PRIZE FOR BEST ENGLISH LANGUAGE ESSAY

What Makes a Memorial Museum? Understanding their Different Functions in a Modern World

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Introduction

The Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., stands solemnly, offering no context for its content, no history behind the thousands of names which seem to stand at attention along its tapering wall. Alternatively, the National Museum of American History presents a government-funded view of American history, but doesn’t include a national memorial to victims of American colonial expansion. So what happens when memorial and museum intersect? Does the presence of a memorial inside a museum make the museum more effective? Does providing historical context at a memorial make it more meaningful? And who decided what a memorial museum does? I am interested in the larger questions which memorial museums pose to their visitors: questions about healing, what gets remembered and what gets forgotten, and who gets to decide the central narrative of the history presented within. If history, as historian Rudy Koshar writes, is “dates and statistics,” and memory is “monuments and memorials,” then what happens when the two collide? [1] By examining the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Dutch National Holocaust Memorial, Tuol Sleng Genocide Memorial, and Kigali Genocide Memorial

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(in Washington, D.C.; Amsterdam; Phenom Penh, Cambodia; and Kigali, Rwanda respectively), I hope to explore these issues of remembering, memorializing, and preventing.

I am by no means the first historian (or even the first researcher) to be fascinated by memorial museums. Edward Linenthal, American historian and IU professor, had published his book, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum*[^2] by 1995, so memorial museums have been focuses of attention at least since then. This paper will draw heavily from sociologist Amy Sodaro’s *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (2018) and her chapters on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, as well as her introduction[^3]. It is also in conversation with chapter five of Roger I. Simon’s *A Pedagogy of Witnessing: Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice*,[^4] a chapter which deals with controversy behind displays of photos in the S-21 Prison (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia) and is a good example of one of the many controversies which genocide memorial museums face in their founding and running. The rest of my important sources are primary and include the websites of the various museums, memories of genocide survivors when applicable, as well as accounts of people’s visits to the museums.

**Memorial, museum, or both?**

The front page of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s website offers three tabs across the top of the page: “Learn about the Holocaust,” “Remember Survivors and Victims,” and “Confront Genocide, Antisemitism,” making it easy for visitors to the site to immediately

understand what the USHMM's goals are.\[^5\] Similarly, the Dutch National Holocaust Memorial Hollandsche Schouwburg’s site states, “Today, the building is a monument to the memory of those [Jewish Holocaust] victims.”\[^6\] These two sites leave no question as to their goals: to teach and to remember. Sociologist Amy Sodaro defines a memorial museum thusly: as places which 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.”\[^7\] Since Sodaro has proved that it is possible to write an entire book about memorial museums, and since I do not want to get embroiled in the debates over the usefulness of politicizing museums, I will borrow her definition of a memorial museum. For the purposes of this paper, a memorial museum is a “mechanism[s] of political legitimation...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,” and which has the “goal of preventing future violence.”\[^8\] This of course raises questions about democracy and different kinds of state governments, but that is content for a different paper.

**State funding**

Some memorial museums are funded by state or national governments, which changes their function and allows multiple groups of people to have input into their content, form, and message. For example, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was dreamt up originally as a Holocaust memorial and began to be imagined in the late 1970s partially as a way for President Jimmy Carter to secure the Jewish vote.\[^9\] Similarly, the Kigali Genocide Memorial

\[^5\] “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as presented on November 1, 2018, https://www.ushmm.org/.
\[^8\] Sodaro, 4, 10.
Centre in Rwanda sits on government-owned land and is funded by a government-affiliated trust.\footnote{Ibid., 86.} Interestingly, both of these memorial museums were first envisioned as mere memorials, but through various processes gained museum components, and in the case of the USHMM became a museum with a memorial room included.

State-backed or state-funded memorial museums in most cases must advance certain official agendas, or have certain additional functions that private museums might not. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does mean that memorial museums in these cases have less autonomy over what they present or teach. One could say that state-funded memorial museums usually must present a closed-history version of events. As Avishai Margalit wrote in *The Ethics of Memory*, “closed memory…is the one authorized by…the community as its canonical line of memory.”\footnote{Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 60.} Following this line of thinking, memorial museums which receive government aid can be said to present this kind of “authorized history,” one chosen by those providing the funding. As this paper will discuss in further pages, sometimes this history-telling happens at the expense of genocide survivors.\footnote{Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 106. See also page 8 of this paper.} Professor Pat Caplan of Goldsmiths College wrote about her visit to the Kigali Centre in Rwanda, “In Kigali the memorial is educative; it is visited by schoolchildren as well as other visitors, both local and foreign. It teaches history from a *particular standpoint*” (my italics).\footnote{Pat Caplan. “‘Never Again’: Genocide Memorials in Rwanda.” *Anthropology Today* 23, no. 1 (February 2007) pp. 2.} Teaching history is so much more than presenting lists of facts to students: it involves crafting persuasive arguments, gathering sources, and having a concise thesis. Museums have pedagogical purposes in the same way that other methods of learning (books, professors) do, but in the cases of genocide memorial museums, the museum’s thesis can
run the risk of seeming to cut-and-dried: Jews good, Nazis evil. Tutsis victims, Hutus perpetrators. Thanks to restrictions placed on content committees because of government funding, sometimes this is all the information the museum is allowed to present.

This tension is further exacerbated in the Kigali Centre. In *Exhibiting Atrocity*, Sodaro points out that the museum does not place blame on the Hutu for perpetrating the genocide; instead, “The genocide...was caused by divisions in Rwandan society forced by colonial rulers, who planted seeds of hatred.... Meanwhile the government claims that there is no ethnicity in Rwanda”.[14] This is problematic for many reasons. Of course the colonial rule in Rwanda in the mid-20th century contributed to ethnic tensions, up to and including the enforced segregation and preferential treatment of Tutsis over Hutus, but placing blame solely on colonial tensions absolves Hutu of guilt, impeding the healing and corrective punishment phases of moving on, as well as robbing the Tutsis of any opportunity to point blame on a specific group of perpetrators.

**Involvement of survivors**

Though the Holocaust, Cambodian Genocide, and Rwandan Genocide all happened more than 20 years ago, the USHMM, Kigali Centre, and Tuol Sleng are all very good at involving genocide survivors in the museum’s development committees and outreach and education programs. Survivor involvement helps bring humanity and depth of memory to what otherwise could appear to be “just” museums.

Bou Meng is a survivor of the Cambodian genocide. Before the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia in 1975 he worked as an artist, and was eventually arrested along with his wife, who was killed on August 16, 1977.[15] He was imprisoned in S-21 and told BBC reporter Kristie

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Brewer, “The important thing is to document what happened here... I want people around the world to go home and tell their friends and family about the genocide of the Khmer people.”[16] He and another survivor, Chum Mey, return to the Tuol Sleng genocide museum (home of the brutal S-21 prison where they were both tortured) and give visitors tours, sell their memoirs, and distribute photographs. They even go so far as to sit in their old cells and demonstrate how the Khmer soldiers chained them up.[17]

Chum Mey and Bou Meng’s daily return to Tuol Sleng is spurred by their desire to tell the stories of their fellow prisoners who didn’t make it out of S-21 alive, but they do so much more than that. Their presence in Tuol Sleng helps bring the genocide alive for museum guests in ways that are so much more meaningful than just reading text on a wall or looking at a photograph.[18] By meeting survivors, visitors can come as close as is possible with the genocide without having been survivors themselves. By hearing first-person testimonies, museum visitors become a part of the transmission of genocide memory, hopefully going on to use this memory given to them by the survivors in order to work towards a future in which the concept of genocide is relegated to the history textbooks.[19]

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has a very successful survivor-volunteer program. According to their website, 104 survivors work as volunteers who lead tours, greet guests, tell their stories, and work in the USHMM’s library and archives to help each other find

[16] Brewer, BBC.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] See Margalit 83 (“But the issue for us to sort out is what humanity ought to remember rather than what is good for humanity to remember.”) and Sodaro 4 (“It is increasingly a political and moral expectation that societies will confront past violence as a way of moving forward.”) for more extrapolation on this idea that remembering genocides will help prevent them in the future.
information about their families.[20] Additionally the USHMM organizes a program called First Person which allows survivors to share their stories in front of large audiences of people and allows the audience to ask questions.[21] Having structured survivor programming is helpful in disseminating the survivors’ information to as many people as possible, but also limits the survivors in their telling. The First Person programs each only last an hour, and when I first visited the USHMM in 2012 and spoke to a survivor volunteer, I learned that guests are only given time to ask one question to each survivor. How can you sum up the horrors of the Holocaust in one hour? How can survivors answer a question about their personal experiences in one minute? The volunteers at Tuol Sleng who spend whole days with visitors have more time to share their stories, even if they have access to fewer resources like the USHMM provides for their volunteers.

Sodaro points out that the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre in Rwanda has moved away from using in-person survivors in the museum: “In the effort to propel Rwanda into the twenty-first century, survivors, lieux de mémoire,...have been some of the first victims of Rwanda’s development.”[22] By trying to style the Kigali Centre after Western genocide memorial museums, the people in charge have moved away from traditional Rwandan elements and from survivors, instead letting the politicians tell the story through the museum.[23] If the USHMM has the best-organized survivor volunteer program, Kigali certainly has the least-organized. Banning survivors from telling their personal stories at the Kigali Centre means that visitors will never

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[23] Ibid.
learn the whole truth. People just cannot connect viscerally with video and text as well as they can with real people sitting right in front of them.

**Location**

The Dutch National Holocaust Memorial has existed since the 1960s, but their National Holocaust Museum is still under construction.[24] I visited both in the summer of 2018 and was shocked at the differences in the two venues. The Memorial is beautiful and has been renovated multiple times since the 1940s, whereas the Museum across the street is still accepting donations to build a permanent exhibit and in some areas, finish construction. I believe that the construction of a memorial took precedence over a museum in Amsterdam because the theater (Hollandsche Schouwburg) in which the memorial is housed was a physical site of genocidal crimes, thus adding a layer of sanctity to the physical ground of the memorial space.[25] The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, for example, did not share this urgency because its grounds are not physical sites of atrocity.

In *Exhibiting Atrocity*, Sodaro notes that the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre in Rwanda includes a museum, memorial, Genocide Archives, and a burial ground of upwards of 250,000 victims, yet the ground itself was neutral—no killings took place on that site during the genocide, and the burial ground was established later, as part of the memorial.[26] The same holds true for the S-21 prison in Phenom Penh, Cambodia. The prison building had originally been a high school, but when the building was discovered in January 1979 by the Vietnamese it was full of

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dead bodies, a Khmer Rouge government archive, and torture devices.[27] Foreign officials were let onto the site by March 1979 and it was opened to the public as a museum with tours by the summer of 1980.[28] Memorial museums like Tuol Sleng (S-21), the Kigali Centre in Rwanda, and the Dutch National Holocaust Memorial have different functions than the USHMM because they carry the added weight of being located on or near physical sites of genocide. Place holds unavoidable deep memory and emotional gravitas which museums that are not in situ, like the USHMM, cannot replicate.[29]

These three museums do not fit this definition to a T, however. In the case of the Kigali Centre, though some physical remains of genocide victims are buried on the museum’s grounds, the museum itself doesn’t sit on a location of genocide, so its emotional attachments are different. By burying the victims at a memorial museum, rather than leaving them in situ like other memorials in Rwanda do, the victims are afforded some levels of dignity. And in the cases of the Dutch Memorial and Tuol Sleng, while the museums are sites of genocide or genocidal crimes, there are not burial grounds technically located on the premises. This changes the function of the museums because they remain places haunted by evil memory, instead of becoming sites of healing. Sodaro writes, “Every year, during the hundred-day mourning period, additional remains are buried, and the center in Gisozi has become Kigali’s graveyard.”[30] The graveyard at the Centre is a place of healing and peace as it is the final, respectful resting place for victims,

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[28] Ibid., page 8.
whereas the Dutch Memorial and Tuol Sleng exist to keep alive the memory of the horrors that previously existed within.

**Attached burial ground**

Since the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum sits in the middle of the nation’s capital, there’s no room for a burial ground, and as discussed in the last section, the USHMM is not located in a Holocaust country, so it would not make sense for victims to be transported across the ocean to be buried in America. The same holds true for the Dutch National Holocaust Memorial: though it was the site of mass round-ups and violence during the Holocaust, it was not a concentration camp, merely a transport center. Thus it does not merit an attached burial ground, because there were no corpses there needing respect (though, of course, those corpses are unceremoniously dumped throughout Eastern Europe).

But the Kigali Centre in Rwanda does have a burial ground. In fact, most genocide memorials in Rwanda do.²³¹ To save space, I do not plan to address the differences between bodies in burial grounds and bodies left in situ, but rather whether there are bodies in any form held on or near the memorial museums’ premises. There is too much to discuss about the sanctity of the body for a paper of this size, so I must content myself with just studying the physical effects of having bodies near a museum in any context. As Philip Gourevitch writes in *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families*, many Rwandan genocide victims had been left exactly where they had been killed (in this case a classroom) so there are many ways from which Rwandans could choose to deal with bodies in the aftermath of the genocide.²³² In his chapter, “Display, Concealment and ‘Culture’: the disposal of bodies in the 1994 Rwandan

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genocide,” anthropologist Nigel Eltringham writes, “…it has been in ‘cultures of terror’ where bodies are displayed and serve an instrumental and didactic role.”[33] Especially in the case of the Rwandan genocide, where people were hacked with machetes or raped to death, the bodies left behind must have produced very gruesome sights.[34] Leaving bodies on the premises, or burying them and having an attached burial ground be part of the museum, make the experience of visiting memorial museums much more solemn, and indeed places the “memorial” aspect of the complex at the forefront of its purpose. By visiting bodies of victims, visitors to memorial museums are automatically confronted with the inescapable truth of the genocide in question, becoming forced to bear that memory forward.

The USHMM in Washington, D.C., tries similarly to place a human face on the Holocaust by providing each visitor with an I.D. card of a person whose story you follow, only finding out whether you survived at the end of the museum, but even then it is easy to remove oneself from the genocide. If visitors stepped outside of the USHMM into a burial ground containing thousands of people, like they do at the Kigali Centre, their entire museum experience would change. Bodies take the abstract history and make it painfully present.

The Tuol Sleng museum in Cambodia is situated next to the infamous Choeng Ek Killing Fields, where thousands of people were murdered and buried in mass graves.[35] The photos online are gruesome and include one of a large tree against which executioners swung children and

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crushed their skulls. Just like at the Kigali Centre in Rwanda, having a burial ground near the memorial museum adds gravitas that only human bodies can provide. Better even than diaries, photographs, and letters, bodies are the ultimate primary source for genocides.

In his monumental book *The Hour of Our Death*, French historian Philippe Ariès points out that many cultures have different beliefs and practices regarding the disposal (or lack thereof) of dead bodies. He writes, “[Doctors] Duval and Girard believe that the body should be exhibited with the face uncovered…in order to permit and prolong ‘communication with the dead.’” This is just one example of many attitudes towards dead bodies. Linenthal’s book contains an example (to be discussed in a further section of this paper) of human hair—the closest thing to a body left after Auschwitz—demanding the utmost respect and storage away from a public eye. One of the most interesting has to do with the display, not of human bodies, but of human hair at the United States Holocaust Museum. Historian Timothy Ryback published a New Yorker piece about this issue in 1993, and Linenthal wrote about it as well in his 1995 book. The gist of the issue was whether or not the USHMM should be allowed to include piles of human hair in an exhibit. Then-director of the museum, Jeshahuja Weinberg, believed the hair should have been included as a slap in the face to Holocaust deniers: “It was not even so much for the present generation as it was for future generations. The hair was one piece of clear evidence.” But Holocaust survivors working with the museum committee, especially women, did not feel the

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[36] Ibid.


[38] Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 211. See also page 14 of this paper.


same way. Weinberg continues, quoting a survivor, “‘For all I know, my mother’s hair might be in there,’ one of them said. ‘I don’t want my mother’s hair on display.’”[41] A United States Holocaust Memorial Museum committee member believed the hair would make the story of the Holocaust much more compelling because it was “our mothers, it’s our lovers.”[42] This stands in fascinating contrast with the Tuol Sleng museum and Kigali Centre, which both display bodies, cemeteries, or actual bones in the hopes of emphasizing the horrors of genocide. The USHMM Content Committee eventually decided just to exhibit a photo of the hair, out of respect for the survivors who had so vocally spoken out, but this controversy raises questions about both the power that bodies have, but also about the decisions museums should be allowed to make, especially when survivors of the respective genocides are still alive. This is another example of a way in which people choose to interact with the bodies of genocide victims. Therefore, in the display of Rwandan and Cambodian bodies and bones, it is imperative to take into account their respective cultures, as well. This paper would be made much better if there was room to include a study of Rwandan and Cambodian death rituals, but since there is not, we must content ourselves with merely what the physical bodies do for their museums. Which is still, of course, much.

Roger Simon touches on a similar kind of controversy regarding the display of human bodies in *A Pedagogy of Witnessing*, this time centered around not actual bodies but photos from the S-21 Prison (the Tuol Sleng museum). Between 14-20,000 prisoners were tortured and murdered at S-21 between 1975-79, and all of them were photographed for the government’s records.[43] After their discovery, the photos were cleaned and preserved and lent to Americans to

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, p. 211.
exhibit in the Museum of Modern Art in 1997. This exhibit raised all sorts of questions because it did not provide text explaining who each victim was, or otherwise humanize them in any way. The only historical text present in the MOMA briefly described the Khmer Rouge’s reason for having the S-21 prison. This exhibit was controversial because it mainly focused on the photographs themselves in an artistic context, instead of providing history about the genocide. Some even claim the display of decontextualized photos in an art museum was orientalist.

Keep in mind that these photos were displayed next to descriptions of how the two American photographers cleaned and preserved them while at Tuol Sleng. This exhibit took these photos from heartrending testimonies of genocide into cheaply exploitations for the gain of the photographers. It is no wonder this exhibit was controversial because it was so offensive to the victims. These people did not die to bolster the careers of two eager foreigners. This issue ties back into the influence of survivors on memorial museums as well, because unlike the female Holocaust survivors who spoke up for their mothers’ hair against the people in charge, these S-21 photos had no one who spoke for them.

Conclusions

David Chandler writes in *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison*, “In a sense, Mai Lam’s effort to turn S-21 into a museum was an attempt to make its raw terror ‘bearable to others.’ The map of skulls that he designed for the museum is so grotesque that it increases our distance from the prison.”[47] Genocide memorial museums have to tread the fine

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[45] Ibid., 190.
[46] Ibid., 192.
line between teaching visitors about the genocide which occurred while doing so in a way that is honest but does not attempt to sanitize history. It’s difficult to teach about genocide without engaging in an almost pornographic depiction of the violence. The USHMM in Washington faced some similar issues during its formative years: One of the museum’s founders criticized a photo intended for display as “‘an explicit image of mass death,’ in which the ‘human flesh of the exposed victims screams out of the picture.’”[48] The photo in question was deemed too aggressively violent to be the first thing visitors saw within the USHMM’s permanent exhibit, and eventually an image depicting charred bodies was chosen, because the burned nature of the bodies made them less recognizably human and thus less traumatizing.[49] This is a case of museum visitor’s feelings being privileged over depictions of explicit horror, even if the explicit horror was the full truth of the Holocaust. In this way, the USHMM succeeded where Chandler believes the Tuol Sleng genocide museum did not, in treading the line between truth and teaching visitors without traumatizing them.

In their book on museum pedagogy, *Museums: Places of Learning*, George Hein and Mary Alexander write that “by engaging learners in activity, specific, desired educational outcomes can be achieved; the learners will learn those concepts we wish to teach.”[50] This debate over which photographs to display and how to display bodies is just one example of the kinds of issues genocide memorial museums are faced with every single day. Because of variables like available state funding, country’s cultural norms, museum’s location, and survivor involvement, the function of genocide memorial museums all change, too, but what stays constant no matter any

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[49] Ibid., 193-197.

other influence is the dedication to teaching contemporary visitors about the possible horrors of which humanity is capable, in the hopes of “Never Again.”[51] By attempting to keep a memory of violence alive and in transmission, memorial museums work towards a violence-free future. It is difficult to determine whether that is an attainable goal, because as Linenthal points out, the phrase “Never Again” “consign[s] genocide to one place, one time, one regime,” refusing to acknowledge that while Jewish people may never again be massacred on a large-scale level, for example, other groups might.[52] The existence of these museums does nothing to stop, say, the genocide of Muslims in China or Myanmar.[53] But they do do something: they, for the most part, draw awareness to what humanity has been capable of in the past. They urge self-reflection, a look inward at our own actions, and they encourage us to tell stories of past violence. And most importantly they remind us to remember the victims. Like the Jewish practice of placing stones atop a headstone, by visiting memorial museums we remind the victims that they have not been forgotten.