

Response to Taussig-Rubbo, “Sacred Property”

Halfway through Mateo Taussig-Rubbo’s revelatory study of 9/11 and its remains, a resident New Yorker offers online advice to a tourist wondering about whether they should pay a visit to Ground Zero.

Go if you must, but please, please don’t buy any cheesy souvenir from the street peddlers in front of the site. And don’t call it ‘Ground Zero,’ NY’ers would rather call it the World Trade Center Site. And try to limit the picture taking of your loved ones arm in arm in front of the chain link fence.

In three sentences, the respondent—the resident authority—echoes each document of Taussig-Rubbo’s assemblage, simultaneously prescribing habits of buying, strategies of naming, and acceptable forms of sacred framing that hound every 9/11 rubble site. Such enunciations of etiquette reiterate themselves, as Taussig-Rubbo relates incident upon incident wherein government officials, mourning family members and newly patriotic citizens struggle to formalize boundaries for grief. Property and value, authority and acceptability, mourning and marking: all jostle for maintenance in the development of memorials and the reclamation of commercial possibility. That the same process of buying, naming, and framing reoccurs and does so without consistent rules (don’t buy a ‘cheesy’ souvenir, says this New Yorker, but also don’t think twice about all those exported I-beam sculptures) suggests that herein one might distill something productive not only for students of 9/11, but also those of property law and religious studies in late modern America.

Taussig-Rubbo presses in many directions, to some provocative, if occasionally diffuse ends. Threaded with sharp insights, “Sacred Property” describes the way civilian processes (sieving landfill waste, for example) become sacred, while sacred sites (like dumps burying human remains) become valued. This is “the form of value created through destruction,” and it is to this “emergence and distribution of...sacred value” that most of Taussig-Rubbo’s attentions are paid. In the absence of adequate vocabulary, the ‘sacred’ becomes apt discursive filler, adjudicating meanings for which nobody seems to have further wording. Or, as Taussig-Rubbo writes, the sacred emerges “where the usual allocations of the property regime are inadequate—where there is nothing and yet something.” Such filler finds sharply material form here, since talk of the post-9/11 sacred “could be a way of staking a claim to property.” In particular, lay objects arrest Taussig-Rubbo’s gaze as “the recalibration and sacralization of otherwise inconsequential objects and pieces of junk” orient this exploration. A \$50 flag, stolen from a private yacht by Iwo Jima-like firefighters in lower Manhattan, is appraised at half a million dollars; a \$500,000 piece of property in Stonycreek Township, Pennsylvania, is now valued at \$50,000,000. Yes, yes: a “tremendous price,” has been paid, one which cannot be articulated. Yet the repeated re-naming of that obvious stuttering (e.g., no value can be placed on human life) becomes a ritual incantation, and a legal presumption, in the property scandals surrounding 9/11. Once it has been said, we’ve covered our moral bases, and the seal is broken: let the market games begin.

How, then, did the souvenirs mark for the FBI officials the “sacredness of the site and their privileged relationship with it”? Taussig-Rubbo hustles past the details of the destruction and its perpetrators. Instead, he smartly turns us to the quick ways the spaces

altered socially and territorially in the management of its materiality. In the weeks immediately following 9/11, lower Manhattan became an invented sacred, with a militarization of space, the civilianization of space, and the conjuring of mythic characters. Spatial relations dramatically altered, as areas became increasingly permeable and shared (the rush to public spaces to mourn, the creation of public lay memorials) as well as imperial and divine (i.e., the military guarded skies and streets, firemen become martyrs, photos became icons). Taussig-Rubbo offers few documented instances of individuals naming the sites as 'sacred'. Instead, he focuses on its profanation, the profanation which thus signals a presumed sacred. He tracks the profanation of theft (rather, the discourse of profanation surrounding accusations of souvenir theft) and the profanation of cellular commingling (rather, the imagined commingling of postulated remains with everyday landfill detritus). The sacred is behind this posited thievery and rot; it is that which makes the larceny so craven. It is in the distinctions "between sale and gift, between the general public and the community of sufferers and victims, between individual profit and communal property" that the reader may find the twenty-first century sacred. When the FBI declares a "no eBay policy," they are doing more than serving up a potential *Daily Show* punch line; they are also establishing capitalist etiquette in a context that requires such limits to prohibit profanities so predictable as to be ironic premise.

Sacred national properties emerges through such profanity, it seems. Taussig-Rubbo's most movingly vexatious profiles occur in sections III (on the Fresh Kills landfill) and IV (on the National Park Service memorial in Pennsylvania), when he shows the ceaseless rounds which occur in the effort to decide that etiquette, to make explicable the inexplicable injustices of that violence. Texts like the report produced by the Office of the Inspector General, *Investigation Regarding Removal of a Tiffany Globe from the Fresh Kills Recover Site* (2003) and the proceedings of *WTC Families for a Proper Burial, Inc. v. City of New York* strike me as immediate additions to the documentary canon of American religious history. Not because they tell us much about American religion, but because they signal just how the language of ritual observance refracts through the rubble of governmentality. Although Taussig-Rubbo argues that there is a sacred here outside or beyond standard definitions of religion, I am unconvinced. These episodes don't endorse his aspired sacralization arc as much as they do the interlacing valuation of rites and rights, the "sacralization theme with a reassertion of property in order to protect the commingling of the remains amidst garbage." Whatever we observe through that glass Tiffany globe, it is neither as disgusting as some mourners accuse nor as marvelous as Rumsfeld intones.

If this piece of writing faces any serious problem, I would say it is one of admirable overabundance. This excess is not that of evidence, but that of too many attempted summations causing the dilution of his exhibited properties. Scholars of religion, in particular, would benefit from this work if it were to pursue more rigorously a consistent framework of such 'valuation' over and above that of the 'sacralization' repeatedly promoted, yet not always made precise, in "Sacred Property." What Taussig-Rubbo has found are "regimes of property and valuation," with sacralization as just one of the many idioms of invocation waged by the participating subjects. He seems to argue this as the end, when he writes that what his essay has discerned is "not the creation of the sacred, but rather its redistribution and confounding with other kinds of value." Embracing this competitive pastiche of values over and above some re-sacralized post-secular sacred would improve that occasionally muddy talk. At the outset, the reader (any reader, really: legal or historical or

anthropological) anticipates more quickly than Taussig-Rubbo imagines the focus of his research (to discern how the sacred is mobilized, institutionalized, and formalized). “We might say that the sacred is like a volatile combustible material, one with a short half-life, and that it has now dispersed or has been reintegrated into the property regime or the memorial regime,” Taussig-Rubbo notes. This is a claim neither accurate to what his discussion ultimately unfolds, nor sensitive enough to the bibliography of the sacred to which the author gestures but could rest more easily upon. Which is all to say: cut to the quick, because the literature—broader and deeper than Taussig-Rubbo’s footnotes to Agamben, Durkheim, and Sahlins—establishes already the cycle of property, value, and authority as integral to ritual making of sacred space.

One route to improvement might be to exploit potential sites of comparison, like the growth and sacralization of cemeteries in the United States, or the development and institutionalization of shrines, or the history of repatriating indigenous artifacts. Any one of these longer historical series could expand the contextual framework of the piece to name more powerfully the sacred exploded by his exhibits. Consider, for example, these three claims: first, one observer remarks about Fresh Kills that “the burying of the debris was its final resting point; it was not abandonment.” Second, Mayor Bloomberg says that downtown residents don’t want to live next to a “cemetery.” Third and finally, Judge Hellerstein claims that the “City has offered a memorial, but the plaintiffs insist on a cemetery.” While Taussig-Rubbo lingers in the obscurantism of the ‘sacred’, he has here ample beginning to a tactile description of the cemetery and its imagined strictures in American legal and religious history. That the three claims are themselves irreconcilable only reinforces the sense of chaos which began on that clear-skied morning, and continues deep into this questing aftermath.

In the end, Taussig-Rubbo does not prove that “the main effect of the attack was to elevate the sense of sacredness of (American) life,” as he argues, nor does he find that the sacred reemerged where it had been “invisible.” Elevation and uncovering is just not in his evidence, as he swings into and out of the methane, the Pennsylvania crater, and the cool judicial chambers of ongoing recovery efforts. The sacred pervades more humbly, maybe. Maybe it is in Larry Silverstein’s contracts, or in the crucifixes dangling around firemen’s necks; maybe it framed the last wills and testaments calling for cremation and burial; or maybe still it was smothered in that morning’s hasty goodbyes and commuting PATH train meditations. The challenge to cultural studies of religion is not the discernment the sacred, cataloguing its surprising abruption amidst modern disenchantment. It is, instead, the tracking of those flies at Fresh Kills. The sacred is not the tourist’s counselor, adjudicating a photo before a chain link fence. It is in the photographs cycling presence, from Kodak sale, to office cubicle bulletin board, to shrine memorial, to disintegration from the plane’s exploding heat. Untangling that cord of memory from commercial expression to incineration, tracking the profane as it blares inside and within the sacred, is the only way that the fables of secularism will, and can by Taussig-Rubbo, be untold.

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