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BOOK REVIEWS

After the Fall: New Yorkers Remember September 2001 and the Years that Followed

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The September 11th, 2001 Oral History Projects, that were created by and are now housed by the Center for Oral History at Columbia University in New York, are a unique and invaluable collection. The first project, the Narrative and Memory Project, was begun by Director of the Center for Oral History, Mary Marshall Clark, and interdisciplinary sociologist and Columbia University professor, Peter Bearman. This original project was intended to be longitudinal oral history endeavor using a modified life history approach to investigate whether the traumatic events of September 11th, 2001 were a turning point in the lives of those interviewed. What resulted from this seminal project and the projects that followed was the creation of a compendium of experiences, emotions, and events generated not by those with politically vested interests but by those who lived it.

The project did this by using oral history methodology to capture the creation of memory as it

progressed from individual inchoate experience to more or less stable narrative – a narrative that granted meaning and purpose to the narrator and also evolved over time. The oral history approach allowed a space for this creation, evolution, and recreation of each distinct narrative all while many of the politically charged events of September 11th, 2001 were swept up and coopted for use in a politically-motivated narrative.

Because of this cooption, the stakes were high for this project. Very shortly after the initial event, specific constructed stories were held up as representative of a collective experience and provided a *raison d'être* for many in positions of power. The individual lived experience -- in all its sometimes surreal and sometimes banal complexity -- was overlooked by the mainstream media in favor of rousing and politically useful tales of heroism, patriotism, and bravery. This is not to discount the stories that reflected and reinfor-

ced these values. Instead the tales of heroism and bravery evident in these oral histories are reflective of a more tempered and multifaceted reality. A reality that allows for more than simply the saga of a united nation bound together in grief.

It is, therefore, a breath of fresh air to be privy to these revealing life stories in *After the Fall: New Yorkers Remember September 2001 and the Years that Followed*. These oral histories allow a viewing of the tragic and harrowing events as they were intimately lived. Compiled in the wake of a forming national consensus that assumed that the event was a turning point and an impetus for major political and foreign policy decisions as it suited those in power, these transcripts reveal instead a nuanced, multidimensional, and varied history that reflects the diversity of the city itself.

Moving beyond a monolithic collective narrative allows for the inclusion of a variety of perspectives not just from those who were in the thick of the destruction at Ground Zero, but also those who were in various places both physically and socially lending to the inclusive nature of the collection. Likewise, each narrator was given space and time to form their own personal narrative and in so doing the project serves as a survey in the breadth of human response to tragedy.

In the whole of the September 11th Oral History Projects, close to 600 individuals were interviewed in five distinct projects reflecting various areas of inquiry. Oral historians believe groups form meaning by constructing stories. Here are captured not only stories from the tragedy but also stories unique to New York and to the interplay between memory and history. The diversity of this collection comes from vigilance of the project coordinators. Originally, people were approached on the streets, at memorials, in public places or through community or religious organizations where they heard about the project. The projects as a whole allowed for this unprecedented collection of oral histories of fascinating diversity.

These stories are incredible and revealing, archived and preserved with an intimacy and pared down austerity notably absent in rousing tales of

heroism and patriotism. They reveal the many sides and stories of the days around and after September 11th.

It is evident in this that many of these collected oral histories willfully refuse to be knit into a coopted narrative of hagiography. One example is the account of paramedic James Dobson who reveals how he had to twice abandon the patients he was trying to treat in order to save others when each of the towers collapsed and how his ambulance acted as a shuttle to drive people to safety while avoiding thinking what remains he traversed over on his journey. Here is also his staunch rejection of the American military attacks. He describes how he felt little personal connection with the language of retaliation for the September 11th attacks and he rejects being included in a political-motivated meta-narrative.

Likewise refusing a facile narrative, filmmaker Somi Roy's delves into a discussion of the way September 11th was interpreted in his home country of India. Displaying the complex process of grief, he describes how a stirring but tragic play based on the experience his friend who was killed in attacks, *Jupiter* was a meaning-making activity for those who had experienced the attacks only from a distance. Educator Robert Snyder likewise problematizes the idea of the heroism by emphasizing that it was not only those in uniform who met challenges but also those that simply decided to step in where needed. This is also seen in the words of activist Sandra Hernandez who expresses her helplessness concerning the impoverished population she served. They did not necessarily feel patriotism in the ways that it is traditionally defined, but instead believed that the government was the cause of their suffering. Financial manager Salmaan Jaffery also tries struggles with attempting to intellectually weigh the suffering of the various groups involved in the tragedy -- both in the US and in his home country of Pakistan. He wonders, "What has more significance, suffering of people here or suffering of people there?"

Here also are the words of programmer

Donna Jensen discussing the incongruity of the beauty of the day coupled with the horrific tragedy of seeing a man descending to the ground from the towers while she was inexplicably fixated on the gleaming white of his shirt. This leads to her own decision to jump from the esplanade and her honorific explanation of the motivations of those that made similar decisions. She says, “They had to make a life-or-death decision. Go or no go. I can understand that... It’s the only way they could do something, and even though that doing would lead to death, doing was life. Taking action was life.” Jensen’s fixation dovetails with the insightful interview with psychoanalyst Ghislaine Boulanger who describes her personal experience with the way one holds on to trauma. “After the trauma, you find that your mind really doesn’t move much beyond this kind of obsessiveness.”

This is only a small selection of the memories, questions, and ideas discussed in *After the Fall*. In her first report on the Narrative and Memory Project, Mary Marshall Clark discussed “the necessity of realizing we are living in a fragile and interdependent world.”¹ This collection reflects the same. Just as the narrative of September 11th, 2001 was quickly shaped from disarray to concerted patriotism there is now the space to look anew at the events from a distinct vantage point – both political and historical of ten years on. In the negative shadow of the tower’s absence and the looming ten years the project originally undertook to address the issue of turning points, it now illuminates many different areas of historical inquiry. It is a piece of living history and the words that Mary Marshall Clark wrote of the project at its outset are even more true today, “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.”²



1 Clark, Mary Marshall, “The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project: A First Report”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 89, No. 2, p. 576

2 Ibid.