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Prof. Dr. Ingrid Gessner
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**American Exceptionalism and Its Representation
in Selected 9/11 Memorials**

Laura Blaß
laurablass.95@gmail.com
Bachelor Degree
Pedagogy (2nd SEM) and English and American Studies (4th SEM)
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1. Introduction: The Shock of the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

9/11 was the largest terrorist attack on American soil. Four planes were hijacked by members of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda; the group and their leader Osama Bin Laden has repeatedly claimed responsibility for the destroyed World Trade Center¹, the partially hit Pentagon and more than 3000 dead people. Even now, more than fifteen years later, American citizens and the rest of the world are still feeling the grief and shock these terrible events caused.

Since then more than six hundred permanent and many more temporary memorials have been built in the USA and all over the globe to remember the harsh end of all those innocent lives. These memorials are mostly at places that everyone can visit and will probably be a reminder and warning against Islamic terrorism long in the future. In the first place, these memorials are something positive, a way to show that nobody can bring the US and their citizens down and that they are not afraid of terrorism. But if you look closely at the memorials, the temporary and the permanent ones, you realize that there is a deeper, hidden meaning. The people who lost family members and friends in the attacks in 2001 and all the nations that showed their compassion and shared grief through the building of 9/11 memorials in their countries of origin may have – sometimes inadvertently – reiterated a specifically US-American version of exceptionalism.

American exceptionalism refers to the idea or myth that the United States are different from other nations and display a special character as a free nation with democratic ideals. In this view the United States serve a model for other nations to follow. While it may not come as a surprise that a national memorial that commemorates the 9/11 terrorist attacks is indebted to the myth of American exceptionalism, it is indeed surprising that the same narrative is discernible in memorials built outside the United States. This paper examines the representation of a U.S.-American narrative of exceptionalism in the *National September 11 Memorial* in New York and two international ones. First, the *National September 11 Memorial* in New York City will be examined for its underlying exceptionalist discourse. The discussion and analysis is based on theories of memory and memorial culture. In a second step, two external versions of U.S.-American exceptionalism inherent in the British 9/11 memorial *Since 9/11* in London, and the Italian *Monumento alla Memoria "11 Settembre"* in Pompeii will be under scrutiny. to show how and to what end this specific self-image of the United States is portrayed in these international 9/11 memorials.

2. Memorials and the Exceptionalism of the United States

With a focus on built memorials the following chapter traces the way the United States employ the exceptionalist myth and how the representation has changed since 9/11.

¹ It will be abbreviated as WTC from now on.

2.1 Memorials as Symbols of Mourning and Remembrance

Memorials are built all over the world, and in each country they may mean something different: they are part of the grieving process, they present a memory, or give honor to something or someone. Is there a specific way in which U.S. citizens see their memorials? In her study of American memorials Mona Doreen Greenberg explains that memorials have played an important role in the American culture for centuries. Throughout American history memorials have been built in order to honor important citizens, places and even events. Furthermore, they form a link between the memories of people, their history and their commemoration in the present (cf. Greenberg 2011).

Another function of memorials in the United States is described by [add his first name] Savage and [add his first name] Kavanagh; they think that memorials are a place of collective memory where you can find sense in the death of a loved one or work out problems with the uncertainty of the situation, especially if it is not clear what happened to the missing person. This particular way of mourning at a memorial sites enables a new form of grieving process. There are many ways people grieve and one of these practices can be the visit to a memorial of the dead or missing, where one may reflect the life one shared with the person remembered. Through this practice the people left behind may be able to overcome their grief easier and to start a process of healing (cf. Savage 1997, and Kavanagh 1989, both cited in Greenberg 2011).

2.2 U.S.-American Homemade Exceptionalism

2.2.1 The United States as an Exceptional Country

Donald Pease describes U.S. American exceptionalism as a form of nationalism that helped the United States to feel empowered as a nation during the Cold War. Furthermore, he speaks about the importance of ideologies and myths that play an important role in U.S.-American exceptionalism. One of these practices is the belief of the American people that their country is unique and other nations should take the example of the United States as a model (cf. Pease 2009:7). For Pease the roots of this phenomenon are found in the sixteenth century, when the first white settlers arrived with the hope of building a new and better life for themselves and their children. Pease describes American exceptionalism as “[...] a political doctrine as well as a regulatory fantasy that enabled U.S. citizens to define, support, and defend the U.S. national identity” (Pease 2009:11).

2.2.2 From ‘Virgin Land’ to ‘Ground Zero’

National cultures create myths to maintain important images of themselves during times of crisis. The creation of certain myths through symbolic political acts was also a strategy after the attacks of 9/11 to offer an explanation to the U.S. citizens and to give them a way and a space to allow for the remembrance of the event (cf. Pease 2009:156).

An easier way to understand how this works is to look at an example. Ten days after the event the President of that time, George W. Bush reacted in the following way:

On September 11, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. Americans have known wars, but for the past 136 years they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war, but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. [...] Americans have known surprise attacks, but never before on thousands civilians. [...] All of this was brought upon us in a single day, and night fell on a different world. [...] I will not forget the wound to our country and those who inflicted it. [...] Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done. (Bush 2001)

This excerpt of George W. Bush's speech shortly after 9/11 shows the change of emotional language that spoke to many Americans. The U.S. were no longer the 'Virgin Land,' the country of innocence, purity and unwavering faith but a 'Ground Zero,' a destroyed place, which makes people want to protect and defend their country and its beliefs, no matter the costs (cf. Pease:2009:158).

The two concepts of 'Virgin Land' and 'Ground Zero' which are further explained by Pease as myths that are used to symbolize a specific contradiction of the United States. The American landscape can be described by both terms, but their meanings are completely oppositional. On the one hand, the myth of the 'Virgin Land,' the wilderness, which the first settlers turned into fruitful cultivated pastures; on the other hand, the term 'Ground Zero' the place where everything changed, the place of the destroyed WTC and death of thousands of people. For Pease, 9/11 is the date when the American exceptionalist self-image was transformed (cf. Pease 2009:155). Yet, did the myth of the 'Virgin Land' prevail? How was this juncture reflected on the memorials of 9/11?

3. Analysis of the *National September 11 Memorial* in New York City, the *Since 9/11 Memorial* in London, and the *Monumento alla Memoria "11 Settembre"* in Pompeii

3.1 The *National September 11 Memorial*

3.1.1 Reflecting Absence by Arad and Walker

The *National September 11 Memorial* is the most widely known 9/11 memorial in the



Fig. 1. The *National September 11 Memorial* in New York City, USA.

world. It was constructed on top of the remains of the twin towers in New York and is based on Michael Arad's and Peter Walker's design called 'Reflecting Absence.' It is supposed to mirror the feeling of loss caused by the destruction of the World Trade Center and the death of nearly 3000 people on September 11, 2001 and on February 26, 1993.

The center of the memorial consists of two large waterfalls and pools covering the footprints of the World Trade Center, the names of the dead and missing are inscribed on the parapets surrounding the pools. The names of the dead are grouped according to their location in their last minutes on this earth. The empty pools are surrounded by the Memorial Plaza with hundreds of white oak trees that were harvested from within a 500-mile radius of the WTC site and the other locations of terrorist impact in Pennsylvania and Maryland symbolizing life and rebirth (cf. 9/11 Memorial: About the Memorial).

The memorial is complemented by the *National September 11 Museum* which offers information about the attacks and traces the impact of 9/11 on the general public. The director of the museum, Alice M. Greenwald, explains that the main work of the museum consists of telling the victims' stories and to give them a place where their lives are being honored instead of just stressing the tragic cause of their death (cf. 9/11 Memorial: Message from the Museum Director).

3.1.2 Memories of 9/11 and the Survivor Tree

It took several months to recover and clean up all of what remained of the destroyed WTC in New York, but with the help of donors, pro-bono workers and New York citizens, the people of the city managed this together. The stories and feelings of those people, family members of the victims and of the survivors were recorded and can be listened to on the *National September 11 Memorial's* website. People from around the world can dive into the harsh world of 9/11 and maybe understand a little more of the tragic events that happened then (cf. 9/11 Memorial: Oral History Archives).

Besides the sunken pools, the oak trees, and the recordings, the *National September 11 Memorial* in New York has many more features that attract people. One of these attractions is the survivor tree and its seedling program. The survivor tree is a Callery pear tree that was found during clean-up procedures around 'Ground Zero,' at the time badly damaged, burnt and broken. It was sent to the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and after a prolonged healing process, the tree returned to its original location (cf. 9/11 Memorial: Survivor Tree).

The survivor tree gave rise to the Seedling Program organized by the *National 9/11 Memorial*. Since 2013 every year three communities worldwide have been receiving seedlings from this special tree in order to remember that the tragedies they had to

witness and work through are not the end, and there is always hope and resilience (cf. 9/11 Memorial: Seedling Program). This particular practice of sharing American history and faith through the resilient seeds of this tree may be read as a symbolic act to transnationally share values inherent to American exceptionalism.

3.1.3 Distribution of Strength and Persistent Faith

Millions of visitors travel to and visit the *National September 11 Memorial* each year in order to pay their respects and learn more about the history of the attacks and their aftermath. For Americans and the world that day in 2001 became one of the most remembered dates in history. Furthermore, these gruesome attacks have triggered the display of American strength and willpower. For example, the survivor tree and its seedling program are an extraordinary example for the representation of this particular self-image. The burned and violated Callery pear tree is a symbol for the United States after 9/11. Even though the attack in 2001 and the tragedy it brought will never be forgotten, the installment of a 'Survivor Tree' is a symbol of American strength and persistent faith. It shows to the world that every terrible thing can be overcome. Furthermore, by sending seeds from that particular tree to different places around the world, the U.S. symbolically distributes their exceptionalist self-image to other countries. Each town or country chosen to receive such an important seedling will naturally honor this gesture of the *National September 11 Memorial* in New York as a generous act.

The exceptionalist self-image of the United States is also conveyed on the website of the *National September 11 Memorial*. For example, the already mentioned Oral History Archives highlight the strength and willpower that Americans showed on and after the days of the attack: firefighters, policemen, and ordinary civilians recorded their stories and made them available for the world to hear. The many recorded voices show the exceptionality of the situation and the strength of the American citizens to overcome this tragedy. They testify to the uniqueness of the situation in 2001. Concluding, it can safely be assumed that the *National September 11 Memorial* is a prime example for a continued American exceptionalist self-image.

3.2 Since 9/11, London

3.2.1 The Second Life of WTC Fragments

American artist Miya Ando designed a 9/11 memorial located in London, UK. A brief description of the memorial can be found on the *Memorial Mapping* website, which was created by Erika Doss and Ingrid Gessner:

[The] Sculpture made from three World Trade Center steel girders erected vertically honors 9/11 victims, including the 67 British victims. Artist Miya Ando polished a plate of World Trade Center steel, attached to girders, to reveal a shiny, reflective surface. (Doss & Gessner: Memorial Mapping)

The Memorial was temporarily displayed in Battersea Park but stands now permanently in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (cf. Doss & Gessner: Memorial Mapping).

3.2.2 A Beacon of Hope and a Call for Better Communication

The memorial in London was commissioned by the organization that bears the same name as the memorial “SINCE 9/11, formerly the 9/11 London Project, [...] a UK educational charity, set up to mark the tenth anniversary and to ensure that the legacy of 9/11 is one that builds hope from tragedy” (Since 9/11 - An Introduction). The program became famous all through the UK because of the important educational work they have been doing, for example teaching younger generations in countries all over the world possible reasons and prolonged effects of the 2001 attacks in the United States. *Since 9/11* develops new teaching methods to support this cause, stressing the importance of compassion and the need for communication between countries, genders, races and religions in order to prevent similar acts in the future (cf. *Since 9/11- An introduction*).

Furthermore, the memorial’s location itself plays an important role in the act of memory making. The Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park that surrounds the memorial is a very famous place in London and stands for a tranquil atmosphere and transports a hopeful message that goes back to the London Summer Olympics 2012 (cf. *Since 9/11 – The Unveiling of Artwork*).

3.2.3 A Focus on Hope and Difference

Miya Ando’s sculpture is completely made out of WTC fragments; most pieces look old, rusty and wrecked, but one piece stands out from the rest, a polished, shiny part of metal has been beautified and included by the artist. A possible interpretation of this artwork in context with a theme of American exceptionalism may be the following: many U.S.-Americans see the attacks on 9/11 as a point of rupture in their history; before that date they seemingly enjoyed a protected and secure life, but this changed with



Fig. 2. *Since 9/11* in London, UK.

the terrorist attacks in 2001. The 'Virgin Land' was no longer pure and safe, it was transformed into 'Ground Zero.' This specific location marks the beginning of a new time, in which U.S.-Americans must fight in order to protect their country. Exactly this notion is being portrayed by the New Yorker artist Ando. The shiny metal piece symbolizes the pure America before the attacks while the destroyed metals represent the now tainted 'Ground Zero.'

The memorial's design furthermore needs to be analyzed within its environment. It is definitely no coincidence that the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park has been chosen as its permanent location. The Olympic Park has a special meaning for the citizens of London and the rest the UK, it symbolizes the hope for peace that rose during the Summer Olympics 2012. The placement of the memorial in that area changed the meaning of the park and the memorial: the Olympic Park no longer simply convey happy memories of peaceful Olympic Games, but it also invites visitors to remember the tragic history of 9/11. On the other hand, the tragedy the memorial conjures up is contrasted by the hope and happiness of the London Olympics. Even during the most trying times there is always reason for continuance and faith.

3.3 Monumento alla Memoria "11 Settembre," Pompeii

3.3.1 Embedding a WTC Fragment into Italian History

Pompeii is one of two Italian cities that received a fragment of the popular steel beams from the World Trade Center.² First of all it is again important to look at the design of the memorial. Figure 3 on this page shows that the monument, which is located on the on the Piazza Bartolo, consists of only two pieces: the center piece is a large twisted steel fragment from the WTC, the smaller second piece is the base of the memorial that is made from a lava stone from the famous Mount Vesuvius. This memorial was probably dedicated on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of 9/11. It was built to honor all of the victims including the ten Italian civilians and to stress the alliance between the United States and Italy (cf. Doss & Gessner: Memorial Mapping).



Fig. 3. Monumento alla Memoria "11 Settembre" in Pompeii, Italy.

² The second Italian memorial that included a WTC fragment "Memoria e Luce" is located in Padua, Veneto

3.3.2 An Italian Saint and a City Risen from the Ashes

Bartolo Longo, the man who contributed his name to the Pompeiian Piazza where the 9/11 Memorial is located, is no unknown person in Italy. Longo is famous for as an ex-satanist turned saintly. Born into a rich family in nineteenth-century Italy he lived the life of a Catholic gentleman before he turned away from God and the Catholic church and joined a Satanist group. Longo took part in many occult rites and eventually suffered a mental breakdown. After his father died he found his way back to God and together with his wife built "the Basilica of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary" to honor the Christian belief and his Catholic parents (cf. Stagnaro 2011). Besides the person of Longo the city of Pompeii itself is of great importance for the Italian nation. Everybody knows the history of this tragically famous city:

The city has re-emerged from the darkness of centuries precisely as it would have been when it was unexpectedly buried in the thick layer of ash and lava which poured down from the devastating eruption of Vesuvius. It was the year 79 A.D. The scale of the tragedy was appalling: in what had been one of the most active and splendid Roman centres, life came to a permanent standstill. (Pompeii Online)

This quote summarizes the story of Pompeii and shows at the same time why this particular city was chosen for the 9/11 memorial: the striking similarity of the fate of the ancient Italian city and New York City. Yet, while one was struck by a natural disaster, the other found itself the victim of a terrorist attack.

3.3.3 Common Historical Experience and Religious Faith

Like with the other analyzed memorials the analysis is not complete before examining if and how a version of U.S.-American exceptionalism is present in the Pompeiian memorial. A quick glance at the memorial already reveals the most important fact. The Pompeiian experience and the American experience of 9/11 are combined. The fragment of the WTC rises out of the lava stone from Vesuvius (see fig. 3).

The Pompeiian volcanic eruption is likened to the terrorist attacks on 9/11. The total destruction of ancient Pompeii was unique, a city with thousands of innocent people was not able to stop the threatening mountain and the horror it brought. By combining fragments signifying similar stories the city of Pompeii stresses that the United States has suffered a very similar tragedy. The terror attacks of 9/11 surprised and shocked New Yorkers, the whole United States and the world, and almost like a natural disaster there was nothing to be done to stop it once events unfolded. Pompeii is sending a message to the United States: although they have been attacked and deeply hurt, New York City will rise again like the exceptional city of Pompeii which was rediscovered and slowly excavated 1700 years after the city was destroyed. About a third of the city still lies buried under volcanic rock, the rest has become a site of touristic pilgrimage. The message sent by the Italian memorial is one of exceptionalism and has echoes of a Jeremiadic sermon: Even if the United States are at their weakest, they will not

stand down or give up in their fight against terrorism, just like Pompeii after the devastating volcanic eruption. The exceptionalist self-image of strength and resilience is thus transferred from the United States to Italy and back.

Again, not only the design is important to discern the exceptionalist impetus in many 9/11 memorials, the location of a memorial is too. Piazza Bartolo references a saintly figure, and 'Ground Zero' has been called a 'sacred space.' We already discussed the transformation from the 'Virgin Land' to the 'Ground Zero' myth; in Italy the reference to 9/11 stands on a Piazza dedicated to a saint. The story of Bartolo Longo shows that even when you lose faith and start to doubt your religion, God will always take you back and support you. By placing the 9/11 memorial on the said Piazza, an exceptional faith in God and an American righteous way of living in the 'Virgin Land' is put back into focus.

3.4 Exporting Exceptionalism Around the World

To conclude the analysis of the exceptionalist self-image of the United States represented in 9/11 memorials in New York and worldwide, it has to be mentioned that this particular self-image is probably conveyed (in different degrees) in all 9/11 memorials. Although further studies are needed to prove this with certainty, after looking at the results of this paper the following can be stated: This analysis showed that 9/11 memorials put an emphasis on continued strength and unwavering faith after the attacks in 2001. The three chosen memorials, national and transnational, share basic symbols: the myth of the 'Virgin Land' and the importance of strength and willpower are included in the design and the location of each memorial.

Summarized it can be said that even though the *National 9/11 Memorial* reiterates an exceptionalist self-image, it also spreads something important all over the world: the belief that even though tragedies strike and it may seem that all hope is lost, it is important to work and to not give up and help others who may feel the same loss to rise again.

4. A Call for the Continued Study of 9/11 Memorials

The exceptionalist U.S.-American self-image in the culture and memory of 9/11 has been briefly analyzed in this paper, but the surface of this topic has only been slightly scratched. Although the exceptionalism of the United States has been, of course, widely studied, the particular context of the mourning process engaged in by a whole country – and possibly the world – is something that needs to be looked at closer in the future.

The culture of mourning in the United States and worldwide seems undervalued in academia. There are some researchers like Erika Doss and Ingrid Gessner who try to work their way through this field of unknown potential, but it is important that more people start looking into this. The results presented in this brief essay need further

proof through an extended analysis of further memorials, so that my hypothesis of an exceptionalist self-image represented in every 9/11 memorial can be substantiated. The *Memorial Mapping* project by Doss and Gessner is the perfect place to start this investigation.

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- Fig. 2** *Since 9/11 in London, UK.* Available from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2415868/9-11-girders-given-UK-remember-67-Britons-died-terror-attack-discovered-rusting-away-farmyard.html>. [11 September 2016]
- Fig. 3** *Monumento alla Memoria "11 Settembre" in Pompeii, Italy.* Available from: <https://naples.usconsulate.gov/news-events/commemoration-ceremony.html>. [10 September 2016]