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Incompatible identities: Memory and experience at the National September 9/11 Memorial and Museum

Karen Wilson Baptist

Department of Landscape Architecture, Room 305C J.A. Russell Building, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2N2, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The National September 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York City is simultaneously a secular location and sacred place, a space for collective mourning and for individual grief. The incised identities of the diasporic 9/11 dead are displaced from loved ones and from traditional resting places for the dead. While the ephemeral presence of the deceased on the memorial site may be tangible to some, the dead will soon return to this site in the physical form of bone fragments and unidentifiable remains. What will this place then become – public place or death space, ossuary or park, or simultaneously a heterotopic realm of incompatible identities and multiple experiences? The writer's voice echoes these heterotopic tensions; the presence of the subjective voice struggles with the vividness of a 'prosthetic' attachment to the events of 9/11 and the scholarly voice struggles to attain a critical distance from the event. From these seemingly incompatible perspectives, a middle ground is negotiated by embedding an autoethnographical perspective, allowing for reflection upon the implications of the return of the dead to the heart of the living city upon practices of death and grief, of memory and experience, of mourning and of everyday life.

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,

no one conjures our dust.

No one.

Paul Celan, *Die Neimandrose*, 1995.

1. Prosthetic memories

It is September 11, 2001. Centre Space in the Faculty of Architecture, University of Manitoba is shrouded in darkness but for the flickering on the large screens. Twin towers stand stalwart against a flawless blue sky. A plane pierces one building. The tower begins to burn. About fifteen minutes later, another jet hits the second tower. Dark shadows emerge from the building, hover above the flames, and then fall. In the silent room, the towers collapse over and over again.[1]

[1] This text is positioned as an autoethnographical response to events of personal loss, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the experience of visiting the National September 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York City at various stages of wholeness, destruction, excavation, and construction. Following Butz (2010), the entwined narrative – that of more traditional scholarly voice and the autoethnographic text – are intended to be a means of reflecting upon the *sensibility* of experience as an "epistemological position" where "the slippery nuances and particularities of experience – emotions, feelings, bodily responses – are integral to the constitution, understanding, and representation of social or cultural phenomena" (141). The 9/11 memorial site becomes the impetus for reflections on self, death, and landscape - the landscape itself acts as *other*; as loci for "*seeing the self see the self through and as the other*" (Alexander, 2005: 423). Holman Jones positions the autoethnographer as provocateur, directing inquirers to "create disturbances" with texts that niggle the norm and problematize expectations. The mere presence of self within the text is often enough to invite dismissal in some venues, as autoethnography can be characterized as therapeutic (Butz, 2010: 147). But rather than a description of self-interest, the autoethnographical voice is one of humility and of self-exposure, a writing of the self in order to right the self (as in an unsteady boat) that is directed towards illumination, not just of one's own sensibilities, but as a means of "interpreting the past, translating and transforming contexts, and envisioning a future" for others (Holman Jones, 2005: 767–768). Seminal essays by Reed-Danahay (1997) and Ellis and Bochner (2000) are of interest to readers who wish to probe further into the origins of autoethnography.

E-mail address: karen.wilsonbaptist@umanitoba.ca.

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I first visited New York City in 1996, taking in all the required tourist sites, the Statue of Liberty, the radiant Chrysler building, Central Park, and the Empire State Building. I toured galleries and shopped. I was a fine art student at the time and New York City, the mecca of aspiring young artists, began to creep into my art practice, the twin Trade Towers forming the background to allegorical drawings. The viewing decks of the World Trade Tower were on my 'must see' list, but the immense crowds that day forced me back. I remember the throngs of people crowding up the wide staircase in the ample foyer. As I watched the broadcast of the falling towers, the memory of that scene haunted me, filling my mind with the vision of rescue workers ascending the staircase pushing past those frantically attempting to escape the building and of collapsing floor plates condensing the twinned human columns.

When my husband and I introduced our niece to the city in 2004 we brought her to Ground Zero. Behind the chain link fence there was a massive trench. Surrounding buildings were shrouded as if in mourning cloth. Crowds of people surrounded the site, some were smiling and laughing, reporters interviewed people, the sun shone. The experience felt inappropriate, irreverent, profane. We walked past the interpretive signs situated along the perimeter fence in silence. In the excavation pit we saw construction workers and machinery moving earth, uncovering debris far below, and to the north of the site, the subway station entrance – seemingly a threshold to the underworld.

What right do I have, a Canadian citizen, with no familial ties to the dead of 9/11 to grieve this tragic event? I have not worked, paced, nor occupied the sacred ground that we now describe as Ground Zero. And yet, in a De Certeauean sense, my claim to the site is a spatial practice, defined by my *emplaced* operations and the act of representation (de Certeau 1988: 17). Perhaps my 9/11 grief is a secondary affliction, not a 'relationship of attachment' as Weiss (1993) would describe it, nor even a 'relationship of community' (271). My personal experience of the event is vicarious, but for others I know, remembering 9/11 recalls memories barely suppressed—the loss of colleagues and friends, the screaming sirens, the fluttering papers raining from the sky, the ash that coated the city, the endless walk home, an uncertain future. But the day that I watched two passenger jets swallowed by two towers, is a day that I recall distinctly as the end of normal for it was not much after that my world of assumptions began to unravel (Parkes, 1975; Kauffman, 2002). Death arrived in a cluster, pilfering my mother, father, aunt, grandmother, great uncle and aunt, dear friend, even a beloved pet, and in the wake of all this loss, my unraveled mind hitched their absence to the events of 9/11.

Landsberg (2004 cited in Crowshaw, 2010) engenders the term 'prosthetic memory' to describe memories that become attached through 'the technologies of mass cultural communication' (4). Prosthetic memories are 'privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person's own archive of experience' (19). The tension aroused by a subjective interpretation of memory and experience as it pertains to the New York memorial to 9/11, could be described as problematic, the spectre of a 'postmemory' (Hirsch 2001 cited in Crowshaw, 2010) that allows for the projection of the experiences of others upon one's own memory (8). Equally, one might conceptualize this as a form of pathos; designers of a memorial are, for example, tasked with negotiating the tension between their own memories of an event and doing justice to competing demands for the site. These modes of memory can be a powerful force when translating trauma to representational form, even when one has not directly experienced the event. Consider Maya Lin's (2000) response to the site selected for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: 'I imagined taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, an initial violence and pain that in time would heal' (4:10). In discussing 'emotional geographies' (which undeniably a memorial landscape is an exemplar) Smith et al. (2009) note, 'Places like people can thus be understood as being constituted within an emotionally charged middle-ground, one neither entirely subjective nor objective' (11). The phenomenological intertwining of memory and experience with place is a form of transference that provides a means of negotiating between subject and object, between a subjective attachment to the events surrounding 9/11 and the critical distance assumed for the observer. This positionality stretches towards the operative role suggested by Crowshaw (2010)—that of a middle voice. 'As a focal point of collective remembrance, the middle voice registers that collective memory maybe in part constituted by transference, illuminating the variegation of the collective and the different subject positions that inhabit it' (12). Jones (2005) reminds us that 'We are not aware of, or in control of, how experiences are mapped into us at the moment of their living out, or of how they are retained or retrieved (or not) through differing forms of memory' (208). Prosthetic or otherwise, ashes to ashes, my memories of the dead commingle with the cinders of strangers.

2. Contrasting notions

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, numerous memorial sites dedicated to the victims of 9/11 were established throughout the United States and around the world. The privileging of the New York site over any other location is attributed to death toll as well as 'a prevailing sentiment of "recovery through rebuilding"' endemic to the Manhattan financial community (Doss, 2010: 6). As Doss states, 'There was never any doubt that there would be a permanent memorial at what was quickly dubbed "Hallowed Ground Zero" … '(6). The National 9/11 Memorial and Museum was envisioned as an all-encompassing memorial site, inclusive of victims' names from the terrorist attack on World Trade Tower One in 1993, the crash of American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon, the passengers and crew of United Flight 93 and those who died at Ground Zero. For Gopnik (2014), the simplest and most poignant memorials for 9/11 were the handbills depicting missing loved ones that appeared in Lower Manhattan in the wake of the attack (44). Equally, the twin towers of violet light that emerged, phoenix-like from the ashes at Ground Zero, powerfully symbolized the '[f]ragility and resilience, loss and persistence, spirit and substance' of the nation (44). The competition for the New York memorial was launched in 2003 by Governor George E. Pataki, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) as a means of rebuilding the sixteen-acre void in lower Manhattan and commemorating victims of the terrorist attacks (LMDC n.d. 'World … ').

The 'Freedom Tower' that stands sentinel over the memorial plaza was an element of a comprehensive scheme for reconstructing the site by the architect Daniel Libeskind. Libeskind's master plan for the site included many memorial elements, leading some to fear that the architecture would be all encompassing (Young, 2010: 88). However as Young details, 'a separate design competition for a memorial was always part of the LMDC original plan for the redevelopment of downtown' because 'the conflation of re-building and commemoration would also foreclose the crucial process of memorialization, a process they had come to regard as essential to both memory and redevelopment' (88). The international competition for the National September 11 Memorial was launched in 2003 receiving 5201 submissions (LMDC, n.d. 'About … '). The jury for the competition faced a difficult task in determining