*In the course of Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, students were invited to write a series of papers to analyze a social setting that was familiar to them. This is the third produced by Samantha Berger, who transformed her commute between Staten Island and Manhattan into an urban ethnography about racism, terror and security.*

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**Between Manhattan and Staten Island: race, security and terror**

Samantha Berger

The Staten Island Ferry has two terminals, one in Manhattan and one in Staten Island. Walking into the terminal in Manhattan you see posted at all times, two men in full uniform with ‘bomb’ dogs, other times with military men in full gear armed with machine guns. You pass them and can either be stopped, or continue to go into the large waiting room where you wait for the next arriving ferry.

Originally, the Ferry never had trained K-9’s present, however, these were one of the many increased security measures installed by then Mayor, Rudy Giuliani, in a post 9/11 lower Manhattan. They were mounted along with a shutdown of lower level boarding which helped elevate the crowds, and a constant presence of the Coast Guard following the Ferry at all times. Take a ride, and you’ll notice a small speed boat behind or on the side of the ferry with two machine guns mounted on the top. Security increased to bring people back into Lower Manhattan and to assure New Yorkers, commuters especially, that New York was safe. There is a specific announcement that echoes through the terminal that speaks to this: you are subjected to screening and your cooperation is appreciated. These added security procedures relate to Levi-Strauss’s theory of symbols and the role that they play (Lévi-Strauss 1963). He reasons that symbols get stronger the more that you believe in them, and the more shared knowledge of experiences occur. In the case of the Ferry, the security procedures such as the dogs and the guns are symbols of protection, that commuters are safe because they’re there. There’s a shared understanding and experience of trauma that plagued Lower Manhattan commuters specifically after the act on 9/11, and these symbols are a way of combating that. The more they believe they work, the more power they have so to speak

Both terminals, Whitehall (Manhattan side) and St. George (Staten Island side) have bomb dogs, but I conducted my research specifically on the Whitehall side. I sat across from the waiting room, by the Wendy’s for an hour during peak rush hour traffic, when the boat leaves Whitehall every fifteen minutes. Thousands of people rush through, some running for the boat, others walking in the crowd. During this time, I did not hear the dogs bark once, although I have on different occasions, and the announcement mentioned earlier was played six times, once every ten minutes.

The men were chatting with each other, two times other employees of the Ferry in the same uniform came up to talk to them. The two men posted during this time were both White, middle aged, around early 40’s. I see them every day, and hear them talking about their children in college. They stopped 50 people during this hour period, 45 of which were men, and of those men, 42 of them were POC. The 5 women that were stopped were all friends or acquaintances of the men, and stopped to talk to them and pet the dogs. They stayed for about five minutes each, some shorter because of the boat. The remaining 3 men were light skinned, and had large bags, two had a duffel bag and the last one had a larger backpack: they were all within there 20’s. Out of the 45 men stopped, only 5 of them had large bags, the rest either carrying small briefcases or a light book bag. They ranged anywhere from their 20’s to upper 70’s, however, they were mostly on the younger side, anywhere between 20 and 40 years of age.

What does this mean? Men that are POC are more likely than anyone to be stopped by these men, not by the bomb dogs, who were laying down and were tugged to work. They’re targeted, and some people get stopped so frequently, to the point where the men were talking with the guards (men holding the dogs) like they’re old friends.

I spoke to one of the men stopped, his name is Tim[[1]](#footnote-1), and he takes the ferry twice a day, once in the morning, specifically the 7 am boat, and coming home the 6:30 pm boat. I asked him how frequently he gets stopped, and at St. George, very rarely, and at Whitehall almost every day. If it is the two white men, like it was that specific day, all the time. If it is the Asian man, he doesn’t stop me. He explained that he began to speak to these men, and they know each other on a first name basis now. Their kids go to the same school on Staten Island. Tim said “I never understood why they stopped me, I’m in a full suit. I have a small brief case. I work on Wall Street. I remember when 9/11 happened. No one ever thought anything of my small brief case before. I remember walking home across the Brooklyn Bridge that day. It was the scariest day of my life. Now I get stopped every day because of it”. Why is that?

In St. George however, I was presented with a completely different set of results. There was two men there with dogs, both white and middle aged, with two cops in between them, which was unusual for that day. In the hour I was there, during rush hour from 7 am to 8 am on a Friday, 65 people were stopped. Out of that 65, 35 of them were men, and the remaining 30 were women. Of those 35 men, 15 of them were POC and 20 were white, all with large bags. Of the 30 women stopped, 25 were POC and 5 were white. This differs drastically, because women were just as likely to be stopped in St. George as men were, and race really didn’t play a huge factor.

I had the opportunity to speak to former head of security for St. George’s station, as a whole including all buses and trains that run through, Jerry[[2]](#footnote-2). He explained that when he ran his ‘station’ he taught everyone that it “doesn’t matter who you look like, or what you might have done, that person is innocent until proven otherwise.” Jerry explained that when training and given new security workers, such as the bomb dog holders, he would “shadow” them on the job for the day, without them knowing, to see what they did, how they behaved etc. He found that by doing this he realized that men were being stopped more, black men in particular which “I found disgusting, but at the same time, I was probably doing that same thing”. He would sit that employee down afterward, and explain to them what the problem was. “Women can be murders, kids could be murders, heck, your grandma could be a murder. You just don’t know. You can’t judge a book by its cover as cliché as it sounds.”

After 9/11 Manhattan was a warzone, specifically everything below 14th Street. No one wanted to come to Manhattan, it was another world. “The only thing that played in people’s mind when they walked on Wall Street or by Battery Park was the image of the plane hitting the second tower. That’s when we realized this wasn’t an accident anymore” as said by Martin[[3]](#footnote-3), a dock worker on the Whitehall Side. He’s worked in the same position for 20 years, he’s planning to retire in five years and live on a boat docked in the South. “Boats are my passion but after that day, even my wife was begging me to stay home. She said, and I’ll never forget, ‘Martin, I swear if you go back to work and something happens to you, I’m having the dog pee on your grave’”. Nothing happened thankfully, but the thought still remained, he tried to transfer to the Staten Island dock, but everyone at the time had the same idea and he was fairly new. “No one wanted to be there.” The scariest was what happened on that fateful day.

“The ferry and boats were a safe heaven, people running from everywhere to breathe, to get away. Patients were being transported. People walking covered in ash, and yet I had to work. I thought I was going to die.” During the initial attacks on September Eleventh, the only way in or out of Lower Manhattan was boats, everything from subways to bridges were shutdown immediately. The ferry and other boats from all around came and flooded Lower Manhattan evacuating nearly 500,000 people in under nine hours according to the documentary, *Boatline*. Private boats, party boats, ferries, “if it could float and it made it, it was there” said one of the captains of the Coast Guard Vessel No. 1 who called in for everyone to help evacuate the island. There was a striking realization, that Manhattan is an island and the water was the only way out. This idea still lingers on the crew today in Manhattan specifically. “I’ll never forget that day. We were a target in the water, dead center. I prayed every time we departed, prayed that I would be okay and New York would be okay” said Martin. Jerry was at the time a captain of one of the ferry boats. He explains that “Once in a while, when I dock, I remember the look on this one child’s face. She was literally grey with ash and she asked me, can you take me home?’ I had come out of the cabin to see what happened after the second tower fell and all I saw was her.”

This is how Lower Manhattan’s mindset differs from that of Staten Island; there is still a lingering fear in Manhattan, people *remember* 9/11. There is a physical constant reminder, that the towers were only 10 minutes away. This trauma seen in older crew members is recreated in this specific symbol, every time you encounter a security policies, surveillance and the militarization of very public spaces. This paranoia is only proven more through Foucault’s (1995) theory of power. He explains that power is everywhere, and doesn’t necessarily have to be through one specific token. When you walk through the ferry you know you aren’t in charge but at the same time who is because there are so many people, crew members watching you. This idea that power is everywhere relates to the ferry in particular because there is always someone watching. There are the bomb dogs, crew members, workers, surveillance, men with machine guns, there is always someone watching so you can’t necessarily pin point the power but you know you don’t have it. There was a paranoia created that ‘big brother’ is watching, that everything is fine until it isn’t because of the power relations.

This relates to Massumi’s (2010) idea of double conditioning which is this idea of could’ve would’ve. If something could’ve happened it would and if something didn’t happen, it would’ve. The example that Massumi used was the ‘Anthrax scare’ at an airport; the whole airport was shut down and evacuated because there was a bag leaking white powder. People assumed it was Anthrax, but days later it was found to be flour. The response wasn’t drastic, it could’ve been Anthrax and therefore they took drastic measures, but it wasn’t. However, it would’ve been if it was someone else, or if it was another time. This idea that it didn’t happen but if it did we were protected, we were safe, is Massumi’s idea.

This relates to the symbols shown in security measures because it’s used to remind people that there is a fear that something is going to happen at any moment; we’re prepared if it does, and if it doesn’t happen it always could have. That is the society that runs around the ferry, this double condition that makes men get stopped every day, that makes tourists look confused at the machine guns on their quiet boat ride. They play on this idea of a ‘terrorists’ society where something is bound to happen, but if it doesn’t at least we’re prepared.

However, where does the racism come into play? Why is it that only men of color are stopped in Whitehall? *The fear of the unknown*. Durkheim (1982) created the theory of social facts and currents. A social fact is something that feels natural to the individual but is actually socially created. For an example, the way that we sit is a social fact, you aren’t born knowing to sit with your legs spread open, it’s something your taught. Social facts plague society, however when you go against the current, against the social facts as a collective we are taught, there is a punishment. This plays on the idea that the group conquers the individual because if one goes against, there is a punishment in the form of laughter or violence, because one can’t change the current.

After 9/11 there was a fear. What was to happen? What’s next? The people involved invited a scared America to as a collect social group, turn against an entire religion because of its far-radical association. That’s what helped people cope; there’s an explanation, a way to categorize the trauma that occurred.

My theory is that Post-9/11 Lower Manhattan created an atmosphere that shifted from the unknown to the known, back to comfort and familiarity. Before 9/11 New York has a history of racial tensions, because America at its core is racist. After 9/11 something shifted; because of this shared trauma, this shared social fact, people were afraid of the unknown, now more than ever. Once they could put a name and a face to the events, the comradery shown ended, and New York was once more a ‘stop and frisk’ city. Now as a collective they could place their blame, and they could go back to their routine. They were able to categorize this as what is known as an act of terrorism. They were taught to make sense of it that way, to box it up and move forward. Everyone wanted to forget, wanted to believe that they didn’t think about the attack every day, every time they stepped on a plane or docked at Whitehall. There was a panic, and now they needed to stop and move on to what they knew. What they knew was black people, what they knew was white people. Foucault (1995) explains that things create social facts and this ‘thing’ is 9/11. 9/11 created a social fact that all Muslims are terrorists, and blacks are just as dangerous as ever, because you never know what’s going to happen. The constant surveillance, the constant security and militarization in not only places like Whitehall, but Times Square, created and instilled this reoccurring fear. A fear of the unknown, a fear of what lurks around the corner. These precautions, these security measures, propelled a decade full of racist legislature in New York under Mayor Giuliani to show that everything is fine. The bad people are being watched, we’re not going to tell this happen again, we can go back to normal soon enough.

Why is it that security makes people feel safer? How is it that after 9/11 President Bush was able to, and supported in creating the Patriot Act, one of the biggest violations of an American citizens civil rights? How is that Mayor Giuliani was able to take the same approach to New York, with initiatives such as stop and frisk? How is that the country became more divided despite this act of unity, this shared trauma? If you ask anyone, they know exactly where they were on 9/11, exactly what they were doing. Shouldn’t that unite us?

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1. Tim’s name has been changed to remain anonymous. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jerry’s name has been changed to remain anonymous. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martim’s name has been changed to remain anonymous. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)