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American Graffiti: Musings on the Ground Zero Mosque

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Title: American Graffiti: Musings on the Ground Zero Mosque

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Abstract: The author discusses reactions and parallels to a mosque proposed near the site of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in public discourse.

Remember TAKI 183? The nickname of a contemporary graffiti vandal. The nickname that subverted distinctions between private and public property—a weapon of mass instruction—as it proliferated throughout the streets of the boroughs of New York City. The nickname that subverted distinctions between the private and public selves—a weapon of mass identification—as it spawned a proliferation of competitors and admirers, mimickers and mimes, who vied for respect and celebrity, signifying monkeys day and night. The New York Times ran a story on TAKI 183 in 1971. Assertors of first rights included JULio 204. In 1985 with the release of the film TURK 182, the social contagion runs its course with actor Timothy Hutton as Jimmy. It may well be that there always have been and will be graffiti vandals with a figurative mark linking the Vandals who sacked Rome in 455CE with the Vandals who rocked Huntington Beach, California in the 1980s. After all, in TURK 182, the New York City Mayor's Office finally comes around from moral outrage to making Jimmy a hero.

Now it's the time of Park51, the so-called Ground Zero Mosque at 51 Park Avenue in New York City, not to be confused with the Ground Zero Café at the center of the courtyard within the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. (The latter is so-named because—in the context of gallows humor—it was thought to be the prospective site of a nuclear first-strike against the United States by the Soviet Union). But Park51 is neither at Ground Zero nor is it a mosque. Instead, it is the name of a planned complex located two blocks from the site of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. The complex is to become a cultural center within a tower as high as 15 stories that will include a 500-seat auditorium; swimming pool; basketball court; child care center; bookstore; culinary school; art studio; food court; a 9/11 memorial; prayer spaces respectively for Muslims, Christians, and Jews; a theater; performing arts center; and fitness center. It is said to be modeled after both the Y (YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association)) and the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan.

The Mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, already is strongly supporting the planned complex based on a self-professed principle of religious freedom and his own family's experience of religious bias in Medford Massachusetts. Recent polling data released by The New York Times, however, suggests that a majority of city residents believe the planned complex's organizers have no right to build so close to the World Trade Center attacks or do have the right but shouldn't build it. Why? Out of feelings of sensitivity towards victims, their families, the city, and the country as a whole, as well as out of a belief that ground zero and the ground around it is hallowed.

To briefly summarize the public discourse, many political officials and candidates are asserting stances on the issue for obvious partisan purposes sometimes conflated with what they might actually believe—many more against Park51 than for it. On the Issue of sensitivity and hallowedness, these people usually ignore or discount existing structures near or nearer to ground zero like The New York Dolls Gentlemen's Club. This august establishment—according to online testimonials—features topless waitresses and pole dancers who are “freaking hot,” a “real chill,” “do not jump down your throat for

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money,” and “provide the perfect environment for you to unwind.” It also has 1,506 friends on Facebook as of September 6, 2010. Then there’s a Subway sandwich shop; an Off-Track Betting establishment; McDonalds; Burger King; Ho Yip Chinese Fast Food; an Express BBQ awning featuring quesadillas and pulled pork over a space-to-rent; a Vitamin Shoppe; Lilly O Brien’s Bar and Restaurant including a “Large Party Room Available for All Occasions;” the kosher Broadway Café featuring a Health Bar and Pizza; Olga’s Salon and Spa; Dunkin Donuts; a wholesale and retail jeweler; and a place for sundries including gloves, t-shirts, belts, cell phone accessories, sunshades, sweaters and sweat shirts, belts, “scarfs,” hoods; street vendors . In addition, The Pussycat Lounge—featuring “T&A at the hippest financial district scene around”—and Thunder Lingerie and More—a sex shop and peep show emporium.

Besides the nature of what should be at or near ground zero, the public discourse includes other Issues like the sources of funding for Park51, the motives of planners and supporters, the nature of Islam, the identities of those truly responsible for the 9/11 attacks, and the religion of the United States President. The white heat and white light of the discourse is matched only by its imperviousness to conflicting facts and values.

What to make of this? It may be the case that this very public discourse on the ground zero mosque is or functions as graffiti. A very brief summary of the 78 studies in the American Psychological Association’s PsycINFO data base (accessed on September 6, 2010 with graffiti in the Title of books and articles from as far back as 1967) suggests that people who produce graffiti are trying to (1) compensate for feeling neglected or separated, (2) secure individual recognition, (3) display association with positive people and ideas and no association or disassociation with negative ones, (4) delineate physical and psychological territorial boundaries, (5) figuratively and literally engage in social protest and political campaigns, and (6) manage desires which may be unknown or experienced as ungovernable by graffiti vandals, victims, observers, and enforcers alike.

In other words, much of the public discourse has as much to do with 9/11, Islam, and terrorism as the New York Dolls Gentlemen’s Club has to do with gentlemen. (I wonder what these gentlemen would make of the other The New York Dolls—the gender bending rock and rollers who did “Looking for a Kiss,” “Stranded in the Jungle,” and “Puss ‘n’ Boots” during New York City’s early 1970s?) TAKI 183 where are you?

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