

The Commodification of Tragedy in the American Museum:
How is Suffering Experienced vs. the Causes of Suffering Displayed in the 9/11 Memorial and Museum?
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The American obsession with tragedy is so widespread in our culture that it has become a cliché: “it’s like a bad car crash; you can’t look away.” Our fascination with terrible events is such that we are not just satisfied with monuments to events that hold tragic cultural significance. For events that our society deems national tragedies, we create museums. The goal of this presentation is to examine why and how American museums commodify tragedies for public consumption. In a thorough examination of the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, I will also look at the public experience of this location to see what about it makes it so successful. I will use the anthropological theory of phenomenology to attempt to understand subjective experiences in museums by looking at phenomena as they would appear to the museum visitor. In a recent study, it was discovered that more people trust museums than most other public sources of information. They also found that people do not see museums as institutions with political agendas (Dilenschneider). They are seen as unbiased, expert sources. However, no place is without its agenda. Museums as a whole have a narrative to present and the curators have control over the way that narrative is presented. So, what is the purpose of a museum? Museums are meant to tell stories, educate people of all ages, and, in many cases, museums help to forge a national identity (Arinze). In general museums can be symbols of a nation, even if they don’t have much information about the nation inside – the Louvre, for example. However, national museums have the power to control the narrative of the history of the nation in what they choose to display and how they choose to display it. The 9/11 Memorial and Museum is an example of a national museum which very much controls the narrative of the event and in some cases even provides justification for actions committed after the event.