

The Terror of the Place: Anxieties of Place and the Cultural Narrative of Terrorism

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ABSTRACT Place is sometimes understood as reinforcing personal and cultural identity in the face of dissipating versions of modernism or postmodernism. However, that identity can also come with a variety of cultural neuroses and manias that are inscribed on place. I consider the ways in which terrorism has become a feature of place, and how we can expect to see the terror of the place in the future. First, we can expect a relative diminishment in 'place-making imagination', the ability to see places as rich, ambiguous, and multi-purposed. Second, we can expect the terror of the place to exhibit itself as an inability to come to terms with the other. Third, we can expect the continuation and development of a triumphalist narrative of place, including a sense of entitlement. Fourth, we can anticipate the death or the fear of the agora, the true 'agoraphobia', as the public space of discourse is closed down, and the private space of patriarchally enforced agreement gains ascendancy. Fifth, we can expect people to regard specific places as having fixed and permanent meanings, and to try to constrain those meanings in such a way as to guarantee that permanence. Sixth, we can expect topophobia, not only the fear of place but also stage fright, as the expression of self on the world stage becomes more and more limited and narrowly focussed. And seventh, we can expect a re-assertion of memory of place, perhaps with a shifted baseline, as the places of terror become exhausted. We can furthermore expect all of these phobias and manias to be rationalized as virtue in a society that cannot deal with the terror of the place.

The language of anxiety and mania has long been associated with the cultural conditions of modernity and sites of postmodernity. Our anxious modern subjectivities include existential conditions such as ennui, angst, and vertigo (Sartre, Camus), along with psychopathologies such as schizophrenia (Deleuze), paranoia (David Harvey), and panic (Arthur Kroker). And we have been imagined as culturally manic in a variety of ways as well.

At times, the concept of place has been seen as a panacea for a variety of social ills and misshapen subjectivities. Place is imagined by some to re-integrate the self, resist the anomic effects of modernization, provide continuity and meaning in an increasingly fragmented and meaningless time, and link the cultural self back to a sure foundation. It has sometimes been used as a new term or variable in positivist social science, either a cause or an effect of other forces and phenomena. While place

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seems to designate any geographical location, in fact the term has been used lately as a site of positive meaning, while locations bereft of meaning, or where meaning is deferred, become 'non-places'.

And yet, the comfort of place is a contradictory gift. What is too seldom noticed is that there are a host of psychological conditions related to place that refer not simply to individual neuroses, but to identification of place as the cultural answer to dissipating modernism. We are well aware of agoraphobia (fear of open spaces or of being in a crowded place (Vidler, 2000, pp. 25–50)) and claustrophobia (fear of enclosed spaces) as cultural conditions. But whereas Baudelaire's and Benjamin's *flâneur* was fascinated with the street, many today feel the opposite, ayrophobia, fear of the street. Whereas place is meant to establish home as constitutive of the self, as a place of dwelling in a Heideggerian sense, we are now faced with oikophobia, or fear of home surroundings (Jacobson, 2004). And, while Yi-Fu Tuan could speak of 'topophilia', the love of place, we are now faced with 'topophobia', the fear of place (notably, also, fear of performing, or stage fright). Foucault argued that personal identity is made available not simply by acts of will, but by what is suppressed, feared, or prohibited. In the same way, the identity of a place derives in large degree from what that place is not. Sometimes this is a result of nostalgia for an imagined past (the 'small town' myth), sometimes the result of yearning for a utopian future, but the identity of a place can also be produced by our anxieties and manias. When it is, these anxieties and manias are no longer seen as pathological, but are rationalized as virtues.

My example of this is the contemporary political and cultural discourse around terrorism. Terrorism necessitates a new attitude to place, one that reaffirms the ownership of places and re-inscribes their cultural meaning. Places take on a new significance, both literally (as the sites of destruction became contested monuments) and theoretically (as the place that is the United States became signified against the backdrop of 'terrorism'). They become places 'in terror', and the establishment of places of surveillance, and the resultant heterotopic spaces, do not alleviate this terror in place, but rather re-assert it.

Terrorism is not a fact but a narrative (this is not to say that terrible things did not happen in September 2001, or that these things did not demand a response). What 'terrorism is a narrative' means is that we understand the meaning of the terrorist attacks in terms of prior senses of the place that is the United States (of America as a land of divine entitlement, as a place of conquest, as the promised land, as the Wild West), as well as in terms of our sense of other places with which the United States is commonly compared and contrasted. Terrorism (particularly in the case of 9/11) is not the official action of an identifiable country (recognizing, of course, that there is state sponsored terrorism); nor is it launched by any government. That fact alone could have the tendency to dissipate the place identity of the target of attack. I contend that the place identity of the target of terrorism, the United States, was brought into line again by the declaration of 'war' on terrorism, a term previously largely reserved for actions that a territorial state took against another territorial state (with the notable exception of Reagan's 'war on drugs'). This metaphor of war re-legitimized the place identity of the United States by putting the narrative of terror back on familiar ground, as the conflict of one country with another.

One result of this, though, was the re-inscription of the nature of place, both by refashioning the world as a place, and also by refashioning the United States as a new kind of place. In order for this narrative of terror to have legitimacy, this place had to be understood as besieged by a nation or something analogous to a nation. And yet, the terrorist attack did not come from a nation, not in the sense that the Soviet Union was, nor in the sense that Germany or Japan were in the Second World War. The result is a sense of place that contains dissonance. If the official narrative of terrorism is that it is produced by something analogous to a nation, and yet the very nature of terrorism is that it cannot have been produced by a nation, this produces cultural tension in the imagination of place. Patriotic and nostalgic imagery, and the assertion of entitlement over the imaginary space of the nation, takes on a manic edge as the search for the object of war becomes desperate. It becomes a reassertion of the terror of the place. If it was a state that attacked, then fear has a clear face; if it is something else that attacks, however, fear scrambles to find its face, and imprints itself on a series of places, both local and distant, in an attempt to satisfy the need for a clear enemy and a coherent narrative. Religious fervour grows, both literally and figuratively, as the government fans the flames of fear and uses messianic imagery to establish its own credentials. And the narrative of place goes as far as to establish a 'terrorist nation' that can be presented as the legitimate target of the holy justice of this place. In this narrative, the fact that Iraq had no connection with the attacks of September 11, 2001, and that this was knowable right from the beginning, is not the point. Iraq, unlike Osama bin Laden or al Qaeda, was a territorial state, and by establishing it as the target of American wrath, America simultaneously re-established itself as a place. In doing so, however, the dissonance of the place was inscribed on the place itself.

There are several options for dealing with such dissonance. One can rationalize it, one can recognize only one side of the dissonance, and deny the other, one can transcend the dissonance, or one can refuse the terms on which the narrative of dissonance emerged in the first place. Public discourse in the United States after 9/11 attempted to re-establish dwelling as the mode of being (in the Heideggerian sense), but in fact has written into place transcendence on the one hand, and rationalization on the other. The dissonance is particularly acute in the re-assertion of the pieties of place (patriotism, the value of the classic liberal virtues of freedom and equality). In each of these attempts to transcend dissonance, place has become the site of surveillance (to ensure that the right kind of patriotism is enacted), and the values of freedom and equality have been interpreted in a way that actually undermines their application to all. On the other hand, one might rationalize dissonance by supposing that it ultimately resolves (as is the goal in music) in a temporal order. This implies that the current dissonance of place is to be endured because it will progressively yield a result not available without such endurance.

In both cases there is a rational assertion of place that covers over the roots of its construction, and that simultaneously obscures and reinforces the resultant dissonance. In both cases, we can expect further anxieties and or manias of place.

- *First*, we can expect a relative diminishment in 'place-making imagination', the ability to see places as rich, ambiguous, and multi-purposed.

- *Second*, we can expect the terror of the place to exhibit itself as an inability to come to terms with the other, and the resultant tendency to demarcate boundaries that both imagine and deny the other.
- *Third*, we can expect the continuation and development of a triumphalist narrative of place, including a sense of entitlement, which comes along with (and represents the other side of) the victimhood narrative of place.
- *Fourth*, we can anticipate the death or the fear of the *agora*, the true ‘agoraphobia’, as the public space of discourse is closed down, and the private space of patriarchally enforced agreement gains ascendancy.
- *Fifth*, we can expect people to regard specific places as having fixed and permanent meanings, and to try to constrain those meanings in such a way as to guarantee that permanence.
- *Sixth*, we can expect topophobia, not only the fear of place, but also stage fright, as the expression of self on the world stage becomes more and more limited and narrowly focussed.
- *Seventh*, we can expect a re-assertion of memory of place, perhaps with a shifted baseline, as the places of terror become exhausted. We can furthermore expect all of these phobias and manias to be rationalized as virtue in a society that cannot deal with the terror of the place.

Before describing these manias and anxieties in detail it is important to understand what I am not saying. As I have already indicated, the term ‘place’ is sometimes used as a new variable in a social science that is looking for new causal elements. So, we might imagine that places are caused by some factors of society, or that places themselves cause social or psychological phenomena. For instance, we might think of a place as causing an individual’s moods or beliefs about the world. We might think that places are produced by social forces such as the drive for profit, the need for community, and so forth. And so, we might conclude that place is best studied in a quantitative manner, first defining it, and then isolating its causes or effects using standard social-scientific experimental tools.

This move would misunderstand the nature of place. Place is not another feature or force, populating the social and natural world. Places are neither ‘out there’, apart from intersubjective expectations and desires, nor are they ‘in here’, subjective projections on reality. Furthermore, they are not easily isolated as beliefs, even generally held ones. We find ourselves in places, literally (as we find ourselves in a room), and also figuratively (as we see a manifestation of ourselves made available by the places we are in, but also find the places made available by who is there).

This is why I am not interested in looking at place in a cause and effect manner. I am not claiming that terrorism ‘causes’ places to be a particular way, or that there is something new about places after 9/11 that was not there before. Terrorism itself is a narrative, as I argued earlier. We (mis)understand events partly based on the encoded and experienced places in which those events happened. And the events themselves then make available particular understandings of these places, and encourage certain kinds of places over others. This makes its presence felt far beyond the literal examples related to terrorism. Our response to hurricanes in recent years, for instance, is connected to terrorism in the sense that the same anxieties of place

that were exacerbated by the terrorist attacks were also exacerbated by the devastation of the hurricanes.

It is worth noting that the concept of place has many applications and uses (Janz, 2005). This is significant because as we think about the ways in which place can exist as terror, we are actually adding to the list of uses of place. A pathological place serves to support and justify a wounded identity. At the same time, it can also produce those wounded identities. To use an extreme example, a concentration camp comes from the extreme application of instrumental reasoning, to the detriment of the complexity of human life. That camp may produce any number of fears after the fact, and the very place can continue to be populated by cultural ghosts, both for those who experienced the horrors, and those who later only visit it. The idea of place, in other words, does not just reinstate a holistic, peaceful past or bring back human meaning in an alienated world. It can also be the site of that alienation.

I will now speak briefly about each of the seven features of the terror of the place mentioned earlier.

I

Our anxieties concerning place lead to the diminishment of place-making imagination. One of the clearest examples of this is the cancellation of the Freedom Museum at the former World Trade Center site. The narrative of that place is a hotly contested site (Martin, 2004), and the Freedom Museum was one of the casualties of that battle. It was proposed to be a museum to the idea of freedom and the ways it has been manifest at various times, but it was vigorously opposed by some families of the 9/11 dead, as well as some politicians and firefighters' unions. Some objected simply to the placement—the proposed Freedom Museum would have obscured another memorial to the victims of the attack. Others objected that it would foster debate about the attacks and other world events. It would be, in the words of one opponent, a 'magnet for protestors' (Joshi, 2005). In the words of another, 'the so-called lessons of September 11 should not be force-fed by ideologues hoping to use the memorial site as nothing more than a powerful visual aid to promote their agenda' (Burlingame, 2005, p. A14).

These last reasons are the most interesting. For the memorial to fulfil its function, for some it clearly must be univocal. It must express only one idea (the *right* idea), not admit ambiguity, and thus control discourse into the foreseeable future. The memorial must not, in short, allow any scope for the place-making imagination, any possibility that the place might come to mean something other than what the initial political circumstances require it to mean. It is Henri Lefebvre's 'representations of space' with a vengeance.

The site of the World Trade Center towers is, to be sure, a sensitive place, and it ought not to be taken lightly. But then again, no place should be taken lightly, even when the reasons for gravity are not so obvious. To suppose that a place should raise no questions does not mean that it will raise no questions, only that it will show the marks of its single-mindedness. Despite the fact that Maya Lin was on the selection panel for the WTC Memorial competition, it is unlikely that anything as ambiguous, resistant to scripting, and ultimately powerful as her Vietnam War Memorial will happen under these conditions. The ability of a place to touch and release the human

soul depends on taking risks in its imagination and construction. It is more likely that the memorial at the World Trade Center will be an illustration of a received and prescribed narrative. Once one 'gets it', there will be little reason to return. Emotions will be released, but this place will reinforce the terror of that day while telling us little about what it means to move past it.

One might argue that the place is being kept 'sacred' (a word often used, but rarely examined, in the discourses about place and terrorism) by focussing on the individuals who died. But the memorial seems to be less about the individuals and more about the narrative that makes their deaths meaningful, which renders all of them heroes by virtue of the place they died rather than the actions they did. Janet Donohoe makes this distinction while discussing Maya Lin's Vietnam memorial:

The controversy surrounding the addition of the statues reveals how we often think of monuments: that they must be patriotic. There are, however, some problems with the memorial. In an effort to silence the complaints from some quarters that the Vietnam Memorial was not patriotic enough, a sculpture of three soldiers was added to the Memorial. But the addition of these statues risks making the memorial something ideological. It is meant to cover over the questions that the wall poses with certainty about the heroism of dying as a soldier. It challenges Heidegger's notion of dwelling by giving a false impression of immortality and allowing us to avoid the anxiety of individual mortality. It denies soldiers an individual death by giving a mere representation in the form of nameless, ideal soldiers. Those who view the statues are confronted with ideals, not with individual, human death. (Donohoe, 2002, p. 238)

No one is suggesting patriotic statues in the case of the 9/11 memorial, but in fact the hypostatization of one specific narrative and the exclusion of problematizing or broadening narratives fulfil the same function. It subordinates the individual lives and deaths under a narrative of heroism and nationalism. It prevents reflection on individual mortality by rendering the place of death into a heroic site.

The loss of place-making imagination in its most extreme sense was deftly shown in the recent Jim Jarmusch movie, *Broken Flowers*. Don Johnston (played by Bill Murray) is travelling around to see his old girlfriends, to determine whether he has a 19 year old son he never knew about. He meets one of these women, Dora (played by Frances Conroy)—she lives in an immaculately clean house, which the audience instantly recognizes as an externalization of her own sense of despair and alienation. Its relentlessly upper middle class grace seems utterly fake, utterly lifeless, and as we see Johnston interacting with her, and later with her husband, it is clear that she is a broken, controlled, miserable woman. The pretty designer house in the pretty neighbourhood does not signify affluence, but rather alienation. There is no imagination of any sort here; deviation from the proper décor would risk having to deal with one's identity, or lack thereof, and this is far too threatening. There is no hint of literal terrorism in *Broken Flowers*, and yet the place shown is a place of terror. Place-making imagination

admits that there is risk in place. In the wake of terrorism, that risk is too high. The threat to identity is too great, so, like the desperate woman in the immaculate house, we dwell in this new, stunted way, rather than risk the unknown.

II

Terror of the place is associated with an inability to encounter otherness. It was remarkable how the narrative of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans immediately provoked accounts of crime that were quickly shown to be untrue. Rapes and murders were alleged, but once the facts were known, it became clear that no rapes or murders actually happened. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, assumptions about place and race allowed us to construct the story that was part of our pathology all along:

[I]t is about those on the other side of the wall that we fantasize: more and more, they live in another world, in a blank zone that offers itself as a screen for the projection of our fears, anxieties and secret desires. The '*subject supposed to loot and rape*' is on the other side of the Wall—this is the subject about whom [Bill] Bennett can afford to make his slips of the tongue and confess in a censored mode his murderous dreams. (Žižek, 2005)

The racial inscription of that tragedy became plain for everyone to see. It was not the first time that such a conclusion betrayed American fears—the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was initially ascribed to Muslim terrorists in several news reports, until it became clear that the perpetrators were white Americans with a very different agenda. Notably, in the case of Hurricane Katrina, everyone concluded that FEMA was simply incompetent, led by a political appointee with no ability: yet just one year before, when hurricanes hit Florida, the FEMA response was fast and seamless. But these were different places, and different times. Florida was a swing state in an election year, with a governor who was not only Republican, but also the brother of the president, while New Orleans was hit in a year that did not have an election and was, moreover, predominantly Democrat and predominantly black.

But the mere fact that tragedy inscribes our boundaries is, in itself, unsurprising. More interesting is the way that the other is both partitioned within the US and defined outside of it. We see clearly the divisions within the country with each tragedy. We also see the externalization of the other in places like Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, in the official doctrine that we will fight the terrorists on someone else's soil so that we don't have to fight them here.

With the attacks of 9/11, it seemed that no one could continue to afford the fantasy that the US was exceptional, that it was not part of the world community. And yet eventually, astonishingly, that fantasy was re-inscribed, both in policy and in place. The America that might have been, one that faced a world of equals, having now shared the experience that so many other countries have lived through, instead became, again, the city set on a hill, bruised but not beaten.

The fear of the other is also inscribed in more local places. Setha Low, in her book on gated communities, says this:

The threat of terrorism in the United States following the attack on the World Trade Center deepened Americans' fears. Yet to date the only solutions offered are increased policing in the public sector, and walling and gating, surveillance technologies, and armed guards in the private. These are inadequate solutions for what is actually a complex set of issues ranging from profound concerns about one's continued existence and emotional stability to everyday problems with economic survival and maintaining a particular way of life. Gated community residents then, like many Americans, are also searching for security. (Low, 2004, p. 231)

The response to the deep fear following terrorism was for some to create fortresses, even if those fortresses did not demonstrably increase safety. For others, it was to permit greater surveillance and intrusion in life. Even before 9/11, gated communities were justified by a fear of crime and a distrust of the public institutions charged to deal with it. Terrorist action on American soil focussed what had been a diffuse threat, and was again served as proof to many that government agencies were incapable of providing true protection. These communities may give an emotional sense of security, but politically, at both the federal and local (home owner's association) levels, they justify an authoritarian form of government. So, as our places became more walled and more watched, we imagined and created an other that fulfilled our fears, and that simultaneously led us to surrender personal freedoms for a new, more tenuous sense of security (Low, 2008).

III

The pathological place imagines itself through a triumphalist narrative of place and a sense of entitlement. This is the other side of victimhood. It is seen in the city set on a hill, a metaphor popularized in recent years by Reagan and reclaimed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 by George W. Bush. This was to be the moment that the world would rally to America's side, rise up in holy wrath, and with the stars and stripes in the front, move forward to crush terrorism wherever it may be found.

But that's not what actually happened. The coalition of the willing was far less impressive than originally hoped. Did the rest of the world somehow think that America deserved what it got? No. Their reluctance to aid the US in Iraq did not indicate indifference to the events of September 11, but disapproval of what came after. America re-asserted its status as the only superpower, as it reasserted its ability to act unilaterally, based on dubious intelligence. Victimhood justifies its opposite, triumphalism.

How might this be inscribed in places? For one, it is prepared by our narratives of victimhood and triumph. While the immediate cinematic reference point for the terrorist attacks was the movie *Pearl Harbor*, which came out a few months before, an earlier movie was far more indicative of our sense of place. *Independence Day* formed the imagination that allowed us to narrate the attack, and the place that was being attacked. In that movie, a completely external force came down and

obliterated significant buildings. They were established as being wholly other by the fact that, in the single communication that was shown (through a scientist who was taken over by one of the invaders), the invader's intent was established. They were there to consume (in an interesting parody of the stereotype that Americans are only interested in material consumption). They could not be reasoned with. We had no history with them that might give us pause—they literally dropped from the sky. The only possible response, therefore, was all out war and the destruction of the other. The president, played by Bill Pullman, gives a speech in which the American day of independence becomes the world's day of independence, the day when the invaders are met with the world's combined force, led by the Americans. The combination of the military and corporate worlds, the assimilated Black and the assimilated Jew (represented in Will Smith's and Jeff Goldblum's characters), defeats the invaders.

This mythical tale fit well with the American government's response to the terrorist attacks. The terrorists are understood as invaders from another planet, not as residents of the same world as ours. Their place is no place, and so we imagine ourselves as defending our positive place from their placelessness. American forces will be at the vanguard of a worldwide effort to repel them. And American military and corporate power will combine to save the world. That the movie did not come true in real life suggests that the fantasy is just that, and that the rest of the world recognized it as such. When I saw the movie in Canada, and the president's speech came on, talking about how America's Independence Day will become the world's Independence Day, people laughed. The fantasy was obvious.

IV

The death and fear of the *agora*. Long before the events of 9/11, the public space of American discourse was fading. The literal spaces have become harder to find, as single use entertainment and commercial spaces have mimicked public space. But the terrorist attacks helped to solidify the virtual space of talk radio as private space, policed by abuse to those who disagree with the (mainly) male hosts. Physical space has yielded meaningfulness to virtual space as our discourse shifts; and as such, public spaces are becoming less about the encounter with those who might be different, and more about control so that such encounters are unlikely to occur.

Again, this loss of space is rationalized as virtue, as the nation is urged to pull together. Boundary lines between 'us' and 'them' become starker, and are represented cartographically as 'blue states' and 'red states', designations that belie the fact that there can be diversity in a single household, let alone a state. The terror of the place is inscribed on our political state, as the us-them of the victims and the terrorists becomes the us-them of political agreement and opposition. The polarities that allow a superficial grasp of terrorism are written onto political relationships and also places. Liberals in 'red' states and conservatives in 'blue' states begin to feel like spies behind enemy lines, ironically unhomed in the very place they thought they knew.

The agora is maintained as illusion in the 'public' spaces that are left. It is the difference between the original sense of the agora, a marketplace where all sorts of exchanges happen, and the current model of exchange that we have, which is the mall. It is significant that after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the nation was

encouraged to shop rather than to learn, that is, to go to the mall rather than the marketplace. And indeed, the agora is an active space that supports more than learning. We might well have been encouraged to conserve energy, for instance (a small sacrifice compared to what was asked of Americans in past conflicts), but instead the opposite occurred. Energy conservation, in the Vice President's words, was 'personal morality', an attitude that makes good sense in the mall and no sense at all in the marketplace. The complex interchange implied by the agora gives way to the straightforward consumption of the mall, and we in turn end up with agoraphobia, the fear of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the agora. We would not want to represent the agora as an unproblematic space—it may just as well be 'the product of the destructive character's determination to clear away every obstacle' as it could be the presencing of Being in a complex manner (Carter, 2002, p. 233). But either way, it allows for an interchange that the repression of being cannot make available.

V

Our places will come to be seen as having fixed and permanent meanings. With the loss of the agora, we find ourselves with simulacra, constructed places that evoke the memory but resist the reality of formerly rich places. As has already been mentioned, public places become interpreted primarily as places of commerce. But this fixed meaning has more in common with mania than with anxiety. We fixate on desired places. Advertisements for new developments increasingly proclaim the connection between place and the good life, and we try to recover the romantic image of the past in new urbanist developments. Places become narrowly defined, and alternate understandings are pushed out, as the fear of terrorism takes root in the fear of place.

One colleague reported to me that she tried to hand out issue-oriented literature outside a church around the 2004 federal election. The literature advocated a position with which church members would most likely have sympathized (and it did not promote a candidate). This colleague stayed on public land, but the church still said they would call the police if that sort of activity happened nearby, even legally on the public land. Clearly, this church had defined its role in a very specific manner, and had fixed the boundaries of place, and therefore of discourse, even for discourse that most members would have agreed with.

This permanence of meaning can be cast into the past as well. For example, the reality of America's past as a pluralistic nation gives way to an imaginary Christian America, tacitly contraposed to the Muslim 'nation' of terrorism that is being resisted. Christianity was, of course, part of the founding narrative of this country, but so were many other things, and the version of Christianity that informed the founders was far from current evangelicalism. Yet none of that matters in this imaginary permanent place, fixed since its founding with a morality based in the Ten Commandments and ever more certain of the difference between right and wrong.

Is this about place? It is certainly about this nation as a place, and its imagination as a place set apart, a city on a hill. But it becomes apparent at other levels as well. I have already argued that there is a tendency to use place to control memory, in the case of memorials. I have suggested that even sympathetic voices can be sacrificed in order to maintain the fixed definition of the place. A fixed place is a fixated place.

VI

Topophobia is clearly an expected outcome of terrorism. Specific places have been targeted, and so after the terrorist attacks there was fear of those places, and symbolically similar ones as well. But more significantly, there is a kind of cultural stage fright. We end up blurting out our cultural identity on the world stage, relying on the tried and true. We fool no one—we continue to live in terror, and that terror is manifest by our foreign policy. We cannot improvise, change direction (then ‘the terrorists win’), or react to given circumstances except in a completely instrumental manner. Our identity as the sole world superpower has become questioned, and we have no good answer for the question, except to push and bully. Our stage fright is such that we create terror wherever we go, since we act out of terror, and so replicate it no matter what our intentions. We mistake swagger for strength. We have flop sweat, and everyone in the world sees it. By the midpoint of George W. Bush’s second term, the failure has become so obvious that every candidate for presidency in both major parties campaigned against the current administration (even if the Republicans continued to support the war, and the Democrats had few new answers to it). And, even where there previously was support (among the ‘coalition of the willing’), troop levels were reduced and leaders felt pressure at home to discontinue support for the war. The net result was that, while presidential candidates talked about America appearing strong and in control, much of the rest of the world saw past the bravado.

VII

But these places of terror do not, and cannot, hold sway forever. The seventh aspect of our collective neurosis inscribed onto place is that, at some level, we will become weary of these places that straightjacket cultural narratives. Even in the gated communities, variations of life will assert themselves. The fear is, though, that the inscription of terror into our places will not be consciously recognized, but will continue to shape the narratives about place that will be available for years to come. While the gated communities may eventually allow richer narratives to be imagined, the cumulative weight of constructing places of terror will be difficult to overcome very quickly. What will make such re-imagination possible, though, is the realization that place itself is a multiply-constructed concept. In other words, place is not just phenomenological, rooted in the presence, memory, or anticipation of dwelling. It is not just semiotic, based in the interrelation of legible signifiers. And it is not just the result of systems of social exchange, produced by flows of capital and labour. It is all of these. Places of terror capitalize on one mode of accounting for place, and further narrow that mode to one narrative of place. Lyotard characterized terror as follows:

By terror I mean the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him. He is silenced or consents, not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened (there are many ways to prevent someone from playing). The decision makers’ arrogance, which in principle has no equivalent

in the sciences, consists in the exercise of terror. It says: 'Adapt your aspirations to our ends—or else'. (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 63–64)

In a footnote, Lyotard notes that Orwell has a bureaucrat comment that 'We are not content with negative obedience, nor even with the most abject submission. When finally you do surrender to us, it must be of your own free will' (Orwell, 1949, p. 258). And yet, that free will can be consciously given, but the cultural neurosis of terror is such that the closed down language game, inscribed in place, never really acquiesces. We inhabit places constructed to restrict narratives, but those restrictions do not really result in compliance. They only result in dissatisfaction with place, and the resulting idealization or desire that can be seen in 'house porn' shows and magazines.

My argument has been that terror is inscribed upon places, and that it both produces and reflects a kind of cultural neurosis. I have resisted arguing this point in a positivist manner, as if 'place' is an independent object of investigation that is susceptible to the causal forces of the world. It is not; it is made available by our discourse, and it shows our mode of dwelling. It is notable that place is not only evidence of our mode of dwelling, but a productive element in that dwelling. Put simply, our ways of existing in place have also contributed to defining terrorism in the way that it has been defined, and has made it available as a particular experience. It is not just that terrorism has made certain kinds of place available, but our way of dwelling in place has made terrorism available. How is this so?

To some extent, we need only reverse some of the comments already made to see this. In post-9/11 America, places become more insulated, more defined by polarities, more instrumental. But in fact, that tendency was hardly new in 2001. It had been observed and decried by urban and place theorists for a long time. In fact, the narrative of terrorism was made possible in this country in part by our imagination of place, or lack of it. To the extent that political and corporate interests at every level of society have sought to control and define place in terms of opposition and instrumentality, the narrative of terrorism as supporting that opposition and instrumentality becomes the only narrative available. And, as we imagine authentic place in a spiritual sense—that is, as being imbued with the ghosts of the past—we are equally able to retreat from the place as defined by terrorism into the non-place of spirituality.

Terrorism simultaneously brings us face to face with our worst fears of mortality, and also uncovers the fears that had been there all along. Our places are configured as shields from that mortality, but in fact become expressions of it, as the places become lifeless themselves. We struggle to dwell, but mistake the control of the place for dwelling.

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