



An absent presence: Affective heritage at the National September 11th Memorial & Museum



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ABSTRACT

The traumatic nature of the September 11th terror attacks shook most Americans to the core. The attacks contributed to overall sentiments of insecurity and paranoia, and a nostalgia for 'safer times' no longer discernable through the dust of the fallen buildings. Focusing on the emotional impact of the attacks on World Trade Center (WTC) redevelopment, this essay contributes 'more-than-representational' approaches to geographies of heritage by tracing the reverberation of this traumatic event through processes of cultural commemoration and the establishment of the National September 11th Memorial & Museum (NS11MM). Tracing visceral responses to more-than-representational experiences of place at the NS11MM, this essay asserts that the site's traumatic past is felt by memorial and museumgoers through affective encounters at the wounded site. As visitors are encouraged to feel absences and sense presences at the memorial and museum, the trauma of 9/11 is no longer confined to the space and time of the past; rather, it exists presently through newly unfolding emotional and material registries. Building upon feminist theories of embodiment and emotion, this essay critically engages the mind-body mechanism of feeling material and immaterial environments in order to map the geographies of trauma underpinning WTC redevelopment. To this end, I argue that "affective heritage" thwarts linear perceptions of time and place-bound notions of space, as traumatic pasts are re-membered presently by visitors, profoundly re-shaping physiological and psychological experiences of place, space, and time.

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The traumatic nature of the September 11th terror attacks shook most Americans to the core. The attacks contributed to overall sentiments of insecurity, paranoia, and a nostalgia for 'safer times' no longer discernable through the dust of the fallen buildings. U.S. vulnerability had been exposed for the second time in the nation's history, and the city of New York transformed into a "wounded landscape" (see Harvey, 2003; Till, 2012a).

Central to mending the collective wound in Lower Manhattan was establishing an appropriate memorial (see Kaplan, 2005). The winning architect of the World Trade Center (WTC) memorial design competition, Michael Arad, recalled his inspiration for *Reflecting Absence* in a public speaking engagement (*Building the Memorial*, 2012). Arad reminisced about staring out towards the Hudson River from the roof of his apartment building, days after the terror attack, lamenting the massive voids where the Twin Towers once stood (2012). Articulating his vision for the memorial pools as: "voids never filling up where the surface of the water was *torn open*" where a "secondary void yawns forever, remains *forever*

empty ... you cannot see the bottom", Arad conceptualized the commemorative site as both a physical and emotional wound (*Building the 9/11 Memorial*, 2012; italics mine).

First conceived as a physical wound on the body (Greenberg, 2003), modern psychologists have theorized trauma as emotional, or psychic wounding (Caruth, 1996). Traumatic wounds, according to Cathy Caruth (1995), manifest as unknowable voids, unassimilable into the psyche. Arad's aestheticization of the former Trade Towers transforms "unknowable voids" into a traumascapes: space of and for encountering traumatic events (see Tumarkin, 2005).

A growing literature at the interface of cultural geography and heritage studies theorizes the significance of affect in shaping embodied encounters at 'places of memory' (see Sturken, 1997, 2007; Landsberg, 2004; Williams, 2007; Crang and Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Doss, 2010; and Sather-Wagstaff, 2011 on affect in heritage; and Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004; Johnson, 2005; Jones, 2005; Till, 2005, 2006; Legg, 2007; Dwyer and Alderman, 2008; Hoskins, 2007; Azaryahu and Foote, 2008; Rose-Redwood et al., 2008; Hoelscher, 2008; and Stangl, 2008; on geographies of memory). Moving beyond representational conventions, this scholarship marks an important shift towards the 'more-than-representational spaces' (Thrift, 2004; Thien,

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2005; Bondi, 2005; Anderson and Harrison, 2006; Lorimer, 2008) of contemporary memorial design (Heumann Gurian, 1995; Yanow, 1998; Vergeront, 2002; Huyssen, 1994, 2003; Waterton, 2014).

In the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, dominant modes of memorialization relied heavily on monumentality. This aesthetic and mnemonic genre served to preserve historical memory *in place* (see Nora, 1989). Limits to monumentality came, however, in that as an immobile, static, manifestation of collective memory within the landscape, monumentality did the work of cultural remembering on its own (see Young, 1994). Put otherwise: why remember if we have places that do it for us? As monuments became graveyards of collective memory over time, places for memory to live *and die*, the late 20th Century developed new memorial aesthetics favoring 'anti-monumentality' (see Carr, 2003).

Breaking with the rules of traditional memorial design, including figuration, iconography, and doctrinal elements, the anti-memorial favors abstract, spatial, and experiential elements of memorial architecture. This trend prioritizes spatiality and the affective dynamics of memorial design in creating embodied experiences for visitors. As the scholarship acknowledges:

Even as background, spaces are evocative. They speak to us. ... The settings we inhabit—bedrooms and buses, airports and art galleries, playgrounds and pubs, museums and mosques—shape us as much as we shape them (Vergeront, 2002: 8 and 12).

Built spaces are at once storytellers and part of the story being told. As storytellers they communicate values, beliefs, and feelings using vocabularies of construction materials and design elements. ... In this way [museum] spaces are both medium and message (Yanow, 1998: 215).

[T]hinking about the spaces of heritage means shifting from the static 'site' or 'artefact' to questions of engagement, experience and performance. ... These are all multi-sensual sites, alive with intense and often lingering sounds, smells, and sights (Waterton, 2014: 824 and 830).

Although monumentality has never been fully abandoned in western practices of memorialization, this shift towards what I am calling 'affective heritage' has become commonplace in post-modern memorial architecture (see Heumann Gurian, 1995; Linenthal, 1995; Huyssen, 2003; Savage, 2009).

Unlike its mnemonic predecessors, affective heritage relies less on authoritative narratives and official rhetoric to shape and sustain meaning at commemorative sites. In affective heritage, the impetus is for visitors to *feel* meaning as it is produced through embodied encounters with and within memorial spaces. As Waterton understands,

[N]arratives of affect are mediated in affective worlds that shape their receptions, tapping into everyday emotional resonances and circulations of feelings ... which means understanding heritage as a complex and embodied process of meaning- and sense-making (2014: 824).

This is not to say that institutional narratives are irrelevant to, or ineffective in shaping visitor expectations. Rather, affective heritage mobilizes embodied experiences in relation to memorial dogma to produce a kind of 'feeling truth' for visitors. This is especially true at sites commemorating traumatic pasts. Here, the more-than-representational spaces of memorial landscapes are vital to representing that which is 'unrepresentable' and unknowable: trauma itself (see Freud (1920–22) 1955; Felman and Laub 1992; Caruth 1995, 1996; Brown 1995; LaCarpa, 1994, 2001).

Representing the unrepresentability of 9/11 trauma, or lamenting voids, as Mr. Arad characterized, is a central theme of WTC commemoration. This raises important questions about the mobilization of affective heritage at sites of collective trauma, particularly when the procurement of public feeling is a design priority. As Arad himself acknowledges: "you can't understand the importance of [this] public space, until you viscerally *feel it*" (*Building the 9/11 Memorial*, 2012; emphasis mine). Therefore, if Arad's *Reflecting Absence* is a catalyst for public feeling, how do we begin the work of reading those feelings critically?

Mapping the more-than-representational spaces of affective heritage underway at the World Trade Center, this article explores the role of trauma in shaping the evocative site of the National September 11th Memorial & Museum (NS11MM). I ask: how is trauma mediated throughout WTC memorialization, and how is this traumatic past 'felt' by memorial and museumgoers encountering the wounded site? To make this argument, I draw on feminist geographers Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy's (2010) theorization of visceral geography and feminist art historian J. Bennett's (2006) concept of sense-memory. Here, I navigate the role of trauma in shaping embodied experiences of WTC memorial space as I traverse affective heritage through the central tenet of the NS11MM: feeling absence and sensing presence.

Trauma, according to Kerler, is "characterized by a paradoxical presence/absence [...] on the one hand, the trauma is present in the sense that it hauntingly calls for its articulation; on the other hand, it is absent since it cannot be completely represented/articulated..." (2013: 84). This paradox of being simultaneously present and absent, what Kerler refers to as trauma's "representational elusiveness" (2013:85), is a fundamental organizing structure at the NS11MM, profoundly shaping institutional narratives and visitor experiences of place. Situating my arguments within feminist geography's broader 'emotional turn' (see Grosz, 1994; Nast and Pile, 1998; Probyn, 2000; Longhurst, 2001; Anderson and Smith, 2001; Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Bondi, 2005; and Dick, 2007), more-than-representational theories offer promising methodological approaches for studying places of trauma. Investigating the co-constitutional production of thinking and feeling, embodiment and emotion, emotional geographies highlight the more-than-representational qualities of place. As Davidson and Milligan acknowledge,

Emotions can clearly alter the way the world is for us, affecting our sense of time as well as space. Our sense of who and what we are is continually (re)shaped by how we feel. Likewise, place must be *felt* to make sense. This leads to our feeling that meaningful senses of space emerge only via movements between people and places (2004: 524, emphasis added).

Meanings of place, in other words, are simultaneously negotiated through psychological and physiological encounters.

The intensely emotional nature of post-9/11 World Trade Center redevelopment, for instance, is compounded by the site's traumatic transformation as a result of the attacks: the site *feels* like a wound. Here, meaning of place is negotiated by the psychological desire to *make sense* of trauma, as well as the physiological *sensing* of traumatic space. As Hutchison acknowledges (2016: 78):

Trauma[ti]c space] is experienced not only physically but also psychologically, through emotions. Trauma is a sensory experience [...].

As such, the insights of emotional geography are instructive for mapping the more-than-representational spaces incited through

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