

Memorializing Victims of Political Violence with Personal Objects

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to illustrate how personal items that were worn or carried by civilian victims of war crimes have the ability to commemorate civilians who have been caught up in the tragedy of war or the violence of political conflict. Museum professionals at memorial sites or those seeking to create memorial content may benefit from this thesis by understanding how material belongings symbolize an individual or group of victims in a way that evokes empathy and personal connection among potential museum visitors.

This paper will address the function and purpose of museums, the role of material objects as artifacts, the process of empathy and how personal items are currently being exhibited as commemorative items. By considering each of these elements, professionals working at memorial museums and memorial sites may become better informed on how to successfully engage new audience members and create social awareness.

Nomenclature

Authentic: Real or genuine: not copied or false; of undisputed origin.

Artifact: The remains of one, characteristic of an earlier time or cultural stage, especially such an object found at an archaeological excavation.

Acculturation: A merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact

Civic Engagement: The focus on museums as places of learning, growth and personal development.

Commemorate: To call to remembrance or to mark by some ceremony or observation.

Empathy: Understanding and sharing another person's experiences and emotions or the ability to share someone else's feelings.

Emotional Memory: The notion that memories are more vivid due to emotional stimuli.

Memorial: An object or structure, established to remind others of people, person or event.

Memorial Museum: Museum or institution based on commemorating a body of people through artifacts and exhibitions of remembrance.

Reception Study: A research method intended to gain the opinion based on impressions and interpretations.

Photojournalism: The art or practice of communicating news or stories of truth by photographs.

Social Justice: Providing all people will the same opportunity to have basic needs met with the goal of generating wellbeing. ¹

Sympathy: Feeling sorry for another person's trouble, grief or misfortune.

War Crimes: Crimes committed against an enemy, prisoners of war, or subjects in wartime that violate international agreements or, as in the case of genocide, are offenses against humanity.

Restorative Justice: Addressing offenses through reconciliation for victims and community at large.

¹ Silverman, Lois H. *The Social Work of Museums*. Abington, Oxon: Routledge, 2010. 36-37.

I. Introduction

In sixth grade I visited Washington, D.C. for the first time with a select group of staff and students, making the likely tourist stops to historic sites such as the Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, Vietnam Memorial and Arlington National Cemetery. Included in our itinerary was a visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where our chaperones prepped us with the precautionary note that the visit would be uncomfortable and emotional at times. It is possible that my adolescent self may have experienced information overload, since I remember very little of this trip, but what I do remember is the shocking first glimpse of personal items belonging to concentration camp victims. In particular, I can recall an exhibit of victims shoes; a multitude of worn leather in all shapes and sizes, seized by the Nazis. Among those 4,000 shoes, which lined each side of the walkway, were infant shoes, and out of the memorial sites visited that day, those little shoes left a lasting mental image that has been branded in my mind.

More recently, my interest in how personal items can commemorate an individual or group of innocent victims of violent political conflict was inspired by a project entitled, "Quest for Identity," by photojournalist, Ziyah Gafic of Sarajevo. The original intent for this photography project was to identify missing persons and expose the war crimes of the Bosnian War of the 1990s, in which thousands of

civilians went missing.² Through his images, Gafic has created a uniquely powerful presentation based on the items left behind by civilians who were fleeing the Serbian army and were mostly likely buried in mass, unidentified graves. In the process of collecting thousands of personal items, Gafic photographed each group or single item on a forensic table, providing a breakthrough in how the International Commissions of Missing Persons catalogues forensic evidence for war crimes³. Gafic arranged a strikingly powerful presentation by laying out material objects belonging to victims in the same way that cadavers would be presented. As a result of this photo project, digital images were transferred to an online catalogue, providing a new possibility for family and friends to identify items lost by victims of the genocide (see *Figure 1*).

“Quest for Identity” is one example of how personal items that were worn or carried, act as emotionally stimulating artifacts of those who underwent unjust suffering due to political conflict. In a way, such items pay tribute to all victims of similar acts of violence throughout the world and that are still going on today. One can only hope that through engaging others in conversation and fostering personal connection with objects that many people have in common, there will be a sense of restorative justice. In the short documentary about his project, Gafic observes, “In all

² Kamber, Adjin. Institute for War & Peace Reporting, "Thousands of Bosnians Still Missing." Accessed Jan. 15, 2014. <http://iwpr.net/report-news/thousands-bosnians-still-missing>.

³ Gafic, Ziyah. “Quest for Identity.” Accessed January 2, 2014. <http://www.ziyahgafic.ba/photo.php?id=14>

their simplicity, these items are the last resort of identity; the last permanent reminder that these people ever existed.”⁴



Figure 1.

This thesis encourages museum professionals to take a closer look at the personal and social impact of current museum exhibits that use personal items to reflect on victims of war crimes, through a deeper understanding of how personal items evoke empathy, personal connection and sense of responsibility. Memorial museums and historic sites may benefit from the information in this report by understanding how personal belongings create lasting impressions on visitors while acting as authentic records of a victim’s life. Through learning how visitors interact with personal items of belonging to victims of violent political conflict, museums can create lasting impressions and stronger memories and can effectively commemorate an individuals or groups who were marginalized.

⁴ Gafic, Ziyah, *Vimeo*, “Quest for Identity,” Photographs & Spoken words: Ziyah Gafic & VII Network, Web. <http://vimeo.com/8631824>

The next sections of this thesis will discuss examples of how personal effects may be utilized in museum exhibits to foster social responsibility and historic knowledge, while keeping in mind the functions and purpose of museums. Each of these sections will also include my review of the relevant literature. First, I will discuss the rise of memorial museums and their importance as institutions. In the following sections, I will provide insight into the value of material objects, explain current exhibits using personal items as artifacts, investigate the significance of empathy, and present an independent reception study.

II. Museums & Social Impact

In the past decade, an institutional shift in the museum field has occurred, where museums are focusing less on the visitor's internal reflection, personal growth, or their renowned collection and are taking a more community-based approach. Museums' educational and social initiatives are being executed through the use of exhibit space and programming in order to create a more communal environment. In her lecture, "Social Work of Museums," Lois Silverman refers to museums as "change agents" with the unique ability to address human needs that cross cultural barriers.⁵ In the same vein, Stephen Weil explains, "If our museum are not being operated with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of people's lives, on what (other) basis might we possibly ask for public support?"⁶ In most cases,

⁵ "Social Work of Museums." *Vimeo*, Studio 12, Dec 03 2010. Web, <http://vimeo.com/19213313>.

⁶ Weil, 242.

museums have become as concerned, if not more concerned, with a museum's role in the community or society than with the collection and preservation of objects.⁷

As museums focus less on private collections and more on their public impact, museum professionals grow increasingly accountable for how a museum collection inspires, creates community, and cultivates better citizens. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM; formerly the American Association of Museums), founded in 1906, created new standards and guidelines, which were implemented in the 1920s to establish better training for museums that previously functioned as private organizations as a way to establish credibility and consistency among similar organizations. As a result, museums became accountable for higher standards and in 1968 museums were invited to go through an accreditation process. Today, a wealth of information is available for museum professionals, illustrating that a museum's role as an institution is capable of serving the commonwealth of the community in which it resides.⁸ The more museums evolve to serve as vessels for social change, the more their aims adjust to the needs of the visitors and how they respond to a collection. AAM believes that a successful museum serves the public in at least one of the following ways:

- 1) Centers of Learning,
- 2) Civic Institutions,

⁷ Weil, Stephen, "From Being *About* Something to Being *For* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum." *Daedalus* 128 (1999) 229-230.

⁸ Alexander, Edward P. and Mary Alexander. *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, CA: AltaMira Press, 2008. 307-311.

- 3) Protectors of our Artistic, Historic, Scientific and Cultural Heritage
- 4) Key Partner in Travel and Tourism
- 5) Key Element in Attracting and Retaining Major Business Activity.⁹

As this paper discusses the role and characteristics of objects at memorial sites and memorial museums, we must keep in mind that museums have a responsibility to fulfill each of these five categories. We must also be mindful of the delicate balance museums must maintain in order to provide stimulating content and generate interest in museum subjects. It is important to uphold scholarship as historic, educational institutions that act in the public interest and stay true to the museum's mission.

III. Memorial Museums & Purpose

Although the memorial museum is a relatively new category of museums, there has been a growing number erected in the past two decades. Since the 1980s in particular, there have been more memorial museums being established, while many memorials that have been turned into museums (See Appendix A). One may assume that more individuals are seeking more memorials for people who are "just like me," or who could be hoping to identify with ancestors who may not have been military or government officials. Exploring the differences between memorials, historic sites and memorial museums, and investigating the common themes among memorial museums may help one better understand the reasons for the creation of more institutions of this sort.

⁹ AAM. *Museums Working in the Public Interest*, 2003.

In *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, Paul Williams differentiates history museums from memorial museums, which simultaneously indicates the distinction in priorities of each institution. Williams believes that the difference between each institution relies on the presentation of objects. According to Williams, history museum professionals have a greater concern for artifacts from a specific time period that have aesthetic value and believe that an object's artistic prestige in a historic museum is as important as its authenticity. In comparison, memorial sites present objects as a way to provide evidence of what transpired and create dialogue surrounding its origin and condition.¹⁰ The difference is also noted when Williams criticizes the neoclassical design, which was a more widely accepted presentation of memorials during World War I:

The problem was that, although the column and arch-based design is stylistically consistent with earlier World War memorials, it communicates little of what we now expect from structures commemorating mass death and suffering, including the experiences and conflicted memories of ordinary citizens who fought, worked and grieved.¹¹

In the article "Violence and Empathy: National Museums and the Spectacles of Society," Grieg Chrysler indicates that memorial museums are being established

¹⁰ Williams, Paul. *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate*. New York: Berg, 2007.25

¹¹ Williams,1.

to create ideal models of citizenship and strengthen national identity;¹² however, one may argue that more museums are recognizing the need to remember citizens and innocent victims of war crime whose suffering, trauma, and bravery must be represented in ways that are different from those that served to fight in a war.

Michael Berenbaum has described his experience during fourteen years as the Project Director while establishing the United State Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., under President Carter's aspiration to erect a "Living Memorial." Berenbaum expresses concern for the ability for museums to present authentic recollections of the Holocaust in an institution based in the United States. He issues a challenge to all museums that seek to commemorate victims from other parts of the world, stating: "How do you transmit an understanding of the Holocaust to the American people so that it resonates with the American narrative while still doing justice to the event?"¹³ This is perhaps one of the primary concerns for many new memorial museums being newly established and to identify and come to terms with a solution in which museum content is authentic, thought provoking and historically accurate.

¹² Crysler Grieg C. "Violence and Empathy: National Museums and the Spectacle of Society." Vol. XVII, 11. Berkley, CA: 2006.

¹³ Berenbaum, Michael. "How the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum changed my life." *JewishJournal.com*. (2013). http://www.jewishjournal.com/yom_hashoah/article/how_the_u.s._holocaust_memorial_museum_changed_my_life (accessed December 12, 2013).

One way that museums may cross cultural and social barriers while providing strong memorial symbols is by incorporating personal items such as pocket watches, glasses, or baby shoes. Not only can personal items from victims represent many individuals from around the world but this also can relate to those from varying time periods or economic status. Later in this thesis I will discuss how common items that were worn or carried create a sense of empathy that promotes a deeper connection with an individual or group of people who underwent an atrocity due to political violence

IV. Material Objects

The fact that museums are a valued part of our communities and attract people from around the world is an indication that material objects are of great value to society. In *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, Alexander and Alexander write, "Whether aesthetic, documentary or scientific, objects tell much about the universe, nature the human heritage and the human condition."¹⁴ Objects capture the memory of those who came before, demonstrating value through ritualistic appreciation and self-exploration.

The ritualistic practice of using material objects to honor the dead at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. demonstrates the symbolic power of personal items that have been used to commemorate the dead. At this site, a museum was created from numerous objects that were left as a token to

¹⁴ Alexander, Edward P. and Mary Alexander. *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, CA: AltaMira Press, 2008.108.

commemorate veterans of the Vietnam War. Shortly after the first person dropped a Purple Heart by the Wall, an overwhelming amount of items were left to remember other loved ones who had lost their lives in the war. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection is an example of a museum that has allowed the general public to help curate a massive memorial of exhibits left for soldiers, which gives weight to the importance material objects have as a symbol of remembrance of those who have perished during a political conflict. Although many have been moved by a personal connection with the names on the wall, visitors clearly saw the need to commemorate individuals in a more tangible and individualistic way.¹⁵

Although the memorial established after 9/11 does not exhibit personal items, the need to hold on to material effects worn or carried by individuals who perished in the buildings is evident in the documentary, *9/11; The Falling Man*. This particular retelling concerns the ambiguous political and personal struggles surrounding an image of a free-falling man captured by photojournalist, Richard Drew.¹⁶ That day, in 2001, three thousand innocent people were killed¹⁷ and, like many other innocent civilians from around the world who have lost their lives in the midst of political violence, these victims were not honored as heroes and did not

¹⁵ West, Pamela Best. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection, "Collection Overview." Last modified 05 06, 1997. Accessed December 19, 2013. <http://www.nps.gov/mrc/indexvvm.htm>.

¹⁷ Anderson, Brian. Vice, "Motherboard: <http://motherboard.vice.com/read/the-most-famous-9-11-photograph-no-one-has-seen>." Last modified Sept 11, 2011. Accessed March 30, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-14869230>

choose to place themselves in the midst of a violent political conflict. After the attack, many family members were called to identify bodies and during one of the interviews the film highlights a boy who volunteered to go to the site and help identify his brother for his family. During this time, the boy confirmed that his brother was one of the jumpers. As a means to remember his brother, he took one of his shoes.¹⁸ Although this is just one example of how a personal item was acquired as a token of remembrance, this act speaks of the larger desire to commemorate and remember those who have perished through personal items that have been left behind by victims.

When it comes to understanding how personal items act as artifacts and memorials to individuals or a group of people, it is importance to remember that objects as exhibits much appear authentic. In order for museum or memorial content to be believable and engaging it must appear genuine or of an undisputed origin that tells of time and place. Because historical museums are regarded as trusted sources of information and act in the public interest, content must convey meaning that is relevant, truthful and personal.¹⁹ In accordance, as museums use

¹⁸ Singer, Henry. *9/11; The Falling Man*. Darlow Smithson Productions.

¹⁹ Griffiths, Jose-Marie and Donald W King. "Interconnections: The IMLS National Study on The Use of Libraries, Museums and the Internet: Conclusion Summary." *Institute of Museums and Library Services*. (2008): 3.

objects to tell stories and convey sympathy, museums must find a balance between accurate information and exploitation.²⁰ Objects that are displayed as artifacts should not simply be placed in a memorial exhibit to convey emotion or to personify a victim, but must also present an artifact in a historically accurate narrative that is relevant to a particular time and place.

In "Locating Authenticity, Fragments of Dialogue," Crew and Sims note that one of the problems with the retelling of historical events is the idea that, "Authenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority. Objects have no authority; people do."²¹ Although the chapter expresses the lack of representing the *common people* and a focus on individuals with high statuses in society, during this time memorial museums were beginning to become more prominent (see Appendix A: *Memorial Museum Timeline*). Crew and Sims present the case that historic retelling not only honored the wealthy but that there was a lack of evidence from those who were less well off because, historically, museums of this sort did not offer the resources for the poor or marginalized to preserve their belongings, nor was there a desire to show the disadvantaged individual²² From this, one can presume that museums are evolving to not only honor those who were victims of war crimes,

²⁰ Crane, Susan A. "History and Memory " *Indiana University Press*. no. 01 (1996): 5-29.

²¹ Crew, Spencer R. and James E. Sims. "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of Dialogue." In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington & London: Smithsonian Institute, 1991.162.

²² Crew & Sims, 165.

but also to present a piece of history from the belonging to those who were not of high stature in society, creating a more holistic look at the time period being represented.

V. Memorial Exhibits

As the research study conducted during this project will demonstrate, objects that were worn or carried on the body are more likely to evoke empathy and conversation than those that were not worn or carried. Additionally, the clearer the content is and the more relevant to the viewer, the more apt a person is to feel a personal connection with that particular artifact. Understanding how objects affect visitors and considering common goals to present information is important in strengthening the curation and presentation of memorial objects.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's mission is one that demonstrates similar values among comparable cultural institutions. The common goals as presented at USMM are to provide accurate knowledge or exposure about an occurrence, preserve memory, present an area of reflection (or grieving) and voice the importance of good citizenship. All of these components allow memorial museums to be more effective for a larger body of people, initiate change for future generations, and promote peace and social responsibility. The museum's mission states:

The Museum's primary mission is to advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual

questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.²³

Although there is little research on how personal items effectively memorialize victims of violent political conflict, this paper presents examples in which objects may create powerful and meaningful experiences for visitors, thereby allowing memorial museums to carry out these particular values.

In *Violence and Empathy: National Museums and the Spectacles of Society*, Crysler discusses his journey through the USMM and the elements of each floor. On the third floor, content from Auschwitz provides the visitor with a sense of emptiness: "An empty boxcar, an empty train station, empty bunks, piles of shoes: these are all powerful icons of loss (see *Figure 2*).²⁴" Out of all of these items that present a ghost-like ambience, one may infer that a visitor would have a personal connection to the shoes based on the idea in which this idea was worn on the body. This projection is evident in the research study that will be discussed later in this paper along with the elements that aid museums professionals in understanding the physiological concepts of both sympathy and empathy.

²³ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Mission Statement." Accessed April 1, 2014. <http://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/mission-statement>.

²⁴ Crysler, 24.



Figure 2. (Shoes confiscated from prisoners at Majdanek, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)

Another example of memorial museum using personal items to commemorate individuals is the Kigali Memorial Center in Rwanda. The center provides knowledge of the events that occurred during the Rwanda Genocide with an objective view and memorializes innocent civilians through respectful and emotionally heavy content. Examples of how personal objects are used to education and memorialize innocent individuals who were victims of the Rwandan Genocide can be viewed in the Burial Chamber section of the museum, containing an exhibit that is entitled, "Room of Clothes," in which the center's website indicates that the clothing was worn by victims as they died (see *figure 3*).²⁵ In this exhibit the clothing is hung in a way that implies action and almost personifies the struggle and violence of the victims. The clothing is dirty, appears to have a bloodstain on one of the

²⁵ Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, "The Memorial Centre." Accessed January 26, 2014. <http://www.kigaligenocidememorial.org/old/centre/index.html>.

articles, and is slightly ripped in places. In the research that will be discussed in the research study portion of this thesis, I will address how the physical condition of clothing that has been worn by victims of genocide affects museum visitors.

The Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre's states this permanent memorial was established for those who fell victim to the genocide and that the center not only exists as memorial museum but as a space for family to grieve and honor those they have lost. Although the museum resides as a space for those who have a personal connection with victims of genocide, it also has proven to have a profound effect on visitors from outside the country or community of sufferers. This is apparent as one visitor recalls a personal experience spending time in the Room of Clothes." In her private blog she writes:

The third and final room is a display of clothing and other items found buried with the victims. Scarves, pants, shoes. There is a dirty, tattered bed sheet. I can tell it's from a child's bed because it has superman printed all over it. There is a massive bloodstain in the middle. Then I see a children's t-shirt. It says on it, "Ottawa, Canada." I break down. I sit and stare at the bloody t-shirt. Ottawa, Canada, with a big maple leaf on it. I am so far from home. And yet Ottawa was there when this child was slaughtered in cold blood. My country, like the rest of the international community, turned its back and watched as nearly one million people were murdered by their very neighbours. My country, even my city, was there. And we did nothing.²⁶

I have cited this poignant quote at length to illustrate how one visitor experienced both empathy and sympathy while viewing the clothing in the "Room of Clothes."

This visitor's blog presents a powerful, first-person recollection of how exhibited

²⁶ Von Stackelburg, Marina. "Blog: The Kigali Genocide Memorial ." *Carletonjhr* (blog), August 01, 2013. <http://carletonjhr.com/2013/08/01/blog-the-kigali-genocide-memorial/> (accessed April 20, 2014).

items that were worn or carried by victims can evoke empathy, emotional response, personal consideration, and a sense of social responsibility.



Figure 3. Burial Chamber: Room of Clothes at the Kigali Memorial Centre

Along with photographer Ziyah Gafic, Miyako Ishiuchi's "Hiroshima" is another effective exhibit of personal items (in this case clothing) from the victims of the Hiroshima bombing, which has appeared in a variety of venues from around the world. In 2011, the *Vancouver Sun* conducted an in-person interview with the artist, which provides information about the intentions behind her project. In this discussion, Ishiuchi speaks of the interest in representing people like her, that victims didn't just wear school uniforms but silk: "Every time I exhibit the work, I'm creating my Hiroshima in the image of what I see. It's not a documentary. I want people to experience them as a whole as opposed to drawing attention to individual

images. It's an aggregate.²⁷ She provides motives, which express that her interests in some of the items allow her to identify with the owners of the clothing and that she too could have been wearing that silk dress (see *Figure 4*).



Figure 4.

VI. Empathy

In order to understand visitor experiences with personal items, it is important to gain insight into the psychology of empathy and sympathy. In "Cognitive and Neural Mechanisms of Emotional Memory," Stephan Hamann explains how scientific evidence proves that emotionally stimulating content and events can create more vivid memories. Memorial museums may be able to evaluate visitor experience and curate exhibits more effectively once museum professionals understand the concept of "emotional memory." Emotional memory is the concept

²⁷ *The Vancouver Sun*, "Art Scene." Last modified Oct 25, 2011. Accessed Jan 3, 2014. <http://blogs.vancouversun.com/2011/10/25/ishiuchi-miyako-clothing-from-hiroshima-waiting-to-say-hello-to-her/>.

that emotional events create retention in learning and remembering.²⁸ Hamann reviews a study on human brains that helps explain why increased emotional arousal correlates with more accurate recollections. In particular, more brain activity was present while experiencing negative emotions and study participants were able to recall details of these experiences more vividly than positive memories with content. We can then conclude that negative emotions allow us to remember more because they usually offer more emotional stimuli.²⁹

In understanding the difference between emotional stimuli that may be associated with sympathy, it is important to understand how this differentiates from empathy. Nancy Snow explores the definition of empathy and its moral concerns by exploring the work of philosophers, Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson. Snow's knowledge as a psychologist clarifies the difference in behavior between one who sympathizes and one who empathizes. Empathy, Snow explains, is not feeling sorry for an individual who is going through adversity but rather feeling emotion similar to the one experiencing adversity. Being sad for the individual is sympathy, whereas feeling sad in regards to the situation is empathy, "I am happy (perhaps with some effort) for you. This is not empathetic happiness, though since I do not

²⁸ Labar, Kevin S and Roberto Cabeza. Nature Reviews: Neuroscience, "Cognitive neuroscience of emotional memory." Last modified 01, 2006. Accessed April 20, 2014. <http://www.nature.com/nrn/journal/v7/n1/full/nrn1825.html>.

²⁹ Hamann, Stephan (2001). "Cognitive and neural mechanisms of emotional memory," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 5 (9): 394–400.

feel happy with you.”³⁰ After clarifying the notion of empathy, Snow leads the reader to discover how empathy is formed in infants and carries on through adulthood. She mentions that one may legitimately empathize with fictional characters because it is merely enough that one believes that another’s emotions are genuine ³¹

The stimulus from another person is not necessary but helps one form the concept of empathy as a child. When for example, a child cries out of distress another child may match that child’s cry in acknowledgement of the pain the other is going through.³² Although Snow believes that mimicking is an aspect of empathy, unless the observer is actually understanding the pain of the other, it is not empathy but as she describes as “pre-empathetic” or empathic arousal that is triggered by physical cues. ³³ That being said, understanding the difference between empathy and sympathy is significant when considering what content evokes personal connection versus emotionally stimulating content or shocking material. Although visitors may be attending museums because of the curiosity that comes with discovering emotionally heavy content, it is important the museums understand how to evoke empathy and understanding the authenticity and personal narrative that an object represents.

³⁰ Snow, Nancy E. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Jan., 2000) 66. “Empathy.”

³¹ Snow, 68-71.

³² Snow, 72.

³³ Snow, 65.

In a related article, Suzanne Keen describes empathy as “both affective and cognitive,” and further explains that empathy is the idea that “I feel your pain,” whereas empathy is the notion that, “I feel pity for your pain.”³⁴ Museums must therefore understand the ability for objects to evoke emotional responses that stimulate empathy in order to avoid exploitation and create narratives in exhibits that evoke personal connection. Although there are a number of resources that explore cognition and general human behavior as each interact with each other, as well as articles that inform museum professionals about visitor experience, both museum professionals and physiologists must collaborate in order to learn more about how material objects evoke empathy through personifying a victim who is symbolically represented through personal effects.

VII. Independent Research Study

Summary

Through reading articles and looking at memorial museums and memorial sites, I realized that there was an overall lack of evidence supporting the idea that personal objects are powerful, international symbols of commemoration. In particular, museums have done little to provide insight into the psychological impact personal effects can have on museum visitors and potential museum visitors. This study was designed so that memorial museums and memorial sites may obtain

³⁴ Keen, Suzanne. "A Theory Of Narrative Empathy." *Narrative* 19: 209.

a better understanding of how visitors value and reflect upon personal effects of innocent victims of violent political conflict. As a result, a reception study was designed and conducted in person to gauge levels of empathy based on photographs from current memorial exhibit or memorial sites. The results demonstrate both qualitative and quantitative outcomes of visits to memorial museums. This study may help museum professionals design similar studies to understand how visitors experience items that were worn or carried by victims who have perished in the midst of injustice.

Methodology & Survey Design

A pre-survey or pre-test was conducted in an online format, using the web-based program, Survey Monkey. Pre-test participants consisted of family and friends who were connected to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and participants who answered the online questions were anonymous. From the responses of this sample, the survey instrument was modified to include open-ended questions in order to seek common responses that offered key words such as “personal” “worn,” “like me,” or “poverty.” The survey was also modified to include the definition of a memorial museum during the third question of the survey, and in addition, short descriptions were added to the comparative photo study as prompts to let the viewer know what he or she was looking at.

The first round of in-person survey interviews were conducted at Independence Hall Information Center in Philadelphia, in the heart of Independence National Historical Park. The surveys took place between the dates of March 8 and

March 29, between 1pm and 6pm on the weekends. One visitor from each group of passers-by, who appeared eighteen or older, was asked to participate in the research survey. During the introduction, volunteers were informed that the survey would last about five minutes, depending on the length of the answers provided, and that input would help inform a research topic for a master's thesis in the Museum Studies program at the University of the Arts. In the introduction, participants were also informed that if any of the questions were too uncomfortable to answer, volunteers could simply say, "pass." During the introduction participants were asked politely to hold all questions until the end of the survey so that answering questions prior to the interview would not sway the research survey results.

The first half of the research survey was designed to gather demographic information that included gender, age and the level of previous experience visiting memorial sites or memorial museums. The second half of the survey was a reception study in which visitors were asked to compare images of exhibits at memorials sites or museums. Each study question had a follow-up, open-ended element, offering participants the opportunity to voice opinions of which image was more memorable or evoked more empathy. Participants were handed the three 8 ½" x 11" pages of photographs, printed out on laminated sheets, and were asked to flip to the next page when prompted. During the comparison of the first two images of the reception study, volunteers were asked to compare images from exhibits that were similar in condition and appeared worn or soiled. This question in particular was designed to find out if potential museum visitors had a more personal connection (empathy) with a group of belongings that were worn or carried on the body a or a

singular suitcase with a person's name written on it (See *figure 5* below).



Knowing that each of the items above belonged to innocent victims of war, which image do you feel a more personal connection to and why?

Figure 5

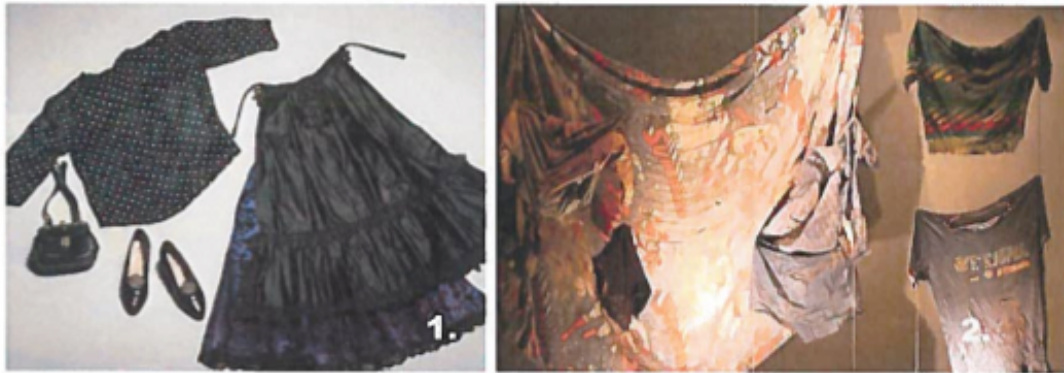
The second set of images was intended to discover which type of material objects had a more memorable impact on a viewer when taken as a representation of a large number of individuals who have died. This question was intended to compare a mass number of gravestones versus the impact of a mass number of shoes. The question did not describe the location or theme of the symbolic objects, but it was intended for viewers to state which memorial site created a more memorable experience for visitors or viewers like them (See *Figure 6*).



Of the two images above, which site has a more memorable impact on visitors or viewers like you? 1. Graves (left) 2. Shoes (right)

Figure 6

The last two images compare worn, violent and blood-stained clothing from the Rwanda Genocide at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre with the seemingly new, clean looking items from the persecuted, German Gypsies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This particular question was designed to discover which condition and presentation evoked more empathy, knowing that each set of clothing belonged to victims of a genocidal conflict (see *figure7*).



Knowing that the items shown above belonged to victims of a genocidal conflict, which group of clothing are you more likely to empathize with? Why? (Tell why people skipped...some of the reasons why they couldn't decide.)

Figure 7

Expected Findings

Prior to conducting the reception study, it was expected that visitors of Independence Hall would be interested in topics of history and would be likely to visit memorial museums or memorial sites. It was also expected that personal items that appeared worn or dirty would evoke more empathy or memorable experience in viewers than items that were new or were not personal effects of victims. By adjusting the survey and asking open-ended questions following the images, my methodology provided the ability to obtain qualitative aspect responses to be able to quantify specific language associated with memory, empathy and personal connection. It was predicted that because both the mass of graves at the Arlington Cemetery and mass of shoes from USHMM were located in the same area, within the Washington Museum district, that if participants had visited one location, they might be familiar with the other memorial site as well. At the least it was assumed

that volunteer participants would be familiar with depictions of the Arlington Cemetery from the news and popular culture

Observations & Findings:

Findings from the in-person survey suggest that personal items carried in an individual's pocket or worn on the body evoked more empathy and personal connection than personal objects that were not worn on the body or carried in a pocket. This was particularly clear as most participants described feeling a more personal connection to the image with broken glasses, money, and beads than the personalized suitcase. It appeared as though many viewers had an easier time making observations and empathizing with common objects in the first group of images because there was less hesitation, uncertainty and inability to answer than the other images. It was also clear that visitors were able to provide more information based on observation and ideas because of the visual prompts than having to recall an experience as stated in question five of the in-person survey.

Although the first set of images demonstrated the importance of things worn or carried on the body, a fairly large number (35% of the interviewees) chose the graves at Arlington Cemetery as being more memorable to viewers or visitors than the worn shoes from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (See figure 8). This result could be explained by the visitor having more experience with a gravesite or similar memorial and understanding the symbolic connection with a gravestone more than the emotional and personal meaning of the shoes. In addition, the image of the worn shoes may also not have fully communicated the environmental context of the

display, while the gravestones present a more recognizable image that is easier to interpret at through a photographic image.

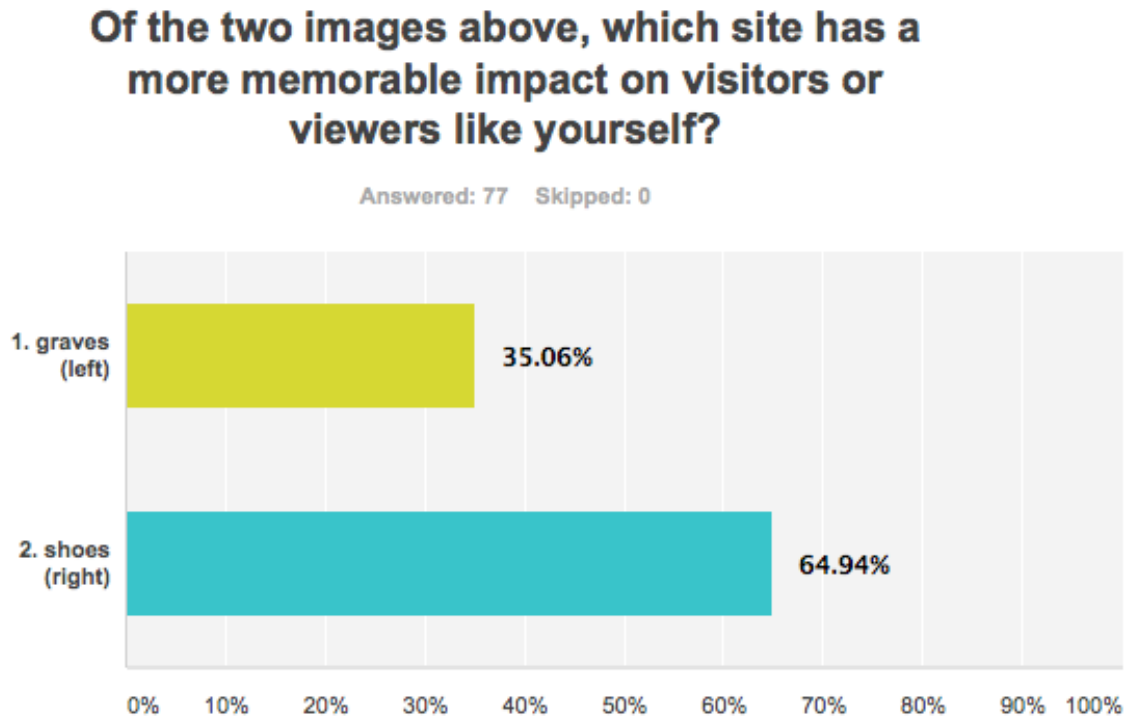


Figure 8

As one can see from the results, the largest numbers of participants were ages 18-30, which could be the case because many of the surveys were conducted during the time when many college students were on spring break.

In assessing memorial museum experience, most of the respondents rated their experience at the most recent visit to a memorial museum or memorial site between 5 and a 7 (1 being not memorable and 7 being very memorable). Most volunteers were not able to recall specific memorable experience with an artifact, object or exhibit (See *figure 9 & 10*). Because these open-ended questions did not

have an image prompt, they did not elicit as much response as the questions that provided volunteers with images that they could hold onto and compare. In conclusion, participants were more responsive with visual prompts and tactile experience where they could make observations and had the option to choose. There was perhaps less pressure to have a “right” answer and less fear of looking foolish as opposed to the question about recalling an object, artifact, or exhibit that was memorable from a past experience at a memorial or memorial museum.

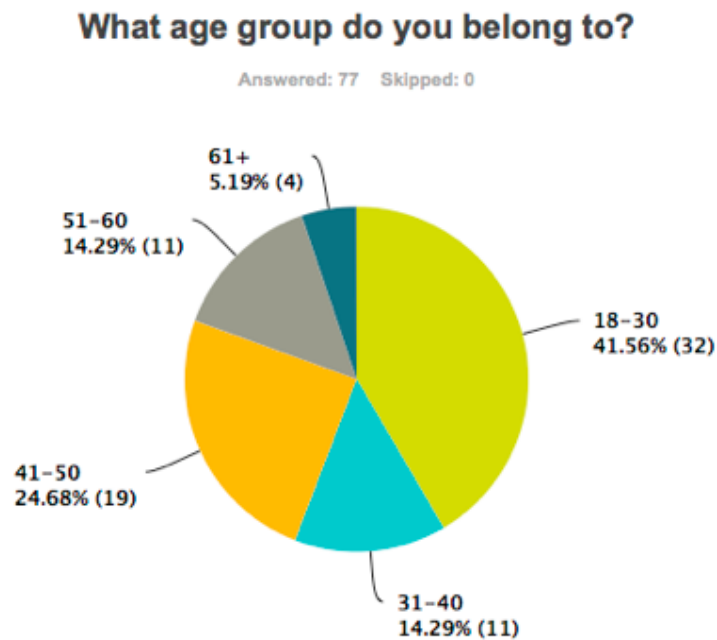


Figure 9.

On a scale of 1-7 How would you rate your experience at the last memorial site or memorial museum you visited? 7 being very memorable and 1 being unmemorable

Answered: 74 Skipped: 3

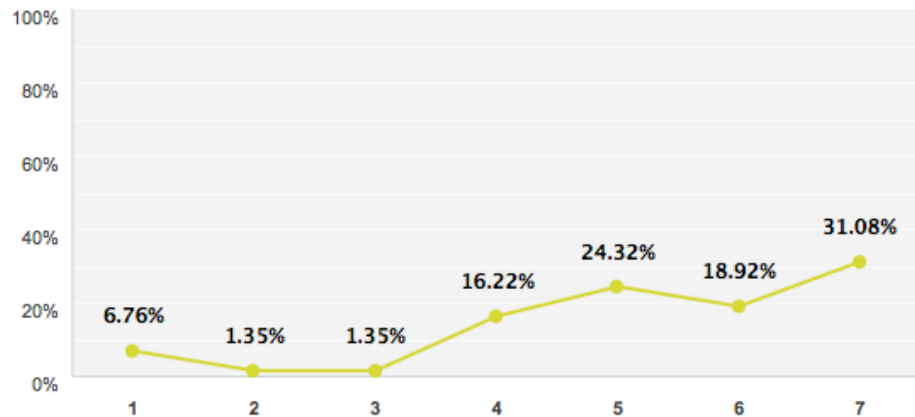


Figure 10.

When comparing the first set of questions in #7, terms like “Glasses,” “Carry,” and “Personal” were used most frequently used words to explain the survey choice indicating why participants chose the group of items versus a single item belonging to victims (see Appendix C & D). Common terminology used for question #9 included, “Poor,” “Worn,” “Children,” “Women” or “Like me,” when describing why participants chose one group of clothing over the other.

Before conducting the in-person survey I did not consider that the respondents would identify with clothing based class or money in question #9, however this ended up being a common theme in many of the answers. Results from question #7 suggest that people may be less apt to feel a stronger personal connection with those who have more money and it also appears that those who are

poor evoke more sympathy among participants in this study. Answers to #9 in particular indicated the challenge that volunteers had in having to empathize with clothing from a genocidal conflict. Many answers indicated that visitors were providing feedback about the images based on a feeling of sympathy. In a couple of responses those who could not choose stated “I feel sorry for both.”

Survey Question #7



Knowing that each of the items above belonged to innocent victims of war, which image do you feel a more personal connection to and why?

Figure 11.

When comparing the victim’s shoes of the Holocaust with graves from the Arlington Cemetery, a few participants mentioned that at first they were going to choose graves but then they decided to select the shoes. This could be the case due to the limited context and sensory experience excluding sense of smell and physical location and experiencing an authentic artifact as part of a collective. In case a participant came running back after the survey concluded to explain, “My daughter just told me that she also remembered the smell of the shoes at the Holocaust

Museum; I thought you would want to know that.” According to the United States Holocaust Memorial museum website, one of the most vivid and memorable experiences that visitor’s report is the sight and smell of the exhibit of the 4,000 victims shoes that were seized at killing centers at Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Chełmno, Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau.³⁵ In addition, from what visitor’s stated during the study, those who chose shoes as being a more memorable experience were likely to have been to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum or another memorial dedicated to the victims of WWII that provided the public with a similar exhibit (See Appendix D).

Based on the answers of 77 participants, it seems that sympathy may have been a larger component than empathy for Question #9. As mentioned earlier in the text, empathy and sympathy are often difficult to differentiate and perhaps so were these photographs of clothing exhibits. In addition, this was the only image comparison question that was skipped by multiple people for the reason that participants were told each group of clothing was from a genocidal conflict and they just could not decide (see *Figure 12* & Appendix D).

³⁵ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Shoes." Permanent Exhibition. <http://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/permanent/shoes> (accessed April 14, 2014).

Survey Question #8



Knowing that the items shown above belonged to victims of a genocidal conflict, which group of clothing are you more likely to empathize with? Why?

Figure 12.

Research Limitations:

The reception study was conducted at Independence Visitor Center to gather responses from potential museum visitors from a variety of walks of life and various location of the world. One of the limitations of this study was the location. Many who were approached responded to the questions based on the setting of Independence Hall and assumed that the survey was based on Independence Hall-related content or services. When recalling a significant exhibit or memorial from past experience numerous participants asked, “Does this (here) count?” The setting also appeared to make it challenging for visitors to recall specific items for another museum visits, in which participants often brought up the Liberty Bell or other icons of Independence Mall area. This feedback may have been a result of the visitor feeling rushed or because the survey was conducted in the afternoon in most cases,

visitors may have been experiencing an “information overload” at this point in the day.

Although the participants mentioned prior had trouble recalling specific memorial items during a visit to a memorial museum or memorial site, this does not disprove the notion that memories are more vivid when content is emotional or stimulating. Museum visitors may recall a theme, a feeling or historic information from this experience but because of the nature of the survey question, participants had difficulty coming up with specifics when image cues were not present. This finding indicated that it is important for participants to be involved in surveys through being invited to interact. In this case, participants were more responsive when asked to hold onto images and speak about their observations and give reasons for choices as they viewed personal items and memorial icons. More specific studies could be conducted on the impact of memory and experience within museums and memorial sites that exhibit emotionally stimulating artifacts.

VIII. Recommendations

Survey

1) The reception study has the potential to engage participants of various age and gender if interviewers are also of various age and gender.

2) It was helpful to preface the survey with, “If you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions or you do not wish to answer, you are welcome to say ‘pass.’ “ If participants were unable to answer, they were encouraged to provide information

about observations in the photographs being shown. In most cases this strategy was successful in allowing the volunteer to provide information and ultimately make a choice based on these observations that were voiced out loud.

3) Another attempt at this sort of survey may include the option for visitors to compare a photograph of violence inflicted on an individual or a photo of torture devices. One could also compare how viewers react to a photographic portrait of an individual compared with a personal belonging of that person and observe which artifact evokes more empathy.

For Museum Professionals:

1) Museum professional need not re-invent the wheel when it comes to understanding what visitors take away from museum exhibitions. Personal blogs and Yelp reviews are just a few of the readily available means in which museums can gain a better understanding of what visitors are already saying about their museum experiences.

2). Museums can also do a better job of understanding the cognitive experience in terms of visitors' interactions with personal objects and artifacts that represent victims.

3) Museum professionals can borrow strategies from other sources and cross disciplines to create stronger exhibit programming. Memorials museums may, for example, incorporate elements of photography, forensic science, brain mapping or elements of journalism.

IX. Conclusion: Moving Forward

With more memorial museums being erected, there needs to be more research on visitor experience and how artifacts such as personal items have the opportunity to create more memorable experiences in museums. One could assume that the ultimate goal for museums of this type is to educate the public about war crimes and political violence of innocent civilians; the more stimulating the museum experience, the more likely that information will be retained or shared. Presenting objects that could have belonged to any number of people from around the world with clothing and other personal items left behind in the midst of atrocity can act as influential elements of an exhibit. Personal items that were worn or carried by victims have the potential to evoke empathy and kindle sympathy for an individual or group of victims.

Borrowing exhibit strategies and creating visitor surveys such as the one presented in this research project can be used for museum professionals to understand the importance in creating important symbols of remembrance and commemoration for those who were not honored as fighters in the traditional, militant sense.

Victims of political violence not only deserve to be remembered, but they also deserve to have their story told as a body of people who suffered injustice. If memorial museums hope to create better citizens, promote change and generate awareness, museum must consider the lasting effects memorial exhibitions have on visitors. Investigating how visitors interact with material objects such as common,

personal items can only strengthen the ability for museums to curate content that evokes both empathy and personal connection between a museum visitor and exhibits. Because museums are respected institutions of unbiased, educational information, memorial museums have the unique ability to raising awareness about war crimes and unjust atrocities that continue to happen as we speak.

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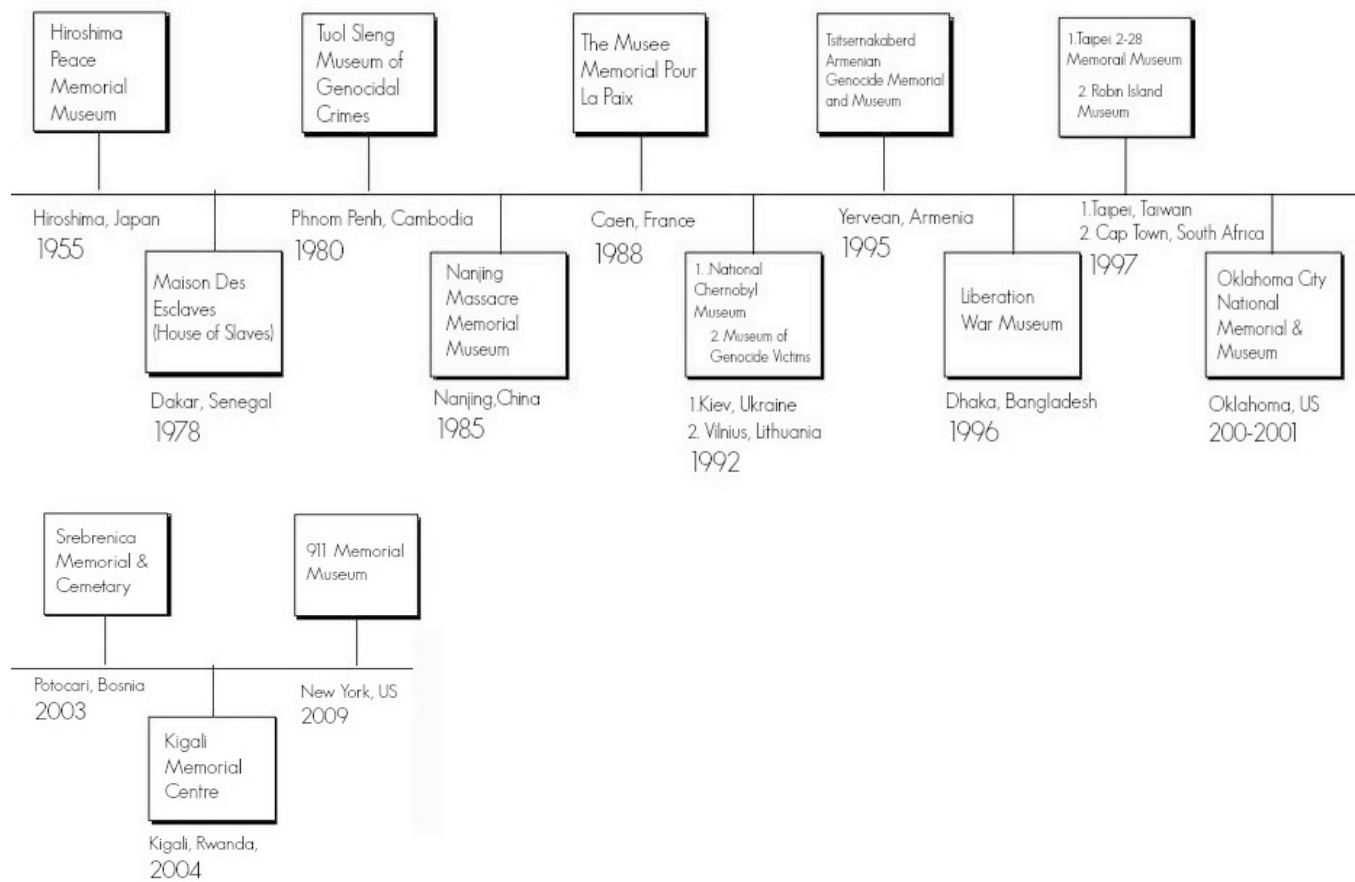
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Appendix A: Memorial Museum Timeline



Appendix B: Survey Instrument

1. Gender M F

2. Age

18-30 31-40 41-50 51-60

3. How many times have you visited a Memorial Museum or Memorial Site in the past 5 years: (*Define Memorial Museum and Provide specific examples*)

0 times 1-2 times 3-5 times 6-10 times 10+ times.

4. On a scale of 1-7 how would you rate your experience at the last memorial site of museum you visited? 1 being not very memorable and 7 being very memorable:

Not Memorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Memorable*

5. Please describe an exhibit or object that impacted you the most during the most recent visit to a memorial site or memorial museum.

6. Based on this experience how likely are you to share this experience with family or friends?

- a. Very likely
- b. Somewhat likely
- c. Not Likely

(Survey Instrument Continued)

7.



Knowing that each of the items here belonged to innocent victims of war, which image do you feel a more personal connection to and why?

8.



Of the two images here, which site do you feel has a more memorable impact on visitors or viewers like yourself? On the left are graves; on the right are shoes.

9.



Knowing that the items shown here belonged to victims of a genocidal conflict, which group of clothing are you more likely to empathize with?

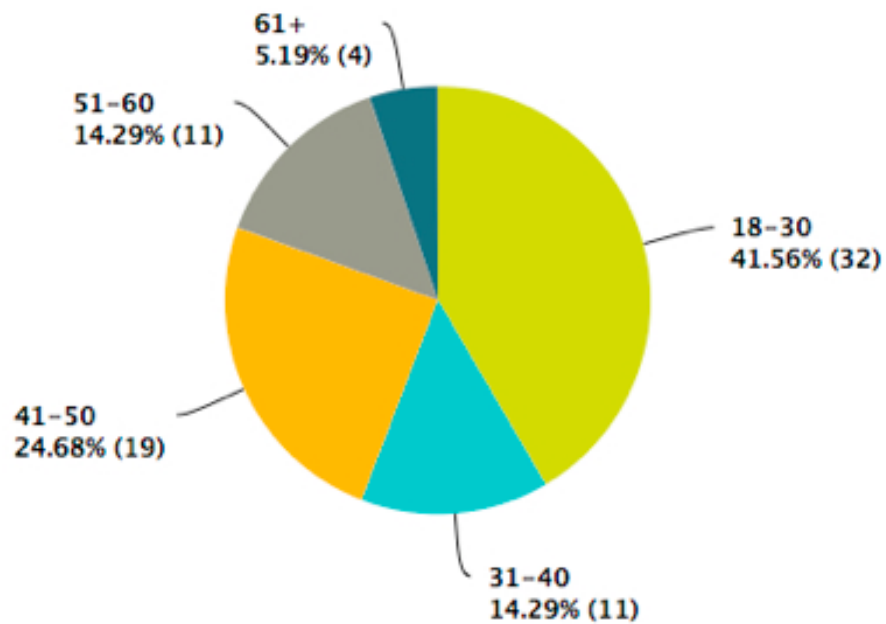
***Thank you for your participation. Your answers were very helpful.**

Appendix C: Quantitative Outcomes

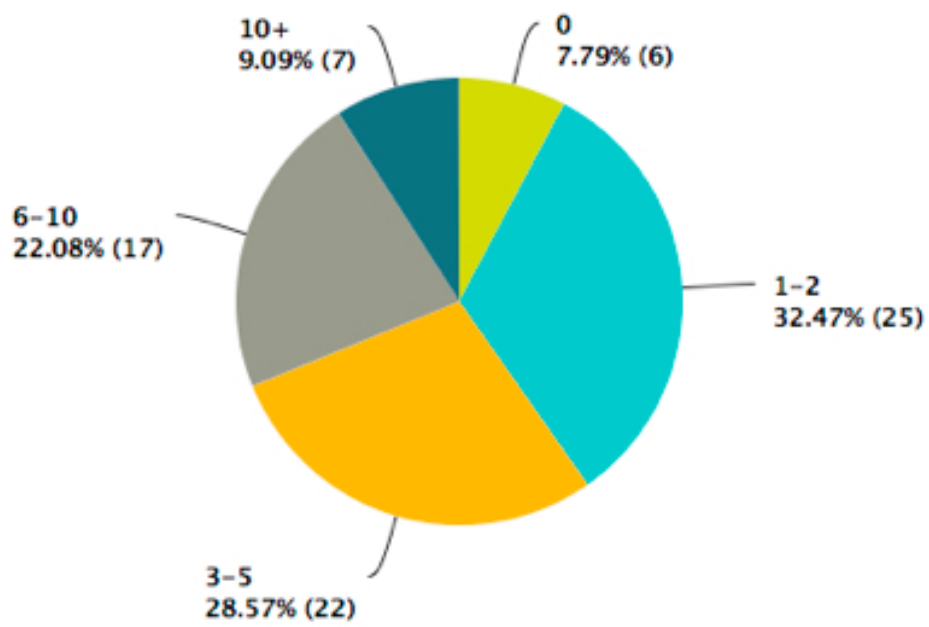
What is your gender?



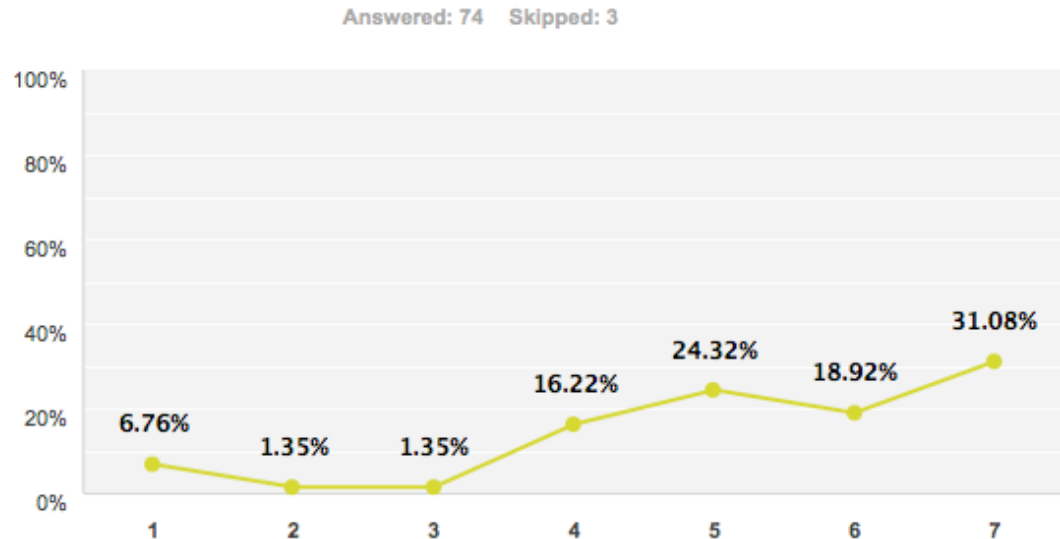
What age group do you belong to?



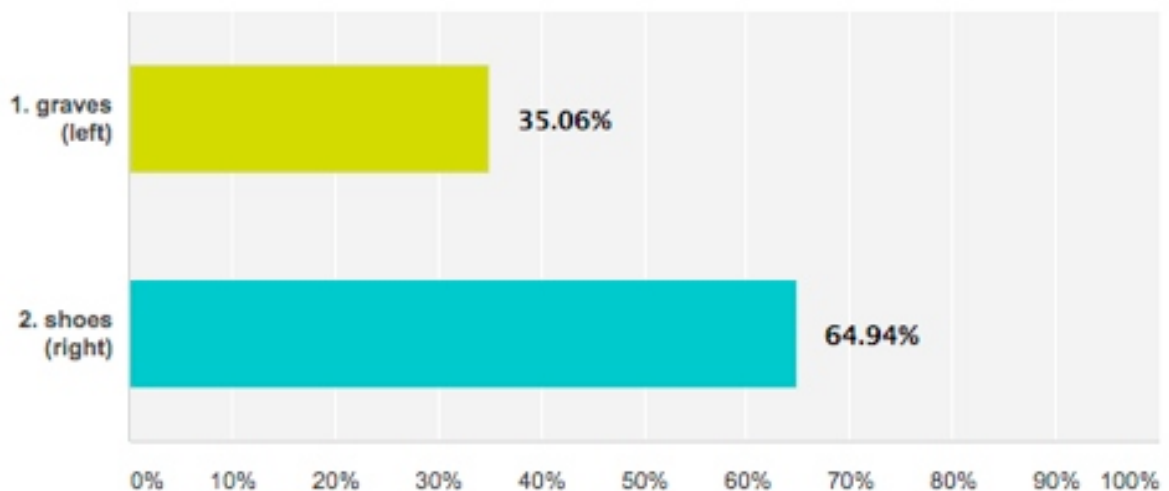
How many times have you visited a memorial site of memorial museum in the past 5 years?



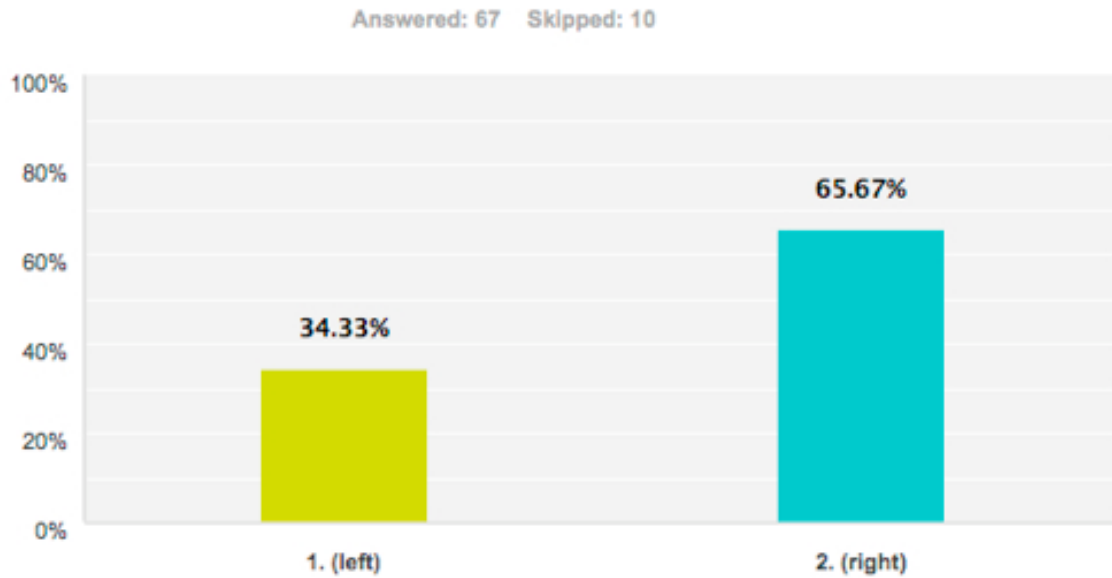
On a scale of 1-7 how would you rate your experience at the last memorial site or museum you visited? 1 being not very memorable and 7 being very memorable (Below the chart demonstrates how participants rated their last visit. Most participants chose between a 4 and a 7).



Of the two images shown here, which site has a more memorable impact on visitors or viewers like yourself? On the left are graves and on the right are shoes. (Below is the percentage of participants who chose graves versus shoes)

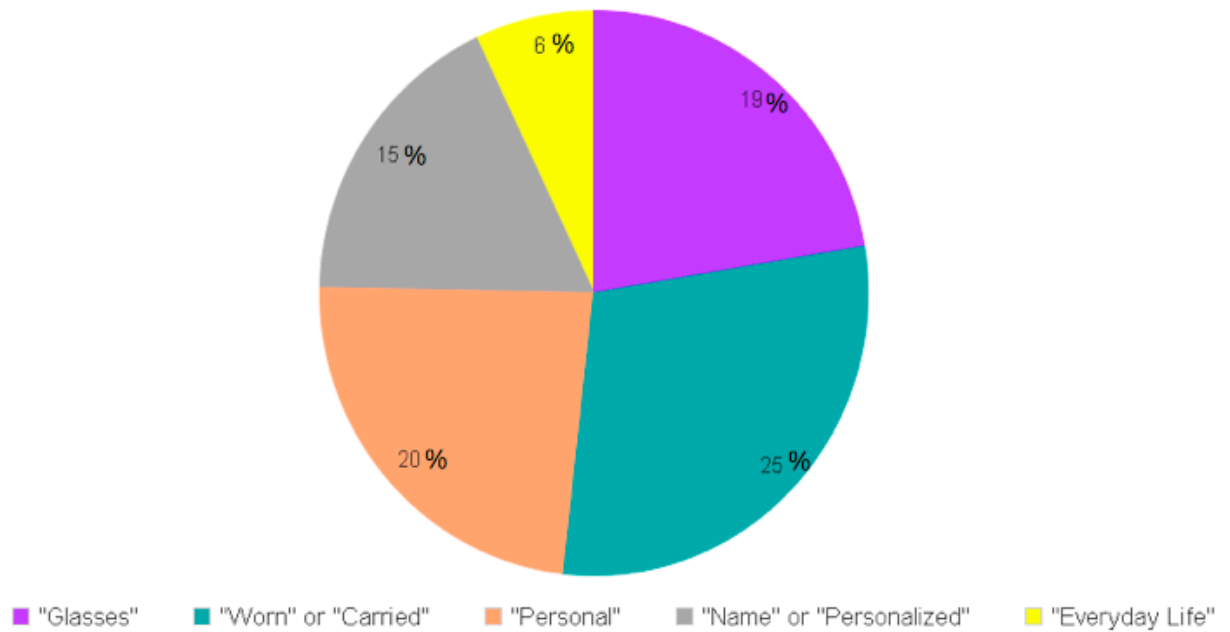


Knowing that the items shown here belonged to victims of a genocidal conflict, which group of clothing are you more likely to empathize with? (The chart below indicates the percentage of participants who chose the Gypsy clothing (left) and the Rowanda clothing on the right. As you can see, 10 participants skipped this question altogether).



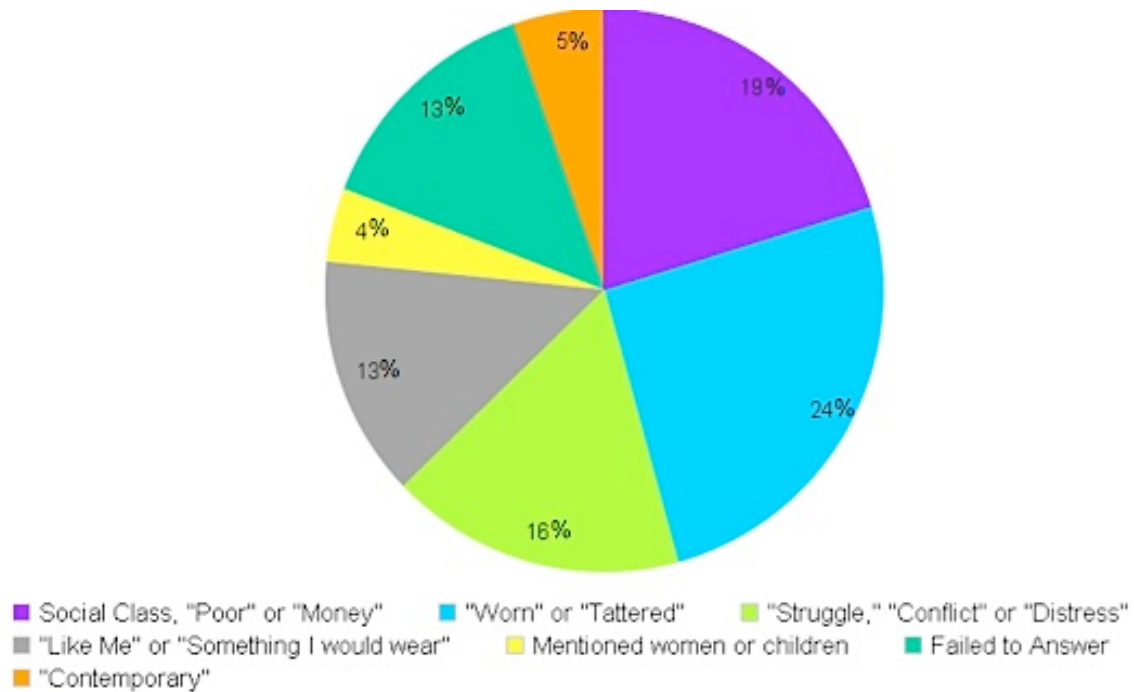
Survey Question #6

Words participants used when describing the images based on personal connection.



Survey Question #8

Below is a graph based on words participants used to describe the group of clothing that evoked more empathy.



Appendix D Qualitative Outcomes: Participant Quotes from Survey Questions 7, 8, & 9

(Qualitative outcomes are based on the feedback from Participants when asked why they chose a particular image and below are a few of their responses)

GROUP OF ITEMS FROM A VICTIM OF THE BOSNIAN WAR



"I also wear glasses and I envision personal ownership."

"These touched their skin. The glasses, the beads...were all personal items."

"Looks like currency...personal items tell more about who they were and where they came from."

PERSONALIZED SUITCASE FROM THE HOLOCAUST



"I went to the Holocaust museums and we saw a suitcase with our family's name on it."

"A suitcase is something you pack your life into. It also fosters curiosity and invites discussion with yourself and others."

GRAVES



"I usually associate tombstones with death."

"I don't quite get the personal experience behind smashed shoes. The graves are very visually powerful."

"I've been there (Arlington Cemetery) and I can connect with it."

SHOES



"It was something they were wearing. I can picture people in them."

"I visited outside of Germany where the Holocaust occurred. This is what I remember: the remains of human brutality."

"The graves are common but the shoes stand out more"

"It still feels like there is life there"

"I could have also have been wearing those shoes"

GERMAN
GYPSY
VICTIMS



"It looks like it was taken care of... clean, handled, and washed properly. It also looks like it belonged to a good person; an ordinary professional."

"I guess I have more empathy towards women."

"It appears this person wasn't ready for what was to happen where in number two they may have already been involved in a conflict."



RWANDA
CIVILIAN
VICTIMS

"It seems like in the left one they seem to have had it better. On the right it seems like they had it a lot harder...it's dirty."

"On the right there's more clothing of victims, so it seems like more people died."

"It seems like the clothes themselves have been through a struggle"