

Proof

10 Museums and memorials as sites of dialogue

Historical narratives, mass violence,
and atrocity prevention

Alexander Karn

George W. Bush's "mission accomplished" speech, delivered on May 1, 2003 from the flight deck of the *USS Abraham Lincoln*, sparked immediate controversy. While Bush never actually uttered the infamous words emblazoned on the banner hanging behind him, his speech was widely understood as a victory lap following the toppling of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime and as a signal that America's war on terror, which began with airstrikes and the insertion of ground forces into Afghanistan in October 2001, had reached its final phase.¹ Describing the success of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Bush likened the advance of American forces toward Baghdad to "the daring of Normandy" and the "fierce courage of Iwo Jima." For Bush, the military operations in Iraq fit within a broader nationalist narrative, centered on World War II and America's emergence as a global hegemon. In this account, Iraqi Freedom fit squarely within America's proud tradition of unambiguous wars, decisive victories, and moral leadership.

The prematurity of Bush's speech has been cited repeatedly since 2003, by Democrats and Republicans alike. Whatever one thinks of the decision to make war in Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11, there are at present no significant voices claiming victory. Far from having completed its mission of securing the homeland by means of preemptive war, the U.S. has instead been continuously engaged in combat in these two countries since October 2001 and March 2003, respectively, with no clear signs of withdrawal. The war in Afghanistan has entered its eighteenth year and, as of August 2019, has cost American taxpayers \$975 billion.² While Donald Trump hinted in August 2019 that the U.S. would soon conclude a "deal" with the Taliban, deadly terror attacks in Kabul have continued, and there are few indicators of improvement, in terms of the overall security crisis.

But even if we bracket the questions of how long these wars will continue, or whether it was prudent to launch them in the first place, understanding the ways in which the war on terror has been framed in the public discourse remains vitally important in terms of assessing possibilities for peace and atrocity prevention. Even if the most recent diplomatic negotiations finally allow the U.S. to pull out of Afghanistan, the global war on terror (GWOT) will migrate elsewhere. For this reason, it is still worth asking whether, or to what extent, the

Proof

most widely circulated narratives that have shaped our understandings of the GWOT have not also helped to lock the United States and its adversaries into a cycle of conflict from which there may be no viable exit. The fact that Bush compared the 9/11 hijackers and their backers to Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan and described the U.S. combat mission as a contest between good and evil highlights how history, politics, and morality have been co-mingled in the GWOT discourse. Bush's speech also raises questions regarding how these conflicts have been contextualized and legitimated. For example, how have the memorials, museums, and narratives surrounding the GWOT shaped conditions for its continuous prosecution? In what ways have the most prominent representations of the 9/11 attacks created the conditions for never-ending warfare?

In the following chapter, I will examine the 9/11 Museum to offer some tentative answers. I will then use this analysis to pursue a larger project that looks at museums and memorials, more broadly, to see how they might contribute – depending on their content, presentation, and pedagogy – either to protracted violence or conflict abatement. In addition to the 9/11 Museum, attention will be given to two other museums which focus on histories of conflict and mass-violence, the District Six Museum in South Africa and the War Liberation Museum in Bangladesh, to explore the potential of such institutions to function as sites of historical dialogue and peace-building. In the final section of the chapter, I examine a fourth site, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which opened in Montgomery, Alabama, in April 2018. Although there are important differences to consider within this lineup (e.g., distinctions between museum practices in authoritarian versus democratic societies and the specific challenges that arise where museums attempt to engage with political versus ethnic conflicts), each of the four cases studies presented here is framed by the same set of questions. How do representations of large-scale violence and atrocity at museums and memorial sites help or hinder efforts to promote historical dialogue? Which kinds of representations and narratives can contribute to the atrocity prevention program, which is the focus of this volume?

While it is difficult to establish a concrete link between specific practices in museology and effective programs or policies for atrocity prevention, I begin this project from the premise that museums and memorials can play, at least potentially, a useful role in conflict mediation and atrocity prevention, even if their efficacy is outweighed by certain external factors. In other words, even though museums and memorials lack sufficient power to determine geopolitics or single-handedly prevent large-scale conflict, they can play a crucial role in how rival groups see one another and how responsibility for past violence is apportioned. In theory, this means that museums can influence how societies choose to confront past episodes of violence and whether they choose to engage in future (or continuing) conflicts. How to measure and assess the impact(s) of these endeavors will also be explored. Focusing on the negotiated and discursive aspects of historical dialogue,³ I will argue that the utility of museums and memorials for the purposes of atrocity prevention depends on the development of a critical methodology, based on core concepts from the field of memory

studies, that gives careful attention to the politics of knowledge, while also offering the public strategies for navigating historical uncertainties and ambiguities. While the utility of this approach has not been rigorously assessed, the objective of this chapter is simply to begin a critical and analytical appraisal of existing initiatives in order to suggest potential pathways for future work.

The 9/11 Memorial Museum: America and the global war on terror

Since it opened in May 2014, the 9/11 Museum in downtown Manhattan has become one of New York City's most visited attractions. Located adjacent to the site of the fallen twin towers, the Museum received 4 million visits in its first year of operation, and, by the end of 2018, had welcomed 14 million visitors from more than 170 different countries. The Museum gives more than 7,000 tours each year, and its paid membership has expanded to more than 20,000 individuals and organizations. Admission to the Museum is currently priced at \$26 for adults, or \$46 when coupled with a staff-led tour of the exhibition. Directly next to the Museum, the 9/11 Memorial, featuring its two inverted fountains, is constructed over the "footprint" of the destroyed towers. Charging no fee for admission, the Memorial has been visited by nearly 45 million people since its dedication in 2011.⁴

The September 11 attacks represent a watershed in America's recent history, and the 9/11 Museum has had a powerful effect on many who have visited. At its opening, one visitor reflected, "I'm just in shock. I didn't think it would be as extensive as it was, and I didn't think I would be so saddened once again."⁵ Others who attended the opening were more critical. Todd Fine, the organizer of a grassroots movement to bring public recognition to Manhattan's Arab-American history and culture, felt that the Museum was informed by a misleading political agenda: "If they are going to get into the history of the ideologies behind Al-Qaeda, they need to get into the full political context of the Middle East in the twentieth century that created these organizations."⁶ The Museum, according to Fine, presents the September 11 attacks as something that arose *ex nihilo*, rather than as an event to be understood on the basis of deep historical analysis and investigation. Writing in a similar vein, the scholar Marita Sturken draws attention to "the broader problem of chronology" and historical periodization.⁷ The Museum painstakingly provides a minute-by-minute account of the 9/11 attacks, but the before and after segments of the exhibition, are underdeveloped by comparison. According to Sturken, this reflects an unwillingness (or inability) on the part of the Museum's planners to think critically either about events leading up to 9/11 or the contentious aspects of its aftermath.⁸ It could be that a detailed historical analysis of atrocity requires more time than the Museum's curators were given and that the desire to memorialize and commemorate the victims was seen as paramount, in which case, one would expect to see further development of the before and after sections in the years ahead. However, I would argue, with Sturken, that avoidance of historical context and

deep analysis is one of the inherent features of the Museum rather than simply a result of its hasty construction. Although the Museum's mission statement cites the importance of understanding the consequences of terrorism, its authors do not explain what the work of historical analysis entails, nor do they explain how the Museum approaches the challenges of historical contextualization. This is crucial, since the potential of historical dialogue to promote accountability for past violence hinges on the willingness of its participants to explore such episodes in their full complexity.⁹

Before proceeding, I need to state as clearly as possible that questioning the Museum's narrative of 9/11 does not connote an assumption of guilt on the part of the victims, nor do I seek to identify the victims of the attack with the U.S. government or its past actions in the Middle East. It should go without saying that the targeting of innocents on 9/11 was something morally reprehensible, unlawful, and thoroughly contemptible. However, this does not mean that the 9/11 Museum is not also the purveyor of a powerful narrative, which can help to explain how and why the U.S. has remained engaged in two costly and highly destructive wars long after the killings of key leaders and operatives within the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS/Daesh. Even if this proposition is seen as threatening by the families who regard the Museum as a sacred site and even if bypassing the victims entails a degree of moral risk, we can still examine the 9/11 Museum to see how it contributes to – and helps to legitimate – the global war on terror.¹⁰

While it is difficult to distill the meaning of the 9/11 Museum in a single statement, there is little question that the planners and designers took a deliberate approach to the arrangement and “emplotment” of the exhibits and architectural elements. By this, I mean not only the packaging of 9/11 into a recognizable literary genre (i.e., tragedy), but also the manipulation of narrative elements and display materials to evoke a clear moral message and enforce a particular ideological perspective. This is apparent in the Museum's organization of physical space. Visitors enter at street level, where they must submit to airport-style security screening. Once cleared, visitors descend into the excavated, subterranean chambers of the former World Trade Center, where they are immersed in an emotionally piercing re-construction of the attacks (explicit imagery and sound recordings of the event pervade the space, and facial tissues are provided for those brought to tears). Following this, they move into smaller spaces that treat events prior to the attacks and in the years afterward. At the end of this odyssey, visitors leave the exhibition space by means of a long, ascending escalator, which is bathed in blue light and into which are piped funereal hymnals and other mournful sound recordings, including the bagpipes that are commonly played at the burial ceremonies for members of the New York City Police (NYPD) and Fire Departments (NYFD). The visitor's trajectory – down into what rescue and recovery workers referred to as “the pit” and then upward again toward the Memorial plaza – has profound symbolism and powerful political overtones. Passing through these spaces, it is difficult not to feel that the Museum's planners want visitors to have an emotionally cathartic experience, one which instills patriotic pride, provides civic affirmation, and feeds retributive

appetite. The Museum's catalogue describes a "four-pronged approach" to content development, with equal attention given to commemoration, preservation, education, and inspiration.¹¹ Not explicitly mentioned here, but equally evident, is the idea of justice, which is symbolized by a brick taken (by Navy SEALs) from the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011 (see Image 10.1). While perhaps not as totemic as other war trophies collected by U.S. soldiers (recall, e.g., what GIs carved from the bodies of enemy soldiers in the Pacific Islands during World War II), the brick from Abbottabad, dramatically lit and encased behind glass, nevertheless exudes a similar meaning. It makes clear the fate of the perpetrator, and it suggests a measure of "closure" (similar to Bush's "mission accomplished" speech) for what is, in fact, an ongoing and seemingly intractable conflict. The brick encourages visitors to think of the campaign in Afghanistan as having produced a just verdict and stable outcome, even as the violence there supplies fresh atrocities. This could be seen as an example of what Stefan Berger refers to, elsewhere in this volume, as "antagonistic memory." By sacralizing the global war



Image 10.1 The Abbottabad brick, from the compound where Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. Navy SEALs on May 2, 2011, is displayed in the final gallery of the September 11 Museum. Visitors encounter the brick at the end of a heavy-handed exhibition, which suggests both closure and justice for victims of the September 11 attacks and for the American people, more generally.

Source: Photo by the author.

on terror and relegating America's adversaries to a special metaphysical category beyond the scope of history and politics, the 9/11 Museum reinforces a nationalist cultural identity on the basis of an "us versus them construction."¹²

There are other problematic aspects to the 9/11 Museum.¹³ Critics have lamented the Museum's gift shop and the cheap kitsch available for purchase there. How, they wonder, does this enterprise square with the solemnity of the site, e.g., as evidenced by the recordings of religious hymnals and the close attention paid to burial rituals and the interment of human remains? Plans for an upscale café and wine bar were scrapped in 2014 owing to similar concerns. But while these are valid criticisms, they miss a much larger point, which is the Museum's conspicuous avoidance of the most politically contentious aspects of 9/11 and the resultant war on terror. Throughout the Museum, where the explanatory narrative hinges on historical knowledge, the past is presented as something one-dimensional, meaning no space is given for an exploration of its inner contradictions, inconsistencies, and silences. Whereas the voices and stories of victims are decidedly heterogeneous, causality is reduced to something monolithic, and all contemplation of the attacks is directed toward a single, unqualified, explanation. The perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks are driven by elemental, undifferentiated hatred of American freedoms and values, while the Twin Towers and victims are invoked as the visual evidence of their unprovoked assault.

Perhaps the best example of this is the Museum's treatment of the 9/11 hijackers and the Al-Qaeda terror network with which they were affiliated. There are several spots throughout the Museum where the identities of these individuals are muted or otherwise distorted.¹⁴ Bin Laden, the chief sponsor and "spiritual architect" of the attack, is described (accurately) as "Saudi-born" on the wall label where he first appears in the Museum, but this text is applied onto an enlarged graphic of Bamiyan Province, Afghanistan, which was a Taliban stronghold at the time of the U.S.-led invasion. While this conflation of identities and geographic spaces is subtle enough to go unnoticed, it allows (encourages?) visitors to see Al-Qaeda as an Afghan adversary, rather than an offshoot of Saudi Wahhabism or an extension of Jihadi-Salifism. At the same time, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are downplayed in the Museum, and the wall space devoted to U.S. military engagements after 9/11 (approximately 10 by 12 feet) comprises a tiny portion of the total exhibition (110,000 square feet). In a strange way, America's military response to the 9/11 attacks pervades the Museum (everything leads, in the end, to the "hunt" for bin Laden and the Abbottabad brick, which signals its success), but, at the same time, the full scope of the war on terror – and especially its origins, e.g., in U.S. policies toward the Middle East during the Cold War – is left un-interrogated. Consequences of the GWOT are equally ambiguous. A small display highlights several articles and clauses within the USA Patriot Act (signed October 26, 2001), but the most controversial aspects of the law are ignored. A potentially interesting and important photograph, which depicts a public demonstration against the Patriot Act, is also included, but the label that accompanies it is resolutely descriptive, rather than interpretive: "Others protested that the law curtailed civil liberties." Similarly,

the Museum displays two handbills from anti-war protests that took place across the U.S., but no context (e.g., regarding the size of these demonstrations, or key participants) is provided. One might argue here that the Museum has elected to “teach the debate,” in order not to overload the exhibit with a partisan perspective, but what kind of debate, if any, is possible on the basis of this limited presentation? Neither the stakes of the debate nor the realities of its outcome are open to questioning. Divisions within the body politic regarding the war on terror and the tactics for fighting it, whether at home or abroad, are eclipsed throughout the Museum by the physical devastation and loss of life resulting from the 9/11 attacks. If the Museum is a “place of remembrance,” as the catalogue states, then it is crucial to see where the politics of memory impinge on what its directors have called the mission of “authoritative” documentation.

There is another significant manipulation of memory where the Museum has displayed photographs of the 9/11 hijackers. Closely cropped in the manner of criminal “mug shots,” these nineteen photos are mounted at knee level, so that visitors cast their glances toward them in a downward and, one might say, contemptuous manner. The hijackers are presented as a uniform clique of “disaffected men,” even though their profiles varied considerably, and some came from privileged backgrounds. Elsewhere, the Museum describes the hijackers as “Islamists” and “violent extremists” without making any effort to explain the sectarian, doctrinal, and other cultural divisions within Islam. While inter-faith groups complained prior to the Museum’s opening about the crude treatment of Islam and the display of material that seemed to “equat[e] all Muslims with jihadists and terrorists,”¹⁵ the planners chose not to engage with these criticisms. As with the bin Laden brick, the hijackers’ photos seem intended to feed antagonistic memory. They make a statement about American justice and rectitude that takes as its premise the moral inferiority of an alien other. This does not mean, of course, that visitors ought to feel sympathy for or solidarity with the 9/11 attackers. It means only that the perspective(s) of the perpetrators is crucial context for deep understanding. Even if one asserts that the attacks/attackers were radically evil, historical comprehension and prospects for dialogue still require consideration of the “circumstances [under which] otherwise ordinary people become perpetrators.”¹⁶ For the purposes of cultivating understanding (including a nuanced approach to the question of responsibility), this would be an important step away from a purely accusatory discourse toward an explanatory framework in which alternatives to violent reprisal and counter-reprisal could be weighed on their merits. Elsewhere in this volume, Stefan Berger describes this as a practice of “agonistic memory.”¹⁷ Agonism, he maintains, “avoids the antagonistic confrontation of political adversaries by positing mutual respect as a precondition for the political process.” Of course, many visitors to the 9/11 Museum visitors will have concluded already that the hijackers do not merit such respect, but it is important to see that agonistic memory does not require forgiveness or reconciliation so much as historically informed appraisal of our rivals and enemies. In other words, the concept of respect here can be a thin one, entailing little more than a basic willingness to rethink the efficacy of (endless) war as a means of politics.

And while such an exercise would seem to push lawful and unlawful killing, conceptually speaking, more closely together, this broadening of categories might be necessary if conflict mediation and atrocity prevention wish to displace the moral reifications nourished by antagonistic memory. In terms of fostering historical dialogue, this shift would represent a disentangling of the socio-political (i.e., terrorism/terrorists) from the meta-physical (terror). It would also mark a deliberate commitment toward opening new spheres of action with new formulas for conflict resolution and abatement.

Imagining a museum aimed at diminishing animosity between the United States and those who have pledged to kill its citizens and undercut its power will seem far-fetched to some readers, if not altogether misguided. But the aim of historical dialogue is not necessarily building affinity or sympathy between enemies, so much as bringing their differences back into the realm of normal politics. This means defusing the logic of total (or holy) warfare, in which modes of killing and acts of violence which are materially equivalent are coded as either moral or immoral, depending on who is killed and to what end(s). Unfortunately, the 9/11 Museum traffics in precisely this kind of thinking. Throughout its exhibitions, terrorism is presented as a category of violence unique to the Muslim world. Where terror attacks following 9/11 appear, all of these are “al-Qaeda-inspired” operations launched against Western targets. Large-scale attacks in Bali, Mumbai, Tunis, Kenya, Riyadh, Nigeria, and other sites outside the West are not mentioned, nor does the Museum make reference to terrorist attacks perpetrated by Western militants, e.g., Anders Breivik, who killed seventy-seven people in Oslo, Norway, in 2011 in an attempt, he claimed, to protect Europe from “Islamisation.”¹⁸ Instead of engaging with violent extremism as a global phenomenon with interpretable spikes throughout modern history, the 9/11 Museum focuses exclusively on Islamic extremism and groups like al-Qaeda. This not only ignores what historians know about terrorism,¹⁹ it flies in the face of data published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which shows that domestic extremists, not foreigners, perpetrate the majority of terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.²⁰

There is one further aspect of the 9/11 Museum worth exploring here, though some will object to the discussion on the basis that it seems to denigrate key actors in the official narrative of the attacks. Of the nearly 3,000 individuals killed in the 9/11 attacks, 412 were emergency personnel and/or first-responders. Within the Museum, attention to these groups creates a hierarchy of victims, which could be read as diminishing the status of “ordinary” victims. While much is made of the bravery of certain office workers and airline passengers, fire and police personnel, who ran into the burning towers and died as a result of their collapse, dominate the narrative. This is made clear in the Museum’s gift shop, where visitors are enticed with all manner of NYPD and NYFD merchandise, but nothing touting the expertise of firms like Cantor Fitzgerald, whose headquarters were near the top of the twin towers. The Museum’s Center Passage houses the crushed and severed carapace of the NYFD’s Ladder Company 3 truck, which is also featured in the official catalogue, along with a note that

eleven members of that company died during the rescue operations. I want to be clear, since this point could be misconstrued, that I am not calling into question the bravery of any individual members of the NYPD and NYFD who lost their lives on 9/11, but the vaunted status of these groups within the Museum is problematic nevertheless. Both organizations have had mixed records and checkered pasts, in terms of observing fundamental democratic values and principles of non-discrimination. The 9/11 Museum may not be the place for a critical discussion of these subjects, but the dust-covered and tattered articles on display there that belonged to members of the NYPD and NYFD, arguably, make it more difficult to have these conversations outside the Museum, too. It does matter that the faces of these officers and firefighters are, by and large, white and male, but in a sacred space like the Museum observations such as these will likely be regarded as out of bounds and out of order. This has undeniable consequences, whether one worries about the culture and institutional norms of these organizations or not. While I do not wish to question the character of any of the victims of these attacks, I would still argue that the Museum's overarching narrative, including the valorization and elevation of non-civilian victims above others, helps to prepare the ground for a martial response to terrorism that too easily legitimates and propagates itself in the absence of critical discourse. Even if there is no straight line connecting the 9/11 Museum to the many atrocities that have arisen from the global war on terror, political ambiguities and evasions within the Museum, as well as problematic treatments of both victims and perpetrators, have created a devotional space where the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the advent of new approaches to mass surveillance and military combat are presented uncritically and possibilities for limitless "civilizational" conflict are greatly multiplied.²¹

District Six Museum: history and memory as cultural restitution

Located in Cape Town, South Africa, the District Six Museum opened its doors to the public in December 1994 on the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Established as an independent non-profit, the Museum portrays the everyday history of apartheid and its impacts on ordinary people. The permanent exhibit includes visual, oral, and material artifacts contributed by former residents of Cape Town's sixth municipal district, which, according to the Museum's website, originally developed as "an island of tolerance and freedom in the growing sea of apartheid oppression and injustice."²² The district's liberal political climate and cultural diversity made it especially objectionable to the apartheid government, and, as a result, it was designated a "whites only" area by city officials in 1966. More than 60,000 individuals were evicted and relocated to outlying areas; their properties, in many cases, were bulldozed, and the land was redeveloped. The principal mission of the Museum is to support property restitution and reconstruction in District Six and to commemorate and restore what apartheid sought to erase.

188 *Alexander Karn*

Since 1994, the Museum has organized an impressive range of activities and programs geared toward public engagement and community building. The Museum has also sponsored several major educational programs, including teacher training and youth outreach endeavors. The Museum takes pride in offering a diverse array of “encounters” and experiential learning programs, and it touts its commitment to immersive learning by trying to get visitors to “enter [the] story: physically, symbolically, and psychically.”²³ The main floor of the Museum features a historical map of District Six, which visitors are invited to mark up and illustrate with their personal knowledge and memories (see Image 10.2). A photograph in one of the Museum’s brochures shows a grey-haired visitor kneeling on the floor and adding comments to the map at a site located on the corner of Virginia and Windsor Streets. According to Bonita Bennett, the Museum’s director, the map “was always meant to be a place of re-inscription for people whose homes, lives, stories, and material traces [have] been layered over both physically and through intentionally biased apartheid records.”²⁴ While the map has sometimes created problems for Museum staff (e.g., incorrect property identifications and contested claims of ownership/tenancy), most of these disagreements have been clarified and resolved with the help of researchers and curators, and the display has become an important



Image 10.2 Inside the permanent exhibit space at the District Six Museum. The floor map, which shows the layout of District Six prior to 1966, has been an important component of the Museum’s outreach programs and restitution efforts.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. See: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AUSMC-090918-M-8345L-001.jpg>.

instrument for bolstering restitution applications.²⁵ Like other displays within the Museum, the map strives to facilitate dialogue by soliciting and weaving together the memories of ex-residents and other individuals with historical knowledge of District Six. The map, Bennett writes:

became a space where claimants met each other, and, via reminiscences, were able to verify for each other that they had indeed lived in a particular area before it was destroyed. This was especially useful for displaced tenants who had no title deed, or other documentation to support their claims for restitution. From the time the map was laid down, people came to mark their family homes; to fill in roads traveled and routes followed; to identify missing building and place markers. Hundreds of thousands of people must have walked its streets in the seventeen years since it was laid down.

By collecting and collating local knowledge of the past, the floor map aims not only to “resurrect facts” that can serve as the “preamble to restitution,” it also attempts to unlock memories that can add depth and understanding to South Africa’s official, but also problematic, narrative of post-apartheid truth and reconciliation.

This emphasis on individual and collective empowerment distinguishes the District Six Museum from other sites, like the 9/11 Museum, where the representation of history aims, largely, at recreating a sense of helplessness and collective insecurity. In an article published in 2017, Bennett recounts the story of a former District Six resident and his involvement in a series of workshops organized by the Museum. Already in his seventies when he started attending these events, which were devoted to recovering and recording the memories of former residents, this gentleman at first had been reluctant to participate. Over time, however, he “discovered a place where he felt valued . . . and where he developed awareness that he, too, was a keeper of knowledge that could be valuable in understanding the past.”²⁶ This realization fed a new sense of self-worth and helped mitigate what he described as a mindset of internalized subservience, which he attributed to having grown up under apartheid and the experience of being funneled into a lifelong series of menial jobs. About his eventual decision to become a financial contributor to the Museum, the gentleman explained, “[T]he value that I have received from being part of this far outweighs [what] I have put in the [donation] box.”²⁷

Bennett has described this gentleman’s experience as an example of “creating platforms for social change on a micro-level,” but whether transformation at the individual level can be reliably translated into broader socio-political change remains an open question. It may be true, as Bennett has argued, that societies are transformed “community by community, gathering by gathering, family by family, individual by individual,” but this does not mean that the District Six Museum has fully succeeded in forging such upward linkages, or that linkages of this kind lead, inevitably, to some kind of social tipping point. Of course, there are metrics by which political scientists and others have attempted to

assess the vitality and robustness of democratic culture and institutions, but whether these indices and scales illuminate what happens at the grassroots level is unclear. If visitors to the District Six Museum and participants in its outreach programs report having had a transformative experience leading to a new sense of personal empowerment, that ought to count for something. At the same time, there is published data on South Africa's process of democratization and the experience(s) of reconciliation since 1994, which makes optimism difficult, particularly with respect to future prospects for inter-racial understanding and multi-cultural cooperation.²⁸ To be fair, Bennett has already identified some of these unknowns in her published work. She raises important questions about what differences the Museum makes in terms of translating broad participation into specific policies and programs that move the human rights agenda forward in concrete ways. This helps to explain why the Museum has focused its efforts on property restitution and neighborhood revitalization; these initiatives represent important opportunities to highlight and remediate "[t]he difference between human rights as legislated and human rights as experienced."²⁹

While the Museum's approach to empowering visitors as both keepers and producers of knowledge has led, in some cases, to messy outcomes (e.g., competing claims over contested properties), there is a growing body of literature which suggests that historical dialogue works best (in terms of maximizing its capacity for conflict mediation) when it enlists a multiplicity of voices and perspectives and engages these in a framework premised on multi-cultural tolerance and respect for difference.³⁰ Bennett has invoked this kind of multi-vocal history, for example, where she writes about the importance of "seeking out new narratives that portray a diverse demographic and reflect the plurality of lived experience."³¹ Diversity and plurality are vital to "engag[ing] with former residents as co-creators, co-authors, and co-owners within the various fields of [its] work." Bennett contrasts this approach with a more traditional conception of museum visitors as "beneficiaries" of institutional knowledge, which she associates with "the liberal morality that informs and permeates engagement work in museums, exercises invisible power, and thereby robs people of their active agency."³² This is where the 9/11 Museum and the District Six Museum differ most dramatically. In the former case, knowledge emanates directly from the institutional center, and visitors are called upon to embrace the authority of that narrative. In the latter, visitors are invited to construct historical knowledge for themselves, and multiple understandings of the past – some that overlap or run in parallel, others that diverge sharply – are opened for critical appraisal. This makes the District Six Museum a potential site of dialogue and epistemological interrogation. In the context of South Africa's transition to democracy, this could mean the difference between opening new pathways for justice and enduring old patterns of subjugation, despite the emergence of a new, outwardly egalitarian, constitutional framework.

Willingness to embrace multi-vocal histories also holds importance for established democracies. I have made this point elsewhere,³³ but fruitful dialogue cannot be expected where newly empowered majorities run roughshod over

rival perspectives. For as long as they remain in power, political majorities can enforce a particular narrative of the past at the level of officialdom, but if that perspective does not penetrate the thinking of groups who view the past differently – if it is rejected *a priori* by those who feel marginalized and denigrated by it – then the next political reversal will likely be an occasion for counter-history and revisionism. Competing versions of the past get shunted back and forth in this scenario, and conflicts over whose facts will be given primacy are steadily escalated by those with a political axe to grind. Michel Foucault (riffing on von Clausewitz) called this kind of wrangling “war by other means.”³⁴

Bearing in mind Foucault’s dictum, we might ask with respect to the District Six Museum: Is the embrace of political advocacy and activism at such sites a viable strategy for fostering dialogue and shared understanding (i.e., understanding that transcends the racial categories and ideologies of apartheid), or is it simply an epistemic skirmish, that is, an exchange of contested perspectives, which produces no settlement or durable outcome? On the basis of its publications and the reflections of its director, it appears that the District Six Museum proffers more than simple counter-history. Beyond mere revision of the past on the basis of newly liberated subjectivity, the Museum challenges the liberal perspective that South Africa, as a result of its new constitution (1996), has transitioned into a democratic state fully committed to securing justice for all of its citizens. In contrast to other South African monuments and memorial projects, the District Six Museum shows that the injustices of South Africa’s past, far from being remedied and repaired, still shape the country’s patterns of settlement, structures of commerce and ownership, and political processes. While others have celebrated what South Africa has achieved on paper (i.e., in law), the District Six Museum promotes what one scholar calls “more open and fluid imaginations of subjectivity that question the centrality of the law and the nation as the organizing force of political community.”³⁵ Instead of legitimating or aggrandizing the authority of the post-apartheid state, the District Six Museum challenges the power of the state to establish its liberal democratic credentials on the basis of a superficial reorganization. In doing so, the Museum has emerged as a potential site of dialogue, where engagement with the past can support a conversation regarding who gets to serve as the arbiter of South Africa’s political transition and its outcomes.³⁶ This is an important aspect of the Museum’s work, which goes well beyond the scope of attempting to communicate historical knowledge on the basis of racial identity. In order to function as a site of dialogue, museums and memorials must be unabashedly critical (i.e., ready to unpack and explicate the ideological baggage within all representations of the past), even if this means they do not manage to enshrine the universalist values associated with the human rights discourse. Before they can speak to the question of peace, these sites must provide a forum to engage histories and legacies of injustice, as well as the fractures and fault lines which they produce within society. Rather than embracing a saccharine conception of reconciliation, e.g., as the return to a quasi-mythical state of social harmony, the District Six Museum draws visitors’ attention to enduring tensions and flaws within the new South Africa, which it takes as

both a normal (i.e., political) state of affairs, as well as an obstacle to the full realization of justice.

Liberation War Museum: projecting victims' voices in Bangladesh

Established in 1996, twenty-five years after Bangladesh's war for independence, the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka arose from civil society to become a founding member of the International Sites of Conscience global network.³⁷ These sites aim to preserve and commemorate past struggles for freedom and justice, while, at the same time, confronting their contemporary legacies and ramifications. In the case of the Liberation War Museum (LWM), the stated mission is two-fold: the Museum seeks to commemorate the struggles and sacrifices that were the price for national independence, while also trying to foster a critical dialogue on the issue of genocide prevention and the search for legal and moral justice³⁸ in the wake of mass atrocities that took place around the globe during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In pursuing this double mission, the LWM presents two distinct narratives, one that concerns primarily national history and suffering and another that highlights the global, or cosmopolitan, injunction against genocide, which is encapsulated in the well-worn discourse of "never again."³⁹ According to Mofidul Hoque, a member of the board of trustees, the LWM aims to "foster civil engagement by using places of memory as catalysts for new dialogue on contemporary issues."⁴⁰ The Museum's goal, Hoque writes, is to "go beyond the limited scope of victim/perpetrator dichotomies to engage the broader public on issues related to justice, accountability, and reconciliation."⁴¹

Relocated to an expanded and "modernized" site in 2017 (see Image 10.3), the LWM gives special attention to public outreach and to programs that directly engage Bangladeshi youth with no direct memory of the war in 1971. Enlisting the familiar tropes of "melancholic loss" and hope for a peaceful future, the LWM deploys what Nayanka Mookherjee describes as "a political aesthetic" that seeks to combine "affective citizenship [with] notions of national and cosmopolitan belonging."⁴² The Museum depicts the victims of the 1971 war between West and East Pakistan as both Bangladeshi martyrs and as the victims of a larger, global tragedy, namely the scourge of modern genocidal violence. While the Museum explicitly honors the individuals who helped to "carve out a nation," its trustees also promote the Museum as "dedicated to all freedom-loving people and victims of mindless atrocities and destructions committed in the name of religion, ethnicity, and sovereignty."⁴³ This is essentially the same framework employed at other sites of conscience, and it resonates with other major memorial sites focused on mass atrocity, for example, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), which, notwithstanding the recent controversy over analogies between migrant detention camps and Nazi concentration camps, commemorates the Holocaust as a particular instance of a broader and still extant socio-political phenomenon.⁴⁴ The LWM and USHMM



Image 10.3 Exterior view (rendering) of the newly constructed Liberation War Museum in Dhaka, Bangladesh. After more than twenty years in a two-story residential space, the LWM opened at its new site in early 2017.

Source: Design Work Group.

employ many of the same strategies for historical representation, e.g., display of personal effects, worn clothing, shoes, and identification documents, and both house impressive collections of audio-visual materials, including written and recorded testimonies. Also like the USHMM, the LWM organizes lectures and readings by historians, filmmakers, and novelists, whose work relates to the themes of war and genocide. Serving as an institutional space for “secular, left-liberal civil society,” the LWM also exists as a vessel for “the nation’s pain.”⁴⁵

Like Cape Town’s District Six Museum (also a member of the Sites of Conscience network), the LWM endeavors to engage a fractured society by navigating among competing memories of the past. That it does so in a hybrid state (i.e., neither democratic nor fully authoritarian) is important. On the one hand, it speaks to the limited potential of museums to serve as agents of democratization in repressive regimes. On the other hand, the fact that the LWM manages to endure (and even expand) in this climate could be seen as evidence of its usefulness as a bulwark against destabilizing violence or further authoritarian entrenchment. Obviously, by drawing these distinctions, the task of assessing museums as potential sites for historical dialogue and atrocity prevention becomes more complicated. But, if one accepts that no two histories of atrocity are exactly alike, then clearly no single strategy for dialogue can be appropriate for all (post-)

conflict scenarios. In some cases, it will be necessary to pursue simultaneous dialogues with a variety of participants stepping in and out of the process at different moments. In Bangladesh, the war of independence produced reciprocal violence between rival political factions (e.g., Awami League forces engaged with those of the Jamaat-e-Islami), but it also generated ethnic violence, in which minorities were targeted despite their being marginal to the larger political struggle (e.g., the Biharis). In an age of “new wars” and cascading atrocities, we can no longer conceive of warfare, as von Clausewitz did, as a contest between two parties, each seeking to impose their will on the other. With regard to civil wars and state disintegration, and in cases where inter-state conflicts overlap with and exacerbate intra-state conflicts, historical dialogue contends with the politics of history and pluralistic memory in a far more complex matrix and on a much larger scale. In such cases, it is important that expectations for dialogue be set appropriately. Rather than aiming for “deep” social harmony or reconciliation on the basis of shared humanity, it would already be an improvement if parties to large-scale conflict were to enter into a dialogue geared toward non-lethal coexistence.

According to Hoque, the LWM attempts to mitigate political fragmentation and ethnic tensions by “depicting history through documents, artifacts, and memorabilia and refraining from imposing a particular point of view on historical events.”⁴⁶ Visitors are encouraged to “formulate their own positions,” although the Museum also promotes what Hoque has described as “the liberal syncretistic culture and tradition of Bengal, which was reflected in the liberation struggle of the people, who were upholding secular democratic values to ensure the rights of all religions.”⁴⁷ Whether these principles can be maintained in tandem is debatable. Where the LWM invokes the “core values” of the liberation struggle, there is little transparency regarding how (or by whom) these have been identified, or whether such values can be conjured at all, except through an ideological lens (i.e., “a particular point of view,” which the Museum claims to avoid). There is a solemn and potentially galvanizing aspect to the LWM’s exhibits and educational programs. “Viewing, interpretation, and witnessing,” Mookherjee writes, “become profoundly communal acts.” At the same time, she contends, the Museum presents multiple and “diverse versions of history,” in order to foster a critical public culture, which is alert and responsive to “the politics of history.”⁴⁸

Because these descriptions dovetail with the rhetoric surrounding historical dialogue, it is tempting to think that the LWM succeeds in providing a space for the negotiation of divergent memories and adversarial identities. Images of skulls, bones, mutilated bodies, and “dishonored” women convey mournful gravitas, which provides the backdrop for moral slogans and activist exhortations. Visitors, according to Mookherjee, often feel sad and dismayed after viewing the exhibits, and many leave in (contemplative?) silence.⁴⁹ She also reports that comments left in the Museum’s guest book are generally somber, and many of the entries communicate a sense of deep resolve never to allow any repetition of past atrocities. There is also a gift shop where visitors can purchase mugs, T-shirts, posters, and other paraphernalia. Outwardly, the LWM projects the same signifiers and

lifestyle accoutrements which one encounters elsewhere in the activist discourse on human rights and genocide prevention (e.g., on the websites and merchandise pages of major humanitarian NGOs).

Given this left-liberal bent, it may be surprising to learn that conversations in the Museum's café sometimes circle back to the antagonistic national patriotism, which the Museum seeks to domesticate. While the evidence here is anecdotal, Mookherjee records some troubling encounters: "On one visit, I met young people and other trustees of the Museum at the café who expressed their disdain for Pakistan by saying that they refrained from buying *salwar kameez* or fruit juices made in Pakistan."⁵⁰ During another visit, Mookherjee spoke with a trustee, who expressed similar antipathy toward Pakistan: "So what if we hate Pakistan because of 1971? Our secular PM [is] trying to forge bonds with other Islamic countries."⁵¹ Of course, one must be cautious with these informal and "off-the-cuff" comments. Also, it should be said that views of this kind are hardly specific to "non-Western" cultures, as some might like to believe.

Mookherjee describes her experiences in the LWM as "dialogic moment[s]" in a larger process of creating cultural literacy," but to what extent do these moments actually bolster the ethos of "never again"? There is little evidence, at least in Mookherjee's study, to suggest that exposure to cosmopolitan genocide tropes is effective in creating "global" citizens who will eschew mass violence where prevailing cultural and political forces work to encourage it. Even if visitors engage in some kind of communal enterprise when they enter the Museum, we are still a long way from understanding what long-term impacts, if any, these types of exhibits have on their audience. We do not know whether strong emotional identification with victims has the kind of peace-building potential that advocates of these strategies have claimed, nor do we know whether educational initiatives related to histories of mass violence and genocide really help to instill and strengthen "the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind," as organizations like UNESCO have claimed.⁵² The theory of agonistic memory, in any case, suggests that peace and atrocity prevention are better served by understanding the historical context in which perpetrators became activated than through empathy for victims or exclusive concern for their rights. What does seem clear is the need to unpack, delineate, and test all of these variables. While strategies for empirical assessment exist, the necessary planning and resources for pursuing these have not been consistently prioritized, or even recognized.⁵³ Longitudinal research studies, in particular, have been under-utilized, not only because of the practical difficulties these entail (e.g., interviews with the same subjects over long intervals), but also the time and money they require.

For historical dialogue to attract the needed level of interest and investment, the question of assessment will have to be faced squarely. At the same time, given its relative novelty, there is no reason why experimental pedagogies and practices aimed at promoting historical dialogue need to be deferred, while researchers and practitioners attempt to establish proof of principle. Moreover, there are already some encouraging signs for those seeking to use the past to

promote peace and prevent atrocity.⁵⁴ Mookherjee observes that the 1971 conflict in Bangladesh is still described in most of the international legal and human rights literature as a civil war rather than an act of genocide, and she points out that Pakistan has not offered an apology for its actions. The question I am posing here is whether the LWM really “trigger[s] a debate about the existing contestations relating to the Bangladesh war,” if the role of Pakistani perpetrators is crudely depicted, which is what Mookherjee’s study seems to indicate. Does the LWM foster dialogue or bolster the chance for positive peace, or is it merely a site where a pre-digested and, to some extent, ideologically driven version of the past is presented in the fashion of “war by other means?” Raising this question does not mean collapsing the relevant distinctions between perpetrators and victims, nor is it meant to suggest any moral equivalence between them. Rather, we must think carefully and, perhaps, more critically, about a museum which allows visitors to leave, as Mookherjee has shown, thinking that they may “hate” the country next door on a permanent basis, owing to events that took place almost half a century ago. If we come at this, as I do, with the assumption that such unrelenting hatred is not embedded, *a priori*, in the history of the conflict, we can then launch a practical inquiry to probe the potential outcomes of responsible historical debate, framed in a variety of experimental iterations. Which are the frameworks for dialogue and the narrative trajectories that can guide visitors through the history of the conflict in a truthful and responsible manner, but without recalling antagonistic prejudices or reinforcing the cycles of blame and recrimination that can easily foment more violence?

The current realities of political life in Bangladesh require further attention. Given the ethnic and religious tensions that still exist in many regions of the country and the authoritarian constraints on civil society, any commemoration of 1971 is potentially explosive, and, therefore, it makes sense for the LWM to present a measured history of the war, even if this does not allow for the vibrant and transformative debates that advocates of historical dialogue sometimes conjure when advocating for the peace-building potential of negotiated history. Where the educational culture is still based, to a large degree, on the authority of the instructor and on exercises aimed at memorization of prescribed facts, there is already something very compelling about a museum that seeks to teach the “difficult past” in a secular setting where multi-cultural values are given full-throated support.

The LWM also deserves credit for its innovative outreach initiatives. A good example is the Mobile Museum project, which transports LWM exhibits via minibus to thousands of students in rural areas where the “potential fault lines for religious violence and intolerance” are most salient. But even if the Museum succeeds in raising awareness of the war and encouraging Bangladeshi youth to engage with the past in ways that promote “democratic values,” there are still questions regarding the narrative and political trajectory of its programs, as well as the cognitive and behavioral impacts these have on the students who are exposed to them. Among the students who were surveyed after seeing the Mobile Museum, one commented: “Everyone sacrificed for the liberation war,

no matter if they were male or female, rich or poor, Muslims or from other communities.” Even if these claims are not immediately verifiable, the sentiment here is basically innocuous. Other students, however, came to different conclusions, for example: “We hate all those that created the conflict.” Here, hatred and collective guilt are combined in ways that conjure disturbing historical examples of social fragmentation and scapegoating as the prelude to mass atrocity. Given this kind of response, it is difficult not to worry about the possibilities for political activation of such avowed (but also free-floating) hatreds.

Hoque has stated that the passage of time since 1971 presents a challenge for educators who see the war as something that can help generate both patriotic pride and a sense of civic responsibility. The principal difficulty for the Museum, he maintains, is how to “link the past with the present and imbue the new generation with the core values of the liberation war”? While the desire for relevance here is commendable, this formula also ignores what historical dialogue takes as given, i.e., that the values, lessons, and understandings of the war are deeply contested. To state what is obvious, the “core values” of one group are not necessarily those of another, and, in any case, transmitting prescribed values to a new generation does not guarantee that dialogue will flourish where perspectives diverge. Does the LWM mediate or transcend partisan approaches to history, or is it merely another node in a larger system of conflict? Unfortunately, lack of data prevents our giving an answer here. The ethos of the LWM seems to be that teaching the past from a liberal, secular perspective is good in itself because it models peaceful strategies for conflict mediation, but, unfortunately, what needs to be proven here is merely asserted. The Museum’s overarching narrative recalls a slogan, “Never Again,” which has not shown the potency that peace-builders and genocide prevention advocates have wanted. Historical dialogue aims to be more than idealistic aspiration, but, like other frameworks for genocide prevention, e.g., Responsibility to Protect, its potential depends on whether there is political commitment behind the rhetoric.

Some principles for action and future initiatives

In general, museums do not have the power to extinguish the political fires that engender mass atrocity or halt genocide before it happens. While cultural initiatives can impact the political dynamics and economic structures that fuel large-scale violence, there is, to this point, no “culture of peace” that negates real imbalances of power, whether these result from histories of dictatorship and oppression or the entrenchment of neoliberalism and its inequalities. But museums are not completely powerless either, and culture can be a shaper of political economy while also being its product. This means that museums can contribute toward peace and violence abatement, provided that the narratives they develop engage, rather than eschew, politics, and so long as they devise a deliberate strategy for engaging and mediating the conflicts that arise where a multiplicity of voices and perspectives lay claim to different aspects of the past. If some historical understandings exacerbate conflict, while others can help mediate between rival

perspectives (the fundamental tenet of historical dialogue), then attention to historical representation at museums and memorial sites can potentially bring something useful to the conversation. We should also seek out general principles for how to operationalize such a program. I will suggest four principles below, before presenting a final example of how a museum can leverage historical dialogue for the purposes of conflict management and atrocity prevention.

The first principle for action relates to the 9/11 Museum and its narrative of loss, resilience, and retribution. Museums cannot avoid the politically contentious issues that surround their exhibitions. To pretend that there is only one legitimate reading of the past and that the Museum has unquestionable authority to determine which historical narratives ought to have traction within society is to forfeit any chance of mediating the conflicts that arise out of divergent patterns of remembrance. By equating terrorism with Islamic extremism and presenting the attacks as having arisen *ex nihilo*, the 9/11 Museum offers substantial support for the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and for the global war on terror that is being prosecuted in an increasing number of venues worldwide. Intense focus on the grimmest details of the attacks and the carnage they produced, coupled with relative disinterest in the before and after aspects of this event, makes the 9/11 Museum a site of nationalist outrage and military mobilization. The identities of the perpetrators and victims are manipulated to build support for a martial response to terrorism that is applied unevenly, dishonestly, and with insufficient regard for actual outcomes.⁵⁵

Second, museums can facilitate historical dialogue by recruiting members of the public to aid in the production of knowledge. This can lead to conflicting memories and divergent interpretations of the past, but these tensions can also be useful for cultivating cooperation, mediation, and exchange of viewpoints. At the District Six Museum, visitors are invited to contribute to a mapping project that seeks not only to reconstruct the past, but also to lay the groundwork for historical justice in the form of property restitution. While visitors have sometimes disagreed about which properties belonged to whom and when, these conflicts have been mediated by museum staff who are deeply invested (and practiced) in historical methodologies. Although the full impact of its programs has not been thoroughly assessed, the Museum's director has already outlined a plan for doing so. This will be an important step toward deciphering which strategies are most effective for nurturing dialogue and for changing attitudes regarding the meaning and effects of South Africa's transition to democracy. The Museum's commitment to historical justice also shows how cultural institutions can help put a spotlight on the failures, shortcomings, and blind spots within South Africa's new multicultural democracy. This is an important lesson not only for transitional states, but for established democracies, too. Opportunities for conflict resolution are limited where the ebb and flow of political power and sudden reversals of fortune lock rival groups into a battle for epistemological supremacy. It may be an exaggeration to say that these skirmishes for control over the past represent "war by other means," but there is no interpretive framework devoid of politics. Every narrative of the past, even those constructed

according to rigorous standards of evidence, carries ideological content that can be potentially provocative and offensive to those whose identities are bruised or sullied in the telling. Objectivity is not neutrality, and museums need to anticipate and deal with the consequences of this, if they want to advocate for specific historical claims and/or political policies without being identified as purely partisan actors.

Following on this, museums should not claim to be neutral sites, where visitors are invited to draw their own conclusions, if, in fact, they promote a specific concept of citizenship and moral obligation. Pretending that there is no political perspective within a museum is likely to alienate visitors who do not already share that political orientation, and, at the same time, this formula may lead some visitors back to the prejudicial perspectives with which they arrived. While the data on the Liberation War Museum is ambiguous, Mookherjee's ethnography is concerning. For instance, it is tantalizing to consider how students might be engaged by conducting oral history interviews with family members who lived through the war in 1971, but this can also have unintended and undesirable consequences. Probing family members for their personal recollections could, potentially, clarify certain aspects of the war, but this exercise might also stir up, and perhaps inculcate, the prejudices, insecurities, and grievances that were part and parcel to the conflict when it initially erupted into violence. History can be tool for putting the violent past to rest, but it can also fan the flames of conflict. This has sometimes led to the conclusion that it is better to forget the past than fixate on its difficult legacies and contentious aspects, though that is not what is being suggested here.⁵⁶

Finally, we should remember that historical dialogue is still something relatively new. As a consequence, we need to balance a spirit of experimentation with an appropriate degree of skepticism. Empirical evaluation and assessment of outcomes is necessary to identify and refine the tools which historical dialogue purports to offer. At the same time, leveraging a social scientific endeavor, i.e., historical analysis and interpretation, for the purposes of peace is not something that can be easily tracked on the basis of statistical, quantifiable datasets. For the purposes of atrocity prevention and peace-building, we are still working out a clear program for what to measure and how to do so. Cultural values and public perception are obviously important to assess, but their exact relationship to state power and the political apparatuses that make mass violence possible is complex (to say the least). If, as Bennett puts it, "social change on a micro-level" is the key to building peace and achieving justice, then we should be interested in whatever can move hearts and minds toward non-violence and multi-cultural democracy. On the other hand, liberal theories of peace are frequently premised on precisely what is missing from the contexts in which mass atrocity typically unfolds, i.e., a universal history ascertained and comprehended on the basis of universal values. Once universal values enter the conversation, dissent and disagreement are likely to be recast as irrationality, ill will, and enmity, and historical memory reverts to the antagonistic mode that historical dialogue seeks to overcome.

But rather than end on a sour note, I want to offer a final example of how museums and memorials might leverage historical dialogue for the purposes of peace. In April 2018, in Montgomery, Alabama, a city synonymous with the struggle for civil rights and racial justice in the United States, a new memorial incorporating key principles from the previous discussion was opened to the public. While Montgomery has a large number of monuments and memorials that speak to the city's unique place in American history, there has not been, until now, anything that relates directly to the history of racial violence after Reconstruction. In 2015, a Montgomery-based non-profit organization, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), launched a project to document that history. In a self-published report titled *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, the EJI tallied 4,075 lynchings in twelve Southern states between 1877 and 1950.⁵⁷ In 2017, the EJI undertook a second study to investigate additional lynchings in eight other states. The EJI links this history of racial violence to a range of problems within the contemporary criminal justice system, including mass incarceration, racial bias in the implementation of capital punishment, excessive and disproportionate sentencing of racial minorities, and police brutality in communities of color. Bryan Stevenson, who directs the EJI, sees his organization's report as both an exercise in truth-telling and a springboard to racial justice: "We cannot heal the deep wounds inflicted during the era of racial terrorism until we tell the truth about it. The geographic, political, economic, and social consequences of decades of terror lynchings can still be seen ... today, and the damage ... needs to be confronted and discussed."⁵⁸ The EJI's report received extensive media coverage, and it paved the way for the construction of America's first national memorial to racial lynching victims, as well as the creation of a new Legacy Museum, which seeks to tell the story of the African-American experience "from slavery to mass incarceration."

To build the memorial, the EJI purchased a six-acre parcel of land on a hilltop overlooking Montgomery and partnered with architects from the MASS Design Group (which had already completed a space for "truth-telling and reflection" within Rwanda's Kigali Genocide Memorial). Working together, EJI and MASS came up with a plan for a "classical structure" consisting of 816 suspended steel columns. Each column represents one of the counties where the EJI has documented a lynching. Where available, the names of individual victims are inscribed on these columns with the date of the lynching, so that visitors are given both a spatial and chronological representation of America's history of racial terror. The EJI's website explains that the memorial was designed specifically to spawn further work toward racial justice and commemoration.

Just outside the main memorial structure will be a field of identical columns, one for each county where a lynching has been documented. EJI [invites] each of these counties to retrieve their county's monument and place it back in the county where the terror lynchings took place. This National Memorial for Peace and Justice hopes to have component pieces all over the United States where racial terror lynchings have been documented.

Over time, the national memorial will serve as a report on which parts of the country have confronted the truth of this terror and which have not.

As visitors enter the memorial pavilion, the walkway is graded so that they descend beneath the columns, which hang above them in the manner of dangling corpses (see Image 10.4). As these columns are exposed to the elements, they will gradually oxidize, producing a reddish-brown stain on the ground below.

A few blocks from the memorial, in an area near Montgomery's historic slave market, the EJI has also opened the Legacy Museum in an 11,000-square-foot structure built on the site of a former warehouse where slaves were confined prior to their being sold at auction in the nearby market. In addition to commissioned artworks and sculptures, the Museum incorporates videography and multimedia exhibits, as well as a collection of first-person narratives of former slaves. The Museum also houses what the EJI describes as "the nation's most comprehensive data collection on lynching," making it an important resource for both teachers and researchers. Offering "a powerful sense of place" and a wealth of research and learning materials, the Museum presents itself as "an engine for education about the legacy of racial inequality [in America] and for the truth and reconciliation that leads to real solutions to contemporary problems."⁵⁹

For those who work on topics related to transitional or historical justice, this is familiar rhetoric. Some will claim that it is exaggerated, given the limited data on impact and outcomes. It is also unclear how much appetite exists for historical justice in the United States, particularly at a moment when political and environmental crises already threaten to overwhelm the capacity of ordinary citizens for concerted action. These are not minor issues. But, if the past were really seen as irrelevant compared to these "more pressing" challenges, there would be no reason for the running debates over which historical memorials and monuments should come down or remain on display. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum in Montgomery are intriguing, not because they arrive at a moment of placid, academic reflection, but because they appear in the context of social and political polarization not seen since the civil rights era and the national trauma of the Vietnam War.

Critics have said (in good faith and bad) that the lynching memorial is too divisive and that America needs to come together to solve its current problems, not wade into a "difficult" history of injustice that pits some memories against others. Montgomery's mayor, Todd Strange, has supported the EJI's work, but he also concedes that the memorial will receive a cool reception from some residents who would rather not have their city associated with racial violence and white supremacy.⁶⁰ At the same time, if the memorial can attract visitors and bring an infusion of cash, then, according to the mayor, Montgomery's history will have paid dividends. The mayor's logic may be coarse, but his calculations are important to the politics of history nonetheless. The intersection of competing interests can provide a space for dialogue that would not exist otherwise.

Of course, the lynching memorial is not geared toward economic revitalization primarily. The EJI's work in Montgomery is not about dark tourism or using

Proof



Image 10.4 The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Spearheaded by Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative and opened in 2018, this is the first national memorial to the victims of racial violence in post-Reconstruction America.

Source: Photo by the author.

Proof

history as a means for urban development. The key, for Stevenson, is the connection between the history of racial terror and the ongoing subjugation of African-Americans in a system characterized by structural violence and unequal access to justice. The memorial and museum in Montgomery are not instances of simple counter-history, but, rather, are attempts to show all Americans how they are implicated in – and how they might confront – the enduring legacies of a history that undermines the constitutive principles of the nation's founding narrative. One exhibit at the Legacy Museum features rows of glass jars filled with soil, collected by community volunteers, from documented lynching sites. The contents of these jars highlight what fastens Americans to the violent past as well as the collective commitment needed to address the legacies of past atrocities. In that sense, the Museum is about engaging with persistent and enduring cycles of violence, rather than just instilling a sense of guilt for past crimes. Stevenson, in an interview from 2016, underscored the present-ness of the past and the need for creating spaces for education, dialogue, and political activation.⁶¹ “We talk a lot about freedom. We talk a lot about equality. We talk a lot about justice. But we’re not free. There are shadows that follow us.” When asked what inspired his vision of the memorial, Stevenson responded that 9/11 had been an important catalyst. Conversations about how to memorialize the victims of that event began within a few years of the attacks. Stevenson wondered: What about other American victims of terrorism? “We haven’t done a very good job of understanding the legacy of lynching, but the black people in Cleveland and Chicago and Detroit and Los Angeles and Oakland and Boston and Minneapolis did not go to those communities merely as immigrants looking for new opportunities.” The memorial in Montgomery, Stevenson has argued, is a “challenge to every county in this country where a lynching took place” to claim a piece of the memorial and display it in their own communities. It will also provide a way of measuring progress and mapping the dialogue. “We’ll know the places that are resisting, and it should build pressure on those communities, and the people in those communities, that are either not doing enough, or need to do more.” As the memorial and museum receive new visitors year after year, we will see more of what this entails – whether the program for action is future-oriented, aiming at social transformation, or whether it is a way to offload our debts without changing the formula under which they were incurred.

Notes

- 1 Bush began his speech with the announcement that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended. [T]he United States and our allies have prevailed.” He continued: “The war on terror is not over, yet it is not endless. We do not know the day of the final victory, but we have seen the turning of the tide.” A full transcript of the speech is available online: www.cnn.com/2003/US/05/01/bush.transcript/.
- 2 This estimate comes from a recent report issued by the Council on Foreign Relations. See www.cfr.org/in-brief/can-us-taliban-peace-talks-end-war-afghanistan.
- 3 For more on this, see Elazar Barkan’s introductory chapter in this volume. Historical dialogue, for Barkan, “aims to rethink mass atrocities and violence and its representation

204 Alexander Karn

- in a manner that would contribute to diminishing the animosity between the parties and would acknowledge responsibility and even guilt, depending on the circumstances.”
- 4 These statistics are taken from the 2018 Annual Report: <https://2018.911memorial.org>.
 - 5 See Stephen Farrell, “9/11 Museum Opens to a Somber Crowd,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 2014.
 - 6 Ibid.
 - 7 Marita Sturken, “The 9/11 Memorial Museum and the Remaking of Ground Zero,” *American Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (June 2015): 471–490.
 - 8 Ibid., 486.
 - 9 For more on the capacity of historical dialogue to transform public perception, see chapter 1 in this collection.
 - 10 What Elazar Barkan notes in chapter 1 of this volume bears repeating here: “The recognition of violence and atrocities in one context does not negate the significance of atrocities committed in another context, or by another group, but rather can inform it and validate it.”
 - 11 See Allison Blais and Lynn Rasic, “Hope Rebuilt,” in *A Place of Remembrance: The Official Book of the National September 11 Memorial* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2015): 221.
 - 12 See Berger in chapter 9.
 - 13 One of the most thoughtful responses to the 9/11 Museum is Adam Gopnik, “Stones and Bones,” *The New Yorker*, July 7, 2014.
 - 14 To be fair, the question of how to handle the hijackers is difficult, given that some of the victims’ families objected to their being depicted anywhere in the Museum.
 - 15 Sturken, 486.
 - 16 See Berger in chapter 9.
 - 17 See Anna Cento Bull and Hans Laugue Hansen, “On Agonistic Memory,” *Memory Studies* 9, no. 4 (2015): 390–404.
 - 18 Breivik’s manifesto is archived online: https://www.webcitation.org/67A04cygA?url=http://www.fas.org/programs/tap/_docs/2083_-_A_European_Declaration_of_Independence.pdf.
 - 19 See, e.g., Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin, eds., *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to al Qaeda* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).
 - 20 Between 2002–2005, i.e., the period immediately following 9/11, twenty-three of twenty-four terrorist incidents recorded in the U.S. were committed by domestic extremists. See www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/terrorism-2002-2005.
 - 21 Arguing along similar lines, Falk Pingel asks about chances for propagating peace in settings where war as a means of politics is “wittingly and consciously” inculcated in the commemorative narrative. See chapter 11 in this volume.
 - 22 For background information, see www.districtsix.co.za/index.php.
 - 23 Bonita Bennett, “Encounters in the District Six Museum,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 55, no. 3 (2012): 319.
 - 24 Ibid., 320.
 - 25 Ibid.
 - 26 Bonita Bennett, “District Six Museum: Activists for Change,” *Museum International* 68, no. 271–272 (2017): 6.
 - 27 Ibid.
 - 28 See, e.g., James L. Gibson, “Taking Stock of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Assessing Citizen Attitudes Through Surveys,” in Hugo van der Merwe, Victoria Baxter, and Audrey R. Chapman, eds., *Assessing the Impact of Transitional Justice: Challenges for Empirical Research* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2009): 173–190.

- 29 Bennett, "District Six Museum," 8.
- 30 See, for example, Willard L. Boyd, "Museums as Centers of Controversy," *Daedalus* 128, no. 3, (1999): 185–228; James Clifford, "Museums as Contact Zones," in David Boswell and Jessica Evans, eds., *Representing the Nation: Histories, Heritage, and Museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999): 435–455; and Simona Bodo, "Museums as Intercultural Spaces," in Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale, eds., *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012): 181–192.
- 31 Bennett, "District Six Museum," 7.
- 32 Quoted in Bernadette Lynch, "Whose Cake Is It Anyway?" in Laurence Gourievidis ed., *Museums and Migration: History, Memory, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2014): 67–80.
- 33 See Alexander Karn, *Amending the Past: Europe's Holocaust Commissions and the Right to History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).
- 34 See Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003): 47–48.
- 35 Stacy Douglas, "Between Constitutional Mo(nu)ments: Memorialising Past, Present, and Future at the District Six Museum and Constitution Hill," *Law Critique* 22 (2011): 172.
- 36 Douglas develops this point in terms of "interrupt[ing] embedded practices of representations." See *ibid.*, 174.
- 37 The network now has more than 230 members in fifty-five countries. For more information, see www.sitesofconscience.org/en/who-we-are/about-us/.
- 38 For background information, see www.liberationwarmuseumbd.org/about-us/.
- 39 For more on this double aspect of the LWM, see Nayanka Mookherjee, "'Never Again': Aesthetics of 'Genocidal' Cosmopolitanism and the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17 (2011): 71–91.
- 40 Mofidul Hoque, "Outreach and Education at the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh," in Clara Ramirez-Barat and Roger Duthie, eds., *Transitional Justice and Education: Learning Peace* (New York: Social Sciences Research Council, 2017): 291.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 292.
- 42 Mookherjee, 74.
- 43 Cited in *ibid.*, 75.
- 44 From the USHMM website: "A *living* memorial to the Holocaust, the USHMM inspires citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity." See www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum.
- 45 Mookherjee, 78.
- 46 Hoque, 293.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 293–294.
- 48 Mookherjee, 83.
- 49 To be clear, Mookherjee's ethnography was conducted at the original Museum and not at the expanded site, which opened in 2017.
- 50 Mookherjee, 84.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 See UNESCO policy guide on "Education about the Holocaust and Preventing Genocide" (2017), available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002480/248071E.pdf>.
- 53 For more on the challenges of impact assessment for museums and memorial sites, see Judy Barsalou and Victoria Baxter, *The Urge to Remember: The Role of Memorials in Social Reconstruction and Transitional Justice* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2007).
- 54 See, for example, Brandon Hamber, Liz Sevcenko, and Ereshnee Naidu, "Utopian Dreams or Practical Possibilities? The Challenges of Evaluating the Impact of Memorialization in Societies in Transition," *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 4 (2010): 397–420.

Proof

206 *Alexander Karn*

- 55 Regarding dishonesty and its impact on outcomes in the global war on terror, see Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal, “The Uncounted,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 16, 2017. See: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/16/magazine/uncounted-civilian-casualties-iraq-airstrikes.html?src=mv. Regarding the lack of measurable progress, see Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).
- 56 A recent example is David Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).
- 57 The full report is available online: <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>. The total number of lynchings has been revised upward to 4,384 since the report was released.
- 58 See <https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america>.
- 59 See <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/museum>.
- 60 Cited in Campbell Robinson, “Memorial in Alabama Will Honor Victims of Lynching,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 2016.
- 61 See Jeffrey Toobin, “The Legacy of Lynching, On Death Row,” *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2016.

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution

Proof