

## **Curating Difficult Knowledge: New Models of Cultural Evocation and Intervention**

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**Organizer/Introduction:** Erica Lehrer

**Chair/Discussant:** Cory Kratz

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**Presenter:** Florencia Marchetti

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What does it mean to work ethnographically at the intersection of cultural analysis and curation? What new models of scholarly production might allow anthropologists and ethnographers to contribute to public understandings of the cultural politics that shape representations of trauma and memory? In the wake of the “genocidal century,” in an era of “transitional justice,” and with the global rise of atrocity museums and so-called “dark tourism” to sites of “difficult heritage,” this panel opens a discussion at the intersection of these two areas of inquiry.

Key questions include: How might the fruits of ethnographic research on these subjects be circulated in new ways and to broader publics, using image, text, sound and technology? How might the public display of difficult—both painful and contested—memories and stories facilitate the acknowledgment of previously unexamined historical wounds? What value might curated settings have as public gathering points, places of dialogue, or sites of reconciliation in a globalizing world? What are some possible “exhibitible units” of ethnographic data? Can creative, technologically mediated curations facilitate empathic understanding of the traumatic experiences of others, and how? Taking “difficult knowledge” as that which challenges or disrupts anticipated experience (and thus potentially induces transformations in understanding or subjectivity) (Britzman), and considering “curation” in its deeper meaning of “taking care of,” this panel engages with these questions as they arise in theory and practice.

Anthropologists traditionally write up their research for publication, possibly including visuals in their texts. But what alternative modes of representation might be developed that intervene more directly in the public realm – and more specifically in the social situations whence ethnographic data was originally gleaned, and therefore is uniquely meaningful – to communicate key cultural issues and catalyze new questions? Inspired by earlier disciplinary suggestions of ethnographic “evocation” (Tyler) and experiments with “para-sites” (Marcus), we explore how ethnography might be deployed to reframe familiar landscapes and practices to create new engagements and fresh understandings. Growing out of an emerging body of interdisciplinary scholarship and practice around representing and conveying experiences and meanings of historical suffering and injustice, panelists will present original research about their experiments in “curating difficult knowledge” in diverse settings and with a range of participants: using video to elicit memories about the local reverberations of past state violence among the neighbors of a former detention center in Argentina; using objects and narrative to challenge

unidirectional, extractive models of research about apartheid-era trauma in South Africa; and using participatory installation to forge dialogue out of conflictual monologues about the Jewish past among Jews and non-Jews in post-Communist Poland. Working at the intersection of ethnography, new media, museology, and public scholarship, this panel considers how the results of cultural inquiry might have a more immediate role in the settings in which research is carried out and beyond.

**Monica Eileen Patterson**

### **Memories of Childhood in Apartheid's Last Decades: (Re)Encountering Lack and Loss in a Post-Apartheid Present**

Although apartheid was officially dismantled when South Africa gained independence in 1994, countless legacies of this legally enshrined and socially upheld system of racial oppression endure. In the aftermath of the state-sponsored Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the formal mechanism charged with bringing a divided population together in a process of nation-building, a tiny, disproportionately white minority still lives in opulence while the vast majority struggles to survive. In the absence of significant socioeconomic transformation and psycho-social repair, celebratory responses to the TRC have made way for a wave of criticism. A key group identified (but never consistently defined) in the TRC's public hearings and subsequent analysis is the ambiguous, malleable category "children and youth." While it was devastatingly revealed that violence and childhood were structurally and practically linked through the apartheid system, the child-youth continuum has been particularly open to manipulation by various actors, including children and youth themselves. I will present initial outcomes of a collaborative exhibition project exploring the relationship between childhood and violence during apartheid rule. Curating memories of childhood loss and lack will offer opportunities to reopen questions of agency, responsibility, culpability, and consciousness for reconsideration and revision. My goal is to identify and maximize the both local and academic relevance of such curated work.

**Florencia Marchetti**

### **Sites, victims, and neighbors: explorations/interventions in Argentinian memory-scapes**

Changes in Argentinean policies regarding the Dirty War period (1976-1983) have brought human rights and memory activists (mainly survivors and relatives of the disappeared) to the forefront of judiciary and memorializing processes. The official recognition of the detainees/ disappeared and their relatives as the "direct victims" of violence, legitimizes them as the holders of truth and memory. By focusing on specific types of suffering (detention, torture, and disappearance) and particular groups as the bearers of that suffering (the detainees/ disappeared and their blood-connected relatives), these policies are creating a limited and limiting narrative that leaves the rest of the

citizenry as either witnesses, perpetrators, or accomplices. The experiences of citizens who, without being direct targets of repression, also suffered in multiple ways due to state sponsored terror are thus silenced or marginalized in the public sphere. This presentation is part of an ongoing ethnographic and documentary art project concerned with mapping these predominant narratives, practices and scenarios, while investigating the experiences, perceptions and lingering effects of the dictatorship among the neighbors of three former clandestine detention centers in the city of Córdoba. I will discuss the process and outcomes of a video installation/intervention that brings the voices of disenfranchised neighbors inside Campo de la Ribera, a military prison used as a clandestine detention center during the 1970s. Recycled as a public school for the kids of the nearby slum during the 1990s, it was inaugurated as a memorial site in 2010.

### **Erica Lehrer**

#### **“Please Respond”: Curating dissensual community in post-Holocaust, post-Communist Poland**

A post-Holocaust “divorce of memory” sundered Polish and Jewish narratives of wartime suffering into two incommensurable stories of definitive victimhood, in which the ‘other’ played a highly ambivalent role. Since Poland became newly accessible to the West in 1989, these two stories about Polish-Jewish relations and heritage have been coming into contact, most concretely in the realm of Jewish heritage tourism. As an ethnographer in a landmark Jewish heritage neighborhood, I saw that heritage venues formed potent sites for “truth-telling” and of potential inter-ethnic encounter around the difficult past. The emotional monologues I heard begged to be put into contact. In the context of an annual Jewish culture festival in the neighborhood, I worked with two artists to create an ethnographic intervention (titled "Please Respond") that aimed to both illuminate the cultural problematics I had noted, and further catalyze the role heritage venues could play in dialogue around these. The interactive installation sought – and we think succeeded – to create a social space that was both diagnostic and aspirational, a participatory ethnographic exercise in cultural documentation and public creation. Visitors’ own contributions to the installation revealed both cultural links and ruptures, and formed the basis of lively conversation about the bases and boundaries of identification. The intimate exchanges suggested that some things can be said publicly that cannot be said privately. I thus propose exploring the installation form as an approach to the ethnographic process and product that can both further cultural analysis and fulfill local social needs.

### **Shinpei Takeda**

#### **"Downloading" Nagasaki: How do we "download" information and emotions of mass destruction?**

Drawing from five years of research with Japanese atomic bomb survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki living in North and South America, I will speak about my work as a

Tijuana, Mexico-based documentary filmmaker, ethnographer, and visual artist, with a focus on my process of making art based on listening to oral stories of survivors “applying” the information, the emotion, the story, and the history in various settings. Many questions must be confronted in the process of transposing survivors’ memories from a private to a public realm. They include ethical dilemmas regarding how to contextualize subjective stories within a factual history, how to avoid conflicts between psychologically sensitive survivors’ individual emotions and politically charged collective rhetoric surrounding the incidents. I approach these challenges by attending to survivors’ relationships to their surroundings, including their families and larger communities, and with a sensitivity to the survivors’ socio-political status in the contexts in which my works are disseminated. In making these decisions and becoming an instrument for this process, I affirm my own subjectivity while also registering my place in history. My various visual works highlight this inner mechanism – which I call “downloading” – with regard to memory and history in wide range of forms including multi-media installations, video projection, documentary film, large-scale photography installation, and community collaborative projects.