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“September 11 Memorials: Tracing the Traces of Their History.”

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Around 8:30 a.m. EST on September 11, 2001, I threw open my kitchen window to catch the morning air in Brooklyn, looked southwest towards Lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center, as I usually did, and remarked the sparkling clear blue beauty of the day. Forty minutes later I returned to the window, gazed out again, and saw the Towers in smoke-billowing flame. Hit by hijacked commercial airliners, the Towers collapsed within the next two hours and left nearly 3000 people dead. So much gone, so quickly, in the blink of my eyes. It was the beginning of a day that is not yet over.^{FN1}

Certainly the temporally traumatizing events of September 11—the attacks at 8:45 and 9:03 a.m. and the collapse of the Towers at 10:05 and 10:28 a.m.—and their aftermath of dust, fragments, traces, and ghosts engaged us all in a heightened sense of the ephemeral. For me, as a folklorist and as a New Yorker, such engagement has continued to preoccupy me both intellectually and emotionally for the past seven years. Perhaps this is the condition of my firsthand experience of September 11. I can't say. Outside the provocations of September 11, I would admit, as a point of rhetoric, the oddity of a folklorist's interest in the ephemeral. Folklore's concern is with what stays, not with what goes; with what remains, not disappears; with what repeats, not with the singular instance. We lean to the traditional, not the ephemeral.

Still, much of my own work over the past 30 years has concerned the investigation of the ephemeral in folk arts. In the 1980's, studying Texas- Mexican women's home altars, I focused primarily on the altar's traditional side: its history,

maternal legacy and aesthetic conventions.^{FN2} But I was also interested in its maker's individually creative engagement with her legacy: her assemblage of disparate images and ephemeral items—votive candles, family pictures, saints' statues, flowers, personal mementoes—into a dynamic, tactile threshold. A personally owned place, the altar not only represents its maker's desire for relationship with the divine, but also serves as an instrument for that desire, a place of momentary performances, where prayers and petitions are spoken and responded to by her divine intercessors. Such dynamism is propelled by the application of ephemeral resources: candles, flowers, photos, glitter, lights, daily gestures such as lighting votives, sprinkling holy water, counting the Rosary, praying, and conversing with beloved saints. Women's home altar traditions are exemplary of the intersection between ephemeral linguistic, gestural, and material means for ritually receiving human benefit from divine resources. Ritual quickly expends and repetitively uses its resources and is in effect a highly refined application of ephemeral performatives for achieving relationship with unseen powers, of accessing the eternal via the ephemeral.

Domestic altars of the south Texas kind share in a broader folk Catholic *topos* of yard shrines, pilgrimage shrines and grottoes, graves, and roadside memorials--all artfully expressive human made markers indicating the intersection of temporal and eternal interests. Mexican folk practice exemplifies in particular the way sites of contact with the deceased—altars, gravesites and memorials—mark the attempt to retain relationship to, and memory of the dead. Not surprisingly, these are also places of profound engagement with ephemerality. The Mexican grave confronts the living with the fleeting materiality of the body—with remains: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. But just as well, the grave provides the opportunity to battle death's finality with material signs and ritual gestures: markers, stones, flowers, Days of the Dead and other holiday celebrations, messages, regular visits, prayers.^{FN3}

Ephemeral Memorials

All of the above-mentioned traditions—altars, gravesites, and so on—are historically old and deeply rooted in codified familial and community practices based, for the most part, in institutional religious affiliation. Their ultimate appeal is in gaining assurance of the relationship between the human (alive or deceased) and the divine, but they also serve as places where the living may remain symbolically or spiritually in contact with their deceased.

Related to these, but significantly different, a new manifestation of memorial traditions has emerged in the past three decades in the United States and elsewhere. In the wake of tragedies both great and small, national and local, we have seen the rise of what folklorist Jack Santino names "spontaneous shrines," what the *New York Times* and other media refer to as "makeshift memorials," and what I generally call "ephemeral memorials." I use Santino's "spontaneous shrines" interchangeably with "spontaneous memorials" to refer specifically to those that arise in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy. They are a special case of the "ephemeral memorial," which also includes, for example, the premeditated memorial constructions brought by family and friends to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Made anonymously and reutilizing what once were the primarily private, formalized means of remembering our personally known dead, these new memorials create secular sites of public mourning. A combination of ready materials—candles, flowers, photos, mementoes—they are vehicles for immediate response to tragic circumstances and the loss of individuals, many of whom the memorial makers never personally knew. In the sense first identified by psychologist D.W. Winnicott (1951), ephemeral memorials are "transitional objects": they exist to allow the transit from grief to mourning, from incomprehensibility to some version of understanding. Testifying to the widespread emergence of this memorial phenomenon, Santino's collection

Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death (2006) provides a range of interpretive approaches to what he suggests constitutes a new “genre of mourning ritual” (2006:2).

Grief, like the spontaneous memorial, is meant to be brief. In what is conventionally understood as the healthy course of things, grief should soon turn into its more civilized counterpart: mourning. Mourning rituals are formal performances of accepting death, but grief's performance is without formality, without acceptance; grief is a cry, a wail, a howl, a flowing of tears. Grief is in, and of the body. The fragility and fleetingness, the individual expressiveness—even the messiness—of the human body is matched by those memorials, which quickly rise in its tragic absence. Because they perform grief in material expressions and physical gestures, they are, in a sense, ephemeral analogs of bodies; they are symbolically composed of the ashes of the dead and the tears of the living.

Remembrance is a performance of memory. Immediately after the crisis of death, ephemeral memorials promote the task of remembrance. They provide the first objects of eventual memory, and even though their performance fades with time, then disappears, they initiate a way to look back across the gap between the present and the past. Fabricated out of ephemeral materials and ready-mades, these new memorials bear certain of the material and symbolic features of personal religious altars—candles, flowers, images, mementoes—but their impulse is wholly secular: they are foremost about solidarity and connection with other humans, not with the divine. They are about comfort and longing: often enough their central “icon” is the teddy bear, and their central image is a photograph of the deceased. They are about immediacy, not longevity. They fill the gap that opens in the difficult conversion of grief to mourning. This gap imposes a sense of liminal emptiness, of estrangement from time's flow from past to present to future. Such estrangement is unspeakably hard to bear and so these memorials are about “right now,” the present, and present need.

Where once a period of appropriate visual abstinence and respectful public silence was observed before the private funeral was held, or before the public monument was raised years later, ephemeral memorials speak of a collective unwillingness to wait for formal ceremony or monumental edifice. They visibly announce a populist desire for emotionally engaged and immediate public performance of grief and loss. In purely temporal terms, though, they also stake a claim on the future. Where random and sudden death interrupts the course of logic and prediction; where a break has occurred with the reality we believe is ordained, or at least expected, memorial making acts to combine ephemerality with tradition in a gesture towards recovery through remembrance, through attachment to the past in hope of a future.

On September 11, a mass contagion of grief resulted in hundreds of spontaneous shrines in New York at neighborhood firehouses and police stations; at Union Square, Washington Square Park, Lincoln Center Plaza, Columbus Circle, and Grand Central Station; on the Brooklyn Promenade, with its once-stunning views of the Towers across the East River; on house stoops and street corners throughout the city; at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.; in the fallow field at Shanksville, PA; across the entire country; and around the world. The spontaneous shrine phenomenon reached a performative pinnacle in the overwhelming magnitude of September 11 memorials that came up across the city and elsewhere within 48 hours following the attacks. But September 11 memorials participate in a lineage of vernacular mourning expressions that can be traced over the past 30 years or more. In the interest of constructing a detailed chronicle of the practice, I offer the following brief genealogy, and invite the response of readers to help in creating an even more refined timeline.

A Genealogy of Ephemeral Memorials

In 1999 the street where he had lived in Lower Manhattan became impassable, so great was the spontaneous memorial outpouring for John F. Kennedy, Jr., who had

died with his wife and sister-in-law in an airplane accident. But nothing similar to this outpouring occurred in Dallas, or anywhere else, in 1963 after the assassination of his much more famous father, President John F. Kennedy. In between these tragedies a sea change in memorial practices had occurred.

My informal research places first evidence of this new custom in the United States in Manhattan on the night of December 8, 1980. As news spread of the murder of John Lennon outside The Dakota apartments, where he lived with his wife Yoko Ono, shocked New York fans of the musician began gathering at the site bearing pictures, flowers, candles, and singing farewells. Immediately and spontaneously the apartment entry became a point of contact between the dead hero and his living public, who materialized and discharged their grief in gifts of ephemera. That night, so many distraught fans congregated, Yoko asked them to move across the street to Central Park. She called for a public vigil in the park on December 14th, attended by thousands. The ephemeral accoutrements of mourning came with them and makeshift shrines appeared in force throughout the area. These early shrines were likely helped into being by available John Lennon/ Beatles merchandise (album covers, John dolls and so on) that fans had on hand and by the proliferation of a photo-copied picture of Lennon wearing a New York City t-shirt. The photo gained icon status in the emergent memorials. In 1981 the park area they gathered in was officially named Strawberry Fields. It became the scene of an ongoing Lennon memorial site, active to this day, especially on his birthday and the anniversary of his death.

What precedes the Lennon memorials of 1980 is approximated in the outpouring of tribute at the "graveside shrine" of Jim Morrison, the Doors lead singer, who died of a drug overdose in Paris in 1971 and was subsequently buried at Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris (Thomas 2006: 17-22).^{FN4} I recently visited Père Lachaise and was moved by the many current ephemeral memorials attached to the tombs of queers, marginals, and iconoclasts including Morrison, Oscar Wilde, Colette, Edith Piaf, and Marcel Proust.

Attesting to a long-term devotion, regularly replenished ephemeral means appeared to be keeping past lives—some gone for over 100 years—active in contemporary memory. If, as Jonathan Lohman suggests, cemeteries became controlled sites by the turn of the twentieth century (2006: 200; see also Hass 1998; Senie 2006), and as Hege Westgaard further suggests, the spontaneous, anonymous shrine is a healthy antidote to the tabooing of grief (2006:166-169), these Parisian graveside shrines, especially Jim Morrison's, help explain the crucial John Lennon moment of 1980 quite well: the time was right for the 1970s Morrison phenomenon to jump the graveyard and the Atlantic in a slightly new form, further breaking the taboo against public grief in the name of another musical and political iconoclast.

From the early 1980s forward, the phenomenon of ephemeral memorials has repeated. In the United States, it was given primary impetus by the completion in 1982 and soon thereafter the spontaneous reutilization of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Much has been written about this national monument which instantly became, and still is, a profound meeting place between the personal and political and the ephemeral and traditional. With the exception of flower wreaths laid at them on official commemorative holidays, war monuments have not historically served as interactive mourning sites. The bereaved are rarely seen at these monuments, which do not invite remembrance of the individual soldier. Rather, they stand for the permanency of the empire or nation-state, recognizing only the sacrifice of the many to maintain its sovereignty.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial brought a status change.^{FN5} The individual deaths carved into its black granite surface retained their uniqueness because family and friends commanded an informal process of communicating this by communicating with them. Leaving ephemeral signs and symbols (flowers, candles, written messages, flags, and personal effects such as military medals, photos, items of clothing and much

more) on the walkway in front of their loved ones' names, praying, crying and storytelling there, the living "spoke" to their dead.

Here was the beginning of a counter-monument movement privileging the ephemeral to ignite the task of symbolically holding the memory of individual soldiers at a standard higher than, or at least in consort with official memory of the war itself, a war troubled by years of protest against it, a war that was never won, a war that divided the nation, opening a gap between official and unofficial sentiments regarding it. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial underscores what Santino says is crucial for a general theory of spontaneous shrines as they have evolved from other expressions: "...the conjunction of the memorializing of personal deaths within the framework of the social conditions that caused those deaths, ..." (2006:5). Simpson calls the ephemera left at the Memorial "second order commemorations" (2006:77) whereby people take charge of meaning at this public site and create their own sense of history. Ephemeral modes—self-organization, assemblage, accumulation—fragmentation lend organic flexibility to this process. All the parts are *not* filled in; there is room to grow meanings of remembrance, also room for them to disappear, be replaced, or renewed.

During his lecture in New York in 2002 on points for consideration in designing the World Trade Center memorial, landscape architect Paul Morris (a consultant for the permanent memorials commissioned for Mt. St. Helen's, Columbine, and Oklahoma City) noted that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial changed future considerations of how official United States memorial monuments are to be understood and used. Morris says that memorials "are now about the living as much as they are for the dead."^{FN6} Mourners, especially victims' relatives and friends, become actively involved in advocating their establishment immediately following a tragedy. This new sense of advocacy is spurred in part by the same emotional urgency and democratization that drives the creation of spontaneous memorials.

The 1980s era proves to be critical in addressing and redressing public and national trauma in arenas additional to Vietnam. Public expression of empathy for once-forgotten, denied, or erased historical trauma begins to rise. Marita Sturken (1997) emphasizes that in this period, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and the AIDS epidemic all start to be recognized in memorial monuments and museums, the national AIDS Memorial Quilt, and so on. Native Americans also began a process of revisiting and reclaiming historical sites of trauma such as Wounded Knee.^{FN7} While praising Sturken's approach for the legitimacy it brings, Ann Cvetkovich, speaking of AIDS activism, suggests that "it also mutes the critical and oppositional force of the more marginalized forms of activism..." She calls for a focus that "aims to illuminate a counterpublic memory that has a more critical relation to the more prominent national representations of AIDS..."(2003:162).

Such counter-public memory is lodged, for example, in the way HIV/AIDS memorials were used creatively as sites of healing, remembrance and protest during the early years of the American AIDS crisis. By the mid-1980s, as the disease ravaged urban gay communities in New York and San Francisco, portable memorials were included as part of mock funerals, sit-ins, and Gay Pride parades. In part a transposition of the countercultural impulse felt at Père Lachaise, Strawberry Fields, and at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, they also signaled what Michael Moon calls "the specifically queer energies" at work in the experiences of mourning related to AIDS deaths in the gay community. Moon declaims, "I invoke the social in the face of a predominantly privatized, heterosexualized, teleologized and 'task-oriented' conception of grieving and mourning." (quoted in Muñoz 1999: 67). This "invoked social," more particularly an "aesthetic process," (Ibid. 68) included making and maintaining memorials.

My own experience of this era suggests that the ephemeral memorial arts were learned by mourning men from their lesbian and feminist friends, who since the early 1970s had been reclaiming and reinventing the usefulness of personal altars to

address secular crises of both a political and individual nature. These women taught their gay friends to make altars at home, first as sites of healing, then, too often, as memorials. [FN 8] Also influential in this period was the unusually wide dissemination beyond its culturally specific locus, the secularization, and later the commercialization, of Mexican *Días de Los Muertos* (Days of the Dead) *ofrenda* (altar) traditions brought north in the late 1970s and early 1980s by activist Chicana artists such as Amalia Mesa Bains and Kathy Vargas.^{FN9}

It is worth considering that many of the early adopters of secular ephemeral memorials were marginals, outcasts, immigrants, radicals, and artists. This cursory account points to a confluence of cultural strategies in the 1980s resulting in new possibilities for response to tragedy. These were in turn directly influenced by intersecting social, cultural, and popular reforms of the 1960s and early 1970s. Liberation movements--civil rights, women's, gay, Chicano, and Native American--gave rise to, among other reforms, an increasing sense of religious democracy. One result of this shift was the formation of neo-traditional religious communities founded in earth-based, elemental ritual and ceremony. New religious traditions were formulated with available means: ephemeral fundamentals of the earth itself (water, air, fire, earth) sufficed as sacraments. Simultaneously, radical changes in art practices including Pop Art, Happenings, Earth Art, women's political and autobiographical art, street art, altar art,^{FN10} and numerous other politicized "schools" of that era facilitated a more expansive use of ephemeral materials, including the re-contextualization of vernacular religious imagery and objects in secular productions and performances.^{FN11}

As I suggested earlier, the stage was set by 1980 for the emergent period of the ephemeral memorial as we know it today. Grounded in a new sense of religious democracy and the expansion of public arts, the practice was in its florescence by the mid- 1990s, playing a central part in a much wider public response to tragic celebrity deaths, exemplified most notably by Princess Diana's demise in Paris in 1997, and the

deaths resulting from a marked increase in domestic, school, and political violence. Spontaneous memorials took on an ever more important role in response to the murders of government workers and their children at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 and of innocent students at Columbine High School in Denver in 1999. The accidental collapse of the Texas A&M bonfire, also in 1999, killed twelve students, bringing rupture and sorrow to that campus community which notably responded with elaborate shrines dedicated to each of the dead, as well more typical fleeting memorials.^{FN12}

The mid-1990s forward to the present also records the rise of anonymous urban memorials recognizing sudden individual deaths at the sites of violent gang encounters and urban traffic accidents. Here in New York City, since at least the end of the 1990s, the *New York Times* and *The Daily News* have published numerous photographs depicting the "makeshift memorials" intermittently erected in the five boroughs. The notable increase in these expressions over the past ten years is due at least in part to the local media attention they have received.^{FN13} They were already news items before September 11 and their place in the daily spin likely lent New Yorkers' some familiarity with the memorial practice as they performed it after the attacks. "Makeshift memorials" join the older urban tradition, memorial walls, the work of Puerto Rican, Mexican, and other graffiti and mural artists, begun as early as 1988 in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Antonio, and other cities.^{FN14}

This genealogy, though certainly ripe for further consideration, sets the ephemeral memorial phenomenon in broad context suggesting that, taken together, these movements, reforms, and practices produced a cultural shift in the understanding of who owns the symbolic means of religious and spiritual expression, especially as it pertains to meeting the existential problem of tragic death.^{FN15} Such ownership shifted in effect from the church to the streets. Freeing certain symbols—the cross, the Buddha, the hand of Fatima, the votive candle—from their ecclesiastical assignments affirms an

unspoken but shared understanding of their meanings and human usefulness. An ephemeral "folk religion" of flowers, candles, photos and teddy bears makes a powerful claim for remembrance and honor lodged in the fragile beauty of that which must disappear.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at a forum "Memory Matters—Responses to September 11: Images, Artifacts, Words 1," held in conjunction with the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society in Rochester, New York, October, 2002. A longer version will appear in a special issue of Western Folklore, edited by Diane Goldstein.
2. See Turner (1983); (1990); (1999); and (2007).
3. For additional sources on the Mexican American folk Catholic *topos* of death and remembrance, see Turner and Jasper (1987) and Everett (2002). Holly Everett's (2002) work on roadside shrines in Texas effectively moves away from cultural specificity towards phenomenology in her useful discussion encompassing cross-cultural appropriation and transmission of this tradition. Given her treatment and my own experience of this tradition in Texas, it is perhaps the roadside shrine--by virtue of its visual accessibility and potential for appropriation, no less its beauty and easy recognition as a token of remembrance in the face of death--that more than any other form in tradition models for ephemeral memorials. Like ephemeral memorials, roadside shrines are what Everett calls a kind of "self-assigned grief work....The construction of memorial assemblages has allowed them [individuals] to incorporate their memories of,

and abiding affection for, their loved ones into the everyday life of their families (Zimmerman 1997:5, cited in Everett 2002). Simultaneously they have sustained the community ties the deceased may have had in life by (re) creating a public site which friends may visit anonymously and quickly..." (2002:99).

4. See Thomas (2006: 19-22) for her efforts to distinguish a subset of spontaneous shrines she refers to as "graveside shrines."

5. Useful sources on the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial include Bodnar 1994; Lin, et al. (n.d.); Sturken (1997); Hass (1998); Lin (2000); and Simpson (2006).

6. Quoted from a lecture delivered by Paul Morris in Spring 2002, part of a series of public lectures sponsored by the Lower Manhattan Development Council (LMDC) to stimulate discussion and public opinion in the early stages of planning for the memorial at Ground Zero.

7. A growing body of scholarship on monuments and memory makes clear that in the late 20th century the Western world entered a new phase of public discourse and practice concerning the meaning and social usefulness of monuments and memory sites. See, Young (1993); Sturken (1997); Hass (1998); Levinson (1998); Norkunas (2002); Nelson and Olin (2003); Simpson (2006).

8. Turner (1983 and 1999) on feminist and lesbian altars; and Magliocco (2002 and 2004) on neo-pagan altars and practices. On gay men's spirituality and HIV/AIDS and healing practices see, Conner (1993) and Connor and Sparks (2004).

9. See Turner and Jasper (1987); Mesa-Bains (1993); Turner (1999); Wilson-Powell (2000).

10. See Lippard (1973, 1976, 1983, 1984 and 1990); Raven (1989); Gablik (1991); and Lacy (1994).

11. See Lippard (1990); Olalquiaga 1992; Turner 1999; Nunn 2002.

12. See Kear and Steinberg (1999) and Walter (1999) on the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997; and Rosenberg (1999) on the fence memorial at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing.

13. My clip file on "makeshift memorials" seen in *The New York Times* over the past ten years marks a certain shift in photographic perspective over the years: a move away from close-ups of the memorials themselves to longer shots which include people viewing or participating in maintenance of the shrine. See also Santino for his suggestive comment that because media coverage of tragic death includes the memorials, "the media helps spread the tradition" (2006:10) on a global scale.

14. On memorial walls see, Cooper and Sciorra (1994) and Zeitlin and Harlow (2001a).

15. A number of writers in Santino (2006) address the populist and democratic nature of the spontaneous shrine practice. See, for example, Owens (2006); Santino (2006); Senie (2006); Thomas (2006); Westgaard (2006); Yocom (2006); and Zeitlin (2006).

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