bound up with a fearful counting on the protections affiliated with state of exception tactics. Such refusals also recruit raced and gendered power relations.