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James Young’s exploration of Holocaust memorials in Germany, Poland, Israel and the United States is intended to address two questions. The first is: what are the differences in memorial style between these four countries, and what does that tell us about that nation’s relationship with the Holocaust? The second is: what was the public process leading to the creation of these memorials, and what was the subsequent reaction of the public? Young presents these case studies not as static indications of a national approach to memory, but a dynamic process of reinterpretation of the memory of the Holocaust by many individuals.

In the preface and introduction, Young discusses some of the problems with studying Holocaust memory through its memorials. One of the first problems he identifies is the difference between the exciting, difficult, controversial process of creating public art, and the “often static result,” and “its seemingly frozen face in the landscape” (x). He cites Lewis Mumford and other critics of the traditional monument, who suggest that once installed a monument petrifies history, signifies a shaky regime in need of a symbol, and is incapable of modernity (4-5). As a result, Young places less emphasis on the memorial itself, but on the needs of the community for memory, and on the aims of the artist. He is also interested in the afterlife of the monument, and especially by public treatment of the monument counter to its original intent. In this way, Young captures the changing, rather than the static interpretations of the Holocaust.

Young also identifies problems with other scholarly work about Holocaust memory. In particular, he is concerned with avoiding terms and theories that could limit his conclusions. For instance, Young chooses to avoid psychoanalytic language, as well as “collective” memory for this reason (xi). His objection to “collective” is an interesting one: he avoids the term because society’s memory cannot exist outside of individual people. Another problem with literature on Holocaust memory and memorial (and interestingly, a problem with Omer Bartov’s 2007 work, Erased) is the emphasis on what is missing from certain nations’ memorials. Young suggests that looking only at the anti-Jewish context of Polish monuments, for example, would severely limit our ability to draw meaningful conclusions about the role of those monuments. Finally, he lays a theoretical groundwork with the work of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and John Hallmark Neff—but he uses them more to introduce a shared language about memory than to really guide his own research. He states clearly that his personal presence in this writing is neither incidental or in need of apology, but is both purposeful and useful in an investigation of memory—a highly personal and subjective phenomenon, after all.

Young then begins his case studies, in which he assigns an overarching theme for the Holocaust memorials of that nation, and subchapters highlighting different approaches to memorials within the country. Germany’s monuments are characterized as “ambiguous.” He discusses monuments at actual locations of Nazi violence as well as at former Nazi government sites, and the problems that Germans have in maintaining meaning at these sites for multiple communities. For example, the rediscovery of the camp at Dachau after years of neglect, and the process of restoration into monument appears to be a much more powerful symbol than the finished memorial at Dachau, for residents and visitors alike (63-65). Dachau also presents some other difficulties for Germans. First, the camp is associated primarily with political victims and less with Jewish victims, and visitors to the camp have their own personal and unrelated needs for memorial. In addition, the town of Dachau struggles with the need to associate itself with the camp because it draws tourists,
and at the same time distance itself ideologically from the camp in order to make visitors feel more comfortable with the local history and residents of the area. The strongest element of this chapter is Young's discussion of countermonuments. These are pieces of public art that place the viewer in an participatory role—perhaps the role of the perpetrator, or at the very least, in the role of the bystander. The aim is to inspire more complex meditations on the Holocaust than monuments usually inspire. In the cases of these countermonuments, the artists have been happy to see the public’s unanticipated reactions to the art (as with the inscriptions on the Gerz pillar, 35). City officials and residents tend to be less open-minded.

The second part of The Texture of Memory deals with Poland’s Holocaust memorials. As of 1993, Young chooses to identify these chapters under the heading of “ruins of memory.” In Poland, much of the original fabric of the concentration camps still exists, and is only sometimes interrupted by plaques and sculptures. Young deals with modernist artworks, traditional representational work, and even monuments composed of destroyed monuments (gravestones). Some of the discussion of these monuments—and their relationships to the sites on which they are located—treads over the familiar ground of politics, in which narratives of the Holocaust change with government. One of the more compelling chapters deals with continual misunderstandings between Catholics and Jews over their interpretation and use of Auschwitz (144-147). Rather than simply showing ignorance or anti-Semitism, the debate over the presence of the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz underscores the very different relationship the Jews and Catholics have to prayer, consecration and memorial sites.

The final two sections of the book, about Holocaust memorials in Israel and America, offer a radically different approach to Holocaust memorial. In both the U.S. and Israel, no Holocaust sites exist, and the creation of memorials serves a different purpose. Most original are Young’s chapters on the Israeli approach to Holocaust memory. He compares the Jewish-Israeli reliance on memory with ritual reliance on liturgy. It is this repeated and ritualized memory that, in turn, justifies nationhood (210-211). As a result, the national responses to the Holocaust emphasize heroism and the relationship of the survivors to the pioneering settlement of Israel. The relationship of the state to the memorials is much stronger, and state intervention easier since there is an absence of competing memories in the nation. By far the most interesting chapter in the book has to do with a performative, not physical, memorial: Yom Hashoah. While observed by Jews around the world, the day has a uniform physical impact in Israel through the “two-minute siren that sounds across Israel at 8 a.m. on Yom Hashoah” (276). There are more questions than answers in this chapter—particularly about how the day is observed, and what memories are recalled. However, as a memorial, this one gains its strength from both its ritual aspect, and the fact that it is a changing and individual experience.

The final section of the book is devoted to memorials in America, which reflect national ideals and politics just as much (if not more) than Holocaust memorials in Europe. While they may have some uniformity of vision, they take vastly different forms and were initiated by a number of different groups. In some cases, the memorials are small and intended as community monuments that serve a regional Jewish population. However, the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C., serves as either an “affirmation” of the ideals of democracy, or a cue to skepticism over a failure to prevent persecution in America. Young ends The Texture of Memory with this discussion of American Holocaust memorials, and the way in which they invite Americans to identify with the victimhood of others, and the ways that feeling may or may not extend to identification with similarly persecuted groups inside America. While the book is full of astute questions and observations about the changing public response to memorial, it is this issue of personal identification with victimhood that is Young’s strongest point.