September 11th as Ritually Rushed:
Liminality, Heroism, and Solidarity Amid the Fallout of American Tragedy

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> It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence, to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: *"And this, too, shall pass away."* How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! -- how consoling in the depths of affliction! "And this, too, shall pass away." And yet let us hope it is not *quite* true. Let us hope, rather, that by the best cultivation of the physical world, beneath and around us; and the intellectual and moral world within us, we shall secure an individual, social, and political prosperity and happiness, whose course shall be onward and upward, and which, while the earth endures, shall not pass away. – Abraham Lincoln[1]

Introduction

On September 11, 2001, a group of transnational terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and might have done further damage to the United States had not the hijacking of United Airlines Flight 93 been in some sense thwarted by passengers. The events of September 11 have become a signpost in American nationalism and a watershed in American history. Whereas Americans have lived through other tragic events, this one has been singled out as culturally significant. The social memory of September 11 carries with it a sense of abrupt and lasting change. People talk of pre-9/11 and post-9/11 America, if not pre-9/11 and post-9/11 world. This paper seeks to cultivate greater understanding of post-9/11 change through the lens of liminality, which is defined as an in-between state in which normal social relations are suspended. Through the examples of business relations and sports and entertainment, I use newspaper accounts to show how liminality set in almost immediately after 9/11, and how those involved imagined their present and future as fundamentally altered. In the conclusion, I reflect on the place of this study within theories of cultural trauma.

Data and Method

Heroism forms the backdrop of this paper. Originally, I sought to explore the phenomenon of heroism as reported by the New York Times before and after 9/11,

and accordingly searched Lexis Nexis for New York Times containing the word "hero" from July 1, 2001 to November 1, 2001. The other themes I have identified emerged from reading the resulting data. Due to current constraints and exigencies, this paper is based entirely on these New York Times articles. Therefore, I attempt to bear in mind that what I am "measuring" is not the entirety of post-9/11 reality, but the accounts of a specific newspaper. This paper is revealing of 9/11 themes only insofar as the New York Times is a yardstick of reality.

This paper should be considered a pilot study. It may be preferable going forward to expand the data set to wider search criteria, or a census of the articles posted within a certain period of time following 9/11. Nevertheless, the present articles yield many interesting results.

Tragedy and Instant Liminality

Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) developed the concept of liminality within the context of ritual process. Liminality can be defined as an in-between state or period of time during which the usual social structures and statuses are suspended. Turner (1969: 94-111) emphasizes that powerful individuals are often brought down to earth within liminality, whereas the usually powerless are invested with special powers in the name of the totality of society. The liminal phase of ritual is preceded by the separation phase and succeeded by the aggregation phase (Turner 1969: 94.) Whereas the separation phase involves "symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or both," the aggregation phase repositions the individual or group in a modified but stable state within the social structure (94-95.)

In the case of 9/11, as reported by the New York Times, a separation phase of ritual is barely discernable, hence the title phrase "ritually rushed." It is as if the city (and the country) were plunged directly into a liminal state by the terrorist act, which instantly separated New Yorkers, and Americans more broadly, from their previous state of innocence (or ignorance, perhaps.) Within two days of the event,

there was discussion of heroes and heroism, and within five days there were clear signs of liminality. In an article on Sept. 16, a Mr. Rivera, a friend of one of the World Trade Center victims, stated that "sometimes through tragedy we get to see the humanity, the incredible compassion of people."[2]

Capitalist Communitas Eclipses Business as Usual

Some of the clearest early evidence of liminality comes from accounts of the reactions of the business community to the events of Sept. 11. Still on Sept. 16, the newspaper published a striking story[3] about a law firm executive, Alan S. Weil, who amid the chaos had the presence of mind to contact the landlord for his office space. While most of his employees had evacuated the World Trade Center successfully, the firm had lost much of its office space and equipment. Within three hours, Mr. Weil had arranged for new space on four other floors of the firm's Midtown location, as well as "800 desks, 300 computers, and cell phones by the hundreds." The journalist's analysis of the feat is instructive:

> The normal rules of business engagement -- deliberate negotiation, adversarial wrangling and jockeying for advantage -- were swept away. The infamously in-your-face New York attitude was nowhere to be found. Instead, the firm encountered generosity in its business partners and even in its competitors -- a cooperative, indomitable spirit that stands in stark contrast to the inhumane brutality of the attack.[4]

In other words, a clearly liminal suspension of business as usual had set in in New York almost instantly. Whereas under "normal" circumstances the landlord and the competitors may have held and used an advantage over Mr. Weil, curtailing his agency, under liminal circumstances he was able to perform rental and logistical transactions that would ordinarily be inconceivable for New York City. The "cooperative, indomitable spirit" stands implicitly in contrast not only to the "inhumane brutality of the attack" but also to the ordinary culture of New York and of American capitalism more generally.

Turner (1969) calls this leveling quality of liminality "communitas." In communitas, people relate to one another in a mode of common humanity more so

than through established social structure (96.) To demonstrate, Turner cites a couple of rituals from the Ndembu people of Zambia. One is the circumcision rite for boys in which even the son of a chief is temporarily reduced to the level of a slave (108.) The other is the ordeal a new chief must go through along with his wife. An ordinarily subordinate headman of the title Kafwana undertakes a ritual berating and humiliation of the new chief and his wife, which is followed by a session during which anyone who has felt wronged by the chief-elect can tell him so in excruciating detail. The chief and his wife must endure all of this in silence. The effect is to emboss the imprint of society as a whole on the chief-elect, who must use his new power with humility and restraint (100-102.) Similarly, one can see the humility and restraint of communitas in the actions of the landlord and competitors above. They refrain from the usual capitalist use of available advantages over Mr. Weil and his firm due to the sacred nature of the moment.

Another instance of communitas in business emerged from the stock exchanges. According to a Sept. 18 article[5], on Monday, Sept. 17, as the markets reopened, the New York Stock Exchange and the Philadelphia Stock Exchange both made space available on their floors for their rival, the American Stock Exchange, "which lost communications throughout its building, situated behind Trinity Church south of the World Trade Center. Across the river, in Jersey City, a shadow Wall Street filled with refugees from Merrill Lynch and Lehman Brothers began work shortly after dawn. It was not the kind of day that matched anyone's memories." Moreover, "there was also a marketwide mood to loosen the normal rules of engagement. Buyers and sellers of government bonds, for example, agreed to give each other more time to complete their trades." Competitive business as usual had been suspended in favor of cooperative business in communitas.

Traders also attempted to put a brave face on falling stock prices:

> "Today, America goes back to business," Mr. Grasso [chairman of the New York Stock Exchange] told waiting traders. "We do it as a signal to those criminals who inflicted this heinous crime on America and all Americans, they have lost." Later, less than an hour before the market closed at 4 p.m., a weary Mr. Grasso said that the sell-off could have been worse. "Given the lack of trading over the past days, the enormous tragedy foisted on the community, and the president saying we are going to war, there is good liquidity in the

> market," he said. "The message we are sending to the world is that you don't measure the market by one single day's performance."[6]

In layman's terms, according to Mr. Grasso, prices were relatively stable considering the national tragedy and interruption in trading. Here we can see a narrative of progress fused with heroic triumphalism.

Liminality, Heroism, and the Momentary Triviality of Sport and Entertainment

"Hero" is a title frequently assigned to sports stars. However, in the wake of 9/11, this combination became taboo. Paradoxically, while the meaning of sports changed immediately after 9/11, some such as Mike Piazza of the New York Mets thought the reinstatement of sports games was a return to normalcy:

> As demoralized as Piazza looked and sounded, he knew there was still a game to play against the Atlanta Braves last night at Shea Stadium. Piazza said the game, the first in New York since the attacks 11 days ago, was important because of what it symbolized. The game would not change anything for the thousands who have been affected, but it would signify a return and a small step toward normalcy. Piazza shrugged after he mentioned symbolism, wondering if that was realistic.[7]

Yet, at the same time, Piazza expressed discomfort with the category "hero" as applied to sports figures post 9/11:

> Even if it is helping others cope with grief, Piazza feels queasy being depicted as a hero for hitting homers. The heroes, Piazza said, never made it out of the two trade center buildings 11 days ago. The heroes, he said, are digging through the debris at the site of destruction. The Mets are trying to win for their fans, but Piazza refrained from saying that the tragedy gave them extra inspiration.[8]

Sports commentators also heeded the palpable need to rein in the use of the word "hero:"

> And just a few hours later, there was Fox Sports New York's Fran Healy, trying to put Mike Piazza's game-winning home run on Friday in a perspective he had never had occasion to think about before." Mike Piazza, one of the heroes of the game," he said, a bit uncomfortably, "if we can use the word." On Fox's Saturday baseball game, Josh Lewin said, "We have been careful about how we toss around the word 'heroes.' " His partner, Tim McCarver, added, "We as Americans have had a distorted view of the word 'hero,' but not anymore." During the Jets-Patriots game, Dick

> Enberg of CBS Sports said, "The fans in Foxboro respect football but are honoring the real heroes."[9]

In the moment, the broadcasters such as Tim McCarver evidently treated the change in usage of "hero" as permanent. Whereas the participants in liminal Ndembu rituals ostensibly know that the state is temporary, participants in the kind of liminality involved in the 9/11 aftermath seem to have magnified the long-term significance of the event, as if none of the moment's feelings and meanings would eventually pass.

Whereas before 9/11 the usage of "hero" had become markedly banal, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 restricted the appropriate use of "hero" according to a logic of sacred and profane. The attacks were an instantly sacred tragedy, and the word "hero" was instinctively tied to that sacredness. Ordinarily, the concept of heroism in sports goes hand in hand with a banal form of nationalism (Billig 1995: 120-122.) In contrast, in liminal, threatened, activated nationalism, the zone of the profane begins to separate from the national, as the zones of the sacred and national merge. Sports still can partake of nationalism in a liminal phase, as long as they observe the boundary between profane and sacred, and self-consciously claim only the former in support of the latter. A journalist from the Daily News went so far as openly to place an "embargo" on the use of the word "hero" to describe athletes.[10]

The article goes on to describe similar restrictions in other areas of entertainment:

> The word "recovery" -- as in "the rescue effort is becoming a recovery effort" -- became associated not with celebrities like Ben Affleck and Robert Downey Jr., in rehab, but with abandoned hope. "Edgy" went from being an adjective connoting hip, downtown art to being a description of the anxiety racking the city. And talk of "asymmetrical hemlines" at New York's Fashion Week gave way to talk at the Pentagon of "asymmetrical warfare." As for the names of television game shows like "Survivor," "Fear Factor" and "Jeopardy," they seemed more farcical than ever.[11]

Even the World Wrestling Federation, which had exploited the Iran hostage affair and the first Gulf War, chose not to do likewise with the 9/11 events "by creating a terrorist character as a surrogate for fan anger." Moreover, the WWF nixed the program title "Raw is War" in favor of "Raw I" and "Raw II," renamed a program

"Payback" instead of "Armageddon," and no longer played a song called "Let the Bodies Hit the Fabric" at live events.[12]

Thus entertainment more broadly, which under ordinary circumstances may have some sacred status among many, becomes quite relegated to the profane under liminal circumstances. When the sacred really matters due to an emergency, it swallows up the only words and images we know that can do it justice, and those words and images become off-limits to profane uses.

In the post 9/11 liminal phase, sports and sporting venues became sites of sacred ritual. The sports themselves were relegated to the profane, but sacred nationalism, treated properly, was invited in:

> I watched Placido Domingo sing "Ave Maria" in the Bronx as the Giants-Chiefs N.F.L game wound down. I watched the Mets lose to Atlanta as Imam Izak-El M. Pasha, a New York Police Department chaplain, scorned those who employ Islam in the service of terrorist acts. "We condemn them and their cowardly acts and we stand with our country against all who come against us," he said. I saw the people at the stadium hold hands and sing "We Shall Overcome" as the Dolphins came from behind to beat the Raiders. Who cared about the scores?[13]

One of the commentators, Terry Bradshaw, even referred to Psalm 10 during the broadcast.[14] Sports become sites of sacred ritual as music, sermon, and scripture are incorporated into the game, whose score no longer "matters." Whereas sports usually involve the "us" and "them" of home team vs. visitor, the context of "us" and "them" shifts to "our nation" and its heroes vs. the "cowardly" villain.

The events of September 11th took place as corporations were already preparing the offerings for the holiday shopping season of 2001. Manufacturers of toys saw an opportunity to sell toys connected to the tragic events:

> Toy analysts and manufacturers expect this holiday season to bring a boom in sales of toys with rescue themes, like Matchbox firetrucks and muscular police officer action heroes, as parents look for playthings to inspire their children after the Sept. 11 attacks. The recent terrorism has prompted toy makers to take a second look at the toys they are offering. They now expect programmable firetrucks and doctors' kits to move up on children's lists of must-have toys and Halloween cos-tumes. Fisher-Price, a Mattel Inc. unit that makes toys for preschoolers, has increased the production of a special New York City firefighter version of its Rescue Heroes: Billy Blazes toy.[15]

However, the opportunity came with awkward concerns:

> But many toy makers are also worried that some playthings that once seemed fantastical now seem all too real. This week, Lego Systems said it was ordering one of its construction kits off store shelves after an American consumer complained about illustrations in the toy's instruction book of an aircraft bombing a city. F. A. O. Schwarz, a toy retailer based in New York, has stopped selling a missile-launching helicopter made by Mattel. The toy's packaging includes a prominent reference to a "diabolical villain" who is "blasting urban buildings to pieces" from the top of the World Trade Center. The changes are coming at a particularly delicate time for toy makers. Most of their holiday shipments have already left warehouses, and November and December sales account for most of their annual revenue.[16]

Some of the toys being offered thus offended the sacredness of the tragic situation, and for the toy companies it may have been a case of terrible timing. This is an instructive example of how temporality is a factor in successful cultural performances (cf. Alexander 2011.)

Caught Up in the Moment? Liminal Journalism

It is clear that the people depicted and quoted in these newspaper articles were caught up in the moment of liminality. With few if any exceptions, they all seemed to believe that history had been fundamentally altered, and that the way we talk about heroes and use words like "recovery" had changed for good. They forgot, in other words, that this too will pass. What is more challenging to discern, though, is whether the journalists themselves were caught up in this moment.

An observant contribution by Neal Gabler[17], dated Sept. 16, frames the events of 9/11 in cinematic terms. Gabler notes that a latent function of the second World Trade Center collision was to get the act on television, as there had been no camera ready for the first collision. Gabler sees the World Trade Center collapse as the first act in a three-act drama, proceeding to a chase for the bad guy, followed by the final showdown in which justice is restored. Gabler recognizes early in the game that the 9/11 tragedy would go through various phases, on its way to some kind of resolution or synthesis. He writes that the battle would be over control of who gets "final cut." It is tempting to say that his view is inherently teleological, that history is

destined to take the path of cinema, but Gabler writes that we see history this way because "we have seen this movie before." What Gabler may be getting at is belief in the fact helping to create the fact, as William James would have put it. All in all, Gabler's analysis escapes most of the liminality of the times.

In general, the liminality that comes through in the articles on which I've concentrated is contained in the accounts of those interviewed. There is relatively little liminal editorializing in the articles. Of course, the message of journalism is conveyed not only by the manifest message of the journalist, but also by the choice of what to cover and to whom to talk. A comprehensive rather than selective study of the newspaper might be more revealing of whether 9/11-focused articles convey a more liminal viewpoint than other articles from the same time period.

Conclusion

Recent work in cultural sociology has emphasized the constructed, rather than naturally occurring, constitution of social traumas. Alexander's (2003) analysis of the Holocaust depicts an initial "progressive" narrative that was, through cultural work, eventually eclipsed by a "tragic" narrative. The "progressive" narrative "proclaimed that the trauma created by social evil would be overcome, that Nazism would be defeated and eliminated from the world, that it would eventually be relegated to a traumatic past whose darkness would be obliterated by a new and powerful social light" (Alexander 2003: 38.) In contrast, in the "tragic" narrative, the evil of the Holocaust became universalized and weighted such that it was now a "sacred-evil" and could not be talked about in such rational terms (Alexander 2003: 48-50.)

In the post-9/11 accounts, I certainly see the former, but truthfully also a blend of the two narratives. The post-9/11 liminal phase incorporates the progressive narrative, but with a significant element of tragedy. Americans were by and large defiant in the face of the terrorism. As the newspaper indicates, passengers on hijacked airplanes rose up against the terrorists as the events unfolded, and in the aftermath, Americans demanded justice and retribution. Yet, I argue that there was an immediate sense of sacred-evil, without which a thoroughly

liminal period would not have been possible. The sacred-evil of the terrorist act immediately suspended usual social relations among New Yorkers and Americans more broadly, ushering in a fleeting period of equality and good will even in situations and sectors of life in which this is not the accepted norm. Participants were so caught up in the moment that they seemed to think that some elements of this change would be enduring. Furthermore, without the element of sacred-evil, the codes of American nationalism would not have been restructured, such that certain words were reserved for the sacred, and thus off limits to profane use.

Americans have consistently believed, and American discourse has consistently argued, that 9/11 is something to be overcome, and that terrorism is something to be defeated. The government founded the Department of Homeland Security, and instituted the "War on Terror." Yet, Americans feel uniquely victimized by 9/11 to this day, which is an element that has outlived the liminal period. Business as usual has eclipsed capitalist communitas, but the feeling that 9/11 was a watershed in American history, and in American suffering, continues.

The sober fact is that terrorist bombings happen around the world all the time. The United States has largely been immune to transnational terrorism, so the break through the defenses stung all the more so. Americans have lived through terrorist acts before, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, but Americans have elected to make 9/11 a defining moment in their history (whereas they did not react the same way to Oklahoma City) due to the sheer symbolic weight of the events. Arguably the activation of banal nationalism into nationalist fervor has much to do with the difference. Whereas an American perpetrated the Oklahoma City tragedy, the World Trade Center destruction was a foreign offense, which facilitated the activation of cultural categories such as "us" and "them." Moreover, the 9/11 attack struck at the biggest population center in the United States, and a major national symbol (the World Trade Center) within a national symbol (Manhattan and its skyline.) The lives of Oklahomans are in some important sense no less precious, but the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building has never been invested with nearly as much symbolism as the World Trade Center. On 9/11, America was hit in the eye. (Or the navel, or where have you.) Thus, Americans circled the wagons, showing

remarkable generosity to each other, while projecting defiance and belligerence to the "enemy" along with much of the rest of the world.

Alexander's (2004; 2011: 159-183) account of 9/11 mentions the concept of liminality in passing, but does not go into detail. This paper has been an attempt to fill in our understanding of liminality following 9/11 through analysis of data from the time of the events. I have attempted to sort the temporary from the enduring and illuminate some temporary aspects of social life in New York and the United States more broadly following the attacks. I would suggest that the cultural sociology of trauma needs more data points in order to separate the general-theoretical from the particularities of specific instances, and offer this analysis as a partial counterexample to the Holocaust in that it combines progressive and tragic narratives.

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Notes

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[1] http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/fair.htm accessed 10/30/2016
[2] Matthew Purdy. "Our Towns; Prayers for a Town, and Jennifer's Dad." New York Times Sept. 16, 2001, sec. 1.
[3] John Schwartz. "Up From the Ashes, One Firm Rebuilds." New York Times Sept. 16, 2001, sec. 3.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Alessandra Stanley with Diana B. Henriques. "A NATION CHALLENGED: THE SCENE; Wall Street Returns to Work, Finding Good in Falling Prices." New York Times Sept. 18, 2001, sec. C.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Jack Curry. "BASEBALL; Not Just Another Day on the Job." New York Times Sept. 22, 2001, sec. D.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Richard Sandomir. "TV SPORTS; Long-Needed Perspective On the Air." New York Times Sept. 24, 2001, sec. D.
[10] Michiko Kakutani. "A NATION CHALLENGED: CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK; The Trivial Assumes Symbolism of Tragedy," New York Times Sept. 23, 2001, sec. 1B.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Richard Sandomir. "SPORTS BUSINESS; Between the Body Slams, the W.W.F. Shows a Sensitive Side." New York Times Sept. 26, 2001, sec. D.
[13] Richard Sandomir. "TV SPORTS; Long-Needed Perspective On the Air." New York Times Sept. 24, 2001, sec. D.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Julian E. Barnes. "A NATION CHALLENGED: THE TOYS; Heroic Rescue Figures May Top Holiday Wish Lists." New York Times Sept. 26, 2001, sec. C.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Neal Gabler. "This Time, The Scene Was Real." New York Times Sept. 16, 2001, sec. 4.