

EPILOGUE

Serial Killing in America after 9/11

In the war on terror, the handwringers see all sorts of difficulties with an attack on Iraq. But when a psychologist studies Saddam Hussein, he or she sees something very different. The very definition of terror is to have weapons of mass destruction in the hands of this sociopathic serial killer.

—Curtis Schmidt, “The Psychopathology of Saddam”

What business do your governments have to ally themselves with the gang of criminality in the White House against Muslims? Don't your governments know that the White House gang is the biggest serial killers in this age?

—From a November 2002 audiotape purporting to feature the voice of Osama bin Laden

And so, if we are to be judged by the wishes in our unconscious, we are, like primitive man, simply a gang of murderers.

—Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death”

It has become the ultimate truism to say that everything changed on September 11, 2001. Without wanting to minimize the impact of the awful events that took place on that day, I think it is possible to overestimate the extent to which the United States has changed since 9/11. To claim, for example, that the country was profoundly altered by the eruption of an act of violence the like of which had never been seen in the United States before is simultaneously to be accurate and not to tell the whole story. The mainland United States had certainly never been subjected to violent attacks of such magnitude before 9/11, and yet to imply that prior to the attacks America existed in a state of unsullied innocence is to ignore both the participation of the United States in similar acts of violence in other countries (either by sponsoring such acts or by committing them outright) and the defining role that violence has played in the foundation and continued development of the country. Despite the temptation to treat 9/11 as some kind of epistemic break, in other words, it is important to insist on the continuities that exist between “before” and “after”; only by studying the continuities can we understand fully the impact of 9/11 on American culture.¹

In the context of reflecting upon the event of 9/11, Jacques Derrida has argued that “terror is always, or always becomes, at least in part, ‘interior.’ And terrorism always has something ‘domestic,’ if not national, about it. The worst, most effective ‘terrorism,’ even if it seems external and ‘international,’

is the one that installs or recalls an interior threat, *at home* . . . and recalls that the enemy is *also always* lodged on the inside of the system it violates and terrorizes” (“Autoimmunity” 188, original emphasis). Derrida’s comments remind us of the fact that the 9/11 attackers lived and trained inside the United States. This fact alone complicates the construction of the terrorist as a foreign outsider, but there are also other ways in which terrorism is part of the domestic scene of the United States. Not surprisingly, one of the continuities that are suppressed by hegemonic accounts of the meaning of 9/11 is the long history of acts of terrorism within the United States. In his recent book *America’s Culture of Terrorism*, Jeffery Clymer discusses a number of such acts, including the 1886 Haymarket bombing in Chicago, the 1910 bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building, the 1920 explosion on Wall Street, and, more recently, the 1993 World Trade Center attack and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Clymer argues that the United States “has had a long and pervasive amnesia about different acts and forms of terrorism in its history” (211), and according to Clymer this amnesia has intensified in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which, he argues, have “become something like a hyperterrorist event that has occluded . . . other, more ‘mundane’ forms of terrorism that were occurring before 9/11 and that are still occurring now” (212). As an example of the “mundane” terrorism Clymer speaks of, we might consider the December 2003 conviction of Clayton Waagner, self-described terrorist and member of the Army of God, on charges of threatening the use of weapons of mass destruction. Although the hundreds of envelopes stuffed with white powder (that he claimed was anthrax) and threatening letters that Waagner mailed to abortion clinics and reproductive rights organizations constituted a campaign of terror that should have attracted widespread media coverage, there was virtually no media attention given to Waagner’s conviction (Clarkson). In a similar vein, the May 2003 arrest of William Krar and Judith Bruey in Noonday, Texas, exposed the existence of a highly organized and heavily armed right-wing conspiracy that was in the process of selecting targets for its stockpile of five hundred thousand rounds of ammunition, more than sixty pipe bombs, dozens of machine guns, silencers, pistols, mines, explosives, and even a chemical cyanide bomb capable of killing thousands if detonated in a shopping mall or subway (P. Harris 21).

Critics who point to such incidents as evidence that the Bush administration, in its obsession with Islamic terrorists, is ignoring the increasingly powerful and deadly assortment of domestic extremists are missing the point somewhat, for this selective attention has the support of the majority of the American public. As I will explain later, part of the reason that 9/11 is so often thought of, with amnesiac insistence, as a break, a discontinuity, rather

than as a continuation of a previously established history of terrorism in the United States is that such amnesia is necessary to maintain the existence and utility of a series of binaries that include inside/outside, innocence/guilt, and domestic/foreign. My focus in this epilogue will be on the role that serial murder plays in this complex drama of (re)memory and willful forgetting. Serial murder is the exception to the rule of seeing 9/11 as an epistemic break, in that it constitutes a principle of continuity between pre- and post-9/11 America. It must be acknowledged, however, that serial murder also seems to provide another tempting opportunity to draw a clear line of demarcation between the United States before and after the traumatic event. Despite the long-standing iconic status of the serial killer in American culture before 9/11, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks it seemed reasonable to suppose that the serial killer would be quickly replaced by the terrorist as the personification of criminal evil.² What actually happened, however, turns out to be considerably more complicated. I will argue that the figure of the serial killer plays an even more central role in post-9/11 America than it did before the attacks. Its omnipresence as an icon of evil enabled the serial killer to become the lingua franca of both sides of the “war against terror.” Consequently, the terrorist did not replace the serial killer; rather, the two categories overlapped. The serial killer provided a way to present the figure of the terrorist to the American public in a way that was both familiar enough to keep public fear and paranoia at manageable levels and deviant enough to mobilize the necessary level of public support for the systematic dismantling of civil liberties in the United States and for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, and quite paradoxically, the reassertion of the quintessential “Americanness” of the serial killer facilitated the reinforcement of the terrorist as a foreign “other” and allowed the majority of Americans to maintain an image of both themselves and their country as paragons of innocence that had been violated by terrorism.

Business As Usual

Although I will demonstrate how intimately the serial killer and the terrorist have become entwined with each other in the aftermath of 9/11, it is also important to emphasize that the serial killer industry that existed in the United States before the attacks has continued to flourish and has done so in many instances without any reference to terrorism at all. Indeed, if anything, this industry is experiencing a boom. For example, the following are just a few of the serial-killer-related movies that have been released since 2001: *Dahmer* (David Jacobson, 2002); *Bundy* (Matthew Bright, 2002); *Speck* (Keith Walley, 2002); *Murder by Numbers* (a documentary on the appeal of serial

killer films that premiered on the Independent Film Channel as part of their “Serial Killer Cinema Weekend” in February 2002); *Red Dragon* (Brett Ratner, 2002), the latest installment in one of the longest-running serial killer movie franchises ever; and, of course, *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003), featuring Charlize Theron’s Oscar-winning performance as Aileen Wuornos. What strikes one immediately about this list is how many of these films are based on actual serial killers. Could it be that American audiences in post-9/11 America find a perverse comfort in consuming representations of familiar serial killers rather than having to grapple with the fears raised by the terrorist?

Movie studios certainly seem confident that the American public will continue to have a sharp appetite for serial killers, as we can see from the following partial list of projects that at the time of this writing are under development or scheduled to be released: *Suspect Zero* (E. Elias Merhige, 2004) stars Ben Kingsley as an avenging former FBI agent who has dedicated himself to tracking down serial killers, including the most dangerous of them all, “Suspect Zero”; *Mindhunters* (Renny Harlin, 2004) will feature well-known actors such as Val Kilmer and Christian Slater as part of a group of FBI agents who are training to join the elite psychological profilers program. When one of the group turns out to be a serial killer, the others must figure out who the killer is before they are all murdered; famed director Ridley Scott is developing a film version of Patrick Süskind’s revered serial killer novel, *Perfume*; Arnold Entertainment has acquired the rights to *The Night Stalker*, Philip Carlo’s true-crime book on Richard Ramirez, and is considering Benicio del Toro for the title role; the *Starz!* film network is doing a made-for-cable film version of *The Riverman*, Robert Keppel’s true-crime book on Ted Bundy and the Green River Killer. To make an obvious point, this list contains in compressed form examples of many of the subjects I have touched on in this study: the celebrity status of serial killers, the willingness of film stars to be associated with serial killer projects, and the continued salience of those figures and institutions that have traditionally been used to sell serial murder to the American public, namely, Ted Bundy and the FBI.

What explains the continued American public interest in serial killer popular culture? Sigmund Freud’s still-relevant 1915 essay “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” suggests a variety of answers to this question, including some that will enable us to begin demonstrating how serial murder in post-9/11 America is imbricated with discourses on terrorism and war. Writing in the context of World War I, Freud defines the modern attitude toward death as an unwillingness to face the possibility of our own death: “Our own death is indeed unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we can perceive that we really survive as spectators. Hence the psychoanalytic

school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or to put the same thing in another way, in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality” (304–5). According to Freud, our “tendency to exclude death from our calculations” (306) draws us toward fictional representations of death: “It is an inevitable result of all this that we should seek in the world of fiction, of general literature and of the theatre compensation for the impoverishment of life. There we still find people who know how to die, indeed, who are even capable of killing someone else. There alone too we can enjoy the condition which makes it possible for us to reconcile ourselves with death—namely, that beyond all the vicissitudes of life we preserve our existence intact . . . In the realm of fiction we discover that plurality of lives for which we crave. We die in the person of a given hero, yet we survive him, and are ready to die again with the next hero just as safely” (306–7). Fictional representations of death allow us to maintain our attitude of disavowal toward the possibility of our own death.

Although the modern disavowal of death can be maintained in times of peace, Freud argues that war “is bound to sweep away this conventional treatment of death. Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in him. People really are dying, and now not one by one, but many at a time, often ten thousand in a single day” (307). Despite our commitment to the idea that we have become more civilized than primitive man, war “strips us of the later accretions of civilization, and lays bare the primal man in each of us . . . it stamps the alien as the enemy, whose death is to be brought about or desired” (316). The figure of the terrorist exposes us to a similarly unadorned confrontation with our primal selves, that “gang of murderers” Freud mentions in one of the epigraphs to this epilogue. As Samuel Weber presciently argued in 1997, there is an intimate connection between war and terrorism: “The spectacle of war is increasingly supplemented by that of ‘terrorism’—which, as its name indicates, defines itself less through institutional acts than through emotional effects: the production of terror . . . The isolated act of terrorism becomes the pretext for a war against it, in which cause and perpetrator tend to converge in the shadowy figure of the elusive enemy” (102). Serial murder plays several roles in the complex relationship that exists between war, terrorism, and our own potential for violence. On the one hand, as the continued health of the serial killer popular culture industry indicates, serial killers provide an ambivalent place of refuge: they are familiar and therefore in many ways less threatening than the terrorist. More important, they allow us to maintain a pleasing image of ourselves as civilized and nonviolent; it is they who are violent, not us. On the other hand, the multiaccentuality of serial murder that I have emphasized throughout this study also allows the American public to

stage the destabilizing possibility that serial murder and terrorism are related, not mutually exclusive, categories.

The Terror of Serial Killing/Terrorism as Serial Killing

The slippage between the categories of serial murder and terrorism takes various forms and to some extent depends on whether one classifies the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as a crime or as an act of war. As Caleb Carr points out, “Over the past forty years, American and other world leaders have generally identified international terrorism . . . as a type of crime, in an effort to rally global indignation against the agents of such mayhem and deny them the more respected status of actual soldiers” (*Lessons* 7).³ The immediate response of the United States government to the 9/11 attacks was to call them a crime, but the terminology shifted very quickly to the language of warfare. The 9/11 attacks were then described as an “act of war” whose closest parallel was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Just as that act precipitated American entry into World War II, so 9/11 would be presented as forcing America into the “war on terror.”

Rather than being motivated by a desire for terminological accuracy, however, the change of interpretive frame from crime to war was more a matter of political expediency. As Carr argues, seeing terrorists as criminals “generally limits to reactive and defensive measures the range of responses that the American and other governments can employ” in their fight against terrorism (*Lessons* 8). Implicitly, therefore, seeing terrorism as an act of war enables the American government to go on the offensive against terrorism, and this is exactly what it has done, as the citizens of Afghanistan and Iraq can testify. Seeing terrorists as war enemies also has profound consequences on the home front. Some of the most controversial provisions of legislation such as the Patriot Act (passed in 2001) and the rumored “Patriot Act II” have involved attacks on American civil liberties justified by the country’s being at war with terrorism. The establishment of military tribunals to try individuals suspected of committing or supporting acts of terrorism; the indefinite detention of such individuals (including American citizens) with no requirement to either file charges against them or provide them with legal representation; the enormous expansion of federal information-gathering activities (including wiretapping and the monitoring of Internet use), activities which in many cases no longer require a warrant—these are all features of the contemporary United States that would have been more or less inconceivable before 9/11.

The rigor with which official U.S. government sources have disallowed the discourse of crime as an explanatory framework for the 9/11 attacks should have been another factor influencing the replacement of the serial killer with

the terrorist. The figure of the serial killer has proved to be stubbornly persistent, however, precisely because he gives both sides of the war against terrorism a convenient way of describing the post-9/11 world. In the context of the demonization of Saddam Hussein that led up to the invasion of Iraq, for example, Curtis Schmidt (a psychologist and former Jesuit chaplain at the U.S. Army's European headquarters in Heidelberg, Germany), in a guest column in the *Denver Post*, described Hussein in the following terms: "Despite the fact that he is not presenting at a clinic, we can, by his words, actions and history, assess his mental state with considerable clarity. As a serial murderer, he has demonstrated, for any nation willing to look, the utter lack of empathy and concern for people's humanity that is so characteristic of the sociopath" (B7). Such a description of Saddam Hussein is representative of a larger tendency among the Western media to describe (Arab) terrorism in psychological terms. By making terrorism the product of a sick psyche, one disallows the possibility that there might be legitimate political reasons for anger against the United States.

Given that Schmidt is an American, writing in an American newspaper, for a predominantly American audience, we should not be surprised that he makes use of the familiar figure of the serial killer as a way to translate the deviance of Saddam Hussein into terms familiar to his audience. Much more surprising, however, is evidence that radical Islamists themselves make very similar use of the serial killer. In November 2002, the Arab television network Al Jazeera was given an audiotape that their contact claimed contained a message from Osama bin Laden. With American intelligence analysts vouching for the tape's authenticity, the American media publicized a government-translated version of the message, which included the following section addressed to the people of Britain, France, Italy, Canada, Germany, Australia, and Israel, all countries taken to be allies of the United States: "What business do your governments have to ally themselves with the gang of criminality in the White House against Muslims? Don't your governments know that the White House gang is the biggest serial killers in this age?" ("Bin Laden"). The most pertinent detail here is that this section of the tape was explicitly addressed to Westerners. Whether or not the speaker was actually bin Laden, it made sense to him to use a figure whom all the listeners would recognize as a shorthand for extreme violence to vilify the U.S. government. What more logical choice than a serial killer?

In their analysis of how the U.S. government has attempted to turn the terrorist into a monstrous figure, Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai have argued that representations of "terrorist-monsters" work by a logic of "absolute morality [that] separates good from a 'shadowy evil.' As if caught up in its own shadow dance with the anti-Western rhetoric of radical Islam, this discourse marks

off a figure, Osama bin Laden, or a government, the Taliban, as the opposite of all that is just, human, and good” (118). The serial killer gets used by both sides because they share a similarly absolutist discourse about their respective enemies. But although the serial killer accomplishes the demonization of the enemy in an economical and effective way, it is a figure, as we have seen before, that signifies in multiple ways. If in some instances the serial killer personifies absolute evil, in other instances the same figure proves to be a morass of definitional instability, making it much more difficult to think through the relationship of serial murder and terrorism with any degree of certainty.

What Are the D.C. Snipers?

When James D. Martin, a fifty-five-year-old program analyst at the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, was shot and killed outside the Shoppers Food Warehouse in Wheaton, Maryland, on October 2, 2002, no one could have known that it was the beginning of a twenty-three-day killing spree that would eventually claim ten lives and leave three people wounded. During the three-week period the killers were at large, the American public was convulsed as it tried to understand the motivation behind the seemingly random attacks. From the beginning, two explanations were especially popular: one, that this was a serial killer; two, that this was a terrorist act, possibly committed by one of the many Al Qaeda cells rumored to exist inside the United States. Although these two theories quickly emerged as the leading contenders, however, it was difficult to find any consensus about which theory was more persuasive.

Some held firmly to the conviction that the shootings were the work of a serial killer. One participant in a Web log debate on the subject, for example, insisted that “we really need to work on our terminology here . . . Next thing you know the next guy to rob a 7-11 will be a ‘terrorist.’ Jesus christ, this is just getting ridiculous. He is a SERIAL KILLER . . . SERIAL KILLER . . . SERIAL KILLER” (“Fear,” original emphasis). Others were just as insistent that the killer should be thought of as a terrorist. In a *Washington Post* article, for example, Caleb Carr, after explaining why the killings did not match the profiles of a serial killer or a spree killer, claimed that “a terrorist (or the members of a terrorist cell) could be expected to conduct himself exactly as the Washington sniper has” (“Just” A21). Still others argued that it did not really matter whether it was a serial killer or a terrorist committing the murders, both because the murders were terrorizing the community (regardless of who was committing them) and because, as William Safire argued, no matter who the murders were being committed by, they would most likely inspire terrorists: “If these weekday murders are the acts of a homicidal maniac and not part of a terrorist

conspiracy, then surely the plotters of last year's devastating strikes . . . are saying: What a perfect follow-up, cheap and simple and maddening. Why didn't we think of that?" (A9).

What these diverse reactions have in common is an intense anxiety about our inability to distinguish a serial killer from a terrorist. The D.C. Sniper case demonstrated that our use of the serial killer as a way to translate the terrorist into familiar terms is unstable; in this instance the serial killer and the terrorist threaten to collapse into each other in a way reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard's comments about the 9/11 hijackers: "They have even—and this is the height of cunning—used the banality of American everyday life as cover and camouflage. Sleeping in their suburbs, reading and studying with their families, before activating themselves suddenly like time bombs. The faultless mastery of this clandestine style of operation is almost as terroristic as the spectacular act of September 11, since it casts suspicion on any and every individual. Might not any inoffensive person be a potential terrorist?" (19–20). Baudrillard's description can be applied almost word for word to the iconic image of the serial killer as a harmless next-door neighbor, an image personified by Jeffrey Dahmer. Given the choice, many Americans might prefer the more familiar figure of the serial killer to that of the terrorist, but if we cannot distinguish between them, that choice is taken away from us, leaving us disoriented and threatened.

To some extent, the arrests of John Allen Muhammad and John Lee Malvo addressed these feelings of disorientation. As Sara L. Knox has argued, the blanket television coverage of the arrests consoled the audience by making the sniper shootings "definite, assessable, *televisable*. They could finally see for themselves the search for evidence, the houses the accused had lived in: no more conjectured bullet trajectories, and possible escape routes" (original emphasis). In other ways, however, the threatening confusion between serial killer and terrorist in the sniper case was not really resolved by the arrests. On the one hand, those who had believed all along that a serial killer was responsible could take some comfort from the fact that, technically speaking, Muhammad and Malvo were not members of any terrorist group. On the other hand, as the media reiterated again and again, they bore very little resemblance to any other serial killers. As journalists N. R. Kleinfeld and Erica Goode argue in an article revealingly titled "Serial Killing's Squarest Pegs: Not Solo, White, Psychosexual or Picky": "As criminologists and academicians try to find the proper context for the sniper suspects—which of the notorious killers of yesteryear to align them with—they have been struck by how unconventional the pair appears to be. In so many ways, based on the still sketchy information known about them, they seem to defy the broad connections that have been

drawn among their criminal predecessors.” If we read between the lines, the problem seems to be that Muhammad and Malvo disturb the logic that organizes the pantheon of celebrity serial killers by refusing close kinship with any of the “notorious killers of yesteryear.” To use a literary analogy, the D.C. Sniper case seems to be a canonical text that explodes the idea of the canon.

If Muhammad and Malvo troubled both self-proclaimed and official experts on serial murder by reminding them of how elusive such an apparently familiar category remained, those who feared that the sniper killings were committed by terrorists could take only limited comfort from the arrests. Even though Muhammad and Malvo were not members of any terrorist group, Muhammad’s approval of the 9/11 attacks, along with his recent conversion to Islam, was widely reported, and such details made it very difficult to separate the D.C. snipers definitively from the category of “terrorist,” as journalist Mark Steyn’s heavily ironic commentary indicates: “It turned out police were looking for a Muslim convert. A Muslim convert who last year had discarded the name ‘Williams’ and adopted a new identity as ‘Muhammad.’ A Muslim convert called Muhammad who in the wake of Sept. 11 had expressed anti-American sentiments. Could even the most expert psychological profiler make sense of such confusing, contradictory clues? Apparently not” (37). In response to the definitional quagmire opened up by the D.C. Sniper case, some reacted by trying to (re)locate the perpetrators firmly in a recognized category. One *USA Today* reader, for example, suggested that Muhammad and Malvo should be tried under the “domestic terrorist” standard that was used in the prosecution of Timothy McVeigh.⁴

Ironically, prosecutors seemed to take this reader’s advice. After Attorney General John Ashcroft took the sniper case away from Maryland prosecutors and instead moved Muhammad and Malvo to Virginia to be tried (mostly because Virginia has a much “better” record on capital punishment, in that it hands out and carries through many more death penalties than Maryland), Virginia prosecutors decided to prosecute Muhammad under the state’s anti-terrorism law, which had been passed in the wake of 9/11, and which stipulated the death penalty for anyone found guilty of ordering killings as part of an effort to intimidate communities or influence governments. According to the prosecutors, this decision was appropriate in view of Muhammad’s attempt to extort \$10 million from local governments in return for ending the shootings, but it is clear that the decision to prosecute Muhammad as a terrorist was also strategic. Because the prosecution had no direct evidence that Muhammad actually pulled the trigger in any of the shootings, prosecution under the antiterrorism statute provided the prosecutors with the best chance of having Muhammad sentenced to death. The strategy worked, despite defense

objections that it misused a statute intended to apply to hierarchical organizations rather than individuals, but it could not disguise the fact that Muhammad was described as a serial killer in court proceedings and in media coverage of the case far more often than he was described as a terrorist. Owing to the persistence of such definitional instability, after Muhammad's conviction the vast majority of people were content to heave a huge sigh of relief and move on to other cases whose demonology was much more familiar and much simpler.⁵

Back to the Future

Given the complexities of the D.C. Sniper case, it is worth reiterating that part of the appeal of the serial killer popular culture industry I discussed at the start of this epilogue is its familiarity. Whether a film is based on Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, or Aileen Wuornos, the pantheon of familiar names allows the viewer to return to pre-9/11 days, when evil had a comfortingly American face and one did not have to concern oneself with the bothersome question of why anyone would hate America enough to want to destroy the World Trade Center. In other words, we have yet more evidence of serial murder's multiaccentuality and what an important role that multiaccentuality has played in giving serial murder its iconic status. Serial murder is able to both translate the frightening realities of post-9/11 America into comprehensible terms and serve as a perversely positive nostalgic oasis. This combination of qualities comes into focus more clearly if we examine a final example of the place of serial murder in post-9/11 American culture.

On September 24, 2001, while the United States was still convulsed by the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, an unknown perpetrator murdered Gina Wilson Green in her home in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The same individual went on to kill at least four other women in and around the Baton Rouge area: Charlotte Murray Pace, Trineisha Dene Colomb, Pam Kinamore, and Carrie Lynn Yoder. Initially, the case was overlooked by the national media because of the preoccupation with the fallout from 9/11. As time passed, however, the number of victims, the length of time the killer was at large (the last murder took place in March 2003 and Derrick Todd Lee was not arrested and charged with the crimes until May 2003), and the paucity of information about the suspect all ensured that a significant amount of media attention was eventually paid to the case. Thus, the killings in Baton Rouge give us a way of examining how a "classic" serial murder case gets represented by the media in a post-9/11 world.

To some extent, the marks of 9/11 and its aftermath are visible everywhere in reporting about the case.⁶ Columnist C. T. Rossi, for example, begins his

article on the case with the following words: “While the juggernaut of the federal government is attempting to redirect its full weight toward using law enforcement as a counter-terrorism force, one local community is already wrapped in the grasp of a terrorist. No dirty bombs or hijacked planes. Neither is this terror accompanied by the call for jihad or suicide bombers. The terrorist acts that have covered Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in a cloak of communal fear come from the hands of a serial killer.” Such an angle on a serial murder case illustrates the extent to which terrorism has become part of the available lexicon in writing about serial murder, a development that ironically brings mainstream discourse about serial murder much closer to radical feminist writing about “terroristic” sexual violence that was previously dismissed as extremist.⁷

The context of 9/11 also intrudes into the Baton Rouge serial murder case in more practical ways. Not only has the FBI gained much more power in the post-9/11 era, it has also undergone a major reorientation in its responsibilities. According to some commentators, much of the impetus for this change came from Attorney General John Ashcroft, who immediately after 9/11 ordered the Bureau to shift from evidence gathering on the terror suspects to protection against and prevention of future terrorist attacks (Brill 15, 37). This reorientation has gone so far that some people are beginning to question how much interest the FBI has in investigating criminal cases (Locy 10A). Responding to such concerns at a March 18, 2003, press conference on the Baton Rouge case, Special Agent-in-Charge Kenneth Kaiser emphasized the Bureau’s commitment to investigating the case properly: “I want to assure the public that even with the looming war and the war on terrorism, that the FBI has resources committed on a full-time basis to the task force . . . I have been in contact with and have briefed the director of the FBI several times and he’s asked me if the FBI in Louisiana is fully engaged in the task force, and we are” (“Yoder”). When one considers what a fundamentally important role the investigation of serial murder has played in the FBI for the past twenty-five years, the fact that it was thought necessary to make such a statement in such a high-profile case is truly staggering.

Apart from such examples where the shadow of 9/11 can be detected, however, the striking feature of the vast majority of reporting about the Baton Rouge case is just how rare such examples were. For the most part, the Baton Rouge case seems to have followed a very typical, even time-honored pattern: a mysterious killer, a frightened community, a puzzled police force, and an almost overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*. As Rossi puts it, “Prior to the advent of thousands dying in fiery skyscraper bombings, the serial killer was the most provocative news event that reporters could have come across their

desks . . . Now the crime story that was once the ringmaster of all media circuses has returned to town.” It is hard not to detect in Rossi’s words a note of relief that things had returned to normal. Next to the horrific, unparalleled spectacle of the destruction of the World Trade Center, the events unfolding in Baton Rouge had a reassuringly familiar, even ritualistic quality.⁸

I have demonstrated in this epilogue that serial murder plays a number of different, sometimes complementary, and sometimes conflicting roles in post-9/11 America. I am not at all sure whether any one role is dominant, but I do believe that the role that comes closest to being dominant is the one evoked by Rossi: serial murder as Americana. In his essay “Welcome to the Desert of the Real!” cultural critic Slavoj Žižek explains the impact of the 9/11 attacks in the following words: “The safe sphere in which Americans live is experienced as under threat from the Outside of terrorist attackers who are ruthlessly self-sacrificing *and* cowards, cunningly intelligent *and* primitive barbarians. Whenever we encounter such a purely evil Outside, we should gather the courage to endorse the Hegelian lesson: in this pure Outside, we should recognize the distilled version of our own essence” (387, original emphasis). One’s immediate reaction to Žižek’s comments is to say that post-9/11 America has not endorsed Hegel in the way he describes and has instead sought ways to strengthen the gap between inside and outside. Žižek goes on to explain the choice facing America after the attacks: “Either America will persist in, strengthen even, the attitude, ‘Why should this happen to us? Things like this don’t happen *here!*’—leading to more aggression toward the threatening Outside, in short: a paranoid acting out—or America will finally risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival into the Real world, making its long-overdue move from ‘Things like this should not happen *here!*’ to ‘Things like this should not happen *anywhere!*’” (389, original emphasis). The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq can, of course, be interpreted as instances of “aggression toward the threatening Outside,” but what I want to emphasize is the role of serial murder in the choice Žižek describes.

At first glance, it might seem as if American culture’s renewed and intensified engagement with serial murder since 9/11 contributes solely to the “paranoid acting out” of which Žižek speaks. Thinking of Saddam Hussein as a serial killer, for example, only demonizes him further and thus contributes to the atmosphere of tub-thumping patriotism that dominates public discourse in the contemporary United States. American culture’s continued engagement with the figure of the serial killer, however, is also an example of a much more positive impulse (even if that impulse has not had positive consequences), namely, what Žižek describes as recognizing “the distilled version of our own

essence.” In other words, in the wake of 9/11, America has indeed looked inward at its own distilled essence, and what it sees there is the serial killer. The significance of this moment should not be underestimated. As I have documented throughout this study, although American culture’s response to the serial killer has always been composed of both attraction and repulsion, by and large the attraction has been disavowed, and repulsion has been allowed to construct the image of the serial killer as monstrous outsider.

Thanks to 9/11, American culture is now more inclined to think of the serial killer as a quintessentially American figure; indeed, as a piece of “Americana,” with all that term implies about folksiness and even a perverse kind of nostalgic fondness. Ironically, however, this new relationship with the serial killer, a relationship that I would describe as more honest, has emphatically not led to a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of America as a space absolutely defined by, rather than empty of, violence. Instead, it seems to me that the serial killer’s presumed Americanness actually reinforces the trio of matched binaries serial killer/terrorist, inside/outside, America/the rest of the world and in doing so further reifies the distance between Inside and Outside. In this sense, the presence of the serial killer enables a misrecognition of “our own essence” that Žižek speaks of, a misrecognition that in turn enables the continued understanding of violence as a characteristic of the Outside, and the renewal of a highly paradoxical notion of American innocence. America has finally recognized that “Serial Killers Are Us,” but only in a way that reinforces the gap between Us and Them.

