Why America Needs the Buried Stories of 9/11

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In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2006, thousands of Americans across the country were assaulted on city streets by fellow Americans. Grief had regressed into fear, and fear into violence against anyone "Arab-looking" – Sikhs who wore turbans were immediate targets. Within the first week, there were at least one thousand reported hate incidents: temples were burned, homes vandalized, people threatened, shot, stabbed.[i] On September 15, 2001, a Sikh man was shot and killed in Mesa, Arizona, the first of an estimated nineteen "retribution" murders in the year that followed.[ii]

Five years after 9/11, discrimination against Sikh, Muslim, Arab, and South Asian American communities is ongoing. While the number of reported "anti-Muslim" hate crimes fell in the initial weeks after the 2001 attacks, subtle forms of discrimination against those who are seen as Arabs, Muslims, foreigners, or immigrants have become part of American culture, including stares in the subway, extra searches in the airport, verbal taunts hurled from across the street, denial of jobs, hate speech on television and radio, harassment at school, and other assaults that don't count as crimes and therefore are never reported or documented. The violence becomes more extreme during critical moments in the war on terror, especially in Iraq, and in the aftermath of new terrorist attacks, such as the bombings in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005.[iii] These new waves of "backlash" continue to go underreported in the mainstream media which keeps its focus on the war on terror abroad. At the same time, government policies and programs intended to protect national security have consistently forced people from these communities into the new racial category "Muslim or Arab." Their particular stories masked by this new category, people have been detained, deported, and denied basic civil and human rights in the name of national security without significant protest by the mainstream public.[iv]

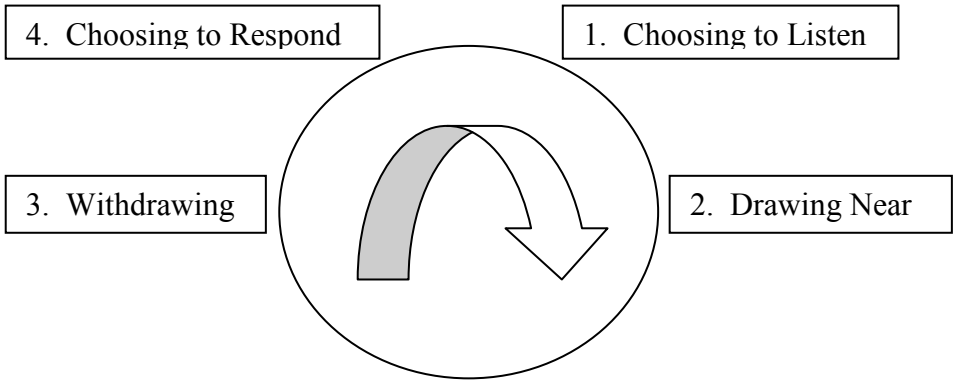
Although entire communities have been profiled and targeted both by individuals and the state, these stories from the aftermath of 9/11 have remained buried in mainstream American consciousness. Whenever post-9/11 hate crimes have been reported in the media, they are represented as isolated incidents in an otherwise united nation. The full scope of experiences– the extent of emotional damage, the deep-seated fear, the lost sense of belonging – would challenge the dominant narrative about a nation

that stands united in times of crisis. In philosopher Hannah Arendt's terms, this violence has stripped entire communities of agency and kept them down in the private realm, unable to submit their stories to the national public.

Why does American need these buried stories? A public recognition of these stories can act as *redemption* for the victims as well as a means to *transgress* and *transform* the norm for who counts as "American" in our current cultural imagination. For Arendt, storytelling bridges the private and public realms. As redemption, the act of telling stories can bring people out of the 'private' realm, where they are invisible and dead to the social world, into the 'public' realm, where they are recognized and participate in the social world. As a means for transformation, this participation can expand the 'we' in public opinion. Since every American has a stake in the question of who counts as "one of us," holding up these stories in the light is necessary for a national debate about who we are and who we want to be.

How do we approach such stories? I propose an ethical model for storytelling that unlocks this potential for redemption, transgression, and transformation (Figure One). There are four moments in my model: choosing to listen, drawing close to the storyteller's mouth, withdrawing so to return to one's own concepts, and finally responding. I will move through these four moments by referencing my own journey as a filmmaker making a documentary on post-9/11 discrimination and violence *Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath*[v] and the imagined journey of an audience of my film.

Figure One: An Ethical Model for Storytelling



The First Moment: Choosing to Listen

In the first moment, we must make ourselves vulnerable to the story. This is not the traditional approach. When psychiatrists, ethnographers, police officers, and other authorities invested in the business of aftermath arrive at the scene of violence, they typically approach the victim with their own checklist of violations each corresponding to a predetermined response. The psychiatrist listens for symptoms of a known illness, the ethnographer for academic categories, the police officer for evidence of given crimes. These authorities listen to the storyteller only insofar as their suffering matches their own framework for what counts as suffering. The storyteller has no power to change that framework but rather must be turned into a category, symbol, or statistic to be processed and treated.

In the aftermath of 9/11, first responders to hate violence were police officers who listened to stories of victims and reported them to the FBI only if they fit the predetermined definition of "hate crime," which requires witness testimony to confirm that hate was part of the motive. The victims had no agency to contest the category of "hate crime" or create a new category that would recognize their experiences. Consequently, the FBI reported only a fraction of the abuses documented by local civil rights organizations, and the problem of post-9/11 discrimination was then underreported in the media. [vi]

When I traveled across the country in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, I consciously rejected the traditional approach that would have required me to impose my own format as a documentarian on the victims. I had to put my preconceived concepts of suffering and the requirements of format aside in order to draw near to the stories. I had to make myself vulnerable to these stories, knowing that they would then have the power to change me. In the same way, the film I produced five years later asks its audiences to take a similar risk and draw near its stories, with the chance that they might also be changed.

The Second Moment: Drawing Near and the Possibility of Redemption

In the second moment, the listener must move close to the storyteller's mouth, listening for what is at stake for that particular person in their particular situation. The listener must make a conscious decision to set aside her own preconceptions in order to draw near. One can never abandon them completely, but to be aware of our prejudices (in the Gadamarian sense) is to loosen their hold on us. We must replace our assumptions with the question: "What is at stake?"[vii]

On the road after 9/11, I wanted to find and document evidence of hate violence to "prove" my thesis that these communities were indeed in danger, but soon I found myself listening to what was at stake for these men and women and their families. They spent less time describing the actual details of violence and more time contemplating a lost sense of "home." In the aftermath of extreme or subtle acts of violence, they began to see themselves in the eyes of others who saw them as alien, suspect, laughable, not-American, not-fully human. The gap between how others saw them and how they saw themselves was oftentimes unbearable, expressed in repeated phrases: "We're American too." Their stories as presented in the film also ask audiences to discover what is at stake for them: a "home" where one belongs, where one may live freely without fear.

In this moment of drawing-near and listening to a story on the other's terms, there is the possibility of redemption. While trauma therapists have long shared an assumption that the one who has suffered must tell a story about their suffering, in whatever form, as part of their healing process, Arendt places this human need for storytelling into a framework: a "life without speech and without action… is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men."[viii] For Arendt, storytelling is an act of redemption for a viable life. If violence strips us of our agency and turns us into mere objects unable to speak about our suffering, then the act of telling a story about what happened restores our agency and returns us to a social world where others recognize our suffering and where we can bring our experiences to bear on greater social structures. Storytelling has become a matter of life and death for entire American populations after 9/11, because as Arendt describes, without recognition of their suffering, people live a sort of social death: their humanity is constantly denied.

While my interaction with the individuals I interviewed may have been part of the healing process for some of them, redemption for whole communities who have suffered violence after 9/11 would require the larger public to "draw near" and acknowledge their stories in mainstream consciousness. Recognition on a national-scale through mainstream media is the only means of recovering the sense of "home" for these alienated populations. A concerted public apology would involve lifting the cages of categories and redeeming the suffering of these people as fellow Americans. Films like *Divided We Fall* are meant to be part of that process, aimed at the possibility of redemption.

The Third Moment: Withdrawing and the Possibility of Transgression

After drawing near to the story, we must withdraw, re-turning to our previous conceptions and whether they have been transgressed or undone by the story. This moment of withdrawal is the third moment, when we take stalk of how the story bears upon our larger understanding. In my work as a filmmaker, I literally withdrew into the academy and the editing room after my fieldwork, integrating the stories into a new framework that had already been changed and expanded by them. The audiences of the film must also re-turn to their own thoughts after the film is over and perhaps assess how their own norms have been changed.

While drawing near to their stories may be redemptive for those who endure post-9/11 discrimination, the moment of withdrawal can allow the stories to transgress and ultimately transform the social norms in the imagination of the listeners. Why be concerned with imagination? "Acts of violence are usually nurtured, contemplated, and morally justified in the individual or collective imagination long before they find outward expression," explains anthropologist Michael Jackson.[ix] While only a handful of people appear to be responsible for the most egregious hate crimes committed in response to 9/11, ongoing forms of discrimination on government and social levels are sustained by social norms in the nation's imagination.

In the hours and days that followed the terrorist attacks, the face of the enemy was held up to the nation – brown-skinned Al-Qaeda terrorists and their leader a turbaned

Osama bin Laden. Since the nation's imagination already associated turbans and even brown skin with foreigners, immigrants, and outsiders rather than full Americans long before 9/11, these traits immediately came to represent "the enemy." Americans who shared these traits were automatically suspect, especially turbaned Sikhs, who activated the picture of the enemy embedded in the national psyche, whether or not it was expressed in outward discrimination. The man who killed Balbir Singh Sodhi in the nation's first post-9/11 hate crime did not act in a vacuum but carried out the last moment in a national imagination that constructed "the enemy" as turbaned, bearded, and brown-skinned. Targeted hate violence against Sikh Americans – who do not share the religion or nationality of the terrorists – shows how visual traits alone are potent signals for who counts as "one of us" in the cultural imagination. [x]

While collecting interviews in Washington, DC in December 2001, a passer-by in Union Station said to my cameraman: "Go back to your country." When my cameraman, a turbaned Sikh, asked him what he meant, Daniel Pierce flatly replied, "Americans don't wear turbans."[xi] Daniel Pierce was invoking what has become a popular social norm in post-9/11 America: "The turbaned is not American."[xii] The contemporary norm for 'the American' is restricted to particular races and religions so that no turbaned man could qualify as American or expect to be seen as American. His sentiments joined those of more prominent individuals, such as U.S. Senator Cooksey who stated shortly after 9/11 that "anyone wearing a diaper on his head" should be interrogated.[xiii]

The social norm for who counts as "American" is crafted in time. Who we count as "American" extends into who we count as "human" in America, whose lives matter and whose bodies deserve full rights, respect, and dignity.[xiv] This category of who counts as "one of us" has changed over the course of American history and it will continue to change. From the struggles of Native Americans at the founding of the nation to Black Americans fighting the bonds of slavery and their effects, to immigrants from Europe and Latin America mobilizing for equal treatment, to Asian Americans winning the right to become citizens, the norm of the American has been a contested category through time. While laws have expanded to recognize more and more groups as fully human, it takes longer to expand the "we" in public opinion, and oftentimes radical events like 9/11 constrict the boundaries. After 9/11, people like Frank Roque, the one who murdered

Balbir Sodhi, claimed to act on behalf of all patriotic Americans; his violence proceeded from the anxious and rigid belief that his world would be radically threatened if Sodhi was permitted to live in his neighborhood. This violence is committed to undo the possibility of "the American," to render it unreal and impossible.[xv]

The stories in the film present a counter force: they work to expand the possibilities of who counts as American. The film presents many different faces and voices claiming America as their home and describing the violence that have endured to make it their home. Their stories transgress "the turbaned is not American" norm. Perhaps audiences notice this transgression upon withdrawing from the film and re-turning to their own imagination: this awareness of transgression is the first step to transformation.

The Fourth Moment: Responding and the Possibility of Transformation

In the last moment, after turning to hear another's story and then re-turning to oneself, one is asked to respond. This response may take any number of forms. For me, I completed a five-year cycle of drawing near, withdrawing from, and responding to the stories I heard on the road by producing a documentary film on the subject. As a person committed to re-telling other peoples' stories, I had to be responsible to what is 'at stake' for the people who entrusted me with their stories as well as what is 'at stake' for my audiences: I had to retell these stories of violence accurately while putting them into a larger narrative examining who counts as American, a question that concerns nearly all American audiences. Now that the film is in the public world, it will invite its audiences into the cycle of drawing near, withdrawing, and responding – even if the response is to tell another story. The cycles are endless. This is how stories implicated in the web of relations have the power to transform the social norms they transgress.

In this last moment, to arrive at a response, listeners must choose to embrace the story and let them transform their norms and resist the impulse to ignore the story and keep their norms safe. For audiences of the film, the norm for who counts as "American" may be expanded and transformed so that all differences in religion, race, gender, orientation, and appearance are recognized and even celebrated as part of the American

mosaic. If embraced, stories can break the spell of the categories that mask people, and bring the full complexity of individual experiences into national discourse. The stories of Sikh Americans in particular provide the ground for a pluralistic society in which visual differences such as the turban and beard are immediately registered as American, even during times of crisis, especially since Sikh religious articles are chosen and meant to be recognized. This transformation of norms may ultimately expand the "we" in public opinion and pressure legal and political institutions to respond to the demand for justice as ordered in these stories.

America needs the buried stories of 9/11, because they will free us from past injustices and may even propel us toward a more perfect union.

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[i] Ahmad, Muneer. "Rage Shared By Law: Post-September 11 Racial Violence as Crimes of Passion." California Law Review. October 2004. Sources include: Asian Am. Legal Defense & Educ. Fund, World Trade Center and Pentagon Attacks: The Anti-Asian American Backlash (2002), available at http://www.aaldef.org/images/101101list.pdf (as of Apr. 11, 2004) [hereinafter AALDEF, World Trade Center]; S. Asian Am. Leaders of Tomorrow, American Backlash: Terrorists Bring War Home in More Ways Than One (2001), available at http://www.saalt.org/biasreport.pdf (as of Apr. 11, 2004) (documenting 645 bias incidents occurring within just six days of September 11). Additional information on the history and continuing reports of bias incidents is available on the website of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, at http://www.cair-net.org (as of Apr. 11, 2004). As more time has passed, the physical nature of the bias has subsided, but has come to take new forms. In particular, reports of housing and employment discrimination against Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians have increased significantly. See Am.-Arab Anti-Discrimination Comm., Report on Hate Crimes and Discrimination Against Arab Americans: The Post-September 11 Backlash 92-103, 105-16, 120-31 (2003), available at http://www.adc.org/hatecrimes/pdf/2003_report_web.pdf (as of Apr. 12, 2004) [hereinafter ADC Report] (describing specific accounts of discrimination in employment, educational institutions, and the media); Lawyers Comm. for Human Rights, A Year of Loss: Reexamining Civil Liberties Since September 11 (2002); Nat'l Asian Pac. Am. Legal Consortium, Backlash: When America Turned on its Own, A Preliminary Report to the 2001 Audit of Violence Against Asian Pacific Americans (2002) [hereinafter NAPALC, Backlash], available at http://www.napalc.org/literature/annual_report/9-11&2000_download.htm (as of Apr. 11, 2004).

[ii] *ibid.*

[iii] The Council on American-Islamic Relations reports that anti-Muslim acts increased by 70% in 2003 (compared with 2002). See: Council on American-Islamic Relations, Unpatriotic Acts: The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the United States 2004, available at http://www.cair-net.org/asp/execsum2004.asp

[iv] Such government programs under the Bush administration include Special Registration, the Alien Absconder Initiative, and security measures permitted in the USA PATRIOT Act.

[v] See the official film site: www.dwf-film.com

[vi] The number of reported "anti-Islamic" crimes to the FBI increased from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001, which represents an increase of over 1600%, while local civil rights organizations cited in *endnote i* report greater numbers, including over one thousand hate incidents within the first week of 9/11. See: Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Hate Crime Statistics 2001*. http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/01hate.pdf.

[vii] The framing question "what's at stake" is taken from: Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman. "Suffering and its Professional Transformation." *Things as They Are.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. Page 167-189.

[viii] Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958. Chapter Five.
[ix] Jackson, Michael. *The Politics of Storytelling*. University of Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanam Press, 2002.
[x] In a recent Harvard study, eighty-three percent of Sikhs interviewed experienced or knew someone who experienced hate crimes or incidents in the aftermath of 9/11, as opposed to a minority of Muslims and Hindus interviewed. See: June Han. "We are American Too: A Comparative Study on the Effects of 9/11 on South Asian Communities." The Discrimination and National Security Initiative. September 2006.
[xi] Kaur, Valarie. "Targeting the Turban: Sikh Americans after September 11." Interview with Daniel Joseph Pierce. Stanford University. June 2003.
[xii] An variation of Franz Fanon's statement "the black is not a man." See: Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove, 1967. Reprint of *Peau noire, masques blancs.* Paris, 1952.
[xiii] "If I see someone comes in that's got a diaper on his head and a fan belt wrapped around the diaper on his head, that guy needs to be pulled over," Senator John Cooksey said during an interview with Louisiana Radio Network. See: Joan McKinney. "Cooksey: Expect Racial Profiling." Advocate Washington Bureau. September 20, 2001.
[xiv] A variation of Judith Butler's category of the "human" crafted in time: Judith Butler. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Pages 17-35.
[xv] *ibid.*