Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 20: Remembering the Past, Remembering 9/11

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone. I’m Peter Salovey. Thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. This week, we mark a solemn anniversary. Twenty years ago on the morning of September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda terrorists flew two planes into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and another plane into the Pentagon. A fourth plane was headed toward Washington, D.C., but it crashed in a field in Pennsylvania before it could reach its intended target. Two-thousand nine-hundred seventy-seven people, including 441 first responders, died in these attacks, resulting in the largest loss of life ever from a foreign attack on American soil.

To discuss how we remember, honor, and commemorate 9/11, I’ve invited David Blight, Sterling Professor of History, Professor of African American Studies and of American Studies, to join me today. Professor Blight is also the director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. An expert in historical memory, David has served as an adviser to the team of curators at the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. David, thank you for joining me today.

**David Blight:** Thank you, Peter. It’s an honor to do this with you.

**Peter:** So let’s start in the nineteenth century. You are a scholar of nineteenth-century America. And your most recent book, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, won the Pulitzer Prize in history in 2019. So tell us, how did you get involved with the 9/11 Memorial and Museum?

**David:** Well, it came about in late 2001, early 2002. The people charged with trying to figure out how to memorialize the site of Ground Zero invited a group of people who were either scholars or writers or curators about problems of memory, historical memory, collective memory. And I was invited on this team, eventually was about eight or ten people. They called us a kitchen cabinet. And our jobs, so to speak, for oh several years, was going to meetings and simply advising with the curatorial team, not the people who were designing the memorial on the surface at Ground Zero, but the people who were designing the museum. And many people perhaps in this audience have been to that museum. It goes six stories deep under the surface. It was a fascinating experience because that team of curators and designers had an unprecedented challenge, in my view. They were being asked to commemorate a world historical event exactly where it happened, as everyone knows, a terribly violent event, and to do it practically overnight. I had the privilege of being in a lot of meetings about how that museum came about.

**Peter:** People don’t always know what professors do when they’re outside of the classroom or for a historian outside of the archives, and this is a wonderful, although tragic, example of what historical expertise, particularly on how we memorialize historical events, can provide.I’ve been there any number of times. It’s still emotional to visit there.

**David:** Oh, yeah.

**Peter:** So let me read a quote that you wrote in 2011: “Memorials are always about the past, but they are almost always also about the present in which they are erected. In the case of the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, both the past it represents and the present in which it lives will be of very long duration.” What did you mean by the idea that the past it represents and the present in which it lives will be of very long duration? And how do you do something that was 20 years ago, that commemorates something 20 years ago, but still feels so recent to people?

**David:** Well, I looked back at that actually today. That came in a piece I wrote for the 9/11 Museum, one of the books, the many books, they produced.

If you think about it, almost any monument has an unveiling, if it’s important at all. Whoever creates it, whether it’s a giant national monument or a simple local monument, a memorial of some sort, there’s always a convening of people, an unveiling of some sort. So that memorial, whatever it is, however large or small, is really going to mean something to the people who put it up, in the moment they put it up. We’ve had a lot of discussion of this in the last few years about Confederate monuments, because most of them went up between the 1890s and 1920s, and they fit very—they did then anyway—fit securely into that time of the Lost Cause tradition and the rise of white supremacy.

And all one needs to do is look at those unveiling speeches for those monuments—and I’ve looked at a lot of those—to know how they fit the moment they were unveiled. But then monuments can greatly change over time. We’ve all in our lives had the experience of going by a monument somewhere and paying absolutely no attention to it. We all do it. There’s a Civil War monument right here at Yale, right over on Broadway.

**Peter:** Yup.

**David:** To a Connecticut regiment that I don’t think gets a great deal of attention anymore. It had a lot of attention when it was unveiled because the people unveiling it were the actual families and in some cases the veterans of that regiment. But over time, a monument can have its meaning essentially become generic or just vanish or sometimes monuments revive in their meaning and become greatly controversial.

In the case of this 9/11 Memorial and Museum, especially the memorial, they knew they were creating something that the whole world was going to come visit. And indeed, in the early projections for the memorial and the museum, once it opened, they expected more than half the visitation—because it’s Manhattan, it’s New York City—would be foreigners, would not be Americans. And indeed, that was the case. So it was a world memorial in some ways. And as we all know, well over a hundred nationalities actually died on 9/11 in the two towers.

So they were trying to come up with something that would speak to the moment when it would be opened, around 2010, within a decade of the event, and yet might stand up for time, especially the memorial. And I think they got the memorial right. That was a huge process, competition. They had submissions from all over the world. They had hundreds and hundreds of artistic submissions for that competition. What’s there today is, of course, this remarkable representation of the footprint of the two towers, done under the aesthetic of what was called—still is called—the presence of absence. And then, of course, they use the pools, the water, as another means of processing what really is a memorial to tremendous loss.

And then, of course, they employed—and this again gets at the way in which a monument does fit its present. And then we have to ask, will it stand up over time? But a method in memorialization in the late twentieth and then into the twenty-first century became this idea of individualized names on memorials. That, of course, was done by Maya Lin, the famous Yale graduate who designed the Vietnam Memorial, and many, many other places in the world have now done this when they can with the actual names of the victims of whatever that violence actually was, whether it’s war or terror or something else.

But I can’t stress enough, though, the difficulty of trying to understand when we memorialize something: What will actually stand up with lasting power? Is it something about the aesthetic that makes a memorial lasting, or is this something about the actual event that is so important that it will last?

I mean, you can ask this question about so many different places. Think about the Lincoln Memorial. That was decades in the making. In fact, most great, big monuments and memorials are decades in the making. 9/11 did this all within eight or nine years, which is extraordinary. But the Lincoln Memorial stands up today for various reasons, I think, as a kind of American secular temple. There Lincoln sits, you know, in that magnificent [Daniel] Chester French sculpture. But it’s become a place used by everybody. Every kind of political persuasion, every kind of ideology, goes to the Lincoln Memorial for one reason or another. There are a lot of ways of looking at that monument, which is now almost a century old.

**Peter:** And I understand it continues to evolve. And so one of the challenges with the 9/11 memorial must be that people visit, and they’re filtering it as they would, as any visitor to any memorial would, they’re filtering it through current thoughts and current emotions. So in that sense, the memorial, which we might think of as a very static thing, yet it’s not static because we’re interpreting the memorial through minds that are developing over time and are changing over time.

**David:** Yeah, and with the 9/11 memorial, now I’m talking about the surface memorial now, and I’ve been there any number of times. Everyone going there who’s over 25, let’s say, has a visual memory of this, because 9/11 became the most visually observed event in world history. It played over and over and over on televisions all across the world. Everybody has seen the towers hit by the plane. The towers come down. And the images that went on for months and years, really, of the rubble and then Ground Zero and so on. So everybody has a visual image of that place. And then they suddenly encounter this tree-lined, gigantic plaza with these two huge pools. And when you get closer to it, of course, you see that the pools are all lined with the names of those who perished, both on 9/11 and in the 1993 bombing as well, and the victims at Washington, D.C. and Shanksville.

At any rate, it’s something everybody encounters through already, a television/video memory. That’s a new phenomenon of the 21st century that the designers of this thing had to think about. I also think the design is genius in the sense of the water. I have to confess, some of the times I’ve been there, I’ve been surrounded by busloads of junior high students who are not quiet. But the pools make enough noise that when you get right up to the edge there, and you’re looking at all the names, noise is mostly drowned out. I don’t know how much that was by design. I think it was, but it works.

The museum, though, is a different question. Museums are not static. They can change exhibitions and so on. And I haven’t been to the museum now in three or four years. I actually used to teach a teacher institute there. The Gilder Lehrman Institute in New York, which we’re associated with here with Gilder Lehrman Center, runs summer teacher institutes all over the country, and I created one on the history of 9/11. And I brought in a whole variety of experts on memorials and monuments and so on. The first two years I did it, I had to do it in the building next to Ground Zero because it just wasn’t finished yet. The third year I did it, we did it down in the museum in a classroom. And we actually taught this institute for a full week inside that museum with high school teachers from all over the country, many of whom never even been in New York City. It was an extraordinary experience.

But here’s the thing. At that point, the museum was very new. And for years afterward, they didn’t change any of the exhibitions. They might have a little side exhibition, especially of art. But the problem with that was—and we faced this in the so-called kitchen cabinet—again, we were only asked for advice. We made no decisions, which was appropriate. But how do you end the story of 9/11? Where do you take the story?

You may remember if you went through, you end in that giant room where you have the slurry wall that held back, literally held back the Hudson River on the day of that attack. And what a lot of people don’t understand is that giant slurry wall almost broke. And if it had broken, lower Manhattan would have been flooded. But anyway, that didn’t happen. But in that space, they have developed a kind of a timeline that’s pretty much apolitical. And in our gatherings, at least the last one we had, I remember, we had a knock-down, drag-out debate about whether they would deal with the Iraq War. Because, you know, my view as a historian was, how can you tell this story and not deal with the Iraq War, one led directly to the next? Not to mention the Afghan War.

**Peter:** No, I mean, here we are, and the history is not over. All of it had consequences for our country and for the rest of the world. Let’s stay with that. Do you think all of that history changes the way we view 9/11, particularly as an event, and the way we memorialize, the way we remember, those who died in 9/11?

**David:** I think inevitably it does, it has to, especially for young people who are coming of age. Think of our students here now, coming of age without having really experienced 9/11, but somehow growing up in this world of the War on Terror and all of its various stages. And now, all of a sudden, the collapse of Afghanistan, which they see on the news every day if they’re paying attention.

But I think this is even more important than just this moment we’re living in, because honestly, our memory of 9/11, despite how riveting that event was, has been, frankly, and I know I’m a historian and it always sounds self-serving, but has been too often innocent of history. That is, you can remember, Peter, when 9/11 happened, people were so shocked and we were all shocked. There’s no question. I was shocked as anyone else. But we kept asking the question, “Is this America? How can this happen? Why do they hate us? How could they do this? How could they attack us with our own airplane technology and so on? How could this be?” Well, you know, with a little retrospect and a little effort, the United States had been in Afghanistan since the 1970s. The CIA secret war in the 1970s and then into the ‘80s, especially in the Reagan administration, have been going on for years. And of course, the World Trade Center had been attacked once before, eight years earlier, by Islamic terrorists in 1993. The bombing wasn’t obviously as consequential, but it happened. That had been targeted before.

And a quick anecdote here. One time during the development of the museum process, a group of us were interviewed who were part of this kitchen cabinet, so-called. We were interviewed by—I don’t know, it was either the *Wall Street Journal* or maybe the *Times*, I can’t remember which. It was a pretty extensive interview, two or three of us. And the journalist kept asking us, so where should this story begin? And somebody said, “there in the ‘90s,” somebody said, “well, somewhere earlier,” and finally somebody said, “Well, with the Soviet war in Afghanistan, because that’s how al-Qaeda got to Afghanistan,” which is true. And that is actually where the museum starts the story. But I remember getting frustrated with this idea that somehow this only has immediate origins. I just said, “Look, this is as old as the Trojan War. This is as old as humanity. Could we please realize that and stop thinking that this only began last year or 10 years ago? Anyway, I know this is not the way most people view history, but it really is a very old story, if you think about it. It just was so shocking because it happened on our soil at the most visible and symbolic places you can imagine. New York City, World Trade Center. Washington, D.C., the Pentagon, and the other plane.

**Peter:** There’s nothing comparable. I guess for me, what it reminded me of at the time was Pearl Harbor. Again, a kind of attack on our soil.

**David:** Right. That was the analogy that so many people immediately went—in fact, there were cartoons that came out showing the famous images of the ships burning in Pearl Harbor with the images of Ground Zero burning. Yeah, inevitably. And it had that kind of shock across the culture.

**Peter:** Yeah, it certainly did. And that was 60 years-ish earlier. So let’s take us up to the present. Here we are. It’s the 2021-2022 academic year. Studentshave settled into the semester, a semester inflected by COVID. You are a gifted instructor of Yale students, and they flock to your courses. What has changed, of course, is current undergraduates were not alive, as you said, during 9/11. You had been teaching undergraduates who were alive to experience 9/11 and might have been traumatized by it, even. How do we teach recent history where some in the room have lived it and others haven’t? How do we teach?

**David:** Two thoughts, Peter. It’s a great question. In my first academic job, way back when, which was in the 1980s, I was teaching at a small liberal arts college outside of Chicago, and I taught almost everything in American history there. I had to. So I created a course on Vietnam. Now I have an older brother who is a scholar of Vietnam. He helped me know what to read. But anyway, in that class, this was a small college, students of all ages. In that class, I had about, it was a seminar, I had about 15, you know, 19- and 20-year-olds, in the ‘80s, for whom Vietnam was, well, it happened to their parents’ generation, they don’t have much memory of it, and two Vietnam veterans. One of the Vietnam veterans was a really serious guy who was becoming a teacher. And he didn’t batter away at these kids. The other one did. And my goodness, it was a learning experience for all of us.

Now, second response, I’ve taught a course here, an undergraduate seminar, which in some ways are the most fun courses to teach here. For years, I’ve taught a course on historical memory. Sometimes it’s focused only on the Civil War. Sometimes I really broaden it and make it comparative history, especially to World War I. I used to teach a course, in fact, with Jay Winter, our great historian of the memory of the Great War. We had great fun doing that until Jay retired. But this year, this fall, I’ve created a version of it that I’m calling “The History Wars.” And I was planning to start with the current history wars, the school boards and state legislatures. Now, I think I might start with talking with them about 9/11 because most of them, obviously, have no memory. And yet they’re seeing this about Afghanistan. I can’t wait to sort of hear their responses to that. How are they thinking about this? I mean I can’t wait to find out. And then I’m going to send them all off to the archives here to do papers on this. It’s always been an interesting term to teach about these kinds of questions. It turns out it doesn’t matter when you teach on this kind of subject, of how the past gets used and memory, there’s always something going on in the world that makes it so poignant. But suddenly right now, I think next week I’ve changed my opening of that class.

**Peter:** You know what’s great about being at Yale for an undergraduate? Here they can hear you, the world’s expert on these topics, talk to them and discuss with them about the purpose of memorialization and about the nineteenth century and let alone about 9/11. While at the same time, they can go off to archives that contain the very documents and photographs and ephemera relevant to the time. And then they can walk over to my department, the psychology department, and take a course on human memory and learn about the way psychologists think about these issues. We often use the phrase “historical memory versus narrative memory.” And usually when psychologists use it, it’s not about a historical event like 9/11. It’s about something like your family.

**David:** Right.

**Peter:** And the way in which a family story is told versus historical memory. I remember in my own family, one of my grandmothers, no longer with us, unfortunately, complained that my other grandmother, also no longer with us, never spoke to her at our wedding. Now there wasn’t any hard feelings between them, and I never could understand why she said that. And of course, when my brother sent me a video that he had taken of our wedding, showing the two of them in animated conversation, you know, historical reality and any historical memory, right, confronted this narrative memory had been going on and retold again and again and again. And I think it was a shock to all involved to actually be confronted with historical fact. That’s kind of a trivial example.

**David:** No, no, no. It’s a great example because the family is still the primary source of how people gain a sense of the past. Some of us overcome it. Some of us never overcome it. It’s like, no, no, no, no, no. My grandfather told me this about World War II. Don’t tell me about D-Day or something. But you know, Peter, you know this obviously better than I do, but historians, as they began to be interested in the problem of memory, which happened back in the ‘70s and ‘80s in France and then in the U.S., in the ‘80s and ‘90s, and that’s how I got interested in it. We had to read a lot of psychology. And philosophy, but especially psychology. We had to learn what had been written, it turns out, for generations, not just about individual memory, but this idea of collective memory. And you’re absolutely right. A collective memory is really a narrative. It’s a story. It’s a story that gets passed on in the way stories are passed on is first through family. It’s why, as I’ve said a thousand times, there’s far more memory in the world than there is history. It’s kind of what we’re up against. And also, it’s the age of psychology, which is what, at least as old as the late nineteenth century, in terms of a formal field. It’s the age of psychology, in which humankind, more than ever before, became concerned about the individual. Today, when we memorialize, when we commemorate, and when we build monuments, it tends to be the search for the individual. That was not the case in the 18th century. If soldiers died in war, they were just this mass of soldiers who died in war. Now, every name is there at the 9/11 Memorial, that is why every name is on the Vietnam Veterans—

**Peter:** And why veterans’ cemeteries are so uniform. Right. Everybody has the same grave marker.

**David:** It’s the concern for the individual that happened over the generations of this age of psychology that ends up being, then, such a pertinent part of how humankind thinks about commemoration or memorialization. Inevitably so, this idea that the Marines never leave anybody behind or Americans will go find their war dead. That’s an obsession of the 20th century. It wasn’t the case in the Civil War. Huge percentage of the people buried in Civil War national cemeteries, which are gigantic in most cases, are buried without names. They didn’t even have dog tags in in the American Civil War. They may have individual identification; that came about later. But now, we care about individuals more than we did, say, a century and a half ago. That’s because of your field.

**Peter:** If there’s one thing that twentieth century psychology taught us, it’s that memory—human memory—is not like videotape. It is not like digitization.

**David:** It’s not to be trusted. [chuckles]

**Peter:** Exactly. Those are not good analogies for human memory. And that every time you ask me a question, whether it’s what happened on my wedding day or what happened on 9/11, I have to reconstruct it. And, yeah, I may have some very vivid images and I may have stories I’ve told about those events. I’m also using what I can remember to try to reconstruct a narrative that is coherent. And, often, we are a lot less accurate than we think we are.

**David:** Yeah, how many times have we all started a sentence with, “I will never forget….” Yes, you will.

**Peter:** Let me end with a question then. So in an ideal world, what is the purpose of memorials?

**David:** What the purposes usually are or what they ought to be might be a different question.

**Peter:** Yeah, I’m kind of asking the “ought” question, but maybe you should contrast the two.

**David:** They tend to be about a community sense of itself. The story, they say, they are living in. When Abraham Lincoln is put at the end of the Washington Mall on one end and Ulysses Grant in that very war-like memorial at the other end, that was a way of saying, “Union victory in the Civil War saved this thing called the United States,” it was saying who we are. A memorial is usually the expression of small community or nation or, for that matter, the world saying, here is who we are.

Now, there are other kinds of memorials though. When we memorialize great crimes like the slave trade, when we try to memorialize slavery itself, we enter a little bit of a different realm. You don’t create a triumphant memorial for the Holocaust. You’re rooting a memorial in a different kind of narrative, often a narrative of loss.

And this is the test. I can’t say this enough. The test of how we are now thinking about memorialization, whether it’s about something like 9/11, whether it’s about this War on Terror, or whether it’s about slavery, which is more and more the subject of memorialization in the United States, for sure, we’re talking about memorializing authentic tragedy. We’re memorializing loss, but especially authentic tragedy. And I mean tragedy in the deep, classical sense, this idea of fated outcomes that come out of histories, that makes cultures and peoples and nations collide and do terrible things to each other.

Tragedy is not something Americans have ever been that good at. We’ve had great writers who are good at it. We’ve had artists who are good at it. But as a national culture, it doesn’t fit our mythology, it doesn’t really fit our narrative of progress. How can a nation be a nation of progress, and have committed what it did with slavery? What it did with lynching and so on? This is where a memorial like the one in Montgomery, Alabama, to lynching that was created by Bryan Stevenson has shown a kind of a new way. Although I think the 9/11 Memorial is also showing a bit of a new way. It is a monument truly about loss. Loss is not comfortable. Loss is terrible. Loss is tragedy. It necessitates a spiritualism. Whatever religious tradition, it necessitates a spiritual approach to the past, which does not allow for nationalistic, patriotic triumphalism. And this is difficult for Americans.

**Peter**:I remember when the Maya Lin Vietnam Memorial was unveiled, it was extremely controversial, and it was because it was a memorial to loss. I remember, I think it was fall 1983, Marta and I visited and it was dusk. And we walked along the path right up against the memorial, and you have this feeling that those walls are growing. And what’s growing is the list of names is growing higher and higher. They just…and it’s so emotionally moving. And the experience, if you let yourself have it, is so draining.

And in my mind, that memorial, that sculpture, is so successful because it forces us to deal with that loss. And yet, when it was first erected, it didn’t feel triumphant enough. And many veterans who served our country and had really difficult experiences in Vietnam wanted, Where are the soldiers? Where are we, the living?

**David:** And they’re saying it right now. Afghanistan war veterans are saying that now and it’s understandable. You know, I often use than the Vietnam Memorial to make people think about Civil War memorialization. Sixty some thousand names are on that Vietnam Memorial, which is just, you know, overwhelming when you’re there in front of them. But over 700,000 Americans died in the Civil War. I’ve often asked audiences, try to think of a Vietnam Memorial-type monument that would have seven hundred and fifty thousand names on it. I mean, you just can’t. It would take, I don’t know, what, two or three miles of a monument or something to put all of the names on it. That is the scale of death in the Civil War versus the scale of death in Vietnam. So instead, of course, memorialization of the Civil War came from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. Very different aesthetics and so on. But we’ve never had that monument to loss, just loss itself, with the Civil War. We had all these triumphal monuments about the Confederate Lost Cause or the Union victory cause. I would like to see, in fact, there’s been talk of this, of a kind of national Civil War memorial that would just be to the sheer scale of loss. But there are models of where this has been done well and models where it’s not been done well. And I think that’s the only way to approach it. I know when they did the 9/11 Memorial, James Young was on that committee. He’s a good friend of mine. They looked at so many different models around the world that became this giant comparative process that they boiled it down to, and then imagine being on that committee that had to choose a design that won. That’s not a committee I’d….well, I wouldn’t know what to do on a committee like that.

**Peter:** You are right, though. It is hard work. And these decisions are very, very difficult. And we are incredibly fortunate that we have historians like David Blight, who I’m speaking with today, who are experts on these very issues, in his case, an expert on nineteenth century America, particularly Civil War and slavery, and on how we memorialize our history and how we remember it and speak about it.

I feel incredibly fortunate, David, that you’re speaking with me today and all of us who are listening. We really appreciate your tremendous insight around these issues and so many others. I really wish I could take your classes this fall, that would be a great excitement.

**David:** Hey, come on in, do a guest appearance on cognition and memory. Why not?

**Peter:** Or I’ll sit in the back and just listen. It would be enjoyable either way.

So for those who are on campus, I want to note that on Saturday, the bells of Harkness Tower will toll four times to mark the tragic events of 9/11.

And before we end, I want to take a moment to remember all those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001, including nine Yale alumni who were killed. David Berray, David Berry, Bennett Fisher, Elizabeth Gregg, Bradley Hoorn, Richard Lee, Charles McCrann, Christopher Murphy, and Stacey Sanders. May their memory be a blessing and may we never forget their lives.

To friends and members of the Yale community: thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes, and take care.