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**Public Displays of Emotion Today:  
Changing Forms of Memorializing Death and Disaster**

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My talk this evening reports on a series of sociological studies of the emotions as *cultural practices*, having as their focus collective displays of emotion and emotionality in a number of different social and institutional sites. These cultural practices, I argue, exemplify something relatively new on the social terrain, a topic of special interest to sociologists as well as behavioral historians (Stearns 2005). For example, in leisure and sports, the rise of risk-taking activities (called “extreme games”) and the pursuit of intense experiences such as those well-documented by climbers of Mount Everest like Jon Krakauer (1997) and Goran Kropp (1997); the new sites and forms of memorializing individual deaths and collective disasters, reflecting the popularity of memorializing in American culture today; the rise of media “spectacles”—extravaganzas of technology, entertainment, sports, and politics (from Superbowls and “reality” TV shows to New Year’s media celebrations and TV shows like American Idol).

What interests me particularly about these cultural forms are the very public displays of emotional behaviors surrounding them (and, in some cases, the emotional displays that they evoke in their audiences); in important respects they are emotional dramas of intense feeling, perhaps, a *display* of intensity (an issue I have yet to adequately resolve for each of these cases I am examining). Among the many things that interest me about these behaviors are what they say to large bodies of work, like Peter

Stearns's (1994) history of modern emotions, his argument that since mid-twentieth century we have been undergoing an important emotional seachange—the emergence of a distinctly American emotional style that Stearns calls “cool”; or, what do these collective emotional dramas mean relative to Arlie Hochschild's influential account of the “commercialization of human feeling,” where emotional control and management are paramount features of everyday life? To put one of my research questions in the most general terms: is today's emotional culture both *cool* and *hot*? sending us messages about the dangers of emotional intensity and deep feelings, while fostering pursuits of pleasure, release, and emotional display?

The “collective behaviors” or “cultural practices” I study (terms I borrow from history and cultural studies, respectively) developed since the 1970s when social scientists were identifying certain distinguishing features of late-modernity: globalization, its information technologies, its cultures of consumption, leisure, and pleasure, its environment of signs and images, to mention some of them. These features of late modernity operate as the backdrop, as it were, of our emotional lives today. But my principal focus are these public displays themselves—visible to all of us—but neither studied nor interpreted as important emotional cultural forms in their own right. In fact, I am impressed by their absence in sociological and historical studies of today's emotional cultures.

Mass media has become one aspect of everyday life that is integral to many of the emotional pursuits that I study: Everyday life is played out against a shimmering background of images and sounds, emanating from television, internet, radio, but also portable electronics like car radios and CD players, iPods, and cellphones that allow for

us to be plugged in almost consistently to an environment of images, messages, voices, and sounds to stimulate and entertain us. Since my study began, I have come to see mass media as elements in the development of many of these new and public displays of emotion. In fact, some of these collective behaviors have emerged out of new forms of media-based social identities where “participants” and “audiences” are inextricably part of the practice or event. Some examples:

*In the pursuit of “extreme games” in leisure and competitive sports*, for example, websites like Everestnews.com keep audiences and journalists informed of current and ongoing events on current climbs and climbers; leading climbers author bestselling books and become media personalities, such as Jon Krakauer, author of *Into Thin Air*. When Tori Murden, the competitive rower, crossed the Atlantic Ocean on the *American Pearl*, her website posted frequent reports while her “onlookers” sent messages of emotional support.

*Or, take the collective and highly emotional responses of individuals and groups to the heroics of firefighters*—such as when six firefighters in Worcester, Massachusetts gave their lives to search a burning building for homeless people. This event and the public displays that followed upon the event—President Clinton and other dignitaries joined 30,000 firefighters from around the world in a 3-mile funeral procession—this gathering, made possible by the internet and email, enabled firefighters worldwide to form “communities,” to “gather” online, to assemble, to march and to be viewed (and to view themselves) if not in living color then in cyberspace. Mass media—photos, films, televised and online ceremonies—are vital to the formation of these cultural heroes, these “risk-takers,” and the powerful collective emotions they evoke;

emotional media dramas express and articulate the meaning of these current-day heroes to the public and to participants. There are many examples of the firefighter hero and the media dramas and iconography that surround them from the Oklahoma City Memorial to 9/11.

*The new emotional sites—both popular and assembled by public and state institutions—to memorialize and to remember deaths, wars, human disasters.*

Sometimes it is the death of a celebrity or statesman (Diana, Princess of Wales serves as the prototype) by masses of mourners and mass audiences. Sometimes—with air crashes—it is to mark the site where unknown victims fell; in others, to mark the deaths of known victims, the Columbine High School students. Both actual sites and virtual sites have become the location for displays, sites for memorializing, for “hanging our feelings” (Gross 1999: 3), and for the gatherings in cyberspace of those who want to participate in these memorial events as they occur.

*The intensity of emotions associated with sports and other media events*, the mania of fans inside and outside stadiums: the displays before and following the Boston Red Sox World Series victory; the now-legendary “Home Run Race” of Mark McGuire and Sammy Sosa to beat Roger Maris’s record. The expression and display of intense emotions figured in the excitement of fans, but also, and especially, they found expression with McGuire and Sosa themselves, whose displays of strong feelings on the field, recorded simultaneously on gigantic stadium digital screens, were striking and unprecedented, particularly when seen against the personal reserve of earlier baseball heroes of similar accomplishment. The 1961 films of Roger Maris—his demeanor and

reserve—replayed during the 1998 competition, provided dramatic studies in contrast of emotional cultures then and now, of celebrity athletes and their fans.

My study of cases like these, construes them as *cultural practices*. This means, among other things, that they can be used as resources for identifying today’s emotional cultures.\* Emotional cultures are embedded, as it were, in these practices, as are moral self-understandings, notions of self and identity, that is who I *really* am (whatever that “really” refers to), *how* the self is construed, *what* it believes itself to be, *how* it is connected (or not connected) to other selves, whether or not it believes in its own individuality. All of these aspects of identity as well as others are closely related to what I mean here by “emotional culture.”

### **Museums, Monuments, and Memorials**

My study—public emotions as cultural practices— includes the subject of memorializing deaths and disasters. In fact, one of the very first signs to me that “emotions” had taken on a new form—surprising me in the ways that it announced itself and by what it said about honoring the dead—were the new and very public displays of grief and mourning that began to appear on my own streets and neighborhoods in New York as well as on the nightly news. These shrines to mark the deaths of both strangers and friends, very public figures as well as those close to us, began to appear across America in the late 1970s, although one of the first expressions of this kind took place in Dallas, Texas after the assassination of John Kennedy in 1962. In the aftermath of the

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\* By “emotional cultures” I mean popular standards and practices about emotions, the ideas and understandings that ordinary people draw from to understand their feelings and emotions—a term identified with pioneering works in the sociology of emotions by Steven L. Gordon (1981) and Carol Stearns and Peter Stearns (1986).

assassination, mounds of flowers, candles, wreaths, and mementos were left at the site. The assassination site also became one of the first memorial museums in the U.S. The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza contains a permanent historical exhibition whose focus is the impact of Kennedy's death on the nation and the world.

There have been many other public displays for those who, like Kennedy, few knew personally but many mourned; in some of these cases, instant shrines were assembled within hours of the events: outside the New York City apartment house of John Lennon in 1980; at Sixth Street and Hudson, a few blocks from the site of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing; in Union, South Carolina where Susan Smith drowned her two young children; at Columbine High School for the fifteen young people killed at the violent rampage there; on the beach near the spot off Fire Island where 230 passengers of TWA Flight 800 died; at Kensington Palace in London in the days following the deadly car crash of Diana, Princess of Wales. For many, these displays—of mourners and the gifts they laid for the fallen—signaled something new about death and dying. Of course not entirely new, for people have always mourned their dead, but new in the public nature of the grieving, and new in the sense that the fallen were not known personally by those who mourned them so extravagantly.

The topic of study, *contemporary forms of memorializing*, is one that is typically examined together with the related subjects of museums and monuments; all three framed as part of *collective identity*—such as national identity, the personal and cultural feeling of belonging to a nation, a people—and *collective memory*, how a people knows itself and constructs that knowledge of itself out of its present and its past. In modern societies,

in particular, a people's memory and its identity are shaped by public and official "sites of memory" (Huysen 1995: 250): the **museum** represents how collecting and display are crucial processes of Western identity formation, for example, embodying hierarchies of value, exclusions, and so forth; "identity" here being a kind of wealth (of objects, knowledges, memories, experiences) (Clifford 1988: 218). The **monument**, such as the tombstone, refers to objects and sculptures used to memorialize persons or events; **memorials**, both mournful and celebratory, are memory sites as well as designated days, times, and assemblies; monuments and memorials can serve similar functions; but the monument is a subset of memorials. (One topic of interest to me in the study of monument-museum-memorial is that there has been a merging of these three institutional forms; boundaries have become fluid and there is a new "hybrid memorial media culture" (Huysen 1995: 255) and a popular reclaiming of these forms in urban centers and other public places, topics I address shortly.

[What follows is a brief discussion on the topic of memorializing to exemplify my approach:]

For about three decades now, there has been a surge of academic and scholarly interest in the museum, monument, and memorial as cultural phenomena, just as there has been a parallel development—popular and political—in building monuments and memorials. Today, memorializing is even described as possessing an "intensity" (Huysen 1995: 253), pointing to the range of engagements with the process (scholarly, popular, journalistic, political) and to the extraordinary rise in memorials and in new forms of memorializing. For example, the sheer proliferation of memorials and their popularity: Holocaust Memorials and Museums are now estimated in the thousands

worldwide and visitors to these memorials are now estimated in the millions (Young 1993: x). In Washington D.C., we have witnessed the most active period of building monuments in a century; for the Washington Mall alone, this includes the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Korean Memorial, the FDR Memorial, and the World War II Memorial. In 2000, U.S. government planners unveiled 102 possible sites for new memorials and museums in the Washington this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since its dedication in 1982, the Vietnam Memorial—by far, the most popular memorial in the country—has been visited by at least 50 million people and has consistently drawn visitors; despite the fact that “there is no liturgical calendar of rites there, nor is there a prescribed routine or custom that the acts of remembrance must follow; but the commemoration is regular, and everyday people go there to remember...” (Butterfield 2003: 32). The Oklahoma City memorial, dedicated in April 2000, received 340,000 visitors in its first five months.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982) and the Oklahoma City Memorial (2000) mark important changes in the culture of modern or postmodern memorials. Scholars describe a “memorial impulse” today (Butterfield 2005: 28), an “expansive historicism” of our culture (Huysen 1995: 254), one claiming that “never before has a cultural present been obsessed with the past” as we have been in the 1970s and 1980s. [I am citing the German philosopher, Hermann Lübbe (as cited in Huysen 1995, p. 253).] These claims are noteworthy against a background where the very notion of a modern monument was seen as a contradiction in terms. The “death” of the monument and the museum has been proclaimed many times: “monumental” was Nietzsche’s “disdainful epithet” for any version of history calling itself permanent (Young 1993: 4). Lewis Mumford’s *The Culture of Cities* (1938) argued that monuments had lost their aesthetic and social

legitimacy. This view, that “memory is an impediment to modernity” (Butterfield 2003: 27), its progressive impulse, has been widely shared by architects, city planners, and artists, and was especially pronounced by the 1960s with its antinomian ethos, its skepticism about common values, its abhorrence of war, along with the view that monuments speak only of state power; they are principally ideological, marking a nation’s history by its soldiers’ deaths, meaningful only in nationalist and patriotic terms. Accordingly, monuments “bury memory,” just as they absorb and displace memory; monuments and memorials aid in the process of forgetting. (I only very quickly touch upon some of the terms of these debates.). Relative to this body of critical opinion which dominated public and academic discourse through the 1960s, today’s engagement with memorializing is of interest and importance, I think, as both recent cultural and emotional history.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Oklahoma City Memorial represent new memorial forms in the U.S., as well as public sensibilities about memorializing; some even view these memorials as forces in themselves, changing the opinion of many that the memorial was dead. These memorials—the one, to the 58,000 dead and missing American soldiers of the Vietnam War; the second, the memorial for the 168 people killed at the federal building in Oklahoma City—represent an iconography described as both highly emotivist and individualist (appealing directly to each of the individuals who died and not to any cause or collectivity). While there have been many readings and interpretations of these public memorials, descriptions like these are typical:

Maya Ying Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Memorial stated that her design was not meant to communicate a political message but to evoke “feelings, thoughts, and

emotions,” of an individual and private nature: “What people see or don’t see is their own projection,” she wrote. From the architectural critic, Paul Goldberger (2004: 82): “few war memorials evoke deep, gut-wrenching emotion” as the Vietnam Memorial....The stark reality of more than 50,000 names engraved on Lin’s stonewall is staggering, and the subtlety of the relationship between the wall and the landscape—we descend, then rise again, as if to return to the land of the living—is deeply moving” (2004: 84). Similarly, the 168 bronze and glass chairs, clustered on a grassy slope and etched with the name of each person, honoring the 168 dead at Oklahoma City, constitute the main component of the memorial; they are positioned in nine rows that correspond to floors of the building where each of the victims were when the bomb exploded.

The architectural term applied to both these memorials is “minimalist,” the unofficial language of modernist art since mid-century, but only recently used for monuments and memorials: Lin’s Vietnam Memorial, Peter Eisenman’s Holocaust Memorial in Berlin (a field of plain concrete pillars like headstones), Oklahoma City’s grid of chairs. These memorials are not only important signifiers of the individual lives lost, they commemorate ordinary people, not something that memorials have done. In fact, as highly individualized cultural forms, they represent a type of “anti-memorial” (Kimmelman 2002), something sentimental and populist. In one critic’s words, this is an art form with an “emotional intensity” and one that allows, even welcomes, the popular and emotional and individual gestures of its visitors: at the Vietnam Memorial people go to read, touch the names, leave flowers and photos—“mementos are one of the great mysteries of the Wall” (Ayres 1992). Kimmelman (2002) calls “the modern memorial sublime,” a grandeur that has nothing to do with the heroic monument, the generalized

image of a soldier holding a gun or flag. And while its form allows for the evocation of lives of individuals—their beings, voices—the minimalist memorial is mute: this is one feature of the Vietnam memorial that caused so much of the controversy surrounding it, on the original design the word “Vietnam” did not even appear. This is one feature of what is called “minimalism,” its ideological silence; its appeal to many, including the judges that selected it, was what it did *not* say; it made death in war a private matter, rather than a sacrifice for a collective cause. Yet, the memorial’s strong appeal and resonance was also its ability to capture our collective feelings of ambiguity and anguish about the Vietnam War and our agreement that those who died should be remembered (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991: 395).

I’d like to insert here one of my study’s concerns, its relationship to the modern history of emotions. 20<sup>th</sup> century public reserve surrounding grief and memorializing has been well-documented (Stearns 2005; Lofland 1985). That is, for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even today, intense and public grief and mourning are, in important ways, socially unacceptable. (I speak of the amount of time and the quality of our display of grief.) That is, if we compare ourselves to our Victorian predecessors, who mourned extravagantly. Clearly, the emotions surrounding public memorializing open new questions as to the rise of these memorials, their popularity, and the need or disposition for expressions of public mourning and memorial sites.

Both Vietnam and Oklahoma City memorials—in their minimalist muteness—allow (invite, really) for an abundance of individual and popular expressions at the sites (expressions like those at local and instant sites of loss and mourning on highways and on neighborhood streets). At the Vietnam Memorial visitors have left so many things:

flowers, photos, letters, medals, even a Harley-Davidson motorcycle—that there’s an entire warehouse to preserve them. Individual names, often traced by visitors, are also personally and emotionally significant; the names are touched lovingly, caressed really.

For some, the emotional and personal responses of visitors—the aggrieved—are a spectacle, more moving than the wall itself. Yet the wall itself, its polished marble reflecting us back to ourselves, can also be seen as an evoker of personal sentiments (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991: 403); the names are the objects of a ritual relation.

The chairs at Oklahoma City are like these names: “The bronze back and frames of the chairs themselves were dipped individually, to remind [us] that these were people. No two chairs are alike” (Rosenblatt 2000: 28).

At the Holocaust Museum in Washington, two particularly emotionally wrenching objects on view are the empty shoes of the dead and the hall of photographs; but also, the identification cards we are handed as we enter the exhibit; “this card tells the story of a real person who lived during the Holocaust,” a person we carry with us through the exhibit.

Besides invoking the lives of individual persons, today’s memorials are *democratic*; not only celebrating ordinary people, but also “created in the name of and for the uses of ordinary people...[offering us] places where ordinary people can reach a personal understanding (Rosenblatt 2000: 29). And today’s memorials are “*more fluid, less set in stone*,” referring to moveable memorials and internet memorials or to replications of memorials in numbers of U.S. states and towns. Museums and memorials are also designed to be *experiential*, transforming of those who visit them. Edward Linenthal, author of books on the Holocaust and Oklahoma Memorials, has said that they

are designed so that “the memory of the event will be as transforming as the event itself” (cited in Rosenblatt 2000: 29). Many of them, and this is certainly the case for Washington’s Holocaust Museum, are *teaching institutions*, telling a story of the event using film, photo, video; the new World War II Memorial includes a teaching museum: they are places of “civic transformation;” one is expected to come away changed (and there are many testimonies of this occurring for those who visit these memorials). Linenthal has described another function of these memorials: they are sites where we discover meanings as well as aspects of our identities. In his words, “memorials are a product of who we are right now. We are a people negotiating our identities...In part, we are doing this by creating and feeling the power of memorials” (Rosenblatt 2000: 30).

These memorials, as I have been arguing, serve many functions: the memorial is designed to be redemptive, educational, and therapeutic for each of us. It is mute so that on its bare walls and blank slates we can (as Maya Lin invited us to) project our own feelings. To return to my earlier claim, the modern memorial is also part of our media environment, not only shaped by its technologies but responsive to our highly reflexive and audience-based perspectives. For a memorial to be built, there needs to be a publicly felt need and desire “to enter into the event” and this requires that it be framed by the media in that way. A memorial provides an occasion to enter and to experience and to remember an event, a place, a person’s life—things that are for many of us remote, but nonetheless experienced as real. Most of us are “remembering” events that we never witnessed. Yet in some important sense, they seem to us to have been experienced *as our own*. Today, because of mass media, we also have deep attachments to people we never met and whom we don’t know in any immediate sense. This is also true of events that we

witness again and again; we feel the need to personally acknowledge, ritually and publicly, the death of someone we never knew, or a collective horrific act that happened before our eyes on a screen, in living color. We believe we live in reality, but in fact we live, in part, in the world of the *imaginary real*. For these reasons and others, the project I have been describing has taken a turn towards media as one of the forces changing both the *sites* of collective emotional practices—memorials, museums, sports arenas—as well as the *actions* of people themselves.

Equally important, it seems to me, is the topic of identity. Clearly, we are witnessing in our time, yet another change in the character of the modern self—a change that will further enlighten us about the emotional practices I have described here. In fact, to state the case in even stronger terms, these emotional practices, these public emotional dramas require not only a particular setting conducive to displays of strong feelings; they also require a certain kind of social actor.

For the present, I describe this new concept of the person as one modeled on and responsive to today's media culture; it seeks to express and to discover itself in the "environments"—media images and dramas (TV programs, movies)—it consumes. It is antinomian in disposition, just as its preferred mode of action is *dramatic*, reflecting the dramas built into the rhythms of our everyday lives. As a society, we have never "acted so much or watched so many others acting" (Williams 1989: 3-5). But why our public dramas have become so *emotional* is the principal question I have raised here. The modern memorial points to a few of the answers. To highlight some of them:

The memorial has become a form and a forum for the masses, for everyone; a public place we have *appropriated* as our own and where we become *spectator-*

*participants*; a place where we seek *emphatic experiences*, eliminating psychic distance between ourselves and what and whom we memorialize; the new memorial sites themselves are consequential, for they situate and frame these emotional acts. Again, the link with mass media, which has effectively severed the connections of ourselves with physical places, and now locates the self in new “hybrid arenas of action,” like these, moral spaces that combine public and private attitudes, feelings, and dispositions, “beckon[ing] new types of social performances...new collective configurations” (Cerulo 1997: 397).

Today’s ritual assemblies neither draw from nor strengthen common sentiments and beliefs. Yet, they are remarkably intense, enveloping spectators in experiences of something important, not in a political, but in a deeply personal sense about something that “really happened” to each of us.

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