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Spontaneous Memorials and Individual Narratives: Community Building Strategies

In the month after the attacks of September 11, 2001, I began to hear stories about the undocumented workers of the World Trade Center. Family and friends were coming forward, negotiating their way through and around the registries in order to find loved ones, who had, in a manner, already been rendered missing through lack of official documentation. Rumor became a mode of discovery. Local community organizations such as Asociación Tepeyac de Nueva York urged an amnesty to facilitate the search, hoping to grant the workers the visibility in death that had been refused in life.¹ In the wake of the attack unofficial voices de Certeau's "pedestrian utterances"ⁱⁱ were coming to the fore, visibly interacting with the official language which one could think of in terms of de Certeau's totalizing and commanding view from the World Trade Center. In the case of the undocumented workers, those once seemingly excluded from the U.S. through immigration challenges, were now included as victims of this "Attack on America."

The attack of 9-11 served as a moment of rupture in the dominating aerial gaze, a point of horror and violence that served as fulcrum for the rearticulation of space according to those invisible in the grand narratives: illegal and legal immigrants, the working class (support and custodial staff), people of color, and so on. Individual testimony, both virtual—on the Internet and actual—on the streets themselves, took a strategic part in the rebuilding of the community and the reconstitution of New York (and by virtual Internet extension, the United States).

Immediately following the disaster, missing posters appeared throughout the city. These posters held similar formats: a photo of the missing person, usually a snapshot capturing him or her in the everyday, accompanied by two legends. One named friends and family while the other stated their place within the Towers (name of business, floor number). The collection of posters remapped the buildings, pluralizing the once impersonal twin monoliths with individual stories. Erstwhile symbols of world trade, U.S. domination, and a generalized New York skyline, they now, in their destruction, became home to a diverse population.

As time passed, these efforts of discovery became practices of memory as they became part of the spontaneous memorials, the shrines that overtook public space. These urban altars, much like the city itself, were projects of accretion. Expressions of grief animated a plurilogue of diverse community and individual practices. Mexican prayer candles, *yartzheit* candles, graffiti, memorial murals came to express a community loss as well as a constitution of community. The devastation became occasion for the reclamation of public spaces by a physical public. City space was reorganized according to the needs of a grieving public.

City officials worked to return the space to municipal dictates. The parks were cleared of the altars. Henry Stern, the Parks Commissioner declared a return to normality. In a letter to the public, he lauded the parks' contribution to the psychological recovery of the city, but went on to explain the parks' function to "reaffirm a daily routine" and to offer "a safe green space—clean and available for peaceful activity"

(http://nycparks.completeinet.net/sub_ask_commissioner/letters/nine_eleven_letter.html). This letter re-established the parameters of the public and the public space.

While many shrines and expressions were gathered and stored for future exhibition (their re-presentation and the ways that will reconfigure our memory and understanding of the public landscape is a subject in itself) and some, according to one Parks Official I interviewed, were given to the Fire Department shrines, to commemorate “the real heroes” (her words), most were tossed. While no malice exists in this designation, it belies a dangerous slippage: who is fit for commemoration? **Where is the appropriate space for memory of a public?**

Immediately following the attacks and persisting to this day, the Internet supplies a virtual public space, providing ample opportunities for the multiplicity of community voices. *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood* (<http://www.mrbellersneighborhood.com/>), a site that predates the attacks of September 11, offers individual stories organized according to an aerial map of Manhattan. Clicking on a neighborhood offers localized, personal narratives, rendering a diverse and complex landscape that confronts the clean aerial gaze. A site entitled *Lower Manhattan* (<http://www.albany.edu/mumford/wtc/fmumford.frm.htm>) declares its mission to rebuild Lower Manhattan and the events of 9-11 apart from the “tyranny of a single present,” examining the place and events according to the many experiences that preceded it. The history of the event will be composed of a multiplicity of voices. *Yungo.com*, a site dedicated to peace actions, offers a gallery of the works of Dario Oleaga, who has been chronicling these sorts of spontaneous memorials since well before 9-11. (<http://www.yungo.com/galeria.htm>) These sites ensure that these landscapes and historical events will be understood within a larger, more complex and more diverse context. Public spaces were not so much changed after the attack, but rendered more visible than ever before.

On many occasions, the individual representation or testimony is taken up in service to another strategic community narrative. *September 11: Gay Victims and Heroes* (<http://www.angelfire.com/fl3/uraniamanuscripts/sept11.html>) offers a queer-specific representation of events. The comment site of *Here Is New York, A Democracy Of Photographs* (http://hereisnewyork.org/gallery/comments_all.asp) offers the following reaction to a photograph:

Hats off to Officer Velazquez and all the other gay folks who helped, and continue to help, to make a difference in a way that offers us all some much-welcome role models.

Here the narration of 9-11 becomes an occasion to integrate gays and lesbians into history and society, specifically as role models in order to counter existing antagonism. (Similar activity occurs in Holocaust narratives. For example, Toni Boumans' film, *After the War, You must Tell Everyone...* (1990) chronicles the heroic resistance efforts of Willem Arondeus whose homosexuality prevented his recognition as hero until recently. The title comes from an interview with him shortly before his execution; he wished people to know that gays and lesbians were not cowards and were a positive, active force in the community.)

Memorial sites, then, particularly those on the Internet, offer the opportunity to mobilize individual testimonies of loss and grief into collective, community practices. Not only gays and lesbians find the opportunity for mobilization; this practice is open to all. A site merely entitled *09112001.com* (<http://www.09112001.com/>) promises “We Will Never Forget” with the subtitle ““Horror Hath Taken Hold Upon Me Because of the Wicked That Forsake Thy Law’ Psalms 119:53.” Taking an apparently Christian stance, it seems to support all war action under the guise of memorial practices. The site also boasts this phrase: “Cursed be he that taketh reward to slay an innocent person. And all the people shall say, Amen. - Deuteronomy 27:25.” To be fair, its hawkishness is tempered by multiple links to other charitable actions, but nonetheless, it articulates a Christian United States.

The initial memorial impulse serves not only to deal with grief and loss, but also to rebuild the devastated world. Amidst the wreckage, opportunities opened to pluralize the standard, official narratives of New York and the United States, rendering unseen or unacknowledged worlds visible. The act itself was strategic even before deliberate efforts of social mobilization came into play. As the memorial projects persist, they are likely to be directed into more overt projects of community activism.

ⁱ For select print media essays on the undocumented workers, see:

Bode, Nicole, et al (2001). “5 Killed Working For a Better Life, NY *Daily News*, 26 October 2001, Friday, p.22

Martinez, Ruben (2001). “Terror’s Aftermath; The Limits of Compassion: Will Our Generosity Extend to Undocumented Workers?” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 October 2001, Sunday, Part M, p.1

O’Halloran, Marjorie (2001). “Illegal Irish May Have Died in the Collapses.” *The Irish Times*, 20 September, 2001, p.8

ⁱⁱ de Certeau, Michel (1985). “Practices of Space,” in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky. Baltimore, MD: Johnson Hopkins UP), pp.122-145