Everyday Prejudice in a Post-9/11 World:
Rationalizing Ridicule

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by

Miraj Upendra Desai

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ABSTRACT

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The tragic events of September 11, 2001 changed the way many people view themselves in relation to their local and global communities. In this regard, 9/11 seemed to have a profound effect on the American story, or what it means to be living in America. Ramifications of this story, however, proved damaging to those who were seen as “not fitting in” to the idealized notion of an American. As a result, many in the Middle-Eastern and South Asian communities experienced backlash in the form of discrimination and abuse. This thesis critically examines this “new American narrative” in the context of those still left marginalized and alienated as a result of the backlash after 9/11. Taking insights from hermeneutics and counter-narrative, it presents the stories, including my own, of four individuals deeply affected by discrimination in the post-9/11 environment. Their stories are intended to help elucidate the lived experience of those dealing with similar circumstances, and the ways they try to make sense of their identity and community. Overall, this thesis should bring to the fore the issue of how we view democracy and pluralism in a post-9/11 world.
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Approved by:

_________________________, Advisor
Dr. Roger M. Knudson

_________________________, Reader
Dr. Amanda Diekman

_________________________, Reader
Dr. Sheila L. Croucher

Accepted by:

_________________________, Director,
University Honors Program
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I. Introduction: An Invitation to Storytelling

“September 11th changed everything.” These words are often spoken by politicians, military officials, celebrities, professors, and, alas, students. How exactly it changed everything naturally varies from person to person. To many, it changed America. It changed the American story. After several years, “we” were finally “united” as one voice. This united voice proudly stated what it means to be living in America in the 21st century. Yet soon one sees, or hears, the voice’s true nature: monotonous, if not atonal. When the “American” narrative after 9/11 spoke of “unity,” it seemed to really be speaking of “conformity”: A conformity to standards set by the majority of “what it means to be American” that unduly ostracizes those “not fitting in.” “Not fitting in” could simply mean looking different or holding different values than the majority. To several others, this “new American” narrative did not fit their idea of America, which had been founded on the principles of democracy and pluralism. Those feeling left out of the new narrative thus felt distanced, alienated.

The perpetually endless “War on Terrorism,” heavy-handed national security legislation, and other post-9/11 policy initiatives mirrored the inner workings of the “new American” narrative. Cornel West (2004) also attributes much of the post-9/11 shift to the right in the liberty-security dichotomy to an escalating assertion of dogmatic authoritarianism. “This dogma is rooted in our understandable paranoia toward potential terrorists, our traditional fear of too many liberties, and our deep distrust of one another”
Here, West, in addition to those with a more empirical bent (Freyd, 2002; Powell & Self, 2004) accurately describe the general state of feelings, the underlying narrative, after 9/11 for many living in this country: Fear, paranoia, and distrust.

Often lost and ignored are the voices of those who have received the negative effects of this climate of fear, paranoia, and distrust—those not “fitting in.” At its extreme, this growing trend of ultra-nationalism and authoritarianism could have corrosive effects on American democracy and pluralism. In a series of essays debating the limits of patriotism, Martha Nussbaum (1996) pondered how far the politics of nationalism were from the “politics of difference.” Nussbaum cites the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore when arguing that “nationalism and ethnocentric particularism are not alien to one another, but akin -- that to give support to nationalist sentiments subverts, ultimately, even the values that hold a nation together, because it substitutes a colorful idol for the substantive universal values of justice and right” (p. 5). To her, wherever nationalism flourishes, cosmopolitanism ultimately suffers.

In a sense, the domestic response to 9/11 was experienced by many as a loss of community. If one did not fit the idealized notion of a “patriot,” or the “new American,” alienation ensued. Much of the backlash that followed 9/11 centered on those who “looked like the terrorists.” The varieties of discrimination ranged from verbal abuse to physical violence, culminating in a total of 507 documented hate crimes against Arab-, Muslim, and Sikh-Americans in the two-year period following 9/11 (fbi.gov, 2003). Mosques were destroyed; shops were vandalized; students were threatened (cnn.com, 2001). This paper is an attempt to document the lived experiences of those on the
receiving end of this “backlash.” Their actions and feelings vary considerably, but each can offer much to the debate of how we should view democracy, and even difference, in a post-9/11 world.

Capturing the true essence of lived experience is a difficult task in the social sciences. Traditional models of science, which champion the use of brute data, univocal operations, and physicalism, have come under great criticism for their inability to address the true nature of human experience (Packer and Addison, 1989; Taylor, 1992). For instance, Charles Taylor (1992) argues that “Action and feeling are…partly defined by judgments and perceptions which are not brute data and cannot be reduced to judgments about brute data… [So], the classical model of science will be seen as inapplicable to the sciences of man” (p. 61). Action and feeling are also subject to interpretation, which the requirements of univocal operations and operational definitions forbid. What is known as “hermeneutics,” on the other hand, places interpretation and subjectivity at its foundation and is more applicable to the matters at hand. Thus, Taylor argues for a “peaceful coexistence in psychology” between what he calls the “correlators” and the “interpreters,” where the latter employ this hermeneutic model.

Dan McAdams (1999) has listed some of the major components of hermeneutics:

The primacy of the story over the storyteller, local rather than universal truths, the inseparability of subject and object, the indeterminacy of language and meaning, the primacy of subjective construals over the (myth of) objective reality, contextuality and contingency in social life, and the subjugating influence of power hierarchies and social inequalities in the construction of life narratives (p. 491).

The term hermeneutical circle or situation (Heidegger, 1962, p.232) refers to the fact that “every researcher brings conceptions and interpretations to the problem being
studied (Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 1975)” (Denzin, 1989, p. 23). So not only are the “subjects” engaging in interpretation, but so are the researchers. The researchers’ own values must be made apparent in order to facilitate subsequent interpretations of the text. As will be shown, my own experiences of post-9/11 backlash will be portrayed and offered for interpretation.

A branch of hermeneutics involves what is known as “narrative.” Jerome Bruner (1986) identifies two modes of thoughts which guide human thinking about the world and self. The “paradigmatic” mode emphasizes objectivity, cause-and-effect, brute data, and empirically-validated “truth.” The “narrative” mode of thought extracts and interprets meaning from lived experiences. Subjectivity is a necessary aspect of narrative and storytelling. “The narrative mode of thought is the preferred mode for understanding how human intentions and desires get translated into human actions and how those actions play out over time” (McAdams, 1999, p. 481).

The present study uses narrative to give voice to those standing in the margins after 9/11. They do not fit a particular category but are united by their belief that America should be a place of democracy and pluralism, not conformity, alienation, and discrimination. On the other hand, their stories also speak of how being outside the boundaries of acceptance forces them to act and think in a certain manner so as to make sense of their situation. Fernandez (2002) shows several ways in which narrative specifically serves the person of color. In addition to letting the marginalized make their stories public, the narrative serves as a counter-narrative that challenges “the dominant story or the reality that is socially constructed by Whites (Delgado, 1995)” (p.48). As
such, counter-narratives are the “voices from below,” from outside the dominant viewpoint (Plummer, 2001, p.90). They aim to interrogate, often implicitly, the objectivity and “truth” claims of the master narrative constructed from positions of authority. Moreover, the act of “sharing one’s stories with others raises the individual’s consciousness of common experiences and opens up the possibility for social action” (Fernandez, p. 48). In other words, individuals realize “there are others like me.” In the end, the following stories are not completely mine, but they could be.

To develop these narratives, I conducted in-depth interviews with three participants who afterwards remained in touch if clarification was necessary. Michael Bamburg (2004) explains that “one possible strategy to counter [culturally accepted] frames [of reference] is by way of appealing to other frames that are contradictory, and to presenting one’s own experience along these lines” (p.360). Thus, I chose participants whose story is unique to the subject at hand and whose lives seem to be a “paradox” according to the status quo: the Christian Indian-American, the Hindu Pakistani, and the German-born Indian-American. During and after each interview, I kept detailed notes of “quotes, experiences, emotions, and stories” (Parry, 2004, p. 921), relating to their encounters, prejudicial or otherwise, after the events of 9/11. In presenting their narratives, I purposefully chose certain writing styles that I felt captured the essence of each individual. As Plummer (2001) states, the task of the narrative researcher is to “get your subject’s own words, really come to grasp them from the inside, and then yourself turn it into a structured and coherent statement that uses the subject’s words in places and the social scientist’s in others but does not lose their authentic meaning” (p. 177). In this
regard, the settings are sometimes fictional, but the stories use the same language and emotion conveyed to me over the course of several interviews.

Scientific objectivity was barred to me, for the alienated, the neurotic, was my brother, my sister, my father.
(Frantz Fanon, 1967, p. 225)

Generally, near the beginning of a scientific report, one should describe the “Participant” group that is/was being studied. The categories should be as succinct and operational as possible. For a paper on “everyday prejudice” after 9/11, however, this task becomes difficult: after all, what are the exact groups that are relevant to this inquiry? The goal of my study was to explore the lived experiences of those receiving discrimination specifically after (and largely a result of) the events of September 11, 2001. As an American-born person of Indian descent, I wanted to portray what it was like to live under the constant scrutiny of being seen as “the enemy” in the War on Terrorism due to the color of my skin and hair. On the issue of post-9/11 discrimination, the national media tended to focus on the category of “Muslim men,” due in part to the “radical” and “fundamentalist” images that populate our airwaves. On the other hand, what about the other groups who resemble this “terrorist” image but are not necessarily Muslim, or even Arab? Confused as I found myself, I looked to the United States government to get some ideas on what ethnic and racial categories might be included in a study like mine. For instance, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission stated on
their website that they were investigating several reported cases of post-9/11 discrimination:

“Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and state and local fair employment practices agencies have documented a significant increase in the number of charges alleging workplace discrimination based on religion and/or national origin. Many of the charges have been filed by individuals who are or are perceived to be Muslim, Arab, South Asian, or Sikh” (EEOC, 2002)

Evidently, the EEOC focused on the categories of “Muslim, Arab, South Asian, or Sikh.” These categories struck me as interesting since two were religious, one was ethnic, and one was regional. So, can I just mix and match as I please? What if I find a White Muslim from Australia? Does this person count?

As confused as ever, I slowly entertained the idea of saying my participants were those resembling the post-9/11 “terrorist profile.” By now, the American public has seen so many pictures of suspected terrorists and heard so many names of suspected jihadists that I thought “terrorist profile” would suffice as an adequate catch-all. As Lopez (2002) states, “the messages that we receive in the media, the stock stories (Delgado, 1995) about this crime [the 9/11 attacks] and the people behind it that are universally accepted as truths, are constantly filtered into our daily consciousness” (p. 197). After some time, however, second thoughts began flooding my already jumbled mind. A sense of paranoia soon engulfed me. I realized that mentioning the phrase “terrorist profile” in my report might attract the attention of those who may misconstrue it. Before even putting ink on paper, I felt that my paper might come under the watchful eye of the current Committee on Un-American Activities. Would talking so openly about people perceived as terrorists place me, and those involved, on the wrong side of the “You’re either with us or against
us” schizm? It seems as though anyone darker than khaki with a beard or “that look” is, on some level, suspected of being one of “them,” our “enemy,” the new “Other.”

Trying to find further guidance, I looked to the state government this time, since the federal government had not been useful in clarifying my categorical dilemma. Thankfully, I received some insight through the recent developments concerning Ohio Senate Bill 9. One of the mandates of the bill, according to its current language, is to:

Require a person in a public place to provide the person's name and other identifying information to a law enforcement officer when the officer has reasonable suspicion that either the person is or has been engaged in criminal activity or the person has witnessed a felony offense of violence.

The second applicable mandate reads as follows:

Require persons in or near a critical transportation infrastructure site to show identification when requested by a law enforcement officer in specified circumstances.

As an upstanding citizen of the United States and a resident of Ohio, I should naturally expect government authorities to catch those committing “criminal activities.” So I found comfort right? Not exactly. Proponents of Ohio Senate Bill 9 explicitly state that it is an extension of the USA Patriot Act. The USA Patriot Act, enacted immediately after 9/11 to combat terrorism, stands for “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism.” (Translation: The “Who Needs Rights?” Act).

Granting infinite power to authorities who sense “reasonable suspicion” under “specified circumstances” tells me, and those who look like me, to start having at least ten forms of identification ready at all times. Brownish skin + dark hair = reasonable suspicion. Eureeka! I found my “Participants,” albeit haphazardly.
...Participants for the study at hand will consist of those who would elicit reasonable suspicion under the post-9/11, ultra security state...

Perhaps my ruminations mirror those of Fanon—the alienated and the neurotic have taken the place of scientific objectivity. So be it. After all, this “alienation and neurosis” comes not from genetics, as some may think. It is steeped in my own experience after 9/11, replete with discrimination, humiliation, and ridicule.
II. Anger in the Age of Anxiety

This is my story—the story of the author, the researcher, the interviewer.

Christopher N. Poulos (2002) recently claimed that September 11, 2001 ushered our society into a new Age of Anxiety. Maybe so, but I have been living in my own world of anxiety ever since I realized I was different from everyone else. Growing up in Southwest Ohio, it does not take long to discover that the only Indian-American in your class is probably you, and maybe one other FOB (Fresh Off the Boat). FOB is the term used by the younger generations of Indians in this country to describe those who recently emigrated from South Asia. Not being an FOB myself, I instead had the privilege of being an A.B.C.D. (American Born Confused Desi). “Desi” is the informal term that generally describes someone hailing from South Asia. We first generation Americans actually are fairly confused. We struggle with obtaining the necessary Whiteness to fit in but also struggle with carrying on our own culture. From arranged marriages to chicken tikka masala, it is a constant push to try to learn as much as I can about my heritage. Nonetheless, this knowledge is never perfect and will always be criticized by FOBs and elders alike. “Why don’t you ever speak Gujarati?” “Why do you need subtitles to watch Hindi movies?” “Why are you dating a White girl? We told you to not bring any BMWs home—Black, Muslim, White.” The last question probably served as my introduction to Being Different in Middle
America 101. In high school, like any other teenager, I began showing affection to certain significant others. Yet, these relationships never amounted to anything serious whatsoever; I kept them as strictly friendships, nothing more. For some reason, a stop sign appeared at the mere thought of an intimate relationship, especially since the person was necessarily of another ethnicity. This new facet of my life marked the first time I dealt with a daily recognition of profound difference, between me and them. Up to that age, I had not felt other forms of difference-making as much, such as explicit prejudice. Instances of overt bigotry only occasionally occurred. If it did, then it came in the form of being called “Somalian” because of my lanky stature, or “Apu,” the friendly Indian store clerk on “The Simpsons.” This was all high school, the class of 2000. College was awaiting.

After September 11, 2001, the proverbial shit hit the fan. I still remember that day so clearly, like everyone else.

<Phone rings>

*S:* Hey Miraj wake up! Put on the TV; I think the World Trade Center got bombed or something.

*M:* Yeah, whatever.

<Miraj hangs up the phone. After coming to consciousness, he realizes what S was saying. Miraj frantically runs to the TV, and a feeling of despair takes over.>

*M:* (to himself) Holy shit. My cousin, whom I consider a sister, lives in Manhattan, and my best friend is visiting there today. Oh my god. Oh my god.
<Remembering he has a meeting with a professor, Miraj gets ready, putting on his American flag shirt, and heads to the appointment. After a brief talk, Miraj makes his way to another meeting, this time with the advisor to the Indian Students Association. During this appointment, the advisor informs Miraj that the Vice President had contacted her expressing concern for the Indian student population. He feared there might be backlash against those eliciting “reasonable suspicion” to the general public after the attacks. Hearing this news, Miraj assures his advisor that he would report any news of backlash. Stepping out of the office into the sunny Autumn day, Miraj feels a different despair this time. As he passes each student on campus (population: 90% White), he senses a growing suspicion of his peers towards him. Looking down, he is relieved at the sight of his American flag shirt. They hopefully would think he’s one of the “good ones.” Hopefully.>

Hope in my shirt proved fruitless. Maybe if I had draped an American flag around me, similar to a sari, and bleached my hair (and skin?), I could have avoided the inevitable racist encounters. Nonetheless, a couple of weeks later, I met my first messenger of racism since the attacks. Standing outside the bars on a weekend night, I overheard a group of girls talking amongst themselves. They were clearly talking about me, so I feigned ignorance while listening intently. One remarks, “Hey, I wonder when he’s going to bomb our country again.” I fill with rage. In the Age of Anxiety, I am clearly the enemy. Born and raised in this country, valedictorian of my high school, university scholar—it all means nothing
to them. What the hell more do they want? That’s the thing. There is nothing more they want, for nothing will suffice. Fighting their own anxiety with hatred is the modus operandi.

The bigotry would and still does continue. There is the typical “Fuck you Osama” screamed from a passing truck, or the more general “terrorist” insult. My favorite one came while standing in a line to a dance club. The Indian Students Association was sponsoring its annual Diwali, Festival of Lights celebration. While patiently waiting in line, I hear someone behind me go “What’s with all these Afghani-?!” Afghani-? Was he serious? Oh, so now we are a whole damn country? I mean if you are going to insult me, at least don’t refer to me as a land mass.

My story is not unique by any means. It is common knowledge in the “reasonable suspicion” community that everyone has experienced events similar to the ones above since 9/11. Using a daily diary methodology (Swim, J.K., Hyers, L. L., Cohen, L. L., & Ferguson, M. J., 2001; Swim, J. K., Hyers, L. L., Cohen, L. L., Fitzgerald, D. C., Bylsma, W. H., 2003), I wanted to document some of these everyday experiences of prejudice. This method examines the incidence, nature, and impact of everyday forms of prejudice by letting participants fill out a daily diary for roughly a week. In one instance, a professor had heckled a Hindu student because he couldn’t eat McDonald’s French fries, which are cooked in beef extract. In front of a large class of students, the professor proceeded to make fun of the student because he could “only order
chicken.” During the incident, the student/participant rated feelings of inadequacy and intimidation more highly than after the incident. Ultimately, the daily diary method did not prove as useful to the study as had been hoped; consequently, they are not the focus of the rest of the paper. Some of the information gathered, however, did provide part of the background for conceptualizing the three, individual interviews.

Whether from daily encounters like these or from more exceptional encounters, 9/11 naturally spawned new stories. I remember traveling in Europe in the Spring of 2003 and meeting a United States citizen in a town outside of Frankfurt, Germany. He resembled my complexion—brown skin, dark hair—so the conversation naturally drifted to questions of ethnicity. This is the usual protocol: if you meet someone who is at least as dark as you, you ask where or how they received their “tan.” “Unfortunately,” he got his from Saudi Arabia. Though a naturalized American citizen, he told countless stories of being pulled aside since his passport still says “Place of Birth: Saudi Arabia.” One time, authorities had pulled him aside because he had the gall to sightsee in New York City with the aid of a camera. What is more suspicious than taking pictures in New York City? I mean who is naïve enough to do that!

Evidently, events like September 11, 2001 stand out from others in their ability to elicit endless storytelling. Taking insights from the German hermeneutic phenomenologists William Dilthey and Hans Georg Gadamer, Mattingly, Lawlor, and Jacobs-Huey (2002), define 9/11 as *erlebnis*, or
“experience that emerges as a time apart” (p. 743). The defining quality of erlebnis is the ability to “split time into a ‘before’ and ‘after’” (Mattingly et. al., p. 743). Erlebnis defies the ordinary, the usual. It forces us to re-imagine consciousness and rethink the dimensions of personal time and space. Similarly, Denzin (1989) speaks of epiphanies as “those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their life projects” (p.15).

Personal storytelling is one avenue where the ramifications of such experiences are told. “Such times are eminently worthy of a story. They insist on narration” (Mattingly et. al., p. 743).

In these next pages, I will tell my participants’ stories that were created out of tragedy. Just like my own story, these act as a counter-narrative to the dominant media-portrayed story coming out of 9/11. These are stories of conflict, despair, and confusion. These are stories of betrayal and alienation. These are the Others’ stories. As Lopez (2002) aptly proclaims, these are “stories that are not told, stories that rub against our most fundamental understanding of reality, stories that reveal the underbelly of American society—the hate crimes, the scapegoating, the vilification and denigration of anything ‘un-American’” (pp 197-198).
III. Oath of Allegiance

The following narrative comes from a 22-year-old college student living in the United States. He was born in Berlin, Germany to parents of Indian descent and recently chose to become an American citizen.

The room is getting fairly crowded. The Immigration and Naturalization officer settles down the room and calls attention to the front.

“In your pamphlets, you will see the Oath of Allegiance to complete your process of becoming a naturalized citizen of the United States of America. Thus, please raise your right hand and repeat after me.”

I am getting very anxious. Though living in the United States for the past decade, I was still a citizen of Germany. My journey might strike some as odd, and understandably so. I was born in Berlin to parents who were both born in India. My father had moved to Germany in his mid-twenties hoping to find better opportunities for employment. To say Berlin is a long way from Bombay (now Mumbai of course) is an understatement.

I don’t remember much about living in Berlin. My fondest memory is “being there” when the Wall came down. I was sleepy but remember the images of people screaming and shouting in jubilation. At the age of six, I obviously had no clue what was going on, let alone the politics of the day. Soon after, our
family decided to move to Columbus, Ohio to be closer to relatives. So, leaving Germany was not as bad as it would have been had I been older. To make a long story short, it took about fifteen years for me to officially become a United States citizen. The delay was due more to my family’s worldview than anything else. Considering my travels, I had always thought of myself as a “citizen of the world.” It may sound cliché these days, but I truly felt that borders did not matter that much to me. Though, pragmatism finally won over, and I took the step to become naturalized. I think that word is funny, “naturalized.” Maybe if they called it something else, I would have done it earlier. It sounds as if I am not natural until I take this oath. Prior to the oath, I am unnatural, base, artificial, fake. At any rate, the time has come.

“I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen;

“To any foreign prince.” As I repeat the phrase, I find myself secretly grinning. Foreign prince? When was this oath created? It’s not like I’m emigrating from the land of Camelot. How many places actually have official principalities these days? I mean only the “primitives” (as the “civilized” world likes to call them) still adhere to strict monarchies, right?

that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the armed forces of the United States when required by the law;
This part sounds much more foreboding than the others. “Bearing arms,” “enemies,” “armed forces”—it sounded like I was enlisting in the military rather than becoming a citizen. Considering the state of the union, though, the possibility of seeing military conscription rises by the day. We are in the middle of Iraq and Afghanistan now, but I keep hearing other countries being thrown around. Iran. North Korea. Syria. A small part of me thinks that my travels have not finished yet. Supporting and defending in this day and age with these policies might become an ever present reality.

> that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

“So help me God.” Why did they write it with a capital “G?” At least for simplicity’s sake it should read “god” to cover all the religions pouring in from all over the world to become American. I mean there are Allah, Yahweh, Jehovah, Brahman, Buddha, and countless others that would take forever to fully list.

Two months later...

It has been a while since I became a citizen of the United States of America on March 28, 2003. It felt good on some levels to finally feel connected to the place I had lived for so long. I must admit that a bit of hubris surfaced when I realized that I’m an American citizen. I mean it grants me easy entry to almost any country in the world. It
also has the backing of the most powerful and prosperous nation out there. However, one thing that being a citizen did not do, as I thought it would, is protect me from prejudice. I assumed that since I was officially American, people would not denigrate me according to my skin color, since we were brothers and sisters by country. Experience soon told me otherwise.

Basically, I was at a party with three other South Asians. Drinks aplenty, we tried to make our way to the keg. Almost there, I suddenly hear a heckle from the back.

“Here comes the terrorists,” an anonymous person quipped.

What the hell? Who the fuck said that? Looking around, nobody of course claimed responsibility. Thinking that it was not worth the energy, I tried to play it off. I figured the jerk was just drunk and trying to impress the crowd. In my experience as a college student, I have noticed that inebriation creates the animal in all of us. Yet, another thought crossed my mind as well. Some often say that alcohol is a truth serum of sorts, that when you drink, you are more likely to say what you actually think. Granted this clown was just drunk, but was he actually telling the truth as he saw it? Do the hordes of sober people I see every day think that I’m a threat to them just because my skin exudes a brownish hue? What if the hordes of soberness were converted to drunkenness? That thought is especially troubling. A sinking feeling engulfs me as I ponder the possibility that the average person who comes up to me believes deep down that I might be the “enemy.” Perhaps I should start buying more people drinks at the bar to get them to tell their true beliefs of my ethnicity.
As if that incident didn’t taint my first months of American citizenship enough, I keep hearing disturbing things coming from the wider public realm as well. All this talk of curbing rights to achieve greater security has me feeling quite perturbed. The American emphasis on rights is a large reason why I came to strive for citizenship. I found inspiration in those who had fought tirelessly to attain these rights—the Dr. Martin Luther King’s and the Susan B. Anthony’s. Now, the powers that be throw around the idea of curbing rights as if rights meant nothing. I apologize Dr. King.
IV. Moral Values

Highlighted in this narrative are the thoughts of an 18-year-old man confronting issues of identity. He is Christian and Indian-American.

“Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.”
Mark 3:35

“My name is Mark.” That was the usual response to the “What’s your name?” question up until about 2 years ago. I was born Christian to parents from South India. “Mark” is actually my middle name. My real first name, which I go by now, sounded too “awkward” to me growing up. It’s clearly Indian, and clearly “foreign” to everyone else. I don’t know if I was ashamed of it, but it just made things easier to go by Mark. Plus, up until the tenth grade, I was a total White boy. I dressed White and even wore the rope necklaces that all the cool kids wore. I was in diverse schooling for the first couple of years, but that changed when I moved to the suburbs. Everyone was White, except for me and my best friend, a Palestinian.

Now, being “Mark” did not come with only benefits. When word got out in my school that I was actually one of those kids with a foreign name, I felt so ashamed. Some kids used to heckle me about it, but I just tried to let it go. Moreover, I have gone to Church every Sunday since I can remember, and still
Some of the other kids in my Confirmation class found out even earlier than the kids in school. Their teasing hurt me even more, since they were supposed to be my Christian brothers. I finally came to grips with the ordeal by insisting that these kids were not true Christians, and they did the Church thing just to impress mom and dad.

That was then. Recently, ever since I got into college, I have found myself under greater scrutiny. Once college was underway, I started introducing myself by my “foreign” Indian name. I’m not sure if there’s a coincidence between “de-(Mark)ing” and alienation, but it’s definitely a thought. During one of my first weeks at the university, a kid had remarked that my family “must be terrorists.” He acted like he was joking.

In high school, when 9/11 had occurred, I remember my Palestinian friend getting a lot of grief like this from other students. He became more and more defensive as the weeks passed. I find myself becoming more defensive now too. But I think it’s for a slightly different reason, having to do with my own Christian faith. For instance, I was watching the news the other day, and the President was speaking about the “War on Terrorism.” I took issue with the way he used Biblical language to characterize the “war against tyranny.” It seemed like a revival of the Crusades-mentality, where us Christians were supposed to take over the world in our image. I take my Christian faith very seriously and don’t like when others use it to pursue selfish means. In fact, it angers me. My religion is that of acceptance and tolerance, not annihilation.
On another level, I realized that most of the perpetrators of discrimination after 9/11 were White men. I will assume that these people were also raised Christian, whether they still go to church or not. When you’re a victim of overt racism, you don’t really think about religion; color seems to run deeper than faith to them. I don’t want to sound like I’m saying, “Hey, don’t pick on me, I’m the good one.” Yet, knowing that these folks are supposed to be my Christian brothers angers me. It is my judgment that they are not truly Christian. So, should I forgive them, for they know not what they do?
V. The Triangle Trade

This is the story of a Hindu man who was born in Pakistan, moved to the United States at age 14, and visited India at age twenty-two. The story is told in reverse.

India-2003

This is strange. I'm Hindu, but these people are so completely different than what I know Hindu to be. I was born and raised in Pakistan, which is roughly 99% Muslim. I lived in a small, tight-knit community of Hindus that had been there for years, even before the partition of India into two (and later three). Though we were a minute minority, the Muslim population did not bother us at all. In fact, I never had to think twice about feeling outnumbered.

In India, though, they all practice Hinduism differently. Where I'm from, we obeyed strict customs. As I look back, our seclusion from other Hindus probably fostered this adherence to strictness. At the same time, I also recognize that the Hinduism of Pakistan is deeply influenced by the culture of Islam. For instance, I don't eat pork, which is a Muslim thing, not a Hindu thing. Also, I went to a wedding recently in Delhi. The Hindu weddings here in India are so different than those in, say, Karachi, Pakistan. Our weddings there, like the one
my brother recently had, are more similar to Muslim weddings than Indian-Hindu
weddings.

I feel conflicted by my newfound discoveries about the variance in my
own religion. I would not like to think that I’m closer to Pakistani Muslims than I
am to Indian Hindus. Ever since 9/11 I have strongly criticized Pakistan for their
role in fostering radical fundamentalism. I had lived there, so I agree with much
of what the American government says about ending the religious-based violence.
What pisses me off as much is that the American government continues to be bed
buddies with the Pakistani government. Let’s be consistent, people. I’m also mad
when I receive discrimination in the US when people think I’m a radical Muslim.
I understand why certain Americans are mad of course: If someone blows my
house up, then I’d be mad too. But my whole point is that I’m as mad at the
radical Muslims that come from places like Pakistan, because I’ve seen it in
person. Don’t put me in their boat.

United States-1996

I was in class today, and this dude who’s been making me mad lately
draws a picture of me which is a stick figure hanging from a tree with a rope
around his neck. That was the last straw. This guy has been making fun of my
accent for so long and also making me say curse words that I didn’t know were
curse words just to get me in trouble. I wasn’t ridiculed like this in Pakistan,
because everyone walked and talked like me! So I went to Mr. Banks, our
teacher, and told him what was going on. He put the jerk in his place. After that, I kind of became more popular with my classmates. I think they think I’m a pretty strong guy now. Though I do feel a little bad for having to tell on him. I mean, I didn’t want him to really get in trouble, that’s not my intentions. God, what was I supposed to do? I mean should I have let it go on and suffer myself, or make it stop, but in the process place the suffering on someone else? I don’t want anyone to suffer.

**Pakistan-1989**

I like Pakistan. I have lot of friends here. My family is here also and I love them. The weather is good too because I get to play outside lots. I have some Hindu friends and also some Moslem friends. I might have to move soon to America but it might be harder.
VI. Conclusion: Glass Houses

“At least I’m wearing my American flag shirt.”
“They were just drunk.”
“They’re not real Christians, anyway.”
“I’d be mad also if someone attacked my house.”

These rationalizations were deeply embedded in the previous stories. Rather than viewing ridicule as unjust by itself, the storytellers all tried to explain why they were being treated with prejudice. Maybe they feel as though their own livelihood, as a citizen in the American democracy, is in jeopardy. Is it? Rationalizations might be the only thing we can look to at this point, those of us eliciting “reasonable suspicion.” How else do we justify to White America, or to the master narrative, that we are still worthy of being American? Ironically, as Carolyn Ellis (2002) points out, those of us in the reasonable suspicion camp may have taken the place of African-Americans in our class system (p.173). Life would be much easier for many people, even the most open-minded, if they did not have to see “terrorist-looking” people in line to board their plane. Our democracy requires a sacrifice of liberty for extra security in times of war, the masses claim. Yet, one wonders whose liberty is actually being sacrificed? Longer waits in line to board a plane hardly count as a “loss of liberty.” Being asked for identification at every step, being accused of “plotting against the U.S.” by random strangers, being genuinely afraid of stopping for gas in Anytown,
U.S.A., and being taken off a plane for no reason sound more like the loss of liberty of which our leaders speak. So let us rephrase: during times of war, it might become necessary to take liberty away from people who make other people feel uncomfortable because they look like “them” (See: Japanese internment).

We are forced to rationalize everywhere, even in the ivory towers of academia. Take my own meta-rationalization. I cannot help but think I rationalized the ridicule I experienced in the very process of creating this study. “I’m receiving this ridicule, but it’s going to help me write my thesis in the long run.” What would I write about if the ridicule wasn’t there? Essentially, my own existence as a researcher depends on ridicule existing. Moreover, this existence relies on making use of others’ ridicule.

In the end, my goal was to aid those who found themselves powerless after 9/11—those who were silenced, speechless. As stated in the opening section, this study found the “counter-narrative” approach to social science and storytelling as the most appropriate methodology when dealing with the raw experience of encountering backlash after 9/11. It is “counter” because the stories I presented, in one way or another, go against the tide of the “master” narrative that has dominated public discourse in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center. Thorne and McLean (2003) define “master narratives” as “cultural standards against which community members feel compelled to position their personal experience” (p.171). Those not in line inevitably suffer the consequences. As mentioned above, the most pertinent aspect of the post-9/11
master narrative to this study is the concept of the “new American story.” In this story, the image of the “patriot” is often evoked, who is, by nature, barred from being an ethnic or religious minority. The latter groups are thus viewed in opposition to the ideals of a “patriot.” The master narrative typically involves some of the following plot lines and actions as well: the act of judging other countries with a “You’re either with us or against us” rubric; dealing with New National Security by only “letting the right people in,” which means letting a select few in; raising a deeply skeptical eye to the religions of non-Western countries; believing in the supremacy of American military might. The storytellers of this piece, however, are not easily accepted by the master narrative. The only possible place of acknowledgment is when the master narrative includes a section about separating the “good ones from the bad” (where the latter outweigh the former) when confronting the reasonably suspicious. Here, an acknowledgment is made that some of “us” might be acceptable, but there is still no way of knowing for sure.

Thus, by portraying the experiences of those prohibited from having space within this master narrative, the ensuing counter-narratives offer an alternative, a resistance, to the hegemonic, constraining “cultural standards” imposed by its master. They also call into question the “objectivity” and truthfulness of these dominant accounts, pointing out inconsistencies and biases. The stories above are rarely, if ever, heard. These stories question the underlying beliefs that have woven the fabric of American society since 9/11. For instance, if America is as
great as we say, then why do we, ever since the American Revolution, scapegoat the Other in times of war? If we value pluralism and democracy, then why must we criticize only minority religions and not majority religions?

However, as was witnessed through each individual’s attempts at rationalizing their experience with prejudice, the narratives do not always fall under the category of “countering.” Therein lies the power of the master narrative. As Bamburg (2004) states, such speakers “create a sense of self and identity that maneuvers simultaneously in between being complicit and countering established narratives that give guidance to one’s actions but at the same time constrain and delineate one’s agency” (p. 363). They do counter yet often must comply in order to make sense of their own identity and place in society. The present storytellers indeed felt the hurt and alienation from discrimination, though they still wished to be accepted in their community. Their rationalizations speak to this “simultaneous maneuvering.” For instance, I dealt with instances of prejudice by wearing American flag paraphernalia, as if this would protect me from hate. Yet, how does merely flying the “Red, White, and Blue” suddenly turn anyone into a “hero” or “patriot?” Moreover, since when has flying the flag on everything from car stickers to beach towels become a requisite of citizenship? The next story explained away others’ racist behaviors by blaming alcohol. Here again one sees a maneuvering between the anger at feeling excluded and verbally abused, yet the hesitancy of rightfully accusing others of explicit racism. In some sense, the aggressors walked away without any
repercussions. The third narrative spoke disdainfully towards fellow “Christian brothers” for being behind much of the post-9/11 backlash. On the other hand, the narrative concludes that it is only a select few who hold these hateful feelings, rather than a wider problem. Finally, the last speaker seemed to acknowledge those who revert to baser instincts upon provocation without much scrutiny. He disliked being put “in the wrong boat,” but never really questioned why there is a “boat” to begin with. All in all, the stories in this study fit Bamburg’s description of narratives that are at one time countering and complicit. Again, therein lies the power of the master narrative to muddle the psyches of the marginalized.

The storytellers all felt great remorse after the events of 9/11, but they were uniquely burdened with an added dimension of discrimination, hate, and alienation. Theirs were tales of happiness in becoming an American citizen yet also of dejection at the lack of inclusiveness in American society, at the daily ambivalence in which they live. Those in business and academia speak of a glass ceiling which prohibits some, often women and minorities, from upward mobility. They can see the top, but they will never reach it. Now imagine a glass house. Imagine that after 9/11, this glass house replaced the one in which you used to live. Your every move is exposed, scrutinized. You are constantly on alert, fearing that one day they will come for you—your only crime being the way you look, the accent you hold, the faith you follow. In the end, the glass house is not really a home; that was lost long ago. You are homeless in your own country.
The present narratives developed within these glass houses, and out of the ensuing confused, rationalizing, dejected psyche.

Since the narrative approach I have used follows in the path of hermeneutics, the author’s own values and subjectivity must be made apparent as well. As stated above, my own story is one of discrimination, one of hatred, and one of rage. Rage at being placed amongst the vilest in society for no reason except ignorance. Rage at those who see me as a color, and at worst, as an Other. Rage at those who claim to hold the ideals of democracy yet scoff at the mention of tolerance and acceptance. I am reminded of James Hillman (2004) when he says, “Hypocrisy in America is not a sin but a necessity and a way of life…Hypocrisy holds the nation together so that it can preach, and practice what it does not preach” (p.197).

In the end, however, my story is theirs, my storytellers’. My hope is that this collection of stories represents a step towards developing an on-going counter-narrative in the post-9/11 world. This counter-narrative would inform such problems as the liberty-security and nationalism-pluralism dichotomies, and also serve as a critique of post-9/11 democracies. Lastly, it should, and must, give voice to those left alienated, humiliated, and ridiculed. That said, we have been warned not to study the powerless “because everything you say about them will be used against them” (Bourgois, 1995, p. 18). The risk of being labeled “un-patriotic” or “un-American” comes to mind. But taking from Paul Farmer, I stand behind the process of “bearing witness.” “Bearing
witness is done on behalf of others, for their sake” (Farmer, 2003, p.28). I hope I have done justice to my storytellers.
References


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