EDITED BY JUDITH GREENBERG

TRAUMA AT HOME

AFTER 9/11

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The terrorist attacks of September 11 brought the effects of trauma home to millions in America and throughout the world. Initially the attacks created a sense of paralysis and a narrative void. Now we find ourselves struggling as a nation to remember and rebuild. The distinguished writers in *Trauma at Home* confront September 11 from a variety of personal, cultural, scholarly, and clinical perspectives. Bringing together wide-ranging reflections on understanding, representing, and surviving trauma, the book offers readers an array of analyses of the overwhelming events. Through the lenses of cultural studies, trauma studies, feminism, film and literary criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and through poetic and photographic images, the contributors use their disciplines to help make sense of the incomprehensible.

These essays and reflections address loss and examine our changed modes of perception, relations with others, and sense of home. *Trauma at Home* contains meditations on the personal and cultural aftereffects of trauma and provides analyses of the historical echoes of Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and Vietnam that the attacks evoked. Collectively these essays replace the silence of shock and disbelief with the possibility of dialogue—even as they also recognize the impossibility of providing a single cohesive narrative for September 11.

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Trauma
at Home

After 9/11

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To Claire—and all the children of the world.
In the hope for a peaceful future.

Contents

Masked Power: An Encounter
with the Social Body in the Flesh
Orly Lubin

"The events of September 11, 2001, were so overwhelming, so devastating in their impact, that more than four months after the fact, we are still struggling to explain and comprehend their meaning." So opens the brochure accompanying the exhibit "Aftermath: Photography in the Wake of September 11" at the International Center of Photography.[1] The word "LEARN," written at the memorial site in Washington Square Park, caught the eye of Sylvia Molloy, current president of the Modern Language Association: "It's attraction resided in its very opaqueness, an injunction without a specific object or practical resolution."[2] Colleges across America have developed courses relating in one way or another to the events of September 11 and their aftermath, catering, apparently, to the need to understand and to give meaning.[3] And Susan Buck-Morss argues that Americans have had to come to a "conscious acceptance of realities . . . that have been in front of our eyes and ears for decades, but that the code of American self-understanding with its master signifier of innocence has effectively blocked out as meaningless."[4]

It seems at times as if the function of the mourning following the terror attack was to maintain that innocence, namely, the innocence of the victim suffering an unjust injury inflicted on her for reasons that she can grasp but are beyond her control. She mourns from the bottom of her heart and in the very act of mourning proves herself to be the good person she always knew she was, that we all were.

But mourning, even when it does not need to have a meaning, does need to be framed. This framing became "the community"; and the notion of the community seems to be a prism through which one can view the trauma, as community becomes the tool of the containment of the trauma.

After 9/11 "community" became the magic word. The sense of community born at the very moment of the event has become, already, an object of nostalgic lament. Very quickly people began to reminisce nostalgically about both the shock and the sense of togetherness; the terrible sense of vulnerability and the birth of new friendships; the feeling of isolation and the ability to rely on others for company and help. It is this construction of the near sacredness of the community, though, that also enabled a discourse of revenge, military action, violations of civil rights, and "the post 9/11 hush," as Hilary Russ labels the lack of civic activism.[5] The community also determines both the structure and the content of the testimonies of the traumatic event so that they will cater to the needs of the community. That is to say, it reaffirms its own coming to be, its norms and morals, and its function as a collective supplying a site for the individual. Thus the *New York Times* "Portraits of Grief" section converted short obituaries of the victims into personal memories as much as images of the collective memory. Along the same lines, on the March 11 broadcast of *Nightline*, Ted Koppel visited the site of the collected personal effects of the victims, most of them badges, company cards, credit cards, all organized alphabetically but also communally—that is, according to ethnicity, gender, and work place. The sense and existence of the individual were kept intact through the private name and the particular, unique biography. However, that very evidence was testimony also to the fact that there was a community that cared and that could be defined along various axes of identity other than the uniquely named individual.

One of the best examples of the constitution of this sense of community without "neglect" of the individual is the amazing documentary *9/11*, made by the brothers Jules and Gedeon Naudet and screened on CBS on March 10. Begun as a film documenting a fire station through the nine-month probation of a rookie, it became a haunting record of the terror attack on the World Trade Center from both inside and out, from the perspective of onlookers and rescue workers, stunned spectators gazing paralyzed at the unfolding drama and stunned officials (who seemed to have little sense of what was going on other than a haunting awareness of the thud of the desperate as they leapt from the upper floors and landed, with grim regularity, just outside the lobby of the North Tower). In the editing room, though, the documentary took on the structure of a Hollywood film, with a narrative, a protagonist replete with a distinct character and view on life, as well as the obligatory happy ending. Structured as testimony, it was more careful to answer to the needs of its audience—that is, with regard to narrative conventions and to the desire for a community—than it was to using (or even filming) footage that might be more "real" but less "useful." Thus, before the documentary was aired, both CBS officials and journalists assured viewers there were "no graphic depictions of deaths on screen," and

Jules Naudet kept telling the press how he saw in the lobby two people on fire and "chose not to film them, thinking no one should see such a thing."[6] Perhaps the most alarming thing of all is the way the events, which no one controlled, lent themselves to this kind of structuring of a story: Here is our protagonist, the rookie in a documentary about "how a boy becomes a man," as the soundtrack announces, selected from a group of trainees, whose auditions we see on screen, assuring us it was not retroactively manipulated. Here is our setting, the station coincidentally close to the World Trade Center. Here is the buildup of expectations, through the impatient wait for a real fire to happen and through the absence of the protagonist from the line of retroactively contemplating talking heads. Here is the action, the initial rush to the towers after the first plane hit. Here is the complication, the disappearance of our young, unseasoned hero, who finally gets to the site of action. And here is the resolution, when he returns to the station after the collapse of the buildings—after a masterfully built suspense during which all firefighters are back at the station, worrying about him—like an urban cowboy, appearing alone from the cloudy, dust-covered horizon. We are relieved to learn the company has lost no one. All the Hollywood conventions are there: the reliable storyteller, the linear bildungsroman and the rite of passage, the birth of a hero, and the happy ending.

As impossible as it might seem, this manufacturing of a happy ending turns out to be the major component of the structure of this testimonial narrative: the creation of a community. As it is, when the rookie first joins the station he finds there an already well-organized community, down to the daily cooking details, gastronomic rituals of an army-style fraternity based on mutual dependency. It is an environment replete with a self-irony that disarms homosocial threats built into the communal closeness. But this proximity and its constant visibility are the necessary, most precious components of the testimony, even more so than the creation of heroism. It is exactly what the spectators need, namely, the testimony of those people who witnessed the community that constitutes the source of bravery.

Being the intended addressee of the testimonies, the listener is their constructor, in the sense that the story is created for her, for her need to believe in the power of community. At some point the community takes over the testimony. As the trapped firefighters are trying to find their way out of the lobby among the rubble, the camera, always rolling, becomes a source of light in the darkness, functioning as a lantern, saving rather than documenting the group. The witnessing apparatus itself becomes a tool for the unification of, and at the service of, the community. It is now

a community of which the spectator imagines himself or herself to be a member.

However, this is a community that is presented also as vulnerable and fragile. This is the mark of a society that cannot contain inner fissures and cracks and is constantly aware of the presumed fragility of its social order. Such a society senses the threat of the total breakdown of its social order whenever it encounters a strong contest to its morals, narratives, and, most important, self-perceptions. A kind of puritanism sets in, and the community then becomes the major policing apparatus. When the hegemonic moral boundaries are not flexible enough to contain all kinds of behavior, from revolution through dissent down to juvenile rebellion, the tenacity to hold on to a rigid, unchanging structured communal social order becomes a major concern. Symbols such as a flag, a national hymn, as well as ethnic and religious purity become the hallmarks of the "community," as is the case in so many other threatened communities that find nationality and nationalism to be the most accessible unifiers. The lack of discourse that might provide alternative kinds of communities, possible in the age of global communication and global threats and interests, based on mutual commonalities or interests other than ethnic or religious or national, makes these symbols the most obvious representation of the interests of the community.

The community is also functional in containing the trauma, thanks to the ability to construct it itself, making it a community that is imagined, in this case through the necessary imagining of the meaning of its strength in times of evident fragility. For some, the realization of the United States' dominance in the world became an easily digestible explanation of the hatred directed at it. For others, the lack of total power spelled a kind of vulnerability that can never be corrected. Yet for others, this strength meant economic or moral responsibility, at times even the right to impose the "correct" morals of democracy and equality on the rest of the world. And the process of securing power has resulted in the untenable position of a state becoming at once a lover of power and a proselytizer of power sharing, democracy, and the tenet of nondiscrimination between the powerful and powerless, overlooking the problems inherent in shoring up power, in owning the gaze, and the huge investment in making sure the steps taken to retain power are occluded.

September 11 created a traumatic shock not so much in the realization of actually having power but in the realization of the horror of being in power. Students of culture, of colonialism and postcolonialism, of feminism and queer studies, have been theorizing and demonstrating in the last two

decades the position of the victim of the gaze. They have studied the gaze as a hierarchical relationship, in which the passive party "lowers her eyes" and is, as Laura Mulvey put it, situated in the position of to-be-looked-at-ness; and they have studied closely the various possible reactions to this passive positioning—the acts of subversion, revolt, disturbance, and disruption.[7]

But not much has been done so far to learn how to get rid of power. Being in power, being the owner of gaze, implies a horrible positioning and the terrible responsibility to act. In his article "The white stuff (political aspect of whiteness)," Homi K. Bhabha demands an action that, as academic as it sounds, has strong pragmatic consequences. He writes: "The subversive move is to reveal within the very integument of 'whiteness' the agonistic elements that make it the unsettled, disturbed form of authority that it is—the incommensurable 'differences' that it must surmount; the histories of trauma and terror that it must perpetrate and from which it must protect itself; the amnesia it imposes on itself; the violence it inflicts in the process of becoming a transparent and transcendent force of authority."[8] Thus the owner of power, the owner of the gaze, has to encounter herself as a source of violence, inherent in her status, which she, more often than not, has not chosen, to confront her own positioning, which she cannot change. Her only way out, her only option to get rid of the objectifying power or gaze, is to move—metaphorically, when the literal move to "the other side" is impossible—to the side of the Other. To "move" metaphorically would mean to follow Bhabha's list of needed revelations. It would also mean to LEARN—not, as Molloy suggests, as "a new awareness of this society's others, an awareness more demanding, more urgent, more disquieting but, one hopes, better informed than our often short-sighted critical musings on alterity have been until now," but an altogether different understanding of the very notion of Otherness, of how to get rid of power and the gaze by defying the "demand" to have an Other in order to maintain one's identity, by never gazing long enough so as to objectify the gazed at, never standing long enough in one identity positioning so as to have to create an Other for that positioning to imagine itself as a position.[9]

As abstract as it sounds, this is the task that the shock of recognition of power brings. It requires one to be on the move constantly, never being "one" long enough for the creation of an Other.

This is, of course, another component of the trauma that calls for the help of the constructed community, for in a community one is never moving, one is always static, one is always part of something, which is by definition an Other of an Other. If the realization of the horror of being powerful, the horror of being always an instigator of violence by virtue of being powerful,

necessarily leads to the demand to act—to acknowledge and to react to the fractures, gaps, contradictions, repressions, and exclusions that are the inherent creations of the state of power and to never succumb to them through a constant self-reflection that is, in effect, a constant movement, a constantly changing self-definition—then a way out is back into the community. But as already discussed, there, within the community, one does not lose one's individuality (as he mourns, as she raises the flag, as she hugs a Muslim) and therefore also is not exempted from yet another burden of being in power, namely the burden of individual accountability. Unlike responsibility, which might mean being politically educated and even active, if only to a minimal extent, accountability is that which the individual carries with him exactly because he is part of a community. Unlike acknowledgment, which can be demanded of anyone regardless of power or economic status, accountability is the burden of the member of a powerful community. A member in a powerful community cannot escape that accountability, precisely because he is what he is—in terms of his financially, politically, educationally, and culturally powerful status— only because he is a member of the community that at some point created the injustice. Realizing your personal accountability is traumatic because it requires a major change in your outlook on life as much as a change in your personal life. And the community, although a refuge from the implications of the trauma in the many other senses discussed earlier, becomes the jail of the powerful individual, who, as part of the community that is necessary for his refuge, is now being implicated because of the community's history.

The realization of personal accountability is so horrible because it relates not only to representations but also to the actual, material, corporeal flesh and blood. At first, the lack of bodily matter—the empty ambulances and hospital corridors, the volumes of dust that might contain corporeal remains—meant dealing, once again, with representations. As Thomas de Zengotita puts it, "So, if we were spared a gaping wound in the flesh and blood of personal life, we inevitably moved on after September 11. We were carried off by endlessly proliferating representations of the event. . . . Conditioned thus relentlessly to move from representation to representation, we got past the things itself as well; or rather, the thing itself was transformed into a sea of signs."[10]

However strong the case for this kind of exclusion of the material body from culture and its transformation into representation, the material body refuses to disappear, as Judith Butler argues.[11] In the case of 9/11, its material absence was a constant reminder of the presence of materiality. The corporeal body also left traces in the form of material dust of bones

or pieces of flesh never exposed to the apparatuses of representation. The actual flesh and blood was kept out of sight. Its presence, as the presence of a dead casualty of war, would disturb the flow of the narrative of the community, a narrative relying on representations, which create, following Benedict Anderson, the imagined togetherness and sameness of all members of the community.[12] Representation, then, is in the service of creating an imagined community that will provide an easily digested set of morals applicable to representations rather than to flesh and blood. The ethics of representation (should Jules Naudet photograph the two people on fire to show the world the results of the wickedness of the terrorists, or would that be invading their privacy?) replaces the ethics of policymaking, since the results of the latter are prevented from the community, as they do not become representations due to the ruling ethics of representation. The community provides the representation as a gateway away from the horrors of responsibility and then accountability.

Unfortunately, the smell of burned flesh, the touch of warm blood, disrupts the smooth flow of the functioning of community. As long as the trauma is the realization of personal accountability for the suffering of corporeal bodies, and the cure is "the community," trauma will never go away. It's only when personal accountability is internalized, "community" is diversified and its inner fractures acknowledged, and a new sense of subjectivity, independent of Otherness and of the need to replace the material with representation, arises that trauma (or the causes thereof, perhaps) will disappear.

NOTES

1. These words were written by the chief curator of the exhibit, Brain Wallis,

2. Sylvia Molloy, President's Column, *MLA Newsletter* 33, no. 4 (winter 2001): 3.

3. Karen W. Arenson, *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 2002, A11.

4. Susan Buck-Morss, "A Global Public Sphere?" *Radical Philosophy* 111 (Jan./Feb. 2002): 3.

5. Hilary Russ, "The Silence of the Lambasters," *City Limits*, March 2002, 30–31.

6. Caryn James, "Critic's Notebook: Experiencing the Cataclysm from the Inside," *New York Times*, Mar. 6, 2002, E1.

7. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (fall 1975): 8–18.

8. Homi K. Bhabha, "The white stuff," *Artforum* 36, no. 9 (May 1998): 21.

9. Molloy, 3.

10. Thomas de Zengotita, "The Numbing of the American Mind: Culture as Anesthetic," *Harper's*, April 2002, 33–40.

11. For a lengthy example, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

12. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).