

**Performing Witnessing:  
Dramatic Engagement, Trauma, and Museum Installations  
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**Abstract**

This essay offers a discussion of two interactive museum installations, “Remembering the Children: Daniel’s Story” at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, and the main exhibit at the Humanity House Museum in the Hague, Netherlands. These exhibits take as their subject the experiences and perspective of a protagonist forced into refugee status, and turn the act of witnessing into a performative engagement for the museumgoer. In using the word *drama* to describe these museum exhibitions, I understand both installations as sites of performance. Both are examples of what I term *self-guided dramas*, taking the viewer/participant on an interactive journey through which they will experience a story or event that follows a dramatic narrative structure. An invisible facilitator guides each installation: at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Daniel, a boy-turned-young man who is the invisible protagonist of this self-guided story drama, leads participants through a chronological retelling of his experience during the Holocaust. They not only witness, but journey through one family’s deportation from Berlin to a ghetto in Eastern Europe, then a concentration camp, and finally conclusion as a displaced person. In the self-guided process drama that is the permanent installation of the Humanity House in the Hague, the movement of the participant/viewer is largely dictated by the different ideological state apparatuses that serve to bounce the viewer – who is thrust into role as a refugee – from station to station, seeking a fleeting safety that ultimately only comes when one exits the museum. In the narratives shaping each of these installations, the participants are at the mercy of insidious laws which, as they capriciously change, walk the individual through dilemmas with no right answer, revealing the terrible problems that occur when our laws are inherently unethical.

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In this essay I examine two interactive museum drama installations: “Remember the Children: Daniel’s Story” at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC, and the original main exhibit at Humanity House Museum in The Hague, Netherlands. These exhibits take as their subject the experiences and perspective of a protagonist forced into refugee status, and turn the act of witnessing into a performative engagement for the museumgoer. At the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Daniel, a boy-turned-young man who is the invisible protagonist of his eponymous self-guided story drama, leads participants through a chronological retelling of his experience during the Holocaust. Museumgoers witness the journey alongside his family’s deportation from Berlin to a ghetto in Eastern Europe, then the gates of a concentration camp, and finally displaced person status. In the self-guided process drama that is the permanent installation of Humanity House in The Hague, the movement of the participant/viewer is initially dictated by different ideological and repressive state apparatuses (media, law, border control) that serve to bounce the museum attendee-turned-refugee from waystation to waystation, seeking a fleeting safety that ultimately never comes. Visitors then bear witness to the words of eight refugees who now live in the Netherlands through a series of oral histories that are the cornerstone of the museum’s 2017 revision of the permanent exhibit. Both installations reveal the suffering produced by laws that render individuals “illegal,” causing man-made refugee crises. “Daniel’s Story” directly examines the impact of the Nuremberg Laws, which in 1935 forbade Jews from holding citizenship in the German Reich. Humanity House does not target one specific set of laws but rather places the viewer in the vantage point of bureaucratic disenfranchisement following an unspecified international crisis, exploring issues of travel access and statelessness.

In using the word *drama* to describe these museum exhibitions, I understand both installations as sites of performance. Examining the connections between museums and performative spaces is certainly nothing new; throughout the past two decades, works by Barbara

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), Diana Taylor (2003), Susan Bennett (2012), and Jennifer Parker-Starbuck (2017) have illuminated the ways in which “considerations of museum and theatre spaces employ similar vocabularies” (Parker-Starbuck: x). In turn, this “shift toward how collections and objects perform histories, and what the performative curatorial strategies of cultural narratives might signal about these histories, has begun to shape museums very differently” (ix). In this descriptive essay I examine the employment of two specific theatrical techniques - story and process drama - that come from the broad and interconnected worlds of theatre in education, drama in education, and applied theatre. By labeling “Daniel’s Story” and the permanent exhibit of the Humanity House respectively as works of story and process drama, I call attention to the ways in which these exhibits move beyond the construction of narrative told by objects (as in object theatre) and add the additional element of embodiment by placing museumgoers in role.

In each of the exhibits discussed here, witnessing is understood as a performative act. The USHMM and Humanity House are dedicated to the cultural preservation of difficult and terrible histories, and use performance as a way to communicate both the stories of victims and the importance of telling those stories. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor (2003) explains the critical relationship between performance, trauma, witnessing, and the epistemology of memory:

Traumatic memory often relies on live, interactive performance for transmission. Even studies that emphasize the link between trauma and narrative make evident in the analysis itself that the transmission of traumatic memory from victim to witness involves the shared and participatory act of telling and listening associated with live performance. Bearing witness is a live process, a doing, an event that takes place in real time (167).

By framing the act of witnessing as an embodied performative practice, both these exhibits ultimately transform participants into witnesses - who then bear the responsibility for bringing these stories with them, beyond the confines of the museum.

In her recent book *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (2013), Silke Arnold-de Simine notes the way in which museums, charged with the task of housing not only objects of cultural remembrance but also acts of remembering, have shifted from sites of observation to sites of (performative) engagement. She writes, “The ethical imperative to remember is taken to its literal extreme: visitors are asked to identify with other people’s pain, adopt their memories, empathize with their suffering, reenact and work through their traumas. Museums take on the role of facilitators in that process by providing experientially oriented encounters with the help of multimedia technologies” (1). In “Daniel’s Story,” the recorded voice of Daniel guides museumgoers into their roles as witnesses to the horror experienced by the eponymous composite character created specially for this exhibit. At the Humanity House, participants begin in role as refugees, then abruptly shift into the act of witnessing oral histories recorded by eight individuals from around the world who successfully sought refuge in the Netherlands. The use of self-guided drama techniques in these exhibits place emphasis on participant agency, confronting museumgoers with small choices -- do I go here? should I touch that? -- that serve to emphasize an individual’s relationship with both the material being presented and the superstructure of the museum that is shaping their experience.

“Remember the Children: Daniel’s Story” follows Daniel, a fictional composite character based on numerous German Holocaust victims who were forced into ghettos and concentration camps. Initially an initiative of the USHMM team and the Capital Children’s Museum, “Daniel’s Story” was “designed specifically to introduce the subject of the Holocaust to young visitors in a sensitive and meaningful manner,” and toured throughout the United States between 1991 and 1993 (USHMM 2010). The museum opened an expanded version of “Daniel’s Story” as a special exhibit in its current Washington, DC location in 1993, and subsequently made the installation permanent. Since a major refurbishment in 2005, the Museum estimates that well over 3.5 million people have walked through the permanent version of “Daniel’s Story” in its current location (Phillips 2010).

When creating the character of Daniel, the curatorial team took great pains to create a narrative that followed a common route for many German Jews who were first sent to the Polish ghetto Lodz, then to Auschwitz. None of the images in the exhibit are staged; only historical photographs are used to illustrate the fictitious – but factually sound – story. There is no single image of Daniel; instead, photographs illustrating “his” life show groups of boys either standing arm in arm all smiles in the sun, or, in contrast, lined up with gaunt faces in the concentration camp. However, while museumgoers do not see any one image of him, they hear “his” voice (played by an actor) in videos screened at the very beginning and end of the exhibit. By denying the viewer a central image of its protagonist on which to focus, the exhibit reveals itself to participants through Daniel’s eyes, employing the pages of his museum-created diary as the primary guide. Many young visitors from around the world will already have some familiarity with Holocaust diaries, most notably Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*. In keeping with this kind of structure, “Daniel’s Story” as story drama goes beyond the use of the young boy’s diary as a framing device and turns it into a physical experience. One’s eye is drawn to the brief entries – they are frequently the focal points of the respective displays, and the act of reading them creates an intimacy between Daniel and museumgoers. Handwritten in a print-perfect script, these entries also direct the viewer to “Look inside” this suitcase or that window. The format of self-guided story drama facilitates an embodied experience that encourages the viewer to experience the diary in the role of historian in their own right, engaging with the primary documentation and material culture of Daniel’s life.

The exhibit’s architecture is slightly distorted and dream-like, as if to suggest a memory: some items stand out in an almost garish fashion, while others seem to recede under a bed or against a wall. The chronological layout of the exhibition in tight halls combined with the lack of space in which patrons can pause to contemplate the items on display encourage the visitor to move through “Daniel’s Story” quickly, thereby creating a sense of unease and anxiety. For example, outside the home hallway sits a bench marked “Only for Jews!” and the storefront of

Daniel's father's store, now defaced with graffiti and broken windows. Patrons could sit on the bench or reach through broken holes in the glass and touch the ripped and torn items inside, yet the small walkway and tight corners effectively hurry visitors toward the ghetto. Represented by a small, crowded, dirty space that serves as kitchen, workspace, and bedroom all in one, this room is in sharp contrast with the bright, spacious, and comfortable rooms of Daniel's childhood home. As the pace quickens and Daniel's family is moved around again, the hallways darken and narrow, flanked by chain and wire. In the last diary entry, dated August 15, 1944, Daniel writes, "I see men, women, children, and babies being forced into trains. Now, I know the end of the ride is a concentration camp." The last time we see the diary is when it is lying in a dirty pile of luggage, separated from patrons by a chain link fence below a painted entrance to a concentration camp that patrons cannot cross - reminding viewers that their experience of witnessing is inherently limited and partial.

In her analysis of the USHMM, Vivian Patraka (1999) has noted that "an American Holocaust Museum is caught on the cusp of happened here/happened there, a conundrum" borne of the experiences of its people that happened outside its geographic borders. Yet the USHMM "has a context of survival, of a 'living memorial' *by* the living (as framers, funders, visitors) that those in the devastated landscape of Europe can never possess. This, too, is part of American history" (111). As the part of this living memorial dedicated to engaging with youth, "Daniel's Story" invites its young viewers to become part of the active process of memorializing. The final room of the exhibit offers visitors the opportunity to respond to Daniel's story on blank index cards with colored markers. This last act of museumgoer-written reflection not only mirrors Daniel's journal writing but marks the point in which this self-guided story drama becomes dialogic. In his capacity as dramatic protagonist, Daniel facilitates an emotional connection between museumgoers and history. Throughout the exhibit, he has directly spoken and written to the young people viewing the exhibit; now, when given the opportunity to reflect, many address directly. Curatorial staff rotate a selection of cards on display that typically offer expressions of

sadness or regret, and are often addressed directly to Daniel. (The Museum stores the thousands of cards not on display for a limited time in their internal archives before they are destroyed.) The majority of these cards also express sympathy for Daniel or thank him for his story. Others share personal details about family experiences regarding the Holocaust; for example: “Dear Daniel, I am very lucky because all my family Left russia before the holocost, but some people aren’t this Lucky” [sic]. With the writing of these cards the transformation from young musuemgoer to witness is complete, marked by the performative first act of bearing witness.

Whereas “Daniel’s Story” focuses the museumgoer on one central story about an ever-present eponymous protagonist, the main exhibit of Humanity House begins by placing the museumgoer at the center of the action. Promotional materials from the museum describe Humanity House as a place where “you can experience what it feels like to live in a place gripped by conflict or hit by a disaster” (Humanity House, n.d.). Humanity House opened in December of 2010 as an initiative of the Dutch Red Cross, and is supported by the European Commission’s European Fund for Regional Development and the city of the Hague, which is also home to the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. Humanity House counts among its partners the International Red Cross, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and sponsors include corporations such as IT company Cisco and consulting firm AON as well as the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The museum works with school groups and has designed programming for children as young as 10 years of age, although it does not consider itself a children’s museum. In December 2016 museum curators closed the original exhibit for a substantial revision that reopened to the public in February 2017. Here I discuss both versions of the permanent exhibit as I believe that the revision offers insights into both the power and the limits of process drama as a form for remembrance, engagement, learning, and understanding.

As my visit to Humanity House placed me, the museumgoer, at the center of my experience, what follows is a thick description of the exhibit from my unique perspective. My

initial encounter with museum personnel began, innocently enough, with the registration of my university ID at the front desk. But then my picture was taken and my bag was confiscated; in exchange, I was presented with a badge that I had to wear around my neck while I waited for an LED screen to tell me that it was my time to enter the exhibit. Once called, I descended into the darkness of the basement level where I was held for a time in another waiting room until I received a letter through a mail slot that contained a personalized registration form that I was instructed to keep if I wanted any hope of being able to get from “zone A” into “zone B.” (This was an unexplained but important-sounding distinction.) My heart rate shot up when I was told this. While my natural inclination was to perhaps dissociate and test how difficult it would be to actually get out without the letter, the procedural immersion into a hostile dark space induced enough anxiety that I was actually too scared to try something like that in this strange and disorienting house.

The next room, only revealed to participants following delivery of the aforementioned letter, is a recreation of a moderately affluent living and dining room in Europe – perhaps in the Hague? – generically decorated and only slightly more comfortable than an IKEA showroom. Yet the key difference is that this space has been hastily abandoned – a radio broadcast urges the participant to leave immediately because of an unnamed emergency, while the air is pierced by the smell of an overturned glass of red wine on the table. Like in “Daniel’s Story,” exiting this space led me into a frightening hallway of locked doors and chain-link fences, punctuated by holes through which one views similar sites of abandon – either created in a *trompe l’oeil* fashion, or full-sized, or on video. Regardless, the message was clear – I was stuck, with nowhere to go but ahead, into an unknown of turning passageways that culminated in a disturbing room in which my reflection had been disappeared through the use of a trick mirror. I, the refugee, had been rendered invisible.

My only recourse was to take my meagre documents - visa letter and registration form given me upon entry - into the archive where I could file my registration form with my



photograph, name, and email address for loved ones to find. (The archive is open for browsing within the context of the exhibit, and a friend actually found my document when he visited at a later date.) The next room was tiny, filled with a desk on which sat stamps and visa applications: this was border control. An aggressive disembodied male voice implored me to show my visa and list names, addresses, and phone numbers of family and friends I would visit. The process was only slightly melodramatic – perhaps the tone of aggression might be replaced by one of cautious boredom at actual borders in the US, the EU, the Middle East, or elsewhere – but the power dynamic and the feeling of angry powerlessness was, for me at any rate, almost overwhelming in its familiarity.

Subsequent parts of the original exhibit took me through an abstracted war zone. One room was full of cots where one could lie down; when I did so the speakers embedded in the International Red Cross pillows softly played interviews with different refugees into my ear. A makeshift shed of pressed board and duct tape also housed images and story clips about one man, known only to us as Sattar, followed by a news report about Palestinian fighters' education efforts regarding humanitarian laws. Perhaps the most distressing room came in the middle of this chaos, for it seemed absolutely normal. Classical music was on the radio, a football game was on television, the lights were on, and there were no telltale signs of distress. Normal had, at this point, become an unusual construct. Near the end of this exhibit patrons also had an opportunity to reflect on what they had seen -- but instead of the cards and markers in "Daniel's Story," Humanity House featured an interactive media room in which participants were asked to make quick decisions about what they would do in given situations of famine, dealing with warlords, unstable regime changes, and health crises. In these simulations I was always in role as Erika, but sometimes in these scenarios I was Erika the refugee, or Erika the fighter, or Erika the visa-holder, or Erika the witness, or Erika the bureaucrat. These choose-your-own adventures never ended well, and were accompanied by recorded interviews with individuals – either those who fled, or doctors, or administrators who dealt with these specific situations.

In February 2017, Humanity House reopened with a renewed permanent exhibit that kept the museumgoer's initial experience up to the border control checkpoint, but replaced the subsequent rooms with a series of oral histories recorded by eight real men and women living in the Netherlands today -- all of whom came to the country as refugees. The kinds of persecution faced by the individuals interviewed ranges from religious (Ram, who fled Bhutan), to ethnic (Akhrat, who fled Iraq alongside her Kurdish family), to homophobia (Yvonne, who came with her wife to escape threats in Jamaica), to domestic violence (Bruce, whose escape from his abusive father ended in his capture and conscription as a child soldier in Liberia), to wartime violence (Lidija, who fled civil war in Sarajevo). Speaking in either English or Dutch, these men and women deliver recorded first-person accounts not only of their experiences in making the journey as refugees, but also commentary on the nature of their experiences. For example, Aiham, who grew up in Syria, learned only of his identity as a Palestinian when he was ten years old. "And one day I was at school, and someone came to the school to do a headcount of the Palestinian people in my class and the Syrian people. And he says, and this man says: All the Palestinian people stand up." Three of his classmates stood, while Aiham remained seated until the man told him, "You are a Palestinian. And then there comes the flash in my life: what does that mean, Palestinian?" Going home that evening to talk with his father, "from that moment onwards I knew what meant 'travel document.'" Aiham had been born into life as a refugee, then fled Syrian violence a decade after learning of his statelessness.

The curatorial act of placing historical documents such as these immediately after the embodied experience of being in role as a refugee serves to break the museum's own fourth wall. In acknowledging the space-as-museum, Humanity House employs a kind of Brechtian alienation effect, or V-effect, effectively disrupting the narrative that the individual museumgoer in role might have created for oneself. In writing about alienation effect from the performer's perspective Bertolt Brecht asks, "How is the actress to speak... in such a way that it is understood as a historic dictum? This can only be achieved if the V-effect is brought out. The

actress must not make the sentence her own affair, she must hand it over for criticism, she must make it possible to understand its causes and to protest” (1977: 157). In the case of the Humanity House museumgoer who is performing for herself, the use of alienation effect prevents her from becoming too comfortable with her experience in role as a refugee - lest she claim ownership over an experience that is ultimately not hers. Leslie Bedford has noted that museums employ theatre techniques including process drama and object theatre so as to deliver “narrative [that] enables people to imagine themselves in an unfamiliar world” (2011: 31). Yet exhibits such as “Daniel’s Story” and the permanent exhibit at Humanity House reveal both the advantages and the limits of drama in conveying difficult histories, where the act of taking on a role might lead to a false and ahistorical sense of empathetic understanding. To avoid this, “Daniel’s Story” very clearly casts the viewer in role as a witness to history from the beginning of the exhibit, while Humanity House uses an alienation effect so as to disrupt the already disorienting embodied experience of moving through border control. The museum visitor is not allowed a false sense of empathetic understanding, but rather challenged immediately by the words of real refugees such as Shaza, a 12-year-old originally from Syria, who simply states that “Actually it is really hard to be a refugee... because people don’t see you as a real person.”

Museum installations such as these aim not for suspension of disbelief, but rather critical engagement - and in the cases of both the USHMM and Humanity House, these do so in the service of helping to inspire social change. Central to the narratives that shape both of these installations are insidious laws which, as they capriciously change, walk the museumgoer through dilemmas with no right answer, revealing the terrible problems that occur when laws are inherently unethical. In pulling back the bureaucratic curtain, these exhibits strive to expose the dehumanizing power structures that dictate movement of the individual as a refugee. While we might have documentation of these power structures and their terrible legacies in our archives, Taylor reminds us of the power that also lies in the act of gathering to remember the stories- oral, gestic, “nonreproducible,” that live on in the repertoire. “The repertoire requires presence: people

participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” (20). Museums are not merely archives, serving as depositories - they are also sites of community gathering in which the repertoire of memory is rehearsed, enacted, and (re)produced. By casting the museumgoer in the critical role of witness, the exhibits at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Humanity House suggest that these stories from the repertoire might live on beyond the confines of the museum walls.

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