The Wounded City: Memory and commemoration in Lower Manhattan

Kay Ferres

Abstract
This paper is about the way words, images and sites of memory have shaped remembrance and memorialisation of the events of September 11 2001 in New York. It begins with contemporary commentary and my own recollection of those events, which occurred as I was travelling to Britain, Ireland and the United States from Australia. It explores both the role of remembering in creating collective identities and the place of emotion in the public sphere. The paper draws on the work of Paul Ricoeur (1999) in discussing how the rituals of remembrance can organise the past and imagine the future. My focus is on local sites of memory: street memorials, sites of conscience and official memorials, and the way they reorder public spaces.

Keywords: collective memory, ethics of memory, living memory, memorial sites, sites of conscience, witness.

Introduction: The Wounded City

It was a day when words failed. In their place, a plethora of images: ‘Witnesses were observing, and photographing, the deadliest terror strike in American history even before they realised it’ (Friend 2006, p. xv). People on the street, at their windows and in front of television screens saw those planes where they should not have been, saw them disappear into the towers, saw the smoke and flame, and watched in horror as the bodies began to fall. Then came the catastrophe.

Writing in The Observer on 16 September 2001, Edward Said described the impact of the attacks:

For the residents of this wounded city the consternation, fear, and sustained sense of outrage and shock will certainly continue for a long time, as will the genuine sorrow and affliction that so much carnage has so cruelly imposed on so many.

(reprinted in Said 2004, p. 107)

Said's immediate and abiding concern was to forestall reactions that underscored religious difference. Invoking the ‘secular consciousness’ that had shaped the Founders’ vision of the republic, he warned against ‘inflamed patriotism’ calling instead for a ‘decent politics’ grounded in patient, compassionate reasoning (p. 108). Collective passion would too easily be channelled into support for war in ‘a suddenly reconfigured geography of conflict, without clear borders or visible actors’ (p. 108).
This paper considers how memory and rituals of remembrance actively shaped public feeling and understanding of the events of 9/11. It draws on Paul Ricoeur’s (1999) insights into the ethics of memory, which he understands as both a kind of knowledge and a kind of action. In his account of the work of memory at both the personal and the public level, Ricoeur emphasises the shift from repetition to remembering, from melancholia to mourning, from pathology to reconciliation. An ethics of memory pays attention to the way lost objects—whether persons or ideals—are redeemed through both remembering and forgetting. The wounds and scars of history can be ‘worked through’ and transformed by certain uses of memory: ‘memories have not only to be understandable, they have to be acceptable, and it is this acceptability which is at stake in the work of memory and mourning’ (Ricoeur 1999, p. 7).

Perhaps like no other day in recent history, September 11 has been characterised by repetition. It is ‘a date that repeats itself over and over, resonating through living memory until everyone who was alive that day is gone’ (Suskind 2008, p. 74). The discussion that follows focuses on that ‘living memory’, tracing how images, feelings and emotions have resonated in the public sphere.

David Friend (2006) has described how he and his colleagues watched from their offices in Times Square as the towers disappeared. He turned to a television screen, already playing that endless loop, to confirm what his eyes were seeing. Across the world, countless people were watching those same pictures of terror appearing out of a vaulting blue sky. Friend assembled an archive of images that document that week ‘when the world changed’. His purpose was to demonstrate the impact and potency of photography in the digital age, as new technologies and networks compressed time and space. Those affordances of digital technology, and the hour of the strikes, meant that a large portion of the world’s population saw the attacks in real time, and that the passengers on Flight 93 knew the hijackers’ intentions. But Friend is less concerned with the factual detail that these images supply, than with their affect. His account of the pictures, and the circumstances in which they were taken and circulated, focuses on how they created a collective memory:

We have come to realise it is pictures that have served as the only reliable vessels of the experience of that day. We remain beholden to photographs—and to the photographers of September 11, witnesses who happened to be possessed of hands and eyes steady enough to stand their ground and make pictures of the otherwise unfathomable. Through images we ached, mourned, and gained our footing. Through images, we retained our memory, conscience, and resolve.

(Friend 2006, p. xxii)

A year later, a memorial service was held in New York for the 67 Britons who died in the attacks. Reflecting on the scale of British loss—IRA terror had never killed so many at one time—expatriate British historian Simon Schama commented on the mute sadness of the bereaved. Words, he wrote, had proved unequal to the task of expressing grief, pathos and comprehending sorrow, and
‘at the smoking core of the misery were, instead of words, images: spools of them, the ones you all know, looping mercilessly’ (Schama 2010, p. 60).

Schama has become a public figure—it might even be said a celebrity—on the basis of his television histories. He is a sharp interpreter of images and an accomplished media performer. But as patriotism was being channelled towards vengeance, he was disturbed by the failure of words to make sense of images, to move from reaction to reason. This failure closed down public deliberation about the meaning of the attacks and how to respond to them. Like Said, Schama saw worrying signs of collective passion in the ubiquity of images of the stars and stripes:

Icons did the talking. The word means image, but also copy, and the iconology of 9/11, unlike the real thing which was utterly singular, drew on past images to guide instinctive response. Stored images of the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima (itself an organised photo op) prompted the shot of the firemen raising the flag on the torn steel ribs of the World Trade Center; a phoenix in a storm of dun ash.

The flags shouted, howled, roared. Tied as fluttering pennants to the radio antennae of Jeeps, they conquered the suburbs, as if drive-by patriotism could of itself make things better.

(Schama 2010, p. 60)

The ‘shroud of mass reverence’, which blanketed everything since 9/11, muffled the secular voices that would articulate Enlightenment values. Instead, simple ideas about evil and terror were taking hold: ‘The notion that the parliament of tongues is, in fact, our best vindication wins few hearts and minds right now’ (Schama 2010, p. 62).

However, in the months following 9/11, a plethora of civic associations appeared in Manhattan. In 2005, Monique Girard and David Stark published a report on the purposes and effects of their collaborative activity. They engaged with a wide range of issues related to rebuilding Lower Manhattan, using the affordances of new socio-technologies. These assemblies did not function only as the deliberative ‘parliaments’ that Schama looked for, but as agencies of ‘sense-making and demonstration’ (Girard & Stark 2005).

Immediately after the attacks, the resolve that David Friend saw in the images of first responders and rescue crews in the ruins of the towers was voiced by the Mayor and Governor of New York, speaking directly to New Yorkers. By contrast, in those first hours, nothing was heard from the President. Media images show the mask falling on President George W. Bush’s face in the elementary school classroom as he is given news of the strikes. Because of the risks in returning to Washington, he was taken to a bunker at a military base. When he emerged to address America and the world, he was clearly shaken. Ron Suskind, a close observer of the Bush presidency, says that this was a cathartic moment for George W.:
That [he lost his nerve] was visible to anyone who saw him on the tarmac making his first timorous statements and speaking uncertainly at first before the rubble at Ground Zero. This began to turn when he grabbed the bullhorn. By the time he delivered the best speech of his presidency, two weeks after the attack, he was rebuilt, a chastened bully, who wiped away tears, brushed off the dirt, and was reconstituted by vengeance dressed up as high purpose.

(Suskind 2008, p. 75)

The rhetoric mobilised collective passions and culminated in the ‘shock and awe’ assault on Baghdad.

A year on, ten years on: the United States has lost moral authority, and the mistrust of its motives has grown. As Anne-Marie Slaughter has commented, openness to debate and deliberation, not the closure of partisanship, is critical to restoring the nation’s standing at home and abroad:

When we are under threat, our instinct is to close ranks, to stifle dissent, to insist on a particular version of our values as the patriotic line. But our instincts are wrong.

(Slaughter 2007, p. 222)

Yet better instincts were also in evidence amid the shock and outrage that followed the senseless violence of that day. On the streets of New York, volunteers queued to offer help. On Flight 93, passengers overpowered the assailants. In many parts of the world, crowds gathered for vigils to remember the dead and to share the sorrow.

**Washington, October 2001.**

The towers had fallen a few hours after my flight from Australia touched down at Heathrow early on that Tuesday morning. I watched the reports with a friend in her Bristol flat, our plans for a tour of the West Country abandoned. In the following weeks, I worked in libraries in London, Cambridge and Dublin. These familiar routines offered a respite from streets full of watchful police. By the time I was due to travel to Washington, trans-Atlantic services had resumed, but flights were often cancelled without notice. Those that took off were delayed by new security measures. Passengers at the crowded departure gates were visibly nervous, but patient and unusually courteous. My travel was complicated by the collapse of Ansett airlines, so after hours of anxious waiting at Heathrow, I was glad to arrive at Dulles in mid-October to visit colleagues at the University of Virginia.

Within weeks of September 11, envelopes containing anthrax spores had been mailed to the offices of two democrat senators in Washington and to media organisations. Ultimately, five people died and several more became sick. The spectre of bioterrorism paralysed the US postal service and panicked Americans, causing a run on the antibiotic Ciprio. That weekend in the capital, in an effort to encourage citizens to resume ‘normal life’, the Metro was free. But few people
came out to enjoy the fall sunshine. The Mall was deserted and the Capitol barricaded. My footsteps echoed in the silence of the National Gallery.

After a few days at Jefferson’s university at Charlottesville, I boarded a commuter train to New York. Two well-groomed women with Laura Bush voices were seated ahead of me in the carriage. They were going to Wall Street and to Fifth Avenue, to support New Yorkers and to affirm their faith in the American way. At Union Station in Washington, two more women took the seats opposite them. Before long, all four joined in conversation. I found myself, not for the last time during this visit, eavesdropping on Americans sharing their experience of that day.

The newcomers were a couple who lived and worked in downtown Manhattan. They had taken a weekend break for the first time since the attacks, and were now going home. One was a nurse. Drawn by the commotion to the rooftop of their building, she had seen the second plane hit, and had returned to her hospital to await the casualties who never came. Her partner, an animal therapist, spoke of tending pets distressed by deafening noise and sickened by toxic smoke and fumes that had cast a pall over downtown. Many survived even as their owners were prevented from returning home; others were bereft and in need of new homes. In hushed voices the women spoke of the need for healing. The train was taking the couple back to their traumatised city. As the familiar skyline came into view, they wept.

It was hot in New York City that October. In Washington Square, people ate ice-cream and watched the leaves turn. At my nearby hotel, guests at the communal breakfast table spoke quietly about the events of September, the difficulties of travel and their distress at seeing the ruins of the World Trade Center. Halloween decorations were displayed in the lobby, and people paused unexpectedly to chat. The before-and-after moment that they all shared created a common bond.

In Union Square, where people had assembled to express grief and solidarity in the days following the attacks, posters of the missing were still fixed to shop windows and light poles. These street memorials were obituaries for the lost: images of faces, poignant references to idiosyncrasies, brief, intimate glimpses into their lives, faded and curled at the edges. They represented the first stage of memorialisation and were soon to be removed and preserved by city authorities. Schoolroom windows displayed children’s drawings: crayon outlines of fire trucks, and family portraits. But at the dog enclosure, new posters invited all comers and their pets to a costume party to celebrate Halloween. Collectively, residents resolved to go on with living.

In the humid air, the acrid smell of the smouldering fires was unmistakeable. Shops and businesses in SoHo and Tribeca were still closed, and at Church Street the barricades kept the curious and the sad at bay. Photographer Steve Simon, who was not in New York that Tuesday, describes how, on his return, he was drawn to the site, now both burial ground and crime scene. Instinctively, he took pictures of the crowds who gathered there, ‘because that is what I do’, he says:
On Church Street every clear afternoon about 3pm, the light from the sun flashed brilliantly into your eyes, making it hard to see. People would lift hands in front of their faces, trying to shield their eyes to glimpse the empty sky in front of them, like an unconscious salute to where the towers used to stand. But the buildings weren’t there, you felt the wind and the light hit your face and you were instantly reminded.

People would cry, people would pray but mostly they would look toward the emptiness, alone with their thoughts. And while the people aimed their cameras at the barricaded fences, with only the smallest of hints as to what they were prevented from seeing, I would photograph them, preserving their bewilderment and grief at that difficult moment. But they didn’t seem to mind or care that I was in front of them, if they noticed me at all. (Simon 2002, pp. 7–9)

Simon’s photo-essay depicts people with cameras, taking their own pictures in defiance of signs prohibiting photography; people squinting into the sunlight streaming through the empty sky; people looking away from the unbearable sights before them. As the mangled tridents of the towers and other debris disappeared, the emptiness lost its intensity and by December a viewing platform opened the site to public view. Hawkers and street vendors appeared at this new tourist destination, selling flags, trinkets and souvenirs of the Trade Center.

From November 2001 Elizabeth Greenspan was there too. For two years, she documented the emergence of this vernacular memorial, and talked to the people who came there, as well as those charged with protecting it. They left tributes, wrote messages on the plywood walls and took photographs. Their perambulation defined a new urban space. Greenspan (2006) argues that through their practices of observation and inscription, these visitors created a site of global heritage. When the Port Authority and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation dismantled these homemade memorials, they removed a layer of accumulated meaning and a space ‘that did not fit comfortably within a category of national heritage (p. 382).

I went to Church Street that October to photograph the barricades and the empty spaces. Businesses were still closed but streets were filled with the curious, like me. On the corner, near the steps to the subway, was an old-style cobbler’s shop where I’d once bought softly burnished leather shoes. A policewoman standing nearby told me that the proprietor was not planning to reopen, ever. The loss of these businesses and of the shopping mall beneath the towers, coupled with the barricades and security checkpoints, made life an ongoing misery for the residents of Lower Manhattan.

It has now become commonplace to say that the events of 9/11 changed the world; that this attack destroyed American innocence at the end of the American century, and exposed its vulnerability in the densely interconnected global world of the new century. The courage of the first responders, and the steadfastness of the mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, whose demeanour that day and in the days that
followed surprised everyone, contrasted with the seemingly dumbfounded reaction of the President. Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1998) writes that tragedy always threatens to baffle the possibility of action. When Bush found his voice, he vowed revenge. Phillips’ ideas about revenge are illuminating:

Our angers are inarticulate theories of justice; they are articulated, acted out, in revenge. Revenge, one might say, is the genre of rage. If rage renders us helpless, revenge gives us something to do. It organises our disarray. It is one way of making the world, or one’s life, make sense. Revenge turns rupture into story.

(Phillips 1998, p. 98)

Revenge has propelled a narrative of deceit and devastation. It has dishonoured the people whose lives were lost on that indelible day. But even more, rage and revenge have displaced the theories of justice and freedom that underwrite the story of the foundation of the republic.

Indeed, according to Robert Byrd, that September morning endangered ‘cherished, constitutionally enshrined freedoms as had almost no other event in the life of [the] nation’ (2005, p. 12). During a long political career, Byrd served as a Democrat Congressman and Senator, and from 2001 to 2003 chaired the Committee on Appropriation. Not only have individual liberties unravelled; in a stinging rebuke to the Bush Administration, Byrd documents how the institutions put in place by the Founders to guarantee the triumph of tyranny over oppression, symbolised by the Capitol, have been wilfully diminished.

Annual public remembrance began on the first anniversary. After the death of Osama bin Laden, and the inauguration of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum at the space formerly known as Ground Zero, can remembrance offer a story that mends rupture, redeems chaos and reclaims the future? Places of memory and sites of conscience have emerged as distinctive features of the public landscape after the horrors of 20th century wars. The World Trade Center had come to symbolise the cosmopolitan character of New York. Steve Simon documented the site as a place of pilgrimage in the weeks after the attacks (see Simon 2002); in the years following, the replacement of the towers and the nature of a permanent memorial became the subject of impassioned public debate.

Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, and later a member of the jury for the 9/11 memorial, pinpointed the issue at stake in remaking the site: moral ownership. ‘It’s this “we” thing’, she told Louis Menand in 2002. Believing the attacks wounded everyone who watched, Lin claimed that the memorial must reflect that. For her, this meant that commercial stakeholders, local communities and especially the ‘9/11 families’ would have to relinquish their special claims to the site. Lin’s thinking was clearly influential. The jury set out to ‘find a design that will begin to repair both the wounded cityscape and our wounded souls, to provide a place for contemplation for both loss and new life’ (Menand 2002, p. 282). It stipulated that the footprints of the tower should be visible, and that individual victims should be recognised in the winning design.
Perhaps it was no surprise that the finalists in the competition worked in the abstract, minimalist style of Lin's Vietnam memorial (Bleiker 2006, pp. 85–86).

**Observance and absence**

Of all the images taken on that day, perhaps the most compelling is that of the ‘falling man’, judged by many editors to be too disturbing to use in the mainstream press. The photographer, Richard Drew, calls it ‘the most famous picture nobody’s ever seen’ (cited in Friend 2006, p. 136). It captures a figure plummeting head first toward the ground, with the vertical pillars of the towers behind. Drew took many pictures of this man, but only in this one is his body so composed, positioned at the juncture of the two towers. To look at that picture and its ‘terrifying dignity’ is to be haunted by the knowledge that so few bodies were found intact.

Because there were so few funerals, the observances at Ground Zero became a focal point of remembrance. These rituals marked a second stage of memorialisation. From the first anniversary, at solemn ceremonies, the names of the dead were read and bells tolled to mark the time of impact on each tower. The towers themselves were mourned: the absence of these iconic landmarks signified the rupture of ordinary life.

On the first anniversary, the ‘Tribute in Light’ created two vertical columns of blue light that penetrated the sky from dusk to dawn. The effect of this installation of 88 searchlights was ‘magical’, according to Maya Lin (in Menand 2002, p. 282). The artwork was conceived as ‘a profound symbol of strength, hope and resilience, a reclamation of New York City’s skyline and identity, a tribute to rescue workers and a mnemonic for all those who lost their lives’, according to the artists (Laverdiere & Myoda 2005). Their claims for the healing power of art were supported by The Municipal Art Society of New York, which funded the work. Initially the Tribute was to be a temporary installation, but such was its impact on New Yorkers that it reappeared each year, and has now been handed over to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum.

The first anniversary was also marked by a joint session of Congress, convened in New York City. Billy Collins, appointed Poet Laureate to the Library of Congress in June 2001, was invited to write for this occasion. He read the poem, ‘The Names’, before the assembled representatives. The elegy lamented:

```
... Names written in the pale sky,
Names rising in the updraft amid buildings.
Names silent in stone
Or cried out behind a door.
Names blown over the earth and out to sea.
...```

Collins used the alphabet to create a list of names that reflected the diverse
nationalities of the victims. ‘X’ signified those lost without trace: ‘(let X stand, if it can, for the ones unfound)’.

Collins has never published the poem but he read it in public again in September 2012, on PBS’s Newshour program. Reflecting on the circumstances of its composition, he observed that as a writer whose subject is ‘little things’ and not ‘geo-political trauma’, he initially struggled with the commission. But the constraints of poetic form, and his characteristic attention to the ordinary, produced an elegy commemorating the dead and their surviving families that struck a chord with Americans. He recalled the experience of its first public reading, and commented on the effect of the intrusion of poetry into the political arena, noting that while some representatives were clearly discomforted by his language and his voice, others listened with close attention (‘Poet Billy Collins reflects on 9/11 victims in “The Names”’ 2012).

‘Tribute in Light’ and ‘The Names’ both figure absence and rupture in the solemn observance of collective grief. Collins’ decision not to publish the poem has preserved its symbolic function, but not diminished its accessibility; it is readily found on YouTube, and is recited by schoolchildren. Similarly, the light of the Tribute only pierces the darkness for one night of the year. These artworks provide ritual occasions that enable memory work to happen, so that grief becomes understandable and acceptable (Ricoeur 1999, p. 7).

An anthology of traces
The first stage of the transformation of Ground Zero to memorial site was completed in 2011. The National September 11 Memorial & Museum has been conceived as a repository of collective memory. In Ricoeur’s terms, it is an anthology of the traces left by the traumatic events of 2001 (see Ricoeur 1999). For more than 1000 people who died that day, and whose remains were never found, this is a gravesite. In addition, remains yet to be identified are being held in trust at the site. This complicates the sensitive issues surrounding the reconstruction of a site regarded as hallowed ground, especially the question of moral ownership.

Within days of the Towers’ collapse, debate about what should replace them began. If Simon Schama (2010) was concerned about the muffling of voices and the lack of public deliberation about political responses to the attacks, in Lower Manhattan many voices found a plethora of means to make themselves heard. They were concerned to restore their way of life, to replace infrastructure and to influence what became of the World Trade Center site. Their interests were initially overridden by official interests that, according to Setha Low, ‘sought to contain an act of terrorism in a name (September 11), place (Ground Zero), and master plan (Libeskind’s) as quickly as possible so that the act’s residual meanings could not escape or spread’ (2004, p. 337). Those ‘residual meanings’ referred to wide concerns about US foreign policy, immigration and the workings of democracy in the city.

Low’s analysis is shaped by an understanding of participation in deliberative debate that opposes dominant and marginalised discourses, and typically sees
power working to incorporate or erase minority voices. By contrast, Girard and Stark conceptualise the new public spaces enabled by technology as ‘zone[s] of inquiry’ (2005, p. 3). They map the changing topography of public space as ‘a place of movement, of churn and heterogeneous turnings’, where groupings emerge around interpretive projects as much as protest, around imaginative practices as much as town-hall deliberation (p. 3). Their overview of local interventions takes in small-scale public forums: dispersed workshop-based initiatives such as ‘Imagine New York’ that enabled citizens to project their images of the good city, to the Civic Alliance, which sponsored ‘Listening to the City’ where 4500 people deliberated about the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan. Girard and Stark argue that these activities demonstrate that digital ecologies are a resource for revitalised civic participation, mobilising energies, supporting the search for information and enabling the collaborative, interpretive work that is key to ‘extended processes of collective sense-making’ (2005, p. 27). It was against this background that the jury chose the winning design for the Memorial & Museum, and that decisions about the scale and purpose of surrounding buildings were made.

Michael Arad’s memorial design, ‘Reflecting Absence’, was chosen from more than 5000 submissions. It features reflecting pools in the footprint of each tower, each with cascading water falling 30 feet down all four sides. The pools are surrounded by a plantation of deciduous trees, designed by Peter Walker, to convey the idea of ‘Consoling Regeneration’. Inscribed on the parapets surrounding each pool are the names of those who died that day, in the planes, in the towers, at the Pentagon and in the field in Pennsylvania. The victims of the bomb planted in the underground car park in 1993 are also remembered here. Collectively, the inscriptions have been arranged so as to preserve the relationships among the victims, whether firemen on the stairwells, passengers on the planes, or workers in their workplaces. Their spatial proximity in death has made a community of these strangers.

The memorial has something of the ambience of a cemetery and the space of the footprints reiterates a common trope of twentieth century memorials: the void. This trope is incorporated in an architectural idiom that attempts to express the inexpressible, to respond to the unspeakable and to address moral questions of guilt and reparation. The void stands for unintelligibility as much as for loss.

Though the Museum is yet to open, it already has an online presence. It will display images of the victims, mnemonic objects and other artefacts drawn from the site and its immediate surrounds. In total, 1.45 million tonnes of materials from the painstaking rescue and recovery operation at Ground Zero were transported to the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island. This detritus was combed for traces of the lost, to find anything that could be restored to their families. In all, some 54,000 artefacts (photographs, jewellery, identity badges, wallets and purses) were retrieved (Friend 2006, pp. 170–72). These objects of the dead preserve memory where there is no body to mourn. Other objects, such as the tridents from the towers, are traces of the ruins, evidence of the total destruction
of the buildings that were engineered to withstand the force of a 747 shearing into them (Darton 1999, p. 117).

The transformation of the site was inevitably political. The New York Port Authority, which had stewardship of the World Trade Center, wanted commercial space, and the resultant revenues, replaced. The initial designs were rejected through a concerted public campaign. The final plan preserved the towers’ footprints, but the memorial will be surrounded by a series of towers, comprising commercial buildings and an arts and cultural centre. The empty sky above will remain, and the memorial now supplements New York’s other civic spaces—Union Square and Central Park—with a site of conscience and a site for contemplation. Work on the Museum, located beneath the memorial, stalled in disputes about funding among the various stakeholders—the Port Authority, and city, state and federal governments. It is now scheduled to open in late 2013.

These disputes rehearse conflicts that arose when the World Trade Center was first conceived. Then, the Port Authority, in an alliance with city authorities in New York and New Jersey, and real-estate developers, replaced the old port with the sheer, vertical structures designed by Minoru Yamasaki. The landfill from the site created Battery Park City on the site of ‘the greatest port in the world’. Eric Darton, a critic of Yamasaki’s design, wrote a biography of the World Trade Center, Divided We Stand (1999), in the wake of the first terrorist attack. Darton saw the buildings as an expression of hubris. Their monumental height, their reflective surfaces and their ‘chilling perfection’ signified exterior value alone: ‘their design makes it nearly impossible to imagine that they are full of people’ (Darton 1999, p. 118). For Darton, the bombing in February 1993 raised ‘disquieting questions of how we have come to build and live in structures we are powerless to defend’ (1999, p. 119).

Darton’s fascinating and complex account details the changing political economy of New York, the history of commerce in Lower Manhattan, the motivations of developer David Rockefeller, the campaigns of opponents of the development and the machinations of the Port Authority. Divided We Stand places the 1993 bombing in the context of earlier violent protests in the Financial District, including the bombing of the first skyscraper, the Tower Building, soon after its opening in 1889. Darton comments on the impact of the 1993 bombing—the cost of repairs and renewed security measures—and asks: ‘Is it possible to imagine the World Trade Center as a ruin?’ (1999, p. 193). His response is that physical failure is not the true measure of a ruin; an intact building is a ruin if it is not viable as ‘a site of active social practice, a repository of the imagination’ (1999, p. 193). In Darton’s estimation, the World Trade Center’s existence was always precarious:

The World Trade Center came prepackaged as a ruin that has slowly been moving in the direction of becoming a living building. But even in the wake of the bombing, New Yorkers have never been able to successfully fill Yamasaki’s twin silos with the kind of psychological investment freely poured into the Empire State, the Chrysler Building, the Woolworth Building, or even
Rockefeller Center. From an economic standpoint, the Trade Center—subsidized since its inception—has never functioned, nor was it intended to function, unprotected in the rough-and-tumble real estate market place. And in the thirty years since it was built, the social forces of which it remains so highly visible an artefact have definitely realigned. Relationships among banks and developers, public corporations, the city government, the statehouses of New York and New Jersey, and even the federal government have all been transformed to a point where it is inconceivable that the World Trade Center could be built today—or even for a moment considered a workable or desirable project. Having escaped destruction at the hands of terrorists seeking to demodernize the world, the trade towers now offer themselves as blunt evidence of the maxing out of the North American skyscraper city. Viewed as a crowning ruin, the towers take on a new symbolic power—they become eloquent in transmitting the drama of their own vanished moment.

(Darton 1999, p. 194)

The Memorial and Museum offer an opportunity to reinstate a different kind of eloquence in American civic life. Oral histories are a key element of the exhibition, stories of selflessness and survival told by those who were there, by witnesses and by surviving family members. Technology preserves these dignified voices and their memories. In discussing the ethics of memory, Ricoeur (1999) notes that in some places and around some events, there can be an excess of memory as well as a surfeit of forgetting. This is especially so if the events experienced collectively were violent or humiliating. When that humiliation arouses anger and vengefulness, the excess of memory works to preserve the sense of injury, and the surfeit of forgetting occludes injustice done to others. According to Ricoeur, at the ethical political level there is both a duty to remember and a duty to forget: the duty to remember is a duty to educate, while the duty to forget is a duty to forgive.

Nuala Johnson (2012) has applied Ricoeur’s thought to the memorialisation of the Omagh bombing, which took place in Northern Ireland after the Belfast Agreement of 1998. A total of 3665 people died during the ‘Troubles’, and the Omagh bombing killed 28 and injured scores more. Johnson asks ‘how memory can be appropriately socially enacted when the event is still temporally close in the public consciousness and when the re-call is of an act of extreme violence’, an act which took place on an ordinary day in a commercial centre, and not in a recognised war zone (2012, p. 242). Though the conflict in Ireland has a long history, the fact that the Omagh bombing took place after it appeared that the peace process had successfully achieved reconciliation renders the violence shocking. The atrocity drew universal condemnation including from Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams. Johnson (2012, p. 243) claims that this marked a watershed, as it was the first time that Sinn Féin had condemned violence. Thus, the Omagh bombing represents a rupture, but the responses to it finally achieved a full ceasefire. Johnson’s discussion of the memorialisation of this event and her
description of the dispersed memorial that was finally installed both show how sites of commemoration can be used to turn a community’s face toward the future.

In the case of the atrocities in the United States, the outcome was an unavailing ‘War on Terror’. The vision of the ‘shock and awe’ assault on Baghdad was succeeded by the images from Abu Ghraib, but the caskets bearing the bodies of young American servicemen were screened from public view. While personal grief and living memory remain entwined in the rituals of remembrance, the National September 11 Memorial and Museum may be constrained in its interpretations of the events it commemorates, and in its ability to raise disquieting questions about the military response.

The most recent anniversary ceremonies were marked by the low-key presence of political figures and the foregrounding of the 9/11 families. This emphasis on the families corresponds with Ricoeur’s (1999) concept of the therapeutic work of memory in practices of mourning. But where collective memory focuses on shared suffering, Ricoeur claims, two further dimensions come into play: the pragmatic and the ethico-political. At a pragmatic level, memorialisation needs to produce a narrative of reconciliation that enables a community to pursue a life in common. This entails selective memory, and perhaps an amnesty (a kind of forgetting or forgiveness). At the ethical level, remembering and forgetting are further rebalanced, or kept in a productive tension: here the duty to the future is to expose moral and political failures, as well as to tell stories of courage and hope. The public spaces dedicated to remembrance can play a critical role in encouraging scrutiny and debate about the values that underpin the cohesion of life in common.

References
Girard, Monique & Stark, David (2005), Socio-technologies of Assembly: Sense-making and Demonstration in Rebuilding Lower Manhattan, working paper, no. 05-09, Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy, Columbia University.
Laverdiere, Julian & Myoda, Paul (2005), ‘Tribute in Light’,
viewed 5 October 2012.

Low, Setha M. (2004), ‘The Memorialisation of September 11: Dominant and Local
Discourses on the Rebuilding of the World Trade Center Site’, American


‘Poet Billy Collins reflects on 9/11 victims in “The Names”’ (2012), PBS Newshour,
11 September, television program transcript,
viewed 5 October 2012.

Ricoeur, Paul (1999), ‘Memory and Forgetting’, in R. Kearney and M. Dooley (eds),
Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy, London,
Routledge, pp. 5–11.


Schama, Simon (2010), ‘The Dead and the Guilty: 9/11 a year on’, Scribble, Scribble,
Scribble: Writing on Politics, Ice Cream, Churchill and My Mother, London,
The Bodley Head, pp. 59–66.

Simon, Steve (2002), Empty Sky: Pilgrimage to Ground Zero, Montreal, Stanké
International.

Slaughter, Anne-Marie (2007), The Idea That Is America: Keeping Faith with Our
Values in a Dangerous World, New York, Basic Books.

Suskind, Ron (2008), The Way of the World: A Story of Truth and Hope in an Age

Author notes
Kay Ferres is a Professor in the School of Humanities at Griffith University. She
publishes on citizenship, culture and migration. Her current research is concerned
with mobility, moral emotions and the public sphere.