Sodaro, Amy (2018) *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memory Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Sociologist Amy Sodaro's first monograph is a welcome addition to a growing body of literature within memory studies that examines the global turn in using museums to commemorate past mass atrocities. Her analysis is grounded in the comparison of five international memorial museums: the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC; the House of Terror (*Terrorhaza*) in Budapest, Hungary; the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre (KGMC) in Rwanda; the Museum of Memory and Human Rights (MMHR) in Santiago, Chile; and the National September 11 Memorial Museum in New York. Sodaro uses 'institutional ethnography' to document the circumstances behind these sites' creation, analyse their exhibits, and consider how the resulting public dialogues 'engage communities in discussions about the past' (p. 6). She takes an appropriately critical approach, revealing that while each site has been created with the stated purpose of promoting 'historical truth-telling' and facilitating individual healing and social repair, they inevitably 'reflect much more on the present regimes that build them than they do actually confront the past' (p. 10). Sodaro thus argues that memorials museums are fundamentally flawed, 'with the past being simply another arena for enacting present politics' in ways that can actually exacerbate tensions within atrocity-affected communities (p. 11).

In the introduction, Sodaro provides valuable context for the recent global proliferation of memorial museums. She explains memorial museums' popularity as grounded in practitioners' beliefs in the 'positive functions of memory,' whereby 'acknowledging human rights abuses and recognizing victims through memory is morally the correct and necessary response to violence' and is 'one of the surest inoculations against future violence' (p. 16). However, the inherent tension is that this approach obscures the possibility of memory being employed to facilitate negative outcomes, such as inciting future atrocities: possibilities that are consistently overlooked by the memorial museums that Sodaro analyses. Similarly, given the limits in what memorial museums can depict and

communicate to visitors, the historical narratives they disseminate—while legitimised by museums' 'privileged status in society' as trustworthy sources for information—are often overly-simplistic and highly politicised (p. 23). As such, they remain steeped in controversy among different parties to the respective conflicts they represent, and limited in their ability to facilitate their goal of ending atrocities in the increasingly violent twenty-first century.

To this end, the first memorial museum on which Sodaro focuses is the USHMM. The USHMM is unique among the case studies Sodaro analyses in that it was established far from where the Holocaust occurred. However, its importance lies in its emergence as an archetype for subsequent memorial museums internationally. Sodaro maps the motivations and controversies that informed the USHMM. She then shifts to an overview of the exhibits, which adopt a storytelling approach centred on an 'American telling of the Holocaust that emphasizes American ideals and values' to evoke an emotional response in visitors (p. 52). The intended outcome is the visitor's identification with the victims, survivors, and liberators and condemnation of the Nazi perpetrators, bookended by reminders of the US's role as a witness to Jewish suffering, a liberator of the concentration camps, and a host to post-war Jewish immigrants. Additionally, it seeks 'to translate the lessons of history into action' via an ambitious public education programme consisting of an interactive website, travelling exhibits, and commemorative events (p. 56). However, Sodaro notes that the USHMM simultaneously reinforces an idealised, mythical vision of what it means to be American that obscures the 'intolerance, racism, and hatred, including anti-Semitism, that is circulating in American society' (p. 56-57).

Unsurprisingly, given the USHMM's status as a model memorial, this tension between memorial museums' stated objectives and their deeply politicised portrayals of atrocities tendency to undermine these objectives carries through the remaining four case studies. Regarding the House of Terror, its creators sought to expose 'the truth' about Hungary's fascist and communist past, hold the perpetrators publicly accountable, and

provide a space for the survivors of communism and fascism 'to come to terms with the past' (p. 67). The exhibits undermine these goals however, by largely overlooking Hungarians' complicity in these atrocities, including the attempted annihilation of the nation's Jewish community during the Holocaust, in favour of a broad narrative of Hungarian victimhood. Sodaro thus views the anti-Communist stance the memorial museum seeks to inspire in visitors as nefarious, given that under Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, the nation is 'slipping away from democracy toward authoritarianism,' and experiencing a resurgence in political violence motivated by similar fascist and racist ideologies to those internalised by the House of Terror's perpetrators (p. 78).

In the case of the KGMC, Sodaro acknowledges its creators' commitment to providing genocide survivors with a place to remember the victims, while promoting national unity and educating visitors to prevent genocide. But she once again questions the site's ability to accomplishment these objectives given the exhibits' tendency to legitimise President Paul Kagame's regime 'antidemocratic politics… at the expense of the victims and survivors' (p. 87). Sodaro notes that the KGMC exhibits clearly blame the genocide on Rwanda's colonial invaders—the Germans and Belgians who introduced the ethnic divisions that made the genocide possible—and the absence of international commitment to intervene in 1994 to save Rwandan lives. It simultaneously privileges the loss of Tutsi lives while ignoring the broader violence that negatively impacted Rwandans' lives in the 1990s, including atrocities perpetrated by Rwanda's ruling party against Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa civilians. For these reasons, Sodaro argues that the KGMC's goals 'of preventing future violence, dictatorship, or genocide… remain to be truly tested' (p. 110).

Whereas the House of Terror and the KGMC have established an overtly politicised narrative of the atrocities they sought to commemorate, Chile's MMHR—while still intended to serve a site for survivors to remember their murdered loved ones and educate visitors—has pursued a more 'neutral' accounting of the Pinochet regime's atrocities. However, this

approach is necessitated by the ongoing political power enjoyed by many of Pinochet's supporters in Chile's government and military, and ongoing political divisions among Chileans, more broadly. Once again, Sodaro's analysis reveals that politics have shaped the form and function taken by this memorial museum: in this instance, creating a 'partial and sanitized' version of the past that teaches visitors little about the historical context that made the human rights abuses possible (p. 137).

The final and most recent case study—the National September 11 Memorial Museum—suggests that global practitioners are continuing to invest uncritically in a problematic model for commemorating mass atrocities. Based almost exclusively on victims' and survivors' testimonies, the exhibits portray the terror attacks as having occurred 'out of the blue,' allowing visitors to 'forget about the causes of the attack,' and ends with the US's subsequent Global War on Terror being celebrated as a 'necessary response' (p. 158; 152). As in the case of the USHMM, Sodaro questions the wisdom of this highly politicised portrayal of events given its ability to 'strengthen the kind of outsider/insider division and triumph of the glorious nation that has the potential to contribute to new forms of twenty-first-century violence' (p. 161).

Taken together, Sodaro's analysis highlights the many potential pitfalls of memorial museums, particularly in contexts dominated by authoritarian regimes who use these sites to reinforce their particular political agendas. In the process, she effectively calls into question many of the stated benefits of memorial museums and related commemorative activities—and indeed, transitional justice more broadly—which are grounded in an internationally-exported understanding of modern societies as capable of progress toward peace and inclusivity if only they do an effective job of recognising and commemorating past atrocities. Indeed, her concluding statement—that it remains unclear whether memorial museums will ultimately more effectively serve 'to reinforce the hegemony of the nation and its power structures or to uphold the values of inclusion, tolerance, and democracy that memorial

museums are meant to embody'—gives rise to provocative questions arguably best investigated by researchers who take a more comprehensive approach to understanding the memories of atrocity-affected people from different sides of the conflict (p. 184). Some research of this nature is already underway, though largely overlooked in Sodaro's analysis. However, this book demonstrates that there is much more research to be done and offers inquiring minds a useful starting point in this regard.