



PROJECT MUSE®

Exhibiting Atrocity

Amy Sodaro

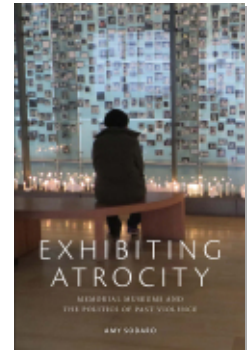
Published by Rutgers University Press

Sodaro, Amy.

Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence.

New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/57541>

1 • MEMORIAL MUSEUMS

The Emergence of a New Form

In Ggolo, Uganda, ground has been broken for a new memorial museum focused on the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda (Muramira 2016). Though Rwanda has an active program of genocide memorialization, including the national memorial museum discussed in chapter 4, the Ugandan museum will be the first of its kind outside of Rwanda and reflects the desire for memory and education about the genocide to extend beyond national borders, much like how the bodies of genocide victims that were tossed into Rwanda's rivers and ended up on the shores of Uganda's Lake Victoria had crossed national borders. Across the globe, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), the leading organization in documenting and preserving the history of the Khmer Rouge genocide, is creating the Sleuk Rith Institute, a permanent memorial museum, documentation center, and campus for research, study, and memory of the Cambodian genocide in a stunning building designed by Zaha Hadid. Though Cambodia is dotted with grim sites of detention and massacre, where bones and other remnants of violence are visible reminders of the genocide, DC-Cam clearly finds it necessary to supplement these sites of memory and preservation in a way that provides a more permanent and robust space for mobilizing memory of Cambodia's suffering for purposes of education for the present and future. And on another continent, plans are under way to revamp the Memorial 68 in Mexico City, a small museum commemorating the 1968 massacre of hundreds of students and other civilians by the police and military. The renovation comes at a moment

when many Mexicans are calling for justice and recognition in response to the political violence that has gripped the country in the last decade; driven by the need to connect political violence of the past to that of the present, the renovation reflects the belief that remembering and understanding past violence is necessary for staunching it in the present and preventing it in the future. These are just a handful of examples of memorial museums that have recently opened or are being planned or renovated around the world, demonstrating how the memorial museum has firmly established itself as a cultural form par excellence for remembering and teaching about past political violence.

The global proliferation of memorial museums is part of a recent, broader interest in the past that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. With, and driving, this interest in memory came a shift in how societies relate to the past, from seeing the past as merely precedent to the nation's glorious future toward an emphasis on coming to terms with past violence and oppression. In response to the political demands of the negative past, memorial forms have been changing to more adequately address the past, contain its memory, and learn from it. Throughout the twentieth century, the paradigm of memorialization has evolved, and the new cultural forms of remembrance are not like their predecessors that dot the memorial landscape of the late nineteenth century—triumphant reminders of the glories of the nation-state. Rather, these new memorials are intended to remember and teach the lessons of the horrors of past conflicts, violence, and genocide, to ensure that that which society might most like to forget is never forgotten. And they appear, indeed, to be increasingly global in form and in content.

It is the purpose of this chapter to trace the emergence of memorial museums as new commemorative forms that reflect this new imperative that societies address past violence and human rights abuses. But looks can be deceiving. Written into the missions and goals of memorial museums are some fundamental tensions that exist in our desires and expectations vis-à-vis past, present, and future. The emergence of new memorial forms and the expectations of the memory that they contain are often at odds with the reality of the present in and by which they are created.

MEMORY AND MODERNITY'S CHALLENGES

Memorial museums are part of a larger “memory boom” that has characterized recent decades. An interest in memory has swept academia—with a proliferation of books, conferences, journals, and centers focused on a new interdisciplinary field of memory studies—and civil society with the rise of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other institutions aimed at confronting past violence, enacting transitional justice, and commemorating the past. It also pervades popular culture in the form of museums and memorials, autobiographies and memoirs, and documentary and feature films and television shows on historical subjects. Memorial museums are one such manifestation of this memory boom—an extremely popular one. Almost everywhere memorial museums are created, they become one of the most popular tourist destinations, demonstrating that it is not just academics but the general public that is interested in memory of past violence.¹

While memory as an academic field and subject of popular interest surged only recently, memory has been of interest for as long as humans have been self-aware, though it was often framed as tradition, heritage, or identity. With Maurice Halbwachs’s groundbreaking theory of social memory in 1925, traditional views of the past as an existential reality that lives within individual memory and shapes the present were radically challenged.² Halbwachs argued instead that memory is acquired, recollected, and articulated solely within society and that without social frameworks, such as language, individuals are not capable of memory. Because of this, the past is always reconstructed by and in the present, and memory is simply “a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present” (1980, 69). Though Halbwachs’s work remained dormant for many years as the Western world was rocked by World War II and its aftermath, it is his concept of collective memory and the past as a social construction that has largely shaped studies of memory today. However, Halbwachs never qualified his concept of collective memory and instead was more concerned with collective memory as a day-to-day social experience; so perhaps even more important than the rise of interest in memory is the focus of much of it on past violence.

Today’s focus on the negative past has become a centerpiece of several important contemporary sociological theories of collective memory that together place a normative demand to confront past political violence at the center of national and international politics. Jeffrey Olick has termed

this focus on the negative a “politics of regret.” Observing the recent rash of public apologies, the spread of reparations, and the emergence of mechanisms that work to address past conflicts and atrocities like truth commissions, he concludes that “the past is very much on the public agenda, but it is more often a horrible, repulsive past than the golden ages so often the part of public discourse in previous centuries” (2007, 121–22). John Torpey similarly conceptualizes a “reparation politics,” arguing that future-oriented, progressive politics have been replaced by the effort to “come to terms with the past” (2006; 2015).

Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider (2006) go further, arguing that while this focus on the negative past began with attempts to come to terms with the Holocaust in Germany, the United States, and Israel, it has since evolved into a “cosmopolitan memory” that creates a transnational and transcultural “memory imperative” that shapes how individuals, groups, and societies around the world remember their own violent pasts and those of others. According to Levy and Sznaider, “The Holocaust sets the parameters for de-territorialized memoryscapes in Second Modernity, provides a model for national self-critique, serves to promote human rights as a legitimating principle in the global community, and plainly offers a negative example of dealing with alterity” (2006, 201). The memory imperative created by the Holocaust presents a set of normative expectations that shape how societies around the world confront their negative pasts, and it is increasingly global. The shared memory of the Holocaust created “a universal imperative, making the issue of universal human rights politically relevant to all who share this new form of memory” (Levy and Sznaider 2006, 132).

The centrality of memory focused on violence that is captured by these theories and evident in cultural forms like memorial museums is thus deeply linked to the emergence and global spread of a powerful human rights discourse that today dominates local and global politics. In the wake of the violence of World War II and the Holocaust, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted and began to lay the groundwork for a global human rights regime. Memory has been at the heart of the promotion and advocacy of human rights, especially in the aftermath of atrocity and mass violence. Andreas Huyssen traces the history of these two discourses as they intertwine through some of the key moments of the twentieth century: an awakening awareness of the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust, the fall of communism in the Soviet Union (USSR) and Central and Eastern Europe, the end of the Latin American dictatorships and apartheid, and

the late twentieth-century atrocities and genocides in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda (2011, 610). Throughout the course of the century, human rights discourse emerged and consolidated, and with it, memory discourse as parallel ways of addressing past human rights abuses with the goal of preventing them in the future. As Huyssen argues, “The continuing strength of memory politics remains essential for securing human rights in the future” (2011, 621).

There are two assumptions about the ethical and moral obligation to remember that are at the heart of this connection between memory and human rights and form the basis of memorial museums’ *raison d’être*. The first is what moral philosopher Jeffrey Blustein (2015; 2008) has referred to as the deontological or expressivist ethic of memory; that is, the idea that acknowledging human rights abuses and recognizing victims through memory is morally the correct and necessary response to violence, regardless of the outcome of this remembering. Memory has become a claim for recognition by groups that have been victimized, silenced, or oppressed and is increasingly considered to be a right for those who have suffered in the past and an obligation on the part of those who have not, whatever the consequences of that memory may be. Memory is thus considered to be healing and restorative when rights have been abused. The second assumption connects memory even more tightly to human rights and is what we can think about as memory’s utilitarian or consequentialist function: the memory of past violence is considered one of the surest inoculations against future violence. As Blustein writes, “Remembering the victims of wrongdoing may be an essential part of the process of building and sustaining political structures that safeguard against a return to the wrongs of the past” (2008, 262). Confronting the past through remembrance provides the framework and standards for our understanding and promotion of human rights, meaning that there is a moral obligation to remember in order to protect and promote human rights. Of course, there is at the same time the very real possibility that “memory may also nurture human rights violations” (Huyssen 2011, 621); as history demonstrates, memory has been mobilized to incite violence perhaps almost as often as to prevent it (Barkan and Bećirbašić 2015; Rieff 2016).

Memorial museums, however, assume the positive functions of memory, and in them, we see both the expressivist belief that remembering is the good and correct thing to do as well as the consequentialist obligation to remember in order to prevent future violence and reinforce a culture that

respects human rights. In this sense, memory is linked to democracy. In the words of Barbara Mizstal (2010), paraphrasing Adorno (1986), “Without memory, that is, without the checking of, and reflection upon, past records of institutions and public activities, we will have no warnings against potential dangers to democratic structures and no opportunity to gain a richer awareness of the repertoire of possibly [*sic*] remedies” (29).

With the spread of liberal democracy and the strengthening of a global human rights regime over the course of the second half of the twentieth century came a new set of demands from populations that had been marginalized or silenced in the past. The new “history from below” demonstrated that “focusing on the history of everyday life has not surprisingly illuminated the ongoing victimization of large segments of humanity along the lines of gender, class, and race discrimination” (Barkan 2003, 101). The new political power of minorities and marginalized groups also meant a new public validation for victims of various historical injustices. The emergent strength of victims, who today increasingly “write the history” in their demands for recognition and reparation, is clearly due to the growing emphasis on human rights throughout the twentieth century, but it also points to an important function of collective memory and identity. Today, many groups build their collective identities on a shared past of victimization, though often underpinned by the problematic notion that “victimization equals virtue” (Barkan and Bećirbašić 2015). This shift in political and moral power from the victors to the victims puts the negative past squarely in the center of present concerns. It also increasingly defines collective identities and present relationships and responsibilities to the past.

It is not surprising that victimization has become an important political, moral, and social tool, for the twentieth century created many, many victims. The numbers of victims of political violence alone are staggering (and this is to say nothing of structural violence)—an estimated 11 million in the Holocaust, 20 million under Soviet communism, 1.5 million in the Cambodian genocide, 800,000 in the Rwandan genocide, and the list goes on and on. An estimated 187 million people were killed or allowed to die throughout the war and conflict of the twentieth century (Hobsbawm 1994, 12). Granted, the abominations of slavery, colonization, and other violent wars and practices that preceded the twentieth century were no less and often far more terrible, but it was the mobilization of new technologies and powerful ideologies that made the wars and genocides of the twentieth century

particularly destructive and that helped make it, in Hobsbawm's words, "the most murderous" (1994, 13).

What is most frightening about the horrors of the twentieth century is that those pillars of modernity that seemed most sacred—progress, science, technology—were precisely the weapons turned against civilian populations. If World War I was devastating because of the new technologies and weaponry that wrought destruction never before imagined possible, then World War II, with the lethal and particularly modern ideology underlying the fascist project, was even more devastating in its murder of the fundamental principles of modernity.³ At the same time, unlike ever before, history and technology made the events much more accessible and available to the global public; it is not just that atrocities were taking place but that they were taking place before our eyes. As technologies and wars became deadlier, media and information became more widely available. While it seems that we might want to forget the horrors of that murderous century, in our particularly modern dilemma and despite all our knowledge and information about the past, we have been seized with the fear that it will disappear into oblivion.

The fear of forgetting underlines Blustein's notion of our moral obligation to remember. In many ways, remembering seems like the only thing that we can offer the millions of victims. Geoffrey Hartman writes about an "ethical impasse" that results from an excess of information, which "removes all excuse by taking away our ignorance, without at the same time granting us the power to do something decisive" (1996, 103). It is, in part, this moral helplessness in the face of tragedy that drives our incessant need to remember the negative past. Remembering is all we can do. This notion of a moral obligation to remember is at the heart of Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider's theory of a cosmopolitan "memory imperative" shaped by the Holocaust; the demand to remember and confront the past is not just for victims but also for society and its future. They are not alone in arguing that the Holocaust has determined how societies relate to the past today and provided the tools and ethical framework for confronting violence and preventing it in the future. The Holocaust and World War II did, after all, result in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Genocide Convention in 1948, and the trials of Nuremberg set the standard for international justice that has evolved over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, resulting in the establishment of the International Criminal Court in 2003. These mechanisms for recognizing and addressing human rights

abuses and other injustices shape national and international politics today, and coming to terms with the past and this preoccupation with the negative past is increasingly viewed as “a positive transitional phenomenon” tied to liberal democratic norms (Cairns 2003, 66).

These norms that have emerged vis-à-vis remembrance and confrontation with past violence have “travelled” around the world (Erll 2011), suggesting that there is in fact a cosmopolitan or transnational memory culture that transcends national borders and connects people and groups from widely divergent backgrounds. In the field of memory studies, a dominant trend of the last few years—what Astrid Erll terms its “third phase” (2011)—has been to depart from what has been seen as its “methodological nationalism” and instead to focus on the movement of memory across nations and cultures. Various descriptions include “travelling memory” (Erll 2011), “transnational memory” (de Cesari and Rigney 2014), “multidirectional memory” (Rothberg 2009), and Levy and Sznajder’s “cosmopolitan memory;” these theories surmise that memory—its forms, contents, and modes—circulates across and beyond national borders, reflecting and producing a new form of global interconnectedness. These “transnational [memory] processes can unsettle established memory regimes, especially nation state-sanctioned ones, and can involve the production of new forms of remembering, forgetting and nostalgia, as well as novel modes whereby different types of actors select what to remember . . . and thus the generation of new forms of solidarity and division as mediated through memory processes” (Inglis 2016, 145). Thus our “moral helplessness” is turned into a positive construct for the present and future. The driving principles behind our relationship to the past like regret, responsibility, and coming to terms are envisioned to be a constructive new basis for how global, cosmopolitan citizens deal with the negative past in a way that transcends the nation-state and other hegemonic narrators of the past and works toward a better future. It is this very principle that is behind the creation of memorial museums: the belief that we can learn from past wrongs to create a better, more peaceful and democratic future.

However, it is clearly naïve to assume that we can learn—or have learned—from the negative past or that memory has indeed become denationalized in a way that is more democratic and inclusive and indicates a better future. “Never again” remains an empty ethical imperative in the face of new and changing forms of political violence occurring ceaselessly around the globe. As Astrid Erll cautions, “The global circulation of mnemonic

media . . . may indeed effect a change of perspective in viewers from other parts of the world, lead to empathy, and trans-ethnic solidarity. But there is of course also the option of misuses, the hijacking, or distortion of trans-cultural memory” (2011, 15). Thus in some cases, memory of a negative past can help perpetuate violence in the present and future (e.g., chapter 6 on the 9/11 Museum; Barkan and Bećirbašić 2015). Or, as in the case of the Kigali Centre (chapter 4), collective remembering of negative pasts can silence alternative narratives and versions of the past and in this way further disenfranchise individuals and groups. Remembering according to today’s “memory imperative” and the “politics of regret” is often simply a way to attain political legitimacy and appease the international community.⁴ James Young warns us that “the motives of memory are never pure” (1993, 2). As tempting as it may be to imagine that there is a truly cosmopolitan memory culture that holds the potential to bridge difference and distance and bring people and groups around the world closer together, this overlooks the instrumental and often self-serving motives of collective remembering of violence, especially as it is embodied in institutions and cultural forms created and run by the state.

FORMS OF REMEMBERING

The shift to an emphasis on the negative past has led to the emergence of new mechanisms for dealing with the past and its victims and perpetrators, such as truth commissions and reparations. In fact a whole new field of study and practice related to dealing with the negative past—transitional justice—has emerged and become a popular enterprise around the world. The shift has also changed the cultural forms that our memories and commemorations take. In response to the many difficulties that the past has posed to the present, commemorative forms have been changing as societies struggle to find appropriate ways to remember. The memorialization process itself has become a subject of substantial scholarly and practical inquiry; debates abound about the proper way to remember the past, and many new organizations are working in the field of memorialization—what we might call an international memory regime—seeking to harness the most effective memorial practices. And increasingly, memorials and other commemorative forms are considered integral parts of the transitional justice “tool kit.”⁵

Monuments from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were blatantly built for the nation-state, an integral part of what Benedict Anderson calls “official nationalism” (1991). They were triumphant and celebratory symbols of a nation’s courageous past, erected to memorialize the nation’s heroes in order to create an imposing sense of shared history for a population being consolidated around the idea of the nation. Commemorative forms were intended to condense the (positive) moral lessons learned from the past and tie up loose ends so that the present could move on along its steady path of progress (Savage 1999). Because monuments and memorials of this era were intended to be celebratory and to inculcate a unified sense of a great history, difficult or controversial subjects were avoided. As Renan (1882) reminds us, forgetting is “a crucial factor in the creation of the nation,” which was a future-looking enterprise.

The totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century used similar hegemonic and monolithic memorial forms to utilize the past for their present and future purposes: imposing figures, grand architectural arches and pillars, and portraits of the heroes of the ideological movement. Communism, especially, created thousands of monuments to itself as an ideology, while at the same time erasing and rewriting the past according to its present needs. And central to both fascism and communism was the attempt to erase even the memory of their victims, so as to leave no trace. The totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century manipulated the past and memorial forms to such a degree that, upon their fall, old commemorative forms could no longer legitimately be used by governments and regimes that wished to enter the liberal democratic political sphere (Young 2005). Faith in modernity and the march of progress was irreversibly shaken, and traditional commemorative forms were found to be no longer adequate for addressing the negative past with the requisite political regret.

The forms in which memory is embodied are thus very important in shaping collective memory and its meaning. Robin Wagner-Pacifici has written extensively on the cultural forms of collective memory, arguing that “meaning emerges and is sustained through the dynamic interaction between the content of historical events and the forms of collective memory available to those intent on their preservation and public inscription” (1996, 301). Thus while the past is an existential reality, cultural and collective meaning are made of past events through their embodiment in cultural forms. However, some events challenge “the adequacy of the available forms to the specific contents of historical events” (1996, 305). These “limit cases” necessitate

new cultural forms better able to remember complicated pasts. One such event is the Holocaust, as we shall see in the next chapter; another example is the Vietnam War. Wagner-Pacifici's work on form and genre is excellently illustrated in her study with Barry Schwartz on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a war memorial that presents a "genre problem" in that it must commemorate a war the United States did not win (1991). And yet Maya Lin's memorial rises to the challenge and is a paradigm of a new commemorative form: it remembers the past with ambivalence, allowing for multiple interpretations and alternative versions of the past, and it encourages interaction and participation with the memorial and with memory. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is viewed by many as one of the first examples of the shift in memorialization that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, emerging with the politics of regret (Young 2005). Following it, a whole new set of practices and principles for memorializing have developed that go beyond the Vietnam Memorial's ambivalence and doubt and instead actively seek to use the past to promote human rights, democracy, reconciliation, and peace.

Around the world, especially in countries and societies emerging from conflict, memorials are increasingly used in tandem with other transitional justice mechanisms like truth commissions, trials, and reparations and are a central mechanism for dealing with past violence, human rights abuses, and atrocities (Bickford and Sodaro 2010). They are forms of symbolic reparation that can be used in situations where more robust transitional justice measures are not possible. They are also symbols erected by governments and other groups to acknowledge victimization and past wrongs. Rooted in the assumption that remembering the past is healing, they demonstrate regret for the negative and atrocious past, but they also promise a better future contingent on learning the lessons of the past; they attempt to be Levy and Sznajder's memory imperative built in stone. And they are efforts at attaining legitimation, internationally and internally. Though there are many examples around the world, memorial museums are among the most prominent of these new commemorative forms working to build peace and democratic culture.

MEMORIAL MUSEUMS AS A NEW COMMEMORATIVE FORM

Memorial museums embody this new ethos for dealing with the past. The very concept of memorial museum implies that a memorial alone cannot fully address the past, and so the museum form is utilized. While memorials can create solemn spaces for remembrance (such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial); active sites for participatory memory (such as the Monument to Fascism in Hamburg, Germany, which invited visitors to write messages on it as it slowly disappeared into the ground [Sturken 1997; Young 2005]); or challenging spaces that are open to interpretation or reflection (such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin [e.g., Dekel 2013]), museums have the force of history on their side. Not only are they able to collect and display the physical remnants of the past, preserving it for posterity, but they can also tell the story of the past, imparting knowledge and understanding. Though they use the material culture of the past, memorial museums are most often not located on the sites of atrocity. The memorial museums that are constructed on the historic sites of atrocity—like the House of Terror and the 9/11 Museum, in this book—go beyond mere preservation of the site as evidence of what happened. Instead, through built-out spaces and sophisticated architectural and exhibition designs, they attempt to be more universal spaces in which the broader implications and reverberations of the past can be explored. They are thus not simply historic sites, museums, or memorials, but memorial museums.

That they are museums is important to the work they do and their privileged status in society. In addition to being spaces for education and preservation, museums play a number of other important roles in society. They are spaces in which the “ritual of citizenship” is played out, and individuals learn what it means to belong to a group or nation (Duncan 1991). They are “exhibitionary complexes” in which society learns self-regulation and discipline (Bennett 1999). They are vital public spaces for the building and fostering of identities of communities and nations (Karp 1992). And perhaps most importantly, museums have a “legitimizing function” (Huysen 1995, 16). They are imbued with authority and widely considered to be trustworthy sources for information.⁶ Memorial museums are so popular because they capitalize on all these functions of museums.

However, part of what separates them from history museums of the nineteenth century that served similar functions is that they provide a new

kind of interactive engagement with the past that constitutes a whole new category of “experiential” museum.⁷ Museums today are changing. In order to appeal to our media-saturated society, especially young generations, the museum itself has become a form of mass media, geared toward a society that is increasingly looking for what Andreas Huyssen calls “emphatic experiences [and] instant illumination” (1995, 14). Experiential museums are focused more on teaching and creating an experience for the visitor than they are on the traditional museological functions of collecting and displaying. Rather than simply telling the story of the past, memorial and other experiential museums seek to make the visitor “experience” it. Driven by a narrative or a concept, such as the story of the Holocaust or the concept of human rights, experiential museums use multimedia and interactive displays to draw the visitor into the story that they are telling, making the visitor play an active role and identify with the story’s characters. The stories they tell are more important than the objects contained and displayed by the museums, though artifacts and other material remains and reproductions are essential to infusing the story with both authenticity and emotional impact.

There are a number of common exhibitionary strategies and tropes that memorial museums use to create this interactive, experiential engagement with the past. They almost always use a controlled circulation path, meaning the visitor is deposited at the beginning and led through the exhibition so that it unfolds according to the exhibition designer’s intent; often along this path there are few or discreet chances to exit. The story of the past as told in these museums generally proceeds chronologically, using text, photographs, artifacts, and documentary footage to chronicle the history in a richly detailed way that tells an apparently complete story for visitors who might not know it. Most memorial museums include interactive elements, like touch screens and headphones or parabolic speakers,⁸ that let the visitor create her own experience, within a carefully scripted narrative. Echoing today’s distrust of traditional memorial forms and historical narratives, memorial museums seek to create a more subjective and individualized experience for their visitors.

In addition to the history that is told through text, photos, and artifacts, memorial museums use other, more experiential techniques to make the past more visceral and present; memorial museums rely on affect and emotion to reach their visitors. Lighting and architecture create spaces of claustrophobia and exposure, and haunting ambiance and sound effects—music,

testimony, historical speeches, and political rallies—help round out the “experience” of the past. Spaces are reconstructed, like the cattle cars, concentration camps, and ghettos of the Holocaust or the torture cells used for political prisoners by the communist secret police or the military junta, and visitors are encouraged to enter these spaces to feel for themselves the victims’ suffering. And to further encourage identification and empathy, an emphasis throughout the exhibits is placed on individual victims and survivors: photographs; names; personal effects like clothing, shoes, identity cards, and other belongings; and video and audio testimony from survivors help make the individual victims real and present to visitors, making the entire experience more visceral and immediate. One of the most distinguishing features of memorial museums is that they are very much victim-oriented institutions that seek to put the individual at the center of memory of the negative past, reflecting victims’ privileged position in today’s politics of regret. Memorial museums also share a set of common memorial elements like eternal flames, walls of names, and memorial sculptures and other works of art that ensure that their commemorative functions are fulfilled. All these elements together make the memorial museum a new cultural form with a novel set of functions: it is intended to give the visitor an intense, affective, and emotional experience that will help her identify and empathize with the victims in a way that will morally educate her to work to prevent future violence, repression, and hatred. And all these common tropes—found in memorial museums across the globe—reflect the ways in which “forms, and practices of memory” circulate and “travel . . . across social, linguistic and political borders” (Erell 2011, 11).

In this way, memorial museums attempt to create what Alison Landsberg termed “prosthetic memory” in the visitor: a “personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live” (2004, 2). Going further than history museums that impart knowledge about the past, memorial museums use experiential techniques and affect to make visitors feel that they have had a personal experience of the past that will shape their present moral sensibility. This prosthetic memory, because it places the individual in the proverbial shoes of the other who has experienced the traumatic event, creates empathy in the visitor. For Landsberg, this prosthetic memory “has the ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics” based on empathy and understanding of others and so holds promise for a new form of ethical political engagement (2004, 2). In this, they represent radical departures from more traditional museums or memorials and are very much a

product of the technology and media age in which we live. They are forms of mass culture intended to create prosthetic memory in their visitors that will ethically alter the individual to internalize the moral messages of the museum.

Memorial museums, as if highlighting the limitations of more traditional modes of remembering, thus fulfill a wide variety of commemorative functions. They are at once massive archives of historical knowledge, housing artifacts, documents, photographs, and film footage; memorial spaces devoted to the memory of the victims; emotional journeys designed to experientially re-create the past for the visitor and leave them with a prosthetic memory; and educational institutions that seek to teach the visitor about the past in order to instill in her the moral imperative of “never again.” Most have broad mandates that go well beyond their exhibitions, and they seek to play active roles in their local, national, and global communities. They collect and archive survivor testimony and support new scholarship and research. They hold teacher trainings and conferences intended to disseminate knowledge and understanding about the past. They work with governments and NGOs to educate about the past and prevent future violence and atrocity. And they attract millions of visitors each year, making them increasingly visible and important cultural centers in the places in which they are built. Because of the broad scope of memorial museums’ functions, they aim to attract broad and diverse publics and become spaces for public debate and discussion about the past, the present, and the future. In the words of Silke de Arnold-Simine, the (memorial) museum has become something of a “panacea” that “promises to offer democratic and inclusive approaches to difficult pasts, to preserve the collective memory of a generation of first-hand witnesses, to channel public debates and to regenerate urban and rural areas” (2013, 8).

We can surmise that from the rate at which they are being reproduced around the globe, memorial museums are believed to be highly effective in fulfilling these functions and coming to terms with a difficult past. They can be sophisticated and elaborate national initiatives, such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC, or small, local projects, such as the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, which commemorates the forced removal of thousands from their homes in the District Six neighborhood of Cape Town. They have proliferated in Eastern and Central Europe to commemorate the victims of fascism and communism; there are museums in the Baltic countries, Poland, Hungary, Czech

Republic, former East Germany, and Georgia and plans for new museums throughout the region. They have transformed former sites of detention from Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to Rosario, Argentina, into sites of memory and learning. Memorial museums remember genocide in Rwanda and Armenia, nuclear destruction by the United States in Japan, and the poison gassing of the Kurds by Saddam Hussein in Halabja, Kurdistan. They are literally emerging all over the world, and their proliferation around the globe implies that any country emerging from a difficult past needs such a mechanism to address the past if it wishes to be a legitimate political player in the international (Western, liberal democratic) scene.

CONCLUSION

Out of the detritus of the violent twentieth century have emerged a new set of memorials that regretfully acknowledge what is negative and abhorrent in the past. Memorial museums in particular attempt to burden their visitors with responsibility—if not for the past, then for the future—and empathy for their fellow human beings. They are attempts to make up for the grave errors of the past in the only way possible: they are Arendtian “promises” to the future made by societies to guarantee that never again will such violence and atrocity be allowed. As Hannah Arendt describes it, the promise is a form of social contract that allows us to live together in the world (1958, 244). We cannot take back actions previously committed, but we can promise not to do harm again in the future. Thus the nations and groups that build memorial museums seek to demonstrate to the rest of the world and to their own populations their commitment to a different future. While they cannot undo what has been done “out of the ‘darkness of the human heart’” (Arendt 1958, 244), memorial museums can attempt to create a new contract with their people, with humanity, and with future generations that such acts will not be allowed in the future. They are intended to be a sort of “prosthetic conscience” for all of society. This is a very large commitment on the part of these museums and reflects and supports the claim that political legitimation increasingly relies on coming to terms with the past. The nations and groups that build these promises to the future are demonstrating to the international community their present and future adherence to international standards, increasingly universal norms of human rights, and democratic values.

What does this tell us, then, about our relationship to the past that we believe the construction of a memorial museum can serve as a promise that violence will not be allowed in the future? One thing it demonstrates is that—contrary to Halbwachs—the creators of these museums embrace the notion that the past does exist and can teach us something. The presumption is that by uncovering, displaying, and telling the “truth” about what happened in the past, something will be learned in the present that will shape a better future. But the museums are created in and by the present, often with deeply political motives that shape the past as they tell it and so belie this notion of the existential truth of the past.

This reveals a fundamental tension in our present relationship to the past and in much of the recent literature about memory: on the one hand, we have a postmodern skepticism of those modern concepts that let society down in the violent twentieth century. Modern beliefs about progress, the objectivity of history, and even truth have been shaken by the failure of modernity and its dark ideologies, leading us to this regretful relationship to the past from which memorial museums emerge. Where once the (glorious) future was the social and political way of ordering and orienting the world and the past was simply tradition that was incorporated into everyday life, today the future is uncertain and the past becomes the primary field for enacting and ordering politics and life. Memorial museums, then, are central to this ordering of our world vis-à-vis the past.

On the other hand, however, the active efforts of memorial museums and other commemorative and transitional justice mechanisms to learn the lessons of the past in order to shape the present and future demonstrate that we continue to hold onto the very modern notion that progress is possible. In the words of Levy and Sznajder, contemporary mechanisms for dealing with the past seek to “continue the project of modernity by retaining some of its normative quests for a better and a just life” (2010, 7). The idea that learning the lessons of the past will help us avoid the same mistakes in the future is one of the foundational principles behind the creation of memorial museums, but ironically it is rooted in modernity’s optimistic belief that through knowledge and education, society’s ills can be ameliorated, prevented, and ultimately eradicated.⁹ Thus these postmodern museums are built upon modern assumptions about the preventability of social evils that continue to order our present relationship to the past.

A closer examination of memorial museums—why and how they are conceived and created, how they exhibit and narrate the past, and what

roles they play or attempt to play in their societies—sheds light on this fundamental tension within memory studies and practice of how and whether the “truth” of the past is accessible and useful to us today. It reveals the potential and limits of some of our present presumptions regarding the past. Violence, atrocity, and genocide continue to rage around the world, despite robust efforts at remembering. Thus we need to understand not only what is behind this urgent need to remember but especially the limits of memory’s ability to aid in the prevention of violence, promotion of democracy, and promise of peace.