

Herodotus Reconsidered

An Oral History of September 11, 2001, in New York City

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The work of historians becomes especially complex when their services are needed most, namely, when addressing the inevitable rewriting of history that takes place in the wake of catastrophic political events. Never in recent history has there been a clearer case in which the intervention of conscientious historians as guardians of memory (the future of the past) was required more than in the political aftermath of the spectacular attacks on the World Trade Center and other sites on the clear morning of September 11, 2001.

Within hours of the terrorist events in the United States on September 11, CNN selected the headline designed to frame the meaning of this historic experience, “America under Attack,” which was quickly picked up by most major news outlets. This headline was quickly transformed into the ubiquitous banner “America at War.” President Bush announced a global war on terrorism only days later. The nightly news channels cooperated in heightening the hysteria that defined the coverage of the attacks by supplying a soundtrack and by repeating the images of the towers collapsing again and again, as if New York City was entirely engulfed by the impact on lower Manhattan and had vaporized as a result. This media hysteria aided the state in rationalizing a wholesale war on terror that positioned Osama bin Laden as the head not only of the Taliban but also of an amorphous group of people who appeared to be the enemy, both at home and abroad. This war was named in memory of those who had tragically perished in New York, in Shanksville, in Washington, and on the planes—who became instant citizens and patriots by virtue of

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a sacrifice they never intended to make and could never speak about. Next in the hierarchy came those who died saving others, beginning with the firefighters, all of them persons who also could not testify to the meaning the events held.

Some of us living and working in New York raised the following question: How did the views of those most directly affected, and who therefore had something potentially valuable to say about the country's response, relate to the rollout to war? Did New Yorkers agree with the growing national consensus that government retaliation was warranted in the time frame in which it occurred? And finally, how did New Yorkers differently affected by the attacks make meaning of the events in light of the strong international community that links New Yorkers to the rest of the world? In a national context that treated September 11, 2001, as an exceptional event that resisted any serious attempts at historical analysis, how would the events of the day become history in the place where they occurred and had the greatest impact?

Our idea was simple in its intent. Like Herodotus, we placed great value on the stories of those who lived through the events that histories are written about. We believed this approach particularly important in a culture that increasingly mass-mediate memory and, therefore, the accounting of political events.¹

Project Origins and Methodology

The first suggestion for a major urban oral history of September 11 came from the New York City historian Kenneth Jackson, who asked me as the director of Columbia University's Oral History Research Office to speak to his class on New York City. He urged his students to help the research office launch a major project to capture responses to the events. I contacted the provost of Columbia, Jonathan Cole, about the possibility of securing emergency fieldwork funding, and he enthusiastically suggested I collaborate with the interdisciplinary sociologist Peter Bearman, who used biographical analysis in his research. Together Peter and I wrote a proposal for the project and received funding from the National Science Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Columbia University to create the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project. The project was conceived longitudinally, using life history as a primary methodology that would result in three hundred interviews in the first year; the same people were to be followed up on in the months or years to come.

We wanted to allow those we interviewed to begin by telling their stories of origin, move through their life history to September 11, 2001, and construct a story of the events and their aftermath based on their own identities and values. The project's intellectual purpose, defined in the days after the attacks, was to explore the myriad ways that September 11 became history in the life stories and eyewitness accounts of those we interviewed:

The purpose of the first wave of the effort is to document the early interpretations and experiences of the event through life story interviews before “official” versions of the story defined by the media, government, and private and public institutions take hold. Oral history is founded in the knowledge that people and societies organize meaning through the construction and telling of stories, and that cultural and individual stories often revolve around events that are perceived as “turning points” in history, particularly in situations where public meaning is contested.

Because stories provide the most fundamental bases for self-understanding, contestation over the significance and meaning of the World Trade Center/Pentagon tragedy is taking place now through the generation and diffusion of stories from individuals differently positioned with respect to the tragedy. At some point, in the not too distant future, collective interpretations of the bombing will emerge that will highlight some narratives and eclipse others. It is likely that those with greatest access to media and to official channels of decision making in public and private spheres will have the greatest power to describe the lasting impact of the tragedy, repositioning not only our understanding of a quintessential city, but a nation in a time of already great transition. The purpose of this project is to extend the power of interpretation of the events of September 11, 2001 to individuals in New York City whose stories provide critical perspectives on the immediate and lasting impact of the terrorist attack and its cultural, economic and political legacy.²

Bearman, an heir to the intellectual legacy of Paul Lazarsfeld, a sociologist who first wrote about the impact of mass media on society, was keenly interested in the role of media in the construction and telling of stories. His expertise in training interviewers to approach people in public places to make initial contacts allowed us to find interviewees with broad and diverse networks. These networks and other contacts resulted in nearly two hundred interviews in the first six or seven weeks following the events. Among those we interviewed were people directly affected by the attacks, including about 170 eyewitnesses, survivors, rescue workers, volunteers, and others who lived or worked in relative proximity to the towers; 50 of them worked at the World Trade Center. We also interviewed people throughout New York City, at a more distal location to the events, who were affected by the economic and political aftermath.

From the perspective of creating a diverse archive that would grow over time, we also realized that we had the unique opportunity to capture the memory of New York City in a way that would reveal the particular tensions between memory and history that was already evident. As I wrote in 2002, “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. . . . As a result, debates over the relationships between memory and history, and between individual and collective memory, often remain abstract and theoretical.”³ Given the opportunity to collect such a rich and diverse set of voices, we intended to create an archive that would stand the test of time.⁴

To extend our outreach as widely as possible, we obtained funding to hire interviewers who had the knowledge and language skills to work in Latino, Muslim, and Arab communities. We also committed ourselves to interviewing those whose work was affected in the aftermath of the events: artists, public health workers, business people, psychologists, teachers, lawyers, and service workers throughout the city and its boroughs.

The thirty interviewers we directed were assigned to conduct ten interviews each, to mitigate trauma, and to encourage in-depth encounters. The interviewers were either experienced fieldworkers trained in oral history, journalism, or sociology or received training before they began their work. The interviewers exhibited skill and creativity in their interventions in the field, met weekly to encourage one another in their work, and played a significant role in defining the ways that project objectives were achieved. The interviews we conducted in the first five to six weeks after September 11 were often compressed, as people could only focus on the trauma of the event itself, but by November 2001, our interviewees often talked for two hours or more, relishing the opportunity to ascribe meaning to experiences that were complex and difficult to talk about with friends or family members. From the beginning, our work transcended the limits of pure historical research and emerged as project documenting public meaning and memory.

The September 11, 2001, Narrative and Memory Project grew in scope, and by the end of the first round of our work—roughly within a year—we had interviewed close to 450 people. We returned to 215 narrators to reinterview them beginning eighteen months later. We also used the method of life history to interview people in the second round, allowing the interviewees to choose new aspects of their lives to talk about or to return to themes and topics they had discussed earlier. Some returned to a discussion of the events of September 11, elaborating on its individual or collective impact; others used the time to talk about their lives without reference to September 11, which made for an interesting finding in itself.

By the end of our fieldwork in 2005 we had conducted 665 sessions with people in the longitudinal project and had completed three additional related projects resulting in more than six hundred full interviews totaling more than one thousand hours.⁵ By the end of our work we had interviewed over fifty Muslims and sixty Latinos. With the exception of Mexico, most of the first generation immigrants we interviewed came from countries in the Middle East and South Asia. We also interviewed about thirty artists whose material conditions for work and forms of artistic expression were influenced by the events. The majority of the interviews,

transcribed and edited, are now available for consultation at the Columbia University Oral History Research Office.

Everyone we interviewed received a transcript of the interview and was given ample time to review and correct it and to give open access to all or part of the interview immediately or at a future point in time. Most of our interviewees were grateful for the opportunity to reflect on their interviews before committing them to an official archive. This occasion to review and edit interviews is not given in journalistic event-centered oral history projects that are commemorative and curatorial in nature. In the oral history project directed by the National Memorial Museum, to complement and extend the number of StoryCorps interviews of September 11 that will be stored there, one of the first questions asked is “Where were you when our homeland was bombed?” This question perfectly exemplifies a leading question that defines the meaning and purpose of the interview, before the interviewee’s (note, not narrator’s) story begins.

Findings

“The Event”

One of the most striking findings of our work, based on a careful reading of all the interviews conducted in 2001 and 2002, was that the majority of those we interviewed across political, national, cultural, and ethnic lines of difference did not agree with the official description of their experiences, namely, that used to rationalize a war on terror. As Rameen Moshref Javid claimed, “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.”⁶ Javid’s life experiences, which included his training as a soldier in Kabul to fight the Taliban (then supported by the U.S. government), would understandably lead him to question the designation of a single day’s attacks as a war. But we found a similar resistance to the characterization of 9/11 as an ultimate geopolitical catastrophe in many of the interviews we conducted, both before and after October 7, 2001 (when the first U.S. bombings of Afghanistan began). For our interviewees, this often meant rejecting the prominent constructions of meaning about the attacks perpetuated in the mass media, for example, the analogy with Pearl Harbor. Especially those who fled for their lives down the steps of the towers, often having to leave others behind, and who witnessed the carnage at close range were offended by a comparison between the massacre they lived through and an attack on a military base.

The majority of New Yorkers we interviewed experienced the events as an almost random civilian massacre, one that had symbolic overtones. The word *surreal* was the single term most frequently used, and it expressed the unreality of September 11 as a historic marker, even as that marker was used to legitimize the deaths of civilians in Afghanistan. The formulaic linguistic tropes contributed by the media to describe the attacks contributed to the sense, omnipresent in our inter-

views, that an Armageddon had occurred and had to be avenged in kind. The use of the term *ground zero* to describe the impact of the towers' explosion in Manhattan, when it originally described the horrific impact of a nuclear bomb detonated by the United States on Hiroshima, proved particularly toxic. One could read from it that the epicenter of ultimate terror had shifted to New York City. Similarly, *9/11* quickly became the shorthand for what was being treated as one of the most exceptional days in recent world history, eclipsing September 11, 1973, in Chile, for example, when Augusto Pinochet's coup led to Salvador Allende's death and the exile of more than two hundred thousand Chileans. These antihistorical terms evidenced the fusion of nationalism and patriotism under the umbrella of U.S. empire.

The towers, and their absence, became the focal point of the nationalistic imaginary about the events. The continued dissemination of images of the towers collapsing expressed injury to the nation, in which the experiences of those on the ground in New York, Shanksville, and Washington, D.C., and of those who lost loved ones on the planes were wrapped into one synchronized story. While many of the New Yorkers we interviewed mourned the destruction of the towers and the loss of life that occurred, they most feared a future in which other innocent people like them would be harmed. Concretely, they expressed despair over the probability that an expansive war on terror, fought in their names, would unleash more terror at home and abroad. This worry took two forms. First, a number of interviewees feared that Muslim citizens would suffer the same kind of internment that Japanese American citizens had suffered following Pearl Harbor. Second, and as suggested above, almost all of those we interviewed were either opposed to or ambivalent about a rush to war both in 2001 and in 2003.

One antiwar story that stands out in its nonpartisan character is that of James Dobson, a paramedic who was one of the last to leave before the second tower collapsed: "I'm more of a pacifist than ever. I said — and I'm a Republican — because what I saw that day, the devastation, I could not basically see us doing to other people. Life is too cheap then; it doesn't mean anything, and there's no reason for it. These people did not attack me, Jimmy Dobson, or the American people per se. They attacked the corporate world."⁷ Dobson's perspectives on the misuse of his suffering to launch what he felt was an illegitimate war were conditioned by the general lack of respect accorded the paramedics, who were treated as second-tier rescuers in relation to the firefighters. But especially fascinating is his interpretation of the attack as corporate in nature, and his refusal to want his experiences used in the same meaningless way. While we did not specifically ask people for their political opinions on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, many people, like Dobson, found little personal meaning in the media and government rhetoric around sacrifice and suffering.

On a political level, many of our interviewees, including first responders, resisted the grafting of their experiences onto a highly symbolic, and narrowly patriotic, narrative focused on those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Firefighters, police,

paramedics, ironworkers who helped with search and rescue, and others told complicated stories of running to survive, sometimes at the expense of others.⁸ The nationalistic promotion of the ideal of citizenship as the heroic loss of life, while useful for a government preparing to recruit its soldiers for a prolonged war, did not fit into the structure of the life narratives of most people we interviewed. That so many New Yorkers actively protested the war itself in the days and weeks after September 11 seems to have escaped the rest of the country, but it constituted an active form of mourning as well as a cry for humanity on the part of those who had themselves suffered.

In sum, people in New York City contested the collective understanding disseminated by official sources that a global war on terror constituted a necessary outcome of the September 11 attacks. This became evident both during our first round of interviews and during the second, when the United States was preparing to invade Iraq.

The Aftermath

A second major finding in our work was the degree to which Muslims, Arabs, and anyone who appeared to be the “enemy,” including nonnative citizens, were persecuted in the aftermath of the events of September 11.



Incidents like this August 22, 2010, demonstration against the Park 51 Islamic cultural center near the World Trade Center site in New York City have made many Muslims, Arabs, and others feel they are being cast as the enemy at home. Credit: David Shankbone

The work we did in Muslim, Arab, and Sikh communities revealed a striking level of fear about the loss of a sense of belonging in the “beloved community” that they had migrated to find. Often the parents’ generation expressed this fear more directly than did the younger generations of immigrants. A case in point is two interviews we did with Pakistani immigrants: a father who worked in one of the World Trade Center towers and a son who was at an appointment in the other. Zaheer Jaffrey, the father, had to climb down seventy flights with a cane to survive. His son, Salmaan, arrived by subway at the scene to go to an appointment in the other tower, emerged, and saw the large gaping hole in the building where his father worked and believed, for several hours, that his father had died.⁹ The father did not describe the event itself as tragic, but mourned his son’s loss of identity in the aftermath (Salmaan shaved his beard and would not leave the house for weeks for fear of being targeted).¹⁰ This was a typical narrative we found among older Muslim, Arab, and Sikh immigrants, many of whom had fled war and conflict to bring a sense of security to the next generation, those, in effect, now seen as potential terrorists. The fear affected not only service workers but professionals at all levels. Inder Singh, a Sikh professor of anatomy and dentistry for decades at New York University, was troubled by the uninformed fear of Sikh citizens in the aftermath.¹¹

Stories of detention and deportation echoed throughout the narratives of Muslim communities in Queens, in particular. We interviewed a taxi driver whose uncle ultimately died in detention of unknown causes. While we could not directly interview those detained, or those who had been deported, we interviewed lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Center for Constitutional Rights, and diplomats in New York and Washington who recorded human rights and civil liberties violations against those formerly protected. An atmosphere of suspicion, both subtle and direct, affected ordinary people, both citizens and refugees, far more profoundly than we could record at the time, but Ann Cvetkovich’s article in this issue describes these effects.

For those who now appeared to be “the enemy” at home, New York City transformed from a site of refuge and belonging into an epicenter of fear. The climate of fear, even trepidation, was palpable and of great concern to many New Yorkers, who felt pride about their city’s history of welcoming immigrants and refugees. While we had defined the scope of our outreach in the early days of our work and thus did not record the full impact of the backlash against Muslims or those of Middle Eastern or South Asia descent, these trends bear further investigation in New York City and throughout the country.

The interviews conducted with Latino immigrants and refugees also reflect this profound sense of dislocation, as reflected in reports from Robert Smith, a researcher working in Mexican and Dominican communities. As a first trend he noted in his interviews the simultaneous and conflicting emotions of belonging and alienation experienced by these immigrants. Many of them expressed their sorrow

for and sympathy with the victims of the attacks and their families, empathetically expressing that they could have been the unlucky ones. Some went even further and said that they felt more “American” and more “like a New Yorker” in the wake of attacks that had targeted everyone. Yet even in the immediate interviews conducted within two weeks of the attacks, this tremendous sympathy coincided with a more critical stance on the United States and a willingness to find the causes of the attacks not just in the minds of “evil doers who hate America,” as many said, but in U.S. foreign policy throughout the world.¹² These interviews, conducted by Mexican researchers trained by Smith, allowed people (from dishwashers to undocumented students) to offer historic interpretations of the September 11 attacks that many others felt too fearful to express.

A second trend Smith and his researchers explored was how the September 11 attacks, the anthrax attacks that followed, and the U.S. government’s reaction brought into sharp relief the in-between status of both documented and undocumented immigrants. Undocumented Mexican immigrants, for example, were besieged with calls from their relatives in Mexico to come back and to save themselves from what they believed to be an imminent and massive biological attack on New York. “Don’t die for your bad job in the United States” could sum up this sentiment, one reinforced by Spanish-language television in the United States and in Mexico. Some Latino immigrants directly affected by the attacks did not find the responses by U.S. institutions either helpful or appropriate. For example, many of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) volunteers came from the Midwest and did not understand New York. One interviewee reported feeling humiliated by a FEMA worker who repeatedly reprimanded the woman for not speaking English after thirty years in the United States but did not really try to find someone to help her. (The woman in fact did understand some English, but she could not speak well.)¹³ Finally, the reactions of the city, state, and federal governments to September 11 made many immigrants feel unfairly targeted and insecure. Those interviewed objected both to what they saw (and what was reported on Spanish-language television) as the wholesale roundup of anyone looking Arab and to their being lumped into a suspect category because of their lack of documentation.

In these and other interviews done in the second round of our work, and later in 2004 and 2005, patriotism emerged as the most complex historical theme we investigated, and it begs for an intensive analysis in future readings of the interviews, particularly in relation to the nationalist framing of heroic sacrifice both in New York City and elsewhere.

What Role Does History Play in the Aftermath of Catastrophic Events?

The different ways in which the meaning of the September 11, 2001, events have been written into a national collective consciousness, on the one hand, and revealed in an urban oral memory, on the other, lead to several important questions.

To what degree do we, as scholars and citizens, bear a responsibility to provide a historical accounting of catastrophic political events that acknowledges the life stories and worldviews of those most directly involved? Should we continue to place our faith in those geopolitical experts who have vested interests in maintaining U.S. power at any cost? Can we continue to rely on those government and media sources that first did so much to build a national consensus to go to war in Afghanistan and then uncritically employed manufactured evidence to justify the invasion of Iraq?

This leads us to ask a prominent question in writing the history of an event broadcast more widely than almost any previous event in the world: If official government and media sources were exaggerated or falsified, where do historians turn ten years later—and one hundred years from now—to write the history of September 11, 2001? To whom, other than the lawyer advocates who documented the case histories of illegal attacks on innocent Muslim and Arab Americans, do they turn to in an effort to fully evaluate the aftermath?

In chronicling an event that has been treated as a turning point in U.S. history, one that rationalized two invasions and a wholesale war on terror, the task of historical interpretation that Herodotus would expect lies before us. Meanwhile—as the number of innocent civilian casualties of violence or famine rises and as the terrorizing of citizens and refugees at home continues—the news from New York is that many of the worst fears of those we interviewed have been realized.

Notes

1. The work of Brigitte Nacos, particularly *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), proved extremely helpful in interpreting the complex relationships among the mass media, the government, and policy makers.
2. Peter Bearman and Mary Marshall Clark, “The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project,” proposal, September 2001.
3. Mary Marshall Clark, “The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project: A First Report,” *Journal of American History* 89 (2002): 569–79.
4. Our interviewers were also conscious of this goal, and they often began their interviews with statements like “your interviews will be listened to and read forty and fifty years from now.” Documenting the present, they asked the narrators they interviewed to imagine themselves as key historic actors in framing the way in which history would ultimately be written, rather than as victims of trauma.
5. In addition to the 450 interviews conducted for the longitudinal project, the Oral History Research Office received funding from the New York Times Foundation to conduct 67 interviews with professionals responsible for the crises that followed the attacks and worked with the School of Public Health to archive 34 interviews with professionals in the field of public health. Additionally, we were funded by the New York Times Foundation to start a public oral history project, called *Telling Lives*, that was constructed to strengthen vulnerable communities and to teach mainly youth oral history to strengthen their capacity to interpret September 11 and other traumatic events. This program resulted in two after-

school programs and a major initiative in two Chinatown middle schools that encompassed semester-long in-class programs, completed in partnership with the New York University (NYU) Child Study Center. The New York University Child Study Center (CSC) was founded in 1997 to treat children with psychiatric disorders, conduct scientific research, and influence public policy. That work resulted in two exhibits in Chinatown through a partnership with the Museum of Chinese in the Americas (MoCA). We also partnered with MoCA, the CUNY Graduate Center, and NYU to complete an online oral history project interviewing Chinese American leaders about the impact of September 11 in Chinatown. See “Ground One: Voices from Post-9/11 Chinatown,” 911digitalarchive.org/chinatown (accessed March 1, 2011).

6. Reminiscences of Rameen Moshref Javid, the Columbia University September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, Oral History Research Office Collection, session 1, 15; interview by Amy Starecheski, November 8, 2001.
7. Reminiscences of James Dobson, the Columbia University September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, Oral History Research Office Collection, session 1, 39; interviews by Ed Thompson and Gerry Albarelli, March 6, 2003.
8. These stories only started appearing in the press in the spring of 2002.
9. Reminiscences of Salmaan Jaffrey, the Columbia University September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, Oral History Research Office Collection, session 1, 33; interviews by Gerald Albarelli, December 3, 2001, December 4, 2002, and June 21, 2001.
10. Reminiscences of Zaheer Jaffrey, the Columbia University September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, Oral History Research Office Collection, session 3, 92; interviews by Gerald Albarelli, November 14, 2001, December 4, 2002, and June 24, 2005.
11. Reminiscences of Inder Jit Singh, the Columbia University September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, Oral History Research Office Collection; interviews by Amy Starecheski, January 20, 2002, and March 2, 2003.
12. Robert Smith, portion written in Mary Marshall Clark, director, Oral History Research Office, “Rockefeller Foundation, Final Report on September 11, 2001 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project,” 2005.
13. *Ibid.*