

We Will Never Forget: Activism Essentialism

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On September 11, 2001, disaster struck as terrorists bombed The World Trade Center. Onlookers watched as the buildings engulfed in flames, instantly succumbed by black and gray smoke. Hundreds of souls parted from their bodies while the statue of liberty wept in the distance. This is the clip that plays over and over in my mind when I think back to that tragic day. Three months earlier, my family and I had first stepped foot on American soil in New York City like many immigrants before us. My aunt was eager to take us to different places. The image that remains vivid in my mind to this day was view from the observation deck of The World Trade Center. I never felt more invincible than in that moment. So when I saw the news of the attack on the buildings that I visited three months ago, panic ensued. My mind raced as I thought about the family I had just met and I wondered if the terrorists would strike Chicago next. I was seven at the time of the 9/11 bombings and I am twenty-one today. I will admit that during the time in between I did not think too much about post 9/11 activism and what that meant. I knew people blamed and attacked Muslims. I even saw films that depicted males with turbans appearing suspect whenever they boarded a plane. Maybe the strength of the memory and the numbing pain were too great that it was repressed in the minds of many. Maybe they wanted us children to maintain our innocence because the adults did not talk about that day in depth.

Today, I find myself conducting research to find a way to turn on the headlights that will enable me to see through my foggy memory. After 9/11, there were an increased number of hate crimes toward Muslims. Instead of being referred to as a person, they were referred to as the enemy. It should be apparent that one group of people cannot adequately represent an entire population, but this was far from the case. Nationally, many Japanese Americans defended the mistreated because they knew what it felt like to be betrayed by their own country. They did not want the injustice that happened to them to happen to the Muslims because of the actions of extremists. Post 9/11 activism means that I find the correct answers for that little girl inside me. I am sure there has been post-9/11 activism at UIC and in Chicago though I have not seen it personally. The impact of activism in general is tremendous, because of it UIC's campus is diverse, has ethnic studies, recognizes undocumented students and advocates for "the other." There is still more work to be done, religious and cultural stereotypes and prejudice still exists to this day. So in this regard, post 9/11 educational activism is crucial not just in the United States, but worldwide. Actually, it might be crucial for our existence.