“Portraits of Grief”: Telling Details and the Testimony of Trauma

Miller, Nancy K., 1941-

differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, Volume 14, Number 3, Fall 2003, pp. 112-135 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

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“Portraits of Grief”:
Telling Details and the Testimony of Trauma

In the summer of 2002, Times Books published a volume containing the 1,910 “Portraits of Grief” that appeared in the New York Times between September 15 and December 31, 2001. The 1,910 stories that readers had consumed in the newspaper along with their daily breakfast or their morning commute were now compiled into a manageable archive and filed in alphabetical order. Rescued from the ephemera of the daily paper and the fluctuations of the internet, the portraits finally came to rest between hard covers. In the prefatory material to the volume, editors and reporters characterize the work they did in creating this popular and much remarked on journalism. Their commentary both describes how the genre came into being—as a direct response to the flyers that had materialized along with the news reports—and provides a frame through which the portraits should be viewed.

Almost immediately after the disaster, the frantic search for survivors took the form of flyers identifying the missing. These homemade artifacts were hurriedly pasted onto walls, mailboxes, lampposts, and phone booths, papering the walls of bus shelters and train stations. In addition to often detailed physical descriptions, the flyers typically
included photographs of the loved ones, almost always smiling. As the hope of finding survivors faded, the distinction between the missing and the dead began to blur. It is no doubt for this reason that as of the second day of reporting, the original title of the series, “Among the Missing,” with its implicit hope of recovery, disappeared, to become “Portraits of Grief.”
Given their spontaneous and multiple origins, the flyers varied widely in size, style, and presentation. The newsprint portraits were of necessity uniform. As in a high school yearbook, everyone memorialized was given equal space and equal treatment.

How could readers be made to care daily about the individual dead who, unlike the subjects of traditional New York Times obituaries, were neither eminent nor glamorous? At the one-month anniversary of the profiles, an editorial titled “Among the Missing” analyzed the newspaper’s attempts to master the civilian trauma. Faced with the massive numbers of victims, the editors pondered the best strategy for identifying the singularity of each life within the constraints of the form: “Each profile is only a snapshot, a single still frame lifted from the unrecountable complexity of a lived life.” On the first day of reporting the losses, the metaphor of photography had also figured—recalling the effect of the flyers: “Snapshots of Their Lives, With Family and at Work” ran the headline (15 Sep. 2001, A11).

In the introduction to the volume, Janny Scott, the reporter chiefly responsible for the profiles in the earliest coverage, makes explicit the connection between the portraits and the flyers, the verbal and the visual. “We began,” she explains,

*dialing the phone numbers on the flyers. What we wanted were stories, anecdotes, tiny but telling details that seemed to reveal something true and essential about how each person lived. [ . . . ] The profiles [ . . . ] were closer to snapshots—concise, impressionistic, their power at least as much emotional as intellectual. And they were utterly democratic. (ix)*

Scott continues to make the analogy to the visual medium as she looks for a metaphor to render the vast undertaking. “Like a panoramic photograph, the project gathered everyone it could and attempted to bring each one fleetingly into focus” (ix). Howell Raines, then executive editor, also embraces the discourse of photography in his foreword to the volume: “I'm convinced,” he explains, “that the core of the portraits’ appeal lies in our metropolitan desk’s decision to cast these stories as snapshots of lives interrupted as they were being actively lived, rather than in the traditional obituary form.” Most of the people who died would not have been the subjects of the traditional obituaries, he observes, a “powerful storytelling format in itself [ . . . ] entirely appropriate to the task of recording the key facts of prominent (or notorious) lives” (vii).
In these statements that self-consciously define the newspaper’s project, the visual trumps the verbal, almost as though the “newspaper of record” found itself at a loss for words, words suddenly seeming inadequate to the task of representing what makes an individual life a life, unable to convey its emotional truth. What narrative form was equal to that task? If not the classic obituary, then what? What shape to give to the stories? In the face of collective disaster, whose scale strained the imagination, the anecdote was seized upon as a form suited to rendering the familiar acts of ordinary life. Like the snapshot, the anecdote, through the brevity of its narrative, catches life in its everyday dimensions. In this particular context, moreover, again like the snapshot, the anecdote’s appeal resides in its ability to carry both life and death, present and past. What once was but recalled to memory somehow still is.

Let’s return now to the language of reporter Janny Scott’s account of how the portraits were invented. “What we wanted,” she said, were “stories, anecdotes, tiny but telling details that seemed to reveal something true and essential about how each person lived.” The anecdote here is set up in apposition to the detail, but the two are not interchangeable; their relationship is not reversible. The effective anecdote requires details; but details by themselves do not necessarily add up to an anecdote. Nonetheless, in the slippery discourse about the portraits, it is no easy matter to separate anecdote from detail. The anecdote might even be said to serve as a telling detail in a life’s interrupted story.

This past January, the New Yorker devoted a column to the portraits, fleshing out some of the back story on the reporting and the reporters. Here (unlike Raines’s recourse to the snapshot metaphor), the portrait of portrait making, as it were, retains its narrative function. Once again, the creation of the portraits—the subject of some fascination—is retold . . . to a reporter. And again, the anecdote alternates with the detail in a by now familiar story: the birth of a genre. The reporters placed phone calls to the numbers displayed on the flyers in order to “glean details about the lives of a few hundred among the thousands of individuals who had disappeared.” The portraits here are characterized as “miniprofiles,” and the first batch of them as vignettes—“twenty vignettes, averaging less than two hundred words each.” The portraits are further described as “sketches”—picking up the pictorial code—“sketches that revealed an emblematic, usually endearing anecdote or character trait” (Singer 50). In other words, the portraits seen here conform to the dictionary definition of the anecdote: “[A] usually short narrative of an interesting, amusing, or
curious incident, often biographical and generally characterized by human interest” (*Webster’s*). The anecdote has the right dimensions for evoking a brief life, which was mainly the case among the dead of September 11.

Editorial self-consciousness about the portraits, we learn, was immediate. For if the portraits sprang up spontaneously, their production was not unsupervised. One month into the daily practice (around the time of the newspaper’s editorial about the portraits to which I referred earlier), a memo was circulated “admonishing contributors to avoid certain tropes.” Reporters were encouraged to “reach for illuminating details” beyond the “bond traders who loved their wife and kids,” the perks of “the Cantor Fitzgerald guys,” and “how the deceased was such a devoted student of *The Simpsons*’ or Bruce Springsteen” (Singer 31). When asked to describe her experience of the interview process, Jan Hoffman, a reporter who turned in a large number of the portraits, says that what moved her when she was on the phone with the survivors (“I have never wept so much while working,” she confesses), was “the crispness of their memories, the way they described these poignant, funny, heroic moments.” As she reflects upon the process of eliciting responses, Hoffman sounds a bit like a safecracker: you have to listen patiently, “until you have that click where you can see the person and how they moved on the planet” (31). The desirable anecdote for the “Portraits of Grief,” we might say, is narrative **DNA**. (The DNA opens the lock of identity, if only you supply the right “reference sample” [30 Nov. 2002, B3].)

Here is an example from a set of portraits published on December 8, 2002. Steven Schlag.

> When a neighbor was in her third pregnancy and uncomfortably late, Mr. Schlag, 41, a partner with Cantor Fitzgerald who lived in Franklin Lakes, N.J., whipped up his chicken cacciatore, which had helped his wife go into labor. (It didn’t do the trick for the neighbor.) And when a friend was scheduled for cancer surgery on Sept. 11, 2001, Mrs. Schlag recalled, her husband bought two copies of the bicyclist Lance Armstrong’s autobiography and told his friend, “We’re both going to read this, and you’re going to get through it.” (8 Dec. 2002, B3)

Immediately following this heartwarming good-neighbor story comes an internal gloss on the portrait that culminates in the supervising anecdote, which in turn produces the portrait’s title: “She related a trademark attitude of his,” the reporter observed, “which she and their three
children [. . .] are trying to live by now. ‘Strangers would come up to him when he was skiing and ask, “How are the conditions at the top?”’ she said. ‘He’d always say, “It’s 88 and sunny.”’ ‘That was his favorite saying.’” That saying became the portrait’s caption.

Tied to family and friends, beloved of coworkers, the victims in the portraits were not only smiling from the portraits; they wore in the memory of those who survived them smiley faces. Nonetheless, traces of sadness of course sometimes punctuate the mourners’ narratives and often provide an underlying sense of irony. Here’s one other from December 8. Kevin Prior. “I’m Always Coming Home.” Like so many of the portraits, this one is a love story.

Firefighter Prior’s cheerful hardheadedness surfaced again in 2001 atop a mountain in Ireland, the couple’s ancestral home. They both wanted to take a rock home from the peak back to New York, but each claimed to have found the perfect one. So they wound up taking both. When Firefighter Prior died in the World Trade Center, Ms. Noone [his fiancée] was glad they had two rocks. She kept one and put the other in his coffin. (8 Dec. 2002, B54)

If you have attended a funeral lately, or watched one on television, these anecdotes will sound familiar. Like the subject of the eulogy, the subject of the portrait always appears in a good, often humorous light—and the story told, like the desirable details the reporters typically sought for, is meant to illuminate that something “true and essential”: Mr. Schlag’s “trademark attitude.” The trademark always reveals something good, like virtue—often civic, or at least domestic, virtue. Not every single portrait is organized anecdotally. Often the details are not harnessed to a narrative; rather, they provide points of entry into character: personality traits, habits, quirks, hobbies, mottoes, which are cumulative in effect but not shaped into a story. Almost all have a catchy sign-off, however, that summarizes the victims and what they meant to the ones left behind in a kind of anecdotal degree zero, where nouns lack their verbs: “He was my plumber, my electrician, my seamstress,” a widow concludes. “My everything, really” (8 Dec. 2002, B54).

Like the eulogy, the “Portraits of Grief,” by giving formal dimensions to suffering, create a coherent public persona to fit the event and one that also serves to protect both the victim and the mourners from the display of excessive or unsuitable emotions. The portraits take the
private person into the public arena within recognizable conventions, within what we might think of as an ethics of mourning: the “emblematic” anecdote is “endearing,” not damning. What feels new about the portrait, of course, is the fact that for the vast majority, these private lives were not destined for the public space of the newspaper. In its etymology, anecdote means unpublished—“items of unpublished or secret history or biography” (*Webster’s*). By passing through the scrim of the “Portraits of Grief,” the anecdote becomes what it was not meant to be: a public document. We are left with a paradox: the anecdotes extracted by the reporters were meant to bring the dead back to life—or at least to keep them alive—in the memories of the living. Is an anecdote still an anecdote once it is published? Or, in the end, are the portraits really informal obituaries?

In the *Ethics*, Aristotle wonders about the “praise accorded to happiness” (27). Praise, he writes, “is proper to virtue or excellence, because it is excellence that makes men capable of performing noble deeds.” But then he goes on to add: “Eulogies, on the other hand, are appropriate for achievements of the body as well as of the mind. However, a detailed analysis of this subject is perhaps rather the business of those who have made a study of eulogies” (28–29). I cannot say I have made such a study, but in the winter of 2002 I went to a play created in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, *The Guys*, by Anne Nelson, that staged the relation of the anecdote to the eulogy. A firefighter finds himself overwhelmed by the number of eulogies he has to deliver at the funerals of the men from his company he has lost. He finds himself speechless with pain. A writer—a middle-aged woman—volunteers to help him put his feelings into words. He needs to figure out what to say “for them, for the families.” And he wants to describe each fireman in such a way that his family and the other men will “recognize” him. “Tell me about him,” the woman says. And the captain provides details—the Waldorf salad for the church picnic, the fireman’s “work, church, home” motto—scraps of memory, details, that the writer shapes into anecdotes. When one of the portraits makes the man seem too much of a hero and not sufficiently “human,” the captain objects—“he sounds too perfect.” What’s his flaw, then? “He was a perfectionist!” When the captain reads aloud the portrait the writer has devised, he has delivered the eulogy.

Unlike the obituary, which presents life in the past tense, as a plot that has come to its end, the anecdote, however narrative in form, remains closer to character—which is probably why it is a staple of the eulogy. Paradoxically, perhaps, and for this reason, the anecdote feels
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timeless, lifelike—alive with what is always uniquely true of an individual—which is why it fits a life that is too short to have discovered the shape of its own, singular plot. Nonetheless, incorporated into the portraits, as in a eulogy, the anecdote is necessarily also a memento mori bearing a different message. It says: Remember that one of the perfect rocks ended up in a coffin—having met the one plot that fits all and that therefore cannot be avoided.

I want now to pick up the thread of the “tiny but telling details” that Janny Scott explained were the key to unlocking the mystery of an individual life, the details that would “reveal something true and essential about how each person lived.” This is reporter Jan Hoffman’s “click” of discovery, or perhaps, changing registers, the punctum of Roland Barthes. If we reenlist the metaphor of photography that as we saw earlier made the snapshot the visual analog of the portrait, then we might say that the portraits on the whole belong to the domain of what Barthes in Camera Lucida famously called the photographic studium, “that very wide field of unconcerned desire,” whereas the “telling” detail resembles the punctum, “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). Although Barthes, we know, argues that the studium is a result of the photographer’s intentions, and the punctum a spectator’s purely subjective reaction to an element that punctures or punctuates the studium, I think we can, for purposes of argument, bracket the question of intention to deal with the effect—and the affect—of the punctum. For Barthes, the punctum is the detail that grabs him as viewer, that “attracts or distresses” (40). For Naomi Schor reading Barthes, the detail is also, she emphasizes, Proustian, that is, associated with the “valorization of involuntary memory” (90). As Barthes declares, the effect of the punctum is not to be understood through intellectual effort: “[N]o analysis would be of any use to me.” He goes on, however, to add in a parenthesis, “(but perhaps memory sometimes would)” (42). Again, I have had to slightly manipulate, not to say swap, the terms of the categories to construct my analogy, but I think it works. The reporters consciously press the mourners, newly placed in the role of biographers, for their memories. When the memories bubble up to the surface, they provide the reporters with the unexpected but much desired details needed to create a portrait that in turn captures the life—that “something true and essential about how each person lived.” I recognize that memories prompted by questions are not strictly speaking “involuntary”; but in the combination of the terms “crispness” and “poignant” in the way they were characterized by the reporter, we feel the
effects of something punctum-like, the kind of homely detail that doesn’t belong, for instance, to the discourse of the studium. (Naturally, we do not learn what details caused Susan Sontag, an eminent Barthesian, to cry, as was reported, when she read the portraits every morning [Scott, “Closing” B6].) The “telling details” would be out of place in the narrative of publicly acknowledged accomplishment. Still, if the portraits seem to reveal this essential truth because of the detail’s power to deliver the truth of personality, can we trust that performance? Or, should we heed Schor’s warning about investing the “detail with a truth-bearing function” (7)? Going back to the question of our perception, rather than the reportorial production, of the details in the portrait, if we are moved by them, does this mean that we are moved because we have been given entry into the truth of another person’s life or because it makes a good story?

Put another way, just because we are “pricked” by, say, the rock in the coffin, or the chicken cacciatore recipe, should we believe that we’ve had access to the whole story and that it’s all true? I have been struck by the overwhelming public acceptance of the portraits, the assumption among journalists and readers that the anecdotes and details have delivered the truth of the beloved victim. And I have also been unable to keep myself from wondering about the stories the details aren’t telling.

Interviewed live near the World Trade Center as events were unfolding, Mayor Giuliani urged people in the area to leave the site of the disaster and “go north.” For many of us living uptown, who witnessed the events solely on television, it almost felt as though we were inhabitants of another city. But a young woman who lived in my building, and who had served on the co-op board, died on September 11. Although I did not know Karen Klitzman (by all accounts a remarkable person), along with neighbors I attended a memorial service in “celebration” of her life that her family had organized at a local synagogue; it seemed a small, if inadequate, gesture toward sharing in the communal grief. I found it strange and indeed poignant to see her face for the first time when her portrait was published in the newspaper shortly after the service. Like most of the victims, in the snapshot that accompanied the portrait, Karen Klitzman was smiling.

On September 10, 2002, Karen Klitzman’s brother, Robert, a psychiatrist, published a personal essay in the “Health and Fitness” section of the *Times*. He described his painful and confused reaction to his sister’s death: “I saw what I had been taught but never experienced or understood as much until now: that the grief over the loss of an ambivalent relation-
ship can be far harder than the grief would be otherwise.” After narrating the various strategies he employed to allay the pain he was feeling—from antidepressants to seeing a psychic—he concluded: “The difficulties were far more complicated and long-lasting than I would ever have imagined; closure has been far more elusive.” Only when another sister told him she was going to say that Karen “was not perfect but that we loved her anyway” was he able to write a eulogy (Klitzman). The codes of idealization in the “Portraits of Grief” make the expression of certain kinds of feelings taboo in the public domain. Another survivor is quoted in the *Times* the day after the anniversary on that very subject: “‘My brother was a selfish, arrogant guy,’ one man said, ‘but you can’t say that because my 87-year-old mother will be reading this.’ Secrets about the victim,” the reporter goes on to observe, “character flaws, gnaw and tear at the survivors, who struggle over whether and how to acknowledge them” (Hoffman). The coverage of the first anniversary was organized as a kind of calendar of emotions—“For the Families, a Long Year’s Journey into Grief, and Back Again”—describing symptoms from the initial psychic blows in the immediate aftermath to the mood of the summer of 2002. The commentary for January/February, which included the remarks I just quoted, raises the problem of the truth in the portrait: “As survivors realize, there are many truths about a victim [. . .]. While many families are satisfied by the published sketches of the victim, others are offended and pained. Some feel guilty for not having been sufficiently articulate when they talked about their loved ones” (Hoffman). But of course as readers standing outside the circle of intimate loss, we have no way of gauging the emotional, not to say factual, accuracy of the portraits in relation to the experience. We are confronted with the texts, the narratives, which almost instantly became the studium of the new genre. “By now, many families have created a public narrative of their victim. The tales feel oft-repeated, laminated” (Hoffman). We can only guess by what is reported elsewhere about family feuds the details that have been suppressed or edited out. Is the suppression of ambivalence in the portraits and comparable forums—along with other emotions tinged with negativity, like anger and resentment—really the best way to carry out and represent the process of memorialization? I don’t think it’s an accident that when the Discovery Channel selected the subjects of their televised portraits for the first anniversary—the video version of the newspaper narratives—they chose individuals who loved—or appeared to love, who wanted to think they loved, or wished to appear in public saying that they loved—the ones they lost unambivalently. I confess. I did tear up watching
this program. I felt overcome—wring out, actually—by the display of so much love. Being me, I suspended critical judgment and instead envied their emotions, the happiness of their families despite their loss, and felt not just like a bad survivor but a poor human being.  

After a long hiatus, a fresh installment of the portraits appeared on Sunday, March 9, 2003. One of the portraits took as its theme the challenge of accounting for feelings of overwhelming loss while defining the specificity of the victim. This is how it begins: “With Tommy Knox it was often the little things. The way he put the toothpaste on his wife’s toothbrush when he got up before her, almost every day. He’d leave it on the vanity ready for her before he left his home in Hoboken for his job as a broker at Cantor Fitzgerald” (9 Mar. 2003, B36). The toothpaste on the toothbrush is the quintessential prosaic detail, the ultimate fact of everyday life, the metonymy of the domestic fable, and often the summary of couple strife: putting or not putting the cap back on the tube, squeezing the tube from the bottom or the top or, worst of all, squishing it in the middle. Here the toothpaste presqueezed onto the toothbrush is the mark of suave consideration for the other, the proof of love. If this is not a “telling” detail in the narrative universe of the *Times* portraits, what is? For it tells the story of what worked in the marriage, and to the extent that the portraits represent something larger than an individual—and they do—they are crafted to serve as the microcosm of family life, of community values, of a valiant and, though wounded, above all, happy America. The domestic detail of the toothbrush comes to stand for the intimacy of the home, and the home for the nation’s public life: the home front against the incursions of terrorism. The detail as the index of poignant loss—the toothpaste on the toothbrush, the minute and the familiar—embodies that which we cherish against what is foreign and terrifying, that which protects against the war on terrorism. In measuring disaster, the smaller the marker, the bigger the loss seems to be the rule of incommensurability. (Robert Klitzman pockets his sister’s toothpaste tube: “I took her toothpaste, indented by her fingers, but as I used it up, felt sad again.”)  

The portraits of March 9, 2003, are based not on the sharp immediacy of recent loss but on the distilled temporality of recollection. “I guess it was all the little things,” Nancy Knox says. “All these little, special things that made Tommy who he was and made us all love him” (B36). Like the emotional addition that calculates individual loss through the “little things,” what adds up in the affective economy of the detail only appears to be a paradox of scale: the loss is so great that the only way to bring it to
language is to think small, cutting it down to size. You accede to the big through the little: the “telling detail” testifies to the big whole, the hole left by the disappearance of the loved one within the global identity of victim. Thus, in an article reporting on discussions of what form the memorial to September 11 should take, which drew on an analogy to the Holocaust memorial that displays a mountain of abandoned shoes, the caption read: “Remembering the Little Things.” If, as the article suggests, the shoes are “the most vivid reminders of the terror and the hope of survival, of the panic and the uniquely individual scale of that monumental tragedy” (15 Oct. 2002, B35), we can wonder what “little things” from the dust and rubble will come to stand for September 11.5

In the months following September 11, as they appeared daily in the newspaper, the portraits—lives captured in miniature—relying as they did on anecdotes, often served as the little things that provided the footprint of human scale—and of community. What will become of the daily newspaper experience of reading the portraits that afforded ordinary citizens points of entry into the overwhelming loss? In an article titled “Horror Pictures,” in which he discusses the difference between publishing war photographs in the newspaper and collecting them in books, John Berger (writing in July 1972 during the Vietnam war) makes the following observation: “There is a sense in which a newspaper belongs to the events it records, it is part of the same process, the same flux: it bears the same stains. A book stays clean and is meant to outlive its meaning” (194).6 Eventually, the newspaper will stop publishing the portraits, as it almost already has. Certainly, the edited volume—and perhaps a second one for the remainder of the portraits that fell outside the cutoff date—will find a place in the homes of the victims’ families, in libraries, and in the museum that will one day be created in relation to the memorial.

But beyond the pedagogy of the archive, remembrance will take other forms of historical preservation. Tatana Kellner, an artist known for her work connected to Holocaust memorialization, has created an installation for a gallery in Buffalo that makes use of the portraits as they appeared in the newspaper. Her project, Requiem for September 11, was displayed on the Web in the fall of 2002. The artwork consists of forty-five banners, sixteen feet long by four feet wide, spaced two feet apart. The banners were designed to fill the open atrium of the Market Arcade Building in Buffalo—a nineteenth-century retail building. On the website, Kellner describes the impulse behind the project as a response to reading the portraits in the newspaper:
For the past four months I have been reading, cutting out and re-assembling the “Portraits of Grief” pages from the New York Times. This is my way of “doing something, anything” about this national tragedy. As I read the sketches I cry and laugh and am saddened by so many lives cut short. I’m struck by the youth of the victims and their apparent normalcy. These were not captains of industry, but ordinary people aspiring to the good life.

What speaks to me most are the victims’ faces, mostly smiling in snapshots of happy times. I plan to transform this material into a large scale installation which will be a memorial to the victims of the September 11th tragedy. Each victim will be represented by a photograph, name and a byline describing the person [. . .]. What I hope to accomplish is to put a human face on numbers that are unfathomable to most of us.

Kellner’s installation features the actual snapshots that accompanied the portraits in the newspaper. The smiling faces belong to a life that is no more, the past tense of “happy times.” In this work, the texts of the portraits disappear (sometimes marked by blanks), their prior existence signaled by the caption that from the start served as the title of the portrait and that shared in the euphoric register of the snapshot: “Fat Cigar and Time for Fun,” “The Big Kid of the Family,” to cite the captions of the very first portraits as they appeared in the original installment, “Snapshots of Their Lives with Family and at Work” (15 Sept. 2001, A11).

As the journalists involved in the project sought to come to grips with the numbers (“the interminable registry of the missing” [15 Sep. 2001, A11]), they tried to refashion in narrative the life lost to language; to find a story to go with the name (above the headline announcing the new feature, the mention “The Names” appeared in small caps). Paradoxically, Kellner pays homage to the verbal portraits that emerged from the desperate information the flyers supplied by eliminating the text, keeping instead the visual imprint of the face. Of the “endearing anecdotes” that formed the body of the portraits, Kellner retains the irony of the smile of “happy times”—and the caption: like the smile, a synecdoche of the portrait’s narrative. Through her emphasis on the physical layout of portraits as they appeared in the Times, however, Kellner preserves even as she transforms the ephemera of the newspaper. Enlarging the images and names of the victims with a photocopier, she transfers the pages of
newspaper onto a silkscreen and then onto the banners of fabric. The verbal portraits pass into another kind of text, another cultural register. The names of the September 11 victims are listed alphabetically (as they are in the volume of published portraits), followed by those of the Pentagon and Shankesville. Here, though, the logic of scale that operated in the portraits’ representation of emotional devastation that we saw earlier is reversed: by their size, the banners make big what was little, as intimate loss expands to occupy the space of a public building, as the one comes to stand in for the many, the individual name for the collective story. The solitary experience of reading the small print of the newspaper becomes a form of shared large-type public viewing. In the process of that transformation, Kellner also restores the work of countermemory performed by the flyers that documented the many faces of loss. In Requiem for September 11 the smiling faces on the banners created from the newspaper portraits evoke the flyers produced in the immediate wake of the disaster. The banners hang one by one, recognizing each individual. But the transparent sheets of fabric also allow the viewer to look through the layers and, along with the face of the victim, simultaneously receive the impact of the images that follow immediately behind—the succession of the dead. The banners float like the melancholy ghosts of the lost and disappeared.
Larry Harris’s ten-minute play, Totems of the Fall, created in the wake of September 11, also works the boundaries between past and present, erasure and connection, as actors representing “the photographs and Xeroxes of the missing” are brought briefly to language, returned from the dead.7 “In general,” Harris indicates in the script, “the photographs depict happy moments.” But assembled at the wall belonging to St. Vincent’s Hospital at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Eleventh Street, in a vast collage of despair and hope juxtaposed (and now preserved under glass), the photographs on the flyers necessarily also carry the mark of death—of happiness that was. A pedestrian arrives carrying flowers, deposits the flowers and card, looks at the photographs that in Harris’s play are arranged in a tableau and that begin to speak, one by one. The ordinary people in the photographs affixed to the wall of remembrance are no more and no less than their particularity—a young woman on the brink of a new romance, an older man, self-conscious about his chins in a photo id, a new dad holding his six-month-old son, a fireman—come briefly, poignantly, to life, the time of a camera flash. The process of memorialization constituted by the play’s gestures—neighbors and passers-by depositing cards, messages, candles, in a word, totems—enacts as theater the testimony of loss that had already begun in post–September 11 daily life. Remember me, each says, as terrible noise returns them all to silence, and the speechless photographs reabsorb the voices of the dead.

Photographer Lorie Novak, who is known for her work on the complex relations between snapshots, memory, and politics, took many photographs of the flyers and improvised memorials that sprang up throughout the city, especially downtown near the World Trade Center, and at Grand Central Station. “Placed near the site as public memorials,” she writes, “the photographs also become portals to speak to the dead” (94) (exactly what is staged in Totems of the Fall). Her photographs record the life of the snapshots on the flyers as the images become texts—family and friends sign them like a yearbook or like the cast on a broken leg—and as they begin inexorably to erode from the effects of the weather and the passage of time.8 Novak’s photographs poignantly bring into relief the clumsy details of the homemade artifact: the corners of the tape affixing the flyers to the walls (like children’s drawings pasted onto refrigerator doors) start to curl up and wrinkle. For me, the tape carries the punctum, as the happy faces on tattered flyers become the perverse measure of the pain of loss. When survivors convert the images into texts, they bring their personal grief into the open and create new narratives. Several of
Figure 3
Novak’s images eerily identify the places on the flyers where “messages to the deceased that have been added by family and friends make private messages public” (Novak 94). In certain cases, the survivors have returned to the original flyer, even months later, to add information as well as expressions of love—the dates when the body was found and buried. This
return is testimony to the unbreakable link between flyer and event, to the productivity of the original (even if, paradox of postmodern cliché, the original is a photocopy). 9

In much the same way, since the anniversary of September 11, we have witnessed a significant erosion of the border between private suffering and public reckoning. As survivors seek different kinds of recognition and compensation for their loss, the portrait continues to play a role in the production of public testimony. I want to follow here the reportorial afterlife of the portrait genre—the reliance on detail, anecdote, and narrative in various enactments of traumatic memorialization. In October 2002, the *Times* reported the production of narratives by families applying to the Victim Compensation Fund: “minibiographies about the dead, based on interviews, photos or videotapes.” The journalist, David Chen, suggests that economic incentive—to increase the amount of the award for emotional suffering—is not the only motive behind the narratives (especially since Kenneth Feinberg, the special master in charge of the fund, has indicated that his flexibility in deciding on the awards will be in the area of economic and not emotional compensation): “[T]he real value,” Chen speculates, “may lie in their timeless and therapeutic resonance in telling the full story of life, love and loss, beyond cold, raw numbers” (“Families” B1). In certain cases, the narratives include the last words of the victim left in a voicemail message. Like the original “missing” posters, these individual creations taken together will constitute an archive both of “what happened in the doomed buildings on Sept. 11, and what the people who died there meant to their families.” As with the “Portraits of Grief,” each minibiography becomes a synecdoche for the lost whole. The portraits worked, Alan Singer observes in the *New Yorker*, by “reducing to human scale, the immeasurable dimensions of September 11th while rendering, in a different sense, the incomprehensible totality of what had been lost” (30). Survivors who want their loved ones to count on paper must become authors in their own right, not merely the subjects of journalistic solicitation. 10 They have been forced to learn not only how to manage their suffering but how to turn its implications to good account. It is unlikely, therefore, whatever the details enlisted in the act of representation, that these portraits will escape the push toward idealization that we encountered in the newspaper portraits; after all, the families—and their lawyers—are trying to make a case for the value of the life that was lost in the disaster to prove that their loved one “was a special person” (“Families” B6). In this sense, following the model of the portraits, the
details provide not so much the “whole truth” that we swear by in court, but the partial, emotional, perhaps literary, truth of what makes the person you love special to you.

Finally, like the piercing visual detail of the Barthesian punctum, the memorializing narrative also demonstrates a wounding tempo-
ral dimension. And like the snapshots of the flyers, or the anecdotes that punctuate the eulogy, or the “Portraits of Grief,” the poignancy of these new portraits derives from the fact that they inevitably bear the signature of death in the future, as well as life now. This is the newspaper account of one of the postanniversary videos:

As she watched her husband’s life unfold on the screen, Mrs. Van Aukens crumpled tissue after tissue to dab away the tears. “It’s ripping your heart out,” she said. “But I’m glad I’m doing this, because it’s something you’ll have forever.” Then, almost as abruptly as it began, the video was over. And for the next minute or so, no one said anything. (Chen, “Beyond” B6)

Forever.

It is perhaps the way trauma binds us to a temporality that by definition we do not master that supplies the true measure of its pain. Six months after watching the video biography of her husband, Mrs. Van Aukens testified at the first—by all accounts highly emotional—day of hearings held by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, March 31, 2003. Her photograph, along with that of another widow whose husband worked at Cantor Fitzgerald and one of a Port Authority police officer, appears below the article (1 Apr. 2003, B15). Although her testimony is not quoted, the tormented expression on Mrs. Van Aukens sorrowful face is there to be read. Her head is tilted to one side like a Modigliani portrait and a single, glistening tear begins to slide from beneath her lower lid, pointing toward her cheekbone.

Unlike the victims, in photographs the survivors do not smile.

I am grateful to Tatana Kellner and Lorie Novak, who provided not only the images for this essay but their insights as well.

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Notes

1 I wrote about the portraits for a collection titled *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, edited by Judith Greenberg, before the *Times* volume appeared. Traces of the thinking that shaped my contribution to that anthology, “Reporting the Disaster,” remain in this piece. It seems impossible not to say here that Naomi’s death came so close to September 11, 2001 that I inevitably thought of her—and the shock created by sudden loss—as I meditated about the “Portraits of Grief.”

2 There is also a striking absence in the portraits of any kind of political anger—having to do with safety conditions at the World Trade Center, governmental handling of security, and all issues related to the national context of the event. This silence may change over time. A small number of relatives of victims (fifty representing thirty-five victims) have formed a group called “Sept. 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows” with the goal of promoting an antiwar agenda and refusing to have their losses used by Bush administration policy to justify war. A woman who lost her brother, a man whose rescue efforts were lauded in public by Bush, said that “she didn’t feel honored. She felt as if she’d been punched in the stomach” (Haberman B1); see also note 5. The problem of the politics of loss has surfaced in the arena of economic compensation and also in that of public recognition. As the commission on the design of the memorial considers the entries, various groups press their demands for representation. Some feel that “everyone who died should be treated equally” (following the principle of the portraits); others do not. The president of the Uniformed Firefighters Association stated in the *Times*: “We are not going to let people say that what we did on 9/11 was the same as everybody else [. . .]. Because it wasn’t” (Lipton B47).

3 Nonetheless, the videos were surprising in other ways. One focused on a gay male couple, unusual given the heavily heterosexual and familial model of the mourning families. Another dealt with a young woman, Jacqueline Donovan, whose portrait is not found in the volume. The calendar of grief picks her up, though. “Sturdier relatives can see their loved ones in the clear light of life, rather than a halo of death. ‘These stories make Jackie sound like a party animal,’ said Jacqueline Donovan’s father, James. ‘Well, she was’” (12 Sept. 2002, B9).

4 Despite the difference that time can make in mourning, the later portraits echo the figures of speech we saw in the earlier ones. Here, a very young Russian woman talks about losing her husband of one year, and how even in December 2001, she had hope that he would be found: “I even had a tiny hope in October 2002.” Now, in March 2003, she is finally willing to speak to the reporters, sounding very much like the widow I quoted earlier, whose testimony was closer to the event but was still after the first anniversary: “All I need to say is: He was my everything. That is very important to me to say” (9 Mar. 2003, B36).

5 I am not proposing a literal comparison between the loss of life at the towers and the Holocaust, but between modes and figures of memorialization in relation to problems of scale. I want to thank Marianne Hirsch for her comments on an earlier version of this essay as well as for her own work on Holocaust representa-
tion, in particular, her meditation on a miniature diary from the Vapiarika concentration camp, “Points of Memory.”

In a series of somewhat perverse autobiographical and political cartoons, “In the Shadow of the Towers,” that he has published in the London Review of Books, Art Spiegelman plays with various analogies between the Holocaust and the events and aftermath of September 11. In the sequence that appeared on April 3, 2003, he has himself saying to his wife, as they walk through the wounded neighborhood in downtown Manhattan: “I finally understand why some Jews didn’t leave Berlin right after Kristallnacht” (21). On May 8, 2003, he has the neighborhood “Crazy Lady” screaming at him that the Jews were responsible for the attack on the World Trade Center: “Dirty Jew! We’ll hang you from the lamp posts, one by one!” (25). But on March 6, he visualizes the problem of human scale in the representation of September 11 (of which the portraits are just one example). Spiegelman draws the towers burning “live—unmediated,” as he saw them, he says. But how to render that? “Maybe it’s just a question of scale,” his cartoon artist self wonders as he stares at the screen. “Even on a large tv,” his persona remarks cynically, “the towers aren’t much bigger than, say, Dan Rather’s head . . .” (22). What look enormous are “logos,” he adds, staring at the American flag that fills the screen.

The article, published in a left-wing weekly, New Society, was collected under the title “Photographs of Agony” in About Looking, but this quotation does not appear in the reprinted version.

“Totems of the Fall” was written in response to a call from Nicola Sheara, Artistic Director of TheatreSounds, for plays related to the events of 9/11. Under [Sheara’s] direction, WANTED (as it was originally titled) was read in October 2001 in Kingston, NY as part of a memorial evening and later in Rhinebeck, NY as a benefit for Hudson Valley firemen.

8 Through a strange coincidence, this snapshot features a victim whose portrait I described in a previous essay on the reporting of September 11. The photograph of Andrew Stern is signed by his wife and children (Novak 94). I felt as though Novak and I separately had each come to “know” the same person.

9 Novak was fascinated, she said, by the fact that “the families altered the original missing posters rather than replacing them with new memorials. It is as if the missing poster was a stand-in for the deceased.” I am grateful to Lorie Novak for sharing not only her photographs but her thoughts about them.

10 The lawyers involved in the proceedings take the task of constructing a persuasive narrative as seriously as the survivors do. Maura V. Laffan, a lawyer, is quoted as saying that she “has been thinking about Faulkner, Henry James and others who have looked very closely at the human condition,” because the narratives are “probably the most important pieces that I’ll ever write” (26 Oct. 2002, B6).

11 In her presentation at the “Lure of the Detail” conference, Christie McDonald placed “Portraits of Grief” in the context of the war in Iraq in the spring of 2003, arguing persuasively that the portraits had a different effect when read retrospectively, after the war had begun. This is one of the crucial ways in which the disaster at the
World Trade Center has been pulled into a future national narrative. A parent who had lost his son, a firefighter and former marine, at the twin towers held up a sign making the connection that read: "HE WOULD BE SAFER IN IRAQ THAN HE WAS AT THE WTC ON 9/11!" Mindy Kleinberg, the other widow, mixed personal anguish over the death of her husband [...] as well as a detailed summary of her own research into the shortcomings of American intelligence. [...] Afterward, some of the family members [...] expressed a queasiness over whether their words would stick, or whether political considerations would eventually erode their concerns. (Chen, "Beyond" B15)

The coverage of the soldiers who were killed and wounded in the war demonstrated some of the same features that the "Portraits of Grief" did, but because the soldiers belonged to the military, their deaths could not be described with the same underlying sense of injustice (without making the soldiers seem unpatriotic). In the reporting on the first deaths, under the heading “The First to Fall,” photographs of victims’ relatives were shown—often in a fairly large format—with the relatives holding photographs of their lost loved ones, mostly smiling in happier times. In their emphasis on human interest and personality—“He Was Like a Magnet”—the portraits showed distinct similarities to the “Portraits of Grief”; they also evoked the World Trade Center portraits in the use of touching anecdotes and the attention to the intensity of family bonds (Halbfinger). When she heard that her twenty-three-year-old grandson had died jumping into a canal to save his comrades, one soldier’s grandmother said: “We have a lake here too, and if he would have seen someone fall in there, he would have been right in after them” (Davey A11). Many of the men killed in the war—those whose photos are not taken in uniform are mainly smiling too—were as young, if not younger, than the civilians killed at the World Trade Center. This kind of coverage was not sustained, however, and never became a distinct feature of the newspaper.

Finally, no comparable attention to lives lost in Afghanistan (and then Iraq) made it possible to imagine the individuality of those killed by Americans. As Howard Zinn wrote in The Nation: “In contrast with the vignettes about the victims featured in the New York Times, there are few available details about the dead men, women and children in Afghanistan” (16).

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