

THE DESTINY OF THE MISSING

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As the first images of an airplane crashing into the World Trade Center were broadcast around the world on the morning of September 11, 2001, the citizens of the United States of America—from Hollywood housewives and Iowa potato farmers to stockbrokers and childcare workers on Wall Street—seemed to be instantaneously pricked and paralyzed by the shattering of glass, the collapsing of iconic towers, the surreal unfamiliarity of vulnerability, and the poison of fear. For the first time in a long time, America was relatively silent. In those first few hours following the attacks, before shock and denial yielded to the desire to assuage acute suffering, a few tangible demonstrations of unadulterated emotional rawness and honesty emerged. One of the first and most poignant of such displays was the fleet of missing person posters plastered across the face of Manhattan. Initially intended to aid in the identification of the missing, they offered an unsullied tribute to the missing people's unique personalities and distinguishing attributes.

But in the days and weeks to come, such testaments to the loss of distinctive individuals disappeared from the national landscape. The victims' stories inundated all faces of mass media, monopolizing mainstream and alternative news networks alike. And yet, despite the victims' pervasive presence in the media, the actual individuals killed in the terrorist attacks—the names and faces, the unique and transparent personas revealed in the missing person posters—were strangely missing from their own dialogue. What explains this ironic contradiction? What accounts for the 9/11 victims being center stage while simultaneously reduced to the spotlight's shadow?

In order to understand the mass media's treatment of the 9/11 victims since the attacks, it is necessary to identify what the absence of individual personas from the media's dialogue—from the evidently newsworthy "victim story"—served to accomplish. Prominent authors Joan Didion and Benedict Anderson offer relevant and invaluable insight. In their books *Sentimental Journeys* and *Imagined Communities: The Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, respectively, they analyze the media's role in facilitating certain symbolic ideologies that kindle a sense of social cohesion. In particular, the specific elements of abstraction and idealization, which typify Didion's "sentimental narrative," exemplified the victims' media portrayal (255). Furthermore, these elements were a prerequisite for Anderson's "imagined community of the nation" (22).

The first phase of the 9/11 victims' characterization began with their transformation into "sentimental narrative," Joan Didion's term for the generalization of an event into an emotionally drenched and unsuspectingly politicized fable, or maudlin chronicle, which offers its audience a "lesson" or an "encouraging promise of narrative resolution" (260). In describing the qualities and consequences of such narratives, Didion repeatedly draws on the example of the Central Park jogger, a

woman who was brutally raped and beaten in New York City's Central Park in 1989. The jogger was a high-profile crime story and was eventually fashioned into a characterization of the city itself—its problems, solutions, and even its inimitable essence, what made it “so vibrant and so great” (256–58, 260). As a rape victim, the jogger remained nameless in most mainstream press coverage. Though this convention is typically construed as a show of respect for the victim's privacy, Didion suggests a more utilitarian and self-serving function: the jogger's anonymity gave the media an unfettered license to marginalize her—to strip her of the idiosyncrasies and varied elements of character, which collectively account for any person's individuality, in order to turn her story into a more generalizable “sentimental narrative” (260).

Although no such convention guaranteed the *9/11* victims' anonymity, and the individual victims had been publicly named on various occasions, this tendency to “distort and to flatten,” to generalize beyond recognition, was indeed the crux of the *9/11* narrative (Didion 272). Consequently, it illuminates the motivation for the absence of individuality and distinguishing characteristics from the media's presentation of the victims. While the sheer number of individuals comprising the overarching category of “victims” rendered the logistics of accurate individual media portrayal to some degree unfeasible, rather than simply acknowledging this predicament, the media chose to capitalize upon the *9/11* victims' intrinsic generalization, and fashion them, just like the jogger, into an iconic caricature.

For example, *America Weeps* (Fig. 1), a heavily distorted photographic reproduction of one of the original 90,000 missing person posters, unequivocally illustrates the media's characteristic distortion and flattening of the *9/11* victims. The original poster has been disrobed of all its distinctive elements: the snapshot, intended as a reference point for identification, has been rendered a painterly emblematic abstraction, leaving the soldier's face hopelessly unidentifiable; the soldier's name, written physical description, family contact information, and the original “last seen” statement have been eliminated entirely.



Fig. 1. Jones, Bronston. *America Weeps*. 2001. Photograph. Bronston.com.
Web. 28 October 2009.

Upon the blank slate left by the erasure of an individual victim's identity, the "character" of the 9/11 victims as a group could easily be fabricated. Didion notes that, in fashioning such a character into a sentimental narrative, "crimes are universally understood to be news to the extent that they offer, however erroneously, a story, a lesson, a high concept" (255). In light of this, she attributes the jogger's popularity as a newsworthy story to the situation's dramatic contrasts—to the comparison of the white, upper-middle class, Ivy League jogger with the low-income, minority, and delinquent qualities attributed to her alleged adolescent attackers. The 9/11 victims were similarly portrayed as embodying just such a "superior class" in relation to their attackers, and this superiority provided potent momentum for the sentimental narrative (Didion 271).

The press coverage surrounding *America Weeps*, one of over 400 photographic interpretations of the missing person posters that comprise a traveling exhibit entitled *Missing: Last Seen at the World Trade Center on September 11th 2001*, clearly illustrates the implied preeminence in the victims' characterization. The *Times-Herald Record* claimed that the exhibit posters "still denote hope," and the *Los Angeles Times* proffered that they put a "new face on September 11th," while *The Oklahoma Gazette* noted in one headline that "art evolves from NY tragedy" (Jones). The artist proclaimed that it was, "not a lament for lives lost, as much as a tribute to lives lived. The people in the fliers touched the lives of others. They inspired people who refused to give up hope. They should inspire us to see the affect we have on those whose lives we touch everyday" (Jones). Though the artist also claimed that the exhibit's purpose was to make 9/11 "real" for areas of the country geographically isolated from the intimate pain of New York and to "honor" the lives lost, in reality *America Weeps* and the *Missing* exhibit as a whole did precisely the opposite, both reflecting and promulgating the victims' abstraction.

In fact, all such wildly unspecific and hypothetical commentary evidences that the victims' idealized abstraction connoted "not the actual victim of an actual crime but a fictional character of a slightly earlier period" (Didion 272). The victims were depicted not as average people, but as the best of America—heroes, models of success, philanthropists, leaders, intellectuals, and inspirational icons. They were the epitome of diversity, the supposed realization of the American dream. Furthermore, the victims were not the only subjects of this exaggerated glorification. As the sentimental narrative gained momentum, the citizens of New York City as a whole were similarly characterized, modeled into a Pleasantville-like community. Demonstrations of goodwill and neighborly love—of a quaint camaraderie stemming directly from the common bond of having survived tragedy and sharing immediate suffering—were broadcast internationally. Almost immediately, a "pernicious nostalgia" (Didion 272), or longing for a stronger sense of community, for a sense of common purpose, sprang forth across the country.

Benedict Anderson provides another way of thinking about the generalization and abstraction of the characters in this sentimental narrative, and the nostalgic longing for community that the narrative evoked. At the point when they became abstract objects of "pernicious nostalgia" (32), the 9/11 victims became the "solitary hero" of Anderson's "imagined community of the nation" (22)—that undeniable sense of unity, brotherhood, and nationalistic pride that so often characterizes the citizens of countries across the globe. Anderson's description of the nation as "imagined" (6) reflects the fact that no single member of the community will ever know "more than a handful" of the individuals comprising it, yet "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (26).

The introduction of the "pronominal adjective" to the 9/11 narrative—repeated references to "our grief" and "America's loss"—confirms that the 9/11 sentimental

narrative irrevocably crossed into the territory of the imagined community (Anderson 32). Even the title of the photograph *America Weeps* plainly demonstrates this collective generalization of grief, this assumption of “simultaneous” or omnipresent suffering, pain, and loss amongst all citizens of the United States (24). Given that the photographer, Bronston Jones, does not offer any indication that the soldier was a real person with a real family, *America Weeps* seems to imply that the soldier does not “belong” to anyone specifically. Rather, the title and the poster’s distortion, showing the soldier’s face literally melting into and becoming synonymous with the American flag, suggest that the soldier belongs to the United States of America.

As such, the image is “saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings” (Anderson 9). Indeed, the exhibit’s website even compares *America Weeps* to Arlington’s Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and the photographer remarks that “[t]he man in the flier has come to represent all we lost” (Jones). This statement is even more telling when considered in light of Bronston Jones’s safe emotional and geographic distance from the tragedy: he was at home in California on the morning of September 11, 2001. There is no indication that he was personally acquainted with any of the victims murdered in the terrorist attacks. And yet, he says “all we lost” (Jones). Like Anderson’s example of the Filipino nationalist author José Rizal, Bronston Jones, though not having “the faintest idea” of the “individual identities” of those involved in his artistic and nationalistic production (in Jones’s case, the victims and all U.S. citizens) nevertheless participates in a dialogue that is marked by an “ironical intimacy, as though their relationships with each other are not in the smallest degree problematic” (28).

This generalization of grief, which was made possible by the sentimental narrative’s initial abstraction of the victims, is inseparable from the corresponding revival of the imagined community of the nation. From the concept’s introduction, Benedict Anderson links the imagined community to a corresponding dialogue of fatality, to the inevitable loss and taking of life that has paralleled the rise of the modern nation. He states that this nationalistic bond, this “deep horizontal comradeship,” is precisely what allowed “for so many millions of people, not so much to kill” as to be willing to sacrifice their own lives “for such limited imaginings” (7). In other words, Anderson attributes the human bloodshed of the last two centuries, the “colossal sacrifices” incurred by individuals and nations alike, to the largely sentimental notion of “fraternity” or, alternatively, to the nation itself (7).

In addition, Anderson points out that the decreasing significance of religion in society, and hence the decreasing significance afforded doctrines that emphasize belief in the continuation of life beyond physical death, created the need for a replacement belief system. Anderson comments, “Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary” (11). The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were the deadliest attacks on the United States in the country’s history. Taking this into account, the reawakening of the imagined community of the nation immediately following the attacks begins to

make sense. The sentimental narrative of the attacks, which eventually became synonymous with the imagined community of the nation, allowed the victims to be eternalized and provided this other “style of continuity” necessary to ameliorate the country’s collective, real or imagined, grief.

Looking back on the media’s treatment of the 9/11 victims reveals that their initial abstraction and idealization, courtesy of the sentimental narrative, fostered an emotionally seeded, deeply felt, and rigidly defended sense of nationalism—one that utilized its inherent “magic” to “turn chance into destiny,” to make the lives lost in the attacks meaningful (Anderson 12). The victims were no longer “arbitrarily juxtaposed” amongst one another and their simultaneous deaths were not mere coincidence—they were Americans, the “symbolic body and blood” of America, and they died for “our great country” (Didion 270). And, in the end, no greater source of Anderson’s “imagined linkage” exists than the imagined community of the nation, the twentieth and twenty-first century’s most elaborate, resilient, and compelling sentimental narrative.

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