

Close Talking Episode #107

9/11 Poems

September 11, 2020

<https://soundcloud.com/close-talking/episode-107-poetry-and-911-part-1-responding-to-trauma>

Show Notes

(Close Talking theme music)

Jack 0:07

Hello and welcome to Close Talking the world's most popular poetry analysis podcast from Cardboard Box Productions Incorporated. I am co-host Jack Rossiter-Munley, and with my good friend Connor McNamara Stratton we read a poem,

Connor 0:21

talk about the poem

Jack 0:22

and read the poem again.

Connor 0:25

Before we get into today's selection, a quick note that if you like what we do here at Close Talking and have a spare minute of your time, it would mean the world to us, if you would give the podcast a rating and review on Apple podcasts.

Jack 0:39

Those ratings and reviews help boost us up the algorithm and find new listeners.

Connor 0:44

And if you have suggestions for future episodes or comments on this one, you could send us an email at closetalkingpoetry@gmail.com.

Jack 0:53

And you can also find us on social media on Twitter the show is @closetalking. I am @jackrossitermun and Connor is @connormstratton. On Instagram, the show is @closetalkingpoetry, and on Facebook, it's facebook.com/close talking. We also have a website, closetalking.com where you can find all of the past episodes of the podcast.

Connor 1:17

On with the show.

Jack 1:23

Hello and welcome to this all new episode of Close Talking. I am your co-host Jack Rossiter-Munley.

Connor 1:25

And I am your other co-host Connor McNamara Stratton.

Jack 1:32

And today we are breaking our usual format just a little bit. We are not in fact doing our usual read a poem talk about the poem read the poem again, because this episode is going to be coming out on Friday, September the 11th, 2020. And we thought it would be an appropriate time to look back on the poetry that has engaged with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, because those attacks were obviously huge in terms of their not just their tragic scope, but also the reverberations of impact that they had on political and cultural life in the United States. And as a result of that, the impact that they had on international affairs, and they also had a deep response, both from professional poets and well established writers. But art and especially poetry were also used by everyday people who might not necessarily describe themselves as poets. But poetry became a vehicle for processing the trauma of the attacks. So we wanted to look back at not just the poetry that came out of 9/11, but also the ways that that poetry illuminates those attacks in in new and different ways, particularly from the perspective now of 19 years looking back on, on that traumatic event.

Connor 2:58

Yeah, it's it's incredible that it's been 19 years. And that, yeah, I think I was in fifth grade when it happened. And yeah, it's been interesting. It's been a couple years now, but there's there are, you know, many people who can vote now or whatever, who are 18 who were not alive for September 11. So it's an interesting kind of, in a way, it's sort of as a as a millennial. It's a it's been like sort of a moment that I'm getting to see sort of become historicized in different ways and see my own life. Like not that I had anything like, real like connection to it, but just something that I was there for, and remember personally seeing how that sort of like put into the sort of national and international memory in the ways that you know, I can think about and read about, you know how Vietnam war or you know, World War II were kind of assimilated into the memory landscapes. But I have no you know, direct access to those those things. So, hopefully we'll kind of be it'll be yeah, in some ways, the opposite kind of episode, where instead of diving deep, although I think we will touch on a lot of obviously difficult subjects, you know, we're, we're going to be thinking about a lot of different ideas and thinking about a lot of different poems and hopefully covering, you know, a little bit from, you know, a little bit from before to the event itself to sort of like more towards the present.

Jack 5:22

Definitely, yeah, instead of bringing a lot of different things to one poem, or sort of bringing a lot of different poems to one thing. I really responded to what you said on the level of also, like, we're basically the same age, I'm a little bit younger, but, you know, it was a very formative

event in our lives to to be like cognizant of an age to, to begin to understand what was going on in the world on 9/11. And I had this sort of, slightly off kilter experience of being homeschooled at the time so I was watching the news like 24 hours a day because I also was deeply into the news.

Connor 6:02

But I was which I think you will have noticed if you've listened to a few episodes of ours. One of us is providing a great deal more context from the news field.

Jack 6:15

And also, as you noted, currently, the last time I looked at the statistics for national population, fully 25% of the US population was two years older, younger on September 11, 2001. So that's a whole quarter of the population for whom this is basically going to be received knowledge, because they won't have any actual memories of the event. And so I think, to your point of like watching this become historicized, there were a lot of narratives that came out of 9/11 that very quickly gained power and had been reproduced over the years. But I think what we see right now is the tension of whether or not those narratives will become codified into history or whether they will be problematized, questioned and have increased amounts of complexity brought to them. And that's something that's been happening in academic spaces for a while. But in the popular conversation has, in many instances gone missing. I think there's been increasing understanding of the degree to which Islamophobia became rampant after 9/11 - it was always there. It was always obvious for those who sort of had the eyes to see it. But it is something that was pushed aside in a lot of popular narratives and I think there's a growing popular understanding of 9/11 is a moment that really mobilized a lot of animosity towards Islam as a religion, Muslims as those who practice it, stigmatized people who could "look Muslim"; there was a huge uptick in attacks on Sikhs after 9/11 in New York, but particularly under the current president who is openly anti-Muslim, Islamophobic makes these statements I think there's a growing understanding of the potential through line, and the sort of dark strain that has gone unattended in popular narrative around Islam that he taps into so frequently. And so I don't know, there's a lot of different directions that I think we can go in, but I want to start probably with the before 9/11 experience, because that's where a lot of the seeds of the popular narratives and a lot of the responses that come from the attack; there's the deep trauma that is being responded to, but there's also a lot of cultural groundwork that had been laid ahead of the event itself that was then informing that response. And some of that was depictions of Arabs and Muslims in popular media in the United States, which there are a couple of great books about - I would encourage anybody to look up the encyclopedic, "Reel Bad Arabs", because it is basically a catalogue of depictions of people from the Middle East in American popular media,

Clip 9:11

the nature of stereotypes, the origin from the old printing press, one plate, cast in metal. As a result, we have rigid, repetitive images of sameness, over and over again, when we talk about perceptions of Arabs and Muslims in our culture, indeed the world because America is the foremost leader of entertainment, our films our television shows are sent abroad to more than

150 nations. And so when you see an Arab ugly here, you're seeing that same image around the world. We have to understand the impact that these visual images have.

Jack 9:57

They're almost all terrorists or evil or villains of some sort. And that kind of cultural groundwork becomes really powerful when you're trying to mobilize a nation after a trauma. And the other sort of major cultural groundwork is another kind of film thing but it's disaster movies because that was the lens through which a lot of the images of 9/11 were processed. You heard people describing the events as they saw them as though they are disaster movies. And in a lot of disaster movies, it's been pointed out again, in sort of academic circles, that what really happens in a disaster movie is usually a, a fractured fairly, heteronormative family, through the disaster is repaired. And usually it's done through the competence of the father figure. This is not 100% of all disaster movies, that's not what I'm saying, but it is a disaster genre that shows up quite a bit. And it also shows up in disaster movies after 9/11. But that is something else that has been by cultural critics at least pointed to is like laying the groundwork for 9/11, in terms of its cultural response. I think the biggest event that led into 9/11 specifically was that the World Trade Center had actually been bombed before. There was a bombing in the early '90s in 1993, and one of the poems that I came across as we were thinking about doing this episode was from David Lehman, responding to that bombing he was writing in 1996, he wrote a poem called "World Trade Center", and number one, he references a movie with terrorist attacks, Alfred Hitchcock's "Saboteur", which I recently rewatched and is a great movie that totally holds up. But he's basically talking about how he wasn't really moved by the symbol of the World Trade Center, because that was the other big symbolic terrain on which the, you know, if you want to call it the battle of 9/11 was being fought it was attacking the symbols of commerce, finance, American hegemony and economics. And what he talks about in this poem is how he came to have a different relationship to the physical structures of the World Trade Center after that first attack. And part of that poem goes, "My whole attitude towards the World Trade Center / Changed overnight. I began to like the way / It comes into view as you reach Sixth Avenue". And he goes on from there, but it's sort of this view of these wounded, resilient structures that come to take on a meaning even beyond that, which they already contained. And it was that meaning that I think many felt either consciously or subconsciously was being attacked on 9/11 itself. So there's all of this different kind of cultural political groundwork that happens and informs both the deep trauma of 9/11 and, and the response to it. That was kind of a lot of stuff.

Connor 9:56

No, that's great, though. Um, yeah, it's, it's interesting because, you know, it's, it's like, sometimes it can be easy to, you know, there's a balance between, like, you don't want to, or there's a tendency often I think, that I have in myself to like, sort of treat look at these things that happen that were like, you know, pivotal historical moments, and, you know, talk about them as if they were pre-determined or something or that the way that that it was would the way that the response would be to the event was predetermined or something like that. Um, and, you know, I think it's, it's good to be sort of wary of that, but at the same time, you know, these things don't happen, you know, out of a vacuum both in terms of like, you know, the one

one kind of thing about the event that has always struck me about 9/11 is the the kind of vacuum way the reason for it was, like, conveyed to Americans. You know, so I mean, like, and again, this is just like some historical context and explanation in 1998, Osama bin Laden attacked US embassies in Kenya, and Tanzania, and President Clinton retaliated and launched missiles on Tora Bora and Coast. And, you know, there's a long sort of history, both of like US and Western imperialism in the region and like military presence. And there's also like, with the specific individuals, like a history of Osama Bin Laden as a particular political and militant figure. But when I you know, as a kid, it was just like, there was basically no reason given, um, even though like, he, he or someone, you know, wrote a document that basically was like, this is why we did basically and it was like, in part because of US imperialist presence and as a kind of retaliation, which, again, doesn't justify it, but it does explain it and what I think is like that this the balance, you know, the one spectrum, the weird thing about, one of the weird things about 9/11 is this like, total like, because it was so huge, it it everything around it seemed like it was destined to happen or something and what followed had to happen or something, but at the same time, the sort of actual historical context that led up to it was not discussed. And so it was this like, totally aberrant thing of which you know, which allowed sort of people to put things that they wanted to put on it. But what you know, what you've identified too is that like, that even though it's not like overdetermined necessarily there are sort of cultural like things and historical things that have that that provide the the content that then when something like this happens can be used in various ways. This is like a totally lowbrow example, but before in Biggie Smalls song "Juicy" which came out in 1994, he has a great line, "Time to get paid blowing up, like the World Trade". Which I remember thinking, wow, that really aged badly because he wrote this before 9/11, but in a way, it was always aged awkwardly because it was, you know, came out a year after the first attack on the World Trade. But it does, you know, as you were saying, like there, I mean, not to read too much into Biggie Smalls, but it that the buildings were the kind of, had a kind of like, you know the capitalist symbolism which which made them like you know, potent targets for you know, like yeah.

Jack 18:49

And they were potent cultural images, I King Kong climbed them in the remake in the '70s instead of the Empire State Building, Spider Man, the Sam Raimi the first Spider Man movie, the original marketing had him hanging between them in a web before 9/11 happened, and they changed their marketing. And they were, yeah, they were really ubiquitous and powerful cultural symbols as like the one of the defining features of the New York skyline as well.

Connor 19:16

Right.

Jack 19:17

And something you said I think is so important about how all of this exists, and it's and understanding this is not a justification for the act. And for so long after 9/11, any attempt at explanation was treated as justification. Any attempt to contextualize the event was responded to by a powerful group of commentators as you are trying to give comfort to the enemy or you are on the side of the terrorists or that's not what we need to focus on right now. The really

intense focus for a lot of conservative commentators and what was also a more comfortable focus for narrative driven news, which was on tv 24 hours a day, for weeks after the attacks, was on human stories, and there's nothing wrong or bad about that. And the stories that they told are very powerful and moving about many of the people who lost their lives on 9/11 or who were struggling in it's immediate aftermath to clear rubble, or to help connect families or the various first responders who continued returning day after day after day to what became known as the pile which was all of the wreckage of the World Trade Center, which burned for weeks and weeks and weeks, and desperately searched for for survivors. All of that was valuable and important part of the story to be captured and contextualized, but what it ended up doing is having such an intense focus on the personal pain and tragedy of the event, that it failed to put that personal pain and tragedy into any sort of larger story. It took it out of history for a lot of people and it made it such a special and exceptional event that it's impossible to bring any sort of more complex conversation to it. And there's a level on which there doesn't need to be a complex conversation, there's a level of human pain that can be engaged with and accepted and understood on its own terms. But at a certain point, it becomes important for individuals and for a country as a whole to understand how events fit into their larger story. And when that doesn't happen, it can become dangerous, and I think some of that has been borne out with the history of 9/11 because you cannot remove the story of 9/11 from the wars that were started in its aftermath. The wars that are still happening today, and the thousands of American lives lost but also the hundreds of thousands and probably millions of lives lost in other countries. There was just a report that came out a couple of days ago that approximately 37 million people have been displaced because of the US war on terror. Most of which was motivated by legitimate feelings of rage and fear and anxiety after 9/11. But the electorate, and the elected officials were not necessarily acting in the best interests of the country or of the world in the aftermath of 9/11. And I think you see, the there's the uncomfortable tension there, because you don't want to downplay the tragedy when adding context and you don't want to devalue the personal stories by saying there are other stories to tell as well, it's just that there are a lot of stories and they should sit together. And I think you see some of that tension playing out in the early aftermath of 9/11 where you have kind of left wing writers offering critiques and context and wrestling with complexity and you have a very concerted push back against them, basically saying now is not the time for that. And it doesn't play out super cleanly necessarily in the poetry world because it is, for all of its multitudinous failings on inclusion of BIPOC over the years and institutionalized versions of racism that it also perpetuates, but it has been a more liberal space, certainly for this kind of political critique. And so, there are responses from a lot of poets, Billy Collins writes the names which is a very pain filled elegiac poem about those who lost their lives on 9/11. Part of it goes "Names of citizens, workers, mothers and fathers, / The bright-eyed daughter, the quick son. / Alphabet of names in a green field. / Names in the small tracks of birds. / Names lifted from a hat / Or balanced on the tip of the tongue. / Names wheeled into the dim warehouse of memory. / So many names, there is barely room on the walls of the heart." And I think that that's like such an important part. The sort of central part of the story of 9/11 is that pain and grief and the human loss. But I think it is telling that it is mostly, not entirely, but mostly white writers who are writing those kinds of poems about 9/11. Not exclusively, Toni Morrison has a beautiful piece on 9/11, where she talks about the dead and then there are also other white writers -

Diane di Prima, who write immediately about their fears of growing fascism. And there were quite a few people who in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, were concerned about the possibility for this kind of a cataclysmic or traumatic event to stoke what they knew to be latent fascistic possible tendencies in the United States. The journalist, Dale Maharidge talks about how he saw the attacks of 9/11 and he immediately traveled to basically the the "heartland", of the United States, and he wrote a book that came out two years later called "Homeland" that basically catalogued what was happening to people in the country who were daring to speak out against some of the prevailing jingoistic narratives that grew out of 9/11. But that is something that definitely infuses a lot of the poetry that came out of the event that deep trauma that individual hurt and pain, which is still felt if you talk to anybody in New York City who was around on 9/11, who lived through it. It's like it hasn't been a day, which I think is is pretty, pretty amazing.

Connor 25:51

Yeah, I worked, I lived in New York City for a couple of years, 2013 and 2015, and the the people that I worked for you know, by then it was 12-14 years after the fact. And all day on 9/11 it people were just talking about it and like yeah, it's it's and I even, it's interesting I mean, I I lived in lower Manhattan in a in a very tiny closet just just a closet mere blocks away from where the towers were. And I'm pretty sure that that there was a kind of dust in the windows of the apartment that we were in that I think was was dust from the from when the towers fell because of the way that it looked and it's it's true. And yeah, it's, um, we actually talked about an excerpt from this book a few weeks ago, but I was rereading parts of it recently and it actually touches on 9/11, Claudia Rankine's "Don't Let Me Be Lonely". And there's two excerpts, actually from it that speak to two different points of what you were talking about. One is sort of speaking to the human sort of trauma and suffering of the event itself. And, you know, basically, basically, Rankine's speaker is on the bus in New York. And Rudy Giuliani, who has played many parts in his long and illustrious life,

Jack 28:03

America's mayor

Connor 28:05

America's mayor was the mayor of New York at the time and was knighted by the Queen of England afterward, after you know, because of his response. Whatever you have to say about him, but basically on the bus in the book, two women are arguing whether Giuliani had to kneel before the Queen when he was knighted. And so then, Rankine's speaker is kind of thinking about that. And she says, "When my stop arrives, I'm still considering Giuliani as nobility. It is difficult to separate him out from the extremes connected to the city over the years of his mayorship. Still, a day after the attack on the World Trade Center, a reporter asked him to estimate the number of dead. His reply, "More than we can bear" caused me to turn and look at him as if for the first time. It is true that we carry the idea of us along with us. And then there are 3000 dead and it is incomprehensible and ungraspable. Physically and emotionally, we cannot bear it, should in fact, never have this capacity. So when the number is released, that is a sieve that cannot hold the loss Giuliani recognized and answered for." Yeah, which I

thought I mean now Giuliani is of course, a clown and a half. This sort of, anyway, um, which it's but I think, you know, and Rankine obviously, Rankine's speaker comes to Giuliani with a great deal of legitimate skepticism. But it's, I love that moment in part because the more that we can more than we can bear and how the the kind of caused me to turn and look at him as if for the first time there's such a, you know, for one it speaks to the true sort of ineffability of the event and like the enormity of what happened and but it also speaks to kind of like, the turning toward the public or the turning toward you know, public officials and you know, the government for some kind of container for this. And that the power, you know, that the right, not just the right words, but the right sort of attitude and language can like help. Not just an individual but kind of a public, carry on. That it's an incredibly powerful role. It, it reminds me I mean, it's something a friend of mine who's who's a bit, quite a bit older than me keeps saying about Trump is, and there's many things to say, but just just the fact that he hasn't acknowledged, like, the fact that he hasn't acknowledged the enormity of the loss right now during COVID. Obviously, you can't expect him to because he's terrible. But there is this strange thing right now, where there's this kind of public trap like catastrophe happening and this void of like public, you know, rhetoric to kind of like hold that catastrophe. Um, and anyway, and then on the flip side, sort of what you were saying about like, the like, inability to be critical or to offer context, the sort of closing of that discourse, she says later, um, you know, America was seemingly a meritocracy. I, I, I am Tiger Woods. It was the 90s. Now it is the 21st century and either you are with us, or you're against us, where is your flag, and then there's a picture, someone holding the American flag. And then, it strikes me that what the attack on the World Trade Center stole from us is our willingness to be complex, or what the attack on the World Trade Center revealed to us is that we were never complex. We might want to believe that we can condemn, and we can love. And we can condemn, because we love our country. But that's too complex.

Jack 30:16

Such an important point, because that was also a part of the post 9/11 rhetoric, I forget the exact way that Susan Sontag ended her piece about 9/11, but it was basically let's not be stupid together was her her ending message, which was that like, we don't have to respond to this badly, basically, and that was treated as like heresy, comfort to the enemy, one person in an opinion piece said that should be dragged across broken glass. Like in a newspaper, this wasn't an internet crank, this was like a person getting their viewpoint published for public consumption, and there was widespread sympathy for it. And I think the other really important point is when she says maybe we were never complex, and I think that is such a key point because a lot of the rhetoric around 9/11 is that it either changed everything or it created a new world, and really what it did is amplify to a great degree what was already there. And there are myths about the United States that have existed since its founding, and in some cases since before its founding, that pattered along throughout the entirety of the country's history, to greater and lesser degrees and 9/11 as a cataclysmic event, amped them up to 11. And they are myths about American exceptionalism, and about American masculinity in some cases, and they all kind of get wrapped up in that immediate post 9/11 moment in a lot of really destructive ways. And the conservative commentator Robert Kagan, in a short book he wrote after 9/11, I forget the exact phrasing but he said something like we didn't change on 9/11 we

became more ourselves, and I think that that is one of the truest statements about what 9/11 did. And, and and Giuliani is such a fascinating figure because you can talk to a lot of people again in New York who lived through 9/11, and to this day, even after everything he's been through, they remember what he did after 9/11. And they will fully say everything he's been doing recently is terrible. He's totally disgraced himself, he's a hack, he's a fraud, he's the worst. But he did something special after 9/11. I didn't like him before, I certainly don't like what he's done after, but he actually rose to that occasion.

Connor 35:44

Yeah, I mean, not to not to go too far back, but, you know, you're mentioning like, you know, the myths about America and it just reminds me of and it's something that occurred to me just now, I think I've referenced this podcast episode before but Bryan Stevenson was recently on the Ezra Klein show. And something about the way he put this really just has stuck with me. But, you know, because he was talking about his museum to the memorial to lynchings. And like, what the purpose of that is, and kind of like what he hopes will happen out of it, basically. And one thing that he said was sort of said, like, over and over again, even like as Ezra Klein tried to get him to talk about other things was just like, 'Well, first, we have to tell the truth'. Like, and there is this weird thing about America in the history, which is like, you grow up I mean, I grew up in a pretty liberal we've both grew up in a pretty liberal place. And I had a teacher in, you know, fifth grade tell me like America has never started a war, or something, or like it always had, it always joined a war that it had to be a part of kind of thing. And just like, you know, the true, you know, the true like horrors of slavery and all and the genocide of like indigenous peoples in the US, and everything up till then, has never really been reckoned with. And there are people who reckon with it, but as a kind of nation, there has not been a reckoning. In the way that you could argue there has been a reckoning like in Germany or in South Africa, which Stevenson notes like part of the reason that happened is like, the powerful people were defeated. And then they kind of had to and it's like, white people here still still fucking things up.

Jack 38:15

And the second that a non-white person is in power and tries to start those conversations, the backlash is instantaneous. I remember very early in the Obama administration, when Eric Holder said that we are a nation that is cowardly when it comes to talking about race, instant, instant freak out. Kind of the same with how Obama had to contextualize himself in the discourse around race in the United States when he had to disavow his longtime pastor. Right, Reverend Right.

Connor 38:47

Yeah, that's really interesting. Yeah, and it just like, when you when I think about that, I'm like, if it puts in perspective, something like 9/11 and how that would be interpreted. (Close Talking theme music)

Jack 39:05

Hello, everybody, this is co-host Jack Rossiter-Munley. I just wanted to hop in really quickly because this is actually going to be the first of three episodes about poetry and 9/11. Our next episode is going to get into some of the international response to 9/11, and also look at how a 9/11 is deeply connected to the wars that were started in its aftermath. That episode will be coming to you tomorrow. And then on Sunday, our third and final episode on this topic is going to deal with how 9/11 is still being written about today and how the long tendrils of 9/11 and its long influence are still present in American and world culture and politics today. So thanks for listening, and we'll see you tomorrow.