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History 211: The Viet Nam Wars

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The Sacred Memorialization of the Vietnam War

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Americans have looked to memorialize, honor, and revere those who had sacrificed everything in the bloody conflict. This paper is to be an exploration of that process of memorialization, focusing on one of the most prominent, visible structures that acts as a reminder of the devastation of the war: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial. A national monument located in Washington D.C., “The Black Gash of Shame” exists as a stark reminder of the Vietnam War and the heavy casualties of the conflict.

Working on the oral history project, my partner and I had the opportunity to interview Terry A. Williamson, a Vietnam Veteran who served as an infantry officer in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969. Mr. Williamson, who, after a long career as a journalist, currently works in marketing and public relations, serves as the president of the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Fund. This fund works to support the construction, upkeep, and any events at the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans memorial exists, much like the National Memorial, to commemorate the sacrifices of veterans and their families who lived in the neighborhoods of Philadelphia. Constructed similarly to the National Memorial, Mr. Williamson described the memorial, and memorials to the Vietnam War in general, as crucially important to the spiritual health of Veterans.¹ Calling the memorials, “ageless and timeless,” he also noted that memorials to the Vietnam War exist as spaces for honoring not only those who were lost in the war, but also those who survived and returned home to the United States.² For

Mr. Williamson, who has been deeply involved in ceremonies at both the Philadelphia Memorial and the National Memorial in Washington D.C., both monuments exist as sacred spaces for both veterans and non-veterans alike, allowing everyone to experience the devastation of the war while honoring the sacrifices of those who served.³ His words have strongly informed the topic and argument of my paper, and I hope to do justice to them.

Over the course of this brief paper, I will explore the role that the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial plays in remembering the Vietnam War. I find that the memorial itself, in all of its grim glory, exists as a sacred, spiritual space, set apart from the landscape which surrounds it. It achieves this sacrality most notably through the architecture of the memorial itself, as well as through the use of specific rituals practiced at the memorial, most notably the practice of “rubbing.” For the purpose of this essay, I base my conceptions of the sacred on the work of Émile Durkheim, whose prominent text *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* contains a useful description of what “sacred” means.

For Durkheim, the sacred exists as central aspect in systems of religious belief. I extend his characterization of the sacred to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, as I find Durkheim’s definition of the sacred to be useful in describing the phenomena of the memorial as a sacred place. Defining the sacred in terms of its opposition to the “profane,” Durkheim claims that all systems of religious beliefs divide things into two classifications.⁴ These two classes, the sacred and the profane, exist in contrast to one another, and, are defined by those who create the symbols that are held in either regard. The symbols that are made sacred, are beyond being held in high regard, unable to communicate with the symbols made to be profane.⁵ The sacred is made to be wholly distinct from the profane, and in its distinctness, the two classes of symbols are left unable to coexist and be reconciled with one another. Expanding on this notion, Durkheim writes, “The sacred thing is, par excellence, that which the profane must not and cannot touch

with impunity...if the profane were to enter into relations with the sacred, the sacred would serve no purpose”.⁶ While this aspect of Durkheim’s concept of sacredness might not necessarily be applicable to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the use of the site, the notion of the sacred as something set apart and something elevated beyond that which is mundane is. I use this notion to define the sacred for the purposes of my exploration of the memorial as a sacred site.

The conception of the sacred as symbols or objects which exist apart from the profane (or mundane) is one that extends to memorials, monuments, and other similar sites. In “Sacred Space,” Gerard Van Der Leeuw defines sacred space as, “that locality that becomes a position by the effects of power repeating themselves there, or being repeated by man.”⁷ Continuing this, he notes that sacred spaces exist as embodied “places of worship” where man is able to engage with and touch the sacred, or that which set apart.⁸ While Van Der Leeuw this conception of sacred sites as primarily applying to natural locations, such as sources of water, forests, or caverns, I find that his idea of a sacred site as one that becomes sacred through the repetition of acts denoting it *as* sacred. I also find there to be parallels to the Vietnam Veterans monument in Van Der Leeuw’s examples of natural spaces as sacred. The sacrality of natural spaces can be extended to sites that are designed to be set apart from the surrounding landscape, much like the natural formations of caverns, springs, or other often awe-inspiring natural places. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is such a place, as the “Black Gash of Shame” prominently figures and juts from the grassy hills upon which it was built.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, built in 1982, stands out in sharp contrast to the green, grassy hills it rests upon. The Memorial consists of two roughly 246 foot long slabs of black marble that meet in the middle at a vertex.⁹ Jutting out at an angle from one another, the slabs form a shallow “V” shape. Both slabs of marble slope down from the vertex point, which at a height of about 10 feet towers over the heads of those who come to visit the site.¹⁰ The black

marble of each slab, sourced from a location Bangalore, India known for its impressive stone, is highly polished, providing a mirrored surface along the wall. The most notable feature of the Memorial however, is one that can only be clearly seen when close to the walls of the monument. Engraves into the walls of each slab are the names of 58,318 names of soldiers who were killed during the Vietnam War or whose status is unknown.¹¹ Each of these names, carved into the striking black marble of the monument is a small tribute to each of the lives of lost during the War.

Also on the grounds of the national -Vietnam Veterans Memorial are a number of smaller statues and plaques which serve to commemorate and honor others who served in and were affected by the War. The statue of *The Three Servicemen* consists of the figures of three soldiers and is meant to honor those who returned home from the War. This statue is positioned in such a way that the gazes of each figure is towards the Wall, watching over those who were lost in the conflict.¹² The Vietnam Women's Memorial, depicting the struggles of three female nurses to revive a wounded male soldiers, is meant to honor the women who served in the War (primarily as nurses and other healthcare professionals).¹³ Finally, a third small monument, the *In Memory Plaque*, was added to the Memorial grounds in 2004 and serves to honor those who have since died as a result of the Vietnam War, but whose names have been declared ineligible for engraving on the Wall itself. Although each of these statures adds to the aura of sacrality found at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it is the Wall itself that stands out as the primary sacred site at the Memorial.

The role of the Wall as a sacred place, set apart from its surroundings while commanding the attention of those who gaze upon it, is exemplified in the architectural design and features of the Memorial. I now turn my focus to an analysis of a number of these features, as well as one of the rituals performed at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, both aspects of the Wall which mark

the monument as a sacred site. The first of these architectural design features is the black, mirrored surface of the granite slabs that make up the wall. The mirrored surface of slabs, again engraved with the names of those lost in the Vietnam War, provides visitors with the opportunity to, literally and figuratively, reflect on the consequences of the War and the multitude of lives destroyed by the brutal fighting. When one approaches the wall, met upon arrival with your reflection, it is impossible to not see, along with one's own reflection, the reflections of all who sacrificed their lives during the Vietnam War. Through this process of encouraged reflection, made possible by the polished granite surface of the Wall, the Memorial is marked as a space set apart from the mundanity of life that exists away from the sacred site.

Another architectural feature of the Wall that I find encourages the understanding of the Memorial as a sacred space is the sheer size and color of the wall. Both of these features work to cultivate a solemn atmosphere at the memorial which sets the space apart from the world around it. The Wall, consisting of two roughly 250 foot slabs of granite, is quite frankly a massive structure. Extending out from its central vertex, each black slab seems to mar the landscape of the memorial grounds, rising more than ten feet at its highest point in the center. "The Black Gash of Shame" is certainly a fitting nickname for the monument, as its striking color, combined with its sheer size serves to create a somber atmosphere at the memorial site. This atmosphere, which sets apart the memorial from its surroundings, marks the Vietnam Veterans memorial again as a sacred site; "The Black Gash of Shame" reminds us of the massive debt of the War that that can never be repaid.

The final aspect that I will touch on that denotes that Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a sacred site is one of the many ritual acts performed at the monument: the act of "rubbing." A process which involves placing a piece of paper over a name engraved onto the wall, tracing over it with a pencil or crayon, and receiving a tracing of a name of the wall, the act of creating a

rubbing of a name on the wall has been deeply ingrained in the cultural context of the memorial. Speaking to the initial impetus for the ritual, Patrick Hagopian writes in “The Wall is for All of Us: Patterns of Public Response to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” In the discourse surrounding the memorial, touch became a signifier not just for physical contact, but, by extension, for emotional contact—an expression of care for others.”¹⁴ Continuing, Hagopian notes that visitors, longing for this sense of contact with those whose names were engraved on the wall, began to take rubbings of the Wall, creating “a durable trace of physical contact with the wall.”¹⁵

Since the ritual process of creating rubbings began, it has been, as Hagopian suggests, a crucial way that visitors, including the families and friends of those on the Wall, have connected physically and emotional with the sacred site of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The physicality of the Wall is clearly evident the process of rubbing, a ritual which marks the Wall as a sacred site. Interestingly, Hagopian mentions how rubbings taken from the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial were used in the dedications of other memorials, including the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial of which our aforementioned interviewee, Mr. Terry Williamson, I heavily involved with. Hagopian writes, “Philadelphia veterans marched on a “last patrol” from the nation’s capital carrying rubbings of the names of Philadelphia’s dead in an ammunition case.”¹⁶ Upon reaching the grounds of the Philadelphia Memorial, the procession of veterans stood watch over the names until the dedication of the new memorial the next day.¹⁷ This brief story, one of reverence for the names of those who lost their lives in the War, illustrates how important the Vietnam Veterans Memorial exists as not only a sacred site, but an example of a sacred site, for those elsewhere in the country who remember and honor the lives of those who lost their own.

The National Vietnam Veterans Memorial is one such space that allows us to do just this. Existing as a sacred space within the commotion of the nation’s capital, the Memorial allows all

who visit it the chance to engage introspectively with the sacrifices of those who did not make it back from the battlefields of Vietnam. Both the architectural design of the Memorial Wall, specifically the reflective granite engraved with the names of those who made the ultimate sacrifice and the sheer size and imposing figure of the wall, as well as the ritual process of taking rubbings of names on the wall solidify the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a sacred space. This sacred space is one set apart from its surroundings, not only physically, but in the minds of those who bear witness to the space as well. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has solidified itself as such a space, and likely will for generations to come.

As our interview with Mr. Williamson came to a conclusion, my partner and I asked him where he saw the future of the memorialization of the Vietnam War headed. He responded, stating that he saw the memorialization of the war as turning toward digital methods, be they websites, online archives, or other similar technologically based types of remembrance.¹⁸ Continuing the discussion, Mr. Williamson expressed to us the sentiment that the Vietnam War as an event that claimed the lives of more than 58,000 American Soldiers, as well as countless North and South Vietnamese troops, still has not been put to rest.¹⁹ The emotions raised by the war and the struggle to engage with the devastation that it brought are still very much ongoing issues. The discomfort with the Vietnam War must still be reckoned with, and surely that task will require us all to grapple with the events and aftermath of the conflict. Regardless of where the future of the memorialization of the Vietnam War is headed, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial will continue to be an essential part of the spiritual healing and recovery of both veterans and civilians alike.

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Reflection on Our Interview

The interview project has been in many ways a learning experience for me. I had been familiar with the Vietnam War and some of the stories of those who has been a part of it, considering that my father had been drafted into the army, but hearing about the experiences of another person in the intimate space that the interview offered was certainly eye-opening. The stories that Mr. Terry Williamson, the man that my partner and I had been assigned to work with, were quite frankly amazing. His role as Marine platoon commander during the war was fascinating to hear about, as well as his experience returning home from the war and reintegrating back into civilian life.

That all being said, conducting the interview was quite the challenge to put together. At first, we dealt with scheduling issues, and, given the Thanksgiving holiday my partner and I were forced to push our interview back behind schedule. This, on top of my general nervousness about conducting the interview, led to plenty of stressful nights! When we finally got to sit down with Mr. Williamson and speak to him face to face however, all of the worrying proved to be misplaced. Speaking with him was an absolutely great experience, and one which I will carry with me for a long while.

Having never really spoken to my father much about his experience during the war, speaking with Mr. Williamson was a great way for to learn about the individual experiences of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam. I believe the experience has granted me the confidence to speak to my father about his own personal experiences, and his willingness to participate in the interview project itself leads me to believe that such a conversation would be fruitful.

