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## Narrating September 11: Race, Gender, and the Play of Cultural Identities

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### Abstract

This article considers the September 11 tragedy as an event that has created a powerful experience—an astonishing and unthinkable “breach” from the expected and routine—that has riveted the American public and provoked personal storytelling. September 11 and its aftermath have provided an occasion for rethinking and reworking cultural identity. We explore how September 11 and subsequent events have been experienced, constructed, and narrated by African American women, primarily from working-class and low-income backgrounds. These stories, and the commentaries and discussions that surround them, provide vehicles for these women to ponder what sort of social contexts they inhabit, within what sort of subject positions they are placed, and how these may be shifting in light of the attacks and America's “War on Terrorism.”

### Keywords

African American; narrative; gender; cultural identity

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But the morning it happened—I have a really old car, and I turned on the radio because I wanted to know what time it is and I don't wear a watch—and I'm hearing, the World Trade Center, the planes. I'm like, “Oh, my God!” And I'm driving, just freaking out, and I'm talking to my children. “You just won't believe what just happened,” I'm telling my six year old. “You won't believe it. This is nuts. This is unprecedented. Ooh, oh my God!” So then I'm like, “New York City, oh my God!” My father died a year ago. I have three half sisters, and they all live in New York City. One lives in Manhattan, New Jersey, Harlem. OK, I'm just like, “Oh, what does it mean for my family?” I have two brothers. One is in Japan, and one is here [both in the military]. So I get to school, and turn my television on, and I'm just like, I have to see. When I see the visual, it just brings it home. I'm like, “Oh, this is off the hook to me.” And I'm standing there, and my coworker shows up, and she goes, “Why are you here?” She comes in at 8:30. And I go, “I don't know. What is this? Is this war right here?”

—Darlene, September 21, 2001

This story, told to us by an African American woman in Los Angeles a few days after the September 11 events, echoes those narrated by Americans across the country. This article considers the September 11 tragedy as an astonishing and unthinkable breach that has riveted the American public and provoked personal storytelling. In public discourse and for many Americans personally, it has split time into a “before” and “after.” This is a defining quality of any event that attains the status of what some German hermeneutic phenomenologists speak of as *erlebnis* (Dilthey 1989; Gadamer 1975:58), experience that emerges as a time apart. A significant experience stands out as a singular event; it may recall other moments, but it has a vividness that imbues it with historical particularity. The impossible path of the two planes and the pictures of those melting towers, shown again and again, created a horrifying instance of time lifted out of the ordinary stream of things, time set against the routine and expected, so that it achieves its own dramatic shape, its own singular form with beginning, middle, and end (for anthropological discussions of experience that follow this philosophical tradition, see Mattingly 1994, 1998a, 2000; Myerhoff 1986; Turner 1986a, 1986b). Such times are eminently worthy of a story. They insist on narration.

We explore the way September 11 and its aftermath have been experienced, constructed, and narrated by one group of Americans. The interpretive community we consider is made up of Los Angeles-dwelling African Americans, all women, primarily from working-class and low-income backgrounds. Their personal stories of the September 11 attacks and subsequent violent acts reveal complex, ongoing efforts to come to terms with this tragedy. These stories, and the commentaries and discussions that surround them, provide vehicles for these women to ponder what sort of social contexts they inhabit, within what sort of subject positions they are placed, and how these may be shifting in light of the attacks and America’s “War on Terrorism.” How has September 11 become “an experience” within this community? How have individuals variously interpreted it, remembered it? How do their stories cohere with, and differ from, the “public stories” told by the national media? How do their stories coincide with, and diverge from, one another? This article considers the relationship among these events, the stories told about them, and the ongoing construction of personal and collective identities.

If stories are useful for exploring the meaning of September 11, the reverse is also true. September 11 offers a place in which to examine the *cultural work of stories*. This media-portrayed event has triggered impassioned responses around the country, and it has also compelled the negotiation of identity as an American. Thus, another primary question asked in this article is this: What do we learn about personal stories themselves, as simultaneously individual and collective, by examining intimate, emotion-filled narratives told about the most publicly shared national event of the last half century? How, then, does September 11 provide a powerful occasion—cultural material—for exploring the way personal stories are used to construct meaning? Three key features of personal stories are considered here: first, the way that stories portray life in the breach; second, how stories operate within a double landscape, a landscape of observable “public” acts and an internal psychic plane of beliefs, feelings, and emotions; and, third, the way stories construct and reflect on multiple positionalities that can allow for subtle moral readings of situations, actions, and individuals. Stories offer accounts in which there are multiple actors, often occupying multiple subject positions. In the stories we examine, these are based (though not exclusively) on race, gender, class, and the more specific stance of mother.

## Personal Storytelling in One Interpretive Community

It was Friday morning, less than two weeks after the September 11 attacks, and we were gathered in our usual room at the house on Hoover Street in South-Central Los Angeles.

There were about 12 of us in all; this was one of our Collective Narrative Groups. Some of us were research staff (anthropologists and occupational therapists); others were parents or grandparents of children with severe and chronic medical conditions. Two of us (Mary Lawlor and Cheryl Mattingly) began these groups in 1997 as part of a federally funded research study of African American families caring for children with serious illnesses, disabilities, and special health needs.<sup>1</sup> Lanita Jacobs-Huey joined the project early in 2001. When we initiated the groups, in accordance with our “minimal interference” ethnographic approach, we decided to let the meetings unfold with little guidance from us. We asked people to come together to tell their stories about their experiences with their children and with health care professionals or about anything else that was important in their lives at the moment. We told them that we wanted to learn from them and that our main rules were to try to suspend judgment of one another, to listen well, and to make it a safe place to share emotions. In this article, we draw primarily from discussions and stories told in two of these group meetings, though these are supplemented by data gathered from individual interviews.

In examining how any particular group of Americans has experienced September 11 and subsequent events, one is confronted with the issue of how to speak of collectivities while at the same time noting the diversity of perspectives. “What are the conditions,” the culture theorist Lawrence Grossberg asks, “through which people can belong to a common collective without becoming representations of a single definition?” (1996:88). What, especially, are the ways that we, as researchers, can portray others as members of a common collective but also as irreducible to mere “representations”? The fundamental task in speaking of any community is to portray identities in nonessentialist ways, to reveal them as always incomplete, in process, multiple. We have drawn on the felicitous term *interpretive community* (Fish 1989) to describe the families in this research study and, more specifically, those who spoke to us about the September 11 events. Such a term fits their own self-identifications—they often characterized themselves as a “we.” Demographically speaking, this makes some sense. They were all African American women, all dealing with the constant pressure of economic issues; almost all the women were single mothers or grandmothers, and most were raising a number of young children, including at least one with a serious illness or disability. Almost all were embedded in extended family relationships that played an extremely central role in their lives, and many were estranged from the fathers of their children. They were overwhelmingly Christian, and, for many, church communities were nearly as important as family affiliations. That said, there were also differences that make a difference. Some had stable jobs, had a certain amount of college education, and drew effortlessly on white, middle-class speech patterns when needed. Others had been homeless in the recent past, had lived on the streets while on drugs, or self-identified, especially in moments of anger or sardonic humor, as “ghetto.”

But these sociocultural markers are also deceiving, easily glossing the complexities and especially the *shifting nature* and hybridity of cultural identities. When studying a group that is consistently stereotyped in both popular representations and scholarly work, it is important to recognize diversity as well as commonality. For, as Stephen Gregory writes, “despite the perfunctory gestures that many have made to the diversity of black urban life, this socioeconomic, political, and cultural complexity has remained largely invisible” (1998:9). Cultural identity, anthropologists and culture theorists have argued, is not an expression of common origin or shared characteristics but, rather, an ongoing process (Appadurai 1996; Bhabha 1994). Stuart Hall asserts that while the process of identification operates within structural conditions that provide material and symbolic resources, identification is “lodged in contingency” (1996:3). Turning to the subject of this article, how

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<sup>1</sup>For more elaborate discussions of the research project and design, see Lawlor and Mattingly 2001 and Mattingly and Lawlor 2000, 2001.

have September 11 and its aftermath provided an occasion, a “contingency, that has provoked the rethinking and reworking of cultural identity? How—and why—do stories allow us special access to the complexities of this rethinking and reworking?”

## Personal Stories as Interpretive Practices

Stories are highly agentive speech acts that occur in specific contexts and are co-constructed by speakers and their audiences (see, for example, Bauman 1986; Duranti and Goodwin 1992).<sup>2</sup> Through storytelling, speakers represent and remember past events and offer moral vantage points on them (Briggs 1996; Bruner 1984; Labov and Waletzky 1967). Stories may seem to be “about” the past, but they have implications for how one should act on or interpret immediate and future events (Mattingly 1998b; Ochs and Capps 2000). Like other actions, storytelling occurs in particular contexts, and the context of telling also influences the meaning for narrator and audience. To ferret out the meaning of September 11, and its aftermath for a particular interpretive community, we necessarily examine the multiple contextual dimensions of stories and the way stories act to constitute contexts for identity creation and community building among the African American women in our study. Broadly speaking, these dimensions of context include not only the larger sociopolitical climate wrought by the events of September 11, but also the women's preexisting social realities as black working-class women and mothers trying, amid other daily stressors, to raise children with serious illnesses or disabilities.

Personal stories allow us to attend to the collective *and* the personal, the intersubjective and the individual (Garro and Mattingly 2000; Ochs and Capps 1996). A story portrays events as experienced by someone situated in a particular time and place and from a particular social location. Both *the form and the content of narrative* reveal its collective underpinnings, the cultural resources from which it necessarily draws. A speaker's cultural location and membership also shape the range of story genres and character types from which the narrator can draw in framing a story that succeeds with an audience—one that is morally persuasive or even tellable. In these ways, stories point us to, and depend on, a space of shared meanings. They also help to reinforce or, occasionally, modify those shared meanings in light of new circumstances. Stories can index shared ideological stances, as well as mark difference among speakers, including those who may share similar positions by virtue of race, class, and gender (Jacobs-Huey 2001).

### The Breach

Stories implicitly, or with great explicit care, offer accounts of singular moments set against a backdrop of “the usual,” “generally,” “most days,” and other clear markers of the cultural scripts that govern ordinary social life (Bruner 1990). Considering that the normal and expected are always socially governed, it follows that accounts of times when the expected is flouted, or when things somehow go awry, rely on a shared understanding (between narrator and audience) of what the normal and expected look like. Recognizing singularity depends on recognizing normalcy: A narrative moment is marked precisely by its divergence from the usual, those situations in which actors do not carry out their expected tasks and roles or circumstances do not go as they ought. Cultural life is most obvious in the breach.

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<sup>2</sup>Anthropologists have written extensively about narrative, building on widely diverse analytic traditions drawn from linguistics, psychology, literary theory, semiotics, sociology, philosophical hermeneutics, and history as well as those developed within anthropology. Rather than offer an exhaustive reference list, the works cited here are selected because they offer extensive and careful overview discussions of narrative theories that have figured centrally in anthropology, or because they are particularly pertinent to the article's arguments.

## The Double Landscape

Narrative is a discourse that operates on a *double landscape*, an external plane of observable deeds, what we might think of as public events, and an internal plane of thoughts and emotions (for an excellent discussion of this, see Bruner 1986). This formal feature is key in providing narratives the capacity to simultaneously reveal and interpret public and collective events and investigate a highly subjective world of individual experience. Stories (those that purport to be true) draw on and recount events that happen in social spaces; they largely concern interactions in social worlds where there are witnesses as well as multiple actors. Personal stories draw on “facts, that is, what is intersubjectively taken to be true: There were, or were not, two planes that hit the World Trade Center. However, the facts that make up a story are complicated, rendered personal, because in story time there are two planes crashing into two New York buildings *as experienced by someone*, a television viewer in Los Angeles, for instance. These “facts, that is, these intersubjective objects, have their meaningful place within a personal story world that reinscribes them as elements within inner landscapes of thought and feeling.

Stories have formal properties that facilitate this “double vision” in which the audience is offered a simultaneous vantage point onto a public world of (more or less) shared meanings and an intimate world of personal meanings. The process of narration not only shifts sensations into language, but also turns public events into personal reflections on one's experience in time and place, such as where one was when one “heard the news” (Pillemer 1998:34). Stories accomplish this through numerous devices: the cadence with which a story is told; the way words are underscored; the significant pause; the foreshadowing of future events through the sequencing and selection of how “the facts” are reported; the flash of images, which may seem to be just so many facts but turn out to hold shadowy meanings that crystallize at a later narrative moment; and the strategic withholding of a key fact in order to build suspense. Such devices not only allow us to glimpse what is happening inside the characters as the story unfolds, but they also direct our attention and our own judgments—they offer us a point of view on the events recounted. If we are caught up in the story, we will not only discover how story characters feel, we will feel along with some of them, fearful at a dangerous moment, relieved at a narrow escape. We will come to identify with a point of view guided by the narrator, one that may even develop and shift as the story unfolds (Iser 1978). These narrative strategies bring us into the world of the main characters and make the narrated events matter to us, make them “at stake” for us.

## Multiple Positionalities

Narratives can call on an array of devices through which to *display multiple perspectives and social locations*. Storytelling, as a discursive practice, tells us much about a person's membership within key social spaces (for instance, American, female, black, Christian, mother, underclass, Los Angelino). It also provides a social commentary on a range of possible social positions. And, because any cultural identity is framed against oppositional, outsider categories (Bhabha 1994; Fanon 1991; Hall and Du Gay 1996), stories necessarily assert something about who the narrator is not.

Complex personal narratives do more than represent different personal points of view. They also display multiple cultural discourses, what Bakhtin describes as “a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems” (1981:288). Bakhtin's discussion of “heteroglossia” is especially useful in examining how these women's stories create a powerful moral position while at the same time drawing on and displaying other positions and other discourses. Personal stories can be masterful at displaying and juxtaposing these multiple languages, which point toward different “verbal ideologues” and “belief systems.” In narrative, belief systems are not presented abstractly but, rather, are

“personified, incarnated in individual human figures, with disagreements and oppositions individualized” (Bakhtin 1981:326).

## From Breach to “More of the Same”: How an American Story Becomes an African American Woman's Story

When the women in the Collective Narrative Groups told stories about their memories of September 11, most began by highlighting their discovery that what they had mistakenly thought was just another day was a day like no other. Their stories of that first moment of discovery mark, in no uncertain terms, that September 11 constituted a breach of everyday life. Much of the action takes place inside the psychic worlds of the characters. This can be seen in Moira's story, given below. Moira's gradual discovery of something very wrong is recounted through an interplay of external dialogue (what she and her daughters say to one another) and internal dialogue (what she privately says to herself) as her awareness of events unfolds:

I always turn the news on, and I'm not never watching it, I'm just hearing it. Really, I'm listening for the weather, OK? And I remember that being on there [the first plane crashing] and not even associating it as being live. You know, I walked by, “C'mon girls. We gotta get up,” or whatever. I come back, and I'm doing what I'm doing, got out of the shower, and it's still there. “Oh. OK.” And then, when I seen the second plane hit, that made me stop for a second. Though, not like “Wow!” but it made me stop. “Oh. OK, what's going on?” And then, that's when it sunk in that what was going on was actually happening in present time. And for some reason, once that hit, I was paralyzed. I didn't want to leave the television, although my younger children had no idea what was going on. And they're ready to, generally it's me going, “C'mon girls, I've got to comb your hair” and all that. They're knocking at the door going, “Mom, you've got to comb our hair. We're ready.” I did manage to break away long enough to do their hair and walk them to day care.

Moira supplied several linguistic markers that cued her audience about the usual morning routine in her home. In this way, she was able to emphasize what kind of breach this was in her life. The household script is abruptly interrupted. The shift from ordinary to extraordinary time, “an experience,” is marked on both narrative planes. The temporality that guides the recounted sequence of events plays between a chronology of external events and a phenomenological one, one person's process of coming to understand, the time of personal experience.

Stories like these reveal what was true for most Americans, that, initially at least, much of what came to be “an experience” of September 11 was, in fact, an experience of witnessing September 11 and subsequent events as portrayed through the media. September 11 was warfare as theater, an act that turned Americans not only into victims (the shocked recipients of violence) but also into mesmerized consumers of a spectacular media event. Image making, as Ortner (1999) argues, is a key task of public culture. The events of September 11 were so effectively staged that, as the families in this study said over and over, it was “just like a movie.” They were staged by the terrorists precisely for consumption at a global level, a media extravaganza of stellar proportions. As global theater, they are prime examples of what Appadurai (1996) has called the “mediascape,” serving as a stage for the creation of new meanings and for the construction of personal and cultural identities.

These “first report” stories that recall early moments of shock do not challenge the public story in which an innocent is brutally attacked—the United States as the victim of the unprovoked, crazed, and murderous actions of demented foreigners. These stories place the narrators within a common frame, sharing identifying features not only with one another but

also with the rest of public America, as offered through the mediation of newscasters who, like them, were reporting events while also voicing their own internal shocked responses. The “first report” stories told by the women graphically depict a breach congruent with the national story as constructed in public culture. The narrative setup moves from some description of the routine day to the shocked realization that the narrator is in the middle of a day like no other. These narrative moments follow the same script as the publicly circulated stories about the event. Here, America is the stunned victim of an unthinkable attack by unimaginable people (suicide bombers). Suddenly, America is not a safe haven. Anything could happen next, and it abruptly becomes unthinkable to proceed as though life were normal.

However, the stories told by the women in our study quickly departed from the plot structure depicted as America's collective personal story, for their stories have a structure that moves from shocked surprise to a quite different moral. In contrast to the public story, September 11 is inscribed by them as one more in a series of frightening events, much less horrific than other events they had experienced. Because of racism, poverty, and caring for children with serious illnesses and disabilities, they had bigger terrors to face on a daily basis. In their stories, September 11 is recast. It is renamed as “more of the same.” This recasting has been echoed by African Americans elsewhere in the United States. Jarrett Fellows, the editor of *Wave* newspaper, has stated as much in an interview on National Public Radio: “And believe it or not ... in this community where our newspaper circulates, there's a lot of folks that [say] it's business as usual life has not changed” (Olney 2001). Within the narrative group discussions, this shifting stance was marked in several ways. It emerged in the way subsequent episodes of stories that began with the first news of September 11 unfolded. Speakers recounted an uneasy return to everyday life but with something more, the beginning of a critique of the public story and especially of the television news for replaying the same scenes of the planes hitting the Twin Towers. What appeared in the first hours to be an unthinkable breach came to be viewed as an attack on an isolated segment of the population 3,000 miles away. A few days later, lives resettled into the routine.

Politicians pronounced Americans' return to normalcy an act of courage, a defiant refusal to live as though time had changed, that is, a refusal to show fear. However, this is not what the women are saying in their stories. They repeatedly emphasize that they knew how to live with fear in a racially charged environment—this was already part of their routine. As it is put by Steven Price, an African American barber from Jacksonville, Florida (quoted in the *Washington Post*): “From my view, it's like, ‘Welcome to my world’” (Sack 2001). This “more of the same” theme is also reinforced by two of the women who said that these events “didn't surprise them at all.” Other women, ordinarily vocal in the group meetings, were not even compelled to discuss the events. A few seemed slightly annoyed to be asked about the terrorist attacks. The very question presumed that it was a momentous event, and many were trying to tell us that it was not so singular, that it had not, in fact, sliced time into a “before” and an “after” in the way that other experiences in their lives had done. Instead, many indicated that this was yet another occasion on which their own difference from dominant America was marked. Their response underscores what Carlotta Miles, a psychiatrist quoted in the *Washington Post*, has noted: Though prior to September 11 many Americans saw their nation as omnipotent and invincible, “minorities have dealt with homegrown terrorism that is as much a part of America as apple pie. It has always been here” (Gerhart 2001: C1). In particular, their sense of these events as relatively minor, or continuous with the ongoing violence in their lives, underscored their current separation from the United States because of race and class. They were American and yet, somehow, not American, which is evocative of a general and pervasive Du Boisian sense of “double consciousness” among African Americans in the United States (Du Bois 1997; see also Cose 1993; Wilkins 2001).

Within the Collective Narrative Groups, this distancing from the national story was accomplished both through storytelling about specific experiences and through general commentary about what it means to be black, and a woman, in America. One discussion during the Collective Narrative Group that met on December 7 illustrates this with particular force. It began with a story that Delia told:

But the September 11 thing didn't really bother me. It affected my family more than me. My children were asking me questions like, "Why would somebody kill those people?" I can't explain it. I said, you know, "Something is wrong with him [bin Laden]. Nobody didn't show him love or something." You know, it's something that's really wrong with that whole family for them to be plotting that kind of stuff. I just told my children that they need to love each other as a family and don't worry about him, because we can't do nothing about it. And that [terrorist attack] scared my mom. I have my mom now ... she's handicapped. Her whole point, she can do everything for herself, she just don't want to be by herself. She said, you know, she don't want to wake up bombed without her family. But by her being in my house, she's much calmer. At first, she was screaming and hollering. You'd call her on the phone, and she was saying, "Please, come get me. Please, come get me." She just didn't want to be by herself. And now, she say, ah, she talk to bin Laden, like, she saying, "Now you can't get me, I'm with my family" [Delia laughs, and the group joins in], ... which I really appreciate. It's making me feel stronger. It didn't really affect me.

Delia told us that September 11 "didn't really bother" her in a story that recounts how her frightened, handicapped mother had just moved in with her. How is it that something many would regard as a major change in family life, adding the care of a parent with a disability into the family mix, belongs to a story in which the coda is "September 11 didn't really affect me"? The reasonableness of this moral becomes apparent in light of Delia's life, which had recently been marked by the fight to keep alive a critically ill infant who then died, the death of her mother-in-law, her husband's stroke, and a violent armed robbery by neighbors. Given this recent family history, it is not so difficult to imagine that the arrival of a mother into the family home was, comparatively speaking, not a huge event. Nor was the faraway tragedy masterminded by Osama bin Laden.

Delia's story illustrates what many of the women told us: Given the day-to-day burdens of their lives, this tragedy was a distant murmur, especially after the first shock had worn off and they had accounted for all the members of their families. There are, in stories like Delia's, also strong implications that if Americans whose families were not directly affected by September 11 were talking so much about it, or taking it so hard, this was because they had the luxury to do so. Stella commented, after Delia's story, "This is our reality as black people." Stella did not need to tell the group that what she and her daughter (an eight year old seriously ill with sickle cell disease and asthma) were facing reduced bin Laden to a distant threat; this was already understood.

Delia ended her story by expressing a general anxiety about what might yet unfold: "You don't know what they put in our water, our food." This comment, made at the height of the anthrax scare, might seem to contradict her story, but it was taken up by the group in a way that reinforces their situation as also "more of the same." Delia's story precipitated a general commentary along the lines of, as Nadine said, "all those same issues have always been in existence." By this, she meant that one can never feel safe from death, violence, or injury and that one cannot know when it might happen. "We don't even know if we're going to walk out the door and get hit by a bus, have a stroke, fall down and die, she continued. "That's right, that's right," Delia affirmed. In the excerpt given below, the continuity of the



terrorist threats with their lives was then connected by some of the women to a commentary on their own marginalized subject position in America:

**Nadine** Because it's the same issues. It's just now we've got this going on. Not that it's not big, because it is big, you know? But those same issues have always existed. I mean, ever since my kids were old enough to walk, I'm [pause] you're worrying. They start playing.

**Delia** Exactly.

**Nadine** And they stop playing. So watch the little kids.

**Stella** [interrupts] I was just thinking when this whole thing happened, that this is our reality as black people. It's just magnified to a bigger level, and it's become an American problem. But this is nothing new for us. You know? This is nothing new.

This exchange has moved quite a distance from the “first moment” stories. Building on Delia's frank narrative, which breaks from the national script, a new moral perspective began to be voiced, one that reinforces a position and experience that the women believed put them at a remove from general American opinion. There are several components to this perspective: (1) the centrality of the protection of children as a key task and a strong affirmation of their shared subject position as mothers; (2) a general rejection of American violence as the solution to the problem and a suspicion voiced by some that the United States was in part responsible for the attacks because of violence it had covertly committed; and (3) an even more pronounced reiteration that the September 11 events have not changed the world so dramatically for American blacks, who have long been the victims of violence.

For some speakers, this led to an identification with other peoples of color on a global level because of a shared history of victimization by whites. For example, many of the women did not accept official versions of the terrorists as crazed madmen. Several stated that they suspected that the United States was to blame for what had happened; we had “brought it on ourselves,” as one woman said. Their skepticism over the media portrayal of bin Laden offers further evidence of their marginal positions as Americans. During such moments in the discussions of these women, their position as blacks became the most salient characteristic of their cultural identity. Their views are echoed in key statements by African American political leaders. Jesse Jackson, speaking for black Americans as a whole, has remarked: “Initially there was shock, and that turned to outrage, and then African Americans took it to the next level. They urged caution caution in our rhetoric and in the infinite amount of resources we would pledge to our response. Now they are asking difficult and complicated questions. The non-African Americans are still stuck at outrage” (Gerhart 2001: C1). Stella hypothesized that being black allowed for greater compassion toward the terrorists than whites would have. Compassion came, in part, from recognizing that America was not an innocent nation, that it was capable of its own terrible acts of violence against others, especially against people with different beliefs and people of color. She stated, “As a black person in America, I think I'm able to look at this and try to see the broader perspective. I mean probably as a white person, my reaction to this would have been, ‘Go over there and nuke them!’ But as a black person, I think I have a little more empathy for the people.”

Stella then linked the white American reaction to the Islamic terrorists to their reaction to black Americans. In this move, she invoked another powerful imagined community, a broad international diaspora consisting of peoples of color. In this conceptualization, black Americans are depicted as connected more fundamentally to this global “community” than to white Americans. Through a common experience of oppression by a common oppressor, peoples who are otherwise extremely different (Arabic Muslims, American blacks) come to

share a common identity. Stella continued, “It’s like white people generally fear us. They fear us because they don’t know who we are as a people, and they’re afraid of us. Umm, so I look at that, and I say, ‘OK, I know that this is part of the problem with the black experience.’ But taking that on a broader, international level, the same thing with those people too.” Stella’s words can be heard in a commentary in the *Washington Post*, an article tellingly entitled “Many Blacks Have Doubts. Here’s Why.” Columnist Jonetta Barras argues, “For many blacks, the Palestinian fight is akin to the Southern civil rights movement, the racism conference and the demand for reparations. There is no line of demarcation. For them, there is only one continuous cultural narrative written by poor and politically repressed people everywhere” (2001:B3).

In the following exchange, September 11 is no longer a story about America as the unwitting victim of shocking terrorist attacks. It is now a response from those who were bullied and terrorized in secret wars carried out by (official) America, by “the government.” This makes the United States the party responsible for the September 11 attack:

**Nadine** But on the other hand of that, even though our government is responsible for it [the terrorist acts], you can’t imagine being part of any other country [pause], and so it really, to me, hurts me as an American. Really, it’s kind of a creepy situation. I’m proud to be an American, although America don’t want me. They don’t want nobody in here that’s got any color to their skin. America don’t want you. See? And that’s the bottom line. And they make it known on a regular basis. But I can’t be nowhere else.

**Stella** It’s so interesting that when you go over to other countries and you meet other black people in other countries, the thing that they say most about black Americans is that we don’t know who we are, as a people we have lost touch with our own sense of reality. We are so cut off from the whole black [pause] the international culture, the international experience of being black, and I guess of being in touch with our ancestors, and all this other stuff.

..They celebrate their religions that are completely different from Christianity, and they are in touch with ... this is who they are. This is what they’ve practiced for many thousands of years, and yet, we come here, and we practice a borrowed religion. And I’m not saying that it’s right or wrong—your religion is what it is, but it just shows a part of us. We are basically, um, just [pause] I don’t want to say that we are a throwaway people, because we’re not, but somehow we have created [trails off].

**Delia** We are a removed people.

**Nadine** We are removed from where we ... who we originally were.

**Stella** We are making the best of the situation in a country, like you said, that does not want us... We’re still trying to operate as though we are a people in a system that really doesn’t want us...

**Nadine** When you’re removed from somewhere and forcibly taken somewhere else, that’s different as opposed to choosing to go to that place.

**Delia** Exactly.

**Nadine** There’s a difference there, a big difference when you are allowed to hang onto those things that kept you knowing who you are.

To be black, they noted, is to be someone who both does and does not belong to America but has nowhere else to go. The perspective of these women is different, they assert or imply

through their stories, for two reasons. First, compassion has been hard won through their own collective and personal experiences of oppression that come with being black Americans. Their talk reveals an interplay of a narrativized identity with a positional identity, that is, “a person's apprehension of her social position in a lived world” (Holland 1998:127–128). The second reason, as we will see, is because they are mothers. Their position as mothers can be even more powerful than, and therefore can challenge, the construction of their disconnection from America.

## The Cultural and Moral Space of Mothering

Almost every story told to us locates the speaker, first and foremost, as a mother. Mothering is a socially constituted and frequently contested and negotiated practice (Collins 1994; Glenn 1994). As Sara Ruddick (1995) has argued, mothering involves maternal practices and maternal work organized around the moral imperatives to ensure preservation, foster growth, and produce children who measure up well against a standard of social acceptability. Maternal work is coupled with maternal thinking, a form of deep reflection about the abilities to enact the demands of motherhood, even when one's beliefs and sense of virtue are shaken, such as when children are under threat.

In the women's talk, the frequent self-positionings as mothers were regularly connected to the widespread rejection of violence as a solution to the September 11 attacks. The women were angry at the media for what they felt was a barrage of coverage of violent events, especially when they thought it might be frightening their children. The women also frequently noted that what they were hearing about September 11 and the “War on Terrorism” was packaged by others, that is, by journalists and politicians who were likely to skew things for their own covert purposes. In this is a skepticism toward what James Faubion describes as a central task of public culture, the construction of “public enemies” or “threats to the fabric of society” (1999:90). While none questioned that the planes had hit these U.S. targets, many wondered about the way the terrorists were portrayed on television, and a number also questioned America's violent response, its determination to go to war.

But it was not just the media presentation of violence that generated outrage. Many of the women were adamant that they did not see violence as the appropriate moral response. In early December, Nadine remembered back to the first few days after September 11, noting, “What I noticed was that men and women have different views, as far as what we were experiencing, what we were feeling, and our take on how it should be handled. From my perspective, all the females were like, more and more killing is not going to make it better. And men were like, the testosterone was on high. Nadine also equated this “testosterone” position with the official U.S. position, as portrayed by the media: “Now I'll turn on the news, and it'll be ‘America at War.’ And so that's why it's embedded in my mind—we're at war. No matter what's going on in my personal life, that's there, were at war. I turn on the news, and that's all there is. ‘We're at war.”

She distanced herself from this officially mandated, media-promoted position: “And in dealing with these words, it's still really hard for me to swallow because I still don't understand what it is we're doing. And more important, why. I do know what they did to us. So, they say they did it.” Her ambivalence was marked both by her rejection of violence and by her distrust of what she was being told by the media, which she found “hard to swallow.” In her comments, she refers to two distinct “theys” from which she was at a remove. One is the “they” of the terrorists, and the other is the “they” of the U.S. government and media—official America. She continued with this telling comment: “And I'm not even positive within myself that it was a ‘they,’ you know?”

This same moral is vividly expressed in stories as well. Here is one Maria told:

You know, yesterday I was going to the store, and some guy, he's saying to me, "I just have one more thing to sell. Four dollars. Won't you buy this? I'm really hungry, and I'm trying to sell these." And it was a T-shirt with bin Laden's face and like bullet holes through him. I said, "I'm not gonna buy that shirt." He said, "Well why not?" And I said, "I have two brothers over there. I don't want them going into this. But if you're hungry, I'll give you this." And I gave him five dollars 'cause he's hungry, but I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna, I told him to keep the T-shirt. Why would I want something like that?

In her maternal and protective female role, the narrator is happy to feed a hungry man, but she refuses to do so by, in any way, supporting America's new war. The reason she gives is also maternal, though here it is her brothers rather than a child she wants to protect.

### Nadine's Story: The Play of Positions and the Construction of the Other

If abstract discussions and general statements among the women often led to the construction of oppositional, mutually exclusive categories and clear subject positions, their stories often lead elsewhere. Their stories certainly do not cancel out the message of disconnection provided, for example, in the dialogues quoted in earlier parts of this article. But they do reveal the subtle way in which women are capable of holding multiple cultural identities even when these "logically" contradict. In a story, multiplicity and contradictoriness are made coherent, compelling in their own way. Stories and apparently contradictory narrative stances can allow us to understand how morally complex the world is, particularly for social groups whose shared marginalization compels them to move between universalistic (e.g., we are American) and particularistic (e.g., we are African American) stances (see Jacobs-Huey 2001; Sandoval 1991). In narrative, morality is contextualized. This is because narratives link beliefs, values, and emotions to the concrete and unique situations in which we act (Nussbaum 2001a, 2001b). These points are powerfully illustrated by one story Nadine told, presented below. Nadine was opposed to America's "War against Terrorism" *in general*, but in this story she shifts this perspective in relation to very specific concerns connected to her role as mother of an informally adopted "son." Thus, her story vividly portrays the kind of moral ambiguity that attends the "mother" position and the way it can connect someone to those very people and positions (whites, men, pro-war America) that, from other cultural locations (as black, as a woman), one has vehemently rejected.

At first, Nadine's audience did not know why she recounted this particular story in a meeting where we had been talking about the events of September 11. She cued us that this would become clear subsequently if only we continued to listen; "I'm going to get to the point," she says a few lines after she begins:

One of my son's friends that I remember I met when Brett [her son] was in the ninth grade, and Ty was in 11th grade. And I'm going to be honest with you. My first impression of this child was, "Why did you bring him here? I don't want him here." Because he made me nervous. And I remember telling my son, "Don't bring Ty home with you. I don't want that kid here." And I just had a bad feeling about Ty. Um, and as things would have it, I was totally wrong. I got the opportunity to talk to Ty one day when I came home from work. He was sitting on my step. And Brett's room faces the step, so Brett's talking to him out of the window, and Ty's sitting on the step. And I go, "What are you doing here?" And he tells me, "Brett says he can't have company until you come home, so I thought I'd wait." I'm like, "Oh, great." [She laughs, and the audience joins in.] Um, I had the fortunate pleasure of getting to know this child and really found out the only thing that was wrong with him was that he didn't have anybody that, I felt, loved him like a

mother, and only a mother, can. So I took this child under my wing and kind of pushed him through life. And, uh, I made his life matter to him.

Three characters populate this story thus far: Nadine, her son Brett, and his friend Ty. However, only Nadine and Ty are given speaking parts, and it is their changing relationship that fuels the story as a whole. Through the device of reported speech, Nadine begins to sketch two distinct subject positions. The distinctive and even oppositional quality of these subject positions will propel the plot as they are linked to “America at War” in subsequent parts of her story. This episode, and several that follow, draw on the powerful narrative strategy of *reversal*.

In the following scene, Nadine centers on a single incident to graphically portray when and how this reversal in her own attitude was precipitated:

I remember when Ty was in the 11th grade, and it was report card time, and he came to visit my son, and I said, “Ty, what you got on your report card?” And he just kind of looked at me and said, “Nobody's ever asked me what I got on my report card. ...” And my heart broke because he's in the 11th grade. And he didn't do too well, but Brett tutored him, and I promised to cook him the best meal if he would just bring his grades up, because he liked my cooking.

In her remembrance of this heartbreaking moment, the three key narrative devices discussed in this article work together. This moment represents a breach in several senses. It is a turning point in her relationship with the boy, and Ty emerges for the first time as a real person for her. It is a breach of her earlier categorization of the boy. This incident also represents a breach of cultural norms. Nadine is shocked to find that Ty has not participated in the American report card ritual. No one should have been able to reach the 11th grade without this ritual of parental care, she announces with disapproval. Internal and external landscapes provide dual scenes of action and transformation. Nadine's story, thus far, takes on the plotline of a confession, a tale of a certain internal change in which she must repudiate outward appearances, those things that caused her to dismiss Ty initially. This inner change produces immediate changes at the level of outward action. Nadine's own mothering practice is expanded to include one more son.

The confessional structure of the tale allows the introduction of a subtler moral that is repeated and amplified in later segments of the story. This concerns the power and danger of stereotypes and appearances (especially stigmatizing ones) and the terrible consequences that can follow from locking people into categories. Nadine emphasizes this moral in the following segment of her story:

But I said that to say, Ty joined the Marines. And he's stationed at Camp Pendleton. And Ty became part of our family. And it's odd for people because where I work, I have a picture of Ty in his little uniform. Ty's a white kid. And they all go, “Who's that?” And I go, “That's my son. That's my boy.” And I'll take a picture out of the back, and it goes, “Dear Mom, I hope this makes you proud of me.” Ty never did come home. And all I can think of is that Ty is over there now. And Ty is a kid with a good heart, and he really believes in what he is doing.

The audience learns two essential things for the first time: that Nadine has a white “son” and that this white son is in the Marines and has been sent “over there” to fight. Here, the multiple perspectives represented by Nadine and Ty—the different and even oppositional stances they hold concerning America's war—are embedded within a story of how this white boy and this African American woman have come to be connected in that most intimate and binding way, as mother and child.

The *double landscape* of narrative leads the listeners to feel the inexorability of this dilemma. An expert narrator, Nadine was able to convey internal and external landscapes simultaneously through the way she reported this heated and passionate exchange: Ty tells her, “No, no I gotta go [to Afghanistan].” “Ty, no,” she protests. Her son Brett (who is pro-war) agrees with her. “Even Brett said don't go.” She then adds, laughing but also near tears, “You can hide under Brett's bed. Don't go. I'll protect you. Ty replies, “No,” and again, “Mom, no. This is the right thing.” Nadine sent a helpless look to the sympathetic audience, as though shrugging her hands. What can she say to this? She began to cry, something she had never done in these meetings. More than one of us reached for a tissue as well. She continued with Ty's reported speech: “This is the right thing for me, Mom. Aren't you proud?” She comments in the story on the strange position she finds herself in: “And I am proud of Ty. I'm proud of what Ty believes in. And I'm proud that Ty's going over there. Not,” she qualifies, “necessarily because he believes that America needs to get revenge but that the terrorism hasn't stopped, and that if he can do anything to make it stop or help it stop, and he wants to be a part of that, you know?”

As mother, Nadine has come to assume a new subject position, a mother of someone who is going to fight to protect “his family.” But what is this last family that is mentioned? The reference becomes deeply ambiguous. Is it his adopted family, Nadine and her children, that is being referred to? Are the Marines his family? Or is it America altogether, the American family? Nadine's story draws on and displays multiple perspectives that reflect two very different “ideologies” and “belief systems” not as abstractions but, to return to the earlier discussion of Bakhtin, as “personified” (1981:326). Through this personification, Nadine is able to convey a moral complexity and ambiguity, as well as the multiplicity of cultural identities that play out in her own experiences of September 11 and the unfolding “War on Terrorism.” Her role as mother connects her to America, even to white, male America, in a specific and situated way.

## Conclusion

Stories can reveal the world as not only vivid and dramatic but also morally complicated. They can illustrate and support key cultural categories, but they are equally likely to challenge them or at least blur their boundaries. The stories and commentaries recounted here illuminate the shifting stances women take up in and through talk, specifically moral stances concerning September 11 and America's “War on Terrorism.” Their discourse speaks to the salience of specific variables of identities (e.g., race, class, and motherhood), in light of the extraordinary events of September 11. In general, the discussions and stories of these women convey a strong resistance to aligning with a pro-American or patriotic stance. In this, the women are not alone within either the African American community or America's female population. Various polls taken by the *New York Times* and PEW just a few weeks after September 11 reveal a significant gap between white (over 90 percent) and African American (about 70 percent) support for Bush's decision to bomb Afghanistan. A similar and consistent gender gap has also been reported in polls (CNN/*USA Today*, Gallup Poll) with, for example, a 20-point difference between men's and women's support of a lengthy war in a poll taken on October 5, 2001. More graphic than these bare figures are the commentaries and editorials by African Americans in major urban centers (New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles), which repeatedly invoke concern a skepticism about America's pro-war response, an uneasy sense that the United States “brought it on itself, an affirmation that racial profiling and racial violence are familiar parts of life for U.S. minorities, and a wariness about America's current patriotic fervor.

But the stories recounted here also indicate the fluid way in which the storytellers sometimes move among identities. Furthermore, the messages of their stories challenge *both*

universalist and particularist claims about cultural identity. Universalist arguments posit that African Americans are Americans and, hence, subjects of the same rights and responsibilities as other citizens. In contrast, particularist claims employ race-specific rhetorical strategies to explain how African Americans are different. People of color may deploy these different subject positions and ideologies for strategic purposes (Moore 1994; Sandoval 1991). Nadine's story, in particular, presents us with a *situated cultural identity* whereby, within the context of mothering a white boy gone off to war, she identifies with modified versions of both universalist and particularist positions.

The subtlest stories discussed in this article, the ones that display the greatest complexity of cultural identity, are those concerned with their narrators' allegiance to the position of mother. These stories compellingly show how narratives can promote a complex moral reading of the September 11 attacks and America's public response. Stories are particularly able to convey the moral ambiguity of life, the way one can passionately believe two contradictory things at once, or how those things one passionately believes and feels can put one in a position where one is acting and believing what, under other circumstances, one eschews. Morality is revealed as nuanced and situated.

In Nadine's story, the centerpiece of this article, the narrator conveys her moral dilemma through various narrative devices. In telling her story, Nadine relied on audience expectations that Ty is an African American boy by withholding until late in the story the fact that Ty is white. This challenge to expectations adds to the story's power. The audience's implicit placement of Ty within a subject category (nonwhite) must be revised, just as Nadine's assignment of Ty is overturned (from a boy who is trouble to a boy with a good heart). These reversals reinforce one key moral reiterated in the women's narratives—a moral of particular relevance in light of America's “War on Terrorism”—the dangers of relying on categories and stereotypes. Her story deploys the three features of narrative we have focused on in this article. It recounts not one breach but several, and it does so through powerful portrayals of inner and outer landscapes that draw us into the story world. Further, it illuminates the ambiguity of subject positions that apparently oppose one another by showing how these must be revised when personified in people who care about one another.

Finally, the power and meaning of these women's stories do not reside with form and content alone. Nadine's story and those of the other women are not free-floating texts but, rather, speech acts carried out within particular contexts. Their stories illuminate both the personal and the cultural in a particularly effective way because of the social contexts in which they were told; one person's story shapes subsequent reflections and begets yet more stories. The narrators also function as interpreters of narratives, reflecting on the meanings that a story might have not only for the storyteller but also for a wider interpretive community. Through the women's stories and commentaries, September 11 and the “War on Terrorism” are constructed simultaneously as collective experiences and as intimate, highly personal events.

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