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Thinking Conflicted Heritage Through Campscapes

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Winter 2017

ACCESSING CAMPSCAPES: INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES FOR USING EUROPEAN CONFLICTED HERITAGE

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THINKING CONFLICTED HERITAGE THROUGH CAMPSCAPES

04

On the grounds of the Dutch Memorial Camp Westerbork, visitors are made aware of the site's history rather laconically. It is through the monumentalization of its largely empty space that 102,000 people persecuted as Jews, Roma and Sinti, and a number of resistance fighters are remembered here as victims of Nazi war terror. Most of them lived for a longer or shorter time in the former Nazi concentration and transit camp before being transported from July 1942 to September 1944 to Auschwitz, Sobibor, Mauthausen, Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt. Paradoxically, the largely empty field of the former camp is made fathomable by the imposing residence of the camp commanders. One of the few remaining material traces of the original campscape, the commander's house, offered a panoptic view on the atrocities of the weekly transports to the East which were invented and executed with orderly precision by two of its residents, the SS officers Erich Deppner and Albert Konrad Gemmeker. Established after the German 'Kristallnacht' in 1938 as a centralized German-Jewish refugee camp, five years after the war this former refugee, transit, and postwar Dutch internment camp (for fascist collaborators), was used as a resort for Moluccan Christian families (mostly members of the Royal Netherlands Colonial Army) who were relocated to the Netherlands after the decolonization of the former Dutch East Indies. They lived at the site, then renamed Schattenberg, up to its final demolition around 1970, when the campscape became the new destination for fourteen 25-meter-wide, dish-shaped antennas of ASTRON, the Westerbork Radio Telescope, for which it had to turn into a zone of silence.

Despite the solemn intention of its symbolic topography, memories attached to the site continue to evince divergent affective responses: while for the former inmates of the camp and their relatives "Westerbork" represents a reminder of suffering, for members of the Moluccan community, forced out of their homeland and later out of their 'kampung' on the empty moors of Drenthe, "Schattenberg" articulates a tragic

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Reconstructed barrack at the premises of the Westerbork Memorial Center. Photo: S. Wierenga.

memory of loss. In this fluid dynamics of remembrance, representing one's own story often engenders divisive claims of inscription on and authority over a memorial site, further obscured by the contingency of representations. Thus in Westerbork, the national monument established on the Netherlands War Remembrance Day, 4 May 1970, came into public awareness at a time when the Shoah was gradually becoming a historical topos for politics and sovereignty claims worldwide¹ – even though the Dutch Jewish community had not been invited and at that time still showed no interest in protecting the site. In the same decade, the Moluccan national cause would unexpectedly turn violent in the Netherlands with the hijacking of two passenger trains and a school with children by radical Moluccan activists from the former Schattenberg community. It fostered such traumatic memories both in Dutch society and among the Moluccan minority that – with the exception of a small, nostalgic Moluccan 'kitchen memorial' – a mnemonic relationship to Westerbork/Schattenberg has until today hardly been created. Susceptible to the tension between the campscape as a marker of individual and collectivized experience, on the one hand, and as invested public space conveying specific narratives on the past, on the other, Westerbork illustrates the intrinsic layering of memorial sites caught in a broader cultural and political dynamic.

What this shows is that access to such sites requires more than a critical inquiry into how they relate to transnational memory spaces structured by the Holocaust paradigm, human rights discourses, and

1 Daniel Levy and Nathan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, Philadelphia 2006. For a critical consideration of the history of Westerbork, see Rob van der Laarse, *Kamp Westerbork*, in: Madelon de Keizer and Marije Plomp (eds.), *Een open Zenuw. Hoe wij ons de Tweede Wereldoorlog herinneren* Amsterdam 2010, 306-317; Dirk Mulder, *Een vormgegeven verwerking*, in: Dirk Mulder and Ben Prinsen (eds.), *Bronnen van herinnering*, Assen 1993, 20-52; Nationaal Monument Westerbork, Herinneringscentrum Westerbork, <http://www.kampwesterbork.nl/nl/museum/kampsterrein/monumenten/nationaal-monument-westerbork/index.html#/index>

European identity politics.² Campscapes appear today in many forms with multiple textures within very different international constellations, as sites of memory and mourning, cemeteries, protected monuments, etc. Each site establishes its own specific mode of relating material traces, mnemonic practices and cultural representations to the complex historical topography of Nazi and Stalinist era terror in twentieth century Europe (foremost, to their camp infrastructure) as well as to the current geopolitical topography of memory. It thus becomes critical to understand how campscapes are expected to function in various memory cultures, what is remembered, why, by and for whom, and in whose name.

Today, walking as a visitor through Westerbork, we are expected to reflect, to remember – and most particularly, to identify: for it could have been you! The site constructed as inherently traumatic, implicitly foregrounds a static consideration of the past through the lens of victimhood – one that confines complex and often contradictory subject positions to universalizing and moralizing constructions of righteousness and guilt.³ Yet the much more complex chain of ideological and political events that actually shaped the camp's history and present form, might be lost if its entry point is merely suffering and loss. Biographical trajectories conveyed in judicial documents and ego-documents of camp inmates and survivors make clear how the lives of a multicultural and international group of people – both victims and guards – changed in a short span of only 2,5 years during the period of transportations (1942-1944) during which even the borders between victims and guards had become fluid, as demonstrated by the (mostly German-Jewish) camp police, the *Fliegende Kolonne*, whose members had even become a Nazi-collaborating 'nobility' in the eyes of some Dutch-Jewish witnesses. A critical investigation of

2 See for instance Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton 1995; Samuel Moyn *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, Cambridge 2010.

3 See for instance Susanne C. Knittel, Introduction, in: *The Historical Uncanny*, New York 2014.

the mechanisms and politics guiding the processes of the postwar making and remaking of the campscape might equally explain why the relative absence of the Moluccan history at the site is increasingly controversial.

If at present certain meanings have been lost, it is often the materiality of such sites that presents, preserves and frames their potential meanings. For unlike ex post urban war memorials and museums, in situ material traces offer an indexical link to past events and play a significant role in visitors' expectations and processes of signification.⁴ Made to hold enduring claims of justice,⁵ clarify skewed, biased and revisionist claims of the past, traces are conjured to stabilize symbols of affective relevance, mobilize official politics and serve to utter stories otherwise impossible to convey or voice. No less important therefore is the extent to which campscares' materiality is perceived as 'evidence' of war crimes, or/and as a guarantee of historical authenticity and standards of preservation. Taking as a vantage point the intersection between representations, materialities and practices unfolding at the sites, a study of campscares could therefore unravel how they reflect a wider canonization (or erasure) of particular historical and political connotations, and elucidate the role of authorized heritage discourses⁶ and competing memories.⁷

After all, campscares function as more than historical monuments; they also act as theatrical spaces performing their 'pieces' for many sorts of audiences. The curatorial, aesthetic and display strategies determine how the site is symbolized and meant to be experienced through its scripted

4 Compare the introduction to Rob van der Laarse, Francesco Mazzucchelli and Carlos Reijnen (eds.), *Traces of Terror, Signs of Trauma: Practices of (Re)presentation of Collective Memories in Contemporary Europe* (spec. issue *Versus* 119 (2016), 3-20.

5 Susan Buckley-Zistel S. and Stefanie Schäfer (eds.), *Memorials in Times of Transition*, Cambridge 2014.

6 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, London/New York 2006.

7 Rob van der Laarse, *Ils nous l'ont fait: Muséographies des mémoires concurrentes après 1989*, in: Delphine Bechtel and Luba Jurgenson (eds.), *Muséographie des violences en Europe central et ex-URSS*, Paris 2016, 213-233.

storylines.⁸ A critical analysis of the decision-making and selection processes concerning the narratives and imageries, testimonies and types of exhibitions chosen and preferred – whether it is the subjectivities of victim or perpetrator, or agents produced or foregrounded on the site – is crucial for understanding how the sites work on and upon their multiple audiences and (re)tell their specific stories. Yet what is told and not – in publications, museums and campscares – and what is kept backstage (stored in the archives so to speak), is not only determined by the wish of curators but also guided by the ethics of critics and shaped by expectations of both survivors and visitors. In this vein, 'reading' campscares shows the development and changes of the sites through time, and the ways in which they interact with research environments, survivor communities and other interest groups accommodating various configurations of expectations and demands. It also shows how camp memorials themselves act as agents imposing specific interpretations and affective responses through carefully orchestrated readings, experiences, spatial and bodily practices shaped by a range of communications varying from a continuous (re)designing, staging and exhibitions, to school lessons, publications and media events.

When considering the effects and paradigms the site produces, reproduces and transmits, narratives of campscares – irreducible to the purely textual realm – become a laboratory for new emerging intersections of knowledge production. Since stories told at and through campscares not only help make the sites understandable but also invite visitors to identify and relate affectively to the pasts they embody, it is the dynamic discursive-material narratives that present one of the

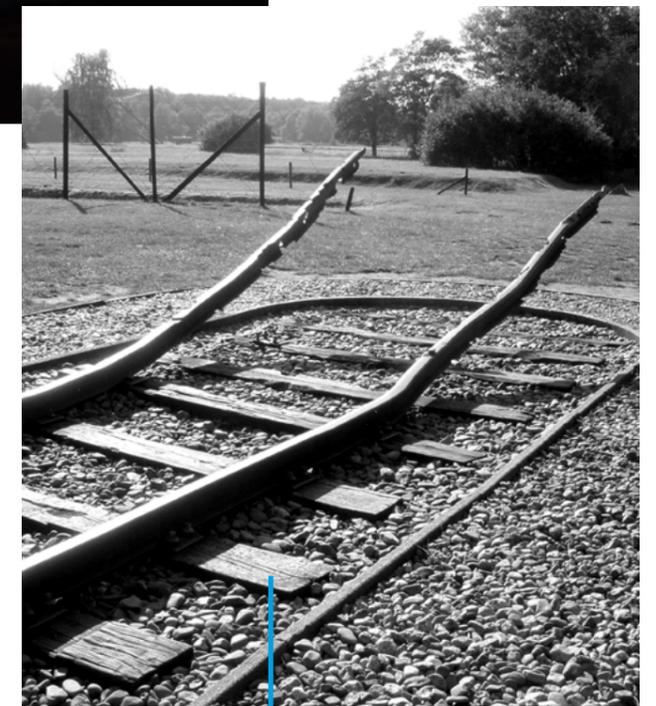
8 The theatre metaphor should of course not be taken too literally, as campscares are not free to choose and elaborate the historical events 'told' at and by the sites. Compare also David Duindam, *Signs of the Shoah. The Hollandsche Schouwburg as a site of memory* (UvA PhD 2016), and Iris van Ooijen, *Kampen als betwist bezit. De hedendaagse omgang met de kampen Westerbork, Vught en Amersfoort als herdenkingsplek, herinneringsplaats en erfgoed* (VU PhD 2016, Amsterdam, forthcoming).

most contentious aspects of memorials. Engaging genealogically and discursively with narratives 'attached' to 'terror- and traumascapes', political and historical events again redirect attention to the contingency of their meanings inherently tied with political articulation (or, in conflicted situations, even to political mobilization). As such, campscape narratives, both emergent and well-established ones, enable us to understand the effects of politicized uses of heritage, conflicted histories and disputed memories concerning violent historical pasts. These are particularly conspicuous in the current age of digitization and transnationalization, and with the rise of right-wing populism. In this regard, the appropriations of particular narratives for the benefit of either victims groups, particular institutions, and national(ist) agendas, or even politics of recall and reconciliation, not only show how competition informs memory dynamics, but also how certain perspectives become silenced, overlooked, forgotten, or deemed 'taboo' as well as being normalized in memory-centered debates around identity and othering. Building on this recognition, iC-ACCESS aims to offer foreground access to backstage archives, while bridging the gap between authorized discourses and 'alternative facts' with mutual trust.

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Camp Commander's House at the former camp Westerbork. Courtesy of the Westerbork Memorial Center.



The National Westerbork Memorial designed by Ralph Prins. Photo: S. Wierenga.

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