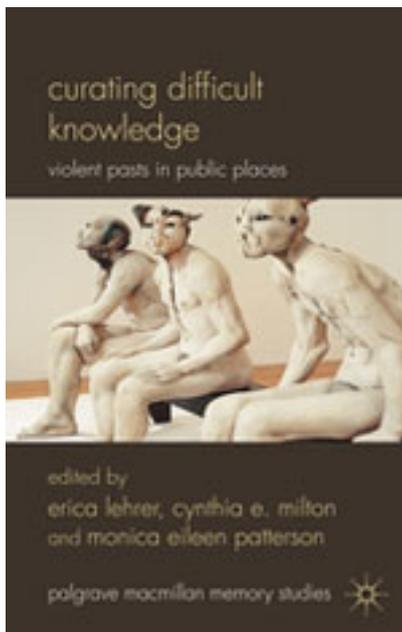


***Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places* edited by Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson**

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Lehrer, Erica, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson, eds. *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 240 pages; \$85.00 hardcover.



Monuments of past violence fill whole blocks in Mexico City; the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, the Monument to the Revolution, and the grounds of the Aztec Templo Mayor immediately come to mind. But two of the most striking examples of artistic engagement with public memory are less grandiose: these are the murals of institutional violence inside the Supreme Court building near the Zócalo and the uncommonly simple façade of the Museo de Memoria y Tolerancia on La Reforma. Museums, murals, and monuments are not new strategies in the repertoire of public memory. Yet, while scholarly and activist approaches to public memory usually privilege the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) of South Africa, Argentina, Guatemala, Peru, and South Korea, the artists and curators of these new Mexican monuments, like the editors and contributors of *Curating Difficult Knowledge*, ask whether curatorial practice can replace confrontation and models of truth and reconciliation as a mode of public memory work. *Curating Difficult Knowledge* answers in the affirmative. The volume is not, however, a theoretical meditation on memory, trauma, and history. It is, instead, a collection of ten geographically diverse case study essays, each of which accounts for the successes and failures of memory projects in many forms, including monuments and exhibits, but also

photographs, websites, quotidian artifacts, and live performances. Contributors take varied approaches to state policy, academia, TRCs, the productive potential of silence, and the function of provocation in museums.

The essays are organized into three sections: "Bearing Witness: Between Museums and Communities," "Visualizing the Past," and "Materiality and Memorial Challenges." In "Bearing Witness," essays by Heather Igloliorte, Vivienne Szekeres, and Monica Eileen Patterson define new possibilities for building relationships between communities and collections. In the second section, "Visualizing the Past," curatorial imaginations of the future of looking and acting bear the weight of nation-building projects in South Africa and Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. Finally, in "Materiality and Memorial Challenges," contributors consider the volatile potential in memorial spaces, as their very materiality can be removed, erased, defaced, and altered.

In this third section, readers will find the volume's single Latin American case study. Cynthia E. Milton's "Defacing Memory: (Un)tying Peru's Memory Knots," convincingly argues that the defacement of the *Ojo que llora* monument in Lima by Fujimori supporters was neither an act of vandalism nor iconoclasm, but rather evidence of competing meanings in Peru's ongoing memory narrative, as each group took on the imperative to "exhibit" the past (163-164). Milton's argument is provocative and compelling, if all too brief. In general, the brevity of the contributions in *Curating Difficult Knowledge* permits greater breadth than depth of analysis. Still, Latin Americanists will benefit from reading an instance of Latin American memory struggle alongside similar cases in other contexts. Amy Sodaro's analysis of the Rwandan Kigali Memorial Centre will be of particular interest to scholars of Latin America, as it speaks to state-sponsored reconciliation impulses in Chile, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala, as well as the work of Steve J. Stern, Leigh A. Payne, Lessie Jo Frazier, Nancy Gates-Madsen, and Diane M. Nelson.

Like the monument in Memory Studies, the museum becomes territory for contestation in New Museology. New Museology is a disciplinary shift that refers broadly to a commitment to critiquing the role of the museum in society. While this approach to museums has become *de rigueur* in recent years, the volume's contributors enliven the approach with a new definition of curating as both caring for and bearing witness (4). Following Susan Sontag's famous claim that a cacophony of signs has weakened the horror of the suffering of others, and Edward Linenthal's and Deborah Britzman's categorizations of "lovely knowledge," or the "comfortable horrible," the volume's contributors work draw out dissonances in preemptively harmonized commemorative narratives. The volume advances New Museological curator- and scholarship by its emphasis on community-building through pedagogical curatorship. One example of just such a successful curatorial practice is the Migration Museum in Adelaide, Australia, which has provided a space where Cambodian and Baltic immigrant groups have staged public memory events within the museum's commemoration of Aboriginal experience, which itself overlays the remembrance of late 19th and early 20th century migrant narratives from Asia, South America, and Africa (51).

As a compendium of cases where this effort has been inconsistently effective, the volume itself is a success. The strength of *Curating Difficult Knowledge* lies in its treatment of practical curatorial, rather than theoretical, implications. Its effort to disambiguate the titular “difficult knowledge” is not completely effective. For instance, the editors’ introduction elides the question of narrative modes of trauma, despite various references to Dominick LaCapra’s influential *Writing History, Writing Trauma* and Ksenija Bilbija, et. al’s *The Art of Truth-Telling About Authoritarian Rule*. In fact, the temporal paradox of traumatic memory may reveal generative possibilities for building communities of witness around “difficult knowledge.” LaCapra’s insistence on “emphatic unsettlement” finds its aesthetic articulation in the Mexican Supreme Court murals and the Museo de Memoria y Tolerancia (xi). These two new Mexican memory sites insist upon unsettling juxtapositions of site and content. In the first case, the murals’ critique of violence committed by the Mexican state cover the stairwells of the office building of the men and women responsible for upholding civic justice. In the second, La Reforma’s clamorous commercial zone is interrupted by the austere intervention of a low-rise gray cement structure with a few sparse trees. These public memory projects reject both linear narratives of recovery and closed integral systems of truth and reconciliation. In this they succeed where *Curating Difficult Knowledge* cannot: difficult knowledge cannot, precisely, be disambiguated. Its unsettling interruptions produce ongoing conversations that are, after all, the goal of museology and public history. In this sense, uncertainty of meaning and the discomfort of incompleteness are imperative.

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