

Your House is on Ground Zero (and Quite Without Permission)

by [Tim Wise](#)

September 3, 2010, 5:01 pm

In all the rancor over whether or not one group of Muslims should be allowed to build a cultural center and worship space near the site of the 9/11 attacks -- which were committed by a separate and totally unrelated group of Muslims -- there is one thing above all else that no one appears anxious to point out: namely, that for any white Christian to say "Ground Zero" is off limits to anyone is possibly the most deliciously and yet grotesquely ironic thing ever suggested. After all, there is scarcely a square foot of land upon which we tread that is not, for someone, Ground Zero. I am sitting atop one now: a killing field for Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Creek; a graveyard in which are buried the bones -- and if no longer the bones, then surely the dust -- of peoples whose evisceration occurred not so long ago, and is still remembered by those who have not the luxury of forgetting.

And so the New Yorkers who believe against all evidence that their trauma is unique in the history of the world -- or even their city for that matter -- prattle on about the "defiling" of the former World Trade Center location. Meanwhile they overlook that their precious island was itself cajoled from indigenous peoples for a handful of worthless beads. And white men have been swindling those we viewed as inferior -- be they of color, or *even other white men* -- ever since, especially (and this is where the geographic symbolism of their protests becomes revealing) in and around Wall Street, where the actions of wealthy investors and financiers have done far more damage than Osama Bin Laden ever could. Would that we might prohibit the construction of banks anywhere in New York so as to make a point about terrorism and our unwillingness to collaborate with it.

Indeed, if those protesting the Cordoba House were the least bit interested in consistency -- as opposed to being content to wallow in a type of hypocrisy both profound and typical -- they would, to a person, vacate downtown Manhattan immediately. And this they would do out of respect for the lives destroyed by people such as they: black peoples forced to build Fort Amsterdam for the Dutch, which is where Battery Park is now, or the walls that gave the famous street its name, or the roads, or the very auction blocks upon which their compatriots

would be sold, thereby allowing 40 percent of white New York households to possess other human beings as property by the mid-1700s.

And they would vacate midtown too, especially any with Irish ancestry, since it was their ancestral fathers who - and so as to show how badly they desired to become white - burned down a black orphanage on 5th Avenue between 43rd and 44th during the 1863 Draft Riots. But I'm guessing there is an Irish Pub within walking distance of the former orphanage, and yet no one seems particularly concerned about the slight.

Truth be told, that whole city is a Ground Zero, and has been for far longer than the existence of al-Qaeda, since long before those phallic monuments to architectural ingenuity and big business were constructed, and since long before there were any airplanes capable of bringing them down. It was Ground Zero for Amadou Diallo but we still allow police to operate in the vicinity of Wheeler Street in the Bronx. It was Ground Zero for Sean Bell but we haven't banned the NYPD from around the environs of the Kalua Cabaret in Queens, where they shot he and his friends 50 times in 2006. Neither have we seen too many New Yorkers losing sleep over the inherent insensitivity towards the respective Ground Zeros for Patrick Dorismond or Timothy Stansbury Jr., both of whom were felled by police bullets, and yet which spots have hardly been made off limits to law enforcement out of respect for the dead.

That many New Yorkers in 2010, and especially white ones -- since there are few residents of the South Bronx or Washington Heights who are making their way downtown for these protests -- cannot feel those other pains hardly acquits their arrogance. That they cannot see how their livelihoods, their homes, their bank accounts, and the clothes on their backs have been paid for with the blood of innocent people, is *their* problem. It is not the fault of those who would build Cordoba House, and in so doing disturb the hallowed ground of what has been, most recently, a Burlington Coat Factory.

Their houses, and mine, and yours, sit atop Ground Zero. And those who died to make it so gave no permission for the construction of the homes, to say nothing of the churches that for so long were instrumental in rationalizing the slaughter. There were no building permits issued by those who died here so that we could be, as we like to say, "free." But here we are nonetheless. And it takes some nerve to pretend, even as we sleep above the graves of those extirpated to make way for us, that *9/11* was the day everything changed. Or to believe that we have the right to tell anyone where they can and cannot live, pray or work. Or to

suggest that we are the only ones who have ever died, or known terror, and that having done so we now have the right to draw a circle around us, a bubble of specialness, which can keep us warm and protected as though it were an amniotic sac inside of which we will forever be insulated from harm.

We wish to be free from the pain, which is understandable. But it is not acceptable that in seeking that freedom we should ignore the pain by which we have come this far already.

Tim Wise is the author of five books on race, including his latest, *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2010). He can be reached at his website, www.timwise.org