



© 2020 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Citation: Swain, S. 2020. Alison Atkinson-Phillips, *Survivor Memorials: Remembering Trauma and Loss in Contemporary Australia* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2019). Pp338. Paper \$39.99. *Public History Review*, 27, 1-2.

ISSN 1833-4989 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/phrj>

BOOK REVIEW

Alison Atkinson-Phillips, *Survivor Memorials: Remembering Trauma and Loss in Contemporary Australia* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2019). Pp338. Paper \$39.99.

Reviewed by Shurlee Swain

National School of Arts Australian Catholic University

As debate rages about memorials from the past Alison Atkinson-Phillips' monograph, *Survivor Memorials*, is particularly timely. However, its focus is not on the past, but on a recent shift in memorial making, the commemoration of trauma amongst the living rather than a focus on the dead. She dates this shift to the 1980s and documents eighty memorials constructed across Australia over the following thirty years. The first half of the book situates these memorials within the wider context of griefwork, memory making and public art. The second explores these theoretical considerations through six case studies. These range from the celebratory memory trail at the site of the Enterprise Migrant Hostel in Springvale, Victoria, through several memorials for Forgotten Australians and bushfire survivors and one remembering a homophobic rape.

These new memorials, Atkinson-Phillips argues, are both personal and political. They offer the opportunity for public performances of mourning, but also bring 'difficult knowledge' into public view in the hope that it will be inscribed into community memory. Initially they arose as a result of collaboration between survivor groups and individual artists. But in the wake of inquiries into various categories of historical institutional abuse they have become an integral part of government reparation packages.

This shift, the author suggests, has not been without its complications. Survivors find local site-based memorials more meaningful than the national ones. In part this is because local memorials provide a space for more effective 'memory work', creating opportunities for gathering and sharing of stories both in official commemorations and more casual visits. Survivors are only one voice amongst many in the planning of national memorials and often harbour suspicions that the money being directed to commemoration could be being diverted

from more practical reparation measures and financial redress that continues to be subject to debate.

Atkinson-Phillips is also concerned with memorials as art, looking at the processes by which they are created, and the toll this sometimes takes on the artist. Collaboration and consultation are key. But consensus is not always possible. The artists who undertake this work often come with experience of similar projects and invest them with additional meaning. Those interviewed for this study all

reported spending much more on the project than they were paid. Many also talked of the psychological toll and the need to seek help to avoid secondary trauma.

In the short term, the effectiveness of a memorial depends on its acceptance by the group whose trauma it commemorates. In the long term, however, it needs to be embraced by the wider community amongst which it sits. Controversy as to the experience being commemorated can see the memorial neglected or even attacked. The diminution in the survivor group over time can see the significance of the memorial lost, unless there is a public commitment to keeping the uncomfortable story alive.

Survivor Memorials will be of interest to scholars across a range of disciplines from art through to memory studies. It will also be invaluable for people involved in commemoration projects. Atkinson-Phillips' study ends in 2015, a point at which she suggested that this trend may have reached its peak. However, in the years since there have been more of the inquiries and natural disasters to which these memorials respond. Those involved in developing commemorative projects will learn much from this study.