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Field Notes / Notes de Terrain

Yasmine Eve Lucas

Dimensions in Testimony[SM]: On Revamping Holocaust Museums

The Montreal Holocaust Museum breaking ground. Photos by author, February 1, 2022 (top two photographs) and February 1, 2023 (bottom two photographs)

As of April 2025, the new and expanded Montreal Holocaust Museum (MHM) is breaking ground in downtown Montreal, miles away from where it previously stood: Cotes-des-Neiges, a diverse neighborhood with a sizeable Jewish population. Just two summers ago, the Toronto Holocaust Museum opened with a ceremony in which Conservative Premier Doug Ford announced that Holocaust education would become mandatory for grades six through twelve. Marking its thirty-year anniversary that year, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. announced that it had fundraised 1.1 billion dollars to expand its online presence. Trustees also shared with me that a major donation will enable the long-anticipated revitalization of its permanent exhibition. Other Holocaust projects currently underway include exhibit overhauls at the LA Holocaust Museum and Detroit's Zekelman Holocaust Center, the first Holocaust museum established in the United States. The Florida Holocaust Museum recently acquired the USC Shoah Foundation's Dimensions in Testimony℠ technology: this holographic device "enables people to ask questions that prompt real-time responses from pre-recorded video interviews with Holocaust survivors and other witnesses to genocide." This technology will also feature in the MHM's new facility.

In recent years, memorial projects of this nature have drawn criticism. American essayist Dara Horn worries that they foster a "love" for "dead Jews" at the expense of

the living, while jason chalmers, in a 2023 essay published in *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, argues that the MHM must undertake significant efforts to decolonize its exhibit: "The MHM's permanent exhibit presents national history in a way that reproduces Indigenous erasure." When I set out to research Holocaust museums in North America in August 2022, I was aware of such criticisms. My fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork would take me to the MHM, the USHMM, and other museums across North America, asking how these exhibits might instill a sense of transgenerational or collective trauma in their visitors. These feelings, I would find, were informed by sublime representations of the Holocaust: artifactual displays, photographs, and personal testimonies that elicited feelings of incomprehensible horror, feelings that instilled a sense of morality and even heroism in their viewers. Questioning such undertakings—for the ways in which they elicit strong emotions that block critical thinking—I hoped that newer projects, then underway, might introduce significant changes.

This hope seemed affirmed on September 8, 2022, during the unveiling of the winning architectural design for the MHM. I sat in the audience, surrounded by family friends, as a narrated video guided us through a virtual rendering of the limestone structure, to the tune of a gentle, somewhat dissonant, flute concerto: "Visitors move between the emotional intensity of the exhibits and shared stories to moments of relief and respite offered by nature and daylight . . . reminding us that there's hope, solidarity and courage, in a time of crisis and uncertainty."

Following presentations by key players, the floor was opened to questions from the audience, consisting mostly of donors. An older man raised his hand: "I think the purpose of the museum is to make you suffer. If you succeed to do that, later you can give visitors hope. But the purpose of the museum is not to give them hope. It's to give them an experience."

Shirley Blumberg, the lead architect, defended her team's vision: "We didn't want to lock in the pain. The point is we survived. This is not a museum about despair."

As I pursued my research, I started to sense that such new visions, which promised to shift the focus from horror to light and renewal, were in fact not so much new models, as updates of the old. When I spoke with her, for instance, Blumberg's aversion to the comment made during the Q&A appeared to be a matter of aesthetic preference, rather than educational value per se. She said, "The Miami Memorial—have you seen it? No? You should look at that. It's as if Monty Python was designing a memorial. It is so grotesque. It's laughable. And that's what that man wanted."

I asked Blumberg what she envisioned for the museum. She said, "The museum's mission is to reach out to other communities. Because genocide is not our prerogative, you know—unhappily. Then I think it's very, very important that people from

different communities feel they can come in. That's why they want a cafe at the new museum. You can just come have a coffee."

In her eyes, the problem with the Miami Memorial was that it did not make non-Jews feel at home—it discouraged them from just grabbing a coffee. To draw on American rabbi-scholar Michael Berenbaum's insight from the 1990s, the horror got in the way of having people recognize that "the Holocaust is one of those few events that forever transform the nature of what it means to be human." Or, in the words of UCLA literary scholar Michael Rothberg in more recent years, it has people forget that "the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories."

Indeed, as I interviewed more visitors and trustees, I came to sense that what was happening was that old ways of eliciting sublime feelings were losing their power. What we were witnessing then were not so much efforts to rethink Holocaust education, as to update old models. The MHM offers a case in point. To understand the thinking behind the expansion, I spoke with Christopher Skeete, Quebec's minister responsible for the fight against racism, a position formed in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and thus far consisting, from what I gleaned from our conversation, of implementing DEI trainings across the province. Skeete had agreed to extend government financial assistance to the new MHM, without which, according to one longtime trustee, its expansion would not have been possible.

Skeete told me he felt compelled support the project because he saw parallels between Quebec nationalism and Zionism, and between the MHM's message of tolerance and his own trajectory as a Black Quebecer becoming a leading member of the Coalition Avenir Québec, a party that identifies as resolutely autonomist, nationalist, non-sovereigntist. He started to draw associations between the two nationalisms when he visited the USHMM as a child. He cited the survivor identification cards, still handed out to visitors at the entrance to the permanent exhibit, as particularly formative: "Je me souviens toujours, après trois heures de visite au musée, j'ai appris que la petite fille que j'avais était morte, elle a été tuée" ("I always remember, after three hours of walking through the museum, I learned that the little girl I had was dead, had been killed"). The underlying message of tolerance held great emotional value for Skeete because he had almost lost his French proficiency following his Quebecois mother's death in his youth. He saw overcoming Quebec racism and enlisting in a nationalist party as reclaiming his maternal roots.

That, idiosyncrasies aside, Skeete's perception of the Holocaust aligns squarely with the Quebecois status quo is highlighted by a recent controversy involving the Coalition Avenir Québec. During Skeete's tenure, the party cancelled an anti-racism training program for healthcare workers after discovering that it acknowledged the existence of systemic racism—particularly anti-Indigenous racism. For Skeete, the

Holocaust could provide a message of overcoming such discrimination, which he saw as biologically hardwired: "N'oubliez pas, les humains ont été programmés pour identifier des similarités" (Don't forget, humans have been programmed to identify similarities"). This message reflected that of the Holocaust museums in which I conducted my fieldwork. Rather than primarily reflecting on decolonial frameworks or structural inequalities, these museums emphasized—and promised to continue to emphasize—personal overcoming. On a minimal, psycho-affective level, the sublime feeling of confronting the Holocaust—in the form, for instance, of a pile of shoes from Majdanek—was structurally akin to imagining oneself as overcoming discrimination.

People I spoke with who did not share such individualized conceptions of human rights were either marginalized from, or interpellated into, such frameworks. Rabbi Ronnie Cahana and his wife Karen Cahana, a social worker, had been consultants for one proposed MHM architectural design. Rabbi Cahana, especially, wanted the museum to emphasize Jewish themes of rebirth and mourning. As we sat together on their sectional sofa, Karen turned to Ronnie: "One thing that you kept emphasizing was the importance of having a prayer space or meditation space, or a place to reflect." Ronnie spoke and—because of a stroke that left him paraplegic over a decade ago—Karen translated: "To bring God back into the world instead of snuffing Him out..."

Perhaps ambivalent about bringing God per se into a nominally secular, provincially funded institution, the architect the Cahanas worked with, Danny Pearl, had submitted a design that centered dialogue and environmental stewardship, which he saw as Jewish themes. In Montreal's Saint-Henri neighborhood—in the company of his poodle—Pearl shared his thoughts on losing the MHM architectural bid: "A memorial should not be about emboldening people to attack. It should be the opposite. It's about opening your arms for a dialogue." He pursued, "It's a hard thing to say, but all museums today should be built for kids of the future, because we've already taken away their past. It's like, the First Nations abuse. It's like, the planet abuse. Anybody entering society today is entering in a minus ten situation. They're already behind the eight ball and they haven't done anything."

This sense of urgency had Pearl reflecting on the museum's new neighbourhood. He explained the importance of creating an environmentally sustainable building in "one of the most problematic sites in the city as far as a heat island." He then discussed the significance of removing the MHM from the Cote-des-Neiges/Snowdon area, where it had stood since its founding in 1976: "There's the whole idea of going from a Jewish kind of ghetto-ish situation in Snowdon next to the Jewish Y and other Jewish things, and having the courage to go on to Saint-Laurent, the Main, where the culture at one point *was* very Jewish, but certainly isn't today. It's incredibly di-

verse. So going there and thinking that you can somehow retell the history of the past and take your place out of a given right, because you were there before, would be an error in judgment. It's the opposite. For me, it's like, if you're there, you're there to show a generosity and an openness, or you shouldn't be there."

Pearl seemed to share Blumberg's idea that the museum should be a welcoming space. Nonetheless, he stood out as being the only person I spoke with who did not cite the Main's Yiddish history as sufficient reason for moving the museum to this now trendy, multicultural, and mostly French-speaking neighbourhood. Based on my conversations with people who had sat on the competition committee, his design was not "classical" enough to win the architectural bid. Perhaps to achieve such a level of classicism, Blumberg had consulted with a Dutch-born, Waterloo-based art historian, Robert Jan van Pelt, rather than with a Conservative rabbi. Like Rabbi Cahana, Van Pelt is a son of Holocaust survivors. He served as an expert witness in defense of American historian Deborah Lipstadt in her case against British writer David Irving, who accused Lipstadt of libel for painting him as a Holocaust denier in her 1993 book, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. Van Pelt wrote about the experience in his acclaimed 2016 book, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial*. Perhaps because of his ability to appeal to secular, and not only Jewish, audiences, Van Pelt has recently been named co-curator of the new MHM, along with Marie-Blanche Fourcade, a non-Jewish Quebecois ethnographer and curator.

Where museum projects did promise new ideas or aesthetics, rather than primarily reformulations of old ones, they sometimes left me a bit uneasy. For instance, van Pelt worried that video testimonials filmed in the 1980s and 1990s got in the way of visitors identifying with survivors. He said, "You have old people in really unfashionable clothing right now, and they talk about when they were young. And so I think, while the survivors are still alive, it's very difficult to do away with this format. But I think that the solution that Michaela Melián had for the Munich NS Terror Memorial, called Memory Loops, is preferable. She had actors basically giving, basically *redoing* the testimony. And they are of the age of the people at the time of the testimony.... It's only audiotapes, it's not video anymore."

The Toronto Holocaust Museum seems to have solved a similar problem of anachronism and poor fashion by filming new survivor testimonies against greenscreens. In the current exhibit, we find survivors floating in black voids, recounting events from seventy-five-plus years ago to everyone and no one. Likewise, the plan, currently underway, to include more Montreal survivor stories in the MHM is an important cultural supplement but leaves unproblematized the underlying political quandaries posed by mainstream institutions of Holocaust memory.

For instance, chalmers argues that the new exhibit might incorporate decolonizing practices by drawing parallels between Nazism and settler colonialism. He also

proposes featuring Palestinian stories in the section on immigration to Israel/Palestine in 1948. While some of these recommendations might be adopted at a later stage, my interviews left me doubtful. Trustees I spoke with who did engage with political questions often reduced these to issues of "consent," in line with the horror-to-therapy shift insinuated by the winning MHM architectural design: "moments of relief and respite … in a time of crisis and uncertainty."

Exemplifying this trend was one new MHM trustee, who said she was interested in "ethical concerns." When I asked her what she meant by this, she said, "In the ethical concerns about running a museum and the choices. I'm also trying to think about how when displaying things, you want to educate the person—the person like me who's incredibly sensitive—but you want that person to be able to sleep that night. How do you walk that fine line?"

In response to such concerns, new design features—including privacy walls, trigger warnings, and smaller-scale images of atrocity—are being incorporated into the MHM, the USHMM, and, according to one lead curator, the Zekelman Holocaust Center. For accessibility reasons, textual content will also be condensed and presented in larger fonts. As one MHM trustee put it, "If you have writing, it has to be legible to everybody."

USHMM privacy wall. Photo by author, May 9, 2023

Some trustees' ambivalence toward the new culture of consent was evident when, during my month in Washington, from one USHMM visit to the next, I noticed that particularly disturbing images had been removed from open view and placed behind privacy walls. Referring to these changes, one curator said, "I'm imagining we won't do anything exactly like that again, because I think those walls have the opposite effect. In fact, you see these young people just crowding around the image, looking at it." This ambivalence surfaced elsewhere as well: several trustees acknowledged that images of atrocity would remain on display if their removal risked compro-

mising the overall "impact" of the exhibition. In an institution that relies on the production of sublime feelings—which evoke the redemptive if purely inward overcoming of "hate" and suffering—what will happen if triggering such affects becomes taboo? At the same time, my research suggests there may be little cause for worry: as much as horrifying images, testimonies and piles of shoes may induce sublime feelings.

By introducing trigger warnings and reducing the number of grisly photographs, new exhibits follow the lead of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Housed in a breathtaking building, shaped to look like a Yoruba headdress, the NMAAHC can be seen, jutting up into the sky, from the USHMM's entrance. Within the museum, the only photo of atrocity is, from what I could tell over the course of my two three-hour visits, a small newspaper clipping of Emmett Till's mutilated face. Only a few people can gaze on it at a time as a security guard admits them, in small groups, into a chapel where his casket also lies. My friend Shaheen, with whom I visited the NMAAHC, remarked that Till's mother had requested that the photo be published in newspapers for the world to see what white men had done to her son. I wondered, however, whether her demand still stood in the present context. Was the NMAAHC a space of mourning, civic incitement, or entertainment? And if it was one or more of these things today, what would it be in forty-five years, the time since the MHM first opened?

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