

Maggie Not of New York

A Nine-Eleven Journal

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Abstract

September 11, 2001 inscribed a violent media spectacle in the individual and collective consciousness. Within weeks, sudden and widespread attention to the lives and deaths of thousands of individual victims was erased by the project to construct a national narrative of abiding binaries: good/evil, us/them, with us/against us. Lost is the voice of ordinary women, men, children, and parents in the shadow of the events, whose identity and standpoint epistemology shape the meaning of the post-nine eleven world. This paper suggests that position, identity, and place matter in the interpretation of this supposedly new world, and presents one student's attempt -- through the literary device of diary entries of a fictional New Jersey teenager -- to confront the meaning of September 11 for the once-ordinary rhythms of urban and suburban life in the New York region.

Introduction

All have seen the images, and none can forget them. Tall, modernist, gray-silver, steel, a sudden shatter, clouds of steel and glass, orange billows turning black, zoom in, broken columns and people standing, screaming, holding hands, and jumping.

September 11, 2001 inscribed a violent media spectacle in the individual and collective consciousness. World War Two was the first radio and radar war; Vietnam was the first television war; the Gulf War inaugurated the GIS war (Smith, 1992); and now we have the globalized, infoedutainment world wide web war, with hundreds of cable channels and web sites (most owned by a handful of media conglomerates) competing for a share of the billions of eyeballs as the human attention span is shattered to incoherence. We can get our dose of All Nine Eleven, All the Time from anyplace we choose: Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell's Revelation on the Seven Hundred Club, Dubya's *Amerrikin* homages and news conferences on C-SPAN, Greta Van Susteren on CNN or the more heavily polished young anchors at Headline News or MSNBC.com, the right-wingers at Fox, or Colin Powell on MTV fielding questions from viewers across the globe. Sadly, the information society is not the society of knowledge or understanding, and the proliferation of information sources and global news coverage has coincided with an increasingly narrow view of the world for most Americans (Castells, 1996; Silva and Wyly, 2001). The narrative presented in the months since September 11, 2001 has been heavy on enforced patriotism and inspired vengeance, shifting from Lower Manhattan to Afghanistan to the Axis of Evil, and it has demanded that we see the events as the expression of a single, coherent history with a single, correct interpretation, freed from the confines of time and space, at least until the Pentagon brings its forces to bear on a particular place with now-trademark speed and accuracy.

But space, place, and time *do* matter. The events appear different, indeed they mean very different things, depending upon our place in the world. Consider an urban perspective, of the millions of people who live within sight of the twin towers, and the many more millions who have lived within degrees-of-separation distance from them, by virtue of employed relatives, business trips, or the reassuring, human-GPS function of orienting oneself by turning around and looking for the twins, long ago named Nelson and David for the Rockefeller brothers (Fitch, 1993). Still, the idea of “an urban perspective” on these events is rather ridiculous, and fails to ground the narrative. A city is made up of politicians, corporations, artists, consumers, jaywalkers, accountants, bankers, freaks, bums, children, lovers, maniacs, vegetarians, peaceniks, gang-bangers, do-gooders, ministers, and sanitation engineers. The categorizations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and people step from one identity to another, as would bell hooks if she were to teach Hagerstrand’s time-geography.

And so perhaps the only way to ground the events for an urban perspective is to consider the effects on one person. For the purposes of analyzing the urban consequences of September 11 at various spatial scales, and to suggest specific propositions for rebuilding and recovery, consider the following series of fictional journal entries, as if written by teenaged girl. She lives in Hoboken, New Jersey, just across the Hudson River from the towers, a place that for generations beat rhythmically with Manhattan as the diurnal circulation of (mostly white, masculine, wealthy) labor flowed in and out of the heart of the financial district. If we write a situated herstory rather than a universal, disembodied history, we can see the standpoint epistemology of a native-born, white, middle-class girl, struggling to come to terms not just with the big-picture violence at the national or global scale, but changes in daily life as well (Haraway, 1991, 1997). If we were to hear her idealistic, innocent voice, purportedly stolen from America that day, what would she say?

September 11, 2001

Dear Journal,

Mrs. Potter said that we'd all want to remember where we were. I was in gym class and we all had to stop playing soccer and go to the auditorium, without even changing first. Mr. Langley, my life science teacher, was on the stage. Instead of the usual wink I've gotten since last year's class trip when I'd voted for the aquarium over Great Adventure, he just nodded at me. I knew something was really wrong when I saw Mr. B, the shop teacher, put his arm around the evil librarian. Mr. L told us not to panic. Then, he said a plane crashed into the World Trade Center. He didn't say much more, only that we should try not to panic, and that we should spend the rest of the day in our homerooms.

Back in homeroom, Mrs. Potter (homeroom and English teacher) told us all to take out some homework or read *Lord of the Flies*, since we were to finish the book by next Monday. No one was to talk. "No," she said, no one could go to the nurse, the bathroom, or the office to call our parents. I'd never seen her this strict before. Some kids were crying, but I felt sort of numb. My best friend Cammie was using her cell phone to e-mail her mom. She always thought she knew what to do. She passed me a note, "Did you SEE Mr. B? I think he was crying. Eli's dad works at the Trade Center so they have him in Guidance until his mom gets here. Where do your parents work?"

I panicked. Where DID my parents work? Mom has a catering business. Her shop was off Washington Street in Hoboken near our house, but most of her business was in the city. Just like she never asked what chapter I was on in Pre-Algebra, I never knew where she was on a particular day. Dad worked in an office building in the city. I knew that much, but he wasn't around often,

and I'd only been to his apartment twice. I didn't want to think about it. I wrote back to Cammie, "They're fine. What did your mom say?"

Before she gave me the response, Joe Cramer brought a note from the office to Mrs. Potter.

"Maggie, Camilla, get your things together. You're being picked up."

Cammie's mom was at the office. She told me my mom would pick me up from her house later.

--mags

September 13, 2001

Dear j -

Lucky you're only a book. I got this card when I broke my leg last summer. On the front was a cartoon drawing of a mouse, telling me how he didn't have to have feelings, or buy things, or get hurt, or have responsibilities. Inside the card, it said, "Don't you wish you were a cartoon mouse, too?"

Cartoon mice don't get trapped in burning buildings. When fiery planes crash with cartoon mice in them, the mice climb out the windows of the squashed plane, wipe off the soot, and make their next joke. Cartoon mice don't wait in line to learn if their mom or dad, or their favorite Uncle Jay made it out. Cartoon mice don't lose sleep, because they don't need sleep. Cartoon mice don't empathize with friends, get stuck in tunnel traffic, or feel really, really sad.

So, while the broken leg was a pain, I still liked being human. Now I wonder about the life of a cartoon mouse.

-maggie

September 16, 2001

JJ:

It's Sunday now, and I know you'd feel neglected if you could. I was supposed to have a big project due tomorrow for my Civics class on the positions in the cabinet. It's been extended since Mr. Fritz finally retired mid-term. Rumor has it that the terrorist thing caused him to have a nervous breakdown. Fritz fought in WWII, and saw a concentration camp. I heard the story about the atrocities he saw and the woman he met, whom he eventually married (embellished with different details depending on the class) four times since I'd been in middle school. I guess a person can only embody one tragedy at a time. Or, at least two would be too many to teach. I imagine Fritz wouldn't have told us of the camps if he knew we'd have our own story one day. I don't think he knows what to say. He felt like he was warning us. Protecting us from ourselves by preventing the wrongs of history from recurring. I guess when new hate, old hate, like that of the terrorists surfaces, what validity do our teachers have when they tell us the reason we learn dates and facts from the past is to stop them from recurring? Apparently, it doesn't work.

I finished *Lord of the Flies* for Mrs. Potter's class. It's hard to believe that kids can be that destructive. I know it's probably meant to be symbolic, but that's odd too. So, it was all anticipated that we

would fight it out, like on an island, the strongest winning all? Death for food, death for goods, death for life? In that scenario, who's gonna save us?

-m

September 22, 2001

~~Dear~~ Truth to J:

I know I never got around to telling you what happened to me. I don't feel like I have a right to cry. Eli has a right to cry, and a couple other kids in my class. Both Karen's parents were killed. She has to move to Montana to live with her aunt. Eli's dad died, so his mom thought it best if he switch schools and have a new start. Others too...it's all a mess.

My parents are both okay. Dad's company had an office in the Empire State Building, but they moved the main operations to Newark for the time being. Dad subletted his apartment in New York, in case the company moves back. He had a little trouble, but he finally found a place in Hunterdon County, wherever that is.

Mom wasn't near the towers, but her business is having a hard time. She books big conventions in advance. Some of them cancelled. The food has been ordered, but no one will fly to the city. She was screaming last night on the phone, "I can't MAKE a buffet suitable for a conference call!" Anyway, she says she needs to market to Jersey businesses. I also heard her complaining to Cammie's mom that while dad was out there enjoying the single life, she "might as well have died a relative virgin" - whatever that might mean. So, she says she doesn't want me to have to smell the

city, or see the destruction. She says it's bad for me. So, I'm spending the rest of the school year with my dad.

The reason mom didn't pick me up from school after "the events of September 11" (J - I'm getting sick of hearing this...can't they just say "after" or "now" or "since"? We all know the event they're talking about!) is because she was at my grandma's house. Her brother, my favorite uncle, recently got a job at the World Trade Center. Apparently, from where Grandma knew his office was, she was sure he was killed. We hadn't hear from him and had confirmation that he was at work, by last Sunday, and had a funeral this Sunday.

Uncle Jay was the best. He'd give me piggy-back rides, even though I was too old. He started buying me grownup gifts, like you, my J, leather-bound, with this gold pen. He'd tease me, but never too much, about my boyfriend, even though he knew mom wouldn't let me have one. Mostly, I remember last year at the house on Long Island, when he came to stay with Mom and I for a few days on our vacation, after his mom, my great aunt June died. He said, "Magpie, we're lucky. We haven't seen a great war. We haven't lost loved ones by any unnatural causes. We have blue eyes, Mags. Hazel is for when we grow up. Stay blue-eyed, sweet girl." He made me promise. I think he thought he was protecting me with a promise we both know I had no control over.

So, now I've got 'em - hazel eyes - maybe I always had them and Uncle Jay was being poetic. All babies have blue eyes, though, so I know what he meant. He had oddly pale blue eyes, the color of the sky in my memory of childhood paint-by-numbers. Now, he'll never get hazel.

- Jay's Magpie.

November 22, 2001

Journal -

Happy Thanksgiving. They tell us we have more to be thankful for than ever. I'm staying with my dad. Mom came over for Thanksgiving dinner (Dad had it catered here so I would feel at home. Ha!). I know he misses the city and his friends. He misses the theater. He tried to take me to *The Lion King*, until I reminded him he had his secretary take me for my 11th birthday. Mom says her business is doing well, and wants to know if I can stay with dad over the summer. She's going to France to learn some new pastry tricks or something. I told her I miss Hoboken, miss the skyline, miss my friends, and I miss going into the city. She said, "Things are different, Honey. It's not the city you miss anymore."

Then I objected, to the plane. How can she fly?! She said, "Don't be silly, Mags, life goes on." I mean, I know I'm back at school and things go on, but doesn't she remember?

My dad's niece and nephew, my cousins Carrie and Tim, lost their mom in the attack. Their dad, my Uncle Matt and them are here for Thanksgiving dinner. While they look so sad, all my drunk Aunt Rita keeps talking about is the scholarships they'll be eligible for. As if that fixes anything!

I guess you're wondering, like everyone else - what am I thankful for?

The answer: I'm thankful for my memory. I'm thankful I'm alive to remember and to scream back once I know what to say, and in which direction. I'm not going to fly or work in a high-rise, or think my business is more important than my daughter. I'm going to remember and be different.

-Maggie and my memories

December 3, 2001

J -

I get letters from Cammie telling me about my old school. Apparently, nothing got quite back to normal. Mr. B is dating the library lady, who apparently has gotten nicer. The teachers don't expect work to be done, and hardly a day goes by where no one cries. Cammie says she thinks it's an act, but when I talk to her on the phone, even her voice seems a little different. She doesn't talk about Justin, her 9th grade future husband, hardly at all anymore. She says she's been going to church, and met new kids in her youth group. She says I can come on their summer camping trip, even if I'm Catholic (I have to say, even though I haven't been to church since I stayed at Grandma's last Easter, I hope God remembers me.)

Cammie's parents are a little strange. They go to church, but they also practice new age meditation and stuff. I used to think that it was cool, but now I wonder. They think it'd be good for her to have the experience of the city first hand. They're sending her to a special camp over Winter Break called, "Experiencing the NEW New York." She'll stay in an NYU dorm, and visit ground zero and the Rockwell exhibit at the Guggenheim among other things. She signed her latest letter - Cammie of New York. They offered to get me a slot in the program if my dad will let me come. I'm not even going to ask.

-Maggie Not of New York

December 8, 2001

Dear faithful Journal,

Cartoon mice don't have homework either. I miss Fritzzy and his Current Event assignments more every day. My new Civics teacher, Mr. Green, is obsessed with September 11th. He's young, and he lost his sister in the South Tower. He wants answers. He wants us to write suggestions. The question: "What do you think would help the situation, mitigate the consequences, help New York, the country, the world rebuild after the tragedy?"

Who is he kidding? He wants something I can't give him. No one can. He wants his hope back. Just because we're kids, and we're supposed to be full of hope, does he think we don't know? Does he think we don't see all the bombing on CNN? Does he think we don't read the obituaries in *The New York Times*? How can we presume to know what to do?

I handed in some junk about not building high-rises any more. I wrote that we should decentralize cities, increase security on mass transportation (especially planes) and in public places. I suggested that each town create a distinct personality, to confuse the terrorists as to whom to target. I said everyone should buy lots of Christmas gifts to boost the economy, and go see plays and visit New York restaurants. I wrote all that because that's what he expects. He's heard it all before like we all have on TV and in magazines. But I'll tell you, dearest j, what I could not write as my assignment: I, Maggie Not of New York, do not know how to recover. I do not know what the cities of America should do to protect our citizens or our way of life in light of "September 11th." I can say nothing with conviction that I believe would make a significant difference. A mood has been

created by the events. I guess, most of all, I think it would help to alter the mood. These are some steps I think might help.

1) I think New York should stop being so selfish. New Yorkers are known for being well off, sophisticated, and full of culture. They haven't had it so bad over the years. Without downplaying the tragedy, they need to understand that it happened to everyone in America and in the world. So many cities, states, and countries lost people in the attack. Maybe everyone in New York should find housing elsewhere, and new people could move in. People who don't dwell on life as it was there before September 11th, but who want to create new memories, and a new personality for the city.

2) All cities in America should change a significant traffic law. For example, instead of people at a stop light or stop sign going straight having the right of way, the people turning left should go first. This would not only teach people more courtesy and self control, it would force them to think differently. Most people take norms and laws for granted, without considering why they do them, or if they make sense. Every day on the way to school we wait four lights to make a left turn at a busy intersection, even if we're only the second car. People need to rethink simple things in order to be in the right mindset to change the bigger ones.

3) Policy people and lawmakers in a city should be forced to maintain only one residence during the time they serve the city. That should be within one mile of the center of the city. It drives me nuts when teachers say, "Do problems 2 to 50, even, for tomorrow." After we've spent hours on impossible homework, the next day they say, "Oh, I hadn't realized we hadn't covered that part of

the chapter, which you needed to do the work.” People in charge need to understand the situation on a more personal level and be forced to live with the consequences of their actions.

4) People should stop spending money on unnecessary goods just because ads tell them it’s patriotic, and the government should stop trying to “fix” our economy. When we learned about the 1929 stock market crash, I remember the teacher showing a chart about how the economy is cyclical - how, as far as it goes up, it has to come back down. Well, if that’s the case, we’re already doomed for the fall. And, our system doesn’t seem to be working. There are so many poor people. My grandpa is always talking about the middle class fading away. Maybe it’s more patriotic to try and understand our system and to let the market, whatever that is, run its course. It could mean hard times, but we won’t collapse.

5) Citizen groups should form all over the country to find non-materialist ways to celebrate the holidays. Charity should be the goal this holiday season, not just for September 11th victims, but for all those suffering. Families should spend time, and not money. I bet many who lose loved ones in the attack wish they had spent an hour for every dollar they spent on a loved one last year, to get to know them better and create memories.

6) The focus should remain on correcting things that were wrong before the attack and have been amplified by it. These things cannot be neglected. For example, tolerance committees should be formed to mediate racial tension and racial profiling (including, especially in these times, that of Muslims and those who “look Middle Eastern”). Basic human rights for all people should be on everyone’s mind.

7) Most of all, people should remember, but not dwell. Tragedies like this happen all over the world, and it's just us this time. We should stay focused and strong.

These may not work. There are probably better ideas. But, what more can I offer than my perspective?

-Margaret, a girl

Coda

Margaret's narrative is one short example of the stories that have been told, and will be re-told countless times, to explore the post-nine-eleven world. The modes and tropes of appeal of narrative, originating from and resonating within the individual, will quickly move into the realm of movies, paintings, novels, song lyrics, and the rest of the output of the dynamic cultural products industries (Smith, 1996; cf. Scott, 1996). And narrative also finds its way into the supposedly hard-nosed objectivity of journalists, pundits, press spokesmen, pseudo-elected politicians, the Pentagon's division of press-conference generals, and eager battalions of social movements ready to capitalize on the events for long-running political agendas; John Walker Lind, the 'American Taliban,' quickly became the poster child for American social conservatives warning of the dangers of raising children in affluent, *liberal* California suburbia. The official narrative on offer is built on military and geopolitical imperatives, and, if John Ashcroft is taken at his word, questioning or even thinking critically about the narrative is tantamount to sedition.

But Maggie reminds us that we need to see many narratives. Maggie's own voice is of the white, middle class family of New Jersey. But she knows that we need to see many other stories, and to understand their time, place, and relations of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nation, political identity, and neocolonial oppression. This is no idle plea for a luxurious, fatalistic postmodern resignation when confronted with the history unfolding in the last months of 2001 and the spring of 2002. Rather, it is a recognition that so-called ordinary Americans find themselves now held responsible, in daily life, for worldwide reactions to American hegemony. To justify or challenge such interpretations is irrelevant: when Maggie takes her shoes off at the airport, shows her national id card, and is questioned about her "Middle-Eastern looking" friend at school, or when she is suspended from school for reading an Internet chat board about the now-terrorist-labeled Earth Liberation Front, it really does not matter whether a suicide pilot's motives are inspired by true fervor, born of binladian hypocrisy, or distilled from rebellion against American imperial agendas. What matters is that the era of post-Cold War uncertainty, the affluent confusion of the "end of history," is over, and the military-industrial-information complex has embarked on a campaign to create a single, universal narrative - America Under Attack, America Responds, and the other mottos appearing in the colorful logos in the corners of the screen of the incessant news broadcasts. Maggie reminds us that we need to hear other voices - from white middle-class Americans, yes, because their stories will be the ones used most often to justify White House and Congressional decisions, but also teenage Arab-Americans growing up in Dearborn, Michigan, Palestinian mothers living with the assassinations and other day-to-day expressions of Ariel Sharon's regrets that Arafat was not killed in the camps in 1982, African-American men who are asked insulting questions about how they feel about racial profiling now, you know, after those things back in September, and, yes, many Afghanis, around the world. Standpoint epistemology and situated knowledge claims (Haraway, 1991, 1997), ideas still not widely accepted in political science or public policy circles,

have found their distorted application in the Pentagon's aggressive public-relations efforts to counter Al Jazeera, and the belated recognition of multiple Islamic resistance to United States hegemony. To the degree that situated, partial knowledge claims require a constant reaching out, engaging in complex and sometimes contradictory conversations in the search for an attainable, partial, and imperfect objectivity, perhaps standpoint epistemology itself has changed - as social theory collides with the newly-enhanced military and intelligence budgets of the post-nine eleven world.

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