EDITED BY
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# STAGING DIFFICULT PASTS

## Transnational Memory, Theatres, and Museums

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This collection of original essays brings together museum, theatre, and performance case studies with a focus on their distinctive and overlapping modes of producing memory for transnational audiences.

Whether this is through narrative, object, embodied encounter or a combination of the three, this volume considers distinctions and interactions between memory and history specifically through the lenses of theatre and performance studies, visual culture, and museum and curator studies. This book is underpinned by three areas of research enquiry: How are contemporary theatre makers and museum curators staging historical narratives of difficult pasts? How might comparisons between theatre and museum practices offer new insights into the role objects play in generating and representing difficult pasts? What points of overlap, comparison, and contrast among these constructions of history and memory of authoritarianism, slavery, colonialism, genocide, armed conflict, fascism, and communism might offer an expanded understanding of difficult pasts in these transnational cultural contexts?

This collection is designed for any scholar of its central disciplines, as well as for those interested in cultural geography, memory studies, and postcolonial theory.

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*Edited by*
*Maria M. Delgado, Michal Kobialka and Bryce Lease*

ROYAL CENTRAL
SCHOOL OF SPEECH & DRAMA
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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# INTRODUCTION

*Maria M. Delgado, Michal Kobialka and Bryce Lease*

Consider the current world-historical landscape: the wars in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria; the political unrest in Peru and Venezuela; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; protests in Iran, Tunisia, and China; or the past and present worldwide critique of imperialism, settler colonialism, racism, and capitalism. They are ideological, politically motivated, and imbued with historical interests, biases, and aims. So is the way they are presented in the news and social media, in film and other forms of mass media, by politicians and political agencies, in museums and theatres. The way these events are 'staged' draws attention to the fact that staging difficult pasts (or presents, for that matter) are never neutral acts. One of the most vehement examples of this claim in the twenty-first century is Vladimir Putin and his administration's resuscitation of the legacy of Joseph Stalin through the lens of the 'Great Patriotic War' whose years are encased between 1941 and 1945, thus eschewing the Soviet Union's pact with Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1941 – the year Hitler turned on Stalin and invaded Russia. Putin's staging of this past reflects his arrogant treatment of the people in his Realpolitik, imposing forms of public forgetting and amnesia, and the harnessing of patriotic pride and nostalgia through erasures of the historical records. Equally important, Putin's staging of this past justifies the war by placing it in the historical context of Russia's continued fight against US/NATO imperialism and its particular claims to the states and territories formerly in the Soviet orbit.[1] Putin has placed memory of the 'Great Patriotic War' centre stage from the very outset of his premiership in order to consolidate his power, emphasising Russian heroism and suffering not only for the citizens of Russia but also for the world at large and the new Eurasian geo-political alliance and regimes of power. A similar rhetoric was used by Putin in his article, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' (12 July 2021 – thus about half a year before a full-scale Russian offensive on 24 February 2022), wherein he voices his

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convictions that Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people', while blaming the collapse in bilateral historical ties on the West/United States and its interventionalist politics. The controversial essay is an ominous final ultimatum to Ukraine being one step short of a declaration of war. Contrary to such rhetoric of historical disinformation promoting thinly veiled threats, this book argues that the public staging of difficult pasts in a manner that promotes contestation over consensus and open debate over perceived acquiescence is crucial to the reparative labour necessary to foreclose ideological – and, ultimately, totalitarian – ambitions to maintain power, dislodge civil resistance, or counteract emancipatory efforts. Working on memory in an open-ended, non-totalising, or evaluative manner, as we propose here, corroborates a political subject's agency and relies on intellectual curiosity, emotional vulnerability, and shared determination. Memory is thus never complete or closed but a multilayered and agonistic process, much like democracy, to be navigated in ways that recognise the different lived experiences and complex political histories that configure to shape societies.

Bridging museum and theatre and performance studies, this book brings into view the political and artistic stakes of such efforts. Our central focus is on the new knowledge that is produced when we – the editors and contributors to this volume – think about the potentials for theatricality in the museum, about the museum itself as a performative space, and how museal strategies in display, in producing narrative and in staging objects, are informing original approaches to theatre making. These elements are particularly acute when considering their relevance for the display, representation, and staging of difficult pasts. The collection comes out of a three-year project, 'Staging Difficult Pasts: Of Narratives, Objects, and Public Memory', in which we found that *theatrical* is often used as a pejorative description in museums, denoting spectacle and excess, while *performative* is embraced by many curators without a clear sense of the differences and overlaps between these critical terms. Conversely, in theatre, if you describe a performance as a 'museum piece', it indicates that something is dead and no longer alive – a mausoleum of sorts, as Theodor W. Adorno signals in his reflections on the Valery Proust Museum (1997: 175–185). Museum in this sense signifies the opposite of live (performance); it functions like *anti-theatrical*. This collection is intended to place pressure on these preestablished but outdated modes of understanding and harmful binaries that do not sufficiently elaborate the complexities of these descriptors or the interwoven approaches to contemporary curation and theatre-making.

In order to accomplish this, we draw on a rich body of materials on a political valence of the terms performance and performativity. If performativity is the 'interconnected triad of identity, experience, and social relations', which includes 'class, race, sex, geography, religion, and so forth', as D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera argue, then performativities (as distinct from performances) can be understood as 'the many markings substantiating that all of us are subjects in a world of power relations' (2006: xix). The 'performances that "materialise" performativity and that

open meanings and critique' (ibid.) include theatres and museums. The concept of performativity enables scholars, as Elin Diamond contends, 'to become aware of performance itself as a contested space, where meanings and desires are generated, occluded, and of course multiply interpreted' (1996: 4). Performance and performativity thus offer further routes to critique what Tony Bennett has called 'museum regimes of truth', the myriad of ways in which museums 'function as and at the junctions of power relations' (2017); and such a critical framework adds to the growing scholarship that has exposed the racist and colonial foundations on which museums have been formed and come into being. Many of the contributors to this volume engage in a nuanced discussion of the staging of difficult pasts by addressing directly or indirectly: the epistemological and phenomenological differences between performance and performative; the relationship between performance and power, or power relations, shaping it – thus, the relationship within the triad: a material object, theatre and museum space, and public memory/memories; and the function of the museum or theatre in today's political and ideological landscape redrawn by identity politics, decolonising manoeuvres, necropolitics, and calls for social and racial equity.

Over the past few decades, widespread attempts to reinterpret public memory – which some scholars have called a 'memory boom' and others a 'memory crisis' (see Nora and Kritzman eds 1996; Terdiman 1993; Winter 2006) – have been determined and shaped in theatres and museums by formerly taboo historical narratives of difficult pasts. Indeed, public memory or memories, which have become a public concern for live audiences, are precisely contested by them because these memories are believed to be crucial to the construction of identity on national, cultural, and individual levels. Contributors analyse how identitarian myths are given dramatic shape or are performatively confronted by theatre makers and curators primarily through narrative (a spoken or written account of connected events) and objects (material things) as well as the relationship between the two – what Jacek Ludwig Scarso terms 'critical theatricality' (2021: 54). This project originates from a central observation: museums, and history museums in particular, have become more invested in theatrical and immersive environments, while theatre makers have been staging archives that included objects and historical images typically confined to museum displays. While they might have shared aims in staging difficult pasts, curators and theatre makers did not necessarily have a shared vocabulary. Shannon Jackson's analysis of Andre Fraser stretches across theatre and performance and visual arts disciplinary frames. She invites the reader to 'notice what comes forward when contemporary socio-political experimentation in one medium finds itself working in a tradition of socio-political experimentation in another medium' (2011: 121). This collection attempts to take note of precisely such transmedial encounters, dialogues, and strategies that produce new knowledge. Jackson draws our attention to the contingencies of perception that are conditioned not only upon 'critical histories but also upon disciplinary perceptual habits that can make for

drastically different understandings of what we are in fact encountering' (2011: 4). The museum curator and the theatre maker often perceive the same phenomena differently. Discussions animate how curators might approach objects as a fundamental problem that can be considered theatrically and how theatre makers can deploy museal strategies in their *mise en scène*.

Examining staged narrative offers a point of comparison and contrast between museums and theatres, and their roles in shaping public memory. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2015) has referred to new narrative history museums as 'theatres of history'. This assertion requires careful analysis. Is this due to their borrowing of theatre conventions, such as scenography, the organisation of history into scenes and acts, the deployment of theatricality or spectacle, or their development of immersive performance techniques? Are their narratives – as Geneviève Zubrzycki (2017) argues – largely constructed through embodied performance? Essays in this collection analyse theatre makers who have innovated approaches to narrative, including the movement between present and past tenses, collaborations with historical witnesses, the blurring of first and third person, and the use of parody, satire and humour. These all operate to challenge histories or positionings that might threaten to fall into 'official' of 'fixed' terrains. Indeed, as it should be noted, the staged narratives in some of the case studies offered here would have been unimaginable or considered unrepresentable in the past or today, in some geo-political spaces, because they contest those narratives determined by former (or current) state historical policies and call into question approaches that ossify or fix the past as a stable, incontestable entity. These narratives have varying aims and can be reparative, redemptive, or defensive; they question, intervene into, or disrupt metanarratives in politics and culture. Contributors reflect on the modes in which spectators can be invited to act as historical agents, to immerse themselves in narrations of the historical present in the 'first person', and to imagine alternative histories and thus alternative futures in modes that are formally specific – and differ from, for example, forms that might appear to be more ontologically fixed, as with literature and film. The 'rewriting' of books through acts of translation, through censorship, editorial intervention and removal of references and/or phrases deemed offensive or racist – as with Roald Dahl, Agatha Christie and Ian Fleming's books in 2023 – does challenge such understandings and show how even an ontologically-fixed object can be rewritten and recirculated due to the changing historical imaginaries and ideological sensitivities.[2] Directors' cuts, final cuts, and re-edits following theatrical releases further reinforce this sense of film as a material (as much as a digital) and malleable entity subject to 'staged' modifications – as per Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) – and repackaging for the small screen – as with *The Godfather* Trilogy (1972/1974/1990). While this volume is primarily concerned with the relationship between museums and theatre, the discussion of film, archival footage, and use of screen technologies across different chapters allows for the discussion of objects and narratives to circulate in a different disciplinary context – one where theatrical motifs, icons, and texts serve

to examine how cultural texts have intervened in broader discussions of the role of multidimensional and post-memory in a contested public sphere where it is linked to gender politics and broader political debates.

Objects are one of the most highly contested aspects of memory in performance, display, and encounter. Although it is often a prerequisite of a museum to have objects (though new immersive experiences are decisively challenging such assumptions), these do not by necessity have to be historically authentic originals. Whether authentic, copied, or reproduced, critics have widely argued that museum objects must be deemed to be of cultural value. While this might suggest an object's value is alterior to its presence in a museum or theatrical frame, a number of performance theorists (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Kobialka 2016, 2022, Lease 2017) have argued that it is an object's placement in representational space that produces its cultural value and its metonymic reach into the past. Peter Bjerregaard argues for a distinction to be made between *Realität*, the physical reality of an object, and *Wirklichkeit*, 'the experience of the object in a particular setting and in a particular relation to subjects' to show that the scenographic arrangement of an exhibition produces an atmosphere that has the power 'to dissolve the individual objects at display allowing them to become part of the general experience of *space*' (2015: 7, 2, emphasis in original). This raises questions concerning the emphasis placed in museums on artefact over copy, on authenticity over theatricality, on historical aura over pedagogical function and the ethical considerations surrounding the reproducibility of heritage objects.

Since the nineteenth century, museums have been shifting their point of focus from the autonomous object to the object-as-manifestation of a predetermined narrative.[3] The essays in this collection grapple with how the latest iterations of the narrative history museum are reliant on spectacle, and whether museums make their forms of representation apparent through visible excess, as Valerie Casey (2005) and Larry Shiner suggest (2011). This requires a nuanced analysis of the relations being generated between spectacle and objects, which is also crucial to our analysis of theatre practices. The book's focus on narrative and object highlights key points of intersection between theatres and museums, while acknowledging that narrative and object are themselves enmeshed and mutually generative. As a number of our contributors demonstrate, for many experiential museums, the *object* is the performative encounter engendered by the interactions of the spectator and the exhibition or installation at a particular moment in time – which is currently framed by renewed discussions about the shifting registers of the terms such as anticolonial, decolonial, culturalism, colonial matrix of power, and supremacist Eurocentrism (Larsen 2022).

Jenny Kidd and Eva Nieto McAvoy note the importance of recognising the implications of digital colonialism in these encounters: 'a risk that information technologies can be used in ways that reproduce colonial power relations, particularly if artefacts and environments are digitally appropriated by institutions from the global north – not to mention the appropriation and exploitation of the user data

gathered. How heritage objects are then (digitally) represented, by whom and for what purposes is a searching question – and one with strong ethical dimensions' (2019). Immersive technologies may offer strategies for the promotion of empathy in audiences, but what has been termed the 'experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore 1998, cited in Kidd 2018) may itself throw up challenges on what Kidd terms 'aesthetic' and 'emotional' capitalism that require consideration. 'What is it', she asks, 'that makes these encounters justifiable without heritage contexts rather than (say) theme parks or theatres?' (Kidd 2018). Perhaps it is this idea of contestation that offers the clearest justification: a way of reforging the present by unsettling the past.

Furthermore, archival, degraded, or artefactual objects have been used in performance practices both to evoke and to contest public memory. Vivian M. Patraka conceives of representation itself as an object 'that is always a reconstruction, a pre-framed, pre-narrativised set of practices that attempts to make visible certain events, practices, and/or beliefs assumed to be fixed, essential, and pre-existing' (1999: 5). However, Patraka is conscious of the foundational tension underlying the relationship that grounds the struggle between an object of representation and a process of reiteration. She defines this as a 'risky struggle' between object and process or memory and history. There appears to be a double marking at work here. While representation attempts to mark the 'goneness' of traumatic historical events, the form of performance (from theatrical objects to performative encounters in museal spaces) is itself generated through an ongoing process of disappearance. Essays consider how objects of memory constitute a particular metonymic situation in relation to disappearance, across theatre, the museum, and film. Performative modes are shown to animate material objects, documenting and marking loss, occlusion, or the impossibility of recovery, instead of simply substituting it through representation.

## Mnemonic Refractions

Public memory of difficult pasts can be activated, contested, and pluralised in performance and museal practices as part of a process of generating *shared* histories and broadening publics' historical consciousness. Commemorative acts in theatre and performance have dynamic relationships to the affective environments and performative encounters currently being generated in experiential museums. In conversations and collaborations with museum curators, we have noted an anxiety over the theatrical experience in the display or approach to difficult pasts that relies on showy or overblown spectacle that produces unmerited or ethically dubious emotional responses or unethical forms of historical attachment or nostalgia. Scholars have been hesitant to rely on empathy as the ultimate horizon of audience experience. Jennifer Bonnell and Roger I. Simon do not reject empathy as a curatorial objective, but invite its interpretation away from a commonality of feeling towards a

> relation of acknowledgement, a responsiveness to the feelings of others that opens the question of what it might mean to live in proximity to these feelings, to live in ways in which one experiences the force of these feelings to alter one's experience of the world and actions in it.
>
> (2007: 76)

Placing an emphasis on the verb 'to remember' positions memory as an action, which is to say, as performance theorists, we conceive memory as *enacted* and *embodied*. We argue that performed memory – as a practice and a generator of social knowledge – affords a productive site in which to apprehend difficult pasts, especially if there is a desire to democratise authority and knowledge of such pasts, to reject totalising syntheses of historical narratives, to foster divergent understandings of the past, and to offer space for contradiction as well as congruence. Adapting Deborah Britzman's concept of 'difficult knowledge' (2000), the project articulates 'difficult pasts' as those that are confrontational, antagonistic towards existing social myths, and difficult to assimilate in grand or heroic narratives. The counterpoint of difficult pasts are then heroic pasts: historical narratives that reinforce existing knowledge, valorise particular ethnic groups, champion political gain, or easily conform to the status quo.

This concept can be separated from 'traumatic pasts' in that they do not assign trauma to the spectator, or 'contested pasts', which suggest that two or more positions are in conflict with one another. This is not to claim that the staging of difficult pasts is not concurrent with performances of and interactions with countermemory that *refract* trauma: the exposure of that which has been 'negated, deemed unrepresentable on account of its traumatic nature, or silenced' (Gluhovic 2013: 103). However, 'difficult' draws attention to the inherent tensions in approaching the past that is embedded in a single object, in the experience of a witness, or in a specific memorial museum. The first-person experience of historical trauma, or second-generation inheritance of trauma (as in Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory) (2012), is not identical to the representation of such pasts. Rather than downplaying competing memories, the term 'difficult' allows us to focus on the ways in which cultural institutions stage understandings of pasts that are not only explicitly disputed by different groups but which are inherently in conflict. For this reason, we analyse how the activity of remembering engages the aim of many contemporary museums and commemorative forms of theatre and performance – as well as film and documentary practices – that seek to democratise authority and knowledge of difficult pasts, reject totalising syntheses of historical narratives, foster shared and divergent understandings of history, and offer space for incompatible, contradictory, or diversified perspectives as well as dialogical encounters. These perspectives are as much about the present as the past – a way of thinking through processes of transitional justice, of what is remembered and why, and the ways in which national histories are constructed that lie at odds with personal memory/ies of communities within the nation-state (Crane 1997). Elizabeth Crooke, writing on

the display of historical artefacts associated with the conflict in Northern Ireland, observes that these mnemonic devices for remembering the past can also make the memory of those who died in the conflict tangible (2016: 87). In making ‘a moment of the past more accessible’ (ibid.), these memories are intrinsically linked to the policies of the present, politics in place since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 that have sought both to recognise past violence and recover the truths of what happened (ibid.). In mapping how projects ‘inhabited by insiders (Lundy and McGovern 2006)’ – that is, the participants being the families and individuals who use the resources of the organising groups’ – differ from ‘the local commemorative projects of marching, murals and monuments’ that the reader may be more familiar with, Crooke discerns a curatorial imperative that invites the viewer to take action (197), in this case the demand for an inquiry into the circumstances in which a person died.

Tadeusz Kantor – an artist who elided easy categorisation and worked between theatre and visual arts and resisted imposed medial divisions of stage, gallery, and museum – is interwoven through this project. He appears and disappears, as is his fashion. Rather than constructing heroes, Kantor invites to the stage the conflicting demands of human experience that do not (and cannot) add up to such a neat category as ‘hero’. From *The Return of Odysseus* (1944) to *Today is My Birthday* (1990), they are always *in* reality, but not *of* it, as Michal Kobialka argues, suggesting that Kantor’s was a radical praxis exposing history and politics caught in the act of inventing forms of presentation of the events and its actors (2009: viii). While space produces particular walking rhetorics and historically and ideologically justified habitability, time has its own slow inculcation of norms. Kantor offers a new way of recognising these demands, alternative responses to time, and glimpses of countermemory. For this reason, we have been interested in the way Kantor might trouble Maurice Halbwach’s long-upheld distinction between history, which produces a double focus highlighting both the alterity of the past and society as inherently in flux, and collective memory, which advocates for a coherent, unbroken line that stitches the past to the present. Transformation, rupture, and catastrophe are eschewed or sidelined to produce a strong sense of preservation and continuity. Our hypothesis is that it is precisely the anxiety over the perceived loss of reified and safeguarded cultural values that have produced what some understandably call ‘mnemonic wars’ (Saryusz-Wolska, Wawrzyniak, and Wóycicka 2022: 1275–1288). Kantor anticipated such anxiety; he also moved us further into it. The focus on difficult pasts and collective memory works across the political spectrum from those values espoused by global coalitional initiatives that cultivate pluralism and tolerance to those tensely defended by neoconservative groups that favour restrictive ethnonationalism. The aim to re-establish and enforce such values in the present can either be enacted as history lessons in human rights abuses or as reinforcements of hierarchies of suffering that privilege particular ethnic groups.

A calculated choice to move away from tightly circumscribed and rigidly policed national frameworks towards postnational communities and forms of cosmopolitan memory and a recognition of entrenched racism in governmental, societal, economic, and cultural structures and institutions has seen curators and theatre makers invest in anti-imperial and decolonising actions. As Dan Hicks has argued in *The Brutish Museums*, such efforts cannot be reduced to or reliant on 'the mere rewriting of labels or shuffling around of stolen objects in new displays' (2020: xiii), even if their ambition is to reformulate understandings of empire in a critical or self-conscious manner; for those working in the global north, this work must entail equitable co-production with colleagues in the global south. Both Hicks and Ann Laura Stoler have called attention to the *enduring* nature of the past in the present – its failure to be past – particularly in relation to what Stoler has theorised as 'imperial durabilities' (2016). For Hicks, museal objects themselves are not fragments of time but are the materialisation of 'endurance', of human duration (2021: xxii). Erica Lehrer and Joanna Wawrzyniak (2023) produced a preliminary to-do list for decolonial museology in East-Central Europe that acts as a crucial reminder to European nations that did not formally participate in colonial exploitation (and which were themselves the object of colonisation through multiple empires until the end of the twentieth century) to consider their own complicity in and benefit from such ventures. If museums are the manifestation of colonial technologies and cognitive maps that upheld Eurocentrism, then their location does not exonerate their implication. In *Decolonising German and European History at the Museum*, Katrin Sieg's contention is that 'the racial inscriptions and Eurocentric underpinnings of cosmopolitanism must be addressed to install racial justice as obtainable within European societies and to visions of egalitarian world order' (2021: 11) and the museum is a primary site for this work. Of course, as a theatre and performance scholar, Sieg conceptualises museums as stages and exhibitions as performance scripts (2021: 12).

Dance, theatre, and performance studies scholars have been equally invested in decolonisation and find compound consonances with their counterparts in curation and museum studies. In a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 'Outing Archives, Archives Outing', that brings together queer and anticolonial performance initiatives that formulate 'outing' as an act of repair *or* a redoubling of colonial violence, Melissa Blanco Borelli, Bryce Lease, and Royona Mitra argue that as a methodology 'the decolonial constantly questions categories and their genesis demanding a multifaceted perspective' (2021: 7). In her challenge to the 'colonising and epistemic grids' that Eurocentric disciplines impose, performance studies scholar Diana Taylor asserts the political urgency of presence and offers *¡presente!* as a fungible concept that is context-dependent and always multiple, ranging from a commitment to witnessing or an ontological reflection on presence and subjectivity as process to the 'ethical imperative' (drawing on Gayatri Spivak) to stand up to and speak against injustice (2020: xi, 4). While museum scholars

have tended to focus on objects, representation, and restitution – indeed, Hicks has dubbed the 2020s the 'decade of returns' (2021: xx)[4] – decolonial action in theatre and performance centres forms of embodiment that 'trace historical and cultural constraints that render sex, gender, race, and sexuality culturally intelligible and see subjectivity as composed by ritualised, public dramatisations of the body' (Blanco Borelli, Lease, Mitra 2021: 8). What is clear across the wide range of theorisations and approaches to decolonisation across these disciplines is the imperative to act through transnational coalitions: the 'I' of imperialism supplanted by a 'we' that recognises that processes of restitution are themselves haunted by the ongoing legacies of colonialism and continuing inequalities.

## Transnational Refractions

The contributors to this collection demonstrate how thinking *transnationally* helps to open up new questions about artistic strategies and discourses around memory that are otherwise closed or stuck in national frameworks. This book moves away from the 'methodological nationalism prevalent in memory studies so far' (Erll 2011: 2) and attempts to rethink memory in an expanded field (Huyssen 2003) that is comparative, multicultural, and diasporic. These essays offer significant points of comparison and contrast in their framing of history and memory of authoritarianism, colonialism, fascism, and communism. Considering them in tandem has the strong potential to afford new insights into the current understanding of these difficult pasts across local, national, and global frameworks. 'Difficult pasts' as a descriptor also reroutes analyses of history that appear to be completed in terms like postcolonial, postcommunist, post-transition, or post-conflict. Dance scholar Anurima Banerji (2018) notes the postcolonial remains embedded in the postmodern, as opposed to the anti-modern decolonial: 'In place of the "universalizing" gesture, the decolonial intervention is to propose "pluriversal" praxis'. Memory studies originated out of the subject of Holocaust memory, which was created 'through a dual process of particularisation and universalisation' (Levy and Sznaider 2006: 93) and has become a paradigmatic global object of remembrance and narrative template. Indeed, Pierre Nora links the memory boom directly to the Holocaust with his oft quoted phrase 'Whoever says memory, says Shoah' (Winter 2001: 57). While Aleida Assmann has demonstrated how memory of the Holocaust has become a global reference point (2010: 97), Andreas Huyssen has argued that the Holocaust is losing its indexical quality and has begun to function as a 'metaphor for other traumatic histories and memories' (2003: 14). The US Holocaust Memorial Museum 'as one of the first self- described memorial museums', too now functions as a paradigm for memorial museums across the globe (Sodaro 2018: 7). Katrin Sieg has highlighted a further and more significant challenge when she concludes that 'a cosmopolitan memory culture grounded in the Holocaust reached an impasse and revealed an inability to curb nationalist narcissism or racist exclusion', which in part is a result of 'insufficiently decenter[ing]

the nation-state as a guarantee against the persecution of minorities' (2021: 14, 16). Our transnational focus and methodology further develop and test Michael Rothberg's 'multidirectional memory' (2009), which proposes that one discourse of memory can enable other discourses of memory and create new forms of solidarity, while remaining alert to Sieg's trenchant warning that apparently convivial memory cultures can conceal other forms of prejudice, imperial rhetoric, or nationalist complacency.

Our understanding of the transnational, as opposed to the global or international, is grounded in a focus on the ways in which memory cultures, artistic and curatorial strategies, and critical discourses circulate and recur across different geographical spaces. Forms of comparison that lack nuance and sensitivity can generate more harm than reparation. Moving beyond the national frame as the originator or propagator of memory cultures, the transnational is embedded in chapters that engage with the movement or circulation of memory that undermine interpretations of the nation-state as singular, impermeable, or dominant in establishing common memory. Through transnational comparisons, we examine how the narratives theatre makers and curators construct are participating in or rejecting global memory discourses. As Shelley Ruth Butler and Erica Lehrer (2016) note, museums emplot (a rhetorical device) or encode narratives not only through objects, but also through a global network of sites in which they take part, which requires a transnational comparative study. Such an examination offers insights into how attempts to narrate public memory – to stage, display, exhibit, and embody memory – lodge a critical interpretation of identity and systems of power. Within a wider context of memory studies, we develop an understandings of memory as a 'discursive construct' (Pethes and Ruchatz 2001: 13, cited in Erll 2011: 6), constituted through linguistic, social, historical, national, and global contexts. Theatres and museums may engage with memory in broader movements that contest grand narratives and undermine monolithic conceptions of history as a 'collective singular' (Kollektivsingular) (Fernández-Sebastián, Fuentes and Koselleck 2006: 122). In our examination of three narrative registers – common histories that emphasise one identity over another; relational histories that fix identities between two or more points; and shared histories that offer space for multiple and conflicting forms of identification – our process of investigation exposes the modes in which the staging of difficult pasts is produced for inter- or intra-public consumption and in relation to (and in tension with) national or cosmopolitan memory (Lehrer and Meng 2015).

This heavy investment in reconceptualisations of the audience takes into account the impact of artistic and curatorial strategies. Moving between and amongst museal and theatrical frames, from visitor to spectator to participant, the embodied encounters with the past explored across the collection form a critical constellation offering a wide-ranging interrogation and critique of the consumption of and engagement with difficult pasts, asking crucial questions concerning the ethics and aims of audience experience, and bringing forth the reality of contradictions framing historical/political pasts dialectically.

## Overview

This investment in reconceptualisations is articulated in different, but complementary, ways in this volume. When this collection of essays is read transversally, it can be found in James Bulgin's reflections on the construction of the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust Gallery in relation to museums in North America, Germany, and Eastern Europe; in Cecilia Sosa's consideration of ESMA Memory Museum's commissioning of Polish director Wojtek Ziemilski; in Giulia Palladini's discussion of the Colombian group Mapa Teatro's intervention into Spanish colonial space at Madrid's Reina Sofía Museum; by Bryce Lease in relation to memory of Eastern European communism and fascism; and in Joanne Rosenthal's curatorial manifesto that looks across a range of European practices and case studies. Furthermore, in order to investigate these reconceptualisations non-linearly, we place chapters in relation to one another so that they function as dialogues: Lynette Goddard's work on the memory of enslavement in British theatre and curatorial practices with Jordan Ealey and Leticia Ridley's embodied encounters with The National Museum of African American History and Culture in the US; Milena Grass Kleiner and Mariana Hausdorf Andrade's analysis of Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos in Santiago, Chile resonates with but diverges from Sosa's reflections on ESMA Museum in Buenos Aires, and the former's methodology of juxtaposing 'live' theatrical encounters with approaches to museal curation resonates with Bishnupriya Dutt's discussion of India's Museums of Independence; Giulia Palladini's critique of Spanish colonialism offers an intersectional opportunity to read Maria M. Delgado's essay on unprocessed pasts of fascism in the country; Katrina Phillips's analysis of the exploitation of Native Americans in outdoor drama industry intersects with Nadia Davids and Jay Pather's historical critique of ethnographic performances in South Africa; Michal Kobialka's essay on interethnic displays of 'awkward' objects in Poland speaks to Erika Diettes' considerations of the ethical responsibility of displaying objects of conflict in Colombia; there are pertinent points of contact in the use of museums to emplot and justify nationalism in India (Dutt) and amplify right-wing curatorial projects in Hungary, Lithuania, and Poland (Lease); and Rabih Mroué's work on representations of violence questions positionality in a move beyond the national as the prevalent condition of spectatorship.

Conceptually, the book starts with a framing of theatricality in museums. Jordan Ealey and Leticia Ridley walk through The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington DC, which is structured to reflect a progress narrative of African American life, beginning with the hold of a slave ship to contemporary narratives of Black 'success'. They argue that the interactive exhibits invite visitors to become what Dwight Conquergood calls 'co-performers' (2006: 359) in their exploration of African American history. Recognising the institution of the museum as a highly curated space, alongside the blatant nationalism of the Smithsonian institutions that the NMAAHC is built

upon, Ealey and Ridley advocate for co-performance as an efficacious framework for navigating what they see as the dichotomy of the museum's mission to foreground 'Americanness' and the embodied experience of visiting the space. Drawing from Black performance theory and feminisms through a queer lens, they ask what it means to stage a history of a people while *decentering* the people in that history. Bryce Lease is invested in the museum itself as the ultimate object of display. Exploring the eschewal of fascism and the Holocaust in favour of communist terror in three museums – Budapest's House of Terror, Vilnius' Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, and the Warsaw Uprising Museum – Lease addresses the fundamental question of theatricality these sites produce. While many critics of these museums simply point to theatricality as either offering curators the artistic means of achieving their ideological and political ambitions or as obscuring them through imitation or spectacle, Lease suggests that, conversely, defining theatricality as a form of material practices and dynamic relations enables a more nuanced understanding of curatorial technique and the positioning of the spectator, while also offering new insights into the pervasive move towards the theatricalisation of memorial museum displays. The obverse of extravagant spectacle, he argues, paying attention to theatricality exposes rather than conceals museums' ideological investments. Interpreting theatricality as the critical positioning of the spectator then resonates in Lease's interview with curator James Bulgin, who reflects on his process of developing the latest iteration of the Imperial War Museum's (IWM) Holocaust Galleries in London. Bulgin admits that he was at first hesitant around theatricality and when the museum sent out the design tender, he explicitly asked applicants to articulate what they would do with the train carriage the IWM has in their collection. More than half of the designers who applied suggested that they would attempt to fill the carriage with sound and lighting effects in order to allow visitors to feel they were retaking the steps of those who were transported in such trains. Bulgin recalls that '[T]his is exactly what we did not want, so it was helpful to learn very quickly the perspective from which the designer was approaching the broader project' (p. 57). The theatrical is rather animated through his approach to scenographic design that employs 'contemporaneity' as an interpretive strategy. Only offering the museum visitor the information a historical subject would have known or had access to in a given historical moment demonstrates how immersion can simultaneously offer intellectual absorption, critical distance, and affective engagement without resorting to forms of emotional imposture.

Having established the contours of theatricality, the next set of essays break traditional museal frames to explore performative potentials of collective commemoration. Michal Kobialka analyses Wojtek Ziemilski's performative action, *We walked just this way*, which removed an object from the *Widok zza bliska. Inne obrazy Zagłady* [officially translated into English as *Terribly Close. Polish Vernacular Artists Face the Holocaust*] exhibition at the Kraków Ethnographic Museum. Kobialka argues that working through the past, here: the objects, representing the Holocaust and Jewish martyrology, created by untrained Polish artists, may well

be what is needed given the multiplicity of global and local crises in our present historical moment, and the proliferation of often contradictory, ideologically imbued meanings of what constitutes a past. As evidenced by the performative action, in bringing together an awkward object from the exhibition and its copy dragged through the streets of Kraków as well as collateral memories of the past in the present moment, a new topography of the possible can materialise. A new topography of the possible can materialise only, however, when the causes of what happened here and there have been worked through, since, as Adorno reminds us, 'only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this unbroken' (1998: 103). Cecilia Sosa also reflects on a practice research commission that formed part of the Staging Difficult Pasts project which took place at the ESMA Memory Museum in Buenos Aires. Located on the site of a clandestine detention centre that operated in Argentina during the 1976–1983 dictatorship, Sosa considers how 'contemporary theatre and performance, in collaboration with museums, might contribute to a more inclusive and transnational politics of memory and grief in collaboration with museums' (p. 90). 'Pasados Conflictivos en Escena' (Conflictive Pasts on Stage) comprised of two performances that offered contrapuntal and entangled readings of a site of terror and ultraviolence, spanning the oppressive to the playful. Sosa queries the ways in which performative interventions might promote or propel action or offer a transformative engagement for visitors with no direct connection to the site's traumatic pasts. Ultimately, she argues, such initiatives produce what James Clifford (1997: 210) termed 'contact zones' in which new trans-affiliative narratives can be formed and transnational solidarities galvanised.

The Berlin-based Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué has long been engaged with the contemporary politics of the Middle East and the history of discord in the region, drawing from his personal experience of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Committed to exploring how the images of war are circulated and absorbed by the public, in his theatre pieces, non-academic lectures, and in gallery spaces, he examines the mediatised processes of normalising the everyday atrocities of war by investigating a complex relationship between memory, fiction, and political reality. In conversation with Michal Kobialka, Mroué, referencing his theatre/performance and visual works, talks about his process of writing/staging history affected by the work of an Arab sociologist, philosopher, and historian, Ibn Khaldun; about the repressed or forgotten images of war, which, like a flash, unexpectedly come back to haunt us; about representation, which becomes pixelated, blurred, and abstract; about his relentless homage to the phantom presence of the dead; and about the state of unrest as a necessary condition for bringing the difficult past to the present time. Mroué conceptualises what he calls the 'in-between' – a mental or physical site or a territory that is undetermined; a non-place – where the known categories and actions lose their pre-assigned meaning imposed upon them by the cultural or political norms; and need to be defined anew, as if outside of the dominant status quo; or as if withdrawn from life, but deferring death at the same time.

This ‘in-between’ reverberates through Giulia Palladini’s discussion of *De los dementes, ò faltos de juicio* (*Of Lunatics, or Those Lacking Sanity*), a site-specific project by the Colombian artistic laboratory Mapa Teatro in Madrid’s Reina Sofia Museum. She argues that ‘the strategy of Mapa Teatro has been to *take responsibility* for the position they occupied as artists, and as inhabitants of this territory in between spaces, in between histories’ (p. 122) through the production of a ‘temporalisation of space’ in a museum that has unspoken colonial presences. Harnessing the concept of *artes vivas* (live arts), Palladini reasons that while the wandering body in the museum activates Mapa Teatro’s dramaturgy, bodies are neither fetishised nor conditioned as the object of inquiry. Instead, Palladini addresses Reina Sofía as a ‘living organism’ in which the artists evoke the museum’s embodied memory as both a hospital that treated those returning from Spain’s colonies to an art institution that benefited from the colonial ruination of Colombia, the ruthless extraction of its resources, and the imposed labour of its indigenous populations.

The chapters that follow discover points of tension between and take up critical perspectives on the constitutive mediating roles of theatre and museal practices. In her analysis of the four new museums located within the grand Mughal era monument in Old Delhi, Bishnupriya Dutt shows how the ultraright Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is distorting the historical record and collective memory through its commissioning of these museums in an effort to advocate a homogenous vision of India tied to religious affiliation and narrow communitarian identities. The museums in the Red Fort selectively display convenient episodes of anti-colonial pro-nationalist historical struggles. Against this co-opting of history for political advancement and cultural hegemony, Dutt champions a theatre practice that counters and resists such narratives and ‘regressive cultural tendencies’ in postcolonial states (p. 151). Lynette Goddard also finds fault with museum curation in their exploration of artworks and objects that document and memorialise histories of enslavement at the International Slavery Museum (ISM) in Liverpool. While two plays by Black British women – Selina Thompson’s *salt.* (2018) and Winsome Pinnock’s *Rockets and Blue Lights* (2020) – bear witness to legacies of enslavement, sexual violence, coercion, and brutalisation, Goddard concludes that the ISM lacks the ‘embodied dramatic and performance strategies to create space for Black women to speak back to past histories of racial injustice’ (p. 155). Goddard invites curators to critically reconsider ‘sedate, sterile, and disembodied’ narrations of such histories (ibid.) and argues that museums must work against exhibitionary habits that fail to fully account for ‘a shared responsibility to address the afterlives of slavery’ (p. 169), from anti-black racism to enduring structural inequality. Milena Grass Kleiner and Mariana Hausdorf Andrade in their chapter ‘Chile’s Museum of Memory and Human Rights: Long Life to the Theatre!’ also examine how a consensus on Santiago’s new Museum of Memory and Human Rights (MMHR) was mandated that presents the Pinochet dictatorship’s human rights abuses through a very particular agreed narrative. A curatorial strategy with respect to the permanent collections sees evidence

trump interpretation and this is contrasted with the theatrical productions that are presented in the venue's Central Square that have 'provided a counter-narrative to counterbalance the limited monolinear discourse conveyed by the permanent exhibitions' (p. 186). Grass Kleiner and Andrade locate in the performing arts a flexibility to enter into a dialogue with timely current concerns, including the 2018 feminist movement, the 2019 *Estallido Social* (social upheaval), and longstanding and ongoing repression of the Mapuche people. Indeed, these three essays (by Dutt, Goddard, and Grass Kleiner and Andrade) all show the ways in which nationally funded museums can be seen to capitulate to the nationalist agenda, and they champion the potential of theatre to provide a destabilising space of critical engagement.

The essays in the concluding section turn to acts of remembrance and emerging approaches to mnemotechnics. In a conversation with Vikki Bell that stretches over a calendar year, the artist Erika Diettes describes the unfolding process of her first site-specific work, an oratorio built on a hillside in Colombia. Diettes has produced arresting visual works in response to the histories of armed conflicts in the country and her most recent pieces are the result of dialogic processes of engagement with the relatives of murdered and disappeared persons. Bell argues that Diettes offers her resources to communities as an artist rather than drawing on them as the object of her artworks. The construction of the oratorio inaugurates a new artistic phase that spreads memory through landscape, materialising an on-going and unbroken process of grieving in Colombia. Maria M. Delgado also explores the commemorated body in the landscape by presenting a treatment of Pedro Almodóvar's 2021 film *Madres paralelas/Parallel Mothers* centred on its call for restorative justice. By considering its parallel narratives as intersectional – dealing with gender politics as well as issues relating to the disappeared who lie in Spain's Civil and post-Civil War mass graves – Delgado argues that the film offers a mode of recognising the role that artistic interventions can play in framing difficult pasts in what has been a politically divided public sphere. The invocation of Federico García Lorca's dramaturgy is not incidental here but rather part of a carefully woven referential framework on theatrical presence/absence and forced disappearance.

The question of burial and commemoration then frame an interview with Nadia Davids and Jay Pather through a discussion of their theatre productions *What Remains* (2017) and *Hold Still* (2022). *What Remains* – a multidisciplinary work encompassing text, dance, and movement that interweaves theatrical and museal strategies – tells the story of the unexpected uncovering of a slave burial ground in Cape Town. When the bones emerge from the ground, everyone in the city – slave descendants, archaeologists, citizens, property developers – is forced to reckon with a history sometimes remembered, sometimes forgotten. Tracing unspoken histories of enslavement through a repertoire of contemporary cultural practices, Davids and Pather tie forms of generational memory to political activism.

Katrina Phillips examines outdoor dramas, which focus on the reconstruction of native or indigenous histories, and how these reconstructions could be seen not

only as examples of the reinterpretation of public memory often effacing conquest of Native lands and Native nations by American governmental officials, missionaries, and militaries, but also as hallmarks of dark tourism. As such, she avers, these outdoor dramas, because they are often staged to boost regional tourism, must offer to their audiences an escape from reckoning with American history in order for the site to maintain its status as a viable tourist destination.

While our inter-sector engagement with project partners and collaborators primarily takes the form of critical reflections and extended interviews, Joanne Rosenthal's epilogue offers an artistic manifesto that is meant to be of practical use for curators. Her ten principles consider how to display or represent objects and narratives which relate to trauma and loss, particularly in relation to issues of identity, family, sexuality, and kinship. While drawing upon a wide spectrum of international case studies, Rosenthal shows how museums, curators, and artists have made creative use of the limitations and opportunities involved in exhibiting absence and loss in expanded landscapes. Her 'menu' of strategies is not intended to function as an exhaustive survey, but rather to provoke further questions for the curator.

Globalism has not produced a post-national (or even post-nationalist) world and nation-states continue to manipulate and weaponise their stagings of the past to achieve their own political ambitions. In Colombia, November 2016 acts as a symbolic end to over 50 years of armed conflict in the country when the government ratified the Peace Accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the People's Army (FARC-EP). In reality, the violence that has officially claimed the lives of more than 8 million people has continued at pace, which makes the designation post-Accord Colombia more accurate than the oft-cited 'post-conflict'. Laura Rodriguez Castro argues that the Accord has not brought an end to the violence because the roots of the social conflict have not been addressed (2023: 44). A Truth Commission was created in 2017, but the construction of a Museum of a National Museum of Memory of Colombia (MCM) has failed to open despite a constitutional mandate (the Victim's Law 1448 of 2011). Although the original project team of the MCM embraced transformative strategies and sought to build public trust through dialogic encounters with communities impacted by violence and to curate galleries that did not take sides in a country brutally divaricated between left and right, the controversial change in museum directorship in early 2020 brought progress to a halt. The election of Iván Duque Márquez and his ultraright-wing government in 2019 resulted in 'state-sanctioned denialist politics' (Rodriguez Castro 2023: 46) that has left most of the exhibition rooms unfinished and the community projects unfunded. The politicisation and state control of memory sites and institutions threaten and curtail the work of activists, artists, and curators who seek to generate plural and inclusive spaces.

On the other side of the globe, as the Soviet Union was slowly collapsing in the late 1980s, Memorial International was set up to document forms of political oppression, which included a database of victims from the period of Stalinist

terror and the gulags. In late 2021, the controversial 'foreign agent' legislation was evoked in a Russian court to force the country's longest-standing human rights group to close just two months before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This assault on public memory was performed in tandem with the crackdown on political criticism and resistance in Russian civil society to Putin's regime. Memorial's lawyer, Genri Reznik, argued, 'The Memorial Society promotes the health of the nation. To eliminate this from the history of the country now means to contribute to the idea of "the state is always right"' (cited in Roth 2021). Theatres and museums play a crucial role in defying the state's self-flattery and attempts to claim ownership of difficult pasts by activating publics and reaffirming the significance of articulating historical implication and responsibility. For Bonnell and Simon, 'difficult' explicitly draws in the cognitive and affective aspects of visitor experience and the ways in which the museum might animate a critical historical consciousness. What is 'difficult' is the 'engagement with the experiences of others that radically calls into question the adequacy of one's concepts to tie down the significance of the lessons of the past' (2007: 81). This collection inscribes the labour and fortitude of those curators, artists, and theatre and filmmakers who are exploring how theatrical and performative encounters with difficult pasts generate new forms of public knowledge. The voices of those making work are often at the forefront of the collection – their contribution to these forms of public knowledge articulated in their own words, predicated on the questions about performance/performativity; performance and power relations; the formation of museum and theatre spaces in today's geo-political and cultural landscape; and on archives – that are shared but not necessarily mutually understood – in spaces that link people who might not otherwise find common ground.

## Notes

1 Volodymyr Zelensky also evokes the Second World War in his rhetoric. One key example was his address to the UK House of Commons on 8 March 2022 in which he called up Winston Churchill's legendary speech in June 1940 after the evacuation of Allied troops from Dunkirk to create a parallel between the war in Ukraine and Second World War – thus working against Putin's claim that the Russian goal was the denazification of Ukraine. The specific reference to Churchill can be easily detected in Zelensky's speech when he states, 'We will not give up, and we will not lose. We will fight till the end – at sea, in the air, we will continue fighting for our land whatever the cost. We will fight in the forests, in the fields, on the shores, in the streets'. Indeed, the Second World War functions across this volume as a powerful point of reference and a site of origin for discussions relating to the navigation of borders, the Cold War and its binaries of East and West, postcolonial movements and the collapse of the British Empire, and the European dictatorships consolidated (Spain) and established (Hungary) in the post-War era.

2 See, for example, Alexandra Alter and Elizabeth A. Harris's (2023) reflections on this trend.

3 For comprehensive overviews of the museum, see Bennett 1995, 2017.

4 It is worth contrasting Hicks' comment of the 2020s as 'decade of the returns' with UNHCR's designation of 1990s as the decade of repatriation – responsible ethical repatriation that takes into consideration the rights of refugees (Fredricksson and Mougne 1994); this shift of focus from political subjects to objects merits closer consideration.

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# 1

# STAGING THE STORY OF A PEOPLE

## The Politics of Co-Performance at the National Museum of African American History and Culture

*Jordan Ealey and Leticia Ridley*

On September 24, 2016, The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) opened in Washington, D.C. With an opening ceremony led by President Barack Obama and an ocean of visitors wanting to experience the long-awaited site, the NMAAHC was nothing short of a cultural feat.[1] The museum featured exhibitions on historical markers and events such as enslavement, the tragic murder of Emmett Till, sit-in counters, Chuck Berry's iconic red Cadillac, among other significant artifacts and materials in African American history. It is structured to reflect a progress narrative of African American life, beginning with the hold of a slave ship to contemporary narratives of black 'success'. Drawing from black performance theory, black feminism, and our own lived realities as African American people, we query: What does it mean to be stanchioned off from black history? To gaze upon it from behind a sheet of glass, to be both in intimate contact with but also deliberately siphoned off from it?

These questions continued to preoccupy us as we both visited and revisited the NMAAHC individually and together.[2] Out of the numerous times we have had the opportunity to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture or as we have taken to calling it the 'Blacksonian', one sticks out in our collective memory as illuminating what we see as the tensions of the museum. Two weeks preceding its much anticipated theatrical release, we saw *Black Panther* (2018) at the Oprah Winfrey Theater, which is housed in the museum. We had already secured our tickets to view the film as fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). However, upon learning that the exclusive event would include not only an early screening of the film but also a panel with Ryan Coogler, the film's director, alongside some of the folks involved in the film's process, we jumped at the opportunity to attend. Following a series of mishaps (sold-out tickets, persistent

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phone calls), we were finally able to solidify our attendance. At the event, there was a predominantly black audience who were just as excited as we were. We felt that this was the ideal way to experience the film for the first time.

*Black Panther* was a significant cultural moment within the United States, particularly for people of the African diaspora. It is both a celebration and contestation for black people. As the first film in the commercially and critically successful MCU to feature a majority cast of black actors, the possibilities of what this representation could mean for the future of black film in Hollywood were incalculable. However, many were also skeptical of the fraught politics of *Black Panther* – from its alleged homogenization of African culture to its blatant nationalism that appeared to further the diasporic divide between Africans and African Americans.[3] Much like *Black Panther*, then, the NMAAHC attempts to toe the line between a project of American patriotism and contending with the histories of anti-blackness. A part of the Smithsonian museum conglomerate, the NMAAHC is always already entangled with American nationalism.

As we experienced this film, we were forced to reckon with how we were interpellated into these projects. Could we as African American queer people disrupt these projects? Or was the space of the museum curated in a way that *invited* performance, but only if and when it aligned with the goals of the museum? Black performance theorist Brandi Wilkins Catanese reminds us, 'Museums are inherently performative institutions, affecting the narratives and ontologies that they purport merely to commemorate' (Catanese 2007: 93). Performance, then, becomes an operative strategy employed by museums to articulate a legible narrative of the histories that it attempts to capture. We are reminded here of E. Patrick Johnson's contention that blackness 'is a simulacrum until it is practiced – i.e. performed' (2006: 446). Johnson complicates this notion slightly, adding – following black cultural theorist Rinaldo Walcott – 'blackness offers a way to rethink performance theory by forcing it to ground itself in praxis, especially within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society' (2006: 446). By establishing the NMAAHC as a 'black' space, blackness becomes attached to a set of materials located within the institution and, thus, performance is the embodied practices that accompany the engagement with said materials. Patrons of the NMAAHC, regardless of their own cultural identity, are asked to engage with the artifacts and histories of African American people with a lack of specificity to how their own identitarian location affects how one responds to and engages with the histories held within the museum. In this engagement, we contend that co-performance is a strategy for investigating both the superstructure of the museum and the potential for embodiment to challenge that structure. In the course of this chapter, we examine three artifacts within the museum – the hold of the ship, the replica slave cabin, and Emmett Till's memorial – in order to wrestle with the politics and potential of co-performance to capture the paradox of institutionalizing African American history.

## The Dramaturgy of Co-Performance, or How to Do Things with Bodies

Billed by Lonnie Bunch, the museum's founding director, as 'America's story […] for all Americans', we view the NMAAHC as a ripe space for exploring the politics of co-performance. Recognizing the institution of the museum as a highly curated space, alongside the palpable nationalism of the Smithsonian institutions that the NMAAHC is built upon, we argue that co-performance offers an efficacious framework for navigating what we see as the dichotomy of the museum's mission to foreground 'Americanness' and the embodied experience of visiting the space.[4] The interactive exhibits in the NMAAHC invite visitors to become what Dwight Conquergood calls 'co-performers' in their exploration of African American history. Conquergood writes: 'The power dynamic of the research situation changes when the ethnographer moves from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer to the intimate involvement and engagement of "coactivity" or co-performance with historically situated, named, "unique individuals"' (2006: 359). Here, we understand Conquergood's definition of co-performance as requiring an individual to shift from the distant and detached observer to an intimately involved and engaged performer. Co-performance raises the individual stakes for each witness, encouraging audiences to move from simply spectators to active participants. In this chapter, we expand upon Conquergood's original ethnographic context to encompass the visual and embodied lexicons of the museum. In so doing, we argue that co-performance is a productive concept to frame our experiences of the Blacksonian because it attunes our attention to the way the curation both works on our bodies and the way our bodies work on it. In doing so, we are aware that this term is not neutral and that it carries histories, contexts, and cultural memories that can problematize its usage, which we will turn to in the last section. This chapter looks at the relevance of co-performance as a strategy for African Americans to make, remake, and unmake prescriptive narratives of blackness that are located within the NMAAHC. Part of these prescriptions fall into what we see as the museum's dramaturgy.

Dramaturgy, as both a theory and a practice, is ultimately concerned with the relationship between the textual and the embodied. Just as theatre is about how a given text is taken from the page to the stage, so, too, does the museum wrestle with this same consideration. However, dramaturgy also considers the fraught relationship between intentionality and impact. This deep dramaturgical understanding brings to mind the work of African American theatre scholar and practicing dramaturg, Faedra Chatard Carpenter, and what she calls 'activating the asterisk'. Carpenter explains this concept as 'a mandate and a multifaceted methodology that charges one to have a f[i]erce awareness of inside/outside audiences, the politics of inclusion/exclusion, and the dramaturgy of intentionality' (2018: 137). Examining this dramaturgy of intentionality using rapper Jay-Z's song and video, 'The Story of O.J.', and his usage of racial epithets, Carpenter explores the multiple intentions and contestations of how Jay-Z uses the n-word as well as the intentions and impacts of his references to harmful stereotypes of Jewish people. In so doing,

Carpenter is clear that dramaturgy can be used as a tool to consider the subjective experience of any narrative – be it play, song, or museum – in interrogating the impact of creative choices. Following Carpenter, we examine the NMAAHC's intentionality to generate a celebratory narrative of African American history and culture and the real, material impact of how that narrative is performed. We, like Carpenter, activate the museum's asterisk by challenging and critiquing its nationalist project while also understanding its clear intentions in uplifting the invisible and erased narratives of African American contributions.

We consider the museum to demonstrate what Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez refer to as 'a palpable black familiar', which they describe as 'the microeconomics of gesture that cohere in black performance' (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014: 8). In so doing, we argue that the NMAAHC is a site that invites a familiar corporeal grammar that is recognized as black performance culture, but specifically rendered within artifacts and materials. This does not mean that there is a singular black experience in the museum, as we realize that nation, culture, gender, and language, among other identities, shape one's own performance in the space. Following DeFrantz and Gonzalez, we argue that black performance can manifest without the presence of black bodies, while also noting the importance of blackness ('black sensibilities, black expressive practices, and black people') to these enactments. We suggest here that the NMAAHC is a site where the pliability of performance and blackness is present, thus fashioning various possible encounters among bodies, objects, and space.

The museum, like performance, relies on a process that infuses symbols with meaning. This conscious meaning-making is not unidirectional from creator to spectator, but rather multi-directional, allowing spectators to infuse their own interpretations that may run counter to the intended message. Performance becomes a viable approach to read the museum because of its focus on the body and how it moves within space. The embodied experience of the visitor becomes primary to navigating the museum, as dance and performance theorist Melissa Blanco Borelli reminds us, the 'body becomes a tool, vehicle, site, and example that demonstrates its active position in culture, destabilizing popularly held notions of it as a passive receptacle of culture' (2016: 16). To Borelli's point, the body offers new ways to consider how black people who have had limited mobility within the United States employ their body to subvert commonly accepted prescriptions of our history. We recognize that embodiment must be primary to any analysis of a museum because of its reliance on the engaged, subjective co-performer.

## Locating the NMAAHC: The Political Complexity of the Nation's Capital

The importance of the National Museum of African American History and Culture's sitedness cannot be overstated. Located on Washington D.C.'s Constitution Avenue, the museum itself sits right on the National Mall, which includes iconic monuments such as the Lincoln Memorial, the U.S. Capitol, and the

White House. It is also surrounded by other Smithsonian museums, including the National Museum of American History, the Museum of Natural History, and the Museum of the American Indian, to name a few. Close to the building is also the infamous Tidal Basin, a popular D.C. tourist attraction due to the cherry-blossom-lined paths that can be seen in early spring. Here, then, through the museum's location and its relationship to other institutions in the area, the NMAAHC is geographically folded into a national project of Americanness.

Returning to Catanese, who writes that space is 'a register of power' that 'invests buildings with memory and meaning' (2007: 91), the NMAAHC's location in Washington, D.C. is one that is imbued with a distinct cultural memory. According to the museum's website, a large part of its significance is due to its association with particular historical figures. Being on the National Mall puts it in close proximity to memorials and monuments celebrating people such as Thomas Jefferson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington, 'whose contributions to African American history and culture are told in the museum' ('The Building'). Notably, only one of these figures, Martin Luther King, Jr., is African American, which further leads us to question who this institution is for and why as well as how historical 'greatness' is codified through objects such as memorials. But beyond the American project that is embedded in the museum's intentionality, Washington, D.C. has a storied history for African American people. Outside of the scope of the museum being under the Smithsonian umbrella, we find that the specificity of Washington, D.C. is critical to understanding the politics of co-performance within the space.

In 1957, D.C. was the first place in the United States to become majority black, the reasoning behind its famous nickname of 'Chocolate City' (Bump 2021). As most places in what is now known as the United States, Washington, D.C. is a product of Indigenous genocide. Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove identify D.C.'s Anacostia River as 'the first racial struggles in the area we now call the nation's capital' due to Native tribes of the Nacostines, the Piscataway, and Powhatan contestations over the geographic space (2017: 7, 8). After the English colonists arrived and swindled the Powhatan out of their land, thus began the colonial takeover of what would become Washington, D.C. Though not a linear history, the colonization of this area led to enslaved Africans being forcibly removed from their homes and brought to the United States. Commissioned by George Washington, Pierre Charles L'Enfant devised a plan for the city that was rigid and segregated. One place, LeDroit Park, defied such expectations.

A few metro stops and one will be right in the heart of black life in the D.C. metro area. Places such as LeDroit Park and U Street showcased then and now the deep roots of black culture that happened within the D.C. area. D.C., after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the so-called end to the institution of slavery, became a hub for rich African American life. It attracted a bevy of the African American intelligentsia, including Anna Julia Cooper, Paul Lawrence Dunbar

and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Ralph Bunche. Many of the aforementioned people lived in the famous LeDroit Park, which is near Howard University. Howard, as a premier Historically Black College and University (HBCU), has a legacy that surpasses its home of Washington, D.C. but is specifically enhanced by its position there. Black theatre and performance culture also have a particularly resonant history in the District, from the historical theatres on U Street to the founding of theatres such as the D.C. Black Repertory Theatre and the African Continuum Theatre Company. Black life, history, and culture are deeply embedded within the history of the nation's capital.[5] This suggests that there is a contradiction between the importance of Washington D.C.'s strong black history and its location on the National Mall firmly situating the museum within a national project of Americanness. We see this as a reflection of the contradictions that exist in the museum itself and the complexities inherent to African American life in the United States, which are explored through the NMAAHC's staging of slavery.

### Started from the Bottom...: 'Slavery & Freedom' Interrogating the Progress Narrative

Architecturally, the NMAAHC's shape is inevitably a part of its dramaturgy. By this, we mean that the literal shape of the museum itself supports its mission to illustrate the story of African American life. Lead designer David Adjaye and lead architect Phillip Frelon, both of whom won a global competition to find the museum's creative team, generated a shape that pulls from many influences and inspirations in order to design the building's structure. According to the museum's website, the building itself blends elements of Greco-Roman design, Yoruban art, the American South, and the Caribbean ('The Building'). This blend of European artistic oeuvre with elements of diasporic blackness speaks to how forced displacement necessitated African American culture's quilting of various global cultures.

The museum's narrative begins, as to be expected, with that of chattel slavery. Visitors are encouraged to begin the museum at the Slavery & Freedom gallery, which is located on the museum's basement floor. To access this particular exhibit, one must take an elevator that fits about 20 people, 70 feet down. As the elevator is descending, visitors watch a timeline scroll past them as they plunge back into the year 1400. The elevators stop and visitors find themselves instantly transported back in time to a colonial America. Visitors step out and, thus, begins 'Slavery & Freedom, 1400–1877'.[6] The exhibit begins with a 2005 quote by John Hope Franklin that reads: 'We've got to tell the unvarnished truth'. The 'truth' in question is the history of slavery in the United States and the important role it plays in the landscape of United States history and the construction of African American identity. It is split in two: the Atlantic world 'before' the advent of chattel slavery and 'after' the slave trade began to capture the capitalist engine that valued profit and power over the lives of people.

What we wish to interrogate here, alongside the politics of co-performance, is the museum's reliance on a progress narrative and the ensuing dissonance that happens through performance. Primarily, our understanding of the progress narrative derives from work by philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who, in his essay 'Narrative Time', critiques and interrogates the link between narrativity and temporality. Ricoeur writes: 'both the theory of history and the theory of fictional narratives seem to take it for granted that whenever there is time, it is always a time laid out chronologically, a linear time, defined by a succession of instants' (1980: 171). As he is specifically discussing the problem in the telling of history, we find his critique of chronology to be resonant with our own interest in dissecting time as progressing linearly and that linearity as being something associated with positivity and growth. We also draw our understandings from queer theorists who critique the 'progress narrative' particularly as it pertains to rights-based discourse, representation, and visibility.[7] We recognize that African American life and culture deserve to be recognized on the grand level that the NMAAHC has acquired and that this visibility serves as a reminder of all that black people have contributed to the making and sustaining of this country. However, we question the linearity with which the museum presents this history and for whom this history is being displayed and why.

In the design of the Slavery & Freedom gallery, visitors are meant to notice the tightness and narrowness of the basement floor, which eventually opens out. Devoted to capturing the experience of the hold of the slave ship, in this conscientious architectural choice, bodies are choreographed to move through the space. Visitors' movements take on added meaning as they become aware of their restricted mobility in the tight quarters, but we also are attuned to the other bodies that surround us. This design tactic requires not only careful consideration of the other people who we are sharing space with but also shifts the museum experience from a solitary act into a communal one.

During our visits to the museum, we found ourselves intrigued by the boundaries set on our embodiment due to this exhibit's architecture. In her separate experience, Leticia recalls that the space itself was packed so tightly with so many bodies that it was hard to move, causing her to want to rush past this portion of the museum. By contrast, Jordan's first experience of the exhibit was that it was not as constricting because there were not as many people within it, and this allowed them to loiter in the space longer. While we recognize that these are only two possible outcomes in a host of responses by visitors, we argue that these two experiences speak to the politics of co-performance. Here, the design tactics invite us to make conscientious decisions that require us to retract our gaze and reflect on our own affective experiences. This recognition of our own bodies calls for us to shift our engagement with the space and artifacts from merely one of consumption. Instead, we must wrestle with the bodies in the space that share it with us, but also acknowledge the hidden bodies whose material objects touched. It is in the

Slavery & Freedom gallery whereby dramaturgy and co-performance are solidified as co-constitutive entities that shape the museum; to achieve the dramaturgical intention of the exhibit – which is to acknowledge the phenomenological experience of slavery – one must have the ability to perform and from that ability comes one's ability to *co*-perform. There is a space set apart from the videos, material objects, photographs, and primary sources in the exhibit that is deliberately putting all of its dramaturgical intentions to specific use.

For the most part, the Slavery & Freedom gallery follows the usual logics of a museum space. Most of the material objects are protected by glass cases, creating the primary mode of engagement to be a visual one. This is disrupted in the space dedicated to honoring the Middle Passage set apart from the rest of the exhibit in a darkened alcove that uses the sonic and the visual to create an immersive experience for the visitor. Once inside, the visitor might notice that the ground below them has shifted; no longer are they standing on gray concrete, but dark wood paneling as the repetition of ocean waves hits their eardrums. Similar to the rest of the basement design, the room creates a feeling of claustrophobia (from which Jordan admittedly suffers). Even though we were the only people in the space on our shared visit, we remarked on the lack of ability to turn and see with just two people.

The intention of this immersion is not to recreate; it is clear that this is mere fabrication as sounds from the rest of the exhibit seep into the room. While museum specialist for the NMAAHC, Mary N. Elliot, notes that the goal is to invite acknowledgment and not replicate the experience of enslaved peoples; it is hard not to make that correlation (Hobson 2022). The room's lack of clear markers or framing mechanisms leaves it up to the visitor to deduce the meaning of this experience. Moreover, markedly different than the rest of the space, the disorientation that one might feel in the hull of a ship is an organizing principle. Here, performance is merely a tool for representation, but performance can never be deduced to just that, it is also involved in the projects of creation, enactment, and transmission.

This particular experience of this portion of the Slavery & Freedom gallery brings to mind ongoing debates around representation, especially within black critical theory, theatre studies, and performance studies. Charlotte Canning and Thomas Postlewait reflect on this debate specifically through the lens of performance historiography, contending that:

> [a] representation, apparently, is simultaneously a facsimile and a simulacrum, a copy and a counterfeit. This polarity seems to be the case with any discourse or code of representation we use (such as languages, drawings, and photographs). The representation makes a show – a deceptive performance – of the original, as if the reality of the thing itself is possessed by a disruptive Doppelgänger. The same thing is delivered as another thing. The historical representation seeks to be an objective image of the thing itself, yet it cannot avoid being, in some capacity, a subjective distortion of that thing. Even the most objective code

> articulates a subjective perspective or formal order. If not similitude, the historian aims for verisimilitude in the representation of the past. Of course, the aim may be easy to articulate, but the method of achieving such a representation is difficult. The aim of telling the truth about past events is a necessary first principle of historical inquiry, but whose truth, what truth, which truth?
>
> (2010: 11)

We quote this at length as we find Canning and Postlewait's provocations to be relevant for interrogating what we see as the complicated politics surrounding the Slavery & Freedom gallery. As it aims to create a direct link between the past and the present through the body, we are left wondering about the effects of the representation. The critical difference is that as co-performers in the museum, we have the option to snap back into our present, in a way that the histories we touch do not – they are captured and static, unable to speak on their own behalf, they are contained by the meaning of the curators and co-performers who deduce significance from them. While the NMAAHC does not require that you enter into a relationship of co-performance for one's entire visit, the interactive exhibits do. Visitors need not be aware of co-performance; we argue that the museum's dramaturgy still compels them to co-perform. Entering into the hold of the ship, for example, the visitor is already becoming a co-performer through simply experiencing the exhibit and subsequently making meaning in that space. On the other end, we understand that co-performance *can* be a source of personal agency in the NMAAHC, which we wielded in our own visits to the site. In the curation of the interactive exhibits, the museum invites one to enter into the agreement – while you may choose not to interact with these experiential components of the NMAAHC, the active choice to avoid these exhibits is still a performance that shapes and asserts an individual's position.

Canning and Postlewait's inquiry about 'whose truth, what truth, which truth' needs to be prioritized in historiographic work and this leads us to question representation and reproduction from the perspective of empathy. To consider the Slavery & Freedom gallery's intention to foster a physical environment that replicates the conditions of the slave ship and its constrictions on the body, we look to the work of cultural historian Saidiya Hartman. In her groundbreaking text, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman interrogates what she refers to as 'the precariousness of empathy'. Beginning the text with a provocative and rigorous critique of Frederick Douglass's recounting of watching Aunt Hester's beating and the graphic descriptions that accompany it, Hartman challenges and implicates the authorial intent to re-present the violence (in this case, Douglass) in the spectacle and asks us to 'look elsewhere' in order to 'defamiliarize the familiar' (1997: 11). Hartman's critique of Douglass lies in questions around the efficacy of reproducing harm. Why must one re-produce and name unspeakable horrors and retraumatize in an effort to empathize? This interrogation of empathy continues in Hartman's discussion of John Rankin, a white abolitionist

and minister, and his own narrative where he imagines himself and his family as slaves in order to create empathy. Of this, Hartman writes:

> [B]y exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others, the humanity extended to the slave inadvertently confirms the expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery. In other words, the ease of Rankin's empathic identification is as much due to his good intentions and heartfelt opposition to slavery as to the fungibility of the captive body.
>
> (1997: 19)

In other words, Hartman explains that by Rankin surrogating the black body of the enslaved person with his and his family's white bodies, the violence of racial terror is made 'visible and intelligible' (Hartman 19). This is problematic because it assumes that the knowledge of the horror against black people is not enough; the violence is only legible if it is attached to whiteness. The ability to recognize unspeakable terror outside of one's own experience is the exact reason as to why Hartman characterizes empathy as precarious. We bring up Hartman's provocations around reproduction and empathy to further question the dramaturgical intentionality and whether co-performance itself is really enough to push back against these narratives. As the museum itself seeks to consider American history from the black perspective, we ask: Who is this all truly for? What good might it do to re-produce an experience of slavery for a black person? As African Americans ourselves, the embodied experience of slavery lives within us so much so that the recreation of the scenario of the slave ship in the museum has the potential to facilitate trauma on our experience, as it did there. Co-performing in the space, then, facilitated an intimate experience of slavery. In our own encounters with the hold of the ship, questions of empathy kept coming up between us. Notably, the exhibit does not house a lot of artifacts that sit behind glass or have placards that provide historical context. Therefore, we recognize that the choice to sit in this exhibit – as we did – is one that is active. What keeps someone there? Why would they stay? We lingered in the space for a moment, noticing that others chose to move through it rather quickly. Our co-performances allowed us the agency to choose to be still and soak in the experiences that our ancestors had during American slavery and ponder the histories of violence that led us to that moment.

## Climbing Alongside History: 'Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom'

The Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom gallery leans into the performance of history and allows intimate contact with the artifacts. Unlike the Freedom Now gallery, visitors are invited to touch, interact, and perform alongside the objects and moments in history. While stanchion and glass still protect most of the artifacts, the

NMAAHC stages encounters between the museum visitor and museum objects, which are the focus of this section.

When ascending from the ground floor Freedom & Slavery gallery, visitors walk up a ramp and approach a large black panel that reads, 'Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation, 1877–1968'. Marking a transition for the visitor, the museum attempts to toggle between the immediate past/present of slavery, while also asserting that the hardships faced during the era of segregation changed the United States for the better. As the visitor moves closer to the panel, the smaller script comes into view, and the visitor is confronted with their first decision – do they stop and read further, or do they move swiftly past it in favor of other artifacts? The spatial location of the panel invites the visitor to become a co-performer in the exhibit. To enter the rest of the exhibit, we must make a conscious decision about how to interact with the panel. The visitor is not detached from this choice. They cannot simply continue to walk straight past it but must choose to re-direct their body to brush up against a replica slave cabin directly behind the panel. This placement of the slave cabin is not circumstantial; it is an effort by the curators to capture the fraughtness of African American history and memory. The inclusion of the slave cabin in this portion of the museum, rather than the Freedom & Slavery gallery, is a notable reminder of the remnants of slavery that shaped 1877–1968, but they also continue to shape the present.

If one does stop to read, the visitor enters further into a dialogic relationship with the curator's intentions. The paragraph frames the historical moment that this section of the museum hopes to illustrate as 'hopeful and disheartening' for African Americans, while also explicating new resistances that African Americans faced in their pursuit of citizenship. The paragraph concludes: 'Through their struggle, they challenged the nation to live up to its ideals of freedom and equality'. This concluding statement displaces the African American museum visitor by anticipating the non-black subject. It is not 'our' struggle, but 'their[s]'. The NMAAHC eschews the specificity of African American witnessing to be subsumed under a larger national rhetoric. This aligns with Faun Rice's categorization of the museum as embodying a space of 'new integration […] wherein all Americans can see their country through the lens of the African American experience' (2017: 250). This new integration model displaces the African American museum visitor for a general subject who is not racialized as black, thus potentially severing the kinship ties that the African American visitor might feel with the collections of the museums.

On our visits to the museum, we questioned the rhetorical distancing. We articulated our inability to separate ourselves from our connection to this history as we ran our hands across the wood of the replica slave cabin. As one of the few artifacts that is not stanchioned off, it entices the visitor to quite literally touch history. The ability to engage directly with the cabin and to walk inside it asks us to recall our earlier experiences in the tight pathway of the ground floor of the museum. As co-performers, we recognize the fraughtness of the process; the slave cabin is a fabricated replica that is a mere stage prop for us and other visitors. But the lack

of authenticity is not unimportant; embodiment plays a crucial role in establishing a connection between the historical moment and the present. We are reminded here of cultural theorist Alison Landsberg's idea of the museum as a 'transferential space' where it 'impose[s] a corporeal, experiential logic [that] might be exactly the inverse of the psychoanalytic process' (2004: 135). To this idea, Landsberg suggests that though a visitor did not live through the event being staged, their corporeal relationship to its reproduction creates a real experience even in the artifice of the museum space. Therefore, we agree with Landsberg – the visitor becomes primary to their experience, building their personal repertoire. These embodied acts that occur in the NMAAHC become a location that can stage histories, sustain colonial power, and where the individual can participate in the creation of meaning.

For Diana Taylor, the archive is insufficient in capturing the myriad of ways that meaning is made. Therefore, Taylor proposes that the archive must be considered in tandem with embodied acts, known as the repertoire (2003: 19–22). The repertoire (performance) plays a role in enacting memory within the NMAAHC. Perhaps the site where performance is most heavily leaned on in the NMAAHC is the exhibit dedicated to Emmett Till.[8] Till's casket was donated to the museum to be preserved and refurbished in 2005 after his remains were exhumed and reinterred. In 2009, a commemoration ceremony was then held at Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ in Chicago, Illinois, the same church where Till's 1955 funeral was held, which founding director Lonnie Bunch III attended (Jones 2017). Bunch notes that his attendance at this commemorative event served as the inspiration for Till's exhibit, as he hoped his re-creation would be able to capture the spirit of the gathering (Jones 2017).

Performance is the organizing framework for this exhibition, employing theatrical techniques such as set construction, sound, and projections to offer an affective engagement with Till. The exhibit is tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the museum. Intimate contact with Till is curated by the museum as an employee of the museum stands on guard outside the exhibition, allowing only a few visitors at a time. Visitors enter a small corridor located in a corner enclave of the museum's second floor, where they find themselves in a small room divided by a wall that creates separation between the displays of the coffin and contextualizing videos and photos. Sonically, the exhibit is somber, despite the competing sounds of Mamie Till's describing the body of her son after his attack and Mahalia Jackson singing 'Amazing Grace'.

Black studies theorist Christina Sharpe provides two terms that we find useful in engaging with this exhibit at the NMAAHC: Black annotation and Black redaction. Sharpe writes:

> Black annotation and Black redaction are ways to make Black life visible, if only momentarily, through the optic of the door. Black annotation and redaction meet the Black anagrammatical and the failure of words and concepts to hold in and on Black flesh.
>
> (2016: 123)

Sharpe's description of black annotation and black redaction questions vision itself as she invites us to think about what is seen and how other logics infiltrate our ways of seeing. To this point, black annotation becomes a strategy for adding or highlighting other grammars of being that exist within the site, while black redaction exercises the dominant logics to push Black subjectivity to the forefront. In the case of Till's memorial, black redaction is utilized as an intentional practice of removing Till's mangled face from the view, destabilizing its spectacularized nature. While a photograph of Till's face after his attack is positioned inside the coffin, visitors must stand on their toes to catch a partial view. On the other hand, the memorial also offers annotations via Mamie Till's voice and supplemental documentation by other civil rights leaders to offer visitors a way to think about the metadata that exists in images and performances. At the same time, we are denied personal archival remnants of our visit to Till's memorial.

Despite performance organizing the exhibition, the staging of Emmett Till's memorial is not meant to be meta-theatrical; visitors are encouraged to stay quiet and photography is not allowed inside the exhibit. Visitors are asked to join in the performance of the funeral gathering, processing past the child-size coffin. The exhibit captures the ephemerality of performance as memory is only what the visitor can leave with since photography and video is restricted. Even in revisiting our notes on Till's memorial, it fails us. The details are not quite clear. Memory and embodied performance meet to redirect the co-performer to the fraughtness of the museum project as there is no redemption story to be found in the murder of a 14-year-old black boy. As Kinshasa Holman Conwill, the founding deputy director of the museum, stated in response to displaying the casket: 'What this museum is going to do is make sure that America remembers that, at one point – and unfortunately some of that still goes on – we killed our children' (Thompson 2016). Co-performance, in this instance, is facilitated through allowing visitors to grieve, mourn, and heal from this violent history. Though our memories fail us of the specifics of the exhibit due to its limitations around documentation, we remember the effect it left us with: a profound sense of loss.

## Conclusion: The White Supremacist Intrusion and the Other Side of Co-Performance

If, as we have hoped to argue in the course of this chapter, co-performance has the potential to make and re-make a space through embodiment, then it is not always in ways that are supportive of the black radical project we sought in our embodied experience with the museum. It is not rare to be accosted with red 'Make America Great Again (MAGA)' baseball caps, often worn by pre-teens and teenagers visiting the museum with what appears to be their school group. The hats, which feature a slogan of 45th president of the United States Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, now infamously symbolize and encapsulate a fidelity to white cisheteropatriarchy, a denial of black and minoritized oppression in U.S. history, a refusal

to engage with the continuing struggle for civil rights, and a glorification of white supremacist cultural values. The presence and frequency of these hats in the exhibits and in the entrance of the NMAAHC could not have been anticipated when the museum opened in 2016, but now they, too, appear to be permanent fixtures among the other exhibits of racial violence. Unlike the KKK hood or the shackles, the 'Make America Great Again' hats are not static; they walk with us through each gallery, and, if we are lucky enough, we only encounter them as we enter or exit the front entrance of the building.

Each time that we have visited the museum, we have come across these symbols of white supremacy that connote an allegiance to the very histories that created and sustained institutions such as enslavement, segregation, mass incarceration, and other forms of anti-black violence. The intention, either conscious or unconscious, by the wearer, is to exercise their own counter-performance as a means to remind black folks that this history is still all too present, despite us physically ascending from the basement to the main floor in an assumed progress narrative. Seeing these hats, worn mostly by young folks, reminds us that co-performance is also a performative based upon its conditions. If a person wearing a MAGA hat stands beside an African American visitor in the Emmett Till exhibit, for example, the African American visitor's intention to experience healing is disrupted by the presence of this white supremacist symbol. It can conjure the feeling of danger and risk for the African American visitor; it has a different meaning altogether. What does it mean to think of something like the MAGA hat wearer as the oppressor to Till as a victim of white violence? Even in these sacred spaces, co-performance serves as a tactic across the political spectrum and shifts dramaturgical meanings. While our co-performance with material objects and other people might activate an asterisk to the narrative of progress that the museum's ethos dearly clings to, it can be insufficient in countering the antagonism one might feel when confronted with white supremacy.

So, what does the co-performance afford us in the space of the museum? We suggest that co-performance is at its best when it operates on the affective registers moving the museum from a space of commemoration that is stagnant and unaffecting to a site that is constantly changing and adapting according to the bodies that occupy it. In this way co-performance regards the entanglement of historical logics and memory as an opportunity that can be reconstructed and engender new understandings about our past, present, and future. Our own co-performance with the NMAAHC illuminates how the mission of the museum is always already in turmoil with competing symbols and logics, and perhaps, these conditions create the opportunity for a memory based in affect to rise alongside a 'truthful' history.

## Notes

1 After numerous proposals dating back to 1970 to establish a national museum of African American history and culture, the NMAAHC was established by an Act of Congress on December 16, 2003. Thirteen years later, the museum opened to the public on September 24, 2016.

2 The first time that Leticia visited the museum was during the historic opening weekend and returned to the museum twice with her family when they were in Washington DC to visit. Jordan's first time was at the *Black Panther* screening, but has visited the museum twice with Leticia after their initial visit.

3 For more on this particular discussion, please see Robert A. Saunders (2019), '(Profitable) Imaginaires of Black Power: The Popular and Political Geographies of Black Panther'.

4 We understand the ideas of 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' to be problematic as they often are in services of imperialism, colonialism, and empire. To produce nationalist narratives is to promote a superiority over colonized communities and to advance a patriotism means to perform complicity under these projects. For more nuanced articulations of nationalism and patriotism in American contexts, see: Karen Shimakawa (2003) *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Gretchen Murphy (2010) *Shadowing the White Man's Burden: U.S. Imperialism and the Problem of the Color Line*; and Riché Richardson (2021) *Emancipation's Daughters: Reimagining Black Femininity and the National Body*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

5 For more information regarding Black theatre history in Washington, D.C., see Briana Thomas (2021) *Black Broadway in Washington D.C.*, Arcadia: Arcadia Publishing as well as the transmedia, digital humanities project, *Black Broadway on U*, curated by Shellée M. Haynesworth, which is accessed here: https://blackbroadwayonu.com/.

6 Though this exhibition is titled 'Slavery and Freedom', we would like to note that the exhibit encompasses historical and temporal context that is pertinent to understanding how slavery came to exist in the United States. US chattel slavery 'officially' began in 1619; however, the Slavery and Freedom exhibit focuses on colonial America and establishes the global network of the transatlantic slave trade.

7 For more on queer approaches to interrogating the progress narrative, see Jasbir Paur (2017) *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press and Dean Spade (2015) *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

8 Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy who was murdered in 1955 while on a trip to visit family in Mississippi after he was accused of whistling at a white woman.

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# 2

# THEATRICALITY & SPECTACLE

## The Museum as Object

*Bryce Lease*

Before visiting the House of Terror, I spent a few months while residing in Budapest walking past the museum, feeling its chilly aura. The ominously shuttered windows and awning placed at the top of the building with the two large cut-outs of the eponymous word 'terror' that cast shadows on its own façade and the pedestrian pavement beneath distinguishes it from the other imposing and elegant edifices on the impressive Andrássy Boulevard in central Pest, which was modelled on Paris' Champs Élysées. This offers the impression that the building still holds the same performative register it had generated under fascist (1944–1945) and communist regimes (1949–1989) of the twentieth century when it housed the secret police of these political systems. This is signposted as an 'evil' place, a haunted house of horrors, a building that invites you to cross the street to avoid its encompassing aura. Although the entrance to the museum is marked by two memorials of equivalent size that signify the Hungarian fascist party, the Arrow Cross, and the hammer and sickle of Soviet-backed communist governments, the first document the visitor encounters while standing in a long and claustrophobic queue for an entrance ticket is a video that plays on repeat. The black and white archival footage shows Mózes Mihály, a Hungarian professor specialising in the 1956 revolution, weeping dramatically while asking, 'One has to forgive, no?' While the visitor is offered no further information, Mihály's reference to teenagers with different or rebellious political affiliations suggests that this is an indictment of communist terror. This impression is then solidified in the first exhibitionary space that is dominated by an imposing Soviet tank in a pool of oil and a wall of portraits of ethnic Hungarians, with the singular word '*Áldozatok*' (victims) (Image 2.1 and 2.2).

This curatorial strategy of displaying portraits explicitly co-opts the display of Jews within the symbolic smokestack in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and

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**IMAGES 2.1 AND 2.2** The central hall of the House of Terror Museum (Budapest, Hungary) with portraits of 'victims' and a Soviet tank in a pool of oil, and the building as object. Photographs by Zoe Belton.

in Yad Vashem, thus creating a visible associative referent that is then denied to the commemoration of Hungarian Jews. The commitment to exposing home-grown Hungarian fascism and collusion with the Nazis is undermined by the establishing frame of the museum as one of anti-Communism. I, as the visitor, am hailed as a witness of atrocity committed through communism by communists.

I start with this museum as it opens up the primary arguments I will pursue in this chapter through a focus on three museums. Exploring the eschewal of fascism and the Holocaust in favour of communist terror in The House of Terror, Vilnius' Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, and the Warsaw Uprising Museum allows me to consider the fundamental question of theatricality these sites produce. While many critics of these museums simply point to theatricality as either offering curators the artistic means of achieving their ideological and political ambitions or as obscuring them through imitation or spectacle, I would like to suggest that, conversely, defining theatricality as a form of material practices and dynamic relations enables a more nuanced understanding of curatorial technique and the positioning of the spectator, while also offering new insights into the pervasive move towards the theatricalisation of memorial museum displays. The museums can be differentiated in their intention to retreat to nationalist frames and to inscribe anti-Communism into the essential practice of democracy and democratic action, while redirecting attention away from histories of fascism and anti-Semitism.

After beginning above ground, I walk downstairs to the museum's basements to demonstrate how attending to that which is under our feet reveals the

commemorative theatricality of these sites more explicitly than the singular focus on their displays that puts the theatrical on trial – a process that typically fails to differentiate between forms of media, scenography, script, immersion, and embodiment, all of which are uncritically absorbed under the rubric of theatricality. In sites of terror, it is precisely the *display* of authentic history that is persuasive. Basement prison cells are often simultaneously rooms dedicated to torture: either too low to stand up in, or too narrow to sit down, guides explain with humble solemnity how prisoners were deprived of food or light, or hung up in cripplingly painful positions or forced to lie in several inches of freezing cold water for hours at a time. Spectators peer into these darkly lit rooms only to physically recoil or flinch with horror. The fact that the rooms resemble theatre or horror-film sets does not undermine the authenticity of the narrative but rather redoubles it. The affective message of the theatrical space is: life under communism was so heinous that it bears no resemblance whatsoever to our own.

The binary of above and below ground is a crucial one for performances of veneration and the hierarchisation and symbolic spatial arrangement of memory in museum environments. In Budapest's House of Terror and Vilnius' Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, visitors descend into the basement to discover new or unknown knowledge. The forms of torture and imprisonment of dissidents that took place in the basements are already 'known'; it is the open (dirty) secret of the regime that guaranteed the functioning of the ideological system. In all of these museums, 'depth' is required and the physicalised trip downwards is key to experiential knowledge. While in Budapest and Vilnius, I want to argue, it is the depths humanity will go to fortify itself against difference and to defend a racist ideology, in the Warsaw Uprising Museum the basement contains the history of the Nazis in Warsaw and a replica of the sewage canals – which were themselves subterranean – recasting the canal as a venerated 'tomb' of historical knowledge. Through its cleansing, the visitor experiences history's veneration, both historical time and space are thus mythified. Like Lenin's mummy, this is death without decay, and the bleaching of these environments bespeaks their unacknowledged symbolic investment in honouring a version of history that reinforces the political and ideological aims of the museums' founders. Their theatricality, as I will argue, exposes such investments rather than obscures them.

### The House of Terror

First opened on 25 February 2002 in the months preceding a major election, the then Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, inaugurated the House of Terror with a speech that set the tone for its anti-Communist agenda that perfectly mirrored the Fidesz party's intention to produce an ultra-right-wing historical narrative of communism as an undifferentiated period of political terror committed against the Hungarian citizenry. As the museum director Maria Schmidt claims, in '60 Andràssy Boulevard, we found a site that, through its sinister historical experiences, was virtually

melded with the concept of terror' (cited in Jones 2011: 98). Between the years 1944 and 1956, the building housed offices for the secret police within both fascist and communist authoritarian political systems, as well as detentions cells where prisoners were detained and tortured. A video of Orbán's speech concludes the visit to the museum, suggesting both narrative closure and the end of Hungarian communist period and influence through the museum's establishment. This structure supports Zsolt K. Horváth's analysis of the museum's teleological function, the main aim of which is 'the affirmation and confirmation of a political identity' (2008: 270).

Amy Sodaro has argued that while history museums aim to 'impart knowledge about the past', memorial museums are designed to 'make visitors feel that they have had a personal experience of the past that will shape their present moral sensibility' (2018: 25). The curators of the House of Terror were indeed invested in affect as the primary mode of historical pedagogy, and they explicitly intended to create a museum that defied the conventions and curatorial strategies of many history museums, which rely too heavily on text and make too little use of 'spectacle' that often results in boring displays that fail to ignite the interest or curiosity of younger generations who did not live through the exhibited historical periods.[1] Scenographer Attila F. Kovács, a neo avant-garde theatre maker in the 1980s, was employed to design the permanent exhibition in collaboration with constructivist architects László Rajk and Gábor Bachmann. As I will show, the museum (i) establishes its authenticity on the historicity of the building and its use by both fascist and communist authorities, (ii) attempts to reproduce the outdated and problematic aims of ethnography museums to represent cultures in their totality, and (iii) employs both theatrical spectacle *and* spectatorial reception into the working aims of reproducing an anthropological frame that has been widely discredited.

Péter Apor couched one of his primary criticisms against this museum in relation to the curatorial choice not to establish any material evidence; objects on display can 'equally be original, found, facsimile, or fictive scenery' (2014: 329). This argument implies that a larger collection of objects would be able to represent these histories with less theatrical displays that allow for a seemingly self-identical instructional presence. I want to suggest a different but fundamental problem. Apor's argument goes in two different directions. On the one hand, he claims that the 'innovative audiovisual technology and the abundance of spectacle simply conceal that virtually there are no objects in the exhibition area of the House of Terror' (ibid.: 341). However, Apor suggests precisely the opposite problem when making a comparison between the Budapest museum and the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution in Mussolini's Italy: the 'overwhelming abundance of objects hindered the audience from appropriately assessing the historical events displayed in the exhibition' (ibid.). So, it is not the number of objects – too *few* or too *many* – that undergirds the argumentation about objects and museum display. The objects the House of Terror has collected are already mobilised to tell the decided-upon narrative and it is unlikely that further objects would undo these ideological

ambitions. Indeed, the curators 'considered their exhibition to be the critique of historical knowledge based on objects' (ibid.: 331). In some part, this is due to their perception that the history they wish to communicate is poor in material evidence, but it is more importantly connected to their interest in collective memory over historical narrative. Apor is highly sceptical of the co-option of the epistemological claims of memory discourses in museums such as the House of Terror, voicing his concern that the performed display of 'social remembering' in the museum offers memory as equal in authenticity to historical interpretation. Such curatorial acts of remembering not only justify their ideological aims but also make it easy for the past to entirely disappear within the museum's walls.

While I value Apor's conclusion, I also think this argument is in danger of reinforcing a reductive binary of history as text and memory as visual index – only in this way is it possible to neatly separate spectacle from evidence. One only needs to look at law courts to be reminded that evidence can be presented in spectacular form, and it is a standard practice for museums to elevate objects *as evidence* through their exhibitionary display. To pit historical interpretation against visual narrative already implicitly returns us to history as objective science and not as narrative (historiography), while also eschewing the materiality of text itself in museum display – that is, historical interpretation *as text* is also a crucial element of visual narrative. From my perspective, it is not that memory 'break[s] through the concealments of the visible towards the invisible' (Apor 2014: 339), as the curators intend, which would position the museum as a stage; rather, I want to suggest that the 'authentic' object is *the museum itself*. The aims of commemoration are then divorced from knowledge and connected to an experience of terror. There may indeed be 'nothing to remember' here and only the visualisation of a political message, but how can we understand this in relation to theatricality as a medium?

Apor highlights the curators' associations of the museum with the theatre, which is described as 'theatre-like': 'a theatre where the overall visual design and the consequent emotional reactions are believed to guarantee the authenticity of the experience of the past irrespective of the authenticity of individual objects' (2014: 338). This is a highly fertile ground to explore further – the suggestion that 'theatre' might guarantee authenticity. Rather than follow Apor here in his conflation of spectacle and memory as the source of the occlusion of the historical record, I would like to change the focus of what is being authenticated. While I agree that memory offers a different inroad to the past than historical interpretation, we should not lose sight of objects in the curatorial strategies that employ spectacle. When visiting a site of terror, audiences tend to desire a particular emotional experience, a desire which can either be validated or disappointed in their experience of the space. The most fundamental change we see in this museum is the very notion of the museum object – while an object is typically embedded in a particular museal frame, the House of Terror's object is inverted. The building *as object* is framed from within, and it is precisely such an inversion that is theatrical.

The museum brochure advertised 60 Andrássy Boulevard as a 'sculpture of terror' in its establishment as a public memorial. In other words, it is not that this is a 'theatre-like' institution in which objects and narratives are staged like a play, but rather that the curators have produced this space as a legitimation of visitors' desire to experience the ultimate object, that is, a fascination with the building itself as a site of evil that is satisfied through affective intensification.

Theatrical displays could actually have afforded the kind of distance between the site and the production of historical knowledge Apor and I both value if this were not the case. Indeed, theatre has the ability to produce such critical distance between audience and stage, but the visitor is not offered any such positionality either spatially or conceptually. The problem then is not theatricality, and 'spectacle' need not be wholly condemned in the historical museum; rather, the instrumentalisation of spectacle towards political ends in this museum actively erases the distance between audience and stage.

At the conclusion of the visit, one has to take a lift that moves deliberately slowly to the bottom of the building. The creeping passage of the lift produces queues and crowd jams in a space devoted to the display of religious intolerance and martyrdom, a section of the museum that visitors might otherwise hurry through. This imposed wait generated a split feeling of dread and eager anticipation about the basement itself. The experience is not unlike waiting in a long queue for a roller-coaster ride, which simultaneously produces pleasure and physical anxiety – the aim of such a wait is to intensify the amusement, delight, and shock of the experience. Once inside the lift, a former attendant at executions gives testimony on a flat screen, describing an encounter that apparently occurred within the basement. The testimony starts abruptly behind the visitor, which compelled me to turn uncomfortably in a crowded lift and watch over my shoulder. This strategy couples emotional distress with physical discomfort. I had the impression that the witness was a cleaner – he describes an execution and his superiors ordering him to mop up blood – but the witness' own position within this narrative and his potential culpability is not addressed. Indeed, his tone of voice and the condemnation of the violence of the execution in his testimony position him in the difficult position of the bystander, the one who sees but does not bear responsibility for a witnessed event. This position is at odds with his work, to clean up the after the execution is carried out. What is also confusing is that executions were in fact *not* carried out in this building – though displays of gallows in the 'execution room' give the clear impression that they were – so this testimony is not directly connected to the site despite the explicit curatorial associative strategy. This geographical displacement functions as a broader erasure of the historical record. The site does not offer execution, which is crucial to the decided-upon narrative, so execution is staged spatially (the gallows, the execution room) and historically (testimony).

Within the basement, testimony itself is then switched off. While there is the presence of black telephones embedded in the walls, unlike in the upstairs galleries

the dial has been removed that allows visitors to listen to first-hand accounts. The imposition of silence in this space has a twofold effect: on the one hand, silence is shared by visitors, it is the appropriate response to the reconstructed scenography of terror, and on the other, it condenses history in a mode that refutes contestation or questioning. The placement of the historically inaccurate gallows in one of the basement rooms further requires silence as the respectful gesture of mourning and commemoration. While the basement is intended to stand *as the witness*, it has in fact been reconstructed rather than unearthed, given the fact that the prison was removed after 1956.

In contrast to the basement, the only room in the entire building that the museum claims was not reconstructed is a prison cell on the first floor. There is no information offered to explain the sudden presence of the cell, which does not coherently adhere to the exhibition's narrative flow. The disruptive presence of the cell is reinforced by its clean walls and the display of instruments of torture on the wall. A soundtrack of dripping water is at odds with the sterile slickness of the display. Stumbling across a room that works beyond the narrative frame allows the visitor to regain the spatial grounding of the historical site. This cell *should* be in the basement, but it is clumsily and confusingly shoved between a narrative display on deportations and the betrayal of the Hungarian peasantry by communist governments. Its inability to tell the 'right' story spatially counteracts the museum's tendencies to aestheticise violence and momentarily breaks the exhibitionary reliance on kitsch. For this reason, I was genuinely horrified when coming upon it. The cell forsakes the aesthetic codes set out by the museum: prison cells are meant to be grimy, darkly lit, mouldy, grey, and faded, while this is brightly lit, freshly painted, and clean. The potential evocation of kink or sexual violence for one's own pleasure in the clean lines and displays of black instruments does not contradict the forms of (creative) violence meted out on prisoners, but offers a further point of historical understanding: interrogators took (or might have taken) pleasure in the violence they inflicted. Conjoining horror and pleasure offers a much starker and more shocking picture of surveillance, power, control, and terror, and one which opens out the emotional stakes of suffering depicted elsewhere. In other words, this (misplaced) 'unreconstructed' room offers an affective understanding of violence on the side of the perpetrator in a space in which affect is only attributed to the victim. It also then breaks an unintentional aesthetic relation established between suffering and kitsch. The result is highly theatrical, but in a mode that contrasts the display of suffering as gloomy or poignant in the basement. The pleasure of violence is much more shocking and disturbing. What I find particularly critical here is how this inversion has the potential to confront the visitor with their own potential pleasure in the consumption of suffering and also to critique or critically reflect upon the mode in which suffering positively affirms their national, political, or ethnic identification through the theatrical space of the displays.

## The Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights

The Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in Lithuania's capital city of Vilnius was for many years called The Museum of Genocide Victims. It is located on the wide central Gedimino Prospektas, one of the city's main boulevards for shopping, cafés, and entertainment. This museum also demonstrates a profoundly one-sided version of history that is ultimately precedes and competes with Jewish suffering. The museum was established in 1992 by order of the Minister of Culture and Education and the President of the Lithuanian Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees, and as with Budapest's House of Terror, it is located within a former site of ideological terror, the past headquarters of secret police services such as the Gestapo, NKVD, and later the KGB. The building held 25,000 prisoners in the years between 1944 and 1953. While this history entails the brutal repression of society and culture and of political resistance, neither the Nazis nor the USSR imposed a genocide on ethnic Lithuanians; conversely, nearly the entire Jewish population in Lithuania was exterminated during the Holocaust with the substantial and well-documented cooperation of ethnic Lithuanian auxiliaries.

Before entering the museum, it is made evident by a plaque outside the entrance that the Lithuanian 'freedom fighter' equates to resistance against the Soviet occupiers rather than Nazi Germany. The complicity of broad Lithuanian society with Nazi occupiers is never detailed, described, or explained; such complicity is indeed erased through the very figure of the anti-Soviet 'freedom fighter'. While western democratic countries did not come to the aid of Lithuania against Soviet invasions, there is no 'liberation' story offered for the conclusion of the Second World War. Countering the dominant historical narrative, the museum then insists that 1945 did not see the end of the war, but its continuation through Soviet occupation. The museum then stages the Soviet occupation of Lithuania as a genocidal event. For this reason, the original name of the museum was a misnomer – this is *not* the story of genocide, but rather one of an occupation that ruthlessly punished dissidents through deportation, exclusion, or murder. While the brutal repression of society and culture is juxtaposed with the valorisation of political resistance, the only actual historical occurrence of genocide – Hitler's Final Solution – is relegated to a single room in the basement. Paradoxically then, it is genocide itself that is evacuated from a museum dedicated to the victims of genocide.

Genocide loses its indexical quality and functions as a metaphor for suffering and death. In this regard, a number of signs throughout the museum point the visitor towards instances of competitive or equivalent suffering, which are frequently determined through statistical evidence. In 1940–1941, during the first Soviet occupation, a sign explains that the 'Lithuanians suffered the most', making up 68.1% of victims. In another room, visitors are informed that during this same occupation 'people suffered the most from deportations', and in the labour camps to which they were exiled 'children suffered as much as the adults'. Clearly missing in the represented hierarchy of suffering are Jews, who are excluded wholesale from the

designation 'Lithuanian'. Two further examples demonstrate this exclusion. First, in the room dedicated to the 1940–1941 Soviet occupation, there is a small, elusive sign that requires the visitor to squat down in order to discern its diminutive text, which offers directions to the Holocaust exhibition should the visitor wish to learn more about the experiences of Lithuanian Jews.

This exhibition is less than a kilometre away but is housed in a much smaller and less publicly visible building, the 'Green House', named for its painted wooden walls, which unlike this museum is not an originary site of terror or genocide. Although the current site was the headquarters of the Gestapo and Sonderkommando, the Holocaust exhibition is indicated as the appropriate space to learn about the Nazi occupation between 1941 and 1944. This spatial displacement of Nazi terror and Jewish extermination represents a constitutive inability to co-represent Lithuanian and Jewish suffering and I would argue this is the fundamental thrust of the underlying logic of the museum's display strategies and ideological commitments. The history of the German occupation is spatially distanced so as not to contaminate or dilute the history of the suffering of ethnic Lithuanians.

Descending down the stairs, one passes out of the constructed narrative environment of the upper floors to the 'authentic' prison that offers its own affective encounters. Visitors are invited to experience the space through an empathetic approximation of the ethnic Lithuanian prosecuted by communist authorities. In the room in which prisoners were photographed and fingerprints were taken there are mug shots displayed. These are exclusively of ethnic Lithuanian prisoners. The atmosphere of the basement is highly visceral. There is very little to no natural light, the lack of heating guarantees the underground prison remains (authentically) cold and there is a sharp stench of dampness and mould. Following the footsteps of a prisoner, the visitor first encounters two narrow, shallow cells, where inmates were detained before interrogations and strip searches. The doors to these are left open, inviting visitors to sit down in the cramped space and imagine what it would mean to wait, threatened with an uncertain future. In my multiple visits, I have witnessed museumgoers gasp and shake their heads upon entering this space. Some people take out handkerchiefs and cover their mouths, either to disguise their horror or as a protection against the invasive smell, or both. While the smell permeates the entirety of the basement, the strongest scent resonates from the bags of shredded files that the KGB attempted to destroy between 1988 and 1991 (between perestroika and the dissolution of the USSR) to conceal their activities. These unreadable files generate a sensory overlap between the evidence of the cruelty, criminality, and corruption of the Soviet regime and its material decay, both of which produce a feeling of disgust in the visitor. The effort to conceal is also emphasised on the walls. In one room, a palimpsest of 18 layers of paint is revealed under the poor artificial light with a sign explaining that the prison was frequently repainted to cover over former prisoners' graffiti.

Moving along the corridor, visitors are required to lean down to look into the hole in the substantial cell doors through which food or messages were passed

to prisoners. The appearance of a mirror in one cell door slot offers an affective encounter that is highly ambiguous. Confronted by one's own face – in lieu of the anticipated view of the cell – places the visitor in a spontaneously self-reflexive position. In line with the prevailing objective of the museum to offer both spatial and temporal proximity between the visitor and the ethnic Lithuanian martyr, the alleged genocidal victim, presumably the intention of the curators here is to allow the spectator to imaginatively locate themselves within the cell, to envisage the prison guard seeing the spectator looking out from within. This then collides the theatrical setting of the basement with the theatricality of the spectatorial position. While my first impression coincided with this projected reaction – I did indeed see myself as the victim of terror – after a short interval, I realised that the mirror was in fact placed to position me as a perpetrator: as the guard, the interrogator, or the agent of the State. Standing on the same side of the cell door as the Gestapo, the NKVD or the KGB officer, I was what the prisoner saw when looking out from the cell. The sudden shock of the encounter was signalled by this dual positioning that I only fully comprehended on later reflection (Image 2.3).

The position of perpetrator is again offered to visitors within the 'eavesdropping room' that exhibits techniques of KGB surveillance. In this space, one encounters a series of black and white monitors that display fellow visitors in the museum's galleries. This is 'live' surveillance at work. Inviting museumgoers to survey each other without mutual awareness of the encounter and without their consent, the ethical encounter forecloses dialogism or exchange in favour of individualised affect. In the eavesdropping room – a name that already reinterprets surveillance in terms

**IMAGE 2.3** Visitors are confronted by a mirror when peering into a cell in the basement of the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights. Photograph by Naubertas Jasinskas.

that are harmless or non-threatening – taking on the role of the perpetrator is a ludic experience, which frequently causes visitors to laugh with delight or surprise. The museum's offer of the perpetrator's subject position is problematic for several reasons. While, on the one hand, it articulates the institution's own unconscious or repressed anxieties about victimhood in relation to widespread anti-Semitism and culpability in Jewish extermination, it also resorts to affect in order to rhetorically energise and experientially reinforce its claims to ethnic Lithuanian suffering and martyrdom. The ruse in both the Budapest and Vilnius examples is predicated on an *affective encounter* that obscures rather than fortifies the visitor's critical engagement with the display's underlying intent.

Sophie Nield prompts a consideration of theatrical space beyond the confines of the mimetic, the imitative, or the 'not-real', all of which point towards a 'political impotence' and instead conceives of the theatrical as a set of material practices conditioned through 'presence, participation, rhetoric and representation (2014: 550, 555). This undermines and reroutes a long-established mode of differentiating the performative (discursive, iterative, transformational) as *doing* and the theatrical as simply *showing* (ibid.: 552). If the theatrical has its own materiality, she argues, then practices that are symbolic or representational are nevertheless real and affective. The simple delivery of a message from a stage to an audience suggests display and imitation as mere spectacle, 'not a real politics at all'.

In these museum spaces, we see how the representational indices of the displays are indeed constructed as stage sets and that we are not only spectators but also actors briefly assigned roles (perpetrator, victim, implicated subject). Not only is a theatrical space one in which things are 'seen to be done', they are also conditioning the actions, the affects, the gaze, and the experience of the subject. This does not neglect the 'doubling' involved through theatricality – for example, in Vilnius, I look into the mirror of the cell and I see myself in a way I do not recognise, while I am, at the same time, the seeing subject alienated by my own image and act. This is what Nield calls 'theatricalised dislocation', which is 'expressed through the doubling of the self; the awareness of the self somehow spectated, even if only by its own self' (ibid.: 555). In other words, this doubling should not be dematerialised. Theatricality then is the experience of being available to be seen and not merely the dispersed relationship between performer and spectator. It is in this way that the 'theatrical space, once "produced", can coerce through its existence' (ibid.: 554) as a material set of practices and not simply as an imitation. This helps to foreground the way in which we need to invert these museums *as their own objects* – they produce theatrical space and thus implicate us in the production of their own ideological aims.

## The Warsaw Uprising Museum

Equally problematic is the subterranean space and the positioning of the Nazi and Communist sections of the Warsaw Uprising Museum exhibition. The museum was opened on a day of commemoration, signalling that the declining *milieux de*

*mémoire* now required a supplementary site. Is this museum dedicated to a legitimating history or a history of mourning? Processes and duties of mourning are of course tied to legitimation. The museum clearly intends to operate as a cohesive force for a national memory community – as a tribute to those who fought and died for an autonomous, liberated Poland and its capital city – which requires the positive self-image of the partisans who fought in the Warsaw Uprising. Made up of over 1,000 exhibits and 1,500 images and films, the permanent exhibition illustrates the horrors of occupation, the struggles before and during the uprising and its aftermath, and the fate of insurgents in the Polish People's Republic (PRL). The communist era is unreservedly represented as a time of terror that both undermines and demoralises the work of the partisans in the uprising against their fascist occupiers. The very material existence of the museum, which is housed in a former trams power station, exerts both the legitimacy and authority of the proposed historical narrative that is extended to the site of the Wola District of Warsaw, to which it might not otherwise be accorded.

Unlike the House of Terror in Budapest or the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in Vilnius, this museum is not located in a former site of terror, such as the headquarters of the Gestapo, KGB, or other secret police services. In sites of terror, it is precisely the unveiling of authentic history that is persuasive. The Warsaw Uprising Museum is equally invested in the anti-Communist politics of display that at times minimises Nazi atrocities to focus visitor's attention and emotional investment in Soviet Russia. From its conception, the museum has been embroiled in a tense power play between Polish anti- and post-Communists. The latter group, who participated in and benefited from the communist regime, prefers to place emphasis on the political implications and reverberations of the Solidarity movement, which they associate with the formal conclusion of communism and the realisation of liberal democracy. Anti-Communists, who were victimised under communism and see its continued legacies in the present, see the Solidarity Movement as betrayed and defeated. For this reason, anti-Communists supported the museum as a marker of the heroic efforts of 1944 that could be 'written into a longer-term national narrative of resistance to occupation and the fight for independent statehood' (Mark 2010: 16). Although Home Army insurgents were defeated by the Germans, there was at least a clear and heroic effort that could be commemorated and celebrated without the messy compromises with occupiers that were later associated with Solidarity. The process of history-making in the PRL is framed as always being a cipher for an explicit ideological agenda, while in contrast, the anti-Communist museum is both a pedagogic and salutary exposure of suppressed, suspended, or denied truth. The museum then implicitly purports to reconstruct 'what really happened', rather than to stake a moral claim 'behind the scenes' in the mode of communist manipulation.

The Warsaw Uprising Museum's essentialist impulses with regard to ethnic identity and its key legitimating claim to historical truth are not openly or explicitly disclosed. The fact that the museum is evocatively contiguous with an anti-Communist

agenda – it performs as a social remedy to the evils of the communist period – may not immediately strike the uninformed visitor. Confronted with the aftermath of the uprising and the persecution of its leaders by Soviet forces may easily produce an impression that the Warsaw Uprising was against Soviet communists rather than German fascists, and that the Polish insurgents were in fact successful in their campaign rather than overwhelmed and defeated. The resignification of history in the exhibition is experiential rather than factually erroneous, which means it can be explicitly denied by the museum's organisers. This is a crucial strategy of constructed memory environments. Visitors can be blamed for leaving a museum with the wrong impression if the curators can point to the accuracy of the displayed facts, although the environment has lucidly (if implicitly) constructed an alternative narrative. This conflict between facts and experience should not be seen as an exception to the experiential museum but one of its potential constitutive and distinguishing features or characteristics. While theatricality is often bemoaned as a dubious or false medium, the desire to employ theatrically immersive environments can actually disguise the aim of being purposefully misrepresentative. Such troubling ambiguities are easily disavowed by historians and curators.

Upon entering the permanent exhibition, the visitor is confronted by mood-establishing music, the reverberant thud of a heartbeat, reminiscent of a thriller or horror-film soundtrack. The visitor then circulates through the space, exiting at the point of entrance, returning to the sound of the heartbeat. History here, I would suggest, follows the logic of myth. This circulation – which is mirrored in a 3D film shown within the museum that gives spectators an affectively intense experience of an airplane's circulatory aerial passage around destroyed Warsaw at the conclusion of the Uprising – is not concerned with dialectic, but is tightly proscribed and bounded. The circle closes in on itself. This is the very dramaturgical movement of melancholic attachment, which always stages its own loss. In the museum's performance of melancholic attachment to traditions of patriotism linked to victimisation, there is an attempt at interpolation. The problem with this museum is not theatricality but rather the production of 'melancholic commemoration', which is always established through circulation rather than exchange and is in opposition to forms of commemoration that are oriented towards and foster historical critique and consciousness.

While the Soviet refusal to help in the uprising and their subsequent occupation of Poland, Stalin's puppet government, and the fate of the Polish resistance in post-war communist Poland are all depicted in the main rooms of the core exhibition, the horrors of the German occupation and the atrocities committed by the Nazis and their collaborators during the uprising are singled out in an underground room that I entirely missed on two separate visits to the museum and only discovered when speaking to a Polish guide. This basement then offers the base point of a hierarchy of suffering and heroism (which are themselves co-organised on the superterraneous floors) that places the Nazis beneath the Soviets. Behind a heavy black

velvet curtain, the visitor may access the basement, which contains the history of the Nazis in Warsaw and a replica of the sewage canals, which were themselves subterranean, that Polish partisans used to move between different districts of the city during the Uprising. It is surprising to encounter the reconstructed canal in the basement of the museum given that another reconstruction already exists on the first floor, replete with signage familiar from Andrzej Wajda's epic film *Kanał* (1957) that documents the partisans' usage of the sewage systems in the Uprising. Although the canal in the basement lacks such historical accessories, it requires a differently embodied experience. The tunnels are smaller, more narrow and claustrophobic, requiring the visitor to bend down. This begs a question of the 'direct' experience of history this promises the museum visitor. What is missing from both experiences of the canal (in the basement and on the first floor) is of course the sewage itself that necessitates the subterranean caverns. In this way, the reconstructed canals are what I would call a 'bleached' experience of history that is suggestive of the interactive display in the Washington DC Holocaust Memorial Museum of a railcar that transported Jews to concentration camps. Visitors are permitted to step inside the freight car to envisage the terrifying claustrophobia of sharing the space (8 metres) when crammed with people. What is 'bleached' from this immersive experience includes, for example, physical contact between tightly compressed bodies, smells and tastes, the movement of the train, the blend of darkness and light, the freezing cold and the suffocating heat, crippling thirst and hunger, the presence of human excrement and urine, intense and persistent fear and anxiety, and the real threat and presence of death. This is supplemented by the visitor's agency of choosing to freely enter or exit the railcar.

I choose to end on the Uprising Museum's replicated canals precisely because it is the absence of shit – both its material and olfactory presence – that recasts the canal as a venerated 'tomb' of historical knowledge. Through its cleansing – comparable to the pristine torture utensils gleaming on the wall in the House of Terror – the visitor experiences history's veneration, both historical time and space are thus mythified. Although such embodied strategies in the history museums I have analysed in this chapter may offer an experience of affective intensification as a pedagogical collision between knowing and understanding, the bleaching of environments bespeaks an unacknowledged symbolic investment in honouring particularised history that is anything but *shared*.

It is of course always the case that museums reveal more than their curators intend. I am not suggesting that these commemorative spaces are melancholic because they are explicitly spaces of sadness, but, on the contrary, their production of melancholy is tied to their failure to generate acts of mourning that encourage the expansion of alliances. The attachment to these histories demonstrates their ongoing significance for current regimes of power, particularly with Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland, and they function as arbiters of nationalist authority. Invested in first invoking hierarchies of suffering that place victims of communism

(literally) above those of fascism reinforces their symbolic investment in communism as the establishment of their own regimes. To mourn communism and to allow it to enter the past would therefore undermine and destabilise the very investments that make current identity politics and social arrangements possible. To critique these museums as overly theatrical, as overblown spectacle, is to misinterpret both their intent and affect.

These three museums are indeed theatrical, but their theatricality is a set of material practices that either expand or narrow our position and experience and, thereby, our concerns with history; and for this reason, it is precisely by redirecting visitor experience through an understanding of self-reflective theatricality that their political and affective investments are revealed. Theatricality thus exposes rather than obscures our understanding of these museums as their own objects.

## Note

1 For a full description of the Hungarian curatorial team's aims and strategies, see Péter Apor (2014).

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# 3

# CURATING THE EXPERIENTIAL

## The Imperial War Museum's Revised Holocaust Galleries

*James Bulgin in conversation with Bryce Lease*

The Holocaust Exhibition first opened at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in June 2000. While many Holocaust survivors visited the museum in this period, the majority of visitors today do not have direct, lived memory of the Holocaust. The IWM decided to change the curation of the exhibition in light of new research on Holocaust histories and global developments in their curation. After several years of preparation, the new Holocaust Galleries opened in November 2021 under the curation of James Bulgin. In this interview, Bulgin discusses the dynamic between the Holocaust and Second World War Galleries in the museum, the renewed focus on landscape and ecology, the approach to experiential design and 'contemporaneity' as an interpretive strategy, and concerns over theatricality and immersion that shape his approach to curation.

*BL:* The Imperial War Museum (IWM) will become the first museum in the world to house dedicated Second World War Galleries and Holocaust Galleries under the same roof. Why do you think this is so rare?

*JB:* To be clear, there are museums that have both subjects within a single Galleries, but the idea of separating them out into two discrete but interrelated purpose-built galleries is original. Within the previous iteration of the IWM, there were Second World War and Holocaust Galleries, but they were completely independent projects and there was no attempt to explicitly relate them to one another. The design of the new Holocaust Galleries was part of a much broader master plan within the organisation, which started with the First World War. The Second World War and the Holocaust followed as phase two of the master plan, and the Cold War and contemporary forms of conflict will come next at some point. Our Galleries were very much

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informed by the work of David Cesarani. Just as he was advocating for a recontextualisation of the Holocaust as a contingent history, the museum was also beginning to think in this direction. When I was first employed in 2016, they were thinking about simply making an edit to the original exhibition, but this plan changed quickly. When we sent the projects out to tender, exhibition designers were invited to pitch either for both galleries or for one of them. A few did pitch for both, and part of the tender process was to ask designers to consider the relationship between the two galleries. Designers came up with various different suggestions on how that was to be achieved. This is a practical factor that you might not consider at the start: if you ask a design agency to consider the connection between the Second World War and Holocaust Galleries and they are pitching for both galleries, then that is an organic part of their holistic design. However, if they are only designing one of the galleries, then one set of designers has to modify the original concept to respond to the other galleries – that is, the ones which are not their own. It might sound obvious, but actually the full extent of what it entails is pretty challenging to deal with. The initial connection between the galleries was meant to be a box, a cinemaette, that tips through the floor. From the perspective of the Holocaust Galleries, which is above, the audience would look down to see footage of the liberation of the camps. Visitors to the Second World War Galleries would look up above them to see the same footage, but from an entirely different perspective. We held onto this idea, which had originated from Casson Mann, who designed the Holocaust Galleries. However, as the Second World War Galleries developed it became clear the footage did not align with their design and they were being forced to incorporate something which really didn't work for them.

Other ideas also had to be abandoned along the way. For example, there was going to be a shared opening for the galleries. The Holocaust Galleries open with a media piece we call 'The Presence of Absence', which is composed entirely from contemporary footage of European landscapes that bear the traces of this history in some capacity. Initially, this was intended to go straight through a slot in the floor as part of a shared single screen so visitors to both galleries would encounter the same artwork, thus speaking to the absences evoked by both these histories. However, it was forcing the hand of the Second World War curatorial team to implement this object which we had commissioned – and stylistically, it was attuned to our whole approach in a way that it wasn't to theirs'. In the end, it was not possible structurally to include this piece. Indeed, trying to identify moments of a shared physical relationship between the galleries remained tricky for a number of reasons.

In the final curatorial plan, the connecting object is a V-1 flying bomb, also known as a doodlebug, that points downwards into a void between both galleries. Visitors in the Holocaust Galleries encounter the V-1 in a space dedicated to slave labour and the subcamp system, while visitors to the Second World War Galleries look up and see the bomb looming above them. The

object functions as what I call an 'interpretive lightning rod'. From the perspective of the Holocaust, the V-1 is about the construction of these bombs within the camp system, while from the Second World War perspective it is about the experience of being bombed – and is also a way of them introducing the Holocaust into their narrative. The object then also functions as a helpful provocation for visitors who feel that British history has little to do with the Holocaust. The doodle bug, so central to the British experience of the war, is also in part a product of the Holocaust. The idea actually emerged during a day-long session with both sets of designers and all of the curators in a room together, so it was something that was mutually agreed on and didn't come from one set of galleries specifically (Image 3.1).

In terms of curation, it did raise an issue of interpretation. We did not want to hang this doodlebug from the ceiling, which would give the impression that the object 'belonged' to one of the galleries rather than to both. As a result, we had to come up with a complex system to mount the V-1 bomb and embed it within the floor between the galleries. This prompted numerous conversations about the angle of the object and the mode in which it was encountered from these different perspectives. Having collaborated with the curators for the Second World War Galleries, I have realised that the narrative they have to tell is very different from the one we need to tell. The Holocaust is a vast narrative, but they have to try to explain how the war happened as a global conflict. The museum moved away from just narrating

**IMAGE 3.1** A V-1 flying bomb, also known as a doodlebug, that points downwards into a void between the Holocaust and Second World War Galleries in the Imperial War Museum. Copyright Imperial War Museum.

the British and Commonwealth experience of the war in the development of the new Second World Galleries. As soon as you start to explain the Eastern Front and the Pacific, you are dealing with vast narratives of history involving millions and millions of people. Having an object that links the galleries means that you need to find a coherent connection point between the two narratives. In the Holocaust Galleries, you do not come to the outbreak of the war until you are 40% of the way through the exhibition, while the war begins in the first room of the Second World War Galleries. As they have evolved, the galleries are very different in terms of interpretive principles, aesthetics, language, design, film, and mood.

*BL:* Could you tell us more about 'The Presence of Absence', the media piece in the opening room of the Holocaust Galleries?

*JB:* The museum's media team spent cumulatively about two to three months in Europe filming. They worked from a brief I produced, which was about identifying traces of Holocaust histories in a myriad of forms. We identified a range of locations that we wanted them to capture before their departure, but there was flexibility for them to be responsive once they were there. They did an amazing job and spent a lot of time liaising with local experts that they met on the ground and local information that wasn't findable through pre-visit research. The one rule, from my point of view, was that they could not film anything from an angle that could not have been seen by a Jewish person in this historical context. For example, there are no shots from the guard room in the death gate at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and there is no use of drones, and no shots from outside the fence of a camp. And at no point does anything we film adopt the subject position of anyone in that context. It was not about taking the same steps as a historical subject, 'walking in their shoes'. It was about the position from which it is considered, not about the specificity of the individual subject. We did not want to include the perpetrator perspective. From the outset, we wanted to be clear about denying the centrality of the perpetrator perspective.

In fact, when we sent out the tenders for the exhibition, I asked designers to suggest what they would do with the train carriage we have, which is the type used for transportations. I wanted to use this as a test. We only have half of a carriage, and about 60–70% of designers suggested that they would attempt to fill the object out with sound and lighting effects to allow visitors to feel they were retaking the steps of those who were transported in the trains. This is exactly what we did not want, so it was helpful to learn very quickly the perspective from which the designer was approaching the broader project. Casson Mann, the company which was ultimately appointed, absolutely understood what we were looking to do – and more importantly shared the same intention and instincts.

'The Presence of Absence' was edited together by a company called Squint/Opera, who have made about 75% of our AV design. The footage itself came from our in-team led by a brilliant man called Damon Cleary. On

the whole, it cites pre-war life and not sites of persecution. For example, they film the shadow on doorways where a mezuzah used to be, an abandoned synagogue in Orla, or the Hackescher Hof in Berlin that had been a Jewish department store. We have had many conversations about whether we should caption the film. I resisted this because I wanted visitors to encounter it as an arresting visual object, suggesting an 'in-our-worldness', without explicit explanation of the sites. I didn't want it to be reduced to having an actively deterministic interpretive function. Watching the footage, you see this massively disparate range of landscapes, so it intuitively communicates the enormous scale of this history with an immediacy that we had not anticipated. But you also have an intuitive sense of how embedded in the world these traces are and so by inference how embedded are the events and their legacy. I always liked the idea too that there is an implicit sense within the film that the landscapes captured exist in the temporally specific moment that they are filmed which is analogous too, to the interpretation. In the same way that as the years pass, the landscapes will evolve, so too will Holocaust historiography. In the end, we only captioned the film with the present-day name of the city and country where the footage was shot. The other part of the brief for the editing team was that it should not have any implicit sense that the piece is about memorialisation or reflectiveness because that turns into something that might be mawkish and is not what the piece was ever intended to do. The museum has a very active remit that it is not a memorial and we are very careful about avoiding any overt suggestions of memorialisation. I always think of the final episode of *Blackadder* and the way it moves from the battlefield of the First World War to a poppy field and birdsong, as what we wanted to avoid with this piece. Rather, 'The Presence of Absence' is a reminder that we walk amongst the traces of the world in which this occurred and that – in very simple and direct ways – this is our world too. You then walk directly into another room called 'Jewish Life', and the sound from this space is deliberately allowed to spill into the 'The Presence of Absence'. We have to consider how much we need to lean into this sound connection – it should feel like the sound arriving on a breeze – faint but discernible, there but only just. It is like when you work in the theatre, sometimes you have to actively do something in order to make it look like you haven't done something.

*BL:* How many rooms are in the new Galleries?

*JB:* It is deliberately worked around, so it is quite circuitous. There are 15 rooms. One of the challenges of the project is that the building already limits the way the space can be manipulated. Sometimes with the route becomes tight in ways that came seem suggestive, but are not necessarily a curatorial choice. Halfway through the design process, two large beams showed up, which had not been present in the architectural drawings. This also created a spatial

challenge. This is the difference between working with an existing building and a museum that is specifically created for an exhibition. Despite surveys, the building is constantly imposing conditions that you have to work around. In practical and more esoteric ways, it meant we had to find a way of establishing an ongoing dialogue with the building.

*BL:* The US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) uses a variety of curatorial strategies to increase audience empathy and identification. Did you consider adapting any of these curatorial strategies?

*JB:* As soon as you enter the lift in the USHMM, you start to wonder: what are you suggesting to me here and what are you insinuating this space is? It is such an active first intervention on the visitor journey. It has become something of an axiom amongst curatorial museum professionals to talk about the distinction between *experience* and the *experiential* – even if it necessarily framed it in that way explicitly. The IWM had two exhibitions that closed around ten years ago, called 'The Blitz Experience' and 'The Trench Experience' which curators squirm about now because of the claims that these exhibits made about providing an authentic experience of the past. The challenge is that visitors loved them and still ask about them. As a curator, it is hard because if this is something that visitors enjoy then this is something you need to try and respond to or work with rather than to simply dismiss. Coming at this project from an academic perspective, I was very concerned about qualifying or limiting any claim we were making within the Galleries about the extent to which the experiential encounter within them offered authentic experience of the past in any way. Indeed, it's something we wanted to counter, so we worked hard to deny that we were making a claim to authenticity of experience that we couldn't and shouldn't substantiate. That said, I am also interested in ideas of affect and I think the idea that museums do not create experiences at all is nonsense as well. Otherwise, why go to a museum? My focus, though, is on the experiential, not experiences. The key question is: how do you moderate those two things? This is not about an academic's abstract problem of making a claim to authenticity – for example, walking through the train car and claiming that this gives you a glimpse into the experience of those people who did that in a paradigmatically different historical context.

We are not denying the possibility of experiential encounters with history. The experiential should offer a visitor an opportunity to have agency in their interpretation of the exhibition in the space, but not to suggest they have ownership of the lived experience of historical subjects. Through 'The Presence of Absence' and a few other pieces in the Galleries, we are suggesting that we do *not* know and *cannot* know what historical subjects experienced, but there are still dimensions of their experience that are familiar to us. When you visit a site like Auschwitz, there are familiar elements – the feeling of

the breeze, the grass beneath your feet – but then you need to reconcile this with something that is so unfamiliar and the knowledge that the environment now is not what it was then. We wanted to think about how to allow for a fundamental gap to remain between the familiar and the unfamiliar, while forming a relationship between the two. In that tension, there is something really productive because you constantly want to resolve something which is irresolvable, but it is active and it remains active. Whereas if you make a claim from an *experience* then you close all of that off. An experience is a completely closed, limited, finished thing. The active tension, on the other hand, is where I think the *experiential* works.

*BL:* The USHMM attempted to bring together individual histories with broader historical narratives. Is this something you considered in the design?

*JB:* One of the central issues in a Holocaust Museum is how you resolve the relationship between the micro and the macro, because either one is a problem if it becomes overdetermined. If you only focus on volume that is problematic, but if you only focus on individuals, you lose sight of how massive the scale of this history is. We considered the strategy of following certain historical individuals through the exhibition very early on. I understand the instinct to do this, but it also seems like an answer to a problem that is taken at face value without sufficiently thinking through the additional problems it creates rather than solves. This is a problem for the whole museum sector. Sometimes, there is a tendency to think in very direct and literal terms and to take the assumed efficacy of this approach at face value.

As an example, if you ask academics how we are going to invite visitors to think about space, they will reply, 'Use a map!' Rather than thinking that is the end of the question, it is actually the starting point we need to move on from. If you ask how we might think about meaningfully positioning individuals within the narrative, the first answer is: 'Follow a person all the way through the exhibition'. Again, this is the starting point to the question, not the curatorial solution we land upon. I understand the instinct that leads towards the assumption that this is a productive approach, but I think that as you think about it more deeply, it is highly problematic. We have employed various strategies. These always end up being described as 'stories' and this is one of my bugbears. I hate the way museums use the word 'stories'. First of all, it seems really reductive to me. Second of all, I think that it ignores and elides some really important dimensions of the discrepancy between the lived human experience and the process of narrativisation. Galen Strawson (2004) writes about this really well in 'Against Narrativity', and I find his idea that hyper-narrativisation completely elides the infinite complexities of human experience really compelling. Particularly in this narrative, I find myself thinking that these are not 'stories'. I read stories to my children, but this is something

different – these are lives. I do not think of my life as a 'story' and if I did, it would be a problem because clearly it doesn't work as a story, which has structure, form, and resolution. Lived experience does not. What we tried to do is look at ways to engage with individual experience at various different moments, but to ensure that these retain a sense of fragmentation.

One of the central interpretive strategies we employed is something called 'contemporaneity'. The First World War Galleries used this as well. We only used objects or assets that are contemporaneous to the period. We do not use any postwar objects or postwar language. We do not use words like genocide or Holocaust in the Galleries because they are postwar ways of encoding these events linguistically and interpretively. If we meet an individual in the exhibition at a certain moment, we have tried to do something to express who what individual is or the specific set of circumstances they are in. This was part of a broader effort to take victims out of 'victimhood'. At an early meeting of the advisory board, Professor Tony Kushner said that one of the things that mattered most to him was to remind people that the chronologies of the people targeted are not the chronologies of the perpetrators. I know it seems like such an obvious point to make, but the way that Tony framed it was really helpful. When I first started on the project, I thought we should deny the hegemony of the perpetrator-determined narrative and try to reverse this interpretive position from how these events were related. Rather than approaching from the perspective of the Nazi arriving at the end of someone's garden path, let's try to see this from the perspective of the person in the kitchen seeing the perpetrator arrive from the other direction. But this is not actually how narrative functions. This might satisfy a very small audience, but it would leave the vast majority of our visitors completely perplexed as to what is going on. Instead, what we attempted to do was deny the aggressive centrality of the perpetrator-determined narrative.

Throughout the Galleries, we use a device that we called 'totems' internally as a shorthand, and this appears in different forms. The main form is to use full length photos of individuals cropped out of contemporaneous images and printed onto full-height glass structures. The original photo they are cropped from is always positioned nearby, so we are very careful about the claim we are making for it. The idea for this came from seeing an exhibition at Sachsenhausen concentration camp museum. The curators took images of Soviet POWs executed in the camp, and seeing them at eye level completely changes your affective relationship with the subjects. It also moderates the claim – they have not colourised them and the curators are not doing anything that suggests they are somehow disinterring people to make them re-real. It also does not suggest you are 'meeting' these people. It is a way of precipitating a different physical relationship.

For the totem biographies, which are captions that accompany these pieces, we have written the text in the present tense and I was uncomfortable with this at first. This came from an initial exercise: when we were writing the

original narrative for the Galleries, I asked the curators to write in the present tense. This was not because I thought we would use them in the present tense in the final galleries, but was intended to encourage them to think contemporaneously rather than to anticipate future events and therefore structure narrative based on anticipation. When we took this idea to the board, this idea of keeping these text pieces in the present tense, I was expecting them to reject it outright. I thought they would think it was kitsch somehow. But a majority of them agreed to keep it – I think they were surprised themselves to find them convinced by its effectiveness.

In many of the Holocaust museums I visited over the years, I noticed that I was not reading about individual lives, but rather lives that were presented as microsites of persecution. I was not reading about a person's experiences, but what was done to them in the guise of reading about them. We tried to avoid this, which is difficult when you are constrained by word limits. To give you an example, there is a man in the Galleries named Leonard Wohl, a German Jew from Breslau whose daughters wrote about his sense of humour in their letters. This aspect of him had nothing explicitly to do with the history of the Holocaust, but we decided to keep this material. It does not build towards something later in the narrative in a Chekhov's gun sort of way. We included details that do not go anywhere, but they are there to give you a small sense of who this person was.

We also use quotations all the way through and we had to consider how to display these on substrates – that is, whether on plinths or wall details, etc. There was a long discussion about how to render quotes on substrates from people whom we know did not survive and whose quotes related to the specific events that would lead to their deaths or were proximate to that moment in time. The question of material was important. Then, we had the idea to display these words in light. That means there is no ink or pigment that is holding their voices; rather, it will be the light that expresses their words. The font that we used is taken from a pre-war Jewish typographer whose work was stopped through Nazi persecution before he had finished developing it. This is not a detail that we mention anywhere. This is where my work as a theatre practitioner comes in, I think. In the theatre, you need to have an answer down to the smallest detail for every part of the production – or that was always the way that I worked, and the way that people whose work I admired most worked too. The audience do not know what they don't know, but I really believe that somehow they know if it is not there. Therefore, it is crucial that the director knows the reason for each decision. This acts like invisible glue, a kind of cognitive glue that holds everything together and gives it shape and purpose.

In the graphics hierarchy, we have section text, sub-section text, captions, and meta-text captions where we explain meta-historical issues. The sub-sections all have quotations on them, but the titles of the sub-sections are almost all taken from contemporaneous diaries or letters. For example, in the

section on the ghettoes, which deals with the ghettoes being sealed off, the sub-section is called 'Guarded Walls Rise', which is a line from a poem that was written in the Warsaw Ghetto. I thought if we impose the discipline on ourselves always to describe these things using the contemporaneous voice of the person, then that conditions us to see events from that perspective. Traditionally I think we would probably have titled 'The Nazis seal the ghettos' or something like that, but by using the contemporaneous Jewish voice to describe the event it ensures it is framed from that perspective.

Some people appear in more than one section, although most do not. In the previous exhibition at IWM and I think all Holocaust exhibitions we visited, if we met someone once in say 1938, the text would tell you that they were then shot in 1942. On a practical level, this did not provide visitors with any kind of contextual information that leads to them to understand how or why that has happened. Also, this completely reduces that person's autonomous experiences to that single detail. Contemporaneity does not allow for this approach. We only tell visitors what was knowable in that historical moment. However, we do think it is important that the Galleries hold wider contextual information, and so in the final room, there is a large AV piece which contains material about every single person mentioned in the exhibition. This is logistically complex as it means displaying biographical information about around 500 different people, so the script for this piece is about 20,000 words and it runs for about three hours or so. Thinking about Strawson's argument again, the brief to the designers was that this needed to be about fragments of experience so it does not seek to close off or resolve through totalising narratives of people's lives. It is also not interactive, so visitors cannot pick and choose whose lives to learn further information about. It is a glimpse into details, fragments. Importantly, we have tried to be open about what we don't know and that also the amount of information available could conceivably change in the future – and so the piece only reflects the record at the period of time it was created.

*BL:* Your focus on multiple forms of narrative makes me think about the criticism the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw received for not focusing sufficiently on the Holocaust, even though it was built on the site of the ghetto. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2015: 50) responded that the museum was dedicated to Jewish life and not only to Jewish death and genocide. Text in the present tense enables visitors to also focus on people's lives and not only the conditions of their deaths.

*JB:* Yes, in our new exhibition, it is important that the visitor sees Jewish individuals as autonomously defined. In a space right at the start of the galleries – the second room in fact, after 'presence of absence' there is a space called 'Jewish Life' that I mentioned before. This is based on a digital installation

about the dynamic plurality of the lives of Jewish individuals and communities before the Second World War. There are over 1,200 different images sourced from galleries and archives across the world that constantly cycle screens across the space. These are supported by fixed graphics that hold specific information about a number of different individuals. It was really important to us before encountering the symbols and objects of persecution, from swastikas to SS uniforms, that Jewish life should be introduced in the centre of the frame, so to speak. Also, no two visitors to the space will see the exact two same set of images. Years ago at a conference, the historian Neil Gregor made a comment that really stuck with me; he said that historians still talk about 'the Jews' in the same way that the Nazis spoke about 'die Juden'. And he is right. There is no 'the Jews' – there are Jewish people with various different belief systems, practices, languages, cultures. The installation is a challenge to that problematic way of thinking. The sound in the space is dynamic too; it is layered through multiple channels so that in a similar way to the imagery it is constantly in motion; it never settles or resolves. The space is experiential, and it is not a space we expect visitors to spend a long time in, but it is a crucial starting point. Interestingly, early impressions suggest that visitors spend a lot longer in it than we expected.

We also worked with various individuals from Jewish communities. A number of rabbis advised us particularly on the display or description of religious objects. I was surprised how little this has happened previously. I was very aware that there have been some issues in Holocaust exhibitions previously with religious objects being displayed in ways that didn't necessarily align with Jewish religious practices. If our committed intention and ambition is to make galleries that meaningfully respect individuals, then we need to work carefully with communities. Rabbi Nicky Liss from Highgate Synagogue comes into the museum regularly to discuss the exhibition and the information he has provided has completely changed the way we describe objects or what we are concentrating on. Rabbi Liss will also come in and place some of the objects into the displays themselves, so we know that it has been done appropriately through his hands.

*BL:* This is one of the changes between the previous and the new Holocaust Galleries. The use of lighting has also been criticised as being too 'theatrical' in the original curation. Why have you chosen to use brighter lighting and how might this change the visitors' experience?

*JB:* Visiting the USHMM in Washington, DC was a revelation because it suddenly became so clear how much that museum defined and centralised an interpretive approach and strategy for so many global museums. I can see that the curation has been done with such scale and bravura that other curators might feel that this is the only way to approach a Holocaust museum.

It's my feeling that the nature of the subject and the magnitude of that project, both politically and nationally, created a set of tropes that no one even realised were tropes. This is the bedrock that everyone else is building upon. They introduced a theatrical approach to lighting, but they have also used a specific aesthetic of hyper industrialisation, which really indulges the notion that the Holocaust is the apotheosis of industrialised genocide. I understand how this emerged, but I think contemporarily, it has conditioned a series of assumptions that are dangerously misleading. It somehow suggests that the Holocaust was less a product of deliberate, conscious and sustained human action than the process of industrialisation and the inexorable momentum of modernity. In terms of the lighting, the spaces in USHMM and most other Holocaust museums are typically dark with stark and stylised lighting that nurtures a sense of drama and doom. I think that it creates a few problems though. Darkness signifies to the visitors that everyone represented in the exhibition is already dead and that is the only way we will think about them. This overdetermines the narrative – the only thing that will happen to these people is that they are going to die. It immediately communicates to the visitor that they should forget about anything apart from the fact that these people are doomed. I fully understand the instinct to use darkness and dim lighting because this is a ghastly and dreadful history that includes indescribable suffering – dark lighting for an extraordinarily dark subject. There is an instinct to say that quietness and sombreness is the appropriate tone. However, darkness also suggests that the Holocaust happened in the shadows and that nobody really knew about it, that it was clandestine and unseen. This use of lighting also suggests that the only possible response is mournful silence and that you are not allowed to ask questions or want to know more. Through contemporaneity, we have used an anti-teleological approach, which is central to our curation, and we felt that bright light enabled this and allowed visitors to ask more questions and not to think of the progression of events as pre-determined. We also wanted to use the lighting to support the broader interpretive principle that these things happened in 'our world' – not in a different one that we have no access to. Somehow reading about or encountering accounts of the things that the Nazis did and that people experienced in a space that has not led you towards a fairly determined response can serve to generate a very different response to them. The use of bright lighting was never intended to be provocative, but we did feel there was something about the standard use of dim lighting we felt needed to be addressed.

All of the walls in the Galleries are painted different shades of blue, which we chose as a neutral colour. It is almost like the sky, or a stage cyclorama. The design concept is that the walls of the space are the neutral vessel the exhibition sits within, so nothing is ever mounted directly on the walls. They function almost like negative space. If we had to mount something from the wall that will not be visible to the visitor.

*BL:* I brought undergraduate theatre students to the previous Holocaust Galleries for many years. After their visit, I asked them what had impacted them most strongly and they uniformly agreed it was the spoken testimonies. Could you speak about how you see the curation of testimony changing?

*JB:* Because of contemporaneity, the testimony just could not work in the same way that it had in the previous exhibition where it had provided the narrative backbone. Having said that, we were obviously very keen to ensure that it was used meaningfully but wanted to find a different way of doing so. One of the problems with curating witness testimony is that as soon as you position a survivor next to other content, you implicitly suggest that experiences are survivable. One of the perhaps under-discussed aspects of the Holocaust is that there are plenty of corners of this history for which there are no survivors. Allowing for the extent of the devastation is really important. Somehow, there is a glimpse of hope or the suggestion that people perhaps could have survived if they had just made different choices, which is of course not the case. One of the terrible, terrible realities of this history is that there are whole families or communities and groups of people for whom there is nobody to speak on their behalf and we have tried to be really clear about that.

There was also an aesthetic question. Many of the recordings of the testimonies are about 20 years old and they will look like they belong to a certain time to a contemporary audience. It is like watching Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) now, which I always think involves a three-part temporal process: the history that is being spoken about, the time that the film was made, and the present moment that we inhabit as we watch the film. The film is now a historical document itself. There is a similar phenomenon with the recordings of the testimony in our collections. The aesthetic in which they were filmed, framed, the background, the clothing people are wearing all impact how we engage with the testimony and this has to be acknowledged. I was also really influenced by Professor Tony Kushner's (2006) writing about testimony. As he suggests, if you watch testimonies unedited, you engage with the people in them completely differently. Rather than just listening to the specific piece of information that the curator has chosen for you to hear, you begin to engage with the way that the survivor remembers and with their physicality as much as what they are actually saying; in fact, for me, the silences are particularly meaningful. Sometimes, the silences do speak more than the words. I sat down in the film room in the museum to watch one piece of testimony in its entirety on one occasion near the start of the project. I watched Roman Halter, who happened to have a cold on the day the recording took place. You wouldn't know that if you only watched what we have used before, because that is an extraneous detail that was removed in the edit. But when you listen to his snuffly voice and see how he has to stop to drink water or blow his nose, it completely humanises him and makes the

experience of watching him feel much more personal and I suppose somehow more intimate. That's obviously just one small and obvious dimension, but it's an example.

In the final space, alongside the piece which offers information about everyone mentioned in the galleries, there are three testimony screens on which our testimony runs virtually unedited. People can sit down in chairs that are very comfortable with speakers mounted into the backrest and listen. Rather than editing anything down or out, it is all there. The only exception is that we decided to edit anything that was never meant for public consumption. For example, if we think there is a private thought expressed between the interviewer and the person giving testimony, then there is an ethical dilemma in making that public that we wouldn't want to ignore. However, we have included everything else, which includes the repetitions, people drifting in and out of shot, or microphones malfunctioning. It means that visitors enter the space and sit down and just discover the interviewee midflow. There are about 30 hours of this testimony that play in the space, so it's possible to sit there for a long time and just watch and listen. Everything is transcribed too. The curators sat with the tapes for weeks and weeks and transcribed everything – every word, every hesitation, every um and ah. We have also recorded second- and third-generation testimony that also appears in this space. This wasn't just individuals, it was siblings, parents and children, cousins. We wanted to try and engage with the really complex ways that different generations have responded and to show how this is not even consistent within the families. This testimony was filmed within the opening space of the Galleries so visitors know that the people they are seeing talking were in the same spaces that they are in too. This makes your relationship with it feel much closer.

This follows a room called 'Responsibility and Judgement', which is about postwar trials, denazification, and the development of principles around genocide. You do not have to stop in the final room, the room with the testimony, but can follow a pathway to the exit. However, it has a second function and is also a space for reflection. It mirrors 'The Life Before' in its shape and structure, but there are no archival images in it and this should offer a reminder of the first Galleries, which represents a full and dynamic set of communities and cultures.

A few years ago, we went to the Czech Republic to visit the museum dedicated to the memory of the town of Lidice, which was razed to the ground by German forces in June 1942. It holds one of the best exhibitions I have ever visited. It is really strong and very simple. They also save testimony to the very end. You walk through the exhibition with contemporaneous history and then you are suddenly confronted with people in the present offering their reflections on their experiences in colour. I found it an extraordinarily affecting thing to encounter and I'm hoping we might be able to achieve something similar.

The final room also gives the opportunity to qualify what it means to be a survivor, to say that survival is anomalous. Rather than suggesting that survivors have the entirety of the last word, we have placed the screens beside the piece that explains what happened to everyone mentioned in the Galleries – many of whom were of course tragically murdered – so that there are various voices. In this final space, we have also included an object. This was a tie pin that Marek Kellerman brought to London from Bratislava in 1938 and deposited in Barclays Bank before returning home. After the war, Barclays were never able to trace him and they gave the object to us, and we never managed to trace him either. Nothing is known about Marek Kellerman and his wife. They do not show up on any records. This object then reminds us about the limits of historical research and that ultimately this is a history defined by incalculable loss.

*BL:* You have already spoken about scale, space, positionality, and audience expectation. In which ways has the concept of 'landscape' been crucial to the curation of the new Galleries?

*JB:* We try to work with this in different ways. At the start, 'The Presence of Absence' evokes landscape. For the outbreak of Operation Barbarossa, we have a piece called 'Massacres', which is about the landscapes in which mass murder occurred.[1] There are three screens: one is at tipped floor level, another is tipped at sky level, and a third is at eye level. The team went to film in five different places where Einsatzgruppen shootings occurred.[2] The brief was very clear that there should be no sense that we were offering visitors a 360° environment, or a sort of virtual reality experience. It was rather about affect, textures, materiality, and tactility. There were a number of strategies they were not allowed to use. At no point are there any zooms or forward tracking shots that offer a sense of ominously moving forwards, and the camera never goes directly upwards as if you are lying on the ground. We did whatever we could to avoid any sense that we were somehow placing visitors into the position of the victims in these sites. This was an idea, the idea of using contemporary footage, that one of the designers came in with early on and it has remained with various modifications. In part, it emerged because there are so few objects to articulate that moment in time, but as an approach, it also belies the notion of the Holocaust as a purely industrialised phenomenon conducted in purpose-built sites (Image 3.2).

Mass killings did not only take place in gas chambers within death camps but also in the same environments where people lived. We have attempted to make clear that we can in no way reproduce or understand what the people in those situations were experiencing, but we do know what it is like to stand in some of the environments in which it occurred. We wanted to move away from the sort of negative sublime, as it has been described, that creeps

**IMAGE 3.2** 'Massacres' shows the landscapes in which mass murder occurred through three screens: one is at tipped floor level, another is tipped at sky level, and a third is at eye level. Copyright Imperial War Museum.

into some part of Holocaust consciousness and suggests that this took place in a different realm or a different reality. Rather, we want to say that this is actually brutal, bloody, barbaric mass murder that took place in forests, in fields, in meadows, on beaches. It is grotesque and despicable, but it is also infinitely human in all its dimensions. In this space, we also have a series of what we call 'place texts' – the three screens offer footage of the sites and these images are constantly revolving, and there are five fixed case studies about the places where this happened, using a contemporaneous landscape graphic of that place. These are known today as Babyn Yar (Ukraine), Chișinău (Moldova), Škēde (Latvia), Lubny (Ukraine), and Paneriai (Lithuania). There is a large landscape image of that site as it was at the time and inset within it are the smaller historic photographs of what happened there. The 'place note' offers wider context; for example, for Babyn Yar, the note tells visitors that this means Babushka's – grandmother's – ravine, and that the site was popular at the weekend for visitors to walk and relax. We want to make sure that it is clear that these landscapes existed in the world and not just as places that were waiting for these atrocities to occur. Liepāja is now a tourist destination as a beach resort, which is shocking when you look at the historical photographs of people being shot in the sand dunes – virtually in the same place as people enjoy the beach today. I'm not saying that they are necessarily doing anything wrong by doing so, incidentally, I just find the radical juxtaposition really striking.

On the edge of the following space, we have a fixed image of the railway buffer at the end of the spur line leading into Sobibór, which is the only original piece of infrastructure from the camp that still exists. In relation to the Reinhardt camps, David Cesarani used to talk about the fetishisation of the gas chambers. We have tried very hard to respond to this problem and to situate these camps in real space to reinforce the fact that these are not places of the negative sublime; actually, they were practical, shambolic spaces with basic technology. We are displaying a tile from one of the gas chambers at Treblinka. Some of the board were worried that this risked making the object a sort of death relic, but for me, it is the opposite. These were not magical or mysterious places; they were just rooms made out of tiles and brick walls, in improvised and rapidly assembled buildings. That is, there is nothing inconceivable about these objects, or something beyond our comprehension. They are the nuts and bolts of the spaces that they killed people in. So, we are trying to engage with the materiality of those spaces.

These are the main aesthetic engagements with the landscape. On a more esoteric level, we use AV for audiences to engage with maps, but we also want to ensure that they have some relationship to landscape or some kind of tactile identity. The other AV piece we use landscapes for is Lili Jacob's album.[3] The team went to Auschwitz and filmed around Birkenau. We used the images from the Jacob album, though we did not overlay the images to produce a 'now' and 'then' kind of effect. I researched the album and particularly some of the recent work of Dr Stefan Hördler. We used the landscape at Auschwitz to give the real-world context and the album photographs come in as discrete entities. We do look to identify important details in the pictures. For example, in one image, there is a group of girls covering their noses, and we include some text that explains that the site was overwhelming and so was the smell. The images from the album used to bother me in Holocaust galleries because people often walk straight past them. If the museum does not offer the full context, then visitors do not realise the enormous significance of these images – these are people who are about to be killed. There is no time bar on the video we have, which means someone might stop for only two minutes and they might come back and watch it for longer, whereas some visitors might watch it for ten minutes. I have tried to avoid time bars on all of our materials. One of the differences between the previous exhibition and the new one is the role of AV. Today, AV is a much more integral part of the whole aesthetic of the exhibition, and this was not possible in the 1990s. Whether this is because of advances in technology or design intent, I am not sure.

*BL:* For many curators today affect and immersion are important factors to consider. How would you situate these terms in relation to the new Galleries?

*JB:* The Galleries is a space, so it is necessarily immersive. It really depends upon how we define what that immersiveness means. It has become clear

to me that all of these spaces are a nexus of a range of different factors: the underlying design, the use of AV, the text, but also the lighting and the sound and the shaping of space itself. All of these are informed by the same philosophy, but how they behave in relationship to each other is something else. Sound is deconstructed, non-literal, non-mimetic, but it is still attempting to create a sense of something concrete. What is difficult about sound is that I think it is even harder to define than the other factors. I think it has to be immersive – it is just really important that this immersiveness does not somehow resolve itself. Again, I suppose it's about the allure of mimesis and the problems that emerge from that. I find mimetic sound, literal soundscapes, really obstructively cliched and overdefined. You want visitors to leave the Galleries with more questions than they had when they arrived, in a productive way.

People often ask me: how do you expect people to *feel* when they leave? I have no idea, and I genuinely never have had. That is because I believe people will behave within the spaces in different ways and respond to the nature of the design and content in highly personal and personalised ways. However, we have worked hard not to create anything that is explicitly emotionally manipulative. These histories are too sensitive, they are too real, and our responsibility to the people involved is too profound for us to engineer their suffering in any way that would precipitate an emotional response. It is intrinsically emotional because it is a dreadful history of suffering. So, it should be emotional because of the history, not because we have attempted to engineer that affect.

I would like people to leave the Galleries and say, 'I have heard the word Holocaust before and had a sense what that was, but I have never *thought* about it like that'. And that might mean the human dimension, the way that it happened and developed so iteratively, the role and responsibility of particular individuals, or how it impacted people in different contexts. In terms of immersion and its role, I think it's important to be clear with ourselves that we are not saying anything in the Galleries that someone could not find out for themselves on the internet. These histories are publicly available, and that is a big difference between the historical moment in which the previous exhibition was created and now. The information is so widely available. We have navigated a route through that information, in a mode that hopefully is authoritative but is not final – an authoritative account, not *the* authoritative account. The way we have designed the text in the Galleries is supposed to allow for the fact that our interpretation is only one of a series of different possible interpretations. It is highly informed by Hayden White's (2015) ideas about emplotment. We have been very dogmatic about the display of text, which always has a specific holder that shows a curator has placed it there, rather than giving the impression that the text 'belongs' to the displayed material. Another curator could come through and lay out a different set of captions – or emplot it differently.

There is, clearly a difference between reading texts in space and reading text on the page. Visitors come to the museum because of the experiential dimension and, in that respect, it has to be immersive.

Our approach is Brechtian in some respects – we show our working process and we show how the exhibition itself has been constructed. Visitors can see the reverse side of flats – I often think of them like theatre flats – and all of the large graphics have 3D form so that they are leaning against walls. Every aspect of the Galleries has a tangible form. We did this to foreground the act of constructing the narrative and assembling the assets, to literally and figuratively to show the seams. We also did it to allow for and acknowledge the gaps that exist between the constituent elements from which narrative is constructed.

*BL:* There is always a critical distancing between the material and its interpretation?

*JB:* Yes, of course, we do this in theatre all the time. The work can offer critical distance but still be impactful and emotional. One does not preclude the other, but it certainly determines where it is coming from.

## Notes

1 Operation Barbarossa was the code name for the invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany and some of its Axis allies, which started 22 June 1941.
2 Einsatzgruppen were the Schutzstaffel (SS) paramilitary death squads of Nazi Germany that were responsible for mass killings, primarily by shooting.
3 Also known as the Auschwitz Album, this is the only photographic evidence of Jews arriving in Auschwitz or any other death camp.

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# 4

# THE MEANING OF WORKING THROUGH THE PAST

## Of Awkward Objects and Collateral Memories

*Michal Kobialka*

This chapter's title is a reference to Theodor Adorno's essay, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past'. I argue that working through the past may well be what is needed given the multiplicity of global and local crises in our present historical moment, and the proliferation of often contradictory, ideologically imbued meanings of what constitutes a past. More specifically, I propose to revisit the 2018/2019 exhibition, *Widok zza bliska. Inne obrazy Zagłady* [officially translated into English as *Terribly Close. Polish Vernacular Artists Face the Holocaust*], curated by Erica Lehrer, Roma Sendyka, Wojciech Wilczyk, and Magdalena Zych at the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków and Wojtek Ziemilski's performative action, *We Walked Just This Way*, which was presented on 23 February 2019 in Kraków as part of the Staging Difficult Pasts project. I shall focus on a moment of the encounter between the exhibition's object, a wooden truck, and the performative action of moving this object from the museal space to the Cricoteka, housing the Polish theatre and visual artist Tadeusz Kantor's objects and machines. By holding them theoretically alongside, I will investigate the different approaches to objects, which reference difficult pasts or awkward memories, while moving through the historical and archived spaces of the post-war European history. This movement will touch upon, one, Walter Benjamin's, Theodor Adorno's, and Henri Lefebvre's forceful statements about history and historical objects and, two, the work of Kantor with awkward objects and collateral memories of the past in his present moment.

### Theatre/Performance Historiography and the Object

With the post-1968 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard 1984: xxiv), the idea of a single, or universal, history had been displaced by multi-perspectival pluralism of historical approaches projected from different, other, points of view.

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Thus, for the last few decades, feminist and lesbian studies, gay and queer studies, cultural and ethnic studies, and postcolonial and subaltern studies have been engaged in a systematic analysis of coercive and disciplining modes of representation stored in the archive in order to combat a series of erasures and to recover the 'Other', traditionally marginalized, or silenced, subject. Employing various strategies, scholars working in these fields of study have been reexamining dominant institutions of knowledge and power, both real and symbolic, which control, shape, and reproduce structures – the archives – whose very assembly and organization, as is forcefully argued today, occlude certain historical subjects (Helton et al. 2015: 1). This occlusion draws attention to the irresolvable tension between *recovery as an imperative*, which is fundamental to historical writing and research infused not only with the cognitive values that solidify the practice of history in the academe, but also with political urgency by scholars-activists, and *the impossibility of recovery*, because the very assembly and organization of the archive dematerializes, not to say, excarnates, historical subjects (Biddick 2016: 30).

The very awareness of the archive trouble, as outlined by Laura Helton et al and by Kathleen Biddick, may help us realize that the meaning of staging a difficult past or working through the past must not solely focus on a Manichean construction of meaning and an examination of the flows and imperfections of a system of knowledge production or on erasures and occlusions of human and non-human objects. Rather, it should critically confront that which determines the structure of the past and its *archivable* contents (Derrida 1998: 90).

Bearing this in mind, let me ask: how are we to think about the ways of housing the past (the archive, the event, and the object) as well as about the experience of the past (time, space, matter) in our working through the past? And to be more precise, consider how increased attention to the meaning of working through the past and the archive itself brought forward the possibility of treating the archive not as a source of 'a trustworthy reconstruction of the past' but a subject that poignantly reveals that, indeed, 'nothing is more troubled and troubling […] than the concept archived in the word "archive"' (Derrida 1998: 90).

Thus, for example, since the 1960s, when the nations in Southeast Asia and Africa were winning freedom from colonial powers, many researchers turned to the eighteenth century in order to reconstruct pre-colonial histories. They did so in order to build both indigenous and national narratives as well as archives for the newly independent states as well as to offer the mode of counterreading of the colonial archive, which interrogated the existing archives as artifacts of colonial bureaucracy and imagination. Postwar historians of Germany emphasized the toleration, liberalism, and internationalism of the Aufklärung's bold motto of *sapere aude* (dare to know things through reason) as a sort of antidote to Nazism's disdain for liberal democracy or the parliamentary system; and promotion of fervent antisemitism, anti-communism, and scientific racism. However, in the aftermath of the reunification of Germany in 1990, they have been more skeptical about any notion that the states of eighteenth-century Germany shared an enlightened,

liberal culture and value system (and, thus, emphasized distinctive and fragmented Enlightenments in different German regions). After 9/11, the attention of many of the American academics was turned to the study of the Muslim–Christian relations. In recent years, many scholars embraced new materialism, environmental history, eco-criticism, performance as social practice, performative commons or collectivities, and trans-perspectives, evoking the idea of mobility of identity, gender, or ethnicity. In the year of the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Wall in 2019, scholars and cultural critics interested in the vagaries of historiography considered a number of possibilities of how to think about that so-called post-historical condition as well as about the different pathways of how to address the idea of staging difficult past by focusing on the performative and historiographic aspects of the commemorations of the fall of the Berlin Wall on both sides of the divide. While commemorating the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the English colony of Virginia, *The 1619 Project* aims to reframe the US history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States national narrative (Hannah-Jones 2021: xvii–xxxiii). The book project explores the legacy of slavery in present-day America to illuminate key moments of oppression, struggle, and resistance as well as to show how the inheritance of 1619 reaches into every part of contemporary American society, from politics, music, diet, traffic, and citizenship to capitalism, religion, and our democracy itself. This is a book that speaks directly to the current moment, contextualizing the systems of race and caste within which America operates today. While precise motivations are subject to much debate, the war raging in Ukraine and Gaza and the highly dynamic political war economy remind us that 'essentially it is a matter of the way in which the past is made present; whether one remains at the level of reproach or whether one withstands the horror by having the strength to comprehend even the incomprehensible' (Adorno 1998: 100).

However, it is not only that the archive is treated as a subject and not just a source, which is important, as these shifts and transformations in historiography unequivocally suggest. I would like to add to this one more essential requirement: that is, how one thinks about the (past and present) storing of the past cannot be separate from the (past and present) experience of the past.

In 'Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum', Giorgio Agamben notes that

> Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated. […] The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to "change the world", but also—and above all—to "change time". Modern political thought has concentrated its attention on history and has not elaborated a corresponding concept of time.
>
> (1993: 91)

Following Agamben, it could be argued that every conception of history is invariably accompanied not only by a certain experience of time, but also by a certain experience of space and objects/matter, which are implicit in and condition history.

That is to say, objects positioned in or moving through space are not passive receptacles that fascinate us; rather, they draw attention to and are imbued with the objective conditions that engendered them in time and space or to the ideologies framing their structures of presence or our emotional structures. Briefly, in his 1937 essay 'Edward Fuchs: Collector and Historian', Walter Benjamin investigates the objects, which Fuchs possessed, that ruptured what was perceived at the time as the continuum of a cultural development. Exploring Fuchs' impulse to collect and to archive the history of caricature, erotic art, and of the genre picture (*Sittenbild*) – the 'insignificant' art forms as he calls them – Benjamin draws attention to a break in the continuum of a cultural unfolding, which he explains using the distinction between historicism and historical materialism (2002a: 225).

Historicism, according to Benjamin, is linked to the notion of history defined as a meaningful narrative of progress in the West – a coherent and linear process, which was described in detail by Leopold von Ranke and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in the nineteenth century. Benjamin calls Ranke's and Hegel's history an epic history. It is a history that promotes a contemplative attitude toward the object and the past. It places the object along the narrative itinerary, which infuses both the object and the past era into a linear totality that produces and justifies the present.

Historical materialism is an antidote to this historicism. That is to say, works of art, or objects, in a historically dialectical mode, illuminating a continuous process of change, demonstrate how their reception becomes a component of the effect that a work of art, or an object, has upon us today. Benjamin refers to this condition of a continuous process of change as the state of unrest, which demands that the contemplative attitude toward the object be abandoned in order for us to 'become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in precisely this moment' (2002a: 227). In other words, as he states in another context, the human sense of perception is determined by physiology/nature and by historical circumstances as well (1988: 222). The goal of historical materialism is therefore to replace the epic element with the constructive element, which will liberate the forces that remain captive in historicism's 'once upon a time'. It is directed 'towards a consciousness of the present which explodes the continuum of history' (2002a: 227). Thus, historicism presents the eternal image *of* the past; historical materialism presents a given experience *with* the past, an experience which stands unique.

As this last sentence suggests, historical materialism is connected with the experience of the present: with the desire of the subject for self-understanding as well as for the understanding of the historical world-object. Rather than perceiving this process as a structure of modernist emancipatory reason, which is delimited either

by the anticipation of the future or by the preservation of the purity of the patrimonial or theological heritage, it is a dialectical relationship with that world defined by specific materiality existing here and now (*jetztzeit*). In his version of historical materialism advocating a nonlinear historical temporality, Benjamin offers a double gesture of bringing historical practice to the point of disruption. This disruption reveals that 'the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of [the] objects. Ordered, however, according to a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection' (1999: 207).

Benjamin's comment about the world or world-historical events being present and ordered in a specific way in and within the object, bring to mind a different nuanced reading of objects in post–World War II Poland as well as, as I will argue in the second part of this essay, today under the sign of a different historical and ideological pressure. After the war, in 1947, the Polish visual and theatre artist Tadeusz Kantor wrote:

> While I was in Warsaw, I saw a piece of an iron bridge, which must have been hit by a bomb.
> I was struck by the sight of this incredible
> c o m p r e s s i o n.
> [I had] a shocking sensation of the force, which had done it;
> unimaginable as a human force. […]
> A thought crossed my mind that if someone, a joker, placed this piece of iron as a monument on a public square,
> in the future, the historians would, in its entangled form,
> decipher the f o r c e s which governed our time.
> (2005: 1:97, author's translation)

For Benjamin and Kantor, this spatial experience of constellation lets the object/fragment slip away from both the imperious presence of the metaphysical and the presence of the regulated temporality, which structure their narratives along a historical trajectory. This spatial aspect of a constellation resonates with Henri Lefebvre's notion of spatial dialectics as discussed in *The Production of Space*.

Unlike dialectics based on an analysis of historical time and of temporality (Hegel and Marx), in spatial dialectics, the notion of contradiction is not restricted to temporality or historicity but draws attention to contradictions and conflicts *in* space as well as to contradictions *of* space. As Lefebvre asserts:

> Contradictions *of* space envelop historical contradictions, presuppose them, superimpose themselves on them, carry them to a higher level, and amplify them in the process of reproducing them. Once this displacement has been effected, the new contradictions may tend to attract all the attention, diverting interest to themselves and seeming to crowd out or even absorb the old conflicts. The impression is false however. Only by means of a dialectical analysis can

> the precise relationships between contradictions *in* space and contradictions *of* space be unraveled, and a determination made as to which are becoming attenuated, which accentuated.
>
> (1991: 334)

Following theses insights about the meaning of working through the past in general – that is, about the archive and the object; about time, matter, and space; about contradictions *in* space and contradictions *of* space revealing objects in the state of unrest, I want to discuss the event, which was co-curated by the Staging Difficult Pasts team, the Cricoteka and Roma Sendyka with the support of Kolektyw Kuratorski in Kraków on 23 February 2019.

## Awkward Object and Collateral Memories

This part of the essay is about a wooden toy truck.

In October 2018, the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków opened an exhibition, *Widok zza bliska. Inne obrazy Zagłady*, curated by Erica Lehrer, Roma Sendyka, Wojciech Wilczyk, and Magdalena Zych. It showcased the objects created by the so-called folk or vernacular artists, also referred to as 'naïve' artists in Poland, and how they attempted to represent the events they witnessed during World War II. The collection of objects gathered by the curatorial team was unparalleled in its attempt to examine the work produced by ordinary people, untrained Polish artists, hitherto labeled unproblematically as folk or naïve artists. It drew attention to the variety of motives and pressures that influenced the artists' individual choices to represent the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish event or framing it as Polish Catholic martyrology or as a universal human tragedy (Lehrer et al. 2017: np). Faced with the objects born of complex and different, often awkward, impulses, the curatorial team posed a series of questions, which haunted the exhibition spaces: How did objects come about? Who made them and why? What do they actually depict? How should we look at them today? Can we treat them as witness to murder? Ultimately, how do these objects, the awkward objects, participate in the staging of difficult pasts?

The exhibition space consisted of four galleries. The first gallery, called 'Too Close to See', introduced artworks made by eyewitnesses to events of the Holocaust, whether it be watching their Jewish neighbors rounded up by the Germans in their hometown, or someone imprisoned in a Nazi camp seeing the treatment of other prisoners. The second gallery, titled 'Histories', was structured around two parallel trajectories on the walls. The first trajectory began with a folk Polish ballad, suggesting some form of a 'cultural memory' regarding what happened to the Jewish neighbors; and continued with a kind of historical 'timeline' made up of photographs of works not physically on display in the exhibition to show how each major 'phase' of the Holocaust was depicted in Polish vernacular visual arts – from persecution, ghettoization, and hiding to mass shootings, imprisonment in camps, gassing, and cremation. The other trajectory comprised three works, from three

different decades: a 1948 painting of village massacres of Jews by German soldiers, a 1962 bas-relief series that copies iconic images from a 1958 photo-documentary album about Polish martyrology, and a 2017 sculpture of the Jedwabne pogrom (a massacre of Polish Jews on 10 July 1941) made by a Polish carver on commission by a German collector (Image 4.1).

In the third gallery, there were six tables, on each of which a single sculpture was surrounded with archival documents and news clippings the curators came upon in their research: the biographies of the makers, collectors, commissioners, sellers: Poles, Germans, Jews; the Communist politics and propaganda; Polish Catholicism; and popular cultural clichés – kitsch, violence, and sado-masochism. In the fourth gallery, there were objects selected by the curators for their makers' possible gestures of empathy coded into these objects (http://www.terriblyclose.eu/exhibition/iv-emotions/). It is here that a wooden truck, described as *truposznica*, as it was categorized by the Warsaw Ethnographic Museum, or a corpse carrier, which was by Franciszek Wacek, was parked in the middle of the room.

In its design, the exhibition attempted to address the problem of the intolerability of Holocaust images in terms of a politics of metonymy – to show how these objects complicate accepted depictions of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders; conflate

**IMAGE 4.1** A wooden bas relief from Gallery 2 of *Widok zza bliska. Inne obrazy Zagłady* [officially translated into English as *Terribly Close. Polish Vernacular Artists Face the Holocaust*]. Photograph by Michal Kobialka.

Catholic and Jewish tropes of suffering; or challenge the perception of these objects of yesteryear as 'minor', 'peripheral', or 'awkward' memorial objects of today.

But what to do with *truposznica*? Further research into its provenance revealed that it was a copy of a real truck used in Kraków during World War II to transport the dead bodies of the Polish Jews; and that it was built as a wooden toy truck by Wacek to illustrate wartime stories and to teach history to local children, as noted by his daughter (Lehrer and Sendyka 2019: 16). Let me ask again – what to do with *truposznica*: leave it in the past as part of mnemohistory concerned with the past as it is remembered by the very few who might have witnessed a corpse carrier on the streets; leave it in a gallery space as part of that difficult past forcing us today to acknowledge historical misdeeds; leave it in in the present as a material object of reproach; or withstand the horror prompted by it by having the strength to comprehend even the incomprehensible; or give in to a cold forgetting, which had already enveloped the oft-invoked scrutiny of the history of World War II, so that we can contemplate the analogue or pixelated images of other genocides that crowd the past and current historical moment (Adorno 1998: 98).

Taking a cue from Adorno, let me suggest that this toy in place of the spectacle of horror, this awkward object, beyond and above being a material object of reproach, discloses historical and material tensions, contradictions, and inadequations, which are being made visible and concrete by its sheer presence in the gallery space. Or, to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, it is an object in the state of unrest (2002a: 227); that is to say, an object which demands that the contemplative attitude toward it be abandoned in order for us to 'become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in precisely this moment' (2002a: Ibid.).

Let me elaborate on this last statement using the Kraków's Staging Difficult Pasts project, executed 'in precisely this moment', on 23 February 2019, as an example.

The Kraków's Staging Difficult Pasts project was designed to explore multidirectional memory housed in the object. By drawing together academic and artistic imaginations and their singular modes of materializing thought, the 'Staging Difficult Pasts' research team, Maria Delgado, Bryce Lease, Cecilia Sosa, and I, wished to bring forth hitherto marginalized or awkward memories of difficult pasts.

*Truposznica*, the focal point of the project, was to be removed from the facticity of a gallery space and moved to the Cricoteka, housing the objects/machines and the archives of the artist Tadeusz Kantor, whose objects used in the productions from *The Return of Odysseus* (1944) to *Today is My Birthday* (1990) were to chronicle and register the troubling historical events of the twentieth century (Kobialka 2009). The encounter between *truposznica* and Kantor's objects was to activate traces of memory in these precarious objects inflicted with the violence of war – a kind of necroperformance based on revitalizing historical remnants and the memories of excarnated bodies (Sajewska 2019: 378–380). *Truposznica's* awkward presence in the space of the gallery was framed by a conceptual framework for the exhibition. As such, it contributed to the current debates about 'difficult heritage'.

*Truposznica's* awkward presence in the space of the Cricoteka was to activate a temporary alternative culture archive, evoking its multilayered 'objectness' in the encounter with other historical remnants – Kantor's documents, artworks, and machines. Placed among Kantor's historical remnants, *Truposznica* called attention to itself and demanded that it be given a place in this non-canonical reflection on our past. In collaboration with the curators of the exhibition and the Cricoteka, the 'Staging Difficult Pasts' research team invited a Polish visual and performance artist, Wojtek Ziemilski, to create a performative action of moving *truposznica* from the Ethnographic Museum to the Cricoteka on 23 February 2019.

*Truposznica's* movement between the two sites was momentous. Not only did it link these two institutions together, but, and maybe more importantly, *truposznica's* spatial trajectory through Kraków's urban space inadvertently drew attention to its differential character – how this urban space was used during World War II and how it is used in the twenty-first century. The urban space – a street outside of the Ethnographic Museum, which leads to the bridge across the Vistula River to the other side, where the Kraków Ghetto used to be during World War II, but whose absence is now marked only by empty iron chairs standing scattered around on a square-monument near the Cricoteka – became thus a mechanism of anamnesis producing cultural spectacle whose effect/affect could not be fully anticipated.

### *We Walked Just this Way*

While working on the conceptual framework of this performative action, Ziemilski abandoned his initial impulse to structure this action as a funeral cortege, a sort of a religious dirge or theatre of death, when it became clear to him that *truposznica* is a copy. 'A copy repeats that which is to be understood by us today. […] It translates and localizes the past into that which is the representation of the present intelligibility' (2019: np). A copy, thus, as it could be argued after Plato's and Aristotle's treatment of the relationship between the model and its representation, is a legible text that speaks of history (the past) while being situated in history (the present). However, a copy, to paraphrase Jacques Rancière, is also 'an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all. [A copy] means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification. To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities. […] A new topography of the possible' (2009: 48, 49). And it is this aspect of *truposznica* as a copy that is of interest to me.

This is how Ziemilski describes his performative action, *We Walked Just This Way*:

> I don't have access. Not to the experience of other people. Not to the events. Not to the source. I had heard about the original sculpture—*Truposznica*.

This is how it was named by its author, Franciszek Wacek. *Trup* means corpse. This truck, as the description reads, transported the dead bodies of the Jews for burning. (Yes, across this bridge, too.)

I am looking at it now. The tangibility of the wood, its sensuality—it is not the driver's features that impress me, but the features of the wood.

*I do not, fortunately, have access to the suffering of other people*.

I am safely hidden behind my sympathy. It protects me.

Slowly, the numbers game meets sympathy: how many were they? How many passed through? How many stayed behind? How many on which side? The algebra of absence.

This is no longer a single toy. This is no longer a singular experience. It's growing into an entire constellation of sympathies—our contemporary constellation, with so many features washed out, only slightly engraved by our own stories.

We carry the burden.

But not on our shoulders.

Because this is not our burden. Our contemporary bodies will not be burdened.

Let us then drag it behind us. The absurd toys, dispassionately symbolizing suffering. […]

And so it happens: we haul the burden.

If at all possible, together. If at all possible, consciously.

The burden is light, as we are of this lightness made.

(2019: np)

Indeed, 90 3D printer copies of *truposznica*, reminiscent of an old-fashioned toy on a string, were pulled behind the participants, young and old, who came to the Ethnographic Museum.

They pulled them along the streets and across the bridge to the Cricoteka. It was not the sight of 90 people dragging a little toy-size *truposznica* that stopped the traffic. It was the noise they were making on the cobblestones; a scratching, unsettling noise giving rise to a more acute sense of hearing obliterating the aestheticized perception of a copy and awakening the state of unrest caused by unresolvable dissonance. Once they reached the Cricoteka, 90 *truposznicas* were placed among Kantor's objects and machines. The wooden *truposznica* was also transported from the Ethnographic Museum to the Cricoteka. It was carried in a wooden box evoking Kantor's Emballage (from the French *emballer* to wrap, pack), whose content 'must be isolated, protected from trespassing, ignorance, and vulgarity' (Kantor 1993a: 81). Upon the arrival at the Cricoteka, *truposznica* was placed next to Kantor's Trumpet of the Last Judgement, an object from *Where are the Snows of Yesteryear* cricotage (1979) and its soundscape – 'Es Brent' [it is burning] by Mordechai Gebirtig who was murdered in the Kraków Ghetto in 1942.

The bringing of *truposznica* to the Cricoteka was not accidental. Kantor was one of the visual artists who contributed to our understanding of what is or constitutes

**IMAGES 4.2 AND 4.3** *Truposznica* on display in the Ethnographic Museum. Participants walking from the museum to the Cricoteka, Kraków, pulling 3D printer copies of *Truposznica*. Photograph courtesy of Michal Kobialka.

'difficult' in the historiography of staging difficult pasts. In his case, the problem addressed in his productions, such as *The Return of Odysseus* (1944), *The Country House* (1961), or *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* (1973), is not whether genocide can be put into images or performance. It is how it is and what kind of narrative is woven by a particular representational practice; what kind of empathy is prompted by the construction of a particular image; what kind of gaze and consideration are created by them; and what history is pushed into the background? These questions were relevant then and are equally relevant in the twenty-first century, if we are to save the past from degenerating into its own caricature and forgetting.

> In 'Milano Lessons: Lesson 1', Kantor noted:
>
> 1944. KRAKÓW. CLANDESTINE THEATRE. THE RETURN OF ODYSSEUS FROM THE SIEGE OF STALINGRAD.
>
> Abstraction, which existed in Poland until the outbreak of World War II, disappeared in the period of mass genocide. This is a common phenomenon. Bestiality, brought to the fore by this war, was too alien to this pure idea….
>
> Realness was stronger.<br>
> Also, any attempt to go beyond it came to naught.<br>
> The work of art lost its power.<br>
> Aesthetic re-production lost its power.<br>
> The anger of a human being trapped by other human beasts cursed<br>
> A R T. We had only the strength to grab the nearest thing,<br>
> THE REAL OBJECT<br>
> and to call it a work of art!<br>
> Yet,<br>
> it was a P O O R object, unable to perform any functions in life, an object about to be discarded.
>
> (1993b: 211)

While confronting us with Penelope, sitting in a chair, in the 1944 production of *The Return of Odysseus*, Kantor seemed to suggest that the chair – the real object – in a room destroyed by World War II not only existed outside of the dominant artistic conventions defining it as a theatrical prop, but also exploded the epoch out of its reified historical continuity. In other words, the staging of *The Return of Odysseus*, and the bodies as well as the objects in it, took place *in* the war reality (Kobialka 2009: 40–47). However, the event and the bodies as well as the objects were not *of* that reality, which stripped them of their historical and cultural signifying features. Bereft of their identities, these useless objects – a cartwheel smeared with mud, a decayed board, a scaffold spattered with plaster, or a kitchen chair – named themselves in this present, resisting 'by their form alone the course of the world' (Adorno 2002: 3004). They were formed in history without surrendering either to the sovereignty of what came before (the past) or to the implacable exigencies of the utopian performative (the future). The uncompromising radicalism of this

work refused to play along with the culture that had given birth to murder; or with the realm where genocide had already become part of the heritage archived in the photomontages that one does not want, or knows how, to see.

Remembering Kantor's words about the 1944 production of *The Return of Odysseus* and how lucid consciousness prompted by the objects found in the war zone breaks the contemplative attitude toward history and forces his audiences to face the forces that governed their and our time, let us return to the Cricoteka gallery space where *truposznica* landed. Here, in this gallery, *truposznica*, placed near The Trumpet of the Last Judgement, shared the space with the school-desks, a cross, a bed, a soldier's uniform, a frame, an oven with a chimney. These objects, which helped spectators grasp an epoch from small symptoms, crowded the space of Kantor's annexed reality, challenging a traditional concept of representation affirming life; of his Autonomous, Informel, Zero, Happening, and Impossible theatres, whose function was to depreciate the value of reality through exploring its unknown, thus far hidden aspects, or its marginalized, degraded, everyday objects; or of his theatre of intimate commentaries, in which his room of imagination, that was never stable and always in flux, became a storeroom for objects from past encounters and bio-objects, which created an indivisible totality with the actors (Kobialka 2009: 27–94). These objects, like the objects in *The Return of Odysseus*, were always determinate negations that would illuminate a continuous process of change; reveal the object's state of unrest and the consciousness of the present, which explodes the continuum of history; and intimate that, indeed, the world is present, and ordered, in each of the objects.

Kantor's impulse to collect and to archive the insignificant or useless objects, which ruptured the smooth surface of cultural and historical conditions, and the praxis of deciphering from the objects the forces that governed their and our epoch, have a potential to challenge the spectator.

Similarly, the 1967 *truposznica* by Wacek and the 90 3D printer copies of *truposznica* by Ziemilski are a reminder of that civilization and power regimes that rationalized the existence of the willing executioners, who turned human bodies into soap and ashes in Auschwitz some 40 miles from Kraków. Kantor's and Ziemilski's materialization of an object brings to mind Jean-François Lyotard statement in 'Music, Mutic' that '[t]he art of the work of art is always a gesture of space-time-matter' (1993: 217). The question is: what space; what time; and what matter? This gesture cannot be a semantic or ethnographic sign operating with a particular culture or an emphatic movement of the body. Neither is it a necroperformance striving to revitalize historical remnants; nor a Brechtian *gestus* conveying particular social attitudes adopted by the speaker toward other people (Brecht 1986: 104).

Looking at *truposznicas* in the Cricoteka gallery, I became aware that it is not the archival accumulation of the traces of a history in those objects that matters. Rather, these objects cancel their original function and are transformed into messages of protest. An object, associated with a specific activity, culture, language,

politics, and the labor of people, is also saturated with the experience of a world and, as such, identifies its complex, multilayered history. This object draws attention away from its immediate experience and use-value to its historiographic structure. It does so by exposing a differential character between the function imposed upon it and the newly acquired force of negation, which is also a critique of the politics of historical amnesia in Poland at the time of the growing nationalism and populism. *Truposznica* in the Cricoteka space, where it is surrounded by Kantor's objects and machines, is both *truposznica in* history (which references its World War II history) and *truposznica of* histories (which references its place in the past and today's troubling political environment in Poland).

Thus, as evidenced by Ziemilski's *truposznica*, the role of the work of art/performance is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to expose internal contradictions, including the contradictions within a historical reality. If such a possibility is tenable, Ziemilski may have escaped the trap of the 'pseudo-reality and actionism that aggravate [themselves] for the sake of [their] own publicity' (Adorno 1998: 291). He did so by establishing a different trajectory of thinking about art already intimated by Benjamin in his 1937 essay, 'The Author as Producer'. In it, Benjamin contends that the revolutionary strength of artworks consisted of their ability to test art for its authenticity and ability to exist contrary to the apparatuses of production and publication which aim at the aestheticization of reality. Brecht's Epic Theatre is offered as an example of a process, which counteracts the bourgeois and the established view of art by disclosing the factors and the forces which aestheticized the possible alternatives to the dominant status quo. Epic Theatre counteracts Aristotelian Theatre; montage of scenes counteracts a linear plot development of illusion in the audience. 'The task therefore consisted of an *Umfunktionierung* of the form' (Benjamin 2002b: 263) – of not reproducing the situation, but of astonishing the audience at the circumstances and conditions under which they functioned. This discovery of the conditions under which they functioned would take place through the interruption of the events unfolding before them and the paralysis of the audience's readiness for empathy.

I wish to argue that Benjamin's comments on the technique of a work of art and on an *Umfunktionierung* of the form, as well as Kantor's remarks about the forces, which governed a resurrected, post–World War II culture, are most relevant to the political and ideological conditions under which Ziemilski encountered the materiality of this object. *We Walked Just This Way*, if it is to be critical, should be viewed in terms of an *Umfunktionierung* of the form.

Dragging *truposznica* behind me and seeing it together with Kantor's objects surrounding it, I become conscious of the constellation in which *truposznica* bears witness to non-synchronous temporalities, which refer to bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak. I become conscious of the constellation in which *truposznica* bears witness to asymmetrical spatialities, which reveal contradictions between spaces of representation (the street used to

transport the dead bodies and the street today – the uncanny archive of the excarnated) and within a space of representation, where, though we can no longer see suffering bodies, a new distribution of the visible changes the landscape of the possible. Such might be the suspensive response to this brief inquiry into the 'difficult' in difficult pasts.

Ziemilski's performative action, *We Walked Just This Way*, ruptured the smooth surface of cultural and historical conditions that governed the past and the present epoch. The presence of these objects in Kraków unequivocally suggests 'that what is conscious could never prove so fateful as what remains unconscious, half-conscious, or preconscious. Essentially, it is a matter of *the way in which the past is made present*' (Adorno 1998: 100).

Thus, *truposznica's* movement between the Ethnographic Museum and the Cricoteka on 23 February 2019 evoked the idea of *truposznica* moving through the streets of Kraków during World War II and the Holocaust. Like Kantor's poor object from 1944, *truposznica* houses the past and the experience of the past. *Truposznica's* movement between the Ethnographic Museum and the Cricoteka on 23 February 2019 activated the tension between memories at once past and present. *Truposznica's* movement between the Ethnographic Museum and the Cricoteka on 23 February 2019 activated 'collateral' memories – the memories of the excarnated or the memories of those which refuse to fall victim to cold forgetting while digital addlement reduces them to just another horrific event "somewhere" – unless we are ready to accept that working through the past, as recent events in the world can attest to, will always inadvertently degenerate into the repetition of the worst. Kantor's 1968 'Emballage humain' (Human Emballage), presented at what used to be the Nazi party rally grounds in Nürnberg, is a reminder of an empty and cold forgetting trying to gloss over the conditions that engendered fascism. His words probe deeply into the current situation:

> It is to feel Tantalus' torment to see that we did not do
> What should have been done.
> That we did not act on what could have been acted upon
> That we did not protect that which could have been protected
> That we did not hide, wrapped and taken away
> That which could have been hidden—before the deluge came
> Before the first shot was fired
> Before a crow shrieked
> Before a car drover over the image of a human—
> We could have done other things, too, before….
> Will we be saved from re-membering, or?
> Perhaps, it was possible to destroy that which destroys us today
> It would have been necessary to push aside what is on our path today
> It would have been necessary to look at the rosy pictures again
> Deception, false comfort, and attempts to calm us down

And chase them away
It would have been necessary to wrap and hide
What is the most precious, so that we could have it again.
An artist protects and destroys, destroys and protects the feeling.
(Kantor 1968: np; author's translation)

Let me live with and walk with these awkward objects and collateral memories of the past in the present moment of working through the past. As Benjamin, Adorno, Kantor, and Ziemilski unambiguously state referencing the discourses in their times of awkward objects and collateral memories, only when the trauma of the loss of representational reality and the temporal duality of a construction of meaning are eliminated, is a new topography possible. In other words, a new topography of the possible can materialize only when the causes of what happened here and there have been worked through, as Adorno would have it. Since is not it true that:

> The past will have been working through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.
> (Adorno 1998: 103)

And this insight may be the mandate bequeathed to us all.

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# 5

# ON CRYING PERPETRATORS AND SUBVERSIVE LAUGHTER

## Trans-Affiliative Encounters inside ESMA Memory Museum

*Cecilia Sosa*

Two decades ago, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett proposed thinking of the museum as a 'theatre, a memory place, a stage for the enactment of other times and places, a space of transport, fantasy, dreams' (1998: 139). Since then, different elaborations have been produced to account for the provocative encounter between museums and theatres, including the note of alarm raised by Johannes Birringer, who argued that participation has become the current fetish in museums and galleries and visitors are just compelled to follow the script (2011: 48). In parallel, from the field of cultural memory, museums have been thought of as sites of political engagement where affiliate and empathic narratives can be created and displayed for public consideration and debate (Assmann 2014, Landsberg 2004, Arnold-de Simine 2019). Museums can be thought of as strategic spaces for developing affiliative narratives in response to traumatic pasts (prosthetic memories) and experiential and immersive forms of engagement for wider audiences, who might not necessarily be contemporary to those historical events.

With these intersectional considerations in mind, I analyse a series of performative interventions that took place in ESMA Memory Museum in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2019 under the title, 'Pasados Conflictivos en Escena' (Conflictive Pasts on Stage). These events were part of the project 'Staging Difficult Pasts: Of Narratives, Objects and Public Memory', where I was employed as a postdoctoral researcher. The first of these, *The Impossible Scene*, was a site-specific performative installation created by Polish visual artist and theatre director Wojtek Ziemilski. The second, *Cuarto Intermedio: Guía práctica para audiencias de lesa humanidad* (Recess: A Practical Guide for Trials Against Humanity), created by local artists, proposed a guided tour around the ESMA trials that investigate the crimes committed inside the Museum during the dictatorship. As part of our project, *Recess* could be performed in the very place of the crime for the first time.

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In this chapter, I will argue that through this event, our project managed to provide a grounded exploration of how contemporary theatre and performance, in collaboration with museums, might contribute to a more inclusive and transnational politics of memory and grief. The examination of the conflicting affects developed within these two performance pieces might also shed light on key challenges and future lines of research around museums, theatre, and transnational memory.

Performance Studies scholar Laurie Beth Clark argued that sites of trauma tend to function as 'counter-sites', cut-out mirrors from the reality where the particular social dilemmas of each society are played out with new intensity (2011: 69). Since its inauguration in May 2015, the Memory Museum located in the former Navy School of Mechanics (ESMA) has had a central role in this debate. The building, which functioned as an Officer's Casino during the dictatorship, was the largest of the 340 clandestine detention centres that operated in the country during the 1976–1983 dictatorship, in which 30,000 thousand lives were lost.[1] More than 5,000 men and women – mostly left-wing activists – were 'disappeared', after being held captive, and tortured in the building, eventually drugged and thrown alive from airplanes into the River Plate as part of the so-called 'flights of death'. Most of the bodies were never found. The Casino also had a clandestine maternity ward where the majority of the *c.*500 babies of pregnant political prisoners born there were stolen by military personnel, or families close to them, and raised under falsified identities.[2]

When democracy was recovered in 1983, the Navy School of Mechanics, maybe the most iconic symbol of Argentina's dictatorship, became a focal point for public anxieties. The ex-military compound is enclosed in one of the wealthiest areas of Buenos Aires comprising 45 buildings within 170,000 square meters. In 2004, the then recently elected President Nestor Kirchner promised to transform the site into a 'space of memory' (Menzulio 2013). The former Navy School now hosts national offices and archives, the headquarters of victims' associations, including two different sections of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the House of the Identity, which belongs to the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, the House of the Militancy, administrated by the Children of the Disappeared, the building *30 mil compañeros Presentes*, administrated by the Relatives of the disappeared, and *Memory Abierta*, a network of associations promoting memory and human rights. In addition, the space also hosts the Malvinas-Falklands war museum, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, and a vibrant cultural centre named after the disappeared writer Haroldo Conti.

The dilapidated Officers' Casino, the actual site of torture and incarceration, remained empty and largely untouched for years. In May 2015, a Museum of Memory was inaugurated in the building. After a decade of contentious debates, a team of experts led by art historian (and a survivor from 'Vesubio', another detention centre) Alejandra Naftal designed and installed the curatorial script. The team had to deal with a crucial fact: since the events that took place inside the former

Casino were, and still are, under legal investigation, the building itself could not be modified. With no objects to be displayed, the Museum's core collection remained the testimonies of victims and survivors. 'To enlighten without altering' was the curatorial tagline. When I first visited the Museum in December 2015, I was fascinated to see how the legal constraint, which dramatically narrowed the possibilities for intervening in the space, had shaped a unique curatorial process. A succession of different 'stations' guided by floating walkways, staged the historical and (para)military uses of the building, featuring a mix of survivors' testimonies and archival research. Removable platforms allowed visitors to circulate around contextual information, inscribed on information tablets. The building emerged as an 'unplugged' installation, a living, intelligent artefact of screens, holograms, and sounds that if disconnected would leave the building in the condition in which it was found in 2004.

Despite or because of these constraints, ESMA Memory Museum managed to emerge as a 'counter-site' of memory. Even during the 2015–2019 conservative government, in which Mauricio Macri's administration managed to actively deflect the public gaze from issues surrounding human rights violations, the museum became the stage where local political dramas were enacted on a small scale. As I have argued elsewhere, these social dramas have been mostly attached to the possibility of transferring the experience of mourning from the network of associations created by the relatives of the victims, which I have referred to as the 'wounded family' (Sosa 2014: 29), to the wider society.

In tune with other global memory institutions that have been trying to use live performance to provide 'an encounter' with a past that is 'brought to life' (Jackson and Kidd, 2011: 1), the ESMA Memory Museum sought to launch disparate exhibitions, forums, and activities to involve new audiences. One of these, *La visita de las 5* [The 5 o'clock Visit], became an established part of the museum's itinerary between 2016 and 2022. Every last Saturday of the month, special guests were invited to take part in conversation with the audience while touring around the museum. Survivors, relatives, lawyers, journalists, philosophers, artists, and comedians all interacted with museum visitors while promoting a novel engagement with the building. Each visit highlighted the liminal character of the institution from disparate perspectives, including those of women and lgbtq+ survivors once held there, contributing to new possible narratives of Argentina's difficult past.

The Staging Difficult Pasts research team's collaboration with the museum translated into two of these events: 'Conflictive Pasts on Stage' that took place on 30 November 2019 and 'The disappeared from Spain and Argentina: Art, Testimony, and Justice' on 25 July 2020.[3] The former marked an important milestone in the history of the museum: it was the first time that a visit was organised in partnership with a transnational project and, more importantly, the first time that a foreign artist could design and lead an artistic installation inside the museum.

## *The Impossible Scene* and the Crying Perpetrator

It is a Saturday afternoon. The audience is seated in the empty room inside the former Casino, waiting for the performance to start. *The Impossible Scene* can be read on the screen projected onto the wall. This area of the museum, known as 'The House of the Admiral', used to be the quarters of Ruben Chamorro. Chamorro was the Navy School's director between 1976 and 1979 and directly responsible for Task Group 3.3.2, who handled the kidnapping and incarceration of prisoners in the detention centre. The 'chalet' house had an independent entrance and its own intercom system, which still shows traces of past glamour. Chamorro invited his family to spend weekends in the house. 'The everyday and the sinister' is the curatorial text at the entrance, signposting that a regular family routine took place while next-door inmates would circulate up and down the stairs, chained and hooded as they were dragged to torture sessions.

Although it is a warm spring day outside, the room is dark and stiflingly hot. The benches are slightly uncomfortable, the close proximity of the audience means I can hear the breathing of the people sitting around me. A projection starts. Spectators can see the huge face of a man projected on the wall. He is in his 60s and his face looks contorted. The image is so large and detailed that it is possible to see his trembling chin and the length of the hair of his beard. As his wrinkles deepen through visible anxiety, he starts moaning and asking for forgiveness. His effort feels inadequate; tears are not coming. The image is upsetting. After a few minutes of projection, a short man in his 60s comes into the room and stands next to the screened image. Spectators soon realise that the person on stage is the same one whose magnified face is part of the footage projected onto the wall. The contrast is uncanny. While looking at his improbable alter-ego, the man explains to the audience: 'Crocodile tears. That's what I think when I think of a crying perpetrator. I feel manipulated'.

The silence in the room is awkward. The intervention marked the last day of Wojtek Ziemilski's three-week residency in the museum, which was the result of a collaboration with Argentine actor and theatre director Rubén Szuchmacher – the performer who stands before the audience. Today is Szuchmacher's first time in the building. One of his sisters was 'disappeared' during the dictatorship. Since then, he has been reluctant to enter the premises of the former detention centre, even when it was transformed into a museum.[4]

Suspended in the darkness, projected onto the wall of the former Admiral's house, Szuchmacher's face acts as the metonymic, virtual presence of the perpetrator in the room, part of the immaterial traces of the past hosted in the building. The man standing in front of his own image, says:

'What shall I do with this? I cannot watch this. He is not human. I don't want him to cry'.

The performer's inquiry – 'What shall I do with this?' – is effectively an articulation of the core question that the research team sought to address after approaching

Naftal to ask whether there were any particular areas she and her team found difficult to curate. Naftal's answer was straightforward: the basement, the kitchen, and the Admiral's flat. For his installation, Ziemilski chose the latter. He already knew that the two-bedroom flat, with its polished floors and independent entrance, had been left empty since the building became a museum.[5] There was one exception: a TV in the middle of the room played a fragment of a testimony from the 1985 trials on a loop from Andrea Krichman, a schoolfriend of Chamorro's daughter, who describes a visit to the flat when she was 11 years old.[6] For Ziemilski's intervention, the TV was removed from the room, but the performance managed to capture another relentless loop, one of a failed begging for forgiveness.

*The Impossible Scene* unfolded as a short performance of around 20 minutes, which consisted of an engagement between the performer and the projected image of the same performer showcasing an endless loop of attempts to cry, accompanied by the screen performer's cacophony of convoluted words without a linear or clear structure. The performance managed to create a 'fracture' in the audience's experience of the museum, articulated through a split. There were two characters in dispute with each other: the image of the so-called 'perpetrator' projected on the screen and the man standing in front of us who confronted the projected image: 'I do not need his tears. I need information and justice'. I had the sense of a growing tension radiating between the 'live' and the 'mediated' performance. A ubiquitous question appears to circulate through the room: might the distressing figure projected on the screen be claiming responsibility for the crimes committed inside the building? As a significant proportion of the audience already knew, those were crimes against humanity, crimes judged in civil trials.[7] In fact, those responsible for the crimes had never asked for forgiveness. Barely any of them had given details of the fate of the disappeared.[8] As such, the projected image of a perpetrator begging forgiveness and attempting to cry provoked two further key questions: is this fiction? And what or whose fantasies are being staged? While fracturing the figure of the performer, Ziemilski's intervention also fractured the present. Spectators were lost in time. The artifice of performance generated a disturbing sense of hide-and-seek where tears would not emerge. If the perpetrator was not able to cry, was it because he does not really repent? Why does repentance matter? When museums all around the world have insistently relied on emotions to provide visitors with a closer engagement with the past, why do the crocodile tears designed by a Polish artist in a southern corner of the world even matter? The title of the intervention – *The Impossible Scene* – stood as a provocation.

As some local critics have argued (Dandán 2019, Fernández Romeral 2019), the image of a crying *represor* (repressor), the traditional vernacular term for a perpetrator in Argentina, seemed to be recalling a redemptive narrative, a pious invocation which might even lean towards fantasies of reconciliation. Yet, this image contrasts sharply with what has emerged as Argentina's post-dictatorship imaginary. Since 1985, when the head of the Military Junta had to bear witness in civil court, the distinctiveness of the local transition had been attached to the possibility of justice,

the main path for the still resilient and powerful mantra *Nunca Más*: Never again (Crenzel 2011, Franco and Feld 2015, Salvi 2012).[9] Thus, the coerced attempts at regret coming from an improbable perpetrator, whose tears the spectators never manage to see, were likely to be received with disbelief and scepticism.

However, the fracture of time in the performance provoked reflections on an ethics of engagement, compelling the audience to critically assess the split of a performer who was at the same time the perpetrator and the entity who resisted him. The installation thus helped to create an empathetic bond between the viewers and the live performer who dared to confront this avatar. The figure of the perpetrator emerged as a fictional character, something that was not there before, a process that was activated through the performance, an amplified, confrontational relationship which had emerged as part of an immersive experience within the context of reception. The perpetrator emerged as a sort of *medium,* an artificially created presence that activated an affective platform to circulate the audience's response to those responsible for the dictatorship's crimes.

Within the process of preparing the public intervention at the museum, both the commissioned artist and the researchers involved in the project were part of complex discussions with the Museum's Director and the board. The latter, mostly formed by human rights organisations and relatives of the victims – fathers, mothers, and children of those held at the building during the dictatorship – were uneasy at the prospect of having an outsider, a Polish artist, and questioned the ethics of developing an artistic work in a former site of torture and profound trauma in Argentina. At that stage, Ziemilski had not yet decided what form his intervention would take. Even before arriving in Buenos Aires, he had been sketching ideas, including the possibility of working with augmented reality and some VR applications he mostly used to play with his three-year-old son. The idea of a duplicated perpetrator would only come later.

Ziemilski's replies to the board's questions involved sharing his experience of growing up alongside diverse forms of public commemorations of the Holocaust in Poland. As the only local researcher in the team, I reiterated the aims of creating transnational dialogues among different traumatic pasts that could resonate differently in Argentina, Chile, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom, the countries involved in our project. The board did not appear entirely convinced. The day of the performance, Naftal also acknowledged her own fears when welcoming the audience at the museum's entrance: 'Today's Visit is a risk. We have taken this risk on board for more people to come to the museum. Not only to experience this initiative but also more ways of thinking about what happened here and what is currently going on today in relation to that past'.

The meeting held with the board and the relatives of the victims left traces in Ziemilski's intervention. In fact, at the end of his piece, the figure of the perpetrator seemed to enact a broken refrain of conflicting, contradictory demands: 'I was the one who cried. We were the ones who cried. We, us – mothers, us – fathers,

us – sons, us – daughters, us – brothers, us – sisters. We cried. And believe me, now is not the time to cry'. Within that multi-layered narrative, the performer did not embody the voice of one exclusive victim, but rather the voices of the victims in plural. The script of the performer had been deconstructed and fragmented in a confrontational process, as if it was articulating all the ethical concerns raised by the different associations of victims during the meeting with the board. This contorted refrain spoke of a victim with no specific gender; it spoke about the pain of the victims as part of a conflicting flow of affects; it evoked various narratives that have been spoken towards the perpetrators: those that await some gesture of repentance and those who value only trials and legal attempts for justice. In sum, this was a bubbling of disconnected speeches full of impossibilities addressing not only Argentina's transitions but those beyond. As Szuchmacher muttered in response to the image of his avatar, the perpetrator: 'He shall cry/I don't want him to cry'. Responses to such figures cannot afford to be univocal.

Ziemilski's residency at ESMA Memory Museum attempted to dislocate some of the pervasive clichés circulating around the figure of the perpetrator. He looked for a wider, more fluid and humanitarian version of the ubiquitous character that seems to embody most of the traumas of contemporary Western societies. In particular, his response went beyond Chamorro's presence in the local aftermath of violence to a wider exploration around the perpetrator as a transnational figure, for whom 'no place should be a safe haven', as specified by the law of 'universal jurisdiction' (Assmann 2014: 554). The idea of 'no safe' space for criminals can be thought of as a legal elaboration of the activist actions of public shaming developed by H.I.J.OS, the organisation of the children of the disappeared in the 1990s, when justice was sidelined by the then President: 'Wherever they go, we'll look for them', they sang during the *escraches.*[10]

Ziemilski's attempt to find a global understanding of the figure was clear from the very first line of the piece: evoking 'crocodile tears', the live performer insisted on naming the man whose face was projected onto the wall as the 'perpetrator'. For the local spectators, particularly those who were familiar with the local human-rights vernacular, the term might have sounded out of place. Local scholars have insisted that the concept of 'perpetrator' was inherited from the Holocaust context, mostly associated with the Global North's traditions of trauma and genocide studies. Memory scholars close to our project suggested that words such as 'repressor' or even 'genocida' (genocide) might have sounded less intrusive within the Argentine context, closer to the local understanding of the traumatic past. Yet, Ziemilski wanted to keep the word 'perpetrator' in the script. In retrospect, I would argue that by imposing this term and, therefore, by exposing the audience to a word that was forged within a different context, *The Impossible Scene* generated audience discomfort, reflected also in the media reviews: 'The task of making visible the repentance of a repressor or a "perpetrator" – in the piece's own terms – left the uncomfortable feeling of being faced with questions as painful as [they were]

inescapable' (Fernández Romeral 2019). '"How to portray a perpetrator? How to look at them? […] Are they human? Are they monsters?", these are the persistent, uncomfortable, unbearable questions Ziemilski introduced' (Dandán 2019).

A survivor commented after the event that Szuchmacher did not seem to fit the stereotype of the perpetrator, typically working-class, heterosexual, and Catholic.[11] The explicit dislocation of narratives highlighted the sense of intersectionality created by his intervention. It shed light on different, contradictory, even 'multidirectional memories' of trauma, to use Michael Rothberg's term (2009), that nurtured each other through the performance. Indeed, that conflicting mix between the local and the transnational was also a response to Ziemilski's own fear of being accused of parachuting into the local landscape of trauma, as Vivi Tellas, an Argentine theatre director, insinuated to him in the weeks preceding the intervention. After the performance, Ziemilski confessed to the local media the fear of being involved 'in narratives of reconciliation that are not my own' (Fernández Romeral 2019). Some of these anxieties were visible during the meeting with the museum's board and were further solidified when many board members did not attend the performance. Traumatic pasts reclaim and mobilise intricate processes of ownership. Some of the relatives of those missing argue that sites of crimes should remain empty and only inhabited by the testimonies of the victims. After four decades of on-going democracy, those boundaries are still painful and difficult to navigate.

These concerns notwithstanding, I argue that something important happened that day. While highlighting that sense of discomfort, Ziemilski's installation also interrogated which traumas visitors, artists, and researchers could dare to claim ownership of. Above all, the intervention managed to accelerate the unattainable distances that communities have in relation to their own experiences of loss. As the artist argued during the post-performance discussion, the intervention was not for a call for action but rather a more modest 'window' to create a sense of 'disturbance in terms of how we see reality',[12] a response from someone who had been 'put at risk' and was therefore compelled to 'give an account of [him]self' in front of another (Butler 2005: 23). In her work on transnational memory, Aleida Assmann argues that 'trans' stands for 'transit', but also for 'translations', the cultural work of reconfiguring established national themes, images, and concepts (2014: 547). This was precisely what was at stake in Ziemilski's piece. His action was a form of exposure, a form of transit, and also an attempt at translation. In doing so, it provided a further opportunity to test how disparate narratives of victimhood, including Christian repentance and punishment, could intersect with each other in the context of a memory museum.

In that manner, *The Impossible Scene* managed to show to what extent audiences are always 'implicated' in processes of trauma and loss, using Rothberg's more recent terms (2018). By bringing the current artistic approaches to collective memory of the Holocaust into the Argentine post-dictatorship context, the intervention dared to speak to the wider discourses that have been widely circulated around the figure of the perpetrator in the Global North. At a time when

both Poland and Argentina faced internal contestations with regard to cultural and political memory – in the case of Poland, not only refusing to acknowledge broader societal implication in the Holocaust, but actively criminalising intimations of collective responsibility[13] – Ziemilski's intervention provided an opportunity to test how disparate narratives of victimhood and broader societal engagement with the past can intersect. In that manner, the installation advocated for a horizontal 'multidirectional' memory narrative, rather than a hierarchical and competitive one. *The Impossible Scene* enhanced dialogues across disparate cultures of memory and national contexts, evoking disparate resonances with other conflicts that could nonetheless come together under the contorted gesture of a perpetrator attempting to cry.

Fully immersed within the strange atmosphere of the performance, I wondered what the performative addition of the piece in relation to the audience and its relationship with the museum might be. During the piece, the spectators were addressed to stay in darkness, before the gigantic face of an unattainable Other, without knowing exactly what was finally at stake in the show. As part of *The Impossible Scene*, the figure of the perpetrator was also put on trial, mocked and ridiculed before the eyes of the audience. The very space of the museum became a 'counter-site' in which the very idea of what it means to be a spectator was interrogated. As part of the immersive character of this performance, I felt somehow 'implicated' within the complex mix of affect released by the dictatorship. In front of the magnified face of a perpetrator attempting to cry, I felt the 'risk' of being part of the scene, an *impossible scene*, in which binary answers no longer sufficed. In this openness to uncertainty *The Impossible Scene* proposed a perhaps new relationship between theatre and museums centred on that which cannot be known.

## Laughter Beyond the Legal

In order to encourage further transnational echoes, Ziemilski's piece ran in parallel with the performance *Recess: A Practical Guide for Trials Against Humanity,* a post-traumatic perspective on the legal trials taking place in Argentina. The piece had been performed since April 2018 in different venues, including cultural spaces and theatres, but never at the very site of the crime.[14] Once participants exited Chamorro's flat at the end of *The Impossible Scene* through the garden, they were guided back inside the museum to find themselves in the Golden Room's big auditorium, the area of the Casino where the high-ranking Navy Task Force developed kidnapping strategies during the dictatorship. Since the museum's opening, the Golden Room has become the last station of the tour and also the space for justice. There, a video-installation lists the names of the military personnel that were convicted as part of the on-going trials. One word is projected onto the walls, *Condenad*os (Condemned), while curtains come up and the light floods back into the room revealing an expanded time of justice. The visual installation highlights how transformative the legal process has been in the country.

When *Recess* was confirmed as part of the schedule of the visit, performers and curators had no doubts that the Golden Room should be the space of performance. Created together by the Argentine writer Félix Bruzzone, both of whose parents are 'disappeared', and the French-Argentine lawyer and writer Mónica Swaig, under the direction of the filmmaker Juan Schnitman, the piece introduces a fresh approach to the crimes committed inside ESMA from the perspective of a younger generation.

Bruzzone explains that the origin of the show was the invitation to write a chronicle of the series of trials that started in 2005 for a public judicial website that no longer exists.[15] It was then that he met Swaig, who did not miss a single session of the courts, and who Bruzzone describes as the 'joy of the trials'. Mónica makes a loud entrance on stage playing on her accordion an ironic version of the Peronist March, dedicated to the Argentine army general and former president Juan Domingo Perón. She also advocates the need for the trials in a nontraditional way. 'As in *Star Wars*, when we talk about the fight against impunity we also talk about trilogies: Memory, Truth and Justice', she argues in relation to the three main pillar demands of the local human rights' movement since the recovery of democracy. And she goes on: 'I even think that's why we ended up putting together a trilogy of ESMA trials: ESMA I, ESMA II and ESMA III. And in August 2018 ESMA IV was launched'.[16] Giggling circulates throughout the room when she proceeds to summarise the content and particularities of each trial. ESMA I 'was a trial with a single accused man for which there was no sentence because the accused died a few days before the verdict', she explains.[17] ESMA II 'was slightly larger', she goes on: 'There were 86 victims and 18 military personnel being accused, all those ESMA's famous repressors', she comments with irony. 'ESMA III was indeed a superproduction, the largest trial in the country'. By now, laughter inundates the room.

Later on, as if confirming to spectators that they are in front of a southern remake of a Hollywood saga, the two performers use plastic sparkling spades to embark on a crusade in the name of the Memory-Truth-Justice trilogy. *Recess* is all about playful repetitions and iterations. It drew on the particularly acid sense of humour widely developed by the generation of the Children of the Disappeared and their contemporaries in response to loss. As I have argued elsewhere, especially during the period of the Kirchnerist administrations (2003–2015), in which memory was transformed into a national commitment, the expansive reverberations of the comical turned out to be a powerful tool in cutting through the earnest approach that defined so much art that dealt with the disappeared in the aftermath of the dictatorship. The power of satire expanded the affiliative links among those who had not been directly affected by trauma (Sosa 2013: 84).

If trials contain a theme on classic drama – the circumscribed theatrical sphere where victims and perpetrators meet under the rule of the law – in *Recess* legal proceedings are light-heartedly grounded. Swaig and Bruzzone provide basic tips on how to survive in courts. Swaig pedagogically introduces a practical 'how to' slide presentation introducing shortcuts to the main judicial building, the security requirements, the toilets, the café, and what to do if you run into a torturer in the hall.

At some point, volunteers from the audience are called to the stage and invited to recreate a scene. There they are instructed to read the lines of a trial before an ad-hoc participatory court. Spectators-cum-participants assume the role of defence lawyers, prosecutors, judges, and witnesses. A screen shows archival footage of the televised 1985 trials. At that point, I felt a similar sense of duplication that was present during Ziemilski's intervention concerning the split of the performer, and yet here, the experience seems to be uplifting and almost restorative.

One of the volunteers re-enacts the testimony of one of the victims. The fragment does not have the poignant feel of many of the testimonies heard during the actual trials. There, witnesses have widely accounted for excruciating scenes of torture, rape, and slave labour. Women have reported giving birth hooded and handcuffed, before having their new-borns stolen from them. By contrast, the testimony read aloud in *Recess* omits any reference to torture. This is 'Luciano's case', a 23-year-old who was kidnapped from the streets, taken to ESMA, and eventually released without explanation. The volunteer who steps into Luciano's role recalls walking out of the detention centre and stopping the bus number 107 to find out that he had no money to pay for the ticket.

How can this selection of testimony be justified? If the atrocities that took place inside ESMA have become a recurrent and even an over-determined national trope, *Recess* subtly nods to that legal framework. The sense of absurdity suggested in Luciano's lines signposts the unbearable testimonies. And it does so without bringing back a sense of terror. Marianne Hirsch has argued that the main risk involved in the post-memorial structure of transmission is that descendants of traumatic events may have 'their own stories and experiences displaced and even evacuated by those of a previous generation' (2008: 107). By contrast, in *Recess*, audiences largely well-informed and educated in human rights are able to read between the lines, and eventually empathise with the victim's story. In this manner, the restaging of the legal process liberates an extra space for collective encounter. Even when abusive tropes and vilification are subtly avoided, the resonances of terror remain in the air, allowing singular responses from the spectators. After finishing their scripts, participants are applauded by fellow audience members. While re-enacting testimonies in public, *Recess* creates an intermediate zone in which the value of the evidence reveals itself as always fragmentary. Within this interstitial space, testimonies in particular, and experiences of victimhood in general, can be embodied and enacted differently. In this manner, *Recess* creates a participatory narrative about the trials; one in which anyone can step in and be the protagonist, if not the hero, of a collective crusade in the name of memory, truth, and justice without subsuming the position of the historical figure who gave testimony. And this provocative reactivation of the past becomes enacted through a simple gesture: the communal act of reading lines of legal testimonies together.

By bringing to ESMA Memory Museum the expansive resonances of the comical, *Recess* suggests that traumatic memories can at least be adopted and shared by others, even though those others are not necessarily direct victims of that difficult

past. As Henri Bergson argued, humour speaks the language of the specific community in which it arises (2008: 10). Even so, forms of trans-generational and transnational affiliation might also create certain unexpected forms of subversive encounters. The incorporation of creative curatorial strategies, including cinematic projections, asphyxiating atmospheres, glimpses of scripted and non-scripted participation as well as strands of comedy might allow participants to explore the resonances of grief in non-traditional ways. Humour becomes the medium of an experience of iteration, displacement, and contagion. While subverting conventional narratives of trauma, the piece challenges a sense of ownership over the past, propitiating a process of transference across wider publics. In doing so, *Recess* invites new actors to play their part.

## Conclusion: The Museum as a Site of Passage

While considering museums as critical sites of political engagement and spaces in which affiliative narratives can be created, our project wanted to explore the possibilities of creating novel and open debates in relation to staging difficult pasts from a transnational perspective. Local analysts have argued that the 'Conflictive Pasts on Stage' visit marked a before and after in the history of the ESMA Memory Museum (Tordini 2020). It might have been because of the unprecedented image of a perpetrator attempting to cry or because it brought laughter into a former concentration camp. It might also have been because of the strange overlap of temporalities that both performances generated throughout the building. In any case, the two interventions showed how the past cannot be easily 'museified' or 'put to rest' inside the museum. Rather, the resonances emerging from both performances revealed the extent to which the past remains open and can be collectively activated and elaborated by using novel

IMAGES 5.1 AND 5.2 Rubén Szuchmacher in *The Impossible Scene* (Wojtek Ziemilski) [left] and *Cuarto Intermedio* (Félix Bruzzone/Mónica Swaig) [right]: a double performance inside ESMA Memory Museum, November 2019. Photos: Cecilia Sosa.

tools and performative strategies. By hosting a collaborative transnational event, the museum showed its visitors how they are always involved in processes of loss that go beyond national borders. In this sense, 'Conflicting Pasts on Stage' became an opportunity to explore how public memories of different traumatic pasts could be explored collectively while still provoking different individual responses.

Both performances brought a new set of affective entanglements to ESMA Memory Museum. The pieces were curated to operate in conversation with each other. Whereas *The Impossible Scene* (re)created an asphyxiating, uncomfortable, and oppressive atmosphere, *Recess* was perceived as agile and playful. While the former confronted the incapability or insufficiency of tears, the latter sought to encourage laughter in the most uncomfortable of places. Together, they enclosed an affective circuit that gave shape to some of the most critical questions that memory museums face in contemporary times: not only whether the affects released by the curation of traumatic pasts generates and produces actions and responses in the present, but also whether these affective arrangements could be transformative even for audiences seemingly not directly affected by those traumatic pasts.

In their disparate forms, both performances managed to explore the performative turn in memory museums from a very local and distinctive position. For different reasons, they pushed ethical boundaries, generating a variety of anxieties among researchers, curators, victims' organisations, and publics. Those tensions not only concerned the way in which memory related to both national and transnational narratives of trauma, but also to global cultural themes such as repentance and forgiveness. The event at ESMA managed to act as a 'contact zone', to use James Clifford's seminal expression (1997: 210), in which the museum as an institution emerged as a 'site of passage and contestation'.

Either in tears or in laughter, the visit on that Saturday in November 2019 showed how a memory museum could recreate public experiences of being together in the aftermath of loss. By encouraging the resonances of different traumatic pasts to come together, the event also explored transnational possibilities of exchange and solidarity. Rather than seeking forms of closure, resolution, or reconciliation, the event provided an amplified stage upon which new trans-affiliative narratives could be formed. As this chapter goes to press, in September 2023, ESMA Museum was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in recognition of its importance 'as a privileged vehicle of the human rights policy of the Argentine State', as argued by UNESCO's officials (Menzulio 2023).

## Notes

1 This is the number referenced by the local human rights movement since the beginning of democracy.
2 By January 2023, the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo have managed to identify 132 of those abducted children.
3 The two events are documented on the website of Staging Difficult Pasts project: https://www.stagingdifficultpasts.org/museums-performance.

4 Szuchmacher's father was Polish and this connection was important in securing his collaboration with Ziemilski. The Argentine director was also attracted to the intervention that Ziemilski had generated for our project in Kraków. See Chapter 4 in this volume for a description of Ziemilski's 'We walked just this way' (2019).
5 There had been a curatorial idea for the area, featuring the living space with all the furniture placed upside down. The museum's board had rejected the design.
6 In her testimony, Krichman declared having seen a hooded woman through a window who was taken captive into the building. The testimony was considered to be crucial since it came from someone who was not considered a direct victim of the dictatorship's crimes (Goldman 2016).
7 By the end of 2022, it was reported that within the last 16 years, 1117 military personnel have been condemned for crimes committed during the dictatorship. 717 remain in custody, but only 168 are serving confinement in prison units (Bullentini 2022).
8 The exception was Adolfo Scilingo. A retired navy officer, he declared his participation in the 'flights of death', thus breaking the military's pact of silence (see Verbitsky 2005).
9 The historic importance of that initial trial has been reflected in the film *Argentina, 1985* (Santiago Mitre, 2022), which was awarded a Golden Globe in 2022 and nominated in 2023 for the BAFTA and Oscar for Best International Feature.
10 The *escraches* were festive and loud street parades in which the children of the missing denounced the impunity of the murders of their parents by signposting their presence and marking in yellow their homes in front of their neighbours (Taylor 2003).
11 As an openly gay artist of Polish-Jewish heritage, Szuchmacher was more likely to be associated with Argentina's political left; in other words, more closely aligned with the victims than the perpetrators.
12 The footage of the intervention and post-show discussion can be found in the Staging Difficult Past's website. See https://www.stagingdifficultpasts.org/pasados-conflictivos-en-escena.
13 For details of the Polish 'Holocaust bill' in English, see Tara 2018.
14 *Recess* premiered in April 2018 at the Casa Victoria Ocampo during the 'Expanded Literature' series organised by the Fondo Nacional de las Artes.
15 The re-launched trials in 2005 were not televised and received scant attention from the media. Therefore, human rights' sectors developed different strategies to publicise them, including the Children of the Disappeared's campaign 'Come to draw at the trials'.
16 *Recess*' unpublished script, author's own translation.
17 Swaig refers to Héctor Febrés who was found poisoned with cyanide in 'his two-room VIP cell', guarded by the Naval Prefecture, as described by the lawyer (*Recess*).

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# 6

# REFRACTING DIFFICULT PASTS

## Temporal Answers and the In-Between

*Rabih Mroué in conversation with Michal Kobialka*

*MK:* Let us consider your decades-long commitment to life as a visual and as a performance artist exploring some of the issues we are interested in concerning how narratives of difficult pasts are created, how theatre and museal practices offer insights into the role of the object in staging difficult pasts, and how narratives, objects, and embodied encounters expand our understanding of difficult pasts in transnational cultural contexts.[1] I am thinking here about *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003), *Pixelated Revolution* (2011), *Riding on a Cloud* (2013), or *Before Falling Seek the Assistance of Your Cane* (2020), which you refer to as non-academic lectures; and *Again We Are Defeated* (2018) and *Swept Under the Carpet* (2022), which were gallery installations. I wonder if, using some of the pieces you presented in *Swept Under the Carpet,* you could talk about your critical approach to history in general, and, of course, your public and private history of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) in particular. How is history staged in these pieces? How to write *about* history? How to *write* history?

*RM:* There are not just *some* layers but many layers in your questions. First, I want to clarify something about some of the works you mention. Whereas *Pixelated Revolution*, *Before Falling Seek the Assistance of Your Cane*, and *Inhabitants of Images* are non-academic lectures, I do not classify *Looking for a Missing Employee* and *Riding on a Cloud* as such. The non-academic lectures have the same set up on stage. *Riding on a Cloud* I would say is a theatre piece and I insist on this, because my concern is to raise a debate about *what* is theatre and how we make theatre today. I ask: What is the relation between the actor/actress and the character he/she is playing, or between representation and the presence/absence of the body on stage? The

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non-academic lecture raises similar questions about the body on stage as well as the questions about the relationship between the lecture and the performance and the academia. What is a lecture? What is a performance? What is a lecture performance? You find the traces of this debate everywhere today because visual artists and performers are finding a 'non-academic lecture' to be interesting as a form.

To draw attention to these questions, for example, I used to present two works as a double bill on stage: first, I would do *Pixelated Revolution*; then I would leave the space to my brother, Yasser, who would come to the stage, which was not changed, and perform in *Riding on a Cloud*. The first one was a non-academic lecture and the second was a theatre work. Each in its way, because they have a different structure, reveal how performance emanates from visual arts practices, experimental theatre and traditional forms to address my questions and reveal its vitality in contrast to the other form.

And now to come to your question about history. For me, I am interested in the past, but I do not go to the past because I would like to bring it to the present. It's actually because the past is shadowing into the present time, and at the same time, it is about how we can think about the future when we go back to the present. We live in the present time, and this is something very intriguing – how quickly the present becomes the past tense. In 2011, I wrote *Pixilated Revolution,* and I performed the first version in Beirut. It was a very quick response to the Syrian revolution, which had started in the same year. As I continued to perform this, I struggled to keep my non-academic lecture in the present tense. I wrote it in the present tense because I believed in the Syrian Revolution, and I wanted to push this and keep it in the present time. I still perform this piece – the only thing I have changed is a move from the present to the past tense. There was a moment when it became obvious that the revolution now belongs to the past. But I still believe that performing it today resonates with our present time, especially with the demonstrators shooting the images of today's street protests…

*MK:* Before you continue with this question about history, I am intrigued about the difference in time. After *Pixilated Revolution*, you created an installation at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis called *Again We Are Defeated*. Could you talk about these two pieces in conversation? What is this relationship between hope for victory in a revolutionary struggle and in the lecture or in the installation when we are only faced with the phantoms of the dead?

*RM:* This is complex for me, but let's try. There is something in Lebanon and the region that is related to justice. The majority of murder cases are unsolved. There are very few cases where we know what happened and a sentence was passed by the judges – they are the exception to the rule. The title *Swept Under the Carpet* refers to this – these murder cases disappear

from view; we forget about them since they are already replaced by the new cases. We think that we forget…. But this is not true. They remain with us—in our head, our body, our emotions, in our subconscious. They are repressed in us. It is exactly like if you delete something on your laptop computer; it is deleted, but if you dig around, you can find it somewhere. We are haunted by these cases and the ghosts of the victims who are seeking justice. We, the living, bring our dead into our world to continue fighting, to use them as weapons. They have a big presence in our daily life, maybe because of social media, the internet, and the spread of images.

If I perform *Pixilated Revolution* over a decade – from 2011 to 2021 – it is not to tackle what has happened in the past as much as to talk about the present time and the future. The performance comes back in a different way, in a different context, and also as a different concept. But we carry the dead with us all the time. In regard to your questions – How to write about history? How to think about history – this is related to the work of Ibn Khaldun, an Arab sociologist, philosopher, and historian, and also to Walter Benjamin, who does not deal with history as an effect and reaction. In his time, Ibn Khaldun's method was revolutionary. The writing of history was based on the oral transmission; on the process of going back from one person to the next until you come to the origin; to the source which is undisputable, like, for example, the Prophet Mouhamad or God. Today, there is a tendency to place temporal or spatial markers in history – for example, September 11 is such a marker, which divides the time into the before time and the after time. I do not deal with history in this way. I do not see a 'before and after' of the explosion in Beirut. No, there are many traumatic moments in our personal histories, and their intensity is different in each person's history.

Writing history is about the analysis of the relationships between these traumas and our complicity, between humans themselves, between humans and objects, between humans and technology, or between humans and our planet, etc. One should look at these relations, develop a hypothesis, and then bring a theory or a concept. This is completely different method than understanding history as an action and reaction – like, I slapped you then you slapped me back and so on. This is how the journalistic media try to deal with things, as if writing that the Syrian protestors did this action, so the regime had to react in this way and then the Hezbollah and the Iranian and the Russians responded and so on. This is not the way to write, read, or to understand history. There is a relationship between political, economic, social, and religious factors.

*MK:* In *Swept Under the Carpet*, we are encountering both images and objects that we do not necessarily arrange in a cause-and-effect narrative, but this encounter with those images and objects forces us to resonate with them. I am thinking about *Image(s), Mon Amour*, which for me is an immediate reference to *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and *As If Seen By a Bird Standing On Top Of a Cow*. Those two works offer an encounter with objects and images which forces us to think about history in space in a completely different manner.

*RM:* *Image(s), Mon Amour* is a work that is overexaggerated and overexposed with images of wars. They are collages that I have developed over many years, but not continuously. I leave it and come back to it. I cut out images from the media and place them in – not in an aesthetic or narrative mode – next to each other. Putting these images together, there is a saturation of war, and they create something else. You see the catastrophes, but together they are not about one catastrophe or one war, but they become like an epic. As if you are falling into the abyss. I did not do this on purpose. Rather, this is what I am encountering in my everyday life – I am bombarded with these images. One image might seem to delete the previous one, but they are not deleted, they are there. These images are posted and circulated on social media, and it makes me wonder how we can bear this life any longer? We delete them, or repress them, in order to continue our life. We see these images and then we just go to work or to meet a friend or a lover and we forget about them. The effect lasts a few hours, a day, and then it goes. This is a human thing, which is good (Image 6.1).

In *Image(s), Mon Amour*, these images from Lebanon wars, and then from Syria and all the violent images from all over the world that I thought I had forgotten unexpectedly came back to me fragmented and like flashes. As such, I put them together as a collage without a chorological order. This refers to *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and a phrase by Marguerite Duras – the protagonist says to his lover that she has not seen anything in Hiroshima. By looking at these images, we do *not* see; maybe they actually cover what is really happening there, although they are violent, although they pretend that they want us to see. These images hide; they do not reveal.

In *As If Seen By a Bird Standing On Top Of a Cow*, I used found footage of a drone showing a bird's eye view of the city of Homs in Syria, which has been completely destroyed. I flipped the way of seeing – it turns upside down. It is not the bird's eye from the sky, but rather from the ground looking up and seeing the destroyed city. So, the visitors become the bird. It is like hell in the sky, so we see history, the event, from a completely different angle (Image 6.2).

To make a comparison between these pieces: one is saturated by images and the other one has a single image, although it is a moving image, it is one event. *Image(s), Mon Amour* shows a lot of events mixed up together and it is non-linear and mixed up in a loop. It is a very long loop, so you do not notice when it comes back; it is like an endless scroll. It is projected on a huge screen and it scrolling as if it is an endless fall.

*MK:* On the one hand, you are offering a scroll of history in which the images are superimposed on top of the other, so it becomes like transparent negatives of various different images. But with *As If Seen By a Bird Standing On Top Of a Cow*, you really force me to be in a spotlight. If with *Image(s), Mon Amour* I can somehow be a bystander watching the scroll of history, with the other piece I am in the spotlight looking up and there is no escape. There

**IMAGE 6.1** *Image(s) Mon Amour*, 2022. 15-minute video in loop projected vertically. Image courtesy of Rabih Mroué.

is a different form of representation that takes me back to your fascination with the eye of the camera and the person shooting at the Syrian protestor in the *Pixilated Revolution*. This was the double idea of shooting with the gun and with the camera. In these examples, you have the double image of seeing the scroll of history and being seen in the spotlight.

*RM:* I use the spotlight in this work as it is used in the theatre, where lights are on the performers who stand on stage and to be seen by the audience. So in the exhibition, the spotlight attracts the visitor to come towards it. She/he stands in the light and looks up inside the tunnel. At the end of the tunnel, there is a destroyed city. For the visitors of the exhibition, who are standing outside the light, whoever steps into this spotlight becomes a performer and part of the work.

In *Pixilated Revolution*, there is another tunnel, but it is horizontal, not vertical. In this piece, you see a sniper with his rifle aiming at the lens, which means aiming at us as spectators. We see the rifle and the eye of the sniper. It zooms in and blows up the image of the eye of the sniper, and it is so close that in the reflection of his eye, we see ourselves as the protestor who is trying to record what is happening with the mobile phone. This was the eye contact in reality between the victim shooting the event and the sniper. If we blow up the surface of the eye, then we see the reflection of the face

**IMAGE 6.2** *As If Seen By a Bird Standing On Top Of a Cow*, 2018. 4:3 monitor – in loop – inside a tube hanging from the ceiling with a spotlight on the floor. Image courtesy of Rabih Mroué.

facing the eyes and if we again blow up the face and the surface of the eye of the protestor, then we see in it the reflection of the face of the sniper. It is a perfect loop, except it is not a loop at all. It is a *mise en abyme*, feedback that goes on for infinity: the victim, then the killer, then the victim, and so on and so forth. If we watch this, we are stuck between two mirrors – we create this infinite feedback. We need something to break this *mise en abyme*, because it is hypnotising. There are two possibilities to cut this circuit: either the protestor understands what is happening (that the shooter wants to kill him and he runs away) or the soldier's bullet will kill him. As I argue in the non-academic lecture, it takes time for the spectator to understand that this rifle aiming at him really wants to kill him. For this reason, the sniper is faster and is able to cut this feedback loop first. This intrigues me because the victim is always off camera – the eye contact is between the rifle and the phone, and the killing is documented by the camera while death is happening off camera, so we can't see it. But death is present by its absence. And this is why these images are very intense.

*MK:* This all has to deal with staging difficult pasts, whether it is a relationship between the Syrian protestor and the shooter or the scroll of history. In *Pixilated Revolution*, you show how the history that is happening today is

presented to us through mediated images from social media, and the interruption that may be necessary for us to realise the degree to which those revolutions are no longer emancipations from existing conditions, but it is registering what we do not want to see or cannot be seen. You speak about the way representations cover up the existing conditions; in a sense, they commodify the existing conditions and show them in a different way.

In one of the pieces, you talk about who is afraid of representations – I wonder if being afraid of representations is what history has become, if history is pixilated so that we look *not* to see; we live *not* to live; we write history *not* to deal with history.

*RM:* So it is like *Again We Are Defeated*, which is related to the title of the work we discussed before. In *Eye Versus Eye*, which is part of *Pixilated Revolution*, I wanted to see the face of the killer to know his identity, his name, to bring him to trial, to be responsible for what he is committing. There are these unsolved cases that are just put to the side, so this is why I blow up the image of the soldier who killed or who shot the protestor – to see his face. But I failed; when we magnify, we don't see anything, we see a face without features. And even if we see his face or learn his name, it is connected to authoritarian or religious systems in which the law is always suspended. So, there is no justice and they hide behind the excuse – 'It is not me, it is the regime, the Party. It is not my responsibility'. In this sense, yes representations become pixelated, blurred and abstract.

*MK:* You are proposing a state of unrest. If representation is a way of stabilising things, then how do we interrupt that moment of stabilisation?

*RM:* Yes, to interrupt, to stop, to see properly. If we can look closely at just one thing, like in *Looking for a Missing Employee*, which goes into the detail of the detail. In all of these works, I take one incident, very local and very precise, not to go to the general. This precise incident can take us to bigger questions. This is my problem with the media, who are generalising things. They pick one victim and create an icon, which denies all the other victims. This victim then hides all the other victims. In the details of the detail, everyone can find something of their own experience. I will deal with something specific that concerns me personally and I will share it with you, which will make you think of something else that you know better than I do and you will share it with me. It is about sharing.

In *Again We Are Defeated*, this work is about murdered people whose cases are unsolved. I draw from daily newspapers people who have been killed in the wars I know or have followed in Lebanon or Syria. What happens to their corpses? When they take them to be buried, they carry the corpse, but they forget the shadow. I started to draw the shadow. I am not trained as a painter, and I do not know how to draw. I was drawing only the shadows and then the corpse started to take shape. It was fascinating how my pencil started to make

the illusion of a corpse. I produced hundreds of these drawings, sketches, which are meant to be shadows of people that are still haunting us. I forgot their names, but they are still there. I failed to bring them justice (Image 6.3).

*MK:* I am intrigued by the hundreds of images of people who are dead, who have disappeared and who have died, and the records are non-existent. Multiplying their presence as the phantoms of history seems to me to be your act of keeping those bodies in a state of unrest, so they prevent us from normalising the unthinkable. Could you say more about this installation and the title you chose for that particular piece?

*RM:* The title is important for me, because there is this word *again*. We go on defeated and then *again,* we are defeated. It is Sisyphean: we will go on and go on; we don't care that we are defeated. So, there is this hope implanted in it. This defeat will not make us stop. We will continue and go on with life, with our struggle, and dealing with our past and how we will continue the future with this past. In terms of 'unrest', it is a question of how you disrupt the flow of events, or of politics. There are some topics we take up in order to freeze, to take a breath, to contemplate what is happening. The Angel of Walter Benjamin. Like the Angel, who would like to stay, awaken the dead, we want to stay still, to look at the ruins and piling wreckage, but something pushes us away, and propels us into the future as time goes on. I have said before: I am not interested in the past as much as I am interested in the future and in the present time, which is fleeing from our hands. We pretend to prolong the present time, but in fact we are chasing after it.

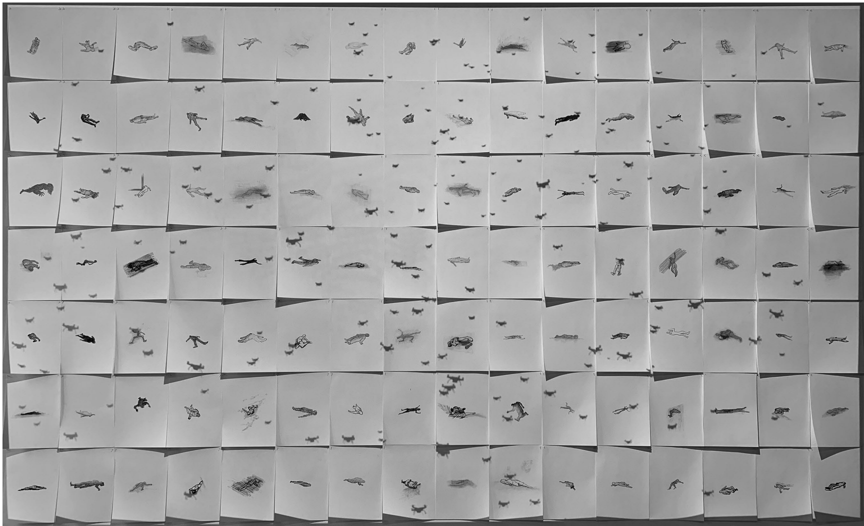

**IMAGE 6.3** *Again We Are Defeated*, 2018. 112 drawings on paper with a video projection on a loop. Image courtesy of Rabih Mroué.

*MK:* If in his essay on existentialism Jean-Paul Sartre says, 'that a human being is condemned to be free,'[2] are you suggesting, as evidenced by, for example, *Swept Under the Carpet* or *Again We Are Defeated*, that we are 'condemned to hope'? In a way, to stop hoping would be the ultimate defeat that perpetuates the status quo, which you want us to disrupt. In your work, are we condemned to be free according to Rabih Mroué?

*RM:* I cannot claim this, but it is an aim, or it is a hope. We are 'condemned to hope' – I agree with this. It is the ultimate defeat when we lose hope. But can we totally lose hope unless we are completely desperate and prepared to commit suicide?

*MK:* Is that a question or is it a provocation to me?

*RM:* It is a provocation, but not to you. Maybe to me as well. I provoke myself in my works. I do not want to provoke my audience, though I provoke myself all the time. In the work I contradict myself. I betray myself also, I betray my beliefs in the work that I portray to the audience. It is because I want to provoke myself – I want to put myself at risk. And I want to fail, and to be defeated. And I am *always* defeated, to be honest. Look at what me and my generation have achieved. I see the new generation and wonder what they have from what we have done. Maybe nothing. It is sad and it is fine at the same time.

*MK:* I want to go back to this one word you mentioned, *betrayal*. In a way, is not a betrayal a form of seeing something as if you are seeing it for the first time? If I betray, it means I betray what has been normalised. And I see that betrayal in your work when you repeat certain images, or you repeat certain themes, but that betrayal, or repetition, is a form of seeing it in a new light. In *Swept Under the Carpet* you use parts of *Again We Are Defeated*, but is it the same as the installation at the Walker in 2018 where you had those hundreds of images, or is it that you are betraying your work by *staging* it in a different way?

*RM:* It is a betraying of time. When you think about things you have done and you bring them back, it is to be sceptical about them or to bring them as proof. I don't bring them back to say, 'You see, I did this 10 years ago and I was right!' Maybe I bring them back to say, 'I was not right, but I was not necessarily wrong'. Time is going on and it changes us, our thoughts, our perceptions. Things and ideas are not fixed especially when we are talking about interpretations and analysis. I need to think about it again. To reframe, to rethink things, and to put them in a different concept, context, to ask different questions. For example, the eye contact in *Pixilated Revolution* or the repetition in *Three Posters* with the martyr repeating the recording of his testimony – when I bring these back, I think them in a different way.

In 2000, Elias Khoury and I presented *Three Posters*, a performance/ video, which was about the suicide operations committed by the Lebanese National Resistance Front between 1982 and 1987 against the Israeli military occupation of Lebanon, and about the resistant fighters' testimonies that they had been recorded on VHS tapes before embarking on their mission. This resistance front was founded by Lebanese communists and secular parties and had nothing to do with Islamic fundamentalists.

In this performance, we show a videotape that contains different takes of Jamal Sati's testimony. We tried to understand why he had repeated his testimony several times in front of the camera.

As in *Pixelated Revolution* and in *Swept under the Carpet*, I was trying to recognise the face of the killer and to think about the absence or presence of his victim, who is not in the image, but whose presence is very strong. How do we bring the killer into the image without doing what a film director does by taking the same shot multiple times – I don't have this privilege. I cannot place my camera in different locations in order to see the victim better. So how will I bring the victim to the image, conceptually, without being able to shoot it from different angles or edit the shots? I have only *one* point of view – it is the point of view of the victim, or it is the one point of view of the killer. How do we show the different angles without changing the angle of the camera? With these different works, they may answer some of our questions, but later on, we will see this is not the answer.

Coming back to *Three Posters*, the performance questions both the rhetoric of the role of/being a martyr by criticising the official narratives, which encourage these ideologies, and how the video recording of Jamal Sati's presence suspended between life and death creates an 'in-between' in a non-place. That is, the repetition of the martyr's testimony is a sign of a double desire of postponing death and at the same time of withdrawing from life. The performance represents a moment between fiction and truth by offering the spectator a voyeuristic view of, on the one hand, a performance and, on the other, of a real suffering. Indeed, what is this 'in-between' between truth and representation in the non-place of the mediated image-scape?

I would like to conceptualise something that I call the 'in-between'. This is a space-time that does not resemble the space-time we are used to in the world of the living. And it is not the world of the dead. This is the in-between of these two worlds, which has different ways of being, and we do not wilfully enter this time-space – it is against our will, we find ourselves there. I have never been there, but I noticed after many years of working and seeing the *mise en abyme* that I talked about and the endless repeating, repeating, repeating, but it is not a repetition. It looks to us in our world as if time is linear and space is measurable – it is not this, but being in another time and in another space that we don't know. We can try to understand, but it is somewhere else, a threshold that is invisible. I am not sure this is a space you can come back from, so when the protestor and the killer are there, I don't know if they come back to the world of the living or to the world of the dead. And if they come

back to the world of the living, I am not sure they will return as they were or not. I think when we come back from this in-between, we are completely different. It is like someone in a coma; this is the state of the in-between. It is a different time and different space, and when someone comes out of a coma, she/he forgets its language and its logic and the only way to describe it, is to use the language that the living person knows and has experienced.

*MK:* This brings me to Ernst Toller's *Masse-Mensch* (Man and the Masses, 1923). In Scene 6, there is an open space in which the human subject is meant to review him or herself and it does not belong to the victim or to the perpetrator. There is no linear time in this in-between space – time is folding back up on itself. It continuously vibrates and is in the state of unrest. It cannot be pacified. It tenaciously negates what you are, who you are, and what you are thinking. It cannot be tamed by the normative categories offered by the status quo. Do you think that thinking about this 'in-between' conditions your modality of expression? So it is not necessarily that you are a visual artist, as in putting things in a gallery using theatrical means, nor are you a theatre artist, using the tools of the visual artist to illustrate something. Do you find yourself also in this in-between performative space where you are not shackled by any conditions, allowing you to materialise your thoughts?

*RM:* I would differentiate between this concept of the in-between that I have seen in these repetitions of the martyrs and the eye contact and the in-between of me as an artist and theatre maker. Yes, I am in-between, but I am also not – it is this blurry space of a situation where you do not know the borders. You are in a way trying to be there without seeing the borders, or playing with them, making them vanish, to be in this territory that is undetermined. I am also sometimes defiant and will say, 'No, this is now theatre and *not* an academic lecture' or 'This is *not* theatre but a lecture'. I will be provocative in this sense because I want to ignite a debate that will change me and others who work with these mediums. I want to challenge artists who think theatre is still like this or like that, who are stuck to traditions in these normalised spaces, to stereotypes and norms. How can you break this? Sometimes provocation is a way, which I use when I decide to name things like, 'This is theatre!' I don't mind if you tell me it is *bad* theatre, but I insist it *is* theatre. If you tell me it is not theatre then you are cutting the possibility to discuss, to dialogue, to debate, and to reflect on what is theatre, what is art, what is an object of theatre, what is an object of a museum, etc. The reflection on these different mediums is so important because I don't know where I am – at the same time, I am lost and I am not lost. I am not lost completely, because declaring being lost would make me irresponsible – for example, if you critique me then I can just say, 'Oh, I am lost', and whatever you ask me I could just respond, 'I don't know'. I am lost and I am not lost, means that I am *responsible*. I have answers, but they

are not definitive answers – they are temporal answers, or they are postponing the conclusions. We have to defer the time for conclusions – just like this in-between, we withdraw from life, but defer death at the same time.

*MK:* In *Riding on a Cloud*, your brother works with you. What is really fascinating is that the piece is a profound mediation on the complex relation between his memory and your memory, his fiction and your fiction, but also the political reality you both shared because of the incident you describe. Can you talk about how you view this relationship between memory, fiction, and political reality?

*RM:* To briefly summarise the incident you mention in this piece: it is the true story about my brother Yasser, who was shot in the head by a sniper during the civil war in Lebanon in 1987. After hearing about my grandfather's assassination, he ran to my grandfather's house and while he was crossing the street, a sniper shot him. Thus, there were two dramatic tragic events on the same day. Fortunately, my brother survived, but he was partially disabled for a long time. He became aphasic, so he lost language, the ability to speak, to write, etc. He also could not understand you very well. He had to go back to zero to learn language. Language was the key for me to build this theatre piece in which Yasser is playing the role of Yasser, but it is not him. This is the first complexity in the piece. The actor is playing his own role, but he is an *actor* playing the role. The representation goes to the extreme. If I play Hamlet written by William Shakespeare and directed by someone else, there is the Hamlet Shakespeare wants, and there are clues for this in the text and in the history of Shakespeare at that time, and then there is the director's concept – how to be and play Hamlet today – and then there is the actor, who brings something from their own biography, reading, understanding of Shakespeare. There are these three and then a fourth level, the character of Hamlet. So, with *Riding on a Cloud*, what if Shakespeare is the life of the actor, and the director is the brother who wrote about the live actor, and the actor is playing his own role? Yasser is playing these three things, only to the extreme. This is why people are sometimes confused and they say, 'Oh, but he is not acting'. He *is* acting, but, coincidentally, it is the role of himself. I like this confusion and I push it. Sometimes, when I stage plays, I use the real names of the actors, which creates the question: what is the limit between reality, real-life fiction, theatre, and representation? I do not want to put my brother Yasser on stage and then have the audience feel empathy or pity for him or feel sad and shed tears. I do not want the piece to be emotional. I want to do it *for* him, but also to bring all my questions and my concerns in art, in theatre, in philosophy to this piece, in collaboration with Yasser. Language was the keyword because it is with language that we can formulate abstract ideas, we can ask questions, we can write poetry, and we can talk about themes like democracy and justice. How to address Yasser's story, which has a lot of pain in it, and go to the level of the abstract, of ideas, of questions? When Yasser started to learn to speak and to

write again, he succeeded in being a poet and published poetry books. He beat the bullet and the sniper who shot him by becoming a poet, even with his broken language, with his broken words. This is what I put on stage.

*MK:* The question that comes to my mind while listening to you is: what does it mean to take a trauma and abstract it? Very often, the immediate impulse is to take a trauma and present it on stage with a level of hyper-realism or realism. What you are suggesting in *Riding on a Cloud* with Yasser's condition is that you take a trauma to the level of abstraction. Is this abstraction a mode of materialising trauma in a way that escapes the conditions that define what trauma is for us today? To what extent does abstraction allow us to look at that object, trauma, in a different universe that cannot be conquered by that sniper who tried to kill your brother?

*RM:* Yes, this is the question of how to present and represent the story of Yasser, not as a victim. It is the trauma that makes us victims and makes the focus the horror of what happened. The horror is not interesting at all. I am not pointing a finger to say, 'You are the murderer and the one who is responsible for what happened to my brother!' To go to the level of abstraction goes beyond 'being a victim' or pointing a finger towards a perpetrator. It is to go to the level of art and philosophy and to think, and to ask questions. This is not about *answering* questions or making conclusions. To contemplate abstract things, like what it means for a person to stop dreaming, which happened to Yasser. Is it good to dream or not to dream? I have no answer, but I think it is a very good question. What happens to literature or poetry or theories based on dreams if I do not dream at all. Not if I dream and then forget my dreams, but if I really don't dream. Yasser posed it as a question to the audience. He did not pose this as a victim, but as a question at an abstract level.

I am not interested in the trauma. I made a piece of work called *The Crocodile Who Ate the Sun* [2015], which would become part of the work *Before Falling Seek the Assistance of Your Cane*, which was about a leaflet dropped by an Israeli warplane over Beirut during the 1982 siege. This leaflet followed a truce and asked the inhabitants to leave immediately before bombardment. I had the leaflet in my hand in Beirut when I was 15 years old – a time in my life when I was young and I was not afraid, so I just put it in my pocket and continued on. I remembered this leaflet after many years and decided to make replicas of it. I invited friends to visit me and I placed the leaflet on the table without saying anything. When they saw it, they started telling me stories from their memories from that period. Some beautiful memories and others that were horrible and tragic. The piece of paper, a replica, not the original, evoked the past, the ghosts of the past. This speaks directly about the trauma of the 1982 besiege, which remains unresolved.

There is something hidden in this piece – it is not true that I made replicas of the leaflet, and it is not true that I invited friends over. I also claim that my

friends each treated the paper in a different way – they destroyed it, or they left it behind. Afterwards, I took pictures of the leaflets and made these into an artwork with the name and age of each of the friends who handled the piece of paper. It is all fictional; it is all not true. But it is a question about trauma itself – how do you make work about trauma? When people say my work is about war and about trauma, it is not true. It is a lazy reading of my work. I made this piece to tickle the people who read my work in this way (Image 6.4).

*MK:* How does this work, in which you lie to us about the leaflet, contrast with *The Crocodile Who Ate the Sun* and *Before Falling Seek the Assistance of Your Cane*, which is the last section of a piece called *Probable Answers That Are Still Far from Any Conclusion*?

*RM:* I do not use the word 'lie', but rather 'fiction', which is also related to memory.

*MK:* Or mnemotechnics.

*RM:* Yes, also. Most often when we write history, we are subjective and in this sense fiction intermingles with reality. It is dangerous when we try to distinguish what is *really* real and true from what is fiction or lies. This is problematic. I do not make a dichotomy between truth and lies, or truth and

**IMAGE 6.4** *Crocodile Who Ate the Sun*, 2015. Set of 12 19 × 28 cm photos with text. Image courtesy of Rabih Mroué.

fiction, or reality and fiction. I would put them together and make them one reality, the reality that includes both truth and fiction. This is an interesting way to try to understand the Other, or to understand the events, or to understand history as well. In this sense, *The Crocodile Who Ate the Sun* and the leaflet – this is not a lie to cheat the audience. At the end, I would not laugh at the audience and say, 'Oh you believed me!' No, it is not a matter of believing me or not. This is not the question. It is true that if I were to show this leaflet from 1982 to anyone who was in Beirut at that time, it would evoke memories in them. So, it is not completely fake, or fiction, it is imagination. It is true, but I do not need to prove it.

The other side of this work is not about this narrative, but rather what the picture shows. You can try to understand the trauma from the wrinkled, torn-up paper in the image, or the person who makes a paper plane out of the leaflet, or a third person who takes notes and writes question marks on the margins. Each one had a different reaction through the paper to the leaflet and you can understand trauma in this way. It is a personal thing – and it is harsh and dangerous to talk about collective trauma, because what is collective trauma? What is collective memory? It is very selective and related to fiction. The collective memory of a group, or a party, or a people always has censorship. It censors what is not to be remembered because it does not serve the collective memory, and it also insists on certain types of memories to be remembered and to be included. So, collective memory reveals and hides at the same time. What it reveals is questionable and what hides is also what is hidden.

*MK:* In that way, Yasser becomes that stranger from Benjamin and Brecht interrupting what we've been thinking about – let's say trauma – by making you think about trauma not in terms of the collective, but really as something very singular and specific that manifests itself in so many different ways that it escapes a dominant form of representation.

Is it accidental that *Swept Under the Carpet* and *Before Falling Seek the Assistance of Your Cane*, one being an installation and the other being a non-academic lecture, are happening at the same time? Is there a coincidence or are you inviting us to be in the space in-between where there are not really answers?

*RM:* Yes, it is to bring many layers to this same space, to put these questions and doubts inside the spectators. There are many ways of giving spectators an opportunity for distance – one of them is being sceptical or being doubtful, and another way is to tell the audience, ' I have a question, but I really don't have an answer'. And I think these strategies can sometimes be in common with the Brechtian theories of theatre, but Brecht also tries to break the audience into social classes, and I don't want to do this, to classify them. I don't want to create any clash, social or psychological or gender, etc. No, each person has her own opinion, thoughts, ideas, and experience. You can

do this by asking a complex question that audiences do not have a yes or no answer to – it is not that you agree or disagree. If you have an answer, then you immediately split the audience into two parties: one agrees and the other disagrees. When you create doubt by putting fiction and reality together, then you are respecting each member of the audience and you expecting each one of them to have a different answer or opinion. *The Crocodile Who Ate the Sun*, which is a fable, is the story about a crocodile who ate the sun. Because the sun is no more, now, all the animals hate all the crocodiles because of that one bad crocodile. This happens every day in our world. One person in 'a group' commits something which creates a stereotype, and this stereotyped image proceeds her/him despite him or her will – it is there before she/he arrives. In my case, it would be the image of the Arab, of the Muslims, of the Middle Eastern, of the Lebanese. There are a lot of stereotypes images that we have to fight every day. We have to fight this image that comes beforehand – this image is not me. This identity is not me.

*MK:* So, what is *difficult* in staging difficult pasts?

*RM:* The 'difficult' is always interesting. The difficulty in representing and bringing the difficult past to the present time is how to put it in an abstract way, which is not monochrome and it does not mean you don't understand anything. To make it philosophical, to make it poetic, to learn from it and put it in terms of questions, and ideas, but unfinished ideas, unfinished thoughts that give us the ability to think, to add, to adjust, and to rethink again and to understand it in a different way. This is how the past is still present in our time. It is interesting for our present and for our future, because we understand the present from the past, and this is the difficulty.

*MK:* I would like to finish by saying that when I think about *Looking for a Missing Employee*, *Pixelated Revolution*, *Riding on a Cloud*, or *Before Falling Seek the Assistance of Your Cane*; and *Again We Are Defeated* and *Swept Under the Carpet*, the words that come to mind are: interruption, field of possibility, latency, intensified realism unhampered by the status quo or dominant ideology, another vitality set against the pressure/demand to reproduce reality/status quo. Your non-academic lectures, installations, productions are relentless refractions of your need to re-singularise history, memory, fiction, all of those elements, in order for them to be dynamic, vibrant objects that cannot be swept under the carpet.

## Notes

1 This interview took place on 29 October 2022 in Berlin, Germany.
2 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism is a Humanism', https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm.

# 7

# LISTENING TO THE MUSEUM, HEARING THE MINE

## Mapa Teatro's live *Réplica* to Modernity

*Giulia Palladini*

*De los dementes, ò faltos de juicio (Of Lunatics, or Those Lacking Sanity)* is a site-specific project realised by Colombian artistic laboratory Mapa Teatro at the Museum Reina Sofía in Madrid between October 2018 and April 2019, in the frame of the program *Fisuras* (*Fissures*), which invited international artists to produce new work that 'tries to reveal interstitial areas of the Museum, allowing visitors to discover the narrative potential of intermediate zones, spaces of *conflict*, hybrid zones (landings, stairwells, basements, connections between buildings)' (Museo Reina Sofía 2011).

The project does not feature the live presence of bodies in space, nor is it performed according to the punctual, ephemeral temporality of a live event. *De los dementes* would hardly be described, according to the terminology of performance studies, as a work of live art. The work is constituted of visual materials, a sound installation, video, a curated montage of materials. Yet, it is precisely the 'liveness' at the core of this work that is key to the political and poetical operation it performs. The museum itself, in this project, is addressed as a living organism, rather than a place of display: this produces a shift from the trust in visibility, traditionally presiding over the encounter with public memory, to the potential of attending the museum building's embodied memory and bringing it to life, making it public.

In the following pages, I trace the logic of this hidden, uneventful liveness, suggesting that Mapa Teatro's intervention in the Reina Sofía not only complicates the terms in which the relation between liveness and the museum is usually addressed (as an ephemeral intervention in time, which agitates the timeless stillness of the collection) but also offers a generative epistemological contribution to thinking the idea of modernity, in which the museum as an institution is intrinsically embedded. Whereas, 'modernity can be characterized, among other ways, by a sense of presence or contemporaneity created by the spatialisation of time' (Mitchell 2000: 15),

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resulting from the fiction produced by the narrative of modernisation, according to which all territories, including spaces supposedly cast as the 'non-West', have now 'reached the same hour on the great clock of development' (Jameson 1991: 97), I suggest that Mapa Teatro's project produces a 'temporalisation of space' in the Reina Sofía: the museum is turned into a colander through which different times drip in, invading the present with waves of past and future. This too is a result of fiction, or more accurately, using Mapa Teatro's own terminology: it is the outcome of a work of 'ethno-fiction' (Mapa Teatro 2019: 3).

The encounter with this project entails an invitation to wander: only the movement of the visitor's body, in space, can activate *De los dementes'* multifarious dramaturgy, opening access to a different 'cartography of the present' (Rolnik 2011). For the returning spectator, for a museum visitor who, like myself, has been affected by Mapa Teatro's work over the years, *De los dementes* constitutes a wondrous compendium of their politics and poetics. This project is, in fact, a testing ground for intuitions and tropes that have long characterised Mapa Teatro's work. It is the outcome of a 40-year-long trajectory that has overflowed from theatre to other spaces, as diverse as streets and public squares, prisons, tribunals, hair salons, the Amazonia, guerrilla camps, private houses, and exhibition places.

Like *De los dementes*, Mapa Teatro's artistic trajectory branches across the Atlantic, and exists between Europe and Latin America. Founded in Paris by the siblings Elizabeth, Rolf, and Heidi Abderhalden, children of a Swiss-German father and a Colombian mother, Mapa Teatro's work has 'always been marked by a double physical, historical and political presence' (Abderhalden 2018), and has therefore confronted from the start the question of negotiating an artistic citizenship in between continents. Mapa Teatro has cultivated a constant dialogue with Europe: it suffices to mention that the encounter with Samuel Beckett, which happened in the early days of the company's work, has left a vital imprint on their poetics, and that Heiner Müller provided Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden with the key term to describe their practice as 'a laboratory of social imagination': an expression translating the German *Sozialer Phantasie* (Abderhalden 2018). Even more vital, however, was the Abderhalden's decision to return to Colombia after completing their education in Europe and to build their 'laboratory of social imagination' in Bogotà: this choice marked an ethical and political positioning, and a commitment to a situated knowledge. It also shaped a militant approach to artistic practice, understood as a technology of transformation, through which the complicated tangle of violence that has long characterised Colombian history could be 'decrypted and resignified' (Abderhalden 2018). In this laboratory, histories and memories migrate and recombine, transforming from one work to the next (Palladini 2018: 141–142). Meanwhile, Mapa Teatro's work has travelled extensively worldwide: it was hosted by prominent festivals and contemporary art venues, such as the Festival d'Automne, the Festival d'Avignon, Find in Berlin, the São Paolo Biennale, the Berlin Biennale, LACMA in Los Angeles, to name just a few. It has increasingly circulated in the slippery map of a globalised art world which, as Suely Rolnik

(2011) pointed out, is quick to appropriate the subversive power of creation, turning it into 'shallow prêt-à-porter cartographies, adaptable for consumption in any point of the globe'. Navigating this movement without being captured, without giving up the gist of that commitment to poetical and political resistance, is no easy task: this is why the strategy of Mapa Teatro has been to *take responsibility* for the position they occupy as artists, and as inhabitants of this territory in between spaces, in between histories. In this respect, *De los dementes* – commissioned by, and exhibited in, one of the most prominent Spanish art institutions, located in Madrid across from Atocha Station and close to the Prado, hence standing at the centre of an ancient map of cultural and symbolic power – is exemplary of Mapa Teatro's pledge to *take responsibility* before history. I consider such responsibility not a moral, but rather a political posture, and I see it powerfully resonating with the very etymology of this word: responsibility as an *ability to respond*, to speak back, to take position, and, moreover, to invite others to do so. *De los dementes* takes responsibility for the history of the museum Reina Sofía, staging both a replica of, and a replica to, modernity.

Responding to *De los dementes* in writing is complicated, because any linear description of this project collapses into multiple directions, demanding space for drifts, bouncing back tropes of Mapa Teatro's 'thinking-creation' (*pensamiento-creación*), which would each deserve much broader critical consideration. My choice, then, is to replicate the invitation Mapa Teatro made to Reina Sofía's visitors: to engage the reader in a practice of wandering. The following pages are, therefore, a guided immersion into Mapa Teatro's conceptual universe. The chapter is organised according to a series of key terms orientating the journey into their poetics, while also engaging with the intervention made in *De los dementes*. The reader is invited to approach these terms not as part of a stable repertoire, but rather as pointers, activating the reverberation each concept produces upon the other, and the play of translation, which is always, of course, both a form of betrayal and an opening onto unforeseen significations.

## Artes Vivas

The first and fundamental term to initiate this journey of resonances into the *De los dementes* is the expression *artes vivas*, used by Mapa Teatro to describe the field of inquiry and intervention in which their practice is situated. *Artes vivas* is not a category, nor a discipline, even less a genre. It rather connotes an 'ethical and aesthetical posture' (Abderhalden 2014), which holds at its core the search for vital forces that are silenced, tamed, emptied out of their intrinsic potency in a given context: a neighbourhood, a historical narrative, an archive, a social practice, a fictional text. A museum, in this case.

The concept of *artes vivas* is both an epistemological proposal and a praxis, each time confronting different questions but always in light of the latent possibility to produce a shift in the texture of reality, and interrogate the canons that

organise both representation, and its so-called crisis (Abderhalden 2014). Rather than communicate, *artes vivas* 're-cycle, transmit, problematize, translate (that is: betray) information into poetic experiences and aesthetic events, making the act of creation a possible act of micropolitical resistance against all forms that suffocate life' (Abderhalden 2014). It is in this sense that the large corpus of Mapa Teatro's work – which encompasses a multiplicity of formats, including theatre, sound work, opera, installation, video – is not merely interdisciplinary, but above all characterised by an impulse to trigger indiscipline in each of those forms, orchestrating the surreptitious incursion of the body and its sensible matter into sites which have seemingly obliterated it. While the body is the compass orientating Mapa Teatro's artistic interventions, its centrality in this work does not translate into a fetishisation of presence: the body is conjured even if, and especially when, it is absent. It does not function as the object of inquiry, but is rather the work's fundamental bearing.

*Artes vivas* is not a translation of the category of 'live art' advanced since the early 2000s by artists, scholars, and cultural workers in the United Kingdom (see Heathfield 2004; Jones 2012; Keidan 2004), but Mapa Teatro claims for this expression a specific bond of proximity and distance with that context:

> live arts (is) a term of Anglo-Saxon origin that these two cartographer-anthropophagites (Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden) have devoured, regurgitated and reinvented in Latin America over the years [...]. Theirs is a process of 'devouring transcreation' in which human bodies are present within the work – the 'live' element from which the English term derives – and become the invisible presence of life itself, a precondition of the work's very existence.
>
> (Mapa Teatro 2019: 1)

The reference to anthropophagy and to its significance in the Latin American context, here, is not accidental. The conception of 'artes vivas', in fact, germinates from a specific lineage of anthropophagic thinking, with its roots in 1930s Brazilian modernism and in Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropophagic Manifesto* (1928), later reignited and expanded upon in the work of Suely Rolnik (1998; 2011), one of Mapa Teatro's long-term interlocutors and collaborators. Anthropophagy, in this context, names the critical operation of confronting alterity outside of a logic of identity, and cultural hybridisation outside of the grammar of globalised contemporaneity, which stems from centuries-long colonial histories in which the Other (regularly imagined as non-European) was either annihilated or reduced to sameness. Cannibalism, here, is reclaimed as the figure of an affective and ethical encounter with the radical Other: it is the 'irreverent devouring' (Rolnik 2011), in which the incorporation of the coloniser into one's body becomes both the scar left by that encounter, and also an opening to a digestion holding the potential for new forms to emerge. The political promise of what Rolnik (2011) names the 'anthropophagic subjectivity' is the capacity to make oneself vulnerable to other

imaginaries, towards 'the emergence of a consistent cartography of oneself and the world, which bears the imprint of otherness'.

It is in this conceptual framework that Mapa Teatro's insistence on the distinctive quality of *artes vivas* as a field affected by, but not derivative of, live art, not only aims at resisting Anglo-American linguistic and cultural hegemony, but also claims the specificity of an approach grown in 'a place in the world undergone ancient and permanent practices of violence, and subjected to multiple forms of colonisation' (Abderhalden 2014) that outlived colonial times and have forever impacted language, body, and representation. The praxis of *artes vivas*, then, is also a tool to come to terms with the longstanding regime of 'colonial-capitalist unconscious' (Rolnik 2017), and to produce novel, porous maps of the world, which do not conceal, but rather expose, the stratification of those histories, as well as the enduring violence of European epistemologies.

## Counterdispositive

Describing the praxis of *artes vivas*, Rolf Abderhalden makes an explicit reference to the notion of 'dispositive' advanced by Michel Foucault to denote the heterogeneous set of relations (encompassing discourses, institutions, architecture, laws, scientific and philosophical propositions, and so on) by means of which human life has been governed, knowledge produced, and power exercised since modernity, and conceives of all Mapa Teatro's artistic interventions in terms of 'counterdispositives' (Abderhalden 2014). If the Foucauldian dispositive is first and foremost a strategic machine producing processes of subjectivation, 'orientating, capturing, determining, intercepting, modelling human behaviours' (Agamben 2006: 22), Mapa Teatro's 'counterdispositives' are likewise devices intervening in fields of forces of knowledge and power, intending to produce a friction among them in order to enact alternative processes of subjectivation in those who witness, who allow themselves to be affected by what the work attempts to activate. In this sense, the remit of their actions also encompasses discourses, institutions, regulations of time and space, which keep governing life in contemporary capitalism, dissociating humans from the conditions of living, and sustaining the 'perverse abuse of the vital force of the biosphere in all its elements, including the human' (Rolnik 2017).

In light of these considerations, it seems almost a strange destiny that Mapa Teatro's creative research encountered the particular field of forces nesting at the core of the Museum Reina Sofía. The museum director Manuel Borja-Villel commissioned Mapa Teatro to conceive a project addressing the materiality of the museum space; the commission did not respond to an explicit agenda, on the part of the museum, to decolonise its history or its collection. The 'fissure' Mapa Teatro decided to explore, however, ended up tackling the materiality of the museum's time: it was a fissure located precisely at the core of the museum's past, in a 'faraway crevice that is still open today, a place of desire and exploitation, ingenuity and brutality,

resistance and oblivion' (Sánchez 2019: 6), located within the walls of the Reina Sofía, but also branching elsewhere, across the Atlantic.

*De los dementes* took its cue from the history of the museum, whose building was originally the location of Madrid General Hospital: the Hospital General y de la Pasión. Founded in the sixteenth century by King Philip II as a *Hospitium Pauperum* (a hospitality refuge providing assistance to the poor and marginalised), the building 'would become a modern health center two centuries later when, in order to save it from ruin, King Ferdinand VI declared that all alms granted by the royal family and coming from the Indies were to be donated to the hospital' (Mapa Teatro 2019: 2). The construction of the whole complex, designed by architect Francesco Sabatini, remained incomplete, as the increasing demand for medical care progressively slowed down the development of the original architectural project. After 1965, the building was abandoned, and for a decade, it was again under threat of demolition, until in 1977, the Spanish government declared it a Historical-Artistic Monument, making it again viable for preservation and public use. Following this resolution, architect Antonio Fernández Alba redesigned the building to make it a suitable venue for exhibitions. A few years later, in 1990, the art centre became a national museum, housed in the Sabatini Building and significantly named Reina Sofía: a name which, at least symbolically, stands in continuity with the colonial ethos that has characterised the building from its very foundation.

Mapa Teatro decided to place at the centre of *De los dementes* the story of one particular inmate of this hospital: the engineer Don Ángel Díaz Castellanos, who, at the end of eighteenth century, was sent by King Carlos III to the region of Caldas, in Colombia (at the time, named Virreinato de Nueva Granada) with the task to modernise the mechanism of extraction in the Marmato gold mine and maximise productivity. Once in the colonies, however, Ángel Díaz started to suffer the first symptoms of what came to be known as *auriferis delirium*, consisting in acoustic hallucinations, and had to return to Spain, where he was hospitalised in the vaulted basement of the hospital, today the Sala de Bovedas, which performed the function of an asylum. According to an ordinance of the hospital, this space would enclose all those patients who had to be removed from the streets 'for the sake of public quiet' and were categorised as '*dementes, ò faltos de juicio*' (lunatics or those lacking sanity) (Mapa Teatro 2019: 5).

The rationale behind this ordinance (retrieved in the National Historical Archives in Madrid) is well known: it participates in what Michel Foucault has described as a structural epistemic shift characterising the historical period of modernity, and that profoundly reorganised scientific knowledge and discourse, as well as the field of perception beyond the medical realm. According to Foucault, key to the political rationality that ensued from this epistemic shift is a novel relation between the eye and discourse: since the eighteenth century, society started to be regulated by a particular kind of visibility, one that implied and facilitated the interpretation of not only the visible, but also the invisible, and pivoted on the human capacity (and hence, the power) to reveal hidden things (Foucault 2003:

xiii). In medical perception, this meant turning 'symptoms' into legible information, welcoming them in a space of representation called diagnostics; in clinical practice, this corresponded to the foundation of dedicated sites for observation, description, treatment of patients and, ultimately, also to the creation of sites of containment, such as the one where the engineer Ángel Diaz ended his days after his trip to the colonies. The logic regulating this broader shift towards a structural trust in visibility corresponded to a particular spatialisation of knowledge and power, engendered and symbolised by specific institutions, such as the clinic and, in different ways, the museum. Not surprisingly, Foucault's work has been a prominent point of reference for a number of scholars who have analysed the institution of the museum as a prime site for observation and construction of the 'order of things and people' (Bennett 1994: 95). It suffices to mention Douglas Crimp's remark that the museum constitutes a certain form of art enclosure (1980: 41), Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's description of the origin of the public museum as an instrument of disciplinary society (1992: 167–171), and Tony Bennett's reading of the birth of the museum as the advent of a technology of behaviour management and the affirmation of a specific relation between space and vision in public (1992: 89–101).

If the history of the building in which the Museum Reina Sofía exists today hands itself over almost paradigmatically to a consideration of the relation between these two modern sites of human experience and knowledge production – the clinic and the museum – it is significant that in *De Los dementes*, Mapa Teatro left this relation implicit and chose, instead, to place under the main spotlight a third site, equally crucial to European modernity in its economic foundations and articulation of discourse, and yet remarkably at the margins of Foucault's analysis (see Bhaba 1994; Mitchell 2000; Spivak 1988; Stoler 1995): the colonial gold mine. It is in the faraway space of the colonies, in fact, that the very procedures to discipline and punish that Foucault carefully analysed in the 1970s as the dispositives of governance of European modernity were first tested, and put to work. In the 'larger world' that Foucault overlooks (Mitchell 2000: 5), a significant part of the drama of modernity was rehearsed and staged.

In convoking the word 'stage' and the act of 'staging', here, I echo the analysis of modernity proposed by Timothy Mitchell (2000: 1), in which 'stage' designates on the one hand a particular historical phase within a temporality that is understood as linear, progressive, homogeneous, and universal, and where modernity would supposedly represent 'a stage of history' (Mitchell 2000: 1), one that from the point of view of the present is now long passed. On the other hand, as Mitchell emphasises, this designation is a distinctly European-modern construction, and modernity should be more productively considered in light of its reiterated discursive placing of itself in the West, determining not 'a new stage of history, but [...] how history itself is staged' (Mitchell 2000: 2).

As Benedict Anderson pointed out, in his critical consideration of the importance of print culture, map-making, and census-taking as tools to corroborate

**IMAGE 7.1** *De los dementes, ò faltos de juicio (Of Lunatics, or Those Lacking Sanity)*, overview of the atlas, Espacio 1, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Photograph by Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores, Archivo Fotográfico Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.

modernity's rendering of time and space as homogeneous (1991: 47–65), it is in the constant representation of itself, through pictures and writing, through data and measurements, that modernity produces, simultaneously, itself *as* the West, and a sense of the world as 'rendered up in terms of a dualism of image and reality' (Mitchell 2000: 28). Such dualism – from which a number of kindred others descend, such as those between 'life and its meaning, things and their exchange value, activity and structure, execution and plan, content and form, object- and subject-world' (18) – is the foundation on which the very spectacle of European modernity took place, and persisted long after the eighteenth century.

It is within this enduring spectacle of modernity that Mapa Teatro's *De los dementes* articulates its counterdispositive, staged on one of modernity's designated stages, a museum, and playing precisely with colonial modernity's structures of representation: maps, archives, indigenous artefacts exhibited as artworks. Furthermore, Mapa Teatro cannibalises the 'the triumph of the gaze' (Foucault 2003: 165), which has structured both the medical experience and the mode of display that have marked the history of the Reina Sofía by means of three main modalities: first, placing sound, rather than gaze, as the narrative core of the project; secondly, using archival documents registering the history of this building, and the story of the engineer Ángel Diaz, not as markers of truth, but rather as fragments of a fictional story; third, questioning the notion of authenticity that traditionally organises the display of items in a museum, 'an institution committed to guarding against counterfeits, a place where replicas ought only to be found in the gift shop' (Sánchez 2019: 16).

## Replicas

*De los dementes* took place in three spaces of the Sabatini building: la Sala de Bovedas, the staircase connecting its five floors, and the main exhibition space (Espacio 1). The first space the visitor encounters upon entering the exhibition, Espacio 1, hosted a visual atlas of the story which unfolded throughout the museum. On a big wall, facsimiles of colonial maps of the Americas were displayed alongside theatrical replicas of ordinances, letters encountered in the archives of the city of Madrid, attesting the details of the mission Ángel Díaz was sent to accomplish in the region of Caldas, as well as paintings representing indigenous people produced in the space between Spain and the colonies, and photographs of the mountains in the region of Caldas, today. In between these still images, a monitor, split into four simultaneous videos, projected moving images documenting the labour of gold extraction that currently continues to take place in the Marmato mine, shot by Mapa Teatro in situ. A second monitor, positioned at a different point in the hall, used a closed-circuit TV camera, showing what was happening in the basement of the museum – the Sala de Bóvedas – where the installation continued. There, allegedly the place where Ángel Díaz ended his days trapped in his delirium, Mapa Teatro reproduced the interior of a traditional mine, realised with material brought from Marmato, and accompanied by an acoustic installation reproducing sounds of mining work: the repetitive sound of the labour of extraction as well as the acoustic hallucinations that haunted those who, like Ángel Díaz, were enclosed in those rooms. The Sala de Bóvedas, one of the spaces least currently used for exhibitions, was the point of departure of the *De los dementes*: during the first visit to the space, Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden recognised the walls of the basement as a form of living archive of the building itself, and from this archive, they decided to investigate, as well as to invent, the rest of the story.

The Sala de Boverdas is connected to the Espacio 1 by a large staircase, which in *De los dementes* became an integral part of the project: the staircase resonated with the sounds from the mine, coming from downstairs, in chorus with those produced by a barrel – similar to those in which gold is still transported on the Colombian mountains – which was slowly carried up and down the five floors of the building. The barrel also carried a small projector, screening on the bare walls of the museum images recorded by Mapa Teatro in Marmato, portraying the miners, their everyday labours, riding mules to access the mine. Curiously, the inspiration for those videos came from a conversation that occurred during another inspection of the space in preparation for this project: walking up from the basement, Rolf Abderhalden asked Teresa Velázquez, Head of Exhibitions at the Reina Sofía, how the furniture used by the inmates of the asylum in the Hospital General y de la Pasión was carried up and down the five floors, and Velázquez replied ‘probably by mules’. The figure of the animal, then, kept haunting the staircase in Mapa Teatro’s imagination, and further migrated not only across space, but also across time: the

mules' slow labour of transportation resurfaced in another space, in Caldas, figuring a continuity of exploitation that silently traced yet another thread between the city of Madrid, back then, and the contemporary Marmato mine.

On closer inspection, however, the connection between those geographical spaces can be detected in all figures included in *De los dementes*. Another significant example is an object on display in the main exhibition hall, alongside the visual atlas on the wall: a replica of a golden statue of a cacique Quimbaya, part of the Quimbaya Treasure, a large collection of 122 golden items (among which jewels, elms, utensils, anthropomorphic figures, musical instruments) looted from two tombs in the Cauca river valley, and donated by the Colombian government to Spain in 1891, allegedly as a gift for the role played by the Spanish crown in the negotiation of the borders between Colombia and Venezuela. This statue marks the access to yet another complex entanglement of power, history, and geography. Since 1965, the Quimbaya treasure has been displayed in the Museum of Américas in Madrid alongside a massive collection of other pre-Colombian, ethnographic, and colonial pieces, and is currently at the centre of a heated dispute between Colombia and Spain. In 2017, the Colombian Constitutional Court demanded the restitution of the treasury on the basis of 'issues of international law relating to cultural property (particularly that of indigenous people)' and human rights in relation to ancestral cultural patrimony (Mejía-Lemos 2019: 122, 123). Colombia's demand to this day has remained unsuccessful: the Museum of the Américas has allegedly agreed to return to Colombia only golden replicas of the original items that could be displayed as 'stand in's for the real thing, which would remain in Europe (Lopera quoted in Infobae 2022).

In preparation for the *De los Dementes*, Mapa Teatro asked the Museum Reina Sofía to request, on their behalf, a loan of a golden statue of the cacique Quimbaya from the Museum of the Américas, with the intention to display it. This request, however, was turned down: what was offered in its stead was, again, a replica of the item. Mapa Teatro, however, refused to accept the replica manufactured by the Museum of the Américas, and this episode became the input for a further articulation of the project. Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden contacted Jorge Mello, a Colombian artisan and *guajero* (someone recovering items from abandoned places, and indigenous cemeteries) trading his manufactured objects in a flea market in Bogotá, and commissioned him to manufacture the replica of the golden cacique that they exhibited in the Reina Sofía. Through the conversation with Mello, Mapa Teatro learned that it would be impossible to produce a replica of the original golden statue of the cacique Quimbaya, since the technique originally used to fabricate it – lost-wax casting – by its nature does not allow identical reproductions.

The theatrical replica fabricated by Mello and exhibited in *De los dementes*, then, was in a sense an original. And yet the context in which it was exhibited, an art museum, relegated it to the function of a replica: it was, in a sense, both an original and a stand-in for the original object displayed in a museum located close by.

The question of authenticity surrounding this statue can be read as a powerful symbol of the careful blurring between reality and fiction on which the entire project *De los dementes* was founded. As José Antonio Sánchez explained, in this project, Mapa Teatro embraced 'a baroque ethos', intrinsically 'questioning the ontological pre-eminence of what is represented' (2019: 16). Drawing on the work of Ecuadorian philosopher Bolívar Echeverría, Sánchez conceptualises the baroque ethos as an attitude fundamentally challenging the distinction between fiction and truth, and reclaiming the 'duality of the theatrical experience' (2019: 16) as a radical epistemological possibility: one aiming at staging reality not according to factual truth, but rather in its excess, including what reality makes structurally invisible. In the case of this replica, then, 'not only the logics of theatre and museums collide, but so do the logics of creation (live) and conservation' (ibid.). The 'excluded middle', that in Echeverría's conceptualisation of the baroque ethos is the space where two spheres of reality can be inhabited at the same time, is exactly where the living labour of Jorge Mello existed, in the museum, and so the convergence of Madrid and Marmato, which *De los dementes* strives to make appear, displays the actual and symbolic brutality of power that has long shaped the relations between Spain and Colombia.

The word 'replica', after all, does not just mean reproduction, or copy: in its etymological potentiality, still expressed in Latin languages such as Spanish, *réplica* also means 'to respond, to speak back'. Indeed, *el derecho de réplica* (the right to replica) is a fundamental juridical principle in Colombia (among other countries), which offers the constitutional guarantee of the possibility to oppose, or ask clarification for, statements previously made public in the media. The verb 'reply', in English, retains this ancient sense: from *re-plicare*, the term is formed by the particle *re* (marking the 'againess' of the occurrence) and the verb *plicare*, literally meaning 'to fold, to wrap up'. In the multifaceted meanings opened up by this thinking in between languages, in the crack between spaces which Mapa Teatro has long inhabited, the particular reply enacted in *De los dementes* 'folds' once again the story of the museum, speaking back to the inward movement of modernity, and demanding an act of listening: listening to what, far away, keeps resonating.

## Ethno-Fiction and Living Archives

Choosing to put the absent space of the golden mine in Marmato under the main spotlight was not merely an aesthetic expedient: it was the speaker through which the museum's visitor could listen to the echoes the project intended to convey. Whereas the commission was meant to focus on the space of the museum located in Madrid, and slowly became an investigation into its past, Mapa Teatro turned this occasion into an opportunity to think, first and foremost, about the future of Marmato, in Colombia. And yet the future of Marmato, very much like its past, is

**IMAGE 7.2** *De los dementes, ò faltos de juicio (Of Lunatics, or Those Lacking Sanity)*, the golden replica of the cacique statue, Jorge Mello. Espacio 1, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Photograph by Federico Paladino, Archivo Fotográfico Mapa Teatro.

already interlocked with the long shadow of European modernity: the population of Marmato, in fact, is still engaged in the same resistance indigenous people started to build during Spanish colonisation, to protect natural resources and ways of living, ways of working, ways of relating to one's territory and culture.

The Marmato mine – which was the actual economic substratum that made it possible for the Reina Sofía to exist in the first place, and where the engineer Ángel Díaz Castellanos was sent to modernise gold extraction in the eighteenth century – has continued to exist. The region of Caldas is the scene of 'one of the most controversial mining conflicts in recent decades in Colombia' (Serra-Carmago 2022), and is emblematic of the enduring consequences of modernity. To be sure, in Marmato gold mining activities had begun well before Spain's colonising of the Americas, on the part of local Indigenous populations such as the Quimbaya, Quinchías, Supías, and Cartamas people (Gärtner 2005: 36). The town was founded in 1536, and the local population that settled there includes descendants of Indigenous people as well as 'enslaved and free Africans, Spanish and other Europeans who came to extract gold' (Ferry 2022). The methodology of extraction, on the part of traditional miners, is non-mechanical and has a low environmental impact: it constitutes one of the various artisanal crafts carried out in the municipality of Marmato that sustains a small-scale local economy. In the nineteenth century, the newly born Republic of Colombia had agreed to allow British investors to mine for gold (in 1825, the mines of Marmato were mortgaged to pay the debt for the War of

Independence) and since then foreign corporations have slowly, but steadily, continued exploiting natural resources in the region. For a period, Marmato's mining tradition has given rise to a kind of 'coexistence' regime around mining, in which different types of mining and different actors have managed to coexist, preserving the upper area of the mountain, intended solely for small-scale mining. Since the 1990s, however, a series of multinational corporations – and most prominently the Canadian company Aris Gold – have arrived and started implementing large-scale, open-pit mining that not only creates enormous environmental damage, but also has had a devastating impact on the life of local communities. A robust movement of resistance has built over the years: The Marmato Defence Committee and the Regional Indigenous Council of Caldas (CRIDEC) have fought over the municipal Land Use Plan in 2011, advocating for the sovereign decision of the people for Marmato. The common front Fuerzas Vivas Marmato is still mobilising to counter Aris Gold's plan to construct a tunnel whose existence would require the resettling of the historic urban centre of Marmato (El Llano/La Betulia) and expose the local population to toxic emissions.

Mapa Teatro brought the story of this struggle into the space of the Reina Sofía, not just as additional background information but as the fundamental core of their creative research. The traditional miners of Marmato are not 'extras' in this story: they are effectively invited onto the stage and named in the exhibition brochure,[1] alongside the members of Mapa Teatro who took part in this project. The miners appear in the videos included in the main exhibition hall, but most importantly, they were Mapa Teatro's main interlocutors for this project.

In preparation for *De Los Dementes*, in fact, Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden decided to 'follow in Don Ángel Díaz Castellanos's footsteps and went in search of his phantasmagorias' (Mapa Teatro 2019: 3) in Caldas, the region where he was sent to modernise the mechanism of extraction. What they found, however, were unpredictable traces: in their extensive fieldwork, Mapa Teatro learned about the traditional miners' work techniques, about the enduring exploitation of the region from the monopoly of multinational companies, and about the struggle local populations have built to protect their livelihoods. This, in a sense, became the vital force they decided to bring to the fore in the space of the museum. As one of the performative activations of the *De los dementes*, on 25 April 2019, Mapa Teatro presented in the Reina Sofía the lecture performance *Museo Vivo,* bringing together elements of the scenography of the piece *La Despedida* (2018), which narrated a hallucinatory farewell to the Colombian communist guerrilla and to their European ghosts. *Museo Vivo* re-enacts the last scene of the piece, featuring an imaginary mute dialogue between Karl Marx and a shaman in the Amazonic forest on the site of a gold mine, including the presence of a spokesperson of the miners' union in Marmato, as well as the videos shot in Marmato documenting the labour of extraction and treatment of gold in Caldas.

Sánchez refers to the specific research methodology characterising Mapa Teatro's work, and prominent in this project, as a form of 'archeological fiction': this

is a research process less reliant on 'traditional scientific procedures' than on 'intuition or chance findings' (2019: 14) and, most of all, assigning to the artists not the role of archaeologists in search of traces of the past, but that of engaged, implicated witnesses of the present.

Mapa Teatro refers to their artistic work as 'ethno-fiction': a term that not only highlights the blending of documentary and fictional materials, but also implies an approach to artistic creation as a process of investigation where the distance between subject and object, typical of traditional ethnography as well as Western approaches to knowledge production, collapses in favour of a poetics that also includes, and strives for, an affective implication. In this context, the moment of public presentation (in this case, the installation, in others a theatre performance, or a moving image work) is only one step within a much longer, much wider poetic and political engagement with the world (Palladini 2018: 669–679).

In Mapa Teatro's works (to name just a few: *Testigos a las ruinas*, 2012; the trilogy *Anatomia de la Violencia in Colombia*, 2010–2015), documents encountered in actual archives coexist with 'guests', invited on stage not to 'represent themselves', neither to offer a testimony, but to participate, with their live presence, in the construction of a fictional memory, which is – however – embodied, rather than illustrated.

> The living archives of Mapa Teatro […] challenge any attempt towards the closure that can result in a mimetic, dramatic or political representation. The presence of the guests fulfils the function of avoiding the objectification of their testimony in a closed representation.
>
> (Sánchez 2020: 167)

This is the case of Danilo Jiménez, the old leader of the Marco Fidel Suárez band, famously accompanying Pablo Escobar in his public appearances, on stage in *Discurso de un hombre decente* (2014), or that of Juana Ramírez, and Antanas Mockus on the stage of *Testigos a las ruinas*, respectively the last inhabitant of the neighbourhood El Cartucho in Bogotà (whose destruction the project documents) and the former mayor of the city, together on stage 'between official history and collective fictions, the mythical tale and local mythologies: un-affective institutional documents face-to-face with personal archives laden with affects' (Abderhalden 2017: 138).

This is also the case of the contemporary traditional miners of Marmato: their gestures (panning, scooping, transporting, touching gold) are documented on video not just for their aesthetic beauty, but for their capacity to make visible, in the museum, a movement of life not detached from the conditions of living, a life which is striving to keep existing despite the enduring shadow of colonial expropriation, and which does so, significantly, using a technology of work which is older than colonisation. In a sense, the choice to document the particularities of artisanal mining, in the space of the museum, can be considered a 'catachrestic gesture', borrowing the term advanced by Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha in their classical

texts on postcolonial agency (Bhabha 1994: 184). 'Catachresis' traditionally means to reclaim the meaning of a word, in order to express something supposedly 'incorrect': it is the 'abuse or perversion of a thought or metaphor' (Spivak 1988: 308), and the manufacture of a replication which upends the supposed hegemony of the signifying function. This concept has been extended, in Spivak's work, also to practices of concepts-metaphors which have been co-opted, but actually pre-existed and survive, colonial domination. Whereas the activity of mining has long been coded, within the text of colonial modernity, as a prime technique of European colonisation, Mapa Teatro makes visible the artisanal mining in Caldas that pre-dates Spanish colonisation, bringing to the surface 'the originary "abuse" constitutive of language production' (Spivak 1988: 308). In other words, while in the text of the colonial past, which haunts the history of the Reina Sofía, the miners of Marmato were doomed to appear (or rather: disappear) merely as victims of colonial exploitation, the images and materials from contemporary Marmato account for their vibrant political agency in the present, and their struggle for the future, which happens through a craft which predated and outlived colonial modernity. Through the activation of the miners' story in the museum, Mapa Teatro welcomes the enduring temporality of anti-colonial struggle and makes it resonate in the heart of Europe.

## The Engineer's Ear, the Miner's Ear

What the visitor may encounter, following the footsteps of Ángel Díaz to the colonial gold mine, and then back to Spain, into the asylum, may well be something that is not a replica of his delirium, but is, in fact, a replica – a reply – to colonial modernity. The engineer's hallucinations, in fact, might be the replication, in a soundscape, of a very tangible reality. It might be the phantasmatic pointer to the destiny of sound within a miner's ear, which Rosalind Morris has described very precisely:

> The miner's ear is attuned to the sounds of catastrophe: sirens, rumbling, explosions, a gush of water where only a dripping should have been heard, coughing, the burble of fluid in the lungs… or too much silence. The miner's ear is attuned to what will destroy him, what is already destroying him in the moment that he hears, if he hears. The miner seeks signs. He is at least prepared for them, for he has rehearsed their arrival. (…) And, what is worse, the miner is in the process of going deaf. Miner's deafness, caused by repeated exposure to loud, often repetitive and percussive noise, emerges as a gradual attenuation of the frequency range that can be neurologically detected. It manifests itself, among other ways, as the transformation of voice into mere sound, and of many voices into constant but diminishing noise. The peculiar deafness of the miner thus annihilates his capacity for differentiation. Sounds become ever more indistinct, unclear. The

> deafness is itself the symptom of an injury. But it is also the cause of greater risk, for it increases the miner's vulnerability to yet more injury. This spiralling deafness extinguishes the miner's receptivity to communication, including, and most dangerously, the sounds of warning.
>
> (Morris 2008: 96)

It is possible to imagine, then, that what was interpreted in the eighteenth century as *auriferis delirium* was in fact Ángel Díaz's experience of this hearing deterioration, which his own task of modernising extraction in the mine had started to bring about in his body. Surely, in the early days of gold mining, the loss of hearing was not yet diagnosed as a physical impairment, not least because the indigenous population employed in the mining industry was hardly put under medical scrutiny, or offered medical treatment. Hence, it was an invisible illness: one that had not yet been welcomed in the space of representation called diagnostics.

It might be, instead, that the sound installation pointed to something else. It might be that being in the colonies, and witnessing the violence of exploitation which enabled gold extraction, had triggered Ángel Díaz, who had lost lucidity, and incorporated within himself the deafening sound that the miners around him had to endure every day. The acoustic hallucination reproduced in *De los dementes*, then, could be a glimpse into the future, a time much beyond the historical moment when Ángel Díaz was confined in the asylum: the hallucinating sounds might well be interpreted as an echo of the following 'stages' of the global business of extraction, tracing a direct line from the Spanish colonisation of the Americas to contemporary exploitation by multinational corporations like Aris Gold.

A curious homonymy seems to hide all these possibilities in the texture of this story, making the *auriferis delirium* both a hearing impairment, and a form of gold rush:

> Wherever there is gold, there lies a possible confusion of signs. The very word invites such confusion. In the innocent ear, homonymy masquerades as etymology, as the aural (what can be heard) is falsely linked to the auriferous (the gold bearing). In one, the root—obscured by time—of an ear: *aurilis* (Latin). In the other, the root of (evil?) gold: *aurum* (also Latin).
>
> (Morris 2008: 98)

At the end of the museum visit, the spectator of *De los dementes* is left to inhabit a strange predicament: sitting at the cusp between the past and the future, they are enfolded into the body of the museum, they participate in its sensorial memory, they witness the ancient breathing of its hidden colonial life. The museum visitor, too, is compelled to search for their ability to respond, which means to take responsibility, to speak back, to respond with life to the enduring, deafening sound of colonial modernity.

## Note

1 Respectively, the catalogue list miners from the following associations: Marmato Associations of Traditional Miners, La Esperanza Mining Company, El Respaldo – Enchanda Gold Mine, as well as the Marmato Cultural Center and the Hospital San Antonio de Marmato. The members of Mapa Teatro involved in the project were Heidi Abderhalden Cortés, Rolf Abderhalden Cortés, Ximena Vargas, José Ignacio Rincón, Alirio Garcia. In Mapa Teatro 2019.

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# 8

# SHOWCASING ANTI-COLONIAL NATIONALIST STRUGGLES

## Museums and Theatre in Contestation

*Bishnupriya Dutt*

In today's India, an aggressive right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which promotes homogeneity, particularly based on religious identities, has tried increasingly to collapse the historical past with narrow chauvinism through distortions and misinterpretations. Therefore, with caution, one approaches the four new museums located within the grand Mughal era monument, the Red Fort, in Old Delhi, theatrically depicting selective historical moments from the anti-colonial nationalist struggle within the aggressive atmosphere of the nationalisation of history and heritage. In this context, it is important to explore how the public consciousness of an enormous number of daily visitors[1] who are the spectators of this new mode of historical dissemination can be raised around BJP's instrumentalisation of history. The current cultural politics, therefore, assumes new dimensions and allows one to engage with colonial histories, anti-colonial nationalist movements, and the questions of violence and non-violence; the growing difference between academic scholarship and popular histories and how State-sponsored cultural hegemony is fostering populism, akin to ideological conditioning and the critical role theatre plays in such a culture-scape by offering a counter-narrative and an active challenge to such histories in the public domain.

Out of the four, the only museum that seems congruous with the location is the one on the rebellion in 1857, marking the end of the Mughal rule in India.[2] The other three museums are of nationalist struggles from the twentieth century – the tribulations of the radical and militant leader, Netaji Subash Chandra Bose (1897–1945); the Jallianwallah massacre of 1919, titled: Yaade-e-Jallian (Remembering Jallian); and the largest, Azadee-ke-Diwane (Freedom's passion) that depicts the militant nationalist movements that occurred throughout the twentieth-century. These are generally regarded as alternatives to mainstream nationalism that were led by Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Indian National Congress, to

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whom power was transferred in 1947. All these histories, since independence in 1947, have been cited or performed to challenge the elite nationalism of the Congress party that is regarded as the ruling oligarchy, mostly by Left cultural practices and now by the right wing. These historical depictions have never been perceived as the historical past, but a spectre of the past that always haunts the present, in cultural politics. In light of the shift to a right-wing ideology that is based on narrow communitarian identities, the new practices assume a critical significance that needs to be discerned and countered.[3]

Depicting the anti-colonial nationalist movement may be the most difficult history to 'stage', as it is often the means by which the Indian State celebrates its existence, but it also invites criticism for the foundational exclusions and structural inequalities that have continued to plague Indian society and are very typical of post-colonial democracies. These debates have long been widespread in academic circles and generate critical historical discourses from the subaltern, Marxist, feminist, and post-colonial historians. Post-colonial theatre owes its popularity and credibility to the dissemination of these critical perspectives as popular histories in the public domain. Yet, at this contemporary moment, there has been an enormous swing towards a populist rendition of these histories that borders on xenophobia and jingoism, which this chapter tries to 'stage' through the description and analysis of these museums and theatre's challenge to State-sponsored museum politics.

This new museum project has been exclusively implemented by the BJP government after coming to power in 2014 (most of the museums were inaugurated in 2019) and as is the norm in India, funded and administered by the State. The anticipated distortion and manipulation of history, instrumentalised for the benefit of the right wing, if present, was positioned in a more subtle way – not on your face appropriation. The deployment of unusual theatrical strategies – life-sized black and white photographs, audio-visual projections, a few artefacts, soundscape, and creating a scenographic locationality that is immersive – with the intention of evoking patriotic affective responses, allows one to experience the museum rather than think and this camouflages a critical approach.

Within this larger historical framework offered by the four museum spaces, I bring in a representative play from 1989, re-staged in 2019, to show how theatre does not shy away from the discursive in popular historical dissemination and makes it accessible to the people to evoke critical thinking.

## Museums of the Past and Present

The new scenography and narrative-dominated museum with theatrical deployment is a new phenomenon in post-independent India. However, as Susan Bennett asserts in her book, *Theatre & Museums* (2013), it is part of a global trend. It maps a shift from 'display to experience, from tableaux to performance, and from quiet contemplation of authoritative interpretation to active participation that implies the

collaborative production of meaning(s)' (Bennett 2013: 60). Bennett regards it as a welcome shift from an art object focus that is imposed on a compliant and passive population to a more interactive mode that she describes as a 'synergic turn to theatricality' (Bennett 2013: 21) with 'deeply performative effects' (Bennett 2013: 19), but ideally is part of progressive curatorial practices.

The new Museums of Independence, mark a departure, in exactly the way Bennett sums up, from the museum culture(s) in post-colonial India that are, usually, centred on objects of antiquity and are, as Kavita Singh lays out so eloquently, premises of the new Nation state that attempt to create a historical discourse around artefacts and objects that otherwise have neutral and even secular values (Singh 2015). Singh's reference to 'neutral' and 'secular' values is based on her extensive work on the national museum and state museums, which transitioned from housing colonial-time discoveries as part of archaeological projects and exhibitions to becoming the new nation's cultural heritage. This, to a certain extent, was instrumental in the larger field of constructing national identities mediated by canonical art objects. Housing artefacts from colonial era archaeological projects and colonial exhibitions, they were more or less neutral art objects entrenched in the autonomy of the world of art and scholarship and mostly subjected to a historical interpretation within their specific contexts and, hence, not seen as representing a particular religion or culture.[4]

The hard proof of material remains of the past – the corpus of relics from monument structures and archaeological discoveries and art objects – handed over to the new nation at the time of independence continued to grow as the post-colonial nation persevered with archaeological and museum projects and according to Tapati Guha-Thakurta became entangled with 'the power of the "nation form" as it enfolds these structures and objects and the histories and traditions they yield' (Guha-Thakurta 2004: xviii). Both Guha-Thakurta and Singh have traced the history of museums and how knowledge is deployed and imbricated by professionals, intellectuals, and the State in a web of demands and desires that come to be woven around the hard proof of the material remains of the past. According to both, the art-history methods and discourse established in the heyday of Nehruvian secular India allowed an open hermeneutic approach invested in the Nehruvian scientific archaeology. The term Nehruvian scientific archaeology then, according to them, allows one to distinguish between the 1950s and 60s – the period when these museums were set up – with the later obscurantist epic archaeology of the 1970s – when contradictions between the worlds of myths, history, and academic archaeology were infused to express a 'deep crisis of self-legitimization of the field itself' (Guha-Thakurta 2004: xviii).

However, as the museums in consideration displayed in the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is no scope to interpret the art object, but as a narrative with its accompanying new 'nation form' that allows one to reconfigure the meaning and scope of the National with the new objectives and orchestration of exclusions and chauvinism that lie at the root of the current crisis of identities

and intrusion of Hindu nationalism. The new experiential museums, conspicuous in the absence of any material remains, leave no scope for the earlier neutrality entrenched in the autonomies of the art objects and associated with the, once, lofty ideals that the nation wanted to display – heterogeneity, plurality, and what, I will reiterate, is the secular tenor of the display of art objects.

## Museums of Independence

The four museums, under the title: India's Struggle for Independence (Bharat ki Swatantra ke Sangram), are located in the old British barracks that were built when the colonial army occupied the Red Fort after the end of the rebellion of 1857. Under the new BJP regime since 2014, the barracks have been converted into a museum complex.[5] The museums, as mentioned on their display plaques, were all inaugurated in 2019, under the current right-wing dispensation. The chief advisor-historian who worked along with a team of historians is Kapil Kumar, a one-time Marxist but now patronised by the new regime and someone who has a declared shift in his ideological affinities. It is an ongoing project conducted under the strict scrutiny of the advisory committee as matters of history are seen as bearing ideological and political intents.

A contrast to the seventeenth-century palace, these are utilitarian colonial buildings and the entrance tickets to the Red Fort with a small addition (Rs. 40) allow the large number of tourists visiting this site every day to walk through the museums. The visitors comprise a very large section of the population from all parts of India and for whom a visit to the Red Fort is a priority. Significantly, while the palace is one of the most important edifices to symbolise Mughal architecture and its glory, it is also a history that is being increasingly marginalised because it was a part of the history of Islamic rule over India. The juxtaposition of the new museums in the same space, glorifying Indian anti-colonial nationalism with its inherent Hindu tendencies is anomalous but deliberate.

Each museum represents a phase, but also tries to create a continuity and cover different regions and time. The cogency is more evident in the formal aspects: they feature standard uniform black and white photographs, enormous boards with visuals and texts, projections on walls and centrepieces of objects or installations. The entrances display installations that initiate one into the space through theatrical means. The one in the museum dedicated to the events of 1857 is a wall fresco with the Red Fort sketched across a large wall as a panorama with four of the leaders: Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775–1862), the last Mughal Emperor, a significant symbol of the Pan-Indian nature of the revolt; Nana Saheb (1784–1859), the Peshwa/ruler of the Maratha Empire, who led the rebellion in Cawnpore; the Rani of Jhansi (1828–1858) and Hazrat Mahal (1820–1879), queen consorts of the princely states of Jhansi and Awadh respectively, who led the rebellion in their respective locations.

The museum dedicated to Jallianwala Bagh has a wall resembling the grounds of the historic park, with bricks jutting out and a monument dedicated to the martyrs

at the centre, while on an audiovisual screen, the names of the people who were killed and wounded roll on. The museum on Netaji Subash Bose has a larger than life-sized photograph, and the final, Azadee-ke-Diwane, has a cannon in the centre of a room and a model of the Cellular Jail where political prisoners and revolutionaries spent many years in exile. Chains and a few utensils are scattered to indicate life in the Cellular Jail. Once you enter the subsequent galleries (about four–five in each one of them), the narrative begins with a similar use of the photographs, audio-visuals, write ups, music, and voice-overs.

The narratives are simple, descriptive, and linear. The 1857 Rebellion starts by announcing it as the first war of independence, without any reference to the controversies that have raged on for years about whether it may be considered a wide-scale rebellion or a mere sepoy mutiny. The nomenclature of the first war of independence was coined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Marx and Engels 1857) while writing about the rebellion,[6] but this was also significantly advocated by the founder of the right-wing organisation, the Rashtriya Sevak Sangha (RSS), Veer Savarkar (Savarkar 1909). The RSS is a sister organisation of the BJP. The narrative weaves its story through the long-term causes of the East India Company's oppressive regime and merges this with the immediate cause: soldiers revolting against the use of Enfield rifles that were supposed to have been made using the fat of cows and pigs that is sacrilege for Hindus and Muslims, respectively. Some rifles and pistols are laid out in glass boxes, but not the Enfield or anything historically specific. The trajectory follows the idea that though started by the sepoys, the revolt spread all over India. A coloured map shows its expansion into the various regions of India and the leaders who represented their people – maharajas, kings, and even the Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. The second floor is dedicated to the defeat of the sepoys and the leaders at the hands of the British through treachery and the superiority of the British artillery – the coming of a Capitalist modern state fighting against the last remnants of a semi-feudal India and the inhuman oppression unleashed on those leaders and people who were seen to be complicit with the rebels.

The Jallianwala Bagh museum also tells a similar story, but one of the early twentieth century. It begins its narrative with the contribution of the Indian soldiers to World War I, which was considerable and went unacknowledged and, as the exhibition says, rewarded with nothing less than the draconian Rowlatt Act. The Rowlatt Act was passed by the Imperial Legislative Council in 1919, and because of it, political cases could be tried without juries and the convicted imprisoned and interned without trial. Protests broke out, particularly, amongst the extremist wings of the Congress Party and in Punjab took on a more radical dimension. To suppress the protests, the army chief of Amritsar, General Dyer, with the tacit support of the lieutenant governor-general of Punjab, Michael Francis O'Dwyer, opened fire on a large group of people who were celebrating the spring festival, Baisakhi, on 13 April 1919, in a closed park – the Jallianwala Bagh. It was a bloody massacre that led to approximately 379–1,000 Indians dying and 1,500 being wounded. Protests

followed with Tagore renouncing his knighthood in 1919 and Gandhi hardening his anti-British stance. The exhibition ends with a note of melancholy as memories of Jallianwala Bagh tend to evoke, but also with an uplifting patriotic moment: Udham Singh in London, 20 years later, killing O'Dyer with the classic, 'India takes revenge'.

The Azadee-ke-Diwane museum contains stories of many revolutionaries who were called militant nationalists and represented the alternative to the Gandhian focus on mass mobilisation, civil society protests of Satyagraha, and non-violent strategies. Tanika Sarkar, in her seminal work *Bengal 1928–1934; The Politics of Protest*, has laid out the close relationship between radical congressmen and revolutionary terrorists, who represented a consistent patriotic discourse for the urban middle-class Hindu nationalist (Sarkar 1987: 23). This comes with a problematic historical stance, as Gandhian politics of non-violence are seen as a direct opposition to the militant strands within the nationalist movements. As Tanika Sarkar has tried to point out, it was difficult, at least in Bengal and some other regions, to distinguish radical congressmen from the revolutionary terrorists. But Gandhi's often calling off nationalist agitations, signing pacts with the British and denouncing the revolutionaries as they were tried and sent to the gallows, is full of contradiction, which the museum highlights blatantly. After the installations of the cannon and the Cellular Jail, come many exhibits extolling rebellions and revolutionaries – unknown soldiers, small rebellions (Indigo rebellion 1859–1860, Gond rebellion of 1868, massacre at Maler Kotla in 1872, Lushai in 1872, the Rampa rebellion in 1879, and the Munda Movement in 1900). These are accompanied by short biographies of their relatively unknown leaders. The Gadar Party rebellion and Rashbehari Bose's revolutionary activities, along with a large number of militant groups such as the Jugantar Samity, the Anushilan Samity, the Hindustan Socialist Revolutionary Party, the Hindustan Republican Army who undertook the assassination of British administrators, and, finally, Netaji Subash Bose adorn the other galleries. One room is dedicated to the women who participated in these movements, while a final audio-visual clip brings the history of all these different events and narratives together. The final installation, before the exit, is a small room with many artificial candles flickering in a darkened room.

The final museum is dedicated to Netaji Subash Chandra Bose (1897–1945), a popular nationalist figure, who introduced to Bengal in 1928–1929, 'a stridently militant idiom and keen interest in agitational politics, recruited large numbers of urban youth and students as his volunteers' […] and fulfilled the longing of a forcibly disarmed people for martial romance' (Sarkar 1987: 14). Bose however was embroiled in controversy with the Congress leadership till his resignation from the party and went on to form the Azad Hind Fauj or the Indian National Army (INA) with help from the Axis Powers to march to Delhi, and finally his mysterious death in a plane crash in Taihoku (now Taipei). His biographical narrative extends from his college days, to the final INA project, and to his disappearance. Life-sized photographs along with his cap, identity cards of the members of the INA, and other

paraphernalia are placed in little glass boxes. Footage from Bose's life and his activities are played on a loop all over the museum – we see him and his associates and hear his voice declaring, what is now his famous speech, 'Dilli Chalo', indicating an impeding march to Delhi to take over power through force from the colonial rulers. He wanted to compel a transfer of power and in the process challenge the compromised position of the Congress and Gandhi. Bose has always been seen as the alternative leader (particularly in Bengal) who could have led India to independence and offered a challenge to the ruling oligarchy that attained power in 1947.

The narrative is supplemented by the visual sources that are chosen to illustrate the curatorial pedagogic intent and to make it 'authentic' and historical. The research is thorough and comprehensive – particularly excavating popular grassroot rebellions, those on the geographical margins that were led by subaltern people and that have always been of significant historical concern and an aborted project by subaltern historians.[7] Where photographs are not available, sketches have been used – a style made popular by school textbooks – that seem authentic and replicas of the icons and patriots. A uniform pattern is maintained, though the availability of photographs is more evident for the later years when the nationalist movement was extensively documented. The audio-visual clips, at least three or four per museum, are old footages. These are film division documentations that were played in cinema halls in the 1960s and 1970s, before films begun – footage of important events. A solemn male voice provides the narration, creating a storytelling form with dramatic modulations of the voice. The clips edited from a more didactic narrative, however, in the larger space seem to bring forth the historical leaders as live subjects and enhance the experience.

A soundscape comprising old patriotic songs constantly play in the background; songs from old Bollywood films such as Manoj Kumar's *Mere desh ki mitti* (The soil of my land) (1967) and Lata Mangeshkar's, now famous, rendition of *Sare jahan se aacha* (The best in the world) (composed in 1904). Like all patriotic songs, they are uplifting and also given the film genres popular amongst the vast majority of the population create the necessary nostalgia. There is probably a concerted sound system that plays across the museums, exceptions being those played to enhance the ambience around the entrance installations such as a song or music piece with adequate pathos for Jallianwallah Bagh or a classical tune based on a raga depicting the poignancy of the events of 1857.

Following the established trend of valourising individuals and constructing national icons, the museum introduces many marginal and forgotten leaders and in the plethora of individuals, some icons, particularly Gandhi and Nehru, are inconspicuous. The individual cult of national, regional, or local leaders is regarded by Partha Chatterjee as an integral aspect of Indian cultural practices and the museums tell us explicitly that there is no dearth of embodied sovereigns and identification with individuals of the past and the present that have effectively built relatively closed communities whose identity is anchored in the leader (Chatterjee 2020: 99). By this logic, the sovereign deficit of constitutional democracy by playing on

individual leadership cults is, thus, 'sought to be filled by sovereignty effect of the icon who demands reverence'. Anyone who is seen as opposing this leader, the colonial ruler in this case, but also their subsequent erasures 'will fall prone to an internal border that divides loyal followers from its enemies or who has marginalised them in political power' (Chatterjee 2020: 99).

Along with the title of the exhibitions, engraved in stone are marble plaques that announce that Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister, inaugurated the museums. His role in creating an international awareness by demanding an apology from Great Britain on the centenary year of Jallianwala Bagh (2019) has been highlighted. In the Subash Bose museum, a plaque near the entrance announces how the anniversary of the formation of the Azad Hind Government was commemorated by Prime Minister Modi at the Red Fort on 21 October 2018. Stray interventions in placing their leaders, including the founder of the RSS – Veer Savarkar – cannot be overlooked given the size and positioning, as museums tend to do in terms of highlighting certain aspects. In front of the central installation in Azadee-Ke-Diwane is a board with the face of Veer Savarkar and his short stint at the Cellular Jail is prominently displayed as are others from Maharashtra who were known to be more oriented towards Hindu nationalism. The original order from the English government for the deportation of Savarkar from Britain to India for participating in nationalist activities is exhibited. It is Rashbehari Bose's later affiliation with Veer Savarkar and the founding of the right-wing Hindu Mahasabha branch in Japan in 1938 that may be responsible for his prominence amongst the militant nationalists.

Where such blatant genealogies are not possible, it offers a different perspective. Bose's history highlighted, thus, becomes the narrative to critique the mainstream Congress politics that sidelined him; his disillusionment and his subsequent search for international allies are also highlighted. Noteworthy is a quote as a graffiti that specifically mentions how he shunned Bolshevik overtures as he refused to be their agent. However, Bose's controversial alliance network with the Japanese imperial powers and the Nazis are conspicuous in their absence. No reality of historical knowledge and criticism is allowed to mar the glorification of the individual's valour and introduce complexities. Similarly, the strong Hindu overtones inherent in the militant strands of radical congress and revolutionary terrorist discourse, where – 'The Gita[8] was frequently cited to evoke a death defying mood among the youth' (Sarkar 1987: 23) is tacitly understood rather than spelt out, either in eulogy or criticism.

Another noteworthy gallery that throws light on the dramaturgical interventions inherent is the one dedicated to the women revolutionaries and martyrs, relatively few and far in between. Once again, apparently, it seems to be an important exercise in excavating lost narratives, but the gallery-centre is symbolically adorned by a towering piece – a replica of Bharat Mata[9] or Mother India, a symbol often evoked by the right wing to valourise the domestication of women while elevating them to the level of a goddess as an empty but regressive signifier. Interestingly, in the great scramble for photographs amongst the visitors, this was an installation where

the visiting women waited to be photographed. The invitation to pay homage to the life-sized portrait of Bharat Mata encourages various modes of identification, obviously overpowering all the other portraits in the room. This is a classic example of the intrusion of right-wing ideology, as many of the women revolutionaries who came out to participate in the movement and political struggles subverted the idea of the hegemonic Bharat Mata that talks of women as a symbolic presence devoid of all agencies and subservient to male subjects.

Indeed, the tourists walk through the new museums, clicking photographs on their phones, paying attention to the historical objects, glancing through the photographs, sketches, and audio-visual clips, but rarely reading the supplementary written texts accompanying the exhibits as they are mostly in English or pausing to study any one object or visual. It is a walk-through performance and experienced viscerally by being barraged by, what I regard as, the forms and idioms derived from theatre scenography and design. It is a coherent experience; exposed to a photographic gestalt that aims to generate a sensorial experience as spaces evoking patriotism, even bordering on jingoism, tend to do. The apparent objective historical narrative is extensively supported by sources such as visual documents – facsimiles of newspaper cuttings or correspondences and coded secret messages circulated within revolutionary networks that helped spread the message of revolt in 1857 within the country, or Rashbehari Bose's and Netaji Subash Chandra Bose's[10] messages circulated internationally during the First and Second World War respectively.

Bennett's recommendation of such experiential museums committed to 'social engagement, often grounded in the specific context of public memory' and 'direct pedagogy' is based on progressive curatorial practices (Bennett 2013: 59) and not the examples that we are examining and scrutinising with justified suspicion. Quoting Paul Connerton, she cautions that such purposeful structuring of memory is not necessarily agentive or evocative of any critical thinking. In this context, the key question is that when the mediation and curatorial practice are an extension of a larger politics and instrumentalisation of cultural institutions for regressive communal motives and interventions into nationalist histories, how do we initiate a critical perspective? Here, the problem is not so much in distortions or manipulations that can be pointed out or critiqued, but I would argue that the linear narrative by eliminating the discursive aspects actually unravels a different mode of efficacy – total absorption by which critical faculties are suspended. The theatre aims to challenge the return to the discursive and evoke self-reflexive critical thinking.

## Theatre's Challenge to Museum Politics

Since independence, the post-colonial Indian theatre, particularly what is often categorised as political theatre, has played with all the themes that the above-mentioned museums espouse. 1857 has long been discussed in the context of the first war of independence (Dutt 2009a);[11] Netaji Subash Bose and his INA (Dutt

1995) have always featured when Gandhian politics has been critiqued; the various militant genres, particularly those inclined towards progressive politics, have been recovered and performed; and plays and jatras[12] on the events at Jallianwala Bagh have been a popular theme (Dutt 1996). The dramatic repertoire critiqued mainstream nationalism and the emergence of the ruling oligarchy by taking up these themes, but through that which invited a discursive critical thinking and intervention not only in terms of history but to develop citizenship values and a form of active participation in civil society. When censorship and repression from the State came, theatre turned into a vortex of artivism.[13]

Since 2015, as the right wing came to power, a number of these plays, written and produced in the heyday of theatre's agonism towards the State, were revived. I focus on one such play that brings together the anomalies of Gandhian politics along with the militant nationalist themes, but through a complex discursive approach that neither allows one to eulogise any iconic figure nor fall into the binaries of militant or non-violent strategies. Most importantly, it points out the biggest contradictions of the Indian nationalist movement – the inherent seeds of communalism that it harboured and whose horrific picture we see in 2022 as the genesis of xenophobia based on Hindu nationalism.[14] The play, *Ekla Cholo Re* (Walk Alone), 2019, written by Utpal Dutt in 1989, has been produced by Sapna Sandhani and directed by Kaushik Sen in Kolkata.

The play is located in the period of transition from colonial rule to independence, when the ruling Indian National Congress party is taking over power in India and still claiming credit for leading a successful freedom movement that enabled it to build sufficient consensus to win elections and rule India for decades. While the movements acted as a compulsion for inclusion, the subsequent monopolisation of power lead to large-scale disillusionment. The play brings in both the dominant strands of nationalist struggle: the militant nationalist trend and Gandhian politics. The militant nationalist trend that the playwright has always highlighted is here portrayed through an ex-revolutionary who in 1947 is returning from the Andamans where he had been imprisoned and had undergone, as it happened, a communist consolidation. The character of Priyatosh combines a revolutionary past with the present and represents the need for a socialist ethos to be incorporated into the Indian polity. His father, Ananthbondhu Chakravarty, is an old Congress veteran who led the Gandhian mass movement from their village, which in 1947 is being torn apart by communal riots. At another level, history is unfolding as the viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten, offers a transfer of power to the Congress party for India and to the Muslim League for Pakistan by a division of the country based on Hindu- and Muslim-dominated populations. In order to retain power as revolts start breaking out all over India (Naval Mutiny of 1946, INA 1946, and other peasant movements), both the Congress and Muslim League are ready to divide the country along communal lines and majoritarian criteria. Gandhi, initially silent, soon realised the huge blunder and goes on a protest fast and offers other means to restore harmony and peace.

Anticipating a hindrance, by Gandhi's protests, in their grand plans of gaining and consolidating power, the Congress party now turns against their leader, who becomes a symbolic figure of resistance. Gandhi's public pro-Muslim stance is opposed by the right-wing groups, particularly the notorious RSS, whose founder-leaders we saw inserted into the pantheon of militant nationalist martyrs – Savarkar and Rashbehari Bose. A conspiracy is hatched that shakes the new nation – the assassination of Gandhi. A thriller-like plot unravels as two police officers are on the trail of the assassins after the first abortive attempt. The play suggests complicity on the part of the new leaders of the nation who wait till it is too late and Gandhi dies a martyr as Nathuram Godse shoots him during a public meeting. Though the RSS is banned, dormant lies the Hindutva politics and deep communalism that refuses to go away even 70 years after independence with the Congress and the right-wing bearing responsibility.

The new production has made a number of dramaturgical interventions by Sen, the director, flagging the contradictions in Gandhian politics as he fights relentlessly for communal harmony and unity. The playwright, Dutt, who all his life critiqued Gandhi and his non-violence particularly his anti-militant stand, in 1989, when the play was written and premiered, changed his stance in the face of the growing influence of right-wing politics in India. He undertook a historical assessment of Gandhi and his positive role in terms of his approach to religious differences and co-existence. The play, unlike the museum narrative, does not evade the colossal role of Gandhi or the Congress party, but subjects it to a very strong critical focus. Gandhi is now the symbol of resistance, but also the cause of the devastation as he built the political organisation to lead the Indian national movement. While he mobilised masses for his campaigns, the leadership and membership remained with the elites who represented a higher class, caste, and in terms of religion harboured a strong Hindu fundamentalist attitude.

The 2019 production in view of the current scenario, when the right-wing party is firmly ensconced in power at the Centre and many states and its ideology is being aggressively disseminated amongst the population through cultural mobilisation, highlights the tragedy of independence and traces the historical root from where communal politics[15] in India emerged. Given the devastating violence that marked the event and the partition of the country, leaves no doubt that the foundation of Indian democracy has been built on many exclusions, particularly that of religion. For the Marxist playwright and the radical director[16], the focus is on a notion of exclusion and its current implications where religion is used in a far more dangerous way than in 1947 or when the play was written and premiered for the first time in 1989. The director has focused on the historical past to address the present and the general disillusionment with the post-colonial moment gives away to a criticality that is reflected in the final scene when Gandhi's shadow looms in the background as he sits spinning his wheel and Nehru, the prime minister, and Vallabhbhai Patel, the home minister, are looking across the heads of the audience to lament a vision of the future – what the country would be like 70 years later as Hindus and Muslims

continue to shed each other's blood. A country that will never recover from the historical moment of its birth.

The production used an ensemble cast to depict the riots and fights, choreographed marches through various levels of the stage and converged to form the diamond map of India. Actors refrained from impersonating the political figures and icons, but through some symbolic costume, make up, gestures, and postures referenced the historical photographs from the archives for its audience to identify the historical figures. However, despite the realistic style of acting in character, the roles were played with identification and non-identification in a Brechtian mode. The scenography, effective but also minimalistic with steel structures, gave an impression of prison grids. The lighting often brought out the starkness and shadows of the prisons. The music and soundscape were part of the scenography, but when refrains of patriotic songs were used, they were done so more as irony with some notes being dropped. Familiarity and non-familiarity created a sound-text of affective criticality.

## Culture and Politics of Violence: Museum and the Theatre

The museums in the Red Fort and the theatre in Kolkata, though on the same theme of anti-colonial freedom struggle and impertinently pointing out historical inclusions and exclusions that affected the post-colonial nation formation and its democratic ethos, could not have been more different. Museums are a part of the statist nation-building projects and reflect shifts according to the affinities of the political parties who are in power and under their hegemonic control. The right-wing conservatism of the current dispensation has been propagating an all-pervading cultural pedagogic mission, which, as Partha Chatterjee describes, often proceeds independent of government agendas and deploys strategies akin to populism.[17] According to Chatterjee, and relevant regarding the current right-wing populism; apparent chains of equivalence through rhetorical, visual, performative, and other modes of representation of grievances are created. 'An empty signifier called "the people" is then filled by a wide array of grievances, all signifying equivalent, unfulfilled popular demands denied by the powerful elite that constitutes the enemy of the people' (Chatterjee 2020: 83). The political theatre, on the other hand, that came to be identified as one of the most important post-colonial genres of theatre practice particularly in the 1960s and 70s and continues to contest the populist tendencies openly, critiques the State and, in turn, faces censorship. Plays are often banned on the grounds of sedition.[18] Chatterjee, however, regards the widescale dominant populism and divisive agendas also as a displacement of practices, such as the political theatre that aims at supplementing coherent political ideas amongst mass followings and cultural mobilisation (Chatterjee 2020: 82). Yet, in face of such adversity, theatre continues to fight back against the all-pervasive populism to build solidarities and create resistance.

Within the populist context, the museums, thus, seem to urge for and make a comprehensible representation of people and their leaders as their embodied

presence. However, as populist principles require, they create palpably in cultural and emotional terms, internal frontiers between the 'people' and their enemies. To interpret the museum narratives, accordingly, one 'enemy' is undoubtedly the elite character of the Congress party and its leadership and, thus, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi are their representation. They are actually focusing on exclusions that have come out of what they claim is an elite secularism and Nehruvian notions of 'unity in diversity'. They turn the critique around to advocate the inclusion of populations and other communities, but not outside what could be regarded as a perverted universality of a majoritarian ethno-religious identity to claim its prominence in the larger imagination of the nation. Within an underlying fragmented, disparate, and contentious narrative, the museum display urges an acknowledgement of the tragedies and aspirations of particular groups or communities that then guide the viewer to a 'people nation' – making people visible without any agentive roles or power of equivalence and reducing them to empty signifiers (Chatterjee 2020).

To achieve such an objective, violence dominates the dramatic and theatrical element and is in synchrony with the current politics of elimination and iconoclastic denigration. Some leaders are iconised more than others and icons replace the collective and offer tokenistic representations to the people – a national perspective without affirming to an equality amongst different people or groups and as a discourse on life. Given the political scenario of communal violence since 2014, citing historical injustices in a performative way, the apparent justification and eulogisation of militancy only enhances a culture of extermination and annihilation of enemies. The simplistic and linear narratives manage to pit patriotic violence against colonial violence, justifying a continuum to the present-day violence as communities and individuals are positioned against each other. Inherent in such a historical paradigm, as Judith Butler points out, lies the seeds of social inequality and an impediment to the democratic ethos (Butler 2021) particularly if we associate the historical narrative with the present situation steeped in Islamophobia.

The theatre offers a contradictory historical analysis that points out the fault lines of the Indian polity and the anomalies of Indian democracy, where violence at the time of laying its foundations despite the Constitution that professed equality amongst all citizens, created distinctions based on caste, class, and gender, but most importantly religion (Jayal 2015) and denounces these violent exclusions. These structural exclusions, implemented through violence, form the basis between how different lives are perceived and that some lives are seen as more grievable than others, rather than all lives being equally grievable (Butler 2021: 116). Loss of Muslim lives historically and in the present are not only 'ungrievable', but tacitly endorsed as they are pushed more and more to the margins with expectations of extermination.[19]

The assassination of Gandhi in 1947, as the play depicts, not only meant that his ideals of co-existence of the two largest religious communities were unrealised and that Muslim lives in India have always been regarded as less grievable than those

of the Hindu subjects of the nation. The theatre, consistently, since independence, but now more so with the revival of plays such as *Ekla Cholo Re*, has tried to create a counter-resistance to these regressive cultural tendencies. Through its dramaturgical re-interpretation of history critically stages Gandhi's protest, not as the credo of an individual but as embodying an affirmative obligation to life that is 'different from preserving oneself or one's own community' (Butler 2021: 146). Gandhi's sympathy and support for the Muslim population is what led to the fast and protest and is an affirmation of Muslim lives as an eternal symbol. According to Butler then, it offers a way on how we might re-approach equality and co-habitation on new terms, 'defined by an interdependence that takes the edge of the individual boundaries of the body, or that works that edge for its social and political potential' (Butler 2021: 148).

The potential was never realised at the time of independence or in the period of the nation's incubation and has continued to haunt and weaken democratic experiments by intensifying social inequalities produced by biopolitical forms of governance. Butler emphasises that dismantling the phantasmatic domain in which lives are differently valued requires not merely a pro-life individual stance that aims to 'establish a metric of grievability' (2021: 147) and is commonly attributed to Gandhi as an individual but as an affirmation of life, a discourse that she says that the Left, and I say Left cultural practices, has not sacrificed to its reactionary opponents (2021: 148). Gandhi's commitment to life, Muslim lives in particular, meant that with his assassination it is not only Gandhi's death that the nation grieves, but all other lives – that of the militant nationalists who sacrificed their lives and all the people who died in the riots of partition and we remember 'that all lives are equally grievable and trying to see how that matters both in death and in life' (Butler 2021: 146).

The play deliberately focuses on Gandhian strategies of non-violence, not to play on his martyrdom but to proposition an affirmation of lives; walking through riot-torn areas to bring peace amongst Hindus and Muslims, taking up a fast in protest as his body exhibited to the public, goes visibly weaker, explicitly unravelled on the stage, and finally his martyrdom. In the middle of the play, *Ekla Cholo Re,* is a poignant scene, where the old Congressman, now marginalised, and his once militant but now communist son, pick up dead bodies in the aftermath of the riots and a voice asks, 'What is that you pick up?' The elderly man answers: 'bodies'. 'Of Hindus or Muslims?' asks the voice, but the man shakes his head and in a soft voice that vibrates across the theatre says: 'the bodies, the dead' (Dutt 1999). In every sense, the criticism is also a critique of Gandhian politics and how he once did not value the lives of the revolutionary terrorists as they refused to follow his path – and the failure of Gandhi in affirming life is what is now destroying the nation he built and envisaged and therefore his final stance and sacrifice in affirming life.[20]

This essay has traced the shift in the museum display that echo with a worldwide trend of interactive modes deploying theatrical tactics, but when it comes to the history of anti-colonial nationalist struggle and given the institutional politics

of museums in post-colonial India, it is significant to critique the narrative and the accompanying scenography which comes with this new theatrical manifestation. Given the larger politics of historical erasures, manipulations and distortions, the new museums in the Red Fort becomes an apt example to re-visit the debates. The museums' objectives to reach out to a larger audience bring back the debate of how populist impulses are deployed to mitigate against what can be called a people's history. In contrast, a theatrical production has adopted within the same theme a critical articulation to create a narrative that reveals the alternate modes of performing histories of the past – which still impact the present, both as a catalyst to initiate changes. I finally have tried to read not only the anomalies of anti-colonial nationalism, but also the contradictions that plague the most important icon of the nationalist movement, Gandhi and his final days when he becomes the symbolic resistance to violence. Judith Butler's formulation of the forces of non-violence and its impact on social inequalities and democracies allows one to understand why the difficult past is still haunting the more dangerous present.

## Notes

1 The Red Fort is the second most visited monument in the country with visitors in 2018–2019 reaching 3.6 million annually. (Government data) https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation.
2 Mughal rule in India spanned from 1526 to 1857 and built an extensive empire covering almost the entire subcontinent. But since the reign of Muhammad Shah (1719–1748) it was in decline.
3 Christophe Jaffrelot has edited and introduced a volume on Hindu Nationalism. It comprises excerpts from the writing of their ideologues and leaders with a detailed history from the nineteenth century. It goes on to show it taking concrete shape in the 1920s and various strands which it has developed on the basis of strategies of ideology building, characteristics of a diverse set of practices clubbed under the rubric of Hindu ethnic nationalism (2007: 6).
4 In India like most post-colonial nations, museums have mostly been controlled by the State as is the Archeological Survey of India, which controls historical monuments like the Red Fort. Kavita Singh has worked on the National Museum in Delhi (founded in 1949) while Tapati Guha-Takurta's works along the same vein are around the Indian museum, Calcutta (previously the Imperial Museum).
5 Other museums are being added to the four that are being discussed in this essay: one on Shahjahan and the Red Fort and one on Kashmir. The one on Shahjahan and the Red Fort opened in September 2022, sponsored by a private industrial house that has used technology more abundantly to create the interactive experience.
6 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels expressed their opinions on 1857 through letters to the *New York Tribune*, during the time of the revolt; commenting on the general character of the revolt, the question of atrocities committed, and the conduct of the military struggle (Marx and Engels 1857).
7 The Subaltern Studies Group comprised a group of historians and social scientists in India and South Asia, who in the 1980s, inspired by the works of Antonio Gramsci, extensively explored anti-colonial nationalist struggles from below, of the subaltern classes, and critiqued the focus on elite narratives.
8 The Gita is a 700 verse Hindu scripture as part of the epic Mahabharata (second half of the first millennium BC), where Krishna counsels Arjuna, justifying the war and violence.

9 The painting is a replica of Abanindranath Tagore's painting of 1905 and depicts a saffron clad woman, holding a book, a sheaf of paddy, a white cloth, and a rosary. This was one of the earliest visualisations of a woman embodying the nation, Mother India, according to ideals of the Swadeshi movement of 1905.

10 Rashbehari Bose (1886–1945) and Netaji Subash Bose (1897–1945) are regarded as heroes who represented the militant genre of Indian nationalist movements particularly the Swarajist party. Rashbehari Bose played a key role in the Gadar Party Mutiny, a plan to initiate a pan Indian mutiny in the British India Army in 1915 and later founded the Indian National Army, which he handed over to Netaji Subash Bose. Both of them tried to garner international support for the Indian nationalist cause from the Japanese and Netaji subsequently from the axis powers during the World War II.

11 For the sake of brevity, I have cited only the works of Utpal Dutt – playwright, director, and actor whose vast repertoire dealt extensively with these themes: *Ferari Fauj* (Absconding Army, 1961), *Kallol* (Sound of the Waves, 1965), *Rifle* (1968), *Jallianwala Bagh* (1969), *Sannyasir Tawrawari* (Swords of the Sannyasis 1972), *Baishakhi Megh* (Storm Clouds 1974), *Titumeer* (1978), *Aranyer Ghoom Bhangche (*Forests are awakening, 1987), *Kuthar* (1980), *Swadhinatar Phaki* (1981), *Bibighar* (1982), Damama Oi Baje (Drums are beating) (1988), Mahabidroho (The Great Rebellion 1975 and 1984).

12 Jatra is popular theatre on the rounds, popular in Bengal, Assam, and Orissa. The Bengal jatra is a totally commercial enterprise, but reach out to an unprecedented number of audiences.

13 See Utpal Dutt's semi-autobiographical work, *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (2009b).

14 Communalism is a derogatory term used to identify the doctrine that came to be known by name 'Hindutva' which according to Jaffrelot fulfilled the criteria of ethnic nationalism. According to him the motto of the right wing political parties and affiliated cultural organizations, 'Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan' echoed many other 'European nationalism based on religious identity, a common language or even racial feelings' (Jaffrelot 2007: 5).

15 Communal politics in the Indian context refers to the major communities, the Hindus and the Muslims divided on religious lines with a long history of violence and antagonism.

16 Koushik Sen (b. 1968) is a theatre director and actor. He directs plays for the theatre group Swapnasandhani which was formed in 1992. The early directorial ventures that he is known for are *Tara Teen Bon* (1998), *Bhalo Rakhosher Golpo* (2005), *Malyaban* (2006), *Suprobhat* (2006), *Banku Babur Bondhu* (2006), and *Dorjiparar Morjinarai* (2009). In recent years, Sen has turned to classics, staging Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (2012), Sophocles' *Antigone* (2015), Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* as *Nirbhaya* (2017) and *Hamlet* (2022).

17 Christophe Jaffrelot has traced in detail the different associations which together with the political party, BJP forms the Sangh Parivar (the family of the Sangh that is of the RSS); the RSS, working at the grass root levels with cadres and branches and subbranches, students union, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP – Indian Students Association) primary aim to combat left influences in campus, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS – Indian Clerics), the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP – the world Council of Hindus) (Jaffrelot 18–19).

18 The colonial Dramatic Censorship Act (1876) and section 124 A of the Indian Penal Code (1860) is often used to ban plays and cultural performances. Its application has increased in the recent times to curtail the freedom of speech.

19 Since 2014 there have been rampant Islamophobia including public lynching and targeting Muslim population and works as a nexus between the state, new legislations, police and Hindu mobs.

20 Tanika Sarkar has also shown how within the radical militant movement there was a divide between those who showed strong indigenous tendencies and those who were finding inspiration in the socialist and working class worldwide movements (Sarkar 1987).

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# 9

# 'IT'S ART, ALL IT CAN DO IS BEAR WITNESS'

## Remembering Histories of Enslavement in Black British Women's Plays and at the International Slavery Museum

*Lynette Goddard*

This chapter examines how histories of enslavement are portrayed in Selina Thompson's *salt.* (Southbank Centre, 2017, Royal Court Theatre, 2019, BBC, 2021; directed by Dawn Walton) and Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* (Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, 2020, BBC Radio 3, 2020, and National Theatre, 2021; directed by Miranda Cromwell).[1] I argue that Thompson and Pinnock use embodied dramatic and performance strategies to create space for Black women to speak back to past histories of racial injustice and comment on the ongoing legacies of slavery in the present. Black women's perspectives are particularly pertinent to understand when taking account of bell hooks' argument that 'it was only in relationship to the [enslaved] black female […] that the white slaver could exercise freely absolute power, for he could brutalize and exploit her without fear of harmful retaliation' (1982: 17, 18).[2] Both Thompson's and Pinnock's plays explore hooks' notion that legacies of slavery, of rape, coercion, and brutalisation manifest in the 'continued devaluation of Black womanhood' (1982: 53).

I compare themes in the plays with objects and artefacts that are displayed at the International Slavery Museum (ISM) in Liverpool to consider how narratives, staging, and curating decisions respond to the ethical issues of bearing witness to the past and drawing out contemporary legacies.[3] I argue that Pinnock and Thompson create a dynamic between the past and the present, whereas ISM's general overview is less effective in conveying the complexities of Black experiences and the continued impacts of slavery's afterlives. In comparison to the embodied representations in the plays, I argue that the ISM presents sedate, sterile, and disembodied narrations of histories of enslavement. A seemingly neutral, objective, and factual stance in the ISM's conventionally curated exhibitions distances visitors from the most traumatic aspects of the transatlantic trade.[4] I follow Ana Lucia Araujo's scepticism that 'depictions of human

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bondage in museums and exhibitions often fail to challenge racism and white supremacy inherited from the period of slavery' (2021: n.p.). Araujo argues that 'attempts to provide an overview of slavery systems' through a focus on four themes – wealth and refinement, submission and victimisation, resistance and rebellion, and achievements and legacies – means that 'most exhibitions fail to fully address the legacies of slavery such as anti-black racism and persisting racial inequalities' (2021: 2).

Histories of enslavement are complex, raising inevitable questions about the ethics of representation and the responsibilities of playwrights, performers, and curators when portraying these themes for contemporary audiences. Questions revolve around the relevance of staging slavery today and about how to avoid valorising the past by focusing on abolition and the heroics of white abolitionists. There is a delicate balance to be struck between showing what happened without relying on portrayals of disturbing tropes or reproducing excessive violence that risks retraumatising contemporary performers and spectators with images of 'black people in chains, again, beaten and degraded' (Jones, Jr. 2019: 383).

A number of African-American theatre scholars have argued that contemporary representations of transatlantic slavery are created to show how the ongoing legacies continue to impact and shape racial discourses today. Douglas A. Jones, Jr. argues that 'many find in the historicity of slavery explanatory frameworks with which to account for, and thereby help redress, persistent forms of race-based inequities and exclusions' (2019: 384). His view is echoed in Stacie Selmon McCormick's perception that playwrights 'push against received histories of slavery' and grapple with the past as 'a site of interrogation of the contemporary problem of un/freedom for black subjects […] in constant negotiation of what Saidiya Hartman calls "the afterlife of slavery"' (2019: 2). Hartman's claim is that 'skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and impoverishment' come from structural racisms that are direct legacies of slavery. In other words that

> [s]lavery […] established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone […;] black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.
>
> (2007: 6)

Afterlives of enslavements manifest in the disproportionate numbers of Black women who die during childbirth, of Black children excluded from education, of Black people in prison, and dying during or soon after being in custody of the police. I argue that these ideas about afterlives of enslavement are shown in how Pinnock's and Thompson's plays are framed within dramatic devices that are shaped to accentuate the continued impact of the past on Black women's experiences in the present.

## Staging Slavery in Selina Thompson's *salt.* and Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights*

Selina Thompson's *salt.* is a solo performance narrating her 2016 journey to retrace the transatlantic slave route, starting with a journey on a cargo ship from Europe to Africa, before taking a flight to Jamaica in the Caribbean and returning to the United Kingdom via visits to plantation houses in Wilmington North America. The journey that Thompson recounts and her experiences of performing the production highlight the ethics of remembering transatlantic slavery on the contemporary stage. Thompson felt compelled to make the trip to heal, to remember, to witness, and to explore the afterlives of slavery in response 'to an endless [social media] feed of black pain, black rage and black people having to assert that black lives matter because black death is normal' (2018: 20, 21). As a way of emphasising gendered dynamics Thompson's speech is attributed to 'The Woman' in the published play text and I will oscillate between referring to Thompson as the writer and performer and The Woman as she appears as a character in the play text.[5] Moving between these two descriptors recognises that Thompson recounts her own personal and specific experiences as resonant with the experiences of Black women more broadly.

At the start of the show, Thompson acknowledges that she and her birth and adoptive parents 'are all descended from enslaved people' (14) and she describes *salt.* as a response to the 'violence that is in my ancestry' (22), a way of grieving, and as a memorial for the dead. Thompson echoes Christina Sharpe's exploration of 'The Wake' (2016) as both the trail left in the sea by a ship moving in water and a vigil or ritual held to mourn and celebrate the life of someone who has died. Stage directions indicate that '[*t*]*he space has been spiritually cleansed, and is ready for the spirit work that is to take place*' (14). As the audience enters the auditorium, The Woman stands in front of a small wooden table, or altar, on which a bottle of water containing a sprig of rosemary has been placed for libation alongside a pestle and mortar of finely-ground salt and an incense stick burning. The Woman is wearing a white cotton dress that is reminiscent of what African women wore while working in cotton fields and of spiritual or religious robes for the wake work. Through direct audience address in a poetic monologue, The Woman describes colonial dynamics that continue to shape interactions today and are (re) enacted and (re)produced in the racist and sexist assertions of power and surveillance that Thompson experiences on the journey. The Woman challenges notions of England's 'green and pleasant lands', stating

> Europe is awash in blood. Every penny of wealth, each brick of each intimidating building, the pavement slabs of quiet city streets and the soil beneath rolling green hillside is built on suffering, massacre, death. It is, and should be a cursed continent.
>
> (19)

Her account of the journey evokes memories of the Middle Passage and invites audiences to consider how colonial legacies result in Black people being subjected to extra surveillance at ports and airports and impact the ethics of tourism in Africa and the Caribbean.

Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* is inspired by two JMW Turner paintings completed in 1840: 'Rockets and Blue Lights (Close at Hand) To Warn Steamboats of Shoal Water' and 'Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhon Coming On' (1840), known as 'Slave Ship'. Rockets and blue lights refer to the Royal Navy sending up flares as a warning to the captains of ships that continued to carry enslaved people after trading became illegal to let them know that they were being pursued or, ambiguously, to forewarn them and give them time to throw captives overboard to avoid being caught illegally trafficking. 'Slave Ship' shows a distant ship at sea in a storm. At first glance, one is likely to be struck by the richness of the bright orange and red sky, the approaching storm, and the precarious ship sailing away in the distance, and on closer inspection, one notices shackles around severed human limbs that are caught in the wake and seagulls preying on human flesh. 'Slave Ship' is widely discussed as being a response to the 1781 Zong Massacre, where the captain of a ship that was running low on food and water supplies after misrouting on the way to Jamaica ordered his crew to throw 133 of the sickest captives overboard into the sea, knowing that he could not make an insurance claim for the loss of cargo if they died from natural causes such as starvation. The story became notorious when the insurers refused to pay out until a court case eventually found in favour of the ship's master's decision to sacrifice some of the enslaved people to protect the rest of the captives and crew. Turner's painting is one of many responses to the Zong in art, poetry, and literature, although as Sharpe argues, calling the painting 'Slave Ship', rather than 'Zong', 'allows it to stand in for […] every slave ship and all the murdered Africans in the Middle Passage' (36).[6]

Pinnock (2020b) recognises 'lots of contradictions in the painting. For a start it's really, really beautiful, but its subject matter is awful'. In the prologue two Black women – schoolteacher Essie and actress Lou – view Turner's painting exhibited to mark the Bicentenary of the 1807 Abolition of Slavery Act at a museum housed on the reconstruction of a slave ship. Lou criticises Turner for dehumanising the murdered African captives by reducing them to severed body parts floating on water, whereas Essie commends him for avoiding the usual pitfalls of portraying 'noble victims' (Pinnock 2020a: 10) or 'mak[ing] abolitionists into saints' (11): 'We can't see the drowning bodies but we know they're there. We have to imagine, and what we imagine is so much worse than anything he could show us' (11). In the second act, John Ruskin questions why '[t]he painting does not depict the slavers nor the action that the title describes' (75).

In response to criticisms that Turner dehumanises the enslaved Africans by reducing them to their body parts, Pinnock's Black characters have names, past lives, and voices to talk back to the white enslavers enacting violence upon Black bodies. Scenes set in 2006–2007 show a company of actors and director rehearsing scenes

from the film *The Ghost Ship,* which includes scenes set in 1781 re-enacting the Zong massacre, and scenes in 1840 as Turner boards the ship to conduct research for his paintings and free Black sailor Thomas leaves his wife Lucy and daughter Jess behind to embark on one last voyage. Pinnock layers these multiple time-frames to show important continuities between the past and the present more effectively than the narrative of slavery shown at the ISM, as I will now demonstrate.

## Exhibiting Painful Pasts at the International Slavery Museum

Jessica Moody recognises that museums were slow to engage with histories of enslavement and she notes that when slavery museums started to appear 'many maintained narratives that celebrated colonial endeavour and acts of white liberation' (2020: 157).[7] Araujo acknowledges that the reluctance of Western museums to engage with histories of enslavement started to shift near the end of the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century in preparation for the 2007 commemoration of the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade (1807). Following years of increasing pressure from Black activists and campaigners for Britain's involvement in transatlantic slavery to be recognised, the ISM opened as a permanent exhibition in 2007.[8] ISM is a two-gallery space occupying the third floor of the Liverpool Maritime Museum, which opened on the Royal Albert Docks in Liverpool on 23 August 2007 as 'the first public museum totally dedicated to the history of slavery' (Araujo 2021: 6). ISM is located 'at the centre of a World Heritage site and only yards away from the dry docks where 18th century slave trading ships were repaired and fitted out' (Anon 2022).

ISM developed from the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery (TSG), which was housed in the basement of the Liverpool Maritime Museum from October 1994.[9] Anthony Tibbles explains that National Museums Liverpool thought carefully about catering for both Black and white visitors when creating the original exhibition. Tibbles argues that concerns about presenting 'factual and accurate' information and ensuring 'that white people should not leave feeling guilty and that black people should not leave feeling angry' (2005: 132) resulted in 'a gallery which tries to look at the whole history of the transatlantic slave trade' (ibid.: 132). TSG 'attempt[ed] to reflect the experience of transatlantic slavery over a 400-year period, between three continents and to tell a human story rather than [a] technical one' (ibid.: 132) and these ideas are carried forward into the ISM. However, despite claims that 'the ISM represented a notable step change in public memory work around transatlantic slavery' (Moody 2020: 156), the collection was criticised as consisting of 'ahistorical presentations of artefacts relating to African culture, from different ethnic groups, regions, and time periods, which presented Africa from a decidedly European point of view through the dominance of Western ethnographic museum practice' (ibid.: 162).

On arrival at the ISM, visitors are greeted with slogans etched into the walls that emphasise the human right to freedom, creating an initial impression that Black

and anti-slavery perspectives will be prominent: ‘No man can put a chain about the ankle’ (Frederick Douglas), and ‘No one shall be held in slavery or servitude’ (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). A wall of video recordings contextualises the museum, which is arranged into three main rooms to create a linear narrative from the past to the present. ‘Life in West Africa’ challenges reductive notions of Black experience as beginning with transatlantic slavery by focusing on pre-colonial African lives and depicting stories of capture, resilience, and rebellion. ‘Enslavement and the Middle Passage’ includes exhibits showing life on plantations, a walk-in film screening of a Middle Passage voyage, and an exhibit showing how street names in Liverpool are connected to local merchants who were involved in the trade. ‘Legacy’ focuses on contemporary forms of enslavement and includes documentary clips about modern slavery that demonstrate how oppressive systems persist in continued global inequalities and forms of exploitation, such as factory sweatshop workers in Brazil. The ‘Legacy’ gallery also includes displays of contemporary artworks that respond to colonialisation and the British Empire, as well as a Black Achievers Wall displaying photographs of Black cultural commentators, arts practitioners, sportspeople, and politicians.[10]

ISM ‘tidied up’ the cruelty of slavery by placing objects and artefacts into neatly arranged glass cabinets, where they are grouped into types, evenly spaced, and labelled with the name, place of origin, and date, which encourages an aesthetic view of them as artworks. Trade beads, which were used for currency, as well as manillas, shackles, and other instruments of torture are observed from a distance in these glass cabinets. African masks, musical instruments, ivory tusks, sculptures, and Caribbean coins are displayed to show African life pre- and post-slavery, and porcelain teapots, plates, and sugar bowls demonstrate the wealth of the enslavers and celebrate artistically intricate European designs. As Araujo notes, however, the ISM fails to fully explain connections between the trade, wealth, and enslaved people’s labour: ‘there are nearly no attempts to associate the fortunes generated by the Atlantic slave [trade] with the present-day legacies of slavery’ (20). While long timelines of historical events are informative, they remain accounts of something that happened in the distant past.

My experience at ISM is reminiscent of Hartman’s experience of visiting a dungeon museum and noticing that ‘the [enslaved] were missing. None of their belongings were arranged nicely in well-lit glass cases […] None of their sayings were quoted on placards throughout the hall. Nor was their family life and social organization described’ (2007: 116). This point is exemplified in an ISM exhibit about the trade of goods between Europe and the Caribbean via Africa. Whilst each page from 1501 to 1867 includes figures showing how the number of ‘Enslaved Africans’ grew from 270,000 between 1501 and 1600 to 3.5 million between 1807 and 1867, the use of arrows and charts underplays the violence that was enacted as part of the trade of ‘precious metals, trade goods, and tropical goods’. Another exhibit prints a list of the names and sale prices of enslaved people, revealing how captured Africans, particularly women and girls, were objectified by remarks made about them

> Violet, 16, Housework and Nursemaid, $900.00; Lizzie, 30, Rice, Unsound, $300.00; Minda, 27, Cotton, Prime Woman, $1, 200.00; Flementina, 39, Good Cook, Stiff Knee, $400.00; Sally, 10, Handy in Kitchen, $675.00; Dorcas Judy, 25, Seamstress, Handy in House, $800.00; Bessie, 69, Infirm, Sews, $250.00; Callie May, 27, Prime Woman, Rice, $1, 000.00; Honey, 14, Prime Girl, Hearing Poor, $850.00; Angelina, 16, Prime Girl, House or Field, $1,000.00.

A note that '[o]n account of low prices listed below, they will be sold for cash only, and must be taken into custody within two hours after sale' (Sale of Slaves and Stock) sounds grim, but the exhibition is disembodied from the reality of those lives at the auction. By not providing any details about how the women became 'infirm' or developed 'poor hearing', for example, the museum fails to invite visitors into the experiences of these enslaved women or to consider how their injuries resulted from the violence inflicted upon them. These descriptions hide the fact that the women's injuries have resulted from the oppressive and violent spaces that they were forced to inhabit and from the brutalities of their environments and owners.

The Middle Passage was the second leg of the triangular route of the transatlantic slave trade, which involved a horrific eight-to-ten-week journey on ships carrying captive African men, women, and children across the Atlantic in severely cramped and dehumanising conditions. Sowande' M Mustakeem argues that 'the interior holds of merchant ships served as vital sites of power sailors used to dehumanize captives, enforce dependency, inflict pain, establish authority, and prohibit any sense of control over one's personal life in the near and far future' (2016: 18, 19). Stephanie Smallwood describes how overcrowding and unsanitary conditions combined with '[e]xhaustion, malnutrition, fear, and seasickness resulted in depressed immune systems and increased vulnerability to disease' (2007: 136). Many captured Africans died during the Middle Passage journeys or jumped overboard into the sea, choosing to take their own lives rather than suffer the humiliation of being enslaved when the ships reached their destinations.

The 'Enslavement and the Middle Passage' exhibit felt sanitised at the ISM with the horrific conditions on the ships captured through a short descriptive summary that made appreciating its gravity less effective. In order to offer a more affective approach, one exhibit 'represents the journey of three slave ships sailing out of Liverpool in 1788' – Rose, Bud, and Brooks – and includes three 'audio excerpts written by people with direct experience of the horrors of enslavement and the Middle Passage'. Yet even in this case, one is the voice of a surgeon on board a ship and another is a ship's master.

The centrepiece of this room is a walk-in audiovisual display about the Middle Passage, which is one of the few performative exhibits in the museum. Before entering, visitors are told: 'The central interactive in this gallery features a two-minute recreation of that journey. Please be warned that it includes graphic scenes of life on board a slave ship'.[11] Visitors enter into a darkened room where we are surrounded by a looped film sequence of a Black man in shackles with close-ups

of his feet, face, and body dripping with sweat as he is writhing in pain, struggling, bleeding, and vomiting with a soundtrack of ambient, squelching music and the sea playing in the background. However, the focus on close-ups of the Black man's body and face does not fully convey the cramped space of the hold of the ship in relation to other bodies or give any sense of who is enacting these cruelties upon him and so denies showing white enslavers as responsible for acts of violence. The implication of sanitising portrayals of the Middle Passage is that the horrors and violence enacted upon Black bodies during transportation are minimised for contemporary viewers who are distanced from its impact. By contrast, Thompson's and Pinnock's plays use narrative and dramatic devices to immerse audiences within detailed expositions of the trauma of Middle Passage voyages.

## Remembering the Middle Passage: Voyages, Massacres, and Resistance

Selina Thompson (2021) recognises the significance of the sea in tethering Europe to transatlantic slavery, preventing the usual 'sidestep' and 'sleight of hand' that seeks to evade acknowledging European responsibility at the forefront of the trade, which is reproduced by the erasure of the white perpetrators in the ISM's Middle Passage display. *salt.* centres on the traumatic experience of being at sea under European rule and highlights how Thompson and her filmmaker colleague were subjected to racism and sexism from the first cargo ship's Italian captain and crew. The captain was reluctant to let them on board the ship, departing first from Harwich, Essex and then Hamburg, Germany without them (Harvie 2018). They eventually joined the ship in Antwerp after signing a contract agreeing to a number of conditions, including agreeing not to film while on board the ship, which undermined the main purpose of their voyage, which was to capture footage of the sea (Harvie 2018). As Black women, they were at the bottom of the ship's hierarchy, and the rules imposed upon them were detrimental to their ability to work together effectively on their creative project. Thompson admits that she did not consider the emotional risk to her collaborator at the time and she protects their identity by not revealing their name in the retelling: 'in not naming them now, and not seeking to tell their story on her behalf, I'm trying not to repeat that harm' (2018: 23).

Thompson's account of the captain's humiliating treatment of them echoes bell hooks' ideas about how enslaved Black women were 'ridiculed, mocked, and treated contemptuously by the slaver crew' (1982: 19). Although adamant '[t]hat his ship is not a slave ship' (Thompson 2018: 24), he insisted that they call him Master and their signed agreement was that 'at sea, the Master's word is law' (24). He repeatedly insults their heritage, 'refers to Africans as [n-word]' (26), tells them that African 'people are feral children' (26), 'that the continent will never progress [and] to be wary of Africans' (26). Thompson's narration evocatively captures how they were not allowed up on the deck for much of the journey, deprived of natural light and fresh air by being down in the ship's hold, which is reminiscent of

how captives were transported across the Middle Passage, chained together and squashed below the decks: 'I curl into the corner of my bed and make myself as small as I can' (27). The Woman stops going to meals to avoid the blatant racism and sexism of the white officers; she becomes depressed and ill and her menstruation cycle stops as her body becomes blocked.[12]

The story is narrated primarily through the use of direct address to the audience while The Woman sits or stands in one of the three main areas of the stage. In Europe, she stands at a lectern above which hangs a neon triangle reminding of the transatlantic route. A wreath to mourn the dead represents Thompson's time at Elmina's Castle in Ghana and The Woman sits amongst a foliage of potted plants that indicate the lushness of tropical Jamaica. However, the centrepiece is a sequence during which The Woman moves centrestage to smash at a large block of pink Himalayan rock salt with a sledgehammer in an act of physical exertion that evokes the sweat and labour of enslaved people. She uses the salt fragments to recount the painful dynamics of power that she and her colleague experienced on board the first ship.

The Woman lays out the rocks of salt increasing in size, each one representative of a character or a force. The smallest block represents the two Black women artists, followed by the Filipino crew, who are somewhat disempowered themselves, the white Italian officers that 'terrorise the artists' (30), the Master, whose 'control is held by intimidation and aggression' (30), the Union, the Company, and the European States. The largest block represents 'imperialism, and racism and capitalism and/God knows what else/Built on Violence/Maintained by it too/It decides who matters and who will die' (31, 32). Thompson is categorical about showing the hierarchy of oppressive forces and repeatedly smashes at each block of salt when the character or force is mentioned, which acts both as a way of venting her rage about how she and her colleague were treated and visually illustrating how disempowered the Black women felt by the actions of the captain and the crew. By the end of the sequence, the largest block of salt representing imperialism remains relatively intact, while the smallest blocks representing the two Black women are smashed into smithereens. Although the sequence centres on the European sailors disempowering the Black women, Thompson's resistance is evident in the defiant final line of this section: 'I should have spat in that man's face before I reached dry land' (32).

Thompson's return journey on another freighter ship is imagined as a '*eulogy [...] of a woman who has jumped into the sea*' (49), referencing the many captured African people who took their own lives during the Middle Passage, choosing to die rather than be enslaved when the ship reached its destination. The Woman's descriptions of 'birds div[ing] into the water we leave in our wake' (49), of 'solitude' (49), of 'not see[ing] land for eleven days' (49) capture how arduous it is to travel by sea. Recounted memories of ghosts coming up from below the decks at the centre of the Atlantic evoke grief for our ancestors who died at sea and bear witness to 'how sacred it is to be a descendant of those that were never supposed to survive' (51).

The Middle Passage is also at the centre of several moments in Pinnock's play, drawing attention to the violence enacted upon Black bodies by white enslavers as well as to the resistance of enslaved Africans. In the first act, the cast rehearses a scene from *The Ghost Ship* (the film within the play) that outlines the graphic violence perpetrated against enslaved Africans. The showrunner reads out the opening directions of the film, which describe a tranquil sea setting that 'explodes into the screaming chaos of a massacre. We see the impressive tall ship in silhouette, its sails at full mast and 'sailors on deck dragging struggling and enchained Africans then throwing them overboard' (Pinnock 2020a: 17). The film directions highlight acts of resistance – a drowning child 'struggle[s] with the water, trying to swim back to the surface' (17) and Olu 'struggles, kicking and biting' (17) the sailor who is trying to hoist her over the side of the ship into the sea. Determined to survive his act of violence, 'she clings on to the rigging' (18) in a moment that acknowledges the story that one of the African women on the Zong defiantly resisted being thrown to death in the sea and tried to clamber back on board. Reading out these film directions rather than showing the action on stage lets the audience vividly imagine the violence without causing emotional or physical harm to actors.

Later in the play, Lucy, who was enslaved until her husband Thomas bought her freedom, remembers the inhumane conditions in which enslaved people were trafficked,

> shackled […] in the hold, all of you together – men, women, children – cheek by jowl; up to your neck in somebody else's shit and vomit, not to mention the stink of festering sores carved out on your back by the cat [o' nine tales].
>
> (40)

Lucy's daughter Jess's fear of and repetitive dreams about drowning evoke memories of African ancestors losing their lives in the sea. In the following scene, the actress Lou is on the film set playing Olu on board a ship where two white sailors are punishing her by forcing a speculum into her mouth to keep her throat open while they force-feed her. The violence of the enslavers is captured as their whipping of Olu becomes more severe. Olu demonstrates ideas of Black resistance by struggling against them before grabbing the whip and turning it upon them in a further act of rebellion. Decisions about how to stage this scene respond to the ethical concerns about how the violence of the past can be shown while not retraumatising contemporary actors or spectators. The National Theatre production's set and costume designer Laura Hopkins and director Miranda Cromwell explain that it was imperative to find a way of staging the scene to show the violence enacted upon Olu without inflicting pain on the Black performer's body. The whip is never used directly upon Olu and instead is lashed next to her on hydrochromic ink, thus 'leaving marks on the floor rather than on an actor's skin' (National Theatre 2021).

## World Heritage Sites of Atrocity, Street Names, Tourism, and Plantations

Araujo argues that 'West African countries seeking to promote economic development through tourism initiatives encouraged the memorialization of the Atlantic Slave Trade, especially through the promotion of heritage sites and [the] creation of monuments and memorials' (2021: 5). One such world heritage site is Elmina's Castle in Ghana, a notorious fort where Africans were held captive before being transported across the Middle Passage. Thompson pinpoints the complexities of 'sites of atrocity' (Hartman 2007: 115) now being packaged for tourists:

> This castle bleached white by the sun, and set against a gorgeous tableau of palm trees and blue sea, was the place where people went through the Door of No Return, and out into the Middle Passage to become slaves.
>
> (Thompson 2018: 35)

At ISM, Elmina's Castle is represented by John Stobart's 1971 painting 'Daru, Off Elmina Castle, Ghana', which captures an idyllic location in which the white walls are set against blue skies and palm trees, with waves gently lapping the shore and ships bobbing in the bay. Stobart's painting gives no indications of the violence of Elmina as a holding fort and by placing the image into an ornate gold frame, ISM's framing encourages viewers to primarily experience an aestheticised version of this site of atrocity as a classical landscape painting.

Drawing from Hartman, who visited Elmina's Castle over 50 times, Thompson's account expresses internal feelings of discomfort by paying particular attention to how she navigates the visit as a Black woman who is there to grieve our ancestors. She recounts her feelings as the tour guide tries to sell them souvenirs of a space where she feels painful connections to the past:

> The women's dungeons reek, we stand in a courtyard where women would have stood, looking up to where the governor would have selected a woman from. The reality of what being selected would have meant, lingers in the air.
>
> (2018: 36)

Hartman recognises that 'how best to remember the dead and represent the past is an issue fraught with difficulty, if not outright contention' (2002: 758). Similarly, Thompson finishes her eulogy by questioning the ethics of memorial sites: 'What should a site of mourning for the enslaved look like?/What might hold the long, long memory? What would be both a covenant to never let such things happen again/And a refusal to forget?' (2018: 37).

Thompson captures how 'residual trauma' (2018: 41) plays out when travelling as a Black woman alone and navigating the tourist trade in Africa and the

Caribbean in the twenty-first century. On the one hand, her British passport carries the instruction 'to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance, and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary'. Yet she recognises being subjected to extra surveillance, '[a] squeeze here./Some fingers down a fat fold there' (40), bringing to mind the scrutiny of enslaved bodies on auction blocks; and she finds affinity with 'a host of Black women/Detained in rooms/Told to remove their wigs/Removed from first class/[…] Dragged off planes/As others are dragged on in the dead of the night' (ibid.). Things are no easier in Jamaica, the country of Thompson's birth parents, grandparents, and one of her adoptive parents, and where in many ways she feels at home. 'Fecundity defines Jamaica' (43), she says, recognising Jamaica as the paradise island of the tourist brochures and a space where she can finally exhale; her blocked period and appetite return. Yet, on the other hand, she recognises some discomforting remnants of the island's colonial past: 'mongooses, here because they were bought by slave-owners to kill rats […;] bamboo planted to stop the skin of white women going dark in the sun […;] private beaches where Jamaicans can't go' (44). Thompson notices these residues and the complexities of seeing 'white tourists coming to enact a dynamic in which they are the master and black people smile and serve happily and I am somewhere [in] between' (44).

A taxi driver tells her the story of 'Devon House, built by Jamaica's first black millionaire, that the governor's wife hated it so much – said it was an affront – that they built a whole new road so that she wouldn't have to drive past a black man's wealth – "Lady Musgrave Road? More like Racist White Lady Lane", the driver says' (44). As Thompson highlights, street names carry the histories of places and some areas are named to remember where celebrated people have lived. Most of the names in ISM's 'Street Names' exhibit are of 'local merchants who were involved in slavery and related trades' (ISM 33), including Liverpool's Cunliffe Street, Earle Street, Great Newton Street, Rodney Street, Tarleton Street, and Penny Lane. Turning over the cylindrical plaques reveals information about the respective streets and the controversies surrounding the figures. Araujo finds that

> [t]his display is certainly the most successful in exemplifying how the profits of the trade left important marks in Liverpool, where streets, buildings, and other landmarks were constructed with the wealth created by slavery or named after slave merchants and other individuals involved in the inhuman commerce.
>
> (20)

However, after the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, during which the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol and renewed calls for streets and buildings associated with people who profited from slavery and were against abolition

to be renamed, ISM took the street names exhibit off display due to concerns that it might cause offence to some visitors.

Former plantations and plantation houses in the United States and the Caribbean are packaged as tourist sites in ways that belie the atrocities that were enacted there, similar to museum exhibitions in showing the grandeur of the mansion houses and presenting objects and artefacts as artworks. 'The Plantation Life' exhibition at ISM includes a touchscreen exhibit on which to listen to testimonies, including from enslaved field and house workers (though it is not clear how these were acquired), as well as a scale model showing the layout of a typical plantation, surrounded by black and white images of enslaved Africans with their feet in punishment stocks, wearing restrictive facemasks and collars as punishments or to prevent escape, and being tied up or whipped. Such a framing discharges slavers from culpability through the focus on the bodies of the enslaved Africans, and placing this series of images amongst those of auctions and sugar plantation mills further lessens their impact.

The violence of enslavers is made explicit in scenes set on a plantation in Brazil at the end of *Rockets and Blue Lights*, where sailor Thomas has been tricked into enslavement,[13] and is cutting cane with an overseer pointing a rifle at him. Singing is a form of resistance that recalls spirituals and Thomas defiantly continues singing even as the overseer threatens more violence. He ends the song by remembering what African-Caribbean people have endured over the centuries, chanting a requiem that remembers the names of past Black heroes and Black people who were victims of racial injustices in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries:

> I survived the slave castles at Bonny, the *Zong* and Baptist massacres […;] I survived the fires of New Cross and Grenfell /; Death in custody, through all this I lived […] I am Yaa Asantewa, Yvonne Ruddock, David Oluwale […,] I am Sam Sharpe, Kelso Cochrane, Stephen Lawrence.
>
> (2020a: 79, 80)

Thomas's song acts as a reminder of historical and contemporary sites of atrocity where Black lives were tragically cut short, concluding with the reflection that '[m]emories survive the centuries […] to remember is to open deep wounds' (Pinnock 2020a: 79), which speaks to the concerns about memorialisation that this chapter has explored.

## Conclusion: Bearing Witness and Remembering Not to Forget

By the end of Selina Thompson's *salt.* all of the props and materials used during the performance are strewn across the stage: a smashed-up block of pink Himalayan rock salt, a sledgehammer, a pair of steel toe-capped boots, safety goggles and gloves. Smoke continues to waft from an incense stick that has been burning throughout. The Woman looks around and describes the stage scene as

> her monument […] her act of remembrance […] her grief. […] Because this is our burden/Sit with it/Sit with the pain/It doesn't go away/But we are sitting with you. There is work to be done/And we must go on.
>
> (Thompson 2018: 52)

The performer acknowledges that the past is not yet over because legacies of slavery continue to impact Black lives today and her words combine with the stage image as a visual reminder of the unresolved residues from traumatic histories that remain to be healed.

Thompson's and Pinnock's plays and the ISM exhibitions all address questions about how we remember and the politics and aesthetics of memorialising histories of enslavement. Hartman discusses the 'slipperiness and elusiveness of slavery's archive', where documentation such as 'ledger books of trade goods; inventories of foodstuffs; bills of sale; itemized lists of bodies alive, infirm, and dead; captains' logs; planters' diaries' (2007: 17) emphasises versions of history that foreground the perspectives of the enslavers while erasing traces of enslaved African people. However, artists and theatre makers can imagine stories and images that problematise the idea of the archives by foregrounding the missing perspectives, which distinguishes plays from museum exhibitions that tend to be primarily concerned with presenting information about the past. Pinnock states 'When you're dealing with very difficult material, theatre can do things that historians can't, to create a voice that you can't see in the archives' (Pinnock 2020b). Thompson reflects on her trip as part of an artist's job to 'reflect and create, imagine new ways of living' (2018: 23).

These observations also speak to questions about whose stories are remembered and how, which are explored in both Pinnock's and Thompson's plays through narratives that contrast viewpoints. In *Rockets and Blue Lights,* the use of multiple timeframes and a film within a play format creates space for characters to challenge how history is (re)presented. During a read through of *The Ghost Ship* film script, Lou notices that her character has been changed in ways that reinforce stereotypical portrayals of Black women, such as her emerging out of the water 'naked, wet' (Pinnock 2020a: 36). Lou questions the cutting of scenes that show aspects of Olu's life before she was captured in order to foreground Turner's point of view in the film as shifting the focus away from her story and onto Turner as a white saviour within the abolitionist movement. Lou's challenge becomes possible within the context of her as an actress arguing for her character's importance in the narrative while at the same time drawing attention to how the past is remembered and of a need to ethically consider how stories about enslavement are told. Lou asserts that '[t]he audience has to identify with her as a person. […] Otherwise, they won't feel the impact of her death. It's supposed to be her story' (37), whereas the director's view is that the film is about the Turner painting and that editorial decisions have been made because 'the conditions for the grant from the Abolition Legacy Foundation require that the film commemorates the bicentenary of abolition' (38). Their argument serves doubly as a critique to the gatekeepers of artistic production

(film, theatre, and performance) for continually reproducing a set of dominant narratives that stereotype or marginalise Black perspectives.

While visiting the art gallery exhibition that opens the play with his teacher, school pupil Billie refuses to take part in a re-enactment of a Coffle Walk after learning that 'people used to jump in the sea and fly to their ancestors rather than be captured' (47);[14] Billie's resistance is a reminder of the need to question appropriate ways to pay tribute to and memorialise the dead. At the start of *Rockets and Blue Lights* Essie and Lou look straight into the audience when studying Turner's painting in the exhibition and Essie states, 'It's art. All it can do is bear witness' (11). On exiting the theatre after the show, Turner's 'Slave Ship' and 'Rockets and Blue Lights' are digitally projected as exhibits in the Dorfman Theatre foyer, where we as an audience gather around to contemplate the artworks for ourselves.

The solo performance format of *salt.* directly engages audiences in the act of witnessing and of understanding the past through resonances with the present. Those sitting in the front rows are provided with safety goggles to wear when Thompson smashes the rock salt during the show. At the end of *salt.* audience members are invited to meet the performer at the door, to take a piece of the broken rock salt and to keep it as 'a commitment to the radical space of not moving on, and all that it can open' (Thompson 2018: 52) and as part of a shared responsibility to address the afterlives of slavery that continue to manifest in structural and institutional racism.

As I stopped to write my first impressions about how sterile, organised, and 'English museum' I found the ISM, the only two other Black people in the space at the time stopped me and said: 'If you get a chance to go to the US you should go to The Wax Museum in Baltimore there; it's much more graphic'. They described the exhibitions in Baltimore as more immersive in recreating the inside of a slave ship and other more visceral performance exhibits. There was no such brutality at ISM, which we agreed had tidied things up too much. The 'Why Slavery?' exhibit problematically frames the past as a 'trade [that] happened because Europeans needed workers for their colonies in the Americas'. The dark lighting casts shadows and glares onto the glass that prevents the eye from easily seeing the objects and labels inside the cabinets. While I understand that the low levels of lighting may well be a way to protect the artefacts from light damage, the effect obscured the story of slavery. A wall entitled 'We Will Remember' consists simply of photographs informing visitors of statues and memorials from around the world, again lessening the potential impact through a reduction to one dimension only.

ISM, it seems, is focused on presenting a narrative itinerary about histories of enslavement that creates a place where one can go to learn about the overall timeline as well as significant events, moments or people, including mutinies such as Amistad or heroes of abolition such as Olaudah Equiano. As argued earlier, ISM's approach produces distanced ways of looking at objects and artefacts that maintain a spectatorial distance from the most traumatic aspects of the trade. As Thompson alludes to, however, there are questions about how the trauma of enslavement that has been passed down through generations of Black people can best be processed.

Expressing anger is one response, and a refusal to forget is another. Structural racisms are direct legacies of histories of enslavement and, in contrast to the ISM, both plays evoke Hartman's idea that 'reckoning with our responsibility to the dead necessitates not only our remembrance but also a promise to forswear the injustice that enabled this crime against humanity to occur' (2002: 757). Plays such as Thompson's and Pinnock's have created a space within theatre for audiences to above all *feel* the emotions that go along with exploring ways to memorialise, grieve, and bear witness to the past.

## Notes

1 Between 2018 and 2021, six plays by Black British women have explored the British Empire, colonialism, and slavery by reflecting on a significant historical event, person or untold story. See also debbie tucker green, *ear for eye* (Royal Court, 2018; directed by debbie tucker green), Juliet Gilkes Romero's *The Whip* (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2020; directed by Kimberley Sykes), Janice Okoh's *The Gift* (Eclipse Theatre, 2020; directed by Dawn Walton), and Amantha Edmead's *Sold* (Kumba Nia Arts, Unlock the Chains Collective and Park Theatre, 2021; directed by Euton Daley).

2 Despite perceptions that there is an obsession with slavery in Black films, literature, and theatre, there are only a few Black British plays on this theme as most of the plays produced in the UK are by African American playwrights. See Mojisola Adebayo's *Moj of the Antarctic* (Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, 2006 and Oval House Theatre, 2007; directed by Sheron Wray) and Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Statement of Regret* (National Theatre 2007; directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah).

3 Since the establishment of the ISM, The National Museum of African-American History and Culture, designed by Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye, opened in Washington DC in 2016. See Jordan Ealey and Leticia Ridley's essay in this collection for a discussion of the US museum.

4 I visited the ISM just after just after the building reopened in 2021 following over a year of national lockdowns to contain the Covid-19 coronavirus. Many of the interactive, tactile, touch-based, and performative exhibits remained taped-off and unusable, which limited the possibilities for fully experiencing certain aspects of the displays and further exacerbated a sterile and distanced effect.

5 Rochelle Rose took over the role for the 2019 Royal Court production while Thompson took a break after becoming mentally and physically exhausted by re-enacting the traumatic journey night after night. Thompson returned to perform in the film adaptation *salt: dispersed* (2021) which can be widely distributed without her reliving the traumatic experiences.

6 Other responses to Zong include David Dabydeen's book, *Turner* (1994), M. Nourbese Phillips's long poem *Zong* (2008), and Giles Terera's play *The Meaning of Zong* (Bristol Old Vic Theatre, Edinburgh Lyceum Theatre, and Liverpool Everyman Playhouse, 2022; directed by Giles Terera).

7 See Antislavery Usable Pasts, 'Legacies on Display: Slavery in Museums', which lists museums around the world with permanent exhibitions on enslavement and abolition. (https://antislavery.ac.uk/solr-search?facet=collection:%22Legacies+on+Display:+Slavery+in+Museums%22).

8 The London, Sugar Slavery gallery (LSS) also opened as a permanent exhibition on the third floor of the Museum of London, Docklands on 10 November 2007. London was the second biggest port involved with the trade of enslaved people in Britain after Liverpool and the museum's building at No 1 Warehouse, West India Quay was originally used to

store sugar from the plantations. LSS uses similar display methods to ISM where objects are collected and displayed in glass cabinets.

9 See also The Wilberforce House Museum in Hull, the birthplace of renowned abolitionist William Wilberforce, which has a collection focused on transatlantic slavery and abolition.

10 While the Black Achievers Wall largely consists of famous African-Americans such as Barack Obama, Black British theatre practitioners include actor, playwright, and director Kwame Kwei-Armah, and theatre director Paulette Randall.

11 See Moody for detailed discussion of the original TSG Middle Passage exhibition, which was a reconstructed slave ship accompanied by a soundtrack of readings aiming to create an emotional 'experiential engagement' (Moody 2020: 164).

12 Thompson's words are written in the script as 'The Woman', so I will interchange between both descriptors of performer and character.

13 Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery in 1888.

14 A 'Coffle' refers to a group of enslaved people being chained together to walk from one destination to another.

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# 10

# CHILE'S MUSEUM OF MEMORY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

## Long Life to the Theatre!

*Milena Grass Kleiner and Mariana Hausdorf Andrade*

On 11 January 2010, the first female Chilean President, Michelle Bachelet, opened the Museum of Memory and Human Rights (MMHR). While giving her inaugural speech, Catalina Catrileo, sister of Matías Catrileo (1964–2008), a young man of Mapuche ascendency shot by the police two years earlier, mounted a lightning tower and, pointing at Bachelet, demanded justice for his brother.[1] Catalina's irruption was a sign of the controversies of a project aimed at addressing human rights violations while excluding state violence against indigenous people. While recognizing Chile's period of political violence under the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990) by inscribing it in the urban space, the building of the museum also meant coming to terms with a conflictive past, but at the price of simultaneously shutting it down.[2]

This foundational moment should have marked a new beginning, but conflicting opinions toward MMHR had been raised from the announcement of the project by President Bachelet during her first public 'state of the nation' *cuenta pública* speech after a year in office. Though her politics on human rights were expansive and included the inapplicability of the Amnesty Law,[3] a new reparation law for relatives of the victims of the dictatorship, the creation of an Institute for Human Rights, and a brief re-opening of the Valech Commission,[4] the whole debate focused on the construction of the MMHR. Bachelet's agenda on human rights was presented to the people in May 2007, only a couple of months after the death of Augusto Pinochet on 8 December 2006. Though Chile regained democracy in 1990, and the reports of the National Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (Rettig Report, 1991) and National Commission on Political Prison and Torture (Valech Report I, 2004) were already issued, the dictator's death finally opened a space in the public sphere for state violence – considered a pending matter by the government and numerous citizens – to be addressed.

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These historical events positioned Michelle Bachelet to promote a policy of *Nunca más* (Never again). As the daughter of a victim of the Dictatorship,[5] she had the symbolic power to turn the defense of human rights into a critical question of her mandate. In her first *cuenta pública*, Bachelet's stated: 'the ethics of human rights and democracy is the legacy this generation of Chileans, my own generation, must inherit for future generations' (2007: 35).[6] Hence, the construction of the MMHR was part of a State-endorsed project based on the idea that the only way to strengthen democracy in a post-dictatorial context was to progress a clear human-rights policy. Despite the reification of the past, museification has been a recurrent means to achieve this goal. As Amy Sodaro has highlighted, the legitimacy of power resides in coming to terms with the nation's violent past (2018: 4). Though the MMHR was meant to serve this purpose, the initiative was received with mistrust and opposition raised by both conservatives and progressists alike. Soon after its opening, the museum hosted theatre events, strengthening the alliance between art and politics that is omnipresent, and ever-persistent in the Latin American republican imaginary. In this chapter, we argue that these theatre events have offered a space for challenging the official narrative regarding human rights violations during Pinochet's Dictatorship that serves the reconciliation agenda, offering instead a critical counter-discourse that reconnects with the contingencies of the present.

## The Museum of Memory and Human Rights

The MMHR is located at the heart of Barrio Yungay, a neighborhood founded in 1888 where President Gabriel Boric decided to reside during his term of office. This unprecedented decision pays tribute to the republican tradition of a district that has known better times. At the beginning of the twentieth century, upper- and middle-class citizens enjoyed the parks and the cultural venues nearby.[7] In the twenty-first century, Cultural Center Matucana 100 (2001) and the Library of Santiago (2005) contributed to the cultural, educational, and recreational offer in this neighborhood. Far from a no man's land, the MMHR was located in a site that has a high density of symbolic identity for the nation-state.

In addition to this first layer of material and symbolic value, the MMHR was constructed in just 330 days,[8] mirroring the epic construction of the UNCTAD during President Salvador Allende's term.[9] Furthermore, the end of Bachelet's four-year mandate coincided with the nation's Bicentennial in 2010, and the strong pressure to flee from the dictatorial past restrained to a minimum the time-consuming possibilities for involving representatives from civil society in the design and execution of the project.

Within a landscape of parks, neoclassical museums, and red brick buildings, the MMHR emerges as an impressive translucent four-story-parallelepiped (or rectangle), reminiscent of the vastness of the Atacama Desert and the Cordillera de los Andes.[10] The main building of the MMHR accommodates permanent

and temporary exhibitions, the documentation center (CEDOC), the audiovisual documentation center (CEDAV), and management offices. In addition, the complex includes a detached auditorium facing the main entrance, a coffee shop, and a bookstore offering various souvenirs. The space within creates a vast open-air inner central square where visitors meet the arts: four permanent artworks – including an installation by contemporary artist Alfredo Jaar[11] – as well as festivals, performances, and commemorations.

Chilean museologist Tatiana Wolff Rojas, who analyzes MMHR's museography, cites María Luisa Ortiz, Director of Collections and Research, in articulating that the Museum aims to be a 'space built upon evidence, not interpretation' (in Wolff 2016: 63). Since the individual and institutional agents engaged in its creation had mandated a display of the agreed consensus over the recent traumatic past, the route and museographic content[12] was devised based on *ad hoc* historical research. The permanent exhibition includes indexical documents, including 'oral and written testimonies, judicial documents, letters, literary texts, essays, posters, drawings, banners, leaflets and flyers, written, audiovisual, and radio materials, documentaries, films and other audiovisual historic material, documentary and historical photography', as well as *speaking* objects, such as vestiges, *arpilleras*,[13] and handicrafts (Wolff 2016, 63, 64).[14]

Despite a factual curatorial mode aiming at providing a seamless truthful narrative, traumatic memory resists closure. Relegated to an outer space, *La Geometría de la conciencia* [The Geometry of Consciousness] provides a divergent experience, one that holds an individual and subjective tone. Alfredo Jaar's installation invites visitors to stay behind closed doors for three minutes, passing from total darkness to see the 500 retro-illuminated white silhouettes of faces of disappeared people and contemporary Chileans photographed by Jaar. Though the whole experience is reminiscent of the Holocaust Tower in the Jüdisches Museum Berlin, its articulation of the absence-presence (Valdés n.d.) is much more complex due to the kaleidoscopic image of the silhouettes both of the faces and the visitors' bodies replicated *ad infinitum* by the mirrors in the walls.

In contrasting the exhibition of objects and documents within the museum and this adjacent experience, Wolff highlights the coexistence of two concurring museographic logics: a literal strategy – 'realistic and without makeup' – and a metaphoric one that is 'aesthetic, sensitive, meditative, nonfigurative of the horror, open to interpretation' (2016: 66). Though this is a central argument for our own analysis, an account of the development of the museum project allows for a broader contextualization of this discussion.

As expressed on its website, the MMHR aims at 'putting upfront the violations of human rights perpetrated by the Chilean State between 1973 and 1990; dignifying the victims and their families, and fostering the reflection and debate on the importance of a culture of respect and tolerance for these events never to happen again'[15] (web.museodelamemoria.cl/sobre-el-museo/). For further clarification, its mission statement highlights its contribution to set 'a shared ethical ground, based

in a culture of human rights and democratic values' (ibid.). Ambitious and large on the one hand – as an educational, formative project – and very specific on the other hand – in terms of the collection and archive – it is part of an ongoing dispute over the Dictatorship, its aftermath, and the connection with the project of social justice which Allende still represents. The museum's promise was to attain symbolic reparation in a context where the pact of silence still protects the perpetrators from prosecution. Hence, the government's strategy to overcome military impunity involves displaying the crimes committed.[16]

Though only a decade old, the museum cannot escape the entropy of an institution originally imagined as a place to display objects to be admired. It shows a divide between what happens indoors, where the official history of state violence between 1973 and 1990 has been sealed; and the outside, where the space can be inhabited by challenging narratives linked to the current political life of the country. It is important to note that the MMHR played no role during the *Estallido Social* (Social Upheaval, Chile October 2019), which led to the creation of a Constitutional Convention and fostered the election of Gabriel Boric as President (2021–2025).

The mission of the Constitutional Convention was to draft a new constitution to replace that introduced by the Military Junta in 1980. Though the Draft was rejected in a referendum held on 4 September 2022, nowadays nobody can deny the political negotiations that led us out of Dictatorship to a formal democracy characterized by neoliberal capitalism and the capitulation of justice for the victims. In so doing, the *Estallido Social* marked the collapse of the discourse of reconciliation that characterized the transitional period, thus alienating the MMHR and its narrative from the current debate.

Since its founding, the MMHR has followed the international move from denunciation to promoting a culture of human rights and democracy. As originally conceived, it symbolized reparation for the victims in a context where actual reparation was out of reach. It also meant foreclosing the inheritance of a conflictive past. In so doing, it depoliticizes memory while asserting facts and tracing the origins of Dictatorship in the USA-USSR battle for hegemony in Latin-American countries since the 1950s. This turns the MMHR into a place more eloquent for foreign visitors than for locals. This is also visible in the contemporary architecture design that evokes similar projects like the Museo de la Memoria de Andalucía (Spain) or the Jüdisches Museum in Berlin (Germany), with the Holocaust as a universal model of memorialization. This reinforces the logic highlighted by Shelley Ruth Butler and Erica Lehrer (2016) and the need for a transnational comparative study unveiling the specific negotiations between the local and the global each case study might have endured.

In the Chilean case, the focus on recent history marginalizes the violations of human rights and the longstanding (and ongoing) repression of the indigenous peoples, namely the Mapuche. The negotiations which led to the creation of the MMHR signal a former authoritarian regime at odds with Bachelet's Socialist

project, exempting 'democratic' governments from any accusation of violating human rights. To balance this closed narrative, theatrical events at Central Square have provided a site for counternarratives. Truthful to the political imperative (Thompson 2021) that haunts Chilean theatre, MMHR has become a venue for the performing arts. Since most companies obtain grants on a one-by-one project basis without permanent support or subsidy from the state, they are in a position to criticize the current government's political agenda.

## Theatre and Political Analysis

> When we come to the question of hosting theatre in the museum, we are very aware that we are not a cultural center, we have no ticket office, no sales system, though we have to create theatre events throughout the year. It was obvious to me. There are so many young groups, not only in Santiago but also in other regions, still working on the dictatorship from different perspectives and approaches.
>
> (Alejandra Ibarra 2021)

Though the MMHR was not originally conceived as a theatre venue, its architecture provides two spaces suitable for hosting theatre productions and commemorative acts. The Central Square, a large open-air esplanade with built-in stone bleachers connecting the building with the urban surroundings; and a separate auditorium for 150 people located in an adjacent building, designed for conferences but also used for small theatre productions due to the lack of a more appropriate room. Exceptionally, there are some shows inside the main building, apart from the permanent exhibitions.

The other relevant feature contributing to the continuous presence of theatre and performance in the MMHR is the existence of a Production and Outreach Department in charge of scheduling various productions or commissioning pieces of various scale and media, and responding to 'the idea that the museum could not only be a place for preservation, but also a mobilizing site for debate and artistic, cultural, academic activities' (Ibarra 2021). Alejandra Ibarra took charge of the Department in 2010, and her trajectory partly explains the success of the live performance events: Ibarra is a journalist and former communications coordinator at Matucana 100, the leading public cultural center in Santiago from 2001 to 2010, when Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral stole its thunder. Alejandra brought in a deep knowledge of the Chilean theatre landscape and a solid relationship with artists, devising a curatorial agenda based on three key principles: to reach new, especially young and local, audiences, to circulate the documents kept in the museum's archives by making them available for artistic creation in different media, and to transform the Central Plaza into a venue for up to 2000 spectators, who might build and embrace a 'theatre of memory'.

In line with the mission of the museum, Ibarra has purposefully scheduled uncomfortable productions to foster debate and critical thinking in memory policies and transitional justice. The first theatre cycle ran in January 2011 in the context of Festival de Teatro Internacional Santiago a Mil (International Theatre Festival Santiago a Mil, FITAM). Dating from 1997, this summer festival is the largest performance arts event in the country, taking place in and outside of the capital city, offering productions to a vast network of programmers who have been taking Chilean theatre and dance all over the world. According to museum reports, 2,500 spectators attended the series of street theatre shows at the esplanade that year.[17] The initial success continued during the following months, and theatre programming became a helpful strategy for consolidating the MMHR's relationship with the neighborhood.

In May 2011, another milestone took place. Chilean playwright and director Guillermo Calderón premiered two plays in tandem *Villa + Discurso*. Whereas *Discurso* 'imagines an apologetic and apocryphal farewell presidential speech by Michelle Bachelet', *Villa* digs deep into the debates on 'the memorialization of Chile's dictatorial past' (Hernández 2021: 133), focusing on a donation given to the board in charge of Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi – hence the title of the production – the most emblematic Chilean memory site. With the code name Cuartel Terranova (1974–1978), the ancient villa accommodated the headquarters of the infamous Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia (National Intelligence Agency, DINA), operating as a torture and disappearance center, and key to the politics of terror operated by the Dictatorship. Three young female members of the board have been summoned to decide the future shape of collective memory while ironically reviewing the pros and cons of the alternatives that a musealization of memory offers in the twenty-first century: recreation, abstraction, and erasure:

*Carla:* Nothing. They took everything away. It's like a perfect crime. So then time just passes. And 'we shall overcome, we shall overcome'. One day there's, like, a little bit of democracy and you feel like the villa isn't as much of a scandal as we thought it was going to be. And someone says, girls, this can't be a perfect crime, people have to be scandalised by this. What if we rebuild it? Good idea. If I had money I'd rebuild the thing. So the Swedes and the Dutch know and say: aha. This was it. It was here. If I had money I'd rebuild everything with every irrelevant detail. Not just the actual architecture of the mansion itself, but the swimming pool of water, too; the trees of the earth, the garden of roses, the silence, the terrible smell, the screams, the chains, the engines in the night, all with artistic special effects. And I'd create a fake oldness, I'd paint the walls with muddy water, with another palette of colours in the background. Tones like sepia. And I'd buy all the paraphernalia. I'd buy a metal bed, I'd buy cables and sockets, I'd buy uniforms, I'd buy the smell of shit.

To create a sort of realist Disneyland reality. So people would feel like they're feeling what the people who felt must have felt.

(Calderón 2013: 15)

Taking the literal strategy described by Wolff to its limits, this suggestion reflects the *mise en scène* of the synthetic torture room in the MMHR that has a *parrilla eléctrica*, a metallic bedstead where prisoners were tied up to be tortured with electric shocks. Not surprisingly, the second proposal directly refers to the MMHR:[18]

*Francisca:* And what else is there inside? Keep walking. Inside there is death and life. That's why I said: a hospital. Well, Miss. It looks like a hospital, but it's a museum […]. Because of course you're in a museum which is, like, white on the outside, sort of with mirrors, like an international architecture competition, which is basically the aesthetic of modern-day capitalism. And you say, this is so contradictory. Intriguing. Ok. […] And then they put you in a room with tables covered in Mac computers. With music, like that. And you can sit at the Macs and see lists of all of the people who came to the villa and died. And you can click on the name and everything about that person appears. Photos of her, her family, who her boyfriend was, whether she liked edible seaweed, if she used to come home eating the bread when she was sent out to do the shopping, and so on. And if you do double-click on VILLA, click-click, a description comes up of everything that actually happened to her in the villa. Click. Who she hugged. Click. Who she spoke to. Click. Who she helped. If she liked singing, if she sang or if she didn't sing. OK. And you see that and then you do another double-click: click-click on an icon that says WHAT HAPPENED? And a video comes up of the testimony of the family describing everything. Click-click. When they arrested her. Click-click. How they beat her. Click-click. If they found her wrapped in newspaper or if they didn't find her. And if they killed her, how she died. Click. Click. How they found out. Click click. How they cried. Click click. How they'll be sad forever.

(Calderón 2013: 19)

Turned into a proper 'hyper historian',[19] Calderón's research allows him to retrace the history of Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi with astonishing accuracy: the third suggestion describes a park, the actual Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi:

*Macarena:* No. It's just, wait. Look. Look. When the old regime ended, there was no president running to the villa, saying let me in. Let me in. Was it here? Was it here? It can't be. No. No. Father forgive us. Father forgive us. From this moment on this will be the new belly button

> of the world, the epicentre of justice. This place. In this country no *cumbia* shall be danced, no school shall be built, no cloth shall be embroidered until the problems of this villa are solved. But no. That never happened. There was no president kneeling or clutching a fistful of earth saying: I swear that this shall not pass into history as if it were a one-night stand. Here we shall build a white museum. No, we'd better build a house of horrors here. No. No one said that. What they said was: we'll aim to see justice done but, gosh darn it, it might not be possible. So this deserted villa was left empty. Until the traumatized people came back, the beaten, the former prisoners, the survivors, the kicked, the enlightened, the untouchables, the chosen ones, the enraged. And they came in and said, let's do something with the villa. Ok. But we have no money. No. We don't even own the real estate. So they started little by little to plant roses here and violets there. And they swept. And they brought together other survivors and said to them. Can you speak? No. I don't want to talk about that, I'm kind of traumatized. Ok then. No. Please. No. All right, maybe. Let's see. I don't know. Well, I remember that this is where the torture houses were. Yes. The tower was here, the iron maiden was here. All the plants and animals were here. Just birch trees and sparrows really. There were evenings and nightfalls but no dawns. And that's how they started rebuilding the park, from memories. Little by little. With no master plan. And making mistakes. Like in love. And this was the result. A strange mix of styles from the end of the century. A pastiche collage potpourri mix.
>
> (Calderón 2013: 31)

At the end of the play, the mystery as to why the three characters were chosen to decide over the site is unveiled. They all share the same origin: their mothers were raped by soldiers while imprisoned in Villa Grimaldi. Whereas Carla and Macarena' mother–daughter relations are tainted by their violent conceptions, Francisca reports an affectionate rapport with her Mapuche mother:

*Francisca:* I kiss my mom every day.
*Macarena:* It's just that we all react differently.
*Francisca:* Yes. That's why we should have the field of grass.
*Carla:* Yes.
*Macarena:* Maybe.
*Francisca:* Yes. Because all tortured women react differently.
*Macarena:* Yes. There are women who never recover.
*Carla:* Yes. And there are women who organize and build museums.
*Francisca:* Yes. Are there are women who become president of the republic.

*END*

(Calderón 2013: 52)

**IMAGE 10.1** *Villa + Discurso*, June 2011. Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Santiago de Chile. Photograph by Guillermo Calderón.

And that's the cue for *Discurso.*

Francisca's suggestion to have a field of grass represents the impossibility to do justice to the past. It is also a wink to the suspicious erasure of the Mapuche people in the story of the Dictatorship and its resistance. As Jennifer Thompson has indicated: 'Villa's debate is predicated on a crisis of democracy: a binary vote to determine the future of a memorial site breaks down when one of the characters nullifies her ballot by writing the Mapuche war cry, marichiweu, instead of selecting option "A"

or "B." The binary choices, like the binary of the 1988 plebiscite ("Yes" for Pinochet, dictatorship; "No" for a democratic election), present a limited set of options and exclude Chile's Indigenous Mapuche population' (2021: 178).

*Villa + Discurso* is a site-specific performance that premiered in Londres 38, another former torture center; and subsequently was presented in the MMHR and Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi.[20] We have so extensively quoted Calderón's play, because we want to stress the tension between its exuberant rhetoric and the objectual nature of a memorial museum. Witnessing *Villa + Discurso* in the museum is an odd experience (Image 10.1).

The three actresses are surrounded by an item from the permanent exhibition: a map of Chile with all the memorials built where violations of human rights took place between 1973 and 1990. Though the characters do not mention the MMHR by its name, the white museum undoubtably represents Bachelet's memorial project with its emphasis on cold information and data over an affective environment, its inscription in an international circuit of institutions aiming at developing a culture of human rights and democracy for future generations, and the aesthetics of contemporary minimalistic globalized architecture. The dissonance between a deterritorialized building and the presence of history is magnified by the focus *Villa + Discurso* places on visitor experience

*Carla:* I'm still in shock. Going to the rebuilt villa is the best thing that could have happened to me in my life.

(Calderón 2013: 16)

*Francisca:* And I'm so angry, Mom. I feel guilty for being alive. It's weird. I feel, like, materialist and dialectical. But it's lovely. Go.

(ibid.: 20)

*Macarena:* I say the villa should stay like that. It's sort of poor but it does tell the story of the survivors so well. And that's how you weigh the fact that we live in a graveyard. That we've been asleep. That the whole country is built on top of a villa. Yes. So we'd better leave it as it is.

(ibid.: 31)

In its wide range of possibilities, *Villa* finds no way to inscribe history and memory into a museum. No proposal gets three votes. Like a Chilean female version of *Waiting for Godot*, Macarena, Francisca, and Carla are trapped in a never-ending debate, demonstrating how words are as useless to ensure reconciliation as a material endeavor like the MMHR. What words can do is to empower individuals who were not yet born when the human rights violations took place to try different ways to connect to this ominous past and prevent these violations from happening again. Looking back, especially after the *Estallido Social*, Calderón's persistence in returning to the foundational moment when the negotiations and pacts resulting in

the construction of Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi or the MMHR – or any other memory site or memorial museum by extension – seems even more anticipatory. Calderón displaces the question from the closure provided by the official narrative prompted by politicians and institutions to the plasticity required to connect with younger generations and an ever-changing present.

*Villa + Discourse* has not been the only theatre production performed in the MMHR. In the same vein of providing a complementary narrative to the monolinear discourse of the museum, it has hosted other controversial productions. The Memoria Escénica Festival (Stage Memory Festival) was created with the purpose 'not only to give a forum to the memory of the victims, but also to the memory of all people, of the work that theatre has produced, relevant work' (Ibarra 2021). The festival in 2016 presented *La amante fascista* (*The Fascist Lover*, 2010) by Alejandro Moreno and directed by Víctor Carrasco; *Los millonarios* (*The Millionaires*, 2015) by Teatro La María; and *La imaginación del futuro* (*The Imagination of the Future*) by Teatro La Re-Sentida, all dark comedies addressing conflictive political issues.

Premiered in 2010, also in the context of the Bicentennial and the Muestra de Dramaturgia Nacional, *La amante fascista* is a hilarious monologue. Sleepless in a city in Northern Chile, Iris Rojas, the wife of an Army Captain, is waiting for her lover – a higher-ranking officer coming to the zone on an official visit. Iris's anxious and hectic speech presents a rare portrait of the pro-Coup and Dictatorship community in a theatrical context primarily devoted to the memories of the resistance, the victims, and the revolutionary ideal. The story of Pinochet's regime, told from the point of view of the perpetrators, collaborators, and supporters, has been less addressed, probably because we still insist on a plea for effective justice instead of the symbolic reparation promoted by the series of democratic governments from 1990.

*Los millonarios* is inspired by a real case, which took place in the Araucania in 2013. A married couple, Werner Luchsinger and Vivianne Mackay, were killed in the zone of the so-called Mapuche Conflict. The assault on their country house was perpetrated simultaneously with the protests on the anniversary of Matías Catrileo's murder. Machi Celestino Córdova, one of the spiritual leaders of the Mapuche community, is the only person to have been condemned for the crime. *Los millonarios* are the partners of a law firm hired to defend a Mapuche being prosecuted for his responsibility in an attack which has similar characteristics. While preparing their case, the long Chilean history of violence against indigenous people is evidenced through the fictional voice of the rich white elite and quotes from ex-presidents, historians, secretaries of the state, and members of Congress from 1859 until the present time. In so doing, *Los millonarios* theatricalizes longstanding power imbalances and, when performed in the central square of MMHR, highlights the complicit silence of the Museum toward the historical violence against the Mapuche.

The controversial *La imaginación del futuro* premiered in 2013, for the fortieth anniversary of the Coup d'état. It portrays President Salvador Allende's last hours while his young millennial technocrat Secretaries of State hectically devise

disparate attempts to prevent the civic–military upheaval, including the television broadcasting of the President's famous last speech in ridiculous settings. In an *in-your-face* intervention, a 'poor' 11-year-old is summoned on stage, and the performers ask the audience to donate ten dollars each to pay for his training as a physician. The initial demand turns into coercion when one actress joins the audience, exposes her breasts, and offers a *paja rusa* (mammary intercourse) in exchange for money. Rather than an accurate historical account, this was described as 'a free, brazen and impudent fiction, based on events that have shaped our political identity':[21] *La imaginación del futuro* is either loved or hated. Fans of La Re-Sentida, described as a punk theatre group (Alvarado 2014), applauded the production's denunciation of the failure of Allende's imagined future and the profitable business education that has shaped Chile. The production toured internationally, invited to the Schaubühne in Berlin and the Festival d'Avignon. Chilean communities abroad and even the media expressed their disgust, qualifying it as 'uncomfortable, electrifying and horrifying' (Salino 2014). Hence, the decision to perform it in the MMHR was not a small matter and expressed the conviction that the venue shall endure dissent if it is to enhance solid political analysis.

## Connecting with New Generations

Along with its curatorial work, the museum provides a space for creation through thematic cycles related to the history and memory of the Dictatorship. Mostly devised to commemorate an anniversary – the Coup or the inauguration of the museum – these commissions give full artistic freedom while prompting the research on material dimensions of the objects it houses. For the fortieth anniversary of the Coup, actress and director Claudia Di Girólamo was invited to devise an intervention in the Central Square. The previous day, a special commemorative act took place; strangely, it was not the state's official ceremony. In 2013, President Sebastián Piñera was in the first year of his mandate leading a right-wing coalition with active participants and supporters of the civic-military regime. Michelle Bachelet was the opposition leader and was building up her re-election campaign; therefore, the museum she had inaugurated that represented the aspirations of her sector was the perfect site for an alternative act. 2013 illustrates the dispute over the past. Everybody aimed to have a say in the public sphere. The theatre sphere participated in the debate: numerous new productions and restagings revisited the Dictatorship and its aftermath of silences and cover-up operations. The event led by Di Girólamo recruited 30 actors to read testimonies of various victims, while children's drawings were also presented; all these objects belonged to the MMHR's collections. The performance provided a less conventional strategy than an exhibit for embodying dormant past experiences (Image 10.2).

The most recent example of creative circulation of objects was 'Epistolaria de la memoria. Mujeres escriben a mujeres' (Epistolary of Memory, Women Write to Women), which promotes an affective, subjective approach to political violence,

**IMAGE 10.2** Commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the Coup, 11 September 2013. Actor José Soza also played the leading role in *The Imagination of the Future.* Photograph courtesy of the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos.

inviting women to write letters to female victims of the Dictatorship. Again, the Museum operates here under a collaborative logic; in this case, the Red de Actrices Chilenas (Chilean Actresses Network, RACH) was in charge of the readings.

The circulation of objects, documents, and experiences enables the connection with other audiences that are offered the opportunity to creatively revisit the museum archive:

> I have so many examples of people who had never set foot in the Museum, people who came here for the first time because they like to draw. They had no relatives among the victims, no academic training. Once a peddler won a prize for a microdocumentary, and that makes me so happy. The peddler stood at the podium with the other winners, people with professional film training. The training, he didn't have it. He was a peddler who had bought a camera and had started exploring with it, with no former knowledge. Ignacio Agüero [a renowned Chilean film director] was on the jury. Ignacio Agüero and people alike, and they choose the work of a peddler.
>
> (Ibarra 2021)

This work, together with a focus on understanding what human rights mean today and how communities understand them, remains a key focus for Ibarra.

## Conclusion: History as Feedback Loop

In the twenty-first century, the historical context has changed immensely in Chile. After the return of Democracy in 1990, the idea of a difficult past equated with the Dictatorship; nowadays, our difficult past is the transitional period, dating from 1988 until – most probably – the Constitution of Pinochet is replaced. In this course of events, the MMHR is in the past, asynchronous to the current conflictive memories and the consideration of the demands in the expanded field of human rights focusing on environmental issues and the rights of historically excluded communities, including indigenous peoples, gender diversity, and women. Less rigid, bulky institutions, like Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi (Grass 2016), have proved more agile in responding to the political moment.[22]

Being only 12 years old and permanently negotiating its position as a museum of memory and human rights, or a memorial museum (Velázquez Marroni 2011), the MMHR offers a unique opportunity to map the crossroads where such projects emerge and how they are navigated in the twenty-first century. The balance between informing the visitors of the past while creating a culture of respect for human rights and democracy is delicate. Nonetheless, this balance toward its mission is not the only tension that determines the place the museum occupies in the Chilean political imaginary and its symbolic value. The institution also embodies a permanent negotiation between the global and the local as it concurs with transnational debates on memory and difficult pasts. Within the internal landscape, any attempt to understand its role must consider the continuities and discontinuities between the MMHR with its official history and the other sites preserving the testimonies of victims of state violence. These last considerations include its physical location in Santiago within the republican tradition of the city and the epic of revolutionary transformation navigated from Salvador Allende, to Michelle Bachelet and Gabriel Boric. Financial resources both of national and international origin highly differ from the budget allocated to grassroots initiatives with similar purposes, and such distinctions also merit consideration.

It is not surprising that conflict has been present from the museum's opening. The short lapse from its conception to its inauguration prevented major community involvement; it even meant that the architectural design ran simultaneously with the devising of the museography, with the latter being forced to fit into the building. We recognize here not only the willpower of the President but also the Chilean people; however, the current practice means initiatives happen in haste or do not happen at all.

Though not originally meant as a cultural center, a quick chronology of the productions presented at the museum that we have briefly presented involves many of Chilean theatre's most influential names. Given the lack of a formal artistic policy, we assume the quality of its programming relies on the professional trajectory of the person in charge and reflects the deep self-understanding of local artists as agents of socio-political change. Theatre has thus become an ally to the purposes

of the museum. It has provided a counter-narrative to counterbalance the limited monolinear discourse conveyed by the permanent exhibitions. The flexibility of live arts to dialogue with current events has also given a deeper connection to the demands of the present triggered by the 2018 feminist movement, the 2019 *Estallido Social*, and the urgent impasse between the Mapuche people and the State.

In opposition to the closed nature of the exhibits,[23] the central open square has welcomed various audiences while weaving a link to the neighboring community. Theatre performances are usually packed and lively, and audience surveys highlight appreciation for the cultural offer the museum provides. This fluid connection with its surroundings has also promoted the circulation of the objects in the museum's collections. Citizens, with or without professional artistic training, have been invited to revisit a diverse range of documents, including letters and recordings, to reconnect them with the living. The museum has organized playwriting, video, and music composition competitions through an open call. The growing number of participants have spoken positively about the engagement these activities have produced due to the prestige of the judges, the quality of the winning pieces, and the platform the museum provides for their circulation.

No one can escape the political turmoil, negotiations, and disputes among the political body and the civil society trying to imagine social justice for the future in Chile. These include: the 1973 Coup, the 2010 Bicentennial, Allende, Bachelet, Boric, memory sites, violations of human rights, the Dictatorship, official history, denunciation, reparation, memorialization, and Mapuche conflict. In this country, it is impossible to understand – and disentangle – the feedback loop linking theatre and museum without considering the past and present material and imaginary reality of which we are trying to make sense.

## Notes

1 Catalina's action was recorded (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=609721113419290). Although the defense lawyer argued that private Walter Ramírez acted in self-defense, he was convicted in 2011 for excessive force. In 2015, the Supreme Court stated that the Chilean State had to indemnify the Catrileo family. The relatives did not accept the money, specifying that all they wanted was President Bachelet to acknowledge the responsibility of the State in Matías' death.

2 Despite its overarching name, the Museum of Memory and Human Rights focuses on the dictatorial period (1973–1990). Numerous political conflicts and violations of human rights in Chilean history are thus excluded from the permanent exhibit; temporary shows and so called "extension" activities have rarely and temporarily addressed these events. Public debate has highlighted two notorious exclusions: the violence prior to the Coup and the longstanding violence against the indigenous population beginning in the sixteenth century. The first exclusion aims at giving no ground to revisionist narratives that might justify the military intervention; in exchange, it blurs the action of local civilians and foreign countries, namely the United States, in destabilizing the country. On the other hand, the violations of indigenous population's human rights, namely against the Mapuche people, goes back to the process of colonization and taints Chilean governments no matter what their party affiliation. The recognition of this kind of state violence

would advocate in favor of indigenous political and territorial claims that have gained momentous in the last decades. National and international reports address the issue, and even President M. Bachelet' nomination as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights triggered protest actions.

3 On 18 April 1978, a law was passed to grant amnesty to all people implicated in crimes and misdemeanors during the state of siege (11 September 1973–10 March 1978), making it extremely difficult to prosecute military and civilians who participated in acts of political violence and repression. In 2014, on the commemoration of the 41rst anniversary of the Coup, President Bachelet announced her decision to revoke the Law.

4 The Valech Commission (National Commission on Political Prison and Torture, 2003–2004) reported 27,255 victims between 10 September 1973 and 10 March 1990. President Michelle Bachelet created the II Valech Commission (2010–2011) to investigate and qualify cases of forced disappearance and political execution, along with new claims of political imprisonment and torture.

5 Her father, Air Force Brigadier General Alberto Bachelet, was charged with treason and detained just after the September 1973 coup d'état. After months of imprisonment and torture, he died from cardiac arrest the following year. In 1975, Michele and her mother were arrested and taken to Villa Grimaldi – Cuartel Terranova, Santiago city's most infamous torture center. Soon after, she left Chile and stayed in exile until 1979.

6 All translations from Spanish are ours unless otherwise indicated.

7 In front of the museum is the Quinta Normal de Agricultura (1841), a center for Agricultural education and experimentation, and also a public park, which includes the Botanical Garden (1853), the National Museum of Natural History (1876), the National Zoo (1882, which moved in 1925 to another location), the Arts Pavillion Partenon (1885), the School of Arts and Crafts (1886), and the Museo de la Educación (1941). For a map of the MMHR and its surroundings, see https://web.museodelamemoria.cl/wp-content/files_mf/1563900982LIBROMMDHMOP_web.pdf, p. 26.

8 For a detailed account of the history and description of the MMHR, see Sodaro 2018.

9 The first elected Socialist President in the world agreed to host the III United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in 1972 even though no venue was big enough for all participants. Thousands of volunteers participated, and the building was ready in 275 days. After the conference, it became the Metropolitan Cultural Center, Gabriela Mistral. Decorated with paintings and sculptures by the most famous contemporary Chilean artists, it also had a canteen open to any passer-by. After the Palace of Government La Moneda's bombardment in 1973, the Military Junta seized the building, changed its name to Diego Portales, and set up the administration offices of the Dictatorship there until the full restoration of La Moneda. In 2010, President Bachelet inaugurated the refurbished Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral (GAM, https://www.gam.cl/), the current national center for the performing arts.

10 According to Sodaro, the architect's rationale was to create 'a building intended to be both bright and solemn, symbolizing transparency and conveying a feeling of space and lightness. The dramatic building floats over the vast concrete Plaza de la Memoria, meant to be an "ark where all the reminiscences of Chilean history can be deposited" (Architonic 2009). The museum hangs, suspended like a bridge over a body of water. Still, in this case, the sparkling, greenish museum resembles the water, and one imagines – on a hot day, in the blazing sun – the vast, empty concrete plaza feels not unlike Chile's Atacama Desert' (Sodaro 2018: 121).

11 On the exterior walls of the building surrounding the Central Square, there are three other artworks by Fernando Prats (Chile, 1967), Jorge Tacla (Chile 1958), and Luis Camnitzer (Uruguay, 1937).

12 On the MMHR website, the museum visit is organized in 'rooms' as follows: (1) Truth Commissions' Reports, (2) Memorials, (3) Wall of the Disappeared, (4) Breakdown of the Rule of Law, (5) Plan Z, (6) Chileans going into exile, (7) Referendum and 1980

Constitution, (8) Children's Suffering, (9) Churches organize, (10) Women for Life, (11) Absence and Memory, (12) Authoritarian Continuity or Democracy, (13) More than Ever. Providing a video for every 'room', this online structure differs from the on-site curatorial script described by Wolff (2016: 65), which counts 16 sections. The obsolescence of the internet accounts for successive websites displaying diverse foci for the MMHR narrative and mission. Its post-pandemic version (https://web.museodelamemoria.cl/) provides an increased interactive experience for virtual visitors.

13 *Arpilleras*, are constructions of pictorial narratives in which bits of discarded cloth are appliqued onto a burlap backing. Many were constructed in response to the atrocities committed in Chile between 1973 and 1990.

14 Currently, the collection of the MMHR numbers approximately 213,995 documents, 44,739 photographs, 9,721 texts, 5,715 audio-visual pieces, 4,139 iconographic pieces, 2,875 objects, and 487 *arpilleras*; less than 1% of which is exhibited (web.museodelamemoria.cl/sobre-las-colecciones/).

15 The original phrasing in Spanish is relevant here because it introduces the *Nunca Más* moto, raised by numerous organizations and movements fighting against the violations of human rights worldwide. In Argentina, the National Commission of Missing People (CONADEP) produced its final report *Nunca Más* (Never Again) to address the crimes during the dictatorship (1976–1983).

16 Along with tackling the difficulties of traumatic memory, the MMHR was established to safeguard the Human Rights Archives of Chile gathered through the *Memory of the World Project* (Unesco 2003, webarchive.unesco.org/web/20220331171923/http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-4/human-rights-archive-of-chile).

17 According to the information provided by the MMHR on the programming of the theatre January to March 2011.

18 The reference is enhanced by fact that the MMHR had opened the year prior to the premiere of *Villa + Discurso*, and that *Discurso*, though a one-character play, is delivered by the same three actresses performing in *Villa*, this time supposedly portraying President Bachelet, who commissioned the Museum.

19 See Bisnupriya Dutt's contribution to this volume, pp. 138–154.

20 Calderón began his exploration of historical venues with his staging of Isidora Aguirre's *Los que van quedando en el camino* (*Those Who Were Left by the Road*). The production was commissioned by Festival Teatro a Mil to commemorate the Bicentennial of the Nation in 2010 and was showcased in the ex-Congress building in Santiago capital city (see Grass 2019).

21 For the activities around the 10th anniversary of the Museum, visit: https://10.museodelamemoria.cl/2020/10/14/museo-de-la-memoria/.

22 Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi has responsively added a section on testimonies of the Estallido Social to its oral archive.

23 The main exhibition has not changed since the Museum's inauguration in 2010. There is a special space allocated to temporary exhibitions, but, being on a different floor, it might easily escape the visitor's trail, as usually happens with Alfredo Jaar's piece which is only accessible from outside the museum. The archive, and artistic and educational programs, nevertheless, have developed and increased.

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# 11

# ON THE MAKING OF THE ORATORIO FOR THE DISAPPEARED

*Erika Diettes in conversation with Vikki Bell*

In loving memory of Nadis Milena Londoño Cardona (1980–2022)

The art practice of Erika Diettes (1978–) has produced some of the most striking contemporary artistic responses to the armed conflict in Colombia. Each of her three latest projects – *Río Abajo* (2008, Drifting Away), *Sudarios* (2011, Shrouds) and *Relicarios* (2011–2015, Reliquaries) – arose from a careful process of working with relatives of the murdered and disappeared. These relationships with the relatives are at the heart of her work; indeed, the art is not 'about' their experience, but arises from the offer of her artistic sensibilities to them as a resource. In both *Río Abajo* and *Relicarios*, the families gifted Diettes objects – clothing, a favourite toy, photographs – that were cherished reminders of their loved ones, and worked with her as she crafted her responses, offering her beautiful artistic installations back to the families, the primary audience, as she emphasises. For the former, the clothing was photographed underwater and displayed as large glass panels, lit like stained glass to form a set of images that people spontaneously began to treat like shrines, bringing candles to lay before them (see cover of this book). In the latter, Diettes encased the gifted objects in amber-coloured rubber tripolymer cuboids, displaying them in a large grid laid out on the floor so that visitors need to kneel to examine their contents. The first exhibition of *Relicarios* was at the Museum of Antioquia in Medellín, where Diettes kept the exhibition closed to all but the relatives for the first three days while she conducted workshops with them, together with a team including psychologists, allowing them to meet each other and to reflect on the process (Image 11.1).

In *Sudarios*, women who had witnessed horrific murders allowed Diettes the privilege of making intimate and moving portraits of them; printed on floating silk panels, they have been hung mostly in Catholic churches. Such projects demand an ethical sensitivity and awareness that must be carried through from the initial

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**IMAGE 11.1** Installation of the *Relicarios*, Medellín (2018) With permission, archive of the artist.

conversations through to the choice of location and curation of the final exhibitions. Given the ethic of care embedded in her work, it was a great opportunity to be able to speak to Diettes as she embarked on a new project, to follow her decision-making process as she developed it.

The following conversation took place over a year, from July 2021 to May 2022. Since we could not meet due to the Covid pandemic, we spoke across four Zoom sessions. Diettes describes her wishes for the new project, a piece that, like her previous projects, is routed through her relationships with families who have suffered profound loss due to the armed conflict, but it is also quite distinct from them. For the first time, Diettes is making a site specific work, a little building, a chapel – not a *capella* but an *oratorio* as she will explain – built on the hillside near La Union, Antioquia, and filled with photographic images made with the families of the disappeared, the *dolientes*, those left to live with their grief (Image 11.2).

## I. July 2021

*In our first conversation, Diettes starts by explaining that this project arose in many ways from her previous project,* Relicarios.

*ED:* *Relicarios* was such a powerful body of work. It was intense for all those years of working. It was scary and painful for all. But it was a process that allowed some of the families – not all of them, but a large number – the chance of some

**IMAGE 11.2** Architect's visualisation of the *Oratorio* on the hillside surrounded by the rows of lavender. With the kind permission of Alejandro Vélez Restrepo.

sort of healing. Healing is a word I hesitate to use, but I believe that grief inaugurates a new state of living that will endure for the rest of your life. My father died three years after *Relicarios* and so this new work has become connected to my personal story. Intellectually, I tried not to let it blur the boundaries of what I'm doing but somehow, and quite suddenly, I find I am a different artist. One important part of the current project for me is to create a healing centre here, alongside the *Oratorio*.

You know the day after the opening of *Relicarios* – the very next morning – I saw the *Oratorio* in my mind. I don't want to be dramatic, but it was like a vision! A little building made of glass with a high roof. And it was all foggy! Here on the mountain, there is always fog early in the morning. So now, I am following that vision, at a stage of art-making where I might not be able to explain it with words, but I know what I'm doing. It was the same with *Relicarios*. No one understood what *Relicarios* was until they saw it in the museum in Antioquia. But for seven years, I had been exploring and following my idea.

*VB:* How did you find the site for the *Oratorio* project?

*ED:* My friend, the sociologist Nadis Milena Londoño, who worked closely with me on *Relicarios*, found it. When *Relicarios* ended, she knew I was sorry to close my studio in La Unión, Antioquia, and leave. Then she sent me a picture of this farm for sale. And I've been here, just outside La Unión, for five months now, waking up at 5am every morning, feeling time. Being here has changed my ideas about the *Oratorio*. The landscape – its contours, the weather, the way the light falls and changes through the day – has an impact on the site and my vision for it.

With *Relicarios* we wanted to build something responding to all the horrors of the conflict in Colombia, which includes not only forced disappearances but also those who have been murdered, gang-raped, forcibly displaced. The idea was to speak to Colombia as a whole. But one thing I noticed from *Relicarios* was that it was the families of the disappeared who stayed the longest in front of their relicarios. They visited and revisited the exhibition.

*VB:* So the Oratorio is working only with families of the disappeared?

*ED:* Yes, the Oratorio will contain images from eighty families, printed on to glass. I'm aiming for eighty families. I am asking them to choose objects for me to photograph, but these objects are to represent not the absence as such, but the story of the on-going conversation that is never-ending for the one who is grieving [*doliente*], the mourner of the disappeared. For example, the image of the two glasses relates to a story a mother told me. She told me that she does not allow her surviving children to toast her on her birthday, because the only toast she wants to receive is that from her disappeared son (Image 11.3).

So, the aim is to give physical space to an image of the relationship or to what they are longing to see. So that it is not blocked or held endlessly in

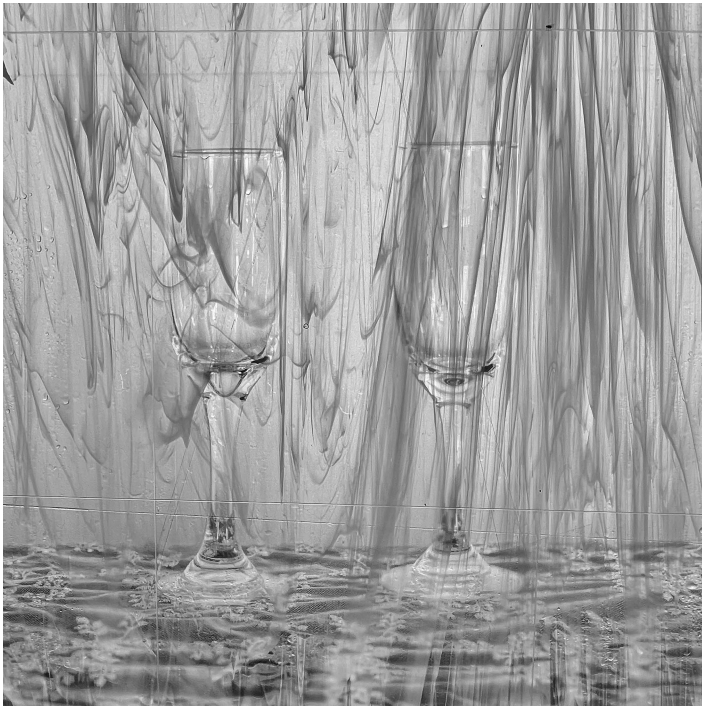

**IMAGE 11.3** Murano glass panel with printed image of two wine glasses. With permission of the artist.

one's mind, as a wish. When you see this image printed on the glass, you can barely see it. It's a ghostly image. But it has a space in the world. I mean, the *Oratorio* could be a place relatives could come on that person's birthday, for example, to commemorate. Because life goes on, and I'm trying to figure out how to help people feel less burdened with these thoughts and wishes.

Before Covid, we brought ten families here for the first of what I had hoped would be three meetings. Because it's disrespectful to just take the objects from the families and to photograph them without doing that work with and for them. We planted quartz in the foundations, and did yoga and gardening together. With Nadis, and Dorcus Atyeno, who I met when I was in Uganda with the Transformative Memory project,[1] we facilitated workshops.

My rather ambitious idea was to create these meetings with healers from different parts of the country that I have connections with, and from abroad, because it's wonderful to facilitate the dissemination of this practice. But of course the pandemic has forced us to postpone these retreats.

*VB:* Was one of the outcomes of that retreat to make some first images for the *Oratorio*?

*ED:* Yes. My hope is that these images might allow the spirit to rest because the families find a path to translate something that is not translatable. One of the women told us she is still serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner for her son who's been disappeared for the last 15 years. I think that's devastating. I know her anguish won't disappear simply because she has an image in the *Oratorio*, but if together we can conjure up this situation in the image, maybe through this process she will come to understand something more about it. It is painful for her and also, perhaps, one could say it's not allowing that soul to rest.

*VB:* Maybe it won't be any sort of solution but you have given her a gift, a physical object outside the body, which gives her something external to consider…

*ED:* Yes, it is made public but *without the story*. This is important because I understand that through telling the story, she feels exposed and vulnerable. Especially in the Colombian context where grief is a complicated peculiar state, it is difficult for the relatives to live in peace. My decision not to publish the story or names alongside the image is to try to honour the pain of the person that I have worked alongside.

*VB:* You are not trying to make people understand somebody else's story and their pain as if it was just a cerebral issue. Instead, you always acknowledge the gaps and the distances and the limitations of, well, just being separate human beings. You can never fully share the experience of another. Better to always start from an acknowledgement of that failure, accept it while still trying to give care, to be human among humans.

*ED:* Exactly. I mean of course I believe in the importance of naming, of not forgetting, of remembering each story. But if you visit a site with 3,000 names you are not really reading the names, you are looking at the idea, the lines, at how overwhelming it is.

*VB:* Yes, I wrote a chapter about the memorial wall in *El Parque de la Memoria* in Argentina where I was reflecting on precisely this issue[2]. The message is scale, and it's impressive but unsettling precisely because you don't have the ability to stand before each name, to consider each story. It was interesting how as I heard more stories, those names would almost jump out at me as I recognised them.

*ED:* It also feels right to follow my instinct not to tell the stories because I would potentially put people in danger. We're still in the midst of conflict here. And we still don't know exactly who, which names, we are trying to memorialise. That's why I just feel – the way you put it was beautiful – it is more about recognising being human alongside other humans.

*VB:* How have you found the people whose images you are making? Are they people you knew before, from the *Relicarios* project?

*ED:* I have a list of names through my social media and other routes, including those who have seen *Relicarios*. It was not an open call because it would be impossible to choose. I have to call and speak to each person one by one. They are people who want to be part of the project because they have been in another of my projects or they have seen it somehow. One is a woman who had told me her story of forced displacement after a massacre for *Relicarios* but then she 'confessed' that she had held back another part of her story, as she was not sure she could trust me. So now she wanted to tell me that story, about her brother's disappearance. She said, 'I have to apologise to you'. It was such a beautiful moment because there you understand the complexity of this country.

*VB:* Can you say something about the difference between the *Relicarios* being shown in museum spaces and this project where you're constructing a site-specific piece?

*ED:* I am not an artist who works only in museums, but with *Relicarios*, because of the fragility of the material and the lighting system required to be able to light the auditorium, it is a body of work that needs that infrastructure. It doesn't need to be necessarily in a museum, but you need a controlled secure space. And you have to be able to plug in those 165 lights! The lighting makes it feel *sacred*. With the *Sudarios*, because they are elevated, the logistics are complicated, so you do need a team. Although *Sudarios* are not so fragile so the transportation is easier. I can show them in a cathedral or in a *salon communal*. This is the first time I have thought about this but while

*Sudarios* are portraits and *Río Abajo* displays images of the object, with *Relicarios* you are transporting the actual objects themselves. They are precious. I think that's the reason that it needs a museum. Also, the idea of it being shown in the museum is, from the families' perspective, very dignifying.

*VB:* Yes, there was a lovely quotation from one of the women who said to her *relicario* 'look where you are!' as if to say 'you will be remembered because, look! You are in a museum'.

*ED:* Exactly. It's giving it a respectful, honouring place. I'm still cross that the Museo Nacional didn't show them and Banco de la República didn't want to show them because it was a chance to acknowledge the history of the country. I mean, they should be in the most important museum ever! With the *Oratorio*, because it is here in the landscape, on the mountainside, it is quite different. I've been thinking of it as similar to visiting a cemetery – the newer type of cemetery, the *parque cementerio*, not those in the city – where one goes out into the countryside, where the concept is more to blend in, dust to dust, etc. I imagine the structure, the *Oratorio*, in the middle of the field. I have been deciding which plants to grow, wondering if I should create a farm, if I should plant tomatoes, potatoes, and so on. But I have decided to create a lavender field. I chose lavender because of all its spiritual and healing properties. I hope it will help the visitor arrive at a place of calm, through the senses. You are not going to be healed, but I want this body of work to be soothing. I have planted 500 lavender plants so far.

*VB:* Can you describe how you imagine the site will be when you enter it and the *Oratorio*?

*ED:* If you visited at dawn or dusk it would be beautiful, especially if the fog created a pale background for the purple and the silver-white ashy colour of the lavender. What I want to do is to interrupt the landscape. Everything around here is bright green, so by interrupting that colour scheme it will be as if this mountain is in grief, in mourning. I'm also planting dark, black flowers so that when you approach *El Sosiego* it appears as if the colours have been demurred. It is like a parenthesis, to signal that something is different about this place.

And if you visit the Oratorio at midday, you will be enchanted by the beauty of the skies and overwhelmed by the potency of nature. I hope that will allow you to connect nature with your own life, to recognise beauty and to connect with the joy of living. Very different from visiting *Relicarios,* which takes you into a very intense space. Here, the space will connect with you. We reshaped the mountainside so you will see the *Oratorio*, then you walk through the lavender towards it against a background of more lavender with the sky beyond.

*VB:* In this midday sun, how will the images in the Oratorio fare?

*ED:* They will fade, for sure. In fact, I can't wait to see how they fade. I am seeking to avoid being part of a mantra of 'remember, remember, remember' and instead to allow time, to allow healing with a certain forgetting. It's tricky to explain. It's not the kind of forgetting that doesn't recognise or know what happened, but the healing oblivion that comes with time. We cannot live in suffering endlessly. Nobody deserves to live there.

*VB:* The phrase that comes to mind is a 'tender forgetting'. A forgetting, but very soft and gentle. Recently I was writing a review of a book from Peru[3] and the author was saying how often people become really angry, telling other people 'you have to remember' or 'you have to forget'. It becomes very brittle. Your idea that actually there could be a gentle process to forgetting resonates with his reflections.

*ED:* Yes, memory within the socio-political context can be aggressive, a sort of a 'luchamos por la memoria'. We're in a battle. But when you are working with the victims, when you are listening to them, you wish for them to have just one minute pain free. You know, just one second.

A tender forgetting doesn't mean you forget you had a son; obviously, it doesn't mean that you are not searching and looking for justice every day of your life. But it means letting go of the horror, a resting in peace. My idea is to create a space to facilitate that, to help the people who are mourning. But it is not a tomb. There's no way the images can replace a grave. That's why it's important to me that the images retain a strong connection with the life of the mourner and not to the disappeared person. Nor can or should art adopt the role of the state. The solution cannot be that instead of a proper state or judicial response to conflict, we make art. Art is not able to replace law and art doesn't occupy the place of law or the official.

*VB:* To return to the images that will be within the Oratorio, were they the result of listening to people's stories and talking to them? How did you choose which image you would create to represent their story?

*ED:* The objects were brought by the families. I never choose the objects because I think they are what's important for that person. Let me show you this one. For this woman, it was important to include the letter and the drawings of the daughters of the man who is disappeared. What she wants to do with the *Oratorio* is to let him know that his daughters are okay. So this image would be more effective for *her*. It is so important is that she feels connected with this image and that she feels that the story as she told me was heard. The whole purpose is for you to feel represented here, to see that your loved one is being honoured, but in these cases of disappearance also to respond to that constant conversation with a person who you don't know if they are really dead or not. With this image it's as if the image is saying 'look at the girls, look at how I'm taking good care of them'. It's in conversation.

## II. October 2021

*ED:* Clearly, the pandemic has interrupted our ways of working profoundly so here I am, almost like a monk in my monastery – well, on my mountain! I have realised that all the elements here are part of the *Oratorio*: the lavender, the sun, the rain, the hens, the locals passing by the land, the chicks who were born here – we have six now! The *Oratorio* is not to be extrapolated from these things. I don't want to force it to reflect a theme or a theoretical point about art, but instead to let it sit within life here. Letting it all pass by. Its time is the time of seeds, sowing and planting, of the earth. It gives the rhythm I'm living. I have cancelled all my exhibitions and I'm here effectively living the time of the *Oratorio*.

I've been thinking about your concept of 'tender forgetting'. The *Oratorio* is a work that I want to have such a softness. There are so many images, some truly awful, such as the bodies found recently on the coast, and so many very hard processes for the victims and relatives of this conflict, talking to the JEP and so on.[4] *Oratorio* is a work that is softer, that is given in a spirit of kindness. It is for the mourner [*doliente*] and the visitor [*espectador*]. And it is a work that lets the dead be dead.

If we believe in the ability of art to help us look at reality, then we have to look at that reality. But it is not about becoming journalists. Art is not journalism, searching for documents about reality. For me, the long-standing critique of art – its aestheticisation of suffering, its ethics, etc. – neglects the simple fact that this reality *is* seen, and moreover, when it enters the worlds of creative people – artists, photographers, choreographers, people who work with sound – that experience is inevitably aesthetic, for them, and this reality is going to pass through their aesthetic sensibility.

All of this project, each thing that is made, is for those who are mourning [*dolientes*]. If we could we achieve that tender forgetting, this restful pause, it would be to me the most magical thing in the world. Of course, you will never absolutely forget. It is ridiculous to tell a mother 'you should forget it'. And it is very different from saying that as a whole society 'we will remember for you'. She knows that we are not going to remember the suffering of her child each year in their specificity. Within the larger political discourse you cannot propose forgetting when it's right we must not forget. But this work is in the sphere of emotion – it is about an individual, emotional process – and not in the sphere of politics, debating with politicians.

I hope we can 'tenderly forget'. I love that formulation. To be over the intensity of sorrow and achieve a softer memory. It's not a political memory. It's not memory with a capital letters, set in stone, but is like a memory of a small moment, a lovely moment. Such as 'when I was little my father brought me this bar of chocolate', like those memories that can be retrieved with delight and carry lighter emotion, rather than a painful memory of the absence. To have memories that you can carry with you, that nourish you, rather than being hurtful. This would be the aim.

*VB:* I wanted to ask you some more about the images you are going to put on to the glass. Why did you decide to use objects in this work, rather than the portrait photography that you used for *Sudarios*? And what is the difference between *Río Abajo*, that used clothing, or *Relicarios*, that also used objects, and these images that you are creating for *Oratorio*?

*ED:* In *Río Abajo*, the photograph of an object that belonged to the disappeared person conjured up something of the aura of the person. Their shirt, their clothes, occupy the shape of their body, so there is something intimate about it. In *Relicarios*, the family chose the objects and the majority chose an object that had belonged to the person, that represented them, such as the music he liked, or the last present he gave his mother on Mother's Day. In the case of the *Oratorio,* the representation that I would like to achieve relates more to the *doliente* themselves – the mourning person – and the conversation that they have maintained afterwards often for many years. The object conjures this desire for the conversation they wish for, more than it conjures up the aura of the disappeared.

*VB:* So it's a way to approach something impossible to represent, that is, grief itself? Your way of working involves a lot of care, working with relatives.

*ED:* Yes, it concerns their suspended grief. How to represent suspension? It's a delicate idea, because the object often represents hope. I try to find more abstract modes of representation than a portrait might be. It is a form of care. Because the family of the disappeared is not the disappeared him or herself and I feel that people don't deserve to be just the daughter of the assassinated general, for example, or the mother of one of the missing. She is a person, in spite of, or as well as, that fact.

I will gift the families something from the *Oratorio* project. I still don't know how, what format it will take, but I know I will create something for them.

*VB:* As you did with *Relicarios*. It seems yours is a staged approach – you have the work with the families, then an exhibition, and also you make a gift for them, present it and take more images of them receiving the work, which becomes in itself another body of work.

*ED:* Yes, but you know the images of the people receiving the gifts will never be part of my exhibition. Maybe they will find their way into an academic book or be available for academic reflection but they are not mine to exhibit. That's part of the care.

*VB:* So have you begun printing the images onto the glass, those that you have already? Can you explain the printing process?

*ED:* They're printed directly on to the glass, with a special printer. Obviously the hard surface does not absorb the ink, so it needs another layer on top. It goes

into an oven with another pane of glass on top, so they are fused together. It is murano glass so has these white swirls in it naturally. It's both transparent and, in places, white.

This image is one I really like. It's an image of a boy holding a baby. But it also has a photograph of the photo I took for *Río Abajo*. It's incredible for me that the things they brought to 'speak' about their son include not only the photo they carry in their wallet, and the larger version of that photograph that they have on the wall in their living room, but also the photo that I took of that document several years ago. So, we are returning and creating layers of images (Image 11.4).

*VB:* I'm thinking about the sun causing these images to fade. As they fade, you will also see more of the landscape outside. I wonder if this is a metaphor for this tender forgetting. It's not that you are left with nothing because you are left with the land, with where you are.

*ED:* Yes, it is a metaphor for life. The images will fade, and at different speeds, depending on the ink. The magenta will be the last to fade. When the image has gone, the family is probably at another point, emotionally. Nonetheless,

**IMAGE 11.4** Murano glass panel with printed image showing the photograph and documentation of a young disappeared man. With permission of the artist.

the initial image will continue to exist, in the catalogue, or in the images we take of it. So the perpetuity of the image will be assured in other ways. The fading is part of this process and in the end the image on the glass will not matter [so much as the issue of] how are you going to spend this life?

*VB:* So will you display all the images at different times, according to when they are ready to go into the *Oratorio*?

*ED:* Yes. I have some already; we are discussing these and some from the project in Uganda. The other panels will be grey glass. So the sunlight will only pass through those with the images on them. It is not my idea to fill the *Oratorio* once and then it is complete. The photographs are not a part of the structure of the *Oratorio*, they are hanging within it but there is a museographical concept to the *Oratorio* too. The images will circulate. They could be here, then go to Uganda, then maybe to the UK. And nor will the *Oratorio* just have images from Colombia. It is about the pain of disappearance, and people understand that is not particular to here.

*VB:* You take such care and time with your work, you are very patient but the work is impatient in that sense that these people may not have time to wait for peace, for the political process. We can't wait for everything to be at peace again before we deal with this healing process, with people's mental health. Yours is an ethic of accompaniment.

*ED:* Thank you, yes. *Río Abajo* was a process over four years. And the work and contact with the *dolientes* has continued, it goes on. And I have learnt with *Sudarios*, too, that my work won't change anything, but I understand that it can be part of a beautiful process. I can't do anything heroic, you know. But these things, they can make all the difference in the world to someone. Like a nurse for someone in a terminal state, turning them if they need to turn over, bringing a pillow. You can't change anything radically but you can make sure someone is comfortable. It is nothing scientific, just a gentle attention, a softness, tranquil and quiet. Everyone needs some form of accompaniment. It's why I like the image of the nurse.

### III. January 2022

*VB:* You sent the photographs, thank you. I can see some lavender!

*ED:* Yes, this past week we cut the first harvest of the lavender, it's an intoxicating smell! We have just the first row and we have sown more seeds to grow more. I'm at a really nice point. For a long time, an art project is just an idea. Sometimes you think it is an illusion. It only exists in my imagination, there and in the render that I have produced with the architect. But everything is still to come. Many practical and economic considerations too. But we

have marked out the rectangle where the *Oratorio* will be, and I hope that by November we will have constructed the *Oratorio*. So, I am considering the landscape and attending to the lavender, but it is like working with a photographic negative, working in reverse. As with the *Relicarios*, you don't know until you remove those pieces from the mould what they will look like, so you are preparing, imagining and working backwards. It's the opposite of taking a portrait because when you're photographing someone your subject is to the fore [*en primer plano*]. And later you work on the background. Here it is the reverse, working on the background and the foundations, before I create the subject, the *Oratorio*.

*VB:* I'm trying to understand what that feels like for you.

*ED:* It is about holding fast to the same idea. The project is to sustain that idea, like an exercise in meditation, while around me everything is almost the same every day, evening, night. Of course, the weather and the seasons are changing. But there is a sense of time that feels and is eternal. It is repetitive and even monotonous. Having animals means you must get into a routine. The hens announce the start of the day in the morning, and in the evening its end. This time doesn't have an end, it doesn't have a conclusion.

*VB:* When you are walking in the lavender and imagining the chapel there, are you imagining the image that you have produced with the architect? Can you say something about the design of the chapel, why this particular design?

*ED:* It was designed by the architect Alejandro Vélez Restrepo, around the remit that I gave to him. It is a little house like a child would draw. Maybe it is not a universal image exactly because I suppose some children would draw the houses in whatever region they live in. But it is the most basic of shapes, as if drawn with a pencil, a rectangle with a triangle on top. Of course, I discussed with Alejandro, and since my background is Catholic, there is a church-like quality to it.

It contains something of my vision of the sacred, I suppose. I could have chosen another form, of say a maloca,[5] but that wouldn't be true to my vision of something scared, which evidently has something Spanish about it too. My main consideration was to have something narrow, with a roof as high as we could make it.

*VB:* You are calling it the *Oratorio*, which is different from a chapel. In English it is oratory. Can you explain the difference?

*ED:* Yes, the difference is that an oratory is not officially consecrated by the church. It could be a chapel in a house, a place to pray. It is an intimate space. Like in the airport, the little quiet space is called an oratorio. They are ambiguous spaces, with no particular faith, no images – or several – and

several books including the Koran, the Bible. It's a space of quiet, to pray or meditate, to rest and relax. But it is not the same as a lounge!

The design is important. The visitor enters and leaves the one passage through the Oratorio. There won't be any doors, it's open. The ground will be the grass, so that a little of Nature will enter the Oratorio, and the space is not enclosed. It's about the paradox of things that contain absence. It is a space of shelter [*resguardo*] and a space of imagination.

I don't want visiting the Oratorio to be like visiting a monument, but more like visiting a sacred place. Not a space of pilgrimage but a place of rest [*descanso*], especially for people who don't have that elsewhere. There are not many places for *dolientes*. It is a spiritual space that is historical without being a monument. The work I am doing now is to think about how to create that atmosphere.

*VB:* Imagining the atmosphere and affect as well as the architecture that you want this space to have. It's quite delicate.

*ED:* Maybe 20 years ago, I visited the piece by James Turrell at the Quaker Meeting House near Houston.[6] He works with light, he builds architecture so you can focus on looking at the sky. He is an inspiration for me. What I am hoping for here is something like the projects of land art, where you contemplate the artwork but always within a specific context. I hope the *Oratorio* will be an experience of light. And that it becomes part of life. If art doesn't become a part of life it has no sense. I take comfort in the fact that when people go to the cemetery it is as a part of life. People visit with family, they have lunch together, collect flowers, then they go together. With *Relicarios,* I remember people left flowers in the exhibition, they would sing or perform a little ceremony. These were the things that people wanted to do in front of the artwork.

There will be a second part to the project, of course, because the photographs will also be printed for exhibitions beyond the *Oratorio*, and those images will travel. Also, within the *Oratorio*, it will be possible to put new images up and remove others, to rotate the images. What I had originally in mind [with the images] is not possible at the moment because of Covid. It would be irresponsible to have groups of people brought together. And we can't visit people's houses so we have to pause. I can't just ask people to send me their objects.

*VB:* No, that is not the way you work at all. And the people you have been working with so far – who came to visit before Covid – have they been in touch with you?

*ED:* Most of them follow me on Facebook or Twitter. Two of them have passed away from Covid, and another two are very ill from that small group of twelve people. What life is giving us is these challenges, and this extended time. This could have been a 3-month project! Just to go slow is a test for me! Once I get my booster, my third vaccine, I think I will be ready to start again.

## May 2022

*Erika has recently returned from a trip to Tucumán where she was invited to talk to a group of families of the disappeared and visit the notorious Pozo de Vargas, a deep well used as a clandestine burial site during the last military dictatorship in Argentina, where at least 147 individuals were thrown. As usual, we start our conversation measuring time by the lavender.*

*ED:* The process here is going better than I expected. The mountain has given me this incredible blossom of lavender. It's that weird moment when the idea that existed only in my mind starts happening in front of me. It's a very particular moment, it is incredible sense of joy but at the same time it is peculiar, like you are stepping into your own mind. I can see so clearly now where the *Oratorio* should be built.

*VB:* Is it in a different place from where you thought at first?

*ES:* Yes we have moved it. We had created a lake so that we could place the Oratorio where it would be reflected. But being here, working here, understanding, how can I put this, the 'spirit' of the mountain, I felt it needed to be down in the midst of the lavender field. So that it feels less exposed. It means there will be more mystery as you will have to walk through the lavender to reach the *Oratorio*. So it is adding these layers of 'care' to the construction.

*VB:* A sensory care. The look and smell of the lavender will have a calming effect.

*ED:* Exactly. And approaching, the first glimpses of the *Oratorio* will make you consider whether you are ready to enter it or not. To go back to *Relicarios*, when we showed it at the Museo Tadeo you had to walk up the staircase to it, before entering the room where all the Relicarios were.[7] But many people just had to sit at the top of the stairs and wait for a while. I think the same may happen here, walking through this beautiful field, being careful to avoid stepping into the lavender, passing by the magnolia tree, will give you time to adjust. It will give you a sense that you are in a safe place of shelter.

*VB:* How was your trip to Argentina?

*ED:* So interesting. I gave a talk and afterwards I was speaking with some of the families there who are all relatives of the disappeared in Tucumán. There was a lot of positive response and support for the idea of a space like this, like the *Oratorio*, precisely because it was not described in terms of a monument. With a monument there is no space for talking about the duration of waiting, the sense that these families are forever waiting. I also visited the houses of five sets of relatives, and I made four images with them.[8] In one, a daughter and a niece of a disappeared man brought the banners that they

had taken on marches, a shawl of their father's, a *mate* [cup for drinking mate], and a little tin [*relicario*] with the hair of his child in it. She didn't really know her father, so her relationship with him was the experience of looking for him. Her image of her father is only as one of the disappeared.

*VB:* Did you feel a difference with Colombia there in Tucumán?

*ED:* Yes, of course. I used the word *doliente* in my talk there. I knew I was introducing something a bit different with that. In Colombia I started using the word *doliente* because the way we speak here about victims doesn't bring together all those who grieve. Instead, we name the victims from the point of view of the perpetrators. In terms of 'victims of the FARC', 'victims of state terror', and so on. To use the term *doliente* is to see people from the point of view of their humanity instead. But in Argentina they had hesitations around the word. It relates somewhat to the different struggles.

*VB:* Yes, I understand. This word does not sit very well with the slogan '*los llevaron con vida, los queremos con vida'*. We want them with life. The idea is that we will act as if they are still alive, and we demand that the state returns them to us. That remains the focus, not the pain.

*ED:* Right, and the *Oratorio*'s focus is elsewhere, on the experience of having lived with this absence. The one who searches [*el buscador*] is the focus.

*VB:* Who asked you to visit Tucumán, and the Pozo de Vargas?

*ED:* It was an archaeologist, Andrés Romano, who works as part of a team there. They have been excavating the well for 20 years, and they have found the remains of 117 people there, in fragments. There are people who did not want to bury the fragments of bones, they say 'my relative was not only one bone, where is the rest?' One of the team came across my website, and saw the images of *Río Abajo* and *Relicarios*. His question to me was: what should we do with the clothes we have found in the well? They are thinking of making an artwork of some kind. There are three families who agreed to lend me these clothes, but they are still held by the state as part of the ongoing judicial process, so actually they cannot give them to me at present. This is for a future project. It will be very delicate, because the clothes are very intimate, some are underwear, and because some have signs of torture.

*VB:* How was your visit to the well itself?

*ED:* It is 40m deep! I went down the shaft twice. The second time was with a group of relatives, because the group CAMIT had an event going on.[9] At the conference some of the relatives asked me, 'How was the visit to the well?', because they haven't been. I said it isn't as one imagines. The archaeologists

have spent 20 years in the well, scrapping and searching, looking for anything that could help in the struggle for justice. It is so clean and the water's like glass! It is a site of truth, justice, and memory, though it is not open to the public, because the judicial process is on-going. But they allow educational visits and give access to the relatives of those involved in the trial.

*VB:* So at the Oratorio you will include the images that you made with the families from Argentina with those from Colombia, and from Uganda too?

*ED:* Yes, but they won't be arranged by country. Because this is not a place with information to read about these situations, but it is to be a place about the experience of waiting and hoping. I would like to give a place to and through these intimate personal conversations, spiritually and metaphorically, as well as literally, to give people a place. It happens to be here on a mountain in Colombia, but it could have been in Tucumán, in Uganda, or elsewhere.

## Notes

1 The Transformative Memory project website is: https://transformativememory.ubc.ca. It is a knowledge-exchange network of scholars, artists, community-based organisations, and policy makers engaged with the question of what makes memory transformative of a sense of self, relations to others, legacies of violence, and connections to the land. Members include memory workers based in several countries including Colombia and Uganda.
2 See Chapter 5 in Vikki Bell (2014).
3 See José Carlos Agüero (2021) and Bell (2022).
4 JEP is the justice component of the Integrated System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition (ISTJRNR) established by the 2016 Peace Agreement, signed between the government and the FARC-EP on 24 November, 2016. The SJP is tasked with investigating, clarifying, prosecuting, and punishing the most serious crimes committed over the more than 50 years of armed conflict in Colombia, before 1 December 2016 (see https://www.jep.gov.co/DocumentosJEPWP/2englishversion.pdf).
5 South American indigenous large communal hut.
6 *Skyspace at Live Oak Friends Meeting House*, Houston, Texas. A retracted skyspace in the ceiling shows light changing as sun moves through the day and sets at night. Subtle lighting within the meeting house complements and accentuates these changes. There are a few restricted hours in which tourists can go into the meeting house.
7 Museo de Artes Visuales de la Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozado, Bogotá.
8 One of the families said they needed more time to think about which objects they wanted to bring to be photographed on Erika's next visit to Tucumán.
9 Colectivo de Arqueología, Memoria e Identidad de Tucumán (CAMIT).

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# 12

# ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE AND SILENCED HISTORIES

## Pedro Almodóvar's *Madres paralelas/Parallel Mothers* (2021)

*Maria M. Delgado*

There has been no shortage of films dealing with the legacy of Spain's Civil War (1936–1939) on the nation's psyche.[1] During the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1939–1975), the Civil War could not be mentioned, but filmmakers forged a language of silence, ellipses, indirect references, and metaphor to capture its devastating impact both on the victors—as with Carlos Saura's *La caza/The Hunt* (1965)—and the vanquished—as with Víctor Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena/The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973).[2] The transition to democracy and the end of censorship in 1977 brought both a graphic directness to coverage of the inequalities that marked life for those who had been on the losing side and a new satirical or farcical lens on the conflict. The former was exemplified by Vicente Aranda's adaptation of Juan Marsé's 1973 novel, *Si te dicen que caí/If They Tell You I Fell* (1989) and the latter by Fernando Trueba's *La niña de tus ojos/The Girl of Your Eyes* (1998), punctuating the sanctimonious tone of films like José Luis Sáenz de Heredia's *Raza* (1942) made during the dictatorship. The twenty-first century has seen a more nuanced cinematographic language in the depiction of the Civil War's legacy: for example, David Trueba's 2003 adaptation of Javier Cercas' influential 2001 novel, *Los soldados de Salamina/The Soldiers of Salamis,* examined the fractured and unreliable nature of memory and by association the process of narration in the retelling of the Civil War; Guillermo del Toro's *El laberinto del Fauno/Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) retold the vindictive genocide of the defeated left through the merging of horror with a gothic fairy tale; Alberto Morais' *Las olas/The Waves* (2011) deployed the road movie trope to tackle the memory of the Argelès-sur-Mer concentration camp on a Republican prisoner who had been held there in the aftermath of the War.

Pedro Almodóvar's 23rd feature, *Parallel Mothers*, while dealing with the legacy of the Civil War, differs from the films mentioned above in its focus on enforced

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disappearances. Over 114,000 civilians are estimated to have been assassinated in extrajudicial executions between 1936 and 1951 and tossed into unmarked graves across the length and breadth of the nation.[3] This invisible history has been the subject of key documentaries that have sought to give testimony to those searching for the remains of disappeared persons, including but not exclusively family members. They include *Lesa Humanitat/Against Humanity* (dir. Héctor Faver 2017), *Bones of Contention* (dir. Andrea Weiss 2017), *Pico Reja: la verdad que la tierra esconde/Pico Reja, the truth that the ground hides* (dir. Arturo Andújar and Remedios Malvárez 2021) and *El silencio de los otros/The Silence of Others* (dir. Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar 2018), a film coproduced by El Deseo, the production company that Almodóvar established with his elder brother Agustín in 1986. These films differ in their focus. *The Silence of Others*, a Spanish–US coproduction, layers multiple testimonies in chronicling the human rights abuses that affected different generations of Spaniards: a daughter who watched her mother taken away by soldiers from the Nationalist faction (also known as the Rebel faction) during the Civil War; a past political prisoner living on the same street has his former torturer; a mother whose baby was taken from her at birth in a state endorsed trafficking programme that removed new-born babies from those deemed to be ‘unsuitable' mothers.[4] *Bones of Contention,* a US production, uses playwright and poet Federico García Lorca's assassination in the early stages of the Civil War to examine the wider issue of LGBT+ persecution under the Franco regime. *Pico Reja* centres on the closed mass grave from which the film takes its name in Seville's cemetery, where over 2,000 civilians are thought to lie. The opening of the grave offers a means through which to both examine the untold histories and to seek, through singer Rocío Márquez and poet Antonio Manuel Rodríguez, to provide an artistic response to issues that the opening of the grave throws up—historical memory, the narrativisation of the past, and the ethical responsibility of a society to bury the dead with respect, whatever their political affiliations.[5]

*Parallel Mothers* lies at an intersection with these documentaries. Set between 2016 and 2019 and completed as Spain was debating a new Democratic Memory Bill that came into force in October 2022, it has engaged with Lorca as a symbol of the disappeared, referenced the role of the documentary in articulating instances of enforced disappeared, and recognised the importance of artistic interventions in the framing of a difficult past. In bringing theatre and testimony into dialogue, the film challenges problematic nostalgia for Francoism embodied in the rise of the far-right party Vox.[6] Drawing on an extensive interview with Almodóvar (2021), this chapter positions *Parallel Mothers* not only as a call for restorative justice, exploring how the unresolved issue of the country's mass graves haunts the structures of Spain's democracy, but also, and equally important, what strategies Almodóvar employs so that the narrative and objects featured in the film function to ‘unmute' the inequalities and abuses perpetrated during the dictatorship as well as the enforced silence that accompanied these abuses.

## Engaging with the Past

As Paul Julian Smith has persuasively argued, the comic irreverence of Almodóvar's cinema and its conceptualisation as 'zany' and/or 'kitsch' has arisen 'from a disrespect for a register coded as "feminine" and for those who identify with women's concerns' (2000: 2). This focus has allowed for a positioning of his oeuvre as an embodiment of a new Spain putting to one side the concerns of the past, and 'apolitical' and 'ahistorical' in its themes (ibid.).[7] Aligning myself with Smith and Juan Carlos Ibáñez—the latter notes the reluctance of the Spanish media as much as the foreign critics identified by Smith to recognise the presence of 'a political vein' in Almodóvar's films (Ibáñez 2013: 153)—I would argue that if you scratch the glossy, colourful veneer of an Almodóvar film, a political standpoint is never far from view. Social unrest rumbles in the background of *La flor de mi secreto/The Flower of My Secret* (1995) as novelist Leo observes that Spain is 'on the point of exploding'. *Carne trémula/Live Flesh*'s (1997) pre-credit sequence, set in 1970, harks back to a pre-democratic Madrid about to enter a state of emergency—slyly aligning Spain's centre-right Partido Popular (Popular Party), who had come to power in 1996, the year before the film was released, to the curtailing of freedom perpetrated during the dictatorship. In *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004) the ways in which the paedophile priest is able to transition without impunity from the dictatorship into the new democracy acknowledges a Transition that absorbed the civil service, a military structure, and a political elite who had been able to consolidate its power base over successive generations between 1939 and 1975.[8] References to the disappeared feature in *Volver* (2006), *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009), *La piel que habito/The Skin I Live In* (2011), *Julieta* (2016), and *Los amantes pasajeros/ I'm So Excited!* (2013).[9] *Parallel Mothers,* however, as Almodóvar has acknowledged on repeated occasions, is his most overtly political film to date (e.g., Almodóvar 2021; Sánchez 2021a) and differs from these earlier works in its candid treatment of what the mass graves mean for the process of dealing with a traumatic past. Spain is often positioned as second only to Cambodia in terms of the number of forcibly disappeared persons lying in unmarked graves,[10] part of what anthropologist Francisco Ferrándiz has termed 'a funerary apartheid' that extolled the Nationalist dead and consigned the Republican dead to oblivion (2019: S64):

> People don't know this. Remembering our past and remembering especially the darkest parts of our past […] this is our present, because 100,000 disappeared persons are still in mass graves—it's important for every generation in Spain, but especially the younger ones who are not haunted by the phantoms of the past. I had wanted to tackle the issue of the mass graves in a film for some time but hadn't found the right script until *Parallel Mothers.*
>
> (Almodóvar 2021)

In conceiving a forensic archaeologist, Arturo (Israel Elejalde), as one of the film's core characters, Almodóvar recognises the efforts made by local historical memory associations, funded through ad hoc grants and on-the-ground fundraising, to oversee the disinterment of the country's mass graves. The viewer first sees Arturo as photographer Janis (Penélope Cruz) captures his portrait for a magazine feature. Just as Janis doesn't want Arturo appearing with a Hamlet-esque skull in hand for the photoshoot—'it's too obvious' she states—so Almodóvar eschews a social realist treatment of the subject matter. Instead, historical memory intersects with motifs of surrogate motherhood and it is 'unresolved issues' that Almodóvar (2021) identifies as the core theme running through the different narrative strands. The result is a complex melodrama revolving around the chance encounter of two single women about to give birth in a Madrid hospital, 40-year-old Janis and teenage Ana (Milena Smit), with far-reaching consequences for both the women and their offspring.

Janis describes her pregnancy as an accident, one of many that feature as plot mechanisms in the film. Accidents of fate are, however, as core to Almodóvar's films as letters are to Ibsen plays; mechanisms through which characters are tried and tested. Janis and Ana both give birth to the fast and furious strings of Alberto Iglesias's score, the coordinated and yellow, green, and purple décor lending a particular synergy to their meeting: 'these unreal colours, you'd never find them in a Spanish hospital. I just don't like white walls', Almodóvar acknowledges, 'they could appear aggressive but I think they are calming colours. I wanted the [hospital] room to have the same colour scheme as the rest of the film' (2021). Motherhood and memory are thus not disconnected in the film as some critics have claimed,[11] but rather part of an interconnected web of references recognising the role of blood relatives—daughters, sons, nephews, nieces, siblings, grandchildren—in campaigning and fundraising through memory associations—as Janis does—for their relatives' disinterment. Almodóvar has acknowledged that in the construction of Janis's family history, he was inspired in a case he had read about of a ten-year-old girl whose father had been forcibly taken by falangists to dig his own grave and that of other Republican comrades:

> I chose for that girl to have a very clear memory of the moment where she sees her father for the last time, and I made her the grandmother. That was the means through which Janis assumes the legacy of looking for her great-grandfather.
>
> (cited in Ponga 2021)

Janis's search can thus be seen as an embodiment of Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory – articulating the relationship that the 'generation after' (or postgeneration(s)) have to the cultural trauma of their parents and grandparents (Hirsch 2012). It is a relationship mediated not by direct recall memory but by artefacts, objects, and narrated memories shaped by photographic images where the indexical and the symbolic merge to powerful effect (ibid.).

## Enforced Disappearance and the Spanish Civil War: Addressing Institutionalised Silence

The *c.*200,000 executions, largely extra-judicial or conducted after dubious legal hearings, that took place in Spain between 1936 and 1945 are part of a systematic annihilation of the left who had supported Spain's Second Republic (1931–1939) (Preston 2012). Enforced disappearance remained—alongside other forms of endorsed abuse including police brutality, torture, the withdrawal of licenses to practice of lawyers, teachers, doctors and engineers, and gendered and sexual repression—a feature of the early Franco years, part of a *limpieza social* (social cleansing) perpetrated by the regime to eradicate those viewed as enemies of the state (Babiano et al. 2017; Preston 2012: 428–517). Historian Jorge Marco delineates the policies—both administrative and discursive—introduced by Francoism to conceal extrajudicial acts: '(1) Not recording the names of the victims, (2) recording some of them but covering up the real cause of death, (3) "disappearance" of people and (4) burial in mass graves' (2017: 157). The policies were facilitated by the destruction of official documents relating to these crimes and the accumulation of documents relating to human rights perpetrated by *los rojos* (those with Republication or left-wing affiliations) (ibid.). An official history was fabricated to legitimise the *coup d'état* and situate the defence of the Republic and its values as a crime—Franco's Minister of the Interior, Ramón Serrano Suner, termed it 'back to front justice' (Preston 2012: 473). The result was a silencing of the purges committed against those who had supported the Second Republic and high-profile and consistent commemorations of those who had died from the Nationalist faction. The Valley of the Fallen, built between 1940 and 1959 using 20,000 Republican prisoners, became a public monument to the Nationalist dead, a mausoleum for Franco—buried there with high pomp and ceremony in 1975—and Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of the fascist Falange Española executed by the Republicans in 1936 whose remains were transferred there in 1959. The visibility of the grand public memorials held annually on 20 November—the anniversary of both Franco and Primo de Rivera's deaths—to commemorate the Nationalist dead stood in stark contrast to the culture of silence surrounding the Republican dead, a silence that Almodóvar addresses in the plotlines of *Parallel Mothers*:

> The silence of the Franco era was a silence born of fear, a fear that families—parents and grandparents—had of speaking out, and it became a pathological fear. In our houses nobody spoke of the War. A number of generations have therefore grown up without even a minimal understanding of the realities of the War and the post-War years. When UN rapporteur [Pablo de Greiff] arrived in 2014 to survey what was happening in relation to Francoist crimes, they were surprised by the fact that it was the great-grandchildren's generation who were demanding the exhumation of these unmarked graves. They thought too much

time had elapsed. There is an explanation for what surprised them: Spanish society had been rendered mute and terrified for many decades, for longer than the regime itself.[12]

(Almodóvar 2021)

By structuring *Parallel Mothers* through the perspective of a generation, like Janis, born in democracy and calling for the recovery of the disappeared, Almodóvar, as Spain's most internationally renowned living filmmaker,[13] affords an international platform for this timely issue: 'Once the great-grandchildren's generation disappear, I'm not sure the great-great-grand-children will have the same interest in disinterring the graves, that's why it's such an urgent issue' (2021). Janis's fortuitous encounter with Arturo in the film's opening sequence provides a means through which the viewer learns of the forced disappearance of her own great-grandfather, Antonio, one of a cluster of ten men from her village who were brutally abducted in the early chaotic days of the Civil War.

The photograph can capture something the eye doesn't see […]. I also felt it was very powerful, dramatically, that Janis's great-grandfather had photographed the people he would end up dying alongside […]. The idea of the photograph as witness not only to what happened but to what was hidden. [Argentinian author Julio] Cortázar of course captured this brilliantly in the story that Antonioni brought to the cinema: *Blow Up*.

(Almodóvar 2021)

In methodically sharing with Arturo the precise circumstances of his disappearance, Janis gives voice to the testimony of her grandmother and great-grandmother who witnessed the disappearance—testimony that could not be uttered for fear of reprisals. Almodóvar deploys black and white portraits of men, women and infants taken by Spanish photographer Virxilio Viéitez (1930–2008) in the 1950s and 1960s to give form to the disappeared. These are the photographs that Janis shows Arturo in an early sequence, photographs that are attributed in the film's narrative to her great-grandfather: the names of the dead spoken aloud by Janis as she clicks on her mouse to bring up each image on her computer, each life corresponding to a missing past. Almodóvar encountered these photographs, many taken for identity cards issued by dictatorship from 1951 to facilitate surveillance and control the population, during an exhibition of Viéitez's work. This archival material interspersed through the fictional diegesis of the film (See Image 12.1) serves both to point to the affective quality of the photograph but also to point to the instability of the image and the potential for manipulation—a black market in identify cards operated under the regime, run by local Party officials (Richards 1998: 139). The photograph therefore reframed in a way that both acknowledges its past but also as recognises its role within memory politics. The act of sharing the photographs with

**IMAGE 12.1** Relatives walk to the excavation of the grave in *Parallel Mothers*. Photograph courtesy of El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

Arturo becomes a process of remembrance—a way of opening up an arrested past that can be viewed repeatedly and refuses erasure (Benjamin 2015), a process of inscribing 'grievability as a precondition of a knowable human life—to be haunted is precisely to apprehend that life before precisely knowing it' (Butler 2010: 98).

Allusions to Spain's disappeared have, as I noted earlier in the chapter (p. 209), featured in Almodóvar's work since *Volver* (2006). Almodóvar's participation in the short 2010 documentary project, *Cultura contra la impunidad/Culture Against Impunity,* demonstrates a public alignment with ideas of restorative justice at a time when he was beginning work on the screenplay of *Parallel Mothers*. His voicing of Virgilio Leret Ruiz, the first military officer assassinated for refusing to support the Rebel insurrection on 18 July 1936, was part of a project involving 15 actors, including Javier Bardem and Aitana Sánchez-Gijón,[14] who ghost the testimony of those who were unjustly killed or disappeared during the Civil War. 'I don't have a disappeared person in my family but I feel close to these 100,000 families who continue to search for their relatives to bury them with dignity. It's not a political question but simply a human one' (Almodóvar, cited in Anon 2010).

*Parallel Mothers* also engages with this ethical issue of recognising the right to dignified funerary rites for those who had supported the Republican cause. Janis and Arturo candidly discuss the limitations of the Law of Historical Memory introduced by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's socialist government in 2007 [Ley 56/2007] which, among other things, advocated the removal of all symbols and monuments promoting the military rebellion, Franco, or his dictatorship from public squares and streets, and assisted with the search for disappeared persons without establishing a body or a legal framework to oversee such a process.[15] Spain's

former Popular Party Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, a vocal opponent of the 2007 Law, is vilified by Janis and Arturo as they leave the photoshoot for his obstinate position in refusing a single euro of state funding for the exhumation of mass graves. *Parallel Mothers* inscribes the right to excavation and burial as core to Spain's democracy, with Janis functioning as a contemporary Antigone arguing for the grievability of those discarded by the regime in mass graves.

In the early 1980s, as the structures of a new democracy were taking shape, Almodóvar was part of *la movida madrileña* (literally 'the Madrid scene'), a counter-cultural movement that attempted to banish the grey years of the Franco regime by looking to the future:

> We were too busy celebrating our new freedom to think about the mass graves. In 1978, I wanted to have fun and speak in my films about a new Spain that was nothing like the old one. *La movida* wasn't a movement, it was a generation, a group of people who found each other, discovering who they were without fear; a number of us weren't that young and remembered what fascism has been like. And while *Pepi, Luci, Bom* and *Labyrinth of Passions* were pop films, they were also my way of avenging myself against Franco—refusing to acknowledge not only his existence but even the shadow of his existence. I didn't think about the reach that the Amnesty Law [Ley 46/1977, granting amnesty to political prisoners convicted by Francoist laws and immunity for those who had perpetrated crimes in the name of the regime] might have.
>
> (Almodóvar 2021)

The Amnesty Law was rooted in compromise—devising a means of releasing political prisoners while preventing any ways of legally investigating human rights abuses. Part of a project of national reconciliation, the Law was focused not on transitional justice but rather on consolidating a new future for Spain as a modern nation within the European community—Spain joined the EU in 1986—and a framing of the war as a fratricidal conflict which, as Jorge Marco observes, 'put victims on an equal footing with their executioners' (2017: 159)—effacing the dictatorship's abuses of those who had supported the Republic and its values.[16] Both the centre-right Adolfo Suárez, Spain's first democratically elected Prime Minister since the Second Republic (1976–1981), and the Socialist Felipe González (1982–1996) agreed on the need to promote a unified Spain by side-lining the Civil War and the dictatorship—what is now referred to as the Pact of Silence or Pact of Forgetting. In 2018, González continued to stand by his decision to not open debate on the Pact of Silence, following a request by General Manuel Gutiérrez Mellado, who had challenged Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero and his fellow insurrectionists on the night of the attempted military coup of 23 February 1981, to wait until the major players in the Civil War had died:

> The exact phrase used by the general, a man whose service to his country was exemplary, was the following: 'Under the ashes there is fire.' What's rarely

> discussed in that, during my presidency, the fiftieth anniversary of the start and finish of the Civil War took place. There were colloquiums, university lectures and all of that was correct […]. There was not a collective forgetfulness as is sometimes claimed to have been the case but a moving on from the past. Anything else would have been a settling of scores.
>
> (cited in Wheeler 2018)

Almodóvar recognises the complexities of the transition—often presented as a success in comparison to the conflict and human rights abuses that marked the break-up of the former Yugoslavia (Gunther et al. 2004; Gurrutxaga Abad 2005)—but the implications of the political decisions made in the 1980s haunt *Parallel Mothers*:

> The [Amnesty] Law and the first steps towards democracy condemned those who had been condemned to non-existence by the regime to be forgotten for a second time. It's sad to think about it but that is effectively what happened. The left [at the time] was a pragmatic left and did what it could, but they were also afraid which wasn't unfounded. Three years later, there was an attempted military coup. The UCD, the first democratic government, had Francoists and there were still Francoists in institutions. But it's also true that Spain lived and took its first steps in a bloodless transition to democracy and that's unusual. My frustration with the left is that when they had an absolute majority, in the mid-1980s, and should have dealt with the issue of the mass graves, the Socialist Party didn't do it.
>
> (Almodóvar 2021)

Forty years on, with the rise of Vox showing that sociological Francoism has not been entirely dislodged, Almodóvar deploys a forensic approach to narrating the conditions of enforced disappearance. Janis shares with Arturo the precise date and details of her grandfather's abduction in the film's opening section and she returns to his disappearance in the closing sequences, informing Ana that he was made to dig his own grave. The film slows down as Janis and Arturo head to her family's village and the process of excavating the grave commences: Almodóvar approaches the film's final 15 minutes 'like a documentary. The narration softens and the film has a certain stillness in this epilogue. It's as if the subject matter calls for this shift' (2021). The film moves away from the fiction embodied in the film's melodramatic plot to the physical remains of a difficult past—the objects and bones of the disappeared. The families of the disappeared describe the final moments before their relatives were taken away in detail and the fear of reprisals that kept them silent for so long. Julieta Serrano excels as the elderly Brígida, hoping to remain alive long enough to see her disappeared father—abducted when she was four months old—buried alongside her mother. Herminia and her sister speak of their grandfather from details shared by their grandmother: an engraved wedding ring, a glass eye, the wooden clogs he was wearing. Janis and Arturo listen; Arturo takes notes; Janis obtains DNA samples. The camera work invites the viewer to listen to

the testimony alongside Janis and Arturo and to then follow the relatives as they walk to the grave to silently observe the excavation (Image 12.1).

Almodóvar's research in preparing the film incorporated press materials, photographic evidence, the 2014 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence,[17] testimonials delineating instances of enforced disappearance, and interviews with Emilio Silva, co-founder of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH) in 2000, and the forensic anthropologist Francisco Exteberria, a leading specialist in the excavation of mass graves (Almodóvar 2021; Ponga 2021). As such, practically all the elements in the final section of the film are based on the findings of this research. The rattle found in the grave helps to identify Brígida's father; the glass eye and clogs distinguish Herminia's grandfather. These personal objects and identifiers challenge the misleading narratives constructed by the regime and its apologists; they contribute to naming and identifying each corpse, what Ferrándiz pinpoints as core components of 'an eye-catching bare bones forensic scenography' of maimed human remains that carry the evidence of erased abuses: ammunition shells; tying ropes and wires; blindfolds; quicklime—all part of 'an evidence-driven interpretative framework where forensic medicine becomes the crucial memory science and the crime scene' (2019: S68).

Almodóvar's camera silently observes the forensic archaeological team at work in the grave as they gently dust the remains and identify personal possessions that aid with identification. The viewer is a witness to this process—shown both the family members holding up the photographs of their disappeared relatives as they visit the excavation site and point of view panning shots of the corpses in the grave. Toddler Cecilia—who has inherited the name of her great-grandmother—looks down into the grave as the past, the present, and the future intertwine. In the film's closing moments, the viewer observes the contents of the mass grave from above—one of Almodóvar's most distinctive camera positions. After the human remains have been taken to the laboratory for DNA testing, the film shows family members and those who have excavated the grave assume the position in which they found the victims on the grave (Image 12.3): 'When Exteberria showed me the photos I thought this a beautiful cinematic image. It's a homage to the dead who had lain in this place until then' (Almodóvar 2021).

As an epilogue, Almodóvar then deploys a quote from Eduardo Galeano's 1998 non-fiction reflections on dictatorship, trauma, justice, and colonialism, *Patas arriba. La escuela del mundo al revés* (published in English as *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-glass World*).

> No history is mute. No matter how much they burn it. No matter how much they break it. No matter how much they lie about it. Human history refuses to shut its mouth.

Galeano's words open Raúl Quirós Molina's 2015 verbatim play, *El pan y la sal/ The Bread and the Salt*, crafted from transcripts of Judge Baltasar Garzón trial at Spain's

**IMAGES 12.2 AND 12.3** The excavation of the grave and the aftermath of the excavation as relatives and those involved in the excavation assume the position in which they found the victims in the grave. Photographs courtesy of El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

Supreme Court in 2012 for violating the Amnesty Law through his preliminary investigation into the enforced disappearance of 114,266 persons between 1936 and 1951. I have written elsewhere on how theatre here offers a way of retrying the case in the public domain, an alternative sphere for justice, with the audience as juror reaching conclusions and judgement based on the testimony they hear (Delgado 2019b). Almodóvar saw the play on its first outing at Madrid's Teatro del Barrio in 2015 and was struck by the simplicity of a scenography that focused the audience's attention on the delivery of the testimony at the trial by relatives of the

disappeared. In *The Bread and the Salt*, the testimony was read out by actors framed by a back wall made up of photographs of the disappeared:

> It was very emotional. […At one point] there was a scene in *Parallel Mothers* where Arturo and Janis met at a performance of the play. I wanted to give testimony to that civic act [of giving evidence] but I wrote it and rewrote it and condensed it and, in the end, there was a reason why I had to remove it. Once you put actors in the roles of the victims or families of the victims, it was so powerful that it annulled the scenes around it, and almost destabilised the script.
>
> (Almodóvar 2021)

Closing *Parallel Mothers* with Galeano's words both inscribes the testimony recounted by relatives of the disappeared at Garzón's trial and recognises the broader role that the film and works like *The Bread and the Salt* might have in giving voice to histories of enforced disappeared, inscribing them into a public or 'official' domain that refused to recognise them for so long. Equally important, ending *Parallel Mothers* with Galeano's words, referencing his meditation on a military dictatorship which imprisoned him in Uruguay, also functions as a means of acknowledging wider global histories of enforced disappearance and transnational human rights processes. *Parallel Mothers* can therefore be read within a complex transnational lineage of cultural works countering the institutional silence that so often surrounds enforced disappearance.

## Federico García Lorca, Theatre, Motherhood, and Memory

In August 1936, Federico García Lorca, arguably Spain's most important twentieth-century playwright and poet, was murdered by Nationalist forces on the outskirts of Granada, the city of his birth. His body, thought to lie in a mass grave to the north of the city, has never been found.[18] His iconic position—a queer artist who places the lived experiences of women at the core of his work—evidently suggests an association with Almodóvar who has referenced Lorca's 'brilliant plays' in *All About My Mother* (1999) and *Volver* (Almodóvar 2021). Crucially in *Parallel Mothers*, however, Lorca enjoys a more central role, with Almodóvar effectively harnessing Lorca's ongoing status as the symbol of Spain's Civil War disappeared—'the most famous, the most universal disappeared person in the world'—to potent effect.

> That was my main reason [for drawing on Lorca] but I was always surprised that at the height of the dictatorship, Francoist artists continued staging works by this disappeared person. I have always wondered what such right-wing artists must have felt doing this.
>
> (ibid.)

The deployment of Lorca's 1935 drama, *Doña Rosita la soltera/Doña Rosita the Spinster*—the role that brings Teresa, Ana's mother, the success she craves—is

significant here: 'The conservative mother says that she is apolitical—in Spain it means that you are conservative—but she finds success and the turning point of her career in this Lorca play' (Almodóvar 2021). *Doña Rosita* was the last play Lorca premiered in Spain before the outbreak of the Civil War and it revolves around the social stigmatisation of unmarried women. This is a clear contrast with Janis's lived experience—she proudly locates herself as part of a lineage of women for whom single parenting has proved empowering. Teresa rehearses one of Rosita's most famous speeches on the sombre stage of Madrid's iconic Abadía theatre—a former church repurposed as a site for innovative performance in 1992—longing to escape as she is designated 'an old maid' by polite Granada society. It is a monologue 'on the passing of time', which Almodóvar confesses, 'I strongly identify with' (2021). Lorca may have centred his plays on women who see no possibility of emotional fulfilment outside the framework of heterosexual love and marriage but, 86 years on, Almodóvar presents a very different picture. Teresa left her husband to pursue an acting career, Janis's close friend Elena edits a successful women's magazine, and Janis and Ana both pursue single motherhood, albeit with the benefits of economic security. Almodóvar's reflections on my drawing parallels between his own rich women characters and Lorca's female-centred dramaturgy are perhaps significant here: 'Perhaps it's because they [women] were condemned to be silent for centuries, so they create inside them a much richer world' (2006).

*Parallel Mothers* thus functions as a space for celebrating the tenacity, adaptability, and enterprise of these female characters, as well as their commitment to securing restorative justice. It is the women of Janis's village that hold the testimonial evidence relating to their disappeared relatives. Janis's sporting of a 'We should all be feminist' t-shirt as she peels potatoes in her bright kitchen speaks to the welcome visibility of gender politics since the case of *la manada* (the wolfpack)—the five friends who brutally raped a young woman at the San Fermín celebrations in Pamplona in 2016, filming the act on a mobile phone. Sparking a national debate on Spain's antiquated rape laws, the case is referenced both in *Dolor y gloria*/*Pain and Glory* (2019) and through the details of the sexual assault that Ana shares with Janis. Almodóvar has referenced the case and its implications as

> an important moment for Spain […]. When we were searching for locations [in *Pain and Glory*], I found the graffiti mural in Vallecas [southern Madrid] that referred to the case of *la manada* and when we went back to shoot three months later it was gone so we created it as it was.
>
> (Almodóvar 2019)

He concurs that in *Parallel Mothers* too, the references to the case position the film at a particular moment in time [2016–2019] with Janis's t-shirt affirming her commitment to that cause.

The film also offers a space for remembrance and mourning. Janis's mother died, like Janis Joplin after whom Janis is named, of an overdose in the early 1980s, the years when Almodóvar was forging a countercultural cinema of brash colours

and hedonistic role play. The bold colours are still in play here—from his beloved red on the kitchen cabinets and photo frames of Janis's bright apartment, and embodied in items of the clothing that bind Ana, Elena, Cecilia, and Janis together—only now there is room for a sombre quality that was absent from the Manchegan filmmaker's early work. 'My films are more austere from *Julieta*. There's more focus on character, on the psychology of character and on the word. But there's still a love of colour, and of the baroque' (Almodóvar 2019).

The fusion of colours in Janis's home, from the aqua walls to the burned orange sheets and fruit bowls, presents an easy coexistence of different traditions and aesthetics. It is a veritable contrast to Teresa's antiseptic apartment and further highlights the contrasting portrait of motherhood that each woman presents, Teresa confessing to Janis at one point that she doesn't have a maternal instinct. She goes on to leave her grieving daughter home alone following baby Anita's sudden cot death to play junkie mother Mary Tyrone on tour in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Janis, a surrogate mother to Ana, herself had a surrogate mother—her grandmother Cecilia—her own mother as absent as Teresa in Ana's childhood. Rossy de Palma's warm, welcoming Elena, editor of the magazine, *Mujer ahora* (Women Now), is a further motherly figure—a nurturing role highlighted as she bathes baby Cecilia and offers to ferry water and coffee to the team exhuming the mass grave in which Janis's great-grandfather is buried.

Janis's patio—a nod to Carmen Maura's rooftop terrace in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*/*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988)—boasts a lemon tree and plants that evoke those in the village where she grew up, which she returns to in the film's final section. Ana may accuse Janis of obsession with her great-grandfather's grave, but Janis's cultural heritage is as much rooted in music—sharing Janis Joplin's *Summertime* with Ana the first time they make love—and food as in her family's lived history. The recipe for Spanish omelette that Janis shares with Ana observes the importance of cutting the potatoes to a certain thickness; Almodóvar's camera looking down at the potatoes sizzling in the pan of hot oil. Arturo and Janis share a glass of wine with *jamón*—a cured ham leg rests on the kitchen counter alongside a Manchego cheese—as they converse about Janis's family history early in the film. Janis's kitchen is a space of nourishment. Janis is shown chopping vegetables and enjoying a breakfast of *pan con tomate* (fresh tomato on bread). Recurring fish motifs feature on artworks and a framed painting by Julio Romero de Torres shows one woman holding out a bowl of fruit to another. Indeed, *Parallel Mothers* shows cultural heritage to be a combination of all these elements.

## Silences, Secrets, and Lies

While Janis's kitchen is positioned as a space of domesticity and of motherhood, it equally operates as the space for the film's most traumatic confrontations, a space where the public and private spheres intersect. Over dinner, Ana articulates the

position of the right when she accuses Janis of being 'obsessed with the grave', advocating instead for a position of 'looking to the future; the rest is there just to open old wounds'. Janis angrily challenges her: 'It's about time you knew what country you're living in'. 'All countries have their issues but the relationship Spain has to the Civil War and its own past is absolutely anomalous', Almodóvar (2021) elucidates,

> the Spanish don't like to be reminded of the worst part of our past. We don't have a good relationship to the past and that isn't good. Until we resolve the issue of the country's mass graves, we won't be able to close the chapter of the Spanish Civil War. It's as serious and as simple as that.

Janis and Ana represent the polarised positions of the two Spains: one calling for state responsibility for the exhumation of the country's mass graves so that relatives can bury their dead with dignity and respect; the other promoting a continued amnesia, a refusal to engage with the complexities and injustices of a history that has been problematically written to erase the inequalities of the post–Civil War years. It was only in 2019 that Franco's remains were removed from the Valley of the Fallen to a Madrid cemetery. Plans for this polemical site to be repurposed as part of Spain's Democratic Memory Law have seen it renamed the Valley of Cuelgamuros.[19] Almodóvar has acknowledged that the Law represents 'a huge development' (2021): with plans for a post-16 and vocational school curriculum that addresses Francoist repression and democratic values—thus directly addressing the 'gap' that Janis identifies in Ana's knowledge on the regime's abuses; a census and DNA Bank established to aid with the identification of the unburied and the state taking legal responsibility for the exhumation of unmarked graves.[20] *Parallel Mothers* was conceived and shot before Spain's Democratic Memory Law had been drafted, at a time when all exhumations of unmarked graves were conducted through private initiatives (cited in Ponga 2021). Janis had to raise the funds for her great-grandfather's exhumation through a grant awarded by a charitable foundation that Arturo is associated with, and the volunteers involved in the excavation wear ARMH t-shirts (Image 12.2).

Just as decades of living with the fear of reprisals inhibited Janis's grandmother's generation from speaking out about the abuses enacted on their loved ones, so Janis lives with the guilt of the secret she holds—that Cecilia is not her biological daughter. It is information she has obtained invasively, lying to Ana to obtain a saliva sample and placing the swab in her baby daughter's mouth on two occasions. 'Janis realises', Almodóvar (2021) explains, 'that she doesn't live according to her own truth, and she can't stand it any longer and decides to share her secret with Ana'. Only through these revelations are Arturo, Ana, and Janis able to move forward across the film's parallel narratives. Arturo reveals to Janis that he confessed to his wife that he had an affair and a child with Janis, Ana dares speak of the gang rape that led to her pregnancy, and Janis shows Ana proof

that the latter is Cecilia's biological mother—an accidental swap when the babies were in observation at the hospital and an incident that alludes to the scandal of Spain's stolen babies, with Amnesty International (2021) documenting 50,000 infants taken from their mothers without consent. Burying an uncomfortable past offers no solace in *Parallel Mothers*. Confronting the injustices of history—at a micro- and macro-level—Janis finds a way of living with herself and forging a new family structure.

## Conclusion

> It's good [to remember], especially at this time when a far-right party [Vox] is trying to tell a different history. They are lying about our history. We are talking about a party that still hasn't rejected Franco and actively promote themselves as his followers. Shamelessly, they don't even try to hide it, spreading hoax stories that the origin of the conflict lies with the [Second] Republic and denying the military coup that launched the Civil War. So, of course, we have to tell young people that this is all a lie, an absolute lie.
>
> (Almodóvar 2021)

Testimony, as Jo Labanyi has noted, is not simply about establishing what might have happened but a form of insight 'into emotional attitudes toward the past in the present time of the speaker' (2010: 193). *Parallel Mothers* inscribes a demand for reparative justice in what remains a divided nation; the act of mourning is conceived as resistance, a form of challenging the Francoist stance that deemed these lives—to use Judith Butler's term—'non-grievable' (2004; 2010). By staging a debate about the country's mass graves in Ana and Janis's confrontation, Almodóvar challenges the institutionalised amnesia that curtailed public discourse on the War and relegated the disappeared to erasure. Paul Preston observes that one of the numerous roles that Franco cultivated was that of Father of the Nation (2008: 14–20); this symbolic position is dismantled by the queer kinship *Parallel Mothers* promotes, allowing for the construction of families, alliances, and communities across multiple configurations. The film's end alludes to a fluid family structure that allows for the possibility of two mothers (Ana and Janis) and a biological father (Arturo).

Fathers in *Parallel Mothers* remain largely absent figures. Ana's father is heard only through bullying phone calls—suggesting a direct association with the missing lover in Almodóvar's 2020 short, *La voz humana/The Human Voice*. This void creates a further association with other deficient or distant fathers in Almodóvar's oeuvre. Ana's father, associated with the provincial conservative Granada bourgeoisie that Lorca denounced in his writings, has a greater concern for keeping up appearances than his daughter's welfare—dispatching Ana off to Madrid when she becomes pregnant, and blocking her return for fear she will 'stir things up'.

The ideological curbing of freedom is never far from the film's surface. Teresa lost custody of Ana to her ex-husband, confessing to Janis that divorce came with 'horrendous humiliation' through the Catholic Church's highest judicial court, the Roman Rota; 'you practically had to admit you were a prostitute for them to annul your marriage' Teresa admits to Janis.

While Teresa tells Janis that 'my work is to be liked by everyone', Almodóvar's own position in arguing for the need to counter the right's rewriting of history has met with criticism in both the press and on social media since the Spanish release of *Parallel Mothers* in October 2021 (see Navío 2022). The film's reviews at the Venice Festival where it premiered in September 2021, and its releases in the United States, France, and the United Kingdom offer a strong contrast to its reception in Spain—where its €2.5m box office takings present a distinctive fall from *Pain and Glory*'s €6m (Vicente 2021). *El País*'s Carlos Boyero, whose antagonism to Almodóvar's work is well known, categorised the screenplay as 'opportunistic and calculating' (2021), while its snubbing at the 2022 Goya (Spanish Film Academy Awards) provided further evidence of its lukewarm reception. Former centre-right Cuidadanos (Citizens) Party politician Marcos de Quinto blamed the film's box office performance on Almodóvar's 'meddling' in politics (EDCM 2021).

*Parallel Mothers* articulates the importance of a functioning grassroots democracy, where the injustices of the past are addressed and lives are grieved. Helen Graham (2014) writes that

> [t]he importance of the mass graves initiative in Spain goes far beyond righting a specific historical wrong, for it offers the constitutional state a means of identifying and naming all its citizens—past and present—as an act of democratic inclusion and a reminder that in democracy no section of a citizenry can be "expendable" in this way, nor should one segment be mobilised against another.

For Francisco Ferrándiz, '[t]he political culture emerging from the mass grave unburials has expanded progressively to question all vestiges of Francoism in public space' (2019: 572). The Popular Party government may, as the film illustrates, have withdrawn all public funding for such excavations between 2012 and 2018, and the Party has committed to repealing the Democratic Memory Law should it win the next election and form a government in 2023, but countering what Graham (2014) posits as a 'democratic deficit at the heart of the state' is a 'functioning civil society and democratic social fabric' that recognises the need to bury its dead—whatever their political affiliations—with dignity and respect. By uncovering and naming these forgotten victims, *Parallel Mothers* shows a functioning civil society in action, as well as a way of countering a politics of national reconciliation that has failed to acknowledge the inequalities and abuses perpetrated during Franco's dictatorship and the enforced silence that accompanied these abuses.

## Notes

1 This chapter expands an earlier short feature on *Parallel Mothers* (Delgado 2022). With thanks to Pedro Almodóvar, Barbára Peiro Asó and Sergio Rey Sánchez at El Deseo. All quotes are translated from the Spanish by the author. This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Margarita Delgado (1930–2022) and Tim Beddows (1963–2022).
2 For further details on the many films looking at the Civil War and its legacy, see Archibald (2012) and Wheeler (2023).
3 The figure of *c.*114,000 is taken from Judge Baltasar Garzón's calculation of 114,266 (from 17 July 1936 to December 1951) as articulated in the October 2008 document where he accepts a written request on the part of 13 memory associations to investigate the enforced disappearances of these persons (Garzón 2008: 23). Preston mentions a figure of 130,199 (2012: xviii). This stands in contrast to the figure of 49,272 attributed to Republican abuses during the Civil War (see Marco 2017: 160). On memory politics in Spain, see Aguilar (2008).
4 For details on Spain's stolen babies, see Rabidoux et al. (2020). See p. 222 of this chapter also.
5 On the role of documentary film in the recovery of historical memory in Spain, see Hardcastle (2010).
6 Cofounded in 2013 by Santiago Abascal, its current party president, Vox has gained increasing prominence in the Spanish political landscape, with the 2019 general elections giving it 52 of the 350 seats in the country's Congress of Deputies (Congreso de los Diputados), twice that secured the previous year (see González 2019). On Franco as a fascist exemplar for Vox, see Ferrándiz (2022).
7 Furthermore, alongside Smith (2000), Vernon and Morris (1995) and Epps and Kakoudaki (eds) (2009) are among those who have also provided complex readings of the intersections between aesthetics, (gender) politics, sexuality and the broader social and cultural landscape in Almodóvar's films.
8 A reading also promoted by Ibáñez (2013). On the Francoist elites who transitioned into democracy, see Wright (2021: 138, 139).
9 I have dealt elsewhere with the how these films, like *Dolor y gloria/Pain and Glory* (2019), allude to the failures(s) of the left in the democratic era and the problematic fissures of Spain's transition to democracy in the years after Franco's death (Delgado 2016a, 2016b, 2019a).
10 There is ambiguity as to the origin of this statement and where the data that substantiates it came from, but it is thought that the claim first emerges in a 2013 statement by Jueces para la Democracia (Judges for Democracy) when referencing enforced disappearances (Junquera 2013).
11 See, for example, Sánchez 2021b; Salazar 2021.
12 On Pablo de Greiff's (2014) report, see note 17.
13 The international visibility of Almodóvar's films, including Oscars for Best International Feature for *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999) and Best Original Screenplay for *Hable con ella/Talk to Her* (2002), and his position as both a countercultural icon and a highly recognisable auteur, have given him a unique cultural capital among non-English-language filmmakers. See Epps and Kakoudaki (2009: 1–15). *Parallel Mothers* secured extensive international sales and was released in over 150 countries.
14 Sánchez-Gijón appears in *Parallel Mothers* in the role of Ana's mother Teresa.
15 For further details on the Law and its limitations, see Ferrándiz (2013: 39–45); Gelonch-Solé (2013: 515); Maystorovich Chulio (2022: 417–420).
16 Michael Richards notes the frequent use of the words 'cleansing', 'purges', 'purification' and 'elimination' by the Nationalist leaders to justify the regime's annihilation of the ideas of Spain's Second Republic (1998: 26–46). One of Franco's press officials identified the regeneration of Spain as dependent on a programme 'to exterminate a third of the male population of Spain. That will clean up the country and rid us of the

proletariat (cited in Richards 1998: 47). This policy of systematic annihilation was articulated by Emilio Mola, the General responsible for organising the military coup of 17 July 1936, in his first speech at the commencement of the Civil War: 'We have to create the impression of mastery, eliminating without scruples or hesitation all those who do not think as we do' (cited in Preston 2020: 295).

17 The report produced by Pablo de Greiff (2014) following his Mission to Spain that year makes a series of recommendations including considering alternatives to and annulling the effects of the Amnesty Law (22). It also locates 'the most serious shortcomings […] in the spheres of truth and justice. No State policy was ever established with respect to truth; there is no official information and no mechanisms for elucidating the truth. The current scheme for the "privatization" of exhumations, which leaves this responsibility to victims and associations, aggravates the indifference of State institutions and raises difficulties with regard to the methodology, homologation and officialization of truth' (1, 2).

18 For further details around the circumstances of his death, see Delgado (2015) and Gibson (1983).

19 On the Democratic Memory Law, see Boletín Oficial del Estado 2022. Around 33,000 bodies lie in the Valley of Cuelgamuros, over a third are unknown and it is not clear how many of these are Republican dead transferred to the crypt without their families' permission. See Ferrándiz (2019: S68–S71).

20 There are estimates of the unearthing of somewhere between 1000 and 2000 bodies between 1975 and 1981 (Marco 2017: 160), and over 9,000 bodies from 740 mass graves between 2000 and 2018 (Ferrándiz 2019: S67).

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# 13

# STAGING MEMORY AND STRUGGLE IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA

*Nadia Davids and Jay Pather in conversation with Bryce Lease*

Jay Pather has directed two of Nadia Davids' plays, *What Remains* (2017) and *Hold Still* (2022), and in this conversation they discuss their creative collaboration and the aesthetic and political imaginaries that underpin their work.[1] *What Remains*, a multidisciplinary work encompassing text, dance, and movement, tells the story of the unexpected uncovering of a burial ground of the enslaved in Cape Town. When the bones emerge from the ground, everyone in the city – enslaved descendants, archaeologists, citizens, property developers – is forced to reckon with a history sometimes remembered, sometimes forgotten. The performance is loosely based on the events at Prestwich Place where, in 2003, a corporate real estate development 'famously, unexpectedly, struck an eighteenth-century burial ground – one of the largest ever to be unearthed in the Southern Hemisphere. Nearly 3,000 bodies were accounted for, from babies who were just a few weeks old – the children of (en)slaved washerwomen – to men in their late sixties' (Davids 2019: xi). *What Remains* is a path between memory and magic, the uncanny and the known, waking and dreaming. Four figures – The Archaeologist, The Healer, The Dancer, and The Student – move between bones and books, archives and madness, paintings and protest, as they struggle to reconcile the past with the now. *Hold Still*, a four-act family drama, focusing on a long-term marriage, generational trauma, and immigration, is set in London. Though vastly different in style, focus, and place, the plays are connected by a deep commitment to the exploration of political life.[2]

*BL:* From your situated perspective, how do you see slave histories resonating in different ways – whether artistically, culturally, museally – in the South African public sphere?

*ND:* Such an interesting question – one that points to histories of enslavement in the Cape. This is certainly something that *What Remains* references, yet I

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don't think about it as a being a play about enslavement, but rather a work about how histories of oppression are present in the now. I wanted to explore the idea that an engagement with the historiographic is less about trying to 'piece together the past' and more about trying to get to grips with the contemporary. *What Remains* was written at a very particular moment in South Africa (2015–2016) in the shadow of the profoundly shocking 2012 Marikana massacre and at the hopeful beginning of the Fees Must Fall student-led protests.[3] Like many South Africans, I grapple with a deep and distressing sense of political defeat, a woundedness and fury around all post-apartheid betrayals – and now a new layer of mass state-sanctioned, sometimes fatal police violence. Prestwich Place, with its layers of material and intangible meanings, became a prism through which to think about all those present difficulties, but also about how the past can erupt suddenly, seemingly without warning and create positive disruption.

The site speaks to the specificities of the unremembered in the Western Cape, finding a particular interface with District Six, but it tells us something about the country as a whole, about who is cherished and protected and who is not, about what is remembered and what is consigned to the forgotten.[4] I was also struck, in the responses to Prestwich Place, about how deep the continuity, the genealogy of struggle is in Cape Town: the same group of community activists – many who claimed descendancy from those buried – advocated for a decent, spiritually sensitive, politically appropriate interning of the remains had rallied to memorialise the District through the District Six Museum. There was something very powerful about that – about the connection between those two sites, and how both rotate around the struggle for people of colour people to remain visible in the city centre and for our histories to be treated with dignity. Julian Jonker (2014), Ciraj Rassool (2015), and Heidi Grunebaum (2007) have written wonderfully on this – their theoretical work on Prestwich Place – around the sediment of memory, inequality, upheaval, and survival in Cape Town, which was foundational in writing *What Remains.*

*BL:* I am curious about the audiences at University of Cape Town (UCT) – generally speaking, would they have encountered some of these histories, whether textually, through novels and poetry, or through history classes. Is there a secure knowledge of the history of enslavement in the Western Cape in younger generations?

*ND:* We had a very diverse audience – young people, older people, the audience was racially diverse, but yes, the play did seem to resonate deeply and particularly with a university-age audience. Likely the figure of 'The Student' allowed them a point of entry, but more, that generation of students had been grappling with these issues, pushing against them, demanding change, re-embodying struggle in real time.

As to the availability of these histories: it's better now than when I was their age; a realistic telling of apartheid and colonial histories is part of secondary school syllabi and I think, even at a community level, narratives around histories of enslavement in the Cape are spoken about more openly. When I was growing up, that history was mostly passed over lightly, fleetingly, dismissively in school. It was taken seriously by revisionist historians who did important, ground-breaking research and it was present in coded ways within the sphere of community, in the realm of the domestic – in food, music, religious practices. Narratives of enslavement may not have been spoken about but that history was/is continuously present through a repertoire of practice – one that speaks to displacement, trauma, creolisation, the re-creation of the self, the finding and making of meaning at the margins – in local foods and recipes, in Cape Malay music – devotional or recreational – in the lyrics and steps of the Cape Carnival, in local legends and myths. Present, but not always acknowledged.

*BL:* That reminds me of Gabeba Baderoon's argument in *Regarding Muslims* that it was not that slaves were invisible in the Western Cape, rather they were deemed *not* visible.

*ND:* Yes, absolutely.

*BL:* Is there something in *What Remains*, as well as in your larger body of work, that you feel is in dialogue with the District Six Museum?

*ND:* I see the text of *What Remains* as emerging from the District Six Museum's methodologies around script and memory, as well as tethered to its politics around place. But more, *What Remains* read as museum-like in the staging, because Jay invoked, deliberately and wonderfully, the idea of the museum in the set. He staged it as a repository of some kind – there were the boxes and archives as the audience entered the space, but there was also the invocation of 'cold storage', and of the duplicity of the possibility of a museum and archive space. I'm sorry that doesn't directly answer your question about the relationship between the Museum and Prestwich Place per se, but it does about where I think the play sits in relation to the two spaces.

*BL:* There is a strong relationship between form and content?

*JP:* Yes, in that form needs to shift somewhat, to make way for the material as well as the mercurial, the *not* visible.

*ND:* I think in Jay's staging of the play in a lateral setting, he's also suggesting in a very considered and powerful way the idea of our Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 1996-98).

*JP:* The lateral setting that Nadia talks to is doing away with the proscenium staging and seating audiences on either side of the work that unfolds in a large passageway, that sense of witnessing an encounter with and passing by of several epochs, an epic.

*ND:* You've staged a process of witnessing, and I think you speak about that in your director's notes. The audience is not just witnessing what's on stage, they're witnessing each other across the room – witness the graveyard, witness the body, witness the witness as they offer testimony, as they try to tell the story of the country: so much of the TRC was about asking the country's unspeakable question, 'Where is the body?'

*JP:* In terms of form, the TRC also resembled a kind of neat, classical Greek tragedy – with all the build ups and moments of confession and catharsis is yearned for. But the catharsis was inconclusive as there was not much immediate talk around reparation or redress, while one evokes that form, it needs to also be disrupted, calling on audiences as complicit accessories to unresolved history and deeply troubled psyches. One of the ways in the play itself that gets the spectator to shift from passive watcher to possible collaborator was how linear time was disrupted; you're moving back and forth although you think you're moving in one direction. It segues into something else, and this is Nadia's writing.

This is also a play that evokes palpable temperatures. It's the cold storage of the archive on entering but also the heat of impassioned arguments that explode; there is heat, there is fire, there is literal fire at the end. There is that promise of a kind of cold reading of a past that is interrupted by this fiery present. There are quite a few different grammars of experiencing museums and also shrugging off the museum experience; the cold, the rational watching of the past, and then the realisation, 'Oh my God, no, they're actually talking about *now*. This is about the student movement actually, the Fees Must Fall protests that began 2015 and then continues even up to today, because of how unresolved the basic issue of access to education is in South Africa'.[5] I was obviously drawing the ideas from the text, but it wasn't, 'Oh this is what it means and this is what I would do'. In just dealing with the subject in quite a visceral way with the cast and with Nadia, the process of deconstructing and disrupting narrative and drawing from a fiery present was very refreshing – to feel like you weren't simply evoking a past.

*BL:* Actually, and in that context, did you feel like there were large differences or distinctions in the various spaces you performed in, from Grahamstown to Cape Town to the Afrovibes Festival in Amsterdam and in Rotterdam?

*ND:* The play means very specific things in Cape Town; although, at the same time, I only wrote one character, 'The Healer' to be recognisably Capetonian. With the others I wanted something that was undifferentiated – that was also me trying to work with the idea of making Cape Town slightly strange. I always think of it as an uncanny, unsettling place and I wanted to play with that Russian Formalist idea of requesting a 'second look', by making it a little 'off world', something both immediately familiar and an 'estranged' version of what is familiar (Image 13.1).

*JP:* Yes, and to direct this sense of the familiar and the estranged was helped so much by the pattern throughout of pithy dialogue punctuated with monologues so there is seduction in a conversation and then 'coming away' from it into a character's internal monologue. This nimble form also fuelled the choreography and creation of the visual images of these iconic archaic shapes in amongst some realist dialogue. These ideas also lent quite a stark sense of the set which then also played with iconic shapes. The play is meant to take place on an actual burial site and we finally settled on a simple set with grey masking tape that simply marked out the outer edges of the graves, in the manner of outlines of a dead body that an investigating unit might leave on the floor when someone is murdered. Something temporary and make-shift and yet indelible.

But, to answer your question, it changed also because in Cape Town the work did feel a lot more familiar. The recognition from the audiences

**IMAGE 13.1** Shaun Oelf (as the Dancer) in *What Remains* written by Nadia Davids and directed by Jay Pather at the Arena Theatre, Cape Town, 2016. Photograph by John Gutierrez.

and then the kind of conversations that happened outside. In Grahamstown, the very cold weather exacerbated the sense of entering cold storage. Also, at the beginning of the work, I did want a fair amount of settled haze – to create a sense of moving into something and working through this opaque haze, and then you make out the figures, the costumes, the stage – but the cold and the smoke all made it really feel like you were in some sort of a storage space. A lot of people reacted to that. By way of contrast, the work in Cape Town was at the Hiddingh Hall on gleaming wooden floors that gave it warmth These factors around a play that really is pithy and minimal and susceptible to any shaft in materiality of space did affect access into the work and sure, how the work was received. But the resonances were most different in the Netherlands, where beyond staging and setting, one did get the sense of people being overwhelmed, and to some extent, attacked. There was a very nervous kind of tension in the audience. In a very strange way, for me, it felt most emotional in the Netherlands.

*ND:* It's the place from which –

*JP:* – it all emanates.

*ND:* I'm just reminded as you're speaking, Jay, about how staging makes meaning and in fact some of the technical limitations of the staging at Hiddingh Hall meant that we had a completely different understandings of the final moments of the play, that we only ever realised maybe a year later. A fundamentally different political read on the ending. Among the final lines of the play are, 'We wait, we watch, we try not to get burnt', and they coincide with The Dancer in a frenzy of pirouettes-turning and twirling and eventually collapsing. Because we couldn't move to a hard blackout in Hiddingh Hall, I thought that the collapse was emblematic of how eventually one suffers under the weight of struggle. But Jay said, no, he intended for the twirling to go on and on ceaselessly, continuous struggle; it was just that the dancer eventually had to fall down because we couldn't achieve a full black out, which would have maintained the impression of the spinning carrying on and on. And I thought, isn't this extraordinary? Jay has a much more optimistic outlook than I do.

*JP:* I just felt he needed more stamina (*laughs*). Those lines – 'We wait, we watch, we try not to get burnt' – from the Healer and the Archaeologist, standing from afar and watching, were significant because right in the middle of the first version of the production, the student protests started. It was a moment of paradox. There was so much despair but also so much excitement. The joy was so palpable it was ridiculous. A lot of people, I must say, also of *my* generation that I was speaking to, were very enervated. I think we

felt that in this wave of courage and energy, the plaster was removed and it that was lacking and kept in check to propagate the intellectual project, had to fall away. A refreshing sense that a grasp on the truth of what goes on at these institutions was ironically what would sustain them. Prior to this you are up against brick walls all the time and there's a fatigue. You know it's never going to get to that space that you've always wanted it to. Certainly, when this happened there was that sense that we *could* go back and connect those dots again, have direct honest conversations, a throughline of desire translated into action, into *real* action and not just talking about and writing about it in dry academic text. I've always felt like the ending would need to suggest: keep going. We just needed to keep continuing. A positive note.

*BL:* That is fascinating. Was it then by accident that you realised you had these different interpretations?

*ND:* I think it says something about the fact that we are also of politically different generations. I came of age during a time of extreme stasis politically, of trusting in the government to do everything that was promised. I was fortunate to be very young in a moment of wild and beautiful national optimism, and that optimism carried us through for at least a decade. I took a very long time to recognise – and to admit – what had gone terribly wrong. At the same time, being young and part of a politically privileged generation meant I also felt a deep allegiance to the *idea* of the new country, to defending that idea and to defending the shape that it took, even as I worried about it, even as I registered early concerns.

I was also outside an immediate history of active struggle – regardless of how it had touched my family or community because I was largely protected by age and class. Jay had been an active part of the anti-apartheid struggle. And then in 2015, I was once again on the outside of the reanimation of that struggle – this time, it belonged to my students' generation. I think that there is more to bind Jay and his generation to this generation of students, than there is between mine and them. They've come of age in much more obviously heightened times than I did. I remember it used to be a source of incredible frustration when I was at university, that for the most part, it was considered very dull for middle-class kids to show any kind of interest in the immediate past. We were dismissed, shrugged out of conversation, told to stop 'dwelling on things'. I suppose it goes without saying that these back and forths at university – at UCT – were racially coded. Students of colour, black students were still in the minority in the mid-nineties. We were encouraged to embrace a certain narrative about the new country and all its possibilities, but we also had to deaden a number of things in order to go along with it. It felt as though, nationally, there was often a deliberate dampening of rage, maybe even a cynical mobilisation of political optimism.

*What Remains* is an attempt to reckon with what's happening and trying to break out of that stasis.

*BL:* And Jay, did you feel a different generational perspective on this?

*JP:* I mean, look, for me the work is profoundly optimistic, and possibly in the manner of protest action around the States of Emergency in the 1980s. The writing brings into such graphic visibility these points of connection, past and present, with submerged bodies or bones and the earth, which then manifests in this one character, the Healer, who bears witness to these interlocking timelines. And then a whole other dynamic embodied by the Archaeologist, who sees things through a rational, forensic and scientific lens, which collapses, predictably, unable to maintain itself as events escalate and reveal the deceit of the Chairman of the institution she works for. This leads the Archaeologist to a state of something much deeper. These are really strong and positive developments in the human psyche and profoundly hopeful about passing on these understandings. And then of course, the most obviously optimistic is actually the protesting Student, who is able to draw from what *neither* is able to see, which is the Dancer, the shadow that passes through wanting rest and unable to. There is a pact between the Student and the Dancer to the end. For me, this simply puts into form what I feel is a growing optimism in the space about embodiment of these ideas. The very idea that we can receive them in our bodies and make them manifest is profoundly optimistic, as opposed to simply staying with a materialist, dire universe and trying to get rid of what could be nourishment for sustaining struggle.

*BL:* Yes, as opposed to trying to exorcise the past in some way?

*ND:* I have to respond to the optimism, because I am astonished at this reading. I love it, and I find it gives me a great feeling of energy, but interestingly I think of the play as being a kind of *cri de coeur* and a cry of great mourning for the country. Maybe it's that, I don't know – mourning is not necessarily pessimistic, it's a recognition. Now we know why the ending is so different for us both.

*JP:* Because with the coldest character, the Archaeologist, who is doing this work as research and inference from materiality, for her to open the other space, to actually be affected, for it to impact her in a way that makes her seek home in a way; to seek a kind of a home that has been invisibilised and that she has put away in order for her to survive in this kind of rational forensic world – I mean that is huge. That's quite an affirmation of the ability for shifts in us. When, in the final moments, the Healer and the Archaeologist are watching trying 'not to get burnt', they are simply watching, they

are not trying to stop it, they're not trying to lecture, they're not trying to cut it. They are aware that something is happening, they try not to get burnt, but they are aware that something, that some movement is happening. For me, whether it is of destruction or creation, the important thing is that there is movement as opposed to stasis.

*ND:* Daniel Bensaïd (2002), the French Marxist, talks about melancholic optimism, which is taking in the full account of brutalities of the twentieth century, but remaining optimistic about struggle regardless. Optimism, political optimism, in this estimation is not naïve hopefulness or misinformed positivity.

*JP:* Not at all. It's absolutely not that kind of optimism.

*ND:* It's the idea of continuing with something, that there is something alive and electric and urgent, full of possibility even within moments that are submerged with struggle. But thank you, Jay, this has realigned my thinking around this. Sometimes you don't know what you mean when you're writing.

*JP:* Some of the optimistic moments of my life were just around the State of Emergency in the 1980s, because a community was being formed. Because we were, you know, sitting on the pavements and – not in a kind of romantic way, but there was some kind of very deeply felt *movement*, as opposed to a sense of resignation and handing over your futures to a government or governance.

*BL:* Could you tell us about your next collaboration, *Hold Still,* which premiered at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town in November 2022? Nadia, your latest play is set in London and focuses on Ben and Rosa Feigel and their son Oliver. Ben is the son of a Holocaust survivor and Rosa is the daughter of apartheid freedom fighters who left South Africa when she was a child. They both carry histories of displacement and generational trauma, which that they seek to hide from their own son. In an unexpected way, this is a return to the terrain of *What Remains*?

*ND:* I've been thinking how the two plays meet: they're both casts of four, they deal expressly with the political life of people of colour, both suggest the past a rupture in the present – the return of the unconscious as something or someone hidden from view, but their differences are also very pronounced and those differences are primarily aesthetic, located around form.

*What Remains* is, I think, a very atmospheric work; there are whole sections written as poetry, so much about what's on the page is suggestive,

impressionistic. *What Remains* asks questions about the uncanny and suggests that the haunting at its centre is grounded not only in the spiritual world but in the material one. With *Hold Still*, I wanted to write something very different; an ostensibly straight, three-act play that messed around, just a little enough to be unnerving, with form. I think this choice has something to do with being a colonial subject, of having been raised as an outsider, inside a tradition of English literature and theatre, and of wanting to exercise some mastery over the culture we all had to imbibe – to use that form to write something about that place. It's rare, I think for South Africans to write and perform work *about* the United Kingdom. We stage work written by British playwrights… not the other way around. More, to write about the interior domestic life of people in the United Kingdom, to comment on the politics of that place, to think about this terrifying moment in British politics where the figure of the refugee has been so thoroughly demonised by the political right – transformed into the stranger, the un-being, the figure to fear and to reject – that felt new and necessary.

There's lots of British writing about *us* – some of it intensely interesting and generative, some of it well-meaning, some of it abysmal, lots of holding forth on the state of our country – our despicable past, our disappointing present, our future that apparently ricochets between wonderful and abysmal depending on whom you're speaking to, but very little the other way round. In that way, the choice to write about this and in this style is political. And then to subvert that style, just a little, with monologues that work a little like ekphrasis in that we, as the audience, are allowed to settle in a little, we're granted a small interior glimpse into each character. Though, of course, these characters have not been 'British' or even 'English' for very long, their histories are much more complicated than that.

The three-act, kitchen-sink drama was exactly the sort of stuff I watched endlessly as a child, and what I was taught constituted 'good theatre', and these characters with their witty back and forth, their familiarity and ease with all things theoretical – with politics and psychoanalysis, with an easy-reach towards talking 'culture' and very performative outrage about unfairness – was exactly what I thought middle-class British liberalism was. I grew up in the Apartheid state and the contours of my childhood were shaped by two brutal states of emergency – I remember hearing so many arguments between adults about 'what to do', but they were never like the conversations between Ben and Rosa. In those long-ago arguments, there wasn't – or didn't seem to my childish ear – to be space for long, nuanced disagreements: Ben and Rosa, on the other hand, are trapped in an endless back and forth about 'what to do' until they arrive back at the place of their own beginning, of their own histories, which is that you act because right action is the thing to do, not because you are sure of what the outcome will be. The only certainty in struggle is that it's the moral thing to do, there's no

**IMAGE 13.2** Mwenya Kabwe (as Rosa Feigel), Lyle October (Oliver Feigel), and Andrew Buckland (Ben Feigel) in *Hold Still* written by Nadia Davids and directed by Jay Pather at the Baxter Theatre, Cape Town, 2022. Photograph by Mark Wessels, courtesy of Baxter Theatre Centre.

certainty in the result. So, after all I've said about the play being about the United Kingdom, it both is and isn't – I always find myself back in South Africa. This time, grappling with middle-class left liberal quandaries in a deeply unsettled – and unsettling – time in the country.

*BL:* Jay, your exploration of lighting and projection enables you to break with naturalism and explore memories that crash up against one another and create tension in the family living room. What was particular about the exploration of the domestic space as opposed to the more abstract spaces you explored in *What Remains*?

*JP:* Yes, it was challenging to remain faithful to the text itself and how it unfolded. One of course has to, but my first impulse in the first reading was indeed to disrupt the domestic space drastically and not give in to a *domestic* reception of a domestic space. But again Nadia does provide for that already in the text itself. What we have in Nadia is a forensic artist. Nothing is left without rigorous question and turning around over and over. Our exploration of text (cast and production team) was so fertile as layer upon layer of intentions lay sometimes near surface at others deeply under. For the two lead characters, married with a teenage child, to start to reveal tremors and then huge rifts in

their relationship in the space of thirty theatrical minutes is a triumph and richness of text. So in some respects then it's very similar to *What Remains* in terms of what we had to uncover amongst the lines. In this instance though the text was *the* thing, its choreography was intact and it was tight and held it all together but with just enough space for the imagination to travel.

So, while I became much more mindful of this, the rehearsal process, besides unearthing the dense text, was full of other experiments in movement and image that I think gave some surreal impetus in the actual staging while staying close to the naturalism. And this in turn informed the choices in set design, lighting, and projection.

The most obvious intervention was when each character breaks away into expansive, incredibly beautiful monologues. Here, the use of projections transported us to forest, massive oceans, black and white footage of steam trains and smoke and sepia jail cells and family portraits pulling us out of the domestic into something larger, both spatially and temporally. With the set, while it was clear that we had to have that kitchen sink living room, we worked on emphasising the hyper realism of holding it as a piece of archive. And this was then complemented with the back wall that is less real, uniformly grey and seems to separate from the actual living room and moreover disintegrates about three-quarters of the way up – the pieces at the top held precariously by gut.

On the floor outside the confines of the Persian rug that as a centrepiece holds the archival lounge, there are line drawings (in masking tape) that resemble debris as if this tiny lounge is in the midst of pulling out of the tiny Islington semi-detached home and exploding. And of course, this is indeed what happens, significantly when someone from the outside, an illegal migrant, is let in and the space has to confront that. So, scenic elements as well as projections flip us out of a taut naturalism. And this was enough for me since that piece of archive in the centre, the neat middle-class, left-leaning family had to be replicated for us to see the cracks beginning to appear, the threat of dissolution and impending rupture and then for these parts to at the very end be held with a combination of strength and grace by the central character, Rosa. It is a play of great precarity but not without hope and courage.

## Notes

1 The first interview took place over Zoom on 17 May 2022 and was extended through subsequent conversations in October 2022 and March-April 2023.

2 In its first iteration in 2016, *What Remains* was staged at the Arena Theater at the University of Cape Town. In 2017, it was invited to the South African National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, one of the largest global festivals of its kind. A run at Hiddingh Hall, Cape Town followed in July, and then a staging at the 2017 Afrovibes Festival at various cities in the Netherlands. *Hold Still* premiered at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town in 2022.

3 The Marikana massacre is the name given to the killing of 34 miners by the South African Police Service (SAPS) on 16 August 2012 during a six-week strike at the Lonmin platinum mine at Marikana near Rustenburg in South Africa's North West province.
4 In Nadia Davids's own words, 'the story of District Six as a place of refuge for emancipated slaves, for the impoverished, the city's underclass, for its refugees and immigrants is well known to the people Cape Town and it occupies a very specific space in South Africa's imagination as one of the greatest, most unresolved signifiers of apartheid triumph. Today, the area remains mostly undeveloped; an expanse of overgrown grass and smashed brick that begins at Zonnebloem and stretches to the edge of the city centre. Behind it, Devil's Peak, ahead, the Habour. And in that stretch of emptiness lie three narratives; the memory of a creolised living space in which Kwame Anthony Appia's fashioning of "cosmopolitanism" was largely realised, the destructive and exacting power of apartheid spatial planning, and the failure of the current government to make good on its promise of land restitution' (2017: 114).
5 'The 2015 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests were the largest, most effective mass political movement the country has known in 20 years. #RhodesMustFall was initially aimed at the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town, a figure the students described as emblematic of widespread institutional racism, an oppressive colonial learning culture, and a system predicated on economic and racial exclusion. Students at the University of Witwatersrand expanded on the call to decolonise the curriculum under the hashtag #FeesMustFall, demanding that there be no increase in fees in 2016 and an end to outsourcing university workers' (Davids 2017: 110).

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# 14

# MARKETING A MASSACRE

## When Outdoor Dramas Become Dark Tourism

*Katrina Phillips*

The stage lights turn red. An actor portraying Lieutenant Colonel David Williamson strides across the stage with a large cooper's mallet slung over one shoulder. Actors playing Williamson's militiamen, guns at the ready, stand guard around the stage. Other actors playing Lenape men, women, and children cower before him, their faces unrecognisable when bathed in the red light. They sing, they pray, and they cry as a leader among them, Isaac, pleads with Williamson for mercy. The singing grows louder as Williamson calls out: 'Isaac, once Chief Glikkikan, come to judgment!' Isaac kneels at the table in front of Williamson, who raises the mallet above his head and brings it down with all his might. Isaac's wife, Anna, is the next victim called to the front. The theatrical executions continue under the glow of the red stage lights until none remain standing. The soldiers set the cabin on fire and exit.

This is the dramatic apex of *Trumpet in the Land*, an outdoor drama staged in New Philadelphia, Ohio, since 1970. The drama, written by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paul Green, centres on a dark moment in the state's past: the Gnadenhutten massacre of 1782, also known as the Moravian Massacre. Led by Williamson, a raiding party of 160 Pennsylvania militiamen slaughtered 96 Christian Lenape Indians at a Moravian mission, charging that the Lenape had participated in raids on American settlers. The Lenape had vehemently denied the charges, but the militia still voted to kill them.[1] After the Lenape spent a night praying and singing hymns, the militia led them to one of two 'killing houses' – one for men, and one for women and children. The militiamen restrained the Lenape, used mallets to stun them, and then scalped them before piling bodies in mission buildings and burning down the village.

Nearly 200 years later, the Ohio Outdoor Historical Drama Association, Inc. (OOHDA) returned to the horrors of Gnadenhutten to create a regional tourist

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destination. Green's conception of what he called 'symphonic' outdoor dramas shaped the growth and development of a national industry that began in 1937 with the premiere of Green's *The Lost Colony* in Manteo, North Carolina. Unlike the historical pageants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which were often staged as commemorative events, outdoor dramas were distinctly designed as regional tourism ventures. From Minnesota's *Song of Hiawatha* and Texas's *Beyond the Sundown* to California's *Lost River* and North Carolina's *Unto These Hills*, Native history has long been a powerful pull for outdoor drama enthusiasts.[2] The Institute of Outdoor Drama, now known as the Institute of Outdoor Theatre, holds the records of more than 180 outdoor dramas that premiered between 1907 and 2010, and close to one-third of those outdoor dramas draw heavily on regional Native history. The geographic and chronological range of these productions, as well as their reliance on Native people, places, and histories, demonstrates how these outdoor dramas were – and continue to be – an integral part of the American tourism industry.

This essay examines the long, contested use of Native people, Native places, and Native history in the outdoor drama industry, particularly in the staging of *Trumpet in the Land*. Outdoor dramas are typically considered their own form of tourism, and they are rarely put into conversation with frameworks like dark tourism – the practice of visiting sites associated with death, destruction, or disaster. However, I argue that the continued reenactment of the Moravian Massacre – through a theatrical portrayal geared toward a white American audience – highlights how these contemporary theatrical productions engage with these historical narratives of difficult pasts in relation to dark tourism. Retold on stage every summer in New Philadelphia for more than 50 years, OOHDA's story of the murdered Lenape caught between the British and the American factions in the midst of the American Revolution stands as a marker of the marketability of America's troubled – and troubling – past.

## When Tourism Goes Dark: The Creation of Dark Tourism

'Dark tourism', coined in 1996 by scholars John Lennon and Malcolm Foley (2010: 3), has transnational applications, from sites of genocide in Rwanda and the battlefields of the American Civil War to the Catacombs of Paris and the concentration camps of World War II. Lennon and Foley argue that memory and remembrance are central to dark tourism: 'If one considers memory and the representation of the past in the context of dark tourism', they write, 'one can chart an obsession with the past' (2010: 146).

But, as self-proclaimed dark tourist Dagney McKinney reminds us, 'haunted houses, abandoned places or just mean people' are not always what we would consider dark tourism. 'All dark tourism is macabre', McKinney writes, 'but not all macabre tourism is dark tourism' (McKinney n.d.). There is a thin line, as author Elizabeth Becker argues, between 'memorialization and manipulation' in the

development of dark tourism (2013: 106). Memory is central to dark tourism; as cultural historian Itay Lotem contends, ‘Memories are not airborne, but need to be appropriated, interpreted and reinterpreted according to changing public contexts and priorities in order for them to still exert any influence over individuals and the public alike’ (2021: 7). On the surface, dark tourism seems entirely oppositional to tourism, the act of travelling for pleasure or relaxation. But for historian Tiya Miles, the popularity of ghost tours on former plantations, cemeteries, and manor homes in the American South underscores the powerful pull of dark tourism, which, in essence, brings together ‘pleasure and pain, death and discovery, in touristic opportunities that highlight mortality, violence, atrocity, and suffering’ (2017: 116).

As people, nations, and governments around the globe continue to reckon with the horrors of the past – such as the 2007 passage of Spain’s Law of Historical Memory that sought to recognise those who were persecuted or murdered during the Spanish Civil War and under the fascist regime of Francisco Franco[3] – these spaces of memory and history underscore the power of dark tourism as a means of attempting to understand the past. The marketability of sites of trauma like Tuol Sleng, a high school that became ‘the Auschwitz of Cambodia’, has turned what Becker calls ‘the dark side of human nature’ into ‘a profit point for tourism’ (2013: 105).

There are, though, few surprises in dark tourism. Many dark tourism sites are deliberately reinterpreted specifically for tourists and, in many instances, these tourists already know the story. The seemingly unending lines of tourists patiently waiting to enter the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam highlight history’s grip on the present. The literal recreation of the Alamo as a shrine to the fallen – visitors are asked to remove their hats before they enter and are not allowed to take pictures inside the structure itself – turns a site of American manifest destiny and settler colonialism into a place of reverence.[4] Tuol Sleng has become what Becker calls ‘the centerpiece of the dark tourism, or genocide trail’ promoted by the tourism ministry, and it is the single most popular destination for tourists who travel to Phnom Penh. Tours of the Tower of London are led by the Yeoman Warders (also known as ‘Beefeaters’), who blend history and humour in a way that belies the tower’s blood-soaked realities.[5] Both the Alamo and the Tower of London, like other sites of dark tourism, purposely steer their visitors to their respective gift shops at the end of their guided tours. For visitors, it is a jarring jolt back to the capitalistic – if not downright kitschy – nature of these sites.

Dark tourism, like the practice of tourism writ large, is often a double-edged sword. Hal Rothman infamously dubbed tourism a ‘devil’s bargain’, arguing that the ‘embrace of tourism triggers a contest for the soul of a place’ (1998: 11). Arguments arise around appropriate behaviour at dark tourism sites: is it ‘right’ to take a smiling selfie at Auschwitz (Drury 2019)? What about slave castles in West Africa, like Ghana’s Elmina Castle or Senegal’s Island of Gorée, which were designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the late 1970s? What about Robben Island, also now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where former prisoners often lead portions of the tours and continually relive the traumas of their resistance to apartheid?

Many dark tourism enterprises encourage their visitors to more deeply engage with the horrible histories that happened in these particular places. Performances produced by the Staging Difficult Pasts research project – including the 2020 film, 'The Disappeared from Spain and Argentina: Art, Testimony, and Justice' and the 2019 performance piece, 'Pasados conflictivos en escena', both staged at the ESMA Memory Museum, the largest of the 340 detention centres that operated during Argentina's last dictatorship (1976–1983), offer thought-provoking interventions on memory and conflicting pasts.[6] Both, the film and the performance, presented what organisers called 'an alternative approach to the building that functioned as a unit of torture' (Staging Difficult Pasts: November 2019). Their unflinching examinations of crimes against humanity center the project's main goal: to examine how theaters and museums shape public memories of difficult pasts.

*Trumpet in the Land*, though, does the opposite: it shields its audience from the centuries of genocide perpetrated against Native people in what became the United States. Characterising *Trumpet in the Land* as dark tourism helps explain not only the outdoor drama's touristic viability but also what is at stake when Native history is coopted for tourist enterprises. The outdoor drama markets itself as an authentic production in an authentic place with an authentic claim to a historical event, but it also *protects* the audience from the actual historic event through Green's use of artistic liberties and the use of predominantly non-Native actors. The outdoor drama does not intend to shame its majority-white audience for the horrors of history. Instead, it is touristically effective through the simultaneous sanitisation and dramatisation of the massacre at Gnadenhutten. Green has already dramaturgically interpreted the history for his audience. The focus on resurrection, redemption, and restoration temporarily takes the audience back in time to witness the dramatic reenactment of the massacre before returning to the comfort of the present.

There are plenty of theatrical productions, museum exhibits, and public forums that stage difficult pasts, using these pasts as inspirations for their plots. They are set in different historical and geographical regions, but those that turn to difficult narratives of Native history within what is now the continental United States require additional analysis and critical examination. This essay asks the reader to more thoroughly question what it means to stage a difficult past like this: a massacre of Native people. There is no arc of redemption in Native history, and yet turning these dark moments into tourist enterprises requires a collective redemption of America. Green's creation of fictional characters that serve to move the story through its redemptive arc removes the sense of responsibility that forms the core of dark tourism.

*Trumpet in the Land* is dark tourism masquerading as history with the intention to have audiences leave the amphitheatre believing what they have just seen. They are not invited or encouraged to explore the history itself – one could argue that they are implicitly encouraged *not* to explore this history. Nor is the amphitheatre directly sited on the grounds of the massacre; that site sits approximately 20 minutes away. The amphitheatre is designed to blend as closely as possible into its

surroundings, allowing visitors' imaginations to wander through the woods. Some sites of dark tourism invite tourists to simply imagine what it would have been like in these moments of historical anguish and pain. Others stage reenactments, forcing audiences to contend with history as it happened. The darkest side of dark tourism, though, is when tourists are allowed to witness a dramatised recreation, one that moves beyond historical accuracy and offers an opportunity for redemption that the people who suffered this trauma never received.

Dark tourism in theory is different from dark tourism in practice, which profits from pain and suffering, and *Trumpet in the Land* profits off the annual recreation of Native trauma. Imagine – in the year 2022 – that an enterprising group of Americans intent on boosting their regional tourism economy might turn to the horrific histories of the Wounded Knee Massacre, the Bear River Massacre, the Sand Creek Massacre, the Long Walk of the Navajo, or the Sandy Lake Tragedy.[7] For Native people, this would be akin to productions that would celebrate the proponents of apartheid, Augusto Pinochet's reign of terror in Chile, the Khmer Rouge's control of Cambodia, or Argentina's Dirty War. The memory work of settler colonialism – what Patrick Wolfe (2006) calls 'the practical elimination of the natives' – runs parallel to the genocidal practices and crimes against humanity perpetrated around the world.

I do not make these comparisons for the sake of sensationalism. Native history is a history of devastation and resilience, a history of violence and 'survivance'.[8] The power of theatre hinges on the ability of the playwright, the director, the cast, and the crew to provoke both an emotional and a critical response from its audience. The power of dark tourism hinges on a site's ability to be interpreted in a way that provokes an emotional response from its visitors. Here, though, Native trauma is deliberately painted as a historical tragedy and a drama. This is not to say that history and theatre cannot coincide – instead, the script takes liberties with the history of Gnadenhutten in order to elicit a particular response from the audience. As historian Jeffrey Ostler argues, 'Pointing out that U.S. military forces sometimes attacked peaceful Indians […] often evokes a sympathetic response', but it rarely challenges people to 'think more broadly about the underlying causes of the conflict' (2015: 153).

## Staging the Story: History versus Drama in the Birth of the Outdoor Drama Industry

The outdoor drama, also known as symphonic drama, began with Paul Green, who wrote more than a dozen outdoor dramas throughout his storied career. From *The Lost Colony* (1937) and *The Common Glory* (1947) to *Faith of Our Fathers* (1950) and *Cross and Sword* (1965), Green left an indelible mark on the genre – and on American conceptions of history. While Green also wrote stage plays, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *In Abraham's Bosom* (1927), his outdoor symphonic dramas were a new movement for American theatre. 'The narrow confines of the

usual Broadway play and stage', Green once proclaimed, 'are not fitted to the dramatic needs of the American people' (Mitgang 1981: 23).

Outdoor dramas are not plays, pageants, or musicals. Historical pageants, for Laurence Avery, were 'chronicles, with events following one another as historical chronology, not dramatic necessity, dictated' (1998: 11). As David Glassberg has shown, these pageants, which usually commemorated a particular event in local history, fell out of favor in the years preceding World War II (1990: 1). Pageants were never meant as a long-term economic stimulus; instead, they functioned as a means to bring local residents and communities together (Phillips 2021: 17). Outdoor dramas, on the other hand, draw tourists and tourist dollars to a particular place. Roanoke Island, home to Green's *The Lost Colony* since 1937, went from being 'obscure [and] poverty-stricken' to almost a boom town with new shops, cottages, and hotels (*TIME* 10 July 1939: 48).

Despite their insistence that these productions were rooted in history (Phillips 2021), these playwrights turned to 'the *spirit* of history', giving themselves the leeway to play with historical chronologies and historical figures in order to create stirring outdoor dramas (Lindsey 1959). When the subject matter of these outdoor dramas turns to difficult histories, such as the forced removal of the Cherokee from their homelands in the 1830s (the subject of Kermit Hunter's *Unto These Hills*, which opened in 1950) or the Shawnee leader Tecumseh's decade-long attempt to build a pan-Indian confederacy (the basis of Allan W. Eckert's *Tecumseh!*, which premiered in 1973) in the early nineteenth century, the question of history versus dramatic narrative becomes even more pressing. These tensions underscore one of the most crucial fundamentals of outdoor dramas and the element that sets outdoor dramas apart from other forms of theatre – the role of place. Audiences are invited to suspend reality and allow themselves to be transported elsewhere when watching plays or musicals. While a production's location is often crucial to its plotline, such as New York City in *West Side Story* or *Oklahoma*'s eponymous setting, theatregoers need not travel to these places in order to see a particular production.

Outdoor dramas, though, are not designed to be touring productions. Like *Trumpet in the Land*, many of these productions center on historical narratives of difficult, and frequently genocidal, pasts. As a Native scholar of Native history, it seems imprudent, almost negligent, to call this history 'difficult' – for whom is it difficult? Is it difficult for those of us who know and understand the horrors our ancestors experienced (and survived)? Or is it difficult for those who do not wish to know, those who would prefer a sanitised, censored version of history? For the outdoor dramas based on Native history, this adds an additional layer of complexity. In the case of *Trumpet in the Land*, set on the Ohio frontier in the 1780s, place plays as crucial a role as the actors themselves. The Moravian Massacre, which occurred in the midst of the American Revolution, highlights the role of place and time in both outdoor drama and dark tourism.

The traditional story of the American Revolution is one wherein the principal actors are the American colonists fighting against the British loyalists, the plucky,

rag-tag American army against the formidable British army and navy forces. Native peoples, if they are referenced at all, are usually depicted as misguided consorts of the British who soon disappear from the narrative altogether. They are rarely depicted as individual and collective forces who, in the words of Colin Calloway, 'did not throw themselves blindly into the fray but weighed the words and actions of both parties' (1995: 41).

Similarly, this narrative ignores the effects of the American Revolution on the 'home front' of Native nations as villages and crops and stored supplies were destroyed by marching armies who either deliberately caused the destruction or simply saw it as an inevitable consequence of war (Calloway 1995: 46, 47). In other areas, such as the Southern backcountry, the American Revolution was, 'from start to finish, an Indian war' (Calloway 1995: 43). As Calloway contends,

> The agony of the American Revolution for American Indians was lost as the winners constructed a national mythology that simplified which had been a complex contest in Indian country, blamed Indians for the bloodletting, and justified subsequent assaults on Indian lands and cultures.
>
> (1995: 293)

The American Revolution was still raging across the colonies and what was, at the time, the American frontier when Williamson led the massacre at Gnadenhutten. Rob Harper emphasises how the violence and retaliation on the Ohio frontier were cyclical in the revolutionary era (2007, 2008). Eric Hinderaker argues that the war on the Ohio frontier overlapped with the American Revolution but outlasted it by more than a decade (1997: 218). This was a war waged on Native lands, a war that came on the heels of the tumultuous 1760s. Pontiac's Rebellion and the Paxton Boys' massacre of Susquehannock Indians in Conestoga, Pennsylvania, for instance, both occurred in 1763. Virginia frontiersmen murdered several Mingo Indians in the 1774 Yellow Creek Massacre, one of the sparks that lit the somewhat obscure Dunmore's War (Hinderaker and Mancall 2003; Parkinson 2006; Middleton 2006; White 1991).

As Gary Nash reminds us, 'Our history books rarely record the names of Red Jacket or Cornplanter of the Seneca, Attakullakulla and his son Dragging Canoe of the Cherokees, Red Shoes of the Creek, White Eyes of the Delaware, or Little Turtle of the Miami', men who were as much the dominant revolutionary figures as Washington, Hamilton, Nathanael Green, Richard Henry Lee, and John Paul Jones. 'Moreover', Nash argues, 'they were well-known to the revolutionary leaders, for Indian tribes of the interior were formidable adversaries who could never be ignored' (2014: 282). As Nash and others have shown, Native peoples and Native histories have long been discounted in the retellings that followed. Native people become objects, rather than subjects, in history. They are simply acted upon; they have not been seen as active participants in the events that occurred before, during, and after the war.

The massacre at Gnadenhutten, like the Yellow Creek Massacre, highlights the brutality of the revolutionary era. It also underscores the impossible position Native nations were caught in throughout the war. David Zeisberger, a Moravian missionary, preached to the Lenape in Pennsylvania beginning in the 1760s. Born in 1721, Zeisberger immigrated to what's now North America in the 1730s. He eventually became a missionary among Native nations in New York and Pennsylvania. Like other missionaries who preached the benefits of Christianity, he encouraged Native converts to stop practicing their traditional ways of life. Zeisberger started living among the Lenape in Pennsylvania in the 1760s as continued colonial settlement pushed the Lenape west and into Ohio in the early 1770s. Zeisberger built a settlement at Schoenbrunn, near what is now New Philadelphia, and the 'success' of his conversion and assimilation efforts at Schoenbrunn led the Moravians to build additional settlements at Lichtenau, which means 'pasture of light', and Gnadenhutten.

Gnadenhutten, in essence, means 'huts of grace', but it can also be translated as 'place of mercy'.[9] Mercy, though, was in short supply as the American Revolution raged throughout the region. Neither the British nor the colonists entirely trusted Zeisberger or his assistant, John Heckewelder. The British arrested Zeisberger and Heckewelder in 1781, charging both men with treason. Other Lenape who resisted the Moravian push to convert and assimilate also distrusted the missionaries. The painful irony of the name of this place and the destruction wrought upon it by Williamson and his militia underscore what is, for Lennon and Foley, one of the most difficult aspects of the phenomenon of dark tourism – the 'interpretation and development of major sites of extermination and mass killing' (2010: 27).

The Moravian Massacre is often included in the laundry list of what R. Douglas Hurt calls the 'sporadic cruelty' that permeated the Ohio frontier in the revolutionary era (1996: 84). A year before Williamson wreaked havoc at Gnadenhutten, American forces led by Colonel Daniel Brodhead had marched from Fort Pitt in western Pennsylvania with 300 men to burn Coshocton – another Lenape settlement – and to destroy Lichtenau. Hurt argues that Brodhead 'set a high standard for the murder of both peaceful and hostile Indians by executing 16 prisoners who could not prove their loyalty to the Americans'. Brodhead's victims included a chief named Red Eagle, who was ambushed and tomahawked in the head as he tried to reason with Brodhead (Hurt 1996: 85, 86). Other missions, including Gnadenhutten, narrowly escaped Brodhead's rampage.

It seems all the more questionable, then, that the OOHDA would turn to the Gnadenhutten massacre as inspiration for what they hoped would become the linchpin of their tourist economy. Why, we could well ask, would tourists make what Hannah Sampson (2019) calls 'the worst parts of history a piece of their vacation, if not the entire point'? Is it what Philip Stone deems 'memorial mania', meaning the exponential rise of dark tourism enterprises (cited in Sampson 2019)? Or is it the painful truth of history – that, without the Moravian Massacre, the region may not even register on a potential tourist's radar? In a place like New Philadelphia,

less than half an hour from the site of the massacre, the town's bucolic feel belies the region's violent history. The OOHDA's decision to make the bloody history of Gnadenhutten the epicenter of regional tourism simultaneously centres the Moravian Massacre as a singular episode, not as one of many pieces of a difficult past.

## From a Road Trip to Reality: The Role of the Landscape in Trumpet in the Land

*Trumpet in the Land* is Ohio's longest-running outdoor drama, and it is one of a handful that popped up across the state in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1964, a Methodist minister named Arthur Kirk took a road trip to see two other outdoor dramas: Bardstown, Kentucky's *The Stephen Foster Story* and Cherokee, North Carolina's *Unto These Hills*. That winter, Kirk wrote to the general managers of both dramas for information about creating an outdoor drama. The general managers encouraged him to reach out to Mark Sumner, the longtime director at the Institute of Outdoor Drama. By September of 1965, Kirk started forming the Ohio Outdoor Historical Drama Association, Inc. (OOHDA). Green agreed to write the script in 1967, and the outdoor drama opened in New Philadelphia in the summer of 1970 (Phillips 2021: 145, 146).

New Philadelphia is about two hours northeast of Columbus, Ohio; an hour and a half south of Cleveland, Ohio; and about two hours west of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Like other American towns and cities with outdoor dramas, the focus is not on what New Philadelphia currently is – what matters is the past. Built along both sides of the Tuscarawas River in the early 1800s, the town once held abundant natural resources (Knisely n.d.). Now, though, New Philadelphia feels like countless other towns across the Midwest that have passed their heyday and are, in a sense, clinging to what they once were but are no longer.

Outdoor dramas tend to start around dusk or sunset. It is a deliberate choice, one that offers a natural replication of the now-typical artificial theatrical lighting system, and *Trumpet in the Land* is no different. Organ music plays over the sound system as ticketholders find their seats and settle in for the show. The set pieces include a small stream and a waterfall, adding to the ambience of the music and the murmurs from the audience as they wait for the show to start. The show begins with a fireplace, ladder, trunks, and a flag that sits on stage right. There is a rock formation center right, and stage right holds an altar, a baptismal font, and a church sign.

Like other outdoor drama amphitheatres, the Schoenbrunn Amphitheatre makes the rest of the world melt away. This amphitheatre, like other outdoor drama venues, is strategically designed to immerse its audience in the site itself, to make visitors forget how close they are to restaurants, hotels and other structures that do not fit the eighteenth-century narrative at hand. The amphitheatre is set back on the hills, carved out of the hill itself. It is an unassuming setting – there's none of the opulence or grandeur that might greet you at a Broadway theatre, but that's part of the allure, part of the draw of outdoor theatre. Green once called outdoor

dramas 'the theatre of the people', underscoring what he believed to be the difference between outdoor dramas and Broadway productions (Phillips 2021: 20). It is the drama's opening night in the summer of 2021, and as I step up to the box office to pick up my ticket the woman behind the glass reminds me that it's general seating in the amphitheatre.

The Three Sisters Snack Bar sits behind a handful of picnic-style tables, offering a potential shelter from the weather. I see audience members buying popcorn and bottled water. A boy drops his bottle of pop, which sprays across the floor. The Turtle Gift Shop is tucked next to the men's bathroom. The gift shop is a small space, not much bigger than the box office. It feels like a time capsule from, say, the 1950s, the age of B-Westerns and John Wayne, only here it feels like a place that time forgot. The shop sells foam tomahawks, 'Wild West' plastic bow and arrow sets, and those Indian dolls with elaborate buckskin clothes and tightly woven braids. I buy a handful of old programs for a dollar each, hardly believing my luck at finding potential archival materials in the gift shop.

The opening night audience is mostly older people and families with children. Some groupings include three generations – kids, parents, grandparents. Several Gen X/Millennial-aged couples stroll in. A teenage girl tries to describe a musical to her father because she cannot remember the name. It's soon apparent that she's talking about *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. 'Oh, that's the one where Tim Curry is the villain', he says. 'He's not THAT bad, is he?' she replies. Her father stops dead in his tracks. 'HE EATS EDDIE', he says, incredulously. About half a dozen teenagers, working as ushers, stand along the front of the stage and in the aisles. A group of ticketholders stand at the entrance to the amphitheatre debating where to sit. 'The acoustics make it so there aren't any bad seats', the head usher reassures them, anxiously trying to keep the line moving. Some folks have brought blankets to keep warm once the sun sets behind the trees.

The stakes here are high. Considering *Trumpet in the Land* as dark tourism – moving beyond its classification as an outdoor drama – invites us to consider the ramifications of settler colonialism and the genocidal practices that undergird the creation and maintenance of the United States. I have long questioned what is at stake in the staging of outdoor dramas like *Trumpet in the Land*. My 2021 book, *Staging Indigeneity: Salvage Tourism and the Performance of Native American History*, wrestles with this very question, and the ongoing erasure of Native history from the collective American consciousness – and conscience – underscores how damaging these seemingly innocuous productions truly are. Dark tourism relies on and profits from pain and suffering. It relies on our desire to imagine the unimaginable. But there is another, more sinister element for Native Studies scholars. Some might argue that it is possible to stage the story of Gnadenhutten without reenacting the massacre. But the voyeuristic nature of dark tourism, coupled with the absolution of the audience, requires it, despite the ongoing knowledge production of Native and Indigenous scholars over the last few decades. The massacre makes the drama dark and macabre, and it is directly tied to the slaughter of Native people.

The continued staging of the production stands in opposition to the scholarship and in direct opposition to the ongoing advocacy work of Native and Indigenous nations across the country and around the world. What is it, then, about this story in particular that makes it financially feasible – in short, why do people come to *Trumpet in the Land*? How does Green's dramatic reinterpretation shape – or obscure – this story of a difficult past? And, perhaps most importantly, how does Green's script make this massacre marketable – and profitable?

### When History Comes to Life: The Re-Creation of History in Trumpet in the Land

*Trumpet in the Land* is one of Green's later outdoor dramas. Some of his earlier scripts included *The Common Glory*, a dramatised tale of the Jamestown colony's formation through American independence from Britain. The drama opened in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1947 and ran until 1976 (Molineux 2001). *Faith of Our Fathers* premiered in Washington, D.C. in 1950 and focused on 'the benevolent, wise and just character of the Father of Our Country', George Washington.[10] *Cross and Stone* opened in 1965, became Florida's official state play in 1973, and closed in 1996 due to decreased state funding. Berea College commissioned Green to write *Wilderness Road* for the college's centennial celebration in 1955, a drama that followed two 'mountain brothers, John and Davy Freeman', in the years leading up to the Civil War.

While this is not an exhaustive overview of Green's oeuvre, Green was a master at turning history into drama. He used historical figures as characters while also introducing fictional characters or events that would help drive the plotline. In *Trumpet in the Land*, as in his other scripts, Green takes substantial liberties with the historical events, adding love triangles, stories of unrequited love, and some comedic relief. Green expertly heightens the tensions between his protagonists and antagonists, collapsing backstories and motivations in order to center his dramatic narrative. Green's decisions, though, offer the audiences at the Schoenbrunn Amphitheatre a chance to *escape* history through the outdoor drama.[11] Furthermore, the casting of non-Native actors in the roles of Native characters offers an additional layer of protection and isolation from this history. Many outdoor dramas that use Native histories as the basis for their scripts do not cast Native actors, and many of the Native nations whose histories are coopted for outdoor dramas are not asked to consult or creatively participate in these productions (Phillips 2021).

Zeisberger is, as expected, the lead character. Sister Susan, who wants nothing more than to marry Zeisberger, is another major role. In addition to the named Lenape characters like Isaac, formerly known as Chief Glikkikan, Green includes Lenape leaders White Eyes and Konieschquanoheel, also known as Captain Pipe. White Eyes is depicted as a calm, sensible ally, while Konieschquanoheel is painted as an angry warrior who vehemently despises and distrusts Zeisberger and

the missionaries. What Green omits, though, is Konieschquanoheel's motivation. While Konieschquanoheel was among those who initially tried to stay neutral, he allied with the British in the wake of Colonel Brodhead's attack on Coshocton and spent the rest of the war resisting American incursions into Ohio Country. As retaliation for the massacre at Gnadenhutten, Konieschquanoheel helped defeat the Crawford Expedition in 1782. Later, Konieschquanoheel participated in St. Clair's defeat in the 1791 Battle of the Wabash, and he was likely at the 1794 Battle of Fallen Timbers and perhaps at the 1795 signing of the Treaty of Greenville (Jackson 2010).

Here, Konieschquanoheel is one of the antagonists. His open alliance with Simon Girty, one of the most notorious figures to emerge from the American Revolution (perhaps second only to Benedict Arnold), deliberately distances Konieschquanoheel from the wise White Eyes and the pious Isaac. Green describes the character of Colonel David Williamson in the script as 'a thin, ascetic, brooding sort of man, narrow-faced, clean-shaven and with a burning eye – a fanatic of hate where Indians are concerned' (1972: 45). Throughout the outdoor drama, Williamson's narrative arc – and what Green uses as the character's motivation – is the supposed murder of Williamson's mother, beaten and scalped by Natives as a young Williamson hid in the bushes (1972: 46).

Historical sources that center on Williamson or the Moravian Massacre make no mention of any such event. In fact, in the wake of Gnadenhutten, Williamson marched his militia toward the settlement at Schoenbrunn, intent on murdering the Moravians there. Warned ahead of time of Williamson's intentions, the people of Schoenbrunn quickly left and escaped Williamson's wrath. Undeterred, Williamson and his men turned toward Killbuck Island, massacring more peaceful Natives who supported the American war effort (Griffin 2008; Mann 2008). I do not make this point simply to argue that Green and his fellow dramatists did not accurately represent the past in their scripts. Rather, it underscores one of the foundational tenets of the practice of outdoor dramas: that the power of the story and the power of the land collectively supersede the power of the history.

Unlike other difficult pasts – and unlike the international and transnational turn toward a reckoning with these histories – *Trumpet in the Land* remains firmly ensconced in the vision of what Patricia Nelson Limerick calls the 'innocence of intention' (1987: 36). The singularity associated with the turncoat Girty and the murderous Williamson increases the audience's expected sympathy toward the unsuspecting Lenape. It is an opportunity for the audience, both individually and collectively, to confidently assert that *they* would never have acted in such a way. The character of Benjamin Washington Campbell, one of Williamson's men who gallantly refuses to participate in the slaughter, is one of the fictional characters Green paints as a historical figure. Campbell is in love with Esther, one of the Christianised Lenape, but a Lenape character named Michael also loves her. Michael is shot by Williamson's men as he tries to escape the slaughter, then dies

after telling Campbell and his comrades about the massacre. But none of these characters – not Campbell, not Esther, not Michael – are based on people of the past. Green's choices are not rooted in history, and they deliberately heighten the audience's emotional connection to the plot while also obscuring the history itself.

Here, as is common across dark tourism enterprises, the audience is implicitly encouraged to imagine what *they* might do in this instance. Would they, like Ben, stand up to the hellbent-on-revenge Williamson? Would they, like Isaac, bravely accept their fate? Would they, like Sister Susan, faithfully follow a man to a dangerous frontier? In *Trumpet in the Land*, Green has crafted a drama that squarely delineates between the good characters and the evil characters, one wherein good and evil are established through an implicit framing of Christianity as the saving, salvaging grace. It is a drama that separates the ones driven by love from the ones driven by hate. After Ben and his comrades bury Michael, the scene shifts to the fort at Detroit where Zeisberger and Heckewelder have just been released and the charges of treason have been dismissed. Ben rushes in, discovers that Esther has escaped the slaughter, and breathlessly shares the terrible news of Gnadenhutten.

The final scene returns to the now-destroyed Gnadenhutten in the wake of the war. Zeisberger tasks Ben and Esther – along with two other Lenape converts who have grown close to Ben's two comrades – with helping build the nation as they remember those who perished at Gnadenhutten. As the music swells around the remaining missionaries and their wives, a chorus of voices begins to sing out from the back of the amphitheatre. The non-Native actors playing the murdered Lenape have made their way to the rear, behind the audience, and the somewhat startled members of the audience turn around in their seats to see the darkened, ghost-like shadows that 'burst into their challenging call to the audience and to the night around, the music also thundering forth its affirmation and its command' (Green 1972: 96).

## Dark Tourism and Difficult Pasts

As Miles reminds us, we interpret our lives through 'the lens of the past, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. But in this epic quest for history we encounter a fundamental challenge: the past exists on another plane of time, far away from us. We cannot fully access the past because it is no longer present'. To visit the past, Miles contends, 'we require a sort of mental time machine, such as the feeling of transcendence that can be invoked by standing at an atmospheric historic site, viewing rare objects in a museum, reading a gripping historical study, or perhaps encountering a ghost' (2017: 14). The ghosts of Gnadenhutten, which rise every summer at the Schoenbrunn Amphitheatre, are a fantastical, fictional, and dramatic recreation of a dark moment in American – and Native – history.

Outdoor dramas, particularly those that use Native histories as the basis for their scripts, offer up an important set of questions around landscape, historical recreations, and public memory. History may tell a story and serve as a vehicle for drama,

even as those histories become repurposed and repackaged for tourists. Few of these dramas seek to upend the typical story of American history, which then often requires a reframing of history as it truly happened. These productions also require a careful consideration of how Native people are perceived in theatrical productions. In many instances, the allure of dark tourism sites rests on a seemingly simple question: why? In the case of *Trumpet in the Land*, it is easier to accept Green's narrative structure than it is to accept that Williamson carried out this self-assigned mission – and several others – without reservation and without remorse. Williamson was not the only rogue revolutionary who murdered innocents and allies, as evidenced by the violence carried out by the Paxton Boys, the perpetrators of the Yellow Creek Massacre, and countless other atrocities that line the pages of history.

Death and destruction are hallmarks of dark tourism. The scale of Gnadenhutten on its own may not match the scale of Tuol Sleng, the slave castles, Nazi concentration camps, or other dark tourism sites. But tourists come to New Philadelphia for the same reason they go to Chernobyl, the National September 11 Memorial Museum, or the Tower of London: because it is a calculated and consciously temporary engagement with the horrors of the past.

The staging of *Trumpet in the Land* mirrors the careful staging of other dark tourism ventures. The pageantry and solemnity that often accompany curated dark tourism experiences are crafted, created, and often *re*created in order to elicit particular emotions or invoke particular sentiments, from the Alamo and Robben Island to Lidice.

The prevalence, popularity, and profitability of dark tourism ventures continue to increase. At the Schoenbrunn Amphitheatre in New Philadelphia, mere minutes from the village of Gnadenhutten, the dramatised recreation of the Moravian Massacre underscores the power of dark tourism and the power of America's dark history. Dagney McKinney argues that it is impossible to 'fully appreciate' dark tourism sites without first learning about the tragedies that occurred in these places. 'Horrific as they may be', McKinney contends, 'these events are a part of a country's history – oftentimes their very recent history – and have shaped them into the places they are today. To fully understand a place, we need to acknowledge and learn about its history'.

As contributors to this volume, we have been asked to consider the interactions of memory and history, looking closely at, among other things, the rise of attempts to reinterpret public memory. The atrocities carried out by the militia at Gnadenhutten only scratch the surface of the lurching, stumbling conquest of Native lands and Native nations by American governmental officials, missionaries, and militaries. This history is a collection of difficult pasts, one made even more challenging by the myriad ways scholars, practitioners, and performers approach these subjects. As a historian, I have long wrestled with how outdoor historical dramas privilege the drama over the history. In a previous study, I came to the conclusion that the history is not what matters in these productions, despite what their promotional materials might say (Phillips 2021). *Trumpet in the Land* is no different. It is not a

carefully curated museum or a tenderly caretaken space. It is not the Kigali Genocide Memorial or the beaches of Normandy. Instead, it is an ephemeral production, one that relies on its own intangibility. Staging these difficult pasts requires an engagement with those pasts – and yet *Trumpet in the Land* continually evades that engagement. The drama offers a safety valve, an escape hatch that allows its audiences to avoid a reckoning with American history. Dark tourism and public memory both have the power to transcend borders. To reckon with them – and with the creation and maintenance of transnational memory through tourism in general – one must endeavor to underscore the critical reformulation of historical thinking and the practices used to stage difficult pasts.

## Notes

1 There were several militiamen who voted against the massacre, and some left the village instead of participating in the massacre. Two Lenape boys survived the massacre, later retelling what had happened in the village. See Hurt (1996: 91) and Harper (2007: 630).
2 The use of 'Native' throughout is deliberate in order to be inclusive of a larger group. While 'American Indian' is the language used in federal policy, it technically only refers to the continental United States. 'Native American' is also specific to the United States, while 'Native' and 'Indigenous' are more broadly inclusive.
3 See Maria Delgado's chapter in this collection for an analysis of Spain's Law of Historical Memory, pp. 207–228.
4 See Flores (2002) and Burrough, Tomlinson, and Stanford (2021).
5 Observations of the author, based on a 2019 tour of the Tower of London.
6 Documentation of these performances are available on stagingdifficultpasts.org. Please see Cecilia Sosa's chapter in this collection for an analysis of *Pasados conflictivos en escena* pp. 89–103.
7 The Sandy Lake Tragedy occurred in 1850 when President Zachary Taylor colluded with Minnesota Territorial Governor Alexander Ramsey and Indian agent John Watrous to illegally move Ojibwe people from Wisconsin to unceded lands in Minnesota. Several hundred Ojibwe people died when they were trapped in Minnesota Territory over the winter without adequate provisions, and more died on the return trip to Wisconsin. The Bear River Massacre occurred in 1863 when a company of California Volunteers attacked a Shoshone camp led by Bear Hunter. Hundreds of Shoshone men, women, and children were slaughtered. In 1864, a military unit led by John Chivington massacred Cheyenne and Arapaho people led by Black Kettle along the banks of the Sand Creek in what's now Colorado. This is known as the Sand Creek Massacre. In what is now called the Long Walk of the Navajo, more than 10,000 Diné people (also known as Navajo) were forcibly removed from their homelands to the Bosque Redondo Reservation at Fort Sumner in today's New Mexico in the 1860s. The Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 occurred when US Army troops from the 7th Cavalry murdered about 300 noncombatants – mostly women, children, and elders – along the banks of the Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Wounded Knee is considered the end of the Plains Indian Wars.
8 Ojibwe scholar and writer Gerald Vizenor uses 'survivance' to mean both the survival and the resistance of Native people. For Vizenor (1999, 2008), Native people have not simply survived the genocidal elements of settler colonialism; rather, they have continued to maintain and pass down their cultures, languages, and histories.
9 Gnade can be translated to 'mercy', and the 'n' makes it possessive. Hütten, while plural for hut, would not necessarily be a literal translation. In essence, it would be a plural

indication of people living in mercy. Translation and explanation courtesy of Rachael Huener, July 2021.

10 'Faith of Our Fathers: Paul Green's Magnificent Symphonic Drama' pamphlet.

11 There are some significant shifts in the 2021 staging of *Trumpet in the Land* from Green's original script, and these are likely not the only changes made to the script since its premiere more than 50 years ago. Some scenes have been cut, while others have been slightly altered.

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# EPILOGUE

## 10 Strategies for Exhibiting Absence and Loss: Objects, Narratives, and Trauma on Display

*Joanne Rosenthal*

This essay is based on a presentation I gave in Buenos Aires in 2019 at the *Parque de la Memoria-Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado*, the Memory Park and Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism. The presentation was one element of a workshop organised in collaboration with staff at the Memory Park as part of the *Staging Difficult Pasts* project. In it, I shared a range of international examples from museums, artists, and sites of memory which, in one way or another, spoke to the topic of exhibiting absence and loss. The content of the presentation was conceived with the workshop participants in mind, in particular artists, academics, curators, and human rights activists, all of whom were deeply engaged with cultural production in post-dictatorship Argentina. However, my hope is that the principles outlined here might resonate more broadly and offer a menu of possibilities for application in diverse contexts. As was the case with the presentation, this essay is organised into ten principles to consider when exhibiting absence and loss. For a topic this complex, and from the length of the piece alone, it should be self-evident that this 'menu' of options is not intended in any way to be an exhaustive survey, but rather functions as an opportunity to consider the principles as broader strategies or to provoke further questions for the curator.

### Show What Is Missing

The first example I'd like to present is connected in a fairly straightforward way to the central theme of exhibiting absence and loss. It relates to the Isabella Stewart Gardener Museum in Boston, which people are often familiar with for one unfortunate reason. In 1990, 13 artworks were dramatically stolen from the museum galleries in a theft that shook the art world. Among the important works taken were several by Rembrandt and Degas. In the face of this disaster, the museum was

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forced to consider the question of what to do in response. How to deal with the loss of these treasures from their collection and the resulting voids in the museum's permanent displays?

Their answer was elegantly simple: to exhibit the absence that remained. Where paintings had been stolen by removing them from their frames, the vacant frames were left in place, as stark evidence of what was now missing. As noted on their website: 'Today empty frames remain hanging in the Museum as a placeholder for the missing works and as symbols of hope awaiting their return'.[1]

Additionally, the museum created new art in the shadow of this loss, inviting the French artist Sophie Calle to produce interventions born out of the missing artworks. The first of these took place in 1991 and was entitled *Last Seen*. Calle interviewed museum staff including security guards and curators, asking them to share their memories of the paintings. The texts from these interviews were then exhibited in the museum, together with photographs showing what was left behind on the empty walls. Returning to the museum in 2013, Calle was struck by visitors, who, on seeing the empty frames hanging in the galleries, did not necessarily know what they were looking at. A new body of work resulted from this visit, *What Do You See?*, exploring how the absences created by the still-missing artworks had shifted in meaning over time.

## Consider the Transformation of Presence to Absence

In 2008, the Wellcome Collection in London staged an exhibition called 'Life Before Death', which focussed its attention on the mysterious transition from life to death. The exhibition comprised photographs by the German photographer Walter Schels who, together with Journalist Beate Lakotta, interviewed a number of terminally ill people of different ages as they came to the end of their lives and anticipated the arrival of their own deaths. The photographer was granted permission to photograph the individuals both before they died and in the moments immediately after their death.

The exhibition strategy was conceived in a stark, minimalist style: white walls with pairs of black and white images, depicting each subject before and after death. Glancing at the left-hand image of each pair, the visitor could meet the gaze of the individual in question, open-eyed, alert, alive. The accompanying photograph on the right showed the same person with their eyes closed, after the moment of their death. The photographs depicted just the faces of the subjects, dramatically enlarged. Little information was provided, apart from a brief, often deeply moving text, edited from conversations Schels and Lakotta had with the subjects in the images before they died.

One powerful example came from a woman called Beate Taube, who died of cancer at just 44 years old. A quotation from her read: 'I think that after I have died, the suffering won't show on my face. If my soul is able to float away, as I hope it will, I will lie there completely at peace'. Visiting the exhibition, I was taken aback by how

peaceful the photographs were. Moving from person to person, there was no suggestion of pain, just a haunting sense of quiet, particularly in the posthumous photographs. In its quiet profundity, the exhibition was able to confront visitors with the ultimate loss, the loss of human life; to show the closing moments of each subjects' life, as well as what is left behind at the very moment that this loss comes into being.

## Recognise that What Is Absent Is Often Still Present

In the aftermath of loss, how can museums and galleries show the presence of absence? This could be absence on a large scale, of people and entire communities – the disappeared in post-dictatorship Argentina, the victims of the Holocaust – or perhaps losses suffered on a more individual level. An important characteristic of difficult and traumatic pasts is that what has been lost is still felt to be present in some sense, even if no longer visible. What visual strategies can be deployed to make absence felt and render it visible to visitors in the gallery space (Image 15.1)?

The photographs featured here are stills from a video work called 'Reflecting Memory' by the French-Algerian artist Kader Attia. Attia's work deals with, amongst many other things, ideas of trauma, repair, and healing. 'Reflecting Memory' is poetic, layered, and deceptively simple in much of its execution. The film draws upon the neurological condition known as phantom limb syndrome, a phenomenon that affects amputees or those who have lost limbs in other ways, such

**IMAGE 15.1** Kader Attia, *Reflecting Memory*, 2016. Single-channel HD digital video projection, colour, sound, 48:01 min. Courtesy of the Artist, Collection MACVAL, France, Collection MAC Marseille, France, Galleria Continua, Galerie Krinzinger, Lehmann Maupin and Galerie Nagel Draxler.

as bomb blast survivors. Although the limb is no longer there, they still *feel* it as a part of their physical self. The body feels the presence of something that is now absent. The syndrome is common and can be distressing and sometimes painful. In the film, Attia uses phantom limb syndrome as a metaphor for collective trauma and the experience of communities that have been traumatised by displacement, exile, loss. They feel the pain of what is no longer there. This is a loss that can be felt but not seen.

'Reflecting Memory' explores the complexities of the notion of healing from such loss. Using carefully positioned mirrors, Attia was able to stage scenes in which amputees appear as if their missing limbs have miraculously returned to them. A lady types on a typewriter with two hands, and a man sits at a table with both arms outstretched. Only later in the film does it become clear that the subjects in these shots are amputees. A visual illusion is at play. The lost limbs are conjured back into being, through reflecting what remains onto itself. These scenes are interspersed with interviews of surgeons and therapists, historians and anthropologists, reflecting on phantom limb syndrome and its possible application beyond medicine, as a phenomenon that might help us to understand societal pain and trauma. Attia describes his work as a 'reflection about the complexity of memory, the working of memory, the duty of memory and its representation; about "repair" as a form of "re-appropriation", but above all as a form of resistance'.[2] The film is a useful example of how to visualise absence, and in particular, traumatic loss. The artwork suggests that any hope for the possibility of healing, whether individual or collective, rests on both our ability to see ourselves as whole, but also our capacity to bear witness to what has been lost.

## Confront Visitors with the Complicity of Looking

In 1997, the Jewish Museum in Vienna staged an exhibition called *Masks: An attempt to define the Shoah*. The exhibition was the museum's first attempt to grapple with the ethics and possibilities involved in exhibiting a collection of objects that had been in the museum's stores for several years but had never been shown to the public: death masks of concentration camp prisoners. The masks had been created during the Second World War from the bodies of murdered Jews, and, after sitting for nearly five decades in the anthropological collections of the Museum of Natural History in Vienna, had been handed over to the Jewish Museum. These masks had been commissioned during the war by officials at the Natural History Museum for the purposes of 'scientific' research into the 'Jewish race'. As such, the masks bore painful witness to the dehumanisation and objectification of Jews during the Nazi era.

Curators at the Jewish Museum foregrounded this problem of objectification and display in the concept for the exhibition. Before visitors arrived at the room in which the masks were shown, introductory galleries laid out the narrative context for the story of the masks. An array of archival materials provided the documentary basis through which the masks came into being, such as correspondence between

officials at the Natural History Museum and the Institute, which prepared the death masks and profited from the trade of human remains. The masks, ostensibly the centre of the exhibition, were displayed in a deliberately stark and clinical manner, with no interpretation or captions. The anonymity of the masks was at first a challenge to the curators, closing off the possibility of visitors engaging with the personal circumstances of the individuals who had been objectified and stripped of their humanity. But ultimately, this allowed the curators to keep the focus on the magnitude of the crimes being remembered; crimes against humanity, not just against the individuals represented in this exhibition.

Walking into the next room, visitors were unexpectedly confronted with their own faces, looking at the masks just moments earlier. Cameras discretely installed behind the death masks had filmed visitors in the act of looking and broadcast that slightly delayed footage in the next room. In doing so, the exhibition executed a powerful reversal. Without realising or consenting, the visitor was transformed from subject to object. As the exhibition's curator Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek has written,

> The real centre (of the exhibition) was this room, with its monitors showing the visitors as they observed the masks. In the end, the focal point was not so much the other, the other person and her history. It was us, and our own history. How did we engage these others – who had been othered by being killed – and the bestiality that enabled their murder?
>
> (2016: 108)

Through the exhibition's organisation and design, in problematising the display of such difficult objects, it shifted the focus from the masks to its own audiences, confronting visitors with the complex question of how we are all to some degree entangled in these histories.

## Personalise the Loss

The next example moves us to the more recent past. ŠTO TE NEMA ('Why are you not here?') is a monument conceived and produced by Aida Šehović, a Bosnian-born artist. The monument commemorates the Srebrenica genocide, the murder of more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys in July 1995, during the Bosnian war. It rejects many of the familiar conventions of monumental architecture, choosing transience over permanence. The artist calls it a 'nomadic monument' because it travels every year to a different city. It is annually assembled and disassembled in one day, the anniversary of the genocide.

A huge mass of porcelain cups is laid on the ground in a public square, each cup representing one of the genocide victims. Šehović and a team of volunteers fill the cups with coffee in a moving ritual of communal remembrance. Passers-by are invited to participate in this act of commemoration, to personally engage with the monument. The filled cups of coffee sit untouched, a painful reminder of the

absence of those lost. The memorial is strikingly simple and yet humbling in scale. The pouring of coffee evokes the sort of intimate social relations that were violently brought to an end by the genocide and the painstaking act of filling each individual cup is an embodied way of honouring every one of the 8,373 individual victims.

### Don’t Overlook the Mundane

When it comes to exhibiting difficult narratives, it doesn’t necessarily follow that the objects exhibited must themselves be weighty or fraught. From a curatorial point of view, it can often be more effective to tell difficult stories with objects that are disarmingly ordinary and mundane.

The Museum of Broken Relationships was founded by two Croatian artists in 2006. When their relationship came to an end, they came up with the idea to crowd-source a collection of objects dealing with the topic of failed relationships. The museum exists in physical form in Zagreb and Los Angeles and online with a virtual collection. The relationships explored by the museum are far more expansive than merely romantic or sexual, encompassing platonic, familial, parental, professional ones as well. At the heart of the concept is the belief that objects are powerful containers for our emotions and effective tools for bearing witnesses to pain and loss.

Anyone can donate an object to the collection through the museum’s website. Object donors can either send the object itself or an image of it, along with a brief description, which functions as the object’s label. In any other context, a toaster would be a bafflingly mundane object to find on a museum plinth, but in this context it is far from mundane; instead, it is a symbol of a romantic relationship that evidently came to an acrimonious end. The caption on the toaster, written by the owner reads: ‘This is the toaster of vindication. When I moved out and I crossed the country, I took this toaster. That will show you. How are you going to toast anything now?’ Similarly, but perhaps more poignantly, is an iron in the collection, with the object label: ‘This iron was used to iron my wedding suit. Now it is the only thing I have left.’ In another display, a pile of Werther’s Originals caramel sweets bears the words: ‘I bought these for you, but you died first.’ We aren’t told what kind of relationship is being remembered here, but in this encounter with such a disarmingly ordinary exhibit, a remarkably powerful emotional response is elicited.

The museum’s exhibition continues to grow and has toured internationally. The model they have created is incredibly simple and inexpensive to produce. Each exhibit in the gallery consists of one crowd-sourced object with one caption, written by the donor. The stories encountered are moving, funny, uplifting, devastating. The disarmingly simple objects offer entry points to surprisingly powerful stories. It is interesting to imagine this ‘single object-single story’ model being used to tell a more unified, coherent narrative, such as the story of a particular historical period. What objects might people bring and how might individual testimonies be utilised to represent collective experiences of conflict or loss?

## Reconstruct the Genealogy of What Was Lost

'Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978' is an archival exhibition that was staged at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) in 2015. This was an exhibition about another exhibition, using exhibition-making as a medium through which to address exile and loss.

The Barcelona exhibition took as its subject matter a group art exhibition which had been produced in Beirut in 1978. The original exhibition, the 'International Art Exhibition for Palestine', was organised by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and brought together the work of 200 artists from over 30 countries, in solidarity with the Palestinian people. To realise this ambitious project, the PLO worked in collaboration with international solidarity groups, anti-fascist and anti-imperialist networks, such as the International Resistance Museum for Salvador Allende. In 1982, during the siege of Beirut, the building where the exhibition had been stored was bombed and many of the artworks and most of the archival records were irretrievably lost.

Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri, the curators of the MACBA show, engaged in an exhaustive attempt to reconstruct the history of the original exhibition, carrying out years of research to recover the remaining traces of its development and production. Fortuitously discovering the original exhibition catalogue in a library, they were able to interview the artists and individuals who had been involved to reconstruct the complex networks and conditions in which the exhibition was created.

Through these excavations into the history of the PLO exhibition, the MACBA curators reconstructed its lost history through testimonies and collected memories. They chose to organise this huge volume of stories in the gallery space using verses from Mahmoud Darwish's poem 'In the Presence of Absence' as a guide. It is interesting to note that the exhibition featured no original materials. Exhibits were displayed in various forms of reproduction, as photocopies, duplications, projections. In an interview in 2015, the curators stated: 'our intention was to recreate a world that doesn't exist anymore and of which scant traces remain'.[3]

## Let the Voices of the Missing Speak for Themselves

The Emmanuel Ringelblum Archive at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw is a priceless record of everyday life in unimaginable circumstances, documenting the experiences of Jews living in the Warsaw Ghetto. In addition to day-to-day life, it offers a rare encounter with the inner lives of those who were facing at best an uncertain and worrying future, and later, as events unfolded, confronting death and destruction. The archive was clandestinely assembled in a heroic act of self-memorialisation by historians, writers, and others living in the Ghetto, working in secret as the 'Oyneg Shabbos' group.[4] These individuals operated in extremely

**IMAGE 15.2** Permanent exhibition at the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw. Photograph by Bryce Lease.

dangerous circumstances to ensure that the material traces of their lives and experiences would survive, even if they might not. The extensive materials collected include newspapers, posters, artworks, diaries, essays, all of which were buried for safe-keeping in crates and milk cartons. Whilst a number were recovered after the war, some are still yet to be found. In 1999, the archive was formally added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register (Image 15.2).

In 2017, the Jewish Historical Institute opened a new exhibition of the Ringelblum Archive. The title of the permanent exhibition, *What We've Been Unable to Shout Out to the World*, is a quote taken from the written testimony of David Graber, who at nineteen was an active member of the *Oyneg Shabbos* group. On 3 August 1942, as he buried one part of the archive, Graber wrote,

> One of the streets next to us has been already blocked. The moods are horrible. We expect the worst. We're in a hurry… Goodbye. I hope we will manage to bury it…What we've been unable to shout out to the world, we buried in the ground.[5]

The first-person register of the exhibition's title is appropriate. Comprised primarily of the extraordinary documentary materials salvaged by the group, the exhibition needs to do nothing more than let the protagonists in this story speak for themselves.

## Inscribe Memory in the Landscape

Opened in 2018, The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Alabama is the first memorial in the United States to commemorate the victims of lynching. It was initiated by the Equal Justice Initiative to create the space – emotional as well as physical – for Americans to grapple with this tragic part of their history. The slogan of the MASS Design Group, the Boston-based design company who created the concept, is 'design that heals'.

The memorial comprises 800 steel columns, suspended from above, representing each of the 800 counties in which lynchings took place. Each column, or monument, is engraved with the names of the victims where these are known. Those whose names have not been recovered are commemorated with the word 'unknown'. Where possible, the age of the victim is included, as well as the alleged 'crime' used as justification for the lynching. Gathering this information, which detailed over 4,000 lynchings, required significant research and cataloguing efforts due to the lack of documentation in this area. The nearby Legacy Museum displays jars of soil, collected from the locations where lynchings took place, the names of the victims printed on the front.

Bryan Stevenson, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative has said:

> I think we have to try to get people to understand that when we confront this history, we don't have to fear punishment. I'm a lawyer. I defend people who have done things that are terrible. And I'm persuaded that each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. Because of that, I want to talk about this history of enslavement and of native genocide and of lynching and segregation, not because I'm interested in punishing America. I want to liberate us.
>
> (cited in Klein 2020)

Adjacent to the main memorial lie duplicates of the 800 steel columns. These duplicates are intended as a call to action to each of the 800 counties represented, to claim their monuments and erect them on their own territory as markers of memory. As they lie unclaimed on this site, the columns additionally function as monuments to the refusal of many to engage in this process of memorialisation and reckoning with the past.

## Expose Multiple, Conflicting Voices

In considering how museums might exhibit difficult narratives, it might be useful to think about the limitations of operating with a single curatorial voice, as is often the case in traditional museum exhibitions. Allowing space to conceive of multiple and even conflicting voices might open up interesting possibilities for new ways to stage and interpret difficult stories. In *Jews, Money, Myth*, which I curated for the Jewish Museum London in 2019, we ended up arriving at the idea of including a

**IMAGE 15.3** *Jews, Money, Myth*, view of exhibition gallery on entry, featuring commissioned film by Jeremy Deller. Photograph by Ian Lillicrapp.

multiplicity of voices through the complex and fraught process of the exhibition's development (Image 15.3).

The exhibition historicised the evolution and circulation of ideas connecting Jews with money and financial greed. Unsurprisingly, this involved dealing with material that was uncomfortable and, in some cases, had been produced explicitly to propagate antisemitic ideologies. One of the most troubling exhibits to deal with was a nineteenth-century sculpture of Nathan Mayer Rothschild, the head of the British branch of the Rothschild banking family, created by the French artist Jean Pierre Dantan. Rothschild is grotesquely depicted as subhuman and bestial, clutching onto bags of coins with demonic greed. The exhibition team reflected on how or even whether to display such a startlingly offensive object, carefully considering the ethical dimensions of this decision and the possibilities of finding ways to call attention to these considerations through the display methodology itself. We considered a number of options but could not reach consensus. Ultimately, we decided to exhibit the sculpture oriented away from visitor sightlines to avoid giving it too much attention.

This is just one of many fraught conversations that took place as we negotiated the question of how to curate these difficult narratives and unsettling artefacts. At a certain point, it became clear that the ambivalences and contestations we routinely found ourselves engaged in deserved some form of expression in the exhibition itself. The mechanism we agreed upon for this purpose was a set of 'alternative captions', which made visible to the public some of the invisible processes that were taking place behind the scenes. These alternative captions animated the gallery

space with a multiplicity of voices, representing the differing perspectives of the individuals who put the exhibition together. They dealt with the ethics of display as well as more philosophical concerns, such as how to avoid apologetics when debunking myths. The caption positioned alongside the Dantan sculpture read

*Exhibition Curator:* *I am worried about the ethics of showing this much antisemitic material. The Rothschild sculpture is so gruesome I wonder if we should even show it.*

*Museum Director:* *I know what you mean. That sculpture is really upsetting. I wonder if we should find a different way to display it. How about using a mirror in the showcase and displaying the object with its back to us? That way it won't be clearly on show. People will have to make a particular effort to look at it and will see themselves looking back as they look.*

*Exhibition Curator:* *I am not sure about that. Wouldn't this be giving the sculpture too much attention? Wouldn't we be perversely treating it with too much respect?*

These captions were among the last texts written for the exhibition, compiled at the absolute latest point possible before installation began. They had not been part of our interpretation strategy until the very end. Ultimately, they forced their way in. Abandoning the need for consensus, we instead decide to harness the conflicting voices towards a creative purpose.

## Notes

1 'The Theft', https://www.gardnermuseum.org/about/theft-story.
2 Attia cited in https://www.bakonline.org/program-item/what-we-mean/reflecting-memory-2016/.
3 Salti and Khouri cited in 'Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978', https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/232340.
4 See https://onegszabat.org/en/.
5 See https://www.jhi.pl/en/exhibitions/what-weve-been-unable-to-shout-out-to-the-world--permanent-exhibition, 105.

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