

The Museum as Ventriloquist
The Use of Oral Histories in the National September 11 Memorial Museum

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SLIDE 1

“Museums are morphing. Once they were chroniclers or collectors, gathering objects and facts and putting them on display. Now many have become crucibles: places where a cultural identity is hammered out, refined and reshaped.”

-- Ed Rothstein, *The New York Times*, July 20, 2006

SLIDE 2

This presentation is based on the plans for the National September 11 Memorial Museum. The museum will open in September 2012, so the paper is based on a visit to the Preview Site, nearby offices, and a discussion with one of the oral historians on the project. I was privy to some audio clips that are being prepared for use in the museum, and I have studied the website, from which the slide images are taken. These visits were with my cohort in the Oral History Master's program at Columbia University. My thoughts about the Museum are inherently speculative as the museum plans are in process.

The National September 11 Memorial Museum bears the great responsibility of **making meaning** out of the events of September 11, 2001. As Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz stated in their essay on the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, commemorative objects are attempts to create a uniform narrative around events that may be contested, and also may be an effort to unite a polarized public with disparate views.ⁱ The design, flow, and content of the monuments at Ground Zero in New York City implicitly and explicitly tell an official, national narrative of this traumatic event. In this paper I examine the collection and use of recorded voices in the September 11 Memorial and Museum as a lens to critique the personal, political, and ideological framing of narratives around September 11.

SLIDE 3 (explain the “narrative historical” wing.ⁱⁱ)

SLIDE 4

“The Museum journey will begin, in a chamber of memory.” the website of the 9/11 Memorial and Museum states.ⁱⁱⁱ Whose memories are chosen, and what they are saying indicates the intended audience for the museum, as well as the larger intentions of the museum. There is a multilingual audio recording of people recounting where they were when they saw the *televised* collision of the airplanes with the World Trade Towers and the subsequent fall of the towers. Primacy is given to the national and international televised eyewitness on September 11, 2001, which, according to a museum curator, was 30% of the world.^{iv} Others have called 9/11 the most televised event in history, though it is difficult to find accurate statistics. The website further explains the use of these many international witnesses: “This experience will affirm that while the attacks occurred on American soil, the impact reached every corner of the globe.”^v The use of sound from televised accounts of the attacks on the World Trade Towers, along with disembodied transnational accounts, layers the national and international geopolitical space over the actual space where the towers fell.

The use of voice clips in this introductory space (and throughout the exhibition) gives the illusion of the personal, while actually de-contextualizing and disembodimenting the story and the storyteller. An oral historian at the museum told me “we pull quotes from hundreds of sound recordings and the media to help push the narrative forward, so there is no, or very little, museum voice.” Pulling the stories out of the embodied and narrative context of the teller creates what Alessandro Portelli describes as “the

reconstruction of a collective, and therefore anonymous, experience.”^{vi}

SLIDE 5

In her article, “Trauma Ongoing”, Ann Cvetkovich discusses the problem of excerpting and condensing interviews of 9/11, isolating the trauma to the event alone. Her astute critique argues for the use of longer oral histories. She says, “it is important that the archive of September 11 become something more than the reification of the traumatic moment, something more than ... [the] repeated image of the planes hitting the buildings. Oral history can help break out of that potentially obsessive focus because it documents the process of people making meaning out of a rift in their lives.”^{vii} The 9/11 Memorial and Museum seems to be stuck in this obsessive focus on the singular moment and day both for national and ideological reasons.

The political ideological framing of “Ground Zero” is enforced on the website, where Mayor Bloomberg can be heard stating, “We were attacked, not just New York, but America and freedom-loving people everywhere.”^{viii} Bloomberg’s statement implies that the museum therefore caters to all global “victims” of hatred. This statement may serve the populist stage of a politician/ In addition, Mayor Bloomberg sits as Chairman of the 9/11 Museum Board and wants to construe the largest possible audience for this museum.^{ix} (In contrast Historian Ed Lenthal discusses that there were no politicians involved in the creation of the memorial for the Oklahoma Bombing.)

NATIONAL NARRATIVE: The desire to conceive of all museum-goers within the trauma narrative, as national “victims” of September 11 is actualized throughout the plans for the museum. Echoing Bloomberg’s quote, the oral historian at the museum told me “we are all survivors of 9/11.”^x The flow of the “Narrative Historical” wing of the museum focuses on the chronology and isolated events of September 11, 2001 and its’ immediate aftermath. The ways in which the visitors listen and receive the audio fragments frame them within the trauma narrative: Visitors are invited to hear sound bites of the experiences of those who directly witnessed and lived through the collapse of the towers, and even to hear the voices of the victims. One such clip is an emergency call by someone on a higher floor of the towers who was killed in the towers later collapse. These voices convey a level of humanity which could be more powerful than graphic visual representation. Disaster psychologist Grady Bray said “the auditory materials in the museum convey the vulnerability of victims, which is easily transferred to the visitor’s loved ones.” This has the possibility of a false mirroring of the grief and loss of the family members of the victims, for educational purposes. Furthermore, since the visitors are framed as survivors, the relative lack of places in the conceptual architectural plans of the narrative wing for rest or emotional support is remarkable. The experience of listening to such traumatic portrayals, without adequate space for intervention and dialogue may even newly traumatize visitors.

SLIDE 6: Memorial wing, memorial hall

There is an apparent contradiction in the narrative framing of the “victims” of September 11 in the museum. While in the Narrative Historical Wing, all visitors seem to be positioned as victims (they are

standing on the site of the towers and hearing from or about the dead), in the Memorial Wing, there is a very particular conception of who is a victim and who is memorialized on this site. The pictures and names are those who are verified through sometimes intensive processes as having been killed in the buildings or the planes. The implication is that the positioning of the visitor as victim in the Historical Wing is to serve pedagogical purposes, while the purpose of the Memorial Wing is to do just that, serving the purpose of remembering and honoring for family members or survivors. Historian Ed Lenthal discusses the push-pull between the pedagogical imperative and the narratives and needs of family members or survivors as being a central one to the creation of the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, as well as in the Memorial of the Oklahoma Bombing.^{xi} Perhaps the split wings is an attempt to embrace the many interests and imperatives. However, the ambiguity in the casting of the “victim” in the museum and memorial is indicative of an ongoing struggle on many levels about the meaning, and to make meaning of September 11, 2001.

SLIDE 7

The images and audio narratives in the Memorial Wing are short three to five minute character descriptions and stories, some conducted by Storycorps, about the deceased. These short stories serve to give some context to the dead, and are an emotional and innovative way of personalizing a memorial. However, these interviews do not give the story of storyteller, those who lived and witnessed 9/11, Instead, they serve as a witness to the dead. On thursday I spoke to a facilitator of the storycorps booth, who said that while most people come with a partner to the storybooth, these

people who are sent over by the museum to record for the memorials often come alone. Their families do not want to go through the trauma of hearing the story. It is as if their imagined partner are the dead. In the narratives are the unproblematic tropes of the war hero, the national heroes of 9/11. It is an emotional eulogy, heard and seen in images, and other digitalized ephemera. I am curious to see how this audio component of the memorial is received by the larger public, it could be quite moving as a new form of memorial.

Whose stories are told, serves the ideological, political, and personal purposes of the Museum. But which stories are told and how they are elicited shows the methodological, and ethical ethos of the museum. These interviews are a kind of curatorial oral history, and may not be oral history at all. The museum oral historian stated, “she has her tricks,” to stop interviewees from telling “a canned narrative.”^{xii} There is an ethical problem in calling an oral historian’s tools “tricks”—which indicates deception on behalf of the historian.

“In an interview,” she says, “I am thinking of what this person is saying, and what they need to say, and I know what we want and what we need. And then there are specific curatorial concerns, like I know one section we are going to create is a listening space about the paper” she gestures as if her fingers were little bits of paper, “the paper flying everywhere. So someone will have shared their story and they might not have mentioned it, and I’ll say, can you tell me about the paper? And they’ll have to go back and tell me about the paper.”

This kind of questioning to fulfill the curatorial needs of the museum could be seen as fabricating memory. Certainly this method of oral history interviewing and later excerpting does not seem to be acknowledging the agency of the narrator, the meaning they make of the event within their lives, or the intersubjectivity and influence of the interviewer.^{xiii} The audience's understanding of the oral histories is reduced to their clipped content alone, and since there is no presence of the interviewer, there is assumption that they are of primary importance to the narrator.

Perhaps we will only truly be able to analyze the ethics of the oral histories included in the museum when they can be heard in their entirety and made available to the public. But as is, the audio clips used in the proposed 9/11 Memorial and Museum are used to ventriloquise the curatorial voice. The museum voice is heard in as a disembodied and anonymous voice to support the conception of September 11 as an international event in which every "freedom lover" is cast as a survivor. The Memorial speaks through the voice of loved ones, also seen as survivors, to honor the fallen "heroes" and victims of the World Trade Tower attacks. The ambiguities in how these voices are used implies larger fissures in the ongoing meaning of September 11 in personal and public memory.

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ⁱ Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past," *The American Journal of Sociology* 97, No. 2 (1991), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2781381>, 376.

ⁱⁱ "Museum Planning, Conversation Series Report," in http://www.national911memorial.org/site/PageServer?pagename=New_Museum_Planning, ed. National 911 Memorial Museum (New York 2008 – 2009), 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ National September 11 Memorial and Museum website, "Introductory Exhibition," http://www.national911memorial.org/site/PageServer?pagename=New_Museum_Exhibitions.

^{iv} Jenny Pachuchki, National September 11 Memorial and Museum Presentation, Sept 30, 2010.

^v National September 11 Memorial and Museum website, "Introductory Exhibition."

^{vi} Alesandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997)*.

^{vii} Ann Cvetkovich, "Trauma Ongoing," *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*. Ed. Judith Greenberg. 65.

^{viii} National September 11 Memorial and Museum website, "The MEMO Blog," <http://blog.national911memorial.org/?p=3768>.

^{ix} In contrast Historian Ed Lenthal discusses that there were no politicians involved in the creation of the memorial for the Oklahoma Bombing.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5784992>.

^x Jenny Pachuchki, National September 11 Memorial and Museum Presentation, Sept 30, 2010.

^{xi} Edward T. Lenthal, "The Predicament of Aftermath: Reflections on 9-11 and Oklahoma City" (presented at the The Resilient City: Trauma, Recovery and Remembrance, MIT, April 29, 2002).

^{xii} Jenny Pachuchki, Presentation.

^{xiii} S.E. Chase & C.S. Bell, *Interpreting the Complexity of Women's Subjectivity*. In E.M. McMahan & K. Lacy Rogers (Eds.), *Interactive Oral History Interviewing* (pp. 63-81). Hillsdale, New Jersey Lawrence Erlbaum.