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# Curating Suffering: The Challenges of Mobilising Holocaust Histories, Narratives and Artifacts

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## **Curating Suffering:**

### **The Challenges of Mobilising Holocaust Histories, Narratives and Artifacts**

*With the upsurge in public interest in truth and accessibility to historically suppressed narratives surrounding human atrocities, the research done by archaeologists has taken on a new authority in these discussions as being a tangible link to victims, perpetrators and context. With this comes a return of the common debate amongst researchers, how best to present and represent their work to the public ensuring it is accessible, accurate and interesting. When it comes to knowledge mobilisation of sensitive but important events, the Holocaust makes an interesting and relevant case study as debates surrounding its teaching and presentation have been continuous over the last half-century. Current trends favour an upfront and personal approach balancing access with empathy when presenting its narrative. This review of current writings on Holocaust archaeology and museum curation will examine these current practices, their implications, and how artifact collection and presentation affect the interpretation of both the objects and the experience of Holocaust victims. Debates surrounding ownership, narrative viewpoint, practice, comparison, inclusion, assumption, subjectivity and sensitivity will all be discussed, with a final discussion of the importance of ambivalence in the manner Holocaust artifacts are presented to allow for an authentic, respectful but challenging experience to engage with visitors and teach both fact and empathy for an impactful presentation of human atrocity.*

#### **Introduction**

The usefulness and relevance of any archeological work tends to be defined by its reach and reference in both the academic and popular communities. Because of this, knowledge mobilization tends to be an integral part of the research and publication process, and a recent trend in this domain is to encourage ‘experiencing the past’ through engagement with, and employment of archaeological research and understanding (citation removed for purpose of anonymity). When seeking a relevant subject for this paper, I reflected on my own most engaging and effective museum experience, the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, whose message was so clearly and poignantly delivered in its presentation to visitors

that this haunting experience has stayed with me ever since I left. This paper will thus focus on the employment of 'experiencing the past' by Holocaust museums and memorials. Obviously, there is much variety in the approach and ideology surrounding Holocaust museums, but this paper will focus on the themes shared by the largest of the museums, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem as these tend to be the formats that set the trends and standards for other such museums and memorials. This discussion will be accomplished through a brief recounting of my experiences at Auschwitz, followed by a discussion of current models and trends, then a discussion of current debates and problematized areas within this field, and finally a discussion of the direction this field is beginning to take and the remedies needed to further enhance the efficacy of the experience.

### Current Models of Holocaust Remembrance and Presentation

Upon exiting the contemporary reception building of the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum and memorial center, visitors are immediately confronted by two imposing sights; the concrete railway platform, and the large, imposing iron gates. The tour follows through the main buildings of the German compound highlighting the realities of arrival, imprisonment, labour, medical experimentation and torture, with a similarly in depth look at the lives of guards and their families. The tour then allows admittance into a preserved gas chamber, followed by a reconstruction of the wooden barrack blocks. The information is conveyed by a mandatory tour guide, written displays and plaques, the impeccably preserved buildings, furniture and arrangements, and artifact collections of both prisoners and guards. The haunting and engaging nature of this experience stems, in my opinion, from a few important facets, the first being the size and scope of this site. The buildings, the rows of barracks, the sheer amount of land utilized

by this site is both breathtaking, and disturbing. Second is the tactility, reality and access granted by this site. To walk the halls of the medical testing facility, you can almost hear the humanity surrounding and embracing you, and standing inside a gas chamber, in complete silence, the thousand of people who lost their lives within its walls become incredibly real, and the weight of their presence brought almost my entire group to tears. The final facet, is the humanity surrounding the displays. Text and images can portray numbers, names and vague faces, but to be confronted, in what I would say was the most shocking and moving portion of the visit, with a room filled floor to ceiling with genuine human hair and another with violently vacated prosthetic limbs makes the reality of the individuals who had previously walked those halls to be inescapable. The entire experience was engaging, educational, cautionary, empathizing and incredibly moving, all hallmarks of a successful attempt at encouraging visitors to experience the past, but it was also emblematic of current trends and ideologies surrounding Holocaust education and memorialisation.

The first aspect of most Holocaust museums is the incredible control over what Reeves (2017) terms 'visitor choreography'. Movement through the site and intake of the information is not random but purposeful, usually to establish or complement a narrative or ideological structure (Reeves, 2017:217). Within Auschwitz, a tour guide is required for entry, free roaming is not allowed, and within both the USHMM and Yad Vashem a path is mandated through the museum to ensure the displays are taken in chronological order and the order experienced by many of the victims of the Holocaust (Reeves, 2017:217-218). These exhibits are very deliberately structured to share a specific experience at them, not only following a logical structure, but eliciting a desired response (Stier, 2005:83). At Auschwitz, you do not start at the gas chamber, or the descriptions of medical experiments on children, but with history and an

establishment of feelings of reflection and solemnity to ensure maximum impact of the exhibit. In Yad Vashem, the hallways are narrow and stark, zigzagging suddenly and counterintuitively to simulate the feeling of insecurity and loss of control experienced in the directed mobility of Jewish groups throughout German rule, demonstrating an intentional narrative and response that curators are attempting to illicit through something as simple as movement (Reeves, 2017:218-220). This incredible control over visitor movement is essential to both protect the safety and integrity of the exhibit, and to ensure its purpose of experience and emotional impact is achieved.

The second strategy often employed is the direct nature of exhibits, very little is withheld unless to protect the dignity of victims. Both the scale and specificity of atrocities is addressed through mass displays of individual experiences, such as walls of pictures, representational markers and stories shared by both survivors and victims (Stier, 2005:83-84). These exhibits confront their visitors with the historical reality of the situation, without restraint, to the best of their ability with documents, personal accounts and media displays (Phillips, 2008:107). This is often aided by the work of historical archaeologists making sense of the vast amount of documentation maintained by the Nazi regime, while simultaneously giving insight into the personal lives of individuals through their discovery and description of personal objects discovered through excavation of ghettos, labour and death camps (Phillips, 2008:106; Berbeck and Pollock, 2016:22-25; Starzmann, 2015:648-649). These personal objects provide the human side of the atrocities, and allude to the subjective nature of the suffering experienced by a diverse group of victims during the Holocaust (Berbeck and Pollock, 2016:24). That those who suffered and perhaps died during this time were individuals whose very real lives were destroyed by this event. The effectiveness of this strategy lies in its ability to give a new perspective to a generally understood historical event; to empathize with the individuals who made up the masses deported,

tortured and exterminated, but also to appreciate the mechanized and hateful manner with which they were disposed (Stier, 2005: 99). The reality is shocking, and the humanity is moving, making this experiencing of the past a profound and effective experience for the visitors of the exhibits.

## Discussion

The most notable debate surrounding this group of exhibits is that of ownership and dominance of certain narratives as pushed both by the museums and by political bodies enacting pressure upon them. Through the selection of artifacts, and the way they are both presented visually and contextually within the display collection will inevitably favour certain narratives and directions of thinking, but who selects the proper narrative (Berbeck and Pollock, 2016:24-25; Moshenska, 2010:34)? An example from outside of Holocaust curation was the Smithsonian display of the Enola Gay, the bomber which dropped the atomic-bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. This was done in an exhibit featuring mainly the devastation and casualties of the bomb in what was argued to be a liberal pacifist narrative (Lewis, 1994). After public outrage and lobbying, the exhibit was changed to a more victorious tone, highlighting American casualties that were avoided by the deployment of this weapon (Moshenska, 2010:41). This example demonstrates the duality of this problem, both the authority of museums in knowledge mobilization, and the pressure to conform to popular narratives surrounding events (Moshenska, 2010:41; Phillips, 2008 106,111). Within the realm of Holocaust memorial many museums, especially the Yad Vashem, are believed to use the narrative of struggle and survival to legitimize Israel as both a state, and a deserved right of the Jewish people. This is achieved through such techniques as the final ascent from the dark and convoluted hallways of the aforementioned Yad Vashem museum

to a straight forward climb into a beautiful garden overlooking the city of Jerusalem, the final destination of the Holocaust survivor (Reeves, 2018: 223-224; Stier, 2005:97).

Due to the often contentious and controversial nature surrounding the presentation of recent conflict, Moshenska (2010) advocates for a very community oriented approach to archaeology of events recent enough to involve work with memory. His work in Germany is often initiated by community organizers who seek remembrance and truth surrounding Germany's Nazi past above all else (Moshenska, 2010:34). Due to this, he is very public in both the process, often allowing for observers around the site, and his findings and theoretical framework of analysis (Moshenska, 2010: 34-36). In doing this, it both permits and encourages realtime public discourse surrounding the implications of finds to local and national narratives surrounding the past (Moshenska, 2010: 34,37,44). Archaeological finds and their perceived objectivity enables suppressed narratives and memories entrance into public discourse, and arms them to include themselves in or contest consensus narratives with sometimes uncomfortable truths (Moshenska, 2010:34,37,44-45). In selecting the archaeological research they display prominently, museums legitimize the narrative of the analysis and interpretation done by researchers on archaeological collections (Moshenska, 2010:41; Phillips, 2008: 107). With this authority comes much public scrutiny of what is displayed and how, and due to the often precarious and political nature of funding sources, museums can find themselves subservient to public narratives (Moshenska, 2010:41; Phillips, 2008:107). The obligation of museums to both accuracy and authenticity can often be challenged through their ability to share a narrative. Community accountable archaeology gives transparency to this process, and allows the perception of the artifacts to not be one of imposing a narrative or history, but of contributing to existing conversation, and making the final narrative one based both in research and debate.

Within this vein, the exclusivity of narratives surrounding the Holocaust memorial is often criticized. What is termed the 'uniqueness' of suffering and experience often leads to notions that only those who were directly affected by the Holocaust could ever truly understand it, and attempts to include oneself in this group with either understanding or empathy is still insufficient to true inclusion (Bernbeck and Pollock, 2016; Starzmann, 2014; Stier, 2005 ;Stier, 2010). Many say that this makes 'experiencing the past' of the Holocaust inaccessible to but a minority of people, and that broader appeal and representation is needed to ensure both relevancy and longevity of exhibits and visitorship (Phillips, 2008:113; Reeves, 2018:219; Stier, 2005: 102). Some claim that this criticism is based both on antisemitism and feelings of being left out, while others have taken this as a motivation to focus their exhibitions around what Stier (2005:89) terms an initiatory ideology, that through engagement with and experience of the museums programs, one can become a part of this group through their own understanding. This is the ideology of experiential designs such as that of the 'out of control' feelings of Yad Vasham and the unadulterated access of Auschwitz (Reeves, 2018:220). This has also lead to the inclusion of other victimized groups into the narrative of displays, mainly that of Homosexual persecution (Phillips, 2008). Due to the highly controversial nature of this identity persisting long after the war, the archaeological record and its study have often ignored the presence of this group, but with the scope of these memorials favouring inclusivity, more research and sharing of the community of victims is beginning to take shape (Bernbeck and Pollock, 2016:28; Phillips, 2008:108). This brings with it caution from researchers such as Bernbeck and Pollock (2016:26) who warn that with the multiplicity of communities and of individual experiences that the objective and comparative nature of archaeology may attempt to compare the experience, and by extension suffering of groups based on their material culture. An inevitable scale of suffering



based on the freedoms or lack thereof demonstrated in the improvisation of personal objects, spatial segregation embodied by dispersed concentrations of gendered, cultural or age specific objects or the construction of quarters and other amenities will come to define the generalized experience of one group as having been 'worse' and thus more deserving of sympathy or rights of display (Moshenska, 2010; Starzmann, 2014). Bernbeck and Pollock (2016:26-28) thus warn that such comparison is both insensitive and impossible due to the highly subjective nature of experience, and that archaeology of such an issue should highlight similarity of experience and suffering over unique exposures to cruelty.

Bernbeck and Pollock (2016) similarly warn that addressing such similarities is not an argument for generalisation, as they argue that this is equally impossible and insensitive. While the curation of archaeology should demonstrate a shared oppression, archaeologists should not claim a universal experience of victims (Bernbeck and Pollock, 2016: 34; Starzmann, 2015:251). The same subjectivity of suffering and specificity of sites means that the data collected should be seen as individual representations of a limited temporal experience and not used to build a template for the whole experience of a site, compound or a cultural group (Bernbeck and Pollock, 2016:28, 34). Their work focuses on the construction of individual narratives and understandings, an approach criticized by other archaeologists such as Starzmann (2014) who argues that the fragmentary nature of the dataset prevents these kinds of personalized narratives. She advocates for an 'archaeology of absence' whereby what is not present in a site can be equally as informative as what is (Starzmann, 2014). She argues that there are many kinds of loss that affect the dataset. The loss of presence can demonstrate the different conditions of sites and values of prisoners as they represent what contraband and construction was considered worthy of risk. The loss of meaning can lead to the dismissal of common place objects such as nails or

buttons by researchers, without considering their presence in history such as holding up a flimsy wooden barrack or fastening a work uniform (Starzmann, 2014:220-223; Starzmann, 2015:657). These both demonstrate, in her view, the ability of material culture to act both as an agent of oppression and exploitation, but also as an act of rebellion through the personalization or crafting of forbidden objects (Starzmann, 2015: 657). While this materiality can speak to the character of a site, she argues that it cannot be used to, in her words “appropriate the stories of victims” by attempting to construct subjective narratives of lived histories from a wholly incomplete dataset and represent individual experience based on the archaeological archive (Starzmann, 2015:658-59).

These subjective narratives are often centered in museum exhibitions and memorials around displays of personal objects meant to connect visitors with the people involved, but this raises many concerns about the sensitivity of the material being displayed. First, the religious aspect of many of these artifacts cannot be ignored. Hidden, makeshift and partially destroyed religious Jewish texts and imagery are prominent features in many Holocaust memorials and displays, often leading to the need for consultation with religious authorities due to concern for their proper treatment and display to prevent their rededication (Stier, 2010). Likewise, personal objects such as diaries, personal photographs, suitcases and even human remains and hair have all been uncovered and researched by archaeologists, but their display is argued to not only invade the privacy of these individuals, but to revictimize them (Reeves, 2018; Stier, 2010). They are at the disposal of archaeologists and curators due to their seizure during the initial victimization by the Nazis, and to put them on display as some form of tragic symbol is to represent them solely as victims and use their identity to promote a narrative of victimization (Stier, 2005: 100; Stier, 2010). The solution many find to this is the display of images or

descriptions of artifacts, but there is concern here for the impact lost through their protection (Phillips, 2008: 208; Stiers, 2010). The inescapable humanity brought about by the presence of relatable objects is often seen to both ground and demystify the narrative of the Holocaust.

### The Importance of Ambivalence

The Holocaust can often be seen as a ‘sacred mystery’ or modern morality story, sanctified by presentation as an ultimate evil, memorialised on a breathtaking scale (Stier, 2005:102). This has led many to argue that avoidance of fetishizing the suffering of others is paramount to any display to avoid both its becoming abstracted to the point of myth, or cemented and specified to the point of irrelevancy (Bernbeck and Pollock, 2016:36; Stier, 2005:99-100). To accomplish this, the virtue of ambivalence surrounding Holocaust exhibitions, displays and narratives must be instilled in curators and visitors. To be clear, this does not advocate for an ambivalence towards the reality, scale, motivations, casualties or effects of the Holocaust, but of our certainty around how the narratives of the Holocaust should be presented and memorialised. Both the mystery surrounding the individuals who lived and whose lives were ended as a part of this genocide while demystifying the tools and systems used to harm them, ensuring the reality of the experience is expressed (Stier, 2005, 97). Stier (2005:92-93) illustrates this with the presentation of an Auschwitz boxcar in the Florida Holocaust Museum. It is closed, the experience of the people who were once inside contained within a mystery, allowing for the visitor to imagine and personalize the experience, while simultaneously it is demystified, sitting on ground level with its outer walls accessible. The reality of the boxcar and its casual presentation ensure that it, and other artifacts will not be denied or sanctified as sacred objects to be revered. The second danger is in absolutes surrounding knowledge mobilization. Claims of

‘objective understanding’ Bernbeck and Pollock (2016) believe, often give a sense of closure to issues surrounding the Holocaust and the conclusion of its effect on modern life. This can lead to a sense of indifference and temporal distance, preventing full engagement with the narrative and intended effect of these exhibitions and memorials (Bernbeck and Pollock 2016:34). For this reason, Bernbeck and Pollock (2016) frame their archaeological research and findings in terms of what they call ‘questioning narratives.’ Narratives that are mobilised in ways that are: clear to readers are not of true lived experience but representative of the kind of experience one may have had, maintain an ambivalence to encourage personal thought and reflection, ensure to reflect also on perpetrator perspectives and the reality and ambivalence of this position, and comparative, with a focus on shared pain rather than different expressions of oppression (Bernbeck and Pollock 2016:34-35). Overall, this model is skeptical of the ability to ‘experience the past’ as this means to experience someone’s subjective interpretation of the past. When dealing with sensitive and difficult to comprehend material such as this, it can be difficult to grant access to visitors into a full understanding of the suffering experienced during this time, and in doing so sharing a singular view and emotional response through the highly directed and selective ways in which this history is shared (Moshenska, 2010; Reeves, 2018; Starzmann, 2015; Stier, 2005). A more personal exploration, imagining and experiencing through a challenging yet open ended portrayal of the realities of cruelty and suffering allows such a presentation to continue to challenge its visitors to consider the lasting effects and lessons of the Holocaust, ensuring that it maintains its relevancy and importance in understanding both our own history, and more current events.

## Conclusion

The atrocities of the Holocaust seem both distant in their taking place, yet ever present with the power of their cautionary message. The way the story of the Holocaust continues to be shared and experienced is one of variety and debate. The most popular trends, stemming from my own experience in Auschwitz and academic writing on the subject, tend to center around a controlled and directed mobility and intake of the exhibit, and the use of chronological and narrative structures to convey personalised accounts while being direct and graphic so as to ensure the reality and impact of the exhibit is never compromised. This approach has led to many debates both curatorial and archaeological surrounding the source and message of narratives used, the exclusivity of representation versus the need for inclusion to ensure relevancy and breadth of impact, the effects of incomplete and fragmentary datasets and researchers ability to compare and generalise, and the sensitivity of the artifacts available balanced with the impact of their display. This all leads to the need for ambivalence in these debates, giving credence to both sides, while maintaining the challenge and lasting effects given to visitors when no singular answer is provided. The history of these exhibits and their current debates are ever relevant to Canadian researchers and curators as they seek to incorporate strategies of truth and reconciliation into exhibits featuring Indigenous histories and narratives, and especially in how the stories of recent atrocities such as the residential schools should be presented to both an indigenous and general audience to garner full impact in their attempt to encourage Canadians to experience our own past, and the pasts of others.

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