



Chapter Five

Cultural Memory in the Wake of Violence

Exceptionalism, Vulnerability and the Grievable Life

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An embrace of cultural memory as a social force began to emerge around the world starting in the 1980s. These past few decades has witnessed an extraordinary number of memory projects, including memorials, memory museums, countermonuments, countermemorials and artistic projects on memory, primarily though not exclusively in the United States, Europe, Latin America and Africa. In many ways, this preoccupation with memory, often referred to as the ‘memory boom’, has involved a reckoning of some kind with twentieth- and twenty-first-century violent events, from World War II and the Holocaust to state terrorism throughout Latin America to genocide in Rwanda to 9/11 and global terrorism.

Memory and memorialization was not a dominant cultural mode prior to this time. The violent events of World War II, which defined in many ways the twentieth century, produced in their immediate aftermath narratives not of memory but of triumph and defeat. Engagements with the memory of the Holocaust and the destruction of World War II emerged several decades (effectively a generation) afterward and then only in certain parts of the world. For instance, the national engagement with the memory of World War II, German fascism and the Holocaust has been deep in Germany and also in France and Great Britain, but the Pacific war has received comparatively less memorialization in Japan or China, with its histories still highly contested 70 years later.

In the United States, it was the divisive effects of the Vietnam War, largely understood as a war of defeat, that prompted a turn toward memorialization. The opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., in 1982 and the broad public embrace of the memorial as a site for the expression of loss and mourning opened up an affective space for cultural memory

in a nation that had mythologized its participation in World War II as one of triumph and victory. A memorial culture has followed in the wake of the Vietnam memorial, with the construction of numerous memorials on the National Mall and several memorial museums. This enabled the sense that all traumatic events need memorials—as a consequence, discussion of memorialization of September 11 began within days, when the event itself was ongoing and the number of the dead was yet to be known.

Latin America's engagement with memory has derived quite differently out of the work of human rights and protest movements (in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay), truth and reconciliation commissions (in Peru, Chile and elsewhere) and ongoing conflict (Colombia) and has, after several decades, produced a broad range of responses to the U.S.-sponsored regimes of state terrorism. These projects began in the 1990s and 2000s, after a period in which erasure and amnesty were often the dominant norms and thus benefited from a temporal distance. In Argentina, for instance, this memory culture is steeped within debates about human rights in the present. Yet Argentina is also the site of continued trials of the perpetrators of state terrorism, which functions at times to generate and reproduce cultural memory (Zaretsky, in this volume).

Why has memory emerged as such a powerful global cultural force in these past few decades when it had not been prior? Is this, as many have argued, an embrace of victim culture, a postmodern rejection of history, a response to the disappointments of modernity? Is it an indication of changing concepts of time? Andreas Huyssen (2003) writes that in certain ways, 'our contemporary obsessions with memory in the present may well be an indication that our ways of thinking and living temporality itself are undergoing a significant shift' (4). Perhaps it is simply that once loss was expressed in these cultural forms, it opened up long-repressed needs to give form to pain and grief. The process proliferated once it began because discourses of memory tend to produce competitive frames of affective power. Memorialization is inherently about inclusion and exclusion. Memorials tend to proliferate when their modes of naming and representation leave certain groups feeling left out. So, for instance, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the statue that was constructed next to it of three soldiers (itself a compromise because of a debate over aesthetics) made not only the women veterans but also the Korean War veterans feel excluded. The memorial's presence on the mall ultimately produced the imperative that all wars have individual memorials, ultimately resulting in the creation of the World War II Memorial in 2004, nearly 60 years after the conflict was over. Michael Rothberg has written about the ways that collective memory is often viewed within a framework of scarcity, with the memory of one particular traumatic event literally crowding out other poten-

tially equally important memories of trauma. He asks, does memory have to work like ‘real estate development’ in this way? He proposes,

Against the framework that considers collective memory as *competitive* memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative. (Rothberg 2009, 3)

Rothberg’s entreaty is also about rethinking the importance of memory itself as a cultural force. In other words, understanding how cultural memory functions to crowd out and erase certain memories as it affirms others allows us to see the detrimental political effects of the overdetermination of memory, whether intentional or not. This raises the broader question of whether forgetting is preferable—or even possible in some contexts—if memory can be less determined, more mutable, less a politically charged entity. David Rieff (2016) has argued that memory itself can be an incitement to violence but that forgetting may open avenues to peace. In her chapter in this volume, Leigh Payne discusses the uses of silence as a form of repression and enforced forgetting and also as a means to avoid the demands of retribution and revenge that come from remembering. Must all violent conflict be remembered?

The assertion of cultural memory, through processes of memorialization, museumization, memory tourism and testimony, is inherently political. How we remember traumatic events is crucial to how we move forward as societies, how we resolve conflict; how we remember wars is enormously influential in how future wars are waged. This leads us to the question, how does memorialization relate to the possibility of peace? Do memorials help move cultures toward peaceful resolutions? Sadly, the memory boom of the past 30 years has largely not contributed to a deeper understanding of the consequences of violence and the peaceful resolution of conflict. Yet certain modes of memorialization can open up a space for a moving past conflict rather than its perpetuation through cycles of revenge and retaliation. By examining these different modes of cultural memory, we can begin to see this relationship between modes of cultural memory and the social aims of peace.

THE EXCEPTIONALISM OF MEMORY

One of the key ways that we can understand the dynamics of the memory of violence and conflict is within the framework of exceptionalism. When traumatic events are seen as exceptional, they have the power to crowd out other traumas, as Rothberg notes; as such, they can be used to justify conflicts in

their wake, providing a kind of moral cushion that disallows counternarratives. In other words, exceptionalism is counter to any movement toward peace.

The primary example of a traumatic event that is defined by exceptional discourses is, of course, the Holocaust. While it was not understood in these terms for several decades, by the 1960s, the Holocaust had been defined in many realms—political, historical and scholarly—as an event with no equal in history, an event that effectively redefined the terms of humanity. This narrative has been the subject of significant debate and contestation, yet it has remained powerful nevertheless. As Rothberg notes, the belief that the Holocaust transcended history became widespread by the latter half of the twentieth century and then prompted many challenges in relation to other histories of genocide and extreme violence. He writes, ‘The dangers of the uniqueness discourse are that it potentially creates a hierarchy of suffering (which is morally offensive) and removes that suffering from the field of historical agency (which is both morally and intellectually suspect)’ (Rothberg 2009, 9). Exceptionalist discourses such as this function not only to create moral hierarchies but also to produce heightened forms of reparation and compensation. In the case of the Holocaust, for instance, this has resulted in the Holocaust serving as justification for the policies of the state of Israel toward Palestine and for the brutal and violent repression of Palestinians in the name of the moral right to a Jewish homeland.

The dominance of the Holocaust as a historical event has a parallel in the field of memory studies, in which there has been a debate about the way the Holocaust looms over the field in general. A preoccupation with Holocaust memory can be seen as distorting understandings of World War II and casting a veneer of sacredness on memory that in turn has produced a policing of the aesthetics of memory. The narrative that the Holocaust was unrepresentable in its horror and the influence of Theodor Adorno’s famous statement that ‘after the Holocaust, the writing of poetry has become barbaric’ had the effect of defining any aesthetic engagement with it as a violation of its exceptional status in history. When the memory of particular historical events becomes overdetermined in this way, it is easily deployed as justification for further conflict in ways that negate any peaceful resolution of conflict.

In more recent history, competitive memory is a key force in the narratives that shape an understanding of 9/11 as a defining event of this century. The events of 9/11 were subject to exceptionalist discourses from the very beginning—of U.S. exceptionalism (one with a long history of defining the United States as an exemplary nation) and of 9/11 exceptionalism that defines the events of September 11 as a unique event of global terrorism, one in which the United States is an innocent and resilient player (attacked out of the blue). 9/11 exceptionalism has had deep political consequences

since it effectively justified the changing of legal norms and moral stances that followed in its wake.

The memorialization of 9/11 has been deeply implicated within to this exceptionalist discourse. The construction of a museum and memorial at Ground Zero in New York was shaped by the idea that this event has no parallels in history. The space of destruction at Ground Zero was defined as sacred, a site where reference to other historical contexts was considered to be sacrilege (an early proposal for an International Freedom Center that would address issues of violence and freedom throughout the world was hotly debated and roundly rejected for its aim to see 9/11 in context). The belief of the uniqueness of 9/11 is thus effectively embedded into the scale of the memorial and museum at Ground Zero, with its oversized memorial pools of the two enormous footprints of the original twin towers and a huge underground museum. While the museum's exhibition is quite effective in telling the story of survival of 9/11—with deeply moving stories of those who died and survived that day, of strangers helping each other, of compassion and tragedy—it is deeply flawed in addressing the political and historical meaning of 9/11.

At one end, the museum has on display a large memory gallery with life stories of those who were killed that day and, at the other end, a historical exhibit with an elaborate time line that barely mentions the wars that took place in its aftermath. Memorialization often functions to define events within a particular time frame, with political consequences, and at the museum, the event of 9/11 is defined mainly as one day of terror and death. The exhibition thus fails largely at the task of situating that day in relation to the political context before that day and to make sense of what happened in its wake (Sturken 2015). For instance, the museum has one image of Guantánamo, one poster about a protest against the war in Iraq, one picture of Afghanistan and one mention of the Patriot Act. That the events of 9/11 drove this nation, with enormous public support, to enter two disastrous and costly wars that resulted in hundreds of thousands dead and contributed to a devastating destabilization of the Middle East is not a story that can be addressed within a museum designed to memorialize. Perhaps most shocking is the museum's display, in its main Foundation Hall, of a brick from the Abbottabad compound, where Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011, along with a jacket worn by one of the Navy SEALs of that operation and a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 'challenge coin' awarded for its completion, as if they provide a simple historical closure to the meaning of 9/11. It is difficult in this context not to see the lives of the almost 3,000 people who died on that day as justification for the actions that followed their deaths.

The vision of the future constructed in the museum is sadly embodied in that brick, a future of revenge and seemingly morally justified ongoing destruction and conflict. Exceptionalist narratives are thus quite powerful in the

harnessing of memory toward political aims, and they are disabling to the capacity to imagine different kinds of futures without ongoing conflict. Clearly, the memorialization of 9/11 has enabled further violence and cannot engage with modes of forgiveness, reconciliation or any movement toward peace.

THE GRIEVABLE LIFE

Forms of cultural memory activate discourses of morality. Thus, in providing spaces for memories to be shared, for mourning and experiencing loss, memorials and memory sites can allow for engagements with questions of empathy, the valuing of life and the moral obligations we have to each other in shared humanity. Remembrance can enable a *moral* obligation not to forget traumas, not to forget the dead and, by implication, not to forget why they died. It is often through design that these kinds of moral stances are conveyed. A memorial like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for instance, lists of the names of the Americans who died in the war. In so doing, it asks visitors to mourn the dead as individuals and as a collective. But it is the form of the memorial's design that can be seen as encouraging a moral stance about those lost lives. The memorial's black granite walls are cut into the ground, drawing visitors down into a space of contemplation and conveying a sense of loss. In its defiance of the triumphal codes of monuments, which on the Washington Mall are designed in white stone to be seen from a distance, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial makes a statement against war, conveying through its form that the war was not worth the loss it produced.

We might think that all memorials engage in the moral stance that deaths must be mourned and that violent conflict does not warrant the lives it takes. But a significant number of memorials are built in response to wars, in which the dead have been effectively nationalized. War memorials memorialize those who died on one side of a conflict, and any memorial that speaks to lives lost on both or many sides of a conflict is extremely rare. Here, Judith Butler's concept of the grievable life can help us to see how memory practices can often divide the dead into those who are grievable and those who are not. Butler argues that it is precisely within the experience of mourning and loss that we come to fully engage with the question of humanity, of what counts as human. Thus, the question, 'what counts as human' becomes the question 'whose lives count as lives?', which in turn takes us to 'what makes for a grievable life?' (Butler 2004, 20). A life of value is thus a life worth grieving, a life whose loss can 'undo' us in mourning.

The world is, of course, filled with examples of disparate mourning, of designations of some lives as grievable and other lives as un-grievable, hence unmourned. In its inclusion and exclusion, memorialization often participates

in designating distinctions of the dead into, for instance, victims and perpetrators, the named and unnamed and the innocent and the complicit. Memorialization can be an expensive, involved and complex project, so cultural memory in official forms is often in the province of societies and nations with resources. A significant amount of memorialization takes place within the official context of nations which have political stakes in designating the dead within terms of patriotism. For instance, it is a strange outcome of the events of 9/11 that those who died that day are often described as American patriots, even though several hundred of them were not U.S. citizens. While the Vietnam Veterans Memorial names the Americans who died in that war, because it is a national memorial on the Washington Mall, it cannot even begin to acknowledge the 3 million Vietnamese who died, for whom it was a war of colonialism, invasion and occupation. Artist Chris Burden responded to the memorial in 1991 by creating a work titled *The Other Vietnam Memorial*, which displays Vietnamese names printed on copper panels—why, he asked at the time, are we celebrating our dead, who were the aggressors? (Forgery 1997, D7).

Conflicts over naming occur quite often with memorials, often with debates about who is officially part of those designated to be mourned. In *The Eye That Cries* (*El Ojo Que Lloro*) memorial in Lima, Peru, designed by Lika Mutal, which pays tribute to the victims of the violence perpetrated by military government and the Shining Path guerrillas with whom it was at war from 1980 to 2000, the stones of the memorial unintentionally included the names of some Shining Path prisoners who were killed while in prison. Yet the fraught debate about their inclusion, which resulted in incidents of the memorial being vandalized, provoked a broader discussion about loss (Hite 2012, 42–62). As Butler (2004) writes, ‘The differential distribution of public grieving is a political issue of enormous significance. . . . Why is it that governments so often seek to regulate and control who will be publicly grievable and will not? . . . Why is it that we are not given the names of all the war dead, including those the US has killed, of whom we will never have the image, the name, the story, never a testimonial shard of their life, something to see, to touch, to know?’ (38–39). So it is that memorials are always as much about forgetting as remembering, forgetting certain dead while memorializing others. Naming is always shadowed by the unnamed. Yet any movement toward peace would need a recognition of loss on both sides of a conflict.

REPARATION AND VULNERABILITY

Can memorialization be deployed in ways that do not create competing frameworks of those who can and cannot be grieved? Butler writes about the

difficult of fully accepting the precarity of life and the state of vulnerability that is inherent to cycles of violence. Thus, the vulnerability exposed in an event like 9/11 is to some extent unbearable and must be screened over and transformed into something else, such as militaristic responses and securitization. The memorial and museum at Ground Zero are shadowed by the newly completed 1 World Trade Center, which, as the most expensive and securitized building ever constructed, is an emblem of the nation's desire to mask and counter vulnerability rather than to make sense of it. In addition, the arbitrariness of life, embodied in this case in the compelling and devastating stories told of those ordinary people caught up in history on that day, the arbitrary difference between those who lived and those who died, is deeply threatening to our sense of security and capacity to make sense of life. What would it mean to actually sit with that vulnerability, to understand the degree to which it demands that we not only confront precarity and arbitrariness but also fully come to grasp our interdependence? Butler (2004) asks, 'Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unacceptability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief through violence? . . . If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?' (30). Confronting our collective vulnerability is a crucial issue of our times, in particular as we face futures of global conflict and climate change-induced catastrophe.

These formulations point to the capacity to feel our connection to the other and, in mourning, to consider the loss of others as well as our own. It is a deeply radical act to mourn a stranger, one of the most powerful acts of humanity. Years ago, while researching the AIDS Quilt, I found a letter that I have never forgotten from a family who worked on a quilt panel for someone they had never met which stated, 'Through our work and discussion we have come to love Rodney. Though we know virtually nothing about him, we have all come to think of him with a special fondness'. The process of making a quilt panel is a kind of tarrying of grief; it is about taking time with mourning since it takes a while to produce a panel sewing by hand. To mourn a stranger is to experience that shared sense of vulnerability.

The question of mourning the other has, of course, much larger political consequences, in particular in terms of considering how memorialization can lead to reparative practices rather than to revenge. Here, the work of counter-memorials and the alliance of memorialization with human rights discourse opens up in some ways a means to move beyond competitive memory and the valuing of some lives over others toward reparative connections. In general, counter-memorial strategies emerge not in the immediate aftermath of tragic

events but rather in second- and third-generation contexts and when memorialization is taking place with some distance of time. Since the 1990s, there have been a number of what James Young (2000) calls countermonuments and countermemorials constructed in Germany which not only memorialize but also address the question of memory itself. These works are as much about the creation of a space for debate about memory and the past as they are about memorialization. For instance, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev Gertz's 1986 *Harburg Monument against War and Fascism and for Peace*, commissioned by the city of Hamburg and constructed in a nondescript plaza in a suburb, consists of a large 44-foot pillar of aluminum that residents were encouraged to scrawl inscriptions on. As it filled with writings, it was lowered into the ground, finally disappearing completely in 1993; all that remains is the top of the pillar and a plaque. The memory of what is written about the past, fascism and peace is there, hidden from view yet present in a way that integrates memory as a shadow into the present.

Countermemorials, like Chris Burden's alternative Vietnam memorial, are often conceived as responses to memorial projects that can perpetuate violence. In 2007, artist Joseph DeLappe created the virtual exhibition and memorial competition iraqimemorial.org as a response to the online publication of the 5,201 proposals for the World Trade Center Memorial Competition in the fall of 2003. His aim was to create a mirror call for proposals to memorialize the many more Iraqi civilians who had died in the Iraq War. He states, 'How do we respond as artists (is it possible to respond)—to the deaths of Iraqi civilians that are occurring as the result of the actions of our government?' (Peraica 2008). The proposals, which number more than 180, aim to render these invisible dead present in some way. To mention just a couple, Peter Janssen and Ward Janssen's *The Circle*, 27.5 kilometers long (which represents one millimeter for each Iraqi), is drawn around the center of Baghdad, demarcated by a thin copper wire. The artists write, 'Anyone entering or leaving the city central areas will always have to cross the circle and might for a short moment reflect on those compatriots who did not survive the Iraq tragedies but also on his or her 27,500,000 fellow citizens, fellow mourners'. Nadia Awad's *This War*, featuring thousands of life-size figures of detainees, civilians and children who have been mutilated by the war, is constructed of the reeds from southern Iraq, their heads covered in white sheets. 'I envision these thousands of reed figures floating down the Potomac River and wafting past Capitol Hill in quiet confrontation with the architects of the War'. The project of counting haunts many of these proposals, demonstrating the need to render the dead present in a context of war in which they have literally not been counted. The iraqimemorial.org project participates in a mourning of strangers by rendering visible not only those caught up in the U.S. invasion of Iraq but also those defined within

the codes of war as the enemy: in suggesting that we should mourn the civilians who were killed by the U.S. invasion and occupation, it asks us to mourn across the borders of humanity that are constructed in wars.

The brings us back to the grievable life and the necessary work of aligning memorialization with a sense of all lives as valuable. Many of the memorializations taking place in Latin America stand out in their connection of the memory of state terrorism and torture in the past to human rights struggles in the present. Because the memorialization in Argentina and Chile, for instance, is about the disappearance and torture of people, most of them young, by military dictatorships and because many of the memorial projects were begun 15 to 20 years after these regimes had left power, these memorial projects were spawned in part through the work of human rights organizations. In some of these contexts, practices of protest were transformed into memory rituals. Thus, in Argentina, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo have marched every week since 1977 in front of the government building, with images of their disappeared children, and over time their performance of protest became one of memory (it is also, perhaps inevitably, now one of tourism). Other sites in Argentina, such as Olimpo in Buenos Aires, have transformed former detention and torture sites into community centers that address contemporary immigrant communities and human rights in addition to memorializing those who died there.

Museums of memory are proliferating throughout the Americas in Chile, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, Uruguay and El Salvador. These museums bear witness to the deaths of tens of thousands who were tortured and murdered and disappeared under political regimes over the past several decades, and many situate their exhibitions in relation to human rights. In Chile, the government inaugurated a national Museum of Memory and Human Rights to remember the time of the country's military dictatorship (1973–1990), in which tens of thousands were tortured and thousands killed. The Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos begins with the day of the military coup d'état in 1973 (coincidentally on September 11) and places Chile's attempts to come to terms with the violations in a larger regional and international context. What would it mean for the 9/11 Memorial Museum to have a similar mission? If the 9/11 museum could tell the history of 9/11 in a meaningful way, it too would have to address the question of human rights—not only to see terrorism as violence against human rights but also to examine the abuses of human rights committed by the United States in response to that day's tragedy. The framework of human rights allows us to see how the tragic deaths of those ordinary people who were caught up in history on September 11, 2001, are connected to the tragic deaths that have followed from it. Such a reframing would move toward reparation, toward the goals of peace, rather than revenge.

Precarious life. Vulnerability. Human rights. And irony. It is perhaps ironic that I argue that it is both irony (in the form countermonuments and counter-memorials) and the largely unironic framework of human rights that allow us to transcend the competitive and exceptionalist narratives of memory and to deploy memory as a means toward peace rather than toward further conflict. Yet the mode of irony in cultural memory projects is essentially about demanding a deep and layered understanding of the stakes of memory and a critique of the capacity of memory to carry too much power. Similarly, human rights demand a connection of memory to present struggles, not as an entity separated off from contemporary struggles. These modes offer ways for the deep, meaningful and affective expressions of memory and loss to produce forms of reparation, to remind us that the capacity to grieve the other is one of the acts that makes us most human. It is in their capacity to generate debate, to open up discussions about what conflict has meant, to encourage us to mourn the other, that memorial projects can aid in the project of peace.

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