

***The Holocaust Museum and Human Rights:
Transnational Perspectives on Contemporary Memorials***
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Introduction

By examining the role and effectiveness of museums as hosts for human rights discourse, this edited book—*The Holocaust Museum and Human Rights: Transnational Perspectives on Contemporary Memorials*—probes our collective memory of violence. Who decides whose suffering is memorialised in our public history narratives and commemorative spaces? What role do memory institutions—dedicated to preserving or presenting memories of violence—play in ongoing struggles for universal human rights? These questions are especially resonant for curators and educators who engage with the intersectional histories of the Holocaust, colonial violence, human rights abuses, and genocide.

The contributions of this book engage meaningfully with the growing field of genocide studies, the rise of human rights museology, and their intersections with Holocaust memory. Collectively, these explorations examine the ethics of cultural representation and the politics of memory, with particular attention to museum visitor experiences, public history narratives, and practices of memorialisation. Through use of interviews, art analysis, and site ethnographies, the contributors’ methodologies engage critically with space, place, and ritual of remembering violence.

Many of the book’s practice-based and scholarly contributions highlight the evolving nature of Holocaust museums, as well as the tensions and limits of representation of genocide and human rights issues in these spaces more broadly. The book will be of particular interest to those working in human rights and genocide education, critical heritage, and/or museum studies. In particular, this book complements ongoing research on the effectiveness of Holocaust education—in commemorative spaces and museums, for instance—while exploring how to better support educators in connecting the Holocaust to other atrocities in meaningful ways. As such, these insights offer educators, researchers, and museum professionals conceptual and methodological frameworks for facilitating an expansive understanding of Holocaust memory and the memories of violence.



A transnational lens

As its title might suggest, one of the book’s strengths lies in its broad geographical scope, with transnational contributions examining Europe, Australia, Asia, and the Latin American experience. The editors include the work of authors focused on memory and heritage practices in Indonesia and Chile that do not take the Holocaust Museum as a reference point. These case studies speak to the emergence of human rights museology as a distinct phenomenon, while posing a challenge to Western-centric approaches and the notion of a ‘one-way process of Western ideas spreading to the Global South’ (262). Similarly, Hearman’s case study of The Munir Human Rights Museum in Indonesia is useful for thinking critically about how societies with a relative lack of Holocaust literacy approach the task of museumification of human rights histories.

The book thoughtfully addresses a central tension in transnational approaches: should the Holocaust be represented and taught as an exceptional case of genocide and state-led atrocity, or is it meaningful to invite comparisons with other forms of historical and contemporary violence? The contributors effectively navigate debates regarding universalism, including concerns over loss of specificity—and, thus, meaning—when leveraging specific, localised violences to teach universal lessons about global human rights (see: Sodaro’s chapter on military dictatorship and human rights violations in Chile).

The authors thoughtfully consider how diverse individuals, communities, and societies, dealing with their specific histories of violence, might turn to the commemorative and educative function of the museum as a trusted institution. In lieu of truth-telling and accountability from state actors, many activists are ‘turning their energy to questions of memory’ (259) and approaching the museum as a contemporary tool for their activism. Some turn to repurposing, or even looking beyond the museum altogether, however, as part of a decolonising critique of museum and memory practices.

Carter’s opening chapter, *Necessary Crossroads*, effectively establishes the emergence of human rights museology, like that of the Holocaust Museum, in connection with the postcolonial turn. Holocaust museums were often community-led and -focused initiatives founded by survivors and their descendants. As grassroots or DIY initiatives, they both informed and reflected the critical turn in cultural heritage and emergence of new museology. This serves as a welcome reminder of the cultural activism inherent in the creation of such initiatives, for readers to keep in mind as they explore how both established and emerging Holocaust museums make conceptual and physical space to include the experiences of non-Jewish victims of the Nazi regime, as well as other genocides and violences.

Representation, representation, representation

One of the main themes explored in this book concerns forms of representation—how to represent lived experiences and histories of violence through tangible materials, intangible practices, and spatial storytelling. Traditional representational practices often attempt to impose coherence on violences that are inherently incoherent and chaotic, producing what Sodaro (277) describes as ‘a neatly displayed and musealised past’. These observations reflect broader curatorial anxieties and debates regarding the challenges, limits, and remits of museal representation of sensitive subject matter or difficult heritages.

Speaking pragmatically to the limits of representation vis-à-vis memorial museums, Sodaro’s observation on Chile’s Museum of Memory and Human Rights is particularly astute: due to practical limitations such as space and resourcing, violent histories are simply ‘too long and complex to be rendered fully in a museum’ (264). Otherwise, observations regarding representational constraints are supportive of the argument that the museum as a concept—an inherently colonial project, a physical legacy of empire, and at times ‘complicit in human rights violations’ (283)—is conceptually unfit for memorialising colonial violences. This argument provides essential context for understanding broader representational challenges outlined across various chapters of this edited collection.

Andrew, Langton, and Neath’s chapter, *Making Visible the Australian Frontier Wars*, offers a particularly insightful analysis of how traditional museum practices perpetuate colonial violence. Collecting or accessioning practices at the core of the traditional museum’s operation—including the refusal to repatriate historical collections—perpetuate the ‘colonial museological’ practice of dispossession (184). How can practices present evidence of museological complicity in genocidal practices towards Australia’s First Nations peoples without replicating that violence? In thinking about the contradictions inherent to the museum, especially those constructed on unceded Indigenous lands (i.e., located on the sites of atrocity, namely, Australia), engagement with the intangible or the void is a compelling way to approach the concept of memorial. Andrew, Langton, and Neath consider Indigenous cultural and ephemeral practices and networks as a means of memorialising colonial violence as an alternative to the museum, engaging thoughtfully with the remedial repurposing of physical sites of memory through self-authorised extra-programmatic or -curatorial interventions.

Discussions about the emergence of human rights museums reveal that grappling with representational methods and challenging subject matter is not new; such debates have long been central to Holocaust museums and continue today. As we lose survivors as eyewitnesses to the Nazi genocide, these memory institutions—and the people entrusted with their care—are

confronted with how best to represent the Holocaust as a historicised event. Faced with an urgent need to extend the responsibility to bear witness, as well as meet the needs of diverse and young publics amid the rise of digital technologies, we might consider alternative or previously ‘unorthodox’—for lack of a better term—interpretation approaches.

Cooke and Frieze’s chapter, *The Social Agency of Museums in Civic Engagement*, offers a compelling focus on educational programs and the connection between learning and critical thinking among young visitors in a museum setting. Their attention to affect—and contemplation of strategies for fostering affective encounters—adds an important dimension to conversations about the transformative potential of these spaces. The authors’ observation about the expectation of visitor performance, namely, that visitors should have an ‘immediate emotional reaction’ (131), represents an interesting extension of the museum’s longer history of prescribing etiquette and norms around what counts as appropriate visitor behaviour in its spaces. Although, what matters here are the moral norms and behaviours engendered beyond the site itself.

In unpacking the assumptions underpinning Holocaust education in these settings, Cooke and Frieze’s chapter points to broader existential reflections on whether museums can effectively prompt visitors to apply the contemporary lessons of the Holocaust to their own lives and localities. As noted in the book’s afterword, maintaining a false dichotomy between the Holocaust as a past event and *current* discourse on human rights undermines the pedagogical authority, as well as the contemporary relevance, of these spaces.

In their chapter, *From the Transnational to the Intimate*, Kennedy and Graefenstein observe that traditional or existing initiatives to commemorate the Holocaust—an ‘offshore’ event—in Australia has been used to avoid grappling with ‘shameful pasts’ (150-1) closer to home. The authors propose approaching Holocaust memory as a multidirectional memory practice; one that can be leveraged to make meaningful connections between violences across time and space. Marrying some of the thoughts explored in this collection together, Cooke and Frieze’s recognition of the expansive nature of emotional intelligence and critical thinking as a skill set readily lends itself to the intersectional approach outlined by Kennedy and Graefenstein. An affective pedagogy cultivates capacities for lifting our gaze; it makes space for historical injustices as well as ongoing human rights issues that impact racialised and minoritised communities amid increasingly hostile political climates worldwide.

A Jewish affair again?

Holocaust memorialisation was once an ‘overwhelmingly Jewish affair’, note Nates and Gilbert (216) in discussing the development of the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre. While the malleability of specific

institutions such as The Anne Frank House—as explored, notably, in Alba’s chapter—speaks to the evolving nature of these institutions and their capacity for transformation, what is more interesting perhaps is its pulling back from promoting the universal messages of the Holocaust, to return to a specificity or ‘Jewishness’ of Holocaust commemoration. An interesting area for future research is to compare how different institutions’ operational factors, such as a decrease in Jewish staff and volunteers—in tandem with the decrease in number of Holocaust survivors available to deliver core programming, as noted by Cooke and Frieze—inform their move from the particular to the universal or vice versa.

Since their inception, Holocaust education centres and museums have sought to educate the public about the conditions that enabled the Nazi genocide of European Jewry—the dangers of antisemitism. However, some scholars have noted that the universal dimensions of Holocaust education might obscure understanding of antisemitism as an ongoing threat to contemporary life (see: Pearce et al. 2020). The instances and implications of institutions shifting towards a pedagogy of tolerance that (re-)positions contemporary antisemitism as a unique form of hatred, especially in the aftermath of 7 October 2023, warrants future contemplation.

Conclusion

The value of this book extends beyond researchers, scholars and museum practitioners—it provides much food for thought for anyone interested in how we remember our violent pasts and presents.

The book’s exploration of museums as contemporary memorials—simultaneously sites of memory, stages for commemoration, and forums for spatial storytelling—offers frameworks applicable to current and emerging challenges. Despite their imperfections, museums—as forums for *unforgetting*—comprise a toolkit to engage with our current political contexts in which ‘human rights are certainly in trouble’ (281). As we continue to grapple with the memory of the Holocaust in the context of resurgent antisemitism and xenophobia, threats to democratic values, and ongoing humanitarian crises, the ideas unpacked in this edited collection are sadly ever relevant. They are likewise expansive and could be applied to thinking about the Anthropocene and its implications for human suffering, a growing area of scholarship within the fields of museology and memory studies.

As the editors of the book note, the museum can serve as a ‘gesture of protest’ (22)—can it be a site *for* protest? Challenging the fallacy of institutional neutrality, museums are far from strictly didactic; their ‘exhibitions and displays can engender debate and controversy’, notes Hearman (239), ‘which is perhaps the aim in the first place’. The memorial museum is not merely a space for grief in the aftermath of tragedy, but an active site for engagement, connection and dialogue. These spaces are hosts for both grief *and* hope.

Reference list

Pearce, Andy, Stuart Foster, and Alice Pettigrew. 2020. “8. Antisemitism and Holocaust education.” In *Holocaust Education: Contemporary challenges and controversies*, edited by Stuart Foster, Andy Pearce, and Alice Pettigrew, 150-170. London: UCL Press.