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Rumors

In an essay about 9/11, American novelist Don DeLillo explained in 2001 that opposing the dominant narrative that had been created in the past months, the coercive, “official” language that had been teaching us how to think, feel, and even speak, there was also an emergent “counter-narrative, a shadow history of false memories and imagined loss.” Not stopping there, DeLillo went on to note that the most important vehicle for counternarrative is the internet, “shaped in part by rumor, fantasy and mystical reverberation.” Nobody needs me to uncover the elements of the “official version” that formed the first wave of the American cultural responses to 9/11. For those of us living in the United States, even outside of New York City, these constituents of the “official version” were as immediate as the music and graphics accompanying major network and cable news reports, each of which traveled as a very particular brand – hooked with theme music, font choices, and a snappy motto (“America Under Attack” belonged to CNN). Before long these corporate-sponsored 9/11 tags were to be joined by presidential and mayoral speeches (and other moments of pontification), mainstream media punditry, print media imagery, and editorializing.

Joining, and at times resisting, these powerful and efficient attempts to erect a virtual tower of rhetoric to replace the actual ones that had been knocked down, was a disorganized and yet forceful array of claims that held that somehow the “official version” was either incomplete, a partial cover-up, or a purposeful lie. There are too many rumors that circulated in the months immediately following 9/11 to do anything like a complete inventory; nor would such a listing be particularly useful for our purposes here. Pioneering work on this front has been done by Snopes.com and

other online urban legend websites and they offer a great glimpse into U.S.-based rumors. What I want to offer here is a brisk run-through of three major forms of rumor that flourished in the post-9/11 era. First came what folklorists call “wedge-driving” rumors – bits of fantasy that are meant to separate out a particular group for punishment, be it physical abuse, social ostracism, or cultural boycott. The second type of rumor I want to investigate is the corporate-sponsored rumor. The most famous of these is the Clear Channel rumor that developed in the weeks after the 9/11 attacks, and whose basic form held that some management-level person at Clear Channel had created a list of songs that were not to be played (i.e. they were to be censored) out of sensitivity to listeners in the painful days after the attacks. The Clear Channel story is not usually treated as a rumor, but I want to (re)introduce it here as another species of rumor – a corporate strategy to control consciousness (and product) in the wake of the attacks.

Finally, I will turn to the whole set of rumors that would, over time, congeal into what we now refer to as the “9/11 truth” movement. Many of these rumors are rooted in the simple doubt (or profound disbelief) that *this* could have happened *here*. A number of novels written in the wake of 9/11, most notably Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004), took this cultural impulse and mapped it onto an earlier historical era, in this case the time of World War II. Taking off from the widely held “common sense” that the American aviation hero Charles Lindbergh was a Nazi sympathizer, Roth develops an entire fiction around the notion that the future of the United States would have been materially changed had Lindbergh been elected president in the 1940 election.

It is important to study the content of 9/11 rumors: truth-hunting in rumors has its place, to be sure, and the good folks at Snopes.com have become a major cultural force by debunking the content of the most egregious rumors that have circulated in recent years. Before the internet age, scholars in many fields admired the popularizing work of Jan Harold Brunvand published in books such as *The Choking Doberman* and *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*; Brunvand again and again demonstrated that what I’m calling “rumors” and what he convincingly introduced as “urban legends” into the cultural lexicon have real force, reveal major truths about power relations at a given moment, and embed important information about contemporary anxieties, desires, and relationships.

The content of this or that rumor is rarely the whole story. In fact, what we might think of as the “job” of a rumor is not its content, but

rather its trajectory. What matters most is who the rumor travels from and to, and how in making its journeys it accomplishes some important cultural work that may not be done by any other means. In her 2002 book *Fast Girls*, for instance, journalist Emily White studies the webs of communication supporting the myth of the “high school slut.” White is able to demonstrate that early physical development does seem a dire indicator of future persecution by the “slut” rumor. But more significant in the findings of *Fast Girls* is how dedicated so many high school boys, and some girls, are to the “myth” of the slut. Telling the slut rumor in all its variants (“the whole football team,” etc.) forms a primary role in clique development, White finds, and serves a very important disciplining function of any high school girl who might dare to step out of the preset molds that are meant to determine her social positioning. The obsessive telling, more than its particular content, is what is most functional here. Likewise with the rumors that Patricia Turner tracks in her book *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (1993), which explore the bonding function of rumors that have traveled around various African American communities.

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The “wedge-driving” rumors that developed in the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks were virtually all fairly predictable. Scholar Janet Langlois (2005) has carefully tracked one of these rumors, which has been named “Celebrating Arabs.” Langlois studied Arabs at a Middle Eastern restaurant in the Detroit, Michigan area, where they represent a large minority. These Arabs allegedly cheered the 9/11 attacks. In fine Brunvandian fashion, Langlois finds evidence of this rumor first at one remove; in other words, like Brunvand, with his wonderful FOAF acronym that he often uses (for “Friend of a Friend”), Langlois can only get as close to the source of this rumor as a “My son-in-law” email. This rumor has cousins on the West Coast, where a driver for Budweiser alleges to have seen “Arabs” in a store near Bakersfield cheering the Twin Tower deaths. To much acclaim, this spectral driver pledges at that moment that this store – these people – will no longer be drinking his good Budweiser beer. On the East Coast, the location is a Dunkin’ Donuts in Cedar Grove, New Jersey, where its employees were similarly seen to be applauding the attacks. Working the same vein was the rumor/not a rumor about CNN supposedly showing “old” footage of Palestinian children dancing in response to the attacks. In classic “lore cycle” fashion (to borrow a phrase from W. T. Lhamon [2000]) this rumor was ultimately debunked – it seems the footage was fresh – but not before an auxiliary rumor developed

suggesting that the children only danced after Israeli soldiers came by and gave them candy in exchange for dancing.

Even *Time* magazine, within a few weeks of the attacks, recognized that these “dancing Palestinians” and “celebrating Arabs” stories seemed at heart to be important “wedge-driving” rumors: *Time*’s writer, summarizing generations of complex work done by folklorists, anthropologists, and other scholars, saw these wedge-driving rumors as one of three major categories in play – along with wish-fulfillment rumors and “bogey” (or fear-mongering) rumors (Tyrangiel, 2001). What is perhaps most interesting about wedge-driving rumors, at least in the context of 9/11, is that more than simply creating a social mechanism for identifying a “them” who exists outside the circle of proper American citizenship, they simultaneously work as a bonding device for groups that may not otherwise have very powerful social glue keeping them together.

To put a finer point on this: in the “celebrating Arabs” of Detroit outbreak, it seems clear from the research of Janet Langlois that Jewish Americans were major transmitters of the emails that were the prime vehicle of transmission. In classic FOAF fashion, Langlois finds the first articulation of this rumor in an email dated September 12, 2001, which establishes its claims to validity through a report from “my son-in-law the Doctor” who heard about the “celebrating Arabs” of The Sheik restaurant from a nurse who worked with him at Henry Ford hospital and went to The Sheik on the 11th to pick up lunch. After this classic urban legend set-up, with its necessary two-handshakes-away format, the writer of the email calls on her recipient to boycott The Sheik. The Detroit area is home to a relatively large Jewish American population, and a bigger-still Arab American population. However much Osama bin Laden and his followers may or may not care about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the wedge-driving rumors on the American scene make it clear that Americans knew right away that somehow the 9/11 attacks were related to conflict in the Middle East.

What I am most concerned with for now, however, is how fabricating, transmitting, and acting on such wedge-driving rumors allowed the Jews of the greater Detroit area to be Jews together. It is interesting to note that, in some diffuse cultural way, going to The Sheik restaurant before 9/11 was – in Detroit – part of a vague but definitive cultural repertoire that we might call “acting Jewish.” Just as eating Chinese food has become widely recognized as an identifiably Jewish American activity – from its early twentieth-century canonization as “safe *treyf*” (i.e. relatively

acceptable non-Kosher food) to its decades-long function as a punchline in stand-up comedy routines and sitcoms – so too, it appears that eating at The Sheik was a Jewish thing to do before 9/11. According to the owner, Dean Hachem (who launched a lawsuit for slander after the rumor traveled and hurt his business), his clientele was somewhere around 80 percent Jewish before 9/11.

In her wonderful research on the “celebrating Arabs” rumor Janet Langlois has tracked the origins of the rumor to a particular sisterhood organization of a Detroit-area synagogue. From here it is clear that the “celebrating Arabs” rumor was very much a Jewish affair; while the rumor was powerful enough to gain the attention of plenty of people outside of the Jewish community, gaining coverage in the *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, it was initially an occasion for an intense in-group discussion (in emails, in the Jewish press, and so on) about the proper way to relate to this particular Arab American and his business. As with so many rumors that developed in the hours after the hijackings, the “celebrating Arabs” rumor functioned, perhaps above any other concern, as an opportunity to say in some fairly direct way: “Here is our new circle of ‘we.’”

Of course those new circles of “we” were just as commonly drawn to put Jews, and even more frequently Israelis, on the outside. Rumors about Jews range from the still murky story of “celebrating Israelis” (actually “dancing Israelis”) spotted in New Jersey just after the attack, to the more widely circulated rumor that 4,000 Jews or Israelis stayed home from work at the Twin Towers on 9/11. Besides the obvious questions about the methodology underpinning this particular mythology (is there a phone tree the Jews have for such occasions?) what is most consequential in the circulation of this rumor is, first, the confusion of Jews and Israelis, and, next, the idea – which would seed many of the larger paranoid visions of the 9/11 attacks that would develop in the coming months and years – that a shadowy alliance of Jews around the world control just about everything. New Jersey writer Amiri Baraka takes great pains in his long poem “Somebody Blew Up America” (2001) to articulate this rumor claim in a way that “Jewish” and “Israeli” cannot be confused:

Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed
Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers
 To stay home that day
Why did Sharon stay away

Versus:

Who put the Jews in ovens
and who helped them do it
Who said "America First"
and ok'd the yellow stars

Repeating the story that the Israeli Prime Minister cancelled a planned visit to New York, Baraka, who struggled to find a third-world revolutionary Marxist stance in the late 1960s that would not be hamstrung by accusations of anti-Semitism, tries here to underscore the important difference between "Israeli" and "Jew." This is a poem, obviously, and not a rumor. But one thing I want to emphasize here is that the rumor cycles of 9/11 were (and are) multimedia: joining the usual person-to-person transmissions that always form the heart of such cultural activity were numerous less predictable contributions – poems, songs, works of visual art, and so on.

Unlike the contributors to the "celebrating Arabs" thread, Baraka was not able to control very effectively the circulating message, and was particularly unable to secure the borders of the circle of "we" that he is drawing in this part of his poem. His inclusion of the "absent Israelis" legend is certainly intended to draw attention to a legible history of United States government interference in Middle East affairs and the ways that an acknowledgment of that involvement might help Americans better understand the geopolitics framing the attacks; Baraka's repeated "Who/Who/Who" is plainly meant to challenge the "Why do they hate us?/They hate our freedoms" refrain which became a kind of collective public poetry in its own right in the weeks following 9/11. But rumor culture is decentered, irrational, audience-driven, and (usually) ahistorical. In the case of "Somebody Blew Up America," Baraka's attempt to incorporate, strategically, the "absent Israelis" rumor as part of a larger anti-imperialist and anti-racist critique was no match for the joined forces of politicians, mainstream media, and advocacy groups. From the New Jersey General Assembly (which abolished the position of state poet laureate that Baraka held) to the Anti-Defamation League, the response was swift and decisive. The ADL was particularly intent on "calling the question" and in numerous press releases, open letters, and the like, the organization rendered Baraka's use of "Israeli" as synonymous with "Jewish." With its single-minded focus, the ADL powerfully took the

reins of the “absent Israelis” rumor from Baraka and rode it as if it were their customary horse of anti-Semitism. (See for instance http://www.adl.org/anti_semitism/baraka_main.asp)

In a fascinating process of wedge/counter-wedge, the ADL (with help from mainstream media outlets and key political figures) guaranteed that the “absent Israelis” rumor would come to fullest life – and become the easiest target – instead as an “absent Jews” rumor. Post-9/11 rumors about Israelis and about Jews are multivalent, sometimes in direct competition with each other, and it is often difficult for reasonable people to give them serious attention. (Type “NYC” into a Microsoft Word document. Now change the font to Wingdings. ✠ See! It’s death by Jews and a thumbs-up! Or is it death *to* Jews and thumbs-up?) What I want to call attention to here is how the rumor culture of the post-9/11 United States acted as a site of dynamic conversation about the relationship of the attacks to the place of Jewish and Arab Americans in the United States, about the relationship of the United States government to Middle East politics, and about the perceived difference between Jews and Israelis. It should be clear from the morphing of “absent Israelis” into “absent Jews” that the clay of post-9/11 rumor gets shaped by many hands. While it is essential that we reveal all the anti-Semitism at play in post-9/11 rumor mongering (as filmmaker Marc Levin, for instance, has done in his useful film *Protocols of Zion*, which traces the historical roots of one of the most pernicious contemporary anti-Semitic 9/11 rumors), it is also important to get a handle, in each 9/11 rumor situation, on who all the significant stakeholders are.

The Anti-Defamation League did not *start* the “absent Israelis” or “absent Jews” rumors, but they did, ultimately, supervise its proliferation. The ADL’s intervention in the life-cycle of this wedge-driving rumor was powerful enough to enlist support in the form of an official denunciation of the rumor from the U.S. Department of State in a document that says Jews died in the Twin Towers in numbers that were almost exactly proportional to their numbers in the New York City area at the time (“The 4,000 Jews Rumor,” 2005). This press release also goes on to give “Portraits of Grief” style information about 76 of these Jews who worked for Cantor Fitzgerald or Marsh & McLennan, coached soccer or baseball, and had memorial services held in their honor at synagogues and Jewish centers around the metropolitan area. I elaborate all of this not in an attempt to enter the logic of the rumor’s content, but to sketch out how, on the post-9/11 landscape of rumors, sometimes the real headline

can be found not in the originating tale, but rather in the organized responses to them.

The “celebrating Arabs” tale has another major wedge-driving function that has nothing to do with Jews or Israelis. The Sheik cycle was joined by other “celebrating Arabs” rumors that serve a major disciplining purpose in the commercial arena, as with the widely circulated story featuring a Budweiser delivery man who observed two Arab employees of a convenience store in a town north of Bakersfield, California, “whooping and hollering” as they watched the attacks unfold on television. As the most common variant of the rumor puts it, this Budweiser driver reported what he saw to his boss, who pledged that there would be no more Budweiser delivered to this store. As I have suggested about many 9/11 rumors, this one does not even exactly “work” as a logical expression of racism. The boycott being promoted here is a shaky proposition (“We’ll show them! We won’t let them sell our beer anymore!”), but the larger point cannot be missed. A large subset of the rumor culture of 9/11 promoted economic violence against Arab Americans (or people who “look Middle Eastern” – which often meant that South Asians got caught in the web) as an adjunct to the military violence that was being promoted in Afghanistan and later Iraq.

It does not seem far-fetched to tie these consumer-oriented rumors of 9/11 to official instructions given by George W. Bush and his deputies, now widely lampooned and criticized, that told Americans to go shopping as the best response to the terrorists. To be fair, I am not certain that Bush ever actually said the words “go shop” to the American people, but the actual content of his post-9/11 speeches is no match for how Americans have processed those orations in collective memory. Bush *did* ask for “continued participation and confidence in the American economy” and urged Americans to “enjoy America’s great destination spots” with the added suggestion that it might be a good time to “Get down to Disney World in Florida” (“At O’Hare,” 2001). Bush did opine that one objective of “the terrorists” was to frighten our “nation to the point where we don’t ... conduct business, where people don’t shop. That’s their intention” (“Bush Gives Update,” 2001). During his 2007 campaign for the presidency, Republican John McCain, for one, seized on such pronouncements in an attempt to create distance from Bush: “I believe that the big mistake that our leadership of our nation made after 9-11 is we told people to go shopping and we told them to take a trip” when a call to military service should have been issued instead (“McCain,” 2007).

But long before McCain or the countless stand-up comics got around to making hay of President Bush's post-9/11 pronouncements, a few rumors had already been put into play as guerrilla commentary on the "go shopping" directives. The "Malloween" rumor of October 2001 (a cousin to the "Grateful Terrorist" tales that actually predate 9/11), for instance, instructed its recipients to stay away from American malls on Halloween because terror attacks would be focused there on that day. This rumor *always* involved a FOAF who has a former boyfriend from Afghanistan who tells her to stay away from the mall on Halloween, and it came from everywhere – Baltimore, "my friend Jill," the offices of Sprint. It is clearly a multifunctional rumor; it at once humanized Afghani (all those Afghani Muslim men taking such care of their ex-girlfriends!) in absurd fashion and reminded Americans that, formal proclamations notwithstanding, it was definitely not safe to go shopping.

The rumor strategically places the danger not only in the space that functions as the new American town square but also in a crucial time: the day of revelry that is Halloween, when we and our children "pretend" to be scary and scared, and when strangers with candy become trusted friends. In the wake of the 9/11 assault and the anthrax attacks that followed that fall, the Malloween rumor erupted as a symptom of American unease about the simple and everyday ritual of shopping. On September 11 itself Americans responded with a surge in shopping: according to Jennifer Scanlon (2005), Wal-Mart sold 116,000 flags on that day, up 110,000 on the same day in the previous year. But once this flurry of activity subsided, numbers fell way off. Mall traffic, for instance, fell by 6.8 percent, in Scanlon's estimation, during the months of September and October (175, 177). The Malloween rumor, then, acted as a kind of surrealistic annotation of this depressed consumer behavior. It reminded us that more than anything else, the confused logic of so many post-9/11 rumors can be explained by remembering that their central cultural work was to articulate confusion itself. So many of the 9/11 rumors make no sense because their social function was to articulate mystification. In this case, Malloween was at once pro- and anti-Muslim, with its careful demarcation of good ex-boyfriend and bad terrorists who were going to attack the mall, and at once consumerist and anti-consumerist: we *want* to go shopping, we just *can't*.

The "Candyman" rumor (as Snopes.com has named it) served similar purposes with, perhaps, a sharper anti-Arab and anti-Muslim point on it. In this October 2001 rumor cycle, parents in New Jersey were warned

not to let their children go trick-or-treating that Halloween because a “gentleman of middle eastern descent” (sic) was reported to have bought large quantities of candy at a North Jersey store. Variants of the rumor inflate the amount of cash this man is alleged to have spent, but in every case the rumor seemed to suggest that Middle Eastern terrorists would be dosing Halloween candy with anthrax. Of course, as Snopes.com and other debunking websites have explained, this rumor built on the decades-old fear that Halloween candy, or the dreaded unwrapped apples of my youth, might have poison or razor blades in them. (Perhaps the Tylenol-tampering murders of 1982 were also lurking in the collective unconscious.) In the time of 9/11, however, the much more focused disciplining intent of this rumor cannot be missed. To begin, the rumor utilized a conspicuous vagueness with regard to what marks the dangerous candy-buyer as “other”: the North Jersey context, with its concentration of South Asian immigrants, makes it clear that the one purpose of the Candyman rumor was to create a circle of we that excluded a huge number of people who might or might not be Arab and might or might not be Muslim, but certainly *were* non-Latino brown people.

Moreover, the Candyman rumor also reminded “us” to distrust (or boycott) immigrant and ethnic entrepreneurs, who rely heavily on being able to buy in bulk from “wholesale clubs” to distribute goods to smaller retailers or to use in their own neighborhood-oriented stores. Joining with the delicious experience of imagining children in peril, this rumor also allowed its participants to pretend that “Middle Eastern looking” business people were a puzzling and brand-new disruption of the proper workings of the American economy. What were they doing with all that cash? And all that *candy*? What explanation could there be, other than anthrax-loaded goodies for Halloween? The distribution of this rumor, then, acted as a meaningful display of ignorance about how contemporary retail culture *works*. The hands-on, community- and cash-based nature of the real transaction that formed the basis of this rumor was presented as a puzzle and a call for heightened surveillance by the American people who facilitated it. If President Bush could not control the rumor culture fully enough to get it to bolster his calls to go shopping, perhaps “the folks” of rumor nation were at least willing to use their power to support his post-9/11 anti-immigrant and pro-surveillance initiatives.

For all of the ways that the wedge-driving rumors had important social and collective jobs to do, perhaps their ultimate meaning can be found in how they satisfied individual narcissism. These rumors, whatever else

their content communicated about the dangerous possibilities of living in the United States in the fall of 2001, always encouraged the people reading, forwarding, or discussing them to stitch themselves into the developing story of 9/11. Scholar Marshall Berman (2002: 1–2) explains that he has written of “wrecks and ruins and early deaths” and that his first thought after learning of the attacks on television, was “Oh my God, it’s like my book!” He catches himself, and thinks, “What’s wrong with me? Parts of buildings and parts of bodies are flying through the air ... and I put my ideas and me in the foreground?” Soon, however, Berman recovers from his self-blame by noticing that his own narcissism is a typical response to the attacks; as he puts it, the people he observes on television and on the streets of New York are also “making enormous mythical constructions that would make the whole horrific event revolve around them.”

The wedge-driving rumors relied on an elaborate construction of a first-person narrative that was anchored by a habitual skeptic who has just this moment been convinced. This identity position offered “average” citizens (that is, the decisive majority of us who were not “heroes” on 9/11 or after) a place to get into the story, a relatively undemanding way to be a part of the national relief effort. In the next chapter I will discuss the celebrity telethon that aired on September 21. Among its many “performances,” this show offered a number of shots of its celebrity phone bank, letting the audience see Whoopi Goldberg, Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, and others answering calls, showing us that they had found a way to “do something,” as Tom Hanks promised they would, in his opening remarks (which echoed a passenger from Flight 93). Repeating a rumor isn’t much, of course, but it did serve as a gateway to the emerging American confederation of victims.

Much of what I’m calling “9/11 culture” is, in fact, constituted by the labors of historians, fiction writers, journalists, musical artists, and so on trying to make the tragedy available to the widest possible public as their own story. At times, as with the massive 9/11 oral history projects that have been launched by a variety of institutions, these efforts seem organic, necessary in fact for the development of a trustworthy national record of the event and its aftermath. But the wedge-driving rumors, along with numerous other components of 9/11 culture, used the illusion of care and community-building to satisfy much more self-absorbed goals. The “Forbidden Thoughts” published by *Salon.com* on the first anniversary of 9/11, with their facile “aren’t we all daring” tone, fits this paradigm, as does Nina Davenport’s 2004 documentary *Parallel Lines*. In *Parallel*

Lines the filmmaker drives across the country from Los Angeles to New York, asking “average” citizens how they were affected by 9/11 and reveals (inadvertently, I think), that most of her subjects are frying much different fish. It is only with a push that Davenport can get most of the Americans she meets to somehow talk themselves into a relationship with the national tragedy and justify her project, which is ultimately about her own painful reentry to New York City after being stranded on the West Coast. For many Americans, living in a time when 9/11 was turning into the answer to every question – an FBI agent in Ken Kalfus’s 2006 novel *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* says simply “It’s all 9/11 all the time” (197) – it sometimes seemed compulsory to find a personal access point to the catastrophe. The FOAF constitution of rumors offered a perfect two-handshakes-away distance from 9/11 to feel at once connected to this huge story and still relatively safe.

While the wedge-driving rumors of 9/11 were sustained by mainstream media outlets, they mostly circulated in the relative freedom of peer-to-peer transmission. But one of the most popular rumors deployed in the immediate days following 9/11 was invented, and thoroughly controlled, by Clear Channel Communications, a powerful media conglomerate that exerts major social power through its ownership of radio stations, its concert promotions, and its control of advertising venues. The basic outline of this story is well known. Media industry magazines reported on September 14 that Clear Channel Communications had released a list of “banned songs” that should not be played on their radio stations (over a thousand of them) in the United States, out of sensitivity to their distraught listeners (Nuzum, 2004). The banned list is a bizarre and at times hilarious compendium of songs by bands from AC/DC to The Zombies (more on the songs themselves momentarily). What I am most interested in establishing here is that Clear Channel understood almost immediately after the attacks that they could exploit the machinery of the rumor to reinforce their position as a major agent of corporate control in the United States and beyond. This corporate control would be instrumentalized in a number of ways in the years following 9/11 and ultimately could be best understood in the larger context of Clear Channel’s ties to George W. Bush and a militaristic political agenda.

A number of the major internet rumor-debunking websites (e.g. Snopes.com, urbanlegends.com) have simple accounts of the Clear Channel story that identify as “false” the claim that Clear Channel circulated a list of banned songs in the wake of 9/11. These accounts follow closely the

party line developed by Clear Channel itself that the banned songs list was a “hoax.” But Eric Nuzum, in his meticulous research, demonstrates clearly that it was Clear Channel’s disavowal that was the real hoax. In what Nuzum calls a “savvy statement” released by Clear Channel on September 18, the media giant, which by some accounts controls 60 percent of rock music programming in the country, insisted that “Clear Channel Radio ha[d] not banned any songs from any of its radio stations.” Taking refuge in semantics (as Nuzum points out, Clear Channel “didn’t order anyone to ban any songs”) the company also did not “deny that a list of ‘lyrically questionable’ songs was created, edited by management, redistributed by management, and then acted upon by its employees.” Corporate censorship gets much of its power by establishing organizational structures and administrative strategies that together act as a firewall between the highest management and local practice. Such bureaucratic distance makes it possible for the corporation to protest, on the one hand, that Clear Channel “believes that radio is a local medium” while also creating an incredibly powerful, vertically integrated monopoly on musical radio broadcast in the United States. Since the Telecommunications Act of 1996 removed hurdles facing media conglomerates looking to increase their local holdings, Clear Channel has become more and more able to “program” American musical life.

One indication of Clear Channel’s power in the United States market is how successful it was in selling this act of corporate censorship as a grassroots and decentered effort. The best measure of this is how willing the mainstream media was to report on the Clear Channel effort as if it were operating on the same level of peer-to-peer rumor-passing as Malloween, the “celebrating Arabs,” or any of the other wedge-driving tales. In promoting this vision of the story, Clear Channel, amazingly, co-opted the very spirit of peer-to-peer interaction (p2p) – music file-sharing, most notably – that corporate conglomerates had been, over the past few years, bemoaning as the death knell for the music industry. The *Guardian* of London was typical in its report:

You may have got the email and have, incredulously, scanned the list of what US radio has deemed inappropriate in the wake of last week’s terrorist attacks. But yesterday Clear Channel Communications, the US’s biggest radio station chain, has denied that they released a list of banned songs. Spokesperson Pam Taylor told Hollywood.com: “It is a rumor. We never banned any songs from airing on our radio stations.” (“Banned Songlist,” 2001)

The “banned song” list got its widest circulation, then, as a disavowed rumor. But this purposeful closing of the barn door after the horse had bolted must be seen as part of the corporate strategy: Clear Channel was clearly one of the first corporate/cultural agents to get out of the gate after 9/11 with a strategy for brand positioning. What I am explaining as Clear Channel’s management of the rumor network is, of course, what half a decade later we might more accurately label “viral marketing.” The *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* “hoax” of January 2007 is perhaps the most infamous instance of viral marketing – a technique that uses existing social networks, rather than traditional advertising venues, to market brands, events, products, and so on. In the *Aqua Teen* case, Boston-area artists were employed by Turner Broadcasting System to place electronic light boards strategically around the city to promote the forthcoming *Aqua Teen* movie. Although hired by a major media company, Peter Berdovsky and Sean Stevens did not market the movie using traditional, centrally placed advertisements, but relied on word-of-mouth at the street level to promote their images.

Capitalizing on not only email, but also on the growing interactivity of Web 2.0, Clear Channel was instructing the American public that the first wave of cultural activity to get ready for after the attacks was on the level of cultural belt-tightening: in this frightening new post-9/11 world, Americans would have to sacrifice some treasures (even those we might not miss, like John Parr’s when-was-it-last-played-in-the-United-States-anyway “St. Elmo’s Fire”) as part of the larger effort of fighting terrorism. The Clear Channel “rumor” acted, then, as a kind of dress rehearsal for the assault of the PATRIOT Act, to be signed into law just over a month later. Again, I am not arguing that this was a heavy-handed act of corporate censorship. As Eric Nuzum explains, it did not take a statement of official doctrine for local radio station owners to get the message that they should follow the dictates of the banned song list. Many program directors admitted that in the wake of the circulated instructions, “they did indeed remove songs from broadcast because of the list or its suggested sense of restraint.”

The list itself is ridiculous, except when it is scary. It mostly imagines a fragile American public, which might endure great pain if it were to hear a song with “Fire” or “Heaven” or “Hell” in the title. It is only a parlor game to pick your favorite list absurdity – is it Shelly Fabares’ “Johnny Angel”? Or J. Frank Wilson’s “Last Kiss”? And, hey, why isn’t “Tell Laura I Love Her” here? – but a much more serious matter to consider just what

Clear Channel was trying to accomplish with these “suggestions.” There *are* hints of something more significant in the list itself: with the inclusion of John Lennon’s “Imagine” (which Neil Young would soon sing at the celebrity telethon on September 21) and “All Rage Against the Machine,” the banned song list reveals itself to be concerned with ideology as well as sensitivity.

Carrying much greater weight than the list itself is the declaration it makes that in the post-9/11 world, Clear Channel would take off the mask of corporate neutrality and work as an agent in support of the Bush military program. Others (Krugman, 2003; Boehlert, 2004) have explained how Clear Channel’s post-1996 consolidation has allowed the company, with its deep historical ties to George W. Bush, to promote a conservative agenda. (Top executives at Clear Channel, as Paul Krugman has explained, were intimately involved with Bush during his Texas years as major supporters of the Republican Party there; Clear Channel Vice Chairman Tom Hicks also bought the Texas Rangers from Bush.) Supporting the work of the rumor of the “banned songs” list were pro-war rallies sponsored by “local radio stations” (all owned by Clear Channel), and corporate suppression of the Dixie Chicks and radio host Howard Stern (who was suspended by Clear Channel after years of getting away with all he got away with). Clear Channel drew a line in the sand almost immediately after 9/11: if there was to be a political front and a military front in the newly declared “war on terror” so too would there be a cultural front. The “banned song” rumor served an important function in this post-9/11 America – like so many of the other rumors I have been discussing here it may not have been exactly “true,” but it gained its power as a litmus test of patriotic feeling rather than as an appeal to pure rationality. As with the wedge-driving rumors, the Clear Channel rumor offered many Americans the chance to join the putative fight against terrorism through their consumption practices. Remove Everclear’s “Santa Monica” (1995) from your playlist (presumably because of how the song’s narrator implores his beloved to move West with him, and go swimming, and “watch the world die” – i.e. watch the sunset), or get rid of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Tuesday’s Gone” (1973) (because 9/11 was a Tuesday?) about a character whose girlfriend, Tuesday, has just broken up with him, and, Shazam, you are fighting for the good guys.

* * *

It is a kind of magical thinking, of course, that Clear Channel attempted to stimulate with its complicated “banned song” rumor. Exploiting

therapeutic keywords that would be familiar to its captive listeners (“healing,” “local sensitivities”), Clear Channel ventured a friendly take-over of the American cultural marketplace. Two major countervailing forces undercut these efforts by Clear Channel to control consciousness through the airwaves and one came from Clear Channel itself: the realities of Clear Channel’s own market interests made it impractical for the company to stay on message in any consistent way. Organizing anti-Dixie Chick hysteria through radio station censorship after Natalie Maines’ infamous early 2003 anti-Bush statement (“Just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas”) is one thing, but Clear Channel did not want to risk losing the Dixie Chicks as a client for the concert-promoting division of the company as the group launched a major tour.

The other, and ultimately more significant, counterforce acting as a check on centralized corporate censorship came with the “9/11 truth” movement, rooted in the new possibilities of Web 2.0 that were growing exponentially and which were tangled up inextricably with 9/11 culture. The origins and evolution of these challenges to the “official story” of 9/11 are outside my scope. I do want to explore how the collective of dissenters who generally travel under the banner of “9/11 truth,” but constitute dozens of real and virtual groups and individual actors, have turned rumor into a vital challenge to the control exerted by the U.S. government and mainstream media interests (e.g. Clear Channel) over the flow of 9/11 information. The opposition that began as scattered rumor quickly evolved into “fifty people a day ... singing” as Arlo Guthrie, in his “Alice’s Restaurant Massacre,” described an earlier generation of war protesters.

Scattered rumors about each attack site developed within days:

- The Twin Towers were taken down not by the planes that hit them, but by explosives placed at their base.
- United 93 did not crash in Pennsylvania, but was shot down.
- The Pentagon was not hit by planes, but missiles.

The larger story/rumor framing each of these particular arguments is that the United States government, or at least key members of it, either planned themselves or had inside knowledge about the attacks. Debunking efforts have been more or less immaterial. The 9/11 Commission report issued in 2004, for instance, only added more fuel to the “9/11 truth” fire by

offering up more details that the “truth community” found laughable: how did those passengers on United 93 get their cellphones to work on board? Within a few years of the attack, the 9/11 truth community formed a conspicuous subset of anti-Bush protesters; at an anti-war rally on the Boston Common in fall of 2007, for instance, members of what was once a diffuse “rumor community” now staked a seemingly unchallenged claim in the larger peace movement, handing out literature (see Figure 3) alongside the immigration rights activists and Iraq Veterans Against the War.

The 9/11 truth rumors are perhaps the hardest of all to deny the logic of. What I mean is that (in my small inventory of student responses to 9/11 rumors – some 300 students now), these truth rumors are the ones most likely to “capture” young people. When I give an assignment about rumors to my 9/11 culture classes, these are the ones that students have the hardest time defining as rumors, even in their earliest, most rudimentary form, and these are the ones that students have the most difficulty framing in the context of transmission and impact: they are desperate, instead, to prove each (or all) of the truth rumors true (or false). In April of 2006, when I taught a “sample” class to 50 or so prospective students and their parents visiting my college, I invited them to initiate a discussion on 9/11 rumors by first writing down what they recalled to be the most dominant rumor in the United States in the first months after that Tuesday. Much discussion ensued about what I “counted” as a rumor, and every single question from the crowd had to do with an individual internet message they received that we now understand to fall under the 9/11 truth rubric. This is another way of saying that the claims of the 9/11 truth movement have lived well beyond the usual rumor duration and taken on a second life as a well-articulated political belief system. In the weeks following the initial attacks, however, these stories about the hijackings and crash sites traveled many of the same routes taken by any of the major wedge-driving rumors.

There are a number of explanations, I think, for the transformation of 9/11 truth rumors from isolated protest into a major social force. The first appeal, as more than a few commentators have suggested, is that the bundle of 9/11 truth rumors take the chaos of that day and map an intelligent design onto it. On a psychological level, then, as film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum (2006a) has argued in reviewing the film *United 93*, in the 9/11 truth rumors “*someone* at least is in control. The inept air-defense command actually got it together to scramble a jet and bring down a



The Independent Thinker's 9/11 FACT SHEET

What occurred on September 11th, 2001 is a matter of facts, physics and unprecedented violations of national protocol by American officials themselves. Here are 10 points to consider. There are hundreds more.

- 1.** No steel-framed building before or since 9/11 has ever collapsed due to fire.
- 2.** No official agency (FAA, FBI, or the airlines) has ever released a list of the 9/11 passengers. But within hours, the FBI released a list of the hijackers.
- 3.** Multiple air-defense drills were planned for the morning of 9/11. These exercises left only two fighter jets available to protect the entire Northeastern United States.
- 4.** Building 7, a 47-story skyscraper and part of the World Trade Center complex, was not struck by a plane but collapsed in 6.5 seconds at 5:20 p.m. on September 11th, in the exact manner of a controlled demolition.
- 5.** There was no visible airplane debris where Flight 93 supposedly crashed in Pennsylvania – only a smoking hole in the ground, much like a bomb crater.
- 6.** Office fires burn at low temperatures of 600-800 dF. Jet fuel is an ordinary hydrocarbon; its maximal burning temperature is 1200 dF in open air. Steel melts at 2750 dF. Neither jet fuel nor the burning contents of the buildings could cause the towers' steel structure to buckle or fail.
- 7.** Tests have shown that cell-phone calls cannot be made at altitudes over 4000 to 8000 feet, as cell towers are located on the ground. Commercial airliners fly at 30,000 feet and above. No passenger could have successfully placed a call for help by cell phone from an airborne plane on 9/11, as reported.
- 8.** 9/11 was immediately declared an "act of war" by President Bush. The rubble from the Twin Towers' collapse was carted away and the steel sold and shipped overseas without examination.
- 9.** Enormous profits were made by insiders on plummeting stock prices of the two airlines involved in 9/11 – American and United. Federal law protects their identities.
- 10.** Accepting victims' compensation barred 9/11 families from further discovery through litigation.

Figure 3 Promoting "truth" at an antiwar rally

plane that was set to commit mass murder” (“Hijacking”). Rosenbaum goes on, with a wider focus, to suggest that in the broader-scale rumors (often dismissed with the label “conspiracy theory”) there is “One Big Conspiracy of the Illuminati, and Skull and Bones, the Elders of Zion, and the Bush Administration exercised its Total Control of History.” The facile dismissal of the 9/11 truth rumors is shared by many, and is not far off from the conclusions offered by Trey Parker and Matt Stone in their *South Park* episode “Mystery of the Urinal Deuce” (2006) which suggests that the president and his minions are actually the masterminds behind all the major 9/11 truth rumors: controlling the conspiracy theories is the ultimate demonstration of the administration’s power. What Rosenbaum and the *South Park* makers refuse to acknowledge (or purposely erase) is the fact that President Bush and other key players in his administration *were* lying to the American people in order to prosecute the case against Iraq; signing on to the position that the “official story” was concealing much turns out to have been pretty reasonable.

The one-dimensional debunkers satisfied the same simplifying impulses that they accuse the 9/11 truth rumors of speaking to and their assessments cannot account for the energetic acts of public refusal that have helped convert individual 9/11 truth rumors into the oppositional movement it has become. All of the major post-9/11 rumors relied heavily on Web 2.0 and their transmission is inconceivable without the growth of YouTube, Google video, internet message boards, and political blogging and wikis. Some estimates suggest that *Loose Change*, a documentary that has become something of a calling card for the 9/11 truth movement, has been viewed around 10 million times on the internet – with countless additional viewings facilitated by other p2p modalities – burned DVDs, and the like (one man handing out a 9/11 truth DVD at the fall 2007 anti-war rally in Boston kept up a steady chant of “make lots of copies”).

I want us to understand the 9/11 truth rumors that were passed, developed, and codified in the months and years after September 11, 2001, as a major “open source” initiative. In this light, as I have been suggesting, the collection of 9/11 truth rumors must be regarded as a key grassroots rebellion, as a revolt not only against governmental control over 9/11 inquiry but also as a critique of the centralized control of American media held by corporate actors such as Clear Channel. “Open source” originally referred to an explicit set of principles elaborated in the late 1990s, concerning the design and circulation of computer software; the contemporary

civil disobedience of open source has, as a central goal, the dissolution of the too-intimate ties between government and commercial interests that are embedded in laws having to do with intellectual property. The ultimate aim of this collective effort is enhancing innovation and broadening access to new technology and content.

It has become useful in recent days to think about the implications of the open source concept outside of the domain of software development and exchange. The open source challenge of the 9/11 truth movement is built into its decentralized and non-discriminatory workings. While it cannot, of course, satisfy the software-specific provisions of the original open source doctrines, the 9/11 truth movement shares many of the ideals of collective creation, constant modification, and non-discrimination that nurtured the development of Linux and Firefox on the one hand, and Wikipedia on the other. The peer-to-peer character of the 9/11 truth rumors relies in part on existing associations (of scientists and political activists, for instance) but also developed from the exponential growth of a variety of new social networks. From the “friend of a friend” formulation so central to Jan Harold Brunvand’s work, we see “friend” becoming a verb in the post-9/11 world. Through the whole range of Web 2.0 possibilities – including Friendster, Live Journal, Facebook, and MySpace – “friending” has become a new language of connection, and one that has anchored the 9/11 truth movement and helped it transform from rumor to doctrine.

The rumors that coalesced into 9/11 truth mean what they mean, of course, but they also function as an occasion to mobilize around distrust of the federal government. In this light, it is important to notice that the largely white leadership of such groups as 911truth.org have been joined in their work by an important cluster of hip hop artists. The rappers, including Afro-Peruvian artist Immortal Technique, and African Americans Paris, Jadakiss, and the Lost Children of Babylon, have used a variety of 9/11 truth elements to carry much broader arguments about imperialism, race, and the control of corporate media. In doing so, they have opened conversations with young Americans who might not otherwise have immediate access to the kind of cultural analysis they are promoting. They have also joined the long list of American popular artists who have “used” 9/11 as an opportunity to expand their own marketing reach.

The most sustained musical activism has come from Immortal Technique and Paris. Paris, in particular, has used not only his music (in particular his 2003 release *Sonic Jihad*, with its cover image of an

airplane – United 93? – about to hit the White House and its inner sleeve photo of Paris with his mouth duct-taped), but his “Guerrilla Funk” website, interviews, and other media to solidify his position as a major African American protest voice. In interviews, Paris insists that in addition to their music, rap activists must use the internet to reach fans: speaking to *Political Affairs* (“Paris Gets a Bad Rap,” 2003) Paris argues that “there’s such a concerted attempt to clamp down on dissent and on alternative points of view that it’s necessary for us to turn to the Internet. The Internet is the only thing that exists now that remains uncensored.” Paris’s website (guerrillafunk.com/paris) uses the relative freedom of the internet to treat his listeners as citizens. With its suggested reading list, an incredibly rich archive of political and cultural essays, its qualified support for p2p file sharing, and fascinating information on financial planning (“Guerrilla Funk Wealth Builder” – drawn from the work Paris did for years as a stockbroker), Guerilla Funk becomes a platform for a rich and thoughtful protest.

The website, the *Sonic Jihad* record, and the Paris-narrated documentary *Aftermath: Unanswered Questions from 9/11*, launch a concerted assault on the official story of 9/11. The song “What Would You Do” in particular summarizes the strong current of distrust of the federal government that runs all through the 9/11 truth rumors: “Don’t forget they made us slaves, gave us AIDS and raped us/Another Bush season mean another war for profit/All in secret so the public never think to stop it/The Illuminati triple 6 all connected.” Once Paris cites the Illuminati it is tempting to dismiss this all as conspiracy theory; popular allegations about a shadowy world government and its control of *everything* (including imagery on American money), is often barely a handshake away from one kind of hate speech or another. But renaming an argument “conspiracy theory” is always used as shorthand to dismiss not only a particular utterance, but really the very right of the speaker to be heard. On the website Paris wisely takes the conspiracy theory charge head on:

Understand the label “conspiracy theory” is a tactic that the media often invokes to immediately discredit voices of dissent and people who seek truth. The tactic of creating manufactured enemies for personal gain has been around for as long as there have been conflicts. Of course there’s no concrete proof of a conspiracy – the media would never allow that – but rather an abundance of evidence that points to a conspiracy on behalf of

US interests. Know that there's no concrete proof of the involvement of any other country either. The first thing that you must do is ask yourself, over and over again, the following question: "Who benefits?"

Paris's own song, with its reference to the idea that AIDS was deliberately inflicted on African Americans by the U.S. government, reveals how deeply Paris is invested in a race-based protest that links homegrown oppression with overseas imperialism.

"What Would You Do" leaves little doubt that Paris is speaking *as* an African American, and using the platform of 9/11 truth rumor to launch an anti-racist analysis. "Now ask yourself who's the people with the most to gain (Bush)/'fore 9/11 motherfuckas couldn't stand his name ... Now even niggas waving flags like they lost they mind." The song continues: "The oldest trick in the book is MAKE an enemy/Of phony evil so the government can do its dirt/And take away ya freedom lock and load, beat and search/Ain't nothin' changed but more colored people locked in prison./These pigs still beat us, but it seem we forgettin'./But I remember 'fore September how these devils do it/Fuck Giuliani, ask Diallo how he doin'." As a popular intellectual, Paris does crucial work here. He is, no doubt, committed to the 9/11 truth cause. But mobilizing these truths (or rumors, depending on your point of view) is also how he opens a window of opportunity, a window through which he wants to shine a light on the continued injuries inflicted by state-sponsored racism in the United States, including the murder of African immigrant Amadou Diallo by New York City police officers in 1999. While Arab Americans would, of course, be the focus of much post-9/11 persecution, Paris here puts 9/11 into a legible history of Black-white relations in the United States. Drawing on a long rhetorical tradition that stretches back at least to Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Paris demands that we recognize the ways that African Americans have been denied (or must, at times, deny themselves) the seductive pleasures of patriotism.

Two other rap acts have given a similar level of sustained attention to the "rumors" that have morphed into "9/11 truth." Immortal Technique has become something of a poster boy for the movement. His record *Revolutionary, Vol. 2*, released in 2003, established Immortal Technique as a notable "truthie" (as opponents of the movement often refer to the faithful); the song "The Cause of Death" is often cited as an important contribution on 9/11 truth websites. Working unlikely phrases like

“Wolfowitz doctrine” into his rhymes without missing a beat, Immortal Technique joins the chorus of people suggesting that the towers were purposely imploded: “you act like America wouldn’t destroy two buildings/... I was watching the Towers and though I wasn’t the closest/I saw them crumble to the Earth like they was full of explosives.” Immortal Technique goes on to anticipate the criticism that this theory projects too much power onto Bush, assuring “Conservatives” that “I don’t think Bush did it, ‘cuz he isn’t that smart.”

In various versions of a 2005 song titled, simply, “Bin Laden,” Immortal Technique and his collaborators (including Chuck D, KRS-ONE, and Mos Def) performed a complex racialized reading of 9/11. The refrain of the song, “Bin Laden didn’t knock down the projects/It was you nigga,” is punctuated by a line from a 2004 hit, “Why,” by rapper Jadakiss, that suggests Bush was responsible for knocking down the Twin Towers. What “Bin Laden” achieves is a complex stitching together of the familiar 9/11 truth claim that the attacks were an inside job, with a devastating reminder of how the U.S. government has imploded public housing sites, beginning with the Pruet-Igoe projects in St Louis in 1972, and carrying on through the entire hip hop era. In a classic bait-and-switch, Immortal Technique uses a rumor (“Bush knocked down the towers”) to tell a history – of how “urban renewal” became “urban blight” – that had been hiding in plain sight.

The song prosecutes its race-based case even more fully, explaining that the interpretations of Iraqi insurgency as loyalty to Saddam are bogus:

I’ll show you why it’s totally wrong
Cuz if another country invaded the hood tonight
It’d be warfare through Harlem, and Washington Heights
I wouldn’t be fightin’ for Bush or White America’s dream
I’d be fightin’ for my people’s survival and self-esteem.

Responding to the seemingly compulsory requirements of “United We Stand,” Immortal Technique promotes a vision of race unity that refuses the widespread calls for a militaristic nationalism.

The most extended rap challenge to the dominant narratives of 9/11 came with the release of *The 911 Report: The Ultimate Conspiracy* (first issued in 2005) by the very underground Philadelphia hip hop group The Lost Children of Babylon (LCOB). LCOB includes followers of

Nuwaubian spiritual leader Malachi Z. York. In addition to the mystical dogma of York, the group also show traces in its lyrics of the influence of the Five Percent Movement, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam that was a major force in hip hop in the late 1980s and 1990s. LCOB takes 9/11 rumors almost to the level of abstract mathematics: following the chain of logic that threads through their song “Conspiracy Theory,” listeners have to follow an obscure history that includes the Rothschild banking family, the Trilateral Commission, the relationship between the symbolism on the back of American dollar bills and pentagrams. *911 Report* is narrated from multiple subject positions (the hijackers themselves, President Bush, an Al-Qaeda operative, and so on) and with varying affect. Evincing sympathy for all victims of 9/11 in the context of an extended critique of the Bush administration, the ultimate goal of *911 Report* is to establish a position from which non-Christian African Americans – “Muslims” for lack of a more precise word – can enter debates surrounding the attacks and their aftermath. As LCOB member Richard Raw put it in an interview, *911 Report* is meant on one level to be taken as the soundtrack to Michael Moore’s documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, because “the fuck didn’t want to put no real hip-hop shit on there!!!” (“Lost Children of Babylon Interview,” 2006)

For all the rhymes and beats offered by Paris, Immortal Technique, and The Lost Children of Babylon, it took a mere seven words offered up by mainstream rapper Jadakiss in the summer of 2004 to bring the inside-job rumor to a mass audience. With his song “Why,” a major hit in the summer of 2004 (the album it appeared on, *Kiss of Death*, debuted at number 1 on the Billboard charts), Jadakiss added much fuel to the fire of 9/11 truth rumors. In a long line of questions that begin “Why” (and give the song its title), Jadakiss asks “Why did Bush knock down the towers?” In the initial press run-up that accompanied this release, Jadakiss cultivated the controversy, and spoke clearly as an African American and an entrepreneur. On the first score, Jadakiss insisted that the inclusion of this line grew from his feeling that George Bush “had something to do” with the attacks: “That’s why I put it in there like that. A lot of my people felt that he had something to do with it” (Heim, 2004). Again, it is clear that repeating a 9/11 rumor is not simply an act of protest, but also contains within it a separate strand of African American protest against post-9/11 attempts to erase race identification in the interest of national unity.

But Jadakiss was also operating as a savvy businessperson, and was quite willing to explain how delighted he was with the controversy surrounding

his 9/11 truth moment. As he told *Billboard* on July 9, 2004, “They’re censoring me all over the place, and that’s good . . . That means it’s reaching out to everybody” (Hall, 2004). Having stoked the media machine so successfully, with the predictable outcry from right-wing bloggers and talk show hosts, Jadakiss took his promotion of the song to the next level, telling interviewers that the line was “obviously” meant to be “a metaphor” (Souls, 2004). Unlike Bruce Springsteen, who situated his 9/11 record *The Rising* as an organic, populist, and inevitable response to the attacks, Jadakiss admits how he manipulated the market to build acceptance for his own 9/11 release. Jadakiss’s masterful management of “Why” and its critical seven words is a wonderful example of the central role played by rumor in American culture after 9/11, and the fascinating way that grassroots cultural efforts have worked in tandem with more centrally located social forces. Rumors were cultural first responders – one of the important cultural forms to grapple with the changes wrought by 9/11 immediately after the attacks. In the first week after 9/11, as the initial 9/11 rumors were in development, the American entertainment industry was also figuring out how its own first responders should enter the picture. *America: A Tribute to Heroes* was the answer that came from Hollywood, Nashville, and New York.