9/11: horizons impacted?

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Those of you familiar with past issues of fire! will probably notice that it’s squarer, sleeker, and smarter than it used to be. Tossing out the old newsletter, we have reconceived the publication as a fuel for thought, a point of ignition for actively confronting and intellectually engaging with our lives. We believe that this type of forum is especially effective for addressing a theme as unwieldy and amorphous as the events and experiences of September 11 and its aftermath.

We imagined this issue, “horizons impacted?”, as an interrogation of how our individual and collective conceptions of our world have changed as a result of the events that have physically altered New York’s skyline. Although still under the auspices of the LGBT Community Resources Center, we have made an effort in this reconception of fire! to include other alternative perspectives along with queer perspectives. Thus Brenda Berkman addresses the events and their media representation from a feminist point of view, Ming Wong takes a politically critical slant, and John Felstiner sheds an environmentalist light. Jenn Lindsay responds highly personally, touching on issues of place and identity. Finally, Tim’m West and Cathy Sakimura explain how the aftermath of September 11 is a specifically queer issue from the perspective of identity-based activism.

The impact of an event like September 11 is measurable only by the sum of the millions of smaller impacts it has had on individuals. While these brief pages capture the voices of only a few of those individuals, we hope that they will spark many more to partake in future dialogues.

Please see the back cover of this issue for a list of future 9/11-related activities on the Stanford campus, and look for information coming soon on fire!’s next issue, dealing with gender.

Thank you,

Ellen Freytag and Caitlin Kalinowski, co-editors
Introduction Prof. Lou Roberts, History Department

I know Brenda Berkman through her partner, Pam Elam. Pam and I both completed a graduate program in Women’s History at Sarah Lawrence College in the late seventies, and have been friends ever since. But while Pam and I were studying Women’s History, Brenda was making it. In 1982 she entered the fire service after winning a sex discrimination lawsuit that resulted in the hiring of the first women firefighters in New York City. Currently, she is a Lieutenant in the NYFD, fighting fires and responding to emergencies for Ladder Company 12 in Manhattan. In addition, she is the founder and President of the United Women Firefighters organization in New York City. No stranger to scholarship or history, despite her pioneering role as a firefighter, Brenda holds an M.A. in American history from Indiana, and a J.D. from New York University. This extraordinary woman was the person I most worried about as I saw the twin towers fall on September 11. Although she was off-duty that Tuesday morning, she rushed to Ground Zero, and remained there for much of the next few days, securing the site and looking for survivors. (Brenda’s personal account of September 11 can be found at http://www.wfsi.org/BerkmanWTC.html.) The following speech relates her frustration concerning how little recognition women firefighters and other rescue personnel have received for their heroic efforts on behalf of us all at Ground Zero.

Celebrating the Many Roles of Women: Remarks of Lt. Brenda Berkman

at The National Women’s Law Center’s 2001 Awards Dinner, November 14, 2001

Thank you for honoring me tonight. By honoring me, you are honoring all the women rescue and recovery workers who have been doing their patriotic duty at Ground Zero and the Pentagon, in the armed forces and all over this country.

Who are these women? Where are the women rescue and recovery workers in the frenzy of media coverage of every little detail of Ground Zero that has occurred since September 11? We have all seen the stories about the rescue dogs and the “brothers” who are riding bikes across the country in memory of the firefighters killed at the World Trade Center. We have had the New York Times opine about the return of the “manly man”—referring to male firefighters as the new cultural icons. We immediately had columns by right-wing pundits arguing that the lack of media coverage of women rescue workers was “proof” that women could not and should not be firefighters. Many of these stories have been reported, written or produced by women.

I am here to tell you that the reality is that women were and are at Ground Zero. They have been there since the first minutes of the attack. Half of the women in the New York City Fire Department—and there are only 25 women out of 11,500 firefighters—put themselves in harm’s way that first day and for many days thereafter. Fortunately, none were killed.
There were also countless women EMT’s, New York City police officers, Port Authority police officers and other emergency workers who responded immediately. Three uniformed women lost their lives that day: Port Authority Captain Kathy Mazza, NYPD officer Moira Smith, and EMT Yamel Merino, who was working for a private ambulance service. Many more women were injured trying to save others—women who literally had to have pieces of the buildings removed from their bodies, women who suffered broken bones and other injuries requiring hospitalization.

Within hours of the first plane, Ground Zero was flooded with other women emergency workers and volunteers. Women by the dozens came from all over the country as part of search-and-rescue and other firefighter teams. Women nurses and doctors, women construction workers, women chaplains, military women, Red Cross women—women volunteering in every capacity, every minute of those first days and weeks. Women continue to work at Ground Zero today. Women and men have worked together as one, desperately searching for any sign of life.

The reality is that women have contributed to the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack in every imaginable way. But the face the media has put on the rescue and recovery efforts in New York City is almost exclusively that of men. Where are the pictures or stories of Captain Kathy Mazza shooting out the glass in the lobby of one of the towers to allow hundreds of people to flee the building more quickly? Or of police officer Moira Smith helping people escape the towers, and last be seen going back into the building to help a trapped asthmatic person? Or of EMT Yamel Merino tending to an injured person when she herself was struck by the falling building? Or of the countless women working on the pile of debris to recover anyone who may have survived, or the remains of the thousands of people who were in the building or on the airplanes?

One of the hardest things for the women firefighters to bear has been their total invisibility at the hundreds of funerals for their fallen comrades—men we worked with for many years—our friends, our “brothers.”

**Women have contributed to the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack in every imaginable way.**

At almost every funeral we attend, the mayor, the cardinal, the fire commissioner and almost every eulogist—except of course when we ourselves are the eulogists—talk exclusively about the *men* and the *brothers* our co-workers worked with. The other day, as I attended another funeral for one of my friends in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, the cardinal asked the *men* who are the “Bravest” to rise—totally ignoring the dozens of women firefighters and police officers in attendance from all over the country.

The word “fireman” has totally eclipsed the gender-neutral and accurate civil service term “firefighter.” Not quite as often, but still too frequently, the same has happened as “policeman” returns, to the exclusion of “police officer.”
Why has this happened? The reality is that women are on the front lines domestically and abroad in the war against terrorism, and we need to do more to acknowledge that fact. After our past wars, the contributions of our mothers and grandmothers in the war efforts were ignored. During World War II, Japanese-Americans were “disappeared” into camps. It has only been recently that the historical amnesia about these events has been corrected. Those mistakes should have taught us that it is important to recognize the patriotism of all our citizens.

The struggle against terrorism and to preserve our way of life will be a long one. We will need to show our children and the world just exactly what it is that we are fighting for. This struggle is not to preserve buildings. It is a struggle to preserve freedoms and diversity, including the rights of women to participate in every aspect of our civic duties.

We all must make it our fight to raise the profile of women in this struggle: not just to give credit where credit is due, but also to ensure that American women are not made invisible in the way the women of Afghanistan have been forced into invisibility by the Taliban. The United States as a society is better than that. I would ask all of you to do everything you can to show your children that:

Women are firefighters;
Women are patriotic;
Women are heroes.

We should do no less for the women who put themselves on the line, not just on 9/11 but every day—especially those who gave their lives to protect our freedoms.
During the early days of September 2001 I was deeply joyfully engaged in writing about poetry and environment—that is, in trying to get the environmental news and urgency from the poetry I’d been teaching for forty years. What made this work most compelling for me was the chance to spend hours each day in the fields and woods and hills of upstate New York, at the 640-acre (Edna St. Vincent) Millay Artists Colony. Hawks, coyote, wild turkey, bears, and songbirds in the just-turning acorn-dropping autumn landscape simply lifted and freed me to write. Then came that Tuesday; and after countless hours in front of the TV I walked up to a meadow I’d been frequenting daily, and felt my mind trying to shape some words that would bear my horror yet not trivialize what had actually happened, as words so very often do.

September 11, 2001

Saying “Earth! Earth!” because
Earth at least remains.
Earth at most.

Prof. John Felstiner,
English Department
Sept 11, 2001 marked a real personal and political challenge for me. As someone who proudly identifies as a hyphenated American, my sensibilities about what it means to be American prior to the terrorist attacks had been clear. I work daily with African-American queer youth in Oakland, California who regularly put their bodies and spirits on the “market” in order to survive. Understanding the multiple -isms many queer folk of color face, I was clear than being American was preferable to being some other intersecting aspect of a complex identity. My sense of patriotism was resolved in my commitment to activism: my holding America accountable to the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness it claims to honor for its citizens.

But immediate unrest and frustration with communities I’m closest to further complicates matters. I grew up in Taylor, Arkansas and used an outhouse until my tragic acclimation to high-culture at Duke University. Having lived on the other side of capitalist exploitation and excess, I had been sympathetic to everything from WTO protests to grassroots challenges to the New World Order by some groups who are perhaps now considered “terrorist” threats. I must also struggle to make sense of the hypocritical acts of racism among majority white gay communities and the perpetuation of homophobia among black communities.
So when the towers came down, my spirit did too.
I watched, stunned, like everyone else, worried
about friends and family in New York, where I
lived just three years ago. The curious mobiliza-
tion that ensued around the nation extended
to my neighborhood. Ironically, people of
color in East Oakland were seduced by the
call to patriotism, though on September
10 and before they had been mobilizing
around racial profiling and fighting the
‘system.’ In days following, my room-
mate, who is also black, came home to
report that he’d been called a “nigger”
in San Francisco. I also began to hear
reports of assaults from South Asian
and Middle Eastern friends, often by
black folk. I am convinced that my
roommate’s being called a “nigger”
in San Francisco and the WTC col-
lapse were not unconnected events.
Any hurt I experienced as a result of
the terrorist attacks was immediately
juxtaposed with a culture I see as culti-
vating hate, bigotry, violence, and a dis-
regard for human life.

I felt worse than it feels to feel bad. Ambiv-
alent. Neutralized. American and Un-Amer-
ican. How had this singular and tragic event
altered our imagination such that challenging
systemic oppressions was deferred to our col-
lective grief and “hunting down” Bin Laden?
Asked to write about September 11 by several
people, I was immobilized by the heavy burden of

how America, and my
relationship to it, have
changed. How does my struggle for
equality change? An optimist, I hope
that the attention given to our national secu-
rity and the struggles against racial, gender, and
sexual inequality will more than happily co-exist.

I hope for an intense examination of what it means
to be American, and a real self-reflective examination
of how we fail America by letting patriotic symbols
speak for us, or by letting the decision not to bear a flag
be associated with apathy. I hope we will realize that
America isn’t just wonderful in everyone’s mind, and
that it is wonderful precisely because it’s okay in Amer-
ica to hold such a view. I am happy to be an American if
only because the voices that call for tough conversations
about the New World Order, its winners and losers, have
a right to speak here—though, as civil liberties are rolled
back, certainly not without consequences.

There are so many things to say, yet words often fail
to adequately explain a range of feelings. I hugged a
young black gay man who lost his sister in the World
Trade Center. I spoke with him after about the racism
and alienation he experiences in San Francisco’s
Castro. These hurts are not unrelated for him. It’s
not as easy as “then leave the country” or bear
a flag. Ambivalence wails for recognition, but
silence grows instead, and there are few ears
for whom the words make sense. My hope is
that these voices in-between find the cour-
age and power to be heard so that we may
validate and honor the range of emo-
tions associated with September 11.
September 12, 2001 I wandered Manhattan’s streets. They were quiet in the nighttime except for sirens. I leave ashen footprints as high as 20th street. Lord I could feel my life. At Union Square all the faces are long with grief, lit by candles: little lives in a cup, in constant danger of drowning in their own wax. The people are heartbreaking, heartbroken, gasping into Kleenexes, shoulders shaking, laying roses with a whisper, holding people they don’t know, and writing signs like, “Mom and Dad, I miss you,” and “Dylan Keeley R.I.P.” The boy next to me writes, “I got out but my friends didn’t. Where are they now? I love you all forever and God Bless. Junior Garcia.”

He is from the Dominican Republic. “You can’t imagine,” he says dazedly, “It’s different if you were there. People who saw it are stricken but I was there, I saw people without arms, people jumping from the buildings. My friends all of them are in there. They haven’t called for three days. I can’t stop shaking.” He starts to cry into a red washcloth, in great sucking snuffles. I sit there helplessly between Junior and Eileen, who sleeps with her lights on now, who lost her cousin. “My cousin was an angel,” she says. “My cousin was an angel.”

I think of my stubborn old resolutions, my sullied old revolutions, burning in me again. My God, not only do people get hit by buses but they get hit by airplanes; they get pulverized in their offices between morning coffee and switching on their email; they rain from the sky and land in smithereens on the howling masses. “It’s different if you were there…I can’t stop shaking.” I wonder what legacy I have constructed with my life, what would occur to me in my last moments: would I wish I had jogged or played guitar more, been vegan, or stopped worrying about money? Would I have jumped?

On Friday at 7 p.m. was the nationwide vigil. I was at the Raven Bar with my friend when a girl handed us candles. After a few minutes outside, everything silent except for the F-16s circling Manhattan island, we started to sing: Amazing Grace, the National Anthem, God Bless America. Bless this girl she started sobbing next to me as I sang and sang, even hitting high freedom in the Star Spangled Banner. Then I passed off my candle and held her, this stranger, while she sobbed.
Life here now is trouble, trouble, soil, and rubble, and we know that we could crumble down dead-in-a-sec like others did, 5,300 times over, this month. I am finding different ways to cope, to welcome beauty back into my life. New York itself helps; as hard as it is, I don’t want to be anywhere else. Maybe that’s a strange thing for me to say since I only moved here in June, an impetuous girl-with-her-guitar, ready to begin my life as a starving freelance something-or-other, to the place where Sinatra told us, “If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere.” But I’ve spent the summer struggling to find anything in New York that wasn’t too humid, too expensive, too brusque. I’ve been seeking something life-affirming amidst the heat and difficulty; seeking a reason other than stubbornness, and dreams of surviving on my own artistry, to stay in New York. And then on September 11, the sky was falling.

The understanding that all New Yorkers presently share, the understanding of acute bewilderment and grief, gives rise to a kind of brotherhood. Or, more simply, more sincerely, a home. I’ve really discovered New York in the wake of disaster, an irony worth all its details. Here are the grieving young and old, their waxy shrines and dried flowers. The kids who wander around in Union Square lighting extinguished candles. The Tibetan nuns who bend and sing dissonantly as if they were alone in a high-walled temple. The sidewalk around New York Fire Departments, where you can’t walk for all the flowers, pictures, childish scrawls of fire trucks and misspelled thank you notes. In the cramp of the swaying subway car, there is an understanding: All of these people are alive. I would help any of them if I could.

New York has always moved. Every emergence to the street is a new revelation. As the city swaggers around you, the buildings reel into the sky, the heat swirls in muzzy gusts, and the subway shudders below your feet. Every person is writing his everyman movie at every moment. The great melting pot, this vast collage of people, all of us sweating together in a grand concrete swamp. As hard as it is to be here now I wouldn’t be anywhere else, because anywhere else I’d be crying, “Don’t you get it?” In New York we get it, we get it so well. We think about being a mile away from the collapsing towers, and about all the people who had no choice, who ran so desperately to get out of that 9 a.m. nighttime, who maybe had rough lives, abuses, had been dumped, had been hated, but still ran desperately to preserve the life they had. Because the body’s will to live is stronger than anything else, ash or tide or storm.

I’ve spent my whole life as an adolescent poet, a coffee shop diva, wondering since age four if I would take my own life. Since September 11, 2001, when I saw what choice was, to have and have not, the option hasn’t occurred to me. Not choosing life: what does that say about the people who didn’t have the choice? Since I arrived in New York I’ve been searching for something life-affirming. And I found it. We all have. And it’s not the destruction of Lower Manhattan; it’s the strength emerging from it. It’s a place where an ancient hatred has finally become a present love.
Shortly after the events of September 11, I started to work at Gay-Straight Alliance Network on implementing the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act. This law added sexual orientation and gender identity to the existing school nondiscrimination policy. Part of the strength of this law is its support of the belief that the civil rights struggles of all oppressed groups are interconnected and equally important.

While my work is focused on homophobia and transphobia, the spirit of this law is to make schools safe for all students. As an organization dedicated to supporting youth to fight discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools, GSA Network believes that this is a critical time for us to offer our solidarity and support to Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian communities who are being targeted with reactionary harassment. We recognize that our own diverse movement overlaps with, and relies upon support from, numerous other communities. Youth fighting homophobia in schools are well aware of what it feels like to be harassed and ostracized at school.

As part of our commitment to providing GSAs with the resources and tools needed to organize against harassment in all forms, we have created a peer education curriculum packet for GSAs to use in dealing with the events of September 11. *Justice For All: Dealing with the Events and Aftermath of September 11* includes discussions about solidarity, analyzing media, being an ally and forming coalitions. We hope that student activists can draw on their experiences and use our *Justice for All* curriculum to help make sure that their schools have safe environments, free of harassment for all students.
We have created a packet of materials to support discussion in GSAs of the current events as well as offer ideas and resources for actions that GSAs may choose to take. While these events are deeply troubling and overwhelming, we hope that these resources will help youth to feel empowered to take a stand for justice and make youth voices heard in the public debate.

We at GSA Network are deeply saddened by the attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. We wish peace and strength to all those who have been touched by this tragedy. To view our online curriculum, *Justice For All: Dealing with the Events and Aftermath of September 11*, go to: www.gsanetwork.org/justiceforall.

*Gay-Straight Alliance Network, founded in 1998 by Stanford alumna Carolyn Laub, is a youth-led organization that works to empower youth activists fighting homophobia in schools. We work primarily with high schools, but also have connections to Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) groups in colleges like Stanford’s Queer-Straight Social and Political Alliance. We are dedicated to helping youth all over California start GSAs, keep them going, and become active in the fight to end homophobia.*
Variously described by critics as anti-American, a Cassandra of the left, and one of the most important intellectuals of our time, Noam Chomsky is one of the few prominent dissenting voices amidst the current atmosphere of righteous indignation (not to mention the previous period during which apathetic self-satisfaction prevailed). In his characteristically tart, ironic deadpan, he adeptly roots out the glossed-over contradictions fed to us as news by popular media, skewers official bluster, blows the whistle on journalistic hush-ups, and generally cuts through bullshit. Articulate, humorous, and easy to read, he backs his arguments up with an astonishingly detailed knowledge of history, current events, and media reporting. Naturally, as a result, he barely gets a mention in the mainstream press, let alone a voice. The mild-mannered MIT Linguistics and Philosophy professor has also been accused of treason, and of being an apologist for murderers, terrorists, dictators and violent street thugs. I admit my tone is bitter, and perhaps has a whiff of the zeal of the newly converted, but these are bitter times.

In his talk at MIT, “The New War Against Terror,” Chomsky criticizes the United States’ current military action in Afghanistan in his characteristically trenchant manner. Patiently flogging the horse that many would rather pretend was dead, Chomsky reminds his audience that acts of terror have in the past been committed by the U.S. and Western European countries and gone unpunished. He specifically mentions the U.S. war against Nicaragua, which was condemned by the World Court as an “unlawful use of force.” He points out that, if a reduction in terrorism is your goal, directing hostility towards personalities such as Osama bin Laden while ignoring the death and destruction inflicted by your own country or group is both hypocritical and unproductive. “There is one easy way to [reduce terrorism],” says Chomsky, “namely stop participating in it.” Meanwhile, huge numbers of deaths of innocent people are being treated as collateral damage in pursuit of a noble but distant goal. Here then, we have the familiar tactic of vehemently condemning in others what you yourself are engaged in, so as to occupy the moral high ground: people in glass houses throwing stones—or cluster bombs, as the case might be.
Chomsky acknowledges that the events of September 11 resulted in “probably the most devastating instant human toll of any crime in history, outside of war.” Still, they remain a crime, not an act of war. The U.S. has notably made no significant attempt to present its case that Osama bin Laden was responsible for this crime in any sort of public court. Indeed, one needs a detailed explanation, a vivid imagination, or a generous lack of interest in evidence to believe that, as Chomsky put it, “a guy in a cave in Afghanistan, who doesn’t even have a radio or a telephone…planned a highly sophisticated operation like [the events of September 11].” The U.S.’s idea seems to be that not only must justice be done, but it must be seen to be done. Even assuming that Osama bin Laden was directly responsible for the crime, the U.S. was not willing to let the Taliban hand him over to a third party. Instead, it has engaged in a military campaign designed to provoke internal instability in Afghanistan, not just bombing major cities but cutting off land routes for foreign aid, which airdropped aid packages are just incapable of making up for.

To sum up, the U.S. has demanded extradition of Osama bin Laden without sufficient evidence of his having organized the September 11 crimes, and, upon refusal, has taken actions that have resulted in millions of deaths of innocent Afghanistan residents from starvation alone. It has garnered enthusiastic support from such countries as Russia, China, Algeria, Indonesia and Turkey, all with histories of brutally oppressive “anti-terror” operations against rebels in their own countries. Chomsky simply calls for a thoughtful examination of the facts, and for moral accountability. He is a reminder that citizenship is more than just pageantry, loyalty and pride. It is also a responsibility to hold your own country to task. In a world where political and economic power speaks volumes, who else can change America but Americans?

Future 9/11-Related Campus Activities & Events

Muslim Students Awareness Network is planning an awareness event on Afghanistan in early February, and is planning a show with Stanford in Government to generate awareness about Muslim cultures.

A Presidential Lecture will be given by Elaine Scarry, Theorist and Cultural Historian, entitled “Nine One One: Citizenship in Emergency.” Law School Room 290, Monday February 25, 2002 at 7:00 p.m.

The Department of International Relations, Student Initiated Courses, Stanford in Government, Stanford Democrats, Stanford Republicans, and Democratic Partners, are sponsoring a class Winter Quarter: IR 193a: Understanding 9/11, Its Causes, Context, and Consequences. For more information, visit the course website: http://www.stanford.edu/class/intnlrel193.

The Christian Science Organization will sponsor a lecture on September 11 in early spring.

Student Organizing Committee for the Arts (SOCA): “An Art Affair” on April 5, 2001 will feature art by many students reacting to 9/11 and its aftermath. If a sufficient number of students submit work, there will likely be a special exhibit devoted to 9/11.

Stanford Law School: A group of students has created a one-time publication of student thoughts and analyses regarding September 11. This includes academic-related papers that students wish to share with the law school community and editorials that might not have other appropriate venues for publication. To be published in the spring.

The Stanford Journal of International Relations’ spring issue will be entitled “After 9/11: A New World Order?” with articles focusing on 9/11 and its implications for foreign policy. For more information or to submit and article, contact Joe Shapiro at joeshap@stanford.edu.

Sarala Nagala and her sister have written a song entitled “This Is Our Place” as a tribute to those who died on 9/11. It has been recorded on CD, and they are selling the CDs with all profits being forwarded to the Twin Towers Fund for the families of uniformed police officers and firefighters who sacrificed their lives. For more information, contact Sarala at snagala@stanford.edu.

The Stanford National Emergency Information and Resources Webpage was developed by the Stanford Medical School after 9/11 to address bioterror, safety, counseling and provide other resources. The URL is http://deansnewsletter.stanford.edu/attackresources.html.

Adapted from a list compiled by Stanford in Government as part of the “University Voices of 9/11” program.