Book Review/Compte rendu

Riley, Alexander T. *Angel Patriots: The Crash of United Flight 93 and the Myth of America*. New York: New York University Press. 2015. 317 pp., $30.00 paper (9781479868452)

In *Angel Patriots*, Alexander T. Riley provides a detailed analysis of material cultural responses to the crash in a Pennsylvania field of United Flight 93, the fourth American plane hijacked on September 11, 2001. Flight 93 was the only hijacking partly thwarted by the resistance of passengers on board. Their desperate resistance, widely memorialized in the United States as heroic sacrifice, did not save their lives, but it prevented the hijackers from reaching their intended target, thought to have been either the Capitol Building or the White House.

Angel Patriots is partly ethnography and partly a theoretically-driven case study in American cultural sociology. The book begins with theoretical chapters dealing with myth, culture, trauma, collective memory, and American civil religion, before turning to discussions of the temporary memorial site, the permanent memorial (including discussions of the design contest and the controversy over the winning design), and the nearby memorial chapel. Riley also dedicates individual chapters to books and films dealing with Flight 93. The penultimate chapter discusses and analyzes interviews with visitors to the temporary memorial site. A short final chapter reflects on "What Flight 93 Tells Us About America."

As thick description of material cultural practices that physically and symbolically generate and orient shared places, identities, emotions, and memories, the book provides a rich resource for further analysis and research. Riley's discussion of the controversy over the supposed crypto-Islamic meaning of the winning design for the permanent memorial provides vivid commentary on the proximity and reversibility of sacred and profane meanings, as universalist themes of mourning and remembering became entangled with discourses many would describe as Islamophobic and/or paranoid. Riley also writes beautifully about his interviews with visitors to the temporary memorial, Americans engaged in the everyday activities of transforming chains of events into ritualized meanings, and profane(d) spaces and objects into sacred places and things. Riley describes an America painstakingly constructing, from the

rubble and human destruction of United Flight 93, a powerful, though not entirely unified, nationalist narrative of heroic sacrifice and sacred memorialization.

Riley is an American sociologist working under the broad umbrella of neo-Durkheimian cultural sociology, which emphasizes the relative autonomy of culture from material political economic determinations. Even political and economic realities must be mediated by means of underlying narrative structures, Riley argues. Acts of violence and mass destruction are no different. Traumatic events are neither automatically recognized and memorialized by collectivities (Alexander 2003), nor is the manner of their memorialization reducible to mere ideological superstructure.

Though Riley emphasizes the importance of performance and narrative, he also establishes limits to the recursive dilemmas generated by cultural autonomy. For his part, Riley stops with *myth*, and goes no further. He does refer, at one point, to "cultural work at a stratum even below that of myth" (73), but leaves this unexplored residual category to return to "a profound set of basic mythical oppositions in the American imaginary" (74). The definite articles Riley uses in phrases like "the American social imaginary" (74) or "the American collective consciousness" (73), tacitly dismiss the multiplicity available within cultural resources that exceed the reach of abstract notions of a unified collective imaginary plenitude, at times tying neat bows in his text, rather than tracing tangled threads of phenomena. Setting limits to social imaginaries by means of the definite article returns Riley to a certain realist, even positivistic, tone, even as *Angel Patriots* channels Durkheim's sociology of religion and its attendant theory of collective representations. In particular, Riley makes a rather straightforward application of Durkheim's theory of totemism to the memorial sites and objects, eliding critiques of Durkheim's claim that totemism is *the* elementary religious form (cf. Jones 2005). I think there is much to recommend Riley's interpretation insofar as it refers to the modern nation state. Indeed, my own impulse is to suggest that Durkheim's theory of totemism is more applicable to modern nationalism than to Australian indigenous peoples (cf. Anderson 1991). However, Riley's emphasis on totemism also takes him away from the framework with which he opened the book, Robert Bellah's concept of civil religion.

Leaving issues with the anthropological tradition aside—though I will mention the encrypted and perhaps unintended analogy offered at the beginning of the book, between the collapsed twin towers and the 'two solitudes' of the 'twin disciplines' of anthropology and sociology (1–2)—there is a problem with Riley's deployment of Robert Bellah's

concept of 'civil religion,' which is not fully compatible with Riley's interpretive framing of Flight 93 memorialization and the 'myth of America' through the notions of totemism and nationalism. In the fraught era of the Vietnam War, Bellah did not identify civil religion with nationalism, but with critical ethical principles that push nations to transcend their self-idolization through "the incorporation of vital international symbolism" (1976: 186). Riley's analysis turns away from this universalizing emphasis to the parochialism of deep national myths.

While Riley rightly foregrounds the real contingency of memorialization, the ever present possibility that the slain may simply be forgotten, his equation of American civil religion with deep myths of totemic and sacrificial nationalism rather than with the themes of transcendence and internationalism emphasized by Bellah seems to limit his sense of contingency with respect to the possible forms of memorialization. Whether this follows from Riley's equation of totemism and the nation state or not, it fits with the book's lack of international comparative discussion (e.g., to Norway's response to Anders Breivik's mass murder of Norwegian youth in 2011. Is Norway also generating a totemic and nationalistic set of sacred memorial sites and practices?).

Bellah's Vietnam War era hope had been that American civil religion might transcend the theme of nationalist sacrifice established during the American Civil War, and develop a new spirit of international solidarity. Riley's failure to look beyond the nation state, however, turns out to be a kind of performative and circular endorsement of his own apparent pessimism regarding the possibility of a more cosmopolitan civil religion. Riley is a fascinating commentator. His 2010 book *Impure Play* is brilliant. It still seems remarkably difficult, however, for American sociology to escape the force of its national gravity.

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