



PROJECT MUSE®

Exhibiting Atrocity

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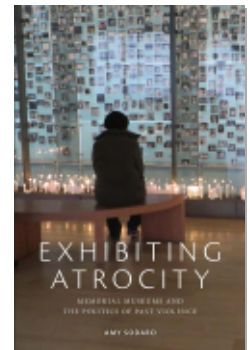
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INTRODUCTION

In Montgomery, Alabama, a new museum called From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration is slated to open in April 2018 in a former slave warehouse. Created by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), the museum is intended to explore “the legacy of slavery, racial terrorism, segregation, and contemporary issues of mass incarceration, excessive punishment, and police violence” (Equal Justice Initiative 2016). Designed by Local Projects, an “experience design” studio that was one of the lead exhibition designers of the National September 11 Memorial Museum and claims as its mission to “push the boundaries of emotional storytelling” (Local Projects), the new museum will confront the violence of African American history in a way that is interactive and deeply experiential. Using virtual reality technology, re-creations, sounds, and images, the goal of the museum is to “immerse visitors in the sights and sounds of the domestic slave trade, racial terrorism, and the Jim Crow South” (Equal Justice Initiative 2016). In connecting visitors to the past in a visceral way, it also intends to help them make connections between the violence of the past and the continued inequality and violence of the present, seeking to use the past to work toward a better future.

The museum is part of a larger memory initiative by the EJI that also includes the Memorial to Peace and Justice; located on six acres of land overlooking the city of Montgomery, it will be the first national memorial to the more than four thousand victims of lynching in the American South. The memorial is designed by MASS Design Group, which aims at “design that heals” and is also designing the new African Center for Peace at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre (MASS Design). The memorial will be an interactive space intended to help confront this exceedingly dark aspect of US history. Underpinning these two projects is the firm belief of EJI that

“public commemoration plays a significant role in prompting community-wide reconciliation” (Equal Justice Initiative 2016); without these sites of commemoration, this violent past may remain in the dark and the wounds will not heal. The Montgomery museum and memorial open on the tail of the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. This wildly popular newest museum on the National Mall is intended to be not just for African Americans but for all Americans, telling a dual narrative of “uplift and tragedy seemingly on a fixed collision course” (Cotter 2016) that echoes broader social and political tensions in a nation passing the torch from its first black president to one unashamedly connected to white supremacist movements. The violence of the past that is contained in these new museums and memorial continue to simmer just beneath the surface, and these memory projects are intended to use memory to help heal the ongoing divisions within American society.

On another continent and in a no-less-complex political and social context, Colombia is breaking ground for its National Museum of Memory to be located in downtown Bogotá. Under the auspices of the National Center for Historical Memory, created by Law 1448 also known as the Victims’ and Land Restitution Law, the museum is intended to “carry out actions aimed at restoring the dignity of the victims and spreading the truth about what happened” during the decades of violent armed conflict in Colombia (Centro de Memoria Histórica 2015). The museum has three primary functions: restoration, as a form of reparation to victims; enlightenment, in its contribution to knowledge and understanding of Colombia’s past violence; and pedagogy, in its effort to “contribute to the construction of a culture of respect for difference, diversity and plurality” and, ultimately, the prevention of future violence (Centro de Memoria Histórica 2015). Like the Montgomery museum and memorial, the Colombian project is intended to harness the memory and history of the violent past in a way that shapes the present and future. And like the Montgomery projects, it is being created in a complex social and political context.

Decades of armed conflict in Colombia between government forces, paramilitaries, and left-wing guerillas finally ended with the signing of a historic peace accord in summer 2016. Just a couple of months later, Colombia’s leaders were surprised and humiliated when a national referendum narrowly rejected the accord, only to be followed that month by the announcement that Colombia’s president Juan Manuel Santos Calderón

was being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to bring about an end to the violence. A revised peace accord was approved by the Congress in November 2016, but the massive project of coming to terms with Colombia's violent past is just beginning. At the center of this effort to "make visible the magnitude of the tragedy" and remember the more than two hundred thousand people killed, the millions who were forced from their homes, and the many individuals kidnapped or forced into combat is the creation of a national memorial museum (Centro de Memoria Histórica 2015). Like other similar initiatives in the region, such as Lima's Place of Memory and Social Tolerance, Santiago's Museum of Memory and Human Rights, and Buenos Aires' Space of Memory and Human Rights, and working with and drawing inspiration from these museums and their creators, Colombia's new museum reflects the centrality today of memorial museums' efforts to come to terms with past violence.

These are but two from many examples around the world reflecting a new approach to remembering and teaching about the past: the memorial museum. Memorial museums focused on past violence, atrocity, and human rights abuses reflect a demand today that those darkest days in human history are not only preserved but musealized and interpreted in a way that is widely accessible to present and future audiences. They are part of the ever-growing trend of "dark tourism"¹ and reflect a significant shift in the late twentieth century in how societies, nations, and groups memorialize past violence. Both Colombia's National Museum of Memory and the From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration Museum are intended to reveal the truth about what happened in the past, preserving that past in a museum so that the present and future can learn from it. They also seek to harness the perceived power of memory to heal communities and promote reconciliation. The impulse to preserve and remember so that atrocity will "never again" happen has driven memorialization from the second half of the twentieth century through today. And both museums, in their international connections to other memorial museums and the increasingly transnational flow of memorial museum aesthetics and design, reflect the global, transcultural nature of this new commemorative form. Around the world, memorial museums, intended to commemorate and educate using cutting edge museological techniques, are being constructed: from the United States and China to Cambodia, Uruguay, and South Africa. But as the complex political and social contexts in which these museums

are negotiating difficult memories suggest, memorial museums are deeply political institutions and their utopian goals are often challenged by their political genealogies.

WHY MEMORIAL MUSEUMS?

This book addresses why and how societies attempt to come to terms with past atrocities and trauma through the creation of memorial museums, a new “hybrid” cultural form of commemoration. Memorial museums emerged in response to the violence and atrocities of the twentieth century and are intended to translate the suffering of the past into ethical commitments to creating a better future through education and commemoration. As such, memorial museums appear to be products of a shift in the way that societies relate to the past: from the nineteenth-century nation-state’s celebratory—and often forgetful—emphasis on past triumphs, to a reflective effort to come to terms with the negative legacy of the past. Memorial museums’ focus on learning the lessons of history points toward a firm adherence to Santayana’s overused (and underthought) maxim that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Around the world today, it is increasingly a political and moral expectation that societies will confront past violence as a way of moving forward, indicating a new temporal orientation toward the past in political and social life.

This new orientation toward the past has necessitated new commemorative forms that can express a more ambiguous relationship to the violence of the past and apply its lessons to the strengthening of a culture based on democratic values like freedom, tolerance, human rights, and the prevention of future violence. In the contemporary world, political legitimacy for regimes emerging from conflict and transitioning to democracy increasingly relies on coming to terms with the past (e.g., Torpey 2006; Olick 2007; Levy and Sznajder 2010). Museums are frequently used as central mechanisms for addressing past injustices and legitimating nations or groups in the eyes of the international community—by recognizing past victimization and demonstrating a new regime’s willingness to learn from history.

As mechanisms of political legitimation, memorial museums are created with the goal of instilling in their visitors and societies democratic values by demonstrating the violence that results from the lack of these values.

They are meant to be inclusive institutions—public spaces in which the past can be confronted, discussed, and debated by its many different stakeholders.² They also serve as centers for education, research, documentation, and truth-telling that can expand society-wide knowledge about the contexts and situations in which violence and injustice occur. They further seek to morally educate their visitors, using experiential, interactive, and affective strategies to give visitors an impactful encounter with the past and inspire empathy in them. Ultimately they are created to be spaces that promote human rights and an ethic of “never again.” By showing the catastrophic effects of intolerance, exclusion, repression, and dictatorship, they work to promote an opposite set of values that the visitor will take away from the museum with her and apply to her everyday life. Because of their seemingly vast potential to confer legitimacy, enact social change, and promote liberal democratic values, memorial museums have become a truly global form: they appear to be the embodiment of what Astrid Erll terms “travelling memory,” exemplifying the movement of “carriers, media, contents, forms and practices of memory” between and across national and cultural borders (2011, 11).

All this makes memorial museums unique new cultural forms intended to work toward the creation of a more democratic, inclusive, and peaceful culture and to put the violence of the past to use in creating a better future. However, they are also political tools, often created and utilized with specific political agendas that can and often do compromise their declared efforts to openly confront and learn from the past. And on closer examination, as this book entails, it appears that the concerns of the present loom much larger in these museums than the difficult memories of the painful past.

A GLOBAL TOUR

To document the emergence of the memorial museum as a new form of commemoration, this book examines five in-depth case studies of exemplary memorial museums that trace the evolution and worldwide spread of the form, as well as highlight the divergent political and cultural contexts in which memorial museums are created. Through these case studies, I explore the questions of why and how societies today use memorial museums as

mechanisms for dealing with the past. This study is not intended to explain or address how visitors experience and perceive the museums but instead focuses on the intention behind their creation.

My examination of each museum is what might be called an institutional ethnography, in which I document the creation of an institution centered on three points of comparison and analysis. The first is the cultural and political context in which the museums were conceived, with a focus on the debates, discussions, and intentions behind each museum's creation. For this I have relied on archival sources provided by the museums, secondary sources, and interviews with individuals involved in the conception and construction of each museum. This reveals the political motivations that drive the creation of the museums and determine the interactions between their primary stakeholders, creators, and intended audiences. It also tells us what sort of experience the museums intend to provide for the visitor, how they work to come to terms with the past, what role they intend to play in building a democratic culture, and how memorial museums around the world are in dialogue with one another.

The second point of analysis and comparison is a close reading of the museums' exhibitions, with a focus on their presentation of the past through narrative, exhibition design, artifacts, photographs, documentary footage, testimony, and other exhibitionary strategies. I have visited each museum and spent extensive time in each exhibit. I have also examined the exhibition guides and have used primary and secondary sources related to the design and construction of the exhibitions and their popular and critical reception upon opening. Again, a comparative study highlights the methods used by memorial museums for imparting knowledge and understanding of the past and its memory. My analysis of the exhibits' content and form shows how different societies attempt to assimilate the past into their present understanding of themselves and the ways in which their present concerns are reflected in their representation of the past. This analysis also demonstrates how memorial museums, as new and unique cultural forms, work to engage and educate the public to be moral citizens through the use of experiential and affective strategies intended to encourage an emotional response, identification with the victims, and empathy.

The final point of my comparison examines the museums as public institutions in order to understand how they attempt to engage communities in discussions about the past and in this way contribute to public dialogue and democratic culture. By examining their external programming, projects,

websites, and other activities and speaking with individuals responsible for such programming, I look at how they use a range of public programs to contribute to public acknowledgment of past injustice, work with communities to right past wrongs, attempt to prevent future atrocities, and aid in the effort to heal a nation or collective. However, as they are political institutions, I also consider what sort of publics these museums seek to create and what the limits of their ambitious goals are.

In the first chapter, I trace the emergence of the memorial museum form as it parallels the “memory boom” of recent decades and a developing normative demand that societies across the globe work to come to terms with past violence and atrocity. The second half of the twentieth century saw a shift that started in the West, but has spread around the globe, from a focus on the glorious future of the nation, to an effort to reckon with past violence and atrocity as a prerequisite for political legitimacy. With this shift appeared a range of new cultural and political forms intended to help societies around the globe with this reckoning, including memorial museums. However, while several key sociological theories of this rise of coming to terms with the past argue that this marks the emergence of a post- or transnational or cosmopolitan memory culture, the case studies in this book suggest that memory—even that of the negative past—remains firmly in the control of the nation-state.

In the second chapter, I examine the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), which opened in Washington, DC, in 1993 and in many ways is the model memorial museum. A number of memory theorists have argued that the Holocaust has set the ethical and legal precedent for societies around the world dealing with past violence (e.g., Levy and Sznajder 2010; Olick 2007; Rothberg 2009). It has also presented today’s societies with new forms of commemoration intended to help them come to terms with the past (Young 1993). Because of the particular political and cultural context of its creation—a Holocaust museum in the heart of the US capital—the long, embattled process of developing an appropriate and acceptable Holocaust memorial led to the creation of the hybrid form of a memorial to the victims and a museum that tells the history and story of the past. Thus, as one of the first self-described memorial museums, the USHMM has become a model for others around the world.

The third chapter examines Budapest’s Terrorhaza, House of Terror, a museum dedicated to telling the story of Hungary’s violent twentieth century under first fascist and then communist occupation. The House of

Terror opened in 2002 as a pet project of right-wing leader Viktor Orbán under his first tenure as prime minister. He returned to power in 2010 and remains a controversial figure today. The House of Terror is one of dozens of museums of communism (and often fascism as well) created in Central and Eastern Europe following its fall in 1989 and the upsurge of memory that accompanied the crumbling of the ideology and its totalitarian rule. As a political project of Hungary's right-wing Fidesz Party, the House of Terror is a deeply political—and problematic—institution. It has embraced many international memorial museum tropes to tell its story of Hungarian suffering in a way that demonstrates how blatantly the memorial museum form can be exploited for political use. However, while the House of Terror's politics are worn on its proverbial sleeve, it is not alone in being driven by a political agenda and importantly reminds us of the deeply political nature of *all* memorial museums.

The fourth chapter focuses on the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, which opened in 2004 to mark the tenth anniversary of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Created under the auspices of the Aegis Trust, a British antigenocide organization, the Kigali Centre clearly shows the internationalization of the memorial museum form. The museum was inspired by Holocaust museums, including Yad Vashem in Israel and the USHMM and not only utilizes increasingly common memorial museum components but also contextualizes the Rwandan genocide among others in an exhibit on twentieth-century genocide, a seeming example of the transnational, “multidirectional” nature of memory today (Rothberg 2009). In Rwanda, the effort to promote peace, reconciliation, and “never again” remains real and urgent, and the museum takes seriously its role as a site of moral education. However, its ambitious work to prevent future genocide and ethnic conflict is undermined by the troubling politics of Rwanda under the powerful leadership of President Paul Kagame, at once praised for rebuilding a broken nation and harshly criticized for his antidemocratic policies and practices. At the moment of writing, Kagame has changed the nation's constitution to allow him to serve a third term, threatening Rwanda's fragile democracy and peace. And Kagame justifies each of his antidemocratic acts by using the memory of the genocide.

The fifth chapter follows the memorial museum form to Latin America where, despite being at the vanguard of the contemporary human rights movement, relatively few memorial museums have been constructed. The recent, most high-profile exception is the Museo de la Memoria y

los Derechos Humanos, the Museum of Memory and Human Rights (MMHR), in Santiago, Chile, which opened in January 2010 as the national site for remembrance and education about the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet from 1973 to 1990. The MMHR was a project of Michelle Bachelet's first presidency from 2006 to 2010. Bachelet was herself imprisoned and tortured under the junta, and the museum likely would not have been realized without her strong political will driving the project. The museum is an excellent example of the crystallization of the memorial museum form in that it adheres to all the norms and expectations of commemoration using this cultural form. However, because of the museum's political provenance and the still-divided politics of Chile today, the museum fails to give sufficient historical context for Chile's recent past in a way that is deeply problematic. Without this context, the museum seems a somewhat empty gesture.

The book's global tour of memorial museums ends in New York City with the National September 11 Memorial Museum, which opened in May 2014. In one of the most deliberative and planned memory processes, the museum was the result of numerous consultations, focus groups, community meetings, and a multiyear "Conversation Series," becoming a twenty-first-century model of the internationally agreed-upon best practices in the creation of a memorial museum. Its debt to Holocaust memorialization is evident in everything from its monumental memorial architecture to the minutiae of artifacts on display (eyeglasses, ID cards), and the museum echoes memorial museums around the world in the set of tropes now commonly recognized. However, 9/11 as an act of twenty-first-century terrorism that was witnessed by an estimated two billion people around the globe, coupled with the museum's location in the heart of the financial center of NYC and its status as a premier tourist destination all greatly challenge the memorial museum form. This chapter thus brings the memorial museum form into the twenty-first century, examining how the form changes in response to a changing world.

The final chapter analyzes my findings and outlines the three primary functions that memorial museums are created to fulfill. First, they are a form of historical truth-telling, intended to preserve the past and serve as a record, complete with material and documentary evidence, of what happened. Second, they are meant to be places of healing and restoration. They are memorials and, as such, serve as symbolic reparations for the individuals, communities, and nations that were injured. Finally, and most

importantly, they are intended to be spaces for the moral education of their publics. Not only do memorial museums intellectually educate their audiences about “history,” but they also seek to emotionally reach their visitors in order to transform them morally so that they embrace the ethic of “never again.” Behind each museum is the claim that it is an essential part of building democratic culture and preventing future violence and atrocity through its creation of a more informed moral public that will work toward these goals. However, the politics behind each museum belie these utopian goals.

PROMISES AND LIMITS

This project began with an effort to identify and describe how the new, global memorial museum form addresses and deals with a pressing normative challenge: the trauma and lasting impact of past violence, genocide, and atrocity on present societies. Memorial museums are new in both content and form. Their focus on what is most painful in the past reflects an effort to critically engage with past violence to build a more tolerant, democratic culture through the promotion of human rights and an ethic of “never again.” That this particular cultural form of commemoration is increasingly being used globally as one of the central mechanisms for addressing past violence suggests that it is believed to be an especially effective mode for critical engagement with the past that can translate into a more democratic and peaceful present and future. However, my research reveals that the reality behind the creation of memorial museums is much more complicated than those initial assumptions suggest. In fact, memorial museums reflect much more on the present regimes that build them than they do actually confront the past.

The existence of memorial museums suggests that memorials alone are insufficient and that memory of the past must be supplemented with history in order to come to terms with and understand the past. This raises the questions of what demands the past makes on the present that necessitate such a robust form of remembrance and what these new commemorative forms tell us about present societies’ relationships to the past and the future. Memorial museums’ goal of preventing future violence reflects the prevalent assumption today that there is a causal relationship between learning about past violence and preventing it in the future. But there is no evidence to suggest that this is the case; genocide and political

violence continue, though monuments, museums, and memory projects vowing “never again” proliferate. Nevertheless, memorial museums have become important transitional justice mechanisms in societies undergoing democratic transformation, suggesting that confronting and remembering the past is imperative for building democracy. This is why memorial museums bestow legitimacy upon the regimes that build them and are so popular around the world. However, as the five examples in the following pages demonstrate, there are fundamental flaws to these assumptions and serious limits to what the form can deliver. Rather than educating about the past, memorial museums reveal the political priorities and goals of the regimes that build them, reminding us that memory remains very much in the domain of the nation-state, with the past being simply another arena for enacting present politics.