

A Day That Will Live In â€¦ ?

- Patrick Deer and Toby Miller
- [Respond To This Article](#)

Volume 5 | Issue 1 | March 2002

1 By the time you read this, it will be wrong. Things seemed to be moving so fast in these first days after airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the Pennsylvania earth. Each certainty is as carelessly dropped as it was once carelessly assumed. The sounds of lower Manhattan that used to serve as white noise for residentsâ€™ sirens, screeches, screamsâ€™ are no longer signs without a referent. Instead, they make folks stare and stop, hurry and hustle, wondering whether the noises we know so well are in fact, this time, coefficients of a new reality. At the time of writing, the events themselves are also signs without referentsâ€™ there has been no direct claim of responsibility, and little proof offered by accusers since the 11th. But it has been assumed that there is a link to US foreign policy, its military and economic presence in the Arab world, and opposition to it that seeks revenge. In the intervening weeks the US media and the war planners have supplied their own narrow frameworks, making New Yorkâ€™s â€™œground zeroâ€™ into the starting point for a new escalation of global violence. We want to write here about the combination of sources and sensations that came that day, and the jumble of knowledges and emotions that filled our minds.

2 Working late the night before, Toby was awoken in the morning by one of the planes right overhead. That happens sometimes. I have long expected a crash when Iâ€™ve heard the roar of jet engines so closeâ€™ but I didnâ€™t this time. Often when that sound hits me, I get up and go for a run down by the water, just near Wall Street. Something kept me back that day. Instead, I headed for my laptop. Because I cannot rely on local media to tell me very much about the role of the US in world affairs, I was reading the British newspaper *The Guardian* on-line when it flashed a two-line report about the planes. I looked up at the calendar above my desk to see whether it was April 1st. Truly.

3 Then I got off-line and turned on the TV to watch CNN. That second, the phone rang. My quasi-ex-girlfriend Iâ€™m still in love with called from the mid-West. She was due to leave that day for the Bay Area. Was I alright? We spoke for a bit. She said my cell phone was out, and indeed it was for the remainder of the day. As I hung up from her, my friend Ana rang, tearful and concerned. Her husband, Patrick, had left an hour before for work in New Jersey, and it seemed like a dangerous separation. All separations were potentially fatal that day. You wanted to know where everyone was, every minute.

4 She told me she had been trying to contact Palestinian friends who worked and attended school near the event—their ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds made for real poignancy, as we both thought of the prejudice they would (probably) face, regardless of the eventual who/what/when/where/how of these events. We agreed to meet at Bruno's, a bakery on La Guardia Place. For some reason I really took my time, though, before getting to Ana. I shampooed and shaved under the shower. This was a horror, and I needed to look my best, even as men and women were losing and risking their lives. I can only interpret what I did as an attempt to impose normalcy and control on the situation, on my environment.

5 When I finally made it down there, she'd located our friends. They were safe. We stood in the street and watched the Towers. Horrified by the sight of human beings tumbling to their deaths, we turned to buy a tea/coffee—again some ludicrous normalization—but were drawn back by chilling screams from the street. Racing outside, we saw the second Tower collapse, and clutched at each other. People were streaming towards us from further downtown.

6 We decided to be with our Palestinian friends in their apartment. When we arrived, we learnt that Mark had been four minutes away from the WTC when the first plane hit. I tried to call my daughter in London and my father in Canberra, but to no avail. I rang the mid-West, and asked my maybe-former novia to call England and Australia to report in on me. Our friend Jenine got through to relatives on the West Bank. Israeli tanks had commenced a bombardment there, right after the planes had struck New York. Family members spoke to her from under the kitchen table, where they were taking refuge from the shelling of their house.

7 Then we gave ourselves over to television, like so many others around the world, even though these events were happening only a mile away. We wanted to hear official word, but there was just a huge absence—Bush was busy learning to read in Florida, then leading from the front in Louisiana and Nebraska. As the day wore on, we split up and regrouped, meeting folks. One guy was in the subway when smoke filled the car. No one could breathe properly, people were screaming, and his only thought was for his dog DeNiro back in Brooklyn. From the panic of the train, he managed to call his mom on a cell to ask her to feed DeNiro that night, because it looked like he wouldn't get home. A pregnant woman feared for her unborn as she fled the blasts, pushing the stroller with her baby in it as she did so. Away from these heart-rending tales from strangers, there was the fear: good grief, what horrible price would the US Government extract for this, and who would be the overt and covert agents and targets of that suffering? What blood-lust would this generate? What would be the pattern of retaliation and counter-retaliation? What would become of civil rights and cultural inclusiveness?

8 So a jumble of emotions came forward, I assume in all of us. Anger was not

there for me, just intense sorrow, shock, and fear, and the desire for intimacy. Network television appeared to offer me that, but in an ultimately unsatisfactory way. For I think I saw the end-result of reality TV that day. I have since decided to call this “emotionalization” network TV’s tendency to substitute analysis of US politics and economics with a stress on feelings.

9 Of course, powerful emotions have been engaged by this horror, and there is value in addressing that fact and letting out the pain. I certainly needed to do so. But on that day and subsequent ones, I looked to the networks, traditional sources of current-affairs knowledge, for just that “informed, multi-perspectival journalism that would allow me to make sense of my feelings, and come to a just and reasoned decision about how the US should respond. I waited in vain. No such commentary came forward. Just a lot of asinine inquiries from reporters that were identical to those they pose to basketballers after a game: Question “How do you feel now?” Answer “God was with me today.” For the networks were insistent on asking everyone in sight how they felt about the end of las torres gemelas. In this case, we heard the feelings of survivors, firefighters, viewers, media mavens, Republican and Democrat hacks, and vacuous Beltway state-of-the-nation pundits. But learning of the military-political economy, global inequality, and ideologies and organizations that made for our grief and loss “for that, there was no space. TV had forgotten how to do it. My principal feeling soon became one of frustration.

10 So I headed back to where I began the day “The Guardian web site, where I was given insightful analysis of the messy factors of history, religion, economics, and politics that had created this situation. As I dealt with the tragedy of folks whose lives had been so cruelly lost, I pondered what it would take for this to stop. Or whether this was just the beginning. I knew one thing “the answers wouldn’t come from mainstream US television, no matter how full of feelings it was. And that made Toby anxious. And afraid. He still is. And so the dreams come. In one, I am suddenly furloughed from my job with an orchestra, as audience numbers tumble. I make my evening-wear way to my locker along with the other players, emptying it of bubble gum and instrument. The next night, I see a gigantic, fifty-feet high wave heading for the city beach where I’ve come to swim. Somehow I am sheltered behind a huge wall, as all the people around me die. Dripping, I turn to find myself in a media-stereotype “crack house” of the early “90s” desperate-looking black men, endless doorways, sudden police arrival, and my earnest search for a passport that will explain away my presence. I awake in horror, to the realization that the passport was already open and stamped “racialization at work for Toby, every day and in every way, as a white man in New York City.

11 Ana’s husband, Patrick, was at work ten miles from Manhattan when “it” happened. In the hallway, I overheard some talk about two planes crashing, but went to teach anyway in my usual morning stupor. This

was just the usual chatter of disaster junkies. I didn't hear the words, "World Trade Center" until ten thirty, at the end of the class at the college I teach at in New Jersey, across the Hudson river. A friend and colleague walked in and told me the news of the attack, to which I replied "You must be fucking joking." He was a little offended. Students were milling haphazardly on the campus in the late summer weather, some looking panicked like me. My first thought was of some general failure of the air-traffic control system. There must be planes falling out of the sky all over the country. Then the height of the towers: how far towards our apartment in Greenwich Village would the towers fall? Neither of us worked in the financial district a mile downtown, but was Ana safe? Where on the college campus could I see what was happening? I recognized the same physical sensation I had felt the morning after Hurricane Andrew in Miami seeing at a distance the wreckage of our shattered apartment across a suburban golf course strewn with debris and flattened power lines. Now I was trapped in the suburbs again at an unbridgeable distance from my wife and friends who were witnessing the attacks first hand. Were they safe? What on earth was going on? This feeling of being cut off, my path to the familiar places of home blocked, remained for weeks my dominant experience of the disaster.

12 In my office, phone calls to the city didn't work. There were six voice-mail messages from my teenaged brother Alex in small-town England giving a running commentary on the attack and its aftermath that he was witnessing live on television while I dutifully taught my writing class. "Hello, Patrick, where are you? Oh my god, another plane just hit the towers. Where are you?" The web was choked: no access to newspapers online. Email worked, but no one was wasting time writing. My office window looked out over a soccer field to the still woodlands of western New Jersey: behind me to the east the disaster must be unfolding. Finally I found a website with a live stream from ABC television, which I watched flickering and stilted on the tiny screen. It had all already happened: both towers already collapsed, the Pentagon attacked, another plane shot down over Pennsylvania, unconfirmed reports said, there were other hijacked aircraft still out there unaccounted for. Manhattan was sealed off. George Washington Bridge, Lincoln and Holland tunnels, all the bridges and tunnels from New Jersey I used to mock shut down. Police actions sealed off the highways into "the city." The city I liked to think of as the capital of the world was cut off completely from the outside, suddenly vulnerable and under siege. There was no way to get home. The phone rang abruptly and Alex, three thousand miles away, told me he had spoken to Ana earlier and she was safe. After a dozen tries, I managed to get through and spoke to her, learning that she and Toby had seen people jumping and then the second tower fall. Other friends had been even closer. Everyone was safe, we thought. I sat for another couple of hours in my office uselessly. The news was incoherent, stories contradictory, loops of the planes hitting the towers only just ready for recycling. The attacks were already being transformed into "the World Trade Center Disaster," not yet the

ahistorical singularity of the emergency â€œnine one one.â€

13 Stranded, I had to spend the night in New Jersey at my boss's house, reminded again of the boundless generosity of Americans to relative strangers. In an effort to protect his young son from the as yet unfiltered images saturating cable and Internet, my friend's TV set was turned off and we did our best to reassure. We listened surreptitiously to news bulletins on AM radio, hoping that the roads would open. Walking the dog with my friend's wife and son we crossed a park on the ridge on which Upper Montclair sits. Ten miles away a huge column of smoke was rising from lower Manhattan, where the stunning absence of the towers was clearly visible. The summer evening was unnervingly still. We kicked a soccer ball around on the front lawn and a woman walked distracted by, shocked and pale up the tree-lined suburban street, suffering her own wordless trauma. I remembered that though most of my students were ordinary working people, Montclair is a well-off dormitory for the financial sector and high rises of Wall Street and Midtown. For the time being, this was a white-collar disaster. I slept a short night in my friend's house, waking to hope I had dreamed it all, and took the commuter train in with shell-shocked bankers and corporate types. All men, all looking nervously across the river toward glimpses of the Manhattan skyline as the train neared Hoboken. â€œI can't believe they're making us go in,â€ one guy had repeated on the station platform. He had watched the attacks from his office in Midtown, â€œThe whole thing.â€ Inside the train we all sat in silence.

14 Up from the PATH train station on 9th street I came onto a carless 6th Avenue. At 14th street barricades now sealed off downtown from the rest of the world. I walked down the middle of the avenue to a newspaper stand; the Indian proprietor shrugged â€œNo deliveries below 14th.â€ I had not realized that the closer to the disaster you came, the less information would be available. Except, I assumed, for the evidence of my senses. But at 8 am the Village was eerily still, few people about, nothing in the sky, including the twin towers. I walked to Houston Street, which was full of trucks and police vehicles. Tractor trailers sat carrying concrete barriers. Below Houston, each street into Soho was barricaded and manned by huddles of cops. I had walked effortlessly up into the â€œlockdown,â€ but this was the â€œfrozen zone.â€ There was no going further south towards the towers. I walked the few blocks home, found my wife sleeping, and climbed into bed, still in my clothes from the day before. â€œYour heart is racing,â€ she said. I realized that I hadn't known if I would get back, and now I never wanted to leave again; it was still only eight thirty am. Lying there, I felt the terrible wonder of a distant bystander for the first-hand witness. Ana's face couldn't tell me what she had seen. I felt I needed to know more, to see and understand. Even though I knew the effort was useless: I could never bridge that gap that had trapped me ten miles away, my back turned to the unfolding disaster. The television was useless: we don't have cable, and the mast on top of the North Tower, which Ana had watched fall, had relayed all the network channels.

I knew I had to go down and see the wreckage. Later I would realize how lucky I had been not to suffer from “disaster envy.”

15 Unbelievably, in retrospect, I commuted into work the second day after the attack, dogged by the same unnerving sensation that I would not get back “to the wounded, humbled former center of the world. My students were uneasy, all talked out. I was a novelty, a New Yorker living in the Village a mile from the towers, but I was forty-eight hours late. Out of place in both places. I felt torn up, but not angry. Back in the city at night, people were eating and drinking with a vengeance, the air filled with acrid sickly-sweet smoke from the burning wreckage. Eyes stung and nose ran with a bitter acrid taste. Who knows what we’re breathing in, we joked nervously. A friend’s wife had fallen out with him for refusing to wear a protective mask in the house. He shrugged a wordlessly reassuring smile. What could any of us do? I walked with Ana down to the top of West Broadway from where the towers had commanded the skyline over SoHo; downtown dense smoke blocked the view to the disaster. A crowd of onlookers pushed up against the barricades all day, some weeping, others gawping. A tall guy was filming the grieving faces with a video camera, which was somehow the worst thing of all, the first sign of the disaster tourism that was already mushrooming downtown. Across the street an Asian artist sat painting the street scene in streaky black and white; he had scrubbed out two white columns where the towers would have been. “That’s the first thing I’ve seen that’s made me feel any better,” Ana said. We thanked him, but he shrugged blankly, still in shock I supposed.

16 On the Friday, the clampdown. I watched the Mayor and Police Chief hold a press conference in which they angrily told the stream of volunteers to “ground zero” that they weren’t needed. “We can handle this ourselves. We thank you. But we don’t need your help,” Commissioner Kerik said. After the free-for-all of the first couple of days, with its amazing spontaneities and common gestures of goodwill, the clampdown was going into effect. I decided to go down to Canal Street and see if it was true that no one was welcome anymore.

17 So many paths through the city were blocked now. “Lock down, frozen zone, war zone, the site, combat zone, ground zero, state troopers, secured perimeter, national guard, humvees, family center”: a disturbing new vocabulary that seemed to stamp the logic of Giuliani’s sanitized and over-policed Manhattan onto the wounded hulk of the city. The Mayor had been magnificent in the heat of the crisis; Churchillian, many were saying “and indeed, Giuliani quickly appeared on the cover of *Cigar Afficionado*, complete with wing collar and the misquotation from Kipling, “Captain Courageous.” Churchill had not believed in peacetime politics either, and he never got over losing his empire. Now the regime of command and control over New York’s citizens and its economy was being stabilized and reimposed. The sealed-off, disfigured, and newly militarized spaces of the New York

through which I have always loved to wander at all hours seemed to have been put beyond reach for the duration. And, in the new post-9/11 post-history, the duration could last forever. The violence of the attacks seemed to have elicited a heavy-handed official reaction that sought to contain and constrict the best qualities of New York. I felt more anger at the clampdown than I did at the demolition of the towers. I knew this was unreasonable, but I feared the reaction, the spread of the racial harassment and racial profiling that I had already heard of from my students in New Jersey. This militarizing of the urban landscape seemed to negate the sprawling, freewheeling, boundless largesse and tolerance on which New York had complacently claimed a monopoly. For many the towers stood for that as well, not just as the monumental outposts of global finance that had been attacked. Could the American flag mean something different? For a few days, perhaps on the helmets of firemen and construction workers. But not for long.

18 On the Saturday, I found an unmanned barricade way east along Canal Street and rode my bike past throngs of Chinatown residents, by the Federal jail block where prisoners from the first World Trade Center bombing were still being held. I headed south and west towards Tribeca; below the barricades in the frozen zone, you could roam freely, the cops and soldiers assuming you belonged there. I felt uneasy, doubting my own motives for being there, feeling the blood drain from my head in the same numbing shock I'd felt every time I headed downtown towards the site. I looped towards Greenwich Avenue, passing an abandoned bank full of emergency supplies and boxes of protective masks. Crushed cars still smeared with pulverized concrete and encrusted with paperwork strewn by the blast sat on the street near the disabled telephone exchange. On one side of the avenue stood a horde of onlookers, on the other television crews, all looking two blocks south towards a colossal pile of twisted and smoking steel, seven stories high. We were told to stay off the street by long-suffering national guardsmen and women with southern accents, kids. Nothing happening, just the aftermath. The TV crews were interviewing worn-out, dust-covered volunteers and firemen who sat quietly leaning against the railings of a park filled with scraps of paper.

19 Out on the West Side highway, a high-tech truck was offering free cellular phone calls. The six lanes by the river were full of construction machinery and military vehicles. Ambulances rolled slowly uptown, bodies inside? I locked my bike redundantly to a lamppost and crossed under the hostile gaze of plainclothes police to another media encampment. On the path by the river, two camera crews were complaining bitterly in the heat. "After five days of this I've had enough." They weren't talking about the trauma, bodies, or the wreckage, but censorship. "Any blue light special gets to roll right down there, but they see your press pass and it's get outta here. I've had enough." I fronted out the surly cops and ducked under the tape onto the path, walking onto a Pier on which we'd spent many lazy afternoons watching the river at sunset. Dust everywhere, police boats docked

and waiting, a crane ominously dredging mud into a barge. I walked back past the camera operators onto the highway and walked up to an interview in process. Perfectly composed, a fire chief and his crew from some small town in upstate New York were politely declining to give details about what theyâ€™d seen at â€œground zero.â€ The menâ€™s faces were dust streaked, their eyes slightly dazed with the shock of a horror previously unimaginable to most Americans. They were here to help the best they could, now theyâ€™d done as much as anyone could. â€œItâ€™s time for us to go home.â€ The chief was eloquent, almost rehearsed in his precision. It was like a Magnum press photo. But he was refusing to cooperate with the mediaâ€™s obsessive emotionalism.

20 I walked down the highway, joining construction workers, volunteers, police, and firemen in their hundreds at Chambers Street. No one paid me any attention; it was absurd. I joined several other watchers on the stairs by Stuyvesant High School, which was now the headquarters for the recovery crews. Just two or three blocks away, the huge jagged teeth of the towersâ€™ beautiful tracery lurched out onto the highway above huge mounds of debris. The TV images of the shattered scene made sense as I placed them into what was left of a familiar Sunday afternoon geography of bike rides and walks by the river, picnics in the park lying on the grass and gazing up at the infinite solidity of the towers. Demolished. It was breathtaking. If â€œtheyâ€ could do that, they could do anything. Across the street at tables military policeman were checking credentials of the milling volunteers and issuing the pink and orange tags that gave access to ground zero. Without warning, there was a sudden stampede running full pelt up from the disaster site, men and women in fatigues, burly construction workers, firemen in bunker gear. I ran a few yards then stopped. Other people milled around idly, ignoring the panic, smoking and talking in low voices. It was a mainly white, blue-collar scene. All these men wearing flags and carrying crowbars and flashlights. In their company, the intolerance and rage I associated with flags and construction sites was nowhere to be seen. They were dealing with a torn and twisted otherness that dwarfed machismo or bigotry. I talked to a moustachioed, pony-tailed construction worker whoâ€™d hitched a ride from the mid-west to â€œcome and help out.â€ He was staying at the Y, he said, it was kind of rough. â€œHave you been down there?â€ he asked, pointing towards the wreckage. â€œYouâ€™re British, you werenâ€™t in World War Two were you?â€ I replied in the negative. â€œItâ€™s worse â€™n that. I went down last night and you canâ€™t imagine it. You donâ€™t want to see it if you donâ€™t have to.â€ Did I know any welcoming ladies? he asked. The Y was kind of tough.

21 When I saw TV images of President Bush speaking to the recovery crews and steelworkers at â€œground zeroâ€ a couple of days later, shouting through a bullhorn to chants of â€œUSA, USAâ€ I knew nothing had changed. New Yorkâ€™s suffering was subject to a second hijacking by the brokers of national unity. New York had never been America, and now its terrible human loss and its great humanity were redesignated in the name of

the nation, of the coming war. The signs without a referent were being forcibly appropriated, locked into an impoverished patriotic framework, interpreted for "œus" by a compliant media and an opportunistic regime eager to reign in civil liberties, to unloose its war machine and tighten its grip on the Muslim world. That day, drawn to the river again, I had watched F18 fighter jets flying patterns over Manhattan as Bush's helicopters came in across the river. Otherwise empty of air traffic, "œour" skies were being torn up by the military jets: it was somehow the worst sight yet, worse than the wreckage or the bands of disaster tourists on Canal Street, a sign of further violence yet to come. There was a carrier out there beyond New York harbor, there to protect us: the bruising, blustering city once open to all comers. That felt worst of all.

22 In the intervening weeks, we have seen other, more unstable ways of interpreting the signs of September 11 and its aftermath. Many have circulated on the Internet, past the blockages and blockades placed on urban spaces and intellectual life. Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's work was banished (at least temporarily) from the canon of avant-garde electronic music when he described the attack on las torres gemelas as akin to a work of art. If Jacques Derrida had described it as an act of deconstruction (turning technological modernity literally in on itself), or Jean Baudrillard had announced that the event was so thick with mediation it had not truly taken place, something similar would have happened to them (and still may). This is because, as Don DeLillo so eloquently put it in implicit reaction to the plaintive cry "œWhy do they hate us?": "œit is the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind" "œwhether via military action or cultural iconography.

23 All these positions are correct, however grisly and annoying they may be. What GK Chesterton called the "œflints and tiles" of nineteenth-century European urban existence were rent asunder like so many victims of high-altitude US bombing raids. As a First-World disaster, it became knowable as the first-ever US "œground zero" such precisely through the high premium immediately set on the lives of Manhattan residents and the rarefied discussion of how to commemorate the high-altitude towers. When, a few weeks later, an American Airlines plane crashed on take-off from Queens, that borough was left open to all comers. Manhattan was locked down, flown over by "œfriendly" bombers. In stark contrast to the open if desperate faces on the street of 11 September, people went about their business with heads bowed even lower than is customary. Contradictory deconstructions and valuations of Manhattan lives mean that September 11 will live in infamy and hyper-knowability. The vengeful United States government and population continue on their way. Local residents must ponder insurance claims, real-estate values, children's terrors, and their own roles in something beyond their ken. New York had been forced beyond being the center of the financial world. It had become a military target, a place that was receiving as well as dispatching the slings and arrows of global fortune.

Citation reference for this article

MLA Style

Deer, Patrick and Miller, Toby. "A Day That Will Live In â€¦ ?" M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture 5.1 (2002). [your date of access] < <http://www.media-culture.org.au/0203/adaythat.php>>.

Chicago Style

Deer, Patrick and Miller, Toby, "A Day That Will Live In â€¦ ?" M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture 5, no. 1 (2002), < <http://www.media-culture.org.au/0203/adaythat.php>> ([your date of access]).

APA Style

Deer, Patrick and Miller, Toby. (2002) A Day That Will Live In â€¦ ?. M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture 5(1). < <http://www.media-culture.org.au/0203/adaythat.php>> ([your date of access]).