

## Stories of a Death Tourist

*Jessica Auchter*\*

I am a death tourist. A visitor to sites of atrocity. One who travels in the name of research, or curiosity, or a story, or something.

How many genocide sites can I visit in a month? One? Dachau. Two? Auschwitz-Birkenau. Choung Ek, where bone fragments still stick up out of the ground after a big rain. Tuol Sleng, where there is a sign telling visitors not to smile. Kigali, where there is a sign telling visitors not to step on the mass graves. How many in a year? In five? In ten? Others, they may go to learn, but I, I already know it all. I have read the stories; I have studied the politics. My experiences start to shape the encounters: I have witnessed the deaths of millions, of tens of millions. I have walked the ground where their ashes were scattered, where their bones mingled with dirt. I take notes. I tell stories. I begin to think of myself as a witness, not a tourist.

At Choung Ek, the Killing Fields memorial site outside of Phnom Penh in Cambodia, I see someone posing quietly with the rags and bones on display, taking a picture with them quietly so as not to draw attention to the fact that they are posing for a picture with these bones and clothing of the dead. #genocideselfie. I read a TripAdvisor review of Rwandan memorial sites that includes someone's illicit photo at the site, the site where you are not allowed to take pictures. At Auschwitz, there has recently been a controversy about people taking selfies. But when I am there, people are only posing for cheery photos at the train car, the one that brought more than a million people to their deaths at that same site. The selfie stick that ensures that you do not miss one chance to have an image of yourself, of your group of friends, in front of the train tracks or the concentration camp buildings, is in wide use. Back in Cambodia, at the genocide museum at the killing fields, I watch a movie about the formation of the memorial site, and the guy sitting in the row in front of me is texting the entire time. In Rwanda, at Nyamata church, a visitor asks "are there more mass graves over here?"

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Am I a death tourist? A death connoisseur? An objective researcher on the trail of atrocity memorialization? I take pictures, but to document. To document what I see. I take notes. At a conference, someone says I am creepy. Somehow this only reinforces my scholarly positioning.

Then, I was in Chattanooga, Tennessee, United States of America, on Thursday, July 15, 2015. So were more than 175,000 other people, including Mohammed Abdulazeez, a former student at the university where I teach, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Abdulazeez brought several guns and began shooting at a military recruiting center, near one of my favorite restaurants, and then drove several miles to the Naval Reserve Center, which is right on my route to get from home to the university. There, he killed four US Marines and mortally wounded a sailor. After the shooting, several people asked me what I felt, given that the student graduated from my university, though I never knew the student. This strange question of guilt and responsibility, as if my response should be some sort of reflection on the nature of what he must have been taught, or the degree to which the educational system must have failed him, recurred several times. My own town envisioned itself as a site of atrocity, and I thought about being a death tourist in one's own home. Perhaps my scholarship has always been a version of this.

On August 15, 2015, I attended a memorial service for the Marines and sailor killed in the attack. How does a town memorialize those killed in a lone wolf attack? The first thing apparent in the speeches was the language of warriors. Freedom. Protecting freedom, freedom isn't easy, said one of the commanders. The audience, mostly military members and their families, seemed to embody this. Yet many chairs were empty in the arena: no one had come to mourn. Ever the consummate death tourist, I had grabbed my husband on this rainy day and insisted that we listen to the stories about these deaths. Yet the stories were not about death, so much as about how we should not try to understand the act itself. The Secretary of the Navy said the attack defied comprehension, defied understanding, and was 'pure evil.'

I don't know how to understand evil. Should I photograph it? Study it? Try not to understand? Be afraid? How do we teach evil in our classrooms? Once when I taught a class on genocide, a student wrote on my teaching evaluations that the class was too depressing. Another student wrote that I had shielded them too much from the disturbing visuals of genocide.

Perhaps I am not a death tourist. Perhaps I am a death tour guide. I find myself trying to convince students why they should pay attention to things that kill people. I try to convince 80 college freshmen that they should care about lack of sanitation in the developing world and a hunger crisis in Central African Republic. They don't know where that is, and I find myself having to explain what open defecation is, as they have never heard of it.

I sit with survivors of the Cambodian genocide in the city of Battambang. Before we ask, an elderly man says that many people ask why they didn't just run away or try to overpower the killers, especially since many of the killers were children. He doesn't answer the question. He asks why did Cambodians kill other Cambodians? He doesn't answer the question. He doesn't know how to understand evil, so he lives next door to it instead.

‘What does identifying an act or an actor as evil suggest? Evil, particularly when used as a noun, implies a force that operates almost independent of human agents. It is to be sensed, but not fully grasped or understood.’<sup>1</sup> Understanding evil is dangerous. It means you have to acknowledge it is human rather than a supernatural force that can neither be reasoned with nor comprehended. It means you cannot destroy it anywhere but in yourself. That doesn’t sit well with my students, who want someone to blame and something to do. Sorry, I say, the world is a depressing place.

At Choung Ek, the Killing Fields in Cambodia, an audio guide tells the stories of survivors, of Chum Mey, who founded the documentation center of Cambodia. He tells how at Tuol Sleng prison, the survivors had to tell stories. They had to tell a lie, to believe their own lies, so they could be forgiven. When you ran out of stories, you’d be killed.

On my way out of Tuol Sleng, Chum Mey sits at a table selling his book. I buy a copy, and he poses for a photograph with me, of course. I return a few months later and buy another copy. Who wouldn’t want their photograph with a genocide survivor? Once, twice. I wonder how many people who buy the book actually read it. I read it a month or so later. I read an excerpt aloud to my students that is the confession Chum Mey was forced to sign that admitted he worked for the CIA. He didn’t work for the CIA.

So many lies. My own lie: the purported objectivity of the scholarship of death. So many stories. My own story: a family history of Jews killed in the Holocaust, unresolved anger over a childhood where this history seemed distant, and where no one talked about Rwanda and Bosnia even when they were happening at that exact moment, and the guilt over the untold stories that has somehow led me to this: the travels of the death tourist.

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<sup>1</sup> See Ronald Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz, ‘Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq,’ *Security Studies*, 16, 3, 2007, 409-451, 426.