

# 9/11

## CULTURE

Jeffrey Melnick



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# 9/11 Culture America Under Construction

Jeffrey Melnick

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# ***Introduction: 9/11 Questions (and Answers)***

It is risky, I know, to call this introductory chapter “9/11 Questions.” At the time I am writing, putting “9/11” and “Questions” into a single, short phrase cannot help but tap into a very complex vein of American political and cultural expressive practices. The “9/11 questions” that shape the cyberculture of our time (you will see if you take a quick break from reading this and type “9/11 questions” into your favorite search engine) all grow from a shaky and contingent yet powerful consensus that has developed in the years since 2001 about how closely the official narrative of 9/11 matches what actually happened that day. Here is one neat summary of the authorized story of September 11, 2001, taken from what appears to be a self-published children’s book, written by an author whose biographical note claims that she is “nationally known for her ability to simplify concepts”:

We Learned That These “Terrorists”

Who did this horrible act are groups of people around the world who

do not like the way we live or the freedoms we have.

They do no like that we have many religions in America.

They also think we are too rich and that we have too strong a military.

These people want to take over the world. (Poffenberger, 2002: 10)

There is much to say about this children’s book, most of which would not be suitable to say in front of children. But what is perhaps most striking about Nancy Poffenberger’s *September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 (A Simple Account for Children)* is how fully it participates in what novelist Lynne Sharon

Schwartz (2005) has, in grief and anger, referred to as a post-9/11 “butchery” – the way that political leaders and media powers have ritually repeated the same key words and phrases in an attempt to control the possible meanings of the September 11 tragedy. Schwartz describes this collective effort as “not bloody but insidious, an assault on the common language” (78–9). The 9/11 questions that have received fullest play in the past few years fall under the general rubrics of “conspiracy theory” or “9/11 truth,” depending on where you stand. Film actor Charlie Sheen has 9/11 questions and Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has 9/11 questions. Television personality Rosie O’Donnell has 9/11 questions and rappers from Jadakiss to Immortal Technique to the Lost Children of Babylon (who made an entire record they called *The 911 Report: The Ultimate Conspiracy*) all have 9/11 questions.

These 9/11 questions are myriad and often quite technical, but in most cases the shape and content of the questions telegraph a few predictable, if politically satisfying, answers: George W. Bush at the very least knew ahead of time about the plan to attack the United States (or “knocked down the towers” himself, as numerous remixed versions of Immortal Technique and DJ Green Lantern’s “Bin Laden” put it in 2005) and bin Laden had nothing to do with 9/11, or was on the payroll all along, so is not ultimately responsible. These now almost-mainstream 9/11 questions form a powerful river of cultural rhetoric, and at times branch off into unexpected tributaries; you know you are there when you hear or see references to the Illuminati or anything about the imagery on American paper money.

There is a *Doonesbury* comic strip from late December of 2003 that presents a fictionalized presidential press conference that lays out the cultural narrowcasting I am trying to describe here (see [Figure 1](#)). Press spokesperson “Scott” (McClellan) is taking questions from the assembled

journalists, including longtime *Doonesbury* figure Roland Burton Hedley III. Scott never lets a full question get asked. One journalist begins “About the continuing chaos in Iraq,” while another starts with “In regard to the ongoing gutting of our environmental laws ...” In each case, before the question is even finished, Scott says “9-11.” Finally, Hedley asks “Uh ... Scott, is 9-11 the answer to every question now?” The answer?: “Yes, It’s 9-11, 24-7.” As a postscript, after Hedley asks “Until when?” this mouthpiece for George W. Bush says “11-2” (the date of the 2004 presidential election). I have been teaching a class on cultural responses to 9/11 for some 4 years now, at a small business college in the northeast of the United States, and my students have, at times, asked me Roland Burton Hedley’s question with some exasperation. Bruce Springsteen’s *The Rising* album? Sure. “V” for *Vendetta*? No doubt. Spike Lee’s *25<sup>th</sup> Hour*? Yes. But the children’s movie *Chicken Little*? Steven Spielberg’s *Munich*? Television’s *Lost*? The first major proposition of this book, then, is that 9/11 and its cultural and political fallout *have* functioned as the answer to countless questions of social import. We may not now be living “9-11, 24-7” but that seems an error only of degree and not of basic approach.

**Figure 1** [Doonesbury on 24/7 9/11 culture](#). Source: DOONESBURY © 2003 G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.



This book is *about* 9/11 questions, and also about 9/11 answers. Or, perhaps more accurately, it is about how 9/11 has served as a question and an answer on the cultural landscape of the United States in the years since September 11, 2001. The basic premise that will be explored in this book is that “9/11” has become the most important question and answer shaping American cultural discussions (in film and other visual arts, in music, in “high” and popular literature) – but not in the banal ways the official story or the “9/11 questions” of our own moment might suggest. Taking this task on means, of course, that we will likely have to be satisfied with hypotheses, possibilities, and even the occasional dead-end inquiry. The assumption here is that we historians, sociologists, musicologists, film scholars, literary critics, and teachers must begin tracking the resonances of 9/11 even as the apparatus used to support this cultural work is still being created: it is, as my subtitle suggests, “under construction.”

What I am calling the “culture” of 9/11 is a multimedia culture; it has grown unpredictably, across space and genre, encompassing numerous demographic, affective, and affinity groups. The trajectory of the book – from 9/11 rumors to what I am calling 9/11 shout-outs – is meant to

underscore the decentralized and anti-monumentalist nature of much of the most significant 9/11 art. To be sure, I discuss blockbuster Hollywood films, major-event novels and chart-topping popular songs in the pages that follow, but a central argument of this book is that the culture of 9/11 (*cultures*, really) has been characterized by its ad hoc willingness to get the job done now. American culture makers, from the celebrities who appeared at the *America: A Tribute to Heroes* telethon on September 21 to the “average” citizens who took pictures and passed rumors in the weeks following the attacks, contributed in remarkably functional ways to a new culture of grief, memorialization, and celebration too. Just above, I used the phrase “cultural work” and it is this concept, with its focus on what popular arts *do*, rather than what they *are* (in some purely aesthetic, non-social way), that guides *9/11 Culture*. While there have been predictable attempts by cultural gatekeepers to name this or that work as the great statement of post-9/11 consciousness (as with Bruce Springsteen’s *The Rising* record and Don DeLillo’s novel *Falling Man*), the people – bumper sticker logic notwithstanding – have not stood united.

Long ago the British cultural critic Raymond Williams explained that the word “culture” was one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. I do not want to wade into the complex debates that have followed Williams about how to define “culture”; I want to encourage a reading of the “culture” in my title as a loose application of the scientific sense of the word – as having to do with material grown in special conditions for particular experimental or commercial purposes. The material of 9/11 culture(s) includes popular songs, comic strips, rumors, films, speeches, photographs, bumper stickers and t-shirts, along with novels and museum-ready visual arts, but is characterized above all by its on-the-fly practicality. While

rules of genre and market (for instance) continued to matter after September 11, one central operating principle here is that as we begin to sift through the cultures of 9/11 we will have to develop appropriate interpretive paradigms that may be more particular to this event and its fallout than the standard frameworks for studying young adult “problem” novels or immigration literature on the one hand, and blockbuster disaster movies and animated television shows on the other. My intention here is less to survey the entire field of post-9/11 cultural expression than it is to create some provisional roadmaps for approaching that field. These “maps” are not drawn to scale; neither do they represent every major point of interest on the American cultural landscape since 9/11. It will no doubt strike some readers that I have overfocused on certain areas of cultural activity and neglected others. This “bias” grows not from any *a priori* belief that hip hop music, say, matters more than television drama, but from an evolving vision of where the most consistent and culturally significant action has been.

An accurate history of the present needs to begin to catalog how 9/11 has provided the obvious answer to expected cultural questions (“What happens to the people on the plane in the movie *United 93*?”), but it also needs to create proper lenses for looking at American cultural expression since the fall of 2001 that will reckon with how 9/11 might be the (less) obvious answer to apparently unrelated cultural questions (What happens to the people on the plane in *Red Eye*? Or *Flight Plan*? Or even *Snakes on a Plane*? Can this wave of airplane anxiety movies possibly be understood *outside* the framework of 9/11 sublimation?). If we are to uncover the deep structures that undergird the realities that we, in the United States, now inhabit, it will be important to approach 9/11 as a cultural readymade, the framing device of countless novels, the surprising answer to dozens of film conflicts, and the punchline to a thousand

jokes. 9/11, as Mojo Nixon sang of Elvis a generation ago, is everywhere. In his comic song, Mojo Nixon took measure of what critic Greil Marcus called a “cultural obsession” (in his 2001 book *Dead Elvis*) and taught his listeners that Elvis built the pyramids and Stonehenge, and was the answer to the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle (“Elvis needs boats!”). This was a joke, of course, but it was a good one, the kind you can actually learn something from. Elvis may not have built the pyramids (his Memphis is in Tennessee, not Egypt) but what Mojo Nixon was getting at was how Elvis had come to be the “answer” to so many substantial questions – about race, sexuality, and region, for instance – on the American scene. Even, or especially, after his death.

Popular culture scholars often struggle with how to sift through the materials they “catch” in the nets they cast. Unlike literary scholars who have often worked to enshrine single great works of art, or historians who focus on great men or great battles, much of the most important work in the study of American popular culture has come from scholars studying dense forests, rather than tall, lone pine trees. From Constance Rourke’s pioneering work in the early 1930s, in which she argues for three main “types” of American figures in popular culture (the minstrel, the backwoodsman, and the Yankee [Rourke, 2004]), to Michael Denning’s (1987) work on nineteenth-century dime novels, to current scholarship on Asian American cyberzines by Rachel Rubin (2003), mid-twentieth-century “family stories” by Judith Smith (2006), or blackface minstrels by W. T. Lhamon (2000), very often the most convincing popular culture studies are those that embrace patterns, repetition, and ritualized expressions as the heart of the matter in American popular culture, rather than as an unfortunate cultural byproduct or incidental marketplace reality. Single articulations of this image or that political position, one instance of this style or that unanticipated line of

questioning may certainly be consequential (or become so over time), but the ultimate significance of popular culture products comes when they meet with a mass audience - or at least with a significant subculture. The obsessive deployment of 9/11 as an “answer” - a way to talk about, say, proper gender roles, or racial and ethnic conflict in United States history - is a major cultural phenomenon of our time and will be treated here not as a hurdle to leap over but rather as what scholars in cultural studies call a “cultural formation.” A cultural formation, in brief, is a site where important social and political institutions, rhetorical practices, and personal behaviors overlap and combine to create a threshold level of cultural energy that comes to help define its historical moment in some significant manner.

“9/11” is a language. It has its own vocabulary, grammar, and tonalities. While this language has certainly been spoken across all media, that fact should not obscure a more important reality - that 9/11 has exerted a more profound influence on certain forms of American cultural expression (e.g. Hollywood film and underground hip hop) while leaving other forms (network television, for instance) relatively unchanged. As a result, my strategy in *9/11 Culture: America Under Construction* is to offer a thematic investigation of some of the major ways that 9/11 has made itself felt in American cultural life, rather than to attempt a systematic overview of cultural institutions in the United States (e.g. “Hollywood” or “the Big Three television networks”) and their responses to 9/11. The thematic chapters that follow represent an argument against more traditional scholarly attempts to catalog how 9/11 appears in film or television or music.

Using 9/11 is not, I want to be clear, a simple cultural bait-and-switch. The burden of this book is not to demonstrate that literary and popular artists are answering “9/11” when



they really mean something else, or to reveal that loads of people are using 9/11 as a cheap shout-out - a way to establish authority, seriousness of purpose, marketability, and so on. Of course all that cynical activity surrounds us and forms a dense forest that needs attention as well. But what might be most culturally significant - and most affecting in so many ways - is exactly in what manner and to what degree "9/11" is becoming our cultural Esperanto: our language of grief and anger, of loss and steadfastness. In what is perhaps the most heartbreaking moment of *"V" for Vendetta* (2005), a character named Valerie narrates, via prison-house diaries, the story of her persecution as a lesbian living under a new fascist regime in England. Valerie and her lover Ruth, even after being spurned by Valerie's parents for their "sin" of homosexuality, still manage to create a little heaven on earth: in a romance-novel worthy sequence, *"V" for Vendetta* gives us vibrant flowers, glossy hair, and long, searching looks, to tell us that these two women have found a pure and authentic love together. That perfect romance is rent violently, of course, by the fascist revolution that comes to England on the heels of some offscreen trauma that has brought the United States to its knees. (And while America's decay is left mostly unseen, the filmmaker does give us a quick shot of protesters carrying anti-Bush signs, thereby rooting the crisis in its time - our time.) In a montage of the revolution, director James McTeigue makes sure that we understand gay people to be among the major targets of the nationalistic frenzy. Earlier in the film an evil newscaster has railed against "immigrants, Muslims, homosexuals, terrorists." (Of course in "real" life, fundamentalist Christian leader Jerry Falwell was quoted as saying that lesbians were among the dangerous groups that had conspired to bring 9/11 down on the United States).

In *"V" for Vendetta* Valerie (another "V," a double for the masked hero of the title) is left to wonder in her jailhouse

narrative as she nears certain death, “why they hate us so much.” Here the filmmakers are very pointedly making 9/11 the answer to many of the important questions, through this faked diary, of how the power of official rhetorics of national victimhood have served to obscure who is really being terrorized in the post-9/11 West. Some version of “Why do they hate us?” was repeated incessantly in the days and weeks following the 9/11 attacks, appearing in every public forum imaginable – from presidential pronouncements, to televised news, to person-on-the-street interviews, and to the children’s book I quoted earlier in this introduction. The constituency of “us” was rarely called into question: “us” meant U.S. – the politically unified, culturally homogenized “heroes” and “victims” marching as to war by the early afternoon of September 11. But *“V” for Vendetta* has a different story to tell. The despised “immigrants, Muslims, homosexuals, terrorists” of the newscaster’s rants will form the only “us” that matters by the film’s end. Along with some disaffected teenagers, children, and other fellow-traveling citizens they will form a masked mob, all looking like “V” – the terrorist/hero engine of the movie. This army of the disempowered and despised is poised to overthrow the fascist regime and is ready to do so largely because they have come to recognize themselves and each other as a new, politically potent “us.” When *“V” for Vendetta* brings 9/11 in as an answer to every question it raises, it does so in the service of an anti-militaristic, pro-democracy message. Inside of its own narrative, *“V” for Vendetta*’s ending turns the film, for our purposes, into a utopian fantasy. Such fantasy also shapes one of the other great cinematic achievements of the post-9/11 era, Spike Lee’s *25th Hour* (2002).

*25<sup>th</sup> Hour* was well into production by the time of 9/11, but Lee, thinking on his directorial feet, managed to turn it into what film critic Ty Burr (2006) has rightly called the first

movie to deal with “this new emotional landscape” after 9/11. Before viewers even see an image on screen they hear a dog’s bark and car tires squealing. The opening scene shows us Montgomery Brogan (Ed Norton) and Kostya, his “fat Ukranian” sidekick, exiting a car to save a dog that has been badly abused by some unknown assailants. The conversation that ensues after Monty rescues the dog revolves around its indomitable spirit: “He wasn’t lying down for anyone,” Monty tells Kostya, who is puzzled by his friend’s resolve in deciding to save the dog by bringing it to an animal hospital. This poetics of redemption established in the opening scene – the resurrection of this beaten but unbowed dog – is contextualized immediately as the title credits roll out over an image of the “towers of light,” the two illuminated beams that stood in the place of the Twin Towers during the winter and spring of 2002.

*25th Hour* (on the most basic plot level) is about Monty Brogan’s last day of freedom before he will begin a long jail term for selling drugs. The movie invites us to play with all kinds of theoretically triumphant parallelism – the redemption of the dog is the redemption of Monty is the redemption of New York is the simplest and most seductive equation – all of which collapses under the weight of Monty’s ultimate reality. If Monty’s adoption of the bloody Doyle allows us a few moments of “we’re down but not out” pleasure, Lee quickly pulls the rug out. Soon after the title sequence Monty, out for a walk with Doyle, meets another dog, this one named Dante. It is hell that Monty now lives in.

Here is where Spike Lee, unlike so many of his American peers in the culture-making business, embraces the complexity of post-9/11 grief and mourning. No one is more clear than Monty that he is, or will soon be, fucked: a major subplot of the movie has to do with Monty’s deep fear that his relative youth and good looks will make him a prime target for being raped in prison, and his desire to have his

best friend Francis make him “ugly” before he goes off to prison the next day. The entire movie, as the *Washington Post’s* Ann Hornaday (2003) has put it, deals with “Monty’s shame and self-loathing” and the “existential dilemma of a man whose once bright future is now a bleak smudge in his mind” in a city “knocked back on its heels, in deep mourning and shock.”

The film is drenched in 9/11 imagery and rhetoric. From its title to its entire “after the fall” trajectory and tone, *25th Hour* makes it clear that, as novelist Don DeLillo (2007) has written in *The Falling Man*, “These are the days after” (138). Preparing for the last party with Monty, his two best friends, Francis and Jake, meet in Francis’s downtown apartment, which overlooks Ground Zero. After some mordant banter about Francis’s location, including Jake’s nervous report of a recent *New York Times* article on the continuing bad air quality downtown (Francis: “Oh yeah? I read the *Post*”), their talk turns to Monty’s future. Jake, the trustfund, liberal Jewish private-school teacher, spins a fantasy about Monty’s potential for a happy post-prison life. With steely-eyed intensity, Francis, the up-from-the-working-class Irish bond trader, sets Jake straight: “It’s over after tonight.” With this, the camera turns from the close shot of Jake and Francis and takes us out Francis’s window – to a ghostly vision of a nighttime work crew at Ground Zero who seem to be arrayed in the form of a question mark.

The two pivotal scenes in the movie involve Monty’s dad, a former firefighter who seems to have left the FDNY because of his alcoholism. Now in recovery (at least for the moment), the sober James Brogan owns a bar in the Bronx that is, in typical post-9/11 fashion, festooned with firefighter photos and regalia. During a last supper with his father, Monty excuses himself to go to the bathroom, where he proceeds to stare into the mirror and lay a curse on New York. Reviving and revising a scene from his earlier film *Do the*

*Right Thing* (1989) and the famous mirror scene of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), about a would-be assassin, Lee has Monty Brogan launch his own attack on New York: from the gay men of the Village, to the Italians of Bensonhurst, from Jewish diamond merchants to African American basketball players, from Wall Street cowboys like his buddy Francis, to his own father ("with his endless grief"), Monty says "Fuck you" to each in turn, and finally to "this whole city." But, in a politically charged climax to this incendiary scene, Lee again pulls the rug out. With a final mirror shot, the director has Monty finally say "Fuck you" to himself - with an admission that all of his problems are ultimately a product of his own bad actions. With this, Lee opens up his film into the realm of political allegory: as rapper Mr. Lif put it in his song "Home of the Brave" (2002), "they killed us because we've been killing them for years."

The dark vision dominates *25<sup>th</sup> Hour* but Lee does allow for a powerful utopian counternarrative, one that grants Monty's father a degree of dignity and parental power that he has lacked up until this point. Driving Monty to prison, James Brogan begins to tell Monty what is essentially a fantasy about what his future could be. "Give me the word," Monty's dad says, and he will get off the Henry Hudson Parkway, go over the George Washington Bridge, and head west with Monty. Digging deep into American mythologies about the West as a place of rebirth and reinvention, James Brogan offers a gift to Monty, a fairytale about his new life in a little desert town - where he will rename himself James after his dad, reunite with his New York girlfriend Naturelle Rivera, and raise a passel of beautiful brown children. "You live your life," James Brogan tells Monty, "the way it should have been."

James Brogan's story is incredibly powerful: I always have some students who leave viewings of *25<sup>th</sup> Hour* with the feeling that this all "could" really have happened in the

movie. After spinning out this wonderful fantasy, though - a story virtually as old as white settlement on the American continent - Lee returns us to the car, where Monty is still Monty, weak and bruised from the beating he finally got Francis to lay on him the night before, on his way to jail. Monty is not James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, still on the hunt for a "trackless" forest, nor is he Huck Finn "lighting out for the territory." He is much more like the doomed Montgomery Clift for whom he was named ("poor bastard," his father remembers). Over the closing credits, instead of the towers of light again, we get Bruce Springsteen's dark song "The Fuse" from *The Rising*, Springsteen's own broadstroke attempt to construct a musical sampler of American responses to 9/11. With its opening image of a flag coming down at the courthouse through the remainder of the song's desperate and seemingly doomed search for physical human connection, "The Fuse" acts as punctuation on Spike Lee's anti-triumphalist rendering of New York realities after 9/11.

On some level, giving Springsteen's song this prominent place is a simple and elegant act of cross-marketing. While this book is concerned with investigating all manner of expressions, including street-level (or personal computer level) utterances and amateur photographs, it would be foolish to ignore the fact that by now there are well-established "stars of 9/11": Springsteen is one, for sure, as are country singers Toby Keith and the Dixie Chicks, film directors Steven Spielberg and Clint Eastwood (for his World War II exacta, *Flags of Our Fathers*, and *Letters from Iwo Jima*), actor Adam Sandler (for *Reign Over Me*, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry*, and *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*), and novelist Don DeLillo. By the time Lee's movie hit theaters Springsteen was already established as a major player on the 9/11 cultural scene - a 9/11 brand, in a sense. (Springsteen's 9/11 bona fides were established by his

appearance at the start of the *Tribute to Heroes* telethon, and were deepened with the release of *The Rising* in 2002; they have remained more or less intact except for a brief moment in 2006 when he was rumored to have left Patti Scialfa, his wife and bandmate, for a 9/11 widow.)

*25<sup>th</sup> Hour* is framed by a haunting score composed by jazz artist Terence Blanchard and, unlike most Spike Lee movies, features very little music in the action of the film itself (outside of one important nightclub scene that features a remix of Grandmaster Flash's anti-cocaine song "White Lines"). "The Fuse," then, offers a hint - if we need it - that Lee wants his movie taken with Springsteen's work as a summarizing effort, an attempt to say "this is how we live and feel now." On an artistic plane this may fall a little flat; more than once Lee has ended a movie with a direct-address declaration that undercuts the complexity of what has come before. In *25<sup>th</sup> Hour* the appearance of Springsteen's song acts as a final reminder, and certainly a gratuitous one, that 9/11 is the explanation for the feelings of fragmentation and loss that anchor the movie. 9/11 is the 24th hour implied by the title: the 25<sup>th</sup> hour is what comes after, which Lee's film tells us looks a lot like prison. While it would be nice to understand the "afterwards" hinted at by *25th Hour* as a commentary on the surveillance culture that has been put in place as an official governmental response, Lee's conclusions are much more speculative and diffuse.

As the "answer to every question now," ritualized invocations of 9/11 sometimes make it seem as if the already narrowcast, corporatized possibilities of American cultural life have come under the control of a wizard with obsessive-compulsive disorder. 9/11 as a sort of magicalthinking response has shaped every imaginable cultural script from the centralized popular culture locales of Hollywood, Nashville, and New York City itself - to the

amateur 9/11 animations of the internet (usually simple Flash productions). Animated computer games offer us one of the fullest glimpses into how quickly a certain kind of cultural unanimity – about Muslims, masculinity, and violence, for instance – developed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Here we find, among hundreds, if not thousands, of titles, “Osamagatchi,” a play on the popular Tamagotchi handheld electronic “pets,” a game that allows players to “maim and brutalize” their very own Osama character. Or “Cokehead 2,” which encourages players to “fill Osama with enough cocaine to withstand nuclear holocaust.” Web creations were preceded by what we might call pieces of “occasional art” found in New York city: fliers, as Leti Volpp (2003) has described, that depict Osama bin Laden being sodomized by the World Trade Center, with a caption that reads “You like skyscrapers, bitch?” (154).

Such hysterical artifacts were joined in the fall of 2001 by all manner of bumper stickers, t-shirts, clip art, and other elements of what Daniel Harris (2002), with a distressing level of elitist scorn, calls “the rhetoric of kitsch” (204). Harris dislikes the content of much of what he found as he surveyed the immediate post-9/11 terrain of American expressive life – the “car window decals ... featuring a lugubrious poodle with a glistening tear as large as a gum drop rolling mournfully down its cheek” along with “the overkill of ribbons and commemorative quilts, haloed seraphim perched on top of the burning towers and teddy bears in firefighter helmets waving flags” (203).

There are good reasons to be put off by what Harris refers to as the “emotional pornography” (214) of public displays of 9/11 mourning and community building, especially in the more market-driven and jingoistic articulations. Harris’s dismay over the “morbid conviviality” of internet message boards in the immediate aftermath of the attacks is another matter entirely (218): you would think the man had never



been to a wake or post-funeral gathering where food and drink are served and laughter is abundant. But it is the messenger that Harris wants to kill, and here he gives us good access to what might be the central fact of post-9/11 cultural life in the United States. Harris is put off above all by the internet and by what we have, with the development and popularity of wikis, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, tagging, and so on, learned to call “Web 2.0.” This tapestry of user-generated content has, to reduce the matter considerably, changed the internet from predominantly a one-way street into a very much more complicated weave of highways, side streets, and dead ends. In the domain of Web 2.0, “content provider” may still mean a record company or film studio, but it may just as well mean your old grampa or little sister.

More than one observer has noted that the “birth of the blog” coincided with 9/11. As one account summarizes, as “phone networks and big news struggled to cope with heavy traffic, many survivors and spectators turned to online journals to share feelings, get information or detail their whereabouts. It was raw, emotional and new – and many commentators now remember it as a key moment in the birth of the blog” (Andrews, 2006). Up until this moment, easy to use blog services were hard to find, and blogging was, according to Matthew Yeomans, “still very much the geek toy of the Slashdot set” (Andrews, 2006). Blogs became, in the aftermath of 9/11, a kind of wireless wire service, an undefined, anarchic first-responder news and opinion service. While the archaeology of Web 2.0 is outside of my concern here, and the relationship of 9/11 and 2.0 will no doubt remain cloudy for some time, a consensus has developed that the events of 9/11 contributed to the rapid development of Web 2.0 in the early twenty-first century.

Harris was writing just a bit too soon to see this all and no doubt all of us who dare to write about 9/11 need to be

generous with each other as we together construct our history of the present. That said, there is something unseemly (and I think just plain wrong) about Harris's wholesale attack on these decentralized and communal 9/11 expressions as constituting at once an aesthetic of "jumble" and "the prefab" that ultimately operates as a kind of intellectual clip art (217). "As an experiment in democracy," he concludes, "the internet has failed." In Harris's reckoning the internet is the "grave of free speech" and only gives its users "freedom to repeat" (217).

The first and probably most obvious response to Harris's misguided attack on 9/11 expressive culture is to say "so what's wrong with repetition?" In literary criticism, film history, theater studies, musicology, and so on, scholars write often of "generic conventions," the endlessly repeated artistic strategies that define a form. It is a given for the most astute commentators on American popular and vernacular culture that repetition is more or less a neutral fact of artistic creation. What is more important to figure out is how repetition (or, what Amiri Baraka called years ago in reference to African American music, "the changing same") makes meaning.

Perhaps more important to get a handle on is how Harris's screed forces us to "embrace the chaos" (to borrow the title of a record released on September 11, 2001, by the West Coast rap/salsa group Ozomatli) of American expressive practices of the past five years or so. The everyday realities of Web 2.0 mean that the usual gatekeeping mechanisms that have defined American cultural life since World War II were being surpassed by a less organized and, at times, anarchic set of possibilities. Harris's critique reeks of high culture condescension of a type that we simply cannot afford if we want to understand the contours of American cultural life since the fall of 2001. While my own focus in this book will turn, at times, to the works of "high" literary