

# A Place to Mourn: Why the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is Crucial to American Healing

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All memorials offer solace to those who visit, but the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is particularly suited to this cause because of certain aspects of its design. As this article demonstrates, qualities such as its black reflective surface, its gradual increase in height, and the ordering of the names work to create an emotional connection to the names on the wall, bringing them to life and creating a place for grief, and ultimately healing, to occur.

The Vietnam War occurred during a time of great unrest in America. The late 1950s through the 70s are considered some of the wildest times in our nation's history, comprising the struggles for civil rights, women's rights, and protests for and against the war. The Selective Service compounded class tensions, as college students and those in certain professions were able to avoid the draft in the early years of the war. Jan Scruggs served in the war, and when he returned, he determined that a memorial was needed, not just to remember the soldiers who were lost, but also to heal the nation, as he later wrote in his book, *To Heal a Nation*. The turmoil was not a mere hardship, but a national trauma, and as horror stories have taught us, a trauma that is not healed will grow to haunt us. All memorials work to release us from our ghosts, but the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is so compelling because of the nature of the conflict and the time period it represents. Other than the time of the Civil War, the Vietnam Era was the most divisive in our nation's history, and can benefit the most from the release of its ghosts.

Location is central in ghost stories, just as it is crucial for mourning to have a physical presence to associate with the loved one lost. With the Vietnam War, this was complicated by the fact that soldiers died in Vietnam, and those who returned were buried in their local cemeteries. Some who were missing in action still have not been buried. On a national level, there was no place of recognition or mourning until the memorial was built, and the conflict threatened to recede from national memory, back into the realm of suppressed trauma. For Scruggs' idea of healing to occur, the nation would require a single place for mourning.

Furthermore, the memorial itself played a role in our national turmoil, as the design and the architect caused controversy. Maya Lin is a Chinese-American, and she was a Yale undergraduate student when she won the national design competition. Many questioned whether someone who was so ambivalent to the Vietnam War itself, and a female of Asian heritage, could design a fitting memorial for the conflict. The modern design was another point of contention, igniting a national discussion of whether modern, nonrepresentational art was for the masses, or only for the college educated. Some Americans preferred representational art such as statues and flags, and were affronted by a memorial that was so abstract it appeared to make no statement. The controversy over the memorial reveals the degree to which Americans needed a place to mourn together, and the memorial, funded

entirely by donation, became a national project of unification. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial provides a place to remember the Americans we lost, and in so doing, it establishes a place for healing, a place for the nation to confront its ghosts.

All memorials are unique as architectural structures, since their job is not to shelter people or corporations, but to provide a space for people to remember their dead, and they often must work to contain the feelings of loss and to help the viewer connect emotionally with those being mourned. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in particular summons this connection because of the way it was designed, from the chronological ordering of the names, to the reflective quality of the granite, the abstract design, and the angle of the two walls. The design allows it to act as a protection against haunting because it is so adept at incurring those connections for the living through its physical presence.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has been one of the most frequently visited monuments in Washington, D.C. since the site opened (Greenspan). One reason the Wall remains impactful to so many visitors is because the names are such a central part of the design. When the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, the organization that raised funds to build the memorial, released its design competition guidelines, one of the few stipulations it made was that the memorial must include room to inscribe the names of the 57,661 thousand who were killed, and the 2,500 unaccounted (“Design Competition”). The memorial’s creators sought to create a simple place for veterans and the country to mourn those lost, without a political message, and the best way to do this was by allowing the names speak for themselves. Names, more than any other word, have the ability to recall a person, and they have a special significance. Many visitors come to the wall to find a specific name, but the sight of all the names amplified along the length of the wall is often sobering. Visitors are able for the first time to comprehend exactly how many people had to die for almost 58,000 names to be on the wall. The names reach out to us on a personal level because we identify so closely with our own name. We condense our identity into our names; conversely, we are able to expand the names on the Memorial into people. Despite the powers of language, however, there are limits. Architect Ochsner remarks, “Language allows us to communicate, but in appropriation of things within language, some reality of things themselves is lost” (162). Despite the power of the names, they aren’t fully able to comprise the full impact of the loss that America experienced. Although the names are important, other elements of the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial play a crucial role in helping visitors conceptualize the loss and value the Wall represents.

One idea from literary analysis that is relevant to my discussion concerns binaries—our understanding of things in opposites, such as life and death, presence and absence. These boundaries are famously broken in Gothic fiction and horror stories, but they apply well to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a place for acknowledging and responding to grief. The Wall opposes our binary understanding of death and life by bridging the gap between the two, allowing the names and memories of the dead to inhabit the same space as the living. This does not occur passively, but the design of the memorial specifically contributes to the link between the living and the dead.

One of the reasons the memorial achieves this link is because we can experience the dead only through our own life experiences. The only way we can relate to them is through our understanding, so we make their lives a part of our experience, whether this is intended or not, and we carry with us parts of everyone who has touched our lives. As Jeffrey Ochsner states, “We ourselves embody in the shape of our own emotional lives those with whom we have interacted” (163), meaning that those we know become a part of us, and are carried

throughout our lives. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial amplifies this connection, prompting Ochsner to call the Memorial a “linking object” (156). His idea is that the Memorial allows the viewer to identify specifically with the names, to take a more emotional and active role as a viewer. Those who gaze upon the wall are allowed to see deeper than the inscribed names and attach meaning to them, connecting on an emotional level, and feeling an emotional presence.

A literary scholar also concerned with ghostly presences, Christine Berthin remarks that “haunting is transgenerational” (4), meaning that the ghosts of any one era continue to have a place in our culture, and that if we refuse to confront the past and reckon with those who were lost from it, the ghosts of our conflicts will not recede. The secrets of the American soldiers who were killed in Vietnam become entombed within the memorial unless they are dealt with, and the viewer who wants to understand is tasked with deriving meaning from the names on the Wall, ensuring that the soldiers mean more than their names. Essentially, readers must bring back the dead to gain meaning from the memorial. The Wall provides a voice to the soldiers, allowing our nation to work through the controversy imposed by the conflict on their own terms.

Part of what makes the Vietnam Veterans Memorial so effective is the fact that it is abstract. Although this was the cause of much controversy at the announcement of Maya Lin’s winning design, something more directly representational would not have been able to accommodate the diverse reactions of Americans to the Vietnam War and to the soldiers. Dolar notes in D. S. Friedman that the postmodern experience is distinguished by a “new consciousness about the uncanny as a fundamental dimension of modernity” (64). Freud’s idea of the uncanny encompasses a fine border between what is familiar and normal and what is disturbing or unsettling, and this can often occur in subliminal ways. What Dolar means is that subjects of the postmodern era (beginning in the 1950s, becoming more popular in the 1970s) were conscious of things hovering at the fringes of what was proper and normal, and artists and creatives sought to include that tension in their work, to force the public to confront things that were beyond the realm of the comfortable in some ways, such as wars and discrimination and change.

There are many advantages to the memorial being abstract instead of strictly representational, like many traditional monuments on the National Mall. Architect Friedman notes the memorial’s “sleek, black, half-buried V...inscribes an iconographical symbolism on the surface of the site, but this mark does not transgress or subvert; rather, it is appropriate decoration. Its phenomenal effect reduces to several binary, compositional devices, involving its reflective surfaces. It does not recode the mall; it schematizes it and sustains it” (73). Although the memorial contrasts in style with the other monuments on the Mall, it adds to them as part of a tapestry of our national history, and is a gesture toward the many voices, some dissenting, who have comprised our nation from its inception. The abstract design allows its meaning to transcend words and target directly the human psyche. Donald Kunze makes the point that “through the use of gesture, the non-present is made present and given a secret status ruled by a non-classical or grotesque order” (28). What the wall communicates is beyond the level of words, except for the names. The abstract qualities break the constraints that are imposed on the other monuments of the Classical style, and the monument conjures meanings that are not representationally present, such as what the Vietnam deaths say about America, and how those losses have affected us a nation. Kunze adds, “Gesture, as a silent language, places us between the pure conventionality of known forms and the mute unintelligibility of objects” (28). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was designed to trigger enough of the war to affect visitors, but not to tell them what to think

about it, and to allow their own experiences to rise to the surface. Monuments dedicated to Lincoln and Jefferson leave little room for any feeling but awe at the men they commemorate, but the Wall is a place to grieve and reflect, as well as a tribute to those it honors. By avoiding specific ideals, it allows visitors to have their own ideas about the war and about those who were lost. It facilitates grief and eventual healing by coaxing true feelings to the surface, instead of mass-produced patriotism.

One way the memorial achieves this is by using our perception of space and linear time to create a deeper meaning for visitors. Kunze notes, "The phenomenon of virtual space is fundamental to the way human beings relate perceptually, behaviorally, existentially, to their world" (28). The arc of the V creates a separate space from the Mall, and even the traffic on nearby Henry Bacon Drive fades to a whisper at the site of the Wall, creating a peaceful space apart from the busy city. The Wall allows us to perceive at a glance the amount of names, based on the sheer size, and a place is created within the arc for reflection.

One of the first things visitors will notice as they approach is the Memorial's reflective quality, which allows them to see their own image reflected from behind the names, as if the names rise out to meet them, overtaking their image. This exposes the viewer to Lacan's theories of the mirror and the way humans recognize themselves. Lacan proposed that after a human has reached this stage of development, not only can a child recognize himself when reflected in other objects, but the ego, or sense of the self, depends on other objects to provide personality. When visitors stand in front of the Wall, they are able to identify more closely with the names engraved upon it because they see themselves reflected inside it. When gazing upon their reflection in the Wall's surface, people will see a different reflection than the one to which they are accustomed, and they will see reflections of those around them differently from the true version, which allows them to relate to the reflection in a new way. As Lacan stated, "you never look at me from the place from which I see you" (67). The reflection creates a double of the viewer, one who is "real," gazing at the Wall, and one who appears to be inside the wall, looking out. Kunze takes this idea of doubles further when he says, "The unreal presence of the virtual reflections informs us that the real double, always and ever, is that of the living and the dead" (28). This startling image can create a haunting connection, especially for those who served, or were of age to serve, as those names could easily have been theirs. The reflective feature allows the Wall to function as a "space of absence," a site for projection and representation of a person who is not actually there, and a site to access memories (Ochsner 162), of either the viewer or something that will bring meaning to them. Humans can only relate experiences to their own lives, and to process grief, especially for those they do not know, they must have a way to establish the connection. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial allows the names on the wall to be projected on the viewers, until they must confront the significance of those names.

There was some debate at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation about how to present the names on the wall, whether it should be chronological or alphabetical. The final decision to alphabetize by date of death was made in part because there were many doubles of common names, and presenting a long list of "John Smith," for example, would have devalued the men the wall sought to honor. This method would prevent visitors from seeing the names as unique people. The resulting system does not classify the men and women by rank, it merely lists the names, and whether they were killed or missing in action or eventually found. It adds drama by revealing days with higher casualties, some lists continuing for hundreds of names before resuming the top of the alphabet. This listing, however, does not prevent the symbolic and abstract properties of language from being visible. In fact, with

such a long list of names, it is impossible to see all of them at once, so our minds group the names as a whole to better understand them. Viewed this way, the names merge to represent something more than each soldier can represent individually; they tell the story of America's involvement in the conflict, and the loss of American lives.

When Maya Lin designed the memorial, she intended it to slope gently into the ground, to create the illusion of circular time, continuing after the wall slopes into the earth, and allowing the suggestion that America's involvement extends before and after the first and last deaths. Scholars Peter Buse and Andrew Stott examine the ideas of linear time, in which time follows a clear line. They argue in "Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, and History" that ghosts disrupt this idea. Indeed, the multiple locations of mourning made possible by the Vietnam War interrupt the sense of death in time and space for those left behind, and left loved ones without a place to mourn, until the memorial was created. Kunze has noticed another effect of the slope. "The gradual descent into the virtual space created by the wedge allows the discovery of the reflection to creep up on the observer, and in the context of an emotionally charged moment the effect is cleared of all sentimentality and charged with gnostic legibility of what is happening" (28). The names begin about ankle level, increasing slowly, until the wall towers over the visitor at ten feet at the apex. The effect is surprisingly overwhelming in comparison with the Lincoln and Washington Memorials, which the viewer can see at all times by turning to the left or right. While descending to the apex, the names become overwhelming in number, until the height of the wall becomes almost suffocating. As the visitor rises toward the other end of the "V," the view opens before them to the lush green of the Constitution Gardens, and the wall ends at ankle level with a single line of names and an inscription.

Just as there was divisive controversy over the Vietnam War, the presence, location, and design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial created a national stir that lasted until the dedication in 1982. Afterwards, people experienced the Wall, and most dissent died down. Although the site remains popular for tourists, Christina Schwenkel has some concerns about the Wall's transition from memorial to tourist site. She says, "Scholars have identified contradictions and tensions between remembrance and forgetfulness when public memorials and commemorative projects are transformed into historical sites for tourists and other audiences who put such space to alternative social uses" (5). Her concern is that the space can become more about the tourist than about remembering those the memorial is intended to commemorate. She need not worry, however, as the reason the Vietnam Veterans Memorial continues to be so frequently visited is the great effect it has for Americans, in part because of the design elements mentioned above, and the way those design elements create meaning for visitors. Scholar Marita Sturken argues that memorials are sacred ground, which "is charged with meaning. It implies not daily life but worship, contemplation and a suspension of ordinary activities. In a sacred place, all activities have meaning, all are transformed into rituals" (315). As a tourist attraction, the memorial is a place separate from the daily life of Americans and veterans, and making a special trip to the wall, across the nation or across town, is the start of a sacred journey to experience something removed from daily life.

In Schwenkel's article on the topic, she introduces recombinant histories, "a term that suggests the interweaving of representation" (5). This idea is that Vietnam's history of the war is interwoven with the American interpretation of it, and vice versa. There is no one Vietnam War. Ghosts are weaved into the memory of a culture, and that culture dictates their representation. In Vietnam, "unofficial knowledge and memories of the past are redirected, reshaped, and revalued to benefit the market and the state as well as the veterans

themselves” (Schwenkel 20) in the form of tourism. Wartime artifacts like the infamous Zippo lighters, often used to identify American dead, are often sold to American tourists, now as symbols of Vietnamese adaptability or commodification. Although few Americans have the chance to experience the spirits of American soldiers in Vietnam, there are many legends of them lingering. Scholar Heonik Kwon traveled to Vietnam, and he notes, “The Vietnamese call what the outside world refers to as the Vietnam War ‘The American War,’ and many of them believe that the ghosts of those who died tragic deaths in this war abound in their living environment.” As is often the case with any type of superstition, this belief remains strongest among the elder and more rural populations. Aside from that, however, he notes there is some significance to certain places within Vietnam. “The places associated with a history of fierce battle or large-scale civilian killing are believed to harbor a mass of grievous and hungry ghosts.” Traces of the American dead appear on Vietnamese soil, and this relates to the ways Americans mourn on their own soil. Americans and Vietnamese own the ghosts of “The American War,” so our mourning of the war cannot be one-sided. To truly understand and heal from the Vietnam War we must think about the war from the standpoint of the Vietnamese, in addition to the American story.

Such broad aims cannot be accomplished by a representational memorial, and the Wall is so important because it refuses to force a representational concept of the war on viewers, whether one of glory or sadness. The Wall is valuable because it allows the visitor to take and leave whatever is needed. Throughout history, humans have used memorials to either encourage a connection to the dead, in a form such as ancestor-worship, or to appease them, to prevent a haunting. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is both. “The monument is a shared creation that plays a role in group and individual mourning” (Ochsner 160). It is also a way to banish the ghosts of the veterans, by creating a space for them to inhabit and to be remembered.

Another scholar, Marita Sturken, has studied American memorials and their role in the grieving process. She notes the sacredness of a place of death that is also a place of mourning and remembrance, an example of which is the former World Trade Tower site. “The discourse of sacred ground at Ground Zero comes not from the blessings of priests, but, rather, from the loss of life that took place there. Traditionally, in US culture, ground has been considered sacred when blood has been spilled on it” (314). Of course, the Vietnam War is somewhat of an anomaly, as there are several places that can be considered sacred, associated with death. There are some battlefields that are considered sacred, notably Gettysburg, but Americans recognize that not all battleground is sacred, nor are all places of death, even violent ones. This is, in part, because few of America’s wars were fought on our own soil, but it also reveals that there are other characteristics that mark places of remembrance. The place where the body rests is a common sacred site, and many Vietnam veterans have marked graves, suited for mourning on an individual level, but the memorial for any war adds context to the death, most summarizing triumph and victory. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, however, makes no such pretenses, and remains a blank slate for whatever the viewer saw in the war, and what they see in themselves. That is the source of its power, and why it is such a potent place of remembrance and mourning. “When death is transformed into sacrifice and made sacred, it is almost always deployed with such political intent. Thus in US culture, the concept of a sacred place has been almost exclusively secular and national rather than religious” (Sturken 314). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial fits this structure, as it was created for national healing and for the healing of the veterans, as well as the memory of those on the wall, both killed and missing. The space seeks to banish the ghosts harbored in the survivors and the nation, to a special place in our National Mall. 1

The trend of leaving memorabilia at monuments may not have begun at the Wall, but it is one of the memorials that receives the most artifacts, so many that the National Park Service has built a facility, the Museum Resource Center (MRCE) in Maryland, where anthropologists archive and store the objects. People leave objects for many reasons, some of which are to connect with those on the wall, or to leave a part of themselves at the wall. “Throughout history, when people have mourned in the absence of remains, they have substituted ritualized objects (empty coffins, flags, photographs, or headstones) as touchstones, material artifacts that can provide some kind of corporeal presence to mediate the absence of a loved one” (Sturken 313). These are the types of items commonly left at the memorial and private gravesites, demonstrating this most typical form of mourning. Visitors connect with the memorial in another unintended way as well: they take rubbings of the names, attempting to take a piece of the wall with them, continuing the process of mourning and healing through artifacts, and seeking physical representation for their memories.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was created to honor those who died, and it brings about national peace, being in the end a place for the survivors and the ghosts of the soldiers. Ochsner notes, “When individuals like these do not find their place in the text of symbolic tradition, they return to haunt the living” (160), while Kwon states, “It is against this historical background of generalized destruction and displacement of human lives that people perceive ghosts of war in their environment today.” Without the Memorial, each soldier may have been mourned, but as a whole, the nation would not have been forced to confront the war itself. The wall serves another purposes as well, uniting past and future. “Yet, as Reagan has suggested, the force of memory and forgetting that constitute a nation’s history also shape and secure its collective visions of the future” (Schwenkel 5). If America had refused to confront its motivations and role in Vietnam, we would be a different country today. Just as family secrets can be repressed and passed down through generations, haunting the family with ghosts of people and misdeeds, the actions of nations must be brought to light, or the nation will struggle with its past.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial provides such a place for healing of the past, where Americans can confront the personal and national trauma they experienced, and the dead can be removed from a place of interference with everyday life into a place of honor. This is exactly the role of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: to provide a place of honor for the lost, of mourning for the veterans, and healing for the nation.

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