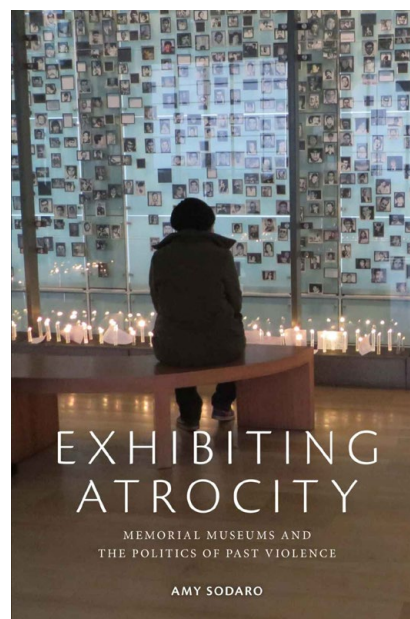


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EXHIBITING ATROCITY:
MEMORIAL MUSEUMS
AND THE POLITICS OF
PAST VIOLENCE.
NEW JERSEY, NEW BRUNSWICK:
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2018**

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How to display some of society's most violent past episodes and their horror? The pain and trauma they caused? How to do this in such a way that it can be a lesson for humanity, so it does not happen again? How to process, manage, exhibit and transmit these difficult heritages to the general public? That is the proposal of Amy Sodaro in her most recent book, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial museums and the politics of past violence*.

Situated at the intersection of memory studies (and certainly influenced by the seminal work of Paul Williams (2007)) and museum studies, this work addresses the importance of memorial museums both as mechanisms of remembrance and as arenas for the discussion and confrontation of society's violent past. These museums are as diverse as the atrocities that have been committed around the globe. The author traces the emergence of these institutions through an in-depth comparative analysis of five international case studies: the United States Holocaust Memorial, founded in Washington DC in 1993, to remember the victims of the Holocaust; Terror Háza [the House of Terror], opened in Budapest in 2002, as a right-wing project envisioned to remember the ones who were held captive and tortured under National Socialist and Communist regimes in Hungary; the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre – a western initiative endorsed by the national government – inaugurated in Rwanda in 2004, to commemorate ten years of the Rwandan genocide; the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, established in Santiago do Chile in 2010, a place of remembrance for those who were tortured and/or disappeared during Pinochet's dictatorship; and the 9/11 Memorial Museum opened to



the public in 2014, in the same location of New York's World Trade Center, to narrate the horror and savage effects of the terrorist attacks in that area.

The author identifies how and why these memorial museums were created, describes their institutional practices and museographic discourses, as well as some of their challenges in handling and managing the "difficult heritages" they portray. As hybrid forms, of museum and memorial, these institutions reflect a change of paradigm in the way societies think about and deal with their 20th century past. This change, prompted by the WWII and the Holocaust memory, set a transnational and global archetype for remembering the past violence (p.15), and is intertwined with human rights discourses. The dissemination of these movements, the uprising of this memory "awareness" and the urge for the confrontation with the atrocities committed and the recognition of historical injustices, created space for "marginal" voices – that had been silenced and distanced from hegemonic narratives – to arise. The victims were finally heard, but more than telling their story, they wanted recognition for the abuses and wrongs perpetrated, as well as moral reparation and "symbolic healing". The establishment of a "politics of regret" (Olick 1964), taking the shape of public apologies and commemorations, was not compatible with the old memorial model anymore. These new forms of remembrance aimed to go beyond the tangibility of the stone and metal in which those monuments were commonly carved, as they were sensed as insufficient and inadequate to remember, portray, contain and narrate the violence, the horrors, and the traumatic pain inflicted to those who suffered brutal acts. Not only because these monuments were created in the 19th century tradition of national glorification, but also because they demanded a more permanent memory activation that would surpass the evocations held in special commemorative dates, through ritualized and institutional memory performances. Therefore, a historical setting was required and a museum would fulfil that role. Displaying material culture as a testimony of past atrocities, supported by a scientific framework, is a powerful tool of remembrance and confrontation, since museums hold a particular authority and legitimacy to produce knowledge. Memorial museums are then inclusive projects, where the effects of intolerance, exclusion, repression and hatred can be discussed and debated by their community of visitors through several activities, often promoted by research and educational centres available to the general public.

In her comprehensive examination of each case study through an institutional ethnography framework (p.6) – regarding museum planning, exhibition layout, museographic techniques and narrative building – Sodaro draws three main conclusions. She begins by arguing that, albeit memorialization processes take different forms regarding their geographical and cultural context and their various themes, the techniques employed for exhibiting atrocity are similar. The exhibitions analyzed strongly rely on documentation (particularly photography), interactive technologies, multimedia (with emphasis on video testimonies) and oral history for their storytelling, creating a powerful narrative that will impact the visitors and establish a stronger and emotional connection with them, transmitting memories that, in most cases, they didn't experience. This "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg 2004)

generates an identification with the victims (and also humanizes them), placing them at the same level as the visitor.

Secondly, those museums also share three important functions, defined by Sodaro as “preserving the past: memorial museums as truth-telling mechanisms” (p.163), “healing the present” (p.169) and “shaping the future: the memorial museums as sites for moral education” (p.173). The author traces the preservation of *in situ* tangible testimonies of past horrors and violence (like the musealization of concentration camps such as Auschwitz, which holds a collection of Holocaust relics) to demonstrate how this strategy is often followed by many memorial museums that are not located in the same sites where atrocities were committed. In these cases, victim’s related objects and human remains are used as memory aids. But they also carry a powerful emotional significance as undeniable and tangible evidences of human rights abuse, of lives lost in tragedies and shall “... persist as record for posterity of man’s inhumanity to man” (p.175). Sodaro further shows that holocaust museums (and particularly Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Israel) set the paradigm for the use of these techniques, elements, spatial layouts and narrative construction. These settings enable visitor immersion in the exhibition space, thus accomplishing another memorial museum’s purposes: education for peace and promotion of human rights. Based on the assumption that “memory heals” (p.169), these institutions provide space for moral restoration and remembrance. Such forms of symbolic reparation are not directed to a specific community, but to society in general, in the present and in the future, as a form of “promise” (Arendt 1958), thus fulfilling the need for the “cosmopolitan memory imperative” (Levy & Sznajder 2005). By doing so, memorial museums clearly cut with the past – it is now a “foreign country” (Lowenthal 1985) – and set eyes on a peaceful and democratic future: “... the museum itself is an external symbol to the world that the present and (future) regime(s) will not allow such violence to recur.” (p.171). However, this chronological and symbolic disruption, separating past and present and considering that the current political regimes are different (and even superior) from the ones that committed such hatred and intolerant acts, is dangerous. It conveys a *rhetoric* (p.182) that, despite “good intentions”, can undermine the mission of these institutions, by replicating the same behaviours they condemn.

Finally, the author underlines that all these institutions have a political genesis, no matter where they are based and what stories they present. They reflect more the current regimes that led to their foundation than the past ones they intend to expose and to come to terms with. And although memorial museums’ goals are promising, they may also present certain limitations that endanger the whole project from within. On the one hand, the chosen versions of the past and the empathy towards the victims might be fabricated according to the current needs of states or governments agendas, thus raising representability issues. What side is being highlighted? Who decides who “speaks”? The preference for representing some groups over the others establishes different categories of “suffering” and victimization. On the other hand, the remembrance goal of memorial museums seems to cloud the necessity of discussing past violence critically, making the hope they portray

seem “hollow” (p.195). Hence, the power of these museums is also their weakness, as memories can be easily instrumentalized, for instance by extremist groups or political regimes, to legitimize specific agendas and narratives.

Sodaro’s work is extremely relevant not only because it convokes a (timely) reflection on these difficult heritages and memories, but also because it highlights the political nature of museums and the impact of its main communication media – the exhibition – on visitors. By addressing issues like atrocities and abuse of human rights, Sodaro’s book meaningfully participates in the current awareness and discussion about humanity’s past violence (such as colonialism and slavery), in which museums play an important role. As the recent debate regarding these matters suggests, it seems that the consequences of European colonial hegemony can no longer be ignored, and that museums have the moral and civic duty to perform such “politics of regret”, as they were often symbols and agents of the regimes responsible for colonial violence and subjugation.

Presented in seven well-organized, clear chapters, Amy Sodaro’s book inspires the reader to know more about these organizations and the violent acts they expose. While the author clearly sets the analysis of the exhibition production as her main goal, it would be interesting to know more about what happens in terms of reception. As she questions several times on *Exhibiting Atrocity*, are the messages being received loud and clear by the visitors?; is this “never again” ethics really inspiring people to do better or is something that is forgotten after crossing the museum exit? The timing for this book review could not have been more fortuitous; falling on January 27th, the Holocaust Remembrance Day, it reinforces, as I am writing, the relevance of this publication and of memorial museums. Even if they are reminders of humanity and fragility, at best and worst, one hopes that they’ll help to educate and empower visitors, changing mentalities and contributing to a better world, so one can do more than just remember. ●

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