PUBLIC MEMORY IN THE MAKING

Ethics and Place in the Wake of 9/11

That there is an intimate bond between Ethics and Place is already suggested by the fact that etheai, the ancient Greek root of “ethics,” meant wild places where animals go to rest at night. In this talk I shall be discussing a single highly civilized place that was, in less than one hour, rendered utterly uninhabitable and that, in the wake of its destruction, could no longer offer shelter of any kind. I refer to the World Trade Towers on the morning of September 11, 2001. I will consider what a group of people in New York City did to deal with this disaster on the Sunday after it happened. My focus will be on the formation of public memory so as to understand better this major form of remembrance, which combines commemoration and place in a very distinctive way. Instead of focusing on the disaster as such, however, I will move to the margin to pursue what may seem at first a diversion but what I take to be an exemplary event for grasping how public memories begin and how commemoration arises.

I

Public memory is radically bivalent in its temporality, for it is both attached to a past (typically, an originating or traumatic event of some sort) and attempts to secure a future of further remembering of that same event. Public
monuments embody this Janusian trait: their characteristic massiveness and solidity almost literally enforce this futurity, while inscriptions and certain easily identifiable features (such as those of the giant seated Abraham Lincoln of the Lincoln Memorial) pull them toward the past they honor. The perduringness of the construction itself acts to cement the strong bond between past and future.

This is not to say that public memory requires the density of stone to mark and re-mark it. At another extreme, a eulogy is certainly a form of public remembering -- it is pronounced before others and is meant to direct their attention to the character and accomplishments of the departed -- yet it is built entirely from words. sounds that carry sense.

Public memory, though thriving on tenacious media such as stone or brick, is not dependent on them. Beyond words, a mere image, reproduced on cheap newsprint but (in the case of a major tabloid or journal) reaching untold thousands of readers, is medium enough, as we know from early photographs of the Trade Towers collapsing. Sometimes a single image (for example, that of the Viet Cong suspect being shot in the head at close quarters) itself becomes an icon of public memory: what began as the record of a transient moment gains its own permanence in the annals of such memory. Paradoxically, its very flimsiness is an asset: whereas we must travel to Washington to view the Lincoln Memorial, any image of any event suffices to bring us immediately to the point. The crucial link between past and future that is at the heart of public memory can be tied on the slenderest of reeds -- so long as these reeds can be shared in significant ways.

1 Public memory thrives on these dense media since they at once embody and support, and concretely symbolize, the perduringness sought in such memory. But they can be supplemented by other less substantial factors, such as the ornamentation that may adorn them, e.g., the leaves that are frequently sculpted in Greek sarcophagi. (I owe this point to Kent Bloomer, whose reading of the entire paper has been invaluable.)
This is not to say that the present is of no compelling interest in public memory. Often it is: the present in the making, the present that is now considered to be very like important in the future. Such is the situation we designate by saying to ourselves: "This event will be forever etched upon our memory." In the case of major events that we suspect to be of world-historical import, we say this on the very day of its happening, as on that fateful Tuesday, September 11, 2001. No one doubted, and many said explicitly, “this day will not be forgotten.” The power of the catastrophe in the present was so shattering -- so unanticipated and so massively destructive -- that there could be no doubt that its futurity was assured from the start, even without speeches or monuments. It generated its own kind of spontaneous memorialization in the form of photographs of those still missing pinned to windows and walls throughout Manhatten, along with sheets of butcher paper on which people’s immediate reactions and reflections were inscribed:

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Buckets swung from trees into which other photographs were placed. "People attached bouquets to the railings, and notes thick with pain. One note read: 'You are missed and loved and will never be forgotten.'"2 The New York Times reported that "an impromptu memorial to ... missing firefighters ... sprung up outside the Rescue 1 station house at 450 W. 43rd St. Carnations, roses, daisies

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2 "Grief, Lessened by Sharing and Solace from Strangers," Amy Waldman, New York Times, September 14, 2001, p. A8. "There are plastic pails tied to trees all over the site with handwritten signs marked 'photos' which are for any picture we may find in the debris." (Eye-witness report of Christina Maile, Sept. 12, 2001)
and lilies stretched half the width of the sidewalk and spilled toward the curb.”

Although none of those memorialized in these various makeshift manners was a public figure, by the mere fact of being noted in such ways and others, they became part of a spontaneously formed public memory in the present.

What does it mean to become part of public memory? Not just to come to the attention of the larger public -- but also, and in this case much more pertinently, it means to be understood right away, without hesitation or interpretation, as a “victim of this disaster.” Such a victim is ipso facto a public person. Precisely because a victim often cannot speak for himself -- whether because already dead, or simply too much set back by the disaster -- public testimonial is all the more requisite if that person is to be recognized and remembered. Without the testimonial, the victim recedes into oblivion, remembered only by his or her family and friends, but not belonging to public memory.

In the case of 9/11, such memory was first established in a quite haphazard way: by means of the notes and photographs hastily assembled and displayed in public places. Not only was the medium less than permanent but the very value of permanency itself -- so much at stake in monuments or memorabilia that are meant to be preserved forever -- was no longer a criterion for admission to public memory. Entry to the latter occurred right away and in

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4 Such spontaneous memorialization occurred either by virtue of the fact that their image or name was being perceived by those on the scene or by this same image being reproduced in newspapers. See the array of photographs attached to the article by Amy Waldman, cit. supra, p. A8.
the form of something not destined to last, so fragile that it was often taken away from public view after a brief exposure on a wall or a fence, a sidewalk or a tree.\(^6\)

But these preliminary remarks are only first forays into the dense realm of public memory in the making. If we are to understand such memory better, we need to locate it in relation to other basic kinds of remembering.

II

It is my contention that -- beyond certain basic distinctions such as short vs. long-term memory that apply to all forms of remembering -- there are four different kinds of human memory: individual memory, social memory, collective memory, and public memory proper.\(^7\)

Let me say something schematic about each.

**Individual Memory.** The singular person, the always unique rememberer, remembers in several distinctive ways, not just recollecting states of affairs (recalling *that* something happened) but also remembering-*how* (to do certain things), remembering-*as* (x as y), etc. And the same person remembers various

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\(^6\) Even documents that did not depict a given person directly but represented merely a business transaction of that person – such as an application for a job, the record of a bank account, etc. -- were assimilated to public memory: as when such documents were published in the newspapers several days after the event. See the account given in "A Paper Trail Leads to Sorrow and Some Hope," *New York Times*, Sept. 14, 2001, p. A10, where there are presented photographs of a credit union statement, a résumé, and a blank check.

\(^7\) Although I shall refer to cultural aspects of memory, I am setting aside a separate discussion of "cultural memory," which insinuates itself, albeit differentially, into each of the four types herein analyzed.
kinds of things -- not just tables and chairs and people but whole environmental complexes, auras and worlds. But we cannot keep the traits and types of individual remembering wholly apart from those of the remembering we do with and through others. Every single act of remembering that I do, however idiosyncratic it may be, is as interpersonal as it is personal, as much between beings as locked inside myself. The primary locus of memory is found not only in the mind or the brain (its most currently fashionable site) but in an intersubjective realm that inhabits and informs every action of memory.

**Social Memory.** This is the memory held in common by those who are affiliated either by kinship ties or by geographical proximity in neighborhoods, cities, and other regions, or else by engagement in a joint project. In other words, it is memory shared by those who are already related to each other, whether by way of family or civic acquaintance or just "an alliance between people for a specific purpose." Social memories are not necessarily public, however: families

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8 Reminiscing has proven more significant than I had first thought; it is a primary prop of social memory; and it introduces the crucial factor of language into memory -- thus narrative and history besides. When we consider, too, that there is a distinctive body memory and place memory and many acts of commemoration, we are already beyond any model of memory as confined to the individual mind and its representations. See my *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987; second edition, 2000), Parts Two and Three.

9 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 23. Arendt elaborates on the centrality of the family for the social realm in contrast with public space: "According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (oikia) and the family... It was not just an opinion or theory of Aristotle but a simple historical fact that the foundation of the polis was preceded by the destruction of all organized units resting on kinship, such as the phratria and the phylé." (Ibid., p. 24) Social memory both presupposes such pre-existing relationships as those of kinship and is often concerned with certain aspects of the relationships themselves, though not always: there can be social memories of events which one did not experience oneself but that were undergone by consociates whom one
can harbor memories that are known only to themselves; such privacy often being prized as such, providing that intimacy and bonding that are so important to the maintenance of family life.

What does "sharing memories" mean? I take this to signify the situation in which those who have had the same history as a group or who live or work in the same place remember what has happened to that group or in that place. This does not mean having exactly the same experience of remembering -- this will always be personally specific in one measure or another -- but instead remembering something which others in one's kinship or work group are also remembering at the time or could do so. When this is in fact happens, it is tantamount to "co-reminiscing," that is, remembering in quasi-narrative form when assembled in a particular place (the front porch in an earlier era, still at dinner tables on holidays). But it can also happen when two or more socially connected people are talking to each other on the telephone, or communicating in real time in a chat box on the internet. What matters is neither the exact technology nor the precise location but the fact (or its imminent possibility) of (a) having had the same history, at least via the proxy of another family member; (b) there having been a common place in which that history was enacted and experienced; and (c) being able to bring the shared-history-in-that-place into words or other suitable means of communication and expression.

Collective Memory. By this term, I mean the circumstance in which different persons, not necessarily known to each other, nevertheless recall the same event -- again, each in her own way. This is a case of remembering neither individually in isolation from others nor in the company of others with whom one is acquainted but remembering severally. By "severally" I mean a plural
remembering that has no inherent basis in overlapping historicities or shared places (real or virtual) but is brought together only in and by a conjoint remembrance of a certain event – no matter where those who remember are located or how otherwise unrelated they may be to each other. Nor do they have to remember at the same time. All that matters is commonality of content. The most striking example of collective remembering is the phenomenon of "flashbulb memories" that were studied in the wake of John Kennedy's assassination – and that have doubtless happened again after 9/11. In both cases, virtually every adult in the United States vividly recalls not just the catastrophic event as such but just where he or she heard it: I was in a barber's chair in Chicago in the first case, in my apartment on Long Island in the second. Despite the differences in the local detail of first hearing – which differs greatly from person to person -- I am linked to all others who also remember exactly where they were on hearing of these two emergencies. We remember it collectively, from our several stances: our entire memorial focus is on one stunning event. It is this focus – amounting to a monothetic obsession -- that is shared in collective memory.

Social memory derives from a basis in shared kinship, shared history, or shared work. Collective memory, in contrast, is distributed over a given population and does not possess a single taproot. Its content and occurrence are not based on prior identity or particular placement. It is formed spontaneously and involuntarily, and its entire raison d'être is convergence on a given topic: typically a dramatic event but also a thought, a person, a nation. The members of this momentary collectivity are linked solely by the cynosure on which their attention falls. Moreover, this convergent attention need not occur at the same time (I may have heard of the Trade Center disaster at a different time than you), and it comes from disparate directions -- as disparate as those individuals who
are united on the occasion by one thing alone: having the same focus memorium.¹⁰

Individual remembering is indispensable at the level of the experiential and the idiosyncratic: however wide the swath of memory may become, in each case individuals realize it uniquely: in the tone and nuance with which they recall it. Social memory thickens such personal recall by drawing upon group identities that go beyond personal experience to include family history and other shared enterprises. Collective memory, in contrast, builds on apartness and anonymity -- on a distinctive dispersion that is overcome only in the sheer fact of remembering the same event, albeit in different places (e.g., where we were on first hearing of Kennedy’s assassination). Public memory is a fourth form of memory that differs from the three I have just sketched so briefly. We use the term, but do we know what it means and how it works? What is “public memory” anyway?

¹⁰ I should add that collective remembering is unremittingly plural – so plural that individual or group identities do not count, only the sheer fact that those remember are remembering the same thing. This is quite different from social or individual remembering, where the singularity of the rememberer or the group of co-rememberers is what counts. In the latter case, intimacy and bonding are important aspects of rememberering – as we often observe in the case of intense co-reminiscing. But in the collective situation, all relations are so external that intimacy is not only irrelevant but intrusive. Students of collective life in cities have underlined this last feature: Richard Sennett refers to “the tyranny of intimacy,” and (much influenced by Jane Jacobs’ similar view) asserts that “the city must be a place where people can join with other people without any compulsion to know them as persons” (Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism [New York“ Vintage, 1977], pp. 338-9). When people in cities together remember a given event – whether awesome or trivial – they do so on just this condition of remaining comparatively anonymous in their very plurality, their extended severalness, their manyness in the midst of their oneness of attention. Only the focus memorium unites them; otherwise, they are rhizomatic in their dispersion, lacking any single shared basis in experience, history, or place.
Public memory serves as an “external horizon” for current events in the public domain – an encircling presence within which further and future events will take place. When we say “in the wake of 9/11,” or “in the tenth year of the new régime,” we are invoking such a horizon, which acts to stabilize, situate, and sanction. Every horizon encloses a place, and in the case of public memory presumes a shared place, whether that of the original occurrence (say, Ground Zero in lower Manhattan) or that of its reception (as when people come together in another place to remember an event in each other’s company). Without such places, within which people interact, both in the event and at the time of its remembrance, public memory would lack the basis for its distinctive power.

Public memory thus comprises two basic characteristics. It signals a major event in time that is a turning point for a given group of people; and it bears on particular places in which that event occurred and is remembered. When these two factors, time and place, are combined, they form an external horizon that provides a spatio-temporal framework for what is to come in the public realm: whether these be acts of overt commemoration or covert histories of suffering.11

So far we are on familiar and unexceptional ground. But in this paper I shall focus on another, less familiar dimension of public memory: this is public memory in the making, its creation at the most local level in the form of what I shall designate as the “hearth” of public memory. Its structure is that of an

11 A striking instance of this latter is the failure of many families of those lost on 9/11 to apply for the federal funds to which they are entitled. Many of these dilatory mourners, still stunned almost two years later by the mourning process, declared themselves “not ready” to take such a practical and self-interested action. But the mourning itself, private and impractical as it may be, is being done in the shadow of 9/11 as a public memory. See Diana B. Henriques, “Concern Growing as Families Bypass 9/11 Victims’ Fund,” New York Times, August 331, 2003, p. 1 (continued at Metropolitan Section, p. 35). Said one survivor: “Considering where most people are in their grief, from the people I know, the deadline Congress set [i.e., December 22, 2002], is just too soon” (ibid., p. 35).
“internal horizon,” by which I mean the intimate life-world of a public gathering that has assembled soon after some major occurrence that has not yet been assimilated by the body politic. Between the sheer happening of this occurrence and its institutionalization in public memory – that is, before it has become part of an official historical horizon of fixed veneration or revilement – there is a stage in which concrete acts of recognition or revulsion, commiseration or critique, can happen. The public is present as a delimited and spontaneously gathered group of people who are neither the creators of a founding event (or the perpetrators of a traumatic one) nor its direct beneficiaries (or its victims); not claiming to be representative of any larger cohort, they have come together to share their initial responses, to find solace in the company of others, and to begin to understand what has happened. It is as if they were gathering around a hearth – not a literal but a symbolic one that engenders invocation, spontaneous sharing, often through story and image, all this in an atmosphere of intimacy and warmth.12

The vigil I attended at Union Square Park on Sunday, September 17, 2001, was a case in point. By then, September 11 had sunk in as the sheer disaster it was: any disbelief having long since vanished, there was only some residual hope for survivors (and this, too, was quickly disappearing). For days, the posted pictures and descriptions of the missing to which I have already alluded had appeared all over: not just near the site of the calamity, but in Penn Station, on stray walls, everywhere. But until the Sunday night vigil there had been no concerted effort to assimilate these fragmentary images and desperate messages and to experience them with other citizens in one place.

12 My discussion of one particular hearth of commemoration is not meant to preclude other kinds of hearth that occurred in the wake of 9/11, including altars built by families in memory of lost loved ones. A striking case in point is the altar constructed by the Petrocelli family in honor of their son Mark. See “For one 9/11 Family, Five Waves of Grief” (New York Times, September 10, 2003, p. 1).
At one entrance to Union Square, a "Mural of Hope" had been assembled, displaying scores of these cries of despair. But throughout the park many other such displays were set up, so that the public space as a whole became something of an outdoor mausoleum. But in contrast with those many public monuments that discourage spontaneous public response – for instance, the Arc de Triomphe, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, or Le Doux’s idealized cenotaphs – something very different was happening here. Union Square had become a mausoleum of images, not of dead bodies; rather than building something lasting – this was to come much later – there was an assembling of people in which a number of unregimented activities were taking place: singing in small groups, playing musical instruments, signing your name and writing out your thoughts of the moment, conversing with strangers. Barred from access to Ground Zero – still smoking heavily and smelling acrid in the near distance – people had taken it upon themselves effect a spontaneous public memorialization. The hearth-like character of this intensely felt scene was underscored by the innumerable votive candles that were lit all over the park, sometimes in small clusters around an image of a missing person and sometimes in larger groups that made up scenes of firey tribute.

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Everyone assembled here was not just beginning to remember September 11 – it had never been off anyone’s mind since it happened -- but to remember it differently. People were not only taking in the tragedy but were starting to respond to it commemoratively – thoughtfully, in the presence of others, in this very place. Nothing permanent had been constructed, everything was to come down in the next few days – and now (two and a half years later) nothing
remains of this occasion in Union Square Park. But it was nevertheless a distinctive phase in the creation of public memory, and no less important for being so impromptu.

Most people, including myself, moved quietly through the park, pausing to look at the faces and names of the departed, paying homage to people one never knew -- but knew now in the midst of disaster. This line from Eliot’s “Waste Land” came to me as I moved through the park: “I had not realized that death had undone so many.” Some sang peace songs; others improvised quietly on instruments. Most walked slowly in silence throughout. The atmosphere was sorrowful and sad but not morbid. There was a sense of relief to find oneself in the presence of others -- albeit strangers -- with whom to share one’s chagrin and grief. The muteness of the sharing was not oppressive but part of the mourning itself.

There was a palpable sense of coming to terms with a trauma instead of letting oneself be crushed by it. incredulousness and numbness -- following upon an earlier stage of sheer shock -- were yielding to another way of handling the trauma, one that refused to be buried under it. This was the experience of doing something that would linger beyond this grim occasion, yet without making any claim to permanence. This consisted in creating a public hearth to which those present, and those who were to hear of it by word of mouth, could recur in times ahead: this was an action that lent itself to further and future remembering. In short, a memorial place was emerging that unforgettable Sunday evening -- a place that, long after it had been disassembled, constituted a narrative of conjoint commemoration that could be invoked by those who were present and passed onto others, as I am now doing at this very moment in your presence: remembering it for you, if you were not there yourself:

Over time, the public hearth that arose so undesignedly in Union Square Park will (if noted by historians) rejoin the outer horizon of a more official and overt public memory that is designated by indicative markers of date and place and by a consolidated collection of memories that retain the gist if not the detail of the occurrence I have described. This collection and these markers will move slowly into the perimeter of the public mind, most likely assuming a rather peripheral position in any comprehensive account of significant events in the early twenty-first century. It will probably be referred to as something like "the Union Square vigil the Sunday evening after the World Trade Tower disaster." By then it will have become (in the future perfect) part of the external horizon of public memory: part of its sheer facticity..

[Despite its accessibility within a given culture or society -- enhanced when technology stores memories several times over, as image and word -- public memory is never a sure thing. It has its own degrees of endurance and reliability. Being public does not guarantee staying the same over time. In fact, a given event in public memory is subject to two forms of revision on the part of the public itself: first, a discovery of a glaringly false part of its content; second, a reassessment of its primary significance as a wider, or simply different, ethical or political context arises. The public memory of the Viet Nam war illustrates both points: the public was actively misled by the military and by at least two Presidents as to what actually happened in this war; and, with time, it has become even more clear that our interests in pursuing it were far less than noble. At the present, the war is certainly part of public memory, but such a festering problematic part that no one, least of all a politician, can invoke it
unambiguously. Perhaps this helps to explain why Maya Lin’s Viet Nam Veterans Memorial has been so effective a monument: in its very design as a deepset ribbon of black stone, it supplies the very stability which the public memory of this tortuous war cannot offer. Moreover, its stark presentation of proper names disposes of rhetoric altogether and focuses attention on sheer signifiers that stand unequivocally one-by-one for the fallen.\textsuperscript{14} (Not surprisingly, the recently accepted memorial at Ground Zero will also list the names of all victims of 9/11 and the earlier bombing of 1993.)

There is a special virtue in Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans War Memorial: by leaving space near the wall for people to stand, identify loved ones, and talk with friends, families, and strangers, the architect has created a genuinely public space in which the spontaneous expression of feeling, and the exchange of thought, are enabled and enhanced. The wall invites pausing and reflecting, as well as creating small personal memorials (for instance, in the form of letters or notes taped to the inscribed name of the deceased) all the while commiserating with others who are making their own visits to those who were lost in the war. Indeed, just like Union Square, this memorial, in its hearthlike sharing of memories, stories, and grief, is to be contasted not only with a people-unfriendly structure like the Arc de Triomphe (ringed by fiercely intense traffic) but with its neighbors, the hieratic Washington Monument and the self-enclosed Lincoln Memorial: both of which tend to overwhelm visitors by their sheer monumentality and neither of which comes across as an inviting places. Active memorialization occurs in a place that encourages hearthlike activity in its very

midst. But what kind of a place is this, and how is it related to what I have been calling “public memory”?

III

Public memory is not a displaceable phenomenon that can occur just anywhere; it always occurs in some particular place. It arises only when people converge in a concrete scene of interaction. This means that place is not indifferent to the act or content of remembering itself, as in flashbulb memories. On the contrary, it is altogether essential to public memory, which is not merely situated in a public arena or literal "common place" but enacted there. The place not only lends itself to the remembering but facilitates it and can even actively induce it, exhibiting its power of drawing out and sustaining the appropriate memories in that location.

Place provides the vital substructure of public memory not only by virtue of certain of its overt features – such as being a polygonal park or a curving black marble wall -- but also for the very practical reason that it offers an arena in which human bodies can come into proximity. Such proximity is for the sake of a shared public presence that can be accomplished only when people congregate for a common purpose. This presence is really a co-presence: of each to the other, a specifically interhuman presence, an embodied community. A genuinely public place nurtures communal presence and direct communication among its denizens. It also supports commemoration, where this term signifies conjoint remembrance whose forms vary from explicit eulogies to artworks, from
gathering to watch a parade, to just hanging out together (as at the Union Square vigil). [Like public memory itself, commemoration points both backward -- to the vanished event or person -- and forward (by means of the resolute wish to preserve the memory of the event or person, or else to act on it). Moreover, one need not have known the person or experienced the event that is being honored in order to commemorate it. When I looked intently at the faces and read the names of those lost in one of the World Trade Towers, I did not recognize anyone I ever knew; yet I was commemorating them nonetheless: not in the detail of their personal lives but in the tragic fact that they once existed and now, victims of the disaster, no longer do so.]

Even if no words are spoken and no further actions taken in the course of a given commemoration, participating in it contributes to the formation of public memory. Much that was mute was nevertheless shared: not just because the commemorators shared a set of similar experiences but more crucially because everyone present that Sunday night was beginning to work through the difficult emotions and thoughts occasioned by a devastating public trauma. And they were doing this in each other’s company – that is to say, they were doing it together in the same place.

IV

15 For further on the Janusian character of commemoration, see Remembering: A Phenomenological Study (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000; second edition), chapter ten.
16 The silence of most of those at the vigil had its own eloquence; as Lyotard insists, “silence is a phrase” (The Differend, p. xii: “Silence is a phrase. There is no last phrase.”)
I am saying that place is the ground and resource, the location and scene of the remembering we do in common. In a given place, feelings and thoughts rise from within as responses to events and persons without: the publicity of place acts as an aegis for the privacy of emotion and idea, but only insofar as these latter are themselves always already on the way to becoming public. Which means: on the way to language, to the speaking and writing and reminiscing that articulate these closely held items.

Public memory, my focus this evening, gathers place, people, and topics in its encompassing embrace. Place and public memory act as epicenters between which the privacy of feeling and thought and the overtness of discussed or discussable subject matters lie linked by words.

And the larger stakes in all this? What conclusions can we draw for the fate of public memory and the ethics of memory today? Let me address these questions in six brief final remarks that will circle about place like a hungry haw:

1. Whatever its position vis-à-vis other parameters of the public realm, public memory is constitutive of identities of many kinds: national and regional for certain, but also (by way of encroachment and internalization) social and personal. There is little in our lives that is untouched by public memory, even if we do not focus on it save on ceremonial occasions or in civil emergencies. Thematized or not, however, it abides and encloses: like any horizon, it is at once encompassing and yet only tacitly present until singled out as such. A large part of the very power of public memory – once formed and sedimented -- resides in its capacity to be located in the margins of our lives, where, hovering, it stands ready to be invoked or revised, acted upon or merely contemplated, inspiring us or (all too often) boring us. In this marginal position, it is all the more formative
of our identities. Fixated without in monuments and texts, public memory is maintained within -- in our various identities, specifying what kinds of citizens, family members, friends, and social agents we are.

2. Places hold memories. Memories do not float freely in minds or brains – nor do they reside properly in texts or technologies – though they leave their mark in all of these. They are anchored in particular places, which harbor them, keeping them in trust as it were. If public memories survive, this is due in large part to possessing what the Romans called stabilitas loci, a "stability of place" in which to arise and last: providing a lasting Ground Zero (a term for place if you think about it: “ground” being the base-line place on earth, and “zero” indicating that you can only go up, i.e., build up, from there).

Places secure memories of many kinds, both personal (as we know from Proust’s descriptions of the talismanic places of his childhood) and interpersonal (as in the case of a family home that becomes the seat of a reunion). They ground and gather social as well as collective memories.17 Places are still more expressly mandated in the case of public memories. Think only of military cemeteries that are built on or next to the battlefields where the buried soldiers once fought: being there, at that place, brings the public memory of a given battle or an entire war back to mind with special poignancy. The same holds true for the Vietnam War Veterans Memorial wall, which, though distant from the original scenes of military action, tethers public memory to one very stable place of recognition and

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17 Maurice Halbwachs, the French sociologist and student of collective memory, emphasized precisely that "[place] is a reality that endures... The collective thought of the group of believers has the best chance of immobilizing itself and enduring when it concentrates on places, sealing itself within their confines and molding its character to theirs." (Maurice Halbwachs, The Collective Memory, tr. F.J. Ditter, Jr. and V.Y. Ditter [New York: Harper, 1980], p. 156) Halbwachs adds: "Since our impressions rush by... we can ... recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surrounds." (Ibid., p. 140). Both statements are cited in Claudia Koonz, "Between Memory and Oblivion," in Commemorations, cit. supra, pp. 258-9.
mournings, the fascination with the slurry walls at Ground Zero – at least these, if nothing else, survived the attack from above – bespeaks the ongoing need for stability of place even (indeed, especially) in the face of disaster. As Daniel Libeskind has said, the wall “is the trace of the actual attack, the witness to it. It speaks to the power of what is unchangeable, and unchanging, there.” It is a source of stabilization not just for the new buildings to be constructed near it – it will be kept on exhibit in Arat and Walker’s award-winning design for the 9/11 Memorial, “Reflecting Absence” -- but also for more diffuse public memories of the World Trade Center.

slide 9 (first slide of “Reflecting Absence”)

No wonder that Liebeskind calls the overall project whose competition he won “Memorial Foundations.” The most lasting foundations for public memories are precisely those provided by place.

18 Without such concrete implacements, public memories would have "no referent in reality; or, rather, they [would be] their own referent: pure, exclusively self-referential signs." (Pierre Nora, ”Between Memory and History: Les lieux de mémoire,” Representations 26 [Spring: 1989], pp. 23-4; cited by Koonz, cit. supra, p. 276 n.

19 “A Wall Once Unseen, Now Revered,” New York Times, June 23, 2003, A 21; my italics. Libeskind also detects a non-material in this same wall: “it stands for the indomitable spirit of New York” (ibid.). Notice these further words from the same article (written by Glenn Collins): “the $200 million effort to brace the entire ground zero site and create a foundation for the memorial,” “the stabilization of the wall [is] a priority,” etc.

20 Not that places themselves are immune from re-construal and even physical restructuring. This is evident in the struggle over whether, and how, to preserve Nazi extermination camps. Buchenwald has been transformed into a major tourist site -- in contrast with Dachau, whose administration buildings and barracks were levelled by the local community, leaving only ruins near the crematoria. (See Koonz, cit. supra, pp. 265-7; on Buchenwald, pp. 271-3.) Nevertheless, despite being subject to major physical and hermeneutical transformations, places that perdure will always be called for in the constitution and continuation of public memory: Dachau, however razed it may have become as a physical site, remains a place of anguish and death.
3. One striking sign of the importance of place becomes evident in the case of public disasters that affect the lives of many, all too many. Here place functions in two essential ways. First, it serves as a place-of-sanctuary to which to flee or retreat from the scene of trauma itself. The schoolchildren who fled from the public school that was only blocks from the World Trade Center made their way, through dust and smoke, to another school in mid-Manhattan -- another place, a safe place.\(^{21}\) I would wager that each of us, even if not in the city on that fateful morning, returned to some sanctuary at the end of the day -- if only to our own bedrooms, within the same house in which we were otherwise so distraught by televised accounts. But then, what of the place itself, the place-of-trauma, in this case Ground Zero itself?

This is a wounded place -- a deeply injured, physically obliterated, public place. At Union Square that Sunday night there were many images -- photographs, drawings and paintings, even woven rugs -- of the Towers themselves. They, too, were missing and already keenly missed. Mourning was beginning not only for the human victims but for the buildings in which they worked, whatever their architectural merits and no matter how much they symbolized corporate capitalism at its sleekest extreme. And mourning not just for the buildings as such but for their place in people's lives: their location in lower Manhatten (the oldest part of the City), their position in the popular imagination. The wound, in short, was to a particular part of the body politic, the body of the place of the polis, and in particular to the late modern equivalent of the agora, a highly capitalized and technologized market-place. The trauma inflicted was on place as well as people, as is testified by the pain many felt in

looking at the New York skyline in the absence of the Towers: "It hurts even to look in that direction," as one commuter from New Jersey said at the time.  

4. The pairing of place-of-sanctuary with place-of-trauma points to a more general principle. This is that there is never a single place; even the most intensely considered place, whether it be Ground Zero or Central Park, comes surrounded by other places: it is a place-among-places. This contrasts with the circumstance of space, which tends ineluctably toward unity and the ‘one’. This is why theories of space, strictly speaking, finally concern one universal field: homogeneous, isometric, uniform in medium and texture. Even as empty – as the universal void – space is still one. In the end, however, the primacy belongs to place. As Archytas (Plato’s neo-Pythagorean contemporary) put it a long time ago: “Since everything that is in motion is moved in some place, it is obvious that one has to grant priority to place...Perhaps thus it is the first of all things, since all existing things are either in place or not without place.” In other words (in what I like to call the Archytian axiom): to be is to be in place.

5. If place is prior to space, it is also precedent to time. The insistent chronocentrism of the last several centuries in the West would have us believe otherwise. It would subsume public memory under time – as I began by doing myself when I talked of it as temporally bivalent. But closer examination has

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22 Bernadette Artus, cited in "On the Free Boat Ride, 'It Hurts to Even Look'," by Nichole M. Christian, New York Times, Sept. 18, 2001, p. B6. I have long maintained that mourning (and not just nostalgia) can be of place, lost place, and if so we are in for a massive public mourning for the loss of this archetypal New York place. The mourning will both for the very place itself (here, the place provided by the buildings as well as the place on which they stood -- now, tragically, all that remains), for all that the place made possible in the aspirations of others, and for all that would have happened there had the place not been destroyed. See Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 198-99.

23 As cited by Simplicius, In Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium, as translated by S. Sambursky in S. Sambursky, ed. The Concept of Place in Late Neoplatonism (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), p. 37.
disclosed another parameter that is even more formative than time. This is place. Even if the outer horizon of any given place is spatio-temporal, the fact remains that the placial dimensions of public memory are not secondary to temporal ones, as chronocentric thought would have us believe. For the more we pursue the time of public memory, the more we land in place as indispensable for time -- above all, the time of our lives: our public lives, our lives with one another in a given circumstance, whether celebratory or sorrowful. This time always happens in some very particular place in which events can expand and expire, and people live and die.

The truth is that place subtends every kind of time, thus every kind of memory: individual and social, collective and public. Place underlies the four main memorial modes differently -- too differently to capture in any single, simple formula. But in the case of public memory it does so in the two basic ways I have been recounting this morning. On the one hand, place is part of public memory in the making, as we have witnessed in the hearth-event of the Union Square vigil, where a limited but exemplary stage of a more enduring public memory was beginning to emerge in that very place, at once requiring and reflecting it. On the other hand, place is integral to a more fully consolidated public memory that has become an external horizon for future remembering on the part of many others, not only those present at the moment of making. Such a horizon will have its own implacements, more stable if less innovative than those in Union Square; it will be embodied and supported by memorials sturdier than the flimsy photographs and hastily scribbled words affixed to the walls and fences of that particular place. But if this horizon will be more encompassing and enduring (whether set in stone or rendered in text), the early phase on which I have focused in this talk was more formative and more poignant. In the end,
each is needed -- the inner hearth as well as the outer horizon -- for a fully effective public memory to arise.

The Germans distinguish between a Denkmal, a monument meant to memorialize a person or event, a Mahnmal (a public reminder that acts as a warning), and a Gedenkstätte, a place in which a momentous event can be meditated.24 Here time and place conjoin in the very language of public memory: if the Denkmal looks back to what has already occurred, the Gedenkstätte invites reflection in the present, while the Mahnmal asks us to take care in (and for) the future. All three temporal modes call for concrete implantation. Indeed, each is already situated in a singular place-world in which we can truly say that public memory takes the time to take place: to assume it, to specify it, to transform it, and finally to be it.

6. And the ethical import in all this talk about place and public memory? I began by noting the link in the Greek word etheia between wild place, animals, and rest. Although the catastrophe of 9/11 occurred in the heart of a most civilized circumstance, it was a wild moment, and it was this even if no natural landscape and very few animals were at stake -- only buildings, airplanes, human beings, and unremitting hatred, and unrelieved suffering. There was a notable lack of care in the situation: a carelessness on the side of the U.S. government regarding the impending danger, and an uncaringness on the part of the zealous perpetrators of the deed. There was no caring reminder, no adequate vigilance that might have averted the disaster. (The lack of vigilance, we might say, was what made the vigil necessary.) The failure to prevent it was also a public failure: a failure at the level of American society at large, not only in preventing the attack but in living in such an unapologetic and unbridled materialist voraciousness as to invite it in the first place.

24 For these terms, see Koonz, cit. supra, p. 259 and p. 275.
Sittlichkeit, in German, names the public level at which “ethics proper” takes place: where the ethical signifies something societal, in contrast with the moral, a matter of individuals and their own conscience. The ethical in this sense builds on ethos, the character of a people, not on that of an isolated person who makes moral decisions. As such, the ethical, the sittlich, draws upon all the ways in which people live together in customary modes of connection called mores: how people sit together, we might say. Public memories belong to this shared sitting, affording to it what I have called an external horizon in space and time. But we have seen that such memories, to be effective, must be situated – must be in situ, must arise and be anchored in particular places: for instance, the hearth-place of Union Square Park I have described in this paper.

“Wisdom sits in places,” says Keith Basso, and we may amplify his point by observing that the wisdom here in question is practical wisdom, that is to say, ethical wisdom: knowing how to act rightly with and for others, for example, in commemorating with them.25 Such practical knowing is not abstract – a matter of rules or categorical imperatives, as Kant would have it in his preoccupation with the rational justification of moral actions. It is concretely located in people’s bodies as know-how (knowing how to act caringly and respectfully vis-à-vis others) and it is located in the landscape as well. Basso shows how reading the local landscape in Cibecue, Arizona – i.e., retelling narratives of good conduct traditionally associated with familiar parts of this landscape -- teaches lessons of how to act rightly: how to be ethical in the larger social scene. In this way, the ethical is seen to be located in wild places for humans as well as animals: places whose stories cannot be situated in the built places of late modernity if ethics is to be set forth in a way that is at once corporeal and incorporated, individually

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decisive and socially effective. Not only horses but humans need to go back to wild places of the sort so movingly described by Basso. For there the ethical is attached to place and can be experienced as such.

This is a long way from lower Manhatten, which offers quite another landscape and one where clues to practical wisdom are much more difficult to find and to read. In the absence of such clues – in the dense jungle of corporate capitalism, where synthetic sites prevail over genuine places – one has no choice but to commemorate the catastrophe to which this often deeply un-ethical corporate life led so dramatically on 9/11: and, perhaps, to begin to form a public memory sensitive enough to serve as a warning to the next generation of how ethics, once severed from place – as happens in globalization without localization – deprives itself of the resources by which it can become, and stay, a resource for right action.

What was truly absent in this impoverished scene – the ultimate referent of “Reflecting Absence” – was place itself: the empty footprints of the two Trade Towers, here underlined in Arat and Walker’s final design, signify not just the destruction of these buildings, their current absence, but the emptiness they embodied long before September 11. For all their bustling activity, the Towers were already empty places, i.e., sheer sites, from which the ethical was all too often notably absent.

What is needed is, in the watchword of A Thousand Plateaus (a title that might be a description of the American Southwest), “a local absolute,” not the absolute in the local (as in the religious literalization of shrines and other such sites) but a renewed conception of a “non-limited locality” in which ethics springs from place unbidden yet compellingly.  

26 The two phrases cited in this sentence are both from Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, tr. B. Massumi, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 382-3: “[the nomad] is in
us of this procession of ethics from place – if it could propose a genuinely place-based ethics) -- it would have broken out of its usual straitjacket, exemplified in monuments of stone and equally stony state-sanctioned pronouncements, and come truly into its own. This “own” would be much closer to the unplanned events of commemoration, the “local operations”\(^\text{27}\) in which I participated that Sunday evening in Union Square Park. These operations did not just contribute to an eventual official public memory, they engendered a different, a far more effectively grounded, sense of what a truly public memory might be like. Such a memory, coming from such a place, is never fully and finally made; it is always in the making, giving to us the care and vigilance so often lacking at the site of the initial trauma.

To conclude in two lines:

Public Memory: still a mystery, but we are gaining on it...

And the Ethics of Place? In the end, there is no other.\(^\text{28}\)

Edward S. Casey
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\(^{27}\) This phrase comes from ibid., p. 383: “the coupling of the place and the absolute is achieved not in a centered, oriented globalization or universalization but in an infinite succession of local operations.”

\(^{28}\) An earlier version of this paper has been published in Public Memory, ed. Brian...... (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).