Taking Attendance: 
Absent Writing and the Value of Suffering

Matthew J. Newcomb

The space of theory, the conscience of a space, immediately reveals a sordid history.

—Peter Hitchcock

The dawn did not erase the preceding day’s agony—no dawn could—and so New Yorkers ate their meals, did the dishes and put out the trash, the mundane tasks of life, but nothing felt the same. It was a day when work meant so much less than family and human companionship.

—N.R. Kleinfeld

In the spring of 2002, two tall beams of light filled and reminded us of a hole in the New York City skyline. The lights functioned as a perhaps apt temporary memorial to those who lost their lives in the World Trade Center towers six months earlier. They are appropriate in the sense that the suffering involved with the terrorist attacks was all about loss and absence—the poignant absence of loved ones and the empty spaces left by the collapse of large, symbolic buildings. The lights were a response to the suffering that attempted to fill one part of the absence that the towers’ fall created. At the same time, the use of lights emphasized an inability to completely fill the space made by the absent buildings. However, it also made clear what absence was most important, and continued to cover over other spaces of suffering and absences that may have needed responses as well. Even now, in the spring of 2003, a competition to design a more permanent filling of the Trade Center site is nearing completion, and the ways of filling absences evolve. Simultaneously, as war continues with Iraq, the FBI has interviewed thousands

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of Iraqis in the United States who are often grappling with being absent from family and past homes. The only expressions they are usually asked for deal with the Iraqi government and military, while the silence connected to their suffering remains unspoken. How can one write about the value of absence, and point to the absences that are not even noticed?

Around Thanksgiving of 2001, I happened to be driving on Route 27 past the empty space on one side of the Pentagon. I was visiting a friend who lives and works as a nurse in the Washington D.C. area. She commented on the overwhelming need to respond personally in some way, to help out, and noted the vast lines for giving blood that initially appeared. But, no longer in view of the Pentagon’s cleaned up gap, we discussed the lack of available responses. Going out and buying something to help the economy, which was the main option being promoted at the time, seemed woefully inadequate, if not inappropriate. We wondered what would be an effective and ethical way to respond to this suffering, especially in a new state of war, where traditional sacrifices of goods or personal desires seemed to be shunned.

As a writing instructor, many of my own words and my students’ words seemed terribly weak or one-sided in response to suffering around the event of September 11. However, the classroom is a uniquely situated opportunity for thinking about how to respond to suffering. I want to ask broadly how we can write about suffering, particularly in the case of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. More particularly, it seems that suffering in this case is all about absence, but not all absences are the same, nor do all stand out. If we conceive of suffering in this case as related to absence, there has to be some space that a person or thing is absent from. And if we view our responses (written or otherwise) as ways to fill or enter those various absences, the story that is told also enters that space. The absences we see and the writing or stories that enter those absences are highly dependent on location. We can then ask, how do the spaces in which we write about suffering impact our writing and value particular stories over others? What absences do we try to fill and what missing things are covered up, going completely unnoticed, in the ways we respond to great pain? The space of the car on Route 27, the space where the Trade Center towers used to stand, and the space of a 30 by 45 foot classroom on a large university campus create very different valuations of stories. It is crucial to look at specific sites to see how they notice, cover over, and write responses to suffering as absence. I want to start with a classroom on September 12, 2001, and then expand the discussion to see broader cultural responses to suffering in other spaces, and to see
the ways stories are exchanged and suffering is written in those sites. How does the value of suffering, and even the definition of suffering, shift as we jump from the classroom to the spaces people inhabit across the United States, to governmental sites of response? Writing about absence hinges on the space an absence is from, and how the writing can show the uses of that absence in new contexts.

My small method of looking at value and absence here—and by here I mean in the space of this paper and the imaginative space around this three-drawer, plywood desk that smells slightly of pipe tobacco and is illuminated to narrow, interrogation-room proportions by a single lamp—will consist of exploring one of these spaces of value. The physical space surrounding a story, along with more intangible but vital aspects of forces influencing a space for exchanging stories, can assist us in exposing how values for stories are created, hidden, and shifted in the geographical-historical space of North America in the months after September 11. Theorist Peter Hitchcock writes about the connection between theoretical, conceptual, and physical spaces, saying, “By re-imagining these spaces postcolonial theorists for instance, are not playing the theory game (despite the lure of that interpellation) but are blasting the assumption that conceptual space does not have a geographic correlative” (108). We must continually point out the impact that physical and historical spaces have on concepts, and how the evolving factors in a space change the ways stories are valued.

This intense moment of cultural conflict called “September 11” needs a couple of clarifications. The temporal area I refer to is a shifting moment. The symbol “9/11” signifies a time that includes a specific day, but also shrinks to certain moments on that day, and expands to include related moments since then. It also defines the day as belonging to a particular geographical and cultural space simply by permeating languages with the month listed before the day. The day is linked spatially to America through that simple ordering of written numerals. By cultural conflict in this context, I refer to the often nonviolent but intensified conflicts among value systems in the U.S. Attorney General’s office, for those connected with fire-fighters, among Arab immigrants to the United States, the Portland Police Department, families of those who died in the World Trade Center towers, the creators of U.S. foreign policy, members of Arab-American media organizations, and many others. I hope to create a small site here both to think about the production of useful responses to the suffering of “9/11” from different temporal distances and to encourage reflection on how ethical spaces for writing suffering can be created.
Writing about absence and writing that simply is absent (perhaps I should say nonwriting or missing texts) receives value unevenly in different spaces. These variations in value can help us better comprehend responses to suffering.

**Missing on September 12**

Why do you want to talk to me? I have nothing to say. Just a few foolish stories here and there.

— Damyanti Sahgal

Our classroom rests almost on one edge of a triangle that could be drawn between the three airplane crash sites in Pennsylvania, New York, and Washington D.C. At 7:57 a.m. on September 12, 2001, I joined the students taking my first-year writing course to tell the mere beginnings of stories about our reactions and feelings from the past day, relegating my previously planned comma usage lesson and definition-writing activities to the back of my lesson plan folder. In a miniscule way, my classroom, surprisingly filled that Wednesday morning with twenty-three of the twenty-four students enrolled in the course, provided a temporary site for small histories, where Adam could relate a story about a cousin who barely made it out of the World Trade Center, express the experience of still waiting to find out the location of his aunt, and use both vignettes for the bit of psychological relief that could come from expressing anxiety and making his TV experience real by telling it to others.

He sat to my left in the five rows of students in early 1990s style desks, with the rows crammed closely together in order to make walking space on the outside edge of the room, thereby creating a structured intimacy. Even the chalkboards that surrounded the third-story class on every wall space except where the windows opened onto a mid-campus street exposed a space of potential expression. You really could just write on the walls in 319 Willard Building, but no one did that morning. Students still raised hands and took turns in that environment, but they occasionally asked questions of one another too. Adam’s small fragment of a personal history also traveled on new lines of use and retelling; intentionally or not, he gave that story to others for their own further understanding and breadth of communal experience surrounding the attacks. His story seemed valuable because of the connection he had to people really there in New York City.
Fariba Nawa, a graduate student and the daughter of Afghan exiles, tells her story, which at least found a place to be heard on the Internet. She is a student in a different space and with a different basis for speaking, and I am sure she too was absent that Wednesday. Hers is a story of fear and waiting at first, and hints at the kind of space questioning Arab men in their homes might produce. The controlling power of fear and the identification of ethnicity, in a racially charged moment, link her words to the men to be questioned, but the difference in social status, visa status, and education inscribe a gap into that connection.

I paced back home with my two Muslim friends, locked the door and sat still in shock. I hoped no one on our street knew that Muslims live in the house. Ever since the Taliban seized my birthplace, Afghanistan and Afghans have become the butt of slurs, jokes and ridicule. But stereotyping and verbal attacks are not my fear anymore. The magnitude of this tragedy may provoke violence against Muslim and especially Afghan communities in this country. Few listen to the warnings by the media that Americans should not convict any group without proof (Nawa).

One can look at this internal worry and only speculate about the unheard stories of the men that make a questioning exchange with government authorities. What Nawa portrays, however, is a sense of fear and desire to hide, to be left alone, and to not be singled out based on ethnicity. That story of worry does not fit into the economy of security that comes with questioning about Arab friends and countries.

My own reluctance to share with the class much of my personal response to the tragedy the day before came from a desire to allow the students a freer space for their own early expressions, or so I told myself. However, the intensity of emotions and increased volatility of possible reactions to a story of response that I told contributed to my failure to risk releasing total control over the uses of my own story. I gave up the option to deliver a story in that context in return for the personal connection with the class, potential for learning for myself alongside them, and emotional relief that may have returned to me and others in attendance. At the same time, the lack of narrative from the authority figure in the classroom site (on a day when the idea of authority as a teacher appeared absurd in the face of the word responsibility) altered the space for and value of stories that were exchanged by about two-thirds of those twenty-three students.

In the same course several months later, we read a chapter by Urvashi Butalia about the Partition of India. In it she seeks to provide an opening for the voices of women, children, and members of the lowest caste to be heard. We read a section to help us think about the position and power of
a writer in relation to what is almost completely unspoken. Her work is far from September 11, yet without Partition there is no Pakistan, a space for possible help and resistance to tracking terrorists and the war on terrorism. Butalia also worked to move beyond the political histories to begin to understand through many interviews “how families were divided, how friendships endured across borders, how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives” (7). In the process, Butalia was questioned herself by some individuals, including Damyanti Sahgal, who wondered why her story could now be valued, and published in another continent. The interview process took place in homes, often with a husband or other family members around. The tasks of caring for a guest and dwelling in the same family roles as usual in that domestic place could appear incongruous with questions that seemed to value these basic stories of family hardships. Butalia performs a questioning process that alters the value of stories to a level that even the storytellers have a hard time accepting. The new question can start to denaturalize the old system of value, making an uncomfortable space until the new questions are assimilated into an adjusted natural system of value.

Adam was one of the students present in class, and I was careful to notice attendance that day. Presence in class seemed to be a way to struggle against the pain associated with absence, and it was a day when we noted absences more than usual. The gap left in the New York skyline, not to mention individual lives, associated absence with profound hurt. Questions about the missing class member bounced rapidly around the room as that single absence established personal feelings of lost security for many of us in the room. She also was a faint reminder to consider the other classroom absences, both students on other days and particular voices and conversations, that often fail to signify moments of suffering. What disparate absences in other spaces were we missing?

**Cultural Spaces**

I argued that armed struggle is less about arms and more about organization, that a successful armed struggle proceeds to out-administer the adversary and not out-fight him. And that the task of out-administration was a task of out-legitimating the enemy.

—Eqbal Ahmad
That same day in a very different space, writer and vice-president of the Arab-American Action Network, Ali Abunimah, realized the risk of not telling a story in his case. He opened an article by saying, “It is extremely hard to write this morning, and yet I feel I have to. . . . Rumors of Arabs being arrested, or Arabic-language materials being found by police are already being made much of. On top of the pain we are all feeling for the continuing tragedy, this fills me with fear.” Abunimah related his fragmentary personal history of emails received over the previous twenty-four hours, notes full of both violence and compassion. The flow of information made his story one that came from a multiplicity of geographical sites and ideological views, put together in a contradictory unit.

His space had a different form of absence than my classroom. The letters of undeserved hatred and unsolicited support, combined with the rumors that concern him, made poignant the absence of a powerful public space for his voice. Given the letters and stories of violence he had received in the previous few hours, the need try to exchange a written form of his own experience for increased attention to the security of Arab-Americans appeared necessary. His story established a public space on the Internet where disparate people, from compassionate Canadians to enraged Midwestern mothers, could link together. However, while many of his friends certainly created a supportive network, Abunimah’s valuable but limited Internet site emphasized the absence of public listening that the classroom seemed to provide.

The section entitled “A Nation Challenged” from the New York Times ran until December 31, 2001 and included numerous stories of those who were victims of the World Trade Center attack in some way, and then gave way to alternate spaces with their own stories (like the Enron scandal and more coverage of the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict to name two immediate followers). The process of creating that news space started with questions. Reporters had to interview family members of those who died in the World Trade Center, and had to query locals with potentially “significant” stories of events in mid-September. In a surprisingly similar way, I, along with many other teachers, had to begin class on September 12 with questions. I asked students to write responses to the day before, asked if they knew people in New York city or near the Pentagon, and asked what they had been able to and still needed to talk about at that point.

Butalia’s questions and questions from New York Times reporters provide instances to juxtapose with another set of stories based on questions and absences. On November 9, 2001, U.S. Attorney General
John Ashcroft created a unique space for the exchange of personal histories through a directive to various antiterrorism task forces. Approximately 5000 young men of Arab descent, in the U.S. on nonimmigrant visas, were listed as people to be questioned. Access to the stories of these men being questioned is more than difficult, but if student Fariba Nawa sat behind a locked door after September 11, what kind of space for an exchange of stories would questions about sympathies for terrorists create?

Perhaps it is obvious to point out that the questions and values available in the exchange influence the answers and stories to be told, but it is important to recognize that whether it is the police and Arab men, or Butalia listening to Indian women, that asking questions establishes a conceptual and emotional space. A Michigan man in the U.S. on a visa can only safely deliver information showing no sympathy with the terrorists, because the security value is not focused on his safety. Pressures on a story and the subtly leading question, which is really the case with all questions, are unavoidable, and that act of questioning itself sets up foci in the value economy. Security, authority, mobility, access, ethnicity, and cooperation as key aspects to a story in this space are hard to ignore given the questions. But how does the site of a young Arab man’s small apartment in Chicago, whose visa status is much more uncertain than Nawa’s, affect his story?

Amnesty International has reported on numerous prisoners, including Ghassan Dahduli, who most likely arrived in Jordan hours from when Mr. Ashcroft announced his plan. Mr. Dahduli’s movements were not identical with his mobility-identity, a fact that is more poignant when one considers his briefly mentioned family.

Ghassan Dahduli, a Palestinian-Jordanian was detained on September 22 in a Texas jail for a visa violation. He was held for two months in solitary confinement with only one hour of exercise a week in a small, enclosed yard. He was shackled during non-contact visits with his family; denied personal property and, unlike other inmates, denied access to TV. On November 28, he was deported to Jordan. He had agreed to Voluntary Departure to Jordan, as he was afraid he would be held indefinitely in jail in the U.S., and was unable to support his family. Fearing for their future, his Jordanian wife and five children under sixteen (all of whom are U.S. citizens) left the U.S. for Jordan three weeks before Dahduli’s deportation (Amnesty International).

Five children, all U.S. citizens, and an unnamed woman, “his Jordanian wife” who took responsibility for moving her family across the
world, changed their geographical space against their supposed mobility. The round-tabled office room for deciding who to take into custody clashes with the space of questioning, which alters the value of six people’s stories, all of whom were not part of that questioning. However, their movements remained free, and fit what many other citizens could do.

Amnesty International attempted to write about Dahduli’s suffering. They tried to make his absence from society and from his family known. But there was no writing that could create a structure where he would not feel the need to “freely” absent himself from the country. The lack of media coverage and the unavailability of contacts for him prevented Dahduli from writing powerfully about his own suffering. His suffering included a forced absence from his family, unlike my absent student, whose absence was precisely due to being with her family. Amnesty International could directly describe aspects of Mr. Dahduli’s situation, but their writing failed to create a structure where his absence could be seen and felt in a communal way.

While Amnesty International’s efforts to gain improvements in human rights and conditions for people worldwide are noble, and sometimes effective, it is notable that their story about Dahduli’s suffering and oppression is also centered on issues of mobility. This refraction of movement issues in the Cooperator’s Program addresses Dahduli’s daily movement in exercise, physical restraints on his movement, and international movement for multiple people. Each of these mobility struggles deserves attention on its own, but the value economy Amnesty International adds to here is a reflection of the system that relates security issues to cooperation (defined as working with authorities), and both to freedom as mobility. Amnesty certainly adjusts some of those values, valuing mobility greatly in relation to these particular forms of security and cooperation, but Dahduli’s story can still only be of worth, even in opposition to the dominance of a law enforcement agencies picture of future spaces, in terms similar to those created and reflected in the Cooperator’s Program.

Even though Dahduli’s story has a multitude of directions for use by others, his suffering is officially nonexistent for the November, 2001 economy. Any violation of visa regulations under a law enforcement economy that controls movement to reduce risk negates personal pain. No matter what Ghassan Dahduli’s attitude and actions were toward the United States, the clarity of law naturalizes a value for security. At the same time, Dahduli’s status outside the law, as a noncitizen, ironically
puts him in a position of needing to leave of his own volition, ultimately erasing his story in relation to U.S. authorities.

Dahduli’s aforementioned suffering in prison can appear small in comparison with the loss of life in September 11 in New York, and perhaps large in comparison to others without direct connections to people in the Pentagon or World Trade Center towers. The importance of suffering, and perhaps necessarily its converse, joy, may ultimately prove to be an inescapable factor in all stories we tell. Some stories of suffering or near loss found room on the Internet, as do many stories, but not those told by the men sought in the Cooperator’s Program.

The relative ease of access to spaces on the web for U.S. citizens makes it a major site for collecting histories that include expressions of pain or loss. One of many websites collecting stories about people’s experiences on September 11 is http://mystory.inter.net/. It contains a collection of two-hundred and eighteen individual narratives, including one about Tony and Amanda, which focuses on the personal shock of the attack and the subsequent frenzied attempts to communicate with as many family and friends as possible. “Where is she? Was the bookstore where she works evacuated? Is she safe? Does she know I am safe? Finally, one of the buddies I am with gets through to her pager via his text pager.” These are the questions Tony mentions in his submission to the site’s readers. The site shows a picture of the two together at a restaurant, and allows one to read the stories in order, search for a particular story, or jump randomly, never leaving behind the September 11 banner at the top of each page. The space requires a certain amount of Internet capability to find it and submit a story, implicitly basing the opportunity to be heard on a certain level of education that lets one use a computer and talk about suffering. The structure for writing about absence in a communal manner requires both a framework of sympathy and a framework of html. People can write about their own loss and suffering and gain the sensation of being heard and valued if they have access.

The moving and agonizing picture of a tearful woman holding papers for posting on a wall that show the picture of a man, with the caption “Hoping: A New Yorker seeks her fiancé” leaps out of Time magazine’s commemorative edition for 2001 and epitomizes what could be valued as suffering in a reflection on September 11 from early in 2002 (33). Again suffering involves a search for one who is missing. Very individual anguish over the loss or possible loss of another person, specifically a close friend or family member who was apparently innocent in relation to the violence and had a hopeful future in front of him or her stands out
as a real loss. And it is. The fact that the picture reflects an engaged couple, with a literal promise for a not-yet-fulfilled future shows a particular value for what we could simply call guaranteed potential in this exchange economy. I cannot escape these same cultural values that feel so strong I have trouble calling them cultural. What culture would not agree? In fact, that value of innocent loved ones with potential was affirmed in a general way through the expressions of condolence from around the world. International writing about suffering requires saying that an absence cannot be filled, but that it is recognized and that the absence itself is felt elsewhere. The construct of terrorism creates a translatable language for sharing in suffering. Writing suffering by recognizing absences, seeing the unseen, and pointing to the unsayable contrasts with Ghassan Dahduli, whose absence was his almost alone.

Looking at the stories that are in some way connected to the September 11 attacks, we can also work a little bit in reverse from Butalia’s process of asking how to create new spaces for questions. Instead, we can ask what this specific space can tell us about the value of different stories, at least in November of 2001, and how supposedly fixed exchanges shift when the space changes.

The name of a Learning Channel TV show, *Trading Spaces*, popular among some interior-design-interested demographic groups in the United States, is a clear metaphor for changes in value by changing a space. *Trading Spaces* allows two neighbors to redo one room in each other’s house, with the help of a few professionals and on a limited budget. The room (for better, and often for worse) can be utterly transformed, creating new flows with adjoining portions of the house, but often simply hiding or shifting older characteristics of the room, whether that is an awkwardly located fireplace or a kitchen counter jutting out at a unique angle. The neighbors and designers certainly produce real change, but it is never utterly new. It always involves a shift in part of the space as it aligns with other aspects of the room, whether those characteristics are the green walls, the 1960s chandelier, or a very modern red sofa. As locations for value change, or as value-producers trade spaces, the values by which stories can be heard take part in a shift analogous to the world of room exchanges.

Value economies are created through specific techniques that can permeate different institutions similarly but that allow for shifts in the value economy, as another post-September 11 program can help show us: the new USA Freedom Corps program asks Americans to spend the equivalent of two years of their lives doing volunteer work. The program
defines volunteer activity in a slightly new way, which includes working with community organizations, serving those who do not have their basic needs met overseas, and working to protect the U.S. from terrorism. The program uses old tested strategies of guilt, promoting togetherness, and appealing to a desire to help others as ways to inspire volunteer work, and it ties it all together under the rubric of freedom. Freedom is joined to service in a way that moves beyond service in the armed forces or other organizations designed around the term freedom. To step back to late November of 2001 again, I had the first of several conversations with people about the desire or even need to be helping or serving in some way. In an odd mental way, not serving functioned as a restriction on freedom, or at least on the pursuit of happiness.

The connection between freedom as a central societal value based on service to others in a general sense, applicable to all citizens and residents of the U.S., reached an emotional plateau on March 11, 2002, the six-month anniversary of the terrorist attacks. CBS aired a documentary put together by two French brothers, Jules and Gedeon Naudet, with the help of James Hanlon, a New York firefighter and friend of theirs. The material they taped while trying to make a story about a new firefighter "becoming a man" changed drastically when they taped many of the events of September 11, 2001, while following downtown New York City firemen into and around the World Trade Center towers. The brothers were separated for most of the day, struggling to document events as their only way to help, while constantly worrying about each other and living through the turmoil of being overwhelmed by collapsing towers. Jules Naudet performed his service of leaving the camera running for us, while the fire chief's tackle gains symbolic status as the force necessary for security, on the body of the unenlightened foreigner, and is then exalted as an act of service. And in this instance, it may have saved a life.

Because the Naudet brothers found a way to network their own story with the societal conflict through extensive editing, what once was the story of Tony, a new firefighter, became partially Tony's story of 9/11, culminating in his dust-covered return to the firehouse, the last man back. Tony and the Naudet brothers' personal histories were adapted and linked to cultural commodities that were already highly valued, and because their story was intertwined from the beginning with the culturally valued heroic firefighters, the impact of their documentary intensified and could be used as a way to memorialize the losses on September 11 for a multitude of viewers. The brothers from France, in the continual hugs and tears at the firehouse on the evening of September 11, became part of the
serving team. In doing their own film work, they came across a sea and helped freedom by the service they could offer, or so goes the imagery. Their filmic version of representing suffering allowed “outsiders” to speak powerfully to many through their own emotional connections to New York’s Fire Department, in their own potential loss of each other, and by their ability to create and enter an absence in the media coverage.

In the midst of the Naudet brothers’ documentary, there were a couple of public service announcements. In the first one, Tom Ridge, Director of Homeland Security, talked about the safety and security of the nation and tied it directly to the work firefighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians, and other health workers do. Work that had previously been seen as service-oriented, but not central to freedom, again was linked to the freedom of the country. A story about service is now a story about preserving freedom, which maybe it ought to be—but spaces open, and spaces close. Service is freedom, which becomes safety and security, which becomes a “return to normalcy,” and normal acts are reciprocally a way to stabilize and serve the country. While it gives a marvelous moment of allowing “normal” stories to be of value, if not heroic, normal is still what happened in the vast before. Stories about intensified normal values, like Jules and Gedeon Naudet’s closer relationship as brothers, can have a space to be valued.

Their documentary also plays with absence in terms of suspense, while they wait for each firefighter to return to the station on September 11. That suspense was very real for many, and it is a happy ending with everyone returning in this case. That happy ending fills the absence, avoiding writing about suffering that leaves larger parts of absences empty. It points to other endings through pictures of many who died that day, but hides some of the sense of loss that never is filled.

That which is seen as abnormal—the Sikh man wearing an eminently noticeable turban—gets shot in Arizona, and not on film. His story has no space, and yet it does, as President Bush shortly after the attacks called for restraint in anger and violence toward those who look different. Different from what was not asked. The Sikh man’s story, which was taken completely from him, does allow “normal” to be influenced, pushing it toward the patriot in words, emotion, and flag displays instead of just skin or assumed cultural background, which brings the circle back to questioning young men based on their ethnicity. Suffering as a documentary on TV was powerful and brought real tears, but it also skates over the long-term emptiness in many living rooms, or behind the counter in the Sikh man’s story. That which is no longer intense disappears. How
can we also create spaces in our writing that holds the steady, throbbing pain that an Arab man thinking about being questioned might feel in his own absences from family, a distant home, and U.S. expectations?

Unanswered Questions

Good afternoon. This afternoon I am announcing a Department of Justice initiative to reach out to freedom-loving people of all nations in the war against terrorism.

—John Ashcroft

The Responsible Cooperator’s Program initiated a new form of relationship and new absences between the U.S. government and many young Arab men living in the United States. The process involved an exchange of information from those young men—often including information about their personal histories, viewpoints, and knowledge of others—for the potential to have an improved visa status and the fast-track to permanent residency or citizenship. It also points out and hides other sufferings in Fall 2001. The program has been adjusted and re-administered in March of 2003 with Iraqis, causing new fears for some. According to Yahya Al-Garib, an advocate for the Iraqi community in Seattle, “Because the agents come unannounced in the daytime, husbands usually aren’t home, leaving agents to question frightened wives who may have limited English skills and misunderstand questions” (Iwasaki). The questions are direct and usually, “Agents are asking immigrants if they know any terrorist groups, anyone who supports terrorists or anyone who works for Saddam Hussein, said Al-Garib, who met with 60 worried Iraqis last weekend.” (Iwasaki). The recent questionings, often with husbands absent, add another layer to the sufferings that cannot be spoken.

The questions asked by Ashcroft’s office’s directive help us begin to understand the kind of values emphasized within that space of exchange, while they also create particular mental and emotional characteristics for the environment. According to the Detroit Free Press and the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), the questions included asking for information about why the men are in the United States, where else they have traveled, and why they have gone to those places. Along with this line of questioning, there are very terrorism-specific questions, including that “the man will be asked how he felt when he heard about the Sept. 11 attacks and whether he noticed anybody who
acted in a surprising or inappropriate manner. He’ll be asked whether he knows anyone who is sympathetic to the hijackers or other terrorists, and ‘whether he shares those sympathies to any degree’” (Action Alert). The memo also features questions about “selling or supplying others with false identification documents,” “knowledge of anyone who is advocating ‘jihad’ or urging others to overthrow the government or to attack Americans, either under the guise of religion or otherwise,” and about “access to guns or to any explosives or harmful chemical compounds, or has any training or experience in the development or use of such weapons” (Guidelines 5). The questions make no pretense about either the main topic or who has the authority to create values with questions. The gaps between an announcement and questions in the Department of Justice conference room and terrorism interrogations in a young man’s small apartment still manage to disappear at times in the guise of people simply asking an open question or two with free responses, like seat neighbors on an airplane. What could be more selflessly caring than asking for a stranger’s story?

The Deputy Attorney General’s memo on the questioning process noted that to avoid implying that someone was being taken into custody, the interviews should usually be conducted somewhere other than the police station (1), a thoughtful move, but where has the pristine conference room gone? What changes in the story, its value, and the mental environment by placing the officer in the home of a person being questioned? A space of security, sitting in one’s own wooden chair, might not feel that way any longer. The Department of Justice conference room removes outside observers from the conflict between two other inside spaces, where the home is of value to allow more information to be elicited, and the pressures of questioning are not as tame as in a conference room where the Attorney General is in full control.

Ashcroft’s announcement in a place physically signifying authority and with automatic access to print, radio, and television media also implied linkages to other groups. This act of creating a space for valuing particular stories required connections with the INS, FBI, and a multitude of police departments. As a network of institutions central to regulating law enforcement and movement within and on the borders of the United States, a questioning process centered on the law and movement, but moving beyond those areas came into being. The transcript of Ashcroft’s announcement of the Responsible Cooperator’s Program began as follows:
The title of this initiative is the Responsible Cooperators Program. Under this new initiative, the Department of Justice will provide immigration benefits to noncitizens who furnish information to help us apprehend terrorists or to stop terrorist attacks. We are asking all non-U.S. citizens who are present in the United States or who seek to enter our country to come forward to the FBI with any valuable information they have to aid in the war on terrorism.

In return for this information, the Department of Justice will assist nonresident aliens in obtaining what are called S visas, which are available when the information provided is critical and reliable and the person is placed in danger as a result of sharing that information. S visa holders may remain in the United States for up to three years, and during that period visa holders may apply to become permanent residents and ultimately to become United States citizens. (Ashcroft)

Ashcroft's announcement emphasizes safety and security, both for the United States and for those who get interviewed. Physical safety takes precedence as a value, as does cooperation. Cooperation is defined by the law enforcement network as working with the government, both in terms of the information given here, and in cases like patience with removing shoes and other new security requirements at airports. The new interchangeability of "police officer" with "hero," combined with security concerns, gives extra legitimacy to an announcement about preventative enforcement work, but that force is tempered by the concern about personal freedoms and racial profiling that had time to grow between mid-September and late November. In other words, the Arab man's story writes into American suffering by possibly alleviating future losses and perhaps providing information for arrests that respond to the terrorist attacks as well. Through this writing, the Arab man can avoid being removed from the country, an absence that hides the ways he already is absent from political processes.

Gayatri Spivak talks about economic attempts to control risk and enforce security by, in effect, reducing the futurity of transactions, making them closer to instantaneous. She defines this move saying, "The epistemic violence of imperialism as crisis-management can still operate" (171–72). Dealing with crisis gives a backdrop to creating new spaces of exchange, but as is the case with the Cooperator's Program, they can be highly controlled markets, to the point of informational violence in the process of examining the aspects of the future that appear most valuable or most dangerous. Confining Dahduli was a crisis response that emphasized future spaces to the point of hiding his physical environment,
which itself overcame the geographical distance and risk-filled move to Jordan.

Even before Ashcroft made his announcement, publicly initiating the program, a memo went out from his office about the questioning procedures. Included with the advice it gave about working with translation issues and how to avoid delivering insults accidentally due to cultural differences, it also referred to the possibility of detaining or even charging some men who came forward. Page two of the memo states, “If you suspect that a particular individual may be in violation of the federal immigration laws you should call the INS representative on your Anti-Terrorism Task Force... Those individuals will advise you whether the individual is in violation of the immigration laws and whether he should be detained” (Guidelines 2). At this point, issues of movement take precedence, and whoever has control of the movements of terrorists, potential immigrants, and the men who came forward for the interviews can push certain spaces to the forefront. The value economy emphasizes having control over access to physical locations and the identity status needed to be in particular spaces (citizen, refugee, immigrant, student, and so on). The valuation of my story in one place, noted by particular documents, permissions, or identification numbers that I receive, allows my movement to other spaces. Identity categories map onto official mobility, as spaces for questioning force movements that often oppose that theoretical mobility—when someone feels the need to hide, for example.

The Responsible Cooperator’s Program created an economy of value for stories that emphasize specific definitions for value terms, eliminating other possibilities. I can point to a few of them, supposedly to allow at least some critique of them, yet they are all values that I, at one level, would want to remain for stories I personally tell. The space and economy of value for fragmentary personal histories permeating the Responsible Cooperator’s Program exalts U.S. security in relationship to specific forms of suffering and loss; cooperation in terms of upward, hierarchical relationships; and the broad, slippery coin I just discussed that can appear to negate aspects of the other values: freedom as control of mobility. The young Arab man who is happy to speak to police officers in Michigan and perhaps help prevent future attacks along with gaining new papers to give him more mobility might still wonder why his own privacy and his uncle suffering in poverty are not freedom and security issues. It is not just stories, but values themselves that are silenced, and this silencing is part of allowing other texts, even my own, to speak.
In regard to security, perhaps the key value here, we have to remember that real fear kept thousands from flying in September and October of 2001, and that fear was based on horrific deaths after security breakdowns. The security concept functions as a signifier for physical safety for U.S. citizens with one major oblique counterpoint: the concept and the actual experience of suffering. The questioning process initiated by Ashcroft emphasizes security really against particular and limited forms of suffering. Dominant suffering forms allow other spaces of hurt to be relegated smoothly to subordinate positions. In the exchange of stories in that same November of 2001, particular forms of suffering slipped out of the U.S. security-based value needed in stories of pain. Stories like Ghassan Dahdulí’s cannot match the right kind of suffering, even with their many uses, including my use to try to make a point about spaces for valuing personal histories.

The memo from Ashcroft’s office suggested that questioners should “feel free to use all appropriate means of encouraging individuals to cooperate, including reference to any reward money that is being offered for information about terrorists. However, you should be careful about mentioning an individual’s potential criminal exposure” (2). The creation of this space for exchange and the value of these men’s stories took a twist when the police department in Portland, Oregon refused to cooperate, citing state laws against questioning based on political and religious beliefs and targeting individuals for visa issues. Here it is actually the silence of stories, and the conflict of fighting against a space of exchange that enters the web of values. The continued silence of approximately two-hundred men in the Portland area is exchanged for an opportunity to assert the primacy of state laws and to make a statement against certain types of profiling. The value of personal securities is at stake, but, ironically, the stories of these men who are not brought in for questioning still have no site to be heard. It is only their silence that now speaks more loudly. Oregon’s example of dissent also shows the possibility for unexpected directions of exchange for stories, especially when they enter public spaces where a multiplicity of subjects can work on them. Silence is bestowed as a gift from societal leaders to “the oppressed.”

The exclusive nature of a space involving FBI questioning also silences stories as far as the public is concerned, giving a perhaps dangerous exclusivity to the control over those histories. This dominant silence hides the stories of all the men listed, whether they were interviewed or not. Either the story was taken in and walled off from others in notebooks and recorders the police officers brought, or the men found the
need to disappear, to not be heard. The interviews with the men are not accessible to their friends, to me, or to nearly anyone else. While the stories were told at one point, any continuation of them has been silenced, and the official space for those stories works to limit their exposure in other economies of value. The battle between this form of silencing and the earlier and rights-preserving silencing from the Portland police moved to a national media space, obscuring the fact of the continual past and future silences for these men because of their societal position. The space of conflict was nationalized geographically and put into official spaces, limiting the possibility of seeing the local issue of particular men as examples of a global issue for visa holders. This is not necessarily to glorify the local or global over national spaces, but to suggest that making the issue one between Portland, Oregon and Washington, D.C., the spatial issues between NW 23rd St. and Killingsworth Ave. disappear.

The volitional or accidental silence of the men who chose not to come forward, who refused to answer questions, who altered their stories beyond any connection with truth, or who simply did not hear about the program, changes the locus of the silencing. The various men's resistant, or simply unaware, lack of storytelling suggests that there really was another option, but the only other option was someone else's silence. That someone else, the officer who came by and knocked, does not own the silencing; it steps back to the system behind the questioner, a space that takes security as a key value. Security is from the sole control of stories and movement, so that guesses about the government's movement based on stories become impossible to make.

These three general silences are both created and hidden. In March, the Attorney General's Office expanded their list of men to question and asked for help in locating those who had not heard about the program yet. Phrasing that assumes the silent ones have not heard about the opportunity to speak starts to whittle away the category of silence for those who choose not to speak. Similarly, the act of supporting a state law against ethnic or religious profiling in Oregon covers over the public silence of the men on the questioning list. Their rights are promoted and they will be guaranteed to remain hidden. Even my brief exploration of the silence of this group as Other can begin to erode the potential need for stories to be heard on their own terms.

For the unknown men not questioned in Portland whose stories cannot be heard, the value of that specific silence in the space of the Responsible Cooperators Program suggests that security values are usually first and foremost for U.S. citizens, who have a more guaranteed
future in the physical space of the United States. It also exposes the fact that the value conflict is not just between personal liberties and security as is regularly trumpeted, but also between opposing parties on the status of noncitizens, and between officially recognized bodies for control of story mobility, whether that body is the Department of Justice, a police department, or those with U.S. citizenship.

As with my reluctance to speak in my classroom on September 12, many of us choose or fail to speak out. Writing in response to suffering often needs time to gestate, to gain distance, and to reflect. Yet, this too is a strange luxury. The academic space that enables me to write this essay as part of my own way to deal with absence can slow response. The patience of waiting to respond creates room for more critique or analytic work but often values that distance at the expense of immediate responses, which may be no less useful. Not speaking in an academic setting can have consequences, but it does not make the evening news like the missing interviews in Portland. Silence without pressure to speak is a space of safety for one’s self, which elides the danger of absence and silence for others.

In the Responsible Cooperator’s Program, speaking becomes a form of freedom-as-service. It is a shift in the definition of freedom. Freedom of mobility and freedom as service work differently. Freedom’s association with service assists in reconciling the discrepancy between mobility and all the limitations that came with cooperation and security values. Even the visual space of a documentary-break on TV, in a show without commercials, accentuates the space for the announcement over the daily business of advertising, which hides other spaces of its own.

The Freedom Corps Program, initiated by President Bush, not only continues the relationship between service and freedom, but moves to a slightly new value economy and shows how that change hides other values. In the Freedom Corps Program, we have security from suffering connected to freedom, a freedom that is a type of cooperation initiated by political forces. The values of security, cooperation, and futurity are still central, but their relationships with freedom as a value are reconciled to some extent when freedom-value refers to service more than mobility. This is not to say that mobility no longer matters or that Amnesty International will start critiquing the lack of social work in prisoners’ lives. Mobility is simply assumed in the service that focuses on who moves in and out of the country, in the service that involves actually traveling overseas, and in the ability to shift between any number of community institutions to help out. One value is subsumed into the
background of a story-economy as new values reconcile the contradictions and paradoxes within that economy. Service is easier to reconcile with cooperating with the government and security issues than mobility is. Freedom as service helped move the freedom as mobility verses security and risk value-dilemma. The contradictions within economies of value can be the key to creating new spaces, but mobility and the contradiction do not simply disappear. Mobility is transferred to those serving, and mobility concerns start to fade in regard to those not participating in normal service. Yet, freedom as service does not end the changes in value-terms. The implicit contradiction between almost requiring work, as a servant no less, and the self-determinacy usually equated with freedom will enable new permutations of the space of values. With service locations central in that development, perhaps the geographic site of working with "the poor" in a "foreign" place, or the environment of a suburban community center will allow hopeful new spaces for value economies.

Looking back at the central values and processes of establishing value for the Responsible Cooperator’s Program, we can note that I have not actually told the story of a single man who was questioned. This gap or lack endangers the legitimacy of my whole analysis in one sense, but it also allows the idea of an unvalued story or a silence to assert itself. Silence is neither entirely empty nor singular. The Cooperator’s Program created the framework for multiple forms of silence, and structured space so that the absence of Arab informants and information about terrorist strategies is the absence we see. A lack of stories and attendance can be seen as a sign of resistance, or simply fear, or even the lack of access to media and communication that advertised the program. Yet, it also is suffering through the lack of societal support. The absence of the broader community’s recognition of their difficult position focuses on their difference from other residents of the United States. It serves to even cover over loss that they might feel from the terrorist attacks, just like the students in my classroom on September 12.

Hiding Absence

The production of subjectivity in imperial society tends not to be limited to any specific places. One is always still in the family, always still in school, always still in prison, and so forth.

—Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri
Writing suffering is highly dependent on the space one is in. Writing about pain is also not a matter of connecting everyone to a universal sense of loss, nor is it simply about finding ways to fill up the space of loss. Instead, writing about suffering involves recontextualizing absences so that they will have direct uses for other specific groups. "Use" here is not in the sense of taking advantage of, but use in the sense of something of value and workable. One also must write to show new absences, and to show how certain absences have been hidden, and in doing so attempt to create structures of things that are directly sayable. Speaking into someone else's pain has a role but often is empty itself, such as when condolences are given for the loss of a loved one. The suffering really is unspeakable. But what around that can be said to show the value and profundity of that suffering? The goal is perhaps to find ways of writing around suffering that allow it to be seen and valued, rather than hidden.

Cultures have a variety of ways to value suffering. It can be in terms of present pain, future expectations, unmet needs, or failures in rights. Who does not have that partial personal history of virtually guaranteed but now lost future productivity? Increased restrictions on immigration for all but those who specifically count as refugees, with the political oppression required for that designation, alter the exchangeability and mobility of the stories for many seeking to enter the United States. The loss of life and property due to oppressive ideological entities, such as the Taliban, increases the value of a personal history, since the political entity at fault gives innocence to the refugee, and adds a sense of potential for their work outside of that oppression. Yet, the contemporaneous suffering of extreme poverty, for example, becomes less exchangeable. A life of poverty during near famine-like conditions in western Africa is less likely to be traded for entry into the U.S., especially when that sort of poverty can be seen as a security risk as much as anything else. It is based on a negative space or a lack, while the politically oppressed person has a positive, albeit evil, form of story to give. When security and control are the concerns in a space, the emptiness of poverty misses out. Negative spaces are hard to identify, let alone control or understand for security purposes. And poverty cannot move so well, giving it a geographical space of otherness that one can put off dealing with, even as I give poverty an abstract face in a few spare sentences while my mere attempts to write provide not only the rice, but also the fish that fills me now.

Whatever story one tells also involves some level of cooperation. In a space where cooperation is defined hierarchically rather than horizontally or in other ways (especially since horizontal networking seems to
usually be a dominant cooperative form at this point), the risk of giving up control over one’s own story intensifies. That risk in a time of conflict implies at least two issues. First, there has to be some sort of power to give up. In this case, that means there must be at least a minimal space for the story to be heard and exchanged in order for a decision about the risk of speaking to occur. Second, I have been speaking about stories as some sort of transferable object or as a commodity. Yet, in these exchanges, the story is not completely lost. Abunimah, whose initial published reaction to the September 11 attacks we heard at the beginning of this piece, still retains his own fragmentary history and potential changes to his own ideas about September 11, just as my student Adam can reuse and retell his reactions to hearing from and about his cousin in the Trade Center towers. When cooperation implies an upward movement, both in terms of who gets to value and use the story and in terms of the status gained in return for information, then the links for where stories are told become slightly reconfigured. The memo from Ashcroft’s office encouraged officers to build semi-permanent links with the men who came in, formalizing lines of communication that tend to run vertically through the power stratification of society, and beginning to limit horizontal connections when the story is about security and cooperation itself is hidden behind laws and walls.

In *Country of My Skull*, an intense look at the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, journalist and poet Antjie Krog spotlights the importance and precision of how Archbishop Desmond Tutu questioned Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. She points out in a conversation with another journalist that by focusing on Madikizela-Mandela’s honor and her code of conduct, Tutu allowed her to admit to wrongdoing and maintain her honor, setting a certain cooperation standard. Through this, “A space was created for the first time for both her and her followers to admit in an honorable way that things went wrong. Dare one ask for more?” (Krog 340). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission stands out as a highly politicized instance of a new site for stories to be exchanged. For perpetrators of violence, it was very literally an exchange of the truth about violence, suffering, and the ends people met for the possibility of amnesty. Turning themselves in was a very literal risk to their own freedom. Those designated as victims were also given a place for their stories to be exchanged in a market that valued, or at least tried to value, reconciliation and the possibility of peaceful future relations above all else. Tutu’s questioning process within this space helps demonstrate the importance of reconciliation in that context, where one por-
trayed as a criminal was even allowed to maintain honor and was called beloved, in order to make a space within the space of the commission for Madikizela's followers and their victims to perhaps dwell in the same area again. To cooperate is to risk, and the men who spoke to police questioners are not so far removed from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its possible amnesty, but the force of a public sphere has disappeared in the November, 2001 version.

Not only does this historical space for stories show the creative power of questioning, but it exemplifies the risk factor of cooperation. Cooperation with the TR Commission worked less hierarchically than in the Responsible Cooperators Program, but the Commission still had a major form of authority. I hesitate before equating the World Trade Center attacks with decade-long struggles like those in South Africa or surrounding the Partition of India and Pakistan, but just as the events in those lands are not simply the moments creating or ending apartheid, nor the second that made Partition official, September 11, is not a single morning. Those decade-long struggles can suggest that the complexity of cooperation and risk involves more than reporting to authorities.

Absence as suffering is always structured. We need to see the conditions that make absences visible and then think about how to create those conditions through our own writing. Only as it is used in a communal way does absence gain wide value as suffering. How can one write suffering in a way that shows the structured use of suffering for communal value? If absences must become useful to others in a particular space to gain value in society, we must look for ways to recontextualize stories of loss, or to point to the unspeakable in new settings that show a broader use. Well before the "present" World Trade Center attack, but with reference to prior moments of crisis around JFK's assassination and economic battles, cultural theorist Evan Watkins talks about the role of information as a commodity and claims, "Information is information only if and when some conditions of use are made conceptually visible. Unlike other commodities, the very identity of information depends on conceptualizations of use" (104). One necessarily must be able to see how information, or some form of a partial personal history in our case, can be used before it takes a position of some value in a space of exchange. I want to suggest that the story is not valued simply because of the use-identity the receiver has for the story either, but for the spectrum of foreseeable potential use values for a range of people who may receive the story. Put another way, the story an Arab man tells to the police takes its material, verbal form based on questioning that helps direct it to a particular form
and use that the Department of Justice establishes. That line is cooperation. Yet, each decision the Department of Justice makes about flight security and personal mobility functions as a response to the hidden, partial, and adjusted stories these men give. As he timidly or boldly comes forth with his story, the immigrant gives shape to the previous emptiness of a department in the U.S. government. One could say that he shapes the space of activity and values a thousand miles away in Washington D.C. through an explanation of only one way that false ID papers and visas are produced.

Incongruencies appear between the perceived exchanges in different physical spaces in this security and cooperation economy. In Ashcroft’s announcement, “The Department of Justice will assist nonresident aliens in obtaining what are called S visas, which are available when the information provided is critical and reliable and the person is placed in danger as a result of sharing that information” (1). In the conference room connoting law enforcement, potentially heroic witnesses can be pictured, exchanging their personal safety for the good of the country and their own visa status. The safety risk for informants, easily handled by such a powerful and official institution with security guards for its own space, masks the alternate risk of getting in trouble for a lapsed visa for some of the men. The latter risk is much clearer when a police officer comes to your workplace and no TV cameras are recording it. Incongruent values and risks in story exchanges occur when the space moves. In a sense, an official economy of exchange falsifies (without lying) the perceived risks and values, because no exchanges occur in the space and conditions where an official declares values.

Writing can try to directly present suffering, as in the TV documentary. It can also focus on actions to avoid the pain of absence, as in the Responsible Cooperater’s Program. But because this writing all takes place in spaces where many stories are devalued or ignored, one must think about how to write in ways that establish structures that create poignant absences. In a terrible way, the terrorist attacks created a powerful symbolic absence, perhaps even related to other suffering. How can our writing and our classrooms speak powerfully in ways that allow others to recognize absences and the unspeakable? Writing about suffering as absence can involve attempting to fill that empty space, but should more look at how to move that empty space to new settings, so others can see its use and the writer herself can experience it anew. Writing about suffering also must work to show the other absences that are covered by the obvious suffering in a space. In the classroom, once time passes, new
absences become obvious in the space where all that was once noticed was a missing student.

**Time’s Presence**

For the first time since the intifada erupted in September 2000, a Palestinian woman carried out a bombing. And by Wednesday, officials were certain the attacker intended to die, making it the first-ever female suicide bombing in Israel. . . . One sister recalled hearing her say she wanted to die “a martyr.” The 27-year-old Idris lived with her mother and other relatives in a refugee camp in Ramallah.

—Naomi Segal

Six months later I could give a new class two very disparate readings about the causes of the September 11 attacks, and I asked for, among other things, a personal response to the analyses given in those two articles. Creating a space or a market for stories to be valued in moments of exchange seemingly necessarily includes some form of questioning process. The simple act of asking another individual a question about their personal history initiates a setting where they can work to develop a story to give you in exchange for any number of things in return. The creation of that story is again limited by the risk factor, risk of personal feelings, future uses of your story, or for some, even personal danger. Again, the manner of questioning is key to determining what information might be withheld in that micro-market of values.

Butalia also realized and lingered on the importance of listening and not simply asking new questions, but asking in new ways, especially while talking with Indian women. She notes, “I realized too that in my questioning, something I had not taken into account was that in order to be able to ‘hear’ women’s voices, I had to begin to pose different questions, to talk in different situations, and to be prepared to do that most important of things, to listen: to their speech, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances” (100). To create the power of a space for exchange of these “unheard” stories, Butalia not only had to convince some tellers that their stories were potentially of value, but had to dwell on the type of site she was creating for the exchange of personal histories through her questions.

In a small but similar vein, I changed the type of questioning process for my class, six months after September 11, seeking to create a space for the exchange of stories that has particular parameters. Months later, the
absences one notices have also changed. I would have to look back at my attendance sheet to have any idea who was present or absent that day. Instead, my students noticed different absences in the responses to war in Afghanistan. In a basic way, the more recent space in my class values academic reflection over emotional expression to a greater extent than a September classroom did. It is an analytical space, one where I structure arguments on the chalkboard, and the wooden desk that I sat on on September 12 sometimes imposes itself between the class and me, as the drive for analysis takes over the classroom. A few students let their emotions pour forth in an assignment that involved analyzing an article focusing on the role of U.S. foreign policy in creating conditions for violence, but most students actually stepped back and observed the rhetorical tactics of the author, even when encouraged to respond personally. The issue of questioning grows into a reflection on how to use questions to create places in the class for new forms of creative and critical thinking to be valued.

Academic and activist Eqbal Ahmad spoke about the importance of pointing out the moral paradox in the position of one's opponent in order to gain the political backing of others, and how that tool was often necessary for political change (29). It is in the realization of moral paradoxes within our own cultural spaces of value that we may begin to be able to alter some of those spaces for exchange. However, timing is vital in the process of pointing out paradoxes, and changes in association, like linking freedom to service, can often overcome more apparent paradoxes without changing material conditions.

In March of 2002, when a student of mine read an article by Arundhati Roy in the September 29, 2001 edition of the Guardian, she brought out the temporal factors in valuing personal stories and responses. The Roy piece, entitled "The Algebra of Infinite Justice," acknowledged the horror and loss of September 11, but focused on the role of the U.S. government in creating a context through foreign policy actions for an attack like that to occur. The astute student pointed out how she was surprisingly un-offended by the article, and actually found parts of it compelling, while noting that if she had read it on September 29th her reaction would probably have been quite different. The space fluctuates significantly over time, and often has small windows for certain stories.

I have asked questions about how spaces for value work with partial personal histories, and how value-economies established exchanges after September 11. My questions in writing here create a particular space
where I take control over fragments of fragments for my own exchanges. This academic space allows the stories I have used to be traded for extending a theoretical conversation, potential publication, learning for myself and those I teach, and the possible furthering of my career and power to create more lines of exchange. I have, almost of necessity, established a space where the stories of those five-thousand Arab men are not heard, but are networked with a series of other stories. Nevertheless, the question about my own continued responsibility to those whose stories I have taken control of, after they released those histories in other spaces, haunts each quote. As I make a space, in this and other writings, with particular analytical and behavioral values, the stories from these men that I have not heard must link constantly to new bodies, examples, and spaces, escaping the false limitation of the “five-thousand Arab men” label. As their stories cooperate, in the sense of network with to create a new temporary subject, with New York City public service workers or small farmers in the mid-west, additional fluctuating spaces with lever-aged value systems are created.

I will teach in a new space next semester: a new physical classroom space, in a new geographic space on campus, with a different emotional and mental environment in the class. Greater temporal distance from the date September 11, 2001, will have been reached, perhaps adding to incongruencies between the advertised safety of the classroom and the value-spaces we may have to address, whether those are New York City or a questioning process with an Arab man in the Midwest. In traversing that distance, we must not simply try to re-create another space, but must address how our own space establishes values that hide the economies of value elsewhere, whether we think of them as good or bad. In the conflict between one’s own cultural spaces—like the high-technology classroom in 223 Thomas building, the conference room for the Department of Justice, and the freeway in Washington D.C. that lets one see the giant empty space in the Pentagon—the differences in place often cover differences in story that call into question what someone can even call her own culture. The places of Iraq, a house with Iraqi immigrants in Seattle, and FBI offices also hide stories and suffering of each other. As the values of the classroom shift, we must examine what previous values or conflicts make that change possible, and we must ask how our students can see the process of making both presences and absences disappear. If my students write about 9/11 next semester, what absences will we notice, and what techniques for shifting the values of stories can they discover in our mutual site of learning? And how can we write in ways that gives power
to the suffering of people like the Iraqis that Yahya Al-Garib helps represent in a time of war?

Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

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