



Title: Never Forget: Ground Zero, Park51, and Constitutive Rhetorics

Author: Tamara Issak

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Never Forget: Ground Zero, Park51, and Constitutive Rhetorics

Tamara Issak, St. John's University

Introduction

It was the summer of 2010 when the story of Park51 exploded in the news. Day after day, media coverage focused on the proposal to create a center for Muslim and interfaith worship and recreational activities in Lower Manhattan. The space envisioned for Park51 was a vacant department store which was damaged on September 11, 2001. Eventually, it was sold to Sharif El-Gamal, a Manhattan realtor and developer, in July of 2009. El-Gamal intended to use this space to build a community center open to the general public, which would feature a performing arts center, swimming pool, fitness center, basketball court, an auditorium, a childcare center, and many other amenities along with a Muslim prayer space/mosque. Despite the approval for construction by a Manhattan community board, the site became a battleground and the project was hotly debated. It has been over ten years since the uproar over Park51, and it is important to revisit the event as it has continued significance and impact today.

The main argument against the construction of the community center and mosque was its proximity to Ground Zero. Opponents to Park51 argued that the construction of a mosque so close to Ground Zero was offensive and insensitive because the 9/11 attackers were associated with Islam (see fig. 1). One of the most vocal opponents to Park51 featured in the national news media was Pamela Geller who is listed as an extremist and the "anti-Muslim movement's most visible and flamboyant figurehead," by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Geller and allies in the Islamophobia industry galvanized racists across the country to protest against Park51 and block mosque construction projects everywhere (Ali et al). The Park51 uproar had a ripple effect on Muslim communities throughout America with reports of arson, vandalism, and violence at mosques. The shutdown of Park51 was another reminder that the constitutional right to practice religion freely and build houses of worship does not apply to Muslims.



Fig. 1: Image of Park51 protestors holding signs (Shankbone)

Supporters of Park51 argued that mosques and Muslim prayer spaces have existed near or at the World Trade Center for many years, and they objected to the notion that Muslims as an entire community bear responsibility for 9/11. Instead, they affirmed that Park51 would bring a much-needed community center to Lower Manhattan, and it would bring together people from diverse backgrounds to challenge misconceptions about Muslims and Islam. Supporters argued that Park51 was not located at Ground Zero as protesters claimed and that it was several blocks away in an area near coffee shops, office buildings, bars, and restaurants. As the map in Figure 2 illustrates, Park51 is a few blocks north of the former Twin Towers and the World Trade Center.

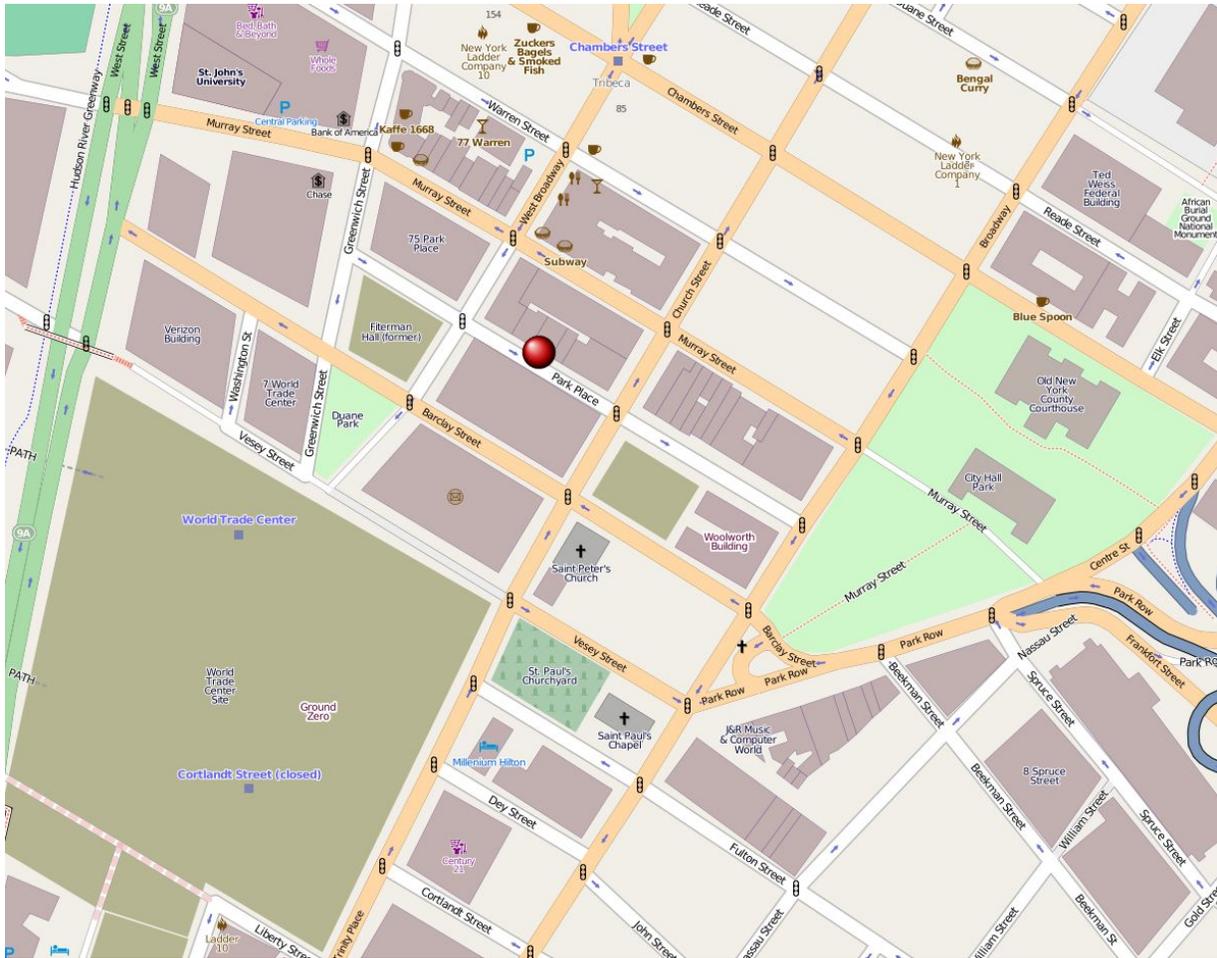


Fig. 2: A map of sites in relation to Ground Zero. Park51 is the red pin in the image. As shown, the large section colored in green a few blocks south of Park51 is the site of Ground Zero. (Blurpleace)

In the debates about Park51, two different stories of America—Ground Zero and Park51—came into conflict. Ground Zero and Park51 create constellated and overlapping stories—one speaks over another because of the way power and identity are infused. To date, this aspect of the debate has yet to be analyzed. While scholarship has attended to the Park51 debate and Ground Zero (Donofrio, Earle, Ivanova, Pierce), my work uses constitutive rhetorical theory to uncover how American identity is constructed at Ground Zero and to illustrate the tensions between the spaces of Ground Zero and Park51.

In this article, I argue that constellating the constitutive rhetoric of Ground Zero with the constitutive invitation of Park51 allows us to understand the exclusion of Muslims in the nation's imagined community. Constellations are a "visual metaphor" for the relationality between "places, spaces, events, people, and

communities” (Powell et al). Constellating the constitutive story of Ground Zero with the constitutive invitation of Park51 illustrates how these spaces exist alongside one another, in relation to one another, on the same ground and it also allows us to see how one constitutive story silences the Other, does violence to the Other, and attempts to erase the Other. Since constitutive rhetoric is about community building, and the exclusion of Muslims (approximately 3.45 million people) from the nation does the opposite, this exclusion does not bode well for Muslims specifically, but also for marginalized communities everywhere. In the following sections, I discuss Ground Zero as a rhetorical landscape that constructs American identity as white, Christian, nationalistic, patriotic, and native¹ and which also is defined in relation to what it is not—Muslim, Arab, foreign, Other.

Ground Zero as a Rhetorical Landscape

Constitutive rhetorical theory provides insights into how national identity is constructed. Constitutive rhetoric provides a way to understand how individuals become “the people” (McGee 236). In turn, “the people” can form a nation which is “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 6). The large work of forming a nation begins when individuals identify with one another and are persuaded by various rhetorical means to see themselves as a distinct group. This transformation of individuals into subjects is called “interpellation,” and it “occurs at the very moment one enters into a rhetorical situation, that is, as soon as an individual recognizes and acknowledges being addressed” (Charland 138). More concisely, constitutive rhetoric is rhetoric that “calls its audience into being” (134). Charland argues that constitutive rhetoric can change the material world: “What is significant in constitutive rhetoric is that it positions the reader towards political, social, and economic action in the material world and it is in this positioning that its ideological character becomes significant” (141). Constitutive rhetoric explains how rhetoric creates identification and identity and, in turn, exclusive communities, whether or not they are nations. More simply, constitutive rhetoric is about community building through various rhetorical means.

Constitutive rhetorical theory is often used to examine language and discourse, but it can also be used to study spaces and places, including those relevant to national identity. In *Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke*, Gregory Clark examines the constitutive function of spaces and places. Clark applies Burke’s rhetoric of identification to “trace the rhetorical work” of “American

¹ The construct of American identity at Ground Zero as native is, of course, a myth. Native Americans are the only people native to these lands. However, the myth is one that animates the anger and violence against anyone who is deemed Other, immigrant, foreign.

tourist experiences from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (4). He argues that national identity is constructed through tourism at public places such as the Grand Canyon, Shaker villages, New York City, Yellowstone National Park, and the Lincoln Highway. He elaborates that, “the rhetorical power of a national culture is wielded not only by public discourse, but also by *public experiences*” (4). Clark argues that Americans tour these places which he calls rhetorical landscapes to feel a sense of “communion and community,” in Burke’s terms.

Rhetorical landscapes impact visitors in subtle ways, and they inspire within visitors a sense of connection to a shared history. L. J. Nicoletti explains that paying attention to the symbolism, setting, audience, scale, permanence, and inscriptions in museums, memorials, and monuments of national sites is important for understanding the meanings of rhetorical landscapes which Nicoletti calls *memoryscapes* (55-6). Nicoletti explains the significance of monuments found at such national sites this way: “Monuments mediate our memory of history and direct our experience through their design *and* the rhetoric surrounding them” (54).² Memoryscapes and rhetorical landscapes teach us how to understand history and teach us about who we are as a people. Much can be gleaned from constellating the overlapping stories in rhetorical landscapes and memoryscapes about who belongs and who is unwelcome.

Both Ground Zero and the yet-to-be-Park51 became rhetorical landscapes. In this article, I focus on the collectivization of Americans at Ground Zero with a focus on the national, racial, ethnic, religious, and political dimensions. I illustrate how the constitutive stories at Ground Zero and Park51 are constellated and overlapping in the same city at the same time. I offer examples of constitutive rhetoric in my analysis.³

Creating Community at Ground Zero: Identification and Exclusion

Ground Zero is a national memorial site, or a *rhetorical landscape*, that creates a sense of shared American identity among visitors in several ways. Upon visiting Ground Zero, tourists “experience privately a powerful sense of public identity” (Clark 25). The rhetorical landscape triggers powerful emotions of grief, sadness and empathy as visitors remember the estimated 3,000 victims who died on September 11. Such feelings of empathy and loss evoke a sense of kinship to the

² Nicoletti uses monuments and memorials interchangeably because monuments are always memorials but memorials can be any range of things.

³ A comprehensive analysis of all of the constitutive rhetoric at Ground Zero and Park51 is beyond the scope of this article.

families of those lost and a deep connection to Ground Zero. When grief is experienced in community at Ground Zero, a sense of nationalism also emerges while a particular American national identity is shaped. Judith Butler explains, “Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense depoliticizing. But ... it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order” (12). At Ground Zero, collective grieving is an especially powerful way to recreate and reinforce a political community centered on notions of American identity.

Rhetorical landscapes such as Ground Zero are also created by the lived experiences of those excluded from this imagined community. The rhetorical landscape is made by active exclusion of those who are imagined as Other. While Ground Zero helps unify and build a sense of community and American identity, it, like many rhetorical landscapes, simultaneously separates people (Clark 4). Constellating the stories of those excluded with those who are included teaches us a deeper sense of the rhetorical reality on the ground (Powell et al). The constitutive exclusion of Muslims at Ground Zero is very apparent upon close examination. I will detail two stories of Muslims at Ground Zero who challenge the official narrative of the rhetorical landscape.

New York Police Department Muslim Chaplain, Khalid Latif, describes his visit to Ground Zero on the tenth anniversary of 9/11:

This past September, I stood with the families of individuals who had passed away on 9/11 some ten years ago now. I have been doing this in my role as a NYC police department chaplain since I started working with the NYPD...And so this past September when I’m standing with these families, I was approached by three individuals who were wearing suits who asked me to show them my police credentials to just ensure that I actually worked for the NYPD. They said that Secret Service spotted you from the top of a building and they asked us to come and ask you just in case. Just in case. And I said to him, ‘Just in case, what?’ And the one guy said, ‘I’m really sorry that we’re doing this to you.’ And I said to him, ‘Then why are you doing it?’ (Latif)

In Latif’s story, he visits Ground Zero to mourn the loss of those who died on September 11, but his presence is questioned. His appearance as a Muslim—brown, bearded, and wearing a kufi—at Ground Zero is seen as a security threat, even though he is wearing a police officer’s uniform with a badge (see fig. 3). His identity is questioned, and he is viewed as an intruder. Latif’s example shows

how the rhetorical landscape of Ground Zero—a place where American national identity can be defined—is also a place where American national identity is policed. Constitutive rhetorics draw the very real boundaries many American Muslims feel and experience. His belonging is questioned at the rhetorical landscape of Ground Zero.

If his identity is questioned, then his grief, by extension, is also questioned. At Ground Zero, collective grieving unites a community, and from this outpouring of emotion, we can recognize which people are grievable (Butler). From Latif's example, we learn who is allowed to grieve. Latif and his emotions are rendered illegible because of his racial, religious, and ethnic identities. Again, rhetorical landscapes both create community and mark those outside that community. Many people, just like Latif, are deemed to be outsiders at Ground Zero and this affirms the exclusivity of the rhetorical landscape.



Fig. 3: NYPD Muslim Chaplain Khalid Latif in uniform wearing a kafi to cover his head. (Derballa)

There is much to learn from another story of a Muslim at Ground Zero, Mohammad Salman Hamdani, an American Muslim of Pakistani descent (see fig. 4). The constitutive exclusion of Muslims in the rhetoric of Ground Zero is evidenced in the placement of Hamdani's name in the 9/11 Memorial. Hamdani was one of the first

responders from New York City who rushed to Ground Zero to rescue the injured on September 11. We learn about his story from his parents, Talat Hamdani and Mohammad Saleem Hamdani. An aspiring doctor, Hamdani worked at Rockefeller University in Manhattan, and he also was an emergency medical technician and police cadet. On September 11, EMTs from across the area were called to assist in the rescue efforts. After several days passed, Hamdani's parents registered him as missing. His mother explains, "We put down his name as Sal Hamdani. My brother did not put down his name, the first name, Mohammad, for certain reasons" (Goodman and Kamat). Hamdani's family knew that he might be singled out because of his religion so they used a common Italian American nickname to prevent any potential issues.

About a month later, a *New York Post* headline entitled, "Missing or Hiding? Mystery of the NYPD Cadet from Pakistan," appeared and soon reporters were at the Hamdani home questioning the family about their son's involvement in the attacks. The *New York Post* article states:

The NYPD is hunting for one of its former cadets, initially reported missing in the Twin Towers attack, issuing an urgent "hold and detain" order for the Pakistani native...Hamdani was last seen, Koran in hand, leaving his Bayside, Queens home for his job as a research assistant at Rockefeller University, but he never made it to work...[I]nvestigators for the FBI and NYPD have since questioned the family about which Internet chat rooms he visited and if he was political...Police sources said he hadn't been to work at the NYPD since April, but he still carried official identification. One source told : 'That tells me they're not looking for this guy at the bottom of the rubble. The thing that bothers me is, if he is up to some tricks, he can walk past anybody [using the ID card].'... [S]ources close to the investigation say the hunt is still on – cops at the Midtown Tunnel reported spotting someone who looked like Hamdani yesterday morning. (Gorta)

In this report, Hamdani is framed as suspect from the outset. The word, "hunt," was used even though the authorities did not know if he was missing through no fault of his own. Talat Hamdani explains that at this same time that the *New York Post* article appeared, she received a call from Congressman Ackerman's office:

[W]e were interrogated by Congressman Ackerman about his [Salman's] faith and about us and everything. And he led us to believe that maybe

he was detained by INS, by the ICE. And I said, 'He's an American citizen.'
But he said, 'Well, he wasn't born here.' (Goodman and Kamat)

It did not matter to Ackerman that Hamdani was an American citizen. His birthplace, Pakistan, made his American citizenship irrelevant.

Six months after September 11, Mohammad Salman Hamdani's body was found at Ground Zero. For *six whole months*, Hamdani's death was not deemed "grievable" (Butler). For *six whole months*, as the Hamdani family was grieving the loss of their beloved son and the horrors of 9/11, they were not given the space or time to heal as other families of victims of 9/11 were. Instead, they were bombarded with unfounded accusations, false news reports, and interrogations.

When Hamdani's body was found and his name was cleared, his funeral was held at a mosque on East 96th Street in Manhattan. Mayor Bloomberg, Congressman Ackerman, and Police Commissioner Ray Kelly even spoke at his funeral. In recent years, however, when the September 11 Memorial opened, Mohammad Salman Hamdani's name was "positioned in a separate section of the memorial, among those considered loosely connected to the World Trade Center" instead of among the police cadets and "first responders who lost their lives trying to help others" (Candiotti). Talat Hamdani believes that her son was not included in the list of first responders and instead "grouped among the miscellaneous victims" because of discrimination based on his Muslim faith (Hamdani). The way in which even Hamdani's name was physically placed away from the group highlights how rhetorical landscapes maintain a powerful message about who belongs and who does not belong based on the imagined ethnicity and race and also the imagined faith of those who can belong.

The story of Mohammad Salman Hamdani is one of presumed guilt. His background as a Pakistani Muslim caused him to be a suspect irrespective of his professional experience as an NYPD cadet and as an EMT. Furthermore, in Hamdani's story, we see how even his designation in the memorial is incorrect, and he is excluded from the list of people who sacrificed their own lives to save others. Hamdani's story demonstrates that rhetorical landscapes such as Ground Zero and the memorial of September 11 are often structured in ways that exclude certain identities because those spaces' imagined communities are definitively *not* Muslim.



Fig. 4 Mohammad Salman Hamdani (Otterman)

As stated earlier, rhetorical landscapes both create community and mark those outside that community. Constellating the stories of those excluded with those who are included teaches us a deeper sense of the rhetorical reality on the ground. Latif and Hamdani's stories push back against official narratives about 9/11. They do not fit stereotypes about Muslims. Most significantly, their stories illustrate the insidious power of these rhetorical landscapes to erase the Other and overwrite the Other's legal and political rights.

Creating Community at Ground Zero: Religious Symbols and the Religious Subject

Ground Zero, as a rhetorical landscape, also creates a sense of shared community through the deployment of religious symbols and encouragement of ritual practice. Ground Zero can be seen as a pilgrimage site or as "a religious journey to a sacred site" which "implies personal transformation" (Sturken 11). There, one can witness or participate in rituals such as lighting candles, reading holy texts, singing religious songs, and praying. These rituals not only help to further "define the sacred meaning of the site" (Kilde 301) but also build a shared sense of community.

There are many who believe that Ground Zero is a site of martyrdom and the discovery of Christian crosses in the wreckage was interpreted as a miracle and a sign of God. This discovery is the subject of the popular documentary, *The Cross and The Towers*. In particular, one prominent cross that was discovered in the wreckage was used as a gathering place for prayer at Ground Zero and is now a main feature in the 9/11 Memorial and Museum (Jenkins). These crosses at Ground Zero help to construct a sense of American identity and community among visitors. The cross is the most powerful symbol of Christianity, and its prominence at Ground Zero calls a Christian audience into being. Furthermore, the cross is the foundational symbol to the nation and therefore affirms the rhetorical landscape of Ground Zero.

The presence of Christian symbols at Ground Zero highlights the absence of other religious symbols. Park51, often called a "Victory Mosque" by opponents, would have been a place where Muslims and people of other faiths prayed. Park51 and Muslim prayer in geographic proximity to Ground Zero was deemed offensive and as a defilement of the sanctity of Ground Zero. In a statement made by former Republican Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, he argues that the placement of the

mosque/Park51 is offensive in its proximity to the sacred space of Ground Zero. Pawlenty states:

I'm strongly opposed to the idea of putting a mosque anywhere near Ground Zero—I think it's inappropriate...I believe that 3,000 of our fellow innocent citizens were killed in that area, and some ways from a patriotic standpoint, it's hallowed ground, it's sacred ground, and we should respect that. We shouldn't have images or activities that degrade [or] disrespect that in any way. (Conroy)

Here, in referring to the tragic death of 3,000 citizens, the governor's narrative erases the presence of Muslims who died on 9/11. He uses the pronoun "we" to argue that anyone who is American and anyone who is patriotic would never degrade or disrespect the sacredness of the site. This "we" excludes Muslims in its assumption that the two identities—Muslim and American—could never co-exist. George Cheney's rearticulation of Kenneth Burke's rhetoric of identification is useful in naming the various rhetorical strategies at work in Pawlenty's comments. One rhetorical strategy Pawlenty uses is the transcendent "we" in which the "pronoun 'we' (along with surrogate forms) often goes unnoticed as an appeal to identification between parties who may have little in common" (Cheney 148-9). Such an appeal often sets up a we vs. they framing in which identification and disidentification are simultaneously at work. As a Republican from Minnesota, audiences of various political persuasions may not identify with Pawlenty, but when he uses the transcendent "we," he collectivizes patriotic Americans against a common "they" (148). In the rhetorical landscape of Ground Zero, "they" are foreign and suspect. Furthermore, he uses the phrase "our fellow innocent citizens" to describe the victims of the September 11 attacks. Such use of a collective "our" not only excludes Muslims as victims but also as part of the broader American community grieving after the tragedy of September 11.

Contrasting this view of Park51 with the wide acceptance of crosses and Christian prayer at the site helps to further illustrate the constitutive rhetoric of Ground Zero. In *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, Tim Cresswell explains that we can learn about a society or culture's values and ideologies by analyzing moments of geographical transgression. He explains that challenging the norms of a place can reveal much about what those norms are. The Park51 proposal and backlash illustrates what does and does not belong at Ground Zero and highlights how American identity is constituted in that space.

Creating Community at Ground Zero: Political Speeches and the Political Subject

The constitutive rhetoric in politicians' speeches about Ground Zero and Park51 also illustrates an imagined community separate from Muslims. In one statement, former Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin tweeted: "Peaceful New Yorkers, pls refute the Ground Zero mosque plan if you believe catastrophic pain caused @ Twin Towers site is too raw, too real." Here, Palin addresses New Yorkers and reminds them of the September 11 tragedy in order to organize them against Park51. She uses the pronoun, "you," to summon a collective body of "peaceful" New Yorkers who felt and experienced the catastrophe. She attempts to identify with the audience through antithesis in which one group unites "against a common 'enemy,'" (Cheney 148). In this case, Palin calls upon peaceful New Yorkers to unite against the organizers of Park51 based on their shared pain, and she groups herself with New Yorkers even though she is from Alaska. Anderson's theorization of imagined communities explains Palin's notion that she is in communion with New Yorkers. Anderson writes, "[T]he members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). This sense that all Americans are one community who feel pain collectively is a rhetorical construction. Palin's "you" excludes Muslims from the collective group of New Yorkers who also experienced pain and loss on September 11.

Constitutive rhetoric that distinguishes Muslims from Americans is even evident in the speeches of Park51's supporters. These examples are, in fact, more egregious than the overt statements of Pawlenty and Palin. For example, consider the speeches of former Mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg and President Barack Obama, who offered powerful speeches in support of Park51. On August 3, 2010 in New York City, Mayor Bloomberg gave a tearful speech:

The World Trade Center Site will forever hold a special place in our City, in our hearts. But we would be untrue to the best part of ourselves—and who we are as New Yorkers and Americans—if we said 'no' to a mosque in Lower Manhattan...Of course, it is fair to ask the organizers of the mosque to *show some special sensitivity to the situation*—and in fact, their plan envisions reaching beyond their walls and building an interfaith community. (Bloomberg; emphasis added)

Even though Bloomberg strongly supported the Park51 project, his speech was contradictory in its support. In Bloomberg's speech, the organizers of the

mosque/Muslims are still positioned in opposition to New Yorkers and Americans, more generally. He does say, for instance, that “we” should support religious liberty and not say “no” to Park51, but he also says that “we” can “ask” the Muslims “to show some sensitivity.” His message, although supportive, tells the audience that “they” are different than “us” in two ways. First, if one acknowledges that not all Muslims are responsible for September 11 and if one is not scapegoating an entire population, this discussion of the relationship between the place of Park51 and the place of Ground Zero would not even be a consideration. Second, what should the organizers of the mosque show sensitivity about? If we accept Muslims as Americans, and we understand that Muslims were as aggrieved as any other community on September 11, then we would not single them out and ask them to be sensitive about how they live and where they worship in America. Despite Bloomberg’s use of “us,” his overall message is that Muslims are Other.

Such contradictions are also evident in the rhetoric of President Obama, who gave a powerful speech in support of Park51 on August 14, 2010 at a White House hosted Ramadan celebration:

Recently, attention has been focused on the construction of mosques in certain communities—particularly New York. Now, we must all recognize and respect the sensitivities surrounding the development of Lower Manhattan. The 9/11 attacks were a deeply traumatic event for our country. And the pain and the experience of suffering by those who lost loved ones is just unimaginable. So I understand the emotions that this issue engenders. And Ground Zero is, indeed, hallowed ground. As a citizen, and as President, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in Lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. This is America. And our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakeable. (Obama)

After this initial statement of support was given, President Obama followed up a day later stating, “I was not commenting and I will not comment on *the wisdom* of making the decision to put a mosque *there*” (Tumulty and Shear; emphasis added). In President Obama’s speech, he notes “the pain and the experience of suffering by those who lost loved ones is just unimaginable.” In such a claim, there is a subtle message that the “those” in “those who lost loved ones” does not include Muslims who lost loved ones. Why would Muslims who lost loved ones on September 11 find Park51/a Muslim prayer space hurtful or offensive to the memory of the victims?

This speech, like Bloomberg's, demonstrates a strong stand for Park51, but it also sends mixed messages. President Obama reminds the American people of the religious freedom granted by the Constitution, yet in doing so, he separates out the Muslim community as somehow needing to be sensitive or wise about their decisions. This statement implies that Muslims bear responsibility for September 11 and suggests that Muslims ought to be sensitive about practicing their religion so as not to offend people. In addition, President Obama's speech, like Bloomberg's, constructs Muslims as one homogenous entity and Islam as a monolithic structure, which neglects the reality that the 1.4 billion Muslims in the world are as varied as any other religious group in their identities, beliefs, and practices.

As these speeches demonstrate, political discourse about Park51 is strongly influenced by the constitutive rhetoric of Ground Zero. By focusing the debate on the proximity of Park51 to Ground Zero, whether or not one supports the construction of Park51, Muslims are scapegoated. In this way, public discourse communicates a powerful message to Muslims: *you* do not belong, and to everyone else, *they* do not belong. Such rhetoric leaves little opportunity for Muslims to intervene because they are already excluded from the outset. As I demonstrate in the next section, Park51 in its original conception, was meant to be an inclusive space for all people, but it was a failed project before it even started. This is because Ground Zero's rhetorical landscape has constellating narratives—political, religious, nationalist, racial—which are premised on creating a community by exclusion. Ground Zero's imagined white, patriotic, nationalistic, Christian, native community is defined in opposition to its enemy—Islam, Muslim, Arab, Other. The former relies on the latter's erasure.

Creating Community at Ground Zero: Exclusion and Excommunication

Sharif El-Gamal, the main organizer of Park51, made extra efforts to make the space inclusive and to appeal to all Americans. Although, Park51 was meant to be a center open to all for worship, entertainment, recreation, and art, and although the Muslim leading its development identified as a liberal and a Sufi, the center and its Muslim congregants were grouped as a monolithic "Other," and El-Gamal was scrutinized and demonized endlessly in media reports. The proximity of Park51 to Ground Zero made it impossible to recognize the diversity of Muslim identity from common stereotypes about Muslims. El-Gamal, in various attempts, worked within and against such rhetorics, and he employed numerous rhetorical strategies to appeal to the public for support.

Rather than market Park51 as a mosque, he called it a community center and reiterated that Park51 was meant to be an “institution for all of us” (Hernandez). In this use of the common ground technique, El-Gamal sought to create a link between him and “others in an overt manner” (Cheney 148). This institution would be for “all of us,” and we would enjoy its facilities together, El-Gamal explained. To amplify this appeal, El-Gamal incorporated features in the Park51 proposal such as a performing arts center, swimming pool, fitness center, auditorium, and a childcare center. These all serve as attractive features for supporting the project and the addition of this space to the neighborhood.

El-Gamal not only referred to Park51 as a community center but also a Prayer Space instead of a mosque. In doing so, El-Gamal made special efforts to distinguish between the kind of Islam he practices and the kind of Islam other Muslims practice. El-Gamal emphasized, for instance, that he is a “moderate Muslim” and that just because there is a prayer space and a Muslim character to some of the spaces, it is in *no way* related to the kind of Islam that Americans envision (Hernandez). Mahmoud Mamdani, in *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, provides a useful explanation of such need to distinguish oneself from “bad” Muslims. In response to President Bush’s speeches after September 11, and his repeated distinction between good and bad Muslims, Mamdani writes:

‘Bad Muslims’ were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seemed to assure Americans that ‘good Muslims’ were anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime and would undoubtedly support ‘us’ in a war against ‘them.’ But this could not hide the central message of such discourse: unless proved to be ‘good,’ every Muslim was presumed to be ‘bad.’ All Muslims were now under obligation to prove their credentials by joining in a war against ‘bad Muslims.’ (15)

In order to align himself with the “good Muslim,” El-Gamal also repeatedly proclaimed his allegiance to America in his defense of Park51. In addition, he repeatedly exclaims, “I am American!” and argues that Muslims are actually good for America in that Muslims enrich American culture and contribute to society. Nevertheless, the distinctions El-Gamal makes between himself and bad Muslims earn him no credit. Despite the fact that he claims to be American, he will never be American. Good and bad Muslims are Muslims either way and therefore not American; they are pitted against each other, but they are outside the circle of

legibility. El-Gamal does not fit in and the project that he is sponsoring does not fit the rhetorical landscape.

In adopting such rhetorical strategies in his defense of Park51, El-Gamal demonstrates the role that rhetorical landscapes play in the process of solidifying narrow and exclusionary views and the difficulties of challenging them. El-Gamal practically bent over backwards in order to appease critics, but it was to no avail. Park51, as originally envisioned, never came to fruition. Unfortunately, the constitutive rhetoric of Ground Zero and the grouping of Muslims as one monolith overwhelmed and erased the diverse representation of Muslims presented by Park51. There was much potential for Park51 to be a space that added dimension through identity, community, and memory being constructed differently. Instead, the space of Park51 was defined by Islamophobia—a “victory” of Other against “nation.” It is no wonder, then, that this project was impossible from the outset. The relationship between the rhetorical landscape of Ground Zero and Park51 has to be a relationship of hostility because the premise is Islamophobia. The relationship shows us who belongs and who is legible and those who do not belong and are questioned.

Conclusion

Working in Manhattan during the frightful protests against Park51 in 2010, I was startled by the vehemence of the protestors and the wave of anti-Muslim violence reported across the country. In 2010, I had flashbacks to the days immediately following September 11, 2001. In the years since, I have struggled to understand what the Park51 uproar was really about. Various analyses and commentary did not seem to explain the fury and rage I witnessed in response to Park51.

It was not until I began to study the constitutive rhetoric of Ground Zero, the ways in which this space calls people to its conception of American identity that I was able to understand the debate better. Constitutive rhetorical theory illustrates how we are guided and shaped by our experiences in spaces. Recognizing Ground Zero as a rhetorical landscape, a space where visitors experience communion and community, and, in turn, develop a deeper sense of American identity is crucial for understanding the Park51 debate. The rhetoric of Ground Zero is created by a particular cultural community and is aimed at a particular imagined community. Through the discursive evidence in varied texts discussed in this article, it is clear that the constitutive rhetoric of Ground Zero is directed at a white, Christian, patriotic, nationalistic community—an imagined community that defines itself in direct contrast to what it is not—Muslim, Arab, foreign. Identity is enmeshed on

imagined relations and layered with religious, political, racial, and cultural associations. Cultural rhetorics scholarship calls us to question the cultural constructions and official narratives of spaces that so often silence, exclude, and erase Others. Constellating stories allows us to see clearly how power is imbalanced and allows us to hear voices we could not hear otherwise.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tamara Issak is Assistant Professor in the Institute for Core Studies at St. John's University in New York City. She is a graduate of Syracuse University's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Ph.D. program. Her current research focuses on religious rhetorics, Islamophobic rhetoric, and Arab and Muslim identity construction in America.

ABOUT THE MENTOR:

Tim Dougherty is an associate professor of English at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. He has published on decolonial rhetorical historiography (*Enculturation*), the constitutive rhetoric of Irish nationalism (*Rhetoric Society*

Quarterly), and antiracist and contemplative writing pedagogies. He is currently working with a community group in his SE Pennsylvania town to reenvision a Civil War Centennial memorial that is steeped in Lost Cause imagery. He and his collaborators are interested in the intergenerational healing potential of decolonial and antiracist public memory.

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