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The Battle Over Memory: The Contestations of Public and Familial Narratives in Remembering 9/11

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Abstract: On September 11, 2001, the four plane crashes marked the three sites of trauma that, to this day, sit in the heart of United States history. The paper examines the contested and often conflicting public and familial narratives at sites of memory and the recurring themes behind commemoration narratives. Drawing on newsletter articles and seven interviews with members of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows and The Peace Abbey, the paper concludes that national and public remembrances of 9/11 adopted a top-down approach that has repressed familial remembrances in three main ways: by glorifying the victims, co-opting the version told of 9/11 stories, and erasing distinct voices that did not fit the national narrative. By contrast, familial remembrances of the victims built a bottom-up approach to memorialize 9/11 and its victims that valued the holistic representation of their lost loved ones in remembrances.

Introduction

Four days after what President Bush referred to as “evil, despicable acts of terror,”¹ Orlando and Phyllis Rodriguez, who lost their 31-years old son in the 9/11 tragedy, wrote the letter “Not In Our Son’s Name.”² The letter contradicted the deterministic war narratives that prevailed in the national discourse. Instead of the publicly emphasized need to again “[stand] down the enemy”³ without situating the attacks “as an object of historical knowledge,”⁴ the Rodriguez family expressed their distress of bearing the thought that their son’s name alongside the many other victims who were killed on September 11th, 2001 would be then turned into the fuel for the United States to declare acts of war.

In February of 2003, a protest involving over 500,000 participants consisting of family members of victims, peace activists, and supporters echoed the same sentiments as Orlando and Phyllis Rodriguez.⁵ Family members carried signs that read, “NOT IN OUR SON’S/DAUGHTER’S NAME,” “9/11 FAMILIES AGAINST WAR,” and those that prompted a similar call challenging the collective national memory of the trauma, which focused on inciting horror and retaliation that has now become a vital part of the history of New York and the United States in general.

The collective memory surrounding September 11th has remained contested, unresolved, and constantly in flux. Considering the conflicting narratives that were present, the immediate call for the building of memorials to commemorate the victims had to inherit that very

¹ “Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation.” Office of the Press Secretary. September 11, 2001. Accessed on May 11, 2023.

<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>.

² Orlando & Phyllis, Rodriguez. “Not in Our Son’s Name A Plea to the President.” Accessed on May 11, 2023. <https://changeagent.nelrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Not-in-Our-Son%E2%80%99s-Name.pdf>.

³ “Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation.”

⁴ Lucy Bond, *Frames of Memory after 9/11: Culture, Criticism, Politics, and Law* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 13.

⁵ Peaceful Tomorrows, “United for Peace and Justice,” 9/11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, November 27, 2013, <https://peacefultomorrows.org/stories/united-for-peace-and-justice-2/>.

contestation of collective and familial memories. “‘Rebuilding the site,’ as architecture scholar Christine Boyer has prophesied, has turned into a ‘battle over images and lost opportunities’ as much as ‘about material form.’”⁶ This paper asks the following questions: “For what audience are these memorials at sites of trauma designed?” “Are these commemorations and sites of memories⁷ a place for grief or retraumatization?” “To what extent are the voices of family members (symbolic survivors) of 9/11 incorporated in the building of memorials?” “What do family protest and self-constructed memorials symbolize, and how do they differ from publicly displayed memorials?”

In this paper, I examine the narratives constructed in public 9/11 sites of memories and explore the sentiments and reactions of family members towards these sites to suggest how contested narratives situate themselves in the memorialization of 9/11 and its victims. Drawing on newsletter articles and interviews with members of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows and The Peace Abbey, this paper concludes that in the battle over 9/11 memories, national and public remembrances adopted a top-down approach when forming a narrative of the event. As a result, they have repressed familial remembrances in three main ways: by glorifying the victims, co-opting the version told of 9/11 stories, and erasing distinct voices that did not fit the national narrative. Familial remembrances of the victims, by contrast, built a bottom-up approach to memorialize 9/11 and its victims that valued the holistic representation of their lost loved ones in remembrances.

⁶ Ekaterina V. Haskins and Justin P. DeRose, “Memory, Visibility, and Public Space,” *Space and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2003): 377-393, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331203258373>.

⁷ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>.

9/11 and the War on Terror

The crashing of planes into the World Trade Center towers on September 11th *officially* marked the start of the War on Terror initiated by President George W. Bush. The administration adopted what Lucy Bond described as the rhetorical proliferation of trauma culture to maintain a hegemonic narrative surrounding the event. Bond argued that the surge of media coverage, literature, and political claims had depoliticized 9/11 and portrayed the event as singular, incomprehensible, and requiring the need to “fight back.”⁸ Thus, the war inevitably became a dominant component that contributed to the collective memory of 9/11. This often led to the blurring of the national and familial remembrances in media coverage, with seeming support of war rhetoric from family members who called for building memorials solely dedicated to the victims. However, these media coverages frequently overlooked how the space for memorialization has been shared between the two parties and the power dynamics at play.

After Bush initiated the War on Terror, the memories of 9/11 quickly shifted from ones that centered on personal tragedy to ones that constituted a nation-oriented geopolitical struggle. The memories expanded from the lost loved ones to narratives that pinpointed the “innocence” of the United States before the tragedy and the following wars. Media coverage of 9/11 has often been conflated with discussions on war strategies. Consequently, the public sites of memory adopted a narrowly defined patriotic and nationalistic approach to reinforce the idea of an innocent and exceptional America and how its collective cultural identity had been targeted by 9/11 and “terrorist” ideologies. The conflation and the following shifting scale of 9/11 memories point to how the public narrative has imposed itself upon the personal and familial memories using a top-down approach that served the national purpose instead of one that constructed a more accurate remembering of those who were at the sites of trauma.

⁸ Bond, 10-14.

Glorification: “In whose name?”

Immediately after the event, the sites of tragedy (mainly Ground Zero, Pentagon, and Shanksville) experienced a surge of public memorialization that continued every year after with their popularization as new tourist destinations. However, the question remained: “What was the collective narrative told at the public memorialization?” Although the sites of the tragedy remained where family members go to memorialize the victims, many families who suffered the loss of loved ones felt stressed and unwilling to participate in the ongoing public commemorations of 9/11 victims in war sentiments. Andrea LeBlanc, a September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows member, recalled, “It was very distressing to...see all the flags waving because they stood for something very different from what I thought the American flag represented. It was all about going to war... little dialogue about what we might be responsible for.”⁹ The presence of the flags came as less of a surprise considering the proliferated rhetoric that echoed how “America was under attack.” At the same time, the national representation adds to the relation between 9/11 commemorations and the national agenda by highlighting its political and symbolic function while further conflating the personal with the public memories.

The distress highlighted the patriotism and glorification of victims that dominated the 9/11 sites of memories, directing the symbolic nature of these sites to serve as a justification for military actions under the nationalist notion of “fight for your country.” The extension of patriotism by situating the flag (vehicle of collective identity) within the sites of memories is then further imposed onto the victims. The mix of nationalist sentiment and the memorialization of innocent loss under Bush’s excessive push for aggression against the Middle East absorbed the victims into the “national cause.” As Sandra Bodley remembers, in the earlier version of *United*

⁹ Andrea LeBlanc, in discussion with the author, April 2023.

93, the film closed on the note to honor “our warriors who started the War the Terror”¹⁰ in remembering the victims. Again, this glorification of victims into “warriors” who “actively” participated in the following War on Terror deprived the individual will and familial remembering of them, a trend that overshadowed the discourse on 9/11. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that the victims in public sites of memorials are frequently remembered not simply as “heroes” but as “*American* heroes and warriors.” The distinction being the latter implies a national sense of war. As Amy Sodaro writes of the mediated and national portrayals of the event, “[They] encourage the public to strongly identify with the 9/11 victims as embodiments of the American cultural identity that was targeted by the ideology of the terrorists.”¹¹ This single-sided remembering aimed to establish the symbolization of the 9/11 victims as the ones who sacrificed under a full-on war initiated by “Islamic extremist groups.”

Similarly, patriotic rhetoric remains prevalent in the current 9/11 sites of memories. In the 9/11 Memorial Museum’s *In Memoriam* exhibit, the walls are lined with photographs of the victims and artifacts of commemorative objects. There were clothing, instruments, family souvenirs, military badges, etc., framed outside the open-styled, darkened room where the profiles of the victims and quotes from their family members have projected all around. It was evident in the museum that many narrated rememberings referenced the militaristic glorification of victims in the artifacts exhibited and the quotes printed. The portraits and individual stories at the sites, although claiming to be a personal account of the victims, “were being put to work in the cause of a patriotic momentum... None here cheated on her spouse, abused his children, or was indifferent to community activities... The notices seem formulaic... regimented, even

¹⁰ Sandra Bodley (member of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows) in discussion with the author, April 2023.

¹¹ Amy Sodaro, “Prosthetic Trauma and Politics in the National September 11 Memorial Museum,” *Memory Studies* 12, no. 2 (April 2017): 117-129, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017720257>.

militarized, made to march to the beat of a single drum.”¹² In the 9/11 museum and media coverages, those killed were *American heroes*; they are remembered by the idea that they were the first fighters in the geopolitical tension, namely, “the United States under ‘terrorist attacks.’”

Co-optation: “Under what memory?”

The collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11 circulated on the front pages of media coverage and was the first image that most of the public would recall from the event. As Marita Sturken noted, the recurring “spectacular images” played a significant role in weighing a narrative that focused on the “spectacular destructiveness” of the trauma instead of the individualized and personal rememberings of victims.¹³ In my recent observation at the site, most visitors glanced passingly at the names and took turns taking tourist pictures while standing in front or sitting on the edges of the memorials. US flags and flowers left in the stone carvings became complementary aesthetic objects for photo compositions, significantly losing their symbolic significance for memorialization. More visitors stood in amazement at the massive memorials and the Post-9/11 buildings instead of reading the names and descriptions along the sides.

The narrative in the 9/11 memorial and museum at Ground Zero can be described as “reliving the tragedy.” Images of explosions, debris from the actual event, and played recordings of victims’ last phone calls became vital to the immersive experience the public memorials incite. The massive number of visitors crowded the exhibitions, causing anxiety and suffocation that resembled the sentiments on the event day. In the museum, “actual personal memories are precluded because, even in these individual accounts, there are *only* perpetrators and victims; only us and them; only a world comprising individuals for whom there is “before September

¹² David Simpson. *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 23-24.

¹³ Marita Sturken, “Tourism and ‘Sacred Ground’: The Space of Ground Zero,” in *Tourists of History Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 165-218.

11th” and “after September 11th”; only a ceaseless process of collection rather than a work of mourning.¹⁴ This binary was simultaneously imposed onto the familial remembrances too.

Phyllis Rodriguez expressed in the interview, “The atmosphere of the country was...either you agree with the President, or you are a traitor or terrorist sympathizer.”¹⁵ This binary, therefore, emphasizes that there is only one narrative and only one definition of being patriotic.

The familial accounts of the victims have been co-opted at the sites of these public memorials as they overshadowed and constructed the life stories of those who died on September 11th, 2001. Instead of a place to exchange the memories of the victims, these public sites persistently reminded the family members, visitors, and the world that they were first and foremost victims and that 9/11 and death are at the epicenter of all their stories. Interviewed family members expressed how the inclusion of personal attributes (name carving, profiles, artifacts) all could not fully reflect their loved one’s life because it memorialized them as victims and not for the entirety of their lives. The family members wanted to remember the victims by what they loved and not how they died. The emphasis on the generalized victimhood documented at these sites of memories leaves little to no room for full familial rememberings.

Furthermore, the encroachment on familial memories was echoed extensively in mainstream media, a vehicle of memory. The massive media coverage of statements on various anniversaries pushed for finding closure. For instance, six years after the tragedy, the New York Times published an article that incorporated Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s call for people to “go forward,” supporting examples from relatives of the victims who “didn’t see anything else [they]

¹⁴ Sarah Senk, “The Memory Exchange: Public Mourning at the National 9/11 Memorial Museum,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 48, no. 2 (2018): 254-276, <https://doi.org/10.3138/cras.2017.029>.

¹⁵ Phyllis Rodriguez (member of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows) in discussion with the author, April 2023.

could do but go forward.”¹⁶ Similarly, a year later, the India Times published a piece on the seventh anniversary that included the subtitle “Pentagon Memorial’s Opening Brings Closure for Many.” Nevertheless, throughout the article, there was no reference to how family members perceived or brought up the notion of closure.¹⁷ In fact, family members claim that closure is a stage that will never come.¹⁸ Instead, the family members absorb such memories and sentiments into their lives. The aggressive nature of these co-optations that infiltrate the familial memories becomes problematic as the site of memories becomes one that biasedly serves a national purpose rather than one that fully incorporates the personal and familial rememberings of victims, losing a significant part of their function to hold a place for familial commemorations as memorials.

Erasure: “Of whose voice?”

During the building of the 9/11 memorial, the committee in charge reached out to September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, asking the family members to provide a square for the quilt they planned to build. Peaceful Tomorrows requested a square to remember the undocumented people killed at the tower but never acknowledged. However, the committee, as one interviewee recalled, “wanted none of that.”¹⁹ The erasure at the public commemorations is political, targeting anyone who does not fit in the collective narrative of the innocent United States and the justification for the War on Terror. Public speeches and mediated information on

¹⁶ Diane Cardwell. “Bloomberg Tries to Move The City Beyond 9/11 Grief: Accord Over Ceremony Searching for a Balance Between Recalling and Rebuilding.” *New York Times*, Sep 11, 2007, <https://proxy.swarthmore.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/bloomberg-tries-move-city-beyond-9-11-grief/docview/848054011/se-2>.

¹⁷ “7th Anniversary of 9/11; Pentagon Memorial’s Opening Brings Closure for Many.” *News India - Times*, Sep 26, 2008, <https://proxy.swarthmore.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/7th-anniversary-9-11-pentagon-memorials-opening/docview/367628532/se-2>.

¹⁸ Andrea LeBlanc, April 2023.

¹⁹ Name of the interviewee intentionally kept anonymous out of consideration for their privacy and safety.

US news media platforms failed to acknowledge the victims' diverse ethnicities, classes, and identities. They had often generalized all those killed as US citizens. At the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 event, Mayor Michael Bloomberg said, "We must also share with them the beautiful memories of the loved ones we lost and of the incredible examples of courage we witnessed on that day." While the implication of "we" has effectively illustrated the assumption that all victims belonged to one category, Arnold Schwarzenegger made the American assumption more explicit, "Let us remember the tragedy but also the triumph of the American spirit...And let us return to the solidarity all Americans felt following those terrorist attacks."²⁰ The assumption that all victims are under the American identity hindered a more ethnically sensitive, culturally aware, and familial remembrance of the victims; instead, their stories either appeared as one of the many or were not included. By excluding those who did not fit the "innocent American citizens" rhetoric, the public sites of memories could mask the political tensions among those killed in the tragedy.

Although the generalized assumption of "American victims" pertained to the center of the 9/11 discourse, among the "American victims," a hierarchy of remembering and grief has been established in these public sites of memories.²¹ Victims are commemorated to different extents at the public sites of memories, with the prioritization of rescuers at the top and the undocumented and unclaimed at the bottom. The hierarchy is meant to reinforce the heroic sentiments that glorify the victims and the broader American identity they are generalized under. Therefore, the erasure of those lost ones who did not fit the heroic and patriotic rhetoric is deemed as deserving

²⁰ "VOA News: Americans Commemorate Victims of 9/11 Attacks." *US Fed News Service*, Sep 11, 2006. <https://proxy.swarthmore.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/voa-news-americans-commemorate-victims-9-11/docview/472727267/se-2>.

²¹ Elizabeth Miller (member of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows) in discussion with the author, April 2023.

less commemoration at the public sites of memories. Conflated with the hierarchical structure in these memorials, the familial remembering of those that fall under the less prioritized are more prone to be neglected and disregarded in the memorials. In the After 9/11 section of the 9/11 museum exhibit, most familial commemorative artifacts, especially cards made by the victims' families, included US flags and military badges that the victims had. In my observation, there is the prevailing sense in the exhibition that many of the killed are and had long been patriots and fighters for the country and that they continued to do so in the event of 9/11.

Unsurprisingly, the political act of erasing also prevailed in the public memorials by depoliticizing the “perpetrators” and the “enemies.” Near the end of the historical exhibition, a few small rooms had a very minimal description of the rise of al-Qaeda and their 9/11 plan. The less than 7-minute film that was central to this section has five sections: Militant Islamists (1970s-1980s), al-Qaeda Emerges (1980s), al-Qaeda Strategy Evolves (1990s), War Against the US (1998-2000), and The 9/11 Plot (2000-2001). The limited information it provided devalued the need to discuss the broader political intention behind the attacks and failed to bring the historical scenes into play. The museum has been “criticized for not doing enough to distinguish al-Qaeda from Islam... and the museum’s use of phrases and terms like “fringe elements of Islam” and “Islamist” to describe al-Qaeda might indeed conflate Islam and terrorism in the minds of some visitors.”²² This latent “Islamophobia” was, in fact, one fear the members of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows held. Right during the event, when the attackers’ identities were still undisclosed, Sandra Bodley recalled how she had hoped that the attackers were not Muslim so that the tension would not escalate this quickly.²³

²² Sodaro, 124-25.

²³ Bodley, April 2023.

Towards Remembering

The contestations surrounding remembering 9/11 marked the distinction between public and familial rememberings. The glorified, co-opted, and selectively erased memories exhibited in the public sites of memories imposed a top-down approach towards remembering the victims nationally but simultaneously misrepresented and limited the presence and reflection of familial remembrance. John McGovern, who lost his loved one at the age of nine, expressed in the interview that he felt hesitant to share his personal experiences and perspectives that differed from the public voices growing up.²⁴ Families have avoided going to public 9/11 memorials due to the fear of being a part of national war rhetoric under the victims' names.

The crowded and political sentiments proliferated in every public and national discourse have retraumatized family members and those who shared the lived experience of the event instead of creating a site for grief. Elizabeth Miller, the Project Director and former Exhibition Coordinator at the 9/11 museum, underlines, "A lot of the individuals who go to the 9/11 museums...are not native New Yorkers... [they] were like 'we lived through this, and there is no reason for us to go through the museum.'"²⁵ Similarly, family members have lived through the experience of losing loved ones that they could never forget. The incomplete profiles exhibited, mediated coverage on television, public calls for finding closure, etc., have made familial grief more difficult to grapple with, contrary to its "intention" for memorialization. Phyllis Rodriguez echoed in her interview, "Media kept retraumatizing people... buildings being hit...of the people running and screaming. We got rid of our TV. Even commercials refer to [the event]."²⁶ The

²⁴ John McGovern (member of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows) in discussion with the author, April 2023.

²⁵ Miller, April 2023.

²⁶ Rodriguez, April 2023.

collective national narrative and its focus on the traumatic significance had perpetuated the retraumatization of those who shared proximity with the victims.

Understanding how the national narratives do not sufficiently reflect the familial rememberings of the victims, therefore, makes it crucial to acknowledge what the family members consider as reflective and holistic sites of memory. Importantly, nuances were present in the familial opinions on the War on Terror that can be spotted in the different protests during the construction of 9/11 memorials. However, the families frequently resonated and agreed with what should count as a more familial remembering of the victims and asked for the truth and reasoning behind these attacks instead of one that only remembered the war. Terry Rockefeller expressed her frustration, “[Initially], the government response was not to have a 9/11 commission...but it took not Peaceful Tomorrows members but just 9/11 family members to... demand that the 9/11 commission be organized.”²⁷ Drawing on responses from the September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows members, three themes of familial memory: familial settings, continuity, and entirety, stood out compared to the more public and national memorialization.

Familial Settings

In the interviews, when asked “what was considered a more familial remembering”, all the family members pointed to the proximity shared in the sites as central to the remembrance of their lost loved ones. While some have and still participate in public commemorations held at national memorials, they all underlined how full familial rememberings occur in specific familial settings. The Rodriguezes described how their family would gather at Christmas and talk about

²⁷ Terry Rockefeller (member of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows) in discussion with the author, April 2023.

their lost son. They would look at his childhood photographs and, importantly, situate him in the familial sphere instead of a public one that encompasses the generalization of all victims.²⁸

Other interviews echoed similar sentiments. Families believe that these familial sites of memory provide a more accurate snippet of the victims' lives, one that extended beyond the scope of 9/11.

Moreover, in the opinion of family members, places with more familial settings better served and reflected familial rememberings. In the 2020 anniversary, the family of Christopher Faughnan organized and hosted their own 9/11 memorial for their loved ones. Colorado Daily reported, "The gathering, which involved Facetiming family members who couldn't be there, was followed by a family picnic." The intimacy shared in this familial setting of family gatherings and "sending messages filled with loving words up to him by releasing balloons"²⁹ indicates how the familial settings are central and effective as they incite a stronger bond and allow the family members to grieve and commemorate the victims more holistically.

Continuity

At the public sites of memory, the victims are frozen on September 11, 2001, a day that "marks" the end and the most highlighted part of those killed. There is only before 9/11 and 9/11 in the narratives that centered on the victims. However, the familial rememberings hope to dismantle that distinct categorization of the lives of their loved ones. Family members would go to victims' favorite sports events and imagine what comments the victims would give if they were still there.

²⁸ Phyllis Rodriguez, April 2023.

²⁹ Jennifer Rios, "Family Hosts Own 9/11 Memorial for Fallen Husband, Son and Father," *Broomfield Enterprise*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.broomfieldenterprise.com/2020/09/11/family-hosts-own-9-11-memorial-for-fallen-husband-son-and-fat-her/>.

In familial remembrances, their focus lies on extending living memories of the victims instead of one that centers around the abrupt ending of the victims.

This continuity can be further examined by what narratives the familial rememberings hope to tell in the name of the victims. One year after the event, in the name of Michael Lynch, a firefighter killed at Ground Zero, his family started a foundation that grants scholarships to the relatives of victims who died in fires and other disasters. Jack, Lynch's father, said, "The act that killed him was evil, I felt that we had to find a good response to that evil." As years passed, the foundation continued to expand in its scope and was almost entirely run by family members.³⁰ Despite the anger and political orientation that the word "evil" implies, the familial response focuses on making a memorial and remembrance that continues to do good in honor of the victims instead of one that centers on retaliation and war.

Entirety

In contrast to the patriotic and limited public narrative that focused on portraying the perfect "innocent victims and America," the familial rememberings tend not only to recall the achievements and honors the victims have received but also the challenges and harshness their loved ones experienced. In the film documenting the Rodriguez family, the familial remembrances they shared at their gatherings not only entailed 9/11 but the obstacles and achievements their son met growing up.³¹ These details might not be useful for the public to contribute to its determined narrative, but they are crucial to the families as they encapsulate the victims more fully and reflectively. The familial memorialization challenges the single-sided war rhetoric and tries to push for the centering of victims' lives as a whole, providing a more accurate

³⁰ Colin Moynihan, "9/11 Scholarships Are a Family Memorial," *New York Times*, March 22, 2010, <https://proxy.swarthmore.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/9-11-scholarships-are-family-memorial/docview/1458371785/se-2>.

³¹ *In Our Son's Name*, directed by Gayla Jamison (2015), Online.

version and countering the co-opted versions told at the public sites of memories through a bottom-up construction of the life stories of their lost loved ones.

Building Memorials from the Bottom-Up

The World Trade Center memorial competition was launched two years after the event in 2003 and opened its memorial planning process to the mass public. As a part of the required element, the guideline asked all the designs to reflect the historical and social context of the World Trade Center building.³² The guideline led to the need for a delicate balance between remembering the victims and survivors and situating the design in the context of its surroundings. On the same note of situating 9/11 in a broader historical and social context, the “Unknown Civilians Killed in War” Stonewalk took a different route. In the peaceful movement, The Peace Abbey and September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows members joined forces to pull the one-ton stone from Boston to New York City. At the gatherings along the way, “people [who lost their loved ones] would come out and put their hands on the stone and [told] a story... beautiful stories, some very sad.”³³ Many stories were shared of their lost ones and how the family members remembered them in their hearts present at the Stonewalk. The gatherings were a place where individuals' stories constituted a larger picture of not only the event but also of mourning for the victims and the grieving families.

The differences between the World Trade Center memorial and Stonewalk become evident when examining how the victims' individualized stories are situated in these sites of memory. In the World Trade Center and other public monuments, the proliferation of trauma culture *encompasses* stories that create a sense of tragic loss and patriotism. Whereas at the

³² “World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition Guidelines.” Accessed on May 11, 2023. <https://www.911memorial.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/2003%20april.28%20LMDC%20Memorial%20Guidelines.pdf>.

³³ Dot Walsh, in discussion with the author, April 2023.

gatherings of Stonewalk, sharing stories that collectively *build* familial and national memories from the bottom-up facilitates the three themes of rememberings echoed in the interviews.

The collective building of memories also provides a better channel of grief. While public memorials that deployed top-down management of the two opposing sides (perpetrators vs. victims) add to the anger and support for the war, the collective building process allows family members and all participants to express their grief without the necessity to follow up with a political agenda and establishes a stronger bond of remembrance. Dot Walsh, the Program Director of The Peace Abbey, recalled a family who lost their son to the 9/11 tragedy. Immediately after the attack, the husband expressed an intense hatred toward the attacks, resonating with rhetorics present in public sites of memories. However, listening to how other family members came with significant effort pulling the stone and remembered their loved ones in promoting a peaceful world provided him a place to reflect and situate the attacks in a broader socio-political context, one that focuses not necessarily on the War and national security, but more on the civilians who are killed in these attacks and the reasons behind.³⁴ The constituting of familial rememberings through vivid individual stories thus creates a shift of focus that allows families to remember and take up space in the face of mass proliferation of national rhetoric.

Crucially, this bottom-up approach is not impossible in public-constructed sites of memories. In the Shanksville memorial, Sandra Bodley mentions tremendous family participation.³⁵ Their involvement in the planning meetings and mock-up voting contributed significantly to the more familial sentiments the Shanksville evoked than the memorials at Ground Zero, where the national rhetoric prevailed as the plane crashings in New York City is deemed more of an “attack on the nation’s heart.” Nevertheless, the example hints toward the

³⁴ Walsh, April 2023.

³⁵ Bodley, April 2023.

trend that the national top-down approach imposes itself on the familial bottom-up approach to an even larger extent in sites where the idea of America is firmly tied, shedding light on how public memorials frequently underlie the overarching theme of America and do not fully reflect these tragedies.

Conclusion

There's no sign of closure. The battle over 9/11 memories continues to date. With the help of vehicles of memories, public sites of memories overshadowed and repressed the familial memories of 9/11 and its victims as they share a different list of priorities and demands than the national and narrowly defined patriotic rhetoric. A bottom-up approach needs to be included in the planning, constructing, and commemorations of and at these memorials. The need is more than urgent in the face of mass shootings followed by the coining of children as martyrs and much more. The imposed national rhetoric needs to be carefully examined. It should not only situate itself in politics but truly reflect the holistic familial rememberings of the victims at the sites of memory. Further discussion should examine the discrepancies between familial narratives, how and when the line between the public and familial rememberings blurs, and in what direction conforming memories travel.

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