

Mourning Absences, Melancholic Commemoration, and the Contested Public Memories of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum

Nicholas S. Paliewicz & Marouf Hasian, Jr.

This essay extends the interdisciplinary work that exists on the dialectic between mourning and melancholia as a way of analyzing the rhetorical effect of the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. We argue that while previous research on this site has often underscored the reverential and mourning functions of this space, few have studied the darker, more melancholic features of these hallowed grounds. By investigating the melancholic dimensions of public memory, and by illustrating how national communities can strategically take advantage of these dimensions, we affirm the importance of resilience, mourning, and recovery for commemorative efforts.

Keywords: 9/11 Memorial and Museum; Melancholia; Melancholic Commemoration; Mourning; Rhetoric of Absence; Trauma

This essay explores the darker psychological and social impacts of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum on audiences by drawing from recent works on mourning and melancholia. While previous scholarship has explained how these grounds help visitors and survivors cope with collective traumas and personal mourning (Sturken, 2004; Vivian, 2010), we focus on the melancholic features of 9/11 memory formation. Informed by the prolific work done on places and spaces of memory (Dickinson, Blair, & Ott, 2010) such as museums and memorials (Balthrop,

Nicholas S. Paliewicz is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Louisville. Marouf Hasian, Jr. is a Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. Correspondence to: Nicholas S. Paliewicz, Department of Communication, University of Louisville, 310 Strickler Hall, Louisville, KY 40292, USA. E-mail: nicholas.paliewicz@louisville.edu
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Blair, & Michel, 2010; Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991; Blair & Michel, 2000, 2007; Carlson & Hocking, 1988; Dickinson, Ott, & Aoki, 2005, 2006; Hasian, 2004; Mandziuk, 2003; Ott, Aoki, & Dickinson, 2011), the National September 11 Memorial and Museum produces a brooding “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1975, p. 27) that appropriates traumatic histories for nationalistic objectives. In the words of Judith Butler, melancholic commemoration may be understood as “a *national melancholia*, understood as a disavowed mourning,” something that “follows upon the erasure from public representations of the names, images, and narratives of those the U.S. has killed” (Butler, 2006, p. xiv, italics added).

Researchers often express anxiety and ambivalence when they hear about the attractiveness of places of tragedy. As Bowman and Pezzullo (2009) note, scholars and policy makers sometimes struggle when they interrogate the darker tropes and performances associated with the politics of death. We believe that a melancholic study of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum better informs critics about the theory and *praxis* of many popular 21st-century tourist sites.

While there is growing interest in thanatourism, or the attraction to death and disaster, existing literature tends to overlook the melancholic functions of memorials and museums. Moreover, when commemorative events or ritualistic functions dominate these analyses, they tend to follow Foote’s (2003) conclusion that hallow grounds help stakeholders cope with individual and traumatic remembrances. However, these readings apparently assume that all of those who visit or comment on key memorials share the same ideological views regarding how to mourn, how to memorialize, and how to remember.

Rhetoricians have suggested that we also need to pay attention to the ideological features of this universalizing speculation. Vivian (2010), for example, notes that during various September 11 services, stakeholders attempted to unite “heterogeneous audiences in a public display of mourning that would transcend intervening social, political, and economic divisions” to strengthen “powerful bonds of sentiment [that] would serve as proof of abiding unity” (p. 81). In other words, officials encouraged publics to remember the heroism and patriotism of 9/11 through a forgetting of the unresolved ethical issues about how citizenship should be “restored or transformed in light of the remembered past” (p. 88). We argue that this perceived unity can be achieved through more than just displays of mourning.

Anglo-American audiences build, maintain, and promote thanatopolitical sites of memory that contain both mournful and melancholic features of remembering and forgetting. For example, for more than a decade various U.S. stakeholders—including mayors, architects, members of New York’s Port Authority, academics, and the surviving relatives of those who died during the 2001 attacks—have advanced numerous arguments about the need to recall and commemorate the acts of those who responded to the darkness of 11 September 2001. We are convinced that by the time the memorial opened to the public on 12 September 2012, audiences were still trying to deal with manifest and latent forms of what Biesecker (2007) characterized as a lingering melancholic situation. “The more the world superpower dials the 9–1–1 emergency number” and “gives a name and face to evil and goes to war,” argued

Redfield (2007), “the more haunting September 11 becomes” (p. 78). This haunting involves more than the therapeutic forgetting that might come from mourning, traditional burials, and fond remembrances of the dead.

Various interdisciplinary scholars have investigated some of the motives and intentions of the memorial planners (Simpson, 2006; Watts, 2009; White, 2004), but as Donofrio (2010) observed, some of the studies of these motives have left out the views of key stakeholders. She argued that most of this previous research overlooks how arguments made by 9/11 survivors and family members used their “place-making authority” to influence memorial designs during early commemorative struggles (Donofrio, 2010, p. 163). If so, then contests for rhetorical status and for the right to engage in melancholic commemoration were central concerns of many of these stakeholders.

Our particular ideological approach adopts Knudsen’s (2011) suggestion that critics use multimodal approaches as they survey thanatopolitical sites, and this allows us to take into account the intertextual nature of information that can be gathered from experiential visits, reviews of memorial designs, and public responses as we seek to determine how visitors feel about mourning and melancholia. This approach helps us contextualize how rhetoricians can evaluate commentaries on this site that appear in a host of archival materials, public remarks, weblogs, and architectural plans.

In 2012 and 2014, one of the authors pilgrimaged to the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum¹ to get a textured feeling for how visitors actually acted and talked about the darker features of this site. This allowed us to collect a wealth of information about these spaces, including material on everything from the famous voids above ground to the more ghoulish display of artifacts from the Bin Laden raid that appear in the museum. Those visits helped us gain an appreciation of the symbolic impact of the physical presence of surveillance cameras, the noise of the waterfalls, and the overall aura of this sacred place.

We contend that the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum commemorates melancholia by evoking an amalgamative, polysemic sense of loss, grief, and sadness. This affective smorgasbord occurs through a dialectic of presence and absence, where visitors are presented with an aesthetic of dematerialization that remembers the loss of loved persons as well as loved objects. The absence of these objects and people leads to trauma and a lingering presence of grief. At this haunted place of remembrance, visitors come face to face with the physical presence of images, videos, and resilient objects that act as catalytic devices producing *melancholic commemorative acts*, and visitors dwell on what has been lost rather than the transformative potentiality of mourning (Butler, 2006).

We recognize that focusing on the thanatopolitical features of revered sites involves a critique of the traditional ways that sociologists, communication scholars, and others often write about the collective nature, or the “working-through,” of public memories and forgetfulness. This heuristic recognizes that commemoration does not always involve uplifting celebrations of historical feats as Durkheim (1915/1995) once speculated because commemoration can also include remembrances of darkness and melancholia. Altogether, this melancholic form of commemoration enables visitors

to stop short of working through trauma by evoking haunted, affective feelings that speak to the terror of absence.

To support this argument, this essay is organized in the following way. First, we identify the theoretical importance of mourning and melancholia for investigations of major monuments, museums, and other sites of memory. This section underscores the need for studies of what Scott (2004) and Zelizer (2010) call “subjunctive” historical moments. Second, we begin our critique by following Ott et al.’s (2011) admonition that “a practice of criticism—and of living” needs to attend “to absence as well as presence,” so that we can recognize the ways “places simultaneously attract and repel us” (p. 235). That second segment shows how architects and planners dealt with the visions of the families of 9/11 victims and other stakeholders who were not that interested in the haunting features of this hallowed ground. The third portion illustrates how planners’ focus on the display of resilience and American responses to terrorism amplified the power of this site’s thanatopolitical dimensions. Finally, we argue that although some planners and visitors had high hopes that the spatial, auditory, and tactile features of the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum would help heal some of the scars created by the 9/11 attacks, haunting worries about securitization and future attacks have made it difficult to “work through” the traumatic public memories of 9/11.

Revisiting “Mourning and Melancholia” in Memorializing Contexts

Freud (1917/1957) once suggested that mourning and melancholia are related in that they both involve feelings associated with a loss of a love object such as a deceased family member, an abstract ideal, or a structural object that no longer exists. Mourning, Freud explained, “is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (p. 243). When subjects mourn, they productively grieve about the lost object, which enables them to realize the object’s absence, and allows the subject to eventually return to regular life.

Freud considered mourning to be a natural and constructive way of coping with bereavement, but he characterized melancholia as a pathological condition that involved a sustained, and problematic, longing for some lost love object, much like nostalgia (see Dickinson, 1997). Freud (1917/1957) recognized that “the distinguishing mental features of melancholia” involves a “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings” (p. 244). In other words, melancholia is the inability to recover from the lost love object, which deprives the ego of its normal libidinal function, leaving it “poor and empty,” and impoverished “on a grand scale” (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 246). A dangerous symptom of melancholia manifests itself when an individual keeps those feelings about the lost object bottled up inside oneself and produces a fantasy that more or less appropriates the object’s qualities (Bjork, 2015, p. 103).

Commemorating difficult or dark pasts, such as Vietnam, Gettysburg, or 9/11, complicates the idea of commemoration as a consensual form of remembrance that is always uplifting, patriotic, and didactic (Schwartz, 1982), because when dealing with difficult pasts, memorial commemoration is not always a simple matter. Butler (2006), for example, notes that President Bush attempted to quickly resolve grief and mourning in order to “reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly” (p. 30). Butler averred that this underestimated the fundamental vulnerability of life and the politics of mourning itself. “What follows as well from prohibitions on avowing grief in public,” Butler explained, “is an effective mandate in favor of a generalized melancholia” that selectively politicized national losses (p. 37).

Commemorative melancholia thus entails the strategic usages of situations where decision makers, curators, museum planners, and others *do not want to end mourning*, and they may not want to witness a final “working through” of public memories. This constant brooding, and talk of national victimage, serves as an occasion for discussing foreign evils and the resilience of those who have to be vigilant as they fight terrorists. Taylor (2003) also comments on this rush to selectively commemorate in *The Archive and the Repertoire* when she cites former Mayor Giuliani’s call for us to “demonstrate our resolve and our support for all the people viciously attacked today by going about their lives” (p. 243). Taylor complained that this collapsed distinctions between “the role of witness, as responsible, ethical, participant” and the “spectator to crisis” in the “rubble of talk of victims, heroes, and the rest of us” (p. 243).

As noted above, some communication scholars seem to assiduously avoid grappling with many of the thanatopolitical and melancholic features of urban and rural commemorative landscapes. For instance, Gallagher’s (1999) essay on the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute offers important insights about the way troubled memories of civil rights struggles are negotiated in today’s political context. However, her analysis underestimates the darkness of these memories and she argued that the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute produced an experience of reconciliation rather than contestation through visually “transactional” patterns (p. 314).

This notion of reconciliation needs to be juxtaposed with more contentious ways of thinking about social struggles and identity formations. In an interview with Bell (1999), Judith Butler drew from McDowell’s work on melancholia and race when she argued that some “public discourse” involves the appropriation of an iconography that “institutes a kind of melancholia for the black community which can’t be overcome.” This was important for Butler because it “makes melancholia” appear as some “constitutive condition of urban black culture” (p. 171).

Privileging mourning over melancholia is also evident in Veil, Sellnow, and Heald’s (2011) analysis of the Oklahoma City National Memorial. To Veil et al. (2011), the Oklahoma City National Memorial is a prototype of how memorials can convey an optimistic sense of renewal that involves the use of special healing powers. This drive for hopefulness is relevant to the study of other historical traumatic events that have emphasized renewal by transforming places such as Holocaust death camps, Ground Zero, and the USS Arizona into “hallowed ground” (pp. 168–169). Making this move “from the profane to the sacred” (Jacobs, 2004) constitutes a “memorialization of

place” that ensures that such sites will “not be forgotten, but will instead be honored, respected, and learned from so that it may never happen again” (Veil et al., 2011, p. 168). However, we argue that critics should also keep the door open for what Vivian (2010) calls a “public” or “cultural forgetting.” In other words, some remembrances come at a price, meaning that national memories are not simply places for optimistic studies of proper mourning, rebirth, or renewal.

Occasionally, hints of extensions of mourning studies appear in journalistic, academic, or public commentaries on the National September 11 Memorial and Museum. Stow (2007), for example, averred that the 9/11 commemorative efforts focusing exclusively on heroism, resilience, and patriotism led to an uncritical process of mourning:

This partiality of perspective and uncritical use of the past is manifested in, and perpetuated by, the adoption of a mode of mourning that simply echoes the Pericles *in the History*, one which celebrates—but fails to acknowledge the limits of—American virtue.... That this bland consensus should be considered “worthwhile” is, perhaps, evidence of the absence of a self-critical perspective from the mourning rituals of the contemporary polity. (p. 206)

In other words, publics, academics, and institutional authorities might be missing different readings of 9/11 that account for the darker, deeper, and more critical features of what actually happened that day.

While we obviously agree that traumatic closure is important, we believe that critics should work harder to understand how melancholia, rather than just mourning, might be operating at commemorative sites of public memory. This is important on the individual level, but it may also have something to say about the more mass-mediated, collective incapacities to work through some memories. Granted, there will be those who may argue that we live in “therapeutic cultures” (Doss, 2010, p. 146) where the focus is on healing and mourning, but the commodification of death, grief, and disaster can also become a part of all of this thanatourism (Lennon & Foley, 2000). We may want to heed Miller’s (2011) advice when he suggested that “those looking to remember 9/11 would be wise to learn from the preservation of Antietam, that is, it is more about the brutality and savagery of war, suffering, and death than rebirth and heroism” (p. 120).

This view supports Biesecker’s (2007) argument that war on terror discourses have constructed “melancholic citizen-subjects” that have psychologically supplemented the loss of democratic life with nationalistic fervor, thus tactically justifying post-9/11 militarization. These subjects adhere to national objectives for securitizing publics from an “enemy who sees but cannot be seen” (Biesecker, 2007, p. 158); in turn, this serves as “ideological enclosure” (p. 151) that forbids subjects from confronting what Žižek (2013) called “the Real.”

Much can be gained from concrete studies of key memorials and monuments that take into account the losses associated with both mourning and melancholia, and presence as well as absence. Hilker (2014) is more explicit about some of these linkages when she noted: “When today’s memorials commemorate the absence of the dead by evoking melancholy, they evoke also the fundamental human dilemma of

absence that lies at the heart of melancholy” (p. 33). Bowman and Pezzullo (2009) adopted a related stance when they opined that researchers need to focus on the allure that the “disgusting, the abject, and the macabre” have at places that also include the “picturesque, the romantic, and the sublime” (p. 187).

These nuanced readings gesture in ways that invite us to pay attention to the melancholic features of key sites of memory, and it is our contention that the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum participates in performances of “aesthetics of disappearance” and “dematerialization” (Biesecker, 2007, p. 152) that deny subjects their capacity to mourn. In other words, the memorial attempts to venerate the dead, but it is unwilling to forget the traumatic loss of 9/11 love objects, namely the victims of the terrorist attacks and the towers themselves. As Gunn (2004) noted, specters are “haunting the United States” (p. 91), and “the mourning of Nine-eleven is an obvious rehearsal of melancholic practices, a hauntopia for audiences to reaffirm what Robert Bellah has described as civil religiosity” (p. 109).

The Return of the Repressed: Melancholic Commemoration and the Securitized Cosmopolitanization of the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum

For almost a dozen years, various stakeholders, as they debated about both the form and content of what would later be known as the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum, spent a considerable amount of time discussing the mourning and melancholic features of this hallowed ground.² For example, in early 2006 several hundred police officers, local workers, and groups of families of 9/11 victims joined protesters at Church Street in Lower Manhattan who were complaining about how certain types of architectural designs disrespected the dead. Michael Palladino, the President of the Detectives’ Endowment Association, stated that “if you want to put people underground, go build a cemetery” (Collins, 2006, p. B-3). Moreover, during these same periods, members of the “Take Back the Memorial” movement would not endorse the plans of officials who continued to talk about arranging the names of the dead in nonmeaningful, “random” ways. These relatives wanted to have the names placed topographically to allow visitors to see where the victims worked and who died beside them (Dunlap, 2006, p. B-1).

The families of the victims may have believed that they needed all of these concessions in the name of sacral decorum to help their bereavement. However, their exclusionary politics ended up promoting a vision for the Memorial that prioritized personal memorialization and mourning over national, didactic remembrance. Kolker (2005) intoned that no one said the 9/11 families were not entitled to recognize their “pain,” but he wondered why a “small handful of them should have the power to shape ground zero” (Kolker, 2005, p. 1). For many family members, the promotion of some of the darker functions of the memorial—often characterized as “liberal” in nature—was interfering with the more personal functions of this hallowed site. As Donofrio (2010) argued, “9/11 must be understood as more than the aggregate of nearly three thousand individual deaths,” and using a monolithic lens that only

promoted “rhetorics of American innocence and blamelessness” truncated “our ways of understanding trauma” (p. 164).

Many visitors and commentators often talked about their traumas, their need to mourn, and their respect for the sacrifices of those who died on September 11, but they also have to navigate some of the more haunting features of this hallowed space. For example, long before reaching the waterfalls, visitors pace through a securitized pavilion that constantly reminds them that this is still a haunted place, a potential target for terrorism, and cameras watch travelers’ every step in the name of law and order. Reporter Martin (2014) noted that various individuals have pointed out “similarities between the 9/11 Memorial and the U.S. Holocaust Museum” because of their mutual affinities for “melancholy, [and an] endlessly funereal and almost unbearably grief-stricken tone” (p. 25).

When one of the authors first visited the memorial during the summer of 2012, the memorial had just opened to the public, and the museum was still under construction. At that time, there were an exceptional number of closed-circuit television boxes that appeared in the memorial’s terminal, and a mandatory security checkpoint ensured that all visitors went through security screens. Here, police authorities guided people through metal detectors after visitors waited in long lines that were protected by the NYPD. These authorized figures served as visual reminders of the continued importance of security, safety, and decorum. During this period, visitors were forced to walk through a narrow postsecurity corridor to the memorial’s entrance, with cameras tracking every move (see Figure 1).

By the summer of 2014, the security checkpoint and the long lines for entry were gone. The cameras, though, had not left; they were just more mundanely embedded in lampposts and the stone of the National 9/11 Museum. Together, these cameras, and the numerous security officials monitoring the perimeter, projected an aesthetic of securitization (see Figure 2). Even though visitors were presented with a wealth of soothing acoustic and visual registers, the melancholic features of securitization militated against the possibility that visitors could mourn—and then forget—about their losses.

Now that the security checkpoint and walkway no longer introduce visitors to the gates of the memorial, the first symbols of commemoration greeting visitors in this park of remembrance are the 400 swamp white oaks that envelop the memorial’s 16-acre open space. The trees line the inner perimeter of the memorial and, according to one *New York Times* staff writer, they adhere to their own “military ranks” (Kimmelman, 2014, p. C5). These oaks serve as natural symbols of devastation because they came from Washington, DC and Pennsylvania locales that were hit by the 9/11 attacks. According to the National 9/11 Memorial Commission website in 2013,

The design of the plaza theoretically conveys a spirit of hope and renewal and creates a contemplative space separate from the usual sights and sounds of a bustling metropolis.... [The trees] remember life with living forms, and serve as living representations of the destruction and renewal of life in their own annual cycles. The result is a memorial that expresses both the incalculable loss of life and its consoling regeneration. (9/11 Memorial, 2013, pp. 1, 9)



Figure 1 A Panoptic Corridor that Once Led Visitors to the Memorial, Guided by Cameras After Passing the Security Gate.

Note. Photograph taken by Nicholas S. Paliewicz during the summer of 2012.

Trees are everywhere, but cement walkways and the sound of flowing water naturally direct visitors through the oaks and toward the main feature of the memorial at the central plaza: the footprints.

The footprints are the hollowed out remains of the former Twin Towers. Here, in their vacancies, they are a key part of “reflective absences,” the massive architectural counters that channel the symbolic water. Each footprint is nearly an acre in size and, from their peripheries, cascades of water pummel downward to the basin 30 feet below. The water then moves its way towards the epicenter of each footprint where it drops another 30 feet only to be pumped and recycled all over again. The names of those who perished on 9/11 are etched on bronze parapets that surround the reflecting pools. While the North Pool contains the names of victims from the North Tower, the 1993 bombing, and Flight 11, the South Pool has the names of those from the South Tower, the First Responders, Flight 93, Flight 77, the Pentagon, and Flight 173.

Like graveyard tombstones, the granite names of those who lost their lives may offer a sense of connectedness between the visitor and the dead. At the same time, the water produces an aesthetic of peace and tranquility that might relieve any lingering trauma from 9/11. For many commentators and visitors, the water is said to be a healing feature of the Memorial, a material reality that influences how one

Figure 2 Security Booth Where the Panoptic Corridor Once Was.

Note. Photograph taken by Nicholas S. Paliewicz during the summer of 2014.

contextualizes 9/11. Denson (2011), for example, argued that the falling water is “in harmony with nature” and consistent with Daoist beliefs, in that it “embodies ... the gravity to which all earthly things, animate and inanimate, must submit” (p. 11).³ To Denson, this conveys Arad’s heightened sense of “the theatrical virtuosity of minimalism and the ‘truth to materials’ [*sic*] functionalism” (p. 4). These observations reflect some of the rhetorical features of this site, but these types of commentaries overlook the darker functions, or the thanatopolitical features, of these grounds.

There is no shortage of commentaries from visitors who wrote about the potential healing power of the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum. A visitor who lost her nephew in the World Trade Center commented that the water “is stunning, like Niagara Falls, and yet calm. It is serene, and we are at peace” (Foley, 2011, p. 5). Another, who never found his son from the 9/11 wreckage, said, “They did a fantastic job.... To me it’s very peaceful” (Hartocollis, 2011, p. 12). McCann (2011) put it quite simply in a commentary that appeared in *The New York Times*: “The falling water, beside the reflecting pools, spoke volumes” (p. 1).

Yet, in many ways, visitors who tried to mourn may also have felt melancholic because of the aura of absence and the memories of the missing Twin Towers. Arad's "voids" were so large that the sheer size of each footprint reminded one of the massive destruction that took place on 9/11 and the fragility of America's collective psyche. For example, for Kennicott (2011) the Memorial "recalls ancient and deeply embedded connections among water, memory and death" (p. 5).

These conscious (or unconscious) worries about past deaths and future attacks—along with the loathing of omnipresent and omnipotent enemies—overpowered the water's soothing rhetorical effects as we think back to the fires and dust of that tragic day. Local police authorities have even raised concerns about potential suicides at the memorial due to its "layout and its powerful relationship to the terrorist act of Sept. 11, 2001, and because those who lost loved ones that day may still have unresolved issues of loss" (Baker, 2012, p. 3). According to Kimmelman (2014) of *The New York Times*,

The memorial permits no recreation, no loud noise, no "behaving in a way that is inappropriate," according to the memorial's online rules list. You can't sing. At a site celebrating freedom and liberty, protests and demonstrations are prohibited.... Even the seating is severe: square concrete blocks, low, backless, as if comfort violated the sanctity of the place.... There can be no forgetting. (p. C5)

Indeed, we argue that both the texts and the contexts of the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum are filled with contradictions, and this architectural wonder reflects and refracts those cultural tensions. The memorial's reflection pools offered some solace, but its physical absences demanded a *retraumatization*. The rhetoric of absence was traumatic, and this trauma was supercharged because it interfered with the promise of closure displayed by the water. These two affective feelings became combustible when considering the center of the pools where all hope for therapeutic access dribbled into an unknown abyss. As Helmore (2013) stated, the water "cascades down the sides towards a giant drain, creating the disconcerting feeling of being sucked into earth" (p. 10). Denson (2011), who wondered whether Arad had planned to evoke sentiments that brought together "architecture, culture, holocaust and mysticism," was convinced that "no one critic can make proclamations concerning whether a memorial site succeeds in mitigating the lingering trauma and loss of an act of war for the public" (p. 18).

The absence of the Twin Towers, and the presence of security guards, reminded us of the difficulty of working through traumatic memories during times of war. In this particular case, the palpable presence of melancholia is confirmed in several ways. First, the cameras and the security guards constantly watch all bodies, which emphasizes the insecurity of this place of remembrance. Although the bordered security checkpoint was eventually removed, and relocated to the museum (see Figure 3), the memorial's cameras, security guards, and security booths on its periphery ultimately put the visitor in a panopticon-like securitization complex.

Second, although visitors are allowed to touch the names on the slabs of granite, they cannot touch the voids' absence, leaving them estranged from the healing powers of mourning that were offered acoustically. Mourning can be heard, but it remains physically inaccessible.



Figure 3 Security Checkpoint and Entrance to the 9/11 Memorial Museum.

Note. Photograph taken by Nicholas S. Paliewicz during the summer of 2014.

Third, the slanted angle of the parapets forces viewers to take a downward, melancholic visual perspective as they view the names of the 9/11 victims. Hilker (2014) calls this perspective an “absent gaze” (p. 31) because the visitor remains mentally absent from the rest of the world as he or she can only downwardly gaze at the names of those who were lost in a lethargic, nonengaged optical manner. Unlike the viewing of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, there is no visual verticality to access at the 9/11 Memorial; there is only a horizontal spread of absence through descent. This cranking of one’s neck may even leave the visitor uncomfortable while standing (see Figure 4).

From a Derridean standpoint, structure, sign, and play (Derrida, 1980) work together to create the networks of relationships that bestow social meaning, and the deconstructive capacity of the memorial stops at this hierarchical reversal since it has not yet interrogated the security/insecurity binary that it has constructed. While a full metaphysical displacement would expose the superficiality of this binary altogether,



Figure 4 The Angle of the Melancholic Gaze and Water Flowing in the South Pool of the 9/11 Memorial.
Note. Photograph taken by Nicholas S. Paliewicz during the summer of 2012.

the central thematic of the memorial has focused on nothing less than the affective display of absence and insecurity.

It might be said, therefore, that this rhetoric of absence produces a commemorative form of melancholia that spatially undermines much of the mourning needed for the resolution of conflict. While visitors can touch the names of loved ones that have passed, their physical *presence* pales in comparison with the physical *absences* displayed in the one-acre pits of hollow spaces inscribed by granite borders (see [Figure 5](#)). Simply stated, the absence of the towers, and the traumatic public memory associated with the violence that created those absences, has prevented psychological and social closure. This lack of closure serves as one more example of how the “accident of art” can be used to invite select performances of melancholia (Lotringer & Virilio, 2005), where even comfort can be sacrificed in the name of national security (Kimmelman, 2014).

In sum, the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum performs what Butler (2006) called a “national melancholia,” or “a disavowed mourning” (p. xiv) that used its rhetoric of absence to hold visitors in a constant state of uncertainty about how to live at peace, while knowing that unknown terrorists may always be lurking around the next corner. Visitors themselves are nearly treated as potential terrorists in that



Figure 5 The Materiality of Absence at the 9/11 Memorial.

Note. Photograph taken by Nicholas S. Paliewicz during the summer of 2012.

closed-circuit television cameras and on-site security personnel carefully monitor their activities to make sure 9/11 never happens again.

If the National 9/11 Memorial is a space marked by absence and insecurity, then the recently opened 9/11 Museum is a place that brings the physical and emotional tolls of 9/11 to the fore by guiding visitors through a house of horrors that once more commemorates melancholia. In one *New York Times* article titled, “As 9/11 Museum Opens, These New Yorkers Will Stay Away,” Feuer (2014) noted that “some people said they did not need a public exhibition to remind them of a personal tragedy that they could not forget. Others simply said they would not find healing or relief at the memorial—only more pain” (p. 3). However, for many, that pain served thanatopolitical purposes.

“Finding Space for the Living” at The National 9/11 Museum

The National 9/11 Museum opened to the public on Thursday, May 22, 2014, and it was met with a host of emotions and stories about various struggles and

accomplishments that were involved in the museum-making process. According to the National September 11 Memorial and Museum Foundation, the underground museum's 110,000 square feet of exhibition space "serves as the country's principal institution for examining the implications of the events of 9/11, documenting the impact of those events and exploring the continuing significance of 11 September 2001" (9/11 Museum, 2014, p. 1).

The way the museum is organized—spatially, visually, and aesthetically—makes it impossible for visitors not to experience some form of post-9/11 grief. When one of us visited this site in 2014, that author could not help noticing that the architecture, the pictures, the videos, the holograms, and the recordings produced a ghastly experience reminding guests of cadaverous objects and haunting spectacles. There were firefighter helmets, fire trucks, cell phones, shoes, wallets, bicycles, and fragments of metal shrapnel that all told stories about 9/11 horrors. Most of all, these abject museum artifacts produced melancholic structures of feeling that recalled the crimes perpetrated by perfidious terrorists. The haunting presences invite visitors to view themselves as traumatized subjects still living in an exposed and vulnerable world of death and disaster after 9/11. This observation is consistent with Vivian's (2014) description of the rhetorical act of witnessing as the ensemble of "words, images, or other precious remainders of those who endured appalling oppression and injustice" that "endow historical accounts with auras of factual and emotional authenticity" (p. 206).

Witnessing the luridness of these ghoulish objects has thus served as an obligatory act of citizenship for the post-9/11 melancholic citizen-subject who now performs commemoration by taking this pilgrimage. In this particular case, the witnessing that "rhetorically evokes and shapes collective perceptions of time so as to commend appropriate historical, political, and moral judgments" (Vivian, 2014, p. 206–207) mandated continued vigilance and counterterrorist displays.

Journalists could not ignore the melancholic darkness. Cotter (2014), for example, characterized the National 9/11 museum as a place and space that was simultaneously "a historical document, a monument to the dead [and] a theme-park-style tourist attraction" (p. 2). The title of his essay, after all, is "The 9/11 Story Told at Bedrock, Powerful as a Punch to the Gut" (Cotter, 2014). Cotter went so far as to claim that the "prevailing" story in the museum, "as in a church, is framed in moral terms," where "the angels are many and heroic, the devils few and vile, a band of Islamic radicals" who "are identified in a cut-and-dried, contextless and unnuanced film called 'The Rise of Al Qaeda' seen at the end of the exhibition" (p. 21).

Artifacts help coproduce this master narrative, and what we see featured are wrecked ambulance cars, devastated fire trucks, and left behind vernacular items (see Figure 6). It is no coincidence that some of these artifacts were taken from the makeshift memorials that once painted the streets of New York—such as teddy bears, unopened letters, piles of shoes, and firefighter helmets. "Stuff" (see Brown, 2003; Pettitt, 2008) was arranged in such a way as to expose visitors to underground halls of terror, where people were encouraged to get to know the victims by reading their biographies and gazing at their pictures so they could feel an attachment with their things.



Figure 6 The Wrangled Wiring from the Former World Trade Center's Elevator Motor at the 9/11 Memorial Museum.

Note. Photograph taken by Nicholas S. Paliewicz during the summer of 2014.

Cotter (2014) provided an uncanny description of the museum experience, a place that offered a “descent into darkness” where “the stuff of suspense” (p. 6) took center stage. A spatial tour of the museum began at the plaza stage, where visitors were confronted with “steel trident columns that were the signature features of the twin tower facades” (p. 7). Then the journey took visitors 70 feet below ground “where the foundations of the towers met raw Manhattan schist” (p. 5). After visitors walk past the atrium and travel below the plaza, they are “out of the range of natural light, and not so neutral in feeling” (p. 8). Visitors can now hear the recordings of the 9/11 narratives that gave “urgent accounts of catastrophe” that “crowd the air” (p. 10). And, of course, there is the exposed slurry wall, which was built as a foundation to the WTC and prevented the Hudson River from flooding Ground Zero.

This movement underground is contextualized by commentary about “missing” posters and vernacular objects that coated the city before the official memorial was ever constructed. One museum tour ended “at bedrock,” where visitors have the option of visiting the galleries of those who died, something that Cotter (2014) regarded as “a disturbingly vivid evocation of the events themselves” (p. 15). Adjacent to the commemorative exhibition is another room, a repository of some 7,930 remains that have not been identified by experts (Farrell & Baker, 2014).

It is quite obvious that the museum has produced a surplus of traumatic meaning about 9/11, and some objected to the way the National 9/11 Museum represents 9/11. One group, called the 9/11 Parents & Families of Firefighters and WTC Victims, argued that they were not properly consulted during the museum planning stages, and they have been particularly vocal about their opposition to the on-site repository. During the May 10, 2014 ceremonial transfer of the remains, a few dozen families protested the event on the grounds that they were not consulted about the decision to

store the unidentified remains in the museum. In an article titled, “The Worst Day of My Life is Now New York’s Hottest Tourist Attraction,” one family member revealed that his “sister is among the many for whom there have been no remains recovered whatsoever. Vaporized. So there’s no grave to visit.... Just this theatrically lit Ikea warehouse behind a panel of glass” (Kandell, 2014, p. 14). Many wore black gags over their mouths to symbolize their alleged marginalization, and a 77-year-old retired deputy chief in the Fire Department said: “We had no say in what was going on here.... You can’t tell me that tour guides aren’t going to be going inside that building and saying, ‘Behind that wall are the victims of 9/11.’ That’s a dog and pony show” (Farrell, 2014, p. 8). Wolf (2014), however, who was on the Families Advisory Council working with the Lower Manhattan Design Corporation that helped design the Memorial, responded by claiming that this organization was contradicting itself and was creating much ado over nothing.

Regardless, it can be stated that the National 9/11 Museum blends melancholy with cosmopolitanism in a complicated way. It is worth mentioning that early on adult visitors were charged \$24 to witness all of this trauma, and they learned that they could even purchase t-shirts, knick-knacks, and other memorabilia at the 9/11 Museum Gift Shop. One item that received particular attention was a United States ceramic cheese platter that had heart symbols as markers displaying where the hijacked planes hit American soil on 9/11. Although the platter is no longer on display, that item—and others, such as the “darkness hoodie,” the German Shepherd Search and Rescue toy, and “survivor tree” earrings—were once part of a growing controversy where accusers said the memorial was “cashing-in on the nation’s pain” (Siemaszko, 2014, p. 4).

The National 9/11 Memorial and Museum has used grief and gruesomeness to hail the individuality of death, trauma, and disaster at the same time that it invited national and international visitors to grieve collectively about terrorism. Gopnik (2014) of *The New Yorker* similarly concluded: “The attempt to fill the museum with personal ephemera—the vitrines are stuffed with relics and mementos of the dead; even tapes of final phone calls play on a perpetual loop—seems merely macabre by comparison” (p. 30). In an earlier portion of the same essay, Gopnik compared the National 9/11 Memorial Museum to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and he wrote about various similarities in style and design. For example, he pointed out that the director of the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum is Alice M. Greenwald, someone who previously served as the Associate Museum Director for Museum Programs at the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Gopnik, however, was trying to make sure that his readers did not conflate the horrors of 9/11 with the Shoah, and he noted that the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum is different because “what happened on 9/11, by contrast, was a crime deliberately committed in open air as a nightmarish publicity stunt, one already as well documented as any incident in history. We can’t relearn it; we can only relive it” (p. 8). This statement may lead some to wonder if museum visitors are being invited to make strong historical and affective connections between the Holocaust and 9/11 events that can be used to rationalize even more strident American antiterror efforts.

It is important to note that the National 9/11 Museum is yet another component of post-9/11 memory work that is still only beginning to develop. The museum emphasizes the affect of melancholia that one feels while visiting the giant voids of the memorial.

In many ways, the museum takes collective national victimage one step further by commodifying anxieties about death and disaster in near carnival fashion (see Lennon & Foley, 2000). Feuer (2014) commented on how local New Yorkers felt about the museum, and he surmised that handfuls would stay away until the rush of tourists calmed down, if ever. One survivor who was interviewed by Feuer argued that the museum “was made for people who don’t really know what 9/11 is about” (p. 20). Another blithely stated that he “won’t visit it anytime soon” because “it promises to be filled with gawking, ghoulish out-of-towners who will overwhelm the New Yorkers, who lived through the sorrow of those days and will have a hard time getting in” (Feuer, 2014, p. 13). While many New Yorkers were simply waiting for a quasi-return to normalcy during the opening ceremonies, the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum was attracting tourists who were drawn to the permanent suspension of relief and closure as they thought about terrorist dangers.

This melancholic commemoration has served as a way for visitors to recall—and be haunted by—past and present terrorist dangers. Derrida (1988) reminds us in *Memories for Paul De Man* that the possibility of mourning—and its elusiveness—is something that unites communities and shapes identities:

We know, we knew, *we remember*—before the death of the loved one—that, being-in-me or being-in-us is constituted out of the possibility of mourning. We are only ourselves from the perspective of this knowledge that is older than ourselves; and this is why I say that we begin by *recalling* this to ourselves: we come to ourselves through this memory of *possible* mourning. (p. 34, italics in text)

So even though the spectres of the dead are haunting, terrifying, and gruesome, they may nonetheless create a sense of community engagement that is uniquely melancholic. The rhetorical effect of this hauntology and thanatopolitics is that 9/11 is not treated as some past historical incident, but as a lingering cultural presence that reminds us that American homeland is always under the threat of terror. Both the memorial and the museum recall the precarious lives of family members, architects, and tourists who need to remember that they live in a 21st century filled with doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum evokes a sense of melancholic commemoration dependent on aesthetic displays of absence to remind visitors of their nationalist obligations. While many observers talked and wrote about the memorial’s curative powers and the importance of mourning for a “working-through” of traumatic memories, these goals are undermined by messages demanding eternal reverence for those who lost their lives during terrorist attacks.

We have explained how even cosmopolitan renderings of this hallowed ground have to be juxtaposed with more dreary reminders of absences and global violence. Sci (2009) may be right when she argued that some public memorials serve as places for public eulogizing and aesthetic negotiation, but there are also times when the reverence for the dead is used to warrant counterterrorism during heightened states of (in)security.

Our own experiences support Stow's (2012) claims that the National 9/11 Memorial is a topographical manifestation of *alaston penthos*, of mourning without end, a phenomenon that encourages the circulation of a kind of "pornography of grief," where emotional responses are deliberately cultivated in ways that are "a confirmation of the viewer's own victimhood" (p. 689). When memorial sites are used for these types of thanatopolitical purposes visitors experience commemorative melancholia, especially in sacred places where an "enigmatically abstract pair of abyss-like pools" are used in a "sobering, disturbing, heartbreaking, and overwhelming masterpiece" (Filler, 2011, pp. 1–2). From a rhetorical vantage point, all of this reminds us that monuments, museums, memorials, and archives can be used for a host of politicized purposes, including melancholic commemoration.

Notes

1. Technically, during the first visit during the summer of 2012, this place of remembrance was not yet the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum because the Memorial Museum was not yet open. The second visit, however, during the summer of 2014, included a tour of both the 9/11 Memorial and the Memorial Museum.
2. Costing over \$1 billion, the National 9/11 Memorial would end up being one of the most expensive memorials in U.S. history, and the staggering \$63 million annual operational costs (Haberman, 2014; 9/11 Memorial, 2014; Schuppe, 2014) provided empirical evidence that American communities were willing to tolerate this type of spending in the name of national mourning. Travelers who took the pilgrimage in the summer of 2012 found that they needed tickets to enter this urban space, and millions have now visited this site.
3. Water in the memorial, for example, could be linked to Christian sacrament, and its primal ritual washing function could also be tied to Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Judaism, Shinto, Taoism, or Islam. Visitors of all ascetic backgrounds might identify with the rhetoric of rebirth (Burke, 1970), and this underscored the redemptive capacities of the memorial's "reflection pools." Denson (2011) remarked that the "waterfalls and reflecting pools are hypnotic, inducing the calm necessary for contemplation and spirituality" (p. 10).

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