TOURISTS of HISTORY

Memory,

Kitsch, and

Consumerism

from

Oklahoma City

to

Ground Zero

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INTRODUCTION

Two snow globes sit on my desk. The first depicts the Oklahoma City National Memorial set against several tall buildings of downtown Oklahoma City, surrounded by snow and topped with an American flag. It is stamped with the logo of the memorial along with the slogan “On American Soil” and reads “The Spirit of This City and This Nation Will Not Be Defeated. Our Deeply Rooted Faith Sustains Us.” The second is a plastic snow globe pencil holder that contains a miniature of the twin towers of the World Trade Center standing next to an oversized St. Paul’s Chapel with a police car and a fire truck sitting before it. When the globe is shaken, bright moons and stars float around the towers. It is labeled, “World Trade Center 1973–2001.”

Each of these objects is a souvenir, purchased at and taken away from a site of tourism. I bought the Oklahoma City National Memorial snow globe at the official gift shop of the Oklahoma City National Memorial, and I purchased the World Trade Center snow globe from a street vendor selling wares at a temporary table next to Ground Zero in lower Manhattan. Whether part of a formal or of an informal economy, each globe is an indicator of the elaborate consumer networks of mass-produced goods that exist in American culture around events of national trauma.

Both of these objects display their urban settings within insulated, bubble-like worlds. I can hold each in my hand.
They thus depict these symbolic sites as miniature worlds. The effect of the miniature is to offer a sense of containment and control over an event; the very objectness of these snow globes narrates particular stories about the Oklahoma City bombing and the destruction of the World Trade Center. Their miniature worlds are not simply small, they are also animated. When shaken, the globes come alive with the movement of snow and stars, each offering a kind of celebratory flurry that then settles back again. We look into the world of each globe as if looking from a godlike position onto a small world.

Both of these snow globes are also about marking time. The Oklahoma City snow globe does not actually contain the date of the Oklahoma City bombing, which was April 19, 1995, but it is labeled as a first edition from 2002, with a limited production run of fifteen hundred pieces. It depicts a time of renewal that marks the aftermath of the bombing in which the Oklahoma City memorial is set against the rebuilt skyline of the city. The World Trade Center snow globe notes the dates of the “life span” of the building and captures it in a mystical temporal moment: the towers remain stand-
FIGURE 2. Oklahoma City National Memorial snow globe.

ing and unscathed though the emergency vehicles that signal the towers' demise are already present. Snow globes are objects that, like photographs, represent a "permanent instant" in which time is arrested, yet they are also objects in which that instant is meant to be in constant replay. One is encouraged to "visit" a snow globe on a regular basis, absentmindedly giving it a shake in a moment of distraction. Each globe indicates the ways these events remain in memory, in the image of Oklahoma City as a rebuilt city and of New York as frozen in the moment of crisis. A snow globe also offers a sense of time as a return: the scene always returns to the way it was before the snow flurry. The comfort of the snow globe derives in part from this expectation that it returns each time to its originary state.

I see these two objects as emblems of the ways that American culture processes and engages with loss. Both are mass-produced and labeled "Made in China." Both thus form part of the elaborate global economic networks
that produce objects of American patriotism (including the vast majority of small American flags, which are made in Korea and China). Each object exemplifies the complex relationship of mourning and consumerism and the economic networks that emerge around historical events, including events of trauma. Each object could also be seen as a form of kitsch. Were I creating a collection to explain the aim of this book, I would include along with these snow globes a piece of the rubble from the federal building in Oklahoma City that was distributed in informal networks, a bottle of water branded with the name of the Oklahoma City National Memorial, a mangled steel beam from the World Trade Center, a roll of duct tape, an FDNY teddy bear, a security bollard, one of the “Hoosier Hospitality” T-shirts that was sold at the execution of Timothy McVeigh, a 9/11 medallion that reads “Freedom is never free,” and a design to rebuild the twin towers as two large lattice towers. Each evokes to some degree the consumerism of trauma, fear, and security and the closely woven relationship of loss to tourism and kitsch.

Tourists of History explores the complex intersection of cultural memory, tourism, consumerism, paranoia, security, and kitsch that has defined American culture over the past two decades and the ways that these cultural practices are related to the deep investment in the concept of innocence in American culture. My aim in looking at these practices and tendencies in American culture is to delve into the question of how they are directly related to the broad political acquiescence of the American public and the national tendency to see U.S. culture as somehow distanced from and unimplicated in the troubled global strife of the world. This book asks: What aspects of American culture specifically encourage a “tourist” relationship to history? How can the tourist be seen as an icon of how American culture relates to, processes, and consumes history? How is national mourning in the United States caught up in practices of consumerism? How is American memorialization repackaged as tourist practices and cultural reenactment? How does this politics of memory and emotion help to enable particular notions of innocent victimhood and a consumer culture of comfort?

Tourists of History examines these aspects of American culture at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, an era marked by two events in particular, the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which resulted in plane crashes at the Pentagon and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City. It is in seeing the connec-
tions between the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11, which have both been
defined as unique and exceptional events, and the interconnections of the
social contexts that produced each that I hope to be able to make sense of
a broader set of trends in American culture. This time period also includes
the Columbine shootings, in which two students, Dylan Klebold and Eric
Harris, killed twelve of their classmates and a teacher before killing them­
selves at their high school in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. Impor­tantly, the time period framed in this book both precedes and continues 
after these two events. The Oklahoma City bombing took place in 1995, but
it was the result of a long-festering relationship between right-wing militia
groups and the federal government fueled by economic changes such as
the failure of family farms that had dramatically affected the Midwest and
Plains states starting in the 1980s and several high-profile violent encounters
between right-wing extremists and federal authorities. The terrorist attacks
of 9/11 produced a frenzied consumer response to the fear of terrorism,
enabling a widespread consumerism of security, yet this sense of threat had
its precedence in what Barry Glassner has termed a “culture of fear” in the
United States during the 1980s and 1990s.5

From the distant perspective of some future time, history will show how
the 1990s and the early-twenty-first century are understood as a period of
American history. Yet, in the midst of this time, it is hard not to see it as a
particularly charged moment in American history, a time of extremist be­
liefs, intense polarization, dramatic economic shifts, and volatile political
battles as well as a time of accelerated cultural responses, of an increased
blur between the image and the material, between civic life and consumer
life, and between fear and denial. It is also a historical moment when the
United States has been a key player in global violence that is spiraling out of
control. While the 1990s was a decade when paranoid beliefs about the U.S.
government circulated among extremist groups and in mainstream politics
and popular culture, the post-9/11 period is defined by a widespread fear of
terrorist attack and an increased culture of security. Though they are rarely
seen on a continuum, these two fears mirror one another and build on one
another in important ways. Fear defines this time, and responses to fear, in
particular consumer responses to fear, mark its moment in history.

The cultures of fear and paranoia that I examine in this book, which
pervade all aspects of domestic life, are the driving forces behind a broad
range of consumer practices of security and comfort. This comfort culture,
with its attendant politics of affect, undergirds the tourism of history in
American culture. It can be found in everything from the small souvenirs that promise reassurance at sites like Ground Zero and the Oklahoma City memorial to the culture of domestic consumerism that sells soft hues and traditional wood furniture as signs of comfort, to the marketing of SUVs and Hummers as machines that will protect the American family. Cultures of comfort are complex and not easily reduced to unexamined consumerism, yet they are absolutely essential to providing a sense of reassurance that mediates the fraught, painful, and difficult world in which the United States finds itself at this moment in history. Much of the culture of comfort functions as a form of depoliticization and as a means to confront loss, grief, and fear through processes that disavow politics. This feeling of comfort is intricately related to U.S. patriotic culture. The experience of patriotism and nationalism is reassuring and comforting; it feels good to feel patriotic because it provides a sense of belonging. Consumer culture exists on a continuum with national identity and is a highly influential factor in the political agency and engagement of consumer-citizens. Thus, an American public can acquiesce to its government’s aggressive political and military policies, such as the war in Iraq, when that public is constantly reassured by the comfort offered by the consumption of patriotic objects, comfort commodities, and security consumerism.

One of the primary examples of this comfort culture that I discuss throughout this book is the teddy bear. While teddy bears have a long history in American culture since the time of Theodore Roosevelt, they have emerged as particular kinds of icons in the past two decades. No context of loss seems to be complete today without teddy bears with particular insignia. This started in the beginning years of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, when people began to give teddy bears to people who were sick with AIDS, and the teddy bear has been increasingly deployed as a commodity of grief since that time. Over the course of the late twentieth century, teddy bears were made larger and less like actual bears, their arms sewn in permanently outstretched poses as if asking for a hug. It is important to note that this recent consumerism of teddy bears is aimed not at children but at adult consumers, and it carries with it the effect of infantilization. These teddy bears are thus primarily objects that are intended to provide comfort to people, to convey the message that one can and will feel better. It is notable that after the events of 9/11, many organizations distributed teddy bears in New York City. In the first days after the attacks, when the Salvation Army organized to help people who were returning to the city after being evacuated to places
like New Jersey, they greeted them with teddy bears. Later, the Oklahoma City National Memorial sent six hundred teddy bears and then the state of Oklahoma sent sixty thousand stuffed animals to New York, which were distributed to children in schools affected by 9/11, family support organizations, and New York fire stations.

The belief in the teddy bear as an object of comfort, for both adults and children, is thus quite strong. What is such a bear understood to offer when one gives it to someone who is traumatized or grieving? It embodies the recognition of pain and it offers, above all, the promise of empathy, companionship, and comfort. An FDNY teddy bear promises to comfort us as we confront the terrible loss of life suffered by the New York Fire Department at the World Trade Center on 9/11, and perhaps to convey the sense that we are not alone in feeling this sadness. Similarly, the feeling of comfort provided by an Oklahoma City memorial teddy bear reminds visitors of the children who died there and aims to allow visitors to leave the memorial feeling positive about the good that the bombing brought out in the people who suffered loss, rather than to come away concerned by what the bombing meant. Importantly, the teddy bear doesn’t promise to make things better; it promises to make us feel better about the way things are.

Comfort culture and the consumerism of kitsch objects of emotional reassurance are deeply connected to the renewed investment in the notion of American innocence. This investment, which has a long and complex historical legacy, has emerged in particularly visible ways in relation to the contemporary culture of fear. American national identity, and the telling of American history, has been fundamentally based on a disavowal of the role played in world politics by the United States not simply as a world power, but as a nation with imperialist policies and aspirations to empire. This disavowal of the United States as an empire has allowed for the nation's dominant self-image as perennially innocent. The imperialist and unilateralist ventures of the U.S. government at this moment in history (ventures that are the reason the United States is a target for terrorist retribution) are shored up in part by the capacity of Americans to see themselves as innocent and passive victims, rather than aggressors, in relation to world politics. Terrorism functions by targeting people who are not directly responsible for the wrongs being addressed, and thus by creating innocent victims. In the aftermath of both the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11, the tragedy of the deaths of these innocent bystanders were then exploited in ways that used innocent victimhood as justification for further violence (or, in the case of
Oklahoma City, for legislation that would restrict the rights of prisoners. The figure of the innocent victim is contradictory in American culture because of its implication of weakness, and this often necessitates the rewriting of victims in contexts like 9/11 into narratives of heroism.

Historically, the American public has been marshaled to support wars of aggression with the justification that it is under threat. Thus, the 1991 Gulf War was justified on the basis of the “defense” of national security, and on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, an unprovoked attack on a country that had had no involvement in the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Americans were distracted from considering the consequences of the impending war by a national preoccupation with defending the domestic home by purchasing emergency supplies, plastic sheeting, and duct tape. The popular fear of reprisal for the war became quite easily part of the justification for that war, one sold on the (false) claim that Iraq was a direct threat to the defense of the
United States. Innocence is a position from which such acts of aggression are easily screened out. I see this position as a kind of tourism of history.

TOURISM

The tourist is a figure who embodies a detached and seemingly innocent pose. In using the term “tourists of history” I am defining a particular mode through which the American public is encouraged to experience itself as the subject of history through consumerism, media images, souvenirs, popular culture, and museum and architectural reenactments, a form of tourism that has as its goal a cathartic “experience” of history. I am not concerned with those contexts in which people visit sites of established historical and entertainment tourism, such as Williamsburg and Disneyland, so much as I am concerned with the subjectivity of the tourist of history, for whom history is an experience once or twice removed, a mediated and reenacted experience, yet an experience nevertheless. Tourists visit sites where they do not live, they
are outsiders to the daily practices of life in tourist destinations, and they are largely unaware of the effects of how tourist economies have structured the daily lives of the people who live and work in tourist locales. Tourists typically remain distant to the sites they visit, where they are often defined as innocent outsiders, mere observers whose actions are believed to have no effect on what they see.

Tourism is a central activity in the experience of modernity, in which leisure practices are a crucial counterpart to the world of industrial and postindustrial work. In his classic study *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell writes that the tourist is the essential identity of modern society: “Our first apprehension of modern civilization . . . emerges in the mind of the tourist,” and the “best indication of the final victory of modernity over other sociocultural arrangements is not the disappearance of the nonmodern world but its artificial preservation and reconstruction in modern society.”11 In this context, native rituals are staged for tourists, and now-lost cultures are consumed by tourists in artificial settings that allow the histories of those cultures’ destruction to be obscured.12 MacCannell argues that the tourist is a primary subject position available to modern citizens.

Of course, there are many different modes of tourism today, and the actual practices of particular tourists may vary a great deal from this definition. My aim is to consider how this subjectivity of the tourist can serve as a metaphor for the ways American citizens are encouraged to situate themselves in relationship to history, and in particular to world history. The mode of the tourist, with its innocent pose and distanced position, evokes the American citizen who participates uncritically in a culture in which notions of good and evil are used to define complex conflicts and tensions. The mode of the tourist can be easily seen in the decision to drive a Hummer because it is a “safe” vehicle and to purchase security equipment for one’s home in the event of terrorist attack, while believing that those consumer decisions are disconnected from the U.S.-led war in Iraq. The mode of the tourist can also be seen in the purchasing of souvenirs at sites of loss such as Ground Zero as a means of expressing sorrow at the lives lost there, without trying to understand the contexts of volatile world politics that produced the attacks of 9/11.

The idea of a tourist is often caught up in notions of authenticity and inauthenticity. Thus, tourists visit places that are understood to be authentic in part because they see their own world as an inauthentic (modern) one; at the same time, the activity of tourism is usually regarded as an inauthentic
activity, one that often must be apologized for. MacCannell writes that most
critics of tourism criticize tourists not because they leave home to travel
elsewhere but “for being satisfied with superficial experiences of other
peoples and other places.”
Contemporary tourism, in particular high-end
tourism, is preoccupied with tourist experiences that seem to be beyond this
reproach, such as exotic tourism, ecotourism, extreme tourism, war tourism,
“tragic tourism,” and the “dark tourism” of visiting places of death and de­
struction, such as former concentration camps and war sites.
Many forms
of contemporary tourism can be said to be guided by a self-consciousness
about the potential superficialities of everyday tourism. Yet, as I have stated,
my aim here is not to discuss contemporary practices of tourism in this full
range of engagements, but to use the traditional notion of the tourist as a
metaphor to make sense of how American culture succeeds in creating a
depoliticized and exceptionalist relationship to the broader issues of global
history and politics.

Sites of collective trauma are seen as having a particular kind of authen­
ticity and are often the focus of tourist activity. A site like Ground Zero in
lower Manhattan, for instance, embodies competing and powerful meanings
of authenticity: the authenticity of a site of violence, a place that contains the
remnants of a much-photographed building, a place where the dead were
not found, a place where iconic images of spectacle took place. The visits of
tourists to places such as Ground Zero and the site of the Oklahoma City
bombing are acts that intend to create a connection between the tourist
and the site of trauma. By visiting these places, tourists can feel that they
have experienced a connection to these traumatic events and have gained
a trace of authenticity by extension. In the contemporary context of global
consumerism, tourism can often take on the meaning of a pilgrimage. In
its traditional meaning of a religious journey to a sacred site, the term “pil­
grimage” implies personal transformation. And it can be said that people
make pilgrimages to sites of tragedy in order to pay tribute to the dead and
to feel transformed in some way in relation to that place. In such places as
the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Ground Zero, the practices of
sorrowful pilgrimage and tourism are intermixed and often inseparable; one
can cry and take pictures, leave a personalized object, and purchase a souve­
nir. It hardly needs to be stated that for those who survived the tragic events
at each site, the option of tourism is not available.

Tourism is also guided by media practices. Media coverage of tourist des­
tinations is key to tourist activity, and increasingly sites of media, such as
the locations where television shows and films are shot, have become tourist sites. As tourists, we deploy media when we take photographs and videos in order to produce image artifacts of tourist destinations; indeed, picture taking is one of the most universal and central activities of tourism. Tourism is also defined by the activity of taking things away from the places we have visited, not only photographs but also commodities such as curios, souvenirs, and artifacts. These objects convey in turn a connection or attachment to a place.

These factors—the search for authenticity, the role of images and media, the practices of consumerism, and the distanced proximity of the tourist—are all key to my argument that American culture's relationship to memory and mourning can be defined as a tourism of history. Each enables a sense of innocence and detachment yet provides a means to feel one has been authentically close to an event, that one has experienced it in some way. In these sites of tourism, history is understood to be something that is consumed and experienced through images, memory is thought to reside in commodities such as teddy bears, and memorials are accompanied by gift shops.

My focus in this book is on aspects of cultural memory, in particular the debates about memorialization that have taken place around events of national trauma, and the ways in which memories, both individual and collective, have been circulated through the cultural responses to those events. However, I am using the term "tourists of history" (rather than "tourists of memory") to signify that this tourist subjectivity has a problematic relationship to the weight, burdens, and meanings of history. It is my intent to call attention to how American cultural responses to traumatic historical events enable naïve political responses to those events. They do this precisely because these cultural responses allow American history to be seen in isolation, as exceptional and unique, as if it were not part of the rest of world history and as if it were something simply to be consumed. Sites of American history, including Gettysburg, have had long histories of consumerism and commercialism. This book's focus on recent sites of tourism builds on a long history in American culture in which there is an established relationship between consumerism and memory, between commercialism and national identity, and between marketing and the symbols of the past.

I use the framework of the tourism of history in order to understand how sites of loss can enable a sense of innocence and particular kinds of politically naïve responses. I am not interested in simply dismissing tourist practices and the purchasing of kitsch souvenirs as activities that are super-
ficial and meaningless; I want to understand how certain kinds of tourist practices, broadly defined, enable people to make sense of their grief. Yet, I don’t feel that the model of cultural analysis that sees such cultural practices as people “making do” with the symbols at hand tells us very much about what happens politically at such places. It may be that the purchasing and display of an Oklahoma City National Memorial teddy bear allows one to feel a connection to and sadness about those who lost their lives in the bombing and to process one’s own grief. The promise of the teddy bear is that it will help to heal those most directly affected by trauma—that it will be able to make them feel better. But such a teddy bear also disables certain kinds of responses. It is not a versatile object that can be employed for a range of responses; it is a circumscribed object precisely because of the message of sentimentality and reassurance it offers. However overstated this may sound, such a teddy bear is ultimately not an innocent object.

Such seemingly innocent objects point to the underlying political implications of the tourism of history. The distanced and mediated ways that U.S. citizens engage with global terrorism and the vast discrepancies of wealth and opportunity around the world continue to create an increasingly volatile political context that will only enable more violence. Tourism is about travel that wants to imagine itself as innocent; a tourist is someone who stands outside of a culture, looking at it from a position that demands no responsibility. I examine how the practices of tourism and consumerism both allow for certain kinds of individual engagement with traumatic experience yet, at the same time, foreclose on other possible ways of understanding national politics and political engagement.

I examine tourism at sites of memory at a moment when the United States has been preoccupied with questions of memory. The period since the early 1980s has been a time of unprecedented national focus on cultural memory and nationally sanctioned remembrance. This current obsession with memory follows a period when American culture was largely disinterested in memory. While World War I produced a culture of memory in the early twentieth century, most of it regretful and concerned that such violence and destruction not be repeated, it was followed by the national sense of triumph of World War II, which subsumed any mourning of the dead into a nationalist narrative that continued through the affirmation of American consumerism in the postwar years of cold war politics. Even the social upheaval of the 1960s was rarely understood in terms of loss or memory. Yet, the fallout of the 1960s, in particular the tragic consequences of the Vietnam War,
brought cultural memory into the forefront of national consciousness. With the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982, it seemed as if the mourning and memory that had been held in check were suddenly released in a national embrace of remembering. Out of this emerged not only the construction of many memorials—including the Korean War Memorial, the U.S. Holocaust Museum, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, the Oklahoma City National Memorial, and the World War II Memorial—but also an intense and highly volatile debate, replete with conspiracy theories and culture wars, about how twentieth-century American history has been officially told or mistold, remembered or forgotten.

This culture of mourning and memory has converged with the concepts of healing and closure that are central to American national identity. American mythology clings tenaciously to the belief that one can always heal, move on, and place the past in its proper context, and do so quickly. The memorial culture of the United States has thus been largely experienced as a therapeutic culture, in which particular citizens, primarily veterans and their families, have been seen as coming to terms with the past and making peace with difficult memories. This is the primary narrative generated by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

This belief in the concept of healing is related to the dominance of U.S. consumer practices, in which consumerism is understood to be a kind of therapy. Throughout American history, consumer culture has also played a central role in the shaping of concepts of citizenship and national identity. From its very early origins, American culture constructed itself around particular concepts of choice and individual reinvention. Indeed, recent scholarship asserts that an interest in consumerism was key in fueling even as fundamental an event as the American Revolution. American consumer culture emerged with tremendous force in the late nineteenth century hand in hand with a new consumer-friendly set of values. As the historian T. J. Jackson Lears has argued, the “therapeutic ethos” of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth replaced the social mores of Protestant scarcity, thriftiness, and saving with an embrace of self-fulfillment and spending in the name of individuality, and this new ethos helped to usher in the emerging consumer society. In many ways, consumer culture replaced the central role of the family and the church as the new modern American citizens imagined themselves to be less tied to the past and capable of reinvention. The American embrace of consumerism has taken hold in powerful and irreversible ways since the late nineteenth century, ways that have ultimately
joined the practice of citizenship with the practice of consumerism. As I discuss in chapter 1, Lizabeth Cohen defines the postwar equation of citizenship and consumerism as the emergence of a "consumers' republic" in which consumerism, rather than social policy, is seen as the means through which to achieve social ideals. In the contemporary context, government authorities speak to Americans in the language of consumerism more than the language of citizenship, inciting us every day to do our part for the national economy by spending our money, buying cars and houses, and accumulating debt on credit cards. Indeed, Americans are almost always spoken to as citizen-consumers.

Consumerism thus forms one of the primary sites of what Michael Billig calls "banal nationalism," those moments when nationalism is "flagged" at citizens, in the mundane modes of everyday practices. These so-called unremarkable practices of nationalism incorporate national identity into the gestures of everyday life. Consumer culture offers banal nationalism via patriotic trinkets and commodities that incorporate national symbols and national brands. I also examine those moments when nationalism is specifically and deliberately flagged through consumerism in times not of banality but of exception. For instance, in the midst of the national crisis after 9/11, U.S. political figures, including New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani and President Bush, appealed to American citizens to help the country emerge from the crisis not by volunteering or working in their communities, but by going out to spend money. In the post-9/11 context as well, grief and loss over the tragedy of lives lost was often transposed in patriotic messages of revenge. The equation of patriotism with consumerism not only reveals the paucity of national identification in the United States, with its ready-made symbols and disconnection from history, but also demonstrates the central role that innocence plays in U.S. culture.

INNOCENCE

The self-image of the United States as innocent has been key to national identity throughout much of American history. This belief in innocence affirms the image of the United States as a country of pure intentions to which terrible things can happen, but which itself never provokes or initiates attack. This aspect of American national identity has a long and complex history and finds its very roots in the narratives that guided the emergent nation. David Noble notes that American exceptionalism is rooted in the image of the United States as a virtuous nation, distinct from and embattled
by corrupt European nations. Yet, Noble points out that this notion of U.S. innocence finds its roots in many European strains of thought.21

Virtually every traumatic event of twentieth- and twenty-first century U.S. history, from Pearl Harbor to the Vietnam War to 9/11, has been characterized as the moment when American innocence was lost. Thus, the immediate analogies made to Pearl Harbor after 9/11 were predominantly about connecting to a previous narrative of innocence in which the United States was subject to unprovoked attack and taken unaware, as if these events were unanticipated and unforeseen. Similarly, the cold war was dependent on a belief in U.S. innocence in the face of communist threat. This investment in reaffirming innocence not only functions to mask U.S. imperialist policies, and the history of the United States as an active history of empire, but also obscures the degree to which violent conflict has been a fundamental aspect of U.S. society.

Both the Oklahoma City bombing and the Columbine shootings were occasions to affirm particular myths about the historical lack of violence in American society. These events were framed in the media as shocking because they were examples of “home-grown” violence in places that were thought to be exempt from violence (a midsize midwestern American city and a middle-class, white suburb). Oklahoma City and Littleton, Colorado, were also seen as places that were more emblematic of an ostensibly innocent American culture than cities where violence is understood as a part of the fabric of daily life. Narratives of innocence thus emerged in relation to both events, narratives that helped to perpetuate the myth that American society is not violent, despite the dominance of gun culture and the high numbers each year of deaths from gun violence; despite the violence of late twentieth-century U.S. involvement in the wars in Southeast Asia, Central America, and the Middle East; and despite the racial violence that has deeply marked U.S. history.

The comparison of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to Pearl Harbor also evokes a “loss of innocence” narrative about being attacked on home soil. This narrative helped to affirm the jolted response after 9/11, as if the rest of the world had suddenly come into view for the American public, the anger of that world suddenly in focus. At the same time, the narrative of innocence enabled the U.S. response to avoid any discussion of what long histories of U.S. foreign policies had done to help foster a terrorist movement specifically aimed at the United States and its allies; thus the historical disavowal of American empire (in this case, U.S. policies in the Middle East) allows U.S. global interventions to be understood in a framework of benevolence.
rather than imperialism. This innocent narrative can be neatly summed up in the constant refrain of government officials in the days after 9/11, when they asked, “Why do they hate us?,” as if such hatred were so unprovoked as to be unthinkable. This refrain allowed the Bush administration to marshal the rhetoric “They hate us because we love freedom” not only to justify its attacks on the Taliban in Afghanistan, but also to facilitate its argument for invading Iraq, a country that had not attacked us but that hated us nevertheless (that hatred now translated into threat). However simplistic this rhetoric sounds after the fact, it was profoundly effective in closing down post-9/11 debate. The media proclamations in the post-9/11 months that the attacks demanded an “end to irony” reveal that this investment in innocence is often dependent on a negation of ironic distancing or critique. In other words, innocence is something created after the fact, rather than an original condition to be recaptured. It is essential to the discourse of American innocence that it is reasserted with each national crisis, and thus by implication that it is understood to be restored and reaffirmed after each ensuing crisis.

As a narrative based on seeing violence as a force that comes from outside, the innocence narrative also cannot sustain the presence of insiders, so-called home-grown terrorists, who use guns and bombs not for self-defense but deliberately to kill innocent civilians. The existence of the militia movement and the actions of former soldier Timothy McVeigh, like the existence of the Abu Ghraib photographs that exposed the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers in the Iraq War, disrupt the narrative of American innocence, and need to be contained. In the case of Columbine, containment took the form of blaming popular culture, which could be seen to have tainted and corrupted formerly innocent boys. In Oklahoma City, the counternarrative took the form of ascribing evil to bomb suspect McVeigh and erasing his former military past. This designation of evil did not demand explanation; it was presented as a quality that came organically from nowhere—certainly not from American culture. Both contexts smoothed over the influence of gun culture within the United States. For Abu Ghraib, the narrative of a “few bad apples” was deployed to avoid any analysis of the systemic role of the abuse and the government sanctioning of torture.

My focus in this book is on the relationship that practices of consumerism have to this maintenance of the idea of innocence, and how this sense of innocence undergirds the tourism of history in American culture. The dominant role played by the United States in global capitalism is mediated by protectionist policies and concepts that portray consumerism as an isolated rather than a global activity. A belief in the global marketplace (with
its attendant neoliberalism) is accompanied by a set of narratives about the U.S. consumer as an innocent bystander to the destructive aspects of that marketplace (global sweatshops, loss of domestic jobs to outsourcing, economically driven illegal immigration). David Noble writes:

The promise of the international marketplace is a regime of perpetual peace. A continuing irony, however, is that one must be prepared for perpetual war to achieve the goal of peace. The culture of international capitalism seems, therefore, to be deeply divided. Within this culture one is asked to accept the rational working of the natural laws of the marketplace, but one is also encouraged to develop a personality that is stronger and more aggressive than that of the leaders of the “rogue” states. One must always be ready to make the sacrifices demanded by war.”

Yet, the innocence-driven pose of domestic consumerism prevents the notion of sacrifice from standing in the way of post-9/11 consumerism. As I discuss in chapter 1, one of the distinguishing aspects of national discourse in the first few months after 9/11 was the entreaties by government officials for citizens not to sacrifice but to consume. Similarly, the war in Iraq was sold to Americans as a war that would demand of them no sacrifices, a fiction that has necessitated the attempted erasure of the more than three thousand American war dead, the many tens of thousands of wounded soldiers, and the actual costs to American taxpayers and to social systems.

Notions of national innocence are fragile and need constant maintenance in order to be sustained. We find that maintenance manifested in many places, including popular culture, tourism, and kitsch. Thus, the narrative of innocence is crucial to what I see as the kitschification of cultural memory in American culture.

**KITSCH**

The tourism of history is intimately caught up in the production and consumption of kitsch. At this moment in history, U.S. culture can be defined as a particular mix of sentimental excess and irony, a naïveté as well as a knowing wink; in such a context, kitsch thrives. As I examine throughout this book, sites of memorialization are now places where kitsch objects proliferate and offer easy formulas for grief, and teddy bear culture proliferates across many contexts. In addition, at both Oklahoma City and Ground Zero, kitsch was a key aesthetic in many of the proposed memorial and architectural designs.
The term “kitsch” emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in Germany as a description of an aesthetic that was seen as banal, trite, predictable, and in bad taste.23 Thus, the original meanings of the term defined it as an outcome of mass culture and situated kitsch in relation to the emergent mass production of modern culture.24 The word itself is derived from the German *verkitschen*, meaning “to cheapen”; Hermann Broch’s pivotal 1933 essay on kitsch negatively referred to those who relish kitsch as “kitschmensch” or “kitsch men.”25 Kitsch is often associated with cheapness in terms of cost and production, as well as the idea that such cheap things are without any cultural refinement or taste. Mass production is a key component in this definition of kitsch, since these objects have no relationship to craftsmanship. Yet, a kitsch aesthetic is hardly restricted to cheap, mass-produced objects. Matei Calinescu notes that many objects that constitute kitsch, while they may be inexpensive, are intended to suggest richness in the form of imitation gold and silver, and that luxury goods can often be seen as kitsch in style.26 Similarly, high-end design can often engage in a kitsch form of sentimentality.

Kitsch was thus initially associated with a set of social factors that accompanied modernity: the rise of mass culture, the sense of alienation that accompanied the shift to industrialization and urbanization, and the widespread commodification of daily life. Calinescu writes that kitsch “has a lot to do with the modern illusion that beauty can be bought and sold” and that “the desire to escape from adverse or simply dull reality is perhaps the main reason for the wide appeal of kitsch.”27 This sense of easy formulas and predictable emotional registers which form a kind of escapism is essential to most definitions of kitsch.

Debates about kitsch in the context of modernity have often focused on distinctions between high and low culture and between art and mass culture. Clement Greenberg’s famous 1939 essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” set up a clear contrast between kitsch and art: “Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and fake sensations. . . . Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.”28 It is not incidental to this critique of kitsch as innocent and naïve taste that kitsch is an important aesthetic for children’s cultures. Thus, the cute cultures of children’s aesthetics form a continuum with the cute cultures of adult kitsch.29

When accusations of kitsch have emerged in relation to 9/11 and Okla-
homa City, they have echoed these critiques of kitsch as mass culture. The assumption is that when someone uses a mass-produced commodity such as an Oklahoma City or World Trade Center snow globe as a means of mourning, he or she is engaging in bad taste, and that this is a superficial way of responding to loss. Yet, kitsch objects, with their prescribed emotional content, are often quite spontaneously mixed with objects that are understood to be more personalized and individual. A memorial shrine at a place like Shanksville, Pennsylvania, or along the fence that surrounded the destruction of the federal building in Oklahoma City is likely to have a huge variety of objects with many different aesthetics, including teddy bears, T-shirts, Hallmark cards, handwritten notes, and flowers.

Thus, in the context of memory and loss, kitsch can often play a much more complex role than the mass-culture critique of kitsch allows for. Celeste Olalquiaga writes about melancholic kitsch and nostalgic kitsch as two distinct kinds of memory kitsch that demonstrate the needs that feed into the consumption of kitsch: “Kitsch is the attempt to repossess the experience of intensity and immediacy through an object. Since this recovery can only be partial and transitory, as the fleetingness of memories well testifies, kitsch objects may be considered failed commodities.” Olalquiaga notes that kitsch is a crucial aspect of the mystical nature of the aura, as well as its destruction: “This is why kitsch may be seen as the debris of the aura: an irregular trail of glittery dust whose imminent evanescence makes it extremely tantalizing.” For her, nostalgic kitsch is a form of remembrance that smoothes over the intensity of the experience of loss, selecting the “acceptable parts” of an event and consolidating them into a memory that can forget the original intensity of a traumatic experience of loss, whereas melancholic kitsch, in the form of souvenirs, sustains the sense of existential loss.30

The kitsch of memory thus functions in a particular way in relation to loss. Memory kitsch is deeply related to tourism. Tourist art has always had a relationship to the production of kitsch objects: Eiffel Tower key chains, Mount Rushmore spoon rests, and Tower of London dessert plates—the list is long. In his well-known essay “On Collecting Art and Culture,” James Clifford maps the art–culture split in relationship to how authenticity is awarded to art and cultural objects. Tourist art is categorized, along with commodities and curios, as the lowest form of culture: “not-art” and “inauthentic.”31 Tourist art is a “fetish for the past,” according to Ludwig Geisz, in which “the past is trapped within the souvenir.”32 This status of inauthenticity makes clear that tourist art is easily dismissible as the kind of
cheap kitsch curio that those with taste would not purchase and display in their own homes.

These definitions of kitsch in the context of modern culture inevitably raise these kinds of issues of taste and elitism. The mass culture critiques of kitsch were, in effect, criticisms of lower-class taste, defining it as uncultured. Yet, in the contemporary context of mixing modern and postmodern styles, ironic winking and the cross-class circulation of objects, such critiques carry little meaning. Contemporary kitsch cultures defy simple hierarchies of high and low. Kitsch forms of easy emotionalism can be found in the realms of high art and architecture as easily as in cheap trinkets, and irony, which is often kitsch's antidote, can also be a part of camp's deliberate engagements with kitsch. For instance, as I discuss in chapter 5, several of the high-end architectural proposals for rebuilding Ground Zero were labeled kitsch and seemed to facilitate a kitsch relationship to both history and mourning.

In the context of postmodern culture, understanding kitsch means moving beyond simple definitions of high and low precisely because of the way that kitsch objects can move in and out of concepts of authenticity. Kitsch objects from the past can also be imbued with a kind of playful engagement with history, a kind of humorous pastiche, such as when cold war posters promoting duck-and-cover drills are recoded as home decoration. When an object of the past is labeled kitsch, it can indicate a doubled reading; that is, an object is defined as kitsch when it is seen to have an original aesthetic status that is reread as being tasteless, a lava lamp for instance, but then is recoded as valuable. Daniel Harris refers to the distancing associated with this second stage of kitsch as a "twice-removed aesthetic" that shifts toward irony. Yet, the second stage of kitsch takes time. It is difficult, for instance, to think about purchasing 9/11 souvenirs in order to humorously put them on display next to souvenirs from the 1950s that have gained value because they display tastes of previous eras of popular culture. The challenge to understanding how kitsch operates today is to see the range of responses that it produces, to consider how it can encourage both a prepackaged sentimental response and a playful engagement, simultaneously and to varying degrees, with history, innocence, and irony.

It is kitsch's relationship to political culture that is most important to this book. Most kitsch conveys a kind of deliberate and highly constructed innocence, one that dictates particular kinds of sentimental responses and emotional registers. It is meant to produce predetermined and conscribed emotional responses, to encourage pathos and sympathy, not anger and out-
rage. People can deploy a range of practices in relation to kitsch objects, yet even when a kitsch object might be used by someone in a nonkitsch way it is rarely an incitement to historical reflection or political engagement. Kitsch does not emerge in a political vacuum; rather, it responds to particular kinds of historical events and indicates particular kinds of political acquiescence. The well-known German critiques of kitsch saw it as an element of the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany, and kitsch has often been associated with a totalitarian or fascist aesthetic. The Nazis were particularly adept at deploying kitsch to create a sense of shared national sentiment, and kitsch is a key element in superficial symbols of national unity. Greenberg wrote, “The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects. . . . Kitsch keeps a dictator in close contact with the ‘soul’ of the people.”

During the cold war, kitsch was the dominant style of totalitarian regimes in the Soviet Union. The dissident Czech writer Milan Kundera famously wrote that it was the function of kitsch to curtain off the abject: “Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.” Kundera argues that totalitarian regimes use kitsch to sell the idea of a “brotherhood of man.” In a well-known passage he states:

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass!

The second tear says: how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch.

A kitsch object can thus be seen not only as embodying a particular kind of prepackaged sentiment, but as conveying the message that this sentiment is one that is universally shared. When this takes place in the context of politically charged sites of violence, the effect is inevitably one that reduces political complexity to simplified notions of tragedy. Thus, the objects produced for the Oklahoma City National Memorial, such as a teddy bear, a cute and cuddly object that is embroidered with an image of the “survivor tree” of the memorial, convey a sense of comfort. That comfort cannot speak to cause; rather, it encourages visitors to feel sadness for the loss of lives in a way that
discourages any discussion of the context in which those lives were lost. What makes this object kitsch is precisely its message that this sentiment is shared and that it is adequate. Kitsch is thus a central aspect of comfort culture.

A particular turn toward kitschification has taken place within the past two decades in relation to American politics and social movements. This first became obvious in relation to the AIDS epidemic. In the 1980s and early 1990s, AIDS organizations and advocates began to produce a broad array of kitsch objects in the form of teddy bear gift items, sympathy cards, posters, and a broad array of AIDS-related merchandise, much of it sold to provide funds for nonprofit AIDS organizations. That this kitsch culture, with its preestablished codes of sentiment and symbols, was counterbalanced by a radical and biting array of AIDS art and activism was fitting. It was through kitsch that the mourning for the AIDS dead was effectively mainstreamed. It was understood in the AIDS community that this kitsch was a strategic means to raise awareness and funds, but it was not without consequences. The demand of this culture was for an innocent victim who could be integrated into the American mainstream. Daniel Harris, who wrote a well-known essay about AIDS kitsch, states:

AIDS is vulnerable to kitsch in part because of the urgent need to render the victim innocent. In order to thwart the demonization of gay men, activists have attempted to conceal sexual practices that the public at large finds unacceptable behind a counter-iconography that has the unfortunate side effect of filling the art and writings about AIDS with implausible caricatures of the victim as a beseeching poster child. Thus, AIDS kitsch produced a childlike, innocent victim of AIDS, one stripped of sexual meaning. It also produced, hand in hand with a pop psychology ethos, a demand that AIDS patients make peace with their disease, act like saints, and adhere to a set of emotional registers that smoothed over anger and defiance within a realm of empathy and comfort.

The kitschification of AIDS signaled something that was in some ways new, a particular kind of production of kitsch that served as a means for political movements to claim their place within the nation. The merchandising of AIDS kitsch started a trend that was taken up by activists working on breast cancer, producing what is commonly referred to now as “breast cancer culture.” Breast cancer fundraising and awareness campaigns have produced a merchandising culture of kitsch, beginning with ubiquitous pink
ribbons and numerous teddy bears and mushrooming into a cornucopia of products such as pink ribbon candles, pins, brooches, scarves, coffee mugs, and lingerie (much of it produced by women who are themselves breast cancer survivors). The cheerful, embrace-your-survivor-status-by-purchasing-comforting-teddy-bears tone of much of the breast cancer movement was rocked by a November 2001 Harper's essay by Barbara Ehrenreich about her own experience with breast cancer. Ehrenreich accused this culture of “pink kitsch” of infantilizing women and encouraging them through popular psychology models to negate their own anger: “Possibly the idea is that regression to a state of childlike dependency puts one in the best frame of mind with which to endure the prolonged and toxic treatments. Or it may be that, in some versions of the prevailing gender ideology, femininity is by its nature incompatible with full adulthood—a state of arrested development. Certainly men diagnosed with prostate cancer do not receive gifts of Matchbox cars.” She goes on to describe the pink ribbon culture as a cult or religion, in which “the products—teddy bears, pink-ribbon brooches, and so forth—serve as amulets and talismans, comforting the sufferer and providing visible evidence of faith.” 

Still, the marketing of breast cancer awareness has continued to expand, producing recently a Pink Ribbon Barbie, marketed by Mattel as a means to “celebrate the incredible strength, beauty and resilience of women” and for mothers to connect with their daughters. Ehrenreich argues that this pink kitsch culture forecloses on what should be an orchestrated anger at the lack of research into environmental causes and what she calls the “Cancer Industrial Complex.”

The kitschification of disease that is evident in AIDS and breast cancer activism forms a direct lineage to the kinds of comfort cultures that have emerged in relation to national traumas such as the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11. These more recent kitsch cultures have profound political consequences. Hal Foster notes that in the post–cold war context, totalitarian kitsch has migrated to American culture:

we are surrounded by “beautifying lies” of the sort noted by Kundera—a “spread of democracy” that often bolsters its opposite, a “march of freedom” that often liberates people to death, a “war on terror” that is often terroristic, and a trumpeting of “moral values” often at the cost of civil rights. . . . The blackmail that produces our “categorical agreement” operates through its tokens. For instance, in support of the “war on terror” are the decals of the World Trade Center towers draped with Stars and Stripes, the little flags that fly on truck antennas and dot business-suit
labels and the shirts, caps and statuettes dedicated to New York City firemen and police. . . .

I would argue, following Foster, that kitsch is the primary aesthetic style of patriotic American culture, indeed that American political culture can be defined by and thrives on a kind of kitsch aesthetic. As Kundera writes, “No one knows [kitsch] better than politicians. Whenever a camera is in the offing, they immediately run to the nearest child, lift it in the air, kiss it on the cheek. Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements.” The banality of kitsch is deeply integral to banal nationalism. In the United States, kitsch is the dominant political style of a nation that is deeply wedded to an abstract notion of populism which is distinct from the people, a sense of populism that is so kitschy that it can be easily inhabited by a president who is a member of the elite.

The kitschification of events such as the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 allows for, if not facilitates, the means by which these events can be exploited for particular political agendas and incorporated into a continuum of kitsch political discourse. Kitsch objects address consumers within a particular emotional register (including sympathy, sadness, comfort, and the reassurance of cuteness). On one hand, these objects skirt anger, since they are couched in terms of empathy and reassurance; on the other hand, many of them were effectively deployed in the first months after these events in declarations of vengeance. These forms of consumer culture enable a political acquiescence, in which consumers signal their “categorical agreement” through the purchase of tokens. When tokens such as teddy bears are circulated as “universal” symbols of comfort they provide a means to participate in Kundera’s image of the universal second tear of emotion. The teddy bear says, We are innocent, and, by extension, the nation is innocent too. The kind of teddy-bearification of the nation that we see in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 thus transposes the comfort of the teddy bear to the nation itself.

It is this relationship of sentiment to the idea of universal emotions shared by all of mankind, Kundera’s second tear, that gives kitsch a broader political meaning. This form of kitsch taps into the belief in a national sentimentality, which, according to Lauren Berlant, is “a rhetoric of promise that a nation can be built across fields of social difference through channels of affective identification and empathy.” She adds, “Sentimental politics generally promotes and maintains the hegemony of the national identity form, no mean feat in the face of continued widespread intercultural antagonism
and economic cleavage.” Sentiment is the glue that holds the fragile and dispersed nation together. A kitsch image or object not only embodies a particular kind of prepackaged sentiment, but conveys the message that this sentiment is universally shared, that it is appropriate, and, importantly, that it is enough. When this takes place in the context of politically charged sites of violence, the effect is inevitably one that reduces political complexity to simplified notions of tragedy.

The kitschification of American political culture and of cultural memory is not uncontested, of course. As I discuss throughout this book, irony as a form of self-consciousness often works in tension with kitsch to speak to consumers and citizens in complex forms of address. Discussions of kitsch inevitably raise the question of where kitsch’s boundaries lie and what it means when kitsch embodies a self-consciousness. While mass production is a key factor in contemporary kitsch, in part because of the set of iconographic codes that are easily repeatable from one object to another, handcrafted and personalized objects and images can easily be kitsch in form. In my discussions of kitsch, I show the ways kitsch forms restrict emotional registers and participate in comfort culture. This does not mean that I do not think citizen-consumers should not be comforted in the face of these sites of tragedy, but rather that we must look carefully when that comfort comes as a kind of foreclosure on political engagement.

TRAUMA AND REPETITION

Reenactment is a key feature of much kitsch. As I noted, my World Trade Center snow globe reenacts the moment of emergency and magically places the twin towers whole among objects that signal their demise. As I discuss in chapter 5, many of the proposals for rebuilding lower Manhattan engaged in various kitschy forms of reenactment of 9/11. In this book I consider the relationship between trauma and reenactment and between trauma and kitsch. Reenactment of dramatic events is a staple of popular culture in the form of television programs, documentaries, and feature films. I do not analyze those reenactments here, but rather focus on the reenactment of still photographs, tourist souvenirs, and architectural design. These often overlooked forms of reenactment are key to understanding how compulsive repetition is a response to trauma.

Theories of trauma, which are for the most part about individual psychology, are often based on a set of binary categories that define the traumatic state and its “integration.” Freud believed that the compulsion to repeat was
a mode through which most people would act out, rather than remember, their childhood dynamics and traumatic experiences. For Freud, patients need to work through their resistances to seeing the distinction between the present and the past in order to move beyond compulsive repetition. In psychoanalysis, compulsive repetition occurs when subjects are traumatized to the extent that they repeat their moment of trauma over and over again and are unable to either narrativize it or move beyond it to make it a memory. The work of confronting traumatic memories is thus understood to give them representational and narrative form and to integrate them into one's life story. In these theories, compulsive repetition is a state of nonintegration, a disabling form of stasis, and it is narrative integration that produces the memory of the traumatic event. More recent analyses of trauma demonstrate that repetition can be a central part of the processing of a narrative of trauma. In her compelling book about her own experience as a survivor of rape and assault, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, the philosopher Susan Brison writes that survivors often attempt to "master the trauma" by repeatedly telling the story of it:

Whereas traumatic memories (especially perceptual and emotional flashbacks) feel as though they are passively endured, narratives are the result of certain obvious choices (e.g., how much to tell to whom, in what order, etc.). This is not to say that the narrator is not subject to the constraints of memory or that the story will ring true however it is told. And the telling itself may be out of control, compulsively repeated. But one can control certain aspects of the narrative and that control, repeatedly exercised, leads to greater control over the memories themselves, making them less intrusive and giving them the kind of meaning that enables them to be integrated into the rest of life.

Brison argues that the construction of a narrative, and its repetition and refinement, allow for a "remaking" of the self.

Brison's argument shows the inadequacies of a binary theory that opposes repetition with the working through and narrative coherence of trauma, precisely because it is often the compulsive repetition of a narrative that allows for someone to feel some form of agency over the story of his or her own trauma. The idea of "working through" trauma, which implies the emergence of a new state of being in which the effects of trauma are properly managed, raises numerous questions and has been debated and contested across many fields of study. Given the transformative nature of the experi-
ence of trauma itself, what does it mean to “successfully” work through the memory of a traumatic experience? Is a working-through an integration or a smoothing over, a forgetting or a reckoning, erasure or recuperation?

These questions have been raised in relation to individual subjects, yet I am interested in analyzing what it means to consider these concepts in relation to how a culture, if not a nation, responds to traumatic events, analyzing the implications of cultural reenactment of trauma. I examine the forms of repetition that can be seen in architectural designs, tourist souvenirs, and the remaking of iconic images in order to consider what this reenactment produces, accomplishes, and enables.

This is a moment in history when what is enabled in the name of trauma demands examination. Twentieth-century history was dominated by the power awarded to those traumatized by the experience of world war; the past sixty years have shown the powerful ways in which survivors of historical events have been defined as primary figures of authenticity in cultures, like the United States, that often contain a pervasive sense of inauthenticity. In a culture in which authenticity is a quality that is endlessly striven for yet never achieved, the status of the trauma victim or survivor gains particular force, one that can allow for a broad range of political consequences. Over the past few decades, American culture has been preoccupied with the concept of the survivor, to the extent of producing a culture of survivor envy. Popular psychology has promoted the idea that we are all survivors to some extent, and a culture of victimhood has been prevalent in U.S. popular culture. In addition, in the context of the victims' rights movement, which I discuss in chapter 3, an embrace of victims and survivors has had broad effects in the legal system.

Both the Oklahoma City bombing and the attacks of 9/11 produced large and vocal groups of survivors and family members; in the case of 9/11, the emergence of this group was accompanied by the quick decision by the government to compensate the families and survivors with large sums of money (the families and survivors of Oklahoma City, by contrast, were not offered compensation). In both cases, the role of victims and families took on broad legal implications. Whereas in Oklahoma City, the families of the victims became involved in a legal debate by intervening into death penalty legislation, in the 9/11 context a small group of families is attempting to use the courts to intervene in the rebuilding of lower Manhattan and the memorial design. The deployment of the Oklahoma City bombing as a tool for stricter enforcement of the death penalty and the use of 9/11 as a means to justify
the war in Iraq are only the most recent examples of how narratives of vic-
timization and trauma enable a perpetuation of violence. I am concerned
with the question of what gets enabled by the designation of trauma, and
how the designation of survivor status awards particular kinds of cultural
authority which intersect with the consumerist and kitsch context of trauma
tourism.

Reenactment is a crucial factor in the cultural responses to traumatic
events within this economy of survivors and consumerism. As I discuss in
the chapters that follow, the famous image icons of both the Oklahoma City
bombing and 9/11 have been remade again and again, until they appear to
convey narratives of redemption. In Oklahoma City, the famous photograph
of a firefighter holding a dead child was remade numerous times by artists
around the country, in images that increasingly presented it as an image of
rescue rather than death. In New York, the absence of the twin towers has
promoted a constant reenactment of their twin forms in the city landscape
and in the architectural imaginings of how to rebuild Ground Zero. Repeti-
tion is a means through which cultures process and make sense of traumatic
events. It is caught up in kitsch and the relentless recoding of trauma into
popular culture narratives, yet it is also evidence of the ways that cultures
reenact, sometimes compulsively, moments of traumatic change.

Reenactments raise the question of the relationship of experience and
authenticity. Experience is the category of engagement that is seen to be the
most authentic, a primary mode of being that is longed for. Yet, most Ameri-
cans’ experience of the key events of history are mediated ones, whether
the experience of watching television footage of the twin towers falling or
the experience of reading a book about the survivors of the Oklahoma City
bombing or watching a Hollywood film that reenacts the experience of sur-
vivors of 9/11.

In the case of highly documented events like the Oklahoma City bomb-
ing and 9/11, the vast majority of people who “witnessed” these events did
so through media images, by watching television and looking at document-
tary photographs. Even many people who were in close physical proximity
to these events watched them on television rather than in person. It is com-
mon to see the effects of these traumatic events on individuals as forming a
kind of ring of intensity, echoing outward from those directly effected, such
as those who escaped, who were injured, and who survived, to those who
lost loved ones and those who were nearby; each step gets further away from
“real” trauma. Indeed, in both these events, as attempts to memorialize be-
gan, hierarchies of grief and trauma were quickly established. In Oklahoma City there was a debate about the criteria, such as proximity to the building, that could designate someone as a survivor, and in New York there was a common tendency for people to marshal their proximity to the event when talking about it in the weeks and months afterward (when they found out, how many people they knew who were there, how close they were in terms of blocks, etc.).

This is not simply about a competition for proximity. It is more often than not a means of processing an event, of talking about it in order to make sense of one’s response to it. The complexity of contemporary media events calls into question the simple equation of physical proximity to a trauma precisely because the media disperses and circulates highly charged images. Nevertheless, cultures tend to create, both officially and informally, hierarchies of grief in order to maintain it bureaucratically (in terms of insurance and compensation, for instance).

Ultimately, cultural reenactment, as well as memory kitsch, lead us to the question of how grief and loss are manifested, made visible, and incorporated into our lives and cultures in times of rupture and trauma. Judith Butler writes that the relationship of grief to vulnerability is essential to understanding the political responses to loss. She argues that close attention to grief, a “tarrying with grief,” can be a means to understand the broader political implications of vulnerability:

Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief through violence? . . . If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another? . . . To foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way.45

It is precisely when kitsch, consumerism, and reenactment aim to smooth over the moment in which grief and loss are powerfully present that opportunities for broader cultural empathy and new ways of response are lost. Even the well-intentioned process of creating a memorial at Ground Zero to provide a place for those suffering loss has been deeply handicapped by a
hurrying up of grief, an inability to “tarry” in grief, just as the turn from 9/11 to a rhetoric of vengeance was a rejection of the mode of experiencing loss and staying within it in order to feel the vulnerability it creates in us.

How to understand these kinds of experiences, from reenactment to the consumerism of grief, is one of the primary questions that cultural practices demand of us. My argument aims to move beyond the dismissal of these experiences as cheapened forms of cultural entertainment that let us off the hook, because I believe that such a critique does not allow us to make sense of how repetition and consumerism constitute certain kinds of cultural labor. For instance, one of the children whose firefighter father died on 9/11 spent the next year in kindergarten building the twin towers in blocks and then destroying them, as a means perhaps of attempting to have some power over his grief. In what ways can we see the repetition of images and stories of 9/11 in the same light: as the need to reenact in order to make sense? Similarly, to dismiss the tourism that emerges around sites of mourning is to negate the ways that such tourism, even the purchasing of a souvenir, performs a kind of cultural labor that provides for empathy and connection and that demands interpretation, if for no other reason than that it will help us to understand how the memory of events such as the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 get deployed in the context of politics—in the context of the death penalty and the “war on terror.”

This returns us to the question of innocence, since it is one of the effects of kitsch and kitsch reenactment that they produce the idea of an innocent culture, one that cannot see its own complicity in the workings of history. The consumer culture of memory helps to affirm a culture of innocent victimhood. This preoccupation with victim status is a paradoxical aspect of American culture; at a time when the United States is the sole superpower, with enormous economic and military power, a nation that is engaged in a long-term imperial political project, its culture is immersed in concepts of innocence and victimhood and a belief in the transcendent power of healing to smooth over history’s burdens. The idea that the nation can heal from the wounds of history and achieve closure of some kind is the more insidious version of the belief that victims of violence can find simple closure in rituals of healing. These discourses work effectively to create a national identity that sees itself as exceptional and separated from the rest of the world.

This exceptionalism has a long history, yet it seems to be manifesting now in particularly powerful ways. American exceptionalism defines the nation not only as unique, but as exemplary. Amy Kaplan writes, “A key
THE BOOK'S CHAPTERS

This book has five chapters and a conclusion, each of which addresses the issues of consumerism, memory, mourning, and kitsch in overlapping ways. In chapter 1, “Consuming Fear and Selling Comfort,” I look at the interrelationship of fear, paranoia, security, and consumerism in the 1990s and the post-9/11 context, and how each helps to shore up the idea that the American citizen exists in a state of innocence. This chapter charts a trajectory from the rise of a culture of fear and of the right-wing militias in American culture in the late 1980s and 1990s to the emergence of the prison industry as an economic force in Middle America to the surge in a consumerism of security in the post-9/11 context. This chapter thus addresses the rise of a domestic military consumerism since 9/11 and the emerging aesthetic of security that governs contemporary consumerism and urban design in order to understand the interlocking roles played by fear and consumerism in American national identity.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the twin responses to the Oklahoma City bombing: the building of the Oklahoma City National Memorial and the execution of Timothy McVeigh. In chapter 2, “Citizens and Survivors: Cultural Memory and Oklahoma City,” I focus on the memorial, which opened in April 2000 and which was the result of an elaborate collaboration of survivors, families, and rescue workers. It is accompanied by a museum which tells a compelling story of the bombing, one defined by an embrace of citizenship, and which houses a gift shop of commodities about the bombing and the memorial. The memorial has been a key factor in the rise of tourism to Oklahoma City and in the urban renewal of its downtown district. In this chapter, I examine how consumerism, survivor culture, and community renewal have converged to produce particular kinds of political responses to the bombing.

Chapter 3, “The Spectacle of Death and the Spectacle of Grief: The Exe-
cution of Timothy McVeigh," is concerned with the McVeigh execution and how the media spectacle it produced constitutes a counterpart to the memorial. This chapter examines the media fascination with McVeigh and the culture of celebrity that arose around him as he was on death row and the consumerism that accompanied the execution. I consider the ways that the emphasis on families and survivors at Oklahoma City was translated into a number of legal decisions that will have an impact on the rights of prisoners for some time to come. This chapter ends with a discussion of the renewal of Oklahoma City and the role of the memorial in the city’s new image.

The meaning of Oklahoma City was dramatically reconfigured in narratives of American history when the events of 9/11 took place. Chapters 4 and 5 examine the intersections of memory, tourism, and design at Ground Zero in New York. In chapter 4, "Tourism and ‘Sacred Ground’: The Space of Ground Zero," I look at the contested meanings at Ground Zero and how they exemplify the national response to 9/11. I see these conflicts as the result of conflicting discourses of sacredness, memory, commerce, urban design, and politics that reveal, among other things, the complex ownership, both economic and emotional, that defines the site. This chapter examines the symbolic role played by the dust from the collapse of the World Trade Center, the iconic images of 9/11, and the emergence of tourism as a central aspect of Ground Zero. Chapter 5, "Architectures of Grief and the Aesthetics of Absence," analyzes the architectural and memorial design proposals that reimagine lower Manhattan and the complex and messy debate over its rebuilding. One goal of this chapter is to clarify that seemingly rarefied areas of high culture—in this case, the elite world of celebrity architects—can also be caught up in processes of kitsch and emotional reenactment. I look at the political battles surrounding the proliferation of designs for Ground Zero and the preoccupation with the erasure of the twin towers, both in calls for their reconstruction and the tendency to redesign the site with reenactments of the towers’ forms. In this context, architecture has been seen as both a redemptive response and a crass aestheticization of a place of grief. In the conclusion, I situate these issues in relation to a broader global context of consumerism and grief.

Many of the aspects of American culture that this book addresses are ongoing and constantly changing and transforming. The debate over Ground Zero shifts on a monthly basis, and the story of the Oklahoma City bombing and the city’s renewal continues to be retold. Yet, the broader questions I pose in this book speak to cultural trends and tendencies that have long
histories and will continue to shape American national identity in the future: What does the American dependence on kitsch consumer culture ultimately tell us about American national identity, and how does the deeply ingrained belief in American innocence shape the American worldview? It is the aim of this book to show how the meanings of consumerism, memory, and innocence help shape American national identity, and how that identity can be found in the smallest, seemingly most innocent objects, like a snow globe.
INTRODUCTION

1. Erica Rand discusses an Ellis Island snow globe in her book *The Ellis Island Snow Globe*. For Rand, the Ellis Island snow globe is emblematic of the mix of consumer culture, nation, sexuality, and multiculturalism. She sees it as the epitome of the simplifying aspects of souvenir culture of national history. She reports that she joked to her date, “Honey, when we get there, I want you to buy me an Ellis Island snow globe,” to which she replied, “That would be like having snow globes at a concentration camp” (2). Yet when they arrive, they see that indeed the gift shop does have snow globes, erasers, and backscratchers.

2. I am indebted to Jani Scandura for first pointing this out to me at an American Studies Association panel on the topic of kitsch.


4. I am grateful to Barbara Rose Haum for pointing out this quality of snow globes to me.

5. Glassner, *The Culture of Fear*.

6. Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic*, 10. Harris sees these teddy bears as part of a culture of “cute sex.”

7. I learned this from one of the Salvation Army volunteers who is working as a tour guide for the Tribute Center at Ground Zero.

8. E-mail correspondence with Helen Stiefmiller, collections manager, Oklahoma City National Memorial archive, November 7, 2006.


12. See Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*; and Desmond, *Staging Tourism*. 


16. See Weeks, *Gettysburg*. See also Shaffer, *See America First*.

17. See Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*.

18. Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization.”


24. See McDonald, “Masscult and Midcult.”


27. Ibid., 229, 237.


33. Daniel Harris, “Kiddie Kitsch.”


42. Freud, “Remembering, Repeating.”

43. This is the key aspect of the trauma/dissociation model, which was developed by the early psychoanalyst Pierre Janet and is ascribed to by contemporary psychiatrists such as Judith Herman, in which traumatic memory is depicted as prenarrative. This prenarrative reenactment is described in Janet’s well-known case of Irene, a young woman who was disassociated from her mother’s death and compulsively reenacted her actions on the night her mother died. Janet helped this woman to narrate the story of this night. This case is described in van der Kolk and van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past.”


46. See LeDuff, *Work and Other Sins*, 298. LeDuff’s story about Aidan Fontana, whose father, Dave Fontana, was a firefighter killed at the World Trade Center, and whose mother, Marian, has become a well-known advocate for the families, was first run in the *New York Times*.

47. Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire*, 16.