

September 11: Masculinity, Justice, and the Politics of Empathy

Vaheed Ramazani

America's immediate response to the shocking events of September 11 has been a near caricature, on a national scale, of the Freudian account of traumatic neurosis. In reaction to the breach of the mental apparatus' "protective shield" by an unexpected and overwhelmingly intense stimulation, the collective psyche has rushed to bind and deflect the influx of dangerous energies—"endeavouring," in Freud's words, "to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis."¹ Like the child who repeats his unpleasurable experience in play, we, as a people, cling to the instinct for mastery, to a compensatory fantasy of control and revenge.² And lest we forget too soon our outrage and our fear, the government and the media have kept us on high alert, through a concerted campaign to incite compulsive aggression—repetitive "acting out" instead of mourning or "working through."³

What seems to me to have provoked far too little surprise, in the current climate of born-again patriotism, is the easy cohabitation of theology and machismo in the hortatory public discourse of our commentators and leaders. In a culture that prides itself on being secular, democratic, and sexually egalitarian—particularly, I should add, when it is by invoking their modern political liberalism that some Americans assert the superiority of their "open" society over the "closed" and oppressive society of their opponents—it ought to be of considerable concern to us as a nation, I think, that our official rhetoric of apocalyptic justice is in many ways the near echo of bin Laden's call to holy war against evil, effeminacy, and sexual defilement.⁴ Indeed, despite the renewed credibility that the events of September 11 would seem to lend, if only superficially, to the problematic notion of a "clash of civilizations,"⁵ it is remarkable that one important way in which the supposedly distinct civilizations of East and West clearly do *not* clash is in their spontaneous articulation of a volatile blend of millennialist themes with traditional (Eastern? Western?) signifiers of masculine virtue ("courage," "resolve," "duty," and so on). It is as if, immediately after the September attacks, George W. Bush were irresistibly compelled by some universal law of homosocial diplomacy to join his presumed antagonist (reified as "The Evil One") in a transglobal ritual of competitive male bonding. A shared discursive ground became, paradoxically, a key catalyst in the United States' rush to armed conflict—to a judgment-day showdown pitting good against evil, civilization against savagery, the "masculine" qualities of self-discipline and strength against the "feminine" qualities of weakness and fear.

Whether or not one wishes to accord any significance to the phallic iconicity of the World Trade Center, it is obvious from the administration's pronouncements following the attacks that the collapse of the Towers was experienced as emasculating, although "humiliating" is the term that the press prefers to use to describe the sudden wound to our na-

tional pride. To say this is not to trivialize the very real horror of the loss of nearly 3000 civilian lives; nor is it to reduce to a psychoanalytic master-narrative the referential opacity of the atrocity itself, the intended political meaning of which remains to this day at once glaringly obvious and deeply ambiguous; it is instead to acknowledge the presence of "private" fantasy at the center of our "public" political speech and in doing so to raise the question of the relation of such fantasy to our ability—or willingness—to care about suffering—to care *responsibly* about the suffering of others. And it is important to note here that the "others" I have in mind are not just the inhabitants of remote and foreign lands, but those—including the victims of September 11—who live and die daily on American soil.

I shall not, therefore, suggest that the discourse of machismo blocks automatically our capacity for empathy; indeed, its considerable power to inflame collective passions springs from its cloying sentimentality. I shall argue instead that this manly manichaeism prevents us from empathizing fully and thoughtfully, by which I mean equitably rather than selfishly, justly and humanely rather than vengefully. And I offer this claim despite, or indeed, because of, the inherently vexed nature of any concept of justice—the historical contexts and cultural contingencies by which it is produced, constrained, and transformed.

The first and, for that reason perhaps, also the most revealing name given by the White House to its retaliatory operation was, it will be recalled, "Infinite Justice." The name was quickly withdrawn on the pretext that it might be offensive to Muslims (for whom, we were told, only Allah can administer infinite justice). But the name's inadvertently patent messianic implications were in fact compatible with any of the major monotheistic religions and suggested, accordingly, that America's Christian God was about to give a good thrashing to the God of the Prophet. So, despite official disclaimers that Islam and its peaceful practitioners were not the intended targets of the American reprisal, the counteroffensive took on instantly the tone of a crusade on behalf of "our" Christian God's moral absolutes. Said President Bush, in his newfound capacity as Augur in Chief: "The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them."⁶

One needs only glance at Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* to recall the history of collusion (not the timeless "war") between justice and cruelty, or the extent to which freedom has consistently implied the right to violence and the will to power. Indeed, when Bush assures us that terrorism will not go "unpunished" (20 September), or that the Taliban "will pay a price,"⁷ he blithely exhibits what Nietzsche describes as a primitive form of barter mentality, a mode of cognition directly derived from "buying, selling, barter, trade,

and traffic,” the cornerstone of which is the contract between creditor and debtor. For Nietzsche, the implication of this commercial logic for the concept of justice is that “every injury has its *equivalent* and can actually be paid back, even if only through the *pain* of the culprit.”⁸ But “how can making suffer constitute a compensation?”

[T]o what extent can suffering balance debts or guilt? To the extent that to *make* suffer was in the highest degree pleasurable, to the extent that the injured party exchanged for the loss he had sustained, including the displeasure caused by the loss, an extraordinary counterbalancing pleasure: that of *making* suffer—a genuine *festival*.⁹ Complete with flags, bumper stickers, and hype from Hollywood stars; patriotic rock concerts and cheerleaders to regale our troops, the American festival of destruction has begun.

In a sense, however, this festival of violence was already well under way. There is terrible irony in newscasters’ comments that the collapse of the Twin Towers was uncannily movie-like, or in the revelation that a chief operative of the al-Qaeda network was an ardent fan of Clint Eastwood films.¹⁰ In a twist of fate not unlike that of America now fighting the jihad it created, the U.S. was primed for war—and had similarly primed its own antagonist—partly through the media’s knack for storytelling, for producing the world’s foremost “action” entertainment. And how do we “control” the global taste for violence that we ourselves have tirelessly produced and purveyed? By manufacturing further scenarios of violence—not just for the big screen and popular consumption, but for virtual-reality training for the army, as technology and ideas circulate busily among screenwriters, scientists, and political advisers.¹¹

A close relative, then, of the Hollywood revenge plot, infinite justice is essentially retributive. It is also oxymoronic. For to the extent that justice implies an equivalence—of crime and punishment in retributive justice, injury and redress in compensatory justice—no form of justice can in fact be “infinite”—immeasurable, proportionless, unlimited in scope and purpose. This may well be why Operation Infinite Justice and its nominal successor, Enduring Freedom, have been, both in theory and in actual practice, infinitely vague and enduringly free of clearly defined military and political objectives. If the goal is to stamp out “every terrorist group of global reach” (20 September), does that include separatists in Northern Ireland and militant right-wing fundamentalists in America? Would American military sanctions not also have to apply to Russian atrocities in Chechnya, to Chinese oppression in Tibet and Xinjiang, and to brutal government crack downs against rebels in Indonesia? Would America not in principle have to find a suitable remedy for the hundreds of thousands of children who have died as a result of the economic sanctions it has levied on Iraq?¹² Is the United States in no way complicit with the war crimes committed by its allies, the Northern Alliance, in Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz?¹³ Should the U.S. go unpunished for having armed, trained, and bankrolled dictators and genocidists in Africa and Central America? For allowing Israel’s illegal settlements, political assassinations, as well as torture and killing of Palestinian civilians? And didn’t the hijackers, on September 11, think of themselves as fighting for freedom—“enduring freedom” from repressive regimes propped up by America’s appetite for oil?

If the fuzzy logic of Infinite Justice cannot even begin to address such questions, it is because they raise complex legal and ethical issues concerning, for example, the definition of pertinent evidence, the range of causation, the relation of intention to action and consequence,¹⁴ and the quantifiability of loss and recovery, responsibility and redress. It is not that such issues can ever be fully resolved, but that Bush’s rhetoric of justice avoids them altogether. It lifts us out of the world of inconvenient facts and embarrassing contradictions and transports us into a paradise of transcendental truth. And it is here, in the realm of moral dichotomies, that gendered euphemism lends a helping hand, by naturalizing as substantive, objective, or inevitable the abstract and disembodied categories of justice. For to the extent that the familiar taxonomies of gender seem self-evident, universal, derived from the laws of nature, they may camouflage as eternal and unproblematically referential a system of values the structure of which is symbolic—not fixed, absolute, or sanctioned by God, but situated, interpretive, and therefore provisional.

The bombing of Afghanistan cannot bring back to life those who died suddenly on September 11, but it can—so our politicians and pundits seem to think—restore our nation’s body to its former integrity, its “masculine” health, purity, and strength. Implicitly, then, the body of Woman is the site both of repair and of reparation, as its porous boundaries and unclean surfaces—its lack, incontinence, pain, and mortality¹⁵—are reversed into order and phallic totality through “tighter” immigration laws and airport security, frozen bank accounts and homeland defense, “clean” missile strikes and spot commando raids. That the association of women with corruptibility and waste, mutilation and loss may have its historical roots in perceptions of childbirth (our “primal castration,” as Otto Rank called it)¹⁶ only sharpens the irony of recent reports that Afghanistan, thanks to America, is a nation “reborn.”¹⁷ Prosecuted from the air at a safe and god-like distance, this war is unencumbered by the messy details normally incident to warring/birthing bodies, as our sleek, state-of-the-art military technology (with the assistance of a compliant, self-censoring press)¹⁸ protects us from the knowledge of our hideous violence, turning injured bodies into game-like labels (“friendly fire,” “systems malfunction,” “collateral damage,” and so on).¹⁹

The rebirth of Afghanistan presupposes, of course, a similar rebirth of the U.S. itself, a similarly rationalized labor and delivery in which the trauma of birthing and the trauma of being born—the *reality* of the pain of September 11—is recuperated by a narrative of national unity. Morally reductive and logically circular, this narrative tells us, in our president’s words, “adversity introduces us to ourselves”—not to an understanding of the anger and despair of those whom our policies may have similarly afflicted, but to the courage and compassion that define “our national character,” the “love” and “deep commitment” that we have for “one another.”²⁰ Marked by disavowal instead of comprehension, self-replication instead of real change, this narcissistic rebirth is no birth at all, but a wishful return to prenatal security, a desperate belief in the false insularity that preceded our fall into the clutches of the real. Indeed, the symbolic apotheosis of this fantasy of omnipotence may be the mythical tegument of the Missile Defense System,²¹ where the attempt to inscribe an impenetrable boundary between “us” and “them,” inside and

outside, ignores the hard lesson of September 11—that the dangerous outside is already inside us, that globalization *means* vulnerability, the interdependence of “First” and “Third” Worlds.

In her 17 November radio address to the nation, Laura Bush “kick[ed] off” (hurray!) what she immodestly billed as “a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the al-Qaeda terrorist network and...the Taliban.”²² “Long before the current war began,” said Mrs. Bush, “the Taliban and its terrorist allies were making the lives of children and women in Afghanistan miserable. Seventy percent of the Afghan people are malnourished. One in every four children won’t live past the age of five because health care is not available.” “The fight against terrorism,” she gravely concluded, “is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.” Leaving aside the grotesque hypocrisy of this sudden concern over the “brutal oppression of women” by a regime that we ourselves had armed, trained, and funded (“freedom fighters,” we used to call them); and ignoring the First Lady’s tendentious suggestion that, in Afghanistan, poverty, illiteracy, and infant mortality are directly and exclusively attributable to the Taliban,²³ I want to look closely at the trope of “women and children” as it serves competing claims to a just and moral war. For there is rarely a clearer instance of the oppression of women than in the discourse that pretends to revere and protect them—not so much as women but as nurturing mothers, the real or potential mothers of innocent children.

Mrs. Bush’s radio address offers a potent mix of the time-honored ingredients of classical tragedy: terror, on the one hand, pity on the other. “Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror—not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us” (14 September). I have no quarrel with the idea presented here that sympathy and alarm are appropriate responses to the plight of Afghanistan’s women and children; I do think, however, that it is vital to understand exactly what interests are served by such a statement, particularly by its historically decontextualized affect. There can be little doubt that, as Mrs. Bush puts it (though the grammatical lapse here is startlingly revealing), “parents the world over love our children” (14 September). But what this broad and seemingly indisputable claim naturalizes is the inference that we are immediately asked to draw from it, that “our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan” (14 September) are likewise incontrovertibly just and humane.

Of course, it was the president himself who, in earlier speeches, had finessed away the difference between punishment and self-defense, there too by recourse to the theme of parenthood: “We defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear” (7 October). “Americans are asking: What is expected of us? I ask you to live your lives, and hug your children” (20 September). The desire to retaliate is, it would seem, at one and the same time civilized²⁴ and natural—as natural, necessary, and decent an impulse as the wish to protect one’s innocent young. Terrorists must be punished because they—unlike us!—fail to obey this natural law: “they make no distinction among military and civilians, including

women and children” (20 September).²⁵ What more powerful emblem, then, of the sacrifice that all Americans are called upon to make, than the police shield of a man who, on September 11, gave his life in the attempt to save civilians? The shield, says Bush, “was given to me by his mom...as a proud memorial to her son” (20 September). The strategic use of “mom” is deliberately infantilizing: it equates the son’s heroism with a childlike innocence, reminding us simultaneously of virtue’s vulnerability and of the necessity of defending it even unto death. In this way, too, the “mom”—the Mother, the repressed but threatening symbol of our earliest pain and loss—is herself reborn, redeemed by *her* pain, as a public allegory of patriotic pleasure. It is not, then, in giving birth that a mother becomes proud (or worthy of mention in a presidential speech) but in masochistically turning her personal grief into a state memorial to righteous revenge.

In his call to national sacrifice, President Bush is careful to note that it is not just our sons whom he sends into battle, but “America’s sons and daughters”—“all the men and women in our military,” he says (7 October). But the sexism of Bush’s language is not significantly altered here by the lip service paid to female combatants, whose identities as women are forthwith subsumed to a litany of traditionally masculine tags: “every sailor, every soldier, every airman, every coast-guardian, every Marine” (7 October), Bush declares, must promptly answer “the calling of our time” (14 September), a calling that is based on “the commitment of our fathers” (14 September) and sanctioned higher up by the almighty Father (“May He comfort our own. And may He always guide our country” [14 September]).

There is a chilling logic to the concluding anecdote of the presidential address of 7 October, in which President Bush notes having received “a touching letter...from a 4th-grade girl, with a father in the military: ‘As much as I don’t want my Dad to fight,’ she wrote, ‘I’m willing to give him to you’” (7 October). “This young girl,” the President exults, “knows what America is all about” (7 October). She does indeed, for, in giving up her father, she rehearses, precociously, her duty as a mother, anticipating the day she might give her sons to war. Having understood so well what America is all about, this little girl is a model of successful socialization; but it is not the naïveté of her “willing” social subjection that we are being asked to notice in this heartwarming story. What we are supposed to see in this patronizing tale is neither the cooptation of an innocent mind nor the cynical use of adult love of children as a pretext for killing many children abroad, but a nostalgic sign of our true, inner selves, our innate and spontaneous loyalty to the nation. Citizenship, on this view, originates in the womb, prior, somehow, to class and sexual hierarchy, to political affiliation or to racial-ethnic identity. Pure, unquestioning, and unquestionably authentic, this infantile citizen is who we “really” are, a primordial and unchanging national essence that we need to rediscover in this time of upheaval. Existing beyond sin and social contradiction, financial motivation and the will to power, this little girl stands in for the innocent fetus—that “supernatural sign,” as Lauren Berlant calls it, that utopian “cipher of...national identity”²⁶ that must be saved, whatever the cost, protected, if need be, by homegrown terror. Like the white, upper-middle-class, heterosexual male whose belligerent agenda she is made to serve here, Bush’s “young girl,” and, behind her, the fetus,

is a theological and ideological icon—a fetish—masquerading as a self-evident and universal value.

What we might call the implied author of Bush's narrative is an imaginary construct that exceeds the immediate text and permeates the discourse of our culture at large. Masculine-gendered and misogynistic, "pro-life" and yet pro-war, this invisibly normative narrative persona is equally available to women and men. Our women-in-uniform, *Newsweek* proudly reports, are assertive, competitive, masculinized warriors, Amazons who say pithy things like "Get out of my way."²⁷ Terrorists, on the other hand, are feminine-gendered,²⁸ "cowards" who go after "soft," not "hardened," targets. "When we perceive a threat to locations we can protect," says one impressively hard marine brigadier general, "we are there with increased vigilance and a really bad attitude."²⁹ What this kind of threat display is intended to do is not only to establish, once and for all, which country is in the position of global alpha-male, but also to restore to health and security the mutilated body of that reigning superpower. "Our wounds as a people," says President Bush, "are recent and unhealed" (14 September). "I will not," he insists, "forget this wound to our country" (20 September). And therein lies the magic of the fetish: we remember our wounds to heal our wounds; we keep our wounds open not the better to remember the similar wounds we inflict around the world, but the better to forget, belittle, or ignore them. The president's refrain, "We will come together" (20 September), performs rhetorically this collective "healing," transforming the incomplete body of the nation—a cracked and bleeding *female* form—into a sturdy and purposeful masculine agent. "[T]his country will define our times, not be defined by them" (20 September). With these words, too, the president turns the nation-state from the passive (female) recipient of a violating aggression into the virile progenitor of world solidarity. Healing requires a sex-change operation.

This change does not merely compensate for feminine lack, shoring up an unsound and effluent surface; it fulfills, in the process, a hygienic function, purging the body politic of foreign impurities. The tight fit between normative gender stereotypes and the American fantasy of moral and physical purity is cogently summarized by a navy photograph showing antigay graffiti on one of the many bombs destined to fall on the Taliban "fags."³⁰ These bombs may initially, the president warns, cause the verminous or rodent-like terrorists to "burrow deeper into caves and other entrenched hiding places" (7 October).³¹ But terrorists, like weeds, will be mercilessly "rooted out"; like household pests, they will be exterminated as we "rid the world of evil" (14 September). Like metastasizing cancer cells or a deadly contagion from which, we suddenly realize, "we are not immune" (20 September), the "enemies of freedom" (20 September) are a subhuman life form, devoid, by definition, of the capacity to reason. Terrorists are not people with political grievances, and terrorism is not a symptom of anything but itself ("terrorism is terrorism," quips President Bush); it is best treated, then, by radical surgery, by technologically antiseptic military "operations."

This kind of pathologizing, dehumanizing rhetoric facilitates escalation rather than understanding, sweeping ultimatum rather than "patient justice": "These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. ... Every nation, every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or

you are with the terrorists" (20 September). This is the language of "conflict dissolution," which Wai Chee Dimock, in discussing the concept of rights, counterpoises as follows to "conflict resolution":

This conflict dissolution, the reduction of every conflict to a nonconflict, the reduction of every opposing claim to a nonclaim, ... confers on the concept of rights not just a *coercive* authority but what appears to be a moral authority, making it 'morally legitimate for one human being to determine by his choice how another should act.' The triumph of rights is, above all, an epistemological triumph, one that confers reality on one claim, one body of evidence and one line of reasoning, over that of its opponent. And the undoing of the losing claim, the erasure of its evidence and the dismissal of its reasoning, is perhaps the necessary basis for the authority granted the right holder, an authority which, to be seen as moral authority, must appear to issue not from the successful demolition of its opponent, but from a Reason immanent in the nature of things.³²

Bush and Rumsfeld like to tout their clear-sighted, non-nonsense, "real-world" politics; yet, in their comic-book vision of global relations, America can rest "assured of the rightness of our cause, and confident of the victories to come" (20 September) because—conveniently enough, for the world's remaining superpower—superior reasoning and superior virtue are entirely synonymous with superior strength. On this view, people lose wars not because they have inferior military capability and not because they reach, more quickly than their opponents, their particular threshold of tolerance for pain,³³ but because they lack reason and courage, morality and morale.³⁴ Courage, as Susan Sontag notes, is "a morally neutral virtue";³⁵ but, by the terms of America's zero-sum adversarial economy, to lose a war is not only to concede defeat; it is to forfeit all right to legal and moral grievance and, along with that right, any claim to "deserve" understanding.

There is violence, then, and considerable injustice, in our wartime language of rights and reason. It is a violence committed in the name of absolutes, truths deemed freestanding, self-adequating, and objective. There is violence and injustice in our president's refiguring of feminine lack as manly plenitude, in his "chivalrous" appropriation of the experience of women and children as a pretext for his bloody military campaign, and there is, it must be said, violence and injustice in Bush's political hijacking of September 11's victims—his presumptuous translation of their shattered lives and bodies into the metaphysical logos of national unity. Whether they happen to like it or not, the victims' families have had their personal tragedy interpreted *for* them by the makers of public opinion.³⁶ Whatever their nationality or religious belief, their gender identity or political allegiance, the dead have been spoken for—officially "redeemed"—by a purportedly apolitical, panhuman discourse, a discourse that extols freedom, equality, and compassion while insidiously exploiting social and sexual phobias.

The point here is not that Bush is "wrong" and bin Laden is "right." Bin Laden's rhetoric of justice is similarly retributive; similarly, if more overtly, macho and gynophobic; similarly rife with metaphors of animalism and sickness.³⁷ And it is, above all, similarly marked by a resolutely selective capacity for empathy. Seeing this might have led us to reflect

on history's ironies. Instead of proclaiming irony dead after September 11, we might have felt more keenly our nation's contradictions.³⁸ We might have recognized that a self-questioning irony is not incompatible with serious issues, that it is the overweening seriousness of a chauvinistic sublime that motivates the endless spiral of like-for-like violence.

Are the changes we have brought about in Afghanistan good ones? I want to say that only time will tell. But by what universal standard, what objective calculus of The Good, will this allegorical persona, Time, enlighten us? Wars, after all, are never definitively won or lost; that is, the "loser" is never utterly incapacitated, absolutely incapable of renewing military hostilities.³⁹ And just as the outcome of any particular war is never really incontestable militarily or politically, so the human and social effects of war cannot be contained within neatly defined temporal and geographic boundaries.⁴⁰ Our leaders have been so busy speculating about fresh military campaigns "after Afghanistan" (directed against the arbitrarily conceived "Axis of Evil") that they seem not to have noticed the many holes in their alleged victory—the elusiveness of bin Laden, the resilience of Taliban and Al Qaeda forces in eastern Afghanistan, the continued feuding among Afghan warlords, the risk of political instability in Pakistan, the widespread popular resentment over civilian casualties, and the diffuseness, mobility, and infinite regeneracy of a transnational enemy vaguely defined as "terrorism."

To return, with Nietzsche, to the language of exchange value: has our intervention in Afghanistan been "worth" the "cost" in, say, the lives of innocent Afghan civilians, or the restriction of civil liberties both at home and abroad,⁴¹ or in the growing international uneasiness over our gunboat diplomacy? I do not pretend to have answers to these questions, but, in the current political climate, asking them is a task as vital as it is difficult. Bush asserted plaintively, in a news conference on 11 October, "we are a nation that appreciates the value of life." But that is precisely the problem: what *is* the value of life (and of *whose* life, exactly) for our "peaceful," "generous," and "compassionate" nation?⁴² By what equation of justice does one weigh killing, as a means, against its real or perceived political end? To the extent that the idea of justice inevitably turns on some notion of equivalence, symmetry, or analogy, it lays bare, if we follow it to its logical *inconclusion*, not only our international inequities and disavowals but our everyday perceptual and affective lacunae. Why, ask the families of victims of terrorism in Oklahoma, Kenya, Tanzania, and elsewhere, are the victims of September 11 worth more monetarily—more on the market of compassion and restitution—than other victims of similar attacks?⁴³ And what about our everyday victims of intentional human cruelty such as battery, rape, or identity theft; are they not, ask their representatives, equally entitled to equally generous government compensation for their equally tragic trauma and loss?⁴⁴ Why—by what measure of emotional responsibility or ethical jurisdiction—does September 11 move us to feel vulnerable and angry when mass slaughter on our highways simply goes without saying?⁴⁵ I am not suggesting that these situations are tidily equivalent, but that they may not be as dissimilar as we tend to think they are, or that their differences may not lie where we intuitively think they do. Two months after September 11, when American Airlines Flight 587 crashed in Queens, New York, killing 265 innocent people, "many Americans,"

noted CBS news, "expressed relief that this was just an accident and not a terrorist attack." Why is such an accident an acceptable risk, while terrorism is not? "We" (and not, apparently, the relatives of the victims) were relieved that the air disaster was "only" an accident because that meant international terrorism was still relatively rare in the U.S., hence, relatively unlikely to happen to *us*.⁴⁶ And yet, given the human desire to recuperate meaning, wouldn't it be preferable, if offered a choice, to die for a reason, i.e., at the hands of terror, as the nationally mourned victim of our era's favorite evil? If September 11 can help us to think critically about questions such as these and perhaps to see their implications for our global sense of justice, it will have accomplished something "good" after all, although I, for one, do not know if it will have been "worth" it.

NOTES

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 37. "Anxiety," Freud explains, "describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. ... There is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neuroses" (11).

² Revenge is explicitly invoked by Freud as a motivating component of the child's fantasy. See Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, 15.

³ On "acting out" as opposed to "working through," see Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (Oxford: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), vol. XII.

⁴ See, for example, Osama Bin Laden, "98 Al-Jazeera TV Interview," *BBC International Reports*, December 1998, transcript: "[O]ur brothers who fought in Somalia... saw wonders about the weakness, feebleness, and cowardliness of the US soldier.... They want to deprive us of our manhood. We believe that we are men, Muslim men who must defend the greatest place in existence, the Holy Ka'ab. We want to have the honour of defending it. We do not want American women soldiers... defending the grandchildren of [Muslim leaders]. ... The rulers in that region have been deprived of their manhood. And they think that the people are women. By God, Muslim women refuse to be defended by these American and Jewish prostitutes."

With respect to the Western media's portrayal of him as a terrorist, bin Laden replies, quoting an Arabic proverb, "She accused me of having her malady, then snuck away" ("Interview with Osama bin Laden," *PBS Online and WGBH/Frontline*, May 1998, transcript, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html>>).

The association of women with moral and physical pollution likewise arises in Mohamed Atta's will: "I don't want any women to go to my grave at all during my funeral or any occasion thereafter.... I don't want a pregnant woman or a person who is not clean to come and say goodbye to me because I don't approve of it" (Philip Shenon and David Johnston, "Suspect's Will Suggests a Longtime Plan to Die," *The New York Times*, 3 October 2001).

And, for bin Laden (as for a segment of our own society when it comes to the subject of AIDS), disease has a morally punitive function: "These diseases [caused by anthrax after September 11] are a punishment from God and a response to oppressed mothers' prayers in Lebanon and Palestine" ("Bin Laden Defiant in October Interview," *Reuters*, 21 October 2001, transcript).

⁵ For a critique of Samuel Huntington's argument in the context of the September 11 debacle, see Edward Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, 22 October 2001, 11-13.

⁶ George W. Bush, "President Declares 'Freedom at War with Fear,'" *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People*, 20 September 2001, transcript, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/print/20010920-8.html>>; hereafter cited parenthetically as "20 September."

⁷ George W. Bush, *Presidential Address to the Nation*, 7 October 2001, transcript, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/print/20011007-8.html>>; hereafter cited parenthetically as "7 October."

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 63, 63.

⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 66, 65.

¹⁰ Ahmed Ressam apparently intended to set off explosives at Los An-

geles International Airport. Members of his family said he had had "trouble holding a job and spent hours watching Clint Eastwood videos" *Newsweek*, 24 September 2001, 43).

¹¹ The Institute for Creative Technologies, a University of Southern California think tank that was founded in 1999 with a \$45 million grant from the army, helps to train American troops through the use of virtual reality and simulation technologies. Since September 11, the Institute has organized ongoing panel discussions between the military and Hollywood screenwriters and producers for the purpose of imagining and thereby anticipating possible terrorism scenarios. See Robert Jablon, "Hollywood Think Tank Helping Army," Associated Press, 9 October 2001, <http://wire.ap.org/public_pages/WirePortal.pcgi/intl_portal.html>. Following a meeting between Bush adviser Karl Rove and Hollywood executives, a White House spokesperson announced, "The administration will share with studio executives the themes we're communicating at home and abroad of patriotism, tolerance and courage." See Robert Reno, "Harrumph for Bush's Hollywood," *Common Dreams News Center*, 13 November 2001 <<http://www.commondreams.org/views01/1113-06.htm>>. Perhaps none of this should surprise us, though, since the film industry has long relied on military experts (or "technical advisers") to show the stars how to handle weapons; indeed, one ex-soldier turned technical adviser has parlayed his experience as a covert operations specialist into a series of bestselling novels that Miramax plans to adapt to the screen. See "Bin Laden Novel Set for Big Screen," *BBC News*, 1 October 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/entertainment/film/newsid_157300/1573878.stm>.

¹² Andy Kershaw, "A Chamber of Horrors so close to the 'Garden of Eden,'" *The UK Independent*, 1 December 2001, <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/story.jsp?story=107715>.

¹³ Robert Fisk, "We are the War Criminals Now," 29 November 2001, <<http://argument.independent.co.uk/commentators/story.jsp?story=107292>>.

¹⁴ For example, in an open letter to Americans and the international community claiming that the "war on terrorism" is "morally necessary," sixty American academics state: "Although in some circumstances, and within strict limits, it can be morally justifiable to undertake military actions that may result in the unintended but foreseeable death or injury of some noncombatants, it is not morally acceptable to make the killing of noncombatants the operational objective of a military action (*Gulf 2000 #14 U.S. Gulf Policy*, 14 February 2002, <<https://www1.columbia.edu/sec/bboard/gulf2000/gulf200014/msg01305.html>>). One must ask, however, whether the U.S. bombing of civilians in Afghanistan can legitimately be called "unintended" when it is an entirely "foreseeable" and "acceptable" consequence of the campaign. If the history of bombing offers us any insight into the question, it is only that nations in the West have routinely refused, since World War I, to discriminate between civilians and military targets, thereby effectively annulling any meaningful distinction between terrorism and the conventions of aerial assault. See Trevor Corson, "The Race to Bomb," *The Nation*, 29 October 2001.

¹⁵ On the philosophical, social, and historical bases for the association of women and femininity with this particular cluster of traits, see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); and Marina Warner, "The Sieve of Tuccia," in her *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Pan Books, 1987), 241-266.

¹⁶ Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth* (New York: Dover, 1993), 20.

¹⁷ On *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, WWNO, New Orleans, 19 September 2001, for example, the establishment of a coalition government and the arrival of peace-keeping forces in Afghanistan were described as "the birth of a nation," while *The New York Times* reported that, in Kabul and across Afghanistan, "many people listened to radio broadcasts of their nation being reborn" ("An Overview: Dec. 22, 2001," *The New York Times*, 22 December 2001).

¹⁸ On post-Vietnam "information management" through the barring of U.S. reporters from battlefields, see John R. MacArthur, "Unleash the Press," *The Nation*, 19 November 2001: 5-6. See also James Dao and Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon Readies Efforts to Sway Sentiment Abroad," *New York Times*, 19 February 2002, <<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/world/index.html>>. Spurred by fears that the United States was losing support among its allies after American warplanes began bombing Afghanistan in October 2001, the Pentagon created the Office of Strategic Influence, whose classified proposals call for aggressive propaganda campaigns using the foreign media, the Internet, and covert operations for the purpose of spreading disinformation in the Middle East, Asia, and Western Europe. Since American news organizations rely increasingly on foreign media outlets such as Reuters and Agence France-Presse, it is likely that the misleading information planted in the for-

eign media would also end up being disseminated at home in the U.S. In this connection, a fair media advisory issued by *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting* points out that, in the recent past, the U.S. government has been directly and deliberately involved in deceiving the American public through domestic disinformation campaigns implemented by the army's Psychological Operations Command (PSYOPS) and the National Security Council's former Office of Public Diplomacy (see "Pentagon Propaganda Plan is Undemocratic, Possibly Illegal," *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, 19 February 2002, <<http://www.fair.org/activism/osi-propaganda.html>>). Of course, in the current situation, this kind of systematic manipulation of the media from above is hardly necessary. Reporters such as Brit Hume, Mara Liasson, and Michael Barone apparently agree that, because civilian deaths are a normal part of war, Afghan civilian casualties are simply "not news." (One wonders, then, why journalists bother to cover American air strikes and ground offensives in Afghanistan, since these, too, are normal war fare.) A memo circulated to the staff of a local newspaper in Florida warns: "DO NOT USE photos on Page 1A showing civilian casualties from the U.S. war on Afghanistan.... DO NOT USE wire stories which lead with civilian casualties from the U.S. war on Afghanistan. They should be mentioned further down in the story. If the story needs rewriting to play down the civilian casualties, DO IT." See "Fox: Civilian Casualties Not News," *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, 8 November 2001, <<http://www.fair.org/activism/fox-civilian-casualties.html>>.

¹⁹ The powerful effect of emotional and conceptual distancing accomplished by such expressions, as well as by the brief journalistic synopses that usually accompany them, may be grasped by reading similarly factual, yet more fully descriptive, accounts of the events to which they refer. See, for example, the devastating description of the mistaken massacre, by U.S. special forces, of America's Afghan allies in Khas Uruzgan in Ellen Knickmeyer, "Survivors: Raid Victims were U.S. Allies," *Associated Press*, 6 February 2002, <http://wire.ap.org/public_pages/WirePortal.pcgi/intl_portal.html>. It is precisely such accounts that are usually, and unconsciously, absent from the mainstream American press (except, of course, in cases, such as the September 11 disaster, where it is American lives that are tragically taken).

²⁰ George W. Bush, *Presidential Address to the Nation*, 14 September 2001, transcript, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/print/2001_0914-2.html>; hereafter cited parenthetically as "14 September."

²¹ For a detailed and compelling discussion of the reasons, both technological and strategic, why missile defense would not only not improve but would harm the national security of the United States, see Steven Weinberg, "Can Missile Defense Work?" *New York Review of Books*, 14 February 2002, 41-47.

²² Laura Bush, *Radio Address by Laura Bush to the Nation*, 17 November 2001, transcript, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/print/20011117.html>>; hereafter cited parenthetically as "14 September."

²³ Mrs. Bush claims that "the terrorists and the Taliban" have imposed "poverty, poor health, and illiteracy" on women in Afghanistan, and that "[o]nly the terrorists and the Taliban forbid education to women" (14 September). It is true that the Taliban prohibits women from going to school, working, and leaving home by themselves; however, before the Taliban seized power, only six percent of women in Afghanistan had access to education because of the lack of resources in a country torn by decades of war, occupation, and civil strife.

²⁴ "This," says Bush, "is civilization's fight. ... The civilized world is rallying to America's side" (20 September).

²⁵ Compare with the words of Osama bin Laden: "The Americans started it and retaliation and punishment should be carried out following the principle of reciprocity, especially when women and children are involved. Through history, America has not been known to differentiate between the military and the civilians or between men and women or adults and children.... [O]ur boys [in Somalia] were shocked by the low morale of the American soldier and they realized that the American soldier was just a paper tiger. He... fled, and America had to stop all its bragging... after the Gulf War in which it destroyed the infrastructure and the milk and dairy industry that was vital for the infants and the children and the civilians..." ("Interview with Osama bin Laden," *PBS Online and WGBH/Frontline*, May 1998, transcript, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html>>). "We differentiate between man, woman, child and elderly people. The man is a fighter.... It is as if you were accusing a man of being a brave knight and fighter" (Osama Bin Laden, "98 Al-Jazeera TV Interview," *BBC International Reports*, December 1998, transcript).

²⁶ Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics," in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, ed. Austin Sarat (Ann

Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 55. My description of the fetal citizen form is indebted to Berlant's analysis.

²⁷ Susan H. Greenberg, "Get Out of My Way," *Newsweek* 29 October 2001, 34-35.

²⁸ A *Newsweek* article describes bin Laden as "soft-spoken, languid in his movements, almost effeminate." See Rod Nordland and Jeffrey Bartholet, "The Mesmerizer," *Newsweek*, 24 September 2001, 44.

²⁹ For an interview with Marine Brigadier General Douglas O'Dell, see Ed Carom, "Send in the Marines: A Corporal's War," *Newsweek*, 12 November 2001, 6.

³⁰ Randy Dotinga, "Navy Photo Shows Anti-Gay Slur on Bomb," 15 October 2001, <<http://www.planetout.com/news/>>.

³¹ Compare with the following from Osama bin Laden: "the Messenger of Allah... said the Hour of Resurrection shall not come before Muslims fight Jews and before Jews hide behind trees and behind rocks" ("Interview with Osama bin Laden," *PBS Online and WGBH/Frontline*, May 1998, transcript, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html>>). Compare also, "America continues to claim that it is upholding the banner of freedom and humanity, while these deeds which they did, you would find that the most ravenous of animals would not descend to" (Osama Bin Laden, interview, "The New Powder Keg in the Middle East," *Nida'ul Islam*, October-November 1996, <<http://www.islam.org.au>>).

³² Wai Chee Dimock, *Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, Philosophy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 197-198.

³³ See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 89: "In war, ...the participants must work to out-injure each other. Although both sides inflict injuries, ...the side that is more massively injured or believes itself to be so will be the loser. The qualification 'believes itself is an important one, for countries will differ in the level of injury that represents the borderline between tolerable and intolerable damage. It sometimes happens in war that the side that is in absolute terms injured less has reached its own cut-off point of unacceptable injury before the other side..."

³⁴ For a discussion of the grounds on which "the translation of physical prowess into morale, and, worst of all, morality" must be considered objectionable, see Scarry, *Body*, 105-107.

³⁵ Susan Sontag, "The Talk of the Town," *New Yorker*, 24 September 2001, 32.

³⁶ Rita Lasar and other relatives of September 11 victims have attempted to resist this coercive rhetorical appropriation by publicly protesting America's instigation of war in the name of their loved ones. A number of relevant reports may be found under the title "Global Exchange, Campaigns, Sept. 11" at <<http://www.globalexchange.org/september11/update.html>>. See also *CNN Newsnight with Aaron Brown*, 28 January 2002, transcript, <<http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/020128/asb.00.html>>.

³⁷ See notes 4, 25, and 31 above.

³⁸ Many of the outrageous historical ironies surrounding September 11 and its aftermath have been brilliantly underlined by Arundhati Roy in her article "The Algebra of Infinite Justice," *The Guardian*, 29 September 2001, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Print/0,3858,4266289,00.html>>.

³⁹ See Scarry, *Body*, 96-108. It is (in addition to historical inaccuracy, logical inconsistency, and ethical irresponsibility) the refusal to acknowledge the potential open-endedness of war—especially of our desultory "war on terror"—that leads one commentator to the paranoid conclusion that the West should simply colonize the states it deems terrorist. See Paul Johnson, "21st-Century Piracy: The Answer to Terrorism? Colonialism," *Wall Street Journal OnLine*, 6 October 2001, <<http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=95001283>>.

⁴⁰ See Carol Cohn, "Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War," in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 232; and Sara Ruddick, "Notes Toward a Feminist Peace Politics," in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 114, 117.

⁴¹ On the many constitutionally guaranteed rights that have been curtailed since the adoption, in October 2001, of the "USA Patriot Act," see Ronald Dworkin, "The Threat to Patriotism," *New York Review of Books*, 28 February 2002, 44-49. As for the restriction of civil liberties abroad, I am referring to the United States' increasing tolerance, since September 11, of human rights abuses in countries such as Israel, Syria, Zimbabwe, or Uzbekistan. The U.S. appears to be willing to turn a blind eye to political imprisonment, torture, and murder, as long as such abuses are carried out against persons (political opponents and anyone else, including reporters) whom the governments in question may designate as "terrorists."

⁴² George W. Bush, *White House Presidential News Conference*, CBS, 11

October 2001. I am quoting as well from the president's remarks of 14 September and 7 October.

⁴³ It can hardly be of comfort to the families of these "other" victims to know that Congress's rush to assist the bereaved of September 11 was intended to protect the airline industry from massive lawsuits.

⁴⁴ *NPR News*, National Public Radio, WWNO, New Orleans, 19 November 2001.

⁴⁵ According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, 41, 821 people died in traffic accidents on the nation's highways in 2000. A comparison of risk of accidental death from 1994 to 1998 shows a general population risk per year of one in 6,300 for motor vehicles and one in 1,568,000 for commercial air carriers. See U.S. Department of Transportation, News, 24 September 2001, <<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/nhtsa/announce/press/pressdisplay.cfm?year=2001&filename=pr49-01.html>>.

⁴⁶ I am reminded here of the following remarks from an essay about September 11 by Slavoj Žižek: "will Americans decide to fortify further their 'sphere,' or risk stepping out of it? Either America will persist in, strengthen even, the deeply immoral attitude of 'Why should this happen to us? Things like this don't happen HERE!', leading to more aggressivity towards the threatening Outside.... Or America will finally risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside World, ... making the long-overdue move from 'A thing like this should not happen HERE!' to 'A thing like this should not happen ANYWHERE!'" See Slavoj Žižek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real!" online posting, 27 October 2001 <postcolonial@lists.village.virginia.edu>.