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# The body in pieces: towards a feminist phenomenology of violence

Archana Kaku<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article proposes that feminist phenomenology offers an essential set of conceptual tools for analysing forms of violence which destroy the body beyond the point of death. To illustrate the potential utility of this approach, I apply this lens to the 11 September 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in Manhattan, New York City. I identify several distinct modes of bodily transformation from the attack, grouped into three broad categories: vaporised bodies, intermingled remains, and hidden fragments. I describe how these transformations unsettled the relationships between bodies and contexts, and occasioned the formation of new relationships in ways that heightened and extended the violence of the attack. I end with a discussion of attempts to resettle and repair these relationships through the creation of fictive bodies. These fictive bodies aim to repair the specific harms caused by the derangement of bodily relations by re-establishing firm boundaries between heroic, national bodies, and the monstrous body of the attacker. Through rigorous engagement with this case, I illustrate the unique potential of feminist phenomenology to account for the relationships between bodies, objects, and spaces as the site of political meaning-making in the aftermath of violence.

**Keywords** Extra-lethal violence · Feminist phenomenology · September 11th · Politics of the body

## Introduction

When does an act of violence end? What marks its conclusion—is it death, retribution, repair? Traditional accounts of political violence, with their focus on the rational and self-interested actor, struggle to make sense of forms of violence wherein the destruction enacted on bodies far exceeds the biological threshold of death. As Lee Ann Fujii described this problem, rationalist assumptions insist ‘that

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severity is a simple matter of how many are killed and not *how* people are killed' (Fujii, 2013, p. 411). Such accounts do very little to help us understand the specificity, and therefore the meanings, of forms of violence which seem to exceed lethality. And yet, it is clear that such forms of violence are both pervasive and politically significant. In his description of judicial torture in eighteenth-century France, for example, Michel Foucault (1975, p. 34) describes the prevalence of 'tortures that take place even after death: corpses burnt, ashes thrown to the winds, bodies dragged on hurdles and exhibited at the road'.

A serious consideration of such violence on its own terms might uncover the politics embedded in the material specificity of these acts. The destruction of bodies is central to the way these moments of violence are processed, memorialised, and potentially repaired. Following Banu Bargu's description of the treatment of Kurdish militants' corpses in contemporary Turkey, I read these acts as 'necropolitical violence'—'an entire ensemble of diverse practices that target the dead as a surrogate for, and a means of, targeting the living' (Bargu, 2016).<sup>1</sup> The proliferation of such forms of violence makes it clear that dead bodies maintain a kind of relation to the living, and that this relation is at least partly a political one. The question, then, is how we might make sense of these forms of violence in relation to the contexts within which they occur.

Feminist phenomenology offers a set of conceptual tools for analysing forms of violence which destroy the body in excess of what is required to extinguish life. Feminist phenomenology takes seriously the relationships between bodies, objects, and context.<sup>2</sup> It proposes that bodies and the world around them derive their substance and their meaning from one another: they are co-constitutive. As our bodies construct and structure the things around us, so too do the things around us construct and structure our bodies. There is, therefore, a profound interdependence between bodies and contexts. This relationship of mutuality is the foundation of subjectivity which, feminist phenomenology argues, is always intersubjective. It is this intersubjectivity which produces and enables what we might think about as political subjectivity: this embodied subjectivity, emerging from intersubjective relations, becomes the lens for understanding 'social structures of oppression and the site where complicity, subversion or resistance are enacted' (Al-Saji, 2010). From this perspective, the breaking, disordering, and rearranging of bodily relations can have transformative effects on our experiences of selfhood, community, and political agency.

As a framework for understanding our shared political world, feminist phenomenology is perhaps uniquely practised in reckoning with three key ideas simultaneously.

<sup>1</sup> Bargu's use of the term 'necropolitics' differs from the more common usage famously articulated by Achille Mbembe. Bargu argues that, in addition to the kind necropolitics that Mbembe identifies, 'there is a more spectacular and morbid form of violence that is often disregarded. [...] At issue is not the reduction of the living to "the status of living dead," [as described by Mbembe] but something else altogether: the dishonoring, disciplining, and punishment of the living through the utilization of the dead as postmortem objects and sites of violence' (Bargu, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> By 'contexts' I mean the inanimate things that comprise the world in which we live. This includes objects that are both everyday and extraordinary, and environments that are both built and found.



First, feminist theories of power and resistance see room for the exercise of power even when agency is stifled, constrained, or denied.<sup>3</sup> Because feminist theories of power recognise that subjects—and their actions—are never unencumbered, these theories do not assume that the pure agentic exercise of power is the only channel through which politics can occur. Furthermore, certain strands of feminist theory theorise politics as vested in and worked out on and through bodies.<sup>4</sup>

Second, and relatedly, feminist theories of the subject have long pushed back against the liberal ideal of the rational, independent subject. Feminist theorists have long demanded that we recognise ourselves to be relational beings who are not merely hindered but also constituted by our attachments and dependencies. The concept of intersubjectivity (which I argue is key for analysing extra-lethal violence) is one manifestation of this feminist commitment to recognising the political and ethical work of our human connectedness.

Third, a phenomenological approach is uniquely attuned to the potentially political character of the inanimate. Recognising the role which the inanimate plays in the constitution of our subjectivity, phenomenology has developed the tools and approaches for understanding the work that happens through and in our relationships to places, spaces, and objects—tools and approaches which are not dependent upon imputing thoughts, intentions, or actions to the inanimate. Thus, while feminist phenomenologists have not typically concerned themselves with corpses, their existing tools are perhaps uniquely suited to the task.

My argument, therefore, runs in two directions: first, I echo the existing calls for the importance of what we might call necropolitical analysis as a way of understanding political violence. Second, I argue that feminist phenomenology offers a way of broadening and deepening these existing analyses, if we can broaden its traditional scope. The dead make difficult study, from one perspective, for phenomenologists. They do not perceive. But as Fujii's studies of extra-lethal violence forcefully remind us, the corpses created by political violence are meant to be perceived. The living have relationships to the dead which are not only based in memories of who the dead used to be. Feminist phenomenology can unpack the ways in which the living are not only called upon as witnesses (i.e. to see the dead) but also transformed by their own relationships to the dead, and by what the dead reflect about the other relationships by which the living are intersubjectively constituted.

My overarching argument, therefore, is a methodological one: an argument for the value of feminist phenomenology for studying political violence and furthermore for the importance of recognising the dead as a key analytic site for understanding what is at stake in this violence.

In what follows, I elaborate on the meaning of feminist phenomenology and the conceptual tools it offers for analysing acts of bodily destruction. Feminist phenomenology tells us to attend to the ways in which violently destroyed bodies constitute and are constituted by the world around them. It does not, however, give us a singular answer to the question of what those relationships look like or how they are

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<sup>3</sup> See, for examples: (Bartky, 1990; Irigaray, 1979; Pateman, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> See, for examples: (Alcoff, 2006; Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Bartky, 1990; Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993).



operating. Instead, it gives us the tools to examine these relationships at the granular level, and inform our understanding of political violence accordingly.

To illustrate the ways in which this approach might expand our analyses and understanding of political violence, I turn this lens to an examination of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC) in Manhattan, New York City. I turn to this case in part because of the sheer volume that has already been said about this momentous event: if a feminist phenomenology of violence can add anything to this already oversaturated conversation, it would be a powerful illustration of its utility. But there is another, more important motivation for this case selection: the scope of this violence was vast, and included multiple, simultaneous forms of bodily transformation. These transformations called forth a massive, multi-million-dollar effort to find, sort, identify, and contain bodily remains.

The scale of this effort was necessitated by the particulars of the attack. The extraordinarily high heat created by exploding jet fuel, the multi-stage collapse of the towers, and the specific qualities of the towers themselves led to bodies that were partial, fragmentary, and commingled. Others simply vanished. Over twenty years later, the effort to identify remains is ongoing.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this forensic project effectively revolutionised the study of mass casualty events (Sudoyo et al, 2008).<sup>6</sup> The identification efforts presented a seemingly limitless supply of challenges—and funding—to support the development of new forensic techniques. New York City's Chief Medical Examiner at the time, Charles Hirsch, promised to continue 'in perpetuity the effort to identify remains as new techniques become available' (quoted in Aronson, 2016, p. 11).

According to official estimates, 2753 people were killed in the WTC attack.<sup>7</sup> Of these, 1649 bodies have been identified through the ongoing efforts of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME). However, this description is somewhat misleading. In fact, only 293 of these bodies—barely over 10% of the total dead—took the form of reasonably whole human bodies. The other 1356 'bodies' were composed of bits and pieces, of which search teams found over 20,000 separate fragments. Others left nothing behind (or at least, nothing identifiable). It required intensive work—and intensely political work—to make these insubstantial remains legible as bodies. As I discuss below, in some cases these bodies had to be quite literally materialised.

It is clear, from the eyewitness accounts, that the dead bodies produced by these attacks were problematic from the very beginning. In his account of the complexities surrounding the dead of September 11th, Jay Aronson (2016, pp. 34–35; 40–41) quotes the reactions of first-hand observers. From NYPD inspector James Luongo:

<sup>5</sup> The most recent identifications were announced on 8 September 2023 (Press Release by Mayor Adams and Dr. Graham, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Other disaster 'repair' efforts, like the sorting of mass graves in Serbia and efforts to locate children of *los desaparecidos* in Argentina, are also important here.

<sup>7</sup> The number of total dead remains in question partly because there were an unknown number of undocumented people working in the World Trade Center complex, mostly as bike couriers. Out of fear of deportation and other reprisals, their families have not been able to register them as missing, or to claim any found remains (Edkins, 2011).



We were trying to time the debris as it was coming down cause it was landing around us, and then we were noticing that it wasn't only debris coming down but bodies [...] When the bodies hit the ground, they were disintegrated. They were just splattered, like watermelons.

Tom Haddad, a survivor evacuated from the North Tower before it collapsed, recounted a similar moment of revelation:

[O]ccasionally you'd hear these devastatingly loud thumps. At the time, I thought they came from more falling pieces of the building. It didn't register, there were hunks and piles of meat all over the ground . . . nothing I recognized as body parts. Later on, I found out they were the remains of jumpers.

From reporter Dan Barry, surveying Ground Zero on 12 September:

[R]escue workers pried at the ground with shovels and crow bars to free body parts, bits of human flesh, and rubbery patches of skin. Then, like sanitation workers tending to some hellish park, they carefully dumped the scraps of human remains into a green trash bag held open by a soldier.

It is clear that these bodies are doing things bodies *should not do*. Luongo and Haddad both assumed that they were hearing and seeing parts of the building falling from the Towers. This kind of debris is cognisable to them: inanimate material has no agency, no capacity for auto-motion. It falls. But the human body is bound by a more rigid set of spatial relations: it is meant to be land-bound, tethered to surfaces, constrained in its motion by its inherent fragility. It is not meant to fall through space. The jumpers are not cognisable as human because they are engaged with the environment improperly; they are not relating to other bodies and to contexts as bodies are meant to do.

This is even more true of the jumpers' remains. From these descriptions—'splattered, like watermelons', 'hunks and piles of meat', 'nothing I recognized as body parts'—it is clear that these broken bodies have lost some essential quality of their human-ness, even though the constitution of these bodies remains the same (the same chemical composition, the same flesh that existed in fully human form). They have transformed into something else.

In turn, the 'rescue workers' collecting these bodies are transfigured into 'sanitation workers tending to some hellish park'. The description of these rescue workers as 'sanitation workers' is particularly telling about how the remains appeared to Barry. In her anthropological study of pollution and cleanliness, Mary Douglas (1966, p. 2) famously argued that 'dirt is essentially disorder... Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment'. In her analysis, dirt is defined intersubjectively: it marks an interruption in the relationship between place and object. As unpalatable as it is to think of human remains as dirt, it is clear that these bodies are disorderly in a way which is particularly offensive to the viewer.

These first-hand accounts suggest that these bodies are broken because of their fragmentary character, but also because in being broken they are out of place and thereby out of relation. Feminist phenomenology, with its focus on bodily



relationships, can recognise the full range of what is ‘wrong’ with these bodies. It offers an avenue for placing these troubled bodies at the centre of political analysis, while also recognising that human bodies are not flesh alone. In the specific case of the WTC attacks, I argue that this approach clarifies both the extended threat and the harm of the attack, and the ways in which the memory of 9/11 was made to participate in a project of national reification.

## Feminist phenomenology: making bodies, making worlds

Phenomenology aims to offer thick descriptions of our lived experiences, and to make those experiences the starting point for analysing the world. Where ‘canonical’ texts in phenomenology largely argue that phenomenology should aim to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, feminist phenomenology (and other forms of critical phenomenology) insists that both the subject and the method of phenomenology is political: there is no such thing as ‘pure description’, free from pre-judgement and bias.<sup>8</sup> Phenomenology has a long history in feminist theory, beginning with Simone de Beauvoir’s call for a phenomenological approach to ‘the woman question’ in *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 1953). This approach has been further developed through feminist standpoint theory<sup>9</sup> and the work of Black feminist thinkers.<sup>10</sup>

Feminist philosophers have turned the phenomenological gaze onto the politics of the everyday, arguing that day-to-day actions and interactions are essential sites for understanding the construction of subjectivity. Iris Marion Young’s seminal text of feminist phenomenology, for example, took on the idea of ‘throwing like a girl’. She argued therein that the stereotypical bodily comportment of women was the result of ‘liv[ing] a contradiction: as a human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence’ (Young, 1980, p. 141).<sup>11</sup> This is not an abstraction for Young, but rather the result of ongoing bodily experiences. She builds on Merleau-Ponty’s argument in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that ‘[b]odily spatiality is the deployment of one’s bodily being, *the way in which the body comes into being as a body*’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 149, emphasis mine). Thus, comportment emerges from experiences of interaction between bodies and space, which shape one’s sense of the world. In Young’s example, women’s throwing-motion is limited by her sense (constantly imposed as she navigates the world around her) that her body is always at risk, only partly within her control, and anchored (rather than mobile) within space.

<sup>8</sup> There are several ways that feminist phenomenology attends to the role that power plays in structuring our experiences. For example, feminist phenomenology suggests that when we perceive the world around us, how and what we perceive is partially a product of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. Furthermore, it recognises that when we describe that world, it matters a great deal whose experiences we assume as the ‘norm’.

<sup>9</sup> See, for examples, (Harding, 2004; Hartssock, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> See, for examples, (Collins, 1991; Hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> I find Young’s characterisation of what it means to be a woman, and how woman-ness is experienced, to be somewhat reductive. Nevertheless, the method she uses to arrive at this conclusion is instructive and adaptable.



Importantly, there is no subject, no ‘I’, who might endeavour to throw the ball prior to ‘the body [which] comes into being as a body’. And this body has been constituted by the feeling of vulnerability, the fear that physical exertion will make her appear unladylike, and the learned expectation that her body lacks the capacity to achieve her ends. Young’s analysis therefore places the focus on the conditions of bodily existence itself: what does it mean to have a body, and how is that body implicated in and generative of subjectivity and agency? How do bodily relations with other people, with spaces, and with objects, both emerge from and shape subjectivity (and by extension, behaviour)? From this perspective, subjectivity is inherently intersubjective. There are neither subjects nor objects which have substance or meaning outside of the field of relations.

Feminist phenomenology theorises bodies themselves as both subjects and objects: bodies are the site of agency, but they are also material things operating among other material things. Young attaches this quality particularly to ‘feminine’ bodies, perceiving it to be a limitation—following de Beauvoir, material-ness is an obstacle to transcendence. But in fact, *all* bodies are both the locus of action and a thing to be acted upon. As Merleau-Ponty summarises, ‘[s]aying that I have a body is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I try to be seen as a subject’ (1962, p. 170). At no time is this clearer than in moments of violence, when it is painfully obvious that bodies can be just as vulnerable—and just as much outside our own control—as any other object.

By emphasising this dual quality of bodies, the quality of being both object and subject, phenomenology offers unique insights into the relationship between violence and political subjectivity. For example, Lisa Guenther used a phenomenological approach to analyse the violence of solitary confinement, countering the claim that the harm of solitary confinement is ‘merely’ psychological or mental. Her phenomenological approach allows her to illustrate the ways in which bodily integrity is premised on the material experience of being able to see, experience, and touch things that are outside our bodies. She concludes, therefore, that solitary confinement destroys the intersubjective bodily relations on which personhood depends: ‘the intersubjective basis for their concrete personhood, and for their experience of the world as real and objective [...] is structurally undermined by the prolonged deprivation of a concrete, everyday experience of other people’ (Guenther, 2013, p. 35). While Guenther’s case is quite different from the one I consider here, it provides an apt illustration of how a phenomenological approach might enable us to think differently about the relationship between violence and bodies.

A phenomenological approach also helps us recognise the mutually constitutive relationship between bodies and spaces, wherein space is the enabling condition of bodies, and bodies give meaning and substance to space. This point—a key insight of critical phenomenology—offers an interpretive frame for analysing the destruction of non-human objects. Following this thread, we might interpret the immense destruction inherent in certain acts of violence as the disordering of intersubjective relations. This violence disrupts the coherence and stability (albeit partial) on which these relations are predicated, and instead forces bodies and objects into new material relations with one another. Feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz (1995, p. 92), in her study of the relationships between space, time, and the





body, offers an intensely phenomenological explanation of the essential role that space plays in creating and governing human relations and identities:

The subject's relation to space and time is not passive: space is not simply an empty receptacle [...] It is our positioning within space, both as the point of perspectival access to space, and also as an object for others in space, that gives the subject a coherent identity and an ability to manipulate things, including its own body parts, in space.

This interdependence between bodies and spaces makes them vulnerable to disordering. The destruction of any one part—or the forcible reordering of their relationships—can ripple out through the network of relations. I mean this quite literally: a body that is forced through a wall by a blast wave, for example, is 'in' the building in a way which profoundly destabilises the intended relationship between bodies and buildings. This kind of new relationship unmask the reality that spaces and bodies are not only mutually constitutive; they can also be mutually destructive. Instead of ordering one another, spaces and bodies can mix in a way that enshrines disorder. Bodies can permeate space in ways that undo it, just as space can permeate bodies in ways that undo bodily integrity. Bodies can also mix with one another in ways that are perverse: mixings which undermine, rather than reify, the possibilities of stable relationships between us. While feminist phenomenology evaluates these relations at a conceptual level, we might use the same logics to think about the literal, material, and catastrophic destruction of bodies and spaces.

This approach aligns with the ways that architectural theorists exhort us to think about forms of violence that target and destroy buildings. As architectural theorist and historian Mark Wigley explained in his contribution to *After the World Trade Center* (Sorkin and Zukin, 2002, p. 84), the WTC attacks look different when we think about the buildings as targets rather than merely collateral damage. As he explains:

In the simplest terms, buildings are seen as a form of protection, an insulation from danger. They have to be solid because their occupants are fragile. Keeping the elements and enemies out, they allow bodies to have a life. To be hurt by a building is unacceptable [...] Furthermore, buildings are traditionally meant to last much longer than people. It is the sense that buildings outlive us that allows us to have a life.

Buildings are both designed and defined in relation to bodies: humans' bodily fragility gives buildings purpose and meaning. But this relationship works in both directions. Just as bodies give meaning to buildings, buildings, as Wigley puts it, 'allow bodies to have a life'. From a phenomenological perspective, the relationship between bodies and buildings emerges from the constant interactions between the two. Every moment that buildings protect bodies—from sun, cold, rain, wind, bullets, bombs, animals, other people—this relationship is reaffirmed. Since the relationship is based on constant interaction, it is never fully settled, but it takes on a kind of permanence in our lives—we come to rely on buildings to be



there, an ‘insulation from danger’, and this assumption characterises our relationship with them. To be harmed by a building is ‘unacceptable’, therefore, because it defies the logics that give meaning to this relationship. Worse still, it shows how vulnerable and contingent that relationship was all along. If it is indeed ‘the sense that buildings outlive us that allows us to have a life’, the destruction of buildings is also the destruction of an essential cornerstone of our intersubjective worlds. Buildings play a key role in our understanding of what it means to be human in general, and what it means to be ourselves more specifically.

As noted above, these moments of destruction can also incorporate the forging of new and complicated relationships. Bodies which were previously separated by skin, space, and circumstance become mixed. That which was outside of the body comes to be within, while that which belongs inside the body can spill out into the world. In this process—which was spectacularly and massively on display in the World Trade Center attacks—the relationships between bodies and contexts are radically redefined.

In what follows, my first category is transformation. I identify several distinct modes of bodily transformation from the attack. I describe how these transformations unsettled the relationships between bodies and context and occasioned the formation of new relationships. I argue that the bodies produced and destroyed in the attack are sites of violence and threat which exceed what any casualty count could communicate. These bodies were recruited in service of violence beyond the point of their own violent deaths, and comprise a central part of the horror the attack provoked and the sense of threat or menace that it conveyed long after the dead had been counted.

The second category is what we might loosely term as repair efforts—this category comprises the ways in which the dead were recruited in service of a kind of national recovery.<sup>12</sup> The challenges which the materiality of some of these fraught bodies posed to these repair efforts emphasise the fact that the signification of bodies is not infinitely malleable: they impose certain limits on what those who attempted to “recruit” them into their political projects could achieve. Indeed, a phenomenological analysis shows that these processes were not merely abstract or symbolic: the materiality of these bodily remains played a central role in them. An intersubjective analysis enables us to understand the field of relations in which these repair efforts intervene, and which in turn give them their meaning.

Certain aspects of this analysis are broadly applicable, while others are highly specific to the case in question. There is nothing uniquely American, for example, about the general observation that corpses can be made to perform political work. Scholars studying nationalism,<sup>13</sup> immigration,<sup>14</sup> and displays of state power,<sup>15</sup> among other topics, have identified the importance of analysing corpses across a wide range of geographical locations and institutional arrangements. The work these

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<sup>12</sup> This section is informed by my fieldwork at the National September 11th Memorial and Museum (NS11MM) in the summer of 2019.

<sup>13</sup> See, for examples, (Verdery, 1999; Weiss, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> See, for examples: (Balkan, 2023; Johnson, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> See, for examples: (Bargu, 2016; Foucault, 1975).



corpses perform, on the other hand, is enacted through their relationships to context, and therefore intensely specific (indeed, it is partly because of this necessary specificity that feminist phenomenology is a valuable tool for examining these cases).

Meira Weiss, for example, has written extensively about how the treatment of soldiers' corpses in Israel is both based upon and contributes to sustaining highly particular nationalist narratives about Israel's founding and its endurance. Other scholars have argued that there are uniquely American ways of thinking and feeling about the body, and that we can track evolutions in this mindset over time.<sup>16</sup> In the case of September 11th, we can look back to comments made by Episcopal chaplain Charles Flood, who became a fixture at Ground Zero during the rescue and subsequent recovery efforts. He argued that the struggle to find and identify bodies was 'all wrapped up in feelings of wanting to conquer death. It is very American. It is a way of saying we will prevail: This dust shall have a name again' (quoted in Edkins, 2011, p. 120). I track the desire this claim encapsulates: the desire to imbue these bodies with Americanness, to incorporate them into a project of reconsolidating and reinforcing a story of national strength and unity that was laid vulnerable by the attacks. I track the insistence that 'this dust shall have a name again' as an insistence on imposing meaning onto the meaningless and order onto the disorderly in a way that might undo the chaos and horror of the attack.

### **Body horror: vaporised bodies, commingled remains, & hidden fragments**

This section examines the three forms of troubled remains which I described above as an extension or expansion of the attack itself. The first of these categories of difficult bodies is those that were instantly vaporised by the high heat of exploding jet fuel. Most likely these bodies contributed to the vast cloud of dust, ash, and smoke that rolled across Manhattan and the surrounding boroughs, choking rescue workers, thickly coating those fleeing the area, and vexing experts who struggled to determine its chemical content and potential toxicity (Lioy, 2010). Hamid Dabashi (2012, p. 3) wrote of the discomfiting awareness, when he walked through the streets of Manhattan after the attack, that the torrent of fine ash which fell over the city undoubtedly contained the imperceptible residue of human bodies. 'These ashes were bones and muscles only a cup of coffee ago', he remarked, bewildered. He notes that people in the city were inevitably breathing these bodies in—a particularly troubling thought considering that these ashes likely contained the bodies of the hijackers, who were at the front of the plane and therefore at the epicentre of the blast.<sup>17</sup>

These bodies not only vanished—although that is itself a troubling occurrence—but worse, they vanished into one another. These bodies became inseparable and indivisible from each other, from the structure of the planes, from the construction

<sup>16</sup> See, for examples: (Martin 1990, 1994). Martin identifies what she describes as uniquely American 'paradigms' of the body, particularly a transition from a Fordist approach to the body to a 'late capitalism' paradigm.

<sup>17</sup> I will discuss this particular problem in more detail below.



materials of the Towers at the point of impact. And in becoming undifferentiated, they also lost the capacity to exist in relation. As Guenther (2013, p. xiii) describes it, 'subjectivity is not merely a point but a hinge, a self-relation that cannot be sustained in absolute solitude but only in relation to others'. Relationships rely on an element of separation, an ability to distinguish between 'me' and 'not-me', even if 'me' and 'not-me' are co-constituted. Indeed, co-constitution requires an element of separation. Indivisibility forecloses relationships: there is no separating 'me' from 'not-me', when both have been reduced to dust and smoke. This collapsing of bodies into each other breaks the 'hinge' or 'self-relation' that subjectivity requires. As Dabashi (2012, p. 3) asked: 'How is one to understand such sudden decimation of physical existence and the restful falling down of human beings as ashes and dust?' Not only are the conditions for the possibility of identity destroyed for these vanished bodies, but their relationships with the living are shattered as well. These vaporised bodies are not simply dead, they are unidentifiable, unthinkable, and in some way unmournable. In other words, they are bodies that cannot be put to rest—deaths that cannot be dealt with or moved past.

The remains that did exist were fragmentary and mixed. The initial search efforts after the attack lasted nearly a year, and sifted through almost two million tons of debris searching for human remains and personal effects. This effort found 4257 different remains, ranging from tiny bone fragments to arms, hands, and feet. They also found over 50,000 personal effects, including jewellery and wallets (Aronson, 2016, p. 59). Sorting through this debris to separate human remains from everything else was immensely challenging and time-consuming.

First, the forensic teams tasked with sorting and identifying the remains were powerfully confronted by the fragile distinction between the human and non-human when they discovered that a considerable portion of the recovered flesh from the site was, in fact, beef, chicken, and hot dogs from the restaurants in the World Trade Center complex. For the firemen without forensic training, digging through the rubble with their hands or with small gardening tools, the burnt, decayed, crushed, and fragmentary flesh all looked the same. Even the forensic teams could not necessarily distinguish by sight, given that human and animal flesh alike had been subjected to the same destructive conditions (Toom, 2016, p. 694).

This uncertainty is profoundly destabilising. The condition of these remains undermined the presumed relationship between the human and the animal—the assumption that being human is to be something *more* than animal alone. Even worse, these were not just any animal remains: they were meat.<sup>18</sup> The indistinguishability of humans from hotdogs, for example, is particularly troubling because of the assumed relationship between the two: humans make and consume hotdogs, manipulating flesh in ways that are bearable precisely because it is presumed (accurately or otherwise) to be wholly different from our own. At the same time, food plays a

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<sup>18</sup> This troubling elision of human bodies and meat appeared in other parts of the identification process as well. For example, in a memorandum for their suit against the City of New York, the organisation WTC Families for Proper Burial, Inc. argued that the surge of seagulls and turkey vultures at Freshkills Landfill (where WTC site debris was transported after being searched) was evidence of human remains within the debris; see: (*WTC Families for Proper Burial, Inc., vs. The City of New York*, 2007, p. 19).



central role in the construction of our intersubjective identities. Being unable to distinguish the human body from food is monstrous. It forced the rescue teams to face horrifying questions that were not only about these specific bodies, but also about themselves and their relationship to the category of the human. What is left of the human when it becomes indistinguishable from the hotdog? What remains of our sense of selfhood when we become what we eat?

Once the human remains had been successfully isolated, the problem of matching these remains to any one individual was extremely complex. Given the difficulty of obtaining testable tissue from degraded, charred, and fragmentary bits of material, finding remains does not necessarily equate to having a sample that can be tested for DNA (Sudoyo et al, 2008). This problem is compounded by commingling. Commingling most often took the form of small fragments from one body embedded in the soft tissue of another or a pile of undifferentiated flesh; forms where the mixing may not be discernible to the untrained or unexpectant eye.

But in some cases, relatively large fragments were mixed together in difficult to comprehend mutations. For example, the OCME found a hand and a finger—from two different people—embedded in an x-rayed chest cavity. Neither the hand nor the finger ‘belonged’ to the chest (Aronson, 2016, p. 84). Thus, what appeared to be one body was, in its fragmentary way, three. The relationship between these three bodies is difficult to read. Given the scope of the chaos and the destruction, there is no way to be sure how these remains became mixed—whether they had some connection in life that might have led them to die together, or whether they were total strangers.

What is clear, however, is that these remains were forced into a relationship of perverse intimacy. These bodies were *too* close—close in a way that destroyed rather than enabled the possibilities of subjecthood. These three fragments had to be found, extracted, separated, and then identified before they could actually appear as human remains in a meaningful way.

In other cases, these messily merged bodies were actually the result of well-intentioned actions taken by recovery personnel, particularly firefighters, who seemed determined to return whole bodies to the families of their fallen fellows (regardless of whether such bodies existed). As Aronson notes, these tactics included ‘placing body parts found adjacent to empty or partially empty articles of clothing into that clothing’, such as ‘when parts of a leg were stuffed into the sleeves of bunker gear or when boots that were associated with a set of bunker gear contained two left feet’ (Aronson, 2016, p. 46).

In a way, these were the first fictive bodies created during the recovery process: bodies cobbled together, Frankenstein-like, from the many incomplete sets of remains. The impulse to create these bodies runs counter to the ways we might expect people to interact with commingled remains. For example, examining the social meaning of commingled remains, social anthropologist Sarah Wagner (2014) argues that ‘[m]ixed up bones need to be made sense of, requiring both literal and figurative reordering, and it is in that process of reordering that we perceive their social meaning’.

In other words, we might expect these bodies to become sensible through the process of separation. Many aspects of the post-9/11 cleanup process seem to evince such a desire. But in this case, the desire for wholeness seems to have overwhelmed



the desire for distinctions: rescue workers felt impelled to cobble together bodies which quite clearly did not make sense. Adriana Cavarero (2009, p. 8) offers a potential explanation for this behaviour: she argues that ‘the body is revulsed above all by its own dismemberment, the violence that undoes it and disfigures it [...] Death may transform it [the human body] into a cadaver, but it does not offend its dignity or at any rate does not do so as long as the body preserves its figural unity’.

In most situations, the demand for whole bodies and the demand for separate bodies would be not just compatible but complementary. But this kind of destruction placed those demands into devastating contradiction. Encountering a conflict between these two impulses is deeply unsettling. In Cavarero’s terms, this conflict provokes a revulsion that cannot be resolved: a harm that cannot truly be repaired.

The scale and scope of the initial attack ensured many confrontations with these dismembered bodies. In April 2006, construction workers found over seventy pieces of human remains in the ballast as they prepared to reconstruct the Deutsche Bank Building—in areas that supposedly had been thoroughly searched during the preceding year. These small but plentiful fragments triggered a new wave of uncertainty about what other remnants of the attack might be lurking unseen around the city. These fears proved well-founded when work began on the new World Trade Center site. It quickly became clear that the drains and manholes around the plaza had been filled with remains all along. Aronson (2016, p. 219) describes the scene as follows:

a contractor working with Con Ed was loading additional material into another truck when he noticed two eight-to-ten-inch objects sticking out of the rubble. [...] Confirming many 9/11 families’ worst nightmares, they turned out to be human bones. [...] Subsequent investigation of the area and the debris that had already been trucked off to Con Ed’s facility revealed more than 100 additional bones, as well as numerous personal items, including two wallets.

These bodily fragments held a highly ambivalent status. On one hand, they had been searched for, sought after, and wanted. On the other hand, they had infiltrated spaces where they did not belong.<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 284) argues that space is not ‘the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible...we must think of it as the universal power enabling [all things] to be connected’. The space of a city is a particularly potent example of this quality: the city is not simply the background against which urban life takes place, but an active participant in that life. The personification of New York City in discussions around 9/11 aptly illustrated this point. A shared relationship to the space of the city enabled the formation of a kind of injured polity. But these fragments violated that space. They were invaders. By getting inside these systems, these bodily fragments had assumed a menacing and perverse relationship to the space of the city. They were *in* the space in a way that violated every rule

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<sup>19</sup> This sense of contamination is perhaps especially disturbing in relation to the prevalent use of discourses of virality in relation to ‘terrorism’. Security-oriented discourse regarding ‘terrorists’ takes on an immuno-pathological valence, describing the terrorist as a kind of virus that has ‘infected’ the body politic, that lies hidden in secret ‘cells’, waiting to attack when immune resistances are low, and threatening (contagion-like) to spread.



and promise of interaction. Because this space enabled both the existence of and the connections between the people who ‘belong’ to it, their connections too are disrupted and violated.

## Reassembly, resurrection, repair

As I have noted, almost half of the known dead from the World Trade Center attacks have no associated remains. Although the search continues, it has long been clear that some bodies will not be found. This section discusses attempts to reckon with these difficult and absent bodies by transfiguring them into national bodies: the bodies of heroes and patriots on whose bones (actual or imagined) and memories a kind of national unity can be consolidated. This section also describes a necessary corollary to that process: efforts to fix, sequester, and contain the bodies of those who perpetrated the attacks. Both these kinds of processes have a correspondence to the threats and problems I described above. Perhaps the most literal attempt to solve such a problem came from then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s curious attempt at transubstantiation: he instructed the NYPD to collect, contain, and consecrate debris that could be offered to families as substitute bodies to bury. Aronson (2016, pp. 49–50) describes this process, which is worth quoting at length:

Mayor Giuliani ordered the NYPD to collect debris from the site, sanctify it through careful (though arbitrary and ad hoc) rituals, and then place a small amount of it in cherry wood urns to be delivered to families. In the first step of the process, powdered debris was shoveled into three fifty-five gallon drums at Ground Zero and blessed by a chaplain on site, then draped with American flags, transported with a police escort to One Police Plaza, blessed again, then guarded by two honor guards twenty-four hours a day in a room that was freshly cleaned, repainted specifically for this purpose, and fitted with potted plants to bring life to an operation that otherwise referenced only death. In the second stage of the process, the remains were carefully spooned into plastic bags, which were sealed and placed in high-quality wooden urns by gloved members of the NYPD’s ceremonial unit. This act was done with great care, in a room with low lights and soothing music. The urns were then sealed, inspected, and stored for safekeeping until they were handed over to families in late October at a special ceremony at Pier 94.

In this peculiar ceremony, one can see the process of a dignified burial being enacted in reverse: a body made from rather than consigned to dust. Interacting with this debris as though it were a body, moving it through spaces reserved for the heroic death, are all ways of insisting on relating to this debris as though it were materially equivalent to the corpse of a fallen patriot. This equivalency cannot be assumed. After all, much of the search effort was dedicated to separating remains from debris, and storing remains for identification while debris was packed off to landfills. The debris Giuliani proposed to collect, therefore, was *specifically* devoid of known remains. Turning this dirt into bodies took work.





In an oddly literal take of Douglas's terms, it is an attempt to make meaning out of dirt by imposing order onto it: an attempt to put what is disorderly back into place, thereby cleansing it of pollutants and clearing the way for it to be something else. Thus, the debris is sanctified through last rites. A solemn wake was convened in a room which—'freshly cleaned, repainted, and 'fitted with potted plants'—recalls a funeral parlour. The parcelling of ashes into bags 'in a room with low lights and soothing music', as though these bags of dust and ash would be adversely affected by bright lights and loud music, reveals a strange awareness of the intersubjective construction of bodies. There is a sense, or at least an aspiration, that we might manifest a body by simply relating to an object as if it were one. Furthermore, it reflects an aspiration that we might manifest specific kinds of bodies through this treatment.

We might think of this process as enacting what Judith Butler (2004, p. 34) described as the nation-building work of obituaries: 'the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition'. Like the obituary, these acts of transubstantiation produced evidence of death, insisted on the value of the life lost, and summoned (perhaps quite literally, considering the necessity of a chaplain, a police escort, a 24-hour honour guard) a public who was exhorted to grieve. In other words, this process attempted to transform this debris into bodies deserving of public grief. As Butler puts it, these fictive bodies are manifested as 'icon[s] for national self-recognition'. This public is not only exhorted to see this dust as bodies but as *their* bodies: bodies which belong to them and which are, in turn, entitled to make claims on them.

The National September 11<sup>th</sup> Memorial & Museum, meanwhile, could be reasonably described as a series of fictive bodies collected and designed to consolidate a kind of American public by exhorting the audience to identify with the right 'heroes' and oppose themselves against the right 'villains'. Perhaps nowhere is this desire clearer than in the NS11MM's inscription of the room where the still-unidentified remains are held. This inscription, which has been a source of considerable controversy among those more familiar with the context from which it has been excerpted,<sup>20</sup> quotes from Virgil's *Aeneid*: 'No day shall erase you from the memory of time'. This inscription not only imputes a kind of immortality to the dead, it also interpellates them as very specific subjects. The *Aeneid* is a story of founding, and particularly of a founding which emerges from destruction (Aeneas's founding of Rome after the fall of Troy). This particular quote, from Book IX, promises two fallen soldiers that their memory will live on as long as Rome endures.

Thus, the inscription interpellates the dead as heroic, national bodies in two ways. First, it resignifies the dead as soldiers—fighters actively engaged in the battle for the nation, rather than as effectively random civilian casualties. Second, it ties the dead to the life and endurance of the nation, tethering them to a narrative of national founding and rebirth. It attributes meaning and purpose to their deaths, implying that they sacrificed their lives for the state. Functioning as a kind of collective obituary for the unidentified, this inscription substitutes a national identity for individual

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<sup>20</sup> For detailed discussion of these controversies, see (Seider, 2017).





names. In doing so, it turns a storage room for unidentified bone fragments into a battlefield grave and monument.

Not every aspect of the memorial museum is overtly dedicated to this grand project, however. In some respects, the design of the primary memorial seems focussed on combating the much more fundamental sense of disorder caused by the attacks: if part of the underlying threat of the attacks was the pervasive derangement of social and spatial relations, this aspect of the recovery process strives to reimpose logic and order. The primary memorial is a pair of enormous fountains which fill the footprints of the destroyed Twin Towers. Appropriately, the memorial design is titled 'Reflecting Absence'. The names inscribed all along the fountains take a different approach to embodying the dead.<sup>21</sup> Each set of inscriptions is designed as a massive network graph of relationships. Distributed into clusters by company, names have been arranged so that friends and colleagues are near each other. As one docent described it to me, if two people ate lunch together every day, you will find their names next to each other. If two people from different companies in the building were married, their companies' clusters have been placed next to each other to keep the couple together. The resulting organisation strives to put the dead *in place*, in a way that is distinctly unlike a cemetery.

Perhaps, in this way, they are named alongside those with whom they died, but it seems rather more like they are named alongside those with whom they lived. Their names are organised as their bodies were in life, maintaining the ties created by bodily proximity, even when these bodies are absent. The result is fictive bodies with restored relationships, not only to one another, but to the spaces and contexts that structured their everyday lives. The offices which made up the interior of the towers are implied in the negative space between the names. Thus, while the fountains themselves invoke the space of the destroyed towers by inverting them, these inscriptions conjure the bodies which inhabited them by embodying their relationships. In sharp contrast to the bone fragments that clogged the drains and sewers, these pseudo-bodies are exactly where they are 'supposed' to be.

As I noted above, these heroic dead are not the only recipients of fictive bodies. The last exhibit on the guided tour of the NS11MM museum is vaguely but accurately titled, 'Brick from Abbottabad'. This exhibit focuses on the May 2011 killing of Osama Bin Laden in his safehouse in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The star object of this exhibit, as the name suggests, is a worn, unassuming brick. The placard in the case explains that this brick was donated by Fox News correspondent Dominic DiNatale from the foundations of the house where Bin Laden was finally cornered: a somewhat heavy-handed substitute for Bin Laden's corpse, which the White House reported was disposed of at sea after his death.

There is something disquieting about the brick. A docent told me of her discomfort with this ending, which she felt gave the false impression of finished business to what 'had really just begun'. Indeed, while the exhibit is undoubtedly trying to 'put

<sup>21</sup> In truth, the NS11MM contains too many fictive bodies to fully recount here. Some crucial bodies I do not address include the flickering projection exhibit of missing-person posters, a room that displays a rotating collection of everyday objects from the lives of the dead, and the famous 'Last Column' (the final large steel beam to be removed from the site during clean-up).



Bin Laden back in his place' (destroyed, contained, defeated), its quiet triumphalism cannot throw off a certain awkwardness, which I suspect is less about Bin Laden himself and more about the problem that cannot be solved: the missing bodies of the hijackers.

Of the four (out of ten bombers) from whom *any* remains have been found, there are only small fragments. These fragments are kept in an undisclosed evidence-locker in Virginia, sequestered and hidden from view. But most of these bodies were undoubtedly mixed into the ash that fell over Manhattan in the immediate aftermath of the collisions. This fact contains a reality which seems almost too horrible to name for those engaged in these memorialisation projects: that the people of New York were blanketed in the burnt remains of the hijackers' bodies, or perhaps breathed them in. Remnants might be mixed into the sanctified debris filling Giuliani's urns. These bodies cannot be found and contained; cannot be rendered as something concrete and tangible which can be easily displayed.

This brick offers an imperfect psychic solution. In a museum that constantly reiterates an identification and elision between dead bodies and destroyed buildings, visitors are thoroughly primed to accept this brick as a corpse. In contrast to the diffuse and imperceptible threat of the hijackers' remains, the brick is reassuringly solid. It is small and knowable, safely contained behind the glass where the viewer can examine it without fear of their gaze being returned.

## What survives?

At the symbolic centre of the Memorial Glade surrounding the NS11MM stands the Survivor Tree, its fence rife with ribbon-tied messages from children and bouquets of flowers nestled into the crook of the branches. When I visited in summer of 2019, a sign explained that these flowers were placed in the tree to recognise the victims of the preceding weekend's violence in Dayton, Ohio, and El Paso, Texas.<sup>22</sup> The tree has a story: burnt and mangled, it was the only tree left standing in the WTC plaza. Though burn scars remain on the lower bark, the tree is healthy and growing. Every year, seedlings from this tree are distributed to three communities around the world that 'have endured tragedy in recent years', forming a rather literal family tree of victimhood.<sup>23</sup>

I end with this particular fictive body because it powerfully engages both aspects of the political work that I have used feminist phenomenology to track, and in doing so it encapsulates the importance of thinking intersubjectively for analysing violence. The careful nursing, naming, and veneration of the Survivor Tree marks an attempt to contain or even undo the specific horrors of the attack that I described above. Simultaneously, the distribution of seedlings frames the WTC attack as the

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<sup>22</sup> See (Levin et al., 2019).

<sup>23</sup> These tragedies range from bombings and mass shootings to hurricanes, mudslides, and fires. Most of the descriptions—'14 people killed and 22 injured', in San Bernardino, '49 people killed and 58 injured at Pulse Nightclub', '20 school children and six adults who were killed'—do not say who was doing the killing or why.



paradigmatic harm, suggesting that it is the shared national cypher through which other forms of violence because legible and other victims validated.

The Survivor Tree stands in sharp contrast to the fragmentary, vanished, and commingled remains that the human victims of the attack left behind. It is not only a body with substance and integrity, but a body that—as the name emphasises—*survived*. In contrast to the many bodies that will never be whole, the Survivor Tree is a body which could, through intense care and attention, be healed. In this way, it provides a model for recovery that human bodies could not.

As a memorial object, the Survivor Tree also ‘responds’ to the horror provoked by the vanished and commingled bodies by modelling a tolerable way of being-in-relation. Where human bodies collapsed and disintegrated into each other, the Survivor Tree stood alone in the plaza. In its new home in the Memorial Glade, museum staff and visitors alike choose to enter a relation with this ‘body’ through their messages, bouquets, and ribbons. In turn, the Survivor Tree creates its own relationships through the conferral of saplings. The relationships here are voluntary and intentional, in contrast to the violent bodily mergings enacted by the attack.

These processes reinstate what Guenther (2013, p. xiii) described as the ‘hinge’ of subjectivity: ‘a self-relation that cannot be sustained in absolute solitude but only in relation to others’. The act of naming the tree formalises this quality: in rebuke to the horror of the unidentifiable and unnameable dead, the Survivor Tree has a name to imbue it with subjecthood. At the same time, the act of naming makes it knowable in a way that might make it a safe object to which to relate.

Finally, the Survivor Tree is a material manifestation of the effort to instate the dead of 9/11 as what Butler (2004, p. 34) called ‘icons for national self-recognition’. The distribution of saplings to other sites of violence not only builds affective connections, but suggests that other deaths gain meaning through the conferral of proximity to the 9/11 dead. In doing so, this program reifies the victims of the WTC attack as the *truest* national bodies—the bodies, dead and surviving alike, who truly represent ‘us’.

Feminist phenomenology enables us to make sense of the contestation over these diverse and troubling bodies, including fictive bodies. I have shown that such an approach allows us to track the ways in which bodies are mobilised for diverse political goals (in this case, both in the attack and in the recovery efforts). The point is not that bodily remains themselves are independently world-moving, but rather that an intersubjective lens allows us to see how intensely our life-worlds can be shaped and altered by the dead in the aftermath of an act of violence. It calls our attention to the interdependence between bodies, objects, and contexts. And in doing so, it illuminates the ways in which this interdependence both makes us vulnerable to necropolitical violence and also opens possibilities to resignify the objects of violence through our care and intervention.

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