MEMORIAL MUSEUMS AND MATERIAL WITNESSES:
FRAMING OBJECTS AS WITNESSES TO TRAUMA

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I will examine how objects are given narrative voices by memorial museum curators, and how these narrative qualities facilitate ethical and critical relations between museumgoers and traumatic histories. My two main points of contention arise out of these questions: 1. What does it mean for an object to be a witness in the context of trauma? 2. What might the material dimensions of witnessing accomplish in regards to museumgoers understanding of and ability to respond to their memorial museum experience? Instead of being silent witnesses to the past, I propose that objects can become contact points of ethical engagement and understanding when it concerns traumatic events in history. The ability and necessity of seeing objects as more than mere things to be manipulated by language and curatorial framing is crucial in cases of trauma, as they can become portals that can help overcome the “constitutive failure of linguistic representation in the post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Vietnam era” (Leys, p. 267f). This thesis will contribute to the theoretical and museological conversation concerning objects and their representation in the aftermath of trauma, with an emphasis on interobjectivity as a tool to combat consumptive empathy. Stressing the dialogic and relational functions of material witnesses will underscore the ultimate responsibility of the museumgoer to take on the role of secondary witness, a position that is perhaps fraught with unclear obligations, but is nevertheless crucial in the transmission of difficult histories.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Figure 1: Identification Card USHMM. Photo credit: Amy J. Freier, May 15, 2013.
“For the dead and the living we must bear witness.” This statement begins the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s (USHMM) permanent exhibition. As the museumgoer waits for her turn at the elevators she is asked to take an identification card, (Figure 1). This card is the first tangible object the visitor encounters on her visit, and the only material object she can take home. The rhetoric of witnessing is used throughout the USHMM. Not only does the USHMM call its patrons to witness the history of the Holocaust, but it also frames material objects as witnesses. Unlike artefacts in natural history museums, objects that derive from traumatic events in history have a much more complicated relationship to both the people who experienced the events and the visitors who experience the objects in the museum. Often, memorial museum curators frame objects as witnesses, thus narratively transforming the objects into subjects - giving inanimate objects animated positions. In this thesis I will examine the ways in which the USHMM facilitates witnessing through its use of material objects in two of its prominent exhibits.

The permanent exhibit at the USHMM includes a display of shoes, a haunting mound of greying objects belonging to those annihilated during the Holocaust. Above the mound, an excerpt from Moses Schulstein’s poem “I Saw a Mountain” stretches across

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1 In this thesis, I will use “visitor” and “museumgoer” interchangeably. I recognize that the wide demographic variety of visitors and museumgoers and their experiences cannot be fully encompassed within this thesis. To be specific, when I speak about visitors and museumgoers, I envision visitors who predominantly have no familial connection with the Holocaust and are part of the third or fourth generation born after 1945.
the wall: “We are the Shoes. We are the last witnesses.” According to these lines, the shoes are meant to act as witnesses to one aspect of the Holocaust. It is their materiality that saved them from the hellfire, and that allowed them to survive and “tell” museumgoers their story. By extension, the shoes, and to a similar extent the Identification Cards, are meant to rope the museumgoer into a position of secondary witnessing, bearing witness to the shoes’ testamentary function. Dora Apel (2002) popularized the term secondary witness when referring to artists who engage with memories of the Holocaust and in so doing create testimonial representations which are removed, or secondary, from the written or spoken testimony of Holocaust survivors. In the context of the USHMM, the museumgoer engages in another form of secondary witnessing. While they themselves do not necessarily create art as a form of secondary witnessing, they are meant to experience the testimony on display and in their own lives pass on both the stories of the witnesses and their own experiences of the museum. As this thesis will show, the shoes facilitate a point at which this transference is palpable.

A similar strategy is used in one of the USHMM’s virtual exhibits, “Silent Witness: The Story of Lola Rein and her Dress.” In this exhibit it is unclear whether the “silent witness” is Lola Rein, a woman who spent three of her childhood years in hiding during the Holocaust, or whether the “silent witness” is her dress, which acts as the central focus of Lola’s testimony. Through both the narrative and visual framing of this virtual exhibit it becomes clear that the dress is meant to stand in not only for the memories Lola has of her mother, who did not survive the Holocaust, but also the stories
of other children who experienced the Holocaust. As described in the virtual exhibit, the dress “is a testament to resilience and survival, yet also a memorial to the up to a million and a half Jewish children who, unlike Lola, perished in the Holocaust.” These are but two examples of objects that are similarly embodied as witnesses in the museum’s exhibits and displays.

Starting in the early 1990s studies concerning trauma and traumatic representations have been on the rise. Writers, such as Dori Laub and Shoshanna Felman, Cathy Caruth, Ruth Leys, and Dominic LaCapra, all penned works that blend narrative theory, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, and history, which created an interdisciplinary approach to the study of trauma and witnessing. The politics of trauma, while not the ultimate focus of this thesis, are necessary in our understanding of representations of the Holocaust in particular, and recent world history at large. Trauma and its subsequent representations are concerned with “crises of witnessing” and “unclaimed experience.”

In the psychoanalytic sense of the word trauma is defined as “A psychic injury, esp. one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed” (“trauma,” definition 1, OED). Although there is no defined consensus of what kinds of events can be constituted as traumatic, it is understood that an “emotional shock to the memory” effects the voluntary recall of the person who underwent the traumatic event and thus alters the representations he or she subsequently creates. Ruth Leys explains,

The idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or
dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim in unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. (p. 2)

The traumatic sufferer is said to be “possessed” by the event and in some instances haunted by it in dreams, flashbacks, or other hallucinations in which the past is immanently felt in the present. Being possessed by the event reinforces to the power the event has over the traumatic sufferer, or rather the powerless position he/she is left in as direct access to traumatic memories are not easily recalled.

If the traumatic event dissociates or cleaves experience from memory, what results are events without reliable witnesses. The role of the witness is crucial to our understanding of traumatic events, and to our understanding of objects as witnesses. To witness is closely tied to the judicial system wherein a person “has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it” (Agamben, p. 17). To bear witness involves a communication of the event, which includes a transmission of knowledge. In the context of memorial museums Roger Simon defines this transmission as difficult knowledge. Difficult knowledge does not just concern communicating information about violent and traumatic pasts; rather it denotes a challenging experience that confronts the visitor with “significant challenges to their museological expectations and interpretive abilities” (p. 432). In the space of memorial museums these challenges include listening and thinking critically about what is and what is not included, along with being mindful of over-identifying with the stories on display (empathically equating
another’s experience with one’s own life experience). When executed carefully, exhibits that challenge and engage museumgoers embroil them in a responsibility-driven activity to bear witness to their experience of the museum, thus becoming secondary witnesses to the history on display.

Using Agamben’s definition, I want to make three distinctions about what and who bears witness in the USHMM. First, there are many films that can be seen in the museum; video testimony from the Fortunoff Archive along with footage from the Holocaust (both US. and German army/newsreel film). These are eyewitness accounts that are meant to attest to the events that happened during the Holocaust. Second, are physical remnants. These are objects that are either pulled from sites of horror or in some cases reproduced so as to preserve the original. These are material witnesses, which are meant to add depth to the eyewitness accounts and provide valuable authenticity to the history on display.

Finally, “we,” the museum visitors, are also meant to bear witness or at least become witnesses to the experience of the museum and the history is provides – “for the dead and the living we must bear witness.” Because of curatorial choices, these USHMM exhibits narratively place the museum visitor in a position between spectator and

2 Reproductions in the USHMM include a brick wall, a portion of the barracks from Auschwitz, and most iconically the gates from Auschwitz.
3 In legal terms a material witness is someone who has information that no other person has and who is integral to the prosecution of the case. I have specifically opted to use this term out of context when referring to the material remnants of trauma to underscore the importance of their inclusion in the museum as witnesses – as material object witnesses they too hold information that no other person has.
secondary witness. The museum is a space that promotes spectatorship, the objects are on display and there is always an element of stimulating and exciting the visitor’s senses. However, in the case of the USHMM the visitor is asked to be an active participant with the history on display. Through the power and authority of the objects and narratives on hand, the visitor is put in contact with those people and objects that experienced the events directly. The secondary witness is implicated in the telling and sharing of this history, with an eye towards preventing future atrocities. In the case of the Holocaust, responsibility is encompassed in the words “never again,” which perform a guarantee that what the witness has gone through and what the secondary witness has learned will not happen again.

In this thesis, I will examine how objects, which are silent witnesses to the past, are given narrative voices, and how these narrative qualities facilitate ethical and critical relations between museumgoers and traumatic histories. My two main points of contention arise out of these questions: 1. What does it mean for an object to be a witness in the context of trauma? 2. What might the material dimensions of witnessing accomplish in regards to the museumgoers understanding of and ability to respond to their memorial museum experience?

Significant scholarly attention has been given towards understanding how the testimonies of eyewitnesses affect secondary witnesses (Landsberg 2004; Levine 2006; Sarkar & Walker 2010). In the last twenty years, studies about testimonial literature and photography, sites and places of memory, and more recently memorial museums have
dominated our understanding of trauma and witnessing. Underlying many of these studies is a belief that knowing or understanding the experiences of others is crucial to any effort to stop traumatic pasts from being repeated. However, this attitude, especially in the context of museums, has been changing; knowledge alone is no longer the answer. In their 2011 edited collection, *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*, Erica Lehrer and Cynthia Milton argue that “if knowledge of the facts of atrocity is no longer seen as a panacea, neither is confrontation the sole communicative posture of endeavors to leverage the past in the present” (p. 1). Working from this understanding, that knowledge alone cannot shape the museumgoers ethical obligations, this thesis aims to move the conversation about witnessing in museums beyond the difference between face-to-face testimony and audio/video testimony towards a consideration of how material remnants factor into this discussion. To be clear, my aim is not to set up a binary between textual/video testimony and material remnants. Rather, I wish to emphasize that material remnants defy traditional communicative structures and in focusing attention on them we can begin to understand the affectual dimensions of knowledge transfer and the role material remnants play in engaging museumgoers in the context of memorial museums.

In the past, objects have been seen as secondary to the politics and poetics of memorial museum displays. Objects and their representation in museums have been critiqued for contributing to “mythmaking” (Williams, p. 30), and further, leaving the “sensory complexity unarticulated” (Feldman, p. 247). In short, objects have been looked
at as the supplementary addition to stories for “we understand that stories about the past are what give life to objects, rather than vice versa” (Williams, p. 49). Objects, in themselves, are seen as being manipulated by curators, either politically or aesthetically, leaving their mnemonic and ethical qualities untapped.

I will attend myself to the *mise-en-scene* of the museum exhibits, which includes text, colour, lighting, framing, sounds, smells, etc.; however, the primary aim of this thesis is to pay explicit attention to the role of the object in witnessing traumatic pasts. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Walter Benjamin writes that the authenticity of an art object is tied to “the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.” (p. 221). While there are crucial differences between art objects and material witnesses, Benjamin’s wording has proven to be an important catalyst in the trajectory of this thesis. This thesis proceeds from the assumption that the objects under scrutiny are, in fact, genuine. There have been and continue to be many articles and that explore authenticity in relation to objects, sites, and experiences of trauma (Tyndall 2004; Stier 2005). However, the attention given to authenticity, sacralization, and fetishization is done with little regards to the testamentary and witnessing functions the objects are presumed to inhere. Instead of examining an object’s witnessing functions as part of a mystical aura, I intend to examine how they come to stand in for witnesses through curatorial practice, how they transmit the “testimony to the history it has experienced,” and ultimately how this communication engages the museumgoer.
Through the use of an object-centered methodology, which consists of both discursive and phenomenological analysis, my thesis will flesh out how the USHMM constructs relationships built on witnessing between object, text, and museumgoer. In the first chapter I will examine how objects in the context of memorial museums have been analyzed categorically in the last twenty years. These categories are narrative, sensory, memory, empathy, and affect. What I am proposing in this thesis relies on theories derived from each of these categories. Addressing these categories will help define and defend a more nuanced category of memorial museum object, the material witness. Emphasizing the political and poetic relationships these objects have to victims, perpetrators, and museumgoers will form the base for my analysis in Chapters three and four.

In Chapter three I will discursively examine semiotic understandings of objects and the various difficulties with ‘reading’ objects. Importantly, this chapter will differentiate verbal symbolism from material symbolism. Here, I will discuss Bill Brown’s distinction between objects and things, and provide a more in depth overview of trauma theory. I will closely consider two areas: how we define the material world through word choices and how the use of the word “witness” in conjunction with objects symbolically charges material remnants. I will demonstrate that despite the potential problems with aligning the object’s symbolism with victims of trauma – these problems include a devaluation of psychic wounding and the risk of political instrumentalization – positioning objects in the roles of witnessing is quite apt in relation to trauma narratives,
and ultimately bolsters secondary witnesses understanding of events such as the Holocaust.

Working from the symbolic transformation outlined in Chapter three, Chapter four will further examine how the museumgoer physically encounters the objects. Here I will put into conversation Sara Ahmed’s notion of orientation and Vivian Sobchack’s definition of interobjectivity. Orientation considers how people position themselves either towards or away from things in the world. Ahmed argues that what we orientate ourselves towards directly correlates to what we are willing to spend our energy on. This I will argue is crucial to any long-term engagement with the Holocaust and the call of “Never Again.” Despite the brief encounters museumgoers have with the museum exhibits in and of themselves, the willingness to spend physical and mental energy on difficult histories is only an initiatory step in heading this call. Interobjectivity defines a state of ethical thinking/being that pushes subjects to contemplate their own materiality. This concept is especially pertinent in regards to the Holocaust, as its violations hinged on the dehumanization/de-subjectification of its victims. In tandem, I argue that the museumgoers experience of/orientation to witnessing objects, objects which are given pseudo-subjects faculties, facilitates the museumgoers understanding of human materiality. Narratively framing objects as witnesses thus opens up a more complex phenomenological and ethical relationship with remnants of trauma displayed in museums.
Instead of being silent witnesses to the past, I propose that objects can become contact points of ethical engagement and understanding when it concerns traumatic events in history. The ability and necessity of seeing objects as more than mere things to be manipulated by language and curatorial framing is crucial in cases of trauma. These objects can be seen as portals that help overcome the “constitutive failure of linguistic representation in the post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Vietnam era” (Leys, p. 267f). Using the conceptual tools outlined here, this thesis will contribute to the theoretical and museological conversation concerning objects and their representation in the aftermath of trauma. Stressing the dialogic and relational functions of the material witness will emphasize the ultimate responsibility of the museumgoer to take on the role of secondary witness, a position that is perhaps fraught with unclear obligations, but is nevertheless crucial to the transmission of difficult histories.
Chapter 2

Memorial Museums: Object Displays and the Politics of Objects

Vladimir Nabokov (1972) writes, “when we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want to stay at the exact level of the moment” (p. 2). In this chapter I will explore five ways that objects have been studied in the context of memorial museums – narrative, sensory, empathy, memory, and affect. The concepts and theorists discussed below all concentrate on material objects, all voluntarily sinking into the history of remnants pulled from traumatic events. Some theorists directly contend with the problem of staying at the exact level of the moment as a way of forestalling over-identification with distant others. All contend with the meanings that curators impart on objects and the affects objects have on museumgoers. By defining and engaging with these categories of objects I intend to highlight the presumptions that underlie object engagement and the points at which these analytic strategies fail to encompass the nuances of the material witness.

2.1 A Brief History of Memorial Museums

It may seem redundant to think about objects as witnesses to the past, when in fact objects have been collected for this reason, or reasons relating closely to it (authenticity, proof, value, etc.), for many hundreds of years. However, the roles of objects as
witnesses, and further, the roles of museums as witnesses, have ballooned in the last two decades with the rise of the memorial museum.

Paul Williams’ (2007) comprehensive study, Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities, defines memorial museums as places “between the ephemeral and the permanent, between dissolving personal memories and hardened official histories” (p. 1). Much like the traumatic histories they encompass, memorial museums function as sites, which are constructed by both facts or “official histories” and personal stories or “memories.” Astutely, Williams notes that even on a semiotic level, the term memorial museum is itself a designator of contradictions:

A memorial is seen to be, if not apolitical, at least safe in the refuge of history. This is largely because we recognize that honor will accrue to most people – no matter their actual worldly deeds – simply because honest evaluation of the dead is normally seen as disrespectful. A history museum, by contrast, is presumed to be concerned with interpretation, contextualization, and critique. The coalescing of the two suggest that there is an increasing desire to add both a moral framework to the narration of terrible historical events and more in-depth contextual explanations to commemorative acts. (p. 8)

The rise of memorial museums correlates to the postmodern and post-WWII distaste and distrust of grand narratives and authoritative experiences. Rather than being immersed in hardened historical narratives, visitors to memorial museums are prompted to have “experiences that are sensory and emotional rather than visual and impassive” (Williams, p. 3). The memorial museum experience is meant to be more fluid, less hierarchical, and ultimately more susceptible to personal interpretation. Memorial museums emerged at a
time in museological history in which museums have responded to “feminist, postmodern and postfeminist” critiques by aiming to “invite reflection on the representational and mediated quality of histories and geographies, and on memory as a complex aesthetic and rhetorical artifice” (Andermine and Simine, p. 4). The common utilization of subjective testimony, personal items such as clothing, shoes, and photographs, and immersive audio-visual components contribute to these aims.

Williams argues that the rise of the memorial museum stems naturally from the vast number of World War II monuments, which “have helped to engender and consolidate social practices of visitation” (Williams, p. 5). Monuments entrenched a social posture to atrocity, comprised of respect and solemnity. They also promoted a link between History and personal family histories, which in turn brought forth the expectation that, “as public art, memorials will lead us beyond their own materiality and back in time to the personas and events they commemorate” (Williams, p. 6). Williams argues that the physical or material aspects of the monument “support[s] the transference of attention towards the viewing subject’s historical imagination by avoiding references to their own life” (Williams, p. 6). The material aspects of the monument facilitates the visitor to engage in difficult histories not by referencing that which is familiar to him/her, but by acting as a prompt to imagine the lives and events of other people and times.

Curiously, Williams’ emphasis on the material aspects of monuments to facilitate

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4 For a more nuanced study of the effects World War II monuments have had on social practices of visitation see Jay Winter’s (1998) *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* and Erika Doss’ (2010) *Monument Mania: Public Feeling in America*. 

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imagination is not extended to the material remnants of trauma, such as the shoes or dress under consideration here. Despite the fact that objects have similarly transitioned in the age of the memorial museum from “ruins of a lost past, certifying its demise,” to “material hinges of a potential recovery of shared meanings, by means of narrativization and performativity” (Andermine and Simine, p. 4), there is still sufficient skepticism regarding any objects’ ability to witness the past. In order to come to a defense of witnessing objects, this chapter will outline five of the major categories of object-oriented analysis in memorial museums. Addressing these categories will help define and defend a new category of memorial museum object, the material witness, by addressing the political and poetic relationships these objects have to victims, perpetrators, and museumgoers.

2.2 Narrating Silent Objects

The debate around the roles objects play in telling stories forms two polarizing positions. On the one hand, objects are seen as being bound by the words and other supporting documents that accompany them. On the other hand, their interpretation and significance are seen to be boundless when deciphered by curators and confronted by a diversity of museum visitors.

As noted in the introduction, Williams is cautious about the potential for objects to tell a story. Or rather, he believes it is common knowledge that stories give life to objects, not the other way around (Williams, p. 49). Williams’ concern is that objects in museums often exceed their historical value and contribute to historical mythologies.
This is referred to as the “museum effect,” defined as “the enlargement of consequence that comes from being reported, rescued, cleaned, numbered, researched, arranged, lit, and written about – enable[ing] objects from the past to be valued in entirely new ways” (Williams, p. 28). Williams sees objects in museums as being able to carry new meanings (sometimes inflated meanings) when categorized and displayed in new ways, which contributes to their role in historical mythmaking:

Any item exhibited in a museum is never allowed to remain the thing itself, but instead invokes meanings greater than the world of objects from which it has been picked out...at heart, this is a philosophical question about any artifacts simultaneous role as a linguistic sign and plastic element. Trying to judge how objects variously symbolize, represent, connote, denote, constitute, embody, realize, signify, and objectify points towards the difficulty in assessing how they can reliably reflect social relations. Given their amplification in the museum context, artifacts can be considered prime contributors to mythmaking. (p. 30)

According to Williams, objects in museums become inflated well beyond their material function, beyond their capacity as material things. In this conception, the process of curation, or revaluation, gives objects false significance beyond their literal meaning, thus leading to individual or national mythologies.

This revaluation and consequent inflation of narrative significance can be seen in relation to the constraints genocidal acts have on both eyewitnesses and material witnesses. Owing that in many cases of genocide and atrocity the aim of the perpetrators, beyond annihilating a group of people, is to destroy evidence; the “injured, dispossessed, and expelled are often left object poor” (Williams, p. 25). Indeed, Williams argues that memorial museum collections are “defined by – or even held hostage to- what the
perpetrators in each event *produced*” (p. 26). Thus, the objects bear traces of a lack of agency by the victims and a continued lack of ownership when on display. Even when victim groups or other conscientious observers take control of the future use of these objects they are still confined by the actions of the perpetrators. In so doing, the exhibition of personal items, such as the shoes or dress, “are those that risk trespassing too far into already violated spaces” (Liss, p. 83). It is evident, especially in the case of the shoes, that had the shoes not had a use value to the perpetrators they would not have been sorted, stockpiled, and eventually found in “mountains.” The narrative of heaps, piles, and mountain is thus defined not by the curators or authors such as Moses Schulstein, but by the Nazi perpetrators.

Another concern with narrative framing of material witnesses is that in giving “life” or a “voice” to silent objects, they are bound to “the life to which the museum attaches it by reducing it to its period of greatest suffering” (Williams, p. 31). In general, memorial museum objects are meant to capture a moment, not a lifetime. The moment in time that the object is meant to represent is, like the traumatic event, only a moment. Despite the fact that the objects may in fact have had happy/ordinary lives with the humans they belonged to, these histories are seldom told in tandem. By foreclosing the full history of the object, the full history of the victim becomes similarly shut off. Despite the observation that objects overflow and complicate meaning, they can have the opposite effect of narrowing the meaning and scope not only of their own lives, but also of the lives they are meant to stand in for. The result is at least to potentially create the myth, in
the case of the Holocaust, that the European Jewish community was always unhappy, under siege, and weak to the power of others (points which we know are untrue). The narrative freezing of time in the object and its display, diminishes these possibilities, and sets the stage for mythmaking.

In a similarly critically and cautious tone, Williams warns that the display of remnant objects, “reassures us that the event has been resolved to some extent. As witnesses to history after the event we are confident we have some control over what the calamity meant, at least some assurance that it is no longer happening.” (p. 50). Assurance and control is not only accomplished by freezing the trajectory of the object’s life in a moment of trauma, but also by the “language and themes used to construct what is now sacred national memory has placed the event beyond dispute, allowing it to harden into myth” (Williams, p. 167). The fragmentary nature of memorial museums, any museum really, allows remnant objects to be inserted into narratives of national, cultural, or personal significance. In short, objects in this view are the optimal supporting “actors” in the narrative tone set by the memorial museum. Without the power to speak for themselves, they are used to bolster a narrative that may or may not be aligned with the life the object, or those associated with it lived.

The malleability of objects in relation to narratives is best shown by Oren Baruch Stier (2005) in his essay “Different Trains: Holocaust Artifacts and the Ideologies of Remembrance.” Stier, a Religious Studies scholar, examines how four different trains used in the extermination of European Jews are now being used in four different
museums. Stier argues that each boxcar defines a specific memorial ideology: initiatory, integrative, ambivalent, and monumental. While Stier’s focus takes a broadly religious and mystical approach, his categorization of different display techniques shows the range of possibilities when it comes to artifacts. In relation to the USHMM, he sees its displays as promoting an integrative approach, which is allied with “concern for clear and unambiguous integration of artifacts into the broad physical and ideological structure of the museum” (p. 91-2). Going with a “historical” and “universalist” approach, Stier sees the USHMM as defining its relationship to its status on U.S. soil by contextualizing, authenticating, and historicizing the artifacts it uses, thus sufficiently distancing itself from a firm claim of ownership, but never losing sight of the impact the Holocaust had in the U.S. In Stier’s analysis, the integrative narrative approach is therefore not about the boxcar or the shoes in the museum, but about how the U.S. wants to be seen and see itself in regards to the history of the Holocaust. The objects are, in this broad narrative sense, secondary to the ideological structure of the USHMM.

Whereas Williams sees the negative potential for inflation and mythmaking in regards to the witnessing objects, others (Brower, 1992; Bernard-Donals, 2009; Simon, 2011) see the inflated and open-ended potential of these objects as helpful to the visitors understanding of the event. While it is true that on their own objects cannot speak of the things they have witnessed, popular programs like BBC’s A History of the World in 100 Objects have highlighted the ability of objects to animate, complicate, and complement history. The term often used when discussing the object’s narrative capabilities is
repressed signifier. Tied to psychoanalytic understanding of trauma and linguistics, the repressed signifier hides something of the original trauma, the incommunicable, yet it is unable to fully contain the potential meanings generated by “its text. Such excesses contribute to contentional processes by which the legacies of the war are negotiated and renegotiated, thus helping to work through their traumatic aspects” (Brower, p. 70). In this sense, it is the object’s inability to speak that allows the visitor to negotiate and renegotiate the terms of history with the language and contexts that they are familiar with. Speaking about an African slave drum, an object that is itself a witness to different moments in history, Anthony Appia (2010) reflects:

When you see an object like this it invites interpretation, but it does not require any particular interpretation, and so you can think of it as an object that condenses the memory of the all horrible ghastly wicked things that happened in the slave trade, or you could think of it as an emblem of possibilities of holding on through all that trauma to something worth holding on to and coming out of it with an object that is both old, because it comes from Africa and has a history of Africa, but also new because it’s now a new world thing that has a new meaning in the new world drawing on the old world meanings, but moving beyond them. (2010, October 4)

The person in front of the object has the ability to interpret it through the frame of its history, but also through the frame of his/her current reality. In this way, the narrative engagement with an object has the ability to momentarily lift the thing out of trauma and move beyond the hardened histories it has come to stand in for.

Whereas Williams saw the revaluation of objects as adding false significance, Jay Winter sees this process as crucial to the commemorative cycle. As the number of survivors of and eyewitnesses to the Holocaust become fewer and fewer those in the
following generations must “inherit earlier meanings attached to the event, as well as add new meanings” (Winter, p. 312). The narrative reinterpretation, while a precarious process, suggests an investment in the past and a continuing relevance in the future.

Countering the “resolved” or “determined” aspects of memorial museums, the “concrete unchanging form makes plain our present inability to ameliorate or change [history] – to ‘make history better.’ As we experience this temporal moment, the mute object offers little way to resolve the unease” (Williams, p. 50). Just as the form and function of the museum may harden history into national myth, the “unsolved,” frozen, unrepai red form of the object leaves a sense that history cannot be made better or resolved. Thus the narrative approach to objects relies both on the prescribed hardened narratives and unsolvable hidden narratives. Binding words to mute objects proves only again that language both shapes and is shaped by the material world.

2.3 Sensing Objects

Except for the sense of sight, museums are generally not associated with the senses. Although some exhibitions that represent atrocity have experimented with sound⁵ and although some exhibits bear the scent-ual traces of history, most exhibits lack sensual complexity and perception on the part of the visitor. In Jeffrey Feldman’s (2006) essay, “Contact Points: Museums and the Lost Body Problem,” there is a marked criticism of

⁵ See for example the “Churchill War Rooms” at the Imperial War Museum, London, where the intermingled sounds of bombs and radio announcements are meant to immerse the visitor in the aural world of World War II.
the visual domination of the museum, especially in regards to inanimate objects, or
*contact points*.

Coming out of discussions in the last two decades of museums as *contact zones* (Pratt, 1991; Clifford, 1997; Boast, 2011), Jeffrey Feldman defines artifact remnants, or *contact points*, as “a general category of object that results from physical contact with the body, and then subsequent removal or destruction of the body” (Feldman, 245). Through violent pasts, contact points are removed from the body, and in cases such as the Holocaust the body is destroyed leaving a physical re-connection impossible. Museum acquisition and curation exacerbates this lost connection to the body by favouring aesthetic display and presentation over a connection with the bodies and people who were the victims of this trauma. While the majority of the work concerning *contact zones* has concentrated on the contact zone as resulting from colonial, post-colonial, and neo-colonial relations, Feldman’s concept of the *contact point* is much more broadly defined in relation to bodies and embodied experiences. He specifically addresses the USHMM’s shoe exhibit, and defines it as a *metonymic* contact point, which are objects that “retains nothing of the body, but is an object associated with one part of the body that stands symbolically for the whole…the metonymic contact point begins with a visual association that opens onto a more expansive discourse of embodiment” (p. 256). In the space of the museum the shoes are only connected to the body through visual association. It is the visitor who must connect them to a body/bodies. Despite the fact that the shoe exhibit at the USHMM emits a distinct smell of warn leather and dust (similar to an
antique shop) it is the visual dominance of the exhibit that overwhelms and surrounds the visitor. In Feldman’s estimation the visual dominance leaves our ability to imagine and mnemonically connect with lost bodies untapped.

Lola Rein’s dress can be seen in a similar way. The dress acts as a metonymic contact point, despite the fact that the video testimony that accompanies it includes “the body” that once wore it. For the virtual visitor the dress is meant to be a contact point, a witnessing remnant to Lola Rein’s life. It is clear from the videos included in the virtual exhibit that Lola is quite elderly and her body will not be able to personally accompany the dress for much longer. However, the metonymic effects of the dress become heightened when we find out that this dress is Lola’s only material connection with her mother. In this way, the dress bears the traces of generations of memory. It acts as a contact point not just for the visitor, but also for Lola Rein herself. Furthermore, experiencing the dress in a virtual space intensifies the visual dominance of the exhibit. Despite the fact that the virtual visitor can zoom in on the dress, the screen blocks a desire to reach out and touch the embroidered edges of the dress, thus leaving the other senses again untapped.

In Feldman’s article contact points are seen as being important to the museum encounter, as they are the only physical connections with the past. However, he argues that contact points are ultimately not utilized to their full extent because of the visual domination of most exhibits. Feldman argues that contact points are “embodied memories whose conventional presentation in museums often limits the ability or dulls the will of
museum visitors to perform the ‘memory work’ necessary for comprehending them” (p. 248). The visual nature of the museum limits the visitor’s other senses along with his/her imaginative and memory capabilities. Thus, the body, which was connected to the object, is removed or destroyed through traumatic history. The museum, through its aims at preservation and display limits the amount of sensory interaction the visitor can have with the objects. Rarely can a visitor touch the objects, the objects do not make noise, and further any olfactory presence they might have dwindles over time. Thus, through the process of curation not only is the connection to the victim’s body removed, but also the visitor’s body and mind are similarly limited and dulled. Sensorially, what we are left with are museum experiences that fail to create both sensory and cognitively rich connections with the past. In the next sections, Memory and Affect specifically, it will become evident that leaving these sensory connections untapped may be what protects the visitor from himself becoming traumatized and allows a critical distance from which to comprehend their meaning(s).

2.4 Memory Links

While Feldman is critical of the capacity of objects to facilitate “memory-work,” two theorists, Michael Bernard-Donals and Alison Landsberg, both of whom have a background in English and Cultural Studies, have written about objects, museums, and their ability to form mnemonic relations with the past. Alison Landsberg’s (2004)
groundbreaking, and controversial, work, *Prosthetic Memory*, merges the concepts of narrative, memory, empathy, and the museological experience. Prosthetic memory can be defined as emerging “at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history” (p. 2). Like a prosthetic limb, prosthetic memory is the adoption of a foreign substance (in the case of memorial museums, historical memory) that does not naturally belong to the receiver. The process of acquiring prosthetic memory is not just about comprehending a historical narrative, but more so about feeling it, bodily and psychologically, so as to create a deeply felt connection to something that he/she did not live through. In turn, this process has “the ability to shape the person’s subjectivity and politics” (Landsberg, p. 2).

The connection between prosthetic memory, subjectivity, and politics is essential for Landsberg’s argument. Without the ability to affect and effect the person, the museum experience would be a morally empty and voyeuristic experience. Her belief in the ability of prosthetic memory to affect one’s subjectivity and politics extends beyond those people most affected by the historical event. Various public forums of displays create groups of “broken kinship” that “challenge more traditional forms of memory that are premised on claims of authenticity, ‘heritage,’ and ownership” (Landsberg, p. 3). This

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6 For a critique of Landsberg’s concept of prosthetic memory see James Berger (2007). Berger questions the sustainability of prosthetic memory, its dependence on commodity culture, and argues that there is little or no difference between prosthetic memory and knowledge acquisition.
directly opposes Maurice Halbwachs (1992) study of memory that exalts the social, i.e.: family, religion, class, as the main conduits of memory. Landsberg argues that technology changed these structures and opened them up for the better, creating communities shaped by experience, in this case the experience of the memorial museum, which do not necessarily rely on those more rigid social structures.

The museum accomplishes this type of memory by giving the visitor a felt experience. Responding to criticism by Gourevitch (1993) and Cole (2004), who both critique the USHMM as being too voyeuristic, Landsberg qualifies her defense of the museum, stating, “the museum visit is designed to be an experience for the visitor. This is not to say that visitors somehow experience the Holocaust. Rather, they have an experience that positions their bodies to be better able to understand an otherwise unthinkable event” (p. 131). The visitor is left with a memory that is therefore a sensuous experience for herself. While she might not experience the senses in the same way as the bodies once connected to the shoes or dress did – leaving Feldman’s desire to sense more complexly the experiences of the other - she does gain a set of sensual memories connected to the space of the museum that may trigger a return to both the information and feelings experienced there. Since the experience of the museum is in fact real, and not imagined, Landsberg holds that the visitor is left with prosthetic memories of difference, wherein their memories of the experience “do not erase differences or construct common origins. People who acquire these memories are led to feel a
connection to the past, all the while to remember their position in the current moment” (p. 9).

In the context of Landsberg’s theories, objects take on the role of being the extended limbs of history. Objects are obviously not new technologies, but nonetheless help in the transference of prosthetic memories. Importantly, Landsberg views objects as a significant legacy of the Holocaust as represented in memorial museums: “We might say that for the second generation and even more for the third, the only access to the Holocaust is through objects, through the piles of objects left behind. Piles, not people, are the legacy of the Holocaust.” (p. 118). Piles of shoes, hair, and glasses create a physical presence that stands in for an unresolvable absence. Along with the unresolvable nature of the shoe exhibit in particular, the multitude of experiences/prosthetic memories one can create with the objects depend on “each visitor’s sense of who he or she is. There is simultaneous negotiation with the object (and the other that it represents) and with a person’s own archive of experiences” (p. 135). In this way, the potentially hegemonic and “anticipated” display tactics of the museum are diffused by the heterogeneous “archive of experiences” that each visitor brings with him/her, again harkening back to the repressed signifier. We can see the multitude of experiences, and the production of prosthetic memory as a reciprocal experience. The museum visitor does not just take the memories of others, he/she incorporates them into their archive of experience giving them new life: “we are simultaneously giving our bodies to these mute objects. We take on their memoires and become their prosthesis” (p. 136, emphasis added). Therefore the process
of prosthetic memory does not just do work for the visitor. The visitor gains a prosthetic memory, but also works as a prosthesis. As a prosthetic extension of another’s memory the visitor is implicated in the history and becomes the extended limb of history that has the ability to pass this history on to others.

Departing slightly from Landsberg, Michael Bernard-Donals (2005 & 2012) argues that objects may provoke memories not just of other lives, but also of other events in our lives. Using the shoe exhibit at the USHMM and visitor comments he illuminates how objects can facilitate both metonymic and synecdochic memory work. While these are not mutually exclusive experiences, they do highlight the different ways in which objects can activate and create memories for the museum visitor. Bernard-Donals, following Roman Jacobson (1956), sees metonymic objects as things that “stand in for those events, to serve as a sign for what happened, and to evoke in the museumgoers’ imaginations the enormity of the destruction…metonyms, [are] parts standing in for the whole” (2012, p. 417). Metonymic memory is, in effect, reductionist, a process in which at the most basic level one part is equated to one whole. Bernard-Donals use of metonymic memory can be further illustrated by going back to Jeffrey Feldman’s definition of the metonymic contact point. Whereas Feldman saw the shoes as standing in for the body as a whole, Bernard-Donals sees the simplest metonymic connection of the shoes as standing in for the Holocaust as a whole. Detrimentally, reductionism has the ability to contribute to historical mythmaking (for example reducing the complex
network of crimes in the Holocaust to a narrative of evil\(^7\) and in so doing imparting a false sense of knowledge on the viewer.

In contrast, synecdochic memory allows the complexity of the object and the event to be perceived. Similar to the post-Saussarian conception of language, wherein one signifier can relate to multiple signifieds, synecdochic memory allows that one signifier, such as the shoes or dress, can work as stand ins for multiple meanings, or signifieds (421), similar to the repressed signifier, but in relation to the visitors own memories. While the shoes do make the connection the “the Holocaust,” Bernard Donals notes:

The shoes also stand in the way of their ability to connect them to the events, and that in important ways the shoes defer that connection…they trouble the visitor’s sense of relation to the past. Rather than function simile as metonymic part-to-whole relation, the shoes…function more as synecdoches, establishing a part-to-part relation that ultimately defers their connection to the historical past, and that potentially undermines the historical authenticity that museumgoers seem to seek, and what the USHMM designers wished to inculcate. (2012, p. 418)

Using visitor comments from the USHMM, Bernard-Donals shows specifically how the shoe exhibit connects visitors not just to the Holocaust, but also to events in their own lives. Importantly, synecdochic memory interrupts the visitor’s association with the past/history by forcing him/her to be mindful of the present. Using Allison Landsberg’s notion of prosthetic memory and radical empathy, Bernard-Donals sees the connections objects and displays might trigger with the visitors own lives, “their shoes could be our shoes, their lives were like our lives, my life is like others’ life” (2012, p. 421), as being

\(^7\) For more on the debate surrounding Holocaust reductionism see Alexander and Jay’s (2009) *Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate.*
productive in disrupting broad historical narratives and more importantly stops the visitor from thinking that they know the others’ experience. The disruption or ability to relate the objects to things other than the historical event is heightened by the “synecdochic autonomy of the objects in the USHMM’s permanent exhibit,” wherein the objects relate to one another “independent of the historical moment that spawned them” (2012, p. 433).

The synecdochic relationship is “an autonomy as fragments, and as such establish a heterogeneous relation, one that troubles the viewer’s relation to the past rather than giving her the mistaken impression that she knows it once and for all” (2012, p. 422). The visitor’s ability to relate the object not just to their own lives, but also to other objects in the museum, “calls into question their (metonymic) authenticity” (2012, p. 433), leaving a reductionist engagement with them less probable.

Lola Rein’s dress works in a slightly different way. Owing to the fact that the dress is not part of the Holocaust iconography, such as the shoe exhibit is, I would argue that the risk of metonymic pull to connect the dress to the Holocaust as a whole is much less potent/effective/powerful. However, as a featured item in a virtual space of its own, it allows for open-ended connections that the visitor might make with other exhibits he/she has experienced and/or the connections she has made with events in her own life. In Chapter 4 I will further explore the connections the visitor is meant to make with the dress if thought of as a material witness.
2.5 Empathy: Consumption and Identification

The concern about over-identification and consumption of other people’s memories and experiences in the space of memorial museums is a persistent issue. In the past two decades empathy has come to be thought of hand in hand with identification. At the heart of empathy is the ability to place yourself in another’s shoes (pun intended), to imagine yourself as another or the Other. As a concept, the term empathy has been in use since the late 1700s. Before empathy became a psychological term, it was embedded in aesthetic discourse and originated as “involving perceiving and understanding the non-human” (Pigman, 238) in art, architecture, or everyday objects. This etymological history is especially important to the understanding of the examples under consideration in this thesis. Not only is the museum meant to be an experience in which the museumgoer places him/herself in the shoes of others, they are also meant to contemplate the shoes and the dress -- the non-human -- and try to understand their positions in history.

Today there are two divergent conceptions of empathy, commodified/crude empathy and “radical”/political empathy. Here I will highlight Megan Boler’s skepticism of empathy and Alison Landsberg’s defense of it as a way of examining the empathic value objects have come to be seen as holding in the memorial museums.

Megan Boler, Professor of Humanities and Education, exemplifies the consumptive model of empathy, and takes as her starting point her classroom experience of teaching Art Speigelman’s (1986) graphic novel, Maus I: My Father Bleeds History. She is critical of the idea that reading and empathy are necessarily linked to democracy,
morality, or social justice. Boler argues that while empathy may prove useful in “lived contexts,” it is all too often a passive event when it comes to literature and the arts; there is, in her estimation, an “untheorized gap between empathy and acting on another’s behalf” (p. 255). At the centre of this problem is the risk that an empathic identification is “more a story and projection of myself than an understanding of you” (p. 257). Boler writes that the “uninterrogated identification assumed by the faith in empathy is founded on a binary of self/other that situates the self/reader unproblematically as judge” (p. 258). This process of identification is a consumptive practice, wherein the identity of the other is consumed with little thought given towards ramifications and actions in the real world. Although Boler agrees that empathy makes us recognize our differences, she contends that recognition is undermined by this consumptive identification. She writes:

> What is ignored is what has been called the ‘psychosis of our time’: empathetic identification requires the other’s difference in order to consume it as sameness. The irony of identification is that the built in consumption annihilates the other who is simultaneously required for our very existence. In sum, the social imagination reading model is a binary power relationship of self/other that threatens to consume and annihilate the very differences that permit empathy. (p. 258)

In this conceptualization of empathy, the self consumes the other’s alterity through the process of identification. Set against Landsberg’s notion of prosthesis, in Boler’s consumptive model the experience of another is not just an added “appendage,” but instead becomes wholly integrated into the body/psyche of the viewer/visitor. Problematically, if the self consumes the other, the differences that allow for empathy would cease to exist and therefore our empathic capabilities would not exist. Here
consumption threatens to disarm empathy, causing the viewer to fall short of understanding the other’s experience or suffering.

Representations connected to the Holocaust are particularly susceptible to empathy, primarily because of their connection to trauma. There is a push to understand the other’s experience as a means of fulfilling the mantra of “Never Again.” Jill Bennett (2005) acknowledges the potential “hubris in colonizing such experience” (p. 3). There is a tendency within the person who confronts traumatic representations to overestimate his/her knowledge of the traumatic experience and their claim to the resulting history. This tendency is also heightened with respect to exhibits that employ contact points, which act as physical, textual, or visual markers meant to connect visitors with people from the past. In the cases presented here, objects facilitate the consumptive model by creating connections, by animatedly illustrating that the other’s things are not so different from our own and inviting the conclusion that our lives could be their lives, their things our things.

Thinking again about prosthetic memories, or those memories worn on the body but not directly connected to it, Landsberg defends commodification as a form of “interchangeability and exchangeability” (p. 20). Prosthetic memories rely on commodification and capitalism for two reasons. For one, the commodified function of prosthetic memories alludes to, and maintains, the foreign or distant dimension of the experience: “the radical potential of prosthetic memory derives from the fact that the subjectivities they produce are not ‘natural’ not based on some count of authenticity.
Furthermore, prosthetic memories cannot be owned exclusively” (p. 146). Second, and importantly, prosthetic memories would not be possible without the evolution of capitalism and the ensuing commodity culture, which is reliant on technology. Landsberg argues, “instead of simply disparaging commodity culture, as many cultural critics have done, I believe that the only way to bring about social change and transformation is by working within the capitalist system” (p. 146). Landsberg gets away with this defense of commodity culture by underscoring the fact that “even though these memories are made possible by a commodity culture and circulate in the same way that commodities do, they can never be owned as private property, and as a result they occupy a unique position within, and yet implicitly opposed to capitalism” (p. 147). Examining museum objects as part of a commodity culture is apt, not only in how they are represented but also in how they function as part of a cultural and empathic exchange value system. However, I would argue that a critique that focused on commodification and over-identification would foreclose the possibility of engaging with objects as witnesses. An overemphasis on the value visitors gain from the objects serves only to diminish the aspects that the visitors must bring and exchange in the museum experience.

2.6 Affect as a Means to Thought

While affect and thought/cognitive apprehension could be given their own categories, their purpose is served better within the context of memorial museums when examined in tandem. What are feelings without a comprehensive understanding of their origin? Further, I argue that it is important to look at affect together with thought and
cognitive process, because it reinforces the marked distinction between the eyewitness of trauma and the secondary witness, or museum visitor. To say that the museumgoer is unable to process the emotions felt in the museum experience, is to equate his/her experience to that of the victim of trauma, who cannot integrate the traumatic experience within already known narratives. To separate affect and thought when discussing the visitor would constitute a replication of the traumatic relation. The acquisition of knowledge in museums is dependent on affect:

At the heart of the matter regarding questions of difficult knowledge is the provocation of affect, that is, affect’s relation to the possibilities of thought. This means that what is particularly difficult about difficult knowledge comes to the fore when the affective force of an encounter provokes substantial problems in settling (at least provisionally) on the meaning and significance of the images, objects, texts and sounds encountered within an exhibition. (Simon, 433)

While objects, narratives, displays, etc. can prompt affect and thought in the museum, it is ultimately the visitor who is responsible for processing the range of his/her emotions and the consequences of his/her experience, which does not mean solving or equivocally defining what either the Holocaust means or what their experience of certain representations are supposed to mean. This moves the museum experience beyond an overwhelming emotional encounter towards an ethical and responsible encounter with the past.

The public presentation and the usefulness of affectual response to difficult knowledge has two distinct viewpoints. Practically, Paul Williams sees in the proliferation of memorial museums, the possibility of a “gentrification of memorial
museum objects” (p. 27) and a dulling of affectual influence. Gentrification in this sense is not so much about comparing or reducing one genocide with another, as it is comparing the subsequent display techniques. The Holocaust changed the scope of memorials and museum displays simply because of the large volume of by-products that were collected by the Nazi perpetrators (shoes, hair, glasses, suit-cases, etc.). These objects were and still are used as powerful displays by museums across Europe and in the USHMM. However, Williams argues that this display technique has been too often used by many, if not too many, memorial museums, which in turn means that visitors can “anticipate the kinds of objects on display” (p. 27). Whether this anticipation is used effectively by curators is another issue; Williams asks:

Is it best that institutions foreground these as access points in the hope that they form a gateway to deeper understanding? Alternately, should the particulars of any event (and especially those produced by offenders) be presented as merely circumstantial, so that visitors’ attention is instead turned to larger principles such as political freedom or human injustice? (p. 27-8)

Williams do not answer these questions; rather, the answers are inferred by his previous declaration of gentrification. Gentrification is ultimately seen as a pathway to false sense of knowing what atrocity *looks like* and potentially impeding what visitors can learn from these displays and how they can be affective, and potentially effective.

We can see this fear of gentrification not only as a fear of false sense of knowing, but also a false sense of feeling, which leads to a lack of further thought. Roger Simon (2006) understands these concerns in a more hopeful light. In his essay, “The Terrible
Gift – Museums and the Possibility of Hope,” Simon writes from the perspective of what he hopes visitors can gain from an exhibit with certain designs in mind, rather than analyzing a specific exhibit. He concerns himself with documentary words and images as tools that help visitors claim an understanding of an event, and as a means of “understanding these words and images as a bearing of witness, an enactment of difficult, at times, terrible gift” (p. 188) Like other gifts in life, the “terrible gift” of troubling exhibitions involves a process of “inheritance” and a passing on of knowledge that has “the potential to open a reconsideration of the terms of our lives now as well as in the future” (p. 188). By confronting visitors with or “gifting” them difficult knowledge, accomplished through challenging their museological expectations, either through open-endedness or creating a sense of “unsolvability,” the museumgoer is not only engaged emotionally, but thoughtfully as well. Curators cannot determine how the museumgoer will engage with or think about exhibits, but they can leave a sense of indeterminacy, which requires some level of thought to decipher.

The affectual nature of difficult knowledge must yield a myriad of different questions and understandings from the visitor, if it is to promote active thought. Simon outlines three specific areas that the museumgoer should be attentive to:

(1) the ‘pastness’ of existence and our own position in the made world,
(2) the immediacy of the testamentary address of historical remnants offered to us as both demand and gift within the moment of engaging the exhibition, and
(3) the ways in which material traces of the past are bound up with one’s future world as sources of meaning and commitment. (p. 190).
Breaking these down, we can call these three concerns *positionality, inheritance, and future orientation*. These areas are meant to have a non-hierarchical interrelation.

Positionality is a major concern of scholars who deal with immersive or difficult exhibits. While the merits of difficult exhibits are defended for their ability to bring visitors closer with stories and people from the past, there is an ever-present concern to maintain a pronounced distance from over-identifying with these histories. This distance must be achieved on two fronts: curatorially and visitorially. Curatorially, the representation of difficult knowledge and remnants from atrocity must be displayed as evidence from the past, and should not be framed as part of an ongoing struggle or lifted out of their historical context. This is difficult in some cases, especially when curators use weapons or personal items. These types of objects are not particular to one atrocity and thus have the potential to “stand in” either metonymically or synecdochically for other traumas. Curatorial choices cannot stop these connections from happening, but they can pronounce the *past-ness* of what is on display as a means to position the visitor at a distance.

On the part of the visitor, he/she must take all precautions to avoid the “hubris in colonizing such experience” (Bennett, p. 3). It is easy, especially in the case of the USHMM’s shoe exhibit to see ourselves in the exhibit: “their shoes…could very well be our shoes” (Landsberg, p. 135). For Simon, as well as Bennett and Landsberg, there must be a constant negotiation of our position, a “dynamic oscillation” between the affective response that the exhibit invites, and the realization of our protected place in the present
(Bennett, p. 11). Thus, even though we would like to imagine “their shoes as our shoes” we must experience the affective empathy as the invitation to recognize “the alterity of identification and the necessity of negotiating distances” and in so doing “inhabiting other people’s memories as other people’s memories and thereby respecting and recognizing difference” (Landsberg, p. 24).

Just because we are to negotiate difference, does not mean that we are not to “get anything” or inherit meaning from the exhibit. On a purely material level we can see the “material remnants as a cultural inheritance” (Simon, p. 189). On a more symbolic and representational level we can see the information conveyed through exhibits related to atrocity as a “terrible gift.” Roger Simon understands the “terrible gift” as a form of inheritance that is more complex than a “straightforward transfer of the material.” Rather, the terrible gift of atrocity exhibits lies in the “indeterminate, potentially fertile practice of reception initiated by the recognition that a bequest has been addressed and sent. If one takes up the responsibilities of inheritance, its fruitfulness as an activity lies in the necessary productive work one must do in order to realize a living legacy that might connect one with specific people and events not of one’s time” (emphasis added: Simon, p. 195). Thus, gifting and inheritance is not meant to be a passive event. This is particularly true in the space of the museum where there is rarely any physical transferring of material. The gift of knowledge and display rests with the visitor who must take on the work of recognition, realization, and responsibility.
Specifically, the work of recognition and realization should not be thought of as a complete understanding of an event, but rather an acknowledgement of the fragmentary nature of the things collected that are “traces signifying something more than the giver or receiver can name and know” (Simon, p. 195). In relation to objects the fragmentary realization is ever more pronounced, for

What the materials displayed ‘know’ by virtue of their having been in the ghetto, can only be performed through their potential to animate conversations about them as elements of a practice of storying integral to the activity of engaging the exhibition…the materials exhibited are a form of (limited) ‘disclosure and not full ‘exposure.’ (Simon, p. 201)

The limited knowledge and communication ability of the objects invites the museumgoer to ask questions, animate conversation, and serve as reminder that the stories told and objects displayed can only be incomplete. This concept ties in both concepts of the repressed signifier and Landsberg’s prosthetic memory. The taking in of an atrocity exhibition is never a complete owning of the events that happened, but a constant negotiation and recognition of the events as things that happened to others in past times. Like the repressed signifier, this does not mean that the exhibit can control all possible meanings to be derived from it. The inheritance of difficult histories formulates an exchange system wherein the history passed on is recognized as another’s history, but at the same time demands an ownership of this fragmented history, which calls into question the responsibility of inheritance.

The responsibilities of inheritance are directly tied with Simon’s final concept: future orientation. Simon admits that the work of inheritance, manifest in the creation of
a legacy of thoughts and actions is “a demanding and difficult bequest indeed” (p. 198). Responsibility in the museum takes on the form of questioning: questioning our own relations to the past, questioning our emotional responses to the representations on display, questioning how the displays relate to one another, and finally questioning our responsibility to what has been seen. In this way, “story spaces are intended to present visitors with the gift and demand of testament, a transitivity that requires an active answerability – whether in the form of historical thinking, collective discussion or personal self-reflection” (p. 201).

The self-implication of these types of spaces along with the recognition and realization of the fragmentary nature of re-presented knowledge, strives towards a “public history that recognizes both its promise and its betrayal” (p. 203). Using Levinas’ definition of thought - what happens when consciousness becomes aware of its own particularity - Simon argues, “the role of public history is to encourage men and women of our time to ask themselves not what they must remember in order to be, but what it means, in light of the experience of the past, to be what they are now” (p. 203). Aligning with Landsberg, Simon is clear that “there is no futurity (no break from the endless repetition of a violent past) without memories that are not your own but nevertheless claim you to a responsible memorial kinship and the corresponding thought such a problematic history evokes” (p. 444).
2.7 Towards a Category of Material Witness

What I am proposing in this thesis relies on aspects from each of these categories. The witnessing object is one that has been narrated by curators to take on a position. The shoes and the dress have been spoken for and defined as witnesses in the form of Moses Schulstein’s poem and the testimony accompanying the dress. However, their material-ness -- such as cracks, stains, degeneration, etc. -- accomplishes another layer of visual narration. The impact of this narration depends on the museum visitor’s ability to engage with and understand them as witnesses, both historically and in the context of his or her own archive of experiences. The witnessing object speaks to the visitor with a demand that the visitor engages in its testimonial transmission. While the witnessing object is rhetorically positioned very close to the eyewitness (or the victim) its physical or phenomenological position is tied intimately with the museum visitor. While I will not engage critically with lack of sensory complexity demanded by these exhibits, a point that Jeffrey Feldman saw as detrimental to the mnemonic aspect of museums, I will emphasize the connections these objects have to both the bodies who wore them and the museumgoers bodies who experience them in manufactured spaces. In doing so I aim to stress the reciprocal work – encompassing memory-work, emotional work, and critical work – that is required on both the parts of the curators, who assemble the objects and the language that accompanies them, and the museumgoers who come into contact with the difficult knowledge displayed. The material witness is a category of object that must be understood as more than just another tool that complements the history on display or that
is *given* a voice by curators, but rather a category of object that gives shape to silence and requires the museum visitor to engage with the material witness in ways that demonstrates his/her own vulnerability as material beings. To fully emphasize the mutual demand of this exchange I will first, in Chapter four, examine the curatorial choices that create witnessing objects, and the demands that the language of witnessing places on the visitor. In the final chapter I will look specifically at the position of the visitor and examine the points where he/she must take on these demands as an active secondary witness to the history on display.
Chapter 3

Transforming the Object – From Material Remnant to Material Witness

All of them took what they loved most because you do not leave your dearest possessions when you set out for far-distant lands.

- *Auschwitz and After*, Charlotte Delbo

In examining the categories of objects set out in Chapter 2, there is an underlying skepticism towards the “life” of any object. Specifically, an object’s ability to speak, testify, narrate, etc. is questioned in relation to its use in animating history. In this chapter I will set out to define the curatorial and narrative choices that transform the “dearest possessions” Charlotte Delbo writes of, into material witnesses. To do so I will first attune myself to the processes of evaluating, collecting, and transforming objects into valued possessions that come to inhabit memorial museums. In probing this process it becomes apparent that the rhetoric of witnessing, and the belief in what any object can “tell” visitors, is accomplished in two distinct stages – first by narratively and metonymically connecting objects to the bodies that underwent the trauma and then entrenching these objects in practices of commemoration. After engaging with these stages in the context of the shoes and the dress, I will then go on to examine the consequences of naming and defining objects outside their material uses. Here I will briefly distinguish between *objects* and *things* as a means of reinforcing the supplanted rhetoric of witnessing that accompanies these objects, and set out and defend my methodological approach in analyzing these objects both rhetorically and
phenomenologically. Finally, I define the roles we understand witnesses to play in society, with an aim towards conceptualizing and outlining both the hazards and benefit of naming an object as witness.

3.1 The Transformation of Materiel Remnants

Perhaps the word ‘transformation’ is not the right choice when referencing the process by which objects are taken from sites of originating trauma. Often in cases of memorial museum displays, there is a conscious desire on the part of curators to preserve a connection to the traumatic moment in history. This is accomplished by limiting practices of cleaning and restoring, in essence freezing the object’s outward appearance at the moment of its greatest fragility. There is, however, a process that occurs between the “moment of trauma” and the object’s final place in the museum. Here we can look to Marita Sturken, a specialist in cultural memory and visual culture, for an outline of how material remnants are transformed into symbolically charged witnesses. Using the frame of 9/11 to focus her analysis, Sturken explores the (re)valuation process objects undergo, first by establishing a connection between the objects and the bodies who underwent the trauma and then by entrenching those objects in practices of memorialization. Sturken does not deny that there is a sacred quality to the objects taken from Ground Zero or any other scene of traumatic history, but rather demystifies the curatorial and archival practices that aid in the exaltation of some objects over others.

As noted, two phases of transformation can be seen. The first phase involves establishing a connection and metonymical association of the object with the people and
bodies that underwent the trauma. Sturken explains, “once it became clear that very few people had survived the cataclysmic collapse of the two buildings, the dust was defined not simply as the refuse of the towers’ collapse, but as the material remains of the bodies of the dead” (p. 178). Within hours of the collapse of the World Trade Towers people were collecting the dust off of surfaces and storing it in makeshift urns; in some instances individuals tried to donate these collections to museums.8 This type of preservation denotes a physical transformation of the buildings and people into dust, and become “material artifacts that can provide some kind of corporeal presence to mediate the absence of the dead” (p. 178). This practice can also be seen in relation to the Holocaust, wherein ashes from the crematoriums have been used as points of connection with the dead. Notably this approach has been used by the USHMM in the Hall of Remembrance (Figure 2). Underneath the “eternal flame” the plaque reads:

Here lies earth gathered from death camps, concentration camps, sites of mass execution, and ghettos in Nazi occupied Europe, and from cemeteries of American soldiers who fought and died to defeat Nazi Germany.

Despite the fact that the visitor cannot see the earth, its presence connects the flame and the space to the sites of concentration camps and graves in Europe and to the people who perished there. The dust and the earth are both explicit examples of the process of connecting material objects to the people who underwent an event, but did not live to testify to his/her experience.

8 In one particularly gripping case a shopkeeper preserved his storefront, refusing to clean the dust off the clothes and souvenir’s in the window display.
While the preservation of dust and earth expose a literal transformation of material beings into precious substances, the transformation of the shoes and the dress involves less of a physical reinterpretation and more of a revaluation, in which objects once connected to the body become “freighted with new meaning” (Sturken, p. 183). Sturken documents how missing posters, which filled the streets of New York after 9/11, evolved “from objects of searching and hope to historical objects of mourning” (p. 186). The objects become embodied with deadly knowledge. Not to be confused with Simon’s concept of difficult knowledge, deadly knowledge communicates a fate that those connected to it did not know or did not live to tell about. Further, Sturken elaborates that deadly knowledge isn’t just about communicating a doomed fate, but also of conveying
the transformation of the objects from ordinary items “to talisman to a trace that marks
the absence of the dead” (p. 184). The meaning that these objects gain has nothing to do
with their use or exchange value other than their previous use and connection to bodies.
New, freighted meaning is based on the objects having been there, once intimately
connected to the bodies that wore them.

After the connection between objects and bodies has been established, the process
of formal and informal memorialization and curation can take place. Sturken explains
that as the missing posters became “increasingly tattered and worn by the weather,”
further entrenching the symbolism of trauma, the images were then collected and
categorized. Some were formally used in a travelling exhibition Missing: Last Seen at the
World Trade Centre, September 11, 2001, while others were preserved at their
originating site such as St. Vincents Hospital where the posters were “preserved under
plastic and maintained facing the street for many years after” (p. 186). In another instance
of transformation Sturken documents the multiple meanings and uses steal beams from
the rubble came to hold:

Several of the beams were featured in the news media as
sources of potential information for the investigation into
how the towers fell. Others were retained by the Port
Authority as potential objects for display, as historical
artifacts…the majority of the steel beams that were part of
the rubble were shipped off to faraway places where they
would be melted down and reused. (p. 206)

From this diverse range of uses it becomes clear that “symbolism is arbitrarily awarded”
(p. 208) to the beams that were salvaged for use in memorials and museums. The pieces
that were preserved, often the most physically mangled, went on to become memorials across the United States where they have been transformed into sacred objects, and in some instances imbued with qualities of living things. The director of the Smithsonian’s 9/11 collections\(^9\) characterized the pieces that they collected as “tortured” (Shayt), while the International Peace Garden’s 9/11 memorial characterizes the pieces of steel as being “rescued” from the Ground Zero. Bodies are “tortured” and “rescued,” whereas objects/things are often said to be “salvaged.” These terms gives a sense of the human rescue that could not take place, and further enforces a human connection between inanimate objects and those who directly experienced, but could not live to tell their story. These are subtle yet important rhetorical choices that become entrenched in practices of preservation and display, thus completing the institutional transformation of everyday objects into objects within which various mnemonic and witnessing functions inhere.

The same process of transformation can be seen in relation to the objects used within the USHMM’s exhibits. After the liberation of concentration camps in 1945, the question of what to do with the camps and the remnants left in them were a major point of contention. In Jonathan Huener’s (2003) *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration: 1945-979*, we are given an outline of how and why certain things were commemorated and preserved in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Huener notes that

\(^9\) The Smithsonian’s object centered collection commemorating 9/11 is itself titled “September 11: Bearing Witness to History.” This communicates the desire of museum curators to imbue objects with witnessing functions and importantly carries the relevance of this thesis beyond the scope of the Holocaust.
although there was a concerted effort to preserve Auschwitz-Birkenau as a “sacred space,” economic and political factors were often more influential in determining what was or was not preserved. Many of the barracks were sold to neighboring towns to house supplies (Huener, p. 65) and looters “began seeking riches at the camp…salvaged goods from the grounds or made a practice of sifting through ash pits in search of valuables, especially gold” (Huener, p. 63). Despite the government’s and survivors’ best efforts, the “sacred” value of the space and items was not enough to keep thieves from seeing economic value in these objects.

In many cases, however, the mounds of personal effects (Figure 3) were left more or less intact, and they became the focal point of numerous exhibitions since. Displaying mounds of personal effects was part of the first “public exhibits” at Auschwitz (Huener, p. 69), where “in the basement of Block 4, artifacts testifying to the extermination process” were kept for people to see. This early exhibit was “simply presented as ‘evidence,’” but nevertheless evidence framed with Christian imagery (an “illuminated cross” was featured at the end of the hallway), which in turn lent the piles of objects towards a narrative of “Polish national martyrdom” (Huener, p. 70). In subsequent years the exhibits at Auschwitz went through narrative strategies that supported state, religious, and/or communist aims. Throughout this time though the display strategy of the piles did not change. Piles of shoes, glasses, hair, and suitcases remained as piles, resembling the
way soldiers found them when the camps were liberated. No matter what narrative strategies were used the shoes quickly developed and maintained a connection to the victims that were lost, thus defining a “kind of corporeal presence to mediate the absence of dead” (Sturken, p. 178).

The subsequent shoe display in the USHMM’s permanent exhibit (Figure 4), or what Sturken would define as formal memorialization and curation, holds many similarities to the piles and the basement exhibit in Block 4. After negotiations between state governments of the U.S. and Poland it was agreed that the USHMM would take on loan some several thousand shoes from the Majdanek Museum (Linenthal, p. 157). Within the exhibit at the USHMM the shoes remain in an unorganized pile in a room of their own. In keeping with previous display techniques the USHMM communicates two things: 1. A transference of authenticity from the Auschwitz and Majdanek concentration camps to the United States, and 2. A desire to diminish the “museum effect,” as defined in chapter two as “the enlargement of consequence that comes from being reported, rescued, cleaned, numbered, researched, arranged, lit, and written about – enable[ing] objects from the past to be valued in entirely new ways” (Williams, p. 28). Leaving the shoes uncategorized, uncleaned, and in disrepair preserves the moment from which they came, while conveying a sense that the shoes have not been tampered with by the museum’s curators.

10 The USHMM continues the strategy of “discovery” from the point of view of soldiers in their permanent exhibit. As the museumgoer rides to the first floor of the exhibit audio is played of a soldier’s first reactions and disbelief towards what he witnessed when the camps were first liberated.
It is the addition of Moses Schulstein’s poem, “I Saw a Mountain,” above the shoes that both alters and entrenches the shoes into a narrative frame of absence and corporeal presence. The poem fragment reads:

We are the shoes, we are the last witnesses.
We are shoes from grandchildren and grandfathers,
From Prague, Paris and Amsterdam,
And because we are only made of fabric and leather
And not of blood and flesh, each one of us avoided the hellfire.
(Berenbaum, p.149).

According these lines, the shoes are framed to act as witnesses to two aspects of the Holocaust. They are metonymic contact points that stand in for bodies, or the absence of bodies, in this way entrenching a connection to lost bodies. They are also meant to stand in for a plethora of different experiences, that of grandchildren, grandfathers, Czech, French, and Dutch nationals, giving them a distinctly universalized narrative. With this display technique the shoes act as witnesses to the liberation of the concentration camps, and in a removed sense they function as a tableau of what was seen or witnessed at the end of the Holocaust. The title of the poem, “I Saw a Mountain,” acts as direct witness testimony. From the title to the descriptions in the poem, the visitor is given an aestheticized sense of realization both of what someone coming across the shoes would have ‘seen’ and also the point of view of the shoes themselves. The “mountain” turns into a mound of shoes, which in turn translates into people. In Chapter Four I will engage more deeply with the connection that is made between the material quality of the shoes, which saved them from the hellfire. For now I will say that the connection preserved between the early display techniques at Auschwitz and Majdanek paved the way towards
a narrative connection with witnesses and museumgoers subsequent engagement with these objects as means to a more complex understanding of the Holocaust.

Figure 3: Pile of shoes outside schulager (shoe warehouse at Pabianice labour camp. Photo credit: USHMM Photo Archive.

Figure 4: Shoe Exhibit, USHMM. Photo credit: USHMM Photo Archive.
Figure 5: Lola Rein’s Dress. Photo Credit: USHMM Photo Archive

Figure 6: Screenshot of “Examine the Dress.”
The transformation of Lola Rein’s dress has a much shorter history than the shoe exhibit. Although the dress, as with the shoes, becomes charged with different or amplified meanings when transformed from a dress (Figure 5) to a framed/curated object (Figure 6), the process of its transformation is made apparent in the virtual exhibit. Notably, the story of how the dress was donated, curated, and restored is included in the virtual exhibit, thus leaving the process of formal memorialization and curation less a mystery to the virtual exhibit visitor. The exhibit is split into two parts: “Explore the Story” and “Examine the Dress.” In “Examine the Dress” (Figure 5), the visitor is able to zoom in on the dress and closely examine the stitching, colours, stains, etc. In “Explore the Story” the visitor is told the story of the dress and why the stitching, colours, stains, etc. are important. The virtual museumgoer is told that Lola Rein directly donated the object, her dress, to the USHMM in 2002. The exhibit begins with a slide which talks about where and when Lola was born (1934) and when her family was forced into a ghetto (1941). It goes on to tell the virtual visitor when her parents died (her father in 1942 and her mother 1943) and how her grandmother arranged for Lola to hide in a “4 x 6” foot hole in a Polish woman’s barn. The visitor is told that the dress was Lola’s “only possession and her only link to her mother.”

After seven months Lola was liberated from her hiding place, and with the help of another Polish couple she was reunited with an uncle who became her father. The last slide of the exhibit (Figure 6) tells the story of Lola Rein’s decision to donate her dress:

In New York, January 2002, Lola (Rein) Kaufman met with a curator of the United States Holocaust Memorial
Museum. Lola told her story of her lonely survival. At the end of the interview she reached into her bag and took out this tiny dress, handing over the only item directly liking her to her mother. At the Museum, textile conservators repaired loose stitching. Conservation specialists prepared a mount for the dress. Additional research filled in the vivid but understandably incomplete memory of a frightened child.

The dress today embodies not only a mother’s love and a grandmother’s courage and foresight, but also the world’s abandonment of a little girl. It symbolizes the tragic experience of Jewish children during the Holocaust, and survives as a silent witness to their lives. It is a testament to resilience and survival, yet also a memorial to the up to a million and a half Jewish children who, unlike Lola, perished in the Holocaust.

Figure 7: Screen Shot of “Explore the Story,” Slide 8.

“Silent Witness” is abundantly more explicit about what the object witnessed, and what the exhibit aims to convey about this experience. This strategy is in part due to the limited control the virtual curators have over how or where the exhibit is experienced (a
point which will become more important in the next chapter); the clarity with which the
virtual exhibit communicates its aims is perhaps a means of controlling the disparate
environments in which it can be experienced. In any case, the dress is constructed as a
witness to the loving demeanor of Lola’s mother, the efforts her grandmother took to
protect her, the years she spent in hiding, the cramped and often hostile quarters she
shared when in hiding, the struggles she went through to find any remaining relatives,
and finally the subsequent years after the Holocaust in which Lola remained silent about
her story. The dress specifically witnessed events in Lola’s life, this is certain. However,
the language of the exhibit is clear that the dress is also meant to stand in for “the tragic
experience of Jewish children during the Holocaust.” The dress is therefore not just a
metonymic connector to Lola’s body/experience and her mother, but also to the “up to a
million and a half Jewish children” who perished. The narrative of witnessing attached to
the dress is thus, in some ways, just as open to a range of different experiences as the
witnessing functions of the shoes. These connections again rely on the virtual visitors
archive of experiences, their own connections with children, grandparents, and textiles
from their own childhoods. In sum, the shoes and dress come to narratively and
metonymically stand in for bodies, which are then entrenched into commemorative and
memorial functions as witnesses to history. In the next section I will engage with Bill
Brown’s notion of “thing theory” as a way into a symbolic and methodological analysis
of objects as witnesses. This discussion underpins and reinforces both a narrative and a
phenomenological examination of objects, and why this two-pronged approach is doubly important in the case of the Holocaust.

3.1 Naming the Object

Before rhetorically analyzing the consequences of naming objects as witnesses I will first contend with approaches symbolically used in analyzing objects and the subsequent need for a methodology that equally emphasizes our phenomenological interactions with material witnesses. Objects can be considered from a semiotic perspective, a system that considers communication methods (natural languages, body language, signs, images, etc.). A semiotic approach divides the sign into a signifier (representation) and a signified (semantics). In the case of natural languages, the relationship between Signifier (the word) and Signified (the meaning) is arbitrary and abstract. In contrast, the materiality of objects, lends them a presumed level of stability that words do not often achieve. It is tempting to see the material world as “dry ground above those swirling accounts of the subject” (Brown, p. 1). Bill Brown, a literary and cultural theorist, contends that it is appealing to see objects as something real, fixed, or finite, in a world of theory and hypotheticals; this appeal stems from the end of World War II when a desire for a finite or fixed world was coupled with a turn towards material cultural studies and material cultural history (Brown, p. 2). The possibility of leaving objects alone, untheorized became impossible in a world where “even the most course and commonsensical things, mere things, perpetually pose a problem because of the specific unspecificity that ‘things’ denotes” (Brown, p. 3). In essence, the finite or fixed
material reality of objects is undermined by the names and cultural symbolism that are attached to them. Calling any object a *thing* heightens the arbitrary system of naming anything, and further calls into question the distinction between the symbolic reality of an object and the material or phenomenological reality of the object.

While I use the word “objects” to denote the shoes and dress informally throughout this thesis, it is important to understand Brown’s semiotic differentiation between *objects* and *things*, and how these designations may enrich our understanding of material witnesses from the Holocaust. *Things*, Brown notes, cannot or should not be equated with *objects*; whereas *objects* refers to named things such as shoes, spoons, or lamps, *things* refer to an unspecified unnamed meta-level of the material world. There is a “semantic *reducibility of things to objects*, coupled with the semantic *irreducibility of things to objects*” (p. 3). *Things* simultaneously define and defy referentiality. If objects are what we touch in the world, *things* refer to objects as a whole on a meta-level. Thing theory attacks the semantic problem of things and objects, with an eye towards distinguishing the symbolic system of objects and the meta-contextual system of naming.

To further elucidate the difference between things and objects Brown uses the example of a dirty window. The dirtiness of the window interrupts “the habit of looking *through* windows as transparencies [and] enables [me] to look at a window itself in its opacity” (p. 4). The clean window is what Brown considers to be an *object*:

As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are
codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. (p. 4)

Objects are structurally symbolic; we are meant to “read” them in meaningful ways that reveal something of significance. In the context of the artifacts under consideration in this thesis we can see and interpret the significance of what they disclose about history, society, nature, culture, and what their display might say about us. The material witnesses disclose the events that mark and demarcate our past; they disclose the violence and unrest that inhabits society, and the cultural importance of material objects that tie us to our pasts. The discourse of object-hood relates them to the events and people from which they come and in so doing allows museumgoers, and the museum to “use them as facts.” The significance of the shoes and dress are meant to be read and tell us something about our past, and in the context of the museum display, they are meant to be seen as objects, which aid in the secondary witnessing of the Holocaust.

In contrast, things are less traditionally symbolic than objects. Things: “can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when the flow within circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition has been arrested, however momentarily” (Brown, p. 4). As a word, “things holds within it a more audacious ambiguity” (Brown, p. 4). Things are raw product; the thing does not function symbolically, but rather things function materially. Things, as a signifier, denotes “a massive generality as well as particularities” (Brown, p. 4). Things are the red thing on the hook, or the brown thing in the corner, “things is a word that tends,
especially at its most banal, to index a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and the unnameable, the figurable and the unfiguralbe, the identifiable and the unidentifiable” (Brown, p. 4-5). Things, Brown writes, can be imagined as, “what is excessive in objects” and “what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible in objects” (p. 5). In as much as things co-exist with objects, things lie outside the symbolic charge of the object. In a way, to talk about things is to denote the unnamable material and metaphysical aspects of the object that get overlooked in our everyday deciphering of the world around us.

In relation to museums and witnessing objects, it might at first glance be difficult to see the relevance of even discussing things. Brown argues that things “lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects” (p. 5). This viewpoint is similar to Williams’ earlier contention that “any item exhibited in a museum is never allowed to remain the thing itself, but instead invokes meanings greater than the world of objects from which it has been picked out” (p. 30). The museum aims to emphasize the object’s role as a linguistic sign while deemphasizing its simultaneous role as a “plastic element.” Despite this, I contend that both the shoe and dress exhibits convey a hint of thingness. It might be easy to flat out say that the artifacts under consideration here are not things proper; they have proper names, they are “shoes” and “a dress,” both named, described, and identified. However, the shoes and dress become a point of confrontation and display because of the fact that they stopped working for their users, or rather the world that made them function stopped working.
In their everyday life, the shoes would have been something to look through. Symbolically parsed, shoes signify the mobilization of a person and protection from the elements as something worn on the body. Although the shoes could be examined for their social, cultural relevance they really only became something to study when their consumption and use were forever altered. In other words, the normal life of the shoes became anything but normal. It is well documented that Nazi perpetrators, both in laws imposed and deeds enacted, sought to reduce the Jewish population of Europe by means of extermination that depended on being able to reduce human life to that of mere things. The Jews were made symbolically disposable because of how they themselves were named in society; they became things that could be disposed of in the same way a broken drill or shattered vase could be. In German society, Jewish people became things to be shipped and moved. In the concentration camp system, Jewish people became numbers in a system of ordered chaos. Their clothes and personal effects were by-products of a society that stopped working for them, and in turn their belongings stopped working for them. Our interest in the mounds of shoes, which can be symbolically read as objects, stem from a reduction of people into things, seen as disposable by the Nazi Party. From this we can see that the object and the thing cannot be separated and that the history that altered them is a history that altered our relation to the shoes and the dress: “the story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (Brown, 4).
It is apt to think of things in relation to traumatic events, for like the traumatic, which is marked by latency and a certain ineffability, “things reside in some balmy elsewhere beyond theory but just because they lie both at hand and somewhere outside the theoretical field, beyond a certain limit, as recognizable yet illegible remainder or as the entifiable that is unspecifiable” (Brown, p. 5). Similarly, the gap or wound left by the traumatic event marks a place between knowing and not knowing. The imprint of trauma is “at hand” through symptomatic markers, yet the experience is not directly graspable or retrieved. We might think of material witnesses as illustrations of the indivisibility of objects and things. Although they are objects that can be encoded and decoded, they are also things that are “both at hand and somewhere outside the theoretical field.”

3.2 Thing Methodology

If things, and in the context of my examples witnessing things, are outside the theoretical field, how then do we methodologically follow and understand them? Brown notes that in order to examine the social, sexual, or environmental lives of things, researchers have had to turn away from “the problem of matter, and away from the object/thing dialectic” (Brown, 6). Relying on Anthony Appadurai’s *Social Lives of Things* (1988), Brown underscores that this turn away from matter invites a methodological fetishism that “refuses to begin with a formal ‘truth’ that cannot, despite its truth, ‘illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things’” (6). Methodological fetishism “disavows, no less, the tropological work, the psychological work, and the phenomenological work entailed in the human production of materiality as such” at the
expense of questions that have been foreclosed by “more familiar fetishization: the 
fetishization of the subject, the image, the word” (Brown, p. 6-7). Going back to 
Benjamin’s claims about the aura of certain works of art, we can see this kind of 
fetishization at work; the material dimensions of the work are foreclosed in an effort to 
emphasize the image and its connection to some “balmy elsewhere.” Therefore, my 
approach to the effects and affects the shoes and dress exhibits have on museumgoers 
will take into account both the rhetorical dimensions of witnessing that surrounds the 
objects, as it will the phenomenological dimensions of being in their presence, either 
virtually or proximally. Focusing on the way in which the material world works on the 
human world, gets at the relation between subject and object that is not so much mystical 
as it is relational.

Thing methodology is then a focus on how the material world effects and affects 
us. Brown notes that “methodological fetishism, then, is not an error so much as it is a 
condition for thought, new thoughts about how inanimate objects constitute human 
subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten 
their relation to other subjects” (7). At the root of the question and investigation of things 
it is not just the rhetorical connection between objects and things (a semantic dimension), 
but also between subjects and inanimate objects and subjects and distant Others (a 
phenomenological dimension). The “claims” that objects/things make on “your attention 
and on your action are made on behalf of things” (Ahmed, p. 9) is the important part. 
Rather than thinking of “what things are for a given society,” we should think of the
effects, affects, and claims they make on our attention. In this light, we can see a thing methodology as a way of highlighting the possible effects and claims that the material world makes on us. This can only be heightened when the material world is connected to trauma and atrocity.

3.3 Defining the Witness

Starting in the early 1990s studies concerning trauma and traumatic representations have been on the rise. Three works that blend narrative theory, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, and history set this stage: Dori Laub and Shoshanna Felman’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1991), Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), and Ruth Leys *Trauma: A Geneology* (2000). The politics of trauma, while not the ultimate focus of this thesis, are necessary in our understanding of representations of the Holocaust in particular, and recent world history at large. As the titles of these seminal works allude, trauma and its subsequent representations are concerned with “crises of witnessing” and “unclaimed experience;” there is an underlying urgency in the agency associated with traumatic experiences and how this relates to any representations ability to convey an experience.

In the psychoanalytic sense of the word trauma is defined as “A psychic injury, esp. one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed” (“trauma,” definition 1). Although there is no defined consensus of what kinds of events can be constituted as traumatic, it can be understood that an “emotional shock
to the memory” effects the voluntary recall of the person who underwent the traumatic event and thus alters the representations he or she subsequently creates. Ruth Leys explains,

The idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim in unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. (p. 2)

The traumatic sufferer is said to be “possessed” by the event and in some instances haunted by it in dreams, flashbacks, or other hallucinations in which the past is immanently felt in the present. Being possessed by the event reinforces to the power the event has over the traumatic sufferer, or rather the powerless position he/she is left in as direct access to traumatic memories are not easily recalled.

Popularized by Cathy Caruth, the lending of trauma to literature stems from the parallel dimensions of literature and psychoanalysis: “literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (1996, p. 2). Language and representation play an important role in our understanding of trauma and subsequently our trepidation in evaluating the truth factor of these narratives. Language is already regarded in some ways as a watering down of experience. Importantly, language gives us access to the lives of other characters, worlds, etc., but there is always something lost between the experience in the world and the words on the page. Similarly, with trauma direct access to the experience is cut off, influencing the ability to know the whole
story. Although all memoires are susceptible to gaps and inconsistencies, traumatic memories are characterized by an inability on the part of the traumatic sufferer to pin them down, in essence leaving the memories of the event hidden from view and thus leaving the traumatic sufferer with often incomplete or distorted versions of his/her own life stories.

If the traumatic event dissociates or cleaves experience from memory, what results are events without reliable witnesses. The role of the witness is crucial to our understanding of traumatic events, and to our understanding of objects as witnesses. In legal terms the witness is a person who “has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it” (Agamben, p. 17). While we understand that the memories of witnesses are fallible, as with any memory, the witness is someone who was there. Witnesses are traditionally human recorders of the sights, sounds, and smells of a certain period in time. The witness augments the facts and statistics of historical or personal events with details only a human could provide.

Especially in the case of the Holocaust, witness testimonies have held a more valued position. There are a few factors that contribute to this position, most notably because of the enormity of the Holocaust. Despite documentary attempts, such as William Shirer’s (1960) mammoth twelve-hundred page history *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, the prevailing historical method when confronted with the Holocaust is a blending of documentary, aesthetic, and testimonial sources.
Despite the importance placed on witnesses, there is a predominant suspicion to the accuracy of witness testimony because of effects of trauma, which include gaps and distortions of memory. While the importance of the witness is crucial, Dori Laub points to the contrary position witnesses and witnessing holds in relation to the Holocaust. In his chapter, “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony, and Survival” he argues that the Holocaust is an event without a witness. Laub writes,

> It was not only the reality of the situation and the lack of responsiveness of bystanders or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place with no witness: it was also the very circumstance of being inside the event that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed. One might say that there was, thus, historically no witness to the Holocaust, either from outside or from inside the event. (p. 81)

This is not to say that there were no witnesses to the atrocities of the camps, the SS, the starvation, or the brutalization. Rather, what Laub points to is the fact that no one person could ever be a witness to the enormous series of events that “the Holocaust” has come to encompass. Cathy Caruth notes that central to the idea of not being able to witness an event as it fully occurs is “a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory. The force of this experience would appear to arise precisely, in other words, in the collapse of its understanding” (1995, p. 7).

This notion of the impossibility of knowing lends itself to the notion of the impossibility of representation. If the event cannot be known fully by the person who was
there, how then can it be communicated through language, art, museums, etc.? Of course, this fear has not stopped many iterations of Holocaust representations. Despite the widespread belief that language, images, and museums can never communicate fully the horrors of the Holocaust, most institutional and non-institutional agencies have forged ahead with a belief that “an exclusive emphasis or fixation on unrepresentable excess may divert attention from what may indeed be represented or reconstructed with respect to traumatizing events, and should be, as accurately as possible” (LaCapra, p. 92).

The belief that representations that do not fully convey the experience of the Holocaust are better than none at all has translated into many museum exhibits that aim to convey the experiences of witnesses, and in turn come to embody all of the problems and possibilities of communicating experiences of atrocity. As noted earlier in this chapter, shoes come to stand in for “grandchildren and grandparents” and the dress comes to stand in for “experience of Jewish children during the Holocaust.” These objects extend beyond the specific experiences of the people who wore them and come to represent the experiences of a group or groups of people. In the next section I will briefly address the risks of rhetorically conflating the object with witness. In the final chapter I will define the ethical and social relationships that become possible when experiencing the object as witness.

3.4 Framing the Object as Witness

The first concern when naming the object as witness is a rhetorical conflation of the material object with the witnessing and traumatized subjects. If we see objects as
witnesses of and to trauma, how does this figure in to the conflation of psychoanalytic trauma to an inanimate object? Can or should we think of objects as exhibiting signs or symptoms of trauma usually reserved for human subjects? I subscribe to Dominick LaCapra’s assertion that “the focus and the use of concepts derived from psychoanalysis should not obscure the difference between victims of traumatic historical events and others not directly experiencing them” (ix). Here LaCapra makes an important distinction between those who underwent the trauma, the victims, and those who witnessed them afterwards. Although LaCapra and others\(^\text{11}\) have shown how traumatic symptoms can be transferred to spectators, they are all careful to distinguish between the experience of watching these types of events and the experience of being in them. When thinking about objects as witnesses, it should be emphasized that despite their symbolic relationship to traumatized subjects and despite their direct experience of traumatic historical events there is a real difference between subjects and objects, namely the presence of a psyche. There is a sense that using the language of trauma on specific objects and their representations in some way devalues the real psychological wounding of victims. If we come to think of objects and their experiences as similar to that of victims, a move which the USHMM makes when connecting the dress to the “experience of Jewish children during the Holocaust” and the shoes to the experience of people from “Prague, Paris, and Amsterdam,” there is an equalizing relationship drawn. These comparisons tend to remove the specificity of individual experiences, and create a homologous whole of

\(^{11}\) See for example Felman and Laub (1992), Alexander (2004), and Kaplan (2005).
trauma, when in reality the hallmark of trauma is that it manifests very differently in each person who experiences the traumatic event. Drawing this connection, between the psyche of an individual and a material object then can be seen as potentially inflating the risk of “mythmaking” and “gentrification” that Paul Williams saw as inherent in memorial museum displays.

The second concern, closely tied to the implantation of psychic values on inanimate objects, is that of political instrumentation. This concern is grounded in the concerns of witnessing in general. As noted in the previous section, in the area of trauma studies witnessing plays a crucial role. Dori Laub, a clinical psychologist and one of the founders of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, has pointed to a crisis in witnessing. Through his experience with video testimony, Laub has demonstrated that witness testimonies may “involve distortion, disguise, and other permeations relating to processes of imaginative transformation and narrative shaping, as well as perhaps repression, denial, dissociation, and foreclosure” (p. 88-89). The traumatic experience/the shock to the psyche prohibits the event from being narratively integrated into ones archive of experience. “Distortion, disguise, and other permeations relating to processes of imaginative transformation” result from this shock and can be said to both protect the victim of trauma from reliving the traumatic experience, but at the same time limit their ability to witness fully. These qualities do not invalidate the experience of the witness, but they do remind us of the problems with witnessing and testifying.
These problems become even greater when we apply witnessing to inanimate objects. Although these silent material witnesses can symbolically speak through the scars, cracks, scratches, and other physical evidence that wordlessly transmit their story and histories, they do not have the ability to speak through language. Because objects placed in the role of witnessing cannot speak, they are often spoken for, whether by museum curators or the political/activist groups that so often play a part in the memorial museum. This proverbially opens the door for the memories associated with them to be distorted and narratively inscribed to fit political and cultural repressions, which may not hold true to past events. Instead of the material witness repressing memory as a tool to help it figuratively cope with its traumatic past, it may be symbolically re-inscribed as a way of controlling political or cultural needs for better or worse.

These are the risks of rhetorically associating inanimate objects with feeling and thinking subjects. Being mindful of these risks and the possible narrative manipulations, is crucial when approaching any ethical engagement with the material fragments of history. Despite the often-incomplete narratives that the shoes and the dress either tell or are made to tell by the museum curators, there is accuracy, as demanded by LaCapra, in labeling these remnants as witnesses to history. Like the eyewitness who provides information beyond the facts, the material witness similarly grants museumgoers a sideways glance into the history they are meant to testify to. This framing in return lends itself to a relation with past events dependent both on the transformation of the material and the museumgoers willingness to engage with the object as witness. In the next
chapter I will explore the phenomenological and ethical possibilities of experiencing objects as witnesses. I will move beyond the role the curators take in transforming these objects into witness – connecting them to bodies and then cementing them in commemorative and narrative practice – and focus my attention of the responsibilities of the museumgoer. These responsibilities include listening, questioning, and feeling in spaces framed by the rhetoric of witnessing and in turn taking on the roles of a secondary-witness.
Chapter 4

Witnessing the Witnessing Object: Positioning the Spectator as Secondary Witness

The object is always more important, more interesting, more capable (full of rights): it has no duty whatsoever toward me, it is I who am obliged to it.
- *Mute Objects of Expression*, Francis Pong

Despite the narrative risks associated with naming the object as witness, I contend that if the museumgoer approaches these objects as extensions of human witnesses there are distinct ethical and empathic relationships that are possible. By constructing the object as witness, the USHMM positions the museumgoer as secondary-witness. This is done narratively and phenomenologically, both in the space of the museum and in the spaces of museumgoers everyday lives. In this chapter I will begin by looking at how the museum imagines the visitor as secondary-witness through the physical and virtual curated spaces. Engaging with Marita Sturken’s definition of “tourists of history” and Sara Ahmed’s understanding of phenomenological “orientation,” I argue that despite concerns that the USHMM is just another stop on the US National Mall, the museum’s physical and virtual constructions have the ability to be impactful both in the moment the museumgoer experiences the curated spaces and well after. Finally, using Vivian Sobchack’s theory of *interobjectivity*, I will reinforce the importance of the material witness to the museumgoer, exploring the implications of imagining the material aspects of witnessing.
4.1 From Tourist to Secondary Witness

In examining the spaces of the museum and the construction of the museumgoer as secondary-witness there are two important aspects to consider. First, how the space constructs and positions the objects vis-a-vis the museumgoer, and second, how the museumgoer positions and imagines him/herself in relation to the material witnesses. In the previous chapter I examined the rhetoric of witnessing as applied to the shoes and the dress. Here I will extend this analysis to the rhetoric of witnessing that is used in relation to the museumgoer. This analysis will take into account both the narrative and spatial construction of the visitor as secondary witness, and the demands it places on him/her.

As illustrated in the introduction, the construction of the museumgoer as witness begins before entering the USHMM’s permanent exhibit with the identification card. Before the visitor queues for the permanent exhibit he/she inhabits the “Hall of Witnesses.” Devoid of any artifacts or didactic panels, the Hall of Witnesses is a liminal tranistory zone. The space, while grand and open, exudes an oppressive and foreboding atmosphere. Here the first demand is placed on the museumgoers to be attentive to their own role in the museum. On the back wall, etched into the black granite is a quote from the book of Isaiah, “You are my witnesses” (43:10) (Figure 8). The space speaks to the visitors, and engages them in the trajectory of the museum. Without “you” the purpose of the space, in witnessing the history of the Holocaust, would not be attained. This narrative structure is continued when the museumgoer lines up to enter the elevators. Here he/she is prompted to take an identification card, which as shown in Figure 1
declares, “For the living and the dead we must bear witness.” Again, the dialectal choice implicates the museumgoer in the mission of the USHMM, to bear witness to the events of the Holocaust.

![Figure 8: “You are My Witness.” Photo credit: USHMM Photo Archive](image)

In the virtual space less aestheticized tactics are used to implicate the museumgoer. Here it is harder to predict what virtual visitors encounter before or after their experience of the “Silent Witness” exhibit. However, throughout the website key phrases are used to connect the museumgoer in the moral demands of the USHMM. Phrases such as “Never Again Begins With You” cycle through many of the websites banners and the slogan “The Power of Truth” is present on every page prior to “entering” the virtual exhibit. From these slogans and other links available on genocide prevention,
antisemitism, and “memory in action” virtual visitors are invited to see themselves in the future of these campaigns. Whether true or not, knowledge is advertised as being pertinent in the prevention of future atrocities and preservation of past memories of atrocity. These choices, both in the permanent exhibit and in the online content, serve to shift the museumgoer from a tourist mindset to a position of secondary witness.

Marita Sturken contends that when it comes to the activation of objects, U.S. citizens have chosen to define themselves as tourists of history. While Chapter Three outlined Sturken’s understanding of how objects are transformed institutionally, here it is useful to understand how the visitor is potentially transformed when confronting material witnesses. Underpinning Sturken’s engagement with the material culture of trauma is the notion that America’s relation to trauma is based on tourism. She defines the tourist as:

A figure who embodies, a detached and seemingly innocent pose. In using the term ‘tourists of history’ I am defining a particular mode through which the American public is encouraged to experience itself as the subject of history through consumerism, media images, souvenirs, popular culture, and museum and architectural reenactments, a form of tourism that has as its goal a cathartic ‘experience’ of history. (p. 9)

This form of tourism and consumption of objects is connected to the “investment in the notion of America’s innocence” (Sturken, p. 7). While it is clear that America’s relationship to 9/11 is vastly different than the Holocaust, the responses to and representations of both events have a marked similarity. Commemorative ceremonies, make-shift monuments, official monuments, and the construction of memorial museums
have followed in the wake of both tragedies.\textsuperscript{12} For Sturken the relationship between history, tourism, and material culture is a process whereby the participant acts on a search for authenticity (tied to pilgrimage) and in doing so “provides a means to feel one has been authentically close to an event, that one has experienced it in some way” (p. 12). Sturken uses the term “tourists of history,” rather than “tourists of memory” as a way to “signify that this tourist subjectivity has a problematic relationship to the weight, burdens, and meanings of history.” (p. 12). The tourist of history thus never attains a genuine experience of the past because of the “distanced and mediated ways that U.S. citizens engage with global terrorism” (p. 13). The mediated nature of most historical, and recently traumatic, events is accomplished through television, photographs, and museums.

Despite this “troubled relationship,” the distanced and mediated engagement has been argued to be necessary to any ethical engagement with history. This especially aligns with Alison Landsberg’s stance that we should “inhabit other people’s memories as other people’s memories” (p. 24). Whereas Sturken sees mediation as a screen or

\textsuperscript{12} The memorials of 9/11 have gone through these stages much more quickly than the commemorative process of the Holocaust, which could be attributed to two reasons. For one, the events of 9/11, while horrific and impressive in the scope of visual impact, was contained to very specific locations, making the resulting memorials easier to define in regards to space and place. The vast network of concentration camps left after the Holocaust made “place” a thing that came to be defined at a slower pace, often in a less organized fashion. Second, the atrocity of 9/11 was born into a memorial culture. Whereas Holocaust commemoration departed from WWI commemoration (Winters, p 313), 9/11 commemoration was born into a memorial culture where the stages of memorialization and proper postural engagement have already been defined (Holocaust commemoration acting as an early model for institutionalized commemoration), thus accelerating the stages of commemoration.
block to fully comprehending traumatic historical events, Landsberg sees mediation as a necessary prosthesis, or rather a necessary reminder that these histories and memories are *other people’s memories*. The narrative strategies used by the USHMM in the Hall of Witnesses and the home page of the USHMM’s website, continually employing “you” and “we,” is but the first step in its bid to transform the tourist into secondary-witness. As will be shown in the next section, this strategy is continued in both the physical and virtual spaces curated that encompass the shoe and dress exhibits, thus combatting the touristic tendency.

4.2 Spaces of Experience: Up Close and Personal Encounters On-line and In-person

The physical surroundings of objects have as much impact on their symbolic connection to witnessing as do the textual surroundings, which was the focus of the last chapter. Physically or geographically the objects in the USHMM have been pulled from their origins in Europe. Museumgoers experience them as out of “place,” yet specific to the “space” of the museum. As Oren Baruch Stier aptly notes, in regards to remnant objects there is a difference between “space” and “place:” “‘place’ invokes stability and calls attention on the proper home of the objects, while ‘space’ is multiple and focuses attention on the environment and our own position as we engage the object in question” (p. 84).

Both the shoes and the dress can be considered to be in the ‘space’ of the museum/virtual exhibit, albeit inhabiting very different spaces. Similarly they are both located in spaces foreign to their origin, and their displacement. Whether pulled from
Europe or Lola Rein’s home their position in these spaces “leads to a sharper focus on space and its multiple, symbolic meanings” (Stier, p. 84). In the space of the shoe exhibit their presence contends with the objects and stories that come both before and after. The permanent exhibit creates multiple, symbolic meaning based on what and how the visitor spends his or her time, whether this is listening/watching recorded testimony, or walking through the reconstructed barracks. Although there are many ways the visitor can experience the museum according to her own archive of experiences, her physical wayfinding is controlled by the curated space of the museum. The virtual space is much more complex in the amount of layers that can be present. Not only does the “Silent Witness” exhibit itself have layers, which include photographs, videos, and text, but it also must contend with a limitless amount of layers that occur in the space of the virtual visitors location, which could be a home, a classroom, a library, an airport, etc. As shown in the previous chapter the virtual exhibit is much more explicit about what it wants its visitors to learn from the space. With the concept of space in mind, it becomes more apparent that this choice is justified; the disparate viewing positions the visitor might find him/herself in, which could include many layers of meaning that might cloud the experience of interacting with the information and the dress, is combatted by the specificity of the virtual space. Importantly, both spaces lend themselves to multiple meanings, but what is stressed in both exhibits is the importance of the witness.

While Chapter Three emphasized the concerns that come with a rhetoric of witnessing, here I will focus on the objects physical surroundings and how the visitor
should come to think of the objects through spatial interactions. Where and how we position ourselves is a basic aspect of how we experience the witnessing object. Whereas Allison Landsberg and Jill Bennett underscore the psychic oscillation that must occur in the museum space to avoid colonizing the other’s experience, Sara Ahmed approaches our consideration of objects in a physical and space oriented method. She emphasizes that how we orientate ourselves either towards or away from certain objects or people directly correlates to our conscious investment in both the objects and what the objects symbolically stand in for. She argues, “to be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things” (p. 31). Ahmed does not look at affect as autonomous, but rather something that is interconnected with all the visible and invisible aspects of life, or what she calls “with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near” (p. 30). What we are near to has as much to do with what we are physically around as it does with what we choose to be around, thus leading to what we choose to evaluate and ultimately what “we direct our energy and attention toward” (Ahmed, p. 3). Just as Roger Simon described the necessary work that accompanies the inheritance of the “terrible gift,” the direction of one’s energy is an intentional process.

Ahmed argues that happiness, or what makes us happy, is a crucial factor in what shapes our “near sphere,” which are the spaces we inhabit and frequent regularly. What we surround ourselves with establishes what we like and what we are like; the objects that
we surround ourselves with daily can be described as a “horizon of likes.” Just as we move toward or orientate our consciousness towards the things we like, the things that “we do not like we move away from” (p. 33). This moving away “might help establish the edges of our horizon; in rejecting the proximity of certain objects, we define the places that we know we do not wish to go, the things we do not wish to have, touch, taste, hear, feel, see, those things we do not want to keep within reach” (Ahmed, p. 32). From this description, Ahmed establishes that the material things we surround ourselves with, or move away from, has as much to do about how things shape our physical environment as it has to do about how things shape our knowledge.

We can see the experience of the Holocaust Museum objects as taking place in different spheres. The shoes are experienced in an “away sphere.” The viewer must make an effort to go and see them, he/she does not just “stumble” upon this exhibit as they experience Washington’s National Mall. She must go, wait in line, have her bag checked, walk through the “Hall of Witnesses,” wait in line more, etc. In sum, the shoes are not experienced in a space that makes up the visitors everyday experience. The visitor’s relation to the dress is radically different. The virtual component to the exhibit allows that it can be accessed anywhere that has an internet connection. Thus the dress and Lola’s story can be experienced in the virtual visitor’s “near sphere.” These are simple observations, but they are ultimately important in considering the lasting impact of interacting with material witnesses.
How we orientate ourselves towards objects is troubling when it pertains to trauma and memorial museums. On the level of memorial museums as institution, they define spaces that are not normally part of our near sphere. The structure of museums dictate that in many cases the things we value become collected and preserved in archives or exhibits that form part of our away space. We can see the physical archival structure of museums and memorial museums as “establishing the edges of our horizon” in two ways. Not only do the physical structure of museums act as the borders of defined preservation, but the memorial museum function of these spaces “defines the places that we know we do not wish to go” (Ahmed, p. 32). In the case of the USHMM, it takes as its mission to foster a responsibility for the “Never Again” motto. The memorial museum represents a state of genocide and war that we do not wish to experience or allow again. The collection and display of remnant objects is in itself an act toward our future selves, by defining spaces that represent where we do not wish to go as a society again.

The museum is a space in which the visitor receives knowledge and affect. We can look at this spatial relation in one of two ways. We can perhaps see memorial museums acting as a necessary comfort, places where museumgoers can revisit traumatic pasts in a very purposeful way, or what Dominic LaCapra would categorize as working through trauma. Working through trauma describes a state where the past is returned to on the terms of the subject, whenever he/she decides, thus allowing him/her to possess the event rather than the event posses the subject. This is certainly true of the USHMM,
as there is a defined process of going to the museum, as outlined above. As part of the
museumgoers away sphere there is a purposiveness and preparedness of going and in turn
hopefully a more engaged relationship with the history represented. On the other hand,
we might want to question the long-term effectiveness of the museumgoers experience of
the site. If the affective pull of the museum is tied to space and place, what happens to
these affects once the museumgoer has left? How do these feelings penetrate into our
everyday lives when our near spheres are not invested with these same emotions? The
museumgoer may purposely direct their attention towards these objects by visiting the
museum, but can we apply the same intent to the visitor’s engagement of all the displays?

The questions relate to our evaluations of whether these objects do more good
than bad. Ahmed explains:

> Things become good, or acquire their value as good insofar as they point toward happiness. Objects become “happiness means,” or we could say they become happiness pointers, as if to follow their point would be to find happiness. If objects provide a means for making us happy, then in directing ourselves toward this or that object we are aiming somewhere else, toward a happiness that is presumed to follow. The temporality of this following does matter. Happiness is what would come after. Given this, happiness is directed toward certain objects, which point toward that which is not yet present. When we follow things, we aim for happiness, as if happiness is what we get if we reach certain points. (p. 34)

For Ahmed, the object and aims of happiness are future driven. To “follow” or move
towards certain things is to aim at future happiness. In the same way, we can see the
USHMM’s objects and displays as similarly future driven. As much as they serve as an
“attraction” for museumgoers they are also attractively leading the call of “never again.”

In regards to the shoes and dress, which serve as material extensions of the witness, we can see them as contributing to a strive towards a “good life,” or at least a life that resembles what the museumgoer believes he/she is entitled to. Ahmed notes, “certain objects become imbued with positive affect as good objects. After all, objects not only embody good feeling, but are perceived as necessary to good life” (p. 34). Again, we must think about the fact that although these objects might not be considered happy or good in and of themselves, but the purpose for their display is a pursuit of a good life or at least a better life. Ahmed underscores the cause-effect/cause-affect attributes of objects. Objects are attributed with certain feelings, and:

Once an object is a feeling-cause, it can cause feeling, so that when we feel the feeling we expect to feel we are affirmed. The retrospective causality of affect…quickly converts into what we could call an anticipatory causality. We can even anticipate an affect without being retrospective insofar as objects might acquire the value of proximities that are now derived from our own experience. (Ahmed, p. 40)

In the context of the memorial museum this analysis is at once comforting and disconcerting. If the museumgoer can anticipate the sad or troubling affects of the objects displayed, he/she may be able to curb the emotional investment that may lead to over-identification. On the other hand, anticipatory causality may lead to a lack of thought and the gentrification that Paul Williams warned of; if we can anticipate the affect (ie: that I will feel upset, sad, etc.), then there is less need to form retrospective thoughts or connect future cause-affects. Although the museum provides us with proximity to objects, which
we can anticipate to produce a certain affect, it does not guarantee, in this formulation, a push to be overly thoughtful when confronting them.

Ahmed is attuned to these possibilities and is cautious about categorizing our experience of certain objects as producing good or bad outcomes. The presumption that “bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive,” and that “bad feelings are seen as oriented toward the past, as a kind of stubbornness that ‘stops’ the subject from embracing the future” has the potential to “disappear” histories, especially histories of injustice (p. 50). Striving to create happy or good experiences forecloses the existence of historical injustices in the present. Letting go of objects associated with injustice, would be to close off an understanding of the persistence of the past in the present. Thus, while it might be easy to see the shoes as creating a cause-effect relation of sad/bad affects, the need to keep them in the present, albeit as part of our away spaces, is essential to the preservation of memory and the realization of pasts effects on the present. In the long term, the objects provide a better facilitation of witnessing by giving us something material to orient ourselves toward.

This orientation exists in two vastly different spaces in regards to the shoes and the dress. The shoes, in the permanent exhibit of the USHMM, are impossible to miss. These anonymous objects take up their own room and there is no detour or path that goes around them. Unlike some of the other more graphic images in the museum, the shoes are not hidden by walls nor are they are they contained in an “optional alcove.” The museumgoer is made to see them, made to orientate him/herself towards them.
proximity the visitor is given in this space is physically close, only being separated by the
glass, which is waste high. Further, the visitor must “orientate” him or herself towards
the shoes because they physically surround the museumgoers on both sides; the museum
path leads through two glass-enclosed mounds of worn shoes (what is seen in Figure 4 is
mirrored behind the museumgoer), and the exhibit envelopes the museumgoer. Their
power is drawn from their simplicity; after all of the images of Jewish people being
beaten, murdered, and degraded these shoes make it clear that indeed they are the only
remaining physical remnants of some of the lives you just saw in the museums
historically contextualized exhibits. In the moment the shoes encroach on the space of the
visitor’s body, but the question arises what lasting effects does their materiality have on
the visitor?

Definitively, this question is unanswerable, but I am going to suggest the away
sphere of the museum is an important aspect in the shoes lasting impression on the body.
Unlike Paul Williams, who is skeptical of the public display of difficult histories, Roger
Simon argues that the public nature of such exhibitions make “an unanticipated claim
that may interrupt one’s self-sufficiency, demanding attentiveness to another’s life
without reducing that life to a version of one’s own stories” (p. 188). The public
relaying, passing, or gifting of information disarms the visitor, provoking the limits of
their knowledge and prodding him/her to ask questions not only about facts, but also
about how they become accountable in the face of such knowledge. Appropriately,
“there is work to be done in the practices of inheritance initiated by public history”
(189). The initial provocation or affect-ual display cannot stop with the feeling of emotion, but must continue with a subsequent reflection and inquisition of what one becomes in the aftermath of that information – a reiteration of the function of the object as a facilitator of affect to thought.

In the Holocaust museum the final floor facilitates this process – the move from the affectual pull of the permanent exhibit to a thoughtful consideration of the experience. In this space the visitor is asked to pledge their support to preventing genocide, ask questions about what they have seen and how to apply their new found knowledge, and finally contemplate what they have just witnessed in the hall of remembrance. The space of the museum facilitates these questions, even if they are short lived. The shoes, in this equation, act as a trigger to the questions and contemplations formulated in these later spaces. As Michael Bernard-Donals explains, the shoe exhibit “dislocates the visitor from the historical past…and—in that dislocation—they trouble the visitor’s sense of relation to that past” (p. 418). Dislocation differs from metonymic equation, in that when the visitor thinks about how the shoes relate to other events, either in history or events in their own life, it disrupts a “part to whole” relationship that “ultimately defers their connection to the historical past, and that potentially undermines the historical authenticity that museumgoers seem to seek, and which the USHMM designers wished to inculcate” (p. 418). As constructed secondary witnesses, I argue that this dislocation enables the shoes to point the visitor not just to the past, but to the future “good life” that Ahmed relates with intentional orientation. By facilitating connections both with
museumgoers’ own lives, and also with other historical events, the newly charged secondary witness is equipped to have the experience of the museum stay with them outside of the museum. The relational aspect that the shoe exhibit invites should therefore not be thought of as solely creating identification, but rather cultivating connections – connections that are necessary for the museum experience to have a lasting impact.

Unlike the anonymous shoes, in the exhibit of Lola Rein’s dress, the virtual visitor is given a very personal and individual account of her time in hiding. This representational choice is clearly different from how the USHMM frames the shoes and the camp uniform, which is displayed at the beginning of the museum’s permanent exhibit. Although the uniform includes an identification number, which could have potentially been used to specify the person who actually wore it, the curators chose not to complete the identification by attaching a name to it. Andrea Liss defends this curatorial choice, arguing that the “uniform’s presence paradoxically lends a sense of living on to the people pictured in the photographs” (p. 77). These photographs include those in the permanent exhibit and the pictures on the identification cards each visitor is given. Not identifying or naming the person who wore the uniform “would seem to present an opportunity for rethinking the traditional museum practice of artifactual display and labeling that often inadvertently dehumanizes its referent” (Liss, p. 77). Naming the subject who wore the uniform might seem like the logical thing to do, as it would make real the person who wore it and potentially provide a greater sense of contact with him/her. However,
Naming in this case might counteract the dehumanizing act of defacing. It might singularize the mass of generalized images – both artifactual and photographic – that only distances the viewer from the material. As it is, the single uniform artifact appears to be hovering, almost stranded, between its ethnographic function as example of relic, and its aesthetic function as exception. (p. 77)

In the space of the museum the visitor must contend not only with the object, which has the ability to singularize and specify a person and a story, but also to contend with other images as well. Naming the referent in the museum might actually take the visitor closer to identification and farther from their encounter with the material objects.

In regards to Lola Rein’s dress, the story told through the object is very personal. In comparing the curatorial choices with the shoes, which remain anonymous, the dress is given a much richer filled out “life” than many of the other objects on display within the museums permanent exhibit. It could be argued that her story is highly personalized because the object, her dress, does not represent an iconic image from the Holocaust. However, I would also argue that her testimony is allowed such individuality because of the way we are meant to encounter it. The virtual exhibit is it’s own space, and does not have to contend with other iconic images or objects that may metonymically link the visitor to the Holocaust or to the other objects they might have seen in the permanent exhibit. The virtual exhibit’s impingement on the visitor’s near sphere is important here. In the museum, objects are integrated into the history of the Holocaust. In the virtual exhibit, the history of the Holocaust is integrated into the story of Lola Rein’s dress. While the visitor to this virtual space is told about Lola’s dress, they are also informed about deportations, the untimely death of parents, and the gut wrenching separations that
occurred between parents and their children. The dress becomes a witness not just to Lola’s life and her “only connection to my mother,” but also to an account of lengths Jewish people went to find safety and the problems both they and their concealers faced under the Nazi regime. The virtual space allows that a personal story can be told perhaps without the greater affective pull that the permanent exhibit evokes, thus limiting identification. The personal story is meant to draw the visitor in and combat the virtual distance created by the screen. Through the process of digitization enough distance is created to combat the urge to sink too deeply into another’s history. Despite the fact that the virtual visitor can zoom in very close on the dress to examine threads, seams, stains (all the physical markers of its experience) the virtual component, or the physical distance from the dress tempers the risk of becoming too embroiled in its history.¹³

The space the virtual visitor experiences the dress, very likely in his or her near sphere, allows the details of the dress’ life and connection with the Holocaust to be linked to the present without undermining the specificity of the object’s experience. The near

¹³ While it is generally agreed upon that virtual objects have different affectual capacities than museum objects (Newell 2012; Cameron and Kenderdine 2010), little research has been done on how virtual exhibits create affective pull in relation to atrocity. In a 2012 keynote address given by Alison Landsberg, entitled “Translating Atrocity: The Materiality of Virtual Sites of Atrocity,” she put forward a theory claiming that the emergence of virtual objects is a process of translation. Like any translation what appears on the screen is in many ways incommensurable with the original object, but in importantly creates new material experiences through the interaction with an inmaterial virtual space. With the dress exhibit in mind, it is possible to see it as a process of translation. New interactions with it are made possible by the virtual space. While the screen may temper affectual pull, the layers of history, memory, text, and voice, would not be possible in the physical space of the museum.
sphere tempers the difficult history the dress facilitates by acting as a necessary comfort and diminishes the chance of the story from overwhelming the visitor. The spatial orientation here allows for a very intimate experience of another’s history without the risk of falling into it or claiming it as ones own. While the virtual exhibit may not hold the same affectual impact as the shoes, their encroachment in our near sphere, the taking in of this exhibit in the near sphere, leaves a sense that this history is in fact still here not just in the pages of history but built into the spaces we inhabit and further integral to staying mindful of the “places that we do not wish to go” in the future. Despite the “un-real” quality of the virtual space, it is clearly connected to something that exists in the real world thus combatting a sense that it is positioned out of history, time, etc., and making it an effective object to orientate oneself towards. The very act of the visitor orientating him/herself towards the virtual exhibit is the first step in having these histories stay with him/her in the spaces he/she inhabits daily. I posit that what we orientate ourselves toward stays with us, leaves an impression on us longer than the physical moment by asking both subtly and overtly to evaluate our surroundings and direct our energy towards. The longevity of this energy is contingent on what we orientate ourselves towards, and how often we choose to do so. The material aspects of these objects and the spaces the USHMM provides facilitates this orientation, thus enabling the potential formation or transformation of spectators into secondary witnesses.
4.3 Interobjective Encounters: Thinking Through Objects

It could be said that the experiences of the physical space of the museum and the virtual space of the “Silent Witness” exhibit provoke different understandings of “the limit between the body and the world” (Sobchack, p. 286). Connected to Ahmed’s notion of affect, the “messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into world” (Ahmed, p. 30), Vivian Sobchack, a specialist in film and phenomenology, proposes that to understand the relationship between ethics and aesthetics one must come to understand the precarious and limited divisions between subjects and objects. This is not to say that there is a marked line between the body and the world, but that recognition of the points where subjects and objects connect/disconnect are crucial areas for understanding difference in the world (not just between different thinking subjects, but between subjects and inanimate objects).

_Flesh_ is the term Sobchack uses to describe the meeting of the two positions:

Flesh connotes the structure of reversibility whereby all things are at the same time active and passive, visual subjects and visible objects, the outside and inside, the inside of the outside…The concept of flesh is precisely what allows…a renewed notion of subjectivity, one which introduces alterity into the very definition of selfsameness. (p. 286)

The flesh, or the meeting point of the self and the other/the self and the object, and the realization of the flesh becomes a means of thinking about the self not only as part of the human world, but part of the inanimate world. The points where one realizes or “discovers” the limits of the body, the point of flesh, give rise to “the common ground of
the world’s physical incarnation and temporalized materiality and in the immanence of the lived body’s primordial sense-ability and response-ability” (Sobchack, p. 295). The realization that “the body” belongs to a material world is central to the responsibility Sobchack explores.\textsuperscript{14} The material nature of this process is lauded over the ideal nature of most ethical and aesthetic theory. Idealist philosophy elevates mind over matter, constituting “both aesthetics and ethics as immaterial and thus nonsensical – idealist philosophical constructs that can have no meaning or value because they do not literally matter” (p. 295). The flesh brings these ethics and aesthetics to the material world and offers an ethical relation to the material world, and ultimately to the human world, through its use.

Sobchack describes the process of recognition as a passion of the material in two senses of the word. The first process is where passion “is the state or capacity of being acted on and affected by external agents and forces, usually adversely” (p. 287). This passion names the passive condition wherein,

The body-subject or an embodied object is subjected to the will of others or the action of external forces, and insofar as it suggests a lack of intentional agency, the passion of suffering brings subjective being into intimate contact with its brute materiality and links it, as well, to the passive, mute, and inanimate objects of the world. (p. 287)

\textsuperscript{14} In regards to the virtual representation of the dress, I include it in the discussion of flesh and interobjectivity for two reasons. For one, it is clearly tied to the physical object located in the USHMM’s archives. Even though we experience it virtually, we are given the knowledge of its materiality existing in the world. Second, although it is a virtual space, the exhibit is still experienced using the material tools of a computer, which is firmly planted in the world of the “real.”
The external forces described here are usually an act of nature, where a tornado or earthquake has no regard for the differences between material subjects and material objects. In these situations subjects “become acutely aware not only of the irrelevance of our subjective will but also of the extreme vulnerability of our material objectivity” (p. 287). These situations force the subject to recognize him/herself as an “objective subject,” a position that magnifies the human lack of agency in certain situations, but also promotes and “enhances the awareness of oneself as a subjective object: a material being that is nonetheless capable of feeling what it is to be treated only as an object” (p. 288). These realizations ground the possibility of ethical behavior towards others in the world. Passion, or the sense of being acted on as a material thing in the world, is what Sobchack argues “intimately engages us with our primordial, prreflective, and passive material response-ability – the general sense of which becomes reflectively and actively re-cognized in consciousness as that particular ethical concept with call responsibility” (p. 288).

The second facet of passion is defined as “an active devotion to others and the objective world, as an intense, driving, and overmastering feeling that emerges and expands beyond our conscious will yet act on us, nonetheless, from within.” (p. 288). This kind of passion is within our own agency and “asserts our corporeal and affective adherence to others and the objective world” (p. 288). Here we can “actively grasp both a concrete sense of one’s own self as immanently material and a concrete sense of how some of the world’s objects may also be subjects” (p. 290). In this way, what is outside
the body becomes an extended part of the self. It is this sense of passion that Sobchack sees as providing “the material foundations of our aesthetic behavior toward the world and others” (p. 290). Passion allows us to understand material sense-ability. In so recognizing and caring for ourselves as both objective subjects and subjective objects, we are capable of appreciating and caring for things outside of ourselves. In turn Sobchack argues that this realization “allows us to hope that the world and others’ material grasp of us will be similarly appreciative and ‘care-full’ (p. 290).

As shown in Chapter 3 when discussing the differences between objects and things, it was the Nazi’s strategy to categorize their victims as things, things that could be easily disposed of. In recognizing the various subject position of objects, or when “things no longer seem quite so ‘thinyly,’ subjects no longer seem quite so ‘subjectly,’ so absolute and closed in their selfsameness, so other in their difference” (Sobchack, p. 293-4). What this means is that both the subject and the object are “reversibly capable of acting upon being and being acted upon, and each provides a reversible ground for the figure of the other” (p. 294). In asking how objects can both be sensible and make us responsible and devoted to the ‘flesh of the world,’ Sobchack concludes that only through recognition of ourselves as objects in the world can we truly become responsible.

Sobchack proposes interobjectivity as a compliment to intersubjectivity and as a better way to understand material foundations of aesthetics and ethics (p. 296). Together aesthetics and ethics:

Emerge first and corporeally a sense-ability and response-ability – by virtue of the inherent structure of the lived body-subject’s
transcendent consciousness of its own objective-immanence, and in the experienced sense (both corporeal and self-consciousness) of what it is to exist, at once, as a sensible body-object and a sensate body-subject. (p. 310)

Transcendence and immanence are located in the “no-thing-ness” side of consciousness that is above explanation, but also on the “being” side of fleshiness (or the material substance of our being). It is this “reversible structure” that allows the possibility of empathy and sympathy between our own subjective position and that of another, commonly known as intersubjectivity. Sobchack argues that this structure “also provides the grounds for the possibility of a similarly reversible structure of empathy and sympathy between our own subjective embodiment and other body-objects that I here call interobjectivity. Interobjectivity, then, stands in a necessary relation to intersubjectivity – albeit in a relation that is, at once, both complementary and contrary” (p. 311). This relationship is complementary because it rests of the assumption that we hold both subject and object positions, yet contrary because the inanimate object does not possess cognitive functions for itself. Ultimately, “interobjectivity names the condition of a deep and passionate recognition of ourselves and the objective world filled with ‘things’ and ‘others’ as immanently together in the flesh – that is, as both materially and transcendentally real and mattering.” (318).

With Sobchack’s understanding of interobjectivity in mind, the possibilities associated with naming the object as witness become both important and ethical. In this vein, the jump from anthropomorphised objects to witnessing objects is less of a stretch. In experiencing the shoes and the dress as extensions of the witness there is the distinct
possibility of realizing that humans belong to a world not unlike the world of objects. Here there is an important distinction to be made. The risk, as Alison Landsberg and others have pointed out, is that in viewing the shoes there is the chance that the museumgoer may jump to the conclusion that “their shoes could be our shoes.” In regards to Lola Rein’s dress, this jump is not as easy, but the narrative still invites the viewer to see the widespread effects genocide has, especially on children. Though it is harder to see ourselves in the specificity of her narrative, we are meant to value her dress as a point that connects us to the time and place of Lola’s most vulnerable position. However risky these positions might be, when using an interobjective perspective, there is the distinct possibility that the conclusion can be made that instead of seeing our position as similar to their positions, a form of crude empathy, we may be able to see our materiality as similar to their materiality, a view that puts to the fore the fragility of all human life. This type of thinking is integral to fulfilling the call of “Never Again.” The realization that we are all vulnerable as material beings, and are all capable of putting others in vulnerable material positions, is crucial to understanding the precariousness of genocide and the ease with which humans can come to be seen as material objects.

An interobjective mindset, would not only appear to buffer over-identification, but also prompt a “reading” of these exhibits that implicates the museumgoer. Megan Boler proposes that in order to combat a consumptive practice of empathy and propel readers into ethical relations with distant others, a practice of testimonial reading must be adopted. Testimonial reading implicates the reader in being responsible for asking and
answering how they themselves might be implicated in similar power relations. The important questions Boler believes we should ask ourselves in a testimonial reading are: “what crisis of truth does this text speak to, and what mass of contradictions and struggles do I become as a result?” (p. 267). A practice of testimonial reading pushes the boundaries of empathy, asking the viewer not only to recognize difference, but to further understand power relations and contemplate personal implications in parallel scenarios. Boler argues that “as we hear about and witness horrors, what calls for recognition is not ‘me’ and the possibility of my misfortune, but a recognition of power relations that defines the interaction between reader and text and the conflicts represented within a text” (p. 262).

I want to propose an augmented form of testimonial reading as it relates to witnessing objects. In the space of memorial museum exhibits that rely on material witnesses a “testimonial reading” should expand beyond the text on the walls to include an examination of our physical/geographical, and spatial relations to these objects. A testimonial reading in the spaces of the USHMM merges the concept of “difficult knowledge” proposed by Roger Simon with an emphasis on how and when the museum visitor chooses to orientate him/herself towards these spaces, objects, narratives, etc. Incorporating and understanding of the importance of orientation and interobjectivity moves textual concerns to the space of the body, a space that is immanently material.

The witnessing objects are, in effect, amplified versions of the memorial museum as a whole. Both the shoe and the dress exhibits overtly point towards the mission of the
museum, which is to engage the visitor: “Never Again Begins With Me.” The overt framing of these objects, as witnesses in and of themselves, builds a connection for the museumgoer between material objects and witnesses. This connection lays the groundwork for him or her to think and respond to the fragility of human life and the ease with which humans can be turned into things and which things can be valued above human life. As the poem above the shoes states, “and because we are only made of fabric and leather/ And not blood and flesh/ Each one of us survive the Hellfire.” It is because of their materiality that these material witnesses survived. Their display, while relying perhaps on the “gentrified” techniques Paul Williams warned of, is an important aspect to the museumgoers understanding of Nazi strategy - the tendency to turn people into things - and in understanding their own position as material subjects.

Going back to Schulstein’s poem, the title perfectly encapsulates the condensation of time and positionality that both the speaker in the poem and the museum visitor occupy. “I saw a mountain.” After experiencing the shoe exhibit the museumgoer is able to state the same thing, “I saw a mountain.” “I saw” is at the root of witnessing and secondary witnessing. Embodying this position moves the experience from the confines of the museum to the borders of the body. In this way, while the objects cannot leave the space of the museum, the body can and does, in so doing taking what it sees and extending it beyond the moment of encounter. The worry that a visitor’s attention is short-lived diminishes when the experience of what he/she intentionally chose to see is
sutured to the body, and further strengthened when the visitor becomes aware of his/her own objectivity.

In Chapter 2 I began with a quote from Vladimir Nabokov warning of the perils of sinking into the history of any given object. Here I want to end with another quote from Nabokov’s novella, *Transparent Things*, “perhaps if the future existed, concretely and individually, as something that could be discerned by a better brain, the past would not be so seductive: its demands would be balanced by those of the future” (p. 2). The objects studied in this thesis are indeed seductive. They hinge the museumgoer alluringly between the moment of the present and the magnetism of the past. I argue that for these objects to have the desired influence as witnesses, as material transmitters of knowledge and affect that have the ability to create secondary witnesses, they must be believed to hinge the viewer towards the moment of the future as well. Perhaps it is gratifying for these museum objects to define ‘places we do not wish to go’ (Ahmed) rather than giving the viewer a concrete or material manifestation of places they do wish to go; but as they define unrealized futures, of places that we do not wish to go as a society, they serve to highlight that which we should orientate ourselves towards. Experiencing and thinking about objects as witnesses can only serve to better equip the museumgoer with the ability to understand history without sinking too far into it, without equating it with events in our own life, but importantly seeing material objects as points from which to understand the fragility of all human life.
Chapter 5

Conclusion: Regarding Remnants of Others

In March 2013 the Jewish Museum Berlin opened an exhibit formally known as “The Whole Truth…Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Jews.” Informally, the exhibit has come to be known as “Jew in a Box.” The exhibit acts as a curated FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) “zone” of all things Jewish. Encompassing 30 questions that range from “How do you know if someone is Jewish?” to “Are Jews the Chosen People?” the exhibit answers these questions by linking “objects, quotations and texts. Visitors are not given a clear or ‘correct answer. Instead, depending on the speaker or context they are presented with a variety of perspectives. The exhibition features a total of 180 contemporary artworks, religious objects and items from everyday life. They provide insight into Jewish thought, debates among Jews on Jewish identity and the relationship between Jews and their non-Jewish environment” (Jewish Museum Berlin).

In the context of Germany, these questions stem from questions posed in the museum’s guestbook along with common misconceptions, stereotypes, and confusions about what it means to be Jewish.

Within this temporary exhibit is the question “are Jews still in Germany?” The answer does not lie in objects, or texts, or pieces of art. Rather, the Jewish Museum Berlin has coordinated a series of German Jewish volunteers to sit in a three-walled box and answer this question, and others if they choose, in whichever way they see fit. In
choosing this curatorial device the Jewish museum went from confronting visitors with uncomfortable questions and answers, to confronting them with a living representation of some of their deepest misconceptions.

The decision to answer the question, “are there Jews still in Germany,” by including humans in the exhibition has caused controversy in the media and anxiety for some museumgoers. The idea of placing a Jewish person in a box, asking him/her questions, brings back for some the iconographic images of Adolf Eichmann during his trial in Jerusalem. For others it is a reminder of the small confines of cattle cars that transported millions of Jewish people to their deaths. Like the mound of shoes, this aspect of the exhibit does more than just link the object(s) inside the exhibit, but synechdochically connects the visitors to other places, images, and historical events. The link that is created between the exhibit and the Eichmann trial arouses unease largely because the roles have been reversed; where once Adolf Eichmann sat in a glass box, representing the epitome of the Nazi Party and in hindsight the figurehead of Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil,” now sits a diverse selection of Jewish people who are themselves testifying to the experience as a Jewish person currently living in Germany.

There is another role reversal that happens in this exhibit, which is relevant to the ideas considered in this thesis. One of the harshest criticisms of “Jew in a Box” is that it “objectifies Jewish people, isolating them and treating them as the "other" – which is exactly what the Nazis did” (Pauls). I would argue that this worry, rather than further reliving history, is productive in making visitors think such things. The process of
recognizing the ability to objectify and isolate Jewish people as the other (or as “things”) is in itself a feat for any museum. In the context of this thesis, the use of a human ‘object’ only proves the strengthen the need to see the material aspects of what is “in” museums, as being in direct dialogue with what is outside of their representational capabilities and what is outside the museum’s walls. The reversal of placing a ‘subject’ where an ‘object’ should be, intensifies the push to recognize interobjectivity. Connecting this to material witnesses, we can come to see remnants such as the shoes and the dress as being in direct dialogue with both the event from which they came and with the lives of museumgoers who take their experiences of them outside of the spaces of the museum.

When thinking about the role Eichmann played in the aftermath of the Holocaust, it is interesting to think about the role of his materiality. While his testimony was important, his physical presence was, and remains, significant. The spectacle of the trial, and his presence in a box, similar in form to many glass boxes used in museums, have become iconic traces from the aftermath of the Holocaust. Like Lola’s dress, which came to stand in for the experiences of all Jewish children during the Holocaust, Eichmann has come to stand in for the experiences of Nazi leaders and executioners. His material presence was important, just as the presence of the remnants left behind have come to be valued. Whereas the living subject/objects ‘exhibited’ in the Jewish Museum can testify, or be a witness to their experience as Jewish people living in Berlin, the object/subjects, such as the shoes and dress, should be equally understood as witnesses. Material witnesses can testify to moments that, while not capable of being vocalized in and of
themselves, can aid in the transmission of witnessing and through physical markers testify to the moments that now distinguish them as points of the flesh. Importantly, the objects come to stand in for moments that cannot be answered in the “here and now” without the aid of curators, but are nevertheless connected to bodies, histories, and traumatic pasts.

When museums rely on objects, instead of photographs, or in the case of the Jewish Museum, human subjects, the process of feeling for, and with, other subjects becomes more complicated. Objects do not conventionally convey pain or emotion. Although cracks and aging can express a sense of damage, objects do not have the same capacity to lure us into their narratives. The work of subjectifying objects, or understanding the object as equal to, or an extension of, a subject, is critical when engaging with the materiality of trauma. The museum effect of arranging, lighting, and writing about objects as witnesses, or in the case of the Jewish museum witnesses as objects, emphasizes the fact that although these “effects” have the ability to distort and engorge the histories they come to stand in for, they also have the ability to engage museumgoers, and in so doing create a subset of secondary witnesses.

5.1 Responding to Mute Objects

Leo Stien writes that “things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project.” Bill Brown uses this quote to explain the “suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power” (p. 3) and a reminder that we are “caught up in things.” In the context of the ideas under consideration in this thesis, we can see objects as having a dual
effect/affect. Not only do these objects assert themselves with their symbolic and emotional power, but they also have the power to influence the ideas that those who interact with them project. If we are to take the charges of Ahmed and Sobchack seriously and engage with these objects in civil and ethical ways, the objects have the ability to propel secondary witnesses’ ideas in directions that may lead them to appreciate the materiality of human life and the ease with which humans can be turned into things, leaving objects in their wake.

In analyzing the shoe and dress exhibits through rhetorical and phenomenological perspectives this thesis demonstrated the ways in which memorial museum exhibits that use objects can be complicated through the frame of witnessing. The five categories of object analysis outlined in Chapter 2 all factored into this analysis, but by engaging with the material witness these categories proved to be individually insufficient. Particularly, narrative analysis applied to the witnessing object proved to show the risks of manipulation and crude empathic identification with the subjects these objects are meant to stand in for. However, these concerns do not disrepute the potentially transformative experience of orienting oneself to material witnesses and the benefits this orientation can have in both near and away spheres. Furthermore, framing the object as witness demonstrates the possible relationships between subjects and objects that memorial museums can facilitate; using this frame opens up the ability to think through the materiality of the self and the immaterial aspects of objects. This quality, in relation to trauma and atrocity, is an important threshold. By constructing the object vis-à-vis the
witness the USHMM subtly brings these contact points -- which Jeffrey Feldman saw as being sensorially dulled by the dominant aesthetic quality of the museum -- into the realm of ethical perspective taking. Though these are not necessarily sensory rich experiences, especially the virtual exhibit of Lola Rein’s dress, they do provide rare opportunities to contemplate the material and immaterial value of people, objects, things, and others in the context of war and genocide.

“For the dead and the living we must bear witness.” This statement began the material narrative of the USHMM’s permanent exhibit. Though complex in their symbolism as witnesses, the material remnants of trauma are important points that museumgoers in both virtual and physical spaces can orientate themselves toward. The material witness is, like the judicial material witness, integral to providing information about and forming relationships with traumatic historical events. Focusing on the material aspects of witnessing adds a layer of complexity to the presence of the past, and emphasizes the necessity of constructing secondary witnesses who engage with the silences and absences these objects embody. Through the analysis of these two exhibits this thesis complicated theoretical claims that objects are secondary to the narratives they are given and that we risk losing something of the human victims when anthropomorphizing objects as witnesses. In working through these problems and proposing a greater emphasis on our spatial and phenomenological engagement with material witnesses, the demands objects place on museumgoers – secondary witnesses – become apparent and important in the role of memorial museums.
Bibliography


