Annals of the „Ovidius" University of Constanța – Political Science Series
Analele Universității „Ovidius" din Constanța – Seria Științe Politice
Volume 12 (2023): 7-29

MEMORY-WORDS AND MEMORIAL MUSEUMS: THE EFFICACY OF "NEVER AGAIN" IN GUATEMALA

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Received: August 30th, 2023 Accepted for publication: November 15th, 2023

Abstract: This research examines visitor engagement with genocidal memorial museums expressed in visitor comments at the conclusion of the museum visit. We analyze the educative function of memorial museums in genocide prevention. Museums that advance a preventative function are gaining traction in the literature on transitional justice, especially that on non-punitive, restorative justice mechanisms. In this sense, we examine two museums in Guatemala and measure visitor engagement and the efficacy of *never again*. In Guatemala City, we examine the *Casa de la Memoria*, which presents the complete historical narrative of the Maya. In Baja Verapaz, we study the *Rabinal Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Historica*, exclusive to the historical memory of the Maya Achí and which seeks to educate about the genocide committed against them by the government between 1980 and 1984. We develop a typology of the comments we call *memory-words* left by visitors to each museum as recorded in their guest logs/visitor books and in other memorial spaces within each museum that allows for individual expression of the museum experience. Finally, we try to determine whether each museums' typology of memory-words resulted in a particular message (specific to Guatemala) or a more universal message of *never again* that mirrors current mass atrocities world-wide, and if so, in what context.
Keywords: Guatemalan genocide, collective memory, memorial museum, memory-words, transitional justice

Rezumat: Această cercetare examinează gradul de implicare al vizitatorilor în urma vizitelor la muzeele memoriale dedicate genocidului, exprimată în comentariile acestora la încheierea vizitei. În acest sens, examinăm funcția educativă a muzeelor memoriale în prevenirea genocidului. Muzeele care promovează o funcție preventivă au câștigat teren în literatura despre justiția tranzițională, în special din prisma analizelor despre mecanismele nepunitive, bazate pe justiție restaurativă. În vederea realizării acestei cercetări, explorăm două muzee din Guatemala ce ne permit să evaluăm gradul de implicare al vizitatorilor, dar și eficacitatea practicii „niciodată din nou". În Guatemala City, examinăm *Casa de la Memoria*, care prezintă narațiunea istorică completă a

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mayaşilor. În Baja Verapaz, examinăm *Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Historica* din Rabinal, dedicat exclusiv memoriei istorice a Mayaşilor Achí, muzeu care are ca scop să educe despre genocidul comis împotriva acestora de către guvern între 1980 şi 1984. Pe baza acestora, elaborăm o tipologie a comentariilor pe care le-am identificat ca „cuvintele ale memoriei" lăsate de vizitatori în fiecare muzeu, aşa cum sunt înregistrate în jurnalele vizitatorilor /cărţile oaspeţilor, respectiv în alte spaţii memoriale din cadrul fiecărui muzeu, care permit exprimarea individuală a experienţei muzeale. În cele din urmă, evaluăm dacă tipologia „cuvintelor memoriei" asociată fiecărui muzeu, conduce către un mesaj anume (specific Guatemalei) sau, mai degrabă, către unul universal, de tipul „niciodată din nou", mesaj care oglindeşte atrocităţile în masă la nivel global, şi dacă da, în ce context.
Cuvinte cheie: genocidul din Guatemala, memorie colectivă, muzeu memorial, cuvinte ale memoriei, justiție de tranziție

I. Introduction

Memorial museums have come to perform a significant role as agents of transitional justice in post genocidal societies. Alongside their function as keepers of the historical record, memorial museums provide a space for healing and remembrance, a place to bear witness and, support truth and justice initiatives through their documentation of genocide and mass atrocity crimes. As a newer form of memorialization, the memorial museum performs a public educative function that aims to prevent future human rights abuses through raising awareness. Broadly, memorial museums serve as educational epicentres that ostensibly engage their visitors in ways that morally empower the advancement of societal change toward the protection of human rights. Memorial museums across the globe have begun to embrace these educational opportunities in numerous ways from developing local educational programs, convening annual conferences, and engaging in public commemorative activities. In the process, memorial museums through their missions have adopted an educative mantle focused on the prevention of genocide and mass atrocity crimes. Our research is interested in the efficacy of the memorial museums' educative mission to promote the value of "never again" and, if the museum experience imparts values that inspires its visitors to be better human beings that will compel them to speak truth to power when faced with future genocides and mass atrocity crimes regardless of where they occur.

As Paul Williams notes, the memorial museum characterizes a particular type of museum meant to commemorate and remember some form of mass suffering[1]. Heidi McKinnon asserts that by their very definition, museums of memory can operate as spaces for both "healing and advocacy"[2]. This new hybrid museum is intended to produce specific values that inspire its visitors to advocate for a better world. As Apsel and Sodaro observe, museums function to influence their visitors to "change their thinking and behavior" through the persuasive "use of history and memory"[3]. Gensburger and Lefranc contend that memory transmission through museums supports public knowledge of the facts and issues that allows one to change behaviors, presumably to promote a better world[4]. Moreover, can memorial museums inspire visitors to advance human rights and to make linkages between past human rights abuses and current ones? This raises several questions that inform our research – can museums dedicated to memorializing genocide function as agents of individual change? That is, can they foster a sense of moral responsibility on the part of their visitors to advocate for "never again" in the face of genocide? Moreover, how does a memorial museum fulfill both a museum and memorialization function while navigating a historical landscape in which the State denies a genocide took place in a contested political space? And more importantly, can we measure the efficacy of their efforts through the imprint they leave on their visitors? Or, as Apsel and Sodaro contemplate, "is the memorial museum's ability to affect change 'more rhetorical than real'?"[5].

II. Materials and Methods

In our effort to seek answers to these questions, we set out to analyze what we call "memory-words" which we define as the comments, expressions, and other reflections that in-person visitors express in guest books, visitor logs, and

[1] Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).
[2] Heidi McKinnon, "Proposing a Museum of Memory: Reparations and the Maya Achi Genocide in Guatemala", in *Museums and Truth,* ed. Annette. B. Fromm, Viv Golding, and Per B. Rekdal (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 57.
[3] Joyce Apsel and Amy Sodaro, "Introduction: Memory, politics, and human rights", in *Museums and sites of persuasion: Politics, memory and human rights,* ed. Joyce Apsel and Amy Sodaro (New York: Routledge, 2020), 3.
[4] Sara Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc, *Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn From the Past? (*Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2020), 5.
[5] Apsel and Sodaro, "Introduction: Memory, politics and human rights, 3.

other forms of museum engagement that allows for individual expression of the museum experience. Our study examines the memory-words imparted by visitors in two memory museums in diverse locations in Guatemala. The *Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam* in Guatemala City focuses on the complete historical narrative of the Maya in an educative context of never forget. The other is the *Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Histórica* located in the town of Rabinal, in the department of Baja Verapaz. This memorial museum is dedicated exclusively to the historical memory of the Maya Achí, seeking to educate its visitors about the acts of genocide committed by the State against the Maya Achí. Against this backdrop, we then set out to measure the efficacy of each museums' educative role to promote the value of "never again", to uphold human rights and, to determine if the museum experience imparts values that inspires its visitors to be better human beings. We develop a comprehensive typology of categories measured against the key objectives of each museums mission and in keeping with the overall function of memorial museums designed for the memorialization and dignification of the victims. In the case of Guatemala both memorial museums place emphasis on the Maya, the recovery of historical memory and the necessity to never forget. Within this context we consider the importance of the functional space of the museum as an edifice to disseminate this information alongside the contents of the exhibitions. Moreover, we kept in mind Buckley-Zistel's observations that memorial museums are not neutral – that is they do not present a "balanced view;" rather, their narratives are "explicitly political" embedded in a "moral framework"[6]. Williams also notes the tendency for memorial museums to present horrific events within a moral context which politicizes the need to remember and the interpretation of events[7].

In analysing memory-words, our typology aimed to measure the frequency and prevalence of phrasing pertaining to historical knowledge of Guatemala and Maya collective memory, recognition of the Guatemalan genocide, awareness of transitional justice initiatives, the need for truth and accountability, and human rights in general. We also took note of the styles of comments, forms of address, and other demographic information that visitors shared and remained cognizant that knowledge of the above was also dependent on the context provided in each of the museum's exhibits. Our interest in historical knowledge

[6] Susanne Buckley-Zistel, "Detained in the Memorial Hohenschonhausen: Heterotopias, Narratives and Transitions From the Stasi Past in Germany", in *Memorials in Times of Transition*, ed. Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Stefanie Schäfer (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2014), 101.
[7] Williams, *Memorial Museums,* 2007, 8.

and collective memory measures visitor knowledge of the thirty-six years of internal armed conflict, the genocide, and the need to present the complete narrative of the Maya. For example, do they mention individual massacres, reference the disappeared, the internally displaced and the importance of documenting these tragic events? We also examine if visitors comments give meaning and significance to concepts such as reconciliation, remembrance, truth, and transitional justice. In Guatemala, among those visitors who identify as Maya, can we ascertain how they perceive the goals of the respective museums and how they may be linked to the respective Maya normative systems? We examine whether each museums' typology of memory-words resulted in a particular message (specific to Guatemala) or a more universal message of "never again" that mirrors both past and current mass atrocities and human rights abuses world-wide, and if so, in what context.

Our study is not without its limitations. For instance, one limitation concerns the issue of reliability and our inability to measure the longevity of visitor sentiment. How long after one completed their memorial museum visit does the experience remain? Is the longevity of the experience necessary to promote a "never again" response in the face of encountering genocide? Or is the experience of having visited the memorial museum itself, a sufficient reminder to elicit a "never again" response? Balcells et al.'s study that focused on the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Chile asked a similar question regarding the impact of "transitional justice museums", their ability to affect a change in political attitudes, and, in turn, to promote post-conflict reconciliation[8]. Unlike the Balcells et al. study that relied on a random survey of undergraduate university students in Santiago, Chile to measure an emotive response, we had no way of gauging demographic specifics of those who were leaving memory-words behind unless the visitor specifically noted this information. Unless someone listed their place of residence and other details, we had no way of knowing if the sentiments were left by residents, or by Guatemalans from other departments, or foreign nationals / tourists. We also are aware that our translations and interpretation of comments must be placed in a cultural context – for example, expressions such as "bonito (pretty in Spanish)" are not necessarily indicative of a description of the aesthetics of the

[8] Laia Balcells, Valeria Palanza, and Elsa Voytas, "Do Museums Promote Reconciliation? A Field Experiment on Transitional Justice", paper presentation at the International Studies Association Annual Convention, San Francisco, CA., 2018, http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/San%20Francisco%202018-s/Archive/d263dc13-0674-4cd5-8c6a-724cb3d2de69.pdf.

physical space but could also be an expression of appreciation for presenting a tragic narrative of the Guatemalan people.

The idea for our research grew out of the lack of improvement in human rights in several post-genocidal societies alongside the growing patterns of hate worldwide. After every genocide we hear the refrain "never again" articulated by political leaders and others in the international community. This sentiment is often followed by the construction of memorials, and in particular, museums to honor and remember the victims and to educate about these crimes in the spirit of "never again". These worldwide public memorials, including museums, form part and parcel of the new initiatives that both commemorate and inform about mass atrocities and human rights abuses. Louis Bickford calls these memorialization efforts memory works whose aims are both *redress* and *prevention*[9].

The universality of "never again" as a tool for the prevention of genocide was borne out of the Holocaust and the need to educate about this event that claimed the lives of more than six million Jews and five million other victims. This oft-repeated phrase sounded at the end of every genocide since the Holocaust aims to serve as a preventative and educative tool against future genocide and mass atrocity crimes. Former President Barack Obama unfailingly used the phrase repeatedly in his yearly statements to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day in part to ensure that "never again" was not just a phrase of remembrance but also a principled cause. In 2013, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) chose "Never Again" for its Days of Remembrance theme calling for a study of the Holocaust to serve as a warning of genocides that are happening anywhere.

The memorial museum is uniquely poised to achieve an educative function and promote an ethic of "never again" as a means of confronting genocide. As Amy Sodaro explains, memorial museums facilitate the understanding of a violent past and they work to "morally educate" visitors that provide an "opposite set of values" that visitors ostensibly will employ in their day-to-day lives[10]. In our case, both museums advance an educative role about the violence that affected Guatemala during the thirty-six-year armed internal conflict. In Guatemala, the army and its proxies largely targeted the Maya communities as part of the State's "scorched earth" campaign.

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[9] Louis Bickford, "MemoryWorks/memory works", in *Transitional Justice, Culture, and Society: Beyond Outreach*, ed. Clara Ramirez-Barat (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2014).

[10] Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 5.

III. Function of Museums

Museums exercise a valuable role in transitional justice and memorialization because they serve as social spaces for shared public memory and commemorative activities. With this shift in focus where education about genocide is the mission, museum spaces are influenced today by the public voice and their demand for knowledge. The public became the driving force for museums, and museums became stewards of the public trust. Globally, museums are understood and expected to be safe spaces, especially when confronting difficult knowledge, eliminating the elitist voice, and encouraging public engagement and participation. This perspective is evident in both museums mentioned in this study. The *Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam* is a broad-based community museum that engages with numerous local NGOs to educate and more importantly, to provide a space in lieu of a gravesite to commemorate the indigenous Maya victims. The *Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Histórica* in Rabinal is instrumental in the recovery of historical memory of the Maya Achí. Both museums engage directly with their respective public on memory, memorialization, and the public role in the museum. And, both museums are the product of local initiatives for memorializing and educating about Guatemala's violent historical past. The idea that memorialization through museums can advance a preventative function is also gaining traction in transitional justice, especially as a non-punitive, restorative justice mechanism. Sodaro notes the growth of the memorial museum began as a response to the mass atrocities of the 20th century and carry with them a commitment to educate against future atrocities[11]. Moreover, the memorial museum in addition to allowing victims to mourn and commemorate a violent past, presumably instructs us to be better human beings, imparting its visitors with the moral obligation to create a better world. Consistent with Williams and others, we recognize that memorial museums embrace multiple functions beyond the presentation of eye-witness memory to mass suffering. As Sodaro explains, memorial museums are established to fulfill three primary functions:

1. The first is the "museum function" and their task "as a mechanism of truth telling about history and preserving the past"[12]. In this context both museums are committed to documenting the truth about what

[11] Ibid., 4.
[12] Ibid., 162.

happened to the Maya in Guatemala.

2. The second function identified by Sodaro is the "memorial" function that provides a space for "healing and repair" as a form of symbolic reparation that acknowledges the victims and allows for remembrance[13]. Again, the museums in this study meet this second function through their various commemorative activities, recognition of the victims, and providing a public space that acknowledges the atrocities committed against the Maya primarily by agents of the State.
3. The third function Sodaro identifies is the moral function. Memorial museums have a normative purpose to educate their visitors with an ethic of "never again" and stand as beacons that warn against "the dangers of division, ideology, intolerance, and hatred"[14]. The *Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam* embraces this normative role to educate its youth who do not have first-hand memories of recent past atrocities to ensure that such abuses are not repeated.

During our numerous visits to both museums over the course of a three-year period prior to the Covid Pandemic and again in July 2023, we noted that each museum updated and sometimes rearranged their collections to include current events, especially as they pertained to ongoing trials and other transitional justice initiatives in Guatemala. They also repurposed museum space to accommodate commemorative events that took place in each museum's public space marking specific anniversaries. Neither museum makes use of authentic objects or material artifacts that evidence the genocide committed against the indigenous Maya. There are no audio recordings of survivors recounting their ordeals nor photos or illustrations of the hundreds of massacres on display. In part this is primarily because the perpetrators destroyed the objects of material life of the Maya villages and those who survived fled without taking broken remnants of their cultural life. Yet each museum successfully combines its museum, memorial, and moral function in a unique way that defines each museum's relationship to collective memory and the historical narrative as it relates to the genocide.

The memory museums in this study present the stories, lives, tragedies, and cultures of the surrounding communities. The *Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Histórica* is especially active in curating the experiences of the Maya Achí during the genocidal period. By providing their visitors with engagement opportunities

[13] Ibid., 163.
[14] Ibid., 163.

to record their memory-words, visitors actively participate in the retention and perseverance of the information they encounter. Without participation in museums, visitors become passive consumers and take away messages cannot permeate past the exhibition.

In the last exhibition room at the *Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam*, visitors can engage with the space by leaving memory-words on the walls that are periodically refreshed to create a blank sheet for others. Both the walls and the visitors are active participants in sharing the events, as they influence one another. An element in an exhibit may spark a memory, an emotion and, so, through these engagement methods, visitors can contribute to that memory. This has an impact on interpretation because it is no longer unbiased or neutral, but, instead, it is transposed through the lens of the public in that moment. When visitors actively participate in museums through varying engagement methods, such as comments in a visitor book or writing on a graffiti wall, they leave parts of their experience behind. As such they share stories and their voice with other patrons, the museum, and the collection; hence the importance of memory-words. In his study of visitor engagement at the Ammunition Hill National Memorial Site in Israel, Chaim Noy emphasizes the importance of visitor books for their value as "cultural artifacts" and communication channel for visitors to express emotions[15]. Because most museums place the visitor book at the conclusion of the museum experience, visitors collect their impressions throughout their visit. Just prior to departing the museum, writing in the visitor books allows them to engage in what Noy describes as semiotic functions which includes "emotional ventilation" and the sharing of "feelings and impressions in situ"[16].

As a prelude to evaluating the educative functions of both museums, it is important to understand the historical background and the respective path to post genocidal memorialization taken by each museum to understand the functionality of these museums and their significance.

[15] Chaim Noy, "Mediation Materialized: The Semiotics of a Visitor Book at an Israeli Commemoration Site", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no.2 (2008): 175-195.
[16] Ibid., 184.

IV. Guatemala's Internal Conflict and Peace Accord Background

Between 1960 and 1996, Guatemala experienced a protracted armed internal conflict. In the context of this thirty-six-year war and in a period known as *La Violencia*, government forces waged a genocide against the indigenous Maya ostensibly to thwart their alleged support for the guerrillas. At the conclusion of the conflict and as part of the peace process, the 1996 Oslo Accord for Firm and Lasting Peace established the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH). Functioning as a truth commission, the CEH's mandate was to explain why both the government and the guerrillas committed extreme acts of violence that ultimately claimed the lives of over 200,000 people, over 40,000 persons forcibly disappeared, up to a million displaced, and the destruction of over 600 Maya villages. The CEH authors believed that documenting these atrocities and uncovering the truth of what transpired would foster national reconciliation and promote human rights for everyone. When the commission submitted its report to the Guatemalan people, the government of Guatemala, and the United Nations in February 1999, it represented the perspective and experiences of the victims. The Lead Commissioner for the CEH, Christian Tomuschat, views this as a strength because it restored the dignity of the victims and ensured their "suffering would not be lost in the anonymous stream of history"[17]. The CEH report also noted the importance of the recovery of historical memory, both individually and collectively, as a means of preserving the memory of the victims in accordance with the Oslo Accord. The CEH recommended several measures to achieve this goal that included dignity for the victims and victim remembrance – defined as a designated day for the commemoration of the victims, the building of monuments and public parks, and naming public spaces after victims. However, despite the CEH recommendations, memorialization which includes the construction of memorial museums and the search for symbolic transitional justice remains exclusively a grassroots endeavor. This is driven by the fact that the State denies a genocide took place, which left the creation of memorials and memory museums to survivors and indigenous associations.

[17] Christian Tomuschat, "Foreword", in *Memory of Silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission Report*, ed. Daniel Rothenberg (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), xvi.

V. *Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam*

Guatemala City is home to the memorial museum, *Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam*, which opened its doors to the public in 2014. As a public educative space, this memorial museum fulfills the three primary functions of memorial museums identified by Sodaro – museum, memorial, and moral. *Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam* museum's function serves as a mechanism for recording the past and a space in which the events about what transpired are on display for the museum's visitors. This function is evident throughout the museum's ten exhibition rooms that present the meta-narrative of the Maya from their creation, conquest, colonization, the internal armed conflict, and concomitant genocide followed by exhibits that provoke thought on topics such as racism, peace, and healing. Created and designed by the *Centro Para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos (*CALDH), *Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam* functions as a community museum for survivors, their families, and other Guatemalan residents as well as international visitors. It is also a member of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) that recognizes museums, memorials, and historic sites as places of memory working to ensure traumatic memories are remembered and not eradicated.

In terms of fulfilling its memorial function, the museum takes both an educational and commemorative approach. The museum's atrium serves as an educational and commemorative venue for various creative and collaborative approaches to memory, including educational workshops, commemorative rituals, music festivals, fundraising, performance and visual art workshops that advance the museum's overall narrative of human rights violations in Guatemala. The museum serves to remember and reconstruct the collective identity of the Maya, especially their recent violent past and the persistence of racism. The memorial museum provides reflective space at the conclusion of the exhibits that commemorates the many victims of the internal armed conflict whose names are embroidered on individualized quilts that often contain details of their deaths that drape the entire reflection room. It serves as a commemorative site where groups gather every February 25 to perform Maya ceremonies that commemorate the National Day of Dignity of the Victims of Guatemala's Armed Conflict.

The museum directs its educative function primarily at Guatemala's youth who do not have first-hand experience with the country's recent genocide and

violent past. Furthermore, this specific history is not widely taught in public schools. As we discuss later, students' memory-words expressed appreciation for the museum's role in facilitating their learning about Guatemala's history, especially the period of the internal armed conflict. As Elizabeth Oglesby explains, even though the Peace Accords were supposed to result in government investment in education through increased government spending and launching curricular reform, this has yet to materialize[18]. Moreover, her study notes that the teaching of historical memory lacks any type of national oversight and the topic of the genocide remains a contested sphere, especially any instruction centered on the CEH report. For the most part, the study of history is embedded into the larger field of social studies and the textbooks that Oglesby's study examined, pedagogically addressed the CEH report by providing only basic information that tabulated the number of deaths and disappearances[19]. Given these educational limitations, we would assume that the *Casa de la Memoria* "Kaji Tulam" is the first encounter that many of Guatemala City's youth have with the historical record of the internal armed conflict. This might offer an explanation as to why the exhibitions are primarily visual and sparse in narrative text as they are designed to engage a targeted age group. In this context, the memorial museum is more effective in visually directing its moral message through its permanent and temporary exhibits that reconstruct Guatemala's historical memory in the hopes that its youth will work to transform society and take action against racism and patriarchy that continue to characterize society.

V.1. Design of Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam

Visitors enter the memory museum through heavy wooden doors of a converted Spanish colonial style home that leads to a small desk and gated entry. Beyond the gated entry, one enters a naturally lit atrium used for special exhibits, educative programs, and commemorative rituals on days of remembrance. The atrium contains a large painted blue wooden tree adorned with painted red wooden bird silhouettes engraved with the names of various NGOs such as National Union of Guatemalan Women (UNAMG), Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA),

[18] Elizabeth Oglesby, "Historical Memory and the Limits of Peace Education: Examining Guatemala's "Memory of Silence" and the Politics of Curriculum Change", June 2004, Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs Fellows Program, History and Politics of Reconciliation, 15, https://media-1.carnegiecouncil.org/cceia/4996_Elizabeth_Oglesby_Working_Paper_2023-09-26-032207_ezus.pdf/.
[19] Ibid., 16-18.

Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG), Mutual Support Group (GAM), Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (ECAP), along with the names of communities massacred during the armed internal conflict. The ten permanent exhibition rooms follow a chronological course that incorporates various visual objects that are both immersive and interactive. Any narrative texts that accompany the exhibits are all written in Spanish. While this could potentially alienate indigenous Maya if they are not bilingual in Spanish, many of the symbols and visuals draw on shared experiences of all groups in Guatemala that bridge the language barrier. What is notable is its attention to women and their experiences throughout Guatemala's historical past. In each exhibit room there is either a small round cloth tent or a wooden door that invites one to open and learn about women in general or a specific woman associated with the chronological period on display. The spaces dedicated to women are emblazoned with the butterfly weaving symbol associated with the weaving traditions in Tactic, Alta Verapaz.

The first exhibit is dedicated to *origin*, and it introduces the visitor to the richness of Maya culture prior to the Spanish conquest through a visual of the Maya codices that envelope the entire room. As one progresses chronologically, subsequent exhibits feature the cultural destruction of the Maya and their conquest by the Spanish. Visitors then navigate three exhibition rooms that document the thirty-six years of the armed internal conflict. These spaces are visually dark and the objects on display are designed to recreate disarray. In one room, a single lightbulb hanging from the center of the room illuminates the physical destruction of a Maya home littered with material once objects used in the function of everyday household activities that are now broken beyond repair. Faceless silhouettes of a family comprised of a man, women, three children, and a baby are representative of the thousands of indigenous who were displaced, massacred, or fled the violence as refugees. The short narrative script above the silhouettes summarizes the casualties from the extreme violence of the internal armed conflict citing the more than 200,000 deaths and at least 40,000 students, unionists, catechists, and campesinos forcibly disappeared. Visitors conclude their tour in rooms designed to create some semblance of hope and reflection. It is in the last room of the exhibit that visitors have an opportunity to engage by reading memory-words left by others and providing their own reflections on s graffiti wall.

V.2. Methods of Engagement with Visitors

Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam provides visitors with two methods of memory-words engagement: the visitor book and a room at the end which allows visitors to write in any available space in a graffiti like format. Their visitor book is not prominently placed in the museum, instead it resides on a stand near the entrance/exit. Even though visitors are not necessarily directed to write in the guest book by the museum staff, there are total of 826 entries that cover a four-year period beginning in February 2014 and conclude in 2017. The graffiti room is located at the end of their tour immediately following a gallery with reflective content that preemptively stimulates visitors to passionately contribute their reflection. Visitors can contribute by writing on any available surface such as the walls, ceiling, and doors. Curating contributions through these two mediums allow for different types of visitor commentary.

In the graffiti space both the museum exhibits and the visitors are active participants in sharing the events, as they influence one another. This has an impact on interpretation, because it is no longer unbiased or neutral, but instead through the lens of the public in that moment – an observation that Noy observes in his visitor book study[20]. When visitors actively participate in memorial museums through multiple engagement methods, such as comments in a visitor book, they leave parts of their experience behind; they share stories and their voice with other patrons, the museum, and the collection.

V.3. Themes of the Memory-Words in the Graffiti Room

The memory-words left by visitors in the graffiti room we documented just prior to the pandemic reflected the following themes: references to the meta-narrative of the Maya; congratulations on the aesthetics of the museum space; the importance of history and memory; and reference to "never again", never forget. Regarding the genocide, there were a few comments that specifically expressed the familiar refrain in defiance of the State narrative – *si hubo genocidio* (Eng.: there was a genocide) with no attribution to the authors. Additional memory-words left in this space were autobiographical – names and cities of residence alongside phrases related to injustice, hope, change, peace, and love for Guatemala. While there were expressions of the need for Guatemala's youth to be the voices of change, there were no references to the current state of human rights in Guatemala. Absent from this space was any acknowledgment of

[20] Noy, "Mediation Materialized".

the transitional justice issues especially the ongoing CREOMPAZ case (acronym standing for Centro Regional de Entrenamiento de Operadores de Mantenimiento de Paz; Eng.: Regional Training Command for Peacekeeping Operations). In this case, former military officers have been charged with forced disappearances and crimes against humanity at the former detention and clandestine execution center in the area known as Military Zone 21, which ironically presently functions as a United Nations peacekeeper training base. Exhumations on the site uncovered 558 human remains, among these the remains of over ninety children, in four graves which remain the largest mass graves uncovered to date in Guatemala.

When we visited the museum in July 2023, the graffiti room had significantly changed in the tone of the contents of the comments. We know that the room had not been refreshed since May 2019 as several visitors had dated their comments. In contrast to our previous visit, graffiti comments centered on: the need for justice; awareness of governmental corruption; the necessity to not repeat the past; and recognition that a genocide occurred. The 2023 Presidential elections in Guatemala which focused on governmental corruption and political violence could account for the uptick in comments on ending government corruption, the need to never repeat the past, and acknowledgement of systemic violence in the country.

V.4. Ledger-Bound Visitor Book

The other method of in-person visitor engagement is the ledger-bound visitor book. In contrast to the graffiti wall that is periodically refreshed with a coat of white paint, washing away previous memory-words, the visitor book has permanency. The first entry corresponds to the opening of the museum in February 2014 and the last entry recorded was in February 2017. Most memory-words were recorded in 2014, with a total of 632 entries; fifty-six entries in 2015; 113 in 2016, and twenty-five in 2017. The museum no longer made the visitor book available to visitors after August 2017 and the museum staff did not provide any details why they no longer provide this method of engagement. Of these, eleven percent of the comments reflected on the historical and collective memory of the Maya and the acknowledgement of "our memory" in the context of the historical presentation of the museum's exhibits; thereby fulfilling the museum function that Sodaro discusses[21].

There were also corresponding memory-words with many comments grateful

[21] Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*.

for the "moral education" the museum experience imparts to its visitors and the necessity to teach the truth of what transpired. While two percent of the posts acknowledge that a genocide took place, less than one percent of memory-words specifically articulate "never again". Indirect references to transitional justice are made primarily by international visitors to the museum. Among these include Father Roy Bourgeois, founder of School of the Americas Watch (SOA Watch) who expressed "hope for the struggle" (nd) and a member of the Veterans for Peace noting the crimes against humanity committed against the people of Guatemala (nd). The museum performs a valuable memorial and museum function reflected in the majority of visitor comments that appreciate how the museum captures Maya historical and collective memory. While several of the museum exhibits focus on the genocide, the less than 1% of visitor comments that overtly express the comment *never again* could be a function of the fact that the museum positions the genocide in the 500-year collective narrative of the Maya.

VI. *Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Histórica*, Rabinal

Located on a side street in the center of Rabinal, the *Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Histórica* is an unimposing one-story structure that sits within plastered white walls and a black metal gate. Save for the sign that sits above the gate with the memorial museum's name, there is no other identifiable marker pointing to its function as a memorial museum. Inside is a long and wide outdoor courtyard with a passageway that leads to the museum's three permanent exhibit rooms and to a large outdoor area that hosts community activities. Many of the courtyard walls host banners that contain dozens of hand-made embroidered fabrics with the names of massacre victims and the disappeared with the date they perished or were kidnapped.

The museum credits its establishment to local civil society organizations, chief among them The Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of the Violence in the Verapaces, Maya Achí (ADIVIMA), who founded the museum in 1999 with the aim at reclaiming historical memory and local

reconciliation[22]. The museum also holds the distinction of being the first museum of its kind to establish a space for survivors of a specific Maya culture, the Achí, for the remembrance and memorialization of the victims of the violence. As noted in the CEH, the Army and the Civil Defense Patrols (PACs) massacred twenty percent of the Maya Achí people between 1981 and 1983. This provided the momentum for the creation of the museum with the mission to "rescue, recover historical, cultural memory, and promote the Maya Achí identity" (Rabinal Achí Community Museum, n.d.).

The museum identifies itself as a community museum because it works together with the local communities on their behalf in the pursuit of its mission and objectives. The founders distinguish the museum, memorial, and moral functions along cultural, historical, and educational keystones that support its mission and overall objectives that are evident in the museum spaces. Inside the museum compound, the gravel path leads to three permanent exhibit rooms. The description of the exhibitions is important in understanding how the museum and its' visitors engage with one another. The first room of the collection is a solemn space specifically dedicated to the dignification of the victims. The dark blue walls function to create a sense of somberness and draw attention to the illuminated glass display cases that line the walls of the room. The lighted cases contain dozens of black and white photographs mounted against a white background.

Engraved on the center post that anchors the room is an inscription in both Spanish and Achí that informs the visitor that they are encountering the memory of their brothers and sisters from the various communities in the region who were massacre victims of the genocide between 1980 and 1983. The images of the victims represent the loss of community and religious leaders, Maya priests, midwives, healers, artisans, and thousands of others among them including the elderly and pregnant women. At first glance, the black and white identification type photos seem repetitive and non-descript. Among the sea of photos, the frontal gaze of each image appears expressionless and gender distinctions seem to be the initial differentiating feature among the images. However, among closer examination the images convey much more than binary distinctions between men and women.

Each image is personal, providing us with the name of the victim and, in

[22] Heidi McKinnon, "Proposing a Museum of Memory: Reparations and the Maya Achi Genocide in Guatemala", in *Museums and Truth,* ed. A.B. Fromm et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

many photos, we learn which community they called home and the date they perished. The more one engages with each individual photo, the more we understand we are staring back at a human being, a real person whose image represents a moment of lived time rather than a death. It also reinforces Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory and the utility of photos as "images of remembrance" and the role of museums that "bridge the distance between memory and postmemory and between postmemory and oblivion"[23]. In this context, we recognize that the museum exists to fulfill a moral function as an educative tool for the public in addition to its memorial role for survivors.

The center pillar in the room also contains the engraved names and ages of the children massacred and listed according to their respective communities, among these include Río Negro, Pichec, Patixlan, Pancal, and Chichupac. The docent conveyed to us that the children's engraved names occupy space on the center support pillar because they represent the heart of the Maya Achí community.

The second room in the permanent exhibit is the "processes of dignification" where eight poster-sized color photomurals line the brightly painted walls than the subdued hue in the previous room. The exhibit's placard describes the contents of the posters as a journey – the eight-step process undertaken by the survivors to dignify both the massacred and disappeared. The progression begins with the survivors filing a public complaint denouncing the clandestine cemeteries before the Public Prosecutor's Office (*Ministerio Público*) in Guatemala City with the legal assistance of ADIVIMA. The exhumation of the remains of the deceased from the clandestine cemeteries follows with the authorization from the *Ministerio Público* and the active participation of the families.

Steps three and four involve taking DNA samples from survivors to identify the height, age, sex, cause of death and in-depth forensic analysis. Once these steps are completed, the families are reunited with the remains of the deceased who then hold a wake to conduct their traditional ceremonies and pay their respects to the dead before they are permanently laid to rest. The final two steps include inhumation in which the remains are buried in legal cemeteries and holding commemorative festivals, which are held at different times of the year. There is also a video playing on a screen documenting the tedious exhumation process. In the year between our visits to the museum, they acquired an interactive computer kiosk that takes visitors to several websites. Among these

[23] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 248-249.

are the documentary film – *Finding Oscar* (2016), recounting the Dos Erres massacre and the story of the two children taken by the military, the REHMI (Recovery of Historical Memory) project, the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG), a database of the victims of the armed internal conflict, TED talks, and the 2011 documentary, *Granito*.

In room three of the permanent exhibit the museum highlights several of the cultural and ancestral practices identified with the Maya Achí through a combination of narrative text and photographic visuals. This theme emphasizes the importance and need to recover historical memory. The narrative text in Spanish that accompanies the exhibit's photographs informs us that the genocide destroyed the social fabric of the group, one of the museum's objectives being to restore that social fabric and recover cultural practices, particularly those generally associated with women's roles.

The narrative text further explains that because many of the survivors experienced forced internal displacement, the Achí became separated from the objects of their material culture including musical instruments and masks used in spiritual practices, access to medicinal plants, and community food and drinks that defined their culture. Featured is a case of archeological objects, a display of masks and musical instruments integral to spiritual ceremonies and four prominent poster sized displays that highlight the important role women have fulfilled in the community that present activities of Achí life and culture before genocide.

VI.1. Memory-Words in the Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Histórica

Within the cultural space of the museum, we come to appreciate the totality of the Achí culture and the museum's educative function in promoting the importance of cultural rights as human rights. Evaluating the Rabinal Memorial Museum's educative and moral function, we explored its visitor engagement exhibits by examining their reflections on the museum experience as recorded in the museum's guest book – the approach we replicated in the *Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam*. Again, our categories centered around the recovery of historical memory and collective Maya identity; the memorialization and dignification of the victims; the necessity to never forget; and the importance of the functional space of the museum as an edifice to disseminate this information. Moreover, we wanted to know if memory-words capture the questions we sought to answer regarding the functions of each museum particularly as they relate to transitional justice as well as concepts such as reconciliation, reparations,

remembrance, historical, and collective memory? And among those visitors who identify as Maya, can we ascertain how they perceive the goals of the respective museums and how they may be linked to the respective Maya normative systems? Did memory-words result in a particular message (specific to Guatemala) or a more universal message of "never again" that mirrors current mass atrocities and human rights abuses world-wide, and if so, in what context?

The majority of memory-words in the visitor log at the *Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Histórica* were left by guests primarily from the department of Baja Verapaz. Visitors emphasized appreciation for the museum's attention to the importance of both victim and cultural remembrance and for documenting the historical memory of the Achí during the internal armed conflict. Of the 408 visitor comments recorded from April 2017 through September 2019, approximately eleven percent recognized the importance of historical and collective memory. None of the visitors expressed memory-words in any of the Mayan languages; instead, the overwhelming majority of memory-words recorded in the visitor book were written in Spanish, followed by English. Many of the memory-words were complimentary on the museum's design and exhibits, expressing their appreciation for the museum's memorial and museum functions. In the nearly three years of comments, only four memory-words made any specific reference to the genocide with the expression "Guatemala Never Again" and these were written by visitors who listed their domicile as Guatemala City. Words or phrases that reference "never again" we documented more often in the museum's Facebook posts as opposed to the in-person visitor log. Furthermore, the majority of visitor book memory-words expressed the importance of the recovery of historical memory and the importance of the dignification of the victims over labelling these as genocide.

VII. Conclusion

In attempting to measure the efficacy of each museum's ability to affect a particular moral response on the part of its visitors, i.e., "never-again", we can tentatively conclude that the memory-words left in both museums the *Casa de la Memoria, Kaji Tulam* and the *Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Histórica* varied according to the type of visitor we were able to identify. Keeping in mind what Apsel and Sodaro voice when they note that even though museums strive to change their visitors, "it is highly unlikely that a visitor can be ethically

transformed after just a few hours in an exhibit"[24]. While both museums embrace exhibition styles that appeal to an emotion-laden collective memory, visitors bring their own experiences and backgrounds to these spaces which shapes their responses.

In the *Casa de la Memoria, Kaji Tulam* the majority of visitors who recorded their memory-words were middle and high school students. By their own admission, this was their first exposure to the tragedy of the internal armed conflict and its impact on the Maya. Moreover, given their education levels, we can speculate that they lack awareness of concepts such as transitional justice and "si hubo genocidio/there was a genocide" particularly given that the State denies such an event took place. Furthermore, the *Casa de la Memoria, Kaji Tulam's* exhibits are primarily based in visual narrative and do not include video testimonies that would give visitors an opportunity to identify with a person that could potentially elicit an emotive response. Also, neither of the museums and their exhibits are centered around themes of transitional justice or "never-again" nor are any of the current judicial proceedings against perpetrators featured. Memory-words that do express the notion of "never-again" were left by visitors with an awareness of the genocide and violence against the Maya.

In the *Museo Comunitario de la Memoria Histórica*, most of the visitors come from the local Achí community and many of them are repeat visitors. They often attend commemorative and educative events held at the museum and often use the visitor book as a check-in log of museum traffic. Moreover, they are primarily Achí Maya language speakers and aside from checking in, rarely leave memory-words in the visitor log. Of the many Spanish or English memory-words which did express solidarity with the Maya Achí, these comments are left primarily by university students that come from the United States or from Guatemala City.

While neither museum directly imparted to its visitors an ethos of "never-again", both memorial museums fulfilled their museum, memorial, and even the moral function albeit not as a direct expression of "never-again". Memory-words expressed by visitors to both museums did speak to the importance of learning about the recent past and the importance of collective memory and expressed gratitude for the educational role played by each museum. Lastly, the ability of each museum to adapt its exhibition space holds the promise of eliciting an ethos of "never-again".

[24] Apsel and Sodaro, *Museums and Sites of Persuasion*, 10.

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