

MEMORIALS AND MEMORIALIZATION

Re-curating Testimony

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Toward a New Pedagogy for Learning from the Past



Erica Lehrer

The last few decades have seen an upsurge among anthropologists (and others) of critical attention to memory in its various manifestations. Simultaneously, there has been a proliferation of museums, memorials and media-based interventions seeking to represent and remember past atrocity. Experimenting at the intersection of these trends, we have developed a “curatorial pedagogy” that engages students in both critical thinking and creative production around the question of what it means for public audiences to “learn from the past” in the face of ongoing global violence.

In the experimental seminar “[Curating Difficult Knowledge: Engaging with the aftermath of violence through public displays, memorials, and sites of conscience](#),” we posed two main questions to our students: What particular challenges arise in attempts to deploy memories and documentation of violence for public display? And what innovations in curatorial practice might these challenges inspire?



Monica Patterson

The realm of museum practice is often seen as a stagnant site that fell by the wayside during anthropology’s great theoretical leap forward since the 1970s. We consider this domain an untapped resource for experimentation for ethnographers and other critical humanists and social scientists, a sphere that holds promise for fulfilling the still-largely-unheeded call for radical ethnographic experimentation that came in the wake of the “writing culture” crisis. The proliferation of eyewitness testimony as a cultural product and site of political potency makes this subject matter particularly rich for experimentation.

DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE

In North America the mainstream public generally approaches stories of suffering with the sense that they are difficult because they contain subject matter that is painful, tragic or gruesome. Less attention is typically paid to the problems inherent in the transmission of such stories: that they are inevitably mediated, perspectival and often contested. Educational theorist

We continually urged students to be mindful of social and cultural difference as well as power and perspective, asking them to attend to the fact that in a global age, there can be no presumed unitary public who will predictably respond to calls to consider, sympathize, or identify with representations of any particular group’s suffering.

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Deborah Britzman's notion of "difficult knowledge" (1998) shifts the locus of difficulty, asking us to look beyond the subject matter itself toward the audiences receiving it. As opposed to the easily assimilated "lovely knowledge" of comfortable truths, "difficult knowledge" induces a breakdown of interpretive certitude and reified notions of identity, forcing audiences to confront unfamiliar perspectives, unsettling and disarming them, and thus opening new spaces for learning, understanding, growth, and change.

Concordia University's [Centre for Oral History & Digital Storytelling](#) provided our students with DVDs of Holocaust survivor testimony collected as part of their extensive oral history project, "[Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and other Human Rights Violations](#)". Drawing on our backgrounds in anthropology, history and museum studies, our goal was to bring students into deep engagement with the testimonies while highlighting the multiple factors mediating this encounter, and to help them to produce public displays based on this testimony that explicitly engage the representational challenges they faced.

We assigned the students readings on various aspects of "difficulty" as it related to the subject matter. We used Holocaust memory scholarship to introduce the idea that even the most intimate remembering is mediated by larger cultural structures, symbols, and genres. They then tackled conflicting but powerful claims about the genre of Holocaust testimony: that the Holocaust is essentially un-knowable, or conversely, that it is too easily knowable, through whitewashed, universalized forms like the popular Anne Frank and *Schindler's List* stories. Our students considered a range of anxieties around the public lives of Holocaust memory, including its use by Jews and by other groups for a range of cultural and political projects.

The course engaged difficult and pragmatic questions: How do people relate to Holocaust testimonies that exist and circulate apart from their tellers, in a social reality in which the viewers are ever-more removed from these materials in terms of community, culture, generation, and experience? What are our responsibilities to various claims concerning the integrity of survivors' testimonies, and to larger, potentially conflicting, imperatives such as the protection of human rights? We continually urged students to be mindful of social and cultural difference as well as power and perspective, asking them to attend to the fact that in a global age, there can be no presumed unitary public who will predictably respond to calls to consider, sympathize, or identify with representations of any particular group's suffering.

WHY CURATORIAL PRACTICE?

As Annette Wiewiorka (2002) has noted, in working with testimony, two moral imperatives come into conflict: the right to define the meaning of one's own life story, and the historian's quest for broader truths. This dialectic, she notes, can pit two categories of practitioners against one another: "those who know" (historians and cultural critics) and "those who heal" (collectors of testimony). To these conflicting imperatives, we add the obligation of a third category of increasingly significant testimonial practitioners: "those who transmit": memory brokers—or curators, broadly construed—who develop mechanisms to deliver testimony to audiences in public settings.

We are intrigued by the possibilities that curating testimony might offer to communicate on multiple levels simultaneously. We had students read key texts in experimental museology to help them imagine new ways to represent materials that respond to—or even exceed—the current advances in museum practice. But beyond understanding key debates in theory, we wanted students to attempt the hard work of representation firsthand. We led them through a series of close-reading exercises to select and prepare the most promising aspects of their testimonies for curation. We challenged them to navigate longstanding representational and ethical dilemmas of anthropological and historical work, including issues of empathy, identification and comparison, and questions about the limits of representation, the communicability of pain, the politics of knowledge production, and the relationship between content and form. One of our

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greatest pedagogical successes was witnessing the ways in which students began to identify some of their own cultural assumptions: what they deemed appropriate representation, authentic expressions of experience, their presumptions about identity, and how they sacralized and romanticized survivors.

The promise of a public audience for their works helped our students understand more deeply the choices ethnographers and other documentarians must make as they craft their final public representations of the people they study. They felt the weighty responsibility of reworking and transmitting another's story, and struggled with the inherent selectiveness of such work and the inevitably partial end products. They also had the opportunity to look over the shoulder of the original interviewer on the DVD, considering what lessons or questions were habitually privileged and thus shaped the testimonies given in patterned ways, and what new concerns they themselves might bring to the materials. In considering their audience, students had to confront the powerful stakes that communities—and givers of testimony themselves—have in particular framings of testimonies and the privileging of certain interpretations. Students came to understand the diversity both within and across imagined publics, developing an appreciation of the public lives of historical materials, and the challenges of doing public scholarship.

PROJECTS AND OUTCOMES

The students presented their projects to one another in a workshop-style [critique session](#), followed by smaller group discussions with members of stakeholder audiences for the two projects that we hope will find broader public audiences. The two strongest projects that emerged were those that defined specific “difficulties” and grappled with them in nuanced, creative ways. The non-linear, three-dimensional space of the gallery offered a social space for communicating multiple kinds of information and for dialogue among viewers, enabling new kinds of thought and action.

The 20-minute student documentary, *A Storyteller's Story*, considered how a survivor of violence became a professional giver of testimony in educational settings. The students filmed Ted, a Hungarian Jewish Holocaust survivor, as he prepared for and carried out his testimonial work. The resulting film was split onto three adjacent screens, alternating between an intimate portrayal of the survivor in his “offstage” life, and shots of his well-rehearsed testimony, raising thorny questions about how format, venue and audience affect how difficult stories are told. The audience discomfort at the survivor's repetition of polished anecdotes regardless of the questions posed also forced us as viewers to ask ourselves what we *want from, expect of, and imagine about* testimony and its givers, and what happens when we are disappointed.

Unsettling Identities: Struggles of a Child Holocaust Survivor with Jewishness was a short audio installation to be listened to in the privacy of darkness. It drew attention to some of the longer-term struggles with estranged identities and socially mandated identity categories, an aspect of the aftermath of persecution that is difficult to address publicly. Dutch Jew Yehudi's testimony troubles the idea that Jewish survivors were able to easily return to stable Jewish identities in the post-war period—or indeed that such identities exist, out there, waiting for people to step into them. Furthermore, his experience unsettles a key image of Jewish victimhood: not only did Yehudi not see himself as a victim, but he also felt deeply conflicted about Jews and his own Jewishness during and after the war.

In preparing students for a range of careers, as well as teaching them how to be critical thinkers, this kind of “curatorial dreaming” is an important pedagogical intervention. It demands that we be not only deconstructive, but also constructive in our scholarship. Curating means not only creating, but taking care, not just of materials, but of the powerful process of making meaning out of other people's lives.

[Erica Lehrer](#) (*Anthropology*) and [Monica Eileen Patterson](#) (*Anthropology and History*) received their Ph.D.s from the University of Michigan, as well as participating in the [UM Museum Studies Program](#). They are based at the

Centre for Ethnographic Research and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Violence at Concordia University, which Lehrer directs and where Patterson is a postdoctoral fellow. They are co-editors, with Cynthia Milton, of [Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places](#) (Palgrave, 2011). Lehrer's research has focused on [sites of Jewish memory and identity construction](#), and her book [Revisiting Jewish Poland: Tourism, Memory, Reconciliation](#) is forthcoming from Indiana University Press (2012). She is also co-editing (with Shelley Butler) [Curatorial Dreams: Critics Imagine Exhibitions](#). Patterson's research, teaching, and curatorial work investigates violence, memory, and constructions of childhood in late apartheid South Africa. She is the author of numerous articles and coeditor of [Anthrohistory: Unsettling Knowledge, Questioning Discipline](#) (University of Michigan Press, 2011). The two student projects discussed, along with other CEREV works, will appear at the 2011 AAA Innovent [Ethnographic Terminalia](#).

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