

# Book Review:

## *Heritage That Hurts: Tourists in the Memoryscapes of September 11*

Reviewed by Wendy Aibel-Weiss

Working at the World Trade Center site at The Tribute WTC Visitor Center, a storefront museum, I interact every day with thousands of tourists. The Tribute Center, composed of five small galleries and offering walking tours, opened in 2006 and shares the personal experiences of survivors, first responders, recovery site workers and volunteers and family members who lost loved ones. Their experiences are shared in intimate environments with artifacts and immersive photos. The number of visitors astounds me, especially after having spent a lifetime creating exhibitions in history museums where high numbers of daily visitors are rarely seen. Guidelines that any exhibit developer ever depended upon are invalid for the audiences that come to the World Trade Center site. People read *everything*, twice! They talk to each other; they talk to strangers; they don't want to leave; and they even start philosophical conversations with the gift shop clerks, just because they need to talk more. And as the tenth anniversary has come and gone, the dialogue and interest increases with each year. Lower Manhattan is the number one tourist attraction in the nation.

Therefore, this new book, *Heritage That Hurts, Tourists in the Memoryscapes of September 11*, by Joy Sather Wagstaff, is extremely refreshing. It provides both an academic and personal investigation of the positive role that tourists do play in the contemporary drama surrounding the WTC. As a practitioner working with this audience, I found that Wagstaff's work brings to light many valuable insights in areas that have not been fully studied, particularly the dynamic flow between the historic site and the

consumer. It is extremely important for museum professionals to look at the ways in which visitors construct meaning and then actively disperse their own "take-home" messages, their own "artifacts" and "images." Author Joy Sather Wagstaff is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at North Dakota State University and teaches topics such as "Death and Dying" and "Disaster and Culture." She is not new to the museum world, as she has also conducted studies at Oklahoma City and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

### **Tourists as Meaning Makers**

The book focuses on contemporary tourism, with its "multiple forms of consumptive practices." The author investigates the critical role that tourists play in the social construction, production, and performance of commemorative heritage and the making of "collective and individual historicities and identities." (p.66)

In academic language, the author makes the point that tourists should be seen as creative consumers, as social agents that "collect" key points. They communicate through graffiti, assemblage, marking places with specific comments, building their own memorials and then communicating their own meaning to others. The souvenirs, the collecting of precious "photo-op" sites and collected stories are lovingly shared with their local community.

Wagstaff studied tourists at the World Trade Center site from 2002 through 2009, although the majority of the research seems to reflect experiences only up to 2007. As a result, the author

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does not take us to the present and leaves issues related to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary unrepresented. The field research for this book consists of 526 recorded conversations and written surveys. Thoughtful and poignant photographs by the author are used as a means to initiate conversations.

An academic, anthropological monograph, the book pays much attention to previous studies, related theories, and definitions. Frequent, short citations are used to support an idea or as a spring board to reject a concept and to posit a new thought, (over 100 citations in a 242 page book). To a non-academic reader, the concentrated referencing is cumbersome, especially as many of the references are presented as a “one-liner” idea, lacking enough conceptual “meat” for the reader to chew on. The book clearly lays out in the introduction what it intends to analyze. Initiating a discussion with theory is always welcome, but this study’s theoretical context is a mixed salad of too many chopped up ingredients. Underneath this mixture, however, are several original ideas that are thoughtfully organized with lovely and humorous counterbalances to the dry academic voice. Each chapter or subsection is labeled in a playful and thoughtful manner that keeps the reader engaged in the larger idea that is being explored. Examples: “Of Traumascaping and Travelers: What is so Dark about Dark Tourism?”; “Nineelevenland;” and “Ma(r)king Place in the Museum.” These witty titles keep the reader on track with the larger points that are being made.

Joy Sather Wagstaff builds upon the thoughts of historian John Bodnar,

who writes that public memory and history “emerge from the intersection between official and vernacular cultural expression.” Tourists, writes Wagstaff “not only provide economic support for the commemorative sites world wide, they also are the population that geographically disperse knowledge of these sites ...using their photographs, the digital sharing of images and stories and their post visit experience as critical to building this vernacular cultural expression.”(p. 20). Wagstaff responds to scholars who denigrate the impact of tourists on historic sites by proposing a counter-point made by anthropologist Malcolm Crick. “Both tourists and anthropologists rise from the same social formation and have a fundamental similarity to collect and expropriate what they value, then tell of their journeys.” (p.64)

### **Examining Dark Tourism**

Wagstaff’s study briefly compares other sites of what is now called “dark tourism.” The author begins by examining the pilgrimages of the Dark Ages, referencing the power of the spiritual treasures that pilgrims brought home with them to share with their community. She then moves quickly to an analysis of the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century historic sites of tragedy, (Oklahoma City National Memorial, Vietnam Memorial, M11 Memorial in Madrid, National Flight 93 National Memorial, Holocaust Museums and concentration camp sites). In a chapter that explores architectural elements of related museums, Wagstaff provides some analytical constructs with which to contrast and compare this group of sites. Some memorials avoid images of dead bodies while others depend upon them

to contextualize the horror. Some sites have a message of resiliency while other simply articulate the importance of never forgetting. The author's analysis centers on contrasting the style of presentation at each site.

### **Why They Come**

Throughout this study Wagstaff examines the motivations that lead visitors to visit the World Trade Center Site. Is it attraction to death and destruction, a spiritual pilgrimage? The author's study indicates that for visitors to the site, 'seeing is believing.' Visitors need to experience the spatial and emotional magnitude of the tragedy in order to construct a wider context for understanding, a reality that is not mediated through the newspaper or televised images. Tourists are engaging in the contemplation of death and dying, not just memorializing the dead. Many are connecting their own lives to the events, making this contemporary history personal. They are placing themselves in the ongoing political narrative of local, national, and international tragedy.

### **Constructing Meaning**

The role of photo taking and souvenir buying at several sites of "dark tourism" is explored. These post-visit experiences, writes Wagstaff, are rarely addressed. How are the photographs that tourists take used after the visit? What are some of the salient social effects of such use? (p.140) Visitors photograph the WTC site, the graffiti, the informal assemblage of items, and people who have shared meaningful conversations with them. These collections are then assembled

and used to transmit the experience. Purchasing souvenirs is seen as a material representation of the experience. Wagstaff writes about scrap-booking and narrative sharing that visitors discussed with her. In this chapter, as in many others, original ideas are explored. Many of these points, however, are not substantiated by the overall research. A specific single example is supplied, but how that single perspective connects to the other 500 interviews is not discussed.

As a 9/11 practitioner, I am aware that the attacks of September 11th were experienced through media by one-third of the world's population. The trauma now belongs to everyone—worldwide. It is the actions of tourists, not only media, that have enhanced the meaning of 9/11. Visitors have collected and contributed and added emphasis to many components of this history by building an emotional bridge between nations and promoting a sense of global citizenship. There are 9/11 memorials in large and small towns throughout the world, many initiated by the visitors. There are many shrines in firehouses around the world that contain photos and souvenirs collected at the WTC site.

At my site, all interpretation is deliberately based upon people's personal experiences of 9/11, delivered in exhibits and walking tours. Visitors consume these stories in order to share them with others. They become contemporary pilgrims bringing inspiration back to their home community, reminding others how fragile life is and how important it is to value the living. A wall of visitor comments is read and revered as thoroughly as the history of

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the day is consumed. Many hand-written visitor comments are poems that reflect a global humanity: they blend history, memory and commemoration. Their comments bring people together in making meaning from an act that is so difficult to understand. Tourists photograph these cards as often as they photograph an iconic twisted steel beam.

Wagstaff makes a strong plea for using new methods to study tourists, not as the objects of anthropological or ethnographic analysis but instead as thoughtful individuals who affect the development of sites of memory. Museum professionals must really examine carefully the role that

tourists play in making history salient and meaningful. In this age of Twitter and Facebook, what consumers write about their museum experience might carry equal weight with the curated message. Museums might have to rethink how to help their visitors begin the process of taking possession of an exhibition's underlying themes, obtaining a greater sense of empathy. Exhibition planners can help visitors to develop their own meaningful perspectives and attachments to objects that they can share with others, assisting the consumer to become the messenger. I hope that this study is just a prelude to further discussion of such important creative perspectives. ✨