Remembering 9/11: Memorials and Cultural Memory

Just a few hours after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, memorials began to appear all over New York: in parks, on street corners, at fire stations. At first, missing-person flyers listing personal details, phone numbers, and photographs were tacked up on the sides of buildings and fences. Then, as the missing became the dead, memorials with teddy bears, balloons, flowers, cards, and other items were created on the Lower Manhattan streets and sidewalks closest to where the twin towers had stood. Similar sorts of temporary memorials were soon seen all over America and, indeed, worldwide. Within days, people began to talk about how the events of 9/11 might be permanently commemorated at New York’s “Ground Zero,” and elsewhere.

Today, ten years after the attacks, hundreds of 9/11 memorials have been built in the United States (and elsewhere, from Christchurch, New Zealand to São Paulo, Brazil) (1). Public debates over their selection, style, location, and meaning have often been controversial, and arguments over some of them, including national 9/11 memorials in New York and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, have been especially contentious. These debates reveal deep cultural anxieties about who and what should be remembered in American history, and on what terms. Indeed, rancorous public debates over 9/11 memorials reveal haunting uncertainties about what 9/11 itself actually means in America.

Memorials as Teaching Tools

Memorials are useful, if overlooked, resources for examining how different Americans reckon with particular issues and interests. Often readily accessible—think of the various memorials in your hometown, or where you live today—memorials are ideal teaching tools in terms of considering how, and why, cultural memory is created, and how it shapes local and national identity. Memorials can be temporary or permanent, ranging from statues and monuments to parks, public squares, cemeteries, public ceremonies, and moments of silence. Understandings of cultural memory are similarly broad, ranging from subjects of personal, local, and civic memory to those of national and/or collective memory.

And in America today, memorials of all kinds are flourishing. Their growing numbers are the result of adamant assertions of citizen rights, and particular demands for public representation and respect. Collectively, they constitute what I call memorial mania: a contemporary national obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express, and claim, those issues in various forms of public art and remembrance (2). Motivated by both individual and social causes and concerns, memorial mania emphasizes personal memories of heroism and hardship, shared stories of tragedy and trauma, and the political agendas of diverse groups of Americans. Driven by heated debates over self-definition, national purpose, and the politics of representation, memorial mania is especially shaped by the fevered pitch of public feelings in America today, including feelings such as grief, fear, shame, and anger.

In the early 1960s, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas imagined an ideal modern society where private citizens, invested in democratic politics and informed by “public reason,” came together to debate and create a rational “public sphere” (3). American public life today, however, is often marked by furious and unreasonable emotions: consider the angry tenor of recent public arguments over health care, abortion, immigration, and the “war on terror.” Consider, too, the confrontational interviews, politically motivated smears, and pugnacious outbursts on today’s talk radio shows and cable television “news” programs. These emotionally charged conditions have significant social and political repercussions, and demand our serious consideration. The essay that follows focuses especially on highly emotional debates over two national 9/11 memorials, and suggests that fresh insights about American history, memory, and identity are especially realized through the lens of public feeling.
Remembering 9/11 in New York

Just a few weeks after the attacks on the World Trade Center, the New York Times asked artists and architects how they might commemorate 9/11. Sculptor Louise Bourgeois suggested a seven-story stone column chiseled with the names of dead and topped by a star, whose edges looked like wax dripping from a candlestick, or tears raining down on the city. Some artists said the huge sixteen-acre site should be turned into a public park. Others insisted that the best kind of memorial would be rebuilding the original skyscrapers. As James Turrell stated, “I feel we should rebuild. I am interested in seeing the working culture of New York continue. People want a memorial now because they’re feeling emotional, but emotion passes, all emotion passes, and then the memorial has no meaning. The new buildings should be higher than the old ones, and there should be three of them. We should not feel bad about building on top of the ashes. All cultures are built on top of earlier cultures.” Artist Shirin Neshat objected, remarking, “It would be absolutely cruel to build a building on the site. In order to remember the loss of lives, you need a certain amount of emptiness. If you build, it’s like you’re covering up the tragedy and will forget it.” And Joel Shapiro, whose sculpture Loss and Regeneration (1993) is located at the entrance to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., advised leaving Ground Zero in ruins: “I think leaving the space empty would be the most effective remembrance. It’s like Berlin. You see the devastation. There are areas of Berlin that have not been rebuilt [since the bombings of World War II], and that’s much more potent than any stupid monument you could build, because you have this real sense of what happened. We don’t need a monument. You see a monument and you don’t think of anything” (4). Following 9/11, heated debates ensued over what sort of memorial—if any—should be created, and where. What story should it tell, and to whom? Who should be remembered: victims killed immediately? Those who died later? Rescue workers? Perpetrators? And who should decide? Artists? Politicians? Business interests? Families who lost loved ones? Survivors? As one woman wrote in response to the New York Times article noted above, “the fallen towers are a fi

Loss and Regeneration 1

rms of the former twin towers. The pools, each about one acre in size, are banded with the names of the dead and bordered by a ramp that descends into an enormous underground museum featuring exhibits on 9/11 and artifacts salvaged from the rubble, including crushed fire trucks and mangled steel beams. Occupying about half of the World Trade Center site, the vast memorial is officially titled the National September 11 Memorial & Museum at the World Trade Center (Figure 1).

Figure 2. Picture of Wikipedia’s “typical” crescent and star (inset) with Paul Murdoch Architects drawing titled “Crescent of Embrace,” originally designed for the Flight 93 National Memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Supposed similarities between Murdoch’s design and images of the crescent moon and star that appear on various Middle Eastern flags drew accusations of “terrorist memorializing” from some critics and politicians, leading the architectural firm to modify its design for the national 9/11 memorial by extending the crescent into a circular shape. (Courtesy Paul Murdoch Architects and Wikimedia Commons)
some carrying signs reading “A Mosque at Ground Zero Spits on the Graves of 9/11 Victims,” and “Clubhouse for Jihadists,” and others stating “Say No to Racist Fear” and “Support Freedom of Religion.” Although endorsed by neighborhood zoning boards, Mayor Bloomberg, and President Barack Obama, who publically stated, “Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as anyone else in this country,” political conservatives decried Park51 as a symbol of radical Islamic “triumphalism” in the war on terror. “This is not about religious liberty,” blasted Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the House, who said building the community center near the site of New York’s 9/11 memorial “would be like putting a Nazi sign next to the Holocaust Museum” (8). These angry public arguments about how to remember 9/11, and how much space—literally and politically—Ground Zero should occupy and control, reveal how Americans remain unsettled, or unresolved, about 9/11’s meaning.

Remembering 9/11 in Pennsylvania

In Pennsylvania, management of the Flight 93 National Memorial, which commemorates the forty people who died as a result of a terrorist takeover on their United Airlines plane on 9/11, has also been highly controversial. Mandated by Congress in 2002, the memorial is managed by the National Park Service and guided by the slogan “A Common Field One Day . . . A Field of Honor Forever.” Over 1,000 proposals were received in the design competition for the immense 2,200-acre site. Architect Paul Murdoch’s winning entry included a marble wall listing the names of the forty passengers who died in the crash (but not the four hijackers), and a concrete “Tower of Voices” housing forty white wind chimes. It also featured a grove of red maple trees planted in a crescent-shaped vale that some paranoid blogospherists called a “Jihadist” symbol of “Islamo-fascism” (Figure 2). On his website “Error Theory,” conspiracy theorist Alex Rawls posted topographical maps and polar coordinates that “proved” that the memorial’s crescent was “pointed toward Mecca” and that its Tower of Voices was, in fact, an “Islamic prayer sundial.” “Someone at Paul Murdoch’s architecture firm is trying to plant an Islamic flag on the bodies of our dead heroes,” said Rawls, calling Murdoch “terrorist memorializing scum” (9).

Whether or not any of this Islamophobia was rather cynically overdetermined (Rawls, son of moral philosopher John Rawls, is given to garbled rantings at his website and is called the “Mark David Chapman [the man who killed John Lennon in 1980] of the blogosphere”), it fueled a memorial firestorm. Much of it raged over what kind of memorial was actually being built in Pennsylvania—a memorial to the victims of terrorism or a memorial to the war on terror. As one blogger remarked: “I’m the old fashioned type. I don’t want to visit ‘remembrance ponds,’ ‘reflection areas,’ ‘hope & healing centers,’ or anything of that sort. I want huge bronze statues and flags.” Or as another put it: “We have had enough of this panty-waisted, new age-y, pop psychology-y ‘healing’ nonsense. We’re at war. It’s a time for anger and vengeance. ‘Healing’ is never appropriate for a war memorial” (10).

Ironically, a jury including Flight 93 families chose Murdoch’s design as a “lasting tribute to our loved ones’ heroism,” viewing the memorial as a “healing place” for “all people, regardless of race and religion.” And the crescent, an emblem of the Greek goddess Artemis, appears on the

Figure 3. Temporary memorial dedicated to the victims of Flight 93, Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Located on a hill about five hundred yards from the site where United Flight 93 crashed on September 11, 2001, this forty-foot chain-link memorial fence (a size chosen to commemorate the forty passengers murdered on the flight) is filled with items left by visitors such as personal notes, items of clothing, religious mementoes, stuffed animals, and military medals. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)
state flag of South Carolina. Nevertheless, Congressman Tom Tancredo (R-CO) criticized the Flight 93 memorial for its supposed “invocation of a Muslim symbol” and insisted that the National Park Service reopen the competition. They did so and Murdoch revised the memorial, replacing the crescent with a circle of trees. The new design, he diplomatically remarked at a press conference, “more fully embraces the site so the focus is that much stronger on the sacred ground” (11).

**Conclusion**

Initially, the attacks of 9/11 generated a sweeping sense of national unity: glued to their TVs and computer screens, Americans were uniformly unable to stop looking at repeatedly visualized images of crashing planes and dark clouds of smoke. Today, however, while shocking images from that day remain fixed in American national consciousness, there is no shared narrative about 9/11, which means that its commemoration is often angrily contested. Angry arguments about crescents in Pennsylvania, or about the physical and political extension of Ground Zero’s sacred space in New York (and across America) reveal the unsettled terms of 9/11’s cultural memory.

Americans do want to remember and memorialize 9/11; in 2005, a majority of those polled felt that a 9/11 memorial should be built at the site of the World Trade Center, and sixty-five percent felt that every American should visit it once it was built (12). For family members and survivors, 9/11 memorials are sacred sites of bereavement and often burial (Figure 3). For millions of tourists, they are “authentic” destinations marked by tragic death and traumatic loss; critic Lucy Lippard describes this as “tragic tourism” (13). Seven million visitors per year are predicted at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum at the World Trade Center and an estimated 230,000 pilgrims will visit the Flight 93 National Memorial on an annual basis. Their visits, like these memorializations themselves, will help shape and define 9/11’s historical meaning for decades to come.

**Endnotes**

2. Erika Doss, Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Erika Doss is professor of American studies at the University of Notre Dame. She is the author of Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America (University of Chicago Press, 2010), which won the 2011 Ray and Pat Browne Award from the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. Doss’s other books include Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism (University of Chicago Press, 1991), Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities (Smithsonian, 1995), and Twentieth-Century American Art (Oxford University Press, 2002).