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# Signifying the Place of Unforgettable Memory: Atrocity and Trauma in a Post-Conflict Landscape

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**Signifying the Place of Unforgettable Memory: Atrocity and Trauma in a  
Post-Conflict Landscape**

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Signifying the Place of Unforgettable Memory: Atrocity and Trauma in a Post-Conflict  
Landscape

**Abstract**

After active inter-group lethal violence subsides places at which atrocities occurred are often assigned significance, reflecting an altered social topography influenced by ideology that may foster the hardening of socio-ethnic boundary distinctions. While using a comparativist approach, this paper explores the relationships between socio-cultural trauma, places of atrocity, and socio-political polarization. Two sites in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, where highly publicized massacres occurred, illustrate the power of place significance in social environments vulnerable to flare-ups of violent conflict.

Key Words: atrocity, place significance, Rwanda, former Yugoslavia

*“Places make memories cohere in complex ways.” (Hayden, 1997, p.133)*

Within a few months after the now infamous 1994 genocidal mayhem in Rwanda the United Nations and numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) initiated in-depth investigations and documentation of atrocities. In late 1995 and early 1996 forensic investigations at Home St. Jean, a Catholic church complex at Kibuye near Lake Kivu in western Rwanda took place under the auspices of the newly established International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). These investigations were focused on massacres that occurred on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of April, 1994 at both the church complex and Gatwaro Stadium in the town of Kibuye. Thousands were killed with guns, machetes, pangas, hoes, and clubs. Exhumation of a mass grave near the rear of the church, as well as those bodies lying near the surface in the surrounding brush and along the lake shore, resulted in the recovery of approximately 500 individuals. Of the 460 victims exhumed in the mass grave, at least half were infants, children and young people under the age of eighteen, most all having suffered from blunt force trauma. The identities of almost all individuals were unknown.

Near the end of the recovery process and initial forensic analyses, clothing with identifiable markings removed from the bodies was laid out on tarps in the front of the main entrance to the church. Relatives and others knowledgeable about possible victims were requested to walk through the rows of clothing and, if possible, assign any clothing to a known individual in an attempt to establish possible identity. Within the mix of people that day was a young girl standing with her back tightly against the front of the stone church wall, her head near the sill of one of the once large stained glass window cavities. She had a very solemn, emotionless look while a small but tight circle of people made attempts to talk with her. This girl, as one of the few survivors of this mass killing,

had only a few months earlier, hid motionless under piles of dead and mortally wounded that were heaped among the rows of benches inside the church. She was now confronted with an almost forced encounter with that horror, being only a few feet from the very church floor in which she experienced extremely brutal killing. During her time there that day this young girl's reluctance to peer into the church, forever to be a defining place in her life, was obvious.

This girl's experience during the mass killing was shared unfortunately by many people in myriad places scattered across the country. Personal accounts and the detailed interviews with survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators actively involved at various scales continue to be documented and published in widely diverse literature (e.g., Lyons & Straus, 2006; Hatzfeld, 2007; Larson, 2009). The now repaired and active Catholic church at Kibuye is but one of hundreds of preserved sites serving as memorials to the massacres. Although many survivors are reported to want more monuments and memorials at killing sites, "to remember", "to remind" (Miller & Miller, 2004, p. 139), many places of atrocity are preserved only in the memory carried by individual actors - survivors, victims, perpetrators, witnesses, and relatives. The Rev. Simon Bayijahe, pastor of a former Seventh-Day Adventist chapel in Mugonero where massacres occurred, verbalized the social memory of much of the surviving population several years after the killing, "Forgetting is not easy, even if you want to forget. If you lose your entire family and you see all these signs of damage and all these mass graves, how can you forget? .... You can't just forget" (Lacey, 2001).

Many places at which massacres or other atrocities occurred during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda attain what Cook (2005, p. 296) assessed as significant "special

status” in that their preservation and/or memorializing is a means by which to “reveal the truth” about the content, context, and extent of lethal violence at a site. Recent essays by Till (2003, pp. 290-292,297), Longman and Rutagengwa (2004, p.175), Foote and Azaryahu (2007, p.131), Dwyer and Alderman (2008, pp.14,93) and Pennebaker and Gonzales (2009) have noted that the socio-cultural “meanings” assigned to sites or spatially defined events that are commemorated or memorialized are subject to change through time. These sites can take on what Pred (1984, p. 287) referred to as “place-specific biographies”, evolving as the physical, social and built environment undergoes transformation (e.g., Marcuse, 2005; cf., Winter, 2009). The commemoration of sites is, as made explicit by Dwyer and Alderman (2008, p. 73), a “custodial process” whereby individuals in some manner invested in the political arena of a geo-polity influence the conception of and interpretation of the past.

In the context of places of mass killing or other atrocities this potential for variance in interpretation and re-orientation is laden with sociological significance worthy of examination. What conditions in the social environment influence the vulnerability to variability in the assignment of “meaning” to these places? Under what conditions and to what extent do places at which atrocities occurred have influence in socio-cultural boundary making in a post-conflict environment? To what extent does the signification of a site of past atrocity through preservation and memorializing influence reconciliatory dynamics among individuals having identified or aligned with groups in violent conflict?

This essay employs a qualitative comparative approach to explore the relationships between sites of atrocities, socio-cultural trauma, and socio-political

polarization. It also examines mechanisms of maintaining and enhancing socio-political power within a society where the effects of recent inter-group violence is reflected in the status and interpretation of places of atrocities. Massacre sites in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda are used as case studies, both because of personal investigative experience in these areas during and immediately following the active violence and because the overall conflicts occurred within the same time frame. Internal warfare in the former Yugoslavia (1991-1995) and the genocidal mayhem in Rwanda during the spring and summer of 1994 are both characteristic of what Fein (1990, pp. 29-30; 86-91) has termed “retributive genocide”, where the decimation of a group contending for power is targeted. Additional references to places of genocidal massacre in other social environments are included for the purpose of assessing the extent to which the significance assigned to these sites is vulnerable to the dynamics of the socio-economic landscape in which they are situated.

### **The Topography of Identity Marking**

What’s come to be termed, with malevolent meaning, “ethnic cleansing” – characterized by selected mass killings, rapes, property destruction, theft, and the forced removal from a landscape those survivors deemed “the other” – is, and has been throughout history and prehistory, a highly successful instrument of genocidal intent. Contemporary and highly publicized conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, the Darfur of Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo exemplify all of those characteristics yielding rapid and dramatic change to the social topography of an area. In many of these dynamic socio-cultural environments of extreme violence, there is no interest in absorption of a population or ethnic cohort in the sense of conquest but rather

the depopulation of villages and rural areas of “the other”, for as anthropologist Simons (1999, p.16) made clear, “securing the future often demands the permanent disposal of rivals, it may not be enough to simply dissolve in-group ties”.

Atrocities committed in the context of lethal conflict occur at different spatial and social scales – between individuals, between or directed at families, villages, or directed toward groups of individuals assigned an identity while at the mercy of a dominant adversary. Places at which an atrocity occurred also take on significance at various scales in a post-conflict environment (e.g., Cappelletto, 1998, 2003; Portelli, 2003). These sites have no inherent, determinate meaning but rather are the “subject of particular discourses of power” guided by ideology that differentiates social groupings (Cresswell, 1996, pp. 59-60, 149-155; Ashplant, 2000). Such places are often forever imbued with landmark status where remembrance has the potential to enhance support of goals deemed achievable by the dominant cohort of the populace. In survivor and eyewitness accounts of atrocities and massacres the visual-spatial component of memory is consistently significant: “Places are the trigger and, at the same time, the setting of memory” (Cappelletto, 2003, p. 254).

Places that are selected for investment by highly informed and motivated political elites are often those that have the potential to promote a collective identity pursued for a geo-polity. Being a victim, as perceived socio-culturally, is a prime driver in supporting investment in the preservation and memorializing of a place. Alexander (2004, p. 24) asserts that “By allowing members of wider publics to participate in the pain of others, cultural traumas broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy, and they provide powerful avenues for new forms of social incorporation”. Conceptualizing a



shared identity with those victimized at a particular place fuels the socio-political goal of solidarity. These sites have the potential to serve as “identity markers” whereby the social representation of a past event reflects group power in relation to social memory (Devine-Wright & Lyons, 1997; Tota, 2003; Hayden, 2004). The decision-making that underlies the socio-economic investment in signifying a place where atrocities occurred is of interest here, that being what Benton-Short (2008, p. 265) refers to as “the politics of location.” In the context of multiple massacres and other atrocities on a landscape the question is one of why the investment here instead of there.

Some post-conflict landscapes like that of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia are punctuated by signified places promoting the collective identity ascribed to by the cohort of the society that maintains socio-economic dominance. Two sites discussed here, in Rwanda and the other in Croatia, exemplify the signification assigned to an event where the victims of massacre are those identified with the dominant cohort of the populace now in control of the landscape. Both places are deemed “sacred” in public spaces.

### **Representing Atrocity: Kibuye, Rwanda and Ovcara, Croatia**

Hundreds of memorials to the 1994 genocidal killings in Rwanda are placed at schools, stadiums, churches and along roadways, often serving as magnets for tourists. Whether visitation to these sites includes “educational value”, in the sense that the visitors are motivated to examine the complexity of human social dynamics, is highly questionable (e.g., Ashworth & Hartman, 2005; Schaller, 2007). What is notable is how visitors are drawn to these places “on the condition that the events of which they bear witness are truly unimaginable” (Runia, 2007, p. 314). The voyeuristic pull to experience

the site visit, no matter how briefly, enables the visitor a means by which to interact with the place and assign personal landmark status to the trauma of victims.

A place where massacres or other atrocities occurred is imbued with intense emotional meaning for survivors and witnesses, resulting in “place attachment”, the emotional bonding formed by the individual with a site that is very high in degree of meaningfulness (Povrzanović, 1997; Milligan, 1998; Crossland, 2002; Antonsich, 2010). Moreover, future interaction, imagined or realized, with the physical setting is often a source of unsettling anxiety. To these individuals, the site of killing itself, apart from what is tangible or visible, becomes the “monument”, what Steinberg and Taylor (2003, p. 453) call the intangible “memories of the mind”.

The place on the landscape, recognized as the site of a killing or other atrocity, serves not only as a physical landmark to observers but as a temporally-coded autobiographical landmark in the right hemisphere of the brain of the person who experienced or witnessed the event. During an experience of high stress, emotion, or pain, the individual encodes, as a “viewer”, the orientation and location of other figures at the place of experience. A survivor or witness who sees the site of an atrocity refers to the self in the retrieval process as the anchor in space and time.<sup>1</sup> The traumatic experience of the girl at the church in Kibuye described above is exemplary of how “collective memory” becomes strongest where a memorialized place brings acknowledged “event memories” together with private memories (Wagner-Pacifici, 1996, p. 312; Wertsch, 2002, pp. 46-45). Representations of the past at a site can continue to be shaped by survivors and their descendants, as well as by governments.

Decision-making surrounding post-conflict investment in sites of massacre or atrocity is influenced by not only the numbers of victims, but by the context in which the killing occurred. The concept of atrocity is highly fluid, conditioned to a great extent on the social status of the victims, their innocence relative to others in the setting, the cruelty inflicted, and the temporal-spatial context of the event in the overall inter-group conflict. In late November of 1991, approximately five months after Croatia broke from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the city of Vukovar on the Danube River in eastern Slavonia came under intense attack by coordinated Serbian military and paramilitary forces. When the city fell on November 19 some 65-87 percent of the Croatian military and armed civilians who defended the city had been killed (Central Intelligence Agency, 2002, I p. 101, II pp. 204-205). At the time, the hospital in Vukovar contained primarily personnel wounded as result of the fighting and siege of the city. More than 300 of these patients and staff were taken from the hospital by Serb forces, packed into buses and driven to a large storage hanger at the hog-raising facility outside of the village of Ovcara. This group constituted mostly wounded men ranging in age from 16 to their seventies, but allegedly a few older women and one young pregnant woman. Late into the night of November 20-21, groups of 20 or more were trucked to a garbage dump near the head of a drainage. At this place, 200 were killed, their bodies buried with trash and the remains of dead farm animals. In the fall of 1996, 198 men and two women were exhumed and forensically examined, 98 percent of which have been identified (Stover and Peress, 1998; Central Intelligence Agency, 2002, II pp. 21-215; Sense News Agency, 2006). In December of 1998, a monument in the form of a tall obelisk with an inscribed

dove dedicated to the “Croatian defenders and civilians from the Vukovar hospital” was unveiled at the killing site. A visitor’s center and memorial is located nearby.

Both the Catholic Church at Kibuye and the rural site of the former garbage dump near Ovcara are currently public spaces deemed “sacred” in the contemporary socio-political environment. In contrast to the church at Kibuye the Ovcara site does not include bodies of the victims of the massacre, those having been identified and returned to appropriate families. In Kibuye, the killing took place in the built environment – an intertwined complex of church and school buildings. At Ovcara the killing occurred in a rural area at the head of a drainage, the site hidden by trees and surrounded by agricultural fields. The process of memorializing at the Ovcara site resulted in change to the environment with the erection of the monument, memorial and visitor’s center. The inherent challenge to designers of a monument in such a setting as Ovcara is what Carrier (2005, p. 6) considers the “impossibility of visually or conceptually” representing an understanding of the atrocity that took place at the location (cf., Young 1993, pp. 124-144).

The prominent presence of a large stone Catholic Church complex at the Home St. Jean, comprised of a school, residences, and associated buildings in a commune such as Kibuye, ensures its significance as one of many such places of mass killing. The church compound continues to function socially not unlike its active role pre-1994. Where bodies of those killed at places of atrocity are interred or the remains preserved in some way, such as that of several sites in Rwanda, the significance dynamic associated with the site is altered, that is, “by burying the dead we create, not our future, but our past” (Runia, 2007, p. 325). Verdery (1999) argues that such sites can help those

associated with the victimized group re-orient, such that identity translated into “community-making” and to a greater extent, concepts of “homeland”, become culturally and politically more powerful.

The memorializing of victims at the place of mass killing leans heavily on socio-cultural trauma often influenced, if not nourished, by factions of the ruling class in a society that find controlled interpretation of events and episodes in recent history worthy of investment. The dominant Croat populace representing victims of the Ovcara killings invested heavily in the site of the mass killing, a place amidst agricultural fields and hidden from the roadway that was initially used as a deposit for trash and dead animals. Sites signified as “official sites” have the potential to “open up spaces for expressions of recalcitrant traumatic memories” (Beiner, 2007, p. 385). The experiences of the girl observed at the church in Kibuye is, in one sense, hers alone – her traumatic thoughts and fears may be shared but the episodic nature of the killing is owned by the group identifying with the victims. In the well phrased words of Humphrey (2002, p. 94), “Terror’s legacy in the survivor can leave them haunted by the past with their private memory unable to be assimilated into public memory.” The nature of what evolves as collective memory is nevertheless highly dependent on the traumatic experiences of individuals and autobiographical memory.

Smelser (2004, pp. 37-39) differentiates psychological trauma from socio-cultural trauma in terms of how the latter reflects the sustained disruption of social life and structure. Those mechanisms operating at the socio-cultural level are, he asserts, primarily those of “sacred agents” and “contending groups.” Traumatic events experienced by individuals and small groups are most effective in influencing the broad

post-conflict social environment when the collective memory of those victimized is compatible with the socio-political objectives and contemporary interests of the elites or ruling class (Kansteiner, 2002, pp. 187-188; e.g., Lehmann, 2009, pp. 527-528, 535).

Individuals and sets of individuals who have acquired influence in a social system, what Smelser (2004, p. 38) calls “cultural specialists”, often find it advantageous within the goals of solidarity, unity, and socio-economic control to maintain an identity with episodes of socio-cultural trauma. In Northern Ireland the preoccupation with atrocities incurred over centuries by both Protestants and Catholics, groups historically defined by class and ideology as well as denomination, led to “folk histories steeped in local recollections of trauma” (Beiner, 2007, p. 385). The definition and interpretation of events deemed traumatic were vulnerable to orchestration by elites, social organizations and institutions. Fear and resentment of “the other” was maintained, effectively enforcing spatially polarized communities in areas of socio-economic deprivation (Kenney, 2002; Beiner, 2007; Mesev, Shirlow, & Downs, 2009).

One well-grounded means of maintaining perception of collective status is signifying select places of atrocity where some form of orchestrated memorializing or commemoration is incorporated into ideology. Genocide memorial ceremonies in Rwanda, for example, are asserted to be “dense sites for social production and nation-building” (Burnet, 2009, p. 95). The form with which such ceremonies are held “reveal intentions underlying their instigation”, that which often reinforces goals of socio-political elites (Carrier, 2005, p. 34). The orientation and values aspired to by leaders in a socio-political system can be reflected in the landscape, exemplified in Cambodia where aspects of the 1970s deemed worthy of remembrance are selected for preservation and

investment (Hughes, 2003; Williams, 2004; Long & Reeves, 2009, p. 78). In geo-political environments characterized by a long history of group diversity places where atrocities occurred easily come to serve as “identity markers” that function highly in terms of social coherence relative to “the other”.

### **Interpreting the Dynamics of Boundary Marking**

The political significance attributed to an ethnic group, is in essence attributed to the construct of the modern nation-state. These groups, as Wimmer (2004) argues, often become social communities with basic political interests shared by individuals and group factions. A common process of constituting a stable nation-state is the attempt by socio-political elites to manipulate the definition of an existing, often dominant, ethnic group as that identity to which all individuals in the geo-polity are to integrate (Wimmer 2008a, p. 1032). In that sense these elites compile the power to frame or assign meaning to events interpreted at places on the landscape with the intended goal of mobilizing constituents and influencing their historical narrative.

Social polarization between groups in a society, whether assigned ethnic status or some other defined category, is characterized by magnified collective memories, myths, and emotional responses to distorted images of “the other”. Political entrepreneurs, as noted by Lake and Rothchild (1996), have the opportunity to manage this polarized social environment with the goal of avoiding violent conflict, or conversely, nurture competition and stimulate fear that may easily lead to lethal violence.<sup>2</sup> Although the costs of violence are almost always high, efforts toward managing fragile socio-political order indefinitely can tax political actors to the breaking point. A communal sense of injustice

or oppression often elicits insecurity in the form of a competing group leading to fear, fueling aggression (Lischer, 1999; also see Ember & Ember, 1992). Communicated memory of past events and episodes that are particularly spatially defined can feed fear responses and the likelihood of intense aggression. Massacres or other atrocities that occurred hundreds of years ago are sometimes used to elicit or maintain fear of “the other”. As Chisholm (1999, p.167) so aptly notes “socialization for aggression is socialization for fear.”

Historiography is highly vulnerable to being influenced by contemporary relationships and events (Hayden, 1994, pp.180-181; Eltringham, 2004, pp.181-182). Stories about extreme violence and killing at a specific place in the past are vulnerable to being augmented or revised and re-constituted in the inherently socio-political process of commemorating an event through the memorializing of a site (Dwyer & Alderman 2008, p. 93). A massacre, for example, may be altered in commemoration to that of a “battle”, a contradiction usually grounded in denial by perpetrators or those instigating aggression (Hayner, 2001, pp.162-163; Azaryahu & Foote, 2008, p.193). The ambiguity inherent to the context of many mass killings is sometimes fuel for sensationalism (e.g. Foley, 2009, pp. 305-319). Moreover, group-contestation about the extent of victimhood at such a place is vulnerable to being driven by nationalist and geo-political competition that transcends the place of signified killing. For example, contemporary competition over the memories and perspectives of the imprisonment and killings of Jews, Italians, and Slavs that occurred during the 1943-45 Nazi occupation of Trieste, Italy, specifically at Risiera di san Sabba, is to a great extent entangled with current socio-political tension and



grievances grounded in episodes of mass murder and atrocities throughout Istria and Trieste (Purvis and Atkinson, 2009).

The specific location of sites of atrocities is, for the most part, inherited by the post-conflict ruling class. Their opportunity and challenge is to use selected sites as political instruments that allow for the interpretation and communication of a chosen message that supports an agenda or ideology (e.g., Bax, 1997). This potential to use the socio-historical landscape of a geo-polity to help steer the populace within the realm of a particular ideology is invaluable. Pavlowitch (1988, p.63) emphasized that pre-1990s Yugoslavia, for example, had been for decades “the victim of ideologues who wanted to force human and historic realities into their conceptual moulds.” Leading up to and in the first year of the break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia the socio-political elite of Croatia and Serbia used sites of massacres during World War II to manipulate the historiographic perception of the populace. Some of these places were memorialized and formally documented in “official histories”, while others were known to local people but not acknowledged officially by the government. Socialist Yugoslavia “embraced a controlled memory space” but the legacy of the World War II era experiences carried by extended families into the early 1990’s was articulated such that the current generation might be fueled with long held pain and resentment (Rutar, 2008, p.38). A landscape permeated with places where massacres and other atrocities have occurred often helps feed group memory in a manner whereby the self-image of the group is immune to negative connotation. Moreover, manipulating the association of events in the past is an effective means of framing collective memory such that a group is vulnerable to self-deception (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997).

### **Communicating Identity Boundaries**

Collective self-image is often seeded and nurtured in an educational setting. Places on the landscape forming the cultural topography are inherently tied to the socio-political history of a group or self-identified groups. The primary and secondary education system for the young members of a geo-polity characterized by multiple ethnic groups can help in suppressing xenophobia, especially in more affluent nation-states where the perception of unity and stability is highly advantageous in international socio-economic affairs (see Thayer, 2003, 2004, pp. 219-265). Rwanda however, a nation-state in the process of re-constituting itself seventeen years after massive genocidal violence, is a context where the repression of ethnicity in the formal education system is less about suppressing xenophobia than it is about enabling the construction of political and economic stability.

Formal education and textbooks are in turn highly effective in manipulating the realities of the past and thereby help form the contemporary social and political landscape (Tyack, 1999; Cairns, 2003, pp. 73-74; Murgeseu, 2004; Rihtman-Auguštin, 2004, pp. 189-191; Eidison, 2005, pp. 565; Cole & Barsalou, 2006, pp. 9-11; Blatz & Ross, 2009, pp. 224-226). Attempts by the political and entrepreneurial elite in Rwanda, for the most part Tutsi who matured in refugee camps in Uganda during the decades prior to the 1990's, to foster a unified, inclusive identity is reflected in the required official narrative of history disseminated in written form and communicated in the classroom. It is worth noting that history courses were not formally taught for at least 10 years following the

1994 genocide. While promoting a unified socio-national identity with the erasure of ethnic identification the official narrative enables a perception of the past that inhibits any future persecution of Tutsi (Freedman et al., 2008, pp. 674-675). A focus on and maintenance of socio-political control is paramount even in the face of growing polarization and inequity (King, 2005; Weinstein, Freedman & Hughson, 2007; Freedman et al., 2004a; Hintjens, 2008; Freedman et al., 2008).

Textbooks of history used during the 1980s in the former Yugoslavia emphasized the role of the partisan during World War II with details of atrocities and violence (Rutar, 2008, p. 35). Writing during the early 1990s at the initiation of extreme violence in much of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Hayden (1994, p. 181) noted that the “totalizing histories” being disseminated by adversaries were “used to justify civil war. In this atmosphere of increasing polarization, the cost of suppressing alternative histories has been measured in blood.”

Within Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and contemporary Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), formal education of students continues to reflect the scars of lethal violence that characterized the former Federation of Yugoslavia. Interpretation of the recent war period in the context of culture history in general varies with curriculum, teachers, and place. Description and photographs of cruel suffering and killing of Serbs has been, for example, a component of the Bosnian Serb version of a high-school text that is to be consumed by the adolescent teen-age population of what is now Republica Srpska. An 8<sup>th</sup> grade geography text in that state focuses on only contemporary Yugoslavia and Republica Srpska, for the most part ignoring Bosnia. (Hayden, 1994, p. 181; Stephen, 1997; Holley, 2001; Hadziosmanovic, 2001; Stojanović, 2004; Hromadžić, 2008).

Furthermore, language variation, minimal with four regional “variants” before the 1991-1995 war and understandable to all, has been enhanced and codified to further nationalistic goals and support segregation (Greenberg, 2004).

In Vukovar, a city where nearly 34 percent of its pre-war adult inhabitants were in mixed marriages, a segregated school system is maintained. Divided Serb-Croat curricula are aimed at sustaining separate identities and maintaining collective myths. Fear of future violence underlies the reluctance to fully integrate students. Fear of “the other” fuels ethnic ideology, reflected in the interpretation of the recent past and who is perceived as the “victim” versus the “aggressor”. Parents, who lived, suffered, or were displaced during and after the 1991 destruction of the city inhibit any inclination of children to integrate (Freedman et al., 2004b). The decade following the siege of the city found the populace of Vukovar to be burdened with “great tension between those who want to forget and those who want to remember” (Weinstein, Freedman & Hughson, 2007, p. 62; also see Freedman & Abazovic, 2006, pp. 66-68). The visit to Vukovar and Ovcara by Boris Tadic, president of Serbia, approximately a year prior to “Vukovar Remembrance Day” (November 18, 2011) may help support current efforts by a generation of political elites younger than those active during the war of the mid-1990’s to dampen explicit inter-group resentment. The laying of wreaths by Tadic and Croatian President Ivo Josipovic, at two sites of killing, one of Serbs near Osijek and one of Croats at Ovcara, in November 2010 is indicative of the significance assigned to these sites in the contemporary social environment. Places memorialized such as Ovcara reflect contemporary lethal behavior that, while subject to future orchestrated assignment of significance, will sustain social identity differences for generations. The “ownership” of

these places by those associated with victimized groups continues a long, sometimes contestable, history of “place attachment” in the Balkans.

Non-formal or “folk” education absorbed by generations that post-date overt inter-group violence can significantly inform concepts of collective identity and solidarity. Such narratives permit individuals to “make social life intelligible” (Till, 2003, p. 290; e.g., Cappelletto, 1998, 2003; Novak & Rodseth, 2006; Rutar, 2008).<sup>3</sup> In Rwanda for example, belief in the origins of ethnicity in the pre-colonial period is common, varying significantly from that maintained as the official political narrative (Eltringham, 2004, pp. 12-19, 158-167; Freedman et al., 2008, pp. 676-677). In the former Yugoslavia sites of massacres of Serbs by Croatian Ustasha during World War II were almost always “known” by local people but not acknowledged by the Federation government and therefore not referenced in official historical narratives (Hayden, 1994, pp. 178-179). In not all situations is belief in the past shared among a populace, however “seeing history from below” can be “a corrective supplement to elite versions” and is often tied to social organization (Cairns, 2003, p. 82; e.g., Kenney, 2002, p. 245).

Places at which atrocity and mass killing occurred are often difficult to ignore by members of the generation that survived the violence, regardless of efforts by an official elite to disregard specific past events or episodes. And, the offspring of this demographic cohort who are in proximity to their elders absorb their ideas and images affecting perception of the social landscape in which they live (Sorabji, 2006). The means by which places and evidence is preserved and interpreted influences the generation that matures after an era of mass killing. Schuman and Scott (1989) demonstrate that socio-political events or episodes observed by adolescents and young adults influence their

perspective, attitude, and opinions toward meaning assigned to future events. The numerous contexts in which human remains, objects and killing sites are preserved, displayed and memorialized in Cambodia for example, is in great part, oriented toward educating those born after the 1975-79 genocidal period. One significant message is the rationale for Vietnam's 1978-79 invasion with the goal of manipulating social cohesion. Commemorations on May 20, the "Day of Anger", facilitate the promotion of solidarity between Cambodia and Vietnam (Hayner, 2001, pp. 196-197; Hughes, 2005, pp. 271-273, 280-281; O'Neil & Hinton, 2009, p. 5).

### **To Influence Place Significance**

Places frequented or used by primarily one group may, in effect, become social "boundary markers" at a spatial scale that is more local than within the complexities of state sovereignty. Nonetheless, these "boundaries" have the potential to "define the contours within which places are imbued with historical and mythical meaning in terms of the nation and collective memory" (Newman, 2003, p.130; also see White, 1996). Group identities are often expressed in a landscape where residential segregation is socially maintained and where intolerance of "the other" is manipulated by the ruling elite (e.g., Massey, Hodson & Sekulić, 1999).

Boundary "displays" manifested in the history or myth assigned to a place enforce and sustain the hardening of divisiveness of "us" versus "them" in the social environment. Wimmer's (2008b) framework for how ethnic boundaries evolve and are sustained in social relationships is grounded in the extent to which inequality permeates socio-economic interaction. The broader socio-economic underbelly of such divisiveness

often fuels struggle and contest about the significance assigned to places where memories about what occurred, while the foundation for “meaning”, are vulnerable to variation.

These memories, shared, cross-referenced, and re-enforced through often informal communication in socio-political fields of various scales “influence what pasts are to be remembered by whom, where, and in what form” (Till 2003, p. 297). Memorializing a site of mass killing is an effective means to indoctrinate an identity, or in some sense collective victimization, to those contemporaneous with the event and to those offspring that inherit the landscape.

Despite Till’s (2003, p. 297) assertion that socio-political elites “cannot control” how individuals or groups perceive and interpret a place it is often in their best interest, and the interest of social stability, to influence perception, emotion, and the assignment of meaning (see Jelin, 1998; Lambert, et al., 2009). Constructing significance is, by definition, highly contextual. The social context, as characterized by in-group identification, in both Rwanda and in the area encompassed by the former Yugoslavia, is laced with inequality at multiple scales. The utility of legitimizing myths about “the other” with the goal of maintaining or sustaining dominance is furthered by influencing the interpretation of what happened at a place where an atrocity occurred. Manipulation and deception through the use of contemporary communicative media tools permits the concept of threat to a social hierarchy to be highly effective in creating intense group cohesiveness (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, pp. 45-48; Quist & Resendez, 2002). The use of visual images of exhumation of mass graves yielding bones and clothing from World War II, for example, were portrayed on Serbian television in the early 1990’s as reasoning for lethal violence directed at the Croatian population (Denich, 1994). Political

and social sanctioning of extreme violence by Serbs against non-combatants was rationalized as vengeance for World War II era atrocities conducted by Croatian Ustasha. Perception, sometimes informed by myths “need not represent the truth if their only significance is group unity; they need only be accepted” (Alexander, 1989, p. 493).

Those places where massacres occurred in the former Yugoslavia during World War II with resulting mass burials were well known, especially by the adult generation of the 1940s that survived in that locality. Their offspring inherited knowledge of the events and spatial context that helped make the memories of their parents, and the parents and kin of their friends an unquestioned historical dimension of their local environment. The perception of events and episodes in time and space through interpretative narrative become increasingly influential as inter-group polarization evolves, often long before organized lethal violence becomes an unavoidable component of that environment (e.g., Naumović, 2004). As Ignatieff (1997, p.185) argued with comparative insight, oftentimes “regimes depend for their legitimacy on historical myths that are armored against the truth.”

The attempt in Rwanda to orchestrate a de-emphasis of Hutu-Tutsi identity helps inhibit, at least superficially, a socio-spatial environment in which the potential for instability and threats to broad-based security is ever present. The preservation and memorializing of select sites of massacre in Rwanda are supported by the central government for the purported long-range goals of education, conflict prevention and social and political reconciliation. Given the number of places where massacres and other atrocities occurred at various scales local communities that suffered “are compelled to



commemorate those events somehow” lest they become lost in the complexities of memories vulnerable to deterioration (Cook 2005, p.308).

Attempts to ferret out an accurate accounting of what happened at the site of atrocities and massacre requires, almost by definition, an assessment of who did what to whom, when, in what setting, and under what circumstances. Evidence in written, photographic, or material form is looked upon to substantiate testimony of witnesses and survivors. The findings of forensic investigations of victims *in situ* can serve as the glue by which other mediums of evidence are evaluated. Signified location is, nevertheless, a vital component to constructing a rendition of what happened in a way that can be communicated to those having little or no investment in the competitive violence, for as Henige (2007, p. 237) emphasized “both historiography and topography are dynamic entities.”

### **Accommodating Dominance**

Competition for power and authority at the scale of the commune during the 1994 mayhem in Rwanda accounted for variance initially in who participated, where and to what extent, in the killing of mostly Tutsi members of the society. The rural social elite influenced relationships between factions of peasants, kin-groups, and individuals during the genocidal episode (Verwimp, 2005; Straus, 2008). Such relationships often become highly vulnerable to being re-structured in a post-conflict environment. Animosity, rivalry, and re-alignments at various scales become both a challenge and an opportunity for entrepreneurial elites in a society recently plagued with intense violence (e.g., Lehmann, 2009, pp. 528-530, 536)

In Chapman's (2009, p. 151) overview of the multidimensional aspects of societal reconciliation, she suggests that while "truth finding and acknowledgement" are important, such pursuits may complicate tolerance and inter-group accommodation in some post-conflict environments. Interpreted "truth", disseminated within a society, can entail "substantial risk to social order" by fostering resentment and rekindling the content and context of serious injustices (Long & Brecke, 2003, p. 68). These observations are not divorced from the assertion of Cairns (2003, p. 82) that interpretations of "realities of the past" in post-conflict settings are usually biased in favor of the dominant, in-control group, identities, or factions attempting to sustain a geo-polity in a fragile socio-political environment.

How dominance and control is maintained while promoting reconciliatory dynamics at both the socio-political scale as well as in the, possibly more important, local community is tricky and fraught with risk for miscalculation. Re-fueling resentment that has the potential to lead to vengeance manifested in violence requires costly management and political risk (Long & Brecke, 2003, p.68). The July 2010 shootings at investigators from the Bosnian Institute for Missing Persons and International Commission for Missing Persons (ICMP) on the shores of the drained Perućac Lake near Bajina Bašta in Republika Srpska while recovering bodies dumped into the Drina river in 1992 is indicative of how nearly two decades later the local cohort of perpetrators and their supporters resort to lethal violence to inhibit threats to the current and future dominance hierarchy (Agence France-Presse, 2010).

Places where atrocities occurred and where acknowledgment of the event is maintained socially often have the potential to play a valuable role in the realm of what at

first glance might seem contradictory – mechanisms of dominance and reconciliation.

The utility of such places to social classes or ethnic groups attempting to maintain socio-economic dominance is the memories and accounts of people who witnessed, survived, or were perpetrators at a signified site that is managed within the context of the agenda of the socio-political elites. The events and activities at these places in the past have the potential to fuel interpretations of the present with a goal of influencing the future (Jelin, 1998; Lorey & Beezley, 2002; Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004). To reconcile divergent, if not conflicting, interpretations of the past should be an idealistic goal of political decision makers with interests in social reconstruction and stability. However, as in the example of contemporary Rwanda, influencing the ambiguity of historical “truth” is an opportunity for socio-political elites to minimize power-sharing (Eltringham, 2004; Reyntjens & Vandeginste, 2005; Oomen, 2005).

Within the extensive academic focus on socio-political reconciliation in environments of past conflict, a fundamental thread of behavioral dynamic is not to be discounted, that being mutual acceptance and tolerance by those individuals who are identified with or self-identify with groups who have been or continue to be adversarial (Hayner, 2001, p.155; Etcheson, 2005; Staub, 2006; Chapman, 2009). In many areas of Republika Srpska and Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, the political elite are in positions of power similar to that at the initiation and during the 1992-1995 war period and have no interest in social integration (Bringa, 2005, p. 190). The recent shooting at Perućac Lake in the vicinity of Višegrad is but one example of the nature of enforced dominance at a socio-spatial scale insulated from the reconciliation efforts of the nation-state theatre.

In contemporary Rwanda, ethnic identity is not acknowledged publicly and is denied to exist by the ruling elite. A goal of solidarity and a perception of unity among the populace is the underpinning of this attempt to orchestrate social interaction. Nonetheless, Staub (2006, p. 868) warns that the potential for violence is substantial when atrocities are stopped by one party definitively defeating the other, especially when the two groups remain socio-ethnically defined while intermixed (also see Cobban, 2007, pp. 56,63-64). While effective conceptually in combating xenophobia, diluting the polarization of Hutu-Tutsi identity may not be accepted socially and economically for a generation or more. Inter-ethnic marriages in Rwanda, for example, have become less common than before the war (Hintjens, 2008; Lemarchand 2009, pp. 88-108).

Tolerating, if not accepting, the co-existence of others that have the potential to be active competitors is a challenge for socio-political elites in the vicinity of locations in which atrocities occurred (eg., Lehmann, 2009). Memorialized or commemorated sites of mass atrocity can fuel an intense sense of group identity for those who are related in some manner to the victims. In Rwanda, Hintjens (2008) cautions that the “officially sanctioned version” of the past at genocide memorials, many of which contain remains of the victims, has the potential to inhibit healing and reconciliation in communities where former killers, their families, and the families of victims are mixed. Reconstructing and managing “truth” about past activities at a place can be an important component of this challenge while it must be acknowledged that “it is putting too much faith in truth to believe that it can heal” (Ignatieff, 1997, p. 186). The creation of “truth” about place specific events in environments of mass killing is, almost by definition, an exercise in interpretation that makes attempts at documentation vulnerable to manipulation. The

most effective judge of an interpretation is the effect its deemed conclusiveness may have on those living in the present and those of the immediate future.

## **Conclusion**

Trauma, both individual and collective, may be absorbed in social life but it is not forgettable. The preservation, memorializing, and interpretation of sites where atrocities occurred have the potential to enhance if not crystallize memory (cf., Cappelletto, 1998, 2003; Longman & Rutagengwa, 2004, p.166). Or, in the words of Smelser (2004, p. 53), “to memorialize is to force a meaning on us.” Oftentimes a collective identity in a post-conflict setting becomes rooted in sacred places and structured in ceremonial ritual (Alexander, 2004, p. 23; eg., Poyer, 1993). Lazer and Litvek-Hirsch (2009) have argued that social-cultural trauma, as defined by the Holocaust, continue to serve in contemporary generations a means toward “symbolic” boundary-making – the categorization and defining of the socio-cultural world such that group collectivity is sustained. During the war in the former Yugoslavia, physical space, whether it be a village or household, became a point of identity that was vulnerable to being violated by aggressive nationalism, especially for those not actively involved in the fighting. Places where kin, friends, or neighbors were killed cease to become insignificant. New meanings are assigned to locations of “the place of death” that elicit an emotional response tied to “space-related’ identity that may endure for generations (Povrzanović, 1997, pp. 158,161).

The girl witnessed at the church in Kibuye, referred to at the beginning of this essay, is now a grown woman who, in contemporary Rwanda, is beyond the mid-point in

her life. Her lineage is defined as Tutsi, regardless of socio-political constraints on self-identification. The place at which she experienced the slaughter of her family and that of hundreds of others is assigned a significance that transcends her trauma, but yet remains dependent on the identity and trauma she shares with thousands of other victims. Her survival for the last decade and a half is a testament to the psychological adaptability of some humans in a social and physical environment where non-phenotypic categorization is not to be avoided, despite its potential for inherent vulnerability leading to abuse. Her identity is forever tied to the narrow peninsula into Lake Kivu in which Home St. Jean is situated, a place similar to countless others in Rwanda, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and elsewhere. There is little doubt that these sites will be ignored in the next generation, yet the stories of behavior at these places are vulnerable to multiple forms of historical representation influenced by the incentives for power.

The landscape of post-conflict environments is littered with places of traumatic experience that have the potential to be assigned meaning and significance reflecting the struggle of socio-economic class and ethnic category. The memories and perceived emotions of those who experienced events at these places influence a subsequent generation in ways that can perpetuate hostility or, conversely, fuel an intense interest in re-evaluation and reconciliation at the scale of local community. It is the responsibility of social scientists and journalists to be aware of the extent to which the presumed contextual reality of spatially defined events is vulnerable to the influence of ideology and power, and foremost, to pursue communication of balanced interpretation as an obligation to casualties of atrocity.

## Endnotes

1. The context of episodic (autobiographical) memory has the capacity for some degree of change in neural networks at each conscious retrieval, accounting for variation in accounts of shared experience (Grigsby & Steven, 2000). Internal representations of an external event can be selective relative to current knowledge, goals, and the emotional state of the individual (Ross, 1997; Davis & Loftus 2009). Variation in accounts, especially with reference to spatial memory, is likely to change over time and presentation, influenced by current circumstances, audience and social setting (Orbuch 1997, p.470; Tversky, 1997; Grigsby & Steven, 2000; Sorabji, 2006; Hollingworth, 2009). Discussion among a mix of participants, witnesses, and survivors during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa and the Gacacca proceedings in Rwanda are exemplary of how specific memory leans heavily on the encoding of spatial reference frames.

2. A hostile social environment rooted in socio-economic inequality is shown cross-culturally to fuel inter-ethnic violence regardless of measures of intra-ethnic loyalty (Cashdan, 2001). Males, especially young males subject to inequality are the most divisive and active competitors. Recent brain research suggests that intergroup bias and xenophobic fear likely has evolutionary roots manifested in neurophysiologic markers in males (Navarrete, et al., 2009).

3. Communicating orally the story of the past killings of members of a community or group to a younger generation is expedient cross-culturally in the enforcement of social

identity. The Waorani of Ecuador, for example, frame stories of past killings of group members within an interpretation of the inter-ethnic dynamic particular to the parents and grandparents of the recipients of the tale. Details in the narrative almost always include the precise place where the victims were killed. The construction of imagery of victimhood in the group by the younger generation becomes a part of the overall Waorani historical narrative, creating social memory (High, 2009).



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