

# Contentious sites: Cultural memory, collective organizing, and symbolic struggles over the Park51 Islamic center

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## Abstract

Working from a Goffmanian dramaturgical perspective, this article analyzes the struggle between two opposing social movement coalitions formed in response to the proposed construction of an Islamic center near Ground Zero. To this end, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with leaders from key organizations involved in the conflict, in addition to participant observation at rallies and meetings of the different organizations involved. The authors find that despite great differences between the two conflicting sides, both coalitions experienced similar internal challenges that had to be managed when staging the performance for the public eye. The struggle over memory, space, and language strongly impacted how these actors understand coalition-building and mobilization. The article makes a contribution at the intersection between memory and dramaturgical studies applied to collective action.

## Keywords

dramaturgy, identity, memory, social movements, space

This research explores the underlying linkage between space, remembering, and collective action through the study of the struggle between two opposing social movement coalitions formed in response to the proposed construction of an Islamic center near Ground Zero. The meanings of sites and spaces are not monolithic entities; they are

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subject to contestation and regular re-signification on the part of groups (Richardson, 1974). The meaning that objects, sites, and places have for groups is oftentimes related to the memory they attach to them (Halbwachs, 1992 [1951]).

On 11 September 2010, at least three groups of people took to the street surrounding the Ground Zero site. There was a group of people who were there to commemorate the attack and its victims, just as they had done in previous years. But two new groups appeared to express contesting views about what Ground Zero means to them. These contesting views were crystallized in the context of a political struggle over a very concrete issue: whether or not to allow the construction of an Islamic center (Park51) near the site. A rally in support of the center of about 2000 people (according to CNN<sup>1</sup>) began first with speakers telling the crowd that ‘Muslims were also victims of the 9/11 attack.’ At the same time, a second rally began, consisting of those against the building of the mosque at Ground Zero. Their chants included ‘USA’ and ‘No Mosque.’ The rallies which took place on 11 September 2010 at Ground Zero are but the tip of the iceberg of a more complex, multifaceted phenomenon.

Social movement studies and memory studies are intimately interrelated as available mnemonic frames oftentimes underlie shared interests that drive political action (Edy, 2006; Jansen, 2007; Tilly, 1994; Zerubavel, 2003). This is what makes mnemonic sites (such as Ground Zero) privileged places to study how different groups endow them with meaning, how they engage in collective struggles over their definitions, and how, through taking part in this struggle, they come to define themselves as collectivities. The struggle over Ground Zero is more than a story about the battle over commemoration and remembering; it is also a story about specific types of collective action in the city of New York. By taking the rallies of 11 September 2010 as an analytical and empirical point of departure, we hope to understand how it is that specific groups of individuals come to organize themselves and mobilize for a common cause; who they see as their enemies and allies; and what they seek to accomplish.

The analysis is structured following Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to identity construction but applied to collective performances. In doing so, we utilize an understanding of the ‘front stage’ that comprises actions intended to be visible to the broader public (for example, demonstrations, public statements, and press releases) and ‘back stage,’ conversely, as actions that take place outside of the public eye (for example, internal organizational negotiations and disputes). We also utilize Goffman’s (1974) concept of ‘framing’ as has been applied to social movements (e.g., Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Snow, 2004; Snow et al., 1986) to refer to attempts by social movement participants to craft a positive image of themselves and their activities in the public eye. Just as individuals engage in ‘impression management,’ so too do social movements.

Previous work has commonly drawn upon theatrical metaphors to describe social movements (Blee & McDowell, 2012; Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2012; Tilly, 1978). This article extends this body of research by describing the spaces in which social movement actors not only perform for a public audience, but also engage with each other. In coalitions of diverse organizations, social movement participants must present a unified front amid their disagreements. In this way, a collective’s public presentation of self cannot be understood without an analysis of internal negotiations and disputes that take place in the

back stage over the meaning of space. Nora has coined the term 'memory sites' to refer to places 'where [cultural] memory crystallizes and secretes itself' (Nora, 1989, p. 7). These can include an array of different elements such as places (e.g., memorials, cemeteries, museums), objects (e.g., monuments, basic texts, symbols), and concepts and practices (e.g., commemorations, rituals).

The article begins by briefly presenting the methodology employed in this study. The discussion that follows first sets the stage of the controversy around Park51. Each of the rallies under study is analyzed in terms of 'presentation of the self' (i.e., an examination of how actors on each side portrayed themselves to the public), followed by an account of the 'back stage' (i.e., the negotiations and ruptures between different organizations within each side of the conflict). Both opposing coalitions staged the performance in a similar spatial and mnemonic context, but they struggled over how to define it. The article ends by discussing the importance of contemplating how the staging of collective action intersects with struggles over memory and space.

## Methodology

The results of this study are based on field research carried out between September and December 2010 in the city of New York using participant observation and in-depth interviews ( $N = 9$ ) with prominent activists who undertook mobilization strategies to oppose and support the construction of the Park51 Islamic center near Ground Zero. The proposed construction of the Islamic center (originally called Cordoba House and later renamed Park51) came from a private organization on land they already owned, two blocks north of Ground Zero (600 feet or 180 meters), which was already being used for Muslim worship. The official website for the facility had said it was intended as a community center, accessible to all members and visitors. In addition to a mosque, the design included features such as a theater, fitness and childcare areas, and a memorial to the victims of the September 11 attacks. The project was initially put forward as a joint collaboration between non-profit organizations such as the Cordoba Initiative and the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA).

## Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews ranging between 30 minutes and 2 hours were conducted. They are justified in that this research sought to assess elements that cannot be directly observed such as feelings, perceptions, meanings, and past experiences.

The method for selecting participants for interviews was 'purposive' (or theoretical) non-probabilistic sampling and they were recruited through snowball sampling techniques (Kuzel, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1980). This enabled us to develop a sense of the web-like networks that were formed on each side, as well as to identify the actors that different organizations perceived as 'significant others' in the conflict. An explicit methodological decision was made to interview leaders, directors, and founders of the different organizations involved in the conflict, due to their privileged position to provide inside information and a first-hand account of organizational framing strategies.

### *Participant observation*

Data obtained through participant observation are useful for accounting for practices that many times participants do not recognize in speech, and for understanding the physical and symbolic contexts in which interaction takes place.

Comparative 'passive' participant observation was carried out at the two rallies that took place on 11 September 2010 and at subsequent meetings and mobilizations which took place after this date (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1969).

The nature of the circumstances and research question at hand did not permit intensive continued participant observation because organizations publicly mobilized for this cause for a short period of time during the months under study. Thus, participant observation serves here as a snapshot of (a) *when* different organizations decide to 'go public' and mobilize in the public sphere, (b) *how* they decide to 'stage' their mobilization, and (c) *what* elements they decide to put 'onstage' for the public eye. Fieldnotes were taken in order to obtain 'thick descriptions' of both of the rallies (Geertz, 1973, p. 9). Additional participant observation was carried out at other mobilizations/meetings that took place after the 9/11 rallies in order to obtain information on the 'behind-the-scenes' organizing, and to understand the place that this particular conflict has within their general agenda.

### **Contentious sites**

The weeks preceding 11 September 2010 witnessed an upsurge of media coverage about the Park51 initiative and the controversy surrounding it. Sites of contention refer to settings that serve as originators, objects, and/or arenas of contentious politics (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 237). An initial view of the controversy may give the idea that there were two monolithic sides contending over the issue: those in favor and those against the center's construction. In reality, each side of the controversy was composed of a complex network of actors striving to develop a unified position to present to the public and, at the same time, struggling to define the outcome of the conflict.

### **Setting the stage**

The proposed construction of the Islamic center at Ground Zero provided the bases for coalition-building among different organizations. While alliances among organizations were often facilitated by member interlocks (Rosenthal, Fingrutd, Ethier, Karant, & McDonald, 1985), important conflicts and tensions emerged around, for example, whether the Park51 controversy constituted a central issue or not in their broader agenda, or on how to stage the protest. As a result, this alliance-building implied making concessions even while, at the same time, each organization tried to advance its own objectives.

It is important to acknowledge that there is a great deal of *performativity* in how organizations present themselves to the media, to perceived allies and enemies, and to the public as a whole. It is thus possible to conceptualize interactions among individuals and groups from a Goffmanian dramaturgical perspective, and we extend this theory to apply it to organizations and institutions (Goffman, 1990 [1959]). From this perspective, actions are social performances that have the aim of giving off and maintaining certain

desired impressions of the self to others. Performances, as ‘learned and historically grounded’ ways of claim-making (Tilly, 2008), build upon existing repertoires but, just like in a play, innovations take place in the making. As studies in contentious politics have shown, while performances are based on pre-existing scripts, there is always an element of agency. ‘*The theatrical metaphor calls attention to the clustered, learned, yet improvisational character of people’s interactions as they make and receive each other’s claims* [italics added]’ (Tilly, 2008: p14). In this way, through their claim-making performances, the actors involved in the controversy sought to challenge and recreate the meanings of the world around them.

### **Act I: Defending the center: The emergency mobilization against racism and anti-Muslim bigotry**

‘We had at least 10,000 people,’ said Sara Flounders, one of the coordinators of the Unity and Solidarity Rally. ‘And the rally program – with speakers from the labor movement, immigrants’ rights coalitions, and clergy from synagogues, churches and mosques – featured the dynamic diversity of almost every community in New York.’<sup>2</sup>

The organizations involved in the ‘emergency rally’ that took place on 11 September in support of the Islamic center all appeared to share a common criticism of what was seen as a racist escalation of violence against Muslims and Islam. Many organizations envisioned this specific conflict as one among other related issues (for example, opposition to immigration laws, racial profiling, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan). The opposition to the construction of the Islamic center was seen as part of an ongoing attempt to demonize and target the Muslim population in order to create fear among the population and justify war in the Middle East. As one of the members of the coalition put it:

*We all realized that the problem wasn’t going to go away, and it wasn’t something that just spontaneously happened. It happened out of the fact that war became increasingly unpopular and in order to continue the war we need to have a target, and that’s the Muslim population ... I think there’s a broader picture here and the main ingredient is that the Empire needs to exist, and the only way this empire is going to win is by having an enemy and now the enemy is Islam and Muslims and the Middle East. (Anna)<sup>3</sup>*

The heterogeneous set of claims were made evident the day of the rally. Signs presented demands of various kinds (Figure 1), though the underlying thread was the same: ‘Jobs, schools, healthcare, not racism and war’; ‘Defeat Obama’s imperialist war and racist war on immigrants in the US’; ‘Standing for peace and justice for the oppressed Palestinian children, women and men’; ‘No to racism and anti-Muslim bigotry’; ‘The attack on Islam is racism.’ A long list of nearly 50 speakers hailing from different organizations spoke one after the other, and the message that came through was mostly that of unity against what were seen as common enemies and a broadly defined list of common objectives.

Comparisons between themselves and their opponents continually played a prominent role. For example, it was frequently noted that while they had to organize a rally with scarce resources and lack of support from politicians and media, ‘the others’ had



**Figure 1.** Signs from the emergency mobilization against racism and anti-Muslim bigotry.

huge financial support from corporations and managed to get most of the mass media attention:

It's money for them, if you see how much money they poured into 9/11 ... *they* all came up here with buses, and vans, it was all white middle America and driven at the top by people like Newt Gingrich and Pamela Geller, and Robert Spencer, *they* have money and *they* are given money. *We* don't have the money, *we* are there with our handmade signs and they have beautiful, professionally-made signs! It was funny, that day on 9/11 while *we* were there, we were counterprotesting, they had a huge TV screen and a stage that lit up with huge speakers on it. This isn't grassroots! This money is coming from somewhere. It's a lot of money, and it's unfortunate because *they* drag the small people with them. (Anna)

In the above excerpt, Anna conveys a common view shared by many in her group, in relation to the group's identity as well as the nature of its opponents. In this way, considerations of each side were shaped by how each might be perceived by the broader public. Especially amid their opponents, each side presented itself as a unified concise movement, sharing a common interest and serving a common purpose ('impression management'). However, as we will see, internal differences were as notable among the organizations mobilizing to defend Park51 as there were among those mobilizing against it.

## Act I back stage

While on the front stage, interactions (between individuals and/or groups) occur in public, there are hosts of interactions that take place outside of the public eye, behind the scenes, where the 'self' is constructed, practiced, and often contested. This process, which can be more or less conscious, is not one in which everything is up for grabs. It is important not to overlook the power dynamics that underlie the process of defining and negotiating collective identities (Butler, 2000). The fact that the more than 50 organizations which participated in the emergency rally were able to march under common slogans should not be taken to mean that this process of collective mobilization came without contestation or conflict, as observers were made to believe. Framing the march as a mobilization against racism and bigotry was a way of appealing more broadly to the

general public and making sure that it was a message that, in the words of an interviewee, 'every average American citizen could relate to.' At the same time, broad framing of the protest around anti-racism was also a strategic choice in order to give space to all the different organizations that had decided to participate in the mobilization. As Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002, p. 35) notes, 'the "thinner" the message (often a consensual message) the larger the audience that can identify with it.' There was a general consensus that one of the main objectives of the rally was to counter the racist mobilization taking place that same day, even while many groups 'customized' their message by incorporating other issues, such as drawing a connection between domestic racism and the wars abroad:

I've had a fair amount of experience with coalitions, so what I thought *we* needed, for what *we* wanted to accomplish, was the broadest unity possible. And that was 'opposition to attacks on mosques and Muslims, now and in the future: Cordoba House is welcome here.' And then you could bring anything else you want in, but that's why *we're* all together in this place. And then it was not bending towards either support of Islam or not, or it didn't even bring the war in. (Sam)

On the cusp of preparing for the mobilizations, differences emerged around whether it was adequate to mobilize on such a controversial day. Some organizations expressed that they did not agree with mobilizing on such a sensitive day and site. They decided to organize a silent march the day before and they openly expressed their opposition in the coalition meeting, as they considered that marching on that day would be disrespectful to the family members and the memories of those who died on 9/11. Another group decided to organize a silent mobilization on that day. The interviewees referred to these internal discussions in order to exemplify the democratic nature of the decision-making processes that took place in the preceding meetings, which was placed in striking contrast with the nature of the 'other rally.' It is interesting to see how the organizations that decided to move forward with the protest on 9/11 describe these other organizations as less radical pseudo-allies and as less disposed to open confrontation; and while they were seen as strategic allies (since they too supported the construction of the center), they were perceived as misreading the political situation and not understanding the real dimensions of the conflict at hand.

I think this is something to be kept in mind in building a coalition: you have to meet with and listen to people and have a sense of what can hold them together, what is appropriate to ask them to do. At the meeting we had to make sure that they were all speaking and had a role, but we had four or five co-chairs who represented different organizations ... so that the different perspectives would be heard, because we did not want to suppress those views. We did say we would not allow any racist or bigoted views to be shown there. Some people who came said that the appropriate thing to do that day was to just stand there in silence, and not hold any signs, just dress in black and so they had a chance to express that and others responded 'no, we *do* have a message and we want to stand for unity and say that openly, and we do have slogans.' So after a good discussion, they were voted down, but not in a way of ridicule. (Sally)

This last quote refers to some precautions that were taken in order to ensure a fair agreement between different organizations. Nevertheless, it also reflects the internal struggles

over the definition of what the unifying message would be. This internal conflict, equally notable among organizations on the other side, exemplifies an inherent tension that underlined the organization of the rally that had to do with at least two contesting frames: a more radical one that was openly opposed to US war policies and imperialism, or a more moderate frame that would simply place the emphasis on anti-racism. It is evident that various organizations faced a trade-off between generating adherence and putting forward the more radical messages they desired.

Another interesting aspect clearly evident in the interviews and observations of the event was this movement's 'reactionary' character, in that it emerged in response to the actions of the opposing other coalition. The left perceived itself as 'forced' to mobilize in order to counter the risk that the right wing would achieve discursive hegemony over the controversy. There was a palpable fear that if they did not counter the other mobilization, it would gain too much visibility. In this way, the reasons that inspired the two rallies were very different in nature. While the rally to counter the building of Park51 sparked the conflict (they took initiative to stop that which they considered unjust), the rally in support of the center is described as a reaction to the other group's provocation. In the process of opposing, they developed a set of strategic frames and rhetoric to counterattack and, in doing so, they in turn invited a reaction from the other side. In this way, the actions of one side shaped the actions of the other:

We wouldn't have been there if it wasn't for them ... I think at the end it was agreed 'we have to do this, because they are doing it on September 11th' ... It wasn't a protest against anything else but the Tea Party. (Samira)

So we said well, we have to do something publicly: if they're coming out then we have to come out as well. Given that this was all going to be a fairly short-term ... it all came together around this particular mosque effort. (Andrea)

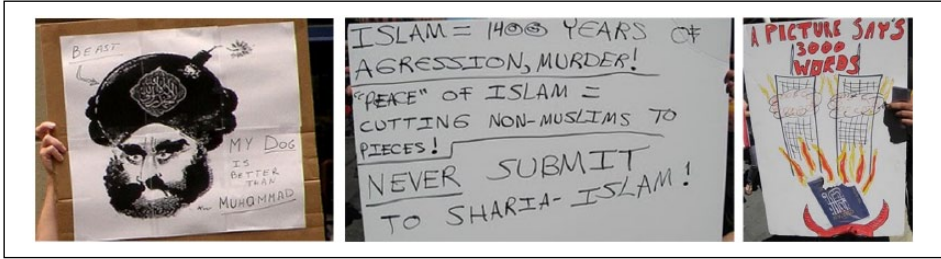
Thus, one of the unique advantages of comparatively studying the organizations and social movements around the controversy is that it provides insight into how political action proceeds dialectically, and how the actions, frames, and perceptions of each side continuously affected the other. As the above account also shows, internal negotiations back stage were critical for identifying shared frames and crafting a collective presentation of self that downplayed differences and projected an appearance of unity front stage.

## **Act 2: The anti-Mosque: 9/11 Rally for Remembrance**

Screams from the crowd encapsulated the emotional energy of the rally's participants: 'No mosque here!' – 'No Obama's mosque' – 'No capitulation' – 'USA! USA!' (Fieldnotes, Rally for Remembrance) (Figure 2).

From an organizational perspective, the 9/11 Rally for Remembrance was well planned. It is not by coincidence that the rally opened with the US national anthem: the overarching themes of patriotism and commemoration were unambiguously clear. The pervasiveness of US flags reinforced the idea that this was an act for America. The purpose of the rally had been expressed in the media the days before: it wasn't a rally against





**Figure 2.** Signs from the Rally for Remembrance.

all mosques but against a mosque being built on this particular site. The problem was one of sensitivity and not of racism against all Muslims, as the other side had claimed.

There were, however, tensions in the message that was being put forward. Even though Pamela Geller had consciously sought to focus the rally on a particular building and site, an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ trope was nevertheless clearly present in the background throughout the day. In many of the speeches made during the rally, an explicit connection was made between the attempt to construct a ‘mosque’ on this site and other radical Islamic activities.

Critiques of Islam were made on the basis of two basic premises: on the one hand, Islam was seen as repressive to basic human rights and freedom of religion; on the other hand, it was viewed as exhibiting desires for conquest, and therefore, as a threat to other nations. The effectiveness of this attack relies on showing Islam as oppressive and dangerous both for its own people and for those in the ‘free world.’ Even though no explicit references to US war efforts in the Middle East were made, the various critiques of Islam nevertheless recalled the justifications for the US’s military interventions abroad.

The protest organizers were well aware of the risks of being ‘misrepresented’ and associated with a racist message. Since the accusation of ‘bigotry’ was constantly evoked by other groups to delegitimize the claims of this rally, the organizers sought to explicitly respond to this in different ways. For example, in their closing remarks, the organizers of the rally warned participants not to incriminate themselves or ‘give ammunition’ to members of the media or those who would otherwise misrepresent their words:

Let me warn you of something ... There are infiltrators, there are agitators, and there are people that are looking to get you on video in an ugly moment. Please trust me on this, I know what I’m saying, this is what I do. Do not give them any ammunition ... You know who you are, you know that you are righteous; do not give them an opportunity to deride this fine and honorable effort. (Closing remarks, Rally for Remembrance)

As evidenced in this excerpt, the leaders of the rally sought to manage the impressions that participants might convey to the outside. The organizers assumed a paternalistic/maternalistic stance toward the participants in trying to channel the messages presented to the public. It is also significant that the frame of ‘righteousness’ was utilized as a way of boosting the image of the self, and of presenting the movement participants as part of a moral crusade.

However, this control was not always successful and disruption of the frame occurred in several instances. For example, the diversity of signs ultimately brought by participants illustrated how individuals carried their own messages and agendas, in many cases challenging the initial frame that the organizers sought to put forward. Many signs illustrated an expansion and broadening of the categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (to encompass, for example, illegal immigrants or socialists), and this identity-work by participants often conflicted with collective frames employed by the organizers.

‘No Obama’s Mosque’ / ‘Illegal aliens were responsible for the 9/11 attack. The solution is simple: CLOSE THE BORDERS. No immigrants, no terror.’ (Fieldnotes on participants’ signs, Rally for Remembrance)

Even though the issue was presented to the public as one of ‘sensitivity,’ it was clear that the rally was fueled in many cases by a broader anti-Islamic sentiment. The underlying emotions and passion driving participants ultimately could not be contained:

‘Christ turned the other cheek, Muhammad never did’ / ‘A picture says 3000 words. (Image: devil with Koran in flames, burning twin towers) / ‘Islam equals 1400 years of aggression, murder! “Peace” of Islam equals cutting non-Muslims to pieces! Never submit to Sharia-Islam!’ / ‘RAMADAN 2010 DEATH TOLL: 217 terrorist attacks, 23 countries, 1012 Dead.’ (Fieldnotes, Rally for Remembrance)

In this section, we have looked at the movement from a ‘front stage’ perspective, placing emphasis on the message that was both intentionally and unintentionally conveyed to the public. Despite the intentions and efforts of organizers, many participants presented a broader and more radical frame to the public eye. In the next section, using the insights that we’ve gained from our interviews, we take a closer look at the underlying tensions between different organizations involved in the anti-mosque initiative and provide a more thorough description of what is happening ‘back stage.’

## **Act 2 back stage**

On the surface, one might be easily led to believe that this rally represented the values and interests of an entire movement. However, internal tensions among opponents of the mosque were so great that some key figures who were otherwise supporters of the movement made the decision to remain incognito during the rally. In a similar vein, the 9/11 rally organizers had previously denounced other rallies organized for the same cause.

Such tensions were not only attributable to clashes between personalities. Conflicts also emerged over issues related to organizing and strategy. For example, there were disagreements between the Manhattan and Brooklyn chapters of the Tea Party about which issues should comprise their primary platform: while the Manhattan Tea Party chose to mostly emphasize ‘the simple message of fiscal conservatism,’ the Brooklyn Tea Party sought to incorporate other issues into their official agenda, such as supporting Arizona’s SB 1070 immigration law and opposing the Park51 center. Thus, back stage, beyond the public eye, the organizations surrounding the issue clashed over their front stage presentation.

Internal disagreements were equally fueled by differences in ideology and opinions regarding the use of framing strategies (Goffman, 1974; Snow, 2004). Just as, among the supporters of the center, the moderate frame of freedom of religion contrasted with the more radical anti-war message, here the framing of the issue as one of ‘sensitivity’ and ‘decency’ contrasted with the more ambitious agenda of stopping all forms of the perceived Islamist threat:

I was a curmudgeon on [the 9/11 rally, organized by Geller] ... I somewhat denounced it ... But her tactic in that rally, I thought, sucked. Her tactic has been to say, ‘it’s all about sensitivity.’ But it’s not about sensitivity. And then they ask her, ‘would you be happy if they move it 10 blocks away?’ [and she says] ‘oh yeah, yeah.’ She doesn’t believe that for a second! And then she says we don’t want any signs at that rally; there can’t be any signs because it’s not ‘political’ ... And it’s like, come on! (Tom)

Even when they have the same political goals, disagreements can prevent organizations from working together, and even lead them to oppose each other. While some thought the ‘sensitivity’ frame would be more palatable to the general public and thus help advance the movement’s cause, others believed that it was too short-sighted, and other issues needed to be incorporated. Similarly, while some saw themselves as part of a broader movement, others were more focused on this particular issue:

*Q:* Do you see your organization in the future working on other issues?

*A:* Yeah I do ... Although people have been trying to get me involved into stopping mosques in other parts of the nation, that I can’t do because first of all, I’m not done settling with this one right here, but second, I’m not an anti-mosque guy; I’m an anti-Ground Zero mosque guy. And there is a difference, and people get the wrong idea. (Jeff)

This perspective easily contrasts with those who situate the issue within a larger ideological framework:

*Q:* You said that you don’t want to turn it into a sensitivity issue; it’s about something else. So what is it about?

*A:* This is why the Voorhees mosque is so important ... Now this mosque is not near Ground Zero, so it’s not about sensitivity; it’s about aggressive Islam. It’s about a network of consciously aggressive Islamists bent on subverting the West. So this is the issue! ... To me, the Voorhees mosque was important because this is a network of mosques that they’re building. (Tom)

Clearly, in other circumstances, these two groups might not work together. Thus, while each rally could be seen as a public performance, the ‘behind-the-scenes’ organizers responsible for its production represent an array of different voices, as each issue summons a unique constellation of organizations. While these actors strove to maintain an appearance of unity front stage, and managed to reach ‘working consensus’ (Goffman, 1990 [1959]), they had very clear disagreements back stage.

## Ground Zero and symbolic struggles over the site

'President Obama,' one speaker cried out, 'you are supposed to be a patriot. Don't you know that this [center] is not about freedom of religion? It is about *geography*.' (Fieldnotes, 9/11 Rally for Remembrance)

The struggle between the two sides of the Park51 controversy took place not only on a political level, but also on a symbolic one. Social conflict and social interactions are very much spatialized (Castells, 1979; Harvey, 1989, 1990). Following Bourdieu (1977), actors wield and exercise different forms of symbolic capital to position themselves in relation to other actors. In this way, performances take place within a broader field of power relations, in which *who* gets to name *what* matters (Foucault, 1980). There was great contention over the meanings of what the construction project entailed, what this building signified, and what the site of Ground Zero represented in the context of the memory of 9/11. Indeed, the very definition of reality is contested when mediated through different epistemological readings of situation and space. These different interpretations, and their reactions to each other, were a visible component of each side's performance front stage and the discussions that took place back stage. Collective actors do not stage performances in a vacuum; it is important to understand the symbolic dimensions associated with the actors' struggles. This section is structured around two analytical aspects that allow the unpacking of the object of the struggle that took place between both sides: space and language, and memory and meaning. Memory and language are two important forms of symbolic capital that grant actors legitimacy in the eyes of the public and, as such, they are fertile soil for contestation.

### *Space and language*

The role of language in meaning-making has been extensively explored (Blumer, 1969), and its role in the controversy has come to signify important differences between divergent understandings of the world. Struggles over word usages are thus essentially battles over the definition of reality. Name-giving and social labeling are fundamentally connected to the issue of power (Foucault, 1982). As a key example in our case, Park51 has been portrayed as an 'Islamic center' by its supporters and as a 'mosque' by its opponents. The careful choice of wording on each side shows that while the latter group seeks to reinforce the building's religious purpose and nature, the former group aspires to place emphasis on its community-based and bridge-building function.

This controversy at the level of language is further illustrated by the fight over the original name of the building. In an attempt to invoke the historical role of the city of Cordoba, Spain as a place of interreligious diversity and tolerance, the building was initially named the 'Cordoba House.' However, opponents of the project soon claimed that 'Cordoba' was a symbol of Muslim conquest. Interestingly, the opposing side ultimately 'won' this particular battle over the name of the project, as the developers subsequently capitulated and agreed to change its name to Park51, taken from the building's location on Park Place.

There was also significant contestation over whether the site of the proposed center was actually 'on' or 'at' Ground Zero. This exemplifies the idea that space can

also be host to a series of competing meanings and understandings. The physical proximity of a building to a site that is considered sacred can turn into a large controversy over how far is far enough in order to be respectful to family members of the victims and the memory of what happened on that site. The very notion of Ground Zero, how large it is, what its territory encompasses and how much is hallowed ground has been subject to intense controversy:

It wasn't really a hot story, but they found ways to make it a hot story by calling it a 'Ground Zero mosque' and stirring up nerves basically. So now everybody wanted to know about this ... *just because of the wording* ... The place used to be a coat factory ... and you can't see Ground Zero from this *masjid* [Islamic center]. (Samira, emphasis added)

However, contestation over space was not only visible in the verbal communication of actors using language (the 'expression we give') but also in the non-verbal communication of how the rallies were staged and how each positioned themselves in the stage ('expressions we give off' as Goffman, 1990 [1959] would say).

### *Memory and meaning*

The role of language and territoriality in the conflict was also closely tied to the importance of memory and its usages. The idea that memory is not a 'storehouse' but rather an active and selective process of meaning-making has been vastly explored (Halbwachs, 1992 [1951]; Huyssen, 2003). Individuals and groups establish particular relations with places and objects; they acquire a symbolic value according to the ways in which they are used and represented publicly.

The link between a place and the memory it evokes is constantly illustrated through practices, and diffused through discourses. Some actors purposefully try to encourage the sacredness of certain places, while others consciously try to break the connection or bestow it with a different meaning (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991; Winter, 1995). As Alexander (2011) reminds us, politics is, essentially, a struggle for meaning, and performance endows social actors with a persuasive power over meaning.

On the whole, the link between Ground Zero and the events of 9/11 are not contested by most US citizens. The mere reference to Ground Zero summons an arsenal of emotions and feelings—especially around the date of the commemoration of the attacks—that makes the site especially susceptible to sensitivities. Staging performances in these sites would evoke those sensibilities and it would be important for organizers of the rallies to channel these in their favor. What is still subject to contestation, however, is the specific connection made between memory and political power. In some instances, mourning can become the basis for enforcing communal identities such as nationalism, while in others it can be mobilized for the purposes of resistance (Saunders & Aghaie, 2005; Winter, 1995). For those that oppose the construction of an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero, this is really a struggle for the respect of the people that lost their lives in the 'terrorist attack' and their family members, and it thus becomes a struggle over American identity and history. Sarah Palin, for example, condemned this initiative by saying that



**Figure 3.** Signs from the 9/11 rally against Park51.

this is a ‘stab in the heart of, collectively, Americans who still have that lingering pain from 9/11.’

The anti-mosque rally opened up with the idea that ‘we will never forget,’ thus explicitly referencing the memory of 9/11 in order to justify what they see as an unacceptable and hurtful provocation. The memory of the tragedy of 9/11 is one of the main driving forces supporting the efforts and sustaining the political actions of the anti-mosque organizations. Memories of the attacks and the pain they evoke are used as a constant reminder of the ever-present risk of terrorism and the importance of curtailing that threat. Memory enables claims over sensitivity. Images like ‘building upon the ashes,’ or ‘spitting in the face of the victims,’ or ‘putting salt in the wound,’ were often evoked in order to suggest that the building is a sign of disrespect (e.g., Figure 3):

The whole sound of it – if they can build a mosque at Ground Zero, what is going to stop them from doing anything? To me that is the ultimate, the big thumb in your eye. (Jeff)

Memory also functions to uphold the fundamental role of victimhood in granting legitimacy and authority (Jelin, 2002; Polletta, 2006). Family members of the victims of the 9/11 attack are the key participants in this process. It is they who have suffered directly; it is they who the sensitivity argument most draws upon to convey the inappropriateness of the location. Due to their victimhood status, family members also have a certain level of ‘untouchability’ in comparison to other individuals and groups. The references to the ‘family members’ and their individual experiences were used to amplify and give legitimacy to the collective frame used by the organizers:

It’s hard for [the other side] to attack the families because the families are the victims of this ... If you notice in their attacks, they don’t go after us; they go after Pamela Geller, because she’s not a family member; they go after the Tea Party, Newt Gingrich, the politicians ... but they don’t go after us. In fact they hide from us. We are the families, so we are the ‘big dog.’ (Andrew)

Scholars who have studied the place of ‘cultural trauma’ in mnemonic practices have highlighted the emotional weight these types of direct experiences have upon the communities which bear witness to them (Alexander, 2004; Perelli, 1994; Roniger & Sznajder, 1999; Schirmer, 1994). Because victimhood boosts claimants’ legitimacy to

speak, personal experience is often appealed to as a way of gaining a better position in the discussion:

And he [Imam Rauf, one of the primary developers of the center] told me: 'I handed out water on 9/11.' I wanted to punch him in the face. Are you kidding me? The building practically fell on my head, all my friends are dead because of terrorists, and you're telling me you handed out fucking water!?' (Andrew)

The privileging of the memory of 9/11 by opponents of the mosque did not go uncontested, however. While supporters of the center did not deny the memory of 9/11 in itself, many claimed it was used inappropriately to advance specific political ends. A common phrase used by many supporters was that the memory was being 'hijacked':

Here is this day that has come to symbolize an excuse for war, and every year a whole number of people, from generals to politicians, all come out – supposedly to mourn those who died – but this is not it at all, it's a war memorial and they use it that day. So to have an even more extreme group try to hijack it in an even more dangerous direction ... And then what happened is all the media and politicians started calling on us to cancel the act, asking that we should show respect, and we said well it's the right wing, they should cancel, why on earth would we leave them the day? (Sally)

The above excerpt shows that even when memory grants legitimacy and power to certain actors, its use toward certain political ends can be challenged.

In this section, we have shown how the struggle over the Park51 center is intimately linked to the relationship that individuals and organizations have with territoriality, memory, and language, all of which are mediated through meaning when staged for the public. Symbolic meanings are fundamentally connected with power, and as a result political struggle is waged over delineating the contours of those meanings. In order to position themselves in public, actors draw upon an ample array of tools; as we have seen, memory holds a special place in this process.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have tried to make a case for the importance of studying collective action in context. Movements can never be understood in a vacuum; it is fundamental to take into account the social and dialectical aspect of all collective action, as groups are often implicitly responding to the arguments and accusations of the other side while simultaneously managing internal disagreements back stage. Collective political action is waged on both organizational and symbolic levels, and this story gives an account of these two parallel processes that mutually inform each other.

The article problematizes the homogenizing views that many times prevailed in the Park51 controversy – both in mainstream accounts and in the perceptions each side holds – by offering a view of collective action as a complex web of interactions, characterized by conscious struggles between those that oppose and support the project but also within each side. However, contrary to Goffmanian perspectives, this study does not view the

situation as Machiavellian actors simply seeking to deceive their audience; the meanings that they bring to the situation informed their performance.

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### Notes

1. CNN, 'Rallies held over proposed Islamic center,' 09 September 2010, retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/US/09/11/new.york.islamic.center.rallies/>
2. 'September 11: Thousands march against racism and anti-Muslim bigotry,' by Sara Flounders in Global Research, 13 September 2010.
3. In order to protect their identity, the names of all interviewees have been changed and any personally identifying information omitted.

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