In *Memorializing the Holocaust: Gender, Genocide and Collective Memory*, Janet Jacobs explores commemoration of the Holocaust in monuments, museums, and memorials through the lens of gender. Jacobs’s book investigates how, at a range of sites in Germany and eastern Europe as well as the United States and Australia, gendered visual narratives contribute to traumatic collective memories of violence and genocide. Utilizing what she describes as a blend of cultural studies and visual sociological approaches and also drawing upon Marianne Hirsch and Barbie Zelizer’s pioneering work on visual narratives of the Holocaust, Jacobs looks at the ways in which these memorial forms communicate Jewish victimhood. As it turns out, her conclusions paint a rather ambivalent picture of memorialization.[1] Chief amongst her concerns is that the presentation of Jewish men and women along highly stylized gendered lines in the sites she examines might unintentionally “denigrate” (p. 156) the memory of the victims.

Jacobs begins with a short introduction that maps out the efforts made by recent memory studies research to explain the role of the Holocaust in contemporary processes of identity construction. She sees a place for the “memorialscape” (p. xx) she has studied in propping up an institutionalized, Holocaust-centered memory culture, but rather than look at their role in the politics of memory she focuses specifically on the category of gender at these sites. A theoretical chapter then reflects on her dual role as empathetic female spectator and distanced, critical researcher—a “role conflict” (p. 33) lying at the heart of her ethnographic approach.

In what is a fascinating meditation on this so-called double vision (p. 37), Jacobs considers the ethical implications of a feminist gaze, in particular with regard to its inherent selectivity and inadvertent voyeurism. Might focusing exclusively on representations of women’s suffering, she asks, risk reproducing a fetishized gaze drawn to the female body whilst relegating the experiences of men and children to the ethnographic background? Likewise how can Jacobs, a Jewish woman, analyze and photograph these images of atrocity without subjecting herself to a kind of traumatic transferance? In answer to the first question, Jacobs has decided also to look at accompanying representations of Jewish masculinity at her research sites in order to mitigate the objectification of her primary research subjects. In answer to the second, she proposes to use her camera and field notes to create an “intellectual space” (p. 38) for managing her emotions and maintaining critical distance.

Jacobs begins the remaining five chapters by discussing the representation of women at the Auschwitz memorial museum. In photos, memorial sculptures, and artifact installations displayed at the site, she discerns a prevalence of maternal imagery on the one hand and sexualized representations of the female body on the other. Whilst the former casts Jewish women as passive victims, the latter turns the act of spectating from remembrance into “sexual objectification” (p. 45). At the Ravensbrück concentration camp memorial, the subject of chapter 3, Jacobs sees a Christianizing frame of remembrance. This is apparent above all in prisoners’ depictions of a “woman-made hell” (p. 63) that feature female guards as diabolical tormenters in black capes and in the motif of a martyred female victim that appears in a number of
memorials to national prisoner groups.

Chapter 4 deals with German memorials to the 1938 Kristallnacht pogroms. In the memorials Jacobs has surveyed, both this incident and by extension the Holocaust in a broader sense are represented primarily as the destruction of a religion and culture, not as the destruction of a people. Indeed, visual symbols such as a desecrated Torah appear in these memorials with telling frequency. For Jacobs this equates to an “emasculaton” of the Jewish sacred text that effectively severs its link to a powerful patriarchal God and reduces the scrolls to a “defeated and ruined female archetype” (p. 102). In this sense, she sees Kristallnacht memorials as unconsciously aping medieval anti-Semitic religious iconography, in which the Jewish synagogue for instance was represented as a defeated and vanquished female figure, Synagoga.

The focus is broadened in chapter 5 to investigate efforts at memorializing medieval and early modern Jewish life in Germany and eastern Europe, thereby situating representations of the Holocaust within a broader language of memorialization. For Jacobs, the effect of drawing attention to pre-genocide Jewry is to exoticize Jewish culture and tradition. As she sees it, the darkened, subterranean exhibition spaces at sites such as the Rashi House Jewish Museum in Worms lends a mix of nostalgic rural pastiche and hints of “Otherness” to depictions of pre-twentieth-century Jewish heritage. The suggestion that this “embed[s] the Jew in medival archaeology” (p. 125), facilitating a disidentification on the part of German audiences, is an interesting one. To be sure, this kind of distancing could conceivably smooth over the problematic fact that a great many Jewish Holocaust victims were also Germans—and assimilated Germans at that. But to argue, as Jacobs does, that this actually “re-stigmatizes” the Jews, who can then be “blamed for their own suffering and destruction” (p. 132), unfairly does away with the searching debates conducted within reunified Germany (not to mention those already taking place in the Federal Republic of Germany prior to 1989) that revolve around exactly this issue of German guilt and complicity in the Holocaust.[1]

A concluding chapter analyzes two Holocaust memorial museums outside Europe and also draws together the geographically wide-ranging case studies introduced in preceding chapters. The two sites examined here, one in Melbourne and the other in Indiana, both attest to “women’s creativity and vision” (p. 141) insofar as female Holocaust survivors and their relatives had a large hand in founding them. Moreover, they both set the more canonical photographic representations of Jewish victims—roups of Jewish men moments before execution or liberated Jewish women survivors of the concentration camps, for example—against photos of survivors’ families that predate the Holocaust. In this way, Jacobs argues, the trope of women’s relationships and kinship bonds serves to yoke the memory of observers to the lives of individual Jewish victims. In this familial frame of remembrance, Jacobs sees an alternative approach to the memory of genocide that might avoid the pitfalls of alienation or voyeurism.

It is not until late in the chapter that Jacobs considers whether other visitors to the sites she has surveyed would share her concern at the “unintended consequences of memorialization” (p. 153). If she feels there are unresolved “issues of gender, anti-Semitism, and representations of victimization” (p. 153) at the center of today’s collective memory of the Holocaust, then the question of exactly whose collective memory this is remains unanswered. Indeed, Jacobs herself remarks that “it is … my interpretative framework through which these monuments and sites have been evaluated and understood” (p. xxii). It would have been valuable to hear more about how the (often problematic) tropes and motifs Jacobs has identified are perceived by others. Underdeveloped sections in chapter 3 on ritual patterns of remembrance at Ravensbrück and in chapter 4 concerning the conceptual and financial involvement of Jewish groups in bringing about memorials would suggest a complex landscape of memorial agents and observers. As it is, however, the sites emerge in the narrative as rather static and two-dimensional.

This could also have been avoided with a keener alertness to historical and present-day contexts at certain points, particularly in the chapter on Ravensbrück. Jacobs castigates the memorial site for not explicitly mentioning that the subject of a memorial stone at the crematorium was Jewish. “Because this memorial has been placed at the crematorium,” she argues, “the absence of a Jewish narrative is all the more striking and highlights the as yet unresolved issues of Jewish invisibility in German memory” (p. 74). Yet the crematorium at Ravensbrück was not primarily a site of Jewish suffering in the way that the crematoria at extermination camps in occupied eastern Europe were—Jewish inmates made up around 15 percent of the total prisoner population at the former. Collapsing together Jewish suffering and the symbol of the crematorium in this way arguably reduces National Socialist racial policy to its anti-Semitic dimensions, resembling the thrust of Anglo-American “Holo-
caust Education” discourses that have emerged since the turn of the millennium.[3] Jacobs might have asked whether this context has worked its way into her own analysis. Similarly, she overlooks the ideological function of the “Burdened Woman” statue at Ravensbrück in the German Democratic Republic. Certainly, one can read it as a symbol of Christian maternity, as Jacobs does. But a closer look reveals that, unlike a traditional Pietà, the statue also appears to be striding forward, signifying a new beginning that resonated with the GDR’s self-proclaimed antifascist genealogy. Political imperatives therefore also served to marginalize the Jewish Holocaust in this statue.[4]

These criticisms notwithstanding, Janet Jacobs has written a thoughtful and lucid study on Holocaust memorialization. Where the book is most successful is in its exploration of the relationship between memorial and observer, convincingly employing a feminist approach to interrogate the assumption that Holocaust memorials “honor” the memory of victims they purport to commemorate. Future studies in this field will be able to profit from Jacobs’s ethical critique and couple it to a more differentiated understanding of collective memory.

Notes


[2]. These were triggered not least by the publication of Daniel Goldhagen’s highly controversial *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).


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