

Sites of Reckoning: Memorials, Museums & Fractured Truth(s) in the Aftermaths of Mass Violence

Organizers

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Memorials and museums commemorating victims of mass violence, war, and genocide have long served as important spaces for societies to grapple with trauma and loss. Indeed, historically, they have served as important sites for truth telling and accounting for past violence. However, over the past half-century, they have proliferated, taking on increasingly global forms that have also become vehicles for emotional transformation – sites of reckoning for citizens and states. This symposium seeks to highlight these patterns of memorialization by interrogating the ways local artistic, cultural, and aesthetic particularities are imbricated with transnational influences, as they appear through aesthetic, functional, and narrative formations.

This two-day symposium scheduled for March 5-6, 2020 at Georgia State University will bring together a distinguished group of U.S. and international scholars to consider memorials and museums as important sites for truth telling and accounting for past violence. It will also explore how these sites narrate violent histories in particular ways—privileging some truths over others—and with distinct intents. The ongoing controversies about removing Confederate statues across the US – and especially in the South – are obvious examples of these dilemmas. In addition, we have planned an optional field trip on Saturday, March 7, 2020 to visit The National Memorial for Peace and Justice and The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration in Montgomery, Alabama.

Drawing on a multidisciplinary approach, this symposium will examine the social, political, historical, and economic factors engaged at memorial sites and museums as sites of reckoning with unquiet pasts. To this end, symposium participants will also come from a variety of academic disciplines (Anthropology, Art, Communication, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Political Science, and others), and will also include artists and practitioners.

We have confirmed the keynote speaker, James E. Young, Ph.D., Distinguished University Professor Emeritus and Founding Director, Institute for Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies, University of Massachusetts Amherst. Professor Young is one of the world's leading experts on memorial sites, and someone whose work has been pioneering in establishing this line of scholarly inquiry. Professor Young's presentation will reflect on memorial art, loss, and the spaces in between by comparing memorial production processes at major memorial sites in New York, Berlin, and Norway.

We have also confirmed the following participants:

- Nicola Brandt, Art.D., multi-media artist, Namibia

- Jennie Burnet, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Global Studies & Anthropology, Georgia State University
- Nitin Sawhney, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Media Studies, The New School
- Ruth Stanford, M.F.A., Associate Professor of Sculpture, Georgia State University
- Brent Steele, Ph.D., Worthmuth Presidential Chair and Professor of Political Science, University of Utah
- Marita Sturken, Ph.D., Professor of Media, Culture and Communication, New York University
- Jelena Subotic, PH.D., Professor of Political Science, Georgia State University
- Natasha Zaretsky, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, New York University and Visiting Scholar, Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights, Rutgers University

To be considered as a presenter, please submit your proposed paper title, 250 word abstract, name, title, and contact information to jburnet@gsu.edu by November 11, 2020. Abstracts should engage with the symposium description and questions as detailed below. We welcome paper presentations by academics, artists, and practitioners. We plan to put together an edited volume based on the symposium. Participants are expected to cover their travel and accommodation costs.

Symposium Description

Some form of accounting for past violence has become critical to rebuilding civil society and democracy, but it often exists in a constitutive tension with justice and the inherently contested nature of memory. These contestations over the meaning of violent histories become fixed in the landscape as memorial sites, even as their political and social meaning evolves. For example, Confederate War memorials proliferated in the United States at the turn of the 20th century when Southern states sought to re-segregate and disenfranchise African Americans and again mid-20th century in a backlash against the civil rights movement. The current debates over these monuments, their meanings in the past and the present, their implications, and their futures illustrate the potentially plural and fractured nature of truth and the moralities imposed on it.

The concurrent development of memorial museums, which serve to simultaneously commemorate, document, and narrate past violence, has transformed the stodgy war museum and put it to new purposes. Holocaust memorials and museums have also become important models for commemorating genocide elsewhere in the world or serving as opportunities for a public accounting for state violence (Young 1993, 2000). While there are clear examples in Europe (such as the Jewish Museum Berlin) and the United States (US Holocaust Memorial Museum), we also see such sites take shape around the world as forms of accounting for nation-states grappling with their own histories of violence and genocide. Aesthetic, functional, and narrative aspects of diverse memorials and museums have reverberated around the world.

Memorial sites and museums offer one of many ways in which memory serves as a modality for contesting and making sense of complicated pasts. This symposium seeks to investigate the particular ways in which physical sites of memory offer insights into the plural and fractured nature of truth(s) in relation to violence, witnessing, and survival. Proposed papers must address some facet of the interaction between the transnational aesthetic, functional, or narrative influences with local artistic, cultural, aesthetic, or narrative particularities. In addition, papers should address one or more of the following questions:

- What strategies do different cultures or societies use come to terms with violent pasts?

- How do public and private sites of memory differ?
- What are the economic challenges for creating, maintaining, or sustaining these sites?
- How does monetizing the commemoration of past violence affect narratives and contested truth(s)?
- What are the links and disjunctures between large-scale commemorations in public spaces (i.e., monuments) and small-scale commemorations in everyday spaces?
- How do materiality and the ephemeral interact at these sites?
- How effective are sites of memory and conscience for healing communities and education for future generations?
- What implications do memorials and memorial museums have for the lived experience of justice? for truth? for repair?
- Are there alternatives to the predominant depiction of suffering and evil prevalent at so many sites? What factors affect how communities remember?
- How do time, space, distance, the types of harms, the politics of remembering and economics (including tourism) contribute to how sites and narratives are structured in the aftermath of violence and suffering?
- How do memory sites and museums interface with local, national, and transnational tourism? What are the consequences of monetizing the commemoration of past violence?
- What are the global patterns of memorialization?
- What is the value of fine arts engagements with sites, museums, and events?
- How do economic constraints shape the aesthetics, functions, and long-term viability of these sites of reckoning?