

Mourning Memory: Performing Sanctity through September 11th Memorials

Anthony J. Kolenic

This article examines how institutional extensions of sacred time and space are being employed at the official memorials being constructed in Lower Manhattan, in Somerset County, PA, and at the Pentagon. This creates a mediatized standardization of public mourning, how it embodies and performs tragedy, undercuts potential resistance to policies enacted in response to 9/11, and subverts diverse conceptions of how memory is to be represented. This serves the dominant, if inauthentic, national identity by controlling the perceptions of its viewers. These memorials share the themes of light, water, and a borrowed individualism – from the victims of 9/11 – to which nationalistic meanings and identities have been applied. The result, this article argues, is the control not just of the space in remaking it as sacred, but also of those who participate with the space.

In the space between experience and memory it appears as though there is always a requisite remaking of identity. And in the case of the social memory of war, it inevitably blends with the collective memories of death, loss, tragedy and disaster not only because on many occasions they are experienced together, but also because they inform each other. A unique, liminal space emerges within the transference from catastrophic experiences to memories of them, which in many cases contains a process of mourning. A grief culture has emerged in the American context from a stream of recent tragedies that stems from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This article examines how representations of sacred time are employed at the official memorials being constructed in lower Manhattan, in Somerset County, PA, and at the Pentagon in response to the events of September 11th, in a highly mediatized culture of mourning. This creates a standardization of what public mourning looks like, how it's embodied, and how it performatively undercuts individualist sentiment as well as diverse conceptions of

how memory is officially represented for the benefit of a dominant, if inauthentic, national identity. This official identity management – constantly practiced rhetorically and through displays of nationalism, exemplified here in the memorial designs and spaces that publicly commemorate 9/11 – serves to undercut resistance to policies enacted in response to these terrorist attacks.

The U.S. governmental response to 9/11 continues to reach far, encompassing a large set of reactions that have manifested themselves in the forms of political rhetoric, debates and applications of new public policies (both domestic and international), martial action in Afghanistan as well as in Iraq, endorsement of the air travel business by the executive branch, and a number of sacred/civic commemorative ceremonies. Of the many implications of these various official commemorations and responses is the goal of simultaneously defending and defining all things officially “American.” The choices of what is commemorated – and how – standardizes and formally defines a post-9/11 American identity. Part of this process is claiming and forming a new identity around spaces. The governmental claims to these spaces – the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the field in Somerset County, Pennsylvania – is an official attempt to make sacred, in Mircea Eliade’s terms, what was previously profane, ground. According to Richard West Sellars and Tony Walter:

In a society devoted to the creation of profit through the exploitation of private property, the permanent removal of property from the market – in order to become wilderness, national park or national monument – is a major way in which Americans create and identify with what for them is sacred. If the sacred is that which is not profane, then in the USA to ensure that a particular object or parcel of land may never be bought or sold both signifies and solidifies its exceptional and potentially sacred character (183).

The official setting-aside of place is itself an act of taking what is otherwise profane and claiming it as sacred, even if the Pentagon and the World Trade Center continue to operate as governmental and commercial centers, respectively. Denis Hollier argues that “[t]he monument and the pyramid are where they are to cover up a place, to fill in a void: the one left by death. Death must not appear: it must not take place: let tombs cover it up and take its place... One plays dead so that death will not come. So nothing will happen and time will not take place” (36). These memorials, by setting aside place and inscribing it with new – and in these cases, permanent – meanings, exist in an economy of repetition, where the memory of death is performed by the monuments so that death will never come for us, so that the part of us that has died – the former identity that must, in some way, be reconstituted as a result of any experience – takes our place. We build performative memories of death so we can forget the experience that awaits. The many individual memories of the parts of our identities that have died – whatever they may be – are rendered subordinate to the nationalistic, sacred expressions monolithically applied en masse through these memorials designed and constructed in response to 9/11.

Much like what Simon Frith calls the Baudrillard effect, writ large, the expressions and images used within these memorials employ a contextual familiarity from what are understood to be sacred forms embedded in popular culture to convey a sense of importance and sanctity. These memorials act not only as communicative texts, but also as aides for performative gestures that instruct the national community toward particularly patriotic identities and away, ostensibly, from their own. This tactic constricts resistance and the plurality of experiences and voices by providing a set of experiences contained in grief culture, using a guided social memory to control other expressions and images and to subsume the individual experience, and subsequent

memory, within the collective. This sense of sanctity is general, informed and constituted by images and meanings attached to images in popular culture since World War II.

These sacred images and forms of expression rely on contextual familiarity to recall a sort of institutional nostalgia; memorials call upon familiar images in the popular mind to symbolically resonate with holy or great meaning, and the use of sacred expression in the case of formalized 9/11 commemorations is no different. According to sociologists Kelly Damphousse, Kristin Hefley, and Brent Smith, “Like many informal memorials, [we found that] narratives of the formal memorials for the 9/11 events suggested that there was something sacred or holy about the site of the tragic events” (22). We recognize these images as meaningful and as important. And when that context is borrowed by the state to define the nation, only the content – not the sacred import thrust into the commemoration’s meaning – changes. This repackaging is quite possibly, in this case, used to undercut potential resistance to martial policies and highly politicized nationalist sentiment. Mirroring the use of contextual familiarity from the images and expressions within popular culture, the emphasis on permanence within these formal memorials also lends a sense of sanctity to the set of values, assumptions, experiences and expectations that is held as the official post-9/11 American identity. This can be mobilized to reinforce the singular code served by reproduction, or in this case, to gain support for agendas such as the War on Terror and its principal policies and tactics.

Formal commemoration has a distinct sense of time, one that attempts to represent an unchanging and unwavering identity. As such, to officially commemorate anything is inherently also an act of standardization, and it will always contain a necessarily inaccurate representation of the event and/or the community responding to it because – as all memorialization is the attempt to reduce set of experiences to a few key ingredients constituting a collective, popular memory. The unchanging nature of identity in the physical permanence in official memorials limits the ability to truly represent the plurality of identities that define the American landscape. Indeed, according to Francesco Pellizzi, “[n]othing defines the specific rootedness of a location – the transformation of a place into a site – more than its being founded on a grave” (84). This sense of permanence is employed in the governmentally approved design as a means of garnering a connection between a specific, formally sanctioned national identity – in some innate and meaningful way – and a maximum amount of individuals, comprising this national “in” community, undercutting the potential resistance to the official position and creation of a specific American identity after this particular tragedy.

Official memorials undergo a number of identity transformations while attempting to maintain a core set of ideals or characteristics to maintain a unified sense of place and sanctity. Those in charge of the memorial at the Pentagon site, feeding off of the popularity of the “beams of light” that stood in the stead of the Twin Towers in Manhattan, initially chose to light up its five corners as well. On the five year anniversary of 9/11, however, the Pentagon lit the skies with 184 beams of light, the same number as there were victims at the Pentagon between both those on the plane and those within the Pentagon. This is an explicitly sacred symbol, literally using beams of light to connect the earth to the heavens. Further, including a beam for each individual is not only a way of representing an upward ascension against the night sky, which borrows agency from religious expressions imbued with sanctity embedded in popular culture, but it also serves to show the tension between individual and collectivity contained within these highly nationalist commemorations. However, the design of the permanent Pentagon Memorial, the result of a design competition, is far more reflective of this tension.

A number of themes appear in the winning designer's description of the Pentagon Memorial: namely, the setting aside of place as an act of claiming a site as sacred instead of profane, a parade of sacred images collapsing into nationalistic meanings, and the use of sacred time. The subsuming of the individual to the collective – in this case, the national – is also clear in the sanctifying rhetoric. According to Kaseman Beckman Amsterdam Studio, winners of the design competition, the 1.93-acre design:

Envisions a memorial that simultaneously affords intimate and collective contemplation through silence within a tactile field of sensuous experience. It sets out to permanently record and express the sheer magnitude of loss through an architectural experience of a place radically different than what we encounter in our daily lives. In this light, the space itself serves as the memorial at all scales of experience and engagement.

As discussed earlier, the setting aside of space, according to Richard West Sellars and Tony Walter, is an act of declaring it as a sacred site; the above statement makes the same claim. A permanent sense of time also accompanies the design description. The notion that the memorial and its meanings are to be made permanent records not just the loss, but also the meaning of loss, freezing and standardizing this memorialization as the memorialization. The description continues:

Personal interpretation is further sparked by embedding layers of specificity into the orientation of each memorial unit within the expansive site. Fifty-nine memorial units face one direction, 125 face the other – thus distinguishing victims on board American Airlines Flight 77 from those who were inside the Pentagon. When visiting a memorial dedicated to a victim who was in the Pentagon, the visitor will see their engraved name and the Pentagon in the same view. Conversely, one would see the engraved name of a victim on Flight 77 with the sky. Though highly specific, this distinction is quite subtle when deployed consistently throughout the site. It adds a level of difference to the visual and spatial field, thus provoking visitors' curiosity, while simultaneously telling the story of those involved in the events that took place here that day.

This passage dictates the role of the viewer as a participant whose interpretation is sparked, but also guided. The memorial units suggest an individual identity for each of the victims, but only provide enough information so that the packaging of the individual is a focal point for the participant to interpret collectivizing, nationalist meanings. This facelessness – this impersonal, concrete, and permanent representation – boils individuality to something that can be perceived, but not realized. In other words, the idea of the individual, the personal, is felt, but is not there; the intentional lack of identity is a means through which the participant/viewer of the memorial can enter into a world of symbols, each of which carry a set of meanings tied more to the nation than to the individual victims.

Claimed as a sacred space distinguished from the profane, this holy ground is dominated by precision, by permanence, and by a singular identity created through the appropriation of many identities. It is a site that is intrinsically tied to the governing body, extending a sense of reverence into the public sphere. Each one of the memorial units themselves is:

Elegant in its self-supporting form... [it is] at once a glowing light pool, a cantilevered bench and a place for the permanent inscription of each victim's name... As the memorial unit grows out of the ground, the stabilized gravel field

is interrupted only by moments of glowing light and water, and the engraved names float above these moments...

Here too the individual is packaged as an engraved floating name, as personalization for the participant to enter into but only to reap nationalist meanings. That each unit is a bench is reminiscent of the Oklahoma City Bombing memorial's empty chairs. It calls upon a peculiar quality of vacancy, but also for participants to interact somehow with the provided exoskeleton of the victims' individual identities for the sake of civil religion. The glowing "moment" on which the name and age inscription rests is also a sacred representation of divinity or a life-source, a memorial as much to the proverbial soul as the bench itself is to the body. These sanctifying images and expressions – running water, glowing light, and serene setting – are cues that this is a holy place, constructed to be interpreted as such for the purpose of permanently attaching specific nationalist meanings to the individuals who died, to the space itself, and to the meaning of this event in grief culture and American culture itself.

The same themes are recognizable in the Flight 93 memorial design in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. The final target of the hijackers will forever be unknown, but crashing into an open field was certainly not the plan. As has been documented on a number of occasions, a small number of the 40 crewmembers and passengers (not including the four hijackers) on the flight overpowered the hijackers in hopes of saving the potentially many more lives that would be taken if they did not act. The National Park Service and the Department of the Interior claimed the site at which the plane crashed as an official memorial site shortly after. The identity of the space, for the first five years, was that of a formalized spontaneous shrine. Left as an open field to demarcate the sanctity of the space, the site called upon a number of familiar images in American popular and religious culture to make permanent its meanings in the collective memory.

A controversy surrounding the winning design caused a redesign, though it still contains many of the characteristics that made it controversial. The design, which encompasses a vast area, contains a very large open "Bowl," an entrance called the "Tower of Voices," and a space literally called "Sacred Ground." The controversy surrounding the winning memorial design suggested that the red maples surrounding the Bowl with an opening directly resembled a crescent, and the space called "Sacred Ground," the star. The opening, if traced around the globe, points directly to Mecca, and the four hijackers were, in the initial design, counted among the dead at the site. Beyond this religio-political controversy, however, is a less obvious sanctity that is still rather explicitly called upon in the images and symbols chosen at this site. The site mimics the natural landscape and the bowl itself is a sort of Kiva. The "Sacred Ground" area is a reverent space dedicated to those who died on Flight 93. It is comprised of a black slate plaza with a number of niches to conduct ceremonies, contemplate, or place items. This is the most explicitly ritually religious design feature not encompassed in the controversy. The expectation is, ostensibly, that visitors will use these spaces to identify with the sacrifice a few of these individuals made, connect with them materially, almost commune with them. Perhaps this expectation is a way to use the concept of individual heroism as a sort of focal point, or mantra, for civil religious practice. The "Sacred Ground" area itself becomes a place for formally commemorating national martyrs, praying to the idea of their last acts and identifying them as faceless yet somehow embodied saints in American civil religion. Bringing sacrifice to the fore – particularly sacrifice for a nation – is a particularly useful tool for management of nationalistic sentiment.

The “Tower of Voices” is the entrance and exit for the entire park. It is an ethereal space, with forty large, hung wind chimes – one for each of the victims of flight 93 – that move with the wind, connecting the natural with the purposefully sacred. The tower glows at night with glass mosaics and blue tinted areas, allowing – again – the sense of light, of obscured glowing, to communicate a sense of sanctity, giving the site more importance and claiming the space for a usable collective memory of holy nationalism. The themes of permanence – sacred time – and the setting aside of place as the creation of a sacred site are still very present. When mixed with the context of the use of individualism as a focal point for the participant, this brings death into the culture of repetition, and, as Hollier suggests, works to keep death and time from taking place.

Among the memorial sites, however, the most well known and discussed is Ground Zero. The term “Ground Zero,” like “9/11,” is a sign for a number of meanings, the original of which is lost, leaving an abstract cast of itself built out of the contested communal and national memories and meanings placed upon it. It implies concentric rings of proximity, and one’s relation to death and disaster. As Ann Larabee writes, “Proximity to disaster matters because victims of disaster bear witness and carry the marks of violence. Their suffering, which can never be fully represented, stands outside the simulacrum. Thus, survivors are often silenced by institutions and by the media...”(11). In the case of this memorial, the survivors are not nearly as important as those for whom death did take place, and death does in some ways stand within the simulacrum, within the reproducible. The phrase Ground Zero is borrowed, as are sacred images and expressions familiar in American popular culture to carry a sense of weight, and to recontextualize the space as one of directed legibility, regardless of the fact that it is legibility – and identity – placed upon it by a governing body.

The former site of the World Trade Center, now a space known as Ground Zero, becomes simultaneously a pilgrimage site for civil religion – to which many Americans and citizens of other nations continue to travel – as well as a tourist destination. People come to see the materials that have accumulated as a spontaneous shrine as much as they come to see the place itself. Along with the mass unofficial set of accumulations at the site were a number of symbols that would appear during annual commemoration ceremonies as well as throughout the year. Primary among these were the beams of light and the use of the American flag. The beams of light themselves, called “The Tribute in Light,” were a rather sacred representation. They stood in the stead of their fallen physical forms like holy spirits ascending. This symbolism is arguably largely Christian, but evokes a general sanctity that works in this case to identify and define a national community more than a specifically religious one. The set of expressions is meant to act as an extension of sacred space to influence the national memory of the event, and to subsume individual experience and memory into communal memory. It makes one forget that the buildings were sites of international commerce, replaced by overwhelming tragedy and spectacle boiled down to a sanctity meant to bind people together at a formerly profane – now sacred – space for the sake of unification under the singular code.

This sanctification is further institutionalized through the creation of the formal memorial. The winning design, created by architect Michael Arad and landscape architect Peter Walker, is called “Reflecting Absence,” and is accompanied by the memorial’s centerpiece “Freedom Tower,” designed by Daniel Libeskind. According to the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation:

The Memorial will consist of two massive voids with waterfalls cascading down their sides, to serve as a powerful reminder of the Twin Towers and of the

unprecedented loss of life from an attack on our soil. The names of the 2,979 who perished in the September 11th attacks in New York City, Washington, DC, Pennsylvania, and the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing will be inscribed around the edge of the Memorial waterfalls. An eight-acre landscaped Memorial Plaza filled with more than 300 oak trees will create a contemplative space separate from the sights and sounds of the surrounding city. Complementing the Memorial, a state-of-the art museum will offer visitors an opportunity to deepen their experience at the site... Dynamic, interactive exhibitions including artifacts and personal effects; a resource center, contemplative areas, and innovative educational programming will convey stories of the victims and recount the experiences of survivors, responders, area residents, and witnesses.

As the description above suggests, one of the memorial's purposes is to act as a reminder of the lives lost and of the twin towers. But it also serves to project this same sense of sanctity, which is a means of defining the boundaries of and privileging collective memory. As was true with the Pentagon memorial, names will be used to provide a sense of faceless individuality. The setting aside of a contemplative space is also present in this passage, like "Sacred Ground" at the Flight 93 Memorial, and is a division of space meant to grant the participant a place to use this idea of the individual and the symbols around it to participate in sacred nationalism, condensing and controlling the meanings of the event as a usable past for the purposes of undercutting resistance to policies – or any sentiment that doesn't serve the code – enacted in reaction to it.

Libeskind's "Freedom Tower" has, like its counterpart in Pennsylvania, been the source of controversy and has undergone several redesigns. Filled with symbolism, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation remarks that:

As with the original design, the [redesigned] Freedom Tower will soar to 1,776 feet in the sky and serve as an inspirational and enduring beacon in the New York City skyline. The Tower's design evokes classic New York skyscrapers in its elegance and symmetry while also referencing the torch of the Statue of Liberty... At its middle, the tower forms a perfect octagon in plan and then culminates in an observation deck and glass parapet (elevation 1,362 feet and 1,368 feet – the heights of the original Twin Towers) whose plan is a square, rotated 45 degrees from the base. A mast containing an antenna for the Metropolitan Television Alliance (MTVA), designed by a collaboration of architects, artists, lighting designers and engineers, and secured by a system of cables, rises from a circular support ring, similar to Liberty's torch, to a height of 1,776 feet. In keeping with the original design, the entire composition evokes the Statue of Liberty's torch and will emit light, becoming its own Beacon of Freedom. [Architect] David Childs said, "...While the memorial, carved out of the earth, speaks of the past and of remembrance, Freedom Tower speaks of optimism and the future as it rises into the sky in a faceted, crystalline form filled with and reflecting light."

The symbols present are the obvious reference to the nation's founding in the height of the building, the observance of the original tower heights, the structural echo of the Statue of Liberty, and the design element causing the antenna to emit light. Where the towers that were felled on 9/11 may not have had an explicit identity outside of their commercial purposes previous to 1993 or perhaps even 2001, the Freedom Tower – still holding world class restaurants, retail space, parking, transit systems, and an unfathomable amount of office space –

is clearly covered in symbolism beyond simple patriotism, entering the realm of sacred nationalism. The lives lost that day are – again – used as a means through which to extend an institutional sanctity into the American national memory. The light imagery atop the tower not only ties it to the nation’s founding, but also echoes the Statue of Liberty and acts as a “beacon of freedom” while providing a religious “light in the sky,” so to speak. Further the sheer height of the tower, the choice to build something taller and, frankly, shinier, is a rather defiant move, meant to guard against the perceived erosion of American ideals.

Commenting on the preservation of order under the code, Baudrillard states, “Whoever regenerates this public morality (by indignation, denunciation, etc.) spontaneously furthers the order of capital” (1983: 27). As is true with capital is also true of nationalism in all of these cases. The guiding of communal memory serves to regenerate a specific public morality, to define and consequently preserve whatever ideals the code – enacted in this case through the U.S. government – designate as worth preserving. Just as there is a transitory space between experience and memory, so too is there between memory and history. Memory is the raw material of history; it is the bricks and mortar of a usable past.

These three formal memorials are heavily invested in impersonalized, nationalistic meanings, borrowing much of their imagery and context from religious expressions for the creation of a specific and usable past. Though place varies greatly from densely urban Lower Manhattan to the federal urbanism of the Pentagon to the wide open rural field where flight 93 crashed in Somerset County, PA, the national memory constructed out of these places and the citizenry’s experiences and relationships to them carries an impersonal set of meanings meant to imbue the values officially represented at these places with sanctity. As Baudrillard notes, “the denunciation of scandal always pays homage to the law” (1983: 27). And on a very large scale, this is precisely what is happening through the shaping of these memories as collectively nationalistic; by taking the experience of a terrorist attack and defining a national victim, and constructing memories – and subsequently an official history – the order of capital and law is strengthened in a highly nationalistic way through these spaces and participation in them. The use of such a past, such a creation of history by guiding memory, is to harness and control diverse relationships to the experience, to collapse varied forms and expressions of memory into an official, collectivized national one that serves to temper resistance and subvert competing narratives.

Anthony J. Kolenic is a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at Michigan State University. His research encompasses the intersection of Performance Studies, Media Studies, and Popular Culture with the emerging field of Disaster Studies.

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