

# The uses of a national wound: *Reflecting Absence*, trauma and the global war on terror

Tomoaki Morikawa<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

At the World Trade Center site in New York City where the terrorist attacks happened on September 11, 2001, the

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**Correspondence:** Tomoaki Morikawa,  
tomoaki6@hawaii.edu

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memorial called Reflecting Absence is now standing. Instead of covering up the physical and psychological wound of 9/11, Reflecting Absence structurally incorporates the trauma of 9/11 as the memorial's framing structure. In this paper, I focus on the link between the trauma of 9/11 and Reflecting Absence. More specifically, I examine the latter as the expression of the former to reveal this link. In so doing, this paper also identifies what kind of role Reflecting Absence is potentially playing in the post-9/11 American society. By teasing out the ways in which this memorial evokes the trauma of 9/11 for visitors, this paper discusses the politics in which Reflecting Absence has been engaged as an apparatus of memory.

**Keywords:** The War on Terror; trauma; psycho-analysis; Ground Zero; trace

## Introduction

On September 11th, 2001, the United States was thrown into great turmoil. Four passenger planes were hijacked by the terrorist group al-Qaeda at about the same time on this fateful day, and two of them were used for the suicide attacks targeting the twin towers of the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York City. These two planes, American 11 and United 175, were respectively crashed into the North Tower at 8:46 a.m. and the South Tower at 9:03 a.m. Careening into the towers, these planes, both of which were coast-to-coast flights from Logan International Airport in Boston to Los Angeles International Airport, and thus heavily laden with fuel, burst into flames and set off massive fires. The resulted heat weakened the steel beyond its critical threshold and collapsed the South Tower at 9:59 a.m. and the North Tower at 10:28 a.m.

A huge void called "Ground Zero" was created in Lower Manhattan as a result of a series of terrorist attacks later remembered as 9/11.<sup>2</sup> The twin towers were crushed and gone, and the space that they

<sup>1</sup> University of Hawaii at Manoa.

<sup>2</sup> New Yorkers started calling the WTC site Ground Zero with capital letters – as a proper noun – shortly after 9/11. This singularization of the term ground zero can be considered as a way to take its specific history into account. The term was originally used to designate the epicenters of the atomic and hydrogen bombings by the U.S. in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II and in Bikini atoll (in the central Pacific) and Yucca Flats (in New Mexico) at the time of nuclear testing in the mid twentieth century. Those ground zeroes are, in other words, the sites that attest to the U.S. nuclear hegemony. With the emergence of Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan, however, the term ground zero was appropriated and its meaning reversed; by capitalizing the term, the U.S. is represented not as the provider but as the receiver of violence.

had previously occupied was left empty as the wound of 9/11. In response to the creation of this empty space/wound, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), joint City-State corporation that had been created in the aftermath of 9/11 “to help and coordinate the rebuilding and revitalization of Lower Manhattan,” decided to construct a national memorial for 9/11 at the WTC site.<sup>3</sup> Through the design competition, Israeli-American architect Michael Arad’s *Reflecting Absence* was chosen as the design for the National 9/11 Memorial and is now standing in the midst of Ground Zero. As will be discussed later, contrary to some critics’ expectation that the memorial would physically and symbolically cover up the wound, *Reflecting Absence* incorporates as its framing structure the absence of the twin towers, or the wound exposed in the form of their footprints.<sup>4</sup>

As such, this memorial is intricately related to the wound, or the trauma of 9/11, and this intricacy is what will be investigated in this essay. To be more specific, I will suggest that *Reflecting Absence* is a product of trauma in a not only physical but also psychoanalytic sense and I set out to discuss what kind of role this memorial is potentially playing as a memorial of the trauma of 9/11 in the post-9/11 American society. Through this discussion, this essay will show that *Reflecting Absence* is more than a space for the commemoration of the victims of 9/11.

## Trauma and *Reflecting Absence*

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, a national project was initiated at Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan: the reconstruction of the WTC site as a new complex including the National 9/11 Memorial. This project can be divided into two parts: the planning for the new WTC complex by which the location of this memorial is designated, and the process of selecting the design of the National 9/11 Memorial. In both parts of the project the design competitions were held under the initiative of the LMDC. For the former, seven internationally renowned architectural teams – Foster and Partners, Studio Daniel Libeskind, Meier Eisenman Gwathmey Holl, Peterson Littenberg, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, THINK Team, and United Architects – were asked to propose a master plan for the reconstruction of the WTC site; the latter’s design competition was internationally announced, with 5,201 proposals submitted from all over the world.

Throughout the rebuilding project at Ground Zero the LMDC expressed the unexplained and thus not consciously rationalized obsession with the footprints of the twin towers. For instance, during the design competition for the new WTC complex in 2002, the LMDC informed the aforementioned architectural teams of its “strong preference for preserving the footprints of the twin towers for memorial or memorial related elements” without giving any specific rationale.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the LMDC maintained its favorable stance to the footprints in the case of the construction of the National 9/11 Memorial itself either; in the guideline of the World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition, which was held in 2003, it was stipulated – again, with no guiding rationale – that the memorial’s design had to “[m]ake visible the footprints of the original World Trade Center Towers.”<sup>6</sup>

This obsession expressed by the LMDC is self-destructive: as the footprints of the towers are the trace of 9/11, or, to borrow Charles Sanders Peirce’s term, the “indexical” sign, they signify the attack on the U.S. on the morning of September 11th, 2001. Therefore, in this case, by insisting the necessity of the incorporation of this trace/indexical sign into the National 9/11 Memorial for whatever reason, the LMDC ended up demanding the construction of a memorial that would inevitably evoke the trauma of 9/11. In other words, instead of covering up the trace of the wound, the process insisted on returning spectators to their trauma.

Psychoanalytically speaking, this kind of self-destructive obsession is considered one form of “repetition compulsion,” which is a symptom of trauma itself. In a Freudian sense, this is a state of mind in which one is driven to repeat a traumatic event or its circumstances over and over again. According to Dominic LaCapra whose

<sup>3</sup> “About Us,” The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, accessed October 5, 2018, <http://www.renewnyc.com/overlay/AboutUs/>.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, in an article in the *New York Times* on September 23, 2001, the option of filling the void was almost unanimously supported by internationally renowned architects Peter Eisenman and Richard Meier. See Richard Meier, “Filling the Void; To Rebuild or Not: Architects Respond,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/23/magazine/filling-the-void-to-rebuild-or-not-architects-respond.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “A Vision for Lower Manhattan,” The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, October 11, 2002, <http://www.renewnyc.com/content/avisionforlowermanhattan.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> “World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition,” The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, accessed October 5, 2018, [http://wtcsitememorial.org/pdf/LMDC\\_Guidelines\\_english.pdf](http://wtcsitememorial.org/pdf/LMDC_Guidelines_english.pdf).

argument is built on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, “people who undergo a trauma ... have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the (traumatic) past, with no distance from it.”<sup>7</sup> During the reconstruction process of the WTC site, the LMDC was arguably in this state of repetition compulsion.

Arad’s *Reflecting Absence*, chosen out of 5,201 proposals, is perfectly in line with the LMDC’s obsessive, traumatic attachment to the footprints of the twin towers. In fact, this memorial consists of two massive pools carved into the footprints with cascading waterfalls pouring down each wall. Made of black granite stones, each pool is 192 x 192 feet square and set 30 feet down into the underground. The footprints are, in other words, made use of as the framing structure; they are turned into the National 9/11 Memorial.

The naming of *Reflecting Absence* is very appropriate and astute. As a play on words, the name “Reflecting Absence” indicates that this memorial reflects/mirrors the image of the absence created by 9/11 to the eyes of visitors. Simultaneously, this name implies that *Reflecting Absence* is a memorial that facilitates the reflection/contemplation of what was lost and thus became absent because of 9/11. In either case, the name “Reflecting Absence” suggests that this memorial is expected to function as an apparatus of memory, inviting visitors to remember *something* about 9/11. A question thus arises: “What is this *something*?” Or, to be more specific, “What is intended to be remembered about 9/11 by *Reflecting Absence*?”

In order to answer this question, let us once again turn to what the trace signifies in terms of architecture. Rosalind Krauss argues that the architectural work structured by the trace is filled with “an extraordinary sense of time-past.”<sup>8</sup> According to her, since the trace “produced by a physical cause” is “[a vestige] of that cause which is itself no longer present,” when architecturally incorporated in the built structure, the trace inevitably brings back the memory of that cause and introduces “into the consciousness of the viewer” of the building the past moment that is absent yet still telling.<sup>9</sup> *Reflecting Absence* uses the footprints of the twin towers, or the trace of 9/11, as its framing structure and is thus possessed by the trace of a past moment. In other words, *Reflecting Absence* is designed to keep evoking in the minds of visitors the sense of time-past returning to September 11th, 2001, or to the past moment of being injured.

In fact, this is what the selection jury members of the World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition saw in the design of this memorial. In an interview about the choice of Arad’s *Reflecting Absence*, James Young, one of the jury members, answered:

[Arad] made the footprints themselves the memorial, in their geometric form, and that was very important. We saw that as the most authentic reference to the site, even more authentic than bringing remnants back. The downward flow of the water seemed suddenly to remind you of the towers’ implosion. It was all suggested in the design.<sup>10</sup>

To Young and the selection jury members *Reflecting Absence* would re-present what had happened on the day of 9/11, or the injury caused by 9/11.<sup>11</sup>

## ***Reflecting Absence* and the Global War on Terror**

As a matter of course, *Reflecting Absence* is a memorial that opens up a space where victims of 9/11 may be grieved, their names engraved on the rims of the black granite pools, inciting visitors to sense the personal losses caused by 9/11. In addition, visitors would occasionally see flowers put into some of the engraved names. Those flowers are given to the victims of 9/11 on their birthday to commemorate them.

<sup>7</sup> Dominic LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 142-43.

<sup>8</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 217.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> James Young, “Inside the Jury: An Interview with James Young,” *Architectural Record*, January 21, 2004, [https://archive.org/stream/architecturalrec192janewy/architecturalrec192janewy\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/architecturalrec192janewy/architecturalrec192janewy_djvu.txt).

<sup>11</sup> In other words, the selection jury members also manifested the symptom of repetition compulsion and returned to the trauma of 9/11 in the decision-making process, just as the LMDC did so. Consequently, Arad’s design won the competition as the plan for the National 9/11 Memorial. As such, *Reflecting Absence* is a product of trauma.

And yet, *Reflecting Absence* is a memorial that not only provides a space to grieve the victims of 9/11: it is also a product of the traumatic reactions of those involved in the WTC site reconstruction process, and as such should be expected to function as a mnemonic apparatus through which that could potentially serve to “remind you of the towers’ implosion,” or the actual trauma of 9/11.

In this sense, *Reflecting Absence* is well befitted to the “new normal” of the post-American society. 9/11 ushered in a new era characterized by terrorism and the fear that the U.S. is vulnerable, as was demonstrated by 9/11. For instance, in the address that then-President George W. Bush gave at Congress only nine days after 9/11 he said, “Our nation has been put on notice: We’re not immune from attack.” *Reflecting Absence*, which is expected to function as a reminder of the trauma of 9/11, can be considered a memorial that would serve to fuel such a sense of vulnerability by presenting to visitors the trace of 9/11, indexically signifying the attack on the U.S. on the morning of September 11th, 2001.

What is important to note here is that it is this kind of vulnerability that has driven U.S. hegemonic policy in the post-9/11 world: the global war on terror. In fact, in the aforementioned speech, Bush declared and legitimized this war by arguing that the U.S. was attacked and would be always already in danger of being attacked again by terrorists who would “kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life.”<sup>12</sup> According to him, those evil terrorists “stand against us, because we stand in their way.”<sup>13</sup> To maintain the “way of life” that is targeted by terrorists, Bush continued, they culprits would have to be driven out of every corner of the world and eliminated. Thus the global war on terror was initiated: Bush declared that “[W]e will direct every resource at our command – every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence and every necessary weapon of war – to the disruption and to the defeat of the global terror network.”<sup>14</sup>

This sense of vulnerability is the key for the continuation of this war, as is repeated in the the National Security Strategy issued by the Bush administration and succeeded by the following administrations without any major modification. In this document, while the fear for threats to “American people and American interests” is expressed, “to anticipate and counter” those threats, or to preempt them is defined as “the first duty of the United States Government” and as “our inherent right of self-defense.”<sup>15</sup> This fear does not even have to be empirically proven. When it is felt, an anticipatory military action should be taken, “even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack.”<sup>16</sup> The global war on terror is, in other words, a war against the feeling of fear elicited by a sense of vulnerability.<sup>17</sup>

*Reflecting Absence* thus serves as a memorial that fuels visitors’ the sense of vulnerability. Here, the link between *Reflecting Absence* and the global war on terror becomes apparent: this memorial potentially keeps reminding visitors of the sense of vulnerability, the key component that drives the war on terror.

Scholarly discussion of *Reflecting Absence*, however, tends to overlook such a link. For instance, Erika Doss defines this memorial’s minimalist aesthetics as “dispassionate” and argues that *Reflecting Absence* is “perfunctory in ... the message it projects.”<sup>18</sup> Analyzing Arad’s work, she compares *Reflecting Absence* with *America’s Response Monument* subtitled as *De Oppresso Liber*, a public monument dedicated to Liberty Park overlooking Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan in 2011. This is “a sixteen-foot-tall, five-thousand-pound bronze statue of a Special Ops soldier riding an Afghan pony,” which is intended to “[commemorate] the ‘horse soldiers’ of Operation Enduring Freedom, covert

<sup>12</sup> “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” The White House, September 20, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “V. Prevent Our Enemies from Threatening Us, Our Allies, and Our Friends with Weapons of Mass Destruction,” The White House, accessed October 5, 2018, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/print/sectionV.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> This kind of war cannot be won. The feeling of fear is always already arbitrarily created, as in the case of the Iraq War. The Bush Administration claimed that the government of Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and thus posed an immediate threat to the U.S. national security. Based on such a rationale, which later turned out to be a false claim, the U.S. government invaded Iraq and overthrew Hussein. As such, the global war on terror has been perpetuated and has expanded beyond the Middle East to the Philippines and other parts of the world.

<sup>18</sup> Erika Doss, “*De Oppresso Liber* and *Reflecting Absence*: Ground Zero Memorials and the War on Terror,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (March 2013): 211.

combat troops” deployed in response to 9/11 in the initial stage of the global war on terror in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Doss analyzes *De Oppresso Liber* – “liberate the oppressed,” the motto of the US Army Special Forces – in the following manner:

the stallion’s raised hoof, flared nostrils, alert ears, and agitated tail and mane suggest he is raring to go; the commando’s taut body, aggressive glare, and cache of weapons imply martial heroics and resolute purpose.<sup>20</sup>

Defining this statue as a memorial that fills the absence created by 9/11 with such jingoism, she criticizes this statue because it “reifies violent retribution and American imperialism” and affectively demands of visitors their consent to the global war on terror.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Doss indicates that *Reflecting Absence* whose aesthetics she defines as dispassionate takes no part in this war.

It is, however, precisely through the so-called “dispassionate” aesthetic incorporating the footprints as the framing structure that *Reflecting Absence* is playing a role in the facilitation of the global war on terror, and perhaps more effectively than those memorials which more candidly reify American imperialism. After all, evoking the trauma of 9/11 through the architectural materialization in the form of a memorial can lead to the constant justification and continuation of the counterattack in response to 9/11. In this sense, *Reflecting Absence* is potentially functioning as one of the bastions for this war.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay suggests that *Reflecting Absence* exists not only for grieving the victims of 9/11: while a product of the traumatic reactions expressed by those involved in the reconstruction process of the WTC site, it also incorporates the footprints of the twin towers, or the trace of 9/11, as its framing structure. It is believed to bring back and empathically perform the trauma of 9/11 for visitors. This performance is especially significant in the post-9/11 American society, as the U.S. has been engaged in a global war on terror. This war was initiated and has been continued as a war against the feeling of fear elicited by the sense of vulnerability that arose when it became clear that the U.S. is not immune to external attacks. This sense of vulnerability is what *Reflecting Absence* is potentially fueling in the minds of visitors. Therefore, it can be argued that this memorial is, in some ways, facilitating the justification and continuation of the global war on terror. As such, this war is being fought not just outside the territory of the U.S. but also in Lower Manhattan.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>22</sup> It is not too far-fetched to see the link between *Reflecting Absence* and the global war on terror, and it is not too far-fetched to assume that the WTC site has been reconstructed in part for the global war on terror. In fact, some critics have strongly suggested that this site should be rebuilt as a space not to “bludgeon the free world”/the U.S. in the back when it was fighting against the unfree world/terrorists. Therefore, they opposed the International Freedom Center (IFC), which was going to be built as the museum that would be housed in the new WTC complex. As an institution through which to “[document] historical injustices ... and [chronicle] campaigns against human rights abuses around the world” to situate 9/11 in world historical context with emphasis on freedom, the IFC was going to display the exhibits about such difficult pasts as slavery and the genocide of Native Americans that would certainly disrupt the U.S. national image of the exceptional country of freedom (“The International Freedom Center: Content and Governance Report,” The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, September 23, 2005, [http://www.renewnyc.com/content/pdfs/IFC\\_submission.pdf](http://www.renewnyc.com/content/pdfs/IFC_submission.pdf)). Therefore, those critics decided to crush the plan for this museum (and successfully did so); they believed that the IFC would undermine the moral high ground of the U.S. in the global war on terror. Instead, those critics have demanded the new WTC complex that “would seek ... to place the (terrorist) attack[s] in the context of the wider (global) war (on terror) that is being waged,” or that would inspire morale among visitors for the continuation of this war by “injecting some moral clarity ... into the public discourse” (Ibid.). *Reflecting Absence* is certainly qualified to be a part of this new complex, or one of its central components.

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