

Always Already Again: Trauma Tourism and the Politics of Memory Culture

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PART ONE: SNAPSHOTS

At Nagasaki, there is a large statue of a man pointing at the sky. The Peace Statue, created by Seibou Kitamura, indicates the direction of a nuclear threat. Tourists like to stand in front of this statue and take pictures of themselves posing in the same position. This practice is so popular that the sign directing tourists to the memorial park from the tram stop actually uses this gesture of posing for a photo as the marker of the park's location.

Over three days at three different concentration camps in Poland, I see a dozen different tour groups of Israeli high school students. In these groups, every student carries a flag large enough to wrap themselves in. The groups mark the site with a particular Zionist reading of the holocaust, not just for themselves but for all the other visitors as well.

Just a week after the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, local vendors are already sold out of (and have not yet nostalgically reprinted) the cards of the Manhattan skyline that still feature the twin towers. Street vendors are selling reproductions of amateur and professional photographs of the burning and collapsing buildings to the thousands of "tourists" who pour out of the Fulton Street subway station to circle the still smoking ruins.

In Phnom Penh, I cannot leave my hotel without being asked by a tuk-tuk driver if I would like to visit the "killing fields." They use the term "killing fields" derived from the popular film instead of the monument's actual name, Cheung-Ek, and they presume that, as a "white foreigner," I will at some point be purchasing transportation to the genocide memorials. Both of these actions reflect the prevalence of the global practice of "trauma tourism".

PART TWO: BACKGROUND

My work approaches trauma tourism from a transnational perspective. I am investigating the similarities and differences in the cultural constructions that have emerged to commemorate atrocities, i.e. war, genocide, state terrorism, slavery, apartheid, nuclear bombs, etc. I am interested in what cultures do with sites that are so marked by trauma that they cannot be fully recuperated for normal, quotidian uses. What these sites have in common is not the nature of the events they recall but rather the memorial impulse, the challenge of "curating" intractable spaces, and the often contradictory performances that visitors enact.

I began using the term "trauma tourism" in 2002 because I thought it captured the

contradictions inherent in the practices of visiting memory sites. I find the oxymoronic quality of the term to be most accurate about the ambivalences I have observed. While I first thought the internal tension of the term was between the association of tourism with pleasure and trauma with pain, I now feel more convinced that the tension is that trauma is held to be sacred while tourism is considered profane.

I get mixed responses when I use the phrase “trauma tourism”. By far the most common response is bewilderment. Listeners are so unprepared to hear the two words paired that I am asked to repeat the word “trauma” several times. However, I have also experienced outrage. The most articulate moment of indignation was by a curator at Cape Town’s District Six Museum who felt that trauma tourism described the antithesis of the kind of engaged activism that they and their partners in “museums of conscience” perform.

Research revealed a number of concurrent independent instances of the term “trauma tourism”, which usually appears in quotation marks but never with attribution. The marks are not suggesting citation but rather signaling irregularity, discomfort, or unfamiliar usage. In all cases, there is an understanding of trauma tourism as a global practice, and a sense that the same tourists will visit more than one of these sites.

In choosing the term “trauma” to refer to political atrocity, I am acknowledging both the damage to individuals and to society. There are both costs and benefits to deploying theories of the individual psyche for an analysis of the social psyche. Not all the psychoanalytic discourse on individual traumatic memory applies to the functioning of these sites, but two dimensions of repetition compulsion are particularly relevant to theorizing our impulse to visit these locations and venues.

One dimension is the return to the actual site of trauma by survivors of that particular atrocity in search of some form of healing. This fits a conventional model of trauma therapy where the survivor orchestrates a structured visit to the site of the trauma in order to put the pain to rest. In this model, we find industries built around healing in Europe, Vietnam, and Africa. But the visits to such sites by tourists who have no direct personal experience there far exceed the visits by survivors, or at least this true for the better-known sites. Still, I think that we might productively engage a different dimension of repetition compulsion, one along more Freudian lines, that as a culture we will endlessly be drawn back, again and again, to the sites of trauma until the underlying issue is resolved. These two different psychoanalytic approaches, one of which desires closure, and the other, disclosure, are at the internally contradictory core of the practice of trauma tourism.

Throughout the trauma literature, there seems to be an effort to differentiate the extraordinary nature of trauma from ordinary wounds, stress, or distress. Trauma is “world shattering”, “overwhelming” or “unrepresentable”, an experience “so profound” that it precludes “cognitive knowledge.” Because of its special status, trauma is treated with a kind of reverence,

and trauma sites are often sacralized. Thus, “trauma tourists” at places of memory are often assigned hierarchies according to their proximity to the trauma: first victims, then families, then members of the victim’s grouping (which might be political, religious, or ethnic), then those that share the same ideologies, and finally those with other motives for their visits.

Just as there is a question of how far the term trauma can be stretched, so too is there an issue regarding the pliability of the term tourism. Is tourism really the right word for kinds of activities that take place at the sites of trauma memorials? I believe that it is. Whenever we leave home in search of the unfamiliar, whenever we encounter the unfamiliar inadvertently, and even when home itself is defamiliarized, we are operating as tourists. Rather than a debased or trivial engagement, tourism names a performance of alterity. Tourism is one of the ways we make sense out of the parts of the world not previously known to us, and of the experiences in our own world that are “inconceivable”. Tourism is as “reasonable” a response to traumatic histories as it is to sublime landscapes or to pleasurable curiosities.

PART THREE: DESTINATIONS

Trauma tourism is a firmly established practice in Germany and Poland where, each year, hundreds of thousands of tourists visit the sites of former concentration. That the German government publishes a guide book directed at Jews visiting concentration camps makes clear their understanding of this form of travel as a significant part of their tourist economy.

In Krakow, Poland, the former Jewish ghetto of Kazimierz operates as a kind of “theme park” for the disappeared. Cafes feature “Jewish” foods, klezmer music, and even “kosher” vodka, largely for non-Jewish clientele and to some curious Jewish tourists as well.

In Japan, the atomic bomb blast sites at Hiroshima and Nagasaki have extensive Peace Parks that include indoor libraries and museums, outdoor gardens and sculpture parks, shrines and altars. Because these venues have dedicated themselves explicitly to anti-nuclear activism, they have a strong pedagogical component and a greater degree of “proceduralism,” by which I mean attention to evidentiary methodologies, than most of their counterparts. East Asian popular religious practices also lend themselves readily to interactivity, and this, combined with the ubiquity of folded paper cranes as a reconciliatory gesture, has made these sites models for the global practice of trauma tourism. Notwithstanding this, Japan is also the home of some of the most kitsch engagements with trauma I’ve encountered.

In West Africa, “return” and “heritage” tours visit former slave forts in Ghana and Senegal. A focal point for Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean tourists since the sixties, these sites hold activities which include ceremonies honoring the ancestors and an opportunity to walk back through the “door of no return.” So important is this tourism to the economies of West Africa that the governments of Benin and Ghana have even offered tourism development funds to communities along the routes of the slave trade.

Since the opening of Vietnam to trade and tourism in 1989, there has been a steady flow of visitors, largely European, to locations that were significant in the American War. An increasing number of these visitors are the US veterans of that war who return with hopes of redemption and reconciliation. Their tours, and those of tourists with personal histories of war protest, treat the memorialization in Vietnam as dispersed and diverse. Veterans not only mourn at sites of violence, but also camp out on battlefields and sing period songs. They not only do service work, but also stay with families and learn to cook Vietnamese food as part of their reconciliation programs.

Globally known memorials have been developed more recently at two sites of atrocity in Cambodia: the prison called Tuol Sleng (also known as S21) and the mass graves at Cheung Ek. Tourism at these locations capitalizes on international visitors' familiarity with the atrocities committed there, through films and other popular media. It is less well known that there are eighty other genocide memorials spread throughout Cambodia which are painstakingly being cataloged by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia.

Mountain gorillas are Rwanda's major tourist draw card, but almost everyone who travels through Kigali is very aware of the 1994 genocide, and many choose to stay on in the capital in order to visit the Aegis Trust-sponsored Kigali Memorial Centre. Guide books also direct tourists to the churches at Ntarama and Nyamata and memorials are being developed as international study centers at Bisesero and Murambi. Like Cambodia, these tourist-frequented memorials are but a small fraction of the extensive infrastructure for memorialization. "Local" sites, each of which house thousands of human remains, are activated each April in government-sponsored commemorative ceremonies. Rwanda is a country still in a state of trauma, with new bodies being uncovered routinely, and the performance and architecture of memory there is driven as much by the problem of managing the remains as it is by a commemorative impulse.

Tourists in South Africa who venture beyond Kruger National Park are likely to include in their itineraries at least one of the sites that document the history of apartheid. The destinations for this kind of tourism include Robben Island and the District Six Museum in Cape Town and the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. While the Cape Town venues are site-specific memorials, the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg is built on the grounds of the gold rush theme park Gold Reef City. What distinguishes the South African approach to memorialization from most of its global counterparts is its decidedly upbeat approach. Rather than mourn the tragic history, these venues all celebrate its overcoming.

Trauma tourism is less well established in Latin America, where sites are just now being developed to mark the long history of the struggle for human rights. Venues for memorialization of the victims of the "dirty wars" include Villa Grimaldi and Cementerio General in Santiago, Chile and Parque de la Memoria and ESMA in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Located in former clandestine prisons and torture centers, Villa Grimaldi and ESMA are site-specific memorials

while Parque de la Memoria and Cementerio General (like Johannesburg's Apartheid Museum or Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe) are purpose-built "monument[s] to the victims of state terrorism," as the Parque de la Memoria is known. Many tourists to Argentina observe or join the marches of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo as a way of engaging with the country's troubled past. Trauma tourism in Latin America also includes some more personal tours by "survivor" guides.

I've been thinking about (and visiting) trauma memorials since 2001. In eight years, I've looked at 87 trauma memorials in 16 countries. One of the things that has surprised and disappointed me in that time is the relatively limited vocabulary for memory architecture.

Whereas I was at the start (and still am to some extent) moved by the "spontaneous" placement of candles, flowers, and mementos, I find their ubiquity and global consistency a bit troubling. From New York to London to Nagasaki to Mendoza one can find quite similar makeshift shrines.

Since the construction and unexpected success of Maya Lin's Memorial to the losses of the Vietnam War, walls of names have become "de rigueur" for trauma memorials. Building on the convention of engraved stone burial markers, such walls intend to recognize individuals and at the same time to mark the grander scale of loss. Interesting variations on this can be found at the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires where the only one third of the total estimated *desaparecidos* have been identified by name. There, blank markers far exceed those that are engraved. In Rwanda, where whole families and communities were lost, it is rare to be able to provide any names at all. But the monument at Nyarubuye, which tries to make a mass death individual with un-engraved markers, demonstrates the transcultural reach of this memorial trope even into settings where the victims cannot be identified.

For representing the monumentality of loss, giant tomblike plinths are a popular choice. Both the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and the memorial within the Jewish Museum at Berlin feature this type of architecture.

The empty chair is perhaps an over-obvious symbol for absence. There are empty chair memorials at Oklahoma City (where larger and smaller chairs are used to differentiate between adults and children who perished), in the former Polish ghetto of Podgorze (where Schindler's well known factory was located), and near the airport in Santiago, Chile (in honor of three martyred school teachers).

Spirals are another common memorial form, claiming to represent descents into the abyss of the atrocity as well as ascents towards hope. Though often set into the landscape, as is done in the courtyard of the School of Architecture at La Plata or the memorial at Columbine High School, spirals are also used indoors, quite effectively, at Hiroshima.

Frequently offered as a healing environment, memorial gardens are also often used symbolically. At Villa Grimaldi, each rose variety is given the name of a female victim or survivor

while the gardens at the Kigali Genocide Memorial have such elaborate symbolic schemes that an audio guide is provided to decipher them. Water features, such as fountains, pools, and streams are commonly provided for meditation and reflection.

Objects at trauma sites provide material proof of crimes as well as metonyms for the violated bodies. I found the clothes piled in the pews of the church where the victims perished at Nyamata to be particularly moving, in part because they preclude any further use of the building for conventional worship. Of course, they are also reminiscent of some of the best known objects in trauma culture, the piles of suitcases, shoes and hair at the concentration camps. In Japan, radiation burned objects - toys, housewares, and clocks stopped at the moment of the blast – stand individually (rather than en masse) but no less metonymically.

Though they look similar to one another, photographic grids of victims actually emerge in two different contexts. In Cambodia, Poland, and Germany, the photos were taken as part of the apparatus of repression while those in Rwanda, Chile, and Argentina were provided by the families of missing persons.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to this uniformity in memory culture. Curators of memorial sites from all over the world belong to the same professional organizations and meet each other regularly at international conferences to share “best practices.” The same limited pool of jurors and architects select and design most high profile memorials. Lower profile memorials are often designed in imitation of (or in homage to) the better known memorials, in part because survivors and victim’s families often insist on the use of conventions they have seen deployed elsewhere. The international audience for trauma memorials finds most legible those elements that are familiar. Furthermore, memorial tropes are largely derived from pre-existing funeral practices which have also been unified globally through colonization and religious homogenization.

PART FIVE: “NEVER” AGAIN

By far the most widespread memory trope is the rhetoric of “never again”. Since World War II, there has been a proliferation of trauma sites developed for tourism that proclaim the project of “never again” as their primary mission, including an insertion of this discourse into trauma sites that precede the war, sometime by centuries. Trauma site curators and their visitors share a conviction that we must remain vigilant so as not to repeat past atrocities.

Signs that explicitly proclaim “never again” can be found at almost every trauma memorial and “never again” is one of the most frequent entries in the books of visitor responses. At Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where the declared mission of both peace parks is to put an end to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the museum displays provide a critique of nuclear weaponry and both the city government and the museum administration participate in an ongoing nuclear disarmament effort.

While not all are as explicit in their mission statements as Buenos Aires' Parque de la Memoria (which states that "upon facing the horrors committed during the last Argentine military dictatorship, society becomes aware of the fact that Never Again can there be violations of human rights"), most memorials make some claim that studying the past has preventative value.

And yet, all of these sites are created in the full knowledge of the failure of "never again". They are created, rather, in the context of "always already" again. For, if World War I was ubiquitously named "the war to end all wars", then post-World War II memorial culture was built in full knowledge of the impossibility of the project of "never again". In fact, if we consider chronologically each of the case studies in this project, we can observe that the construction of a memorial has been invariably followed (not causally but temporally) by a subsequent instance of atrocity.

PART SIX: TENSIONS

Such contradictions abound in trauma tourism. Trauma memorials are called upon to serve multiple functions--education, mourning, healing, nationalism and activism--for complex constituencies. The work of developing sites of memory for tourism may be done by government or non-government organizations, private foundations or public trusts, international or local groups, preservationists or activists. They may be invested in redemption, reconciliation, or revenge. Site visitors may include victims, survivors and their families; those who are politically or ethnically allied; students and scholars and intentional and accidental visitors. They may come in solidarity with or in opposition to the professed politics of the site. They may be well prepared regarding the political and social history or they may be completely naive. Sometimes the aims of curators coincide with the desires of audience members and sometimes they are out of alignment.

Tensions are inherent to all trauma tourism but they are exacerbated in places like Vietnam where there are discrepancies over the official and popular, domestic and international meanings of the events commemorated. Similarly, Latin American populations often remain divided over the political necessity of the repressive dictatorships, in contrast to post-Holocaust Europe where there is relative consensus regarding the horrific nature of that genocide. In South Africa and Japan, there are strong internal conflicts over whether it is better for the future of the country to remember or to forget: an impulse to "put the past behind us" competes with a desire to "never forget." Even in the established sites in post-Holocaust Europe or the slave forts in West Africa, tensions emerge between those with personal (familial, ethnic, racial) ties, and those with more distant connections. Tensions also emerge between the tourists "returning" from the diaspora and the descendants of those who remained.

The position of Holocaust memorials has been complicated both by the re-emergence of

anti-Semitism in Europe and by the untenable political position that Israel has come to occupy, often in the name of the Holocaust. The position of African memorials is similarly fraught. While African American tourists may look at contemporary Africans with pride, recognizing in their hosts the possibility of being black without being a descendant of slaves, they may also recognize the possibility that those ancestors were complicit with the slave trade. Our guide told us that the administration has found it necessary to segregate the three major groups of spectators (blacks from the Americas, whites from Europe and North America, and Ghanaian school groups) to avoid altercations over perceived appropriate behavior.

Like West Africa, Vietnam has several intersecting tourist constituencies with competing claims and conflicting desires. The Vietnamese government, European tourists, Vietnamese tourists from the North, Vietnamese tourists from the South, US tourists and veterans with regrets, US tourists and veterans with pride all shape some aspect of the memorial discourse. We shared the bus with progressive European and Australian tourists but veterans book their own groups. Our guide's conversational discretion – using neither the rhetoric of Vietnamese victory nor US defeat – could have been driven by personal politics or market factors.

Propriety is a concern for many trauma sites and efforts are often made to police the behaviors of visitors. At the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a metal plaque is positioned at each corner that offers guidelines for appropriate behavior. Prohibitions include smoking, drinking, playing musical instruments, skateboarding, rollerblading and jumping from stele to stele. It is reported that site designer Peter Eisenman actually objected to the placement of these prohibition signs, arguing that quotidian engagement with the memorial was actually part of reconciliation. In Cambodia, there is a larger-than-life, almost cartoonish, outline drawing of a smiling face with a red “Do Not” circle and line through it. Given that in Cambodia laughter is a common cultural response to uncomfortable situations, it is questionable by whom and for whom this admonition was suggested.

Much veteran tourism to Vietnam is tied up with redemptive charitable projects. At My Lai, a new museum is being built by veterans, and the Tours of Peace website lists humanitarian projects that include “help to a school of the visually challenged” and “custom made wheel chairs for disabled young people”. But our guide at My Lai was quick to point out that these humanitarian gestures fall far short of the need. My Lai remains a subsistence community to this day, as the United States government has done little to contribute to the economic recovery of Vietnam. Similarly, Cambodia offers a range of opportunities to “make a difference” from the amputees begging just outside the gates of the Genocide Museum to the much more structured fund-raising efforts of several groups working to deactivate landmines and unexploded ordinance.

The violence that many of these countries seek to memorialize does not necessarily belong to particular locations, but rather is dispersed throughout, though it may concentrate. Thinking

about particularly desecrated locations may serve as an avoidance of the more generalized nature of the atrocity. When violence is metonymically assigned to a particular site (as when My Lai is considered a paradigmatic site for the Vietnam War), while it effectively provides a pilgrimage locus, it also obscures the widespread occurrence of the atrocity. And, paradoxically, as it asserts its representative function, it does so at the cost of losing the specificity of the events at that particular site.

PART SEVEN: ALIGNMENT

I would argue that such tensions constitute trauma tourism, that trauma tourism owes its substance and richness to contestation. Working from Foucault's and Bordieu's assertion that cultural fields are defined by permanent conflict, I agree that tensions conjure and define trauma tourism.

However, in trying to understand why trauma tourism is so fully developed in some parts of the world, why it has had limited success in other regions and why it has not emerged at all in the aftermath of certain tragic histories, I offer this hypothesis: that trauma tourism *emerges* where it serves empowered interests and it *flourishes* when multiple interests align.

Such interests can be governmental as has been the case for Rwanda and Japan where nationalism may be advanced through "victimization". But the interests can also be extra-governmental, the most compelling example being the ways in which European trauma tourism has been driven almost entirely by diasporic populations yet is a welcome part of the tourist economy and consistent with the nation's self image.

In Latin America, as in Cambodia, trauma memorials are not (for the most part) being championed by members of the government. Though some memorials are governmentally sanctioned and provided with limited resources, it is activists with human rights agendas that are developing the memorials, and this makes them noticeably more engaged with present day politics than their counterparts in other parts of the world.

One example of this would be the conspicuous absence of trauma tourism built around the partition of India and Pakistan, where as many as a million people died and countless others were violated when 12 million were displaced. While there is an extensive body of literature on the Partition (histories, novels, memoirs, poetry, films, plays, paintings, etc.), there is not one physical memorial that deals with the pain and horror of the event.

In trauma tourism, history is written not by the victors but by the victims. There is no interest in either side in this unresolved conflict in putting forward a victim identity. Nor is there an interest powerful enough to control real estate (which requires different social capital than media) that believes that it would benefit from a recounting of the horror. Until such powerful interests come into alignment, memory cultures like that of South Asia are likely to remain ephemeral.

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