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PILGRIMAGE PALIMPSESTS

Storytelling and Intersubjectivity
Across Multiple Shrines, Sites, and Routes

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Traversing Mass Tragedies: Material Religion Between the 9/11 and Newtown Memorials



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INTRODUCTION

On a hot afternoon in the summer of 2017, I emerged from the humid underbelly of the 72nd Street subway station in New York and hopped into the brown SUV that was waiting for me at the corner. Sylvia, the vehicle's driver, was a good friend who I had met in 2011 during my first summer of fieldwork at the 9/11 Tribute Museum.^{1,2,3} As a doctoral student, I spent five years conducting ethnographic research and interviews at this small memorial museum, which draws together individuals who were personally affected by the 2001 attacks: survivors, first responders, family members who had lost loved ones, local residents, and rescue and recovery workers. Each day, these docents shared their stories with visitors from across the nation and the world during walking tours around the new World Trade Center site. Sylvia was like the majority of the other docents who volunteered at Tribute in the sense that she had experienced a deep personal loss on September 11, 2001: Both her cousin and a childhood friend had died in the towers that day. Over the course of my fieldwork, I came to know Sylvia well. I shadowed her training sessions while she was becoming a docent at Tribute; we met regularly for conversations over coffee or lunch in the years that followed; and, we attended the private opening of the National 9/11 Memorial & Museum together.

Our destination that particular afternoon was Staten Island. Traffic was fairly light in the middle of the day, but the drive still took us nearly an hour. Sylvia, a life-

- 1 For the purpose of confidentiality, Sylvia's name has been changed. I use the actual name of the other interviewee quoted in this article, Monsignor Weiss, because, as he is well aware, his unique role in the response to the Sandy Hook shootings as the leader at St. Rose of Lima makes full anonymity impossible.
- 2 I extend my deepest and most heartfelt thanks to Sylvia for not only allowing my research surrounding her experiences but actively going out of her way to support it. I am also thankful to Monsignor Weiss from St. Rose of Lima Roman Catholic Church in Newtown, Connecticut, who shared his time and thoughts with me during a phone interview in February 2018. These individuals' patience, generosity, and kindness remind me of the deep goodness that still exists in our world today despite the violence and tragedies that are also characteristic of our contemporary era. Some of the ideas in this article were also shared during a presentation at the Annual Academy of Religion in November 2018, and I am grateful for the questions and comments that colleagues and fellow panelists offered in response to my work. Finally, I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer who offered constructive feedback on this article during the peer review process.
- 3 Currently named the 9/11 Tribute Museum, this same non-profit was previously known as the Tribute WTC Visitor Center and, later, the 9/11 Tribute Center.



Angels' Circle, 2017
Photo:
Kate DeConinck

long New Yorker and licensed real estate saleswoman, shared rich stories about the neighborhoods that we passed while she navigated. Driving through Brooklyn, she recalled growing up there as a Catholic girl in a Hasidic-dominant neighborhood and how that experience taught her how to live amongst others who hold different beliefs. After we passed over the Verrazano Bridge, she showed me other sites important in her life: St. John's College, where she had gone to school; her family's last home that they had only recently moved out of; and Casa Belvedere, an Italian cultural center where she had taken Italian lessons. Later that day, she would also take me to Green-Wood, one of the first rural cemeteries in America and the place where she herself would one day be buried in her family's plot.

The stop at which we lingered longest, though, was the one that had prompted our visit in the first place: Angels' Circle. Situated on a triangular traffic median at the intersection of Fingerboard Road and Hylan Boulevard, Angels' Circle had, sixteen years prior, become the site of a spontaneous memorial to those killed on September 11. In the decades that preceded the attacks, Staten Island was an appealing place for both firefighters and World Trade Center workers to live. Many were drawn to the borough due to its suburban feel, its relative affordability, and the quiet, 30-minute commute that it offered to Manhattan via ferry. Consequently, this small borough faced a heavy number of casualties in 2001. Of the nearly three thousand men and women who died in the World Trade Center attacks, 193 persons had called Staten Island home, and many residents turned to memorialization





as a means of working through their collective and individual grief. Unlike other, formal 9/11 memorials on Staten Island that took years to build and design, Angels' Circle emerged immediately in the aftermath of the attacks as part of a grassroots community effort.⁴ One sleepless night in the wake of the attacks, Wendy Pellegrino, a Staten Island resident, left her home to place candles and a sign reading "God Bless Our Heroes" on the plot of land. In the days that followed, other citizens left photos, flowers, and other mementos at the same site, which eventually morphed into an established and formally-maintained memorial garden. Today, the site is filled with dozens of angels of all sizes, colors, and types. Families who lost loved ones in the attacks still gather there each year on the anniversary of September 11 to keep their memories of the deceased alive.

Angels' Circle, 2017
Photo:
Kate DeConinck

4 For example, Postcards is a more formal September 11 memorial that was built along the North Shore Waterfront near the ferry terminal on Staten Island. The community held a design competition in early 2003 and, after selecting a design by New York architect Masayuki Sono, the memorial was built and opened in 2004. Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, "The Staten Island September 11 Memorial: Creativity, Mourning and the Experience of Loss," in *Grief and Its Transcendence: Memory, Identity, Creativity*, ed. Adele Tutter and Léon Wurmser (London: Routledge, 2015).

“Can you see my angel?” Sylvia asked me after we passed through the entrance gate. “She’s right there—not that big angel, the small iron one next to it.” The angel was nestled gently beside a fence that delineated the perimeter of the site. She stood approximately eighteen inches high and, with her eyes gently closed, she conveyed a sense of serenity and peace. The angel’s arms reached up towards passersby, as if inviting them into an embrace. “I wanted something that was iron, something that would last,” Sylvia explained to me. “Try to lift her—she’s heavy.” Indeed, despite the statue’s delicate features, she was much sturdier and heavier than she appeared.⁵ “See?” Sylvia laughed at my surprise when I tried to pick her up. “She’s ethereal in a sense, but she’s also not. She’s real. She’s real.” Sylvia’s emphasis on the word *real* here speaks to the extent to which the materiality of this statue mattered to her. Beautiful as she was, this statue was also durable, heavy, and rooted. The angel offered Sylvia a tangible site for mediating her relationships with and memories of the two loved ones she had lost on 9/11, especially since their physical remains had never been recovered from Ground Zero. In a world in which human bodies can instantly disappear during a catastrophic event, it was reassuring to her to have a statue so physically strong and lasting.

The weight and apparent rootedness of Sylvia’s angel to that site in Staten Island today belie a deeper significance: that this angel is a mobile memorial, one that has traversed multiple communities touched by tragedy. From 2001 until 2012, Sylvia’s angel rested alongside the other memorial angels at Angels’ Circle. But then Sylvia heard about the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. A few days after that news broke, deeply troubled by the murder of so many little children, Sylvia got into her car, picked up the statue from Angels’ Circle, and drove her straight to St. Rose of Lima, a Catholic church in Newtown. “It was a visceral reaction,” she told me. “I kept thinking that my angel had gathered the healing energy of Angels’ Circle and that maybe she could share that with the community in Newtown.” After spending a few years in Connecticut, the angel eventually made her way back

5 In keeping with Sylvia’s own ways of describing the statue, I use personal pronouns of “she” and “her” rather than the less personal “it” or “its.” This language is significant because it speaks to the fact that memory objects like the statue are not passive or static but, rather, active participants in webs of intersubjective relationships.





Sylvia's Angel, 2017
Photo:
Kate DeConinck

to Sylvia, who returned her to Angels' Circle. "I hope I never feel compelled to lend her out again," Sylvia told me as we got back into her SUV. "I think at some point I may bring her to my plot so that she can rest with me at Green-Wood." Folded into this one statue were multiple experiences of grief and mourning, both past and future. The angel had previously supported Sylvia in the wake of the September 11 attacks and the Sandy Hook shootings, and Sylvia also found comfort in the idea that the angel might one day accompany her to her own gravesite.

PALIMPSESTS OF GRIEF AND TRANS-SITUATIONAL BONDING

All of the articles in this issue center around the theme of multisited pilgrimages, investigating how modern-day pilgrims negotiate meaning in their lives through

visits to multiple sites. In keeping with recent anthropologists and scholars of religion who are re-imagining the phenomenon of pilgrimage as including more than just journeys to traditional religious sites, my contribution to this issue focuses on visitation to sites of remembrance associated with mass tragedies. These memorials challenge the now-outdated academic binary of “sacred” versus “secular” in the sense that they—like Lourdes, Csíksomlyó, and other sites described in this special issue—serve as nexuses for profound personal and communal meaning-making in the contemporary world.

At the same time, my interest lies not only in the human actors who move between different memory sites, but also in the things that journey alongside or independent of them. Rather than looking at the relationship between Sylvia and her angel as a one-way street in which Sylvia is continually shaping, moving, and re-imagining the meaning of this memorial statue in her life, I take seriously the claims by Bruno Latour and Gordon Lynch⁶ that objects have a degree of agency in the intersubjective relationships that constitute our lived reality.⁷ Sylvia has been shaped by this object and its journeys across time just as much as she has shaped it. Here, I draw upon recent scholarship in the field of material religion to elucidate how objects like this statue can mediate and also inform the lifeworlds around them, including lifeworlds that have been touched with grief.⁸

6 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Gordon Lynch, “Object theory: toward an intersubjective, mediated, and dynamic theory of religion,” in *Religion and Material Culture: The matter of belief*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2010), 40-54.

7 Theories of intersubjectivity have specific intellectual lineages in fields such as psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and beyond. In my use of this concept, I employ the frameworks offered by existential phenomenologists such as Michael Jackson, who defines intersubjectivity as the complex webs of relations that exist between people, places, ideas, beliefs, and objects that are forged through speech and action. Michael Jackson, *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012), 9. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), 183.

8 I use the term “lifeworld” here to call attention to the fact that human responses to tragedy are situated in webs of reciprocal relationships with other people, places, things, and more that are continually shifting and often ambiguous. Jackson defines a lifeworld in this sense of the word, “When I speak of a lifeworld (rather than a society), I follow Edward Husserl’s claim that we live in a world of intersubjective relationships ‘directly conscious’ and ‘plainly certain’ of this experience before anything ‘is established scientifically, whether in physiology, psychology, or sociology’ concerning its nature. Understanding a lifeworld is unlike understanding a text or an object.



Ultimately, this article builds off of scholarship in the fields of pilgrimage studies and material religion to argue that Sylvia's angel and other physical objects that have traversed multiple sites of remembrance can be better understood using the metaphor of palimpsests of grief. As noted in other contributions to this issue, a palimpsest is a manuscript page from which the original text has been washed off for reuse as the basis of another document. Over time, the original writing re-emerges on, in, and around the later text, thus creating layers of meaning that can be interpreted in light of one another. In much the same way, Sylvia's statue holds multiple narratives that have become intertwined over time. This statue was once a marker that commemorated the loss of two people for whom she had cared deeply, and the same statue later became a gift of healing that she extended to another community struck by tragedy. Someday, this angel may be relocated to Sylvia's own cemetery plot, thus accruing another layer of "text" or meaning.

This metaphor of palimpsests of grief illuminates a growing trend that I have witnessed in my ethnographic fieldwork at sites of remembrance across America and beyond: the sharing of material memory objects as a means of attempting to cultivate what I call "trans-situational bonding." Through trans-situational bonding, individuals and communities previously affected by one loss or trauma strive to forge human-to-human connections with those who are currently grappling with the aftermath of a more recent tragedy. Examples of the use of objects to facilitate this dynamic abound across our globe today. For example, in 2013, the National September 11 Memorial & Museum established a "Survivor Tree Seedling Program" that connects the memorial with other communities across the globe. The Survivor Tree is a Callery pear tree that was badly damaged on September 11 but was gradually nursed back to health.⁹ The museum sees the tree as an embodiment of "our nation's spirit of hope and healing, strength and resilience" and, each year,

Lifeworlds are open, complex, and never self-contained..." Michael Jackson, *How Lifeworlds Work: Emotionality, Sociality, and the Ambiguity of Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017), xi.

- 9 The National September 11 Memorial & Museum was not the first site of remembrance to develop this sort of program. A similar program exists in Oklahoma City, where seeds are still regularly collected from an American elm tree that survived the bombing in 1995 and distributed to individuals and groups across the nation. Darla Slipke, "Oklahoma City's Survivor Tree seedlings have spread across the nation," *The Oklahoman*, April 17, 2017.



it sends seedlings from the tree to three communities that have endured recent tragedies.¹⁰ Another example emerged in the aftermath of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, when many of the messages that were left at the temporary memorial on Boylston Street originated from families or communities previously affected by other mass tragedies in America. This phenomenon is made possible, at least in part, by the ease of transportation and mobility that characterize our contemporary world, which allow persons—and their material objects—to travel quickly and directly to the site of a tragedy in the immediate aftermath of a given incident.

This mode of analysis reveals that memory objects like Sylvia's statue are constantly being shaped and re-shaped across time as they mediate relationships between individuals and their deceased loved ones as well as relationships between various communities that have been touched by tragedy. And, yet, these memory objects also lie at the center of processes of meaning-making that are not only continuous but, at times, uncontrollable or unwieldy. As further analysis of the case of Sylvia's angel will reveal, the sharing of memory objects may not always be the most effective means of forging trans-situational bonds, given that they can come to hold radically different meanings for the communities they are working to bridge.

MEMORIALS AND CONTEMPORARY PILGRIMAGE

In their introduction to *Reframing Pilgrimage*, Simon Coleman and John Eade¹¹ raise a question of fundamental importance to scholars across a wide range of disciplines: what is and what can be considered a pilgrimage? Observing that many of the foundational works in pilgrimage studies such as the writings of Victor Turner and Edith Turner¹² tended to prioritize the places associated with pilgrimage, these authors align themselves with academics who posit that greater attention must be paid to the various forms of movement that occur as pilgrims travel to, around, and from a given site.¹³ They

10 "Survivor Tree Seedling Program," 9/11 Memorial & Museum, accessed January 8, 2018, <https://www.911memorial.org/survivor-tree-seedling-program>. In fact, in 2015, Newtown was the recipient of one of these seedlings in memory of those killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

11 Simon Coleman and John Eade, "Introduction: reframing pilgrimage," in *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in motion*, ed. Simon Coleman and John Eade (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-25.

12 Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

13 E. Alan Morinis, "Introduction: the territory of the anthropology of pilgrimage," in *Sacred Journeys:*



also broaden the category of pilgrimage to comprise more than just exceptional journeys to sacred sites. Coleman and Eade write,

Our shift towards movement is itself intended to move the study of pilgrimage away from certain aspects of conventional anthropological discourse on the subject. Just as we broaden our ethnographic gaze to take in more than the central shrine, so we attempt to widen the theoretical location of studies of “sacred travel.”¹⁴

According to these theorists, the same analytical tools that have been used by scholars of pilgrimage to examine ritualized travel to shrines, churches, or other religious places can be employed to examine other cases in which human beings engage in intentional journeys of meaning-making or identity formation. Thus, Coleman and Eade’s edited book includes chapters centered around diverse types of journeying. One chapter by Jill Dubisch explores Vietnam veterans’ annual cross-country motorcycle ride on Memorial Day, while another chapter by Paul Basu analyzes individuals living in the Scottish diaspora who return to their homeland as a means of reconnecting with their past.

Since the publication of *Reframing Pilgrimage*, a growing subset of scholars has investigated how journeys to memorials and other sites of remembrance serve as examples of pilgrimage in the contemporary world.¹⁵ One short but powerful

the anthropology of pilgrimage, ed. E. Alan Morinis (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 1-28, Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere, “Globalization and identity: dialectics of flow and closure: introduction” in *Globalization and Identity: dialectics of flow and closure*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 1-16. Marc Augé, *Non-Places* (London: Verso, 1995).

14 Coleman and Eade, “Introduction: reframing pilgrimage,” 3.

15 The move towards re-imagining pilgrimage in broader terms is strikingly similar to another important conversation that continues to play out in fields such as anthropology, sociology, and the study of religion today: an interrogation of the binary of “sacred” versus “secular” that once persisted in academic discourse. Many of the earliest anthropologists of religion—including figures like E.B. Tylor, James Frazer, and others—tended to define religion and the sacred monothetically. (See Michael Jackson and Albert Piette, “Anthropology and the Existential Turn,” in *What is Existential Anthropology?* ed. Michael Jackson and Albert Piette (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 13.) That is, they associated religion with conventionally demarcated systems of belief such as Catholicism or Islam and believed that “the sacred” could be identified and separated from other elements of human experience. This way of imagining the world often led to binaries of inclusion and exclusion as certain texts, rituals, beliefs, and other phenomena were coded as “religious” or “sacred,” while everything else was relegated to the realm of the “secular.” This theoretical



illustration of this approach comes from E. Alan Morinis's review of Coleman and Eade's edited book, which he begins by recounting his visit to Ground Zero in New York City in 2004. Morinis writes, "Though nothing more than a hole in the ground now remained to be seen, what went on around that unadorned excavation was a display of reverence and awe that matched any of the holy pilgrimages I have witnessed in Europe and Asia. Hushed visitors lit candles, placed notes in the chain-link fence, erected memorials to their visits, and silently circumambulated the site in an orderly, clockwise direction."¹⁶ Morinis concludes his anecdote with a poignant question, stating, "I wondered whether the visitors to the WTC site were perhaps consciously calling on and applying their own experiences of religious pilgrimages to this unconventional context, or whether perhaps more typical pilgrimages as well as other rites (like visiting disaster sites) might weave their meaningful and affective practices out of strands of generic threads that are anchored deep in the human soul."¹⁷ Is it possible, Morinis wonders, that there is a fundamental human impulse or drive undergirding both traditional forms of pilgrimages as well as contemporary visitation to sites of remembrance?

framework has come under intense scrutiny in recent decades. Ann Taves, for example, argues that historical attempts to identify and study "religious experience" have resulted in subjective demarcations pertaining to what counts as religion and imposed artificial boundaries between religious studies and other fields of inquiry. Accordingly, she advises scholars to "disaggregate the concept of 'religious experience' and study the wide range of experiences to which religious significance has been attributed" (Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 8.) Others have articulated similar points. Michael Jackson, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Relatedness, Religiosity, and the Real* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). My own fieldwork in New York frequently revealed the manner in which demarcations between "sacred" journeys or phenomena and "secular" ones often break down amidst the ambiguities of lived experience. Many of the docents at Tribute told me that their weekly visits to the museum were like "going to church," while others described the compassionate, attentive visitors on their tours as "angels sent from God" to lend them strength and support. Sylvia also tended to interweave reflections about her beliefs—such as her belief that Christians should practice charity and love for all people—with other seemingly mundane aspects of her life.

16 E. Alan Morinis, "Review of *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in motion*, by Simon Coleman and John Eade," *Material Religion* 2, no. 1 (2006): 115.

17 Morinis, "Review of *Reframing Pilgrimage*," 115.



E. Frances King's later work¹⁸ continues this line of thinking by comparing the experiences of pilgrims journeying to religious sites in Ireland and France with the experiences of visitors to spontaneous secular shrines. She begins the fourth chapter of her book by summarizing key findings from her fieldwork amongst pilgrims at Croagh Patrick, where thousands of visitors ascend the mountain's steep slopes in honor of St. Patrick each year, and Lough Derg, where pilgrims spend three days fasting and praying as they walk barefoot around the island. She then turns to examine parallels between these Catholic pilgrimages and other journeys to spontaneous shrines that have cropped up in the wake of public tragedies. For example, after ninety-five soccer fans died at Anfield Stadium in England due to a crush caused by overcrowding in the standing-room-only area, citizens throughout the city of Liverpool created an informal memorial at the stadium. Just like individuals traveling to Croagh Patrick or Lough Derg, pilgrims who journeyed to Anfield left tokens and petitions at the site, repeated set phrases (such as "You'll never walk alone"), and emphasized communal support and shared movement.¹⁹

Recent works by these scholars and others have elucidated how, by broadening our definitions of pilgrimage, we may locate useful theoretical frameworks for studying additional phenomena in the world around us today, including the creation of and visitation to sites that commemorate a mass tragedy. Yet, the above-mentioned studies still largely center around a given person or group's experience at a *single* site rather than tracing their journeys to or participation in multiple memorials, monuments, and museums over the course of their lives. If we hope to do greater justice to the complex webs of relationships that surround contemporary forms of pilgrimage, we must pay attention to the ways in which individuals' past experiences with or at sites of remembrance inevitably inform their present journeys. In the section that follows, I will delve deeper into Sylvia's experiences as a means of showing how her involvement at Angels' Circle in the wake of September 11 gave her the motivation to act—and a framework *for* acting—in response to the shootings in Newtown.

18 E. Frances King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

19 King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture*, 98-100.

FROM NEW YORK TO NEWTOWN

The first time that Sylvia spoke to me about her angel was during one of our many conversations over lunch during the summer of 2013. There was a chance of rain that afternoon in July, so the two of us hunkered down at a table in the back of an eatery a few blocks away from Tribute. I had just returned from shadowing a walking tour with a different docent, during which a powerful encounter had taken place: after the 9/11 survivor who was leading the tour told her personal story to the group, a visitor on the tour quietly shared that she was from Boston and her own community was still grappling with the aftermath of the bombings at the Boston Marathon. “Thank you for sharing your story about September 11 today,” the visitor said. “It helps me to know that others have gotten through things like this in the past.” I recounted this story to Sylvia and, in turn, she began to tell me about some of her own experiences since 2001.

“You know, after 9/11, I didn’t know what to do,” she began. “They didn’t find my cousin—we didn’t have any of his remains to bury—and his immediate family lived out in New Jersey, which made it difficult for me to go and visit.” Consequently, when Sylvia heard about the spontaneous memorial that was emerging in Staten Island, she decided to find a statue that she could contribute to the site. “I looked everywhere I could think to find the right angel,” she said. “I knew that I needed something that could sustain the elements. After about two months I found my angel and knew she was the one. She had these beautiful outstretched arms, so I had two small metal plates engraved with [my loved ones’] names and I hung them from her hands.” When Sylvia brought her angel to Angels’ Circle, the site was already crammed with other artifacts, photos, and angels, but she managed to find a space large enough for her statue. It was November of 2001 at that point, and the angel would stay at that same memorial for eleven years.

“The shooting in Newtown happened on the fourteenth of December [in 2012],” Sylvia continued. “About four or five days later I had this impulse. I said, ‘I’m going to get [my angel] and I’m driving her out there.’ So, I did. I got my angel and she was all covered in ice. She was melting all over the car while I was driving.”



Sylvia laughed at the memory. “But I drove her out to Newtown, and I gave her to someone at St. Rose of Lima because I had heard that the priests there were ministering to the grieving community.” Sylvia placed a note on the bottom of her angel that included her name and a short message about how the angel had come from Angels’ Circle in Staten Island. “I told the gentleman at the church about how this angel had helped me through a hard time and how she’d collected the healing energy from the memorial in New York. I told him, ‘Until you have some sort of formal memorial of your own, I’d like to give you this.’” He thanked her for her gift and promised he would pass it along to Monsignor Weiss, the leader of St. Rose of Lima who had been at the forefront of the church’s response to the shootings. Then Sylvia got back into her car and drove home. She concluded her story by reiterating what had motivated her to make this journey to Newtown, stating, “I was trying to take the energy of our own grassroots memorial and bring a piece of that to them so that they could have something to build off of.” Sylvia’s final statement directly reinforced the metaphor of palimpsests of grief that I suggested above. In bringing her statue to St. Rose of Lima, she was attempting to share a “page” from her own life that a new set of authors could use as a starting point for their own processes of meaning making.

When Sylvia first told me this story, it ended on a somewhat unresolved note: in the eight months that had transpired since her drive out to Newtown, she had not heard anything from the folks at St. Rose of Lima and she did not know where her statue had ended up. But the narrative did not end there. In early 2014, Sylvia decided to write to Monsignor Weiss to inquire about the statue. She had heard that the community in Newtown was beginning to plan their own memorial, and she wanted to make sure that the angel did not get lost in the shuffle. The pastor wrote her back, assuring her that the angel was still at the church and that he would return the statue to her soon. By the end of that year, the church had mailed the statue back to Sylvia and she was back in her original home at Angels’ Circle. “I was a little disappointed that I didn’t get a more meaningful response from the folks at the church,” Sylvia admitted to me. “I drove out to see them and I brought something that meant a lot to me, so I would have liked to have heard more beyond their just sending my angel back. But, I really don’t blame them. That whole



community, including the priests and the clergy, was probably just so inundated with messages and outpourings of support. And I imagine they were still working through their own shock.” Although she was disappointed that the sharing of her statue had not led to deeper forms of connection or exchange with persons at St. Rose of Lima, Sylvia suspected that the community had been overwhelmed by their losses as well as the experience of being thrust into the national spotlight.

Sylvia’s suspicion was accurate. *The New York Times* reported that, after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown “was inundated with offers of support and heaps of donations—letters, paper cranes, 65,000 teddy bears.”²⁰ The response was so overpowering that, in July 2013, the town’s first selectman, E. Patricia Llodra, issued a public statement asking outsiders to stop sending things. She wrote, “Over the past many months, we have been the recipients of great generosity and kindness of many individuals and organizations...I believe the time is coming for us to move into a quiet period, of rest, recuperation and healing.”²¹ As much as the community appreciated the symbols of support that they had received from others around the nation and world, the constant reminders of the tragedy were not always helpful as local citizens tried to find a way to cope with their grief. In *Newtown: An American Tragedy*, Matthew Lysiak describes the challenges that many families faced in the year that followed the shootings as they continually confronted the memorials that had cropped up all across their town. One family that had lost a child in the shooting could not bear to walk into a local grocery store anymore because they would have to pass by the large memorial ribbons adorning its entranceway. A parent told Lysiak, “Everyone wants to help, and I can appreciate that, but how do you begin the process of healing?”²² These comments resonate with recent scholarship that analyzes the role that memorialization may play in re-traumatizing communities or individuals affected by a tragic loss.²³

20 Rick Rojas and Kristin Hussey, “Newtown Is ‘Still So Raw,’ 5 Years After Sandy Hook Shooting,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2017.

21 Peter Applebome, “Ready for Less-Tearful Future, Newtown is Declining Tributes,” *The New York Times*, July 9, 2013.

22 Matthew Lysiak, *Newtown: An American Tragedy* (New York: Gallery Books, 2013), 250.

23 Leanh Nguyen, “The Ethics of Trauma: Re-traumatization in Society’s Approach to the Traumatized Subject,” *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 61, no. 1 (2011): 27-47, Britta Timm Knudsen and Jan Ifversen, “Commemoration, heritage, and affective ecology: the case of Utoya” in



While the act of memorialization may help some persons restore a sense of psychological, social, or existential order, others may find that persistent exposure to memorials in the months or even years afterwards only serves to keep them stuck in a wounded space.

Even the leaders at St. Rose of Lima struggled to manage the tokens of public support that they received. During a phone interview with Monsignor Weiss in early 2018, I learned that, in the aftermath of the shootings, his church received hundreds of thousands of things in the mail, which ranged from letters and cards to statues, artwork, cookies and hams, and full-sized Christmas trees with ornaments. These items took years to sort through, especially since subsequent anniversaries of the shootings often inspired people to send even more things to Newtown. “For a while, we tried to keep records of everything that we received,” Weiss told me. “But eventually we had to give up because it was just too much.”²⁴ He also noted that the task of sorting through the memorial items proved overwhelming for a community that was still working to process its own grief. “We knew that it was important to actually physically touch and look at everything that we received. But it was a lot of work for people who were already emotionally exhausted.” Weiss ended up creating a schedule of two-hour volunteer shifts because the emotion of reading letters proved too intense for individuals to do for extended periods of time.

Awash in a sea of memorial items, the church had to get creative at times in figuring out what to do with all of the stuff. Some things were passed on to members of the community; St. Rose of Lima gave the families anything they wanted and invited the citizens of Newtown to take many of the remaining items. Still, hundreds of thousands of objects remained. “I would dare say that we received 50,000 pairs of rosaries,” Weiss recalled. “So, when our [church] kids went to a big youth rally that draws about 3,000 kids, we gave them the rosaries to bring and dispense there. We had to be creative and yet respectful. Things were given to us in love and we

Heritage, Affect and Emotion: Politics, Practices, and Infrastructures, ed. Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, Emma Waterton, and Steve Watson (New York: Routledge, 2017).

24 The sorting process was slowed even further by a bomb threat that the church received just a couple of days after the shootings, which meant that each and every package had to be inspected by dogs before it could be opened.

couldn't just dismiss that."^{25,26} Today, a handful of bins still sit in the church's basement, holding sample cards and other objects that were retained for the archives. And, from time to time, people do call or write to St. Rose of Lima to ask about one of the memorial items that had been sent. Weiss told me, "We just recently got a call from a church in Chicago that is doing some sort of exhibit or event about gun violence. They wanted to borrow a cross that had been sent to Newtown to include [in the exhibit], and they had heard that our church still had it. So, people are watching. They are looking to see where everything that was sent to us ended up."

In light of this reality, it is hardly surprising that Sylvia did not hear back from the community in Newtown until she reached out to them herself. What stood out to me as more remarkable was the fact that the statue, after making her own silent, undocumented journey in Newtown for two years, had managed to find her way back into Sylvia's life. Although no enduring forms of trans-situational bonding emerged from the exchange between Sylvia and the community at St. Rose of Lima, the church clearly appreciated her gesture enough to devote time and money to mailing the statue back to her. And, as a result of the angel's time away from Staten Island, Sylvia felt an even stronger attachment to her.

MEMORIAL OBJECTS, INTERSUBJECTIVITY, AND AGENCY

One striking aspect of Sylvia's experiences is the manner in which her responses to September 11 and the Sandy Hook shooting were so deeply *embodied*. In both instances when she was faced with shock or grief in the aftermath of a mass tragedy,

25 The town as a whole faced a similar dilemma and, in 2013, Newtown decided to have many of the items they had received cremated into a soil to be used as a foundation for the memorial.

26 In the course of my interview with Monsignor Weiss, I asked what sorts of things he had received had meant the most to him in the weeks after the tragedy. He told me, "On the Friday night that [the shootings] happened, the Holy Father sent me a fax. It meant a lot to know that in a matter of hours our tragedy had already been known by the Holy Father and he was responding to us." Another touching thing that Weiss received was an email from a priest in Ireland, where a shooting had occurred in 1995. Weiss recalled, "He said to me, 'Father, sleep. While you sleep, we will pray.' It was just a simple message but wow. And we also had a lot of really sincere people come to visit us. The entire Muslim community in Newtown came to one of our services just to show solidarity." Interestingly, what stood out as most meaningful to Weiss personally were not physical objects but the messages and actions of others.



she journeyed to and participated in the creation of a site of remembrance. Perhaps displacing herself physically was a means of working through the more abstract, psychological displacement that she was feeling. At the same time, it is important to remember that she did not do so alone: her angel statue played a role in mediating and informing her experiences. In this section, I draw from recent works in the study of material religion to argue that greater attention ought to be paid to *physical objects* as integral participants in the intersubjective relationships that inhere at, around, and between sites of remembrance.

In his introduction to the edited volume *Religion and Material Culture*, David Morgan argues that scholars of religion need to shift away from their long-standing focus on “beliefs” and textual sources towards a more thorough interrogation of objects, spaces, things, and other dimensions of what he calls “felt-life” and their significances for people.²⁷ Analyzing abstract systems of thought can only get us so far in understanding how a particular person’s lifeworld is constituted and re-constituted across time because “materiality mediates belief.”²⁸ Morgan claims that, in a world that is characterized by fluidity and ambiguity, human beings tend to manufacture objects in an attempt to stabilize meaning. However, even physical objects often resist states of inertia or stasis, “Things circulate through a variety of protocols of exchange. They are displayed, hidden, disguised, forgotten, destroyed, re-created. They exhibit biographies and are often best studied over time.”²⁹ *Things* matter and, as recent studies of pilgrimage and visitation to memorials have shown, Americans often put their faith in things to help them negotiate traumatic events.³⁰

One rich account of this phenomenon comes to us through the work of Erika Doss, who has studied the increasing visibility of spontaneous memorials in America. Through analysis of memorials created at the sites of tragic and traumatic death,

27 David Morgan, “Introduction: The matter of belief,” in *Religion and Material Culture: The matter of belief*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2010), xiii.

28 Morgan, “Introduction: The matter of belief,” 12.

29 Morgan, “Introduction: The matter of belief,” 14.

30 Erika Doss, “Spontaneous Memorials and Contemporary Modes of Mourning in America,” *Material Religion* 2, no. 3 (2006): 294-318.

such as the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999, Doss argues that spontaneous memorials represent a mode of mourning that is “public and continuous”³¹ and that is “above all, materialist.”³² She notes, for example, that approximately 200,000 items were left at the shrine in Columbine over the course of two weeks, and that as many as a million items were left on the Memory Fence at a site near the Oklahoma City bombing. Objects ranged from prayer cards and devotional tracts to stuffed animals, poems, and military medals.³³ In considering how and why these objects have come to play a central role in contemporary memorial practices, Doss argues that the meaning of material culture lies “in how things—and places—evoke memories, sustain thoughts, and conjure states of being.”³⁴ She also posits that “[t]he things chosen satisfy the emotional needs of [human attempts to negotiate complex moments and events]: flowers symbolize the beauty and brevity of life, as do balloons; condolence cards and handwritten poems give voice to the grief-stricken and permit conversations with (and confessions to) the deceased; teddy bears intimate innocence lost.”³⁵ Thus, as “spontaneous” as they may seem, the material objects that people bring to grassroots shrines and memorials are usually anything but arbitrary; but, rather, they reflect deeper psychological and spiritual concerns. This fact—and its political and social consequences—is also forcefully supported by Marita Sturken’s research, which shows that the buying of kitsch like teddy bears in the wake of a mass tragedy is a trend that operates within a broader “continuum of comfort culture” at play in the United States.³⁶

Returning to the case of Sylvia’s angel, we see that, despite this statue being one of dozens at the memorial in Staten Island, it is anything but indistinctive. Sylvia’s comments about how she needed to find the “right” angel—and the fact that it

31 Doss, “Spontaneous Memorials,” 295.

32 Doss, “Spontaneous Memorials,” 298.

33 Again, while Doss’s research is interesting and important in its own right, it does not address the use of these objects across time or trace the “biography” of any one object in the way that Morgan suggests would be useful. What is most fascinating about Sylvia’s experiences with her angel is the role that this one statue has played at multiple sites and in various moments of life.

34 Doss, “Spontaneous Memorials,” 299.

35 Doss, “Spontaneous Memorials,” 299.

36 Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 51.



took her nearly two months to do so—speak to the fact that this object was meant to serve a specific purpose in her life. One aspect of this particular statue that was appealing to Sylvia was her two outstretched arms, which could be modified to hold images of her loved ones. She was able to take an anonymous object and personalize it in a way that worked for her. In so doing, Sylvia fashioned a material reminder of her ongoing relationship with the dead, one that extended beyond the trauma of what she had endured on September 11. Though the loved ones she lost in the attacks were no longer physically present in the world, they lived on in her memory and in her relationship with the angel. The sense that this angel was a point of connection between heaven and earth was explicitly evident in the adjectives that Sylvia uses to describe her: the angel is simultaneously “ethereal” and “real.” She is here amongst living and also extends somehow beyond the realm that we inhabit.

One must also remember that, in the months after September 11, Sylvia and her family did not have a body to bury or a particular gravesite to visit. As I have written elsewhere,³⁷ memorials can sometimes serve as surrogate cemeteries for persons who face situations of ambiguous loss. When human beings are faced with overwhelming situations of loss or grief, some find it helpful to craft objects or places to help them mediate those emotions. Scholarship in a wide variety of fields affirms this reality. Mary Douglas’s anthropological study of pollution and dirt shows how inner states of disorder are often managed by ritually reorganizing one’s day-to-day environment. She writes, “In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea.”³⁸ D.W. Winnicott’s work on transitional objects³⁹ also illuminates how children often find comfort in teddy bears, blankets, and other readily-available items when they are confused or angry about a parent’s absence. Although there is nothing “childish” about Sylvia’s experiences with

37 Kate DeConinck, “Mourning Ambiguous Loss at a 9/11 Memorial,” *Cosmologies: a magazine of science, religion, and culture*, August 13, 2014, <http://cosmologicsmagazine.com/kate-yanina-de-coninck-mourning-ambiguous-loss-at-a-911-memorial/>

38 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966), 12.

39 D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971).



tragedy, the role that her angel statue has played in her life resonates in meaningful ways with these studies and others.⁴⁰ In all of these cases, an embodied practice or material object serves as a physical means of stabilizing and working upon a situation that feels ungrounded or impossible to tackle abstractly. The angel statue allowed Sylvia to take action and establish a sense of agency when other modes of grieving were inaccessible.⁴¹

Yet, as Morgan reminds us, objects are not as stable as we commonly imagine them to be. Sylvia's angel played an important role in her experiences after 9/11; however, the statue's significance has continued to evolve over time. When Sylvia brought her angel to St. Rose of Lima, she was acting upon an established mode of grieving that had proven helpful to her in the past. She offered the statue as a palimpsest of grief, hoping to share some of the statue's core "healing energy" as that community worked to make meaning of out its own suffering. Sylvia tried to form a trans-situational bond with a different community affected by grief by sharing this object as a sign of solidarity and hope. What is interesting about this particular case, especially when compared to others like the seedling program at the National 9/11 Memorial, is that the means through which Sylvia attempted to establish trans-situational bonds with the community in Newtown was not one that proved effective for the grieving community itself. As Monsignor Weiss's remarks show us, the material items that the community in Newtown received, while affirming in a certain sense, mostly functioned to create a burden for those receiving these objects. The palimpsest did not "take," and the angel did not become the starting point for Newtown's memorial. Instead, the statue likely remained in the church's basement until Monsignor Weiss arranged to have her sent back to Sylvia.

40 Mona Körte, "Bracelet, Hand Towel, Pocket Watch: Objects of the Last Moment in Memory and Narration," trans. Toby Axelrod, *SHOFAR: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* (Fall 2004): 109-120, Ellen Schattschneider, "The Bloodstained Doll: Violence and the Gift in Wartime Japan," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 31 no. 2 (2005): 329-356.

41 My way of conceptualizing agency is derived from the works of existential anthropologists such as Jackson, who describes it as "one's ability to act" and "having a sense of existential power." Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt*, Second edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 23. Thus, in using the term agency, I am referring to a person's sense that they can act upon the world around her in meaningful or purposeful ways—and that they are not just an object of fate who is acted upon.



The metaphor of palimpsests of grief thus illuminates two primary conditions that must be met in order for material objects to effectively mediate trans-situational bonding. First, the original author of the palimpsest must be willing to erase the narratives that they previously inscribed on the manuscript in order to make space for new authors' texts. In the case of the angel, Sylvia readily relocated an object that held a deep significance to her personally, but she never fully gave it over for others to use as they desired. This fact comes through most clearly in how she included a note with her own story and name on the bottom of the statue before handing it over. Second, in order for a palimpsest to take on new stories and significances, the new authors must have a desire or need for it. The community at St. Rose of Lima was so awash in the thousands of objects that people had sent to them that these items came to feel like more of a burden than a help. Rather than writing their stories on the manuscripts that others had shared with them, the community in Newtown instead decided to start fresh with a blank page by establishing transitional objects and sites of remembrance that were uniquely their own.

But the fact that the angel did not cultivate the sorts of trans-situational bonding that Sylvia was seeking does not mean that the statue did not play an important role in Sylvia's own life. This statue has functioned more effectively as a personal or single-authored palimpsest as opposed to one that has been shared communally. Even today, the angel still helps to mediate Sylvia's relationship with those she lost on September 11, and she also carries in her the story of Sylvia's journey to Newtown years later. This angel has helped Sylvia negotiate more viable relationships with both the living and the dead. And, as Sylvia imagines bringing this statue to her own gravesite one day, one can imagine how the angel may also help Sylvia prepare psychologically for her own eventual passing from life. Unlike a traditional palimpsest, Sylvia has never intentionally erased or washed away any of the statue's significances. Instead, the angel holds all of Sylvia's narratives simultaneously. She is full of stories but not in a way that precludes her from being further filled with new meanings. Unlike a sheet of paper, which can only hold as much text as its dimensions will allow, this angel is infinitely capacious.

At the same time, I hesitate to characterize this statue as an object that is entirely



passive. Sylvia's angel is not only the recipient of stories, emotions, or relationships; she also actively contributes to the lifeworlds in which she is enmeshed. As Latour suggests, objects can influence and help to shape the lifeworlds they inhabit. He argues that anything that "modifies a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor" and we can recognize the agency of any thing that "might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on."⁴² This call for attention to the agency of objects has inspired scholars such as Lynch, who admits that "this is not the same kind of agency demonstrated by empirically observable human beings" but believes that "there are reasonable grounds for arguing that our concepts of agency need greater refinement than the intentional actions of individuals and groups."⁴³ To better understand the role that memory objects play in our world today, we must consider how they are agents of change in their own right.

Sylvia's ways of discussing her angel show that she engages this statue not only as a physical object but as also an active agent. Speaking with her, one senses that she and the angel constitute a team—one that will remain connected even after Sylvia's own passing one day. In thinking about how this statue has influenced Sylvia's beliefs, actions, and memories, I am reminded of a small detail that Sylvia shared with me on the day that we went to visit her statue on Staten Island. As we arrived at the site and located her angel, I was surprised to see that the photos that Sylvia had described placing into the statue's hands were not there. "Yes, you're right," she told me. "Over the years, both plates were lost—probably from wind and weather since [the angel] is always outdoors braving the elements." I asked her if she had ever considered replacing the plates. "No," she told me. "When I noticed that the plates were gone, I took it as a sign that [the angel] now belongs to all of us." In this instance, Sylvia acknowledged that, just as we may use things to mediate our relationships with the world around us, things themselves also have the capacity to speak to or affect us. Had this angel never shorn the photos that she once carried, Sylvia might never have recognized the possibility for the new journeys and narratives they might share.

⁴² Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71-72.

⁴³ Lynch, "Object theory," 49-50.



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