

Repeating Until We Can Remember Difficult (Public) Knowledge in South Africa

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TRAUMATIC EVENTS leave people speechless, without direction, jarred loose from the moorings of linguistic stability. They leave an individual, or group of individuals, in a state of incoherence and seeking solace in any vestige of comprehensibility (Zizek, 2002). The meaning that eventually comes to this event is deferred, and only comes after we develop some capacity to once again rejoin our experience with the bonding, cohering, and sociality of language. Trauma, in other words, finds its location in the “after” of an event (Lacan, 1988, pg. 191). Here, in the event’s wake, trauma is recognized through the repetitions that point us towards some unsettled history. These repetitions are the manifestation of our search for meaning or understanding. Put differently, a traumatic event is the antecedent to a repetition of the event, played again and again via the trans-positioning mechanisms of the unconscious (Lacan, 1978, pg. 129). In personal trauma, the event may be obscured but it is replayed when it sneaks into new relationships and interpretations of newly encountered information. Social trauma – events like war or genocide that are experienced by groups of individuals and, also, the focus of this paper– work in much the same way (Felman & Laub, 1992; Simon, 2000). Yet social trauma offers us a somewhat different complication in that part of its repetition can be made public and put on display for those who were affected by the traumatic events and, what is more, for those who were not. Public institutions undertake the task of narrating the trauma to affect the public memory, and therefore have some control over the manner in which replaying occurs. Traditionally, public memorials and museums have been containers of traumatic memory - an institution used as the source of memory designed to settle individuals and collectives impacted by trauma.

This paper looks at two such public museums in South Africa to investigate the ways their visitors are asked to make meaning, asked to signify that which resists signification, as visitors to these museums are confronted with representations of the social trauma that was Apartheid. We present our personal narratives as case studies from the Hector Pieterse Memorial and Museum

and the Red Location Museum to examine how the visitor is confronted with the difficulty of bearing witness to, and confronting, the representations of experiences that are placed on display. The Red Location Museum is located near Port Elizabeth. This award-winning museum is built within the community whose revolutionary efforts are the content of the museum. The Hector Pieterse Memorial and Museum is built in Soweto, a township in Johannesburg, where Pieterse was killed during uprisings against apartheid and celebrates the extensive resistance in this community. Each museum represents a particular event in the struggle for a democratized state in a distinct manner. We see these museums as repetitions in the traumatic wake of Apartheid and as attempts at a “proper” remembrance.

We use the case examples to theorize what is at stake in learning from and through trauma by first mobilizing the idea of “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998, 2000, 2003; Farley, 2009; Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Salvio, 2009). Then, we narrate our encounters with the two museums that serve as the exemplars for this paper in order to give the reader a sense of how these spaces were experienced by the authors. In theorizing these places, we move to refigure the temporality and potential meanings made from them by leaning on psychoanalytically informed theories of learning (Britzman, 2009; Casemore, 2008; Ellsworth, 1997; Matthews, 2009; Farley, 2009; Pinar, 2004; Pitt, 2003; Taubman, 2011). What we wish to highlight throughout the paper is that a certain disruptive, traumatic, force found in such museums can – but do not necessarily – produce new pedagogical possibilities beyond the teaching and learning about the particularities of the events and individuals being memorialized (in this case, Apartheid and the victims of Apartheid policy). Finally, we suggest that there are pedagogical possibilities inherent in learning about and from trauma that lie beyond the specific events and contexts of the trauma.

Difficult Knowledge

Encountering representations of trauma is one moment of difficult knowledge. Pitt and Britzman (2003), working from the field of psychoanalytic theory, articulate difficult knowledge as signifying “both representations of social traumas in curriculum and the individual’s encounter with them in pedagogy” (p. 379). Difficult knowledge is an individual’s encounter (teacher, student, researcher, museum visitor) in a pedagogical setting with social traumas that undercuts, or counter-cuts, a previously held notion about the world, the way it works, or the way the individual fits into it. Experiences with difficult knowledge beckon an individual toward “playing out the uneasy negotiation between one’s own experience of loss and another’s account” (Salverson, 2000). It is a feedback loop of meaning making where our understanding of other people (regardless of subject position) and our own personal histories interfere with one another. In difficult knowledge, like traumatic events, there is a refusal of meaning in the moment; our signifying chains are disrupted and meaning is deferred, displaced, and transferred. In other words, the encounter does not rest within the chronological boundaries of a lesson, museum visit, film viewing. It is revisited, considered again, refuses to rest.

The potentially traumatic experience of learning about trauma is put away in our minds, outside of our awareness, to be dealt with in other ways at other times. How this refusal manifests itself is in individual reactions that allow the individual to “stay safe” and to regard himself or herself as intellectually stable. Britzman (1998) coined the term “difficult knowledge” during an elaboration on the pedagogical issues inherent in Anne Frank’s diary. Britzman (1998) inaugurates the term in the following passage:

The term of learning acknowledges that studying the experiences and the traumatic residuals of genocide, ethnic hatred, aggression, and forms of state-sanctioned –and hence legal – social violence requires educators to think carefully about their own theories of learning and how the stuff of such difficult knowledge becomes pedagogical (p. 117).

Here, Britzman warns of the potential hazards lying within the topography of difficult knowledge. She warns that teachers for whom these tragic human events comprise the curriculum ought to “think carefully” about their planning and instruction, their desires and fantasies of learning. The thoughts that accompany difficult knowledge can be conceptualized as constitutively distinct from the “normal” thoughts of anticipatory sets, structured classroom activity and assessment. The assumption here is that there is a cost incurred from learning about the pain and suffering of others. In this sense, the use of difficult knowledge rests on an ethical premise to acknowledge that these educational “lessons” were never meant to be educational – or at least in the ways we think of them as such. Britzman (1998) thus continues:

This exploration needs to do more than confront the difficulties of learning from another’s painful encounter with victimization, aggression, and the desire to live on one’s own terms. It also must be willing to risk approaching the internal conflicts which the learner brings to the learning. (p. 117)

Britzman makes the move from outside to inside, bridging the foci of examination between that of the war, the violation of human rights, the propagation of social violence and that of the internal struggles that are housed in the student and teacher. These are mutually constructed phenomena within the discourse of difficult knowledge - the social events that constitute the historical/social trauma and the affective consequences of learning from them through school curricula. In short, inquiry utilizing difficult knowledge as a construct, asks us: “What happens when that other war, the war within, meets the conflicts and aggressions enacted in the world outside” (p. 119)? Such a question resonates loudly against the walls of museums containing representation of violence and aggression and, indeed, is part of the provocation for this paper as we revisit our impressions of learning of the violent past of Apartheid.

Contextualizing the Inquiry

South Africa serves as the sight of inquiry because of 1) its efforts to address its past trauma within its post-Apartheid present and 2) our personal experiences, our visits, to museums in South Africa. According to a simplistic, national narrative, democracy has prevailed and Apartheid has been defeated. In hoping to codify and ensure the dominance of that democratic narrative, South Africa memorializes its collective trauma and celebrates the heroic defeat of that system. By taking command of the narration, the government can utilize that past to orient people toward the need for cohesion and peacefulness in maintaining the new democracy. The narrative of trauma in South Africa focuses on the local heroes that defeated apartheid as well as sympathetic voices and actions of individuals, governments, and corporations around the globe who overwhelmingly concurred with the resisters about the genocide-like oppression in the country. One means of promoting this narrative and creating a certain collective memory of this

past is through the design and development of national and local public museums. The country has invested millions of Rand in creating museums as educational spaces for insiders and outsiders, preservation of the past, a holder of the hope the future, and a space to engage and reshape communities (Jordan, 2008; Mandela, 1997; Meskell & Scheermeyer, 2008). These efforts within South Africa enable the country to attempt to narrate the past through its own lenses (Bhabha, 1994; Cesaire, 1972; Chakrabarty, 1995). As much as engaging with Apartheid serves as an example of an encounter with difficult knowledge and trauma, its focus here is also one of opportunity.

The authors of this paper were participants in a Fulbright Group Project Abroad in July 2007. The purpose of the trip was to study South Africa as a platform for disrupting the way in which World History teachers in the United States positioned Africa in their teaching. The content of the trip was designed to educate beyond what was immediately available in U.S. textbooks and media, but also to disrupt the notions of South Africa we brought with us. The trip included visits to universities, game parks, tourist destinations, and museums throughout the nation. Many of the museums we visited were traditional in their pedagogy – displaying artifacts and narratives in a coherent linear fashion. The museums we query in this paper, however, were disruptive pedagogical spaces and in some ways make problematic the idea of museums as collective containers of the Apartheid past that now defines the country in many ways.

In South Africa and elsewhere, the number of public museums and memorials dedicated to traumatic events are gaining in numbers, and, as such, in cultural significance. Their content appeals to a local audience who shared directly in the traumatic event, local residents who live the legacy of the trauma, and visitors from outside the direct lines of Apartheid who are engaged because of the global-ness at which even local social trauma is experienced. Each of these subjectivities would be productive of different reactions in their work of symbolizing their encounters with the difficult displays, depending on their notions of place (Casemore, 2008; Pinar, 2004), their positions of power or national affiliations. The visit to displays that memorialize significant social trauma is wrought with the expectation of an encounter with difficult knowledge (Williams, 2008). Museums like these are considered pedagogical spaces that attempt to facilitate a visitor's relationship with difficult knowledge. An issue that makes the relationship to such trauma difficult is that it requires the individual to know about the trauma without having a prior personal experience with it.

Methodological Considerations

The issue we are seeking to examine in this paper is how people make meaning from representations of traumatic experiences that are not their own and indeed to question what counts as a legitimate meaning to begin with. We wonder, most generally, what we might learn about pedagogy from the position of a museum visitor. Drawing from our (two white citizens from the U.S.) experiences in South Africa, we are specifically asking how the (mostly) white visitors who frequent the Red Location Museum and Hector Pieterse Memorial form a relationship to the exhibitions for the sake of understanding apartheid and racism. Put differently, we are asking about the degree to which public pedagogy, indeed public testimony, operates to solve (or resolve) collective histories marked by violence and wonder what such a resolution would even look like. Indeed, these are questions that are necessarily asked of most all pedagogical encounters, but in this paper we lean on the public nature of these museums and the

narratives upon which they play in order to critically examine the possibilities and problematics therein. With these issues in mind, we wonder whether museums attending to difficult knowledge need to take into account the idea that ethical examination of museums “require[s] a self capable of wounding his or her own ego, the very boundaries that serve as a defense against pain” (Britzman, 2000, p. 47), and also how these boundaries are not only a function of the self, but are a function of socially constructed discourses that, as Lacan (2006) argues, speak us – rather than “us” speaking “them”.

Following researchers (Ellsworth, 2005; Matthews, 2009; Trofanenko, 2006), who read museum spaces pedagogically, we respond to the Red Location Museum and the Hector Peterson Museum and Memorial interpretively, acknowledging the pedagogical structure of these spaces, and reflexively implicating our “selves” within those moments of pedagogical encounter. These museums are created not as mere holders of objects, but around the affective possibility of the space and exhibit. To conduct this investigation we offer first person narrations of the museums under consideration. First, Jim narrates his experience in the Red Location Museum before Sandra does so in the Hector Pieterse Memorial and Museum. We offer these kinds of narrations because of the recognition that our subjectivities will already imbue our readings of museum objects with personal, cultural, and historical investments. We “narrate” the museums in an effort to help the reader in an understanding of the spaces under consideration as well as implicate our own subjectivities as in many ways authoring those very same spaces. We understand and forward the idea that such authorship is contingent, a reaction to/within certain social contexts, and are forged in dialogic relations between self, architect, curator, and the third term of the unconscious (Handler, 1993; Trofanenko, 2006).

Narrating the Museums

The Red Location Museum

Located in Port Elizabeth within the Red Location Township, the Red Location Museum is a commemoration of the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa. This museum was designed by Neoro Wolf Architects and opened in the spring of 2006, immediately winning a prestigious award supported by The Architectural Review claiming, “the building works as both metaphor and object: deliberately unglamorous, this is an architectural tour de force” (Findley, 2006, p. 98). The museum is the first part of a five-part community project, the others having to do with learning places and recreational community centers.

The location of this museum is part of its pedagogy. It is located within the boundaries of a still functioning community borne out of Apartheid policy in which families live, work, play, and learn. In other words, I (Jim) was confronted with the lived realities of those still feeling the policies of apartheid, as this township is a direct result of them. All visitors are also made aware of the choice the community made to make such a museum, as opposed to putting money into housing or other community projects. To get to the Red Location Museum I had to actually be “in” the Red Location, a not insignificant point, especially when compared to museums in the United States that depict, for example, the Holocaust. One cannot be “in” the Holocaust despite being in the Holocaust Museum. Therefore, and as scholars of place would help us conceptualize, I was by nature involved in an embodied experience upon visiting this particular space (Casmore, 2008; Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991; Kitchens, 2009). With this awareness of presence in mind, I entered into the museum expecting, as a Westerner used to the object

presentations in museum exhibitions would, to see artifacts that would help me understand the historical events of Apartheid in a more coherent, more content rich way.

However, within the exhibit spaces of the museum, the pedagogical address (Ellsworth, 1997) did not provide me with a coherent or linear narrative about the Apartheid, the violence associated with it, the struggle to overcome it, or the move toward democracy. In fact, it provided me very little in the way of facts at all. The presence of empty space is jarring. To me, the museum is instead a place of troubling the very notion of knowing Apartheid, its history, and its experience in the first place. As Steenkamp (2006) notes of the Red Location Museum, “The function of the museum is to offer a space in which the present can be negotiated and the future be imagined through formal representations that deal with the complexities of the past as a rich and diverse lived experience” (p. 253). It is, indeed, a place of troubling the very idea of what it means to “know” someone else’s experience – to know history at all. It is worth quoting the museum at length:

Visitors are not treated as consumers but active participants. The conventions of representing history as a single story are challenged through the design of the Museum spaces. The past is represented as a set of memories that are disconnected yet bound together by themes. The concept of the Memory Box is used to achieve these ends. These boxes are inspired by the boxes that migrant workers used to accommodate their prized possessions when separated from their families. These memory boxes were highly treasured. The Museum comprises a series of 12 unmarked, rusted boxes offering a set of different memories of struggle in South Africa. The boxes are housed in the main exhibition space and each box is 6 meter by 6 meter and twelve meters tall. The contents of the boxes are revealed only on entry - there is no sequence - the contents and themes of the boxes are juxtaposed - the experience in each box is a total one. The spaces between the boxes are spaces of reflection - what Huyssen calls the twilight of memory (Red Location Museum, 2006).

These “memory boxes” dominate the material space in the main exhibition hall. They are rusted corrugated metal and stand separate from one another in a strikingly large and otherwise empty space. While they represent the memory boxes that individuals would pack and take with them when displaced from their homes during the era of relocation, they also reminded me of homes comprising the Red Location township itself, standing on their ends, as the homes within the Red Location are made from the same materials. The museum curators extend the idea of “difficult knowing” in that one can only enter the memory boxes through a small entryway. Put differently, I could not see what I was “getting into” before I entered the memory boxes, perhaps paralleling and evoking the uncertainty and vulnerability one felt as a victim of Apartheid policies. No process invited me from one memory box to another, nor is there a suggestion as to how to experience – to reflect in – the “spaces of reflection” between them. There were neither arrows nor direction. In fact, these “spaces of reflection” are the only parts of the exhibit that can actually be seen from the floor of the museum space. I had to enter the memory box in order to become – literally and figuratively – in contact with the unlabelled objects that would traditionally be at the fore of the museum going experience. Here, though, they are contained, walled off, not captioned, bounded, and offered without narration. It was left to me to narrate.

The other presences in the main exhibit hall are seven 12 foot tall cement walls, standing in a row like gigantic dominoes, upon which biographies of local resistors rotate based upon the

wishes and consideration of the current community members. These walls were the first thing I saw upon my entry, draped cement with the faces and names of people whom I did not know, but who represented the struggle. Between the memory boxes and the cement structures, the main spaces of the exhibit hall diminished my physical body, putting me perhaps in a kind of context as at once “outside” of the story and only a small part of the context – as any individual would be.

Upon my visit to the Red Location Museum, my thoughts went directly to the pedagogical model offered in it, the use of space, the seemingly little “content” and exceedingly large amount of “thinking” that the space incited in me. The lack of content left me confused, but provoked me to think. In this sense, it was congruent with the idea of the museum designers to provide focus on the present and future. I thought about my time teaching high school social studies course. My memories became my present, and my experience of Apartheid became an experience of revisiting my own sense of purpose as an educator. I recognized the danger of this affective response in seeming to diminish the importance of the struggle, but I also wanted to take seriously the purpose of visioning different “presents” and “futures” out of my museum experience. I cannot change the history of Apartheid. The space of the museum was pedagogical in that it provoked me to address myself.

As I gazed upon the memory boxes from the outside, my feelings were that, as an educator, I should aim for just such a pedagogy. After all, I thought, isn’t this learning? Don’t we move through the “memory boxes” of each class period, the spaces in between offering the real connections, the ones that matter in our lives? Couldn’t we, then, make curricula that mirrored this museum’s design, as it is to disrupt and provoke? Even the danger that seems to be lurking in such a pedagogy – that unless presented with direct information that some visitors may leave with nothing – seems similar to the consequences of our most common pedagogical tendencies of the lecture, the worksheet, the standardized exam. My body was “in” apartheid but “of” something altogether different, a space of possibility and production of ideas that might help alleviate the chances of such atrocities from taking place in other places and in other times.

This is to say that I did not think too much about the apartheid struggle while in the Red Location Museum. I did speak with the community members who were leaders of the anti-apartheid struggle. I was moved by their stories to think about my own family, and my own political and moral commitments. I was moved to consider how I act in light of my convictions, to reflect upon and justify my actions in past and future situations. In these ways the Red Location Museum allowed me to attend to difficult knowledge in ways that disrupted –in productive ways – my sensibilities about museums, pedagogy, and the relevance of learning about Apartheid in the first place.

The Hector Pieterse Museum and Memorial

The Hector Pieterse Museum and Memorial rests within the boundaries of Soweto. The museum, built at the site of riots in Soweto, is a celebration of how this community came together to overcome Apartheid. Soweto was an impoverished township adjacent to Johannesburg during the Apartheid era that became an important site of rebellion against oppression. Today tourists who want to view a township take organized tours through Soweto that highlight points of resistance like the site of the museum as well as the homes of famous leaders like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. As a visitor to the museum, I (Sandra) was a

voyeur into the community. Although the community is fairly disengaged from the memorial, I could forget the community around it. Windows, narrow – horizontal or vertical depending on location – and at various heights, provide intentional views of the township. The landscape shifts from a parking lot of visitors’ buses to the hospital where injured students were taken to the red roofed houses that comprise the township today. Between the roofs, I caught glimpses into the streets and the yards – into the lives – of the residents of Soweto, a place more “developed” and safe (after all tourists can visit) today. Turning away from the windows is different view. The Soweto inside the museum is the holder of tragedy, the location of my encounter with difficult knowledge. Or was it the other way around?

The Hector Pieterse Museum uses the uprising by school children in Soweto, during which Hector Pieterse was killed, as a site for showing the atrocities of the era, as a springboard to celebrate Soweto’s role in overcoming those atrocities. The photograph of a mortally wounded Hector Pieterse being carried by an older Soweto youth, accompanied by a terrified sibling, is famous for its evocation of the student uprisings, the terror of oppression, and the violence of Apartheid. The museum celebrates the heroics of the youth who gave their life to fight against this oppressive past:

The Hector Pieterse Museum is dedicated to the 1976 Soweto Uprising. It brought immense pride to me as an African for here were Africans who refused to be victims and challenged the repressive order of things. For here is a country that has gone through so much more than Kenya ever has, but has stood up to those difficulties against tremendous odds, and come out on top (The Nation, 2005).

The events memorialized in the museum are a peaceful march by youth to protest the language of the textbooks they could not read and the years of resistance and uprisings that followed. The youth—their innocence, their conviction, their place at the start of life—garnered my sympathy for the bloodbath (the clash between the unarmed children and the armed military) that followed. The children lost and yet won. Their conviction and willingness to act is what positioned Soweto to be described as one of the most important sites of resistance to apartheid. The somber tone for remembering is set in the outdoors. Before I could pass into the museum, I passed through a memorial – a fountain with quotes and markers depicting lost lives, as well as a line imbedded into the cement marking the path of the student protest march.

The entryway into the museum floor-to-ceiling photographs of children resisting took me from celebrating lost lives to what I took as an understanding the trauma in those lives. The collection of pictures – at first glance a continuous scene, but on further examination a set of pictures from many marches – contain life-sized pictures of youth running towards us, fear spread across their face in some moments, conviction in others. How could I not be brought into their world – either to rescue the injured, protect the fleeing, or join the marching? I was torn – is this memory or reality? Here, the cycle of question began. I was now entrenched in the space of difficult knowledge. It was swarming around me. Uncertain, I looked to the remainder of the space as one that might help me understand the images I had just experienced.

The remainder of the museum offers understanding while continuing to disrupt. There are rich, informational displays laid out chronologically and thematically. If viewed from above, the path that I took through the museum is an upward spiral guiding one from exhibit to exhibit. The exhibits are not calming. They do not me in ways I might have hoped. The process of disruption continues as we walk the intended path. There are many disrupters. Some exhibits are artifacts

that placed me alongside a visual history of the experience and the policies. There are classroom desks and books that mark the conditions and languages against which students were protesting. Timelines share the specifics of the policy changes in the education of students in Soweto. There are notes of leaders and recollections of events.

Other exhibits displaced me and the meanings I held. For example, after the floor-to-ceiling photos is an exhibit of two video screens depicting Apartheid policies and resistance to them. The videos silently depict the signing of documents and the organizing of protests, the meetings of Whites and the meetings of Blacks. Their meaning is articulated in the flow of words across the bottom of the screen. This appears to be a continuous flow of words from one screen to the next with words holding the two experiences together and explaining their intersection. I thought that I had found relief in the curators' apparent willingness to tell me how to conceptualize the images. But in the effort to read both screens, I was quickly aware that the two screens contain different captions. They refer only to their own images and are not chronologically side-by-side. The presumed linearity or direct cause and effect that would have helped me understand the situation do not exist. There is no correct sequence, no immediate back and forth to explain the actions of each side. While clearly historically there are certain impactful events, they refuse to reduce it to merely such an understanding.

Like the Red Location Museum, this one is prepared for the active viewer it demands. There are places to take a break and step back. There is a bench near the schoolroom, a chance to sit down during the intensity of the museum. There are a few windows that look outside to peaceful greenery, a symbol of what the battles in the museum have created for the present. At the top of the museum is a classroom, but I had to wind my way through the entirety of the museum before reaching the communal location. The auditorium is conducive to lectures, but comfortable enough for people to sit and talk. This is a chance for coming together, for debriefing the experience, and making collective sense of the experience.

This trip was not my first encounter with South Africa and Apartheid. I had been to Johannesburg but always resisted organized tours, not because of the emotions they might evoke but to avoid a promulgation of gawking tourists. I preferred, during my experiences in South Africa, to interact with people in coffee shops, clubs, on public transport, to examine the past and present through the lives of those struggling to make sense of the "new" South Africa. I had traveled with "friends" to their homes in townships in Umtata and Cape Town, but this was the first venture into a township. I came expecting and wanting whatever experience the museum had to offer. I wanted to be wrong about its role in the tourist circuit. I entered thinking more about the site of learning, having already spent three weeks being awed by the pedagogical possibilities and imaginations of South Africa's museum, than an historical marker.

The disruptions in the museum and the pauses I took in the museum, the pained expressions in photos and the etchings of children on their desks, all observations that left me ponder the experience and lives of South African. I tried to feel their pain and understand what it was like to feel injustice and to be strong enough to resist and fight for one's rights. But the disruptions and pauses displaced me. I was in South Africa but remembering the systems of racism in my home, past and present. I considered Apartheid outside of South Africa, a system that developed because of a racist ideology ascribed in landscapes across the continent, indeed across the globe. Although racism is a global oppression, there are few civil rights memorials and even fewer slavery museums in my country or elsewhere in the world. I moved between there and beyond in encountering difficult knowledge. I had to confront the world beyond South Africa to settle this experience.

Difficult (Public) Knowledge

This section of the paper joins the idea of “difficult knowledge” with our experiences in, and readings of, the Red Location and Hector Pieterse Museums. We consider difficult knowledge to be one trace (among many) left by social trauma, a trace that is felt/found in pedagogical relations to an as-of-yet unresolved social/historical problematic. We do not deny the number of ways that social and historical violence and trauma continue after the conclusion of the event: families, individuals, communities, and institutions all are caught in its wake. But, for us, difficult knowledge is given its weight when these traumatic histories are presented with the intent to educate those who were not directly involved in the specific events represented. We can never really be learning about the Other except through an articulation of our own traumatic, reconstituted, memories. To illustrate this point we note Žižek’s (2002) discussion of US citizens’ reactions to 9/11, as he notices the problematic that “every feature attributed to the Other is already present at the heart of the USA” (p. 43). What Žižek teaches us is that issues of intolerance, violence, and indeed terrorism are located simultaneously within ourselves (historically, culturally, socially) and outside in the Other. Similarly when white U.S. citizens enter the apartheid museums in South Africa, that which they are likely to confront and unproblematically understand are problems of race, violence, segregation and gross injustices sustained by elected government, a theme that resonates at the heart of the U.S., South Africa and the world.

The Difficulty of Destabilizing Pedagogy

The Hector Pieterse Museum and Red Location Museum are in a genre of museums designed to disrupt and destabilize, as these do (to greater and lesser extents) are incredibly challenged from their inception to meet their goals. There are barriers. As thoughtful as the architects and curators are, and as purposeful as the museum design might be, they are working within (and against) some heavily entrenched notions on the part of museum visitors. One barrier that museums designed in this way encounter is they *are* counter to the dominant narrative for how the world works— including notions of what counts as a good or bad museum (or textbook, test, course, lecture, etc.). The dominant narrative of a museum belongs within a constellation of signifiers that structure particular understandings that reinforce existing relationships of individuals to power, privilege, and knowledge, what Lacan (1978) references as the Big Other, or the Master’s Discourse. To put it simply, a dominant discourse of museums structures the visitor’s demand for a coherent, linear history, the kind the places objects and experiences on display behind glass (Bennett, 1995; Lavine & Karp, 1991; Willinsky, 1998). The narrative, or course, extends beyond school and museum and into the apparatus of global free market ideology – what Žižek (2009) considers the most privileged discourse – the Master’s Discourse – of our time. Further complicating these museums is that they serve as both museum and memorial. This is not a museum of culture or science in which the expectation is of distance between the viewer and display. The viewer to a memorial expects to be moved and touched by the experience and in designing it as both memorial and museum, the curator extends such an invitation. It is a certain kind of history, one critiqued by post-colonial writers, which keeps the trauma of events confined to the chronology of a time-line allowing a visitor to say that the problems of apartheid are over, which keeps the trauma attached to and in definition of a nation (Bhabha, 1994; Cesaire, 1972; Chakrabarty, 1995; Duara, 1995). But our narrations demonstrate

that while Apartheid as a structured policy is over, its representations bring the leftovers of it into the historical, personal, and pedagogical present.

Difficult knowledge foregrounds the high stakes learning that comes from an engagement with “traumatic residuals” of genocide, war, and mass violence. In other words, difficult knowledge is an engagement with these “residuals” that are left in the wake of history as they are engaged in pedagogical settings. The construct of difficult knowledge helps bring into focus the idea that history is unsettled, that events from the past continue to circulate and influence the present. This does not parrot the phrase that “in order to know the present you must understand the past”. Instead, it puts the focus on what such learning does to the individual who encounters the past, how the wounds of others come to have meaning within the memories of wounds to the self. The question is not just whether we offer public remembrance of a social trauma via museum or curriculum. Rather, as Zizek (2002) elaborates:

The true choice apropos of historical trauma is not the one between remembering or forgetting them: traumas we are not ready or able to remember haunt us all the more forcefully. We should therefore accept the paradox that, in order to really forget an event, we must first summon up the strength to remember it properly. (p. 22)

In light of Zizek’s claim, these museums could be seen as attempts at “remembering properly”. The trouble, of course, is that no one can determine one certain proper remembering of such tragic, dehumanizing, and systematic forms of violence. Remembering cannot be disentangled from previous, present, and future experiences, interactions, and ways of thinking and being. In the South African context, the Apartheid exhibits are both embedded within and pose a threat to the colonial narrative (Cesaire, 1972; wa Thiong’o, 1986). The decisions of the curators of these museums in South Africa recognize, in attending to the challenges of proper remembering, require input from the viewer in the dialogic creation of meaning. Both museums challenge the pedagogies of space and location as they help viewers make sense of and remember a collective atrocity in particular and intentional ways, often in ways that resist sense making altogether. The intent is explicitly to be disruptive rather than coherent. The impact of the pedagogy of the museums rests in materials and presentation that are themselves disruptive. Rather than labels that offer meaning, the visitor is left without specific narratives and provided artifacts (the memory boxes) or video, audio, and pictorial images to piece together and make sense of both an isolated event and that event’s play in a much larger system. Although the content is largely of the resistance and strength, the artifacts that explain the resistance provide a rich understanding of the era without being a museum of Apartheid. To encourage viewers to step in and out of the exhibits in order to finally make meaning, both museums contain spaces for contemplation. This design specifically recognizes the role of personal meaning-making in the encounter with traumatic moments. Finally, the museums claim that this proper remembrance means confronting the real places of the trauma. The museums are both situated in a community that is centered in the museum. While a visitor can certainly see the community outside the museum, the windows in the Hector Pieterse Museum and the corrugated metal memory boxes mean that the community is constantly in front of the viewer. One must remember that there are real communities and real people immediately in and around the museum whose present is shaped by this past. It seems that in these cases, remembering properly means participating in the collective memories of these communities in order to understand the context that adjoins the museums. Further, it means a focus on connections to the present of the viewer’s subjectivity.

Refusing Narrative Closure

The intent of such a “proper” remembrance seems to be one that leaves the narrative open, refusing “narrative closure” (Ellsworth, 2005), that in leaving the museum is an ellipsis rather than period. The “cure”, or the resolution of a proper remembrance of the social/historical traumas represented in difficult knowledge would lead an individual not to some settling of the past (which is an impossible feat), but instead, as Britzman (2000) suggests:

To make ... new meanings in their own lives; to become attentive to profound suffering and social aggression in their own time; to begin to understand the structures that sustain aggression and hatred; and to consider how the very question of vulnerability, despair, and profound loss must become central to our own conceptualizations of who we each are ... to invoke interest in the work of becoming an ethical subject. (p. 47)

The impact, the reason we encounter difficult knowledge is not to be affected by representations of the traumatic event but also of the (perhaps) previously missing knowledge that such violence and hatred is still sustained today. Laub (1992) suggests, “the listener [to a traumatic narrative] through his very listening...comes to partially experience the trauma in himself” (p. 57). Our narrations of encounters with museums reflect the dual level of consciousness of the traumatic experiences – the manner in which we directly felt the trauma of the community in which we were situated and that which we took to our teaching or understanding of our own lives. This is a crucial component to understanding what is at stake. If we are to take Laub seriously, then we admit that those in attendance at public places, like public museums, that commemorate or memorialize social/historical trauma are going through a certain trauma themselves, however variant those experiences will be.

The significance of Britzman’s and Laub’s notions above is that they attend not to the past, the events that give rise to the trauma, its effects, and its subsequent significations, but to the ways these significations are felt anew, and can be used, in the present. Remembering and memory are as much the present as they are the past. In essence, this is the work that the Apartheid museums we consider in this paper attempt to do: taking the past of Apartheid and imposing them on the present. The hope is that “witness” is made of museum visitor and that the new witness will spread his/her testimony of what was seen. They hope, we think, that the dominant narrative of Apartheid being “over” is resisted and problematized.

Trips (like the one we took) are specifically organized and planned around (re)teaching the world – do not forget the past lest we repeat it. When viewed through the psychoanalytic prescription lens of difficult knowledge, it shuttles us from an anchor in the harbor of didactic certainty and into the more adventurous waters of ambiguity and multiple understandings. In fact, what is closer to the purpose is a less-clear, more uncertain knowing of those times and events – it is, after all, exceedingly egotistical to claim to “know” someone else’s pain or horror – and movement toward making use of this not-knowing. This is one way to hope for the resolution of the trauma of apartheid. We acknowledge that they – as anyone would expect - both succeed and fail in their task.

Trips like these are optional and people enter seeking some kind of disruption, whether it is a disrupting of the current pedagogical practice or their broader thinking about socio-political discourses. This experience is relevant to those of us who consider why and how difficult knowledge is part of the curriculum and concurrently wonders about the ways in which these difficulties can be addressed. Students, confronted by the trauma are affected consciously and

unconsciously by the experiences their teacher provides. As for us, we are subjects in the world concerned with pedagogy and curriculum that invites individuals to act in ways that combat hatred and injustice. In this sense, the museums became spaces of pedagogical instruction for us. Specifically, they teach us that there are social and personal components of a “proper” remembrance. After all, the history of Apartheid, like other traumas presented in school, is not (in most senses, anyway) “our” history. Complications of difficult knowledge are encountered when other peoples’ suffering is displayed and represented in curricula – whether in the classroom or museum – so that a student/visitor is positioned as having something to learn, not only *about* but *from* this suffering. The social knowledge of the systems and structures that sustain violence is one part of the pedagogical trouble.

Another part of the struggle is that by teaching of the past and offering an ending to the story, we dissuade people from coming to terms with their position within a system that perpetuates similar inequity and injustice. They are likely to signify these experiences within a framework of a linear notion of history that gives rise to a narrative confining the problem to the past and celebrating the victory as complete. Each of these is resting in the unconscious of the American people as we continue to deal with our own very real and very present problems of race and violence. The problem is that “we” see the problems as both “theirs” and “done with”. Despite the attempts of museums and pedagogues to provoke the sense of not-knowing, the challenges to accomplish this are quite steep and simultaneously, we think, worth pursuing.

Conclusion

Trauma is something we share as people in the world. We all experience the traumatic break from loved ones, the trauma of the inadequacy of language, and that of the irreducible vulnerability we face daily. Traumatic events, as Lacan (1978) defines them, are traumatic because they cannot be signified or made sense of. The repetition of the event through fantasy, dreams, film, discussion and museum exhibition are then theorized as attempts to, as we learn from Žižek above, remember properly.

Consider the museums in this paper. They are seemingly the containers of trauma or difficult knowledge, yet they are not and cannot be. Rather, they contain the repetitions of the trauma. Their design and engagement is rooted in both what comes before and the hope of something to come later. Our encounter with Apartheid speaks directly to some effort to experience and make sense of this particular trauma but the draw comes largely from the more direct experience with our own traumatic racial history and how this meaning is made and remade in encounter with the past as well as local personal and social encounter in the every-day. In other words, we are destined to speak our positions within the symbolic field (Lacan, 2006). In encounters with representations of social trauma our positions are not simply those intended by the museum curator and designer. If they were, and all visitors were made “witness”, we could make a conjecture that systemic violence would be on the decline. However, the positions we speak are those we carry with us from childhood, from our initiation into language, and also through the big Other discourses that dictate our semblances of normalcy and common national narrative. Our work as education researchers and teacher educators hinges on being able to allow individuals some modicum of understanding regarding ways to identify these positions, how they speak us, and alternative positions that we could seek to occupy (although it is never possible to

simply choose our positionality). We contend that disruptive pedagogical practices such as those fostered in the museums we describe in this paper help work toward those ends.

An ethic of humanism and a belief that history is taught to avoid past mistakes means that students in schools regularly encounter difficult knowledge. While the student may not invite it, teachers, particularly in the social sciences, engage this in their classrooms. But if we are to take the lessons of psychoanalytic theory seriously, then we should acknowledge, as Philips (2004) does, that “the lesson of history is that history is not a lesson” (p. 791). The museums we discuss in this paper seem to understand this, and challenge our senses of space as a tool of pedagogy and the role of the intentional disruption. Rather than attempting stability, these museums accept the absence of that stability and follow this trajectory. Teachers can do the same. Rather than making meaning “for”, these museums propose and increased encounter with artifacts and tales that require meaning “production” individually with the knowledge that individuals bring themselves into the moment. The museums also speak largely to the sense of remembering properly in encounters with difficult knowledge or any element of history. The very space for the encounter with knowledge pushes the limits and expands the boundaries of proper remembrance.

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