

## Death, art and memory in the public sphere: the visual and material culture of grief in contemporary America

ERIKA DOSS

*University of Colorado, United States*

**ABSTRACT** *This paper explores the commemorative dimensions of death, dying and bereavement in contemporary America as embodied in material and visual culture. Focusing in particular on the Oklahoma City National Memorial (dedicated in 2000 and now managed by the US National Park Service) and on temporary shrines constructed near Columbine High School in Littleton, CO (the site of a murderous rampage in 1999), it asks how and why such commemoration is organized—by whom and for whom? What do these practices and rituals—both seemingly spontaneous public practices and those managed by specific institutions—reveal about American attitudes toward death and grief? What do they tell us about who (and what) is deemed memorable in their absence, in US history, and in terms of an imagined national future? Indeed, what is the role of memory in the material and visual culture of death, dying and bereavement in contemporary America?*

For most of the past century and until quite recently, the USA was often characterized as a death-denying society in which public discussions of dying, death and bereavement were essentially taboo, and death itself largely relegated to the institutional, private setting of the hospital (80% of Americans, for example, die in hospitals). Contemporary debate surrounding abortion, AIDS, euthanasia and gun control, however, as well as increased popular interest in 'good death', the afterlife and bereavement therapy, suggest the questioning and perhaps the lifting of certain death-related taboos. By extension, visibly public material culture rituals pertaining to death and grief suggest broad and diverse interests in 'reclaiming' death, in making death meaningful on personal, individual levels and challenging an 'American way of death' that has largely been, since the mid-19th century, the purview of medicine, science and technology.

This paper speculates on the commemorative dimensions of death, dying and bereavement in contemporary America as embodied in visual and material culture, and in particular at the sites of tragedy and trauma.[1] How and why is such commemoration organized—by whom and for whom? What do these

---

Correspondence to: Erika Doss, Department of Fine Arts, University of Colorado, Boulder Campus, Box 318, Boulder, CO 80309-0318, USA; Tel: (1-303) 492-4483; E-mail: erika.doss@colorado.edu

works of art and public rituals tell us about contemporary American attitudes regarding death and grief, and about a national legacy of violence? What do they tell us about who, and what, is deemed memorable in American history, and in terms of an imagined national future? Indeed, what is the role of memory in this apparent ‘recovery’ of death, dying and bereavement in contemporary America?

Why is it that certain violent and tragic episodes in US history—such as the 1864 massacre by US Army troops of 133 Cheyenne Indians (mostly women, children and older men) at the village of Sand Creek in southeastern Colorado; or the 1927 bombing of a Bath, Missouri school that killed 46 students and teachers; or the 1958 arson of a Chicago Catholic elementary school that killed 95 people—have been largely ignored or forgotten, unmarked by any public monument or memorial? Cultural geographer Kenneth Foote asks similar questions in *Shadowed ground: America’s landscapes of violence and tragedy* (1997) and concludes that sites that produce reactions of shame and revulsion are often obliterated or silenced.[2] Yet the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which left 168 dead and hundreds more wounded, has recently been commemorated with a multi-million dollar public art memorial, museum and national park.

Why is it that certain deaths and certain death sites, such as those documented by photographer Joel Sternfeld in his book *On this site: landscape in memoriam* (1996), are absent of public commemoration, and hence of public history and memory? These include figures such as Kitty Genovese, who was brutally beaten and murdered outside her Queens, New York apartment in 1964; Karen Silkwood, who was killed in a car crash in Oklahoma in 1974 on her way to meet a *New York Times* reporter about the falsification of quality-control documents at the Cimarron River Plutonium Plant; and David Koresh, who died with 80 other members of a small religious sect called the Branch Davidians after FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) agents stormed their Waco, Texas compound in 1993.

Yet the Union, South Carolina site where Susan Smith drowned her two young sons in 1994 has become a veritable shrine, visited daily by people who drive to the remote spot and add flowers, poems, toys, teddy bears and candles to the makeshift memorial. Plans are in the works to add a \$3,000 granite marker to the shrine site, a memorial featuring a likeness of the boys and a 14-inch solar-powered light in the shape of an angel. As the woman who commissioned the monument remarks, “So many people are looking at that lake as a horrible place. I don’t want families to feel they can’t go there. That’s what families are missing now, spending time together. I want to help parents realize how special a gift they have that they’ll take more time to be with them” (Riddle, 1995: Y10).

Questions and conflicts concerning public commemoration are common in contemporary America; indeed, today’s public sphere is a contested site of cultural authority as artists, art agencies, politicians, corporations and members of the general public vie for influence and struggle over issues of national identity, historical memory and cultural democracy (Doss, 1995). The 1980s

saw two especially memorable public art conflicts. The decade opened with national protests over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, designed by Maya Lin, nicknamed 'The Wall,' and unveiled on the Washington, DC Mall at a 1982 dedication ceremony that then President Reagan refused to attend. The 1980s closed with more localized actions against 'Tilted Arc', an abstract sculpture by Richard Serra that was removed from Manhattan's Federal Plaza in 1989. Serra bitterly remarked that the sculpture's removal from its New York City location, and hence its destruction, was like the death of a child. The 1990s saw more of the same, with heated national debates over memorials in Washington, DC to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Korean War, and with equally angry local and regional arguments about public sculptures and statues in US cities ranging from Wichita, Kansas and Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Yakima, Washington and Hyannis, Massachusetts.[3]

Whether national or local, public art controversies involve questions of art style, assumptions about audience, concerns about civic identity, and political posturing. Most of all, public art controversies centre on the meaning of cultural democracy, and especially on how democratic expression is shaped in contemporary America. Reagan's refusal to dedicate the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for example, was embedded in the neo-conservative politics of the early 1980s. Ostensibly objecting to the funerary form of Maya Lin's award-winning design, Reagan and others were mainly angered by the memorial's critical and complicated assessment of the war itself: made of black granite and shaped in two ground-hugging walls that chronologically list the names of the 58,196 men and women who died in the war, Lin's counter-memorial not only mourns the dead but raises questions about their loss and the efficacy of the Vietnam war itself.[4] Its dark stone, horizontal design and basic rejection of military triumphalism stands in sharp contrast to traditional US war memorials and 'codes of remembrance', as exemplified in the Iwo Jima Monument in Arlington National Cemetery, and the highly controversial National World War II Memorial, scheduled to be completed on the Washington Mall by 2003 (Sturken, 1997: 46).[5]

In 1984 the 'addition' to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial of sculptor Frederick Hart's bronze figural tableau, 'Three Fightingmen' (an addition which a handful of the political elite, including James Watt, Henry Hyde and Ross Perot, insisted on if The Wall was to be built at all), was clearly the result of political bad faith.[6] Unlike Lin's design, Hart's superficial sculpture, which is located about 100 feet from Lin's memorial, uncritically affirms the neo-conservative position that the Vietnam War was an honourable episode in US history. Likewise, sculptor Glenna Goodacre's Vietnam Women's Memorial, a 1993 addition to the Washington Mall's Constitution Gardens situated about 300 feet from The Wall and featuring bronze figures of wartime nurses and wounded infantrymen, also stands as a thoroughly right-wing recuperation of the war, sentimentalized as an altruistic, innocent and unfinished American adventure.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the contradictory messages embodied in

these public commemorations, today the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the most visited monument in the nation's capital; in 1995 the National Park Service estimated that over 22 million people had visited the memorial. Everyday, thousands of people come to the site, many leaving flowers, flags, letters, poems, photographs, teddy bears, dog (identity) tags, wedding rings, high school yearbooks and other offerings; many others tracing the names that are inscribed on the monument's black walls. Importantly, these activities are not discouraged: rangers with the National Park Service help visitors find particular names on The Wall and are careful to protect the items they leave behind as tributes. Importantly, all of these items are valued: collected and catalogued, they are stored in an enormous warehouse in suburban Maryland (where, by 1993, some 250,000 objects had been collected (Hass, 1998)).

The tensions surrounding the making and meaning of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on national, political terms and on local, personal levels, as well as the abiding conflicts regarding recognition and remembrance of that war in contemporary America, are not atypical. In fact, the story of The Wall informs the similarly complicated narratives and processes that surround other public commemorations of tragic and traumatic events, of events that Americans have generally refused to consider critically in terms of cause and sociopolitical consequence. The following remarks focus especially on two such events, and subsequent commemorative actions: the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, and the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

On the morning of 19 April 1995 Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, a nine-story complex in downtown Oklahoma City housing 17 government agencies and a day-care centre. McVeigh (and his accomplice Terry Nichols) sought revenge for the US government attack on the Branch Davidians' compound in Waco, two years earlier; the Murrah building was the regional headquarters for the FBI and the BATF and McVeigh apparently aimed to target these federal employees in reprisal. He killed 168 people, including 19 children at the day-care centre; at least 600 other people were injured, some severely, by the tons of shattered glass and debris that fell from the 300 surrounding buildings that were damaged in the blast.

Within days of the bombing, a seven-foot steel fence had been built around the rubble of the building, circling an entire city block. 'Memory Fence', as it was called, quickly became filled with tributes to victims and survivors as local, national and international visitors to the site left 'tokens of remembrance': stuffed animals, teddy bears, plastic flowers, laminated poems, hand-drawn pictures, religious mementos, military medals and patches with notes like 'I Serve For You', hundreds of 'What Would Jesus Do?' bracelets, and more. Local residents who lost family and friends in the blast added personal belongings (toys, photographs, baby blankets, prom flowers) and, claiming particular areas of the fence, regularly attended to those mementos (see fig. 1).

Memory Fence became a national and international pilgrimage site for thousands of tourists, many of them guided by Oklahoma Department of

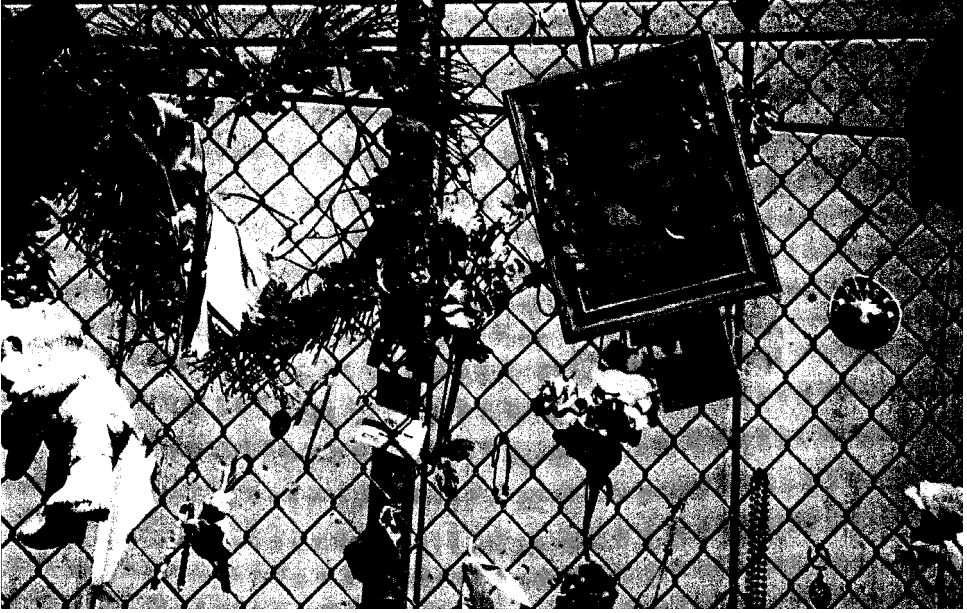


FIGURE 1. Items left on Memory Fence, Oklahoma City in 1997.

Transportation highway signs directing them to the site of the bombing. A nine-year-old boy from Texas left a teddy bear and a note reading, “I just had a nice trip to Walt Disney World with my family, and I wanted to share a toy in remembrance of the children who died here”. A man from New York left a business card for ‘Emily’s Foundation’, a group he organized to help grieving parents deal with the death of their children (Morgan, 1998: 13A). The then First Lady, Hilary Clinton, left a floral wreath, decorated with a teddy bear and an American flag, at the fence in 1996. It was not uncommon to see visitors remove their t-shirts or their caps, write their names and other inscriptions on these items, and then add them to the fence. By 1999 some 50,000 items had been left on Memory Fence. Items placed by families and survivors were left indefinitely, but other materials were collected every 30 days, catalogued and stored in a local warehouse maintained by a museum-trained archivist—much as the National Park Service collects material left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

On 20 April 1999 two teenage boys—Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold—opened fire on their classmates and teachers at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, a middle-class and predominantly white suburb of Denver. During their murderous rampage, which was apparently initiated in retaliation for years of classroom bullying, the boys killed 12 students and one teacher, and then killed themselves. Almost immediately following the shootings, a spontaneous shrine was created in Clement Park, a 325-acre grassy knoll situated



FIGURE 2. Shrine constructed in Clement Park, near Columbine High School, Littleton, April 1999.

near the high school parking lots and a widely travelled four-lane highway. The makeshift memorial started when students piled bouquets of flowers, poems, teddy bears, class photos, school jerseys, letter sweaters and footballs on to the cars and trucks of their murdered school friends and acquaintances. Within a few days this material culture of grief became a veritable mountain of mourning, eventually spreading from the parking lots to Clement Park in four-foot-deep mounds of cellophane-wrapped cut flowers, cards, letters, stuffed animals, balloons, crosses, framed religious prints, laminated Bibles, posters, bed sheets lettered with tearful comments and Biblical passages, origami cranes, American flags, sneakers, soccer balls, candles, and more (see fig. 2).

During its two-week existence, tens of thousands of visitors wandered through the shrine's acreage, many bringing something to add to its carnivalesque setting, some recording their experiences on video, others buying sodas and hotdogs from the fast food vendors who quickly set up shop at the site. Many visitors left messages lettered on scraps of paper or cardboard, some of which included warnings ("the millennium is approaching") and prayers ("Heavenly Father, hear our cries. Heal our children. Help our country"). Trees in Clement Park were dressed with wind chimes, blue and silver ribbons (the high school colours), crepe paper and rosaries. Sympathy banners from businesses were similarly strung along the fences of the park, expressing such sentiments as: "Our thoughts and prayers are with the students, faculty, and friends of Columbine High School. From your Littleton Wal-Mart" and "Love

and prayers from the employees of USWest” (then the major communications corporation in the Western USA). Greg Zanis, a Chicago carpenter who runs an outfit called ‘Crosses for Losses’ and erects wooden crosses “at the scenes of slayings as a way to help loved ones grieve”, erected 15 large crosses—including two for Harris and Klebold—in the park (Cooper & Tomsho, 1999: B1, B4; Cart, 1999: 1–2). Columbine’s shrine was further filled with dozens of TV vans, satellite dishes, mobile-phone towers, roving reporters and blue interview tents where news anchors held court to broadcast the ‘terror in Littleton’ around the globe. The entire Clement Park memorial was, wrote one newspaper reporter, a “perfect suburban shrine, sprawling, growing without boundaries and taking on a life of its own” (Chandler, 1999: 39A).

The images, artefacts and rituals of these visibly public death-shrines in Oklahoma City and Littleton framed issues of memory, tribute and collectivity in contemporary America; their visual and performative dimensions clearly embodied a vast collaboration of mourners and media. As one reporter remarked in 1998, the making of Oklahoma City’s Memory Fence demonstrated how a diverse body of Americans “converted a crime scene ... into a powerful national shrine” (Morgan, 1998: 13A).

“Welcome to the memory industry” Kerwin Klein remarks in a 2000 *Representations* essay detailing the emergence of ‘memory studies’ and, in particular, the influence of such theorists as Pierre Nora, who posited memory as a model of archaic sacred discourse opposed to modern historical consciousness. “It is no accident”, says Klein, “that our sudden fascination with memory goes hand in hand with postmodern reckonings of history as the marching black boot and of historical consciousness as an oppressive fiction. Memory can come to the fore in an age of historiographic crisis precisely because it figures as a therapeutic alternative to historical discourse” (p. 145).

Indeed, the therapeutic dimensions of memory are dominant in Oklahoma City, Littleton, and other sites of national tragedy and trauma. As Nora (1989) argues, sites of memory exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis: “an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications” (p. 9). Sites of memory are, at their core, sites of struggle, with stakes in larger cultural struggles over national collective identity. Like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Memorial Fence and Columbine’s spontaneous shrine legitimated mourning in the public sphere. But Oklahoma City and Colorado’s memorials also elided the historical realities that produced them, largely because of contemporary assumptions that grieving, in and of itself, is a prescriptive political practice.

If traditional cemeteries and nationalistic rituals such as Memorial Day seem to have declined in popular significance, contemporary Americans are increasingly drawn to the locus of tragic death. Roadside crosses are placed at the sites of car accidents.[7] Temporary memorials are constructed at the sites of aeroplane crashes. Fans and tourists visit Graceland, the Memphis, Tennessee home where Elvis Presley died and is buried (Doss, 1999). Thousands flock to the Days Inn motel in Corpus Christi, Texas where pop star Selena was murdered.

Shrines made out of driftwood, shells and handwritten letters are left on the beach near Martha's Vineyard where John Kennedy, Jr's plane crashed in July 1999; other mourners leave flowers, poems and photographs in front of his apartment in New York City. Across the country, newspapers and television cameras feature colour images of the spontaneous shrines and memorials made to students and teachers who have been killed in school shootings, and the rituals of mourning and grief that attend these tragic episodes.

The relationship between mourning and material culture is timeless, of course, and both older and contemporary American monuments testify to human desires to capture and represent memory, to pay tribute, to validate certain historical, political and social perspectives, and to grieve. Yet the spontaneous, often impermanent, and distinctly 'unofficial' nature of many of these roadside shrines, grassroots memorials, offerings and ritualistic behaviours seem less concerned with producing a critique of historical moments and tragic events than in catharsis and redemption. This may relate to the nature of trauma itself, and to the ways in which memory can fail because of traumatic events and episodes—child abuse, civil war, torture, disease, natural disasters or the murder of family members and loved ones.[8] It may also suggest that an American public that is often hesitant and fearful about death and dying has equated the visual and material culture of grief with the transformative milieu of the sacred, that which Georges Bataille defined as “perhaps the most ungraspable thing that has been produced between men”, as “a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled” (Bataille, 1985:, p. 242).

Importantly, it is most often the death site—not the homes or graves of those who have died—that has become the site of these spontaneous and unofficial public memorials. Often insulated from death and disaster, and generally discouraged from public displays of grief, people go to these sites to see and touch real-life tragedy, to weep and mourn and *feel* in socially acceptable situations. As shrines to trauma, these sites memorialize the horrible events that occurred there, and also the grief of relatives, survivors and complete strangers who feel kinship with those who died. Ghoulish fascination with inexplicable death, with the death of innocents and unfortunates, is accompanied by feelings of guilt and gratitude: with worries about personal responsibility, with thanks that we were not inside that federal building or that high school (Doss, 1999: 89–90). These feelings are ritualized, becoming collective and socially acceptable, through offerings and participation: through gift-giving and grieving at the shrine sites.

Equally important is the manner in which these death sites have been claimed as public deaths and hence public, and even national, property. As religious studies scholar Edward Linenthal remarks, the grassroots grieving that generated Memory Fence “means that the deaths in Oklahoma have become, like the deaths in the Holocaust, public deaths that count not only for the families but the nation”. People came to see Memory Fence, he adds, “for all sorts of reasons: curiosity, respect. The fence has become a part of what people



will remember of the tragedy because people have transformed it to a commemorative event” (Morgan, 1998: 13A). Yet as public sites, these shrines also become subject to conflict and controversy in the public sphere, where different audiences with different agendas compete for power and control.

At the Columbine shrine, for example, the two wooden crosses erected for Harris and Klebold were defaced with vituperative graffiti (“God will never forgive you”). Angry debates ensued over who should be memorialized at Columbine’s makeshift shrine: all the dead, including the two killers, or only the 12 students and the teacher who were murdered. At one point a fight broke out (broadcast on Denver television stations) between a group of mourners who were visiting the crosses of the 13 who had been murdered, and friends of Harris and Klebold who had come to place flowers at their memorials. Eventually, the father of one of the slain students stormed the hill where the crosses had been erected and tore down the two markers to Harris and Klebold, angrily explaining that “it was an outrage to use a Christian symbol to honour the murderers at a victims’ site” (Lowe & Guy, Jr, 1999: 10A). Captured on local TV, his actions and remarks were viewed by millions.

Indeed, thousands came to see Memory Fence and the Columbine shrine because, within moments of the traumatic events that first gave these sites meaning, the media were live, on the spot, shaping and directing that meaning—and finding that meaning primarily in the shrines themselves. In fact, mass media coverage of these events has consistently, and rather formulaically, focused on the material culture offerings and public ceremonies of grieving local residents and tourists: at Oklahoma City, at Littleton, and at the quickly generated death-shrines made of flowers, candles, cards, and teddy bears in public school corridors and on playgrounds from Jonesboro, Arizona to Springfield, Oregon. Television has become the witness and conduit for the public expression of grief and the collective enactment of ritual. Victims and visitors eagerly talk with reporters and openly describe their loss and suffering on camera, and viewers become naturalized to these expressive displays of grief. Television newsmagazines such as *Dateline NBC* and ABC’s *20/20* reported some of their highest seasonal ratings in their April/May 1999 coverage of the murders and memorials at Columbine (Sink, 1995: A25).

For the media, the story of the Oklahoma City bombing and the story of the Columbine High School killings was the public expression of grief, not discussion of social causes (such as school bullying) or public policies (such as gun control), or political circumstances (such as McVeigh targeting the Murrah Federal Building on the second anniversary of Waco). On the one hand, such attention to the visual and performative dimensions of mourning suggests new understandings of death in the public sphere. On the other, a superficial focus on psychic closure—on healing and surviving—skirts the causal, historical dimensions of these visibly public deaths. It further fails to provide a shared set of rituals and commemorative forms that might allow citizens to critically consider how to change the conditions that contribute to the culture of violence in America.

If fascinated by the spectacle of public tragedy and trauma, media attention on how grief is managed in the public sphere is sparse. It is remarkable, for example, how few journalists considered the particular religious contexts of these traumatic events and death-shrines. Oklahoma City's federal building, for example, was surrounded on all sides by four different churches, whose congregations were encouraged publicly to declare their feelings about the bombing in visual and material culture forms at Memory Fence. Some congregations claimed certain areas of the fence and conducted religious ceremonies at the fence site. One congregation, which had planned to abandon its downtown church before the blast, saw its numbers substantially increase in the weeks following the bombing and decided to stay at the site.

The national media further skirted the tenor of religiosity central to Columbine High School, situated in an affluent Denver suburb with an extremely active evangelical community and flourishing youth ministry. Evangelicals themselves viewed the Littleton high school killings and the emergent shrine site as a "God-given marketing opportunity, a chance to save souls". The morning after the shooting, hundreds of local students participated in a huge prayer meeting that was orchestrated in Clement Park. Joined together in a group-hug (a photograph of which made the front page of the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*), the students declared "we feel the presence of Satan, operating in our midst" and proclaimed slain student Cassie Bernall (apparently shot after declaring her faith in God) a modern-day martyr. A few days later, at the televised memorial service attended by 70,000 and viewed by millions, the Rev. Franklin Graham "invoked the name of Jesus seven times in under 45 seconds" and called for the "return of prayer" in public schools (Cullen, 1999: G1, G2). And the Columbine shrine itself was especially marked by an outpouring of Christian evangelical art and rituals—from crosses, pictures of Jesus and tracts from the International Bible Society, to prayer and worship services, scripture readings and candlelight vigils, some televised. Visitors were encouraged to participate; more than a few placards and posters urged visitors to the shrine site to accept Christ as their personal saviour, and to "let the healing began [sic] with God" (Cullen, 1999: G1, G2)

Yet, if the media failed to grasp the important authority of evangelical Christianity at Columbine, it hardly failed to frame the shrine itself as 'sacred ground'. The "procession" of visitors, one newspaper reporter remarked, was "a reverent pilgrimage to a sacred place where youth, innocence and hope are struggling mightily to survive" (Carman, 1999: 8A). Memorial services held in Clement Park on the anniversaries of the high school shootings in 2000 and 2001 were similarly framed on religious terms, with Christian music concerts and with rites led by local pastors. Zanis, the Chicago carpenter, returned to Clement Park each year with 13 wooden crosses (not the 15 he had originally made), demanding that they become part of a permanent public memorial. "We're standing up for freedom of religion and freedom of speech", he remarked to newspaper and television reporters ('A time to remember', 2001, p. 4B).

Columbine's spontaneous shrine was dismantled after a few weeks, although many of the items left at Clement Park were stored and catalogued at a local warehouse (operated by the Colorado Historical Society in Denver) and mourners continue to leave offerings at the site. Plans for a permanent memorial are being finalized, and various church groups and civic organizations are actively directing the design process, and debating the memorial's possible subjects and themes. Such debate is fraught with tensions surrounding who is to be commemorated—the 15 who died or the 13 who were killed—and what is to be historically remembered: the school dynamics and social ostracization that led to Harris and Klebold's murderous rage; the comfort of survivors; the fact of a naturalized national culture of anger, hatred and violence.

In Oklahoma City Memory Fence has been almost completely dismantled, replaced by the \$29 million Oklahoma City National Memorial. Within weeks of the bombing, plans were made to memorialize the 168 who died with some form of public art or sculpture. Oklahoma City Mayor Ron Norick appointed a 350-member Memorial Task Force, comprised of survivors, relatives of those killed in the bombing, and "volunteers with expertise in areas ranging from mental health, law and the arts, to fund-raising, business, communications and government".[9] In 1996 they adopted the 'Memorial Mission Statement':

We come here to remember those who were killed, those who survived, and those changed forever. May all who leave here know the impact of violence. May this memorial offer comfort, strength, peace, hope and serenity.

In early 1997 a competition for a 'Symbolic Memorial' was conducted by the Oklahoma City Memorial Foundation; later that year, the winning design by Hans and Torrey Butzer of Butzer Design Partnership (Cambridge, Massachusetts) was selected from among 624 entries. Construction began in November 1998 and the memorial was dedicated on 19 April 2000, the fifth anniversary of the bombing (see fig. 3).

The Symbolic Memorial features 168 bronze, stone and glass chairs, each etched with the name of a victim of the bombing (see fig. 4). These stand on a grassy footprint of the former federal building—repeatedly referred to as 'sacred ground' in memorial press releases—and are arranged in nine rows representing the building's nine floors. The chairs are placed according to where those who died were in the building at the moment of the blast; the 19 children who died in the building's day-care facilities are represented by smaller chairs grouped together in a single row. At night, the glass bases of the chairs are illuminated by small lights, 'as beacons of hope'.

Monumental 'Gates of Time' mark the formal entrances to the Symbolic Memorial, their tomblike appearance framing the site of death and the moment of the blast—9:02 AM. The East Gate reads '9:01' and the West Gate reads '9:03', meaning that the memorial recreates, and its audience re-experiences, the moment when these 168 people died (fig. 5). Each gate also features the words from the Memorial Mission Statement, with its emphasis on "comfort, strength, peace, hope, and serenity". The Survivor Tree (an American Elm that

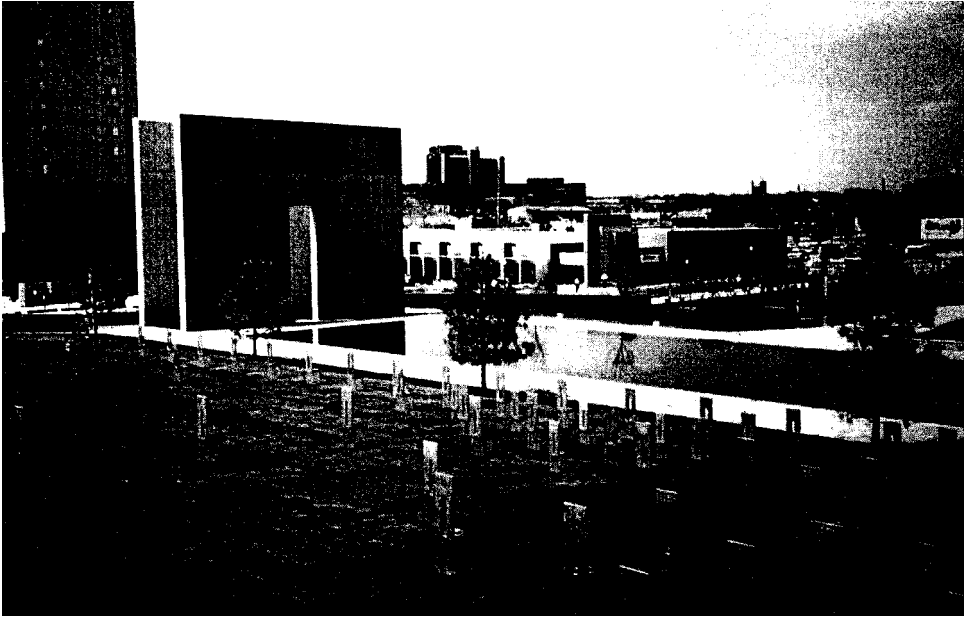


FIGURE 3. Oklahoma City National Memorial, general view.

survived the blast), Survivor Chapel, Rescuers' Orchard, and two smaller 50-foot versions of Memory Fence on either side of the West Gate (the exit) are among the memorial's other symbolic devices. Yet there are no references to why the bombing occurred and who was responsible, or to the nation's history of catastrophic violence. The website for the memorial is particularly vague, noting that the monument "honors the victims, survivors, rescuers and all who were changed forever on April 19" and "encompasses the now-sacred soil where the Murrah Building once stood, capturing and preserving forever the place and events that changed the world".

The Oklahoma City National Memorial is actually a national park, free and open 24 hours a day, and managed by National Park Service rangers, who conduct tours. In addition to the Symbolic Memorial, the site includes a 30,000 square-foot Memorial Center, whose galleries feature hundreds of artifacts and photographs, 16 interactive computers, several lecture halls and a Museum Store. Admission is \$7 for adults. The museum's 10-chapter 'story-line' narrates the physical devastation of the bomb and the 16 days of rescue and recovery, and includes a 'Gallery of Honor' which displays images and personal mementos of each of the 168 people killed in the bombing. The 600,000 items culled from Memory Fence are also stored at the Memorial Center. A third component of the national memorial is The Oklahoma City Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, a non-profit organization dedicated to "research into the social and political causes and effects of terrorism and the development of

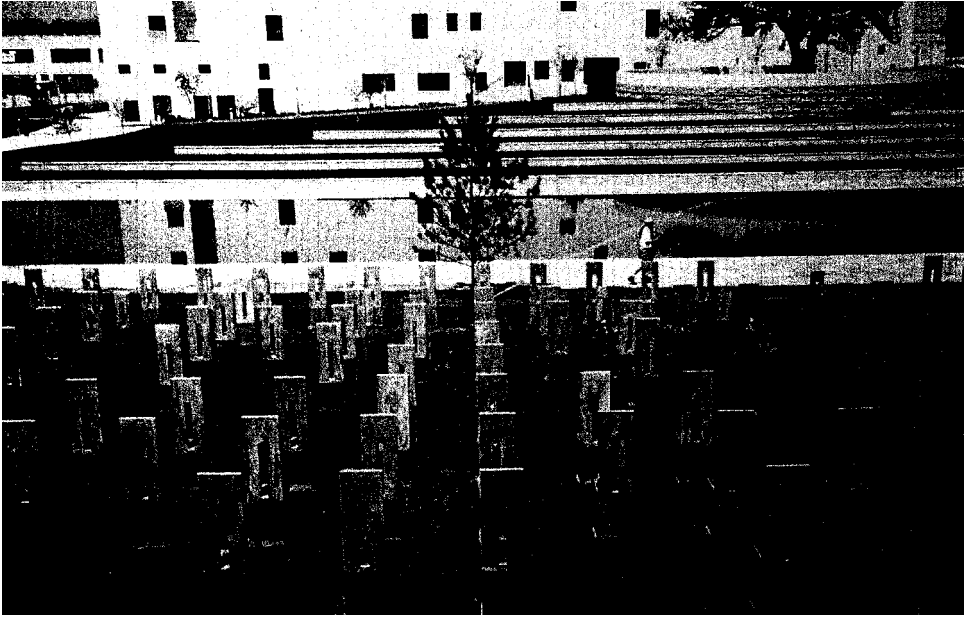


FIGURE 4. Oklahoma City National Memorial, view of chairs.

technologies to counter biological, nuclear and chemical weapons of mass destruction as well as cyberterrorism”. The Institute sponsors conferences and includes five endowed chairs (at \$1 million each) at the University of Oklahoma’s Health Sciences Center, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences.

By most accounts, the making of the Oklahoma City National Memorial was an inclusive grassroots effort, with families and survivors helping determine its design and a public art competition involving multiple surveys and community meetings. “Our process is not like other memorial processes”, the chairman of the Memorial Foundation said in 1997. “This is one that has transcended that and become intentionally part of the healing process.” Linenthal describes it as a “real democratization of the [public art] process. It’s no longer left to the artistic elite” (Linenthal, quoted in Puente, 1997: 8A). Kathleen Treanor, who lost her four-year-old daughter and her in-laws in the bombing, writes that she was initially sceptical about the memorial:

You see, at that time I did not believe that a memorial should be built and if one was built how could they know how to best honor the memory of people they did not know. I knew that Luther and LaRue [her in-laws] would not have wanted a conspicuous statue erected in their honor. They weren’t that kind of people.

(‘An appeal from the heart’, Oklahoma City National memorial Homepage)

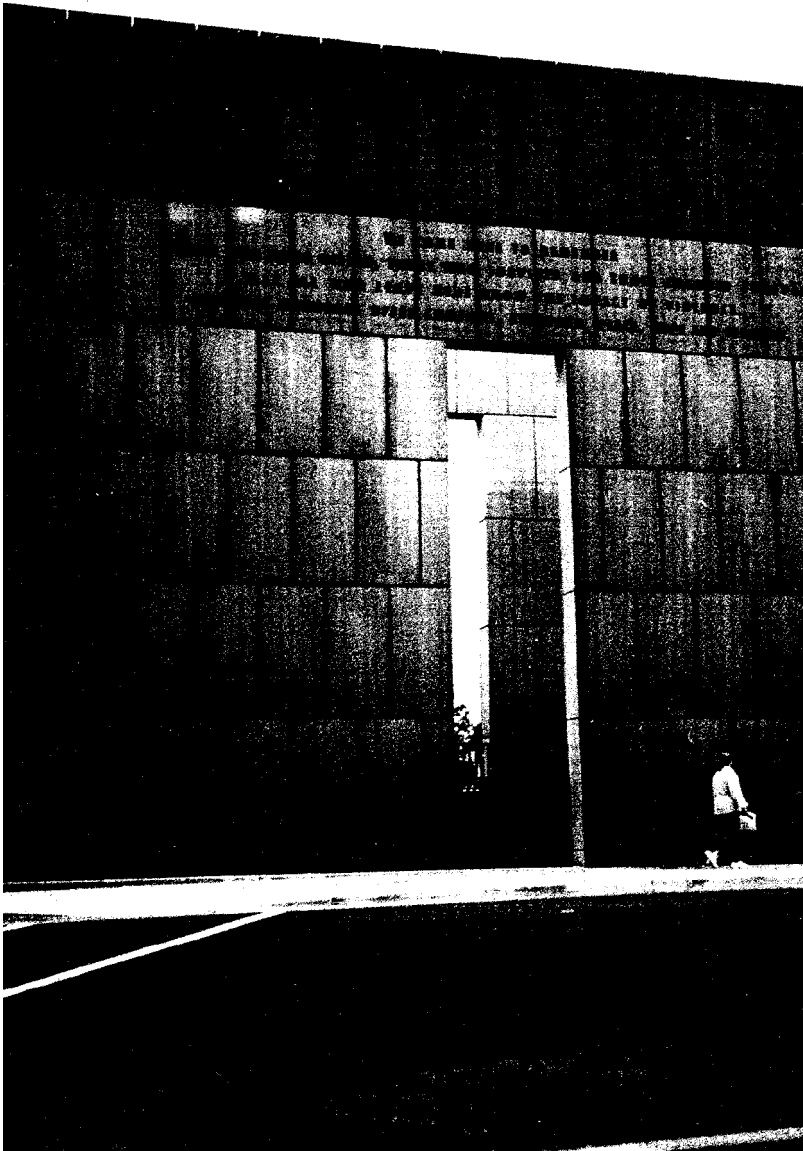


FIGURE 5. Oklahoma City National Memorial, view of Gates of Time.

Eventually Treanor became involved with the Memorial Foundation, co-chairing its Family and Survivors Committee and helping to draft its Mission Statement, whose words appear now on the Gates of Time.

Yet, cast from the onset as a national public memorial, Oklahoma's monument transcended local and regional needs for healing to encompass a variety of contemporary national myths, ideals and political needs more expansively. Broadcast nationwide, dedication ceremonies in April 2000 included speeches by then President Clinton and Janet Reno (chief of the US Depart-

ment of Justice), and opened with the Pledge of Allegiance and the singing of 'God Bless America', both ritualistic acts of national fealty. Later in the day, Clinton intoned: "There are places in our national landscape so scarred by freedom's sacrifice that they shape forever the soul of America. This place is such sacred ground" ('Bombing survivors', 2000: 20). Built of granite, marble and bronze, featuring a reflecting pool and serene, landscaped lawns, the Oklahoma City National Memorial's monumental architectural form, aesthetic symbolism and aura of permanence echoes that of other national memorials, including many on the Washington Mall, and the memorial to President John F. Kennedy, designed by Philip Johnson in 1970, which was erected near the site of JFK's assassination in Dallas.

The 'national' meaning of Oklahoma City first became evident in its immediate and widespread appeal as a pilgrimage site within days of the bombing. Again, the role of the media was central in this sociocultural spectacle: CNN's coverage of the bombing massaged the intense emotional response of national television viewers and manipulated the sense of kinship among subsequent visitors to the site. This was enhanced when Oklahoma City civic leaders and businessmen acted to turn their economically stagnant downtown into a national venue of cultural tourism. Within weeks of the bombing, a coalition of urban design professionals and Oklahoma City politicians began tackling the town's dingy central business district with an ambitious plan of historical preservation, urban renewal and \$52 million in federal funding (The City of Oklahoma City Press Release, April 2000).[10] The Butzers' design was selected because it best meshed with elite understandings of taste, culture, memory and national identity in the public sphere. As Bill Clinton remarked in 1997, "This tragedy was a national one, and the memorial should be recognized and embraced and supported by the nation" (Oklahoma City Memorial Foundation, 1997).[11]

The space of Oklahoma's National Memorial is spare and clean—much like the new Oklahoma City that has formed, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of the bomb. The 168 chairs are empty: a symbolic device drawn from seats left vacant at social occasions to honour those who are absent, and from riderless horses in state funeral parades. Performance artist Karen Finley orchestrated 'The Vacant Chair' in 1993, a memorial to friends lost from AIDS that consisted of two chairs, one empty and one covered with moss and flowers (Lucie-Smith, 1995: 288). The 168 chairs at Oklahoma City are roped off, however, preventing visitors from leaving offerings or even touching them; likewise, they are made of materials that hardly prompt visitors to sit down. Moreover, if their emptiness evokes loss, it also intimates silence: chairs are generally sites of spontaneous and often heated discourse—grouped around dinner or seminar tables, for example—but this memorial's stone and bronze chairs are lined up in nine immutable rows. Designed to avoid contact with each other, they face onto a reflecting pool and gaze upon themselves.

Memory Fence, by contrast, was much more dialogic and, in terms of aesthetic sensibility, messier: a collage, an intimate, grassroots product of

shared, communal grief. Spontaneously (although not accidentally) layered in diverse and fragile materials (photographs, stuffed animals) that remembered the dead as they were alive, Memory Fence evoked the jobs, hobbies, personalities and relationships—the ordinary, daily lives and experiences—of the 168 individuals who died in 1995. Items left by countless strangers who never met or knew the victims of the bombing similarly paid them homage. But, like the items left at other sites of tragedy and trauma—at Columbine, for example—the offerings at Memory Fence also spoke to public needs for comfort and healing. At Oklahoma City, mourners sought relief from the pain and suffering caused by a bombing repeatedly declared by many journalists and politicians as ‘the worst act of terrorism on American soil’. Their visibly public acts of commemoration, like the National Memorial itself, were aimed at generating a public space for grief and redemption.

Indeed, to separate the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Memory Fence into categories of official versus populist memorial discounts their interdependence as material culture manifestations of contemporary patterns of grief and mourning. Psychologists generalize the grieving process in terms of progressive stages: from anger, to bitterness and, finally, to acceptance; indeed, these stages are thought to be necessary in order to allow for psychic recovery from grief. Likewise, social scientists and theorists engaged in the study of trauma explain how various cultural forms, including story-telling and autobiography, can help to recover memory and aid in physical and psychic recuperation.[12]

These progressive stages of grieving are echoed in the heady emotionalism of Memory Fence, and the transition to the cooler stoicism of the National Memorial; likewise, both memorials embody notions that material and visual culture can ‘open a window’ on to traumatic events. Seen in tandem, the two Oklahoma City memorials mesh with the contemporary psychosocial clichés of mourning: from anger to closure, from mourning to acceptance. Indeed, as one survivor remarked at the dedication ceremonies, “This is very peaceful. Now we can go forward” (Yardley, 2000: A16). Or, as the chairman of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation proclaimed: “I’m very optimistic that those who still feel anger resulting from the tragedy here five years ago will find a place of solitude, a place where they can reflect on what has happened and reflect on the positive things that can come out of this” (Mullen, 2000: A8).

Yet such ambitions reveal the dominant tensions concerning death, memory, mourning and material culture in today’s public sphere. Put simply, memory overwhelms history at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, where commemoration of the dead actually commemorates national healing. The memorial’s monumental, monolithic forms, its shady terraces and calming pools, encourage forgiving and forgetting, rather than the urgency of facing the cause of bereavement. While an aesthetic of naming is evident—with the chairs featuring the names of those who died—it is largely anaesthetic because the historical and political context of why these deaths occurred has been effaced. Despite its difference in form and style, Memory Fence did much the same:



sentimentalizing the personal and private dimensions of trauma; downplaying outrage; perhaps asking but not answering the question 'why?' Numbed by the spectacle of memory, as Debord (1994) might have it, visitors to the Oklahoma City National Memorial evade the very reasons it exists.

That the Oklahoma City National Memorial does not invite opportunities for spontaneous and unofficial forms of grieving and giving—and more importantly, for the critique of national forms of identity deeply rooted in a long-standing culture of violence—suggests that these visual and material culture modes of memory and critical discourse have been ignored in deference to a very different civic, and national, agenda regarding death, history and American identity. That the messy aesthetics of Memory Fence are mostly absent in the Oklahoma City National Memorial suggests further, despite insistence otherwise, that an 'artistic elite' of modern commemoration based on massive and minimalist granite forms, shady terraces and reflecting pools, *does* dominate this site—and thus 'manages' collective and communal forms of grief.

Nor does the Oklahoma City National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism seem especially interested in shaping a discourse regarding, for example, Oklahoma's older, pre-1995 history of terrorism and violence, from the Trail of Tears to its present day Indian reservations. A conference sponsored by the RAND Corporation entitled 'Terrorism and beyond: the 21st century', was held in conjunction with the dedication of the memorial in April 2000. The three-day conference featured a number of talks on national domestic preparedness and counter-terrorism measures, yet no lectures were held on America's history of dissent, its legacy of violence. Indeed, since the bombing of the Murrah Building, issues of security have become paramount in federal building projects, and in the public art that often accompanies these projects. Many who are involved with commemorative public art projects today relate how they are struggling to create sites that are both secure and accessible, ironically attempting to blend the aesthetics of gated communities with the traditional spatial and expressive freedoms embodied in the American public commons. Not surprisingly, art in the public sphere is increasingly guarded, closeted and remote.

Traditionally, public memorials in the USA commemorate triumphs and heroes. Counter-memorials—in attempting to raise public consciousness about loss, conflict and contradiction—become entangled in politicized machinations: hence the controversy surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. By extension, there remains a refusal in the USA to recognize dissent and violence as key facets of national identity. Such observations are central to the interplay of death and memory at Oklahoma City, where issues of collectivity and consensus redirected history to memory, and the commemoration of loss and tragedy to survival and national redemption. Effaced from the memorial, Timothy McVeigh's act became an isolated incident rather than part of an historical continuum of violence and terrorism. The consciousness-raising potential of national outrage and grief was similarly effaced, or redirected from questioning a culture of violence to forgiving—and hence redeeming—McVeigh's act and our own complicity. At the dedication ceremonies, the memorial was repeatedly

described as a ‘public stand against terrorism’. Substituting memory and material culture for public action, the history of 19 April 1995 was abandoned for a “kind of national self-congratulatory spectacle” (Young, 1999: 68–82, 234–235). Focused on the ‘comfort’ of survivors and on cultural tourism, the Oklahoma City National Memorial represents a lost opportunity to engage in critically and historically informed public conversations about dissent, violence, authority, loss and grief in America.

The visual and material culture of grief in contemporary America seems to suggest heightened popular commitment to shift the discourse on death from medicine to culture, and distinctive efforts to make death meaningful—memorable—on personal and public levels. Yet the ‘management’ of memory at Columbine and Oklahoma City reveals the authoritative religious, economic and political cultures that continue to shape and direct the commemorative dimensions of death, dying and bereavement in contemporary America, subverting the historical realities of these tragic events, and eliding public efforts to change the conditions that contribute to catastrophic violence.

### Acknowledgements

This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the ‘Thanatographia: figuring death’ Conference held at the University of Western Sydney, Australia in October 1999. Versions have also been presented at the Third International Conference on Media, Religion, and Culture (University of Edinburgh, 1999), and at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting (Detroit, 2000). Special thanks are extended to the Institute for Collaborative Research and Public Humanities at Ohio State University, where I was a Visiting Scholar in Spring 2000 and greatly benefited from the helpful criticism of Chris Zacher, Rick Livingstone, Julia Watson, Michael Swartz and Hai Ren.

### Notes

- [1] This article was written before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the US Pentagon on 11 September 2001. Tens of thousands of spontaneous shrines were immediately constructed in New York, in Washington, DC and in cities across the USA and around the world mourning these tragic events.
- [2] On the bombing in Bath see Ellsworth (1927); on the 1958 Chicago fire see Cowan and Kuenster (1996).
- [3] See, for example, Vinciguerra (2000: 3).
- [4] For further discussion of the concept of counter-memorials see Young (1993: 27–48; 2000: 90–119, 227–228).
- [5] On the controversy surrounding the National World War II Memorial see Gerth (2000: 17).
- [6] This is particularly evident in the 1994 documentary film *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*.
- [7] For one overview see Anaya *et al.* (1995).
- [8] See, for example, Caruth (1995) and Antze and Lambek (1996).
- [9] Information on the making of the Oklahoma City National Memorial, and quotes used here, can be found on the memorial’s website: [www.oklahoma.net/connections/memorial](http://www.oklahoma.net/connections/memorial).
- [10] The federal government provided \$52.5 million in HUD (Housing and Urban Develop-

ment) Community Development Block Grants to fund the Murrah Recovery Program, a loan partnership between local banks and the City to restore business activity in the downtown area damaged by the bombing.

[11] Quoted in information distributed by the Oklahoma City Memorial Foundation, 1997.

[12] See for example, essays in Caruth (1995) and Antze & Lambek (1996).

## REFERENCES

- 'A time to remember': mourners mark the second anniversary of Columbine shootings. (2001). *Rocky Mountain News*, 21 April, 4B.
- ANAYA, R., CHÁVEZ, D. & ARELLANU, J.E. (1995). *Descansos: an interrupted journey*. Albuquerque, NM: El Norte Publications.
- ANTZE, P. & LAMBEK, M. (Eds) (1996). *Tense past: cultural essays in trauma and memory*. London: Routledge.
- BATAILLE, G. (1985). The sacred. In A. STOEKL (Ed.), *Visions of excess, selected writings 1927–1939*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bombing survivors find peace (2000). *Indianapolis Star*, 20 April, 20.
- CARMAN, D. (1999). And still they come to the tear-stained, hallowed ground. *Denver Post*, 25 April, 8A.
- CART, J. (1999). Shrine and its removal are balms to Columbine. *Los Angeles Times*, 6 May, 1–2.
- CARUTH, C. (Ed.) (1995). *Trauma: explorations in memory*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- CHANDLER, M.V. (1999). Heartbreak, mystery shroud shrine. *Rocky Mountain News*, 2 May, 39A.
- CITY OF OKLAHOMA CITY PRESS RELEASE (2000) Federal Government provides recovery funds.
- COOPER, C. & TOMSHO, R. (1999). Aftermath: in Littleton, companies walk a fine line. *Wall Street Journal*, 5 May, B1, B4.
- COWAN, D. & KUENSTER, J. (1996). *To sleep with the angels: the story of a fire*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee.
- CULLEN, D. (1999). From solace to 'Satan'. Do Columbine-area evangelists soothe or fuel kids' alienation? *Denver Post*, 30 May, G1, G2.
- DEBORD, G. (1994). *The society of the spectacle*. New York: Zone Books.
- DOSS, E. (1995). *Spirit poles and flying pigs: public art and cultural democracy in American communities*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- DOSS, E. (1999). *Elvis culture: fans, faith, and image*. Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas.
- ELLSWORTH, M.J. (1927). *The Bath school disaster*. Bath, MI: M.J. Ellsworth.
- FOOTE, K.E. (1997). *Shadowed ground: America's landscapes of violence and tragedy*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- GERTH, J. (2000). Groundbreaking, of sorts, for a contested war memorial. *New York Times*, 12 November, 17.
- HASS, K.A. (1998). *Carried to the wall: American memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- KLEIN, K.L. (2000). On the emergence of memory in historical discourse. *Representations*, 69, 127–150.
- LOWE, P. & GUY, A., Jr (1999). Clement Park begins slow return to normalcy. *Denver Post*, 5 May, p. 10A.
- LUCIE-SMITH, E. (1995). *Movements in art since 1945*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- MORGAN, J. (1998). Americans leave tokens of grief at Murrah Building blast site. *Daily Camera* (Boulder, CO), 19 April, 13A.
- MULLEN, T. (2000). Peace and quiet fill void left by bombing. *Columbus Dispatch*, 17 April, A8.
- NORA, P. (1989). Between memory and history: les lieux de mémoire. *Representations*, 26, 7–25.
- OKLAHOMA CITY NATIONAL MEMORIAL HOMEPAGE (n.d.). Available: [www.oklahomacitynationalmemorial.org](http://www.oklahomacitynationalmemorial.org).

- PUENTE, M. (1997). Bombing memorial a monument to healing. *USA Today*, 30 June, 8A.
- RIDDLE, L. (1995). Where a tragedy occurred, a coming together. *New York Times*, 22 January, Y10.
- SANDERS, T. (Producer) & MOCK, F.L. (Director). (1994). *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*.
- SINK, M. (1999). Small town propelled to world stage. *New York Times*, 25 April, A25.
- STERNFELD, J. (1996). *On this site: landscape in memoriam*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.
- STURKEN, M. (1997). *Tangled memories: the Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- TREANOR, K. An appeal from the heart. Oklahoma City National Memorial Homepage (n.d.). Available: <http://connections.oklahoman.net/memorial/appeal.html>.
- VINCIGUERRA, T. (2000). When taste imposes a limitation on statues. *New York Times*, 17 September, 3.
- YARDLEY, J. (2000). 5 years after terrorist act, a memorial to the 168 Victims. *New York Times*, 20 April, A16.
- YOUNG, J.E. (1993). *The texture of memory: Holocaust memorials and meaning*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- YOUNG, J.E. (1999). America's Holocaust: memory and the politics of identity. In H. FLANZBAUM (Ed.), *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (pp. 68–82). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

### Biographical note

Erika Doss is Professor of Art History in the Department of Fine Arts, University of Colorado and specializes in twentieth-century American art. She is the author of *Benton, Pollock, and the politics of modernism: from regionalism to abstract expressionism* (1991), *Spirit poles and flying pigs: public art and cultural democracy in American communities* (1995), *Elvis culture: fans, faith, and image* (1999), *Looking at Life Magazine* (editor, 2001), and the forthcoming *Twentieth-century American art* (2002).