

# Souvenirs to Forget

JEAN-SÉBASTIEN MARCOUX

In consumer research, the relationship between memory work and forgetting remains largely unexplored, and the “forgetful” role that souvenirs can play in remembering is misunderstood, even denigrated. The present study explores the connections between memory work, forgetting, and material culture. Drawing on contemporary material culture studies, it offers a reflection on the memory practices of New Yorkers in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Based on ethnographic research conducted in New York City, it provides evidence that remembering and forgetting can coexist and interconnect in complex ways. Uncovering the mechanics of forgetting in memory practices with souvenirs, it takes the research on memory and material culture beyond the semiotic analysis of signs and symbols, and shows that souvenirs can play a fundamental role in the process of obliterating and/or compartmentalizing aspects of past experiences. Although it may be true that New Yorkers—especially those who personally experienced 9/11—have no need of souvenirs to remember, many of them have memory practices that involve using souvenirs to forget.

*Keywords:* 9/11, World Trade Center, memory work, forgetting, material culture, souvenirs

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What I would like and I haven't found, although I haven't really looked, is a black and white . . . New York skyline photo that included the two Towers . . . I've seen them where they have the Towers of Light and they have the *Remember September 11* . . . I don't want anything like that. I don't know why that is so overtly about the attacks . . . makes me uncomfortable. . . I would like to have a classic sort of New York skyline night light . . . that includes the two Towers and it would make me feel good to have . . .

—Gil

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Gil was near Grand Central Station when the attacks on the World Trade Center took place on September 11, 2001. He is a New Yorker, not a tourist, yet he talked about how it would be nice to find a picture of the Twin Towers in a tourist shop. His case reveals the paradoxical nature of memory. By showing that souvenirs can be used in memory practices that involve distinguishing between what has to be recalled and what has to be omitted in recollections of the past, it indicates that remembering can involve forgetting. This points to the limits of conventional explanations of the connections between memory and material culture.

Consumer researchers have reflected extensively on the mnemonic value of photographs, mementos, and souvenirs (Belk 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Epp and Price 2010; O'Guinn and Belk 1989; Peñaloza 2001; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000; Turley and O'Donohoe 2012). In doing so, they have broadened our understanding of the multiple ways in which objects are used in the cultural process of remembering. However, their research tends to overlook the role that forgetting plays in memory work, making it difficult to discern the ways that material culture is used in forgetting.

To a certain extent, the situation is different in the humanities and social sciences. In their work on

architecture and on the anthropology of art, scholars like [Forty \(1999\)](#) and [Küchler \(1988, 1997, 2002, 2012\)](#) have partially revealed how artworks, ritual artifacts, and monuments are involved in forgetting. Their research has shed light on the material culture of forgetting, but it has neglected a particular category of objects: souvenirs and other mass-produced objects. This may be because researchers in the humanities and social sciences tend to stigmatize souvenirs as inappropriate memory objects that encourage forgetting and put memory in peril ([Stewart 1993](#); [Sturken 2007](#)). This is particularly clear in the case of [Stewart \(1993\)](#), who associates souvenirs with the “death of memory.”

This disparagement of the phenomenon of forgetting coincides with the traditional view of it as a disturbing disablement of memory. Forgetting has been seen as memory’s “deficient mode” ([Casey 1987](#)) and condemned as delinquent, disrespectful, and threatening ([Connerton 2009](#); [Lowenthal 1993](#)). [Ricoeur \(2004\)](#) notes that from a moral standpoint, forgetting can be characterized as a “betrayal,” and he maintains that it creates the risk of repetition, opens up the possibility of political manipulation, and paves the way for revisionist ideas and negation. [Lowenthal \(1993, 1999\)](#) and [Ricoeur \(2004\)](#) both show that forgetting can be dangerous, but they also acknowledge that remembering can be unsettling, alarming, even oppressive, and this leads them to call for a greater recognition of the role of forgetting in memory work. In line with these scholars, the present study interprets forgetting as a socio-cultural phenomenon that consists of a more or less deliberate effort to unremember difficult memories through specific practices with material objects.

According to [Ricoeur \(2004\)](#), memory work depends on the ability of individuals and societies to turn absence into presence. Providing a means for events from the past to return, it involves a “fight” against forgetfulness and oblivion that has both a personal and a collective component. Drawing on the work of [Ricoeur \(2004\)](#), the present study seeks to contribute to the current discussion of memory work. It proposes a reflection on the memory practices of New Yorkers in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Relying on the theoretical lens provided by contemporary material culture studies, and on ethnographic research conducted in New York City between 2003 and 2011, it explores the connections between memory work, forgetting, and material culture in an attempt to answer the following questions: (1) How do people use souvenirs in memory work? (2) What is the role of souvenirs in forgetting? (3) Why is forgetting an important theme for consumer research? The main goal is to improve understanding of the relationship between memory work and forgetting by shedding light on the role that souvenirs can play in this relationship.

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the literature on souvenirs, material culture, and forgetting. The research on this theme in the humanities and social sciences is contrasted with the way that it has been approached in consumer research. The second section describes the research context for the study and the methodology that was used to bring the relationship between memory work and forgetting into focus. The third section provides an analysis of the findings on the use of souvenirs to forget. The fourth section discusses these findings as they pertain to the literature on collective memory and explores their implications for consumer research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Preeminence of Remembering in Consumer Research

One of the fundamental tenets of consumer research on memory and material culture is that human beings do not keep, treasure, or collect objects associated with persons, places, and events that they do not want to remember. The overall assumption is that human beings keep what they want to remember or, inversely, that they remember what they keep.

Consumer researchers have examined how photographs, mementos, and souvenirs can help people to reminisce about the past, and they have revealed numerous ways in which such objects can be used as repositories of memory and cues for bringing to mind past experiences ([Grayson and Shulman 2000](#)). They have shown that these objects can help establish and maintain a relationship with the past ([Belk 1988, 1991, 1995](#); [McCracken 1988a](#); [Turley and O’Donohoe 2012](#)), create a sense of permanence ([Curasi et al. 2004](#); [Price et al. 2000](#)), and transform fleeting recollections of past experiences into stable memories ([Belk et al. 1989](#); [O’Guinn and Belk 1989](#); [Peñaloza 2001](#)).

In their studies on memory and material culture, consumer researchers usually treat forgetting as a subsidiary issue that deserves little attention ([Wallendorf and Arnould 1991](#)), or they completely ignore it. A few authors, like [Bonsu and Belk \(2003\)](#), have briefly mentioned forms of forgetting related to funeral rituals and bereavement. Others, like [Epp and Price \(2010\)](#), have indirectly alluded to the problem of forgetting in their analysis of family rituals and traditions. It is also implicit in [Weinberger and Wallendorf’s \(2012\)](#) work on community rituals in the aftermath of natural disasters. In almost every case, however, the analysis of memory and forgetting revolves around the question of identity management, and forgetting remains a marginal issue.

[Coupland’s \(2005\)](#) study is a notable exception. It shows that mundane commodities stored in the kitchen pantries of American consumers sometimes become invisible to their owners, and that products acquired routinely, through

habit, can progressively disappear from notice and eventually become forgotten, moving into people's minds and then slowly, over time, completely out again. Contrary to scholars like [Belk et al. \(1989\)](#) or [Bonsu and Belk \(2003\)](#), who emphasize the sacred side of consumer culture, [Coupland \(2005\)](#) analyzes goods like canned food, which are completely different from inalienable or sacred possessions. Indeed, the medleys of things she finds in the kitchen pantries that she excavates have little in common with the domestic collections that [Belk \(1995\)](#), [McCracken \(1988a\)](#), and [Fernandez and Lastovicka \(2011\)](#) examine or with the collections analyzed by specialists in museum studies like [Pearce \(1992\)](#). The routines that [Coupland \(2005\)](#) scrutinizes are also very different from the storage habits that [Epp and Price \(2010\)](#) document or the curatorial practices deciphered by scholars in cultural studies like [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett \(1998\)](#). Coupland stresses the importance of the *inconspicuous* presence of objects, focusing on the most mundane, average objects that surround people in their daily lives: the things that they never notice—even when they are using them—while going about their ordinary activities. Her work calls to mind [Miller's \(2008, 2010\)](#) reflections on “stuff”: things like clothing and personal possessions in which the intimate structure of the everyday world is grounded without being the focus of an explicit awareness.

[Coupland \(2005\)](#) emphasizes, as do [Epp and Price \(2010\)](#), the importance of objects that are kept unconsciously and, to some extent, forgotten. It is fair to say that the issue of a possible role for forgetting in memory work lies beyond the scope of [Coupland's \(2005\)](#) research. Yet by focusing on mundane objects that people are less consciously engaged with, her work tends to portray forgetting as a low-involvement psychological phenomenon, when in fact it can be a deeply meaningful high-involvement human practice. This becomes clear when we look at the ways that forgetting has been approached in the humanities and social sciences.

### Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences on Forgetting

In the humanities and social sciences, researchers like [Connerton \(1989\)](#) have argued that material objects have less significance than rituals and traditions when it comes to conveying memory. Others, like [de Certeau \(1984\)](#), have contended that any attempt to localize memory and fix it in material objects is problematic. [Forty \(1999\)](#) takes a different approach. Instead of radically repudiating the role of material objects in memory, he examines how things like monuments emphasize, enlarge, or highlight certain features of memory, and how they downplay, exclude, or pass over in silence other experiential elements. He is not alone: [Küchler \(2002, 2012\)](#) also documents how ritual artifacts can be involved in forgetting. These two authors not only

challenge the assumption that objects can be analogues of human memory, they also recognize the importance of forgetting. Their work is part of a wider body of research undertaken by historians, philosophers, and social scientists interested in collective memory who question the legitimacy of the notion that there is a polar opposition between remembering and forgetting, claiming that it reduces the latter to an inherently negative phenomenon that supposedly undermines the necessarily positive experience of memory.

Forgetting has been at the center of the psychological and philosophical analyses of modern thinkers like Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger ([Casey 1987](#)), as well as those of writers like Kundera. For example, [Nietzsche \(1874/1997\)](#) and [Kundera \(1980, 1984\)](#) both refer to the burden of the past: the philosopher praises the capacity to forget as a means of supporting the weight of remembering, whereas the novelist insists on the ironies and paradoxes of our complex responsibility to do so. More recently, [Lowenthal \(1993, 1999\)](#) and [Ricoeur \(2004\)](#) have argued that forgetting cannot be reduced to mere memory deficiency and that it is not necessarily a problem to be overcome or a sign of moral failure. Along the same lines, [Connerton \(2008\)](#) conceives of forgetting as the process of allowing certain things or details from the past to slip from memory in order to move forward in one's life. [Rieff \(2016\)](#) goes even further, extolling the virtues of forgetting and decrying remembrance as an illusion that leads to conflict and sorrow.

Scholars like [Lowenthal \(1993, 1999\)](#), [Ricoeur \(2004\)](#), [Connerton \(2008\)](#), and [Rieff \(2016\)](#) recognize that there are forms of forgetting that do not have the negative connotations of failing to remember or losing touch with the past. For them, forgetting is not a unitary phenomenon, and human beings who forget—even to the extent that they may do so deliberately—are not necessarily guilty of doing something wrong: forgetting can be a morally acceptable, positive experience. This notion of positive forms of forgetting is very important to the discussion of memory work. Although [Lowenthal \(1993, 173\)](#) acknowledges the risk of forgetting, he refers to the “vital need for oblivion,” stressing that forgetting is essential to life. According to him, “[t]o forget is as essential as to keep things in mind, for no individual or collectivity can afford to remember everything” ([Lowenthal 1993](#), xi). Selective forgetting is a way to come to terms with the past. [Küchler \(2012\)](#) holds a similar position, arguing that individuals and collectivities sometimes have to forget. For her, some forms of amnesia can be salutary. As for [Ricoeur \(2004\)](#), he not only acknowledges the importance of forgetting, he also warns against the potential abuses of remembering and the trivialization of memory that may result from it.

Another interesting point is raised by [Küchler \(2002, 2012\)](#) in her discussions of how objects can be involved in remembering by being removed from sight, stored, or

destroyed—a type of behavior that Forty (1999) calls iconoclasm. Kuchler (2002, 2012) questions the assumption, more or less universal since Aristotle, that memory is essentially a form of conservation, by showing that remembering can involve destroying memory objects. Inversely, Coupland (2005) shows that objects can disappear from people's minds while remaining physically present. Both authors focus on the interplay between the perceptual presence and absence of objects; however, Coupland (2005) stresses the risk of assuming—too easily—that conservation is a safeguard against forgetting. Paradoxically, what is right in front of us, perceivable and within reach, may be so omnipresent that it becomes absent, completely forgotten.

Forty (1999) and Kuchler (2002, 2012) raise questions about the preeminence of remembering over forgetting, and they deserve credit for recognizing the role of objects like artworks, ritual artifacts, and monuments in the process of forgetting. However, their focus on such objects is also the main limitation of their work. For although Forty and Kuchler (1999) explicitly refer to the classic study of Frances Yates (1966/2014), *The Art of Memory*, they completely ignore the role that souvenirs can have in memory work—which is no innocent omission. Indeed, as we will see in the next section, souvenirs are stigmatized precisely because they supposedly encourage a kind of forgetting, and this makes it difficult to recognize the role that they play in certain memory practices involving a much more complex relation to past events than the superficial connection to history attributed to tourists.

### The Problematic Role of Souvenirs in Memory Work

In their studies on memory and forgetting, Forty and Kuchler (1999) and Kuchler (2002, 2012) make no mention at all of souvenirs and other commodities. Other researchers in the humanities and social sciences look at souvenirs with disdain and suspicion.

A clear example of this attitude can be found in Stewart's (1993) seminal work on souvenirs and collections. Drawing on cultural studies and literary criticism, Stewart argues that souvenirs are, by definition, always "incomplete" because they are replicas, allusions, or samples. She maintains that incompleteness is one of the fundamental features of souvenirs per se: "Whether the souvenir is a material sample or not, it will still exist as a sample of the now-distanced experience, an experience which the object can only evoke and resonate to, and can never entirely recoup" (Stewart 1993, 136). For her, souvenirs contribute to the "death of memory" because they are imperfect memory objects destined to be forgotten.

The theme of the death of memory also pervades Olalquiaga's (1998) work on souvenirs. According to her, "[i]f the souvenir is the commodification of remembrance,

kitsch is the commodification of the souvenir" (Olalquiaga 1998, 80), and kitsch is intrinsically forgettable. Stewart (1993) and Olalquiaga (1998) study the private, domestic side of memory work in a way that recalls the work of Belk (1988, 1991, 1995), McCracken (1988a), and Curasi et al. (2004). However, Stewart (1993) is particularly concerned with situating souvenirs in their broader cultural contexts. For her, the popularity of souvenirs is a symptom of our insatiable demand for nostalgia—she even speaks of the "social disease of nostalgia" (Stewart 1993, ix). She seems to agree with historians and philosophers like Lowenthal (1993), Ricœur (2004), and Todorov (2004) who question the "cult" of memory as well as the abuses and excesses of remembering in modern societies. In a similar vein, Sturken (2007) analyzes the proliferation of souvenirs in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. She describes the selling of these objects as a "kitschification" of remembrance connected to the rise of memory tourism. Claiming that this form of tourism involves an imaginary innocence, she stresses the very distant relation that tourists have to the memory sites they visit. In her view, "a tourist is someone who stands outside a culture, looking at it from a position that demands no responsibility" (Sturken 2007, 13).

The conception of souvenirs that emerges is shared by numerous scholars in the humanities and social sciences as well as by many consumer researchers. It involves the idea that souvenirs are fundamentally connected to an experience of either temporal or geographical distancing (Stewart 1993). Thus, according to consumer researchers, the particularity of souvenirs is that they are taken away from the places visited and brought back home (Belk et al. 1989; Belk and Yeh 2011; O'Guinn and Belk 1989; Peñalosa 2001). Indeed, Sturken (2007, 12) is surely right to claim that "taking things [like curios, souvenirs, and artifacts] away from the places we have visited" is one of the defining tourist activities.

Sturken's (2007) reflections on souvenirs and the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center are indispensable. She focuses on kitsch souvenirs, but her thesis, which recalls the theory of commodity fetishism that Marx presents in the first volume of *Capital* (1867/1976), has broader relevance. She argues that souvenirs attenuate the violence of history by offering comforting images that blur or even erase the complexities of past events. In other words, she holds that by providing an inoffensive, depoliticized view of past events, souvenirs promote a distanced and completely naïve relationship to history that undermines people's ability to adopt a critical stance on its real significance.

Stewart's (1993) and Sturken's (1997, 2007) reflections are grounded in critical theory, which dismisses souvenirs as expressions of the lowest form of culture (Clifford 1988). Souvenirs are supposedly inauthentic, cheap, tacky,

and even childish (Gordon 1986). In a way, this critique is similar to the position of consumer researchers like Belk et al. (1989) who have recognized that the analysis of souvenirs is intertwined, perhaps problematically, with the critique of kitsch. However, the arguments used by Stewart (1993) and Sturken (2007) to criticize souvenirs go well beyond the question of bad taste and superficiality. Indeed, for both authors, souvenirs pose a fundamental threat to authentic memory.

This view of the problematical role of souvenirs in memory work involves the idea that the forgetting facilitated by these objects reinforces what Sturken (2007) describes as a type of alienated ignorance. Indeed, in her critique of the "tourism of history," Sturken argues that the latter revolves around a shallow, comfortable form of remembering that favors simplifications, tolerates historical omissions, and surreptitiously encourages forgetting. Although this amounts to a completely negative account of the problematical role of souvenirs in memory work, it still associates them with a form of remembering. In contrast, consumer researchers rarely discuss the phenomenon of forgetting at all, and when they do, they tend to see it as nothing but an obstacle to remembering. The present study attempts to deepen our understanding of the forgetful role of souvenirs in memory practices and show its relevance for consumer research.

## METHODOLOGY

### "We Should Never Forget"

This injunction to remember has been invoked repeatedly since the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on 9/11. Some of the persons interviewed for the present study said that it emphasizes the need to recall the anguish they felt on 9/11 and in the aftermath. Others insisted that, above all, it invokes the duty to remember the victims of the attacks. In the years that followed, it became a political rallying cry for pro-war Americans as well as for peace activists, and it inspired a whole memory trade. The selling of souvenirs is probably the most obvious manifestation of this trade. Sturken (2007) reports that in New York City an economic network quickly developed and that postcards were being sold just one week after the tragedy.

In line with consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005), the present study treats 9/11 as a context for exploring how New Yorkers used souvenirs in their memory work. Because of the importance of the memory trade that arose after the terrorist attacks, this context is particularly appropriate for examining the relationship between memory and material culture. Here at the beginning of the methodology section, it is important to try to provide a more precise description of the memory objects—the 9/11 souvenirs—involved in this relationship.

In the years that followed 9/11, various kinds of souvenirs and other mass-produced consumer items could be found in tourist shops around the site of the former World Trade Center, as well as on the Internet (Heller 2005; Hurley and Trimarco 2004). There were snow globes, crystals, and miniatures representing the Twin Towers; American flags and New York City Fire Department (FDNY) T-shirts; and teddy bears dressed as firefighters or American soldiers. Images made up a significant portion of the souvenirs sold as part of the memory trade in consumer items related to the tragedy. Postcards, artworks, photographs, and photo albums could be found, and news magazines and weekly publications in the New York City area released special issues that became iconic (see, for example, the September 25, 2001, issue of the *Village Voice* or the September 24, 2001, issue of the *New Yorker* illustrated by Art Spiegelman).

Researchers have analyzed the prominent role that images played in the attacks on the World Trade Center. Noting that the terrorist attacks can be understood as part of an "image war," Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2003) has documented the important role of images in the experiences of New Yorkers on the day of the attacks and during the weeks and months that followed. September 11, 2001, has become an important theme in popular culture and in the media in the United States. Oliver Stone's (2006) film *World Trade Center*, Paul Greengrass's (2006) film *United 93*, and Joel Meyerowitz's (2006) photographic essay on the aftermath are examples of memory products that provide historical accounts, that pay tribute to the heroes and the "ordinary" people involved in the recovery operations, or that portray the horrors suffered by the victims of 9/11. This is nowhere more evident than in *Portraits: 9/11/01*, a 684-page book published by the *New York Times* (2002) that presents a brief biography and a photograph of each of the victims of the terrorist attacks.

The wide array of memory objects just discussed helps explain why there is no clear definition of souvenirs in the literature. Even Stewart (1993) and Sturken (2007), both of whom discuss souvenirs in some detail, fail to offer one. As a general rule, souvenirs are loosely associated with tourists (MacCannell 1999), the word "souvenir" being a generic term used to describe the photographs, curios, and memorabilia that tourists purchase and bring home at the end of their vacations. For some, this notion is exclusionary because it leaves aside a whole range of memory products and commodities that are not sold at tourist sites or that are not at all intended for tourists.

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines a souvenir as "something that serves as a reminder," while the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "a thing that is kept as a reminder of a person, place, or event." Both definitions stress the mnemonic role of these objects, as opposed to their use value, but neither of them associates souvenirs with tourism exclusively. Following Stewart

(1993), it is possible to go further and distinguish between two types of souvenirs: (1) souvenirs of exterior sights and (2) souvenirs of individual experiences. According to Stewart, the former can usually be purchased, whereas the latter are not normally available as consumer goods.

In line with Stewart (1993), the present study treats 9/11 souvenirs as a category of objects that includes photographs, pictures, cultural products (like T-shirts), and unique personal reminders (like a piece of debris found on the street or an item of clothing worn at the time the wearer first learned what was happening). These objects may be connected to the Twin Towers as they were (before, during, or after the attacks), to events that occurred (either on the day of the tragedy or in the aftermath), as well as to human beings who were there (as witnesses, as anguished victims, or as heroic lifesavers). Thus, at first glance, 9/11 souvenirs are simply objects, like the ones described, that can help people to remember 9/11. However, this *general definition* of 9/11 souvenirs is insufficient because, as we will see below, the memory work that drives this remembering can involve complex strategies of forgetting. Indeed, memory practices in which such strategies play a fundamental role are the main focus of the present study, so that it is necessary to define 9/11 souvenirs *more specifically* as objects that can help people, not only to remember 9/11, but also to forget it at the very same time.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The research presented here is informed by contemporary material culture studies, a field in which researchers like Daniel Miller at University College London have had a strong influence. Miller is familiar to consumer researchers for his work on consumption (Borgerson 2009), but his colleagues are best known for their studies on memory. Bender's (1998, 2002) work on Stonehenge and the landscapes of memory, Küchler's (1997, 1998, 2002, 2012) research on Malangan, Rowlands's (1993, 1999) reflections on war memorials and monuments, and Saunders's (2002) study of First World War trench art provide relevant examples of the contemporary material cultures studies approach to memory. The theoretical lens used in the work of these researchers and others offers a unique perspective for analyzing the ways that personal and collective memories take shape and come to matter in and through the world of material objects. Instead of being treated as fossils, material objects are interpreted in terms of the uses they have and the roles they play in meaningful contexts, making it possible to account for tensions and controversies connected to the construction of memory. This theoretical approach is particularly useful for the study of 9/11 souvenirs because they derive their meanings from a historical context in which memory becomes intertwined in complex ways with politics and patriotism.

The present study examines the issue of how and why people acquire and keep in their homes material objects connected to human tragedies. In the context of the 9/11 attacks, the theoretical approach provided by contemporary material culture studies makes it possible to bring out the complexity of the more mundane and usually tacit memory practices of New Yorkers. Researchers often fail to see such memory practices or simply take them for granted, because they appear so obvious and everyday. From the perspective of classical anthropology, memory practices can be seen as human activities in which an effort is made to remember something in a certain way (including, sometimes, by forgetting it). They are what people do—the activities that people engage in with the things that they use to remember—in memory work. The concept of a memory practice is also important to the present study because it stresses the personal side of memory work.

Given the highly sensitive character of the topic of remembering the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City, temporal distance was a key consideration during the research for the present study. This research was carried out between 2003 and 2011—that is, over a period of eight years. Follow-up interviews were conducted with some participants until 2015. Initially, assessing how time affected the ways in which people related to 9/11 was not part of the projected research, but as the years went by, the way that informants talked about the tragedy changed. During the first few years, few spoke about forgetting. Most seemed to see forgetting as inappropriate, unimaginable, and in any case, completely impossible. Ten years after the terrorist attacks, forgetting was still a delicate issue, but participants mentioned it much more frequently in the interviews.

The material culture perspective of the present study privileged an ethnographic approach to the research (Miller and Tilley 1996; Tilley 2001). This means that meticulous observation was the key to success in the field. Over eight years, interviews were conducted with New Yorkers and with Americans from other parts of the United States, and with immigrants, foreigners, visitors, and tourists as well. Some of the informants used to work at the former World Trade Center, some lived in the vicinity of the Twin Towers, and others were from Midtown, Upper Manhattan, Queens, Long Island, Staten Island, or New Jersey. There were also persons who were visiting (or who had visited) Ground Zero. Often their visits to the site involved taking part in commemorative events, religious ceremonies, or political rallies.

For the ethnographic research, a variety of persons were interviewed, including some who had directly suffered from the attacks. Victims' relatives and persons who had taken part in the recovery operations were included, and municipal officials and museum curators participated as well. Interviews were also conducted with artists whose creative work portrayed aspects of the 9/11 tragedy,

souvenir vendors who worked within the perimeter of Ground Zero, and managers from firms working in the souvenir industry. Among them, there were right-wing partisans of the Bush administration who supported the Iraq war and advocated a more patriotic approach to remembering 9/11. There were also Democrats, peace activists, and left-wing sympathizers, and even advocates of conspiracy theories, who were critical of the government's policies. Overall, more than 67 informants were interviewed. Although each of them contributed to the present study by providing evidence that improved understanding of post-9/11 memory practices, the main focus is on 34 persons who live and/or work in New York City.

Several different methods were used to conduct the fieldwork, including formal interviews, direct observation, and photography. The New York City 9/11 commemoration ceremonies in 2005, 2006, 2010, 2011, and 2016 were attended and directly observed, as were several rallies, peace protests, and other public events. In-depth interviews were conducted in people's homes using McCracken's (1988b) long interview method to access the personal, private, or intimate side of memory work. The goal was to understand how people remembered the 9/11 terrorist attacks and to discover the kinds of memory objects that they kept (if they did in fact keep any), as well as how and where they displayed or stored them. The data was analyzed using Thompson, Pollio, and Locander's (1994) interpretive method. Three themes were identified as part of this iterative process: (1) the impossibility of forgetting, (2) selective oblivion, and (3) memory compartmentalization.

The use of 9/11 as a research context requires extra precaution on the part of the researcher because it has the potential to raise certain ethical issues. Sturken (2007, 167) warns against "the narrative of exceptionalism," which blocks out consideration of other terrorist attacks like the 9/11 plane crashes at the Pentagon and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and of other types of violent events that have occurred elsewhere in the United States or the world. She also mentions the risk of instrumentalizing 9/11 as well as that of failing to deal with it in a historically responsible way. During the interviews, it was essential to not lose sight of these issues and to interact with the informants in an ethically responsible manner at all times. More than anything else, it was essential to give them a voice, and the ethnographic approach seemed particularly appropriate for this purpose. Finally, it is important to mention that pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the persons interviewed for the present study.

The presentation of the findings adopts a case-study format that privileges the testimony of a limited number of informants. This testimony is supplemented and clarified by excerpts as well as observations from interviews with other informants, so that cases can be interpreted from a comparative perspective. This case-study format provides a

useful way of presenting the complex, context-dependent interrelationships between memory work, forgetting, and souvenirs.

## FINDINGS

The findings are organized around three themes. The first theme, the impossibility of forgetting, has to do with the discourse of the informants on memory work and the tensions it reveals between the need to forget and the fear of doing so. The second theme is selective oblivion. It has to do with memory practices in which people keep souvenirs as *partial* reminders that they can use to construct deliberately forgetful memories. Examining this theme involves looking into the various types of forgetting that are available to people through souvenirs. The third theme, memory compartmentalization, has to do with memory practices in which souvenirs are kept in the home but not displayed and/or shown to other people. This theme raises the issue of memory control. By integrating the fundamental—but normally neglected—dimension of forgetting into the description of memory practices, these three themes provide a more adequate theoretical framework for examining the post-9/11 memory work of many New Yorkers.

### The Impossibility of Forgetting

Cecilia Winfrey, who was first interviewed in 2005, comes from Queens. During the initial interview, she described herself as a mixed Afro-American woman. In 2001, she had a job in Manhattan a short distance from the World Trade Center. At 9:03 a.m. on September 11 from her office located on the 50th floor, she witnessed the second plane hit the South Tower. She was 44 at the time.

Cecilia said that the attacks on the World Trade Center were a life-changing event. In the months and years that followed the tragedy, she joined support groups and enrolled in coaching programs. During one of the interviews, she insisted that she was not on any medication, explaining that she did yoga instead. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, she lost her job, quit "corporate America," and started to work in the volunteer sector. She said that she wanted to do something "meaningful."

Cecilia was a left-wing activist who spoke extensively about the importance of memory duty. She complained about people who talked about "moving forward" and people who acted as if 9/11 had never happened. She saw remembering as a duty that goes beyond uttering slogans and argued that Americans should make the effort to recall what had happened:

I think that's a problem for Americans. I think that there's too many distractions, superficial distractions, that keep them away from some real heavy-duty consciousness. So that it's easier to watch . . . movies . . . than to really see a

documentary about what's happening in like the (indiscernible) . . . I think . . . in this country [we] are preoccupied with fame and fortune and being a movie star more . . . than [with] starving kids in Africa or . . . the fact that children in Iraq are being blown to bits because we think that they (pause) did something to our World Trade Center.

Cecilia shared the views of other peace supporters and left-wing activists interviewed for the present study who condemned the US Army intervention in Iraq. Both of these groups contested official memory, which they often saw as nothing but political propaganda. There was even talk about the "hijacking of memory." Like many persons holding such views, Cecilia refused to attend official ceremonies or public commemorations. She fundamentally disagreed with the politics of remembrance, which she described as divisive. For her, it kept the "wound open" and encouraged people to be afraid.

As is the case with many left-wing activists, Cecilia found 9/11 souvenirs objectionable. She admitted, however, that she would have liked to have what she called a "memento" from the disaster. Unfortunately, she had never found an appropriate one. Instead, she had photographs of the tragedy that she had taken herself. Unlike the nostalgic pre-9/11 pictures of the Twin Towers sold in tourist shops, these photographs presented the New York skyline with the missing Twin Towers and smoke drifting in the air.

*Memory Struggles.* The New Yorkers interviewed often said that souvenirs sold on the market were unnecessary. Yet many of them preserved cultural artifacts related to the tragedy or other reminders of it. For example, Marcia Vargas, a woman from Puerto Rico, kept one issue of the American edition of a Spanish magazine called *¡Hola!* It was a special issue about 9/11. When interviewed in 2011, Marcia had had it for 10 years (since September 2001), but she claimed that she had forgotten it. When asked whether she had something in her home that served as a personal reminder of 9/11, she mentioned her magazine, but in her daily life she rarely, if ever, looked at it. She did not recall exactly when she had acquired it. She only remembered that she had had this magazine since long before the interview. She talked about it as if it had always been there. When she showed the magazine during the interview, it looked old and crumpled as though it had been buried somewhere in a pile of her things and left unattended for a long time—almost as if she no longer cared what happened to it (field notes, 09-09-2011). It was clear that Marcia kept her magazine without explicitly thinking about it, so that it remained present in her small apartment like one of Coupland's (2005) invisible objects. She kept it like an ordinary possession that she needed to have, knowing full well what it was for, but not focusing on it. Paradoxically, it somehow served as a reminder even though it seemed to go unnoticed most of the time.

There are some parallels between Marcia and Cecilia. During the second interview, which took place a decade after 9/11, Cecilia said that it was important not "to hold on to things." She asserted that she was able to let go of things because it would be pointless not to. She said this, yet she still had her graphic photographs of the New York skyline in the aftermath of the attacks. Like Marcia, she kept these photographs but never looked at them, claiming that she was not interested in doing so.

Marcia and Cecilia maintained that 9/11 souvenirs purchased as consumer goods were completely different from cultural products like special issues of magazines and personal mementos like photographs taken by "ordinary" New Yorkers. Their view recalls Stewart's (1993) distinction between souvenirs that are intended for tourists and souvenirs that are reminders of personal experiences of places and events. With Cecilia, the situation is even more complex. Her understanding of the duty to remember involved a strong opposition, perhaps not immediately obvious, between private and public memory. For her, the distinction between the two was quite clear, but also a source of tension. She called on her fellow citizens to never forget, but insisted that remembering was an essentially private matter.

The cases of Marcia and Cecilia highlight the paradoxes and tensions that were experienced by most of the participants in the study. These memory struggles manifested themselves in different ways, but they became particularly apparent when the question of souvenirs was raised. Participants had strong opinions about whether or not one should keep souvenirs, about what kinds of souvenirs are or are not appropriate, and about how and where possibly appropriate souvenirs should be kept. When Cecilia talked about her photographs, it was clear that the tension between the personal side of memory work and the collective side deeply affected her. As a left-wing activist, she was reluctant to endorse the official view of memory and rejected the idea of using 9/11 souvenirs to remember the terrorist attacks. Yet, as a witness, she still felt that it would be wrong to forget the tragedy. She kept her photographs of the aftermath of 9/11 with the idea that she might someday show them to her future children, declaring that if she had kids, she would show them these photographs and tell them that it was true—she had been there on 9/11. Cecilia wavered back and forth between her reluctance to endorse the public view of memory, with its often bellicose patriotism, and her personal duty to tell her future children about what she had seen. She was also aware of the heavy responsibility that memory entails, and she was even tempted to reconsider the idea of explaining her 9/11 experience to the kids she might have in the future: "Even if I had children, I am not sure I would tell them . . . show them the pictures . . . I don't want to put fear in other people's minds."

Memory work often involves taking into consideration important responsibilities that one has—or that one may



have in the future—to other people. This is obvious in the case of Cecilia. It is also clear in the case of Mrs. Fischer, a risk manager who collected newspaper clippings. Mrs. Fischer preserved these clippings in a scrapbook and annotated them with personal comments on people whom she knew, or people who worked for companies that she knew, who had lost their lives in the tragedy. She described her attitude to forgetting in the following words: “I could never forget, you know, like I said, it’s in my consciousness . . . so I could never forget. I would venture to say most people who lived it in Manhattan or in Washington or the Pentagon, I don’t think that they could ever forget either.” But after saying this, she added an important precision:

I would hope that the people would be remembered and the heroism of the rescue people would be remembered, but things fade in memory, you know . . . I am sure in time it will . . . It will fade from people’s memories . . . I think it is *normal* that we forget. I guess it’s *normal* to forget because it takes an *effort* to remember . . . I wouldn’t want everybody to feel like me. I mean, I wouldn’t want everybody to be thinking about it as much as I think about it.

Mrs. Fischer’s paradoxical juxtaposition of the impossibility of forgetting and the inevitability of past events fading from memory betrays an implicit awareness of what the struggle between remembering and not remembering can mean.

Cecilia and Mrs. Fischer both talked about the difficulty of remembering the 9/11 terrorist attacks. For the one, not forgetting required maintaining an acute awareness of the horrifying events that had occurred on 9/11. For the other, it required a meticulous effort to keep a personal record of lives lost because of them. Both of them also recognized the risks of remembering. Cecilia knew that her photographs could make other people afraid, and she was not sure whether it would be right to expose future children to the terrifying images that they presented. For similar reasons, Mrs. Fischer kept her newspaper clippings to herself, never showing them to her kids. Both of these women insisted on the duty to remember while at the same time recognizing the psychological necessity of forgetting as a coping mechanism.

*The Need to Forget and the Fear of Forgetting.* Cecilia’s reluctance to participate in any public remembering involved complex issues, but it was not an outright refusal to perform memory duty. We have seen, in particular, that she saw her graphic photographs as raising moral issues about the way to tell her future children about 9/11. She condemned the official discourse on memory that pervaded the public remembering of 9/11 because she saw it as a way of legitimizing the US military intervention in Iraq. She was also suspicious of the cultural industry of memory and the superficial remembering that it encouraged. In a sense, her perspective on public memory resonates with

that of Ricœur (2004), Rieff (2016), and Todorov (2004), who all point to the potential abuses of remembering.

We have seen that Mrs. Fischer’s way of speaking highlighted some difficult aspects of memory work too. She stressed the impossibility of forgetting, yet she acknowledged, at the very same time, the vanity of memory work. She seemed to give voice to a feeling of renunciation—or was it hope?—when she said that “things fade in memory.”

The discourse of informants like Mrs. Fischer who said that forgetting is normal was vehemently condemned by some of the other informants. These persons adamantly refused to use the word “forget.” One woman (Ms. Higgins) recognized the need to cope, but compared forgetting to “surrendering.” For her, it was “unpatriotic.” However, Mrs. Fischer’s remarks had no political connotations. It seems better to see them as illustrating Ricœur’s (2004) point about memory being emotionally charged, even oppressive.

The cases discussed so far indicate that remembering and forgetting are complex social phenomena with a great number of different forms and nuances. They also point to an important tension between the need to forget and the fear of doing so. All the informants insisted that it was impossible to forget and that, as a result, they did not *need* souvenirs. However—although each of them stressed the uselessness of souvenirs—many of them kept photographs, postcards, magazines, and newspaper clippings that might in some way “remind” them of 9/11.

To examine the role souvenirs have in the memory practices of these New Yorkers more closely, it is necessary to go beyond the analysis of their discourse on souvenirs. If persons like Cecilia and Marcia Vargas rarely, if ever, take their souvenirs out, why do they keep them in their homes? What kind of remembering and/or forgetting does this use (or “non-use”?) of memory objects involve? How does keeping—“deliberately” not throwing away—memory objects that one never looks at constitute a memory practice?

## Selective Oblivion

To commemorate the 10th anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center, several events were organized and countless visitors and tourists flocked to New York City to attend them. Many of the informants talked about the omnipresence of media persons and paraphernalia, and about the throngs of tourists. Some alluded to the difficulty of finding peace in a context where the terrorist attacks were constantly brought back to mind. The more critical ones spoke about a certain pressure to remember.

The first formal interview with Juan Antonio Santana took place on the eve of the 10th anniversary of 9/11 (field notes, 09-10-2011). It was an emotional moment for him, and he preferred to stay away from the public ceremonies. Along with one of his friends, he watched news reports about the 10th anniversary events on television.

Juan Antonio is originally from Puerto Rico. In 2000, at the age of 33, he moved to New York City and found a job in the restaurant and hospitality sector. Two weeks after 9/11, he accompanied a friend who was an insurance broker as he inspected restaurants in the area around Ground Zero to assess the damages. Juan Antonio spent a couple of days with his friend in the perimeter, which he later compared to the horrors of Dante's *Inferno*.

Like millions of people around the world, Juan Antonio saw the attacks on the Twin Towers on television. He said that it took him over six years to go back to the site of the former World Trade Center. He only did so when his mother came to visit him in New York and asked him to accompany her. She wanted to see Ground Zero because she had heard so much about 9/11 in the news. After the visit, he bought a photograph, which he described as follows: "I bought the Twin Towers in all their glory, you know, when they were strong." Later in the conversation, he added, "It [is] the Twin Towers, on a beautiful gorgeous day . . . You can see the Brooklyn Bridge and . . . the Towers before the . . . Yeah, I wanna remember them like that."

*Memory Selectivity.* Juan Antonio's photograph can be compared to the postcards, the "artistic" reproductions and drawings, the replicas, and the crystals that filled the tourist shops in Greenwich Village and other parts of Lower Manhattan in the years following 9/11 (field notes, March 2003; February, March 2004). It is a typical tourist souvenir in every respect. As we have already seen, [Sturken \(2007\)](#) characterizes 9/11 souvenirs like Juan Antonio's photograph as kitsch. This characterization seems accurate, but it is also important to draw attention to an essential feature that Juan Antonio's photograph shares with many other 9/11 souvenirs: it depicts the Twin Towers intact, completely unscathed—as if nothing had happened. It is a 9/11 "reminder" providing an image frozen in time of "the way it was before" ([Sturken 2007, 3](#)).

Juan Antonio bought his photograph during his visit to Ground Zero with his mother. Their going to the site of the former World Trade Center could be interpreted as a pilgrimage or a sacred journey ([Belk et al. 1989](#)). Indeed, Juan Antonio explained that he took his mother to Ground Zero so that they could pay their respects and pray. He could not recall exactly where he had bought his photograph, but he remembered that there had been items on sale everywhere in the area that day: "They were having all this memorabilia, all over the Village, all around Ground Zero."

At first glance, Juan Antonio's purchase of this photograph *after* the 9/11 terrorist attacks may appear to reflect an attitude different from that of Ms. Hall, a woman in her fifties who kept some old postcards of the Twin Towers that she had had since well *before* the attacks. Ms. Hall wanted nothing to do with 9/11 souvenirs purchased *after*

the attacks, yet her explanation of why she kept her postcards recalls Juan Antonio's explanation of why he bought his photograph: "I'm a New Yorker," she said, "I don't need souvenirs about New York. On the other hand, I haven't thrown out my postcards that have the Twin Towers in them. I have a fondness for that skyline that was one way and is not that way anymore." In mentioning the possibility of throwing them out, Ms. Hall suggested that these postcards had an ambiguous in-between status in her life. She made it clear that she was against the souvenir trade and that she knew she could throw her postcards away; however, she also indicated that for her it was somehow important to conserve them as "legitimate" memory objects that could help her to remember what had happened on 9/11.

In a way, Ms. Hall was similar to [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's \(2003\)](#) collectors of photographs, pictures, and other souvenirs of the Twin Towers. She kept her postcards of the Twin Towers before the attacks with the affection of a collector. Yet like Juan Antonio, who talked about the burning Towers, the scattered debris, and the corpses that he had seen—the scenes from the tragedy that were indelibly etched in his memory—Ms. Hall did not need reminders. She had been there that day, had witnessed the Towers go down: "That's a souvenir in your heart for the rest of your life." This view of souvenirs recalls that of Gil, who was mentioned at the beginning of the present study. Gil worked in financial services and had been 26 in 2001. As we saw earlier, he said that he did not *need* a souvenir picture of the Twin Towers before 9/11 to help him remember, but that he still thought about buying what he called a "classic," black and white photograph of them as they were before the terrorist attacks and putting it on display: "Haven't seen it, haven't really gone out of my way to find it, but when I do find it, I'll buy it and frame it and keep it."

An undeniable nostalgia emanates from most of the interviews, even the ones with the persons who were more critical of the politics of remembering. Indeed, many participants indicated that they *only* wanted to conserve the *good* memories. Juan Antonio's comments on the "glorious Towers" are clear evidence of a yearning to return to the past. The same holds true for Ms. Hall's remarks on the loss of the skyline that she was so fond of and for Gil's thoughts on the "classic" images that he would like to have. However, it is important to distinguish these persons from the "tourists of history" described by [Sturken \(2007\)](#). Contrary to the latter, these persons had a critical stance on memory practices with souvenirs—they *thought about* them. Ms. Hall looked with suspicion at the 9/11 souvenirs on sale in tourist shops around the city after the terrorist attacks. She associated the trade in these souvenirs with exploiting 9/11 for commercial purposes and refused to buy them. Gil never complained about the sale of souvenirs, but he disapproved of the policies of the US government

and criticized the tendency to combine public remembering with nationalistic politics: “I am very proud of my country, but I don’t like the nationalism that has flared up over the past several years. It’s exclusionary in my opinion. It is pompous. It is arrogant.”

It is useful to compare Juan Antonio, Ms. Hall, and Gil’s nostalgic attitude toward souvenirs with Cecilia’s position on her graphic photographs. In one of the interviews with Cecilia, she explained that she objected to 9/11 souvenirs because she associated them with “happy memories” of a bygone era. She was well aware of the nostalgic aspect of 9/11 souvenirs; however, that was one of the main reasons that she objected to them. In her view, it was essential to *show* the tragedy: “I think that [a difficult image] is the only thing that gets people to change. I don’t think that . . . being nice about it and diplomatic and soft about it will do anything. I think showing . . . some really horrid stuff gets people to say, ‘Let’s not do that anymore.’” These remarks recall [Forty’s \(1999\)](#) contention that authentic remembering involves no attempt to lessen the horror.

Cecilia’s position contrasts sharply with the attitude of Juan Antonio, Ms. Hall, and Gil, who wanted souvenirs that would help them erase, or at least take the focus off, the most tragic aspects of the terrorist attacks—the terrible destruction and loss of human life—and the most contested issues that came to be debated in the aftermath: the economic and political exploitation that pervaded public remembering in the years following 9/11. Instead of vivid reminders of the horror of the terrorist attacks, they wanted souvenirs that would make their memories more tolerable by filtering out or at least rearranging certain aspects of what had happened, souvenirs that would help them *select* what was to be remembered—and what was to be forgotten.

Juan Antonio, Ms. Hall, and Gil all said that they appreciated souvenirs that did not stand out. They looked for photographs and pictures that could be framed and put on display discreetly, unobtrusively. As we have already seen, [Coupland \(2005\)](#) discusses the *inconspicuous* presence of everyday objects in people’s homes. In line with this, she also talks about how consumers often purchase commodities that will blend into the background of their everyday lives, arguing that they have a tendency to choose household objects whose visual properties allow them to become “embedded” and/or “normalized” in the domestic environment. This may help explain the desire of Juan Antonio, Ms. Hall, and Gil to have images that they could exhibit in their homes without drawing attention, ones that would go unnoticed and eventually be forgotten.

Drawing on [Lowenthal \(1993\)](#), it could be argued that these informants embraced a selective process of oblivion that involved using inconspicuous “partial reminders” to come to terms with difficult events from the past. As for the propriety of such a process of memory selection, it is essential to recall [Ricoeur’s \(2004\)](#) remark that absolute

memory—remembering the totality of all past experience—would be terrifying.

*Different Kinds of Souvenirs for Different Kinds of Forgetting.* According to [Sturken \(2007\)](#), kitsch souvenirs attract consumers by appealing to a specific range of emotions: sympathy, sadness, comfort, and reassuring cuteness. As we saw earlier, Sturken maintains that in contexts where the tourist industry operates at or around memorial sites, kitsch souvenirs help attenuate the violence of history by providing a depoliticized and often nostalgic view of past events involving tragic human conflicts. The connection with Juan Antonio’s, Ms. Hall’s, and Gil’s “partial reminders” of the attacks on the Twin Towers is clear.

[Sturken \(2007\)](#) speaks of “nostalgic kitsch.” She maintains that this type of kitsch is a form of remembering “that smoothes over the intensity of the experience of loss,” and that this “smoothing over” requires selecting the “acceptable” parts of a catastrophic past experience and consolidating recollections of them into a less oppressive memory of what happened. In other words, it involves a “forgetful” process of memory selection and consolidation that attenuates the trauma of tragic past experiences and makes it bearable. The cases discussed here illustrate this dual process of selection and consolidation. However, [Sturken’s \(2007\)](#) analysis is problematic to the extent that it assumes consumers passively accept the process of kitsch remembering without ever questioning it.

In contrast to the “tourists of history” whom [Sturken \(2007\)](#) describes as having a distanced and completely naïve relationship to past events, post-9/11 New Yorkers like Juan Antonio, Ms. Hall, and Gil were not passive victims of a remembering process. On the contrary, they actively sought to acquire, preserve, and sometimes display objects that blocked out the horror of 9/11 and the dark side of the commercial and political exploitation of the memorializing events and activities that followed it. Their “souvenirs” highlighted certain features of history, while at the same time downplaying, excluding, and suppressing difficult memories. Their souvenirs were “partial reminders” that played an instrumental role in a paradoxical and yet deliberate effort to construct “forgetful” memories.

The struggle of these persons to find adequate representations of 9/11 was empirically evident. Many of their statements in the interviews made it clear that they experienced a fundamental tension between the moral duty to acknowledge the horror of 9/11, by “honoring” its memory, and the powerful desire to make remembering it a bearable experience, by selectively choosing what needed to be “truly” recalled. Although they often had a critical attitude toward 9/11 “tourist” souvenirs and insisted that they had no need of them, they usually spoke positively about the memory objects that would allow them to forget, or at least push into the background, the horrors of the terrorist attacks. This is clearly reflected in Ms. Hall’s fondness for

her postcards and Gil's search for a "classic," black and white photograph of the Twin Towers as they were before the terrorist attacks. It is even more obvious in the case of Juan Antonio, who insisted that he had bought a photograph of the Twin Towers intact because the death and destruction brought about by the attacks were etched in his memory: "The wreckage, the debris, you know . . . *that*, I had in my mind already."

Several of the persons interviewed rejected 9/11 souvenirs as politically charged exploitations of the tragedy. On the other hand, they approved of and wanted to have—or actually kept—photographs, pictures, and other Twin Tower souvenirs that connected them to what had been *before*. It was as if their reaction to the tragedy had transformed them into imaginary tourists on a trip back to pre-9/11 New York City, where they could see the Twin Towers as they had been before the terrorist attacks. This indicated a desire to assert control over the content of memory by distinguishing between what had to be remembered and what had to be forgotten.

These cases also shed light on the issue of the "incompleteness" (Stewart 1993) or the "limitedness" (Sturken 2007) of souvenirs. They show that souvenirs can play a key role in the process of forgetting by helping people block out, omit, or even erase what they do not want to remember. In some instances, what souvenirs explicitly depict or symbolize can provide a protective shield against unwanted memories precisely because of what is not shown. In other words, the things that souvenirs omit to indicate or point toward may be more important than those they are designed to explicitly call to mind.

### Memory Compartmentalization

Mrs. McLaughlin: We had very strange reactions . . . I think. I still have the dress that I wore, I cleaned it obviously, but I still have the dress. I can't throw it out. It's still in the back of the closet. We recorded . . . HBO had a special on 9/11 . . . but have never looked at it.

Mr. McLaughlin: Can't watch it.

Mrs. McLaughlin: Can't watch it, but can't . . . erase it 'cause we had talked about it—why don't we erase it?

Mr. McLaughlin: We realized some day we're going to want to watch it and we won't be able to find it.

Mrs. McLaughlin: Right, and we won't be able to find it, so it's recorded, but we've never watched it . . . We didn't really save anything. I mean, there was a prayer card that someone had given me with Saint Paul's Chapel, which is right on the site, covered with debris, covered with ashes. The firemen used to sleep in [the Chapel] when they were recovering . . . and I have that, but we have . . . never saved anything.

This is an excerpt from an interview conducted in 2005 with the McLaughlins, who are originally from Connecticut. At the time, they had been married for five

years and had been living in New York City for eight or nine years. Mr. McLaughlin worked as vice president of corporate communications at an investment bank. They had no children, but they were in the process of adopting a child.

The McLaughlins witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Center in person. Mr. McLaughlin recalled that he had been in the subway going to work in Manhattan when the first plane hit the North Tower. When he got off at John Street, which is one block from the World Trade Center, he saw people pointing at the burning Tower: "I stood there watching it, you know, and not really knowing what had happened and while we were, while I was standing there watching it, the second plane hit . . . and then we knew exactly what was going on." He explained how he met up with his wife, who was working in the same area, and how they went back home to their apartment on 39th Street: "We went to the apartment and we went up and we were watching everything on TV and we lived on the 33rd floor, so you could see just that column of smoke and ash and dust and everything, just up in the sky."

The McLaughlins are representative of the many people interviewed who said that they did not "save" anything—even though they kept certain memory objects. As Mrs. McLaughlin explained: "We didn't pick stuff up. We didn't save it. The only thing we saved was the recording of . . . the French documentary and we never watched it. And it's still sitting there and it may sit there a year. I don't know, maybe someday we'll watch it, and maybe someday we won't."

*Out of Sight, Out of Mind.* Many of the persons interviewed for the present study simply discarded the memory objects associated with the tragic events that they did not want to remember. For example, Mel, a young man in his twenties from Long Island, confessed (with a certain embarrassment) that 10 years after 9/11 he had acquired a commemorative issue of a well-known New York magazine out of sheer curiosity. He explained, however, that he could not keep the magazine—the images and pictures were too upsetting: "The least images you see, the better it is." Mel's attitude is different from that of the McLaughlins, who are caught between their reluctance to face their souvenirs and their inability to throw them away. For them, it is not merely a question of not seeing these things, it is also a question of ensuring that they are completely out of sight—that they are beyond their physical reach. At the same time, they know that they are there.

Like Cecilia's photographs and Marcia Vargas's magazine, the HBO special kept by Mr. and Mrs. McLaughlin is a souvenir that presents the 9/11 attacks graphically. The McLaughlins had recorded this documentary expecting to watch it someday. Four years after the tragedy, they had not yet done so and they gave the impression that they probably never would. In the interview in 2005, they

declared in unison that it was impossible to watch it, but that they could not erase it either.

The McLaughlins were not unique in this respect. When Cecilia was contacted in 2015, 14 years after 9/11, she spoke of having achieved closure, but she admitted that she still had her photographs of the aftermath. As already mentioned, she never looked at these photographs and had not framed them or ever taken them out to show to others. She kept them in a box in her basement. In other words, unlike the photograph that Juan Antonio displayed in his home or the one that Gil wished he could display in his, Cecilia's photographs had little "exhibition value" (Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011). On the contrary, it was important for her to keep them out of sight. It could be argued that this was a way for her to avoid facing certain dilemmas. Her reluctance to confront her photographs had to do not only with what they showed—images of the grisly destruction visible in the aftermath of the attacks—but also with the flood of memories that these images might set off.

The refusal of the McLaughlins and Cecilia to discard their souvenirs involved a sense of responsibility toward the past: they saw it as their duty to be memory keepers. It may even be plausible to see a link with a form of sacred consumption (Baker, Motley, and Henderson 2004; Belk et al. 1989) in which duty and obligations are prominent. More importantly, however, it seems clear that these persons had the desire to control memory. This becomes particularly apparent when the McLaughlins and Cecilia are compared with tourists. When tourists bring home souvenirs, they do not normally hide them, but some of the persons interviewed for the present study had purchased souvenirs with the intention of concealing them most of the time. Ms. Bernstein, a woman from San Francisco, said so explicitly. She had bought a 9/11 photo album during a visit to New York City in 2004, a souvenir that documented the day of the terrorist attacks in detail: "I thought it would be interesting to . . . see photos that you don't have to download . . . you can just kind of flip through them and remember the history . . . of what happened here . . . I think you have to have a knowledge of history, and especially history that you have lived through." When asked why she had acquired a photo album as opposed to souvenirs like miniatures, which could be found in tourist shops all around the city, she said:

The little glass towers are too . . . For one they're *tchotchke* so you have to dust that kind of thing. But also it's too in your face. I think this is the type of thing that, you know, when you go through a tragedy you don't want to remember it every single day of your life. But you do want to, sometimes, reflect on it. So I think photos are more appropriate 'cause you can hide them away when you don't want to think about it. But then take it out, when you do want to cogitate.

In contrast to people like the McLaughlins who preserved their "relics" with great care and consideration, and the outmost respect, Ms. Bernstein emphasized the mundane, less noble, side of this "curatorial work" when she talked about the need to dust and clean souvenirs. She distinguished photographs from miniatures, but not in terms of moral values or aesthetics. She said that miniatures are "*tchotchke*," but also insisted that photographs are "more appropriate" because it is easier to keep them without displaying them. Ms. Bernstein's case points to the "manipulable" properties of souvenirs (Stewart 1993). It shows that souvenirs (especially photographs) can be displayed, but that they can also be folded, removed from sight, or hidden away.

Not being from New York, and having traveled to other famous sites commemorating human tragedies like Auschwitz, Ms. Bernstein stood out from the persons described up until now. Perhaps she could be seen as one of Sturken's (2007) "tourists of history," but even so, her case is still quite relevant because it highlights the protective function of visual and physical concealment, a function that was also an important aspect of the memory practices of the McLaughlins and Cecilia.

The memory practices in question point to a process of memory compartmentalization that differs from the process of memory selection and consolidation documented earlier. Memory compartmentalization entails removing souvenirs from sight, concealing them, in an attempt to prevent recollections of past experiences from entering immediate consciousness. By making objects unavailable to the senses, people hope to avoid stirring up or awakening memories. They put photographs, pictures, and other souvenirs out of sight, or they hide them, in an effort to keep difficult memories away, at least temporarily. This is particularly clear in the case of Ms. Bernstein, who attempted to keep memories below the level of immediate consciousness, without ever completely erasing them. She put her souvenir away knowing that it would be possible to take it out and look at it whenever she felt like doing so. In other words, she wished to remember 9/11, but not all the time—she wanted to have memories on demand. Her case recalls the persons discussed by Epp and Price (2001) who keep family possessions that do not fit current identity projects in secondary spaces like attics, basements, garages, or other storage areas for a certain period of time.

Most of the participants in the present study were aware that, by their very nature, photographs, pictures, and other souvenirs could awaken memories simply by being present. Their efforts to control their memories are connected to the issue of the "ambiguity of control" (Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011). These persons had an ambiguous relationship to the souvenirs that they kept because they knew that their memory objects had the capacity to bring back memories against their will. They knew that it was possible to lose control of remembering.

*Uncontrolled Remembering/Controlled Forgetting.* In consumer research, and in the humanities and social sciences as well, researchers have shown that material objects are imperfect remembering devices or “mnemonicons” (Casey 1987). Material objects are unable to convey memory accurately or appropriately (Connerton 1989), and they can never be relied on to make memory explicitly conscious (Forty 1999). Unfortunately, emphasizing the inadequacy of material objects as remembering devices leads researchers to overlook another fundamental issue: the difficulty of controlling memory.

During the interviews conducted for the present study, it became apparent that lack of memory control was a key issue for persons who had experienced the 9/11 terrorist attacks directly. Of course, it is important not to minimize the trauma of those who “only” saw the attacks on television. Many of the New Yorkers interviewed had learned of them by way of live coverage and news reports on television. Whether they had experienced 9/11 directly or through television, informants spoke abundantly about how things like the color of the sky, the view of a plane, or the sight of smoke in the air could bring the memory of the terrorist attacks back to mind on any ordinary day. In other words, they talked about the capacity of involuntary reminders to trigger memories in unexpected and often uncontrollable ways. In contrast, Ms. Bernstein had (or at least thought she had) the ability to remove herself from 9/11 physically and psychologically. She talked about taking her photo album out when she wanted to think about the events and then putting it back in a drawer when thinking about them no longer appealed to her.

It is useful to look at the issue of memory control in the light of ritual theory, which assumes that objects need to be hidden to preserve their cult vitality (Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011). Ritual theory highlights the fact that objects are periodically concealed and forgotten in order to increase their capacity to provoke memories. The assumption is that excessive remembering leads to the trivialization of memory and eventually to oblivion. However, the persons interviewed for the present study were not concerned about preserving the cult vitality of their memory objects. They were trying to control their memories by keeping these objects out of sight.

In a way that recalls the Proustian notion of “involuntary memory” (Casey 1987; Proust (1913–1927/1992; Whitehead 2009), persons like the McLaughlins, Cecilia, and Ms. Bernstein insist that remembering occurs without their wishing or willing it. Echoing Casey (1987, 304), it is possible to speak of “remembering’s unfreedom”: human beings are caused to remember past events and experiences, involuntarily, by the presence of objects associated with them. However, none of the persons discussed here, including Ms. Bernstein, believed that not seeing objects would help them to forget the 9/11 terrorist attacks in any

simple sense. None of them went so far as to equate the physical absence of objects with the complete absence of 9/11 memories. All of them were aware that they could not erase memories from their minds simply by removing objects from sight, by putting them out of reach, or by discarding them. Nevertheless, knowing that they could not completely control memory, the McLaughlins, Cecilia, and Ms. Bernstein took pains to try to ensure that they did not find themselves thinking and reminiscing about 9/11 continuously. When they put photographs, pictures, and other souvenirs “away” in a drawer, in a closet, or in a box in the basement, they were trying to control a largely involuntary remembering process through a memory practice that allowed them to deliberately limit their access to objects that could trigger it.

The findings presented here challenge the notion that human beings do not keep objects associated with persons, places, and events that they do not want to remember. They show that memory practices can be much more complex. Not being able to completely block out their 9/11 memories, the persons interviewed for the present study often tried to control them through memory practices that involved forgetting, at least for a time, the most distressing aspects of 9/11. This indicates that souvenirs can play a key role in compartmentalizing traumatic past experiences that human beings are struggling to come to terms with. It may be true that remembering historical events involving horrible human tragedy is a moral duty requiring strong commitment and strenuous effort, but it is essential not to overlook just how difficult it can be to forget.

## DISCUSSION

### Souvenirs in New Yorkers’ Homes

The research for this study began in 2003. From the very beginning, some of the New Yorkers interviewed indicated that they viewed 9/11 souvenirs as cheap, tasteless trinkets—as kitsch. For many, these memory objects were a form of propaganda related to the political recuperation of remembering. Others decried the irreverence of selling them at Ground Zero, and several associated them with the morbid commercialization of 9/11. In these and many other ways, the idea of buying and selling things related to the terrorist attacks raised suspicion.

Some of the informants in the present study had directly experienced the horror of the terrorist attacks and had to live with the destructive consequences in the aftermath. They had seen the Twin Towers on fire and watched them collapse to the ground in a cloud of dust and debris. Because of these terrifying events, they had lost their jobs, landmark buildings in a city that they loved, and their basic sense of security and well-being. In many cases, they refused to keep *anything* related to the Twin Towers or to 9/11 in general. They rejected souvenirs and other

commodities, not only because of their aesthetic ideals, their political positions, or their aversion to rampant commercialization, but also because of a strong dislike of anything resembling a personal memento or keepsake. They saw them as useless mnemonic devices or, worse, as hurtful reminders.

Therefore, it seems surprising, at least at first glance, that several of these New Yorkers—who possessed clear personal recollections of 9/11—had postcards, magazines, or newspaper clippings related to it, and that many kept things that were connected to their individual experiences, things that Barry (2011) calls “mundane relics”: for example, personal belongings such as a dress or shirt that had been worn or a handbag or purse that had been carried that day (field notes, 06-08-2005). Some even had 9/11 souvenirs from tourist shops. In a few cases, they had bought these souvenirs at Ground Zero, which has been described as one of the most important tourist sites in New York City, one of its most important “attractions” (Sturken 2007, 211).

The New Yorkers who were interviewed often differed from the collectors described by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2003), who cherished artifacts related to the Twin Towers. They rarely exhibited the photographs, the pictures, and the other souvenirs they possessed. Moreover, in contrast to collectors, they usually had nothing more than a few reminders, often just one. They can also be distinguished from the persons who were observed displaying symbols and other objects related to the Twin Towers in various commemoration ceremonies, political demonstrations, and other public events (field notes, 09-11-2006; 09-11-2011; 09-11-2016). The informants who kept souvenirs did so inconspicuously, privately, even secretly. Indeed, as was mentioned earlier, Mrs. Fischer never showed her kids her 9/11 newspaper clippings, and Cecilia felt perplexed about whether she should show her photographs to her future children. Often the informants did not remember when they had acquired their souvenirs or exactly how long they had been in their possession. In some cases, they did not look at these memory objects for years.

These memory practices with souvenirs call into question some basic assumptions. They expose the limitations of the concept of a souvenir that is commonly used in the humanities and social sciences and in consumer research. Souvenirs are not just mnemonic devices that tourists buy to remember their holidays. The role that they can play in the process of forgetting points to a whole range of issues that researchers need to address in their analysis of memory work.

### Acknowledging Forgetting

In her influential study of memory, tourism, and the World Trade Center attacks, Sturken (2007) examines the ways that Americans engage with tragic loss and traumatic memories. Challenging the assumption that mass-produced

commodities offer only superficial responses to catastrophic events, Sturken (2007, 31) refuses to label tourist practices and the purchasing of kitsch souvenirs as completely meaningless: “to dismiss the tourism that emerges around sites of mourning is to negate the ways that such tourism, even the purchasing of a souvenir, performs a kind of cultural labor that provides for empathy and connection and that demands interpretation.” Nevertheless, Sturken still maintains that tourism is not a viable option for those who are struggling to come to terms with tragic human events.

The evidence presented here indicates that Sturken is right when she claims that souvenirs are more important than the critique of mass culture suggests. The New Yorkers who participated in the present study made it clear that they did not see engaging in tourist activities as a way to alleviate their memory struggles. Few of them wanted to find themselves among the throngs of tourists at the site of the former World Trade Center, and the ones who in fact visited Ground Zero usually only did so many years later, often stating that it was out of a duty to show their children or their relatives.

Sturken (2007) challenges the idea that consumerism can be understood as a kind of therapy, but some of the memory practices of the persons who participated in the present study suggest that her position on this issue is too extreme. Most of these persons were critical of the discourse on “closure” common in the media, and their memory practices showed that coping was an ongoing struggle to live with something that would never go away, something that they could never completely forget. Since they knew that it was impossible to make a total recovery, the only viable option that they had was to adopt a long-term memory strategy for managing their feelings of pain and loss. This may be one reason that several informants kept 9/11 souvenirs that they never looked at. Having them in their New York homes reassured them by allowing them to remember and forget at the very same time.

The cases presented here highlight issues that Sturken (2007) leaves unexplored. The notion of souvenirs that she advocates excludes mass cultural products that are not kitsch, but which are nonetheless part of the memory industry. Moreover, it does not account for the fact that New Yorkers occasionally bought, kept, and collected so-called “tourist” souvenirs—or that they simply thought about doing so. The 9/11 memory practices of New Yorkers who purchased kitsch souvenirs at Ground Zero or in tourist shops were probably much less common than those of the “tourists of history” discussed by Sturken, but they cannot be ignored.

The main problem with Sturken’s (2007) analysis is that it focuses entirely on what human beings seek to remember and fails to take note of what they try to forget. It offers no interpretation of forgetting as a potentially meaningful part of remembering or of specific memory practices in which

forgetting plays a fundamental role. Criticizing the “tourism of history” as a shallow way of remembering that involves a form of alienated ignorance, [Sturken \(2007\)](#) maintains that souvenirs are both perceptually disabling and politically neutralizing. For her, souvenirs help turn human beings into tourists. Yet the New Yorkers interviewed for the present study had memory practices with souvenirs in which forgetting played a complex role in a process of remembering that had nothing to do with tourism.

This criticism can also be leveled against consumer researchers interested in memory and material culture, like [Belk \(1988\)](#), [Belk et al. \(1989\)](#), and [Curasi et al. \(2004\)](#), to name only a few. As indicated earlier, consumer researchers have devoted significant attention to the mnemonic value of photographs, mementos, and souvenirs, and unlike scholars in the humanities and social sciences, they have not portrayed souvenirs as a threat to memory. Nevertheless, they have failed to develop a serious analysis of forgetting as a meaningful human behavior with a range of specific social functions. As a result, their work often conveys the idea that remembering requires strong effort and vigilant determination, whereas forgetting occurs insidiously as people slowly relax their grip on the past. Remembering is seen as difficult, but forgetting—a more or less unconscious, low-involvement psychological phenomenon—is seen as easy. The empirical evidence presented here contradicts this view, for it shows that memory practices with certain types of objects can involve forms of forgetting that are extremely significant to human beings who have to live with memories of heart-wrenching past experiences. It shows that objects can participate in the process of forgetting and help these persons cope with devastating personal or public events from their past by providing them with a means to forget what they cannot bear to remember.

### The Deeper Meanings of Forgetting

The difficulty of forgetting is manifest in numerous remarks made by the persons interviewed for the present study. Participants like Mrs. Fischer made it clear that they were struggling to find relief from the burden of remembering. These participants considered forgetting difficult, not only psychologically, but also morally.

The present study recognizes the importance of forgetting as a psychological means of coping ([Duhachek 2005](#); [Lazarus and Folkman 1984](#)). However, in line with [St. James, Handelman, and Taylor \(2011\)](#), who adopt a cultural perspective on coping, it also highlights the moral dimension that comes to the fore as people struggle with the ethical implications of forgetting. The normative component of coping was conspicuous in the testimony of many of the informants. In the contexts that they described, memory and politics were intertwined in complex ways

that sometimes involved major conflicts, even contradictions. What they said—and sometimes what they left unsaid—made it clear that persons who forgot were open to criticism and raised suspicion.

In her discussion of the “tourists of history,” [Sturken \(2007\)](#) says nothing about the memory struggles experienced by New Yorkers, nothing about the tensions and paradoxes that characterized their memory practices with 9/11 souvenirs. Yet the lives of the persons interviewed for the present study were replete with anxiety and stress related to 9/11. These persons were divided on the question of how to represent the tragedy appropriately in their personal memory practices. They were caught between the duty to remember the horror of the terrorist attacks and the desire to make this duty less oppressive. They were reluctant to display photographs, pictures, and other souvenirs in their homes, yet they often considered it impossible to throw them away. They also felt trapped between the duty to tell what they had seen to their children and the desire to protect them from traumatic memories. Their memory struggles illustrate the complexities of remembering *and forgetting*.

Most of the persons interviewed tried to avoid constantly dwelling on 9/11. A few of them completely rejected memory duty, but the vast majority wanted to find an appropriate way to remember the city, the world, and the life they had had before 9/11. They recognized the duty to remember the tragic events, the people who died in them, and the heroes who gave their lives to save others. At the same time, although there was no indication that they wanted to forget the tragedy in any absolute sense, their insistence on the importance of finding ways to cope made it clear that they were afraid of being completely overwhelmed by their memories. In a word, they needed to forget so that they could go about their lives.

It is important to mention another aspect of the behavior of these persons: they used forgetting to help them live in a post-9/11 world where future attacks are a real possibility. Mr. McLaughlin expressed this fear poignantly: “It probably will happen again, whether it’s today, tomorrow, 10 years down the road. But I think you put it in perspective, that we’re vulnerable and that we can be attacked. We have been. We probably will be again, you know, and I think people are more conscious of that.” Mr. McLaughlin is not alone. Many informants expressed a similar view. There may be a connection between this fear of future attacks and the fears described by [Humphreys and Thompson \(2014\)](#) in their work on risk and anxiety in the context of disasters or tragedies. In any case, the New Yorkers interviewed had to live with the overwhelming place that the terrorist attacks had in public memory while being constantly exposed to involuntary reminders that could cast a shadow over their daily routines by triggering personal memories. How could they go on living in New York City if they did not, at least to a certain extent,



attempt to forget 9/11? Doing otherwise would have involved taking on an almost superhuman memory burden.

As a general rule, the participants in the present study expressed a need to forget the horror of their 9/11 experiences in order to continue functioning. They rarely saw a polar opposition between remembering and forgetting. On the contrary, the memory practices of many of these persons clearly indicated that for them remembering was possible only through forgetting, so that they were in fact *deliberately* trying to forget some parts of the tragedy. Paradoxically, they hoped forgetting would help them remember it.

### Implications for Consumer Research

The research context for studying the memory of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center is highly specific and imposes limitations that are probably greater than those of most other consumer culture theory research focusing on a unique setting. These attacks were extremely traumatic events with immense geopolitical repercussions that continue to affect the world to this day, and they are etched in the memory of millions of people. As a result, it would be almost sacrilegious to suggest that they should ever be forgotten.

While it is important to stress the specificity of this research context, it is possible to extend the key findings of the present study to other types of tragedies—for example, to the natural and/or human-made disasters that seem to be wreaking havoc ever more frequently in communities all around the world. Moreover, it is essential to emphasize that memory work is not just a coping mechanism that helps people come to terms with earth-shattering tragedies and devastating personal crises (Ricoeur 2004). Memory work can also take the form of personal memory, family memory, community memory, or national memory, none of which can be reduced to coping systems for managing trauma. It may be possible, therefore, to extend the key findings on the cultural meanings of forgetting and the role of forgetful objects to areas of consumer research that are not related to traumatic events in the strict sense of the term, but that are likely to involve memory practices in which active forgetting comes into play. Identity construction, therapeutic consumption, and digital memory work are three particularly promising themes that offer a frame for future research on such practices.

*Identity Construction.* In consumer research, forgetting is only implicitly or indirectly mentioned in discussions of identity that focus on consumer narratives, biographical accounts, and storytelling. This is quite surprising, given that the studies in question deal with how identity construction occurs in and through the narration of past events. How could forgetting not be a part of this narrative process? Yet this research on identity is marked by the absence of explicit theorizing on the role of forgetting, on the importance of what is omitted or excluded from the stories that

individuals and collectivities tell, and on the ways that these “missing” elements can take on profound meanings. It is true that researchers have used methodologies such as triangulation and multiple account evaluation to collect data relating to possible omissions, but in their studies they have not focused on the process of omission itself. Future research needs to address this issue because the present study has shown that omissions and obliterations can be just as meaningful as—sometimes even more meaningful than—what is explicitly related in narratives.

Drawing on contemporary material culture studies, the present study points to the need to look at the aspects of personal and collective identities that are omitted, obliterated, or compartmentalized in memory practices with objects. It shows how investigating certain uses of objects like souvenirs can uncover the “forgetful” side of these memory practices and—given that our theoretical access to these practices usually depends on the interpretation of personal narratives—it suggests that objects involved in the process of forgetting may have the potential to reveal hidden aspects of identity construction. However, for consumer researchers to take advantage of this possibility for future research, they have to change their perspective on the role of material culture in identity construction. In particular, they have to see that material culture can involve narratives built around objects that make it possible not only to remember, but also to forget, past events and experiences.

*Therapeutic Consumption.* Turley and O’Donohoe (2012) have examined the role of objects in the grieving process, and Baker and Hill (2013) have analyzed the role of objects in the coping mechanisms that people adopt in the face of natural disasters. Moisiu and Beruchashvili (2010) have proposed a theoretical reflection on the therapeutic model of consumption, and they have documented how support groups dedicated to helping people deal with overconsumption are often inspired by a therapeutic ethos related to the search for well-being. According to these authors, in the post-industrial United States, this ethos often supplants religious salvation as a meaning system focusing on individual self-fulfillment.

Turley and O’Donohoe (2012) and Baker and Hill (2013) show that the capacity to move on after the loss of a loved one, or to recover from a natural disaster, is marked by uncertainty, anxiety, and distress. Recovery or healing, what some call “redemption” (Moisiu and Beruchashvili 2010, 865), is rarely easy, and far from assured. The cases discussed by Moisiu and Beruchashvili (2010), where the therapy “journey” is usually characterized by relapses and failures, make this particularly clear. It may take years—sometimes a whole lifetime—for therapy to succeed, if it succeeds at all.

As we have already seen, Sturken’s (2007) analysis of the tourism of history that developed in the aftermath of 9/11 involves a critique of therapeutic consumption. She challenges the belief that “one can always heal, move on, and place the past in its proper context, and do so quickly”

(Sturken 2007, 14). In the United States, this belief occupies a central place in the cultural practices of mourning, practices in which consumerism plays a key role.

It is clear that consumer researchers advocating a therapeutic orientation are more nuanced than the critique of Sturken (2007) suggests. And yet the main points that she raises are valid. Consumer researchers with a therapeutic orientation have privileged a psychological view of healing, and they have focused primarily, if not exclusively, on identity management, identity construction, and identity reconstruction. The present study takes the research on bereavement, psychological and physiological recovery, and, more generally, coping, beyond the issue of identity. It points to the need to improve understanding of how individuals and collectivities make sense of traumatic events and of how the memory of such events is transmitted to future generations. It also shows that it is possible for researchers to explore a whole new set of questions related to forgiveness and reconciliation (Riccœur 2004; Rieff 2016). Each of these issues requires a reflection on cultural memory that does not reduce it to a mere component of identity.

*Digital Memory Work.* Although the present study focuses on the relationship between objects and memory, it does not explore the role of digital objects in memory work. This does not mean, however, that the key insights of the study presented here offer no perspectives for future research on this topic.

Belk (2013) maintains that material objects that form a part of the extended self can provide a sense of the past through their association with events and people in our lives. He extends this analysis to digital objects, claiming that they can do the same. This occurs, for example, when they are used to record and archive people's memories. Although Belk addresses the issue of human memory in a digital world, he fails to explore the question of forgetting. Mayer-Schönberger (2009) does explore it, arguing in his thought-provoking study that the digital world poses fundamental challenges to forgetting. His perspective is extremely interesting because it portrays forgetting as a human necessity and calls attention to the dangers of all-powerful digital memory. His troubling reflections suggest that it might be worthwhile to use the key insights of the present study to consider how digital objects may be used in forgetting. Of course, the question of whether there is a fundamental difference between using material objects and using digital objects in forgetful memory practices would be central. Digital objects seem to be much more ephemeral (Belk 2013), but we cannot conclude from this that the memories that they cue are also short-lived. Associating forgetting with the ephemeral and remembering with perpetuity or permanence is conceptually misguided. Küchler (1988, 1997, 2002) has shown that memories of past events and experiences that lasted for very long periods of time may be stirred by very ephemeral objects, and

Coupland (2005) has argued that permanent things can be easily forgotten.

Digital objects do not have the same perceptual presence as material objects. Nevertheless, as Belk (2013) has argued, the differences between these two types of objects should not be exaggerated. This is particularly true if the focus is on memory practices. With human beings engaging in so much identity work online (Belk 2013), it is plausible to assume that this involves their doing a great deal of memory work in the digital world. Consequently, more research is needed on the relationship between memory, forgetting, and online practices with digital objects. It is essential for consumer researchers to explore the issue of personal and collective memory in the digital world and to take a close look at the possibility of forgetful memory practices with digital objects.

## CONCLUSION

In consumer research, the role that forgetting can play in memory work remains unexplored. The present study provides clear evidence that people sometimes keep souvenirs because they want to forget. It shows that souvenirs can play a fundamental role in memory practices that involve obliterating and/or compartmentalizing aspects of past experiences.

The participants in the present study continued to remember 9/11 while they were forgetting it. Their forgetting 9/11 was part of their remembering it—and that is where the souvenirs came in. Precisely because they are memory objects that have meanings in memory practices, souvenirs can be used to forget. Through souvenirs, some New Yorkers struggling with their 9/11 memories were able to remember and forget at the very same time.

Highlighting the fact that disregarding memory objects like souvenirs is not always an accidental consequence of the passage of time, the present study offers an in-depth analysis of the use of such objects in the memory practices of persons who seek to cope with emotionally difficult personal or public experiences by “not remembering” them. In uncovering the basic mechanics of this form of forgetting, it takes the interpretative investigation of memory and material culture beyond the semiotic analysis of signs and symbols. Questioning the hierarchy of remembering and forgetting, it shows that forgetting can have a complex role in memory practices related to traumatic past events, and it calls into question the preeminence of studies on remembering in consumer research.

Finally, the present study opens new avenues of research on issues like identity construction, therapeutic consumption, and digital memory work. Other researchers have analyzed these themes; however, none has explicitly explored the cultural role of forgetting and the forgetful role of objects in memory practices. The concept of memory work

provides a powerful lens for consumer researchers who wish to discuss these fundamental issues. Memory work is particularly relevant in the context of terrorist attacks like 9/11 or other traumatic events, whether they be disastrous occurrences that wreak havoc in entire societies or personal crises that shatter the lives of individuals. It can also be crucially meaningful in countries and cultures whose histories are marked by political instability, violent confrontation, or dehumanizing injustice—one of the main reasons it is an extremely important topic of research in the humanities and social sciences. The present study has attempted to lay some of the groundwork for a profound reflection on the relationship between consumption and memory work in the hope of encouraging researchers in our field to take up the discussion and expand it further.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The research for “Souvenirs to Forget” was conducted in New York City between 2003 and 2011. The author personally collected and analyzed all the data, but research assistants sometimes participated in the data collection process.

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