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Introduction

Taking Time

The whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event, but so, too, are the conditions of analysis. You have to take your time.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD,
The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers

Has the world changed since 9/11? If it has, then in what ways? If it has not changed, then who has an interest in claiming that it has? Whose world are we talking about? Acts of commemoration are particularly sensitive occasions for assessing the balance of change and continuity within the culture at large. They often declare their adherence to time-honored and even universally human rituals and needs, but nothing is more amenable to political and commercial manipulation than funerals, monuments, epitaphs, and obituaries. Outpourings of communal or national grief are proposed as spontaneous but are frequently stage-managed: Abraham Lincoln's funeral train made carefully scheduled and choreographed stops on its protracted twelve-day passage from Washington, D.C., to Springfield, Illinois, in the sad spring of 1865.

Commemorative practices are themselves composed of elements that seem deeply traditional and repetitive, along with others that are open to innovation and surprise. Still others appear to be enduring but can be related to long-term historical preferences that shift slowly but shift nonetheless. Grieving over and laying to rest the bodies of the dead, summarizing and remembering their lives in obituaries and epitaphs, and erecting monuments and buildings that memorialize or mark the sites of tragic events have all been part of the rituals of ongoing life, but not always in the same way or to the same ends. In the period of the modern nation-states, these events have taken on national significance when the occasion has
seemed to demand it.\(^1\) In these same states, millions have died in designated pursuits of national-political ambitions and in avowed defense of homelands. Their deaths have generally been emphatically pronounced worthwhile, not to have been in vain: motherlands, fatherlands, and fellow citizens have celebrated the sacrifices and observed the endings with dignity and ceremony. If all of this has taken on a certain familiar quality, as evident, for example, on the battlefields at Waterloo, Gettysburg, or the Somme, it has remained the case that for those immediately affected, the families and friends of the dead, every death is horribly immediate and unrepeatable. Rituals of memorialization exist to assimilate these intense and particular griefs into received vocabularies and higher, broader realms than the merely personal. The routines of commemorative culture, whether private or public, exist to mediate and accommodate the unendurably dissonant agonies of the survivors into a larger picture that can be metaphysical or national-political and is often both at once. They must somehow signify and acknowledge the idiosyncrasies and special qualities of each of the dead, so that each death is not simply merged with innumerable others, without allowing those idiosyncrasies to disturb or radically qualify the comforting articulation of a common cause and a common fate. In public memorials the personal identification may be nothing more than a name on a wall, but it is still intended and felt as personal.

Taking physical leave of the dead, when there is a body to inter or cremate, normally happens soon after death, and usually with some premeditated ceremony combining tradition and deliberate personalization. Decisions about the monumental, public forms that commemorate local or national traumas and tragedies are often and ideally the products of slow time. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., was not built until seven years after the end of a war that proved too divisive and unresolved to allow for ready representation; the World War II Memorial took form even more belatedly, not so much because its memories are divisive (though some of them are that) but because its scope was so great as to seem beyond representation at all, except as a series of relatively local events: hence the monuments at Pearl Harbor (another memorial that was a long time coming), to the Iwo Jima flag raising, and to the Bataan death march, among others. Holocaust memorials also came late, and are still coming, for a range of reasons that include national and international shame or embarrassment and a sense of iconographic inadequacy (how can it be represented?) as well as of unsolved histories and contested contemporary politics. A culture that can take time over the commemoration of its past signals in its protracted deliberations the expectation that it will have time, that it can look forward to a continuous future both in the minimal sense of mere survival and in the more substantial sense that events from the past will be explained and set into context, made part of an intelligible history. But there is often a sense of guilt or unease that accompanies the assumption of an ongoing history with its implicit emphasis on coming to terms with and getting over tragic events. This is particularly so since the last quarter of the twentieth century, the period of the so-called memory boom, when a proper acknowledgment of the enormity of human cruelty (typified by and sometimes limited to the Nazi genocide) has often seemed to insist that we not pass into a future that is forgetful of the history of atrocity, even that we reenact the primary shock of suffering itself as a state not to be overcome but endlessly made present. This has led to a besetting sense of bad faith about both forgetting (as if we could, but we do) and remembering (as if we could suffer in any way as much as those who lived and died in the camps). Freud’s brief remarks on the distinction between mourning and melancholia, getting over (working through) and acting out, have proved hugely prophetic of and influential for late twentieth-century deliberations on the ethical and psychological burdens of a horrific past.\(^2\) Above all, what has been deemed most intolerable is the role of the bystander, the person who merely notices but does not act. At the same time


the inhabitants of affluent countries, whose economic position insulates them from the routine sight of violence, are often just that, bystanders, biding their time.

The event of September 11, 2001, seemed to challenge such complacency. It has been widely presented as an interruption of the deep rhythms of cultural time, a cataclysm simply erasing what was there rather than evolving from anything already in place, and threatening a yet more monstrous future. It appeared as an unforeseen eruption across the path of a history commonly deemed rooted in a complacent steady-state progressivism (the well-known "end of history" mooted after the fall of the Soviet empire). The forms of its commemoration have been correspondingly urgent and perhaps untimely, hurried along and even hijacked by a tide of secondary events whose connections with 9/11 are to say the least open to dispute. In less than two years we went from the fall of the Twin Towers and the attack on the Pentagon to the invasion of Iraq, a process marked by propagandist compression and manufactured consent so audacious as to seem unbelievable, except that it happened. The time of memory and commemoration evolved from the start alongside the time of revenge, but those now being punished were not the original aggressors. Most of the world knows this and stands appalled. Political scientist Jenny Edkins has seen 9/11 as the moment when "trauma time collided with the time of the state, the time of capitalism, the time of routine," producing a "curious unknown time, a time with no end in sight." Most worrying to her is that "the state, or whatever form of power is replacing it, has taken charge of trauma time." The balance between acting out and working through has been skewed by a prolonged period of ideological shoring up and military hitting out. Mourning and melancholia have both been made secondary to the initiation of new states of emergency. For a national culture as committed as is that of the United States to a high level of ethical self-justification and even self-righteousness, this compression produces a definite tension in the conventions of national self-representation. If the ethical task is somehow to "know how to reinstate justice in the place of vengeance," then it requires (and has produced) a radically devious logic to justify the invasion of Iraq. In the face of this deviance it is tempting to agree with Badiou that 9/11 and the "following battles" represent little more than the "disjunctive synthesis of two nihilisms" (158).

The dissemination of a war against terror has depended on a locution full of historical and contemporary ironies, for terror began its lexical life as the policy of the state, and wars are traditionally waged by states, so the war against terror can be (and has been) deciphered as the war of the state against itself. But international events are not the only sources of interruption of or distraction from the working out of memorial vocabularies for the dead of 9/11. There is also the ongoing negotiation between commerce and commemoration at the WTC site, a process that pits the declared obligations of memory and due respect against those of a future civic life, both economic and cultural. It is easy to cast the moguls of Manhattan as insensitive and materialistic, but the memorial process has also been aggressively suborned by the politicians, whose avowed respect for the dead is not beyond suspicions of present and future self-interest. Debates about the use of the site have not been unmarked by the assumption that the dead should bury the dead and thus by an embarrassingly hasty inclination to get on with life. Many residents have made it clear that they do not wish to live in a national memorial emptied of retail, full of tourists by day and deserted by night. On the other side, melancholic extremes can also be identified among some of the survivor families and other involved groups who want the site to remain always a shrine to the departed.

Through all of these contexts and situations, the sense of the disruptive power of 9/11 has seemed apparent. Its exceptionality has been taken to affront the sense we have of our culture—that we do not do not engage in acts of terror and have not known them. At the same time, and right from the start, there were many people who gave voice to the odd and troubling sensation that they had already seen those falling towers in the movies—movies made in America. On the one hand 9/11 has been described as the result of


a clash of civilizations, ours and theirs, signaling the existence of an implacably different culture that does not march to the same beat as ours, one that is messianic, vengeful, unenlightened, premodern, other: the culture of terror. The relatively comfortable pluralism within which we have been living, whereby other cultures have come to be accepted in their own terms as long as they subsist at some same distance from (or peacefully within) our own, was shattered by this event’s confrontational negation of any ethic of tolerance. On the other hand that strangeness looked familiar, both as an image on the television or movie screen and as a massively amplified rerun of a previous attack on the same building in 1993, an event that with the wisdom of hindsight looks like part of a pattern developing through slow time, and thus very much a part of our inherited culture. That which looked to many of us, on September 11, 2001, like the work of agents so unfamiliar as to seem almost like aliens, also looked like something we had seen before in both fact and fiction.

We should then question those who have presented 9/11 as an attack on culture itself, on any meaningful continuity with the past and with a projected future. In the eyes of our enemy, they tell us, 9/11 was intended as a cataclysmic imposition of revelation and apocalypse, of eternally present time, on the complacent faith in merely historical and evolutionary temporality that characterizes our secular preference for prudence, profit, and accumulation in the world of trade, a world of self-cultivation measured by the reassuring ticking of a predictable clock. (The ticking clock was rendered radically threatening in one of the Republican Party’s televised campaign ads before the election of November 2004.) Michael Ignatieff’s “apocalyptic nihilism” partakes of this rhetoric, as does Thomas Friedman’s description of 9/11 as a “hole in the fabric of civilization.” The attribution of nihilism or nothingness (despite Osama bin Laden’s explicit demands for specific changes in U.S. foreign policy) creates a space for speculation and interpretation that is literally inexhaustible. In the light of this construction of nothing, of inviting emptiness, everything becomes a possible motive: the attack may then be the result of jealousy, of “them” wanting what we have and destroying it because they cannot have it (“they hate our freedom”); or it may be the result of an absolute negation, of “them” responding to an intransigent fundamentalism wholly foreign to our professed ethic of tolerance; or it may stem from “them” being too technologically undeveloped and/or cowardly to face their enemy in open combat. They are secretive, cowardly, primitive, inflexible: terrorists, followers of Islam. We are an open society, honorable, sophisticated, and committed to the global conversation and to respectful dialogue. We stand up in place and identify ourselves; they are anonymous and everywhere.

All of these binaries have been, from the first, disputed both as ideological figments and as empirical facts. The pilots of the hijacked planes were trained in U.S. flight schools, educated in Western ways, and were competent practitioners of Western technologies. The Osama bin Laden who is now our enemy was once our friend, as was the Saddam Hussein who was thereafter called an apostle of evil, despite there being no credible evidence of mass destructive or terrorist intentions or capacities. The everyday assumptions about the neatness of rhetorically declared oppositions, them and us, create a climate for the blatant political manipulation of binaries of the sort we have been seeing since 9/11. The passage from one entity to an unrelated other—from Osama to Saddam—under the guise of “enemy” follows a traditional logic of scapegoating at the service of a ruthlessly presentist political opportunism. It has been analyzed consistently both by anthropologists and by those who speak for what is called theory: the work of Derrida, Baudrillard, Žižek, and others should now more than ever be urgently recognized precisely in the light of popular counterclaims by both left and right that the project of theory has run out of time, gone bad, turned away from life. The repression of theory itself in its conventional appearance of foreignness and hostile rhetorical diffidence is one mark of the willed ignorance maintained by the major media inside the United States, and by many among its intelligentsia, about what the rest of the world thinks of us.

The history happening now has put radical pressure on the domestic humanist project of encouraging sympathy for others by way of shared feelings. The pursuit of a war against innocent people
and the apparent tolerance of avoidable deaths (our own and those of others) suggest that we have not after all learned to suffer with others by way of a common sensing of the vulnerable body. Not yet. The sufficiency of the humanist subject as the site of ethical and aesthetic judgments, still I think the foundation of conventional intellectual work, has been visibly in question through the last four years. Nor can it convincingly be deemed ready and waiting to emerge as an adequate vehicle of just behavior if only we could remove some temporary impediments: media culture, for example, with its saturation of images and simulacra, or short-term political ideology. Edward Said’s call for a humanism that is “democratic, open to all classes and backgrounds,” that is not limited to “extolling patriotically the virtues of our culture, our language, our monuments,” that can recognize in culture not an inert heritage but a “scathing discordance of unresolved notations” and make something of them, has yet to find its audience. Indeed, Said’s call for a return to a “philological-interpretive model” (34) and a “paradoxal mode of thought” (83) will look to many persons exactly like the very same theory to which what is familiarly called humanism, in its reliance on common sense and assumed consensus, has so often been opposed. Said was never a domestic intellectual, and his humanism is itself a foreign legacy, embodied in Auerbach and Spitzer and in the traditions of Islamic ijtihad (58). So in the light of our obvious need to learn its lessons, the return to theory (a theory that was never lost but was rather turned off) becomes more urgent than before. Because theory has been a synonym for the other, the foreign, and for the foreign that threatens to take up residence within our borders, our classrooms (everywhere and nowhere, like terror—this position has been held in some quarters for at least forty years), it is not only an alternative to but a victim of the national self-regard that is currently so dangerous an element in world politics. But in the limited but significant hospitality we have shown to theory’s foreign bodies, we have preserved a contact with the other that is potentially more valuable now than ever before. Edward Said’s untimely death produced an obituary of scandalous partiality in the national newspaper of record, the New York Times.


The equally untimely passing of Jacques Derrida in October 2004 produced another instance of the same (for the Jew as for the Arab), along with an appraisal describing his career as flourishing because of “an orthodoxy in which rebellion is privileged over tradition” and his writing as often “mannered and puerile, endlessly turning rebellion on itself.” The final insult of this judgment was that Derrida had the nerve to say, a propos of 9/11, that we do not yet “know what we are talking about.”

I take this remark very seriously, and as an imperative for the taking of time—that we do not yet know, most of us, what we are talking about. For, in the face of all of the nativized pressures to imagine terror as the absolute other, the enemy, the ultimate incarnation of a model of “them and us,” theory has argued and is arguing for a dialectical understanding of violence and a recognition that there can be no convincing absolute distinction between us and them. Much of what nativist thinkers have dismissed as theory has been formed in the light (and shade) cast by Hegel’s account of the master–slave relation in feudalism, the apparent limit-case for dialectical synthesis, as fundamentally unstable in both epistemological and historical terms: just as the master must acknowledge his own dependence on the slave in his very self-identification, so the feudal world is on its way to becoming something else, the modern, a better and becoming-better world. Theory’s utopian project draws on this Hegelian sense of a recurring dialectic even as it tends to disavow progressive historicism itself, along with the belief that we are in the empirical sense already there or well along the way. Conversely, the sense of a providential narrative at work through history took on its most emphatic recent form among the apologists of free market thought after the collapse of state communism in 1989, and it has reappeared in some of the more deluded projections of the neoliberal war hawks in their talk of a “just” war. But we should hold on to Hegel’s refusal to undermine the sustainability of a strong and absolute distinction between self and other, them and us. Gil Anidjar, in a brilliant study from which I shall be drawing in some detail later in the book, has explained the “lack of integrity” of the concept of the enemy, an enemy whom we are at once to love as ourselves (according to Christian doctrine) but also

to oppose as the Antichrist, an enemy who is, in the last analysis, indistinguishable from ourselves.  

This does not mean that there are no distinctions that matter, that there is some monolithic global culture in which all are equally implicated, like it or not, and from which all events must devolve. Global capitalism, indeed, has been taken as such, and its all-pervasive but unseen operations, for those who see it that way, make it a mirror image and perhaps a near relative of the currently projected image of terror, everywhere and nowhere. But it has not yet produced a world unmarked by significant differences and alternative ideals, though many apologists for the anglophone democracies think, after 1989, that it should and will do so. Neither do we inhabit a world of radically distinct and atomistically isolated entities, called cultures or civilizations, that preserve themselves, like undiscovered tribes in some imaginary rain forest, against any formative contacts with others. Ours is a world both reproducing and resisting a totality holding together all that it contains (or all that matters to the system), but it is not a plurality of purely separate worlds, a series of doggedly impervious societies whose self-sufficiency we will celebrate if we are romantic localists or deplore if we are enthusiastic neoliberals. To counter the model of “them and us” with one that claims that “they are us” is not good enough: neither absolute binary distinctions nor essentialist identifications describe carefully enough the situation in which we are living. What we have instead are various kinds of boundary troubles that cannot be generalized into philosophical absolutes of any kind but that reveal, on close inspection of the empirical kind, that some work is to be done in understanding the different and critical imbalances of power that govern all postulates specifying identity and difference. There has been relatively little detailed attention to the record, to the “facts”: the work of Noam Chomsky stands as exemplary here even as it is almost completely ignored and unreproduced by the mainstream media in the United States.  

The reception of the Abu Ghraib photographs is the most recent reminder that there are no absolute boundaries between them and us, just as there are no simple identities: the culture of torture, as we shall see, is among the most empirical of all instances of the fragility and instability of imagined perimeters.

Taking time for the effort at an inquiry into the culture of commemoration in the light of theory makes the question of whether there is still time, whether it is too late. The resistance to complexity (or the invention of other distracting complexities) in the political and governing classes and all too often in the major media outlets supposed to be monitoring their behavior makes it unlikely that any such analysis will come from those quarters. They do not take time. But those who would do differently and better are also under pressure. The breakneck speed with which the tragic events of 9/11 have been cashed in for the pursuit of long-mediated military adventurisms and global realignments (intended or not) must make us wonder whether taking the time for sustained reflection is still worth doing. Scholarly time looks its best when there are no critical events going on around it: then it can reflect and project and even hope to appear prescient. When things speed up, we scholars run the risk of being left behind, assimilating yesterday’s news. Said’s Humanism and Democratic Criticism calls for “longer periods of reflection” than are provided by the “headline, sound-bite format” (73–74), but this is exactly the settled expectation that has been disrupted by 9/11 itself—for who knows when and if another attack will come—and even more so by the political-communicational hyperalertness disseminated worldwide by those who are using it for their various purposes. The importance of Derrida’s claim that we do not yet know what we are talking about should still be the operational faith of useful inquiry. We should remain committed, in the words of another commentator, to “untimely utterances and awkward silences.” To “examining what cannot or should not be said” and to “reflecting on the conditions of sayability and the unspeakable.” But will there be time? There is no answer to the question. One can only hope that keeping faith with the traditions of critical reflection might somehow matter to a world that can be better than the one we have now. Art Spiegelman, in one of the

most pertinent and provocative of all the responses to 9/11, puts it thus: “I still believe the world is ending, but I concede that it seems to be ending more slowly than I once thought... so I figured I’d make a book.” As I write, in the summer of 2005, novels, plays, and films that take 9/11 as their narrative occasion are beginning to appear; these are the products of a reflection that was not instant and at sound-bite speed. The critical products of scholarly time will also follow.

In the face of the wildly unexpected events of 9/11, it was the most familiar functions of disaster culture that were produced to assuage the popular concern, and to channel both its desire to lend a hand and its need for outrage. The massive response to the immediate Red Cross appeal for blood donations now looks like a communal urge to present the disaster as conventional, as open to the standard remedies, as belonging to a familiar genre of accidents wherein there are bodies for restoration, good deeds to be done. Less charitably, the audible relief at finding an enemy in the ranks of the Islamic other was a fallback to familiar demons for those who had failed to find that enemy in Oklahoma City and again later in the investigation of the anthrax scare. When the system is in shock, it is the familiar (both good and bad) that comes first to mind and first to hand.

Culture is about habit: that is its virtue as well as its limitation. Hegel (theorist extraordinaire) described “habit”—which, as Gewohnheit, assimilates itself to “dwelling” to wohnen—as at once freeing the soul from rational self-monitoring, leaving it open to being otherwise occupied and engaged with the new, while also committing it to a realm of unfreedom, to the uncritical replication of what has been given or handed down. He makes us ask whether we can have one without the other. Habit is a “being-at-home-with-oneself” that is foundational for our sanity, but it leaves us open to freedom only by marking us as already slaves of preformation.\footnote{G. W. F. Hegel, Philosophy of Mind, trans. William Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 139-47.} Culture too is a habit that gives us the self-identity to keep going and to invent new culture while always threatening to limit us to the pure replication of a previous or imaginary wholeness; this last is the mandate of the purely conservative. Habit has an exploratory and liberating function because it allows us to take for granted a state of affairs that we do not have to wrestle with or constantly re-create: this is the “distraction” (Zerstreung), the taking for granted or at best “casual noticing,” that Walter Benjamin hoped to see embodied in culture as the great hope of socialist cinema, art, and architecture.\footnote{Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 3: 1935–38, ed. Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 119–20.} But the life completely given over in the positive sense to casual notice or distraction would be the sign of an achieved utopia, one in which nothing new or challenging needed to come up, in which distribution had indeed undone excess and each would have enough, and no more. We are more familiar with the negative incarnation of distraction as the figure of ideology, which presents profound habit as an inertia open to exploitation, refurbishing our worst traditions as guides to the future.

The event we call 9/11 has a past that we can rediscover, a present that we must monitor, and a future we can project. Many of us who were addressing even the most circumscribed of publics—our students or fellow academics—felt the urge, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, to make a statement, to testify, to register a response, to initiate some sort of commemoration. Many of those responses took the form of grief, sorrow, shock, and above all, self-recrimination at the appearance of carrying on as before. The rhetoric veered wildly between sympathy and self-importance—as if it were a moral duty that each of us should speak—but what was notable was the need to register awareness of some sort. Many people all across America, not only those who knew one of the dead or knew someone who knew someone, reported feelings of acute personal anxiety and radical insecurity, but there was never a point at which this response could be analyzed as prior to or outside of its mediation by television and by political manipulation. With the passage of time it may come to appear that 9/11 did not blow away our past in an eruption of the unimaginable but that it refigured that past into patterns open to being made into new and often dangerous forms of sense. Take the date itself. There is now evidence that it was not selected with absolute foresight as both the national emergency telephone number (911) and the anniversary of various
momentous other events in the history of the West and its "others," but fastened on late in the planning process as the best conjunction of all sorts of pressures and conditions, some of them short term.14 But when we rediscover those events, the prospect of a certain paranoid coherence emerges: the assassination of Allende on September 11, 1973; the British Mandate in Palestine on September 11, 1922; the U.S. invasion of Honduras on September 11, 1919; and the defeat of the Ottoman armies before the gates of Vienna on September 11, 1683. If this is not metaphysical irony or the mark of some devilish and well-informed intelligence, then it is a sign that our culture is saturated with such coincidences, that almost any date would bring up other anniversaries, any of which could become significant in the light of a supervening event. Take September 10, the date of John Smith's assumption of the presidency of the Jamestown colony (1608), or of the beginning of the British economic boycott of Iran (1951). Or take September 12, the date of the first major U.S. offensive in Europe (1918), or of the defeat of Persia by Athens at the battle of Marathon (490 BCE), or of the birth of Richard Gatling, inventor of the Gatling gun (1818). These dates are not quite as redolent with significance as that of September 11, but they are not without significance. September 12 comes up on various Internet searches as the beginning of an era, the "September 12 era"; for one webmaster the date is the "ongoing reminder" of the "positive emotions" we are all deemed to have experienced. Fortuitously the FBI attack on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, took place on April 19, 1993—Patriots' Day. So too therefore it was on April 19, 1995, that Timothy McVeigh detonated his bomb in Oklahoma City.15

These are examples of how an event supposedly without precedent draws to itself a new history and projects a new future, a culture past, present, and to come. Some of these inventions are immediate, but they draw on traditional resources that are indispensable even as they are felt to be inadequate. As we ponder the appropriate means by which to commemorate and memorialize the dead, we are engaging with an element of culture that perhaps goes back to the proverbial dawn of civilization, if the ritualized burying of the dead is indeed to be imagined (as Vico imagined it) as that which makes humans something other than beasts. And as we witness the effort to rebuild at the purposively designated "Ground Zero" what has been brought down and listen to the arguments about it, we are participating in a process of seeking to harmonize the need for shelter and commemoration with the desire for display and political advantage that has governed all public and much other building since buildings came onto the human scene. The massive national debate about memory and memorialization in relation to history has the potential to reinvigorate a debate about these issues that previously had been focused on the Holocaust and had before 9/11 been widely felt to be approaching its exhaustion. Or perhaps the debate will fizzle and falter so that the final pieces of the site plan in New York will slip into place almost unnoticed beyond the parameters of Lower Manhattan. Pierre Nora's encyclopedic Realms of Memory set out to produce for modern France a site-based cultural record that was premised on the end of authentic memory, of a world in which "memory is a real part of everyday experience," and the onset of a society entirely driven by responding to the "thin film of current events."16 This elegiac paradigm pitted memory against history, the one sacred and the other critically demystifying. The "sites of memory" (lieux de mémoire) he records are themselves only vestiges of a lost integrity, the products of "a society fundamentally absorbed by its own transformation and renewal" (6). Nora's own gathering of critical instances is itself selective and can be read as a somewhat willful construction of accepted vestiges; it falls prey to the motivations of an inevitable

14. There is evidence that the attacks were postponed at least twice, with the hijackers finally buying tickets for September 11 only between August 25 and September 5. See The 9/11 Commission Report, official government ed., photographic reprint (Baton Rouge: Claitor Publishing, 2004), 248–53.
historiography. So too will the vestiges of 9/11, whatever they turn out to be.

The need and desire for critique therefore remains unembarrassed. The commemoration of 9/11, and 9/11's culture of commemoration, has both history and a future. The event has been and will be made to mark a new epoch, and as such it is already generating a mythology and a set of practices of its own. This process is not autonomous but, precisely, cultured, in the sense of cultivated, and monitored and produced with the specific possibilities of consumption in mind. The event known as 9/11 lives on as the emergency telephone number painted on the sides of thousands of police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances, a part of our communications rhetoric of which one suspects that some of the hijackers were quite aware, even if the choice of this date was for them a matter of chance. It remains an emergency condition, not just because of the disaster itself (already drummed into our visual imaginations as a flat-screen phenomenon that is repetitively seen while it cannot be "imagined") and its potential recurrence in some other American place (against which homeland security is trying to protect us), but as the available icon of a massive reorganization of the global political sphere on the principles of U.S. exceptionalism and unilateralism—a reorganization that is ongoing and widely held, elsewhere in the world, to be extremely dangerous. What the term 9/11 actually names, as Jacques Derrida was quick to point out in the weeks following the event, is critically unclear. Who first coined the phrase, and how did it spread so quickly across the airwaves and into the lexicon? We may never know the answer—things happened so fast, abbreviation seemed the only way to go. The figure 9/11 is not a place (although New York City plays that role in the national imaginary), nor yet even a time, since what is missing is the designation of the year, 2001. It will repeat itself every year, and it will remain an open designation, a communications channel for crisis, an emergency number. At one moment these numbers will be a sign of remembering the dead, at another the mandate for military adventurism, at yet another an architectural and civic opportunity. The slimmed-down economy of this signifier can draw to itself, with minimum resistance, almost anything that comes its way—and anything that is sent in its direction. The power of its manipulable iconicity is such that the Bush White House can repetitively at once affirm and deny that there is evidence linking Saddam Hussein to the attack on the World Trade Towers, even where there isn't any, confident that many Americans will continue to believe that such a connection exists, a view continually reinforced by images of falling towers and statements that the war in Iraq is about fighting "terrorism" in the open and in a contained place rather than having to respond to its sinister and untraceable penetration of the world system and of the homeland in particular. Alternatively, 9/11 is deployed in the telescoping of an entire worldwide threat syndrome into the living rooms of each and all of us. Army National Guard recruiting literature delivered to my high-school age daughter in April 2004 began with the headline "The Most Important Weapon in the War on Terrorism ... You."

In arguing that the culture of 9/11 has a longer history than many have supposed, even as we must recognize its disruptive forms, my inquiry takes very long views—of the culture of epitaphs, obituaries, and of the naming of the dead, of the building of the shelter and the monument—and relatively short views (though with long-term implications)—the framing of the dead, the war in Iraq, the rebuilding at "Ground Zero." Language itself is a major resource in the naming of what cannot be named, in the location of 9/11 within the longstanding rituals and short-term political strategies that it embodies and enables: so we have sacred ground, Ground Zero, the heroes of 9/11, the careening hyperbole that shifted from shock and awe to infinite justice to enduring freedom to the Freedom Tower itself. All of these terms, and others like them, have already been naturalized and pass by without question in the national media and the popular imagination. The normalization of these terms within the standard lexicon so that they can be repeated without question is precisely one of the most effective ways in which culture is remade. No responsible intellectual should fail to notice and respond to this process.

Much has already been written about 9/11 and its effects on political theory, foreign policy, and legal procedure.\(^\text{17}\) For some of the reasons I have already invoked, the consequences for culture are being assessed at a slower pace. A cynical observer might have predicted that the notoriously voracious apparatus of cultural studies or cultural

\(^{17}\text{See, for example, the bibliography given in Ignatieff, Lesser Evil, 171–72.}\)
criticism would have been as quick to respond to the disaster as were those rescue workers who answered the call on that terrible day. This has not happened, not yet. We have had lots of memoirs, documentary records, political and legal debates, but rather less in the way of cultural analysis. This is only just beginning; it takes time, as it is about time. It is not ready and waiting for modification and discussion, the way a constitution is, or a legal scenario. It is not printed up in summary form or contained in a series of precedents that can be readily accessed. It is, taken seriously, nothing less than everything, but we cannot talk about everything at once. The event of 9/11 has both reproduced and refuged culture, which means that it may take more time than usual to work out how and to what ends. One beginning can be made by attending to the culture of commemoration.

In chapter 1, “Remembering the Dead,” I place the modes of remembrance that sprang up in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 into a tradition of mourning and commemoration that both gives life to and contrasts with what happened in the last months of 2001 in America. The convergence of the dissemination of the New York Times’s hugely popular “Portraits of Grief” series with a truncated and complicated mourning process (few bodies or body parts, an immediately politicized rhetoric of remembrance) produced a symptomatically resonant kind of obituary that deserves close attention. If the burial of the dead is indeed a foundational ritual in human cultures, then 9/11 has taken that ritual in new directions. Chapter 2, “The Tower and the Memorial,” takes up the debates around and prospects for a new architectural configuration at Ground Zero, one that is torn between tragedy and triumphalism, between remembering the dead and celebrating the political credo of the American way of life. The seemingly now-accepted hyperbole of the Freedom Tower looks set to coexist with the darker subterranean environment of the memorial in a juxtaposition that registers a more general uncertainty about what 9/11 means and for whom it means. In chapter 3, “Framing the Dead,” I discuss the aftermath of the culture of mourning in the treatment of the American and other dead in Iraq and in the controversy generated by the circulation of the photographs of the torture in Abu Ghraib prison. In the complex responses to these images I see small signs of hope for a recognition of the boundary problems not yet circumscribed by the traditional languages of outrage and defense. Then, in chapter 4, “Theory in the Time of Death,” I seek to develop these possibilities by way of some of the insights of theory, that conventionally marginalized foreign body, for an understanding of the systematic and historical-empirical situation in which we find ourselves needing to know once again but perhaps for the first time after 9/11. The power of theory is often held to be that it does not obsess over empirical or particular details, aiming instead at some level of abstraction and systematic analysis; that power can only be enhanced when its findings are seen to be in line with so many of the empirical and particular events that have come into focus after and around 9/11. Rhetorically I must here take the risk of being seen to exploit 9/11 as an opportune occasion for a defense of theory. Substantially I hope to persuade any skeptical readers that theory is not the “other” that requires such a defense, but a genre of inquiry and explanation that we, given our relatively shrunken and increasingly shrinking lexical reserve, would be well advised to sustain. Those who do not need to be convinced of this will I hope still find some value in a demonstration of just how pertinent the power of theory is to an urgent world situation. The crazy foreign cousins whose languages we never quite deciphered, whose names are Baudrillard, Derrida, Žižek, and Agamben among others, have come back home and have something to say that is worth hearing.

The World Trade Towers never did fully belong to the world in their empirical life; it is our job to try to supplement that name and claim in their afterlife. Or, in the words of the most striking of all the commemorative messages I have seen or heard of painted on the walls and pillars around the World Trade Center site: “This is history—don’t make it mystery.” Right next to it is another message: “To all who fought for our country: we will survive, always, God bless us forever.” Then, elsewhere, there is another: “Kill all Muslims.” These three slogans embody ideology, its critique, and a vicious if predictable racism. They exist (or existed) among many
others, sitting side by side on concrete columns next to the World Trade Center site. The violence of the contradictions might disturb us but should also give us some hope for a less mystified future: there is a lot to be worked through. I end this book with a discussion of Muslims, though not the ones meant by the author of the third message. Even this language, believe it or not, is not devoid of a productive complexity.

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Remembering the Dead
An Essay upon Epitaphs

Portraits of Grief

Among the many things that changed after September 11, 2001, was the policy on obituaries in the New York Times. For weeks after the attack on the World Trade Towers the newspaper printed fifteen or so brief remembrances a day of some of the almost three thousand people who died in the towers, in the airplanes, and during the rescue efforts. The leaders of corporations, entertainers, politicians, and other more or less public figures whose place in the world would have ordinarily assured them a place on the standard obituary page continued to appear there. The additional full pages of photographs and memorials were for the ordinary people, the firefighters, window washers, janitors, and waiters whose lives and deaths would normally have gone unrecorded by the most widely circulated newspaper in the United States, the newspaper of record for much of the nation. Here they were arrayed alongside the company executives and corporate leaders who also died on September 11; all were accorded the same size photograph and the same number of column inches. The Times was declaring itself at this most tragic time as a paper for all New Yorkers and all Americans and attempting to pay proper homage to the ubiquity of death and the mournful democracy of grief. A parallel series of memorials to those killed in the attack on the Pentagon also appeared in the same newspaper, part of the separate section devoted day after day to the events of September 11 and their ongoing consequences.