The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project: A First Report

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One of the dilemmas in the debate over whether memory or history dominates the interpretation of major events is that few opportunities exist to study how people reconstruct the past before a dominant public narrative has been created by those who have a vested interest in defining the political meaning of events. Oral historians have often claimed that the lived experience of history is more complex than subsequent interpretations reveal. Rarely do we have the opportunity to document the historic evidence of that complexity through first-person interviews collected close to a historical event that has the power to transform our ideas about history. As a result, debates over the relationships between memory and history and between individual and collective memory often remain abstract and theoretical. In the case of an episode such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which immediately stirred a public debate over the ultimate significance of the events for American history and foreign policy, the stakes over how and by whom memory is shaped were particularly high.

Given the nature of the attacks and the need for government response to them, it is no surprise that an official public interpretation of the meaning of September 11 was generated soon after the events occurred. This dominant account portrayed a nation unified in grief; it allowed government officials to claim that there is a public consensus that September 11 was a turning point in the nation’s history that has clear implications for national and foreign policy. It is important to remember that this consensus was constructed not by those who lived through the terrorist attacks and their aftermath, but by those who observed it and had political reasons to interpret it as they did.

Columbia University’s Oral History Research Office and the university’s Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy created the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project within days of the attacks to explore a variety of memories and interpretations of the events and their aftermath that we believed could only be constructed over time through personal accountings of the catastrophe. Peter Bearman, a sociologist interested in the formation of identity in the wake of such
events, and I co-founded this longitudinal oral history study in which sample groups from a pool of four hundred people will be interviewed three times over a three-year period. The project’s purpose is to understand whether the catastrophe and its aftermath constitute a turning point in the lives and the imaginations of those both directly and indirectly affected. We used a modified life history approach in which we asked interviewees to talk about the meaning of the terrorist attacks in the context of their life stories and their understanding of the historical importance of September 11. In an effort to expand beyond the predicted formation of a unified collective memory based only on the experiences of those who were most dramatically affected by September 11, we attempted to interview people with widely different experiences, including many who were not close to the site of ground zero and some who were discriminated against in the aftermath. While most of the interviews were conducted in New York, we also collected interviews in New Jersey, Boston, and Washington.

Given our determination to allow a broad range of people to interpret the impact of the catastrophe, we spread our thirty interviewers around New York City in the first few weeks following September 11. We approached people on the streets in Union Square, an impromptu memorial site, and other public gathering places to invite them to be interviewed. After that we approached people through community organizations, mosques, temples, churches, firehouses, restaurants, small businesses, and other institutions or associations to let them know about our project. Rarely did we approach individuals directly after the first few weeks. Our project was announced through formal networks, organizations, and associations and through informal networks. Generally, people volunteered to be interviewed because they wanted their experiences recorded for history. While we offered all those we interviewed information about counseling services, we are not affiliated with or supervised by a clinic or psychological center. We also provided interviewees the opportunity to remain anonymous. With few exceptions, those we interviewed elected to become a part of the permanent record through depositing their interviews at the Oral History Research Office, a public archive.

In the seven weeks following September 11 we conducted interviews with nearly 200 people. Over the next six months, we conducted another 200 interviews and began to read and analyze transcripts. So far, we have interviewed approximately 170 eyewitnesses, survivors, rescue workers, volunteers, and others who lived and worked within an approximately six-block area around ground zero. Fifty of those worked in the World Trade Center. Among interviews conducted at ground zero and throughout the New York City region, we have interviewed 50 Muslims and 10 Sikhs from a range of backgrounds and over 60 Latinos representing many different countries of origin. We have interviewed immigrants from over thirty different countries, including 25 Afghan Americans or refugees. We have also interviewed over 30 artists whose lives and work were directly and indirectly affected by the events of September 11 and its aftermath. We have interviewed those who have been bereft of relatives, friends, and social networks. We have conducted interviews with health workers, transportation workers, and construction workers who worked in or near ground zero and individuals who lost their housing or work.
In analyzing the interviews, we are especially interested in understanding how individual and social memory is constructed. Specifically, how did the media and government help to define impressions and interpretations of the September 11 events? What was the impact of September 11 on individual relationships and on social networks? What did the terrorist attack mean to immigrants and refugees who looked the way officials portrayed “the enemy”? We also explored how political responses that ranged from patriotism (belonging) to alienation (exile) affected the construction of memory in relation to identity, both personal and social, and how memory was formed in response to a historic event that most considered was “unique” and without parallel. As our work has developed, we have also become interested in the role of grief and trauma in defining the political as well as the cultural legacy of September 11 on national and international levels. Our underlying question was: Is September 11, 2001, a historic moment that qualifies as a turning point in American history? If so, will the continuing threat of terrorism itself spark new interpretations of history that will transform our national self-understanding and how we also view the future?

Initial Findings

To speak is to preserve the teller from oblivion.

—Alessandro Portelli

Given the speed with which images and narratives have combined to form definitive impressions of the September 11, 2001, attack as the beginning of “America’s new war,” it is hard to remember that in the first days and weeks after the events there was confusion about the origin and meaning of the attacks, which promoted a deep disquiet over the definition of the enemy in cultural as well as ideological terms. During this period, the government and the media rushed to consolidate an impression of “the enemy” that was precise enough to rationalize a wholesale invasion of Afghanistan and yet broad enough to stimulate a climate of fear of anyone who “looked like” the enemy at home.

Through our interviews with clusters of communities both directly and indirectly affected by the catastrophe, we found that a climate of fear dominated the responses of those we interviewed in at least two ways that were not reflected in mainstream media accounts. First, those interviewees who experienced the most direct and traumatic aspects of the disaster, through either proximity or loss, often feared that the violence they lived through would spark greater violence. Many whom we interviewed before October 7, 2001, the date of the first air strikes in Afghanistan, wanted publicly to record their reluctance to pinpoint the enemy in a way that would rationalize an invasion. They were particularly afraid not only of retaliation but of a technological war in which civilian populations might accidentally be attacked and falsely targeted. These statements rejected revenge as the only official response and revealed how the vulnerability of eyewitnesses and survivors translated into sympathy for other potential victims. The most striking example of the “resistance” to this fear of
oblivion in which the individual point of view would be lost and terrorism would perpetuate itself through war was a plea I received from a man who described himself as a “part-time” (reservist) soldier at ground zero. He claimed to have taken over two hundred oral history interviews with workers, including police officers and others, and asked me if I would help him organize an oral history project in Afghanistan if he were assigned there, “to show the American people how easily civilians could be harmed there.”1 Most of those we interviewed expressed their desire for peace even when they spoke of patriotism and their fear that their stories might be misused by the media and others to justify an international war.

A second illustration of the extreme climate of fear not fully reported by the media was demonstrated in our interviews with immigrants and refugees, particularly those who by skin color or dress might be confused with the enemy; those interviews reveal the frightening degree to which terror continued to dominate their lives in the aftermath. In the interviews we conducted with Afghans, Pakistanis, Muslims, and many Latinos, the dread of oblivion that September 11 occasioned emerges from two distinct sources. The first is the trauma produced by the catastrophe itself, especially in those who migrated to the United States to flee terrorism or war. The second anxiety, at times taking preeminence over the first, was the fear of retaliation within the United States at the hands of the government, hate groups, and individual citizens. This constituted a double catastrophe for immigrants and refugees, which led to withdrawal and isolation in the aftermath of September 11 and, in a striking number of cases, to attacks and threats on those we interviewed or their friends and families. The Washington Post poll conducted on September 13, 2001, which revealed that 43 percent of Americans polled thought the attacks would make them “more suspicious” of people who “appear to be of Arab descent,” was tragically prescient for New York as well as for the rest of America.2

Some of the threats were direct, and others were subtle. One Latino Muslim we interviewed spoke of his fear of a “collective herd” mentality that he was afraid would “trample him,” and he reported on the experience of a pregnant Muslim woman friend who was beaten in the streets of the Bronx. Like others of Arab descent, a business executive from Pakistan who escaped one of the towers and believed that his father had perished in the other declared that the terror of September 11 paled in comparison to the terror of the aftermath. (The father escaped, and he was interviewed for the collection.) The interviewee refused to leave his neighborhood for two weeks and shaved his beard for a month and a half, all of which he described as “complications from the moment of national [collective] mourning.” Taxi drivers of Arab descent reported to us that almost everyone they knew from Arab lands experienced threats and described their double anguish over not being considered Americans and living in a climate of fear. One individual described his “triple trauma” of living

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1 The interviews quoted here have not yet been fully prepared for the permanent Oral History Research Office Collection; therefore, only descriptions of interviewees and dates of interviews are provided here. The reservist at ground zero sent an e-mail in December 2001.

through the attack, then being betrayed not only by his country but by his beloved city, in which he had previously felt safe in exile.³

For many of the immigrants and refugees we interviewed, September 11 was interpreted as not only a national but also a global event with far-ranging political implications. One man, born in Kabul, was angry because he said most Americans did not understand how the Taliban devastated Afghanistan (a view reflected by many Afghan women we interviewed) and that an American invasion would lead to many civilian deaths. He explained, “This is not a war. This is something small. Once you are bombed on a regular basis and you are targeted as a people you know what war is. This was just a single act of terrorism.” Later, he defined his view of patriotism: “For me patriotism means not staining the blood of American soldiers with innocent Afghan blood.” Most upsetting was evidence of a new and pernicious level of xenophobia in which women and children of Arab descent were threatened and attacked. An Afghan American teacher we interviewed said she often tried to get her students to examine the complexity of an American invasion of Afghanistan, despite her own belief that some intervention was necessary. Despite her attempts to portray herself as a concerned American citizen to her students, she later found a swastika drawn on the windshield of her car with the words “America rules” scrawled in red underneath.⁴ These stories tragically confirm a report by the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, “Backlash: When America Turned on Its Own,” that after September 11 hate crimes that were previously reported as targeting young males were now being reported as targeting a high number of women, senior citizens, and even children.⁵

These incidents confirm my reading of interviews that after September 11 there has been a paradigm shift in racial profiling in which immigrants are perceived as a national security threat by a culture that once welcomed them. It is no surprise that many of those we interviewed feared that the closest analogy to the legacy of September 11 in American history was the experience of Japanese American citizens during World War II or the political repression of the McCarthy era. Incidents we found in our interviews that confirmed this possibility included stories of middle-of-the-night raids by police and federal agents in immigrant communities of Queens and Brooklyn, where family members were taken to detention centers without explanation or recourse, and graphic accounts of violence against people who tried to speak out against the war in Afghanistan.

It is clear from interviews conducted with immigrants and refugees that displacement, exile, loss, and insecurity about the future were common experiences that were not unique to September 11, 2001. The impression created by the media that September 11 constituted a “loss of innocence” for the nation did not apply to its most recent citizens and prospective citizens who had sought refuge from previous trauma.

³ The Latino Muslim of the United States, who has lived in Puerto Rico, was interviewed Oct. 18, 2001. The Pakistani business executive, an immigrant, was interviewed Nov. 6, 2001. The “triple trauma” was described by a Pakistani Sikh immigrant in an interview on Jan. 20, 2002.

⁴ The Afghan American immigrant born in Kabul was interviewed Nov. 8, 2001. The Afghan American immigrant teacher was interviewed Nov. 6, 2001.

Neither did it apply to the millions of refugees around the world who have been prevented from entering U.S. borders since September 11. A hopeful sign that this double standard was noticed and taken seriously is reflected by the concerns of many people we interviewed (across communities and generations) that a widespread climate of fear would result in the profiling of refugees and others who were clearly going to be targets in the wake of the events. On the other hand, there is a frightening degree of evidence in the stories we collected, especially in the first few weeks following September 11, that the “upsurge” of patriotism following the attacks also led to a pernicious inability to discriminate.

Other findings are equally revealing. The September 11 attacks caused fear, confusion, and disorientation among almost everyone we interviewed. The media amplified the trauma and at the same time suppressed it by conscious decisions not to convey graphic scenes of people jumping from buildings, the sounds and sights of bodies hitting the ground, and stories about the violence against individuals, families, and community centers in the weeks and months following the disaster. For many whom we interviewed, the invitation to participate in a longitudinal oral history project was the first real opportunity they had been given to explore the meaning of such experiences and the sights they witnessed without having to reduce their memories to a media-sized story. As a result, long before the media began to report on the true scope of the catastrophe (and before many of us working on it understood it ourselves), our interviewers gathered evidence of massive and overwhelming trauma from people who suffered from isolation and despair, responding to an environment in which there was little public understanding of their experiences.

The experience of isolation often translated into that of exile, not only for immigrants and refugees but also for those whose familiar territories of home, work, and neighborhood were assaulted directly or indirectly. This primary disruption had an impact on social networks created by home, family, and community, further deepening the isolation of many. While we have collected many “heroic” stories, which cohere with the narratives profiled of September 11 survivors and rescuers, we also gathered many more ordinary stories in which the struggle to survive was the primary theme of the interview. There are stories of some who pushed aside others to survive themselves or left behind co-workers in a race to exit the towers—“unheroic” moments that are part of the tragic legacy of September 11 (and that must be included in historical accounts). While many of the genuinely heroic stories did indeed help promote unity in grief for the short term, they failed to account for long-range trauma and loss on both collective and individual levels. These stories included portraits of the September 11 rescuer as national hero/patriot, of New York City as “wounded” but bouncing back, and by extension of the September 11 survivors as “one in grief and mourning.”

Methodology

The challenges of interpreting the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001, in close temporal and physical proximity to the catastrophe are manifold. First and fore-
most, oral history relies upon memory not only as a source of details but also as a rich repository of thoughts, beliefs, and impressions of self-understandings and historical understandings that have evolved over time. We still know little about how trauma affects memory in general or that of the traumatic event itself.

A second challenge stems from the lack of historical research sources and interpretive paradigms. Oral historians usually conduct research in primary and secondary sources before inviting people to construct their own life stories. Moreover, when documenting the history of political events that have had great impact on society and count as an experience of mass culture, there are historical analogies and frameworks of experience that allow us to speculate about the dimensions of the stories that we will collect—allowing us to refine our interviewing approach and tailor our expectations appropriately.

The events and aftermath of September 11 offered us no prototypes, methodological or historical, that would have allowed us the benefit of prior research. Our interviews revealed the absence of comparisons and analogous historical experiences on the part of most of those we interviewed. Moreover, with the exception of those who had fled to this country to escape oppression, there were almost no “collective” experiences of prior trauma among people we interviewed that had been passed down in living memory. This meant that oral culture itself was not a resource from which to create a story or stories by historical comparison.

Accordingly, our interviews are characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradiction, as well as meaning, form, and purpose. This argues for the lack of a “collective” story as it emerges from within the communities most affected by the terrorist events and raises profound questions for all of us who have documented or written about September 11. The questions include: Is this history yet? Is it memory? And, for those of us offering the solace of the interview as a means for people to bring coherence to catastrophe, we must also ask ourselves: Is it therapy?

Despite such limitations, the life history interviews provide important context for narratives about September 11. Our interviews are distinguished by the degree to which people could find—within themselves and their life stories—the frameworks through which to interpret the chaos they experienced on the day of September 11, 2001, and thereafter.

Themes and Interpretations

The past is not dead. It is not even past yet.

—William Faulkner

The dimension of time and memory through which our reminiscences of historic events are framed and filtered is broken, is occasionally fractured by events that could be described as larger than life. In some cases, these events become a “turning point” from which the history of the past and the understanding of the future are rewritten. But the very phrase turning point implies that, for most of these events, there is a before and there is an after, an axis from which a rotation from one set of understand-
ings to another is accomplished. As many of us who lived through and documented the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001, know, the story we are engaged in recording and constructing may have a beginning (as a national story), but it is still unfolding and has no clear end—giving the future far more power than the past. The interpretations we have gathered, reading across the first sessions of the oral histories we have taken to date, reveal the complex and delicate ways in which September 11 still stands outside history as we know it, exploding the frameworks of urban and national consciousness and inviting us to interpret the terrorist attack as a global event with consequences and demands that must cause us to listen and think in new ways. The interviews that we have collected reveal the first whispers of what is possibly a new era in America, one that is defined not only by the reality of terrorism but by the necessity of realizing we are living in a fragile and interdependent world.

The role of the political imaginary, always of interest to oral historians who attempt to derive meaning from the subjectivity of a major historical event, is profoundly important in understanding the events and aftermath of September 11. Because there was no close analogy to the terrorist attack and its legacy in living memory of many of those we interviewed, in concert with the surreal dimensions of the experience itself, people had to search for ways to interpret their experiences outside established frameworks. While the attack on Pearl Harbor was offered as one analogy by the media, the fit was wrong for the lived experience of September 11 because the latter attack was targeted for a civilian population in a major urban center that in some ways represented America’s connection to the rest of the world. The sinking of the Titanic was an analogy used far more frequently by many we interviewed, drawing people’s attention to the myth of invincibility, which was difficult for people to reject as a reality in both cases. The analogy fits in some ways as a literal one, as both the ship and the twin towers were reputedly indestructible (in fact, many people in both situations died because they were told that they should not try to escape). But the Titanic and the myth of invincibility it represents in mainstream American culture was also used as a metaphorical analogy, demonstrating the degree to which many of those we interviewed were still in a state of shock and disbelief that international terrorism could have such a tremendous impact within U.S. borders.

For most people, the interviews represented an opportunity to try to make sense of what was senseless where there was apparently no analogy. Still, the meaning and the structure of their stories yield many important insights into how September 11 will be remembered in its uniqueness by eyewitnesses, survivors, and those who have suffered in the aftermath. While at this time it is impossible to make conclusions about how the people we have interviewed will eventually interpret the legacy of September 11, in political as well as personal terms, we have begun to find some themes that connect people across generations, classes, and ethnic categories.

Among these are narratives of consolation and solace, in which those we interviewed described a search for meaning that began with stories of survival of the September events but continued to define a social response weeks and months afterwards. These stories included expressions of wishes for world peace, a desire for increased humanitarianism and tolerance at home, and the search for personal fulfillment and
meaning that included changes in relationships and patterns of living. As mentioned earlier, in sheer number these narratives dramatically exceed the narratives of revenge that are so commonly reported on and that are used to suggest a national consensus.

We have also found that the themes of flight and refuge connected those who had to run for their lives on September 11 with those who fled terror in their own countries but experienced it again in the aftermath. For many we interviewed this connection provided the link between understanding September 11 as a national event and as a global event, reminding New Yorkers of the identity of the city as an international center. A public interest in the political dimensions of the aftermath and the international nature of the events was reflected in the high rates of attendance at museums and community centers where the plight of Muslim immigrants was profiled.

Finally, patriotism was itself a category of interpretation, and perhaps the most contested and yet important domain in which we began our explorations. We found that for most people prior assumptions about national identity and a collective sense of belonging were often not enhanced, but shaken, by September 11. The meaning of flying flags differed dramatically in various communities, offering protection to many who feared being cast as the enemy in the drama of September 11 as it was played out in the collective culture. For others, the flag was a symbol of mourning, collective grief without any explicit political implications. For most people we interviewed, including those for whom the flag reflected a genuine rise in patriotism, it held different meanings at different times and in different contexts.

Perhaps most important for our ultimate considerations of the significance of September 11 as an axis of national as well as international understanding, the attacks were perceived in direct and indirect ways as an apocalypse. It was registered, in that sense, as a moment that stood outside of time and an event that ended history as we had previously understood it. The interviews we conducted with survivors and eye-witnesses were frequently shot through with religious analogies and metaphors and with apocalyptic imagery from films and movies, demonstrating the ways that many wrestled with questions of good and evil, life and death outside the frame of history as they had previously understood it. Of all of our interviewees, the people who had the most “complete” framework with which to understand the catastrophe were themselves already religious or apocalyptic thinkers. For them, the attacks of September 11 were a confirmation of their view of history and the world we live in. The narratives in which apocalyptic imagery and vision dominate descriptions of life “before and after” September 11 come closest to linking us to an understanding of the nature of the catastrophe itself—and its symbolic intent and purpose. As our primary purpose in the first round of interviews was to capture a sense of what the lives of those we interviewed was like before September 11 and what the immediate impact of the catastrophe and its aftermath was, we did not spend a lot of time exploring patriotism in the complex ways it deserves. We look forward to returning to this theme in our follow-up interviews.

It also tells us that in some ways for many of those we interviewed September 11, 2001, is not yet history, for it is the antithesis of history, of continuity, and of time as
we understand it. For others, it was of course a tragic continuation of history and of traumas escaped. As a result, an early reading of our interviews reveals a great range and variety of experiences, thoughts, and emotions in which the contradictions we expect to find in historical accounts exist not only across communities but within individuals. These tensions and ambiguities are evidence not only of massive trauma but of the genuine impossibility of defining a moment of the magnitude of September 11 too quickly. For most of those we interviewed, the task of interpreting the political and cultural legacy of the events and their aftermath was premature given the scope of both the catastrophe and the United States response to it.

The ways in which September 11 will influence the course of human events and our imagined future cannot be predicted. But, if consensus can be claimed as one outcome of a collective memory in formation, the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project reveals that it does not yet exist within the communities most directly affected. There is ample evidence to suggest, however, that a battle for democracy is being fought at home as well as abroad.

Appendix: Organization of the Project

The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project was launched within a week following the terrorist attacks. Most of the interviewers we hired or accepted as volunteers had previous training or experience in oral history or journalism. We established a large team of interviewers, ranging in number from twenty to thirty throughout the first year of the project, to conduct ten interviews each. A third of our interviewers were volunteers, some of whom had previously interviewed for the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project in Los Angeles. At least five of our interviewers were fluent in Spanish, and we later hired an interviewer who was fluent in Arabic and Arabic dialects. We had to turn away fifty or more volunteer interviewers. We held weekly meetings for interviewers that ran two to three hours. Interviewers were given general instruction in the art of the oral history interview and were provided with a list of the overarching questions and topics we were interested in: interviewees' memories of the event and how those memories supported or differed from public accounts generated in the media; their networks of communication (how people learned about the event, in what medium if they did not witness it directly, and how they talked about it with others); changes in their personal and social relationships; changes in their geographical or work location; the role of the media as a shaping influence; and their views of the future. Interviewees were told that we were conducting a longitudinal study and that, if resources and circumstances permitted, we would be able to conduct at least one and possibly two additional sessions with each of them. They were also told that they would have the opportunity to deposit their tapes and transcripts in the Oral History Research Office Collection, subsequent to their review and editing of the transcripts of their recorded interviews.

The second phase of the project is scheduled to begin October 1, 2002.

The interviews for the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project have been conducted on audiotape, in digital form, and transcribed. Sixty interviews were conducted in Spanish; several were conducted in Farsi; and one was conducted in Dari. Tapes will be preserved in analog and digital formats and will be made available at the individual discretion of interviewees. We hope to begin a program of videotaping in the second
year of the project, and interviewees will be able to choose whether to be interviewed on audio or video.

The project is funded by the National Science Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Columbia University. The Oral History Research Office has most recently received a grant to support additional interviews from the *New York Times* Neediest Fund. That new project, the September 11, 2001, Response and Recovery Oral History Project, will explore long-term issues of recovery and response in the areas of psychological trauma, economic rebuilding, civil liberties, philanthropy, education, and the arts.