



# Moral discourse and argumentation in the public sphere: Museums and their visitors



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## ABSTRACT

Recent studies of moral discourse and argumentation highlight the pervasiveness of morality in everyday life, and how the public sphere is shaped by moral 'stuff': speech acts, narratives, accounts and the like. By taking a discourse analytic orientation, this article joins this line of research, and delineates the situated and interactional nature of moral argumentations and rhetoric. The article focuses on the role moral discourse plays in the formation of the public sphere, as conceptualized by Habermas, and specifically on moral discourse (co-)produced by museums and by their visitors. As cultural public institutions, museums play an important role in shaping the public sphere both thematically (topically) and materially (communication technologies and materialities of display and participation). In recent years, museums have shifted to more interactive modes of operation, where visitors are invited to participate in the public sphere by producing discourse in situ. This study explores museum questions and visitors responses in a large Jewish cultural/heritage museum in the United States. The study first looks at the museum apparatuses, through which discourse is publicly invited, produced and presented, to then study visitors' responses as moral discourse. The analysis critically highlights the dramatic quality inherent to moral scenes, and depicts and discusses how visitors' texts selectively address the moral Actor, Action and Motive as parts of the social moral drama they evaluate.

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## 1. Morality, museums, and the public sphere

Recent studies of moral rhetoric and argumentation confirm how ubiquitous morality is in everyday life, and how the public sphere is both shaped by and saturated with discursive moral 'stuff': speech acts, narratives, accounts, claims, and more. Most of the recent work on moral discourse has its roots in the linguistic turn of the 1980s, which advanced the study of moral rhetoric from its Greek origins, nesting in abstract logics and centering on the concept of virtue, to be viewed as part of everyday social interaction (Antaki and Condor, 2014; Billig, 1991, 1996; Hymes, 1975). Some of the work, such as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969/2000, rests on earlier foundations, namely post-WWII/Holocaust intellectual attempts to come into terms with Europe's moral collapse. See Frank, 2011). Everyday moral discourse is produced in different spheres: from visible public figures on occasions of explicit moral framing, such as politicians' and celebrities' mediated moral scandals (Eronen, 2014; Thompson, 2000), to laypeople's mundane interactions, such as sharing secrets (Gunthner and Luckmann, 1998). In these partly overlapping spheres, Tileagă

(2012) argues, morality "is a matter grounded in our 'grammar' of using ordinary language concepts," and in "common sense . . . assumptions about persons, activities, social relations" (p. 209).

Addressing moral discourse as *situated dialogic accomplishment*, presents a constructionist line of inquiry that is attuned to the social, cultural and of recent also intensely mediated nature of moral arguments and the contexts wherein they transpire (Eronen, 2014; Tileagă, 2012). As an analytical perspective, addressing everyday moral 'grammar' is informative also because it highlights moral claims as situated and interactive accomplishments, often not explicitly coded as possessing moral content. Morality, Bergmann (1998) writes, "is so deeply intertwined with everyday discourse that the interlocutors hardly ever recognize their doings as moral business" (p. 280). In other words, when our research focus shifts from logical claims to everyday moral discourse, the abounding breadth and wealth of morality—its ubiquitousness in various life spheres—becomes powerfully apparent.

What also becomes powerfully apparent when studying the everydayness of current moral discourse, is how thoroughly mediated public spheres are nowadays: moral events are mediated in and into the public sphere, where they are then discussed and negotiated by 'the public'. The public sphere, as Habermas (1962/1989) initially proposed, is "a realm of our social life in

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which such a thing as public opinion can be formed” (p. 105). It is a discursive space of and for deliberation that serves in mediating between the public and various authorities (from the Court and the Church to the State). The public sphere impacts on governmental agencies and on public life, and contributes to shape public discourse, norms and behavior. Habermas’ (1997) view of the public sphere rests on Enlightenment sensibilities, stressing that “access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens,” and that “citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion” (p. 105). His theorizing has been immensely prolific, not least because it has set into motion an array of critical reformulations (“Habermas bashing.” Schafer, 2014, p. 1134). These reformulations address Habermas’ rationalistic and optimistic view of individuals, and of the public as a whole, and his overlooking of the coercive role that power (politics) play in shaping the public sphere (excluding marginalized publics on basis of class, gender, ethnicity, race and more. Mouffe, 2002; Calhoun, 1992). Yet, for Habermas and for his critics alike, the focus on morality is abiding, as it is seen as vital for all forms of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1986, 1990). The public sphere is essentially conditioned on morality, which precisely concerns “the prohibitions, positive obligations, and permissions that regulate interaction among persons” (Bohman and Rehg, 2014, n.p., my emphasis).

Habermas’ early studies examined Britain’s coffee houses and France’s salons of the 19th century, conceived as institutions of the burgeoning public sphere, where discourse and exchange helped constitute publics and shape their moral norms. Yet an additional critic of his theory is that it conceptualizes the public sphere as an “abstract space” (Oliver & Myers, 1999, p. 38, cited in Adut, 2012, p. 239). In order to reply to this lacuna, in this study I turn to cultural and heritage museums as public institutions, where moral discourse is performed by both the institution and its visitors. This occurs through the use of specific practices of representation and mediation (on behalf of the former) and participation (on behalf of the latter).

From at least the onset of the modern (national) museum around the 18th century, museums have supplied physical spaces and semiotic resources for the education of the public, and more fundamentally, for the constitution of their visitors as public (Barrett, 2011). Museums have played an important role in shaping the public sphere both thematically (topically) and materially (technologies of mediation and display). In *The Birth of the Museum*, Bennett (1995) adds on Habermas that the “reorganization of the social space of the museum occurred alongside the emerging role of the museums in the formation of the bourgeoisie public sphere” (p. 25. Also Dickinson et al., 2010). Together with the rise of print and mass media, museums continued to flourish as semiotically dense spaces of and for public learning and opinion-formation, which rest on the shared knowledge and the moral presuppositions that they mediated. With the advent of new media we witness the advent of the new museum, with its stress on interactivity and participatory media. The new museum embodies a shift from a modern environment, characterized by top-down narratives anchored in collections of authentic artifacts, to immersive, experiential, and ‘visitor-friendly’ post-modern media environments (Gans, 2002, p. 372; Runnel and Prulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2014).

This study looks at visitors’ public expressions in museums, which is to say how visitors respond to and interact with museums (Marselis, 2016; McLean and Pollock, 2007; Noy, 2015a,b, 2016a, in press; Sandell, 2007). I view visitors’ discourse in museums in light of studies looking at audience participation in mass media (‘broadcast talk’. Montgomery, 2001; Thornborrow, 2001). Indeed, Thumim (2009) observes the resonances between mass media and museums, arguing that like public broadcasting, public muse-

ums too currently “invite the public to represent themselves” via on-site communication apparatuses (p. 618, emphasis in the original). Notwithstanding historical and contemporary similarities between museums and broadcast media, the former are essentially spatial institutions and visiting them is an encompassing corporal experience. If media, from books and newspapers to mobile phones, are characterized by portability, museums are spacious and immobile (like theaters and cinemas). In museums these are the visitors who are on the move (‘circulating’), and doubly so: to/from the museum and inside it. In fact, the politics of the control museums exercise over those visiting them—their “cultural governance of the populace” (Bennett, 1995, p. 21)—is a cornerstone in the critical study of these institutions (Barrett, 2011; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

Museums’ spatial nature touches on public sphere and moral debate in yet another way, namely that consuming the museum is a social event. “Visiting is almost always co-visiting,” Macdonald (2008, p. 170) reminds us, and museum visitors are commonly co-present in the museum and co-engaged in interacting with it. “Judging how others behave” in the museum, Macdonald (2008, p. 170) continues, is a matter of “moral witnessing: a witnessing of others and opening oneself up to be viewed in public” (p. 170).

## 2. Sticky notes and moral arguments: The apparatuses of the public sphere

All public exchange of opinion requires apparatuses—materialities and technologies—through which participation is afforded and made publicly accessible, and through which it assumes its public character (its public-ness). See Noy, 2016b). Recent semiotic approaches to rhetoric and discourse in the public sphere look more closely into actual settings and communication features, including spatiality and materiality, visibility, and technological affordances (Blair, 1999; Selzer and Crowley, 1999), which are viewed as the “core of the public sphere” (Adut, 2012, p. 238). With this in mind, I turn to examine the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, focusing on the interactive platform that the museum offers its visitors for discussing current political affairs.

The National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia (NMAJH) is a large, state-of-the-art cultural heritage institution. It was founded in 1976, and relocated and comprehensively restructured in 2010. The museum’s glass-clad, five-story building is centrally located in the historic and touristic district of Philadelphia, and hosts 80,000 visitors per year. The museum narrates the history of Jewish immigration to, and livelihood in, the US from a clearly liberal-democratic perspective: it portrays the high levels of integration and accomplishments of Jewish communities and individuals in American culture, society, and politics, and reserves little space for more ‘traditional’ topics, such as the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Regarding the latter, for instance, the main text on display is a quote by Jacob Blaustein, then president of the American Jewish Committee, stating that, “To American Jews, America is home.”

The museum’s display revolves around the theme of “freedom,” which appears in the title of each of the exhibition’s three floors: “FOUNDATIONS OF FREEDOM: 1654–1880,” “DREAMS OF FREEDOM: 1880–1945” and “CHOICES AND CHALLENGES OF FREEDOM: 1945–Today.” In the latter period, freedom, civil right activism, and women’s movements are interweaved and reiterated (“EXPANDING FREEDOM,” “FREEDOM NOW”). The museum’s stress on individual, collective and minority freedoms embodies US liberal political philosophy, as Jewish integration and success build on liberal affordances for mobility across multiple spheres. The NMAJH thus joins contemporary, global democratic museums, which

“reinvent themselves as agents of empowering and liberatory social change” (Sandell, 2007, p. 9).

My first ethnographic visits to the NMAJH took place during 2011, as part of a larger, multi-site, and intercultural study of the relations between museums, audience participation, and moral rhetoric (Noy, 2008, 2015a, 2015b). While the museum’s core exhibition includes many screens, touch screens, soundscapes, and various ephemeral multimedia displays, I was specifically fascinated by its main interactive installation, the Contemporary Issues Forum (CIF). The CIF is a darkened hall, located at the exit from the core exhibition, where visitors—descending from the museum’s fourth floor, where the chronological exhibition begins, to the second floor, where it ends—*must* pass on their way out (Fig. 1). As the museum’s Director of Public Programs put it, the location of the CIF “is strategic, and brings visitors into conversation, dialogue and participation with the museum.”

Unlike the CIF, all the other museum interactives are nested in specific exhibitions and halls, which they address directly. For instance, in a room describing Jewish travel to the West in the 19th Century, a travel diary is presented along with the text: “Think about the things you might want with you during your long journey to the West. WHAT ELSE WILL YOU PACK?” (Noy, 2015b, p. 208). Such location is common for museum interactives, as in Marselis’ (2016) study of an exhibition of Native American culture in the National Museum of Denmark, where visitors are asked reflexive and critical questions that address the exhibit located right near them (“Should ancestors be exhibited or reburied?” Also Sandell, 2007). Yet the CIF is not located organically in a historical exhibition, but where traditionally visitor books are positioned, and where visitors can perform an “audience-contributed gesture of closure” (Katriel, 1997, p. 71. Cf. Noy, 2009). At the CIF, however, this gesture is more responsive and interactive and asks more of the visitors.

The participatory interactional mechanism of the CIF includes four questions, which are brightly projected on each of the hall’s walls (two questions are visible on the two walls in Fig. 1). In the center of the hall a large round table is located, equipped with writing utensils and special colorful sticky notes (similar to Post-It notes but bigger and thicker). In this way, visitors can write their responses to the museum’s questions and post them on the appropriate wall. The sticky notes come in three colors: pink, yellow, or blue, which correspond with answers that are printed at the top of the notes: “Yes,” “No,” and “Um,” respectively. Visitors, who enter the hall from the right and leave it from the left, see the questions and the posted texts, and can then choose whether to partake in these debates publically, by way of writing and posting. Visitors can moreover scan their notes before they post them, in which case their texts will be projected in an enlarged version on the appropriate wall (visible in Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Through the CIF’s interactional apparatus, “a space of public judgement is thus opened” (Tileagă, 2012, p. 210), and we are reminded that “public space is inherently spatial and visual” (Barrett, 2011, p. 40). Note that visitors’ discursive actions at the CIF are limited to responding to the museum’s questions solely through the channel the museum affords, namely the sticky notes (I have never seen anyone write on anything else besides these notes).

At the entrance to the CIF a large sign explains the hall’s meaning and function: “History is filled with debate and discussions and those conversations continue to be relevant today. Join in and lend your voice!” Underneath this text another text elaborates:

Expression and debate are essential to American and Jewish culture. Here, you will find four questions projected on the wall. Each weaves together key themes from this exhibition, and cur-

rent issues we face. What do you think? Pick a question and browse the comments posted by your fellow visitors. Write your own response and add it to the conversation. There are no right answers, only discussions.

There is plenty to say about this text, yet I limit myself to two notes leading to the analysis of visitors’ responses. First, this text embodies the cultural significance *conversation* bears in upper-class urban North American culture, and the connection between this culture and Jewish culture. The perfusion of dialogic/conversational terms—“debate” (twice), “discussions” (twice), “conversations” (twice), “voice,” “Expression,” “questions” (twice), “response” and “answers”—echoes Cameron’s (2000) thesis regarding the *positive moral value* that the *activity of talking* carries in North American culture.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, yet from a different perspective, the reiteration of terms of expression and dialogue also confer a *Habermasian view of liberal-deliberative democracy* and the function of the public sphere. The museum centrally frames visitor comments as “voice,” which they can and should produce as part of the public sphere (“Join”). From either perspective, the CIF invites visitors to take a rhetorical position and act morally by engaging in communication and expression (Cameron) or by engaging in rational-responsible citizenship through participating in public deliberation (Habermas).

Second, since the CIF is not located organically in historical rooms or displays, some work needs to be done so that visitors understand its location/function. “History is filled with [...] continue to be relevant today,” and “Each weaves together from this exhibition, and current issues we face,” is discourse that serves the aim of connecting the past with the present (moment-of-participation), and the CIF questions with the themes of the exhibition. In fact, most of the CIF questions do *not* address specific “key themes” in the exhibition, but rather derive from the underlying notion of North American liberal democracy and its politico-moral underpinnings (individuals’ and minority groups’ freedom and social rights within a capitalist context).

### 3. Does America have a responsibility to promote democracy abroad?

During my ethnography at the NMAJH, I observed fifteen questions presented at the CIF. The questions are composed by the curatorial team, their syntax is polar (yes/no questions), and their contents address liberal-democratic concerns, such as the balanced operation of governmental branches (“Do the checks and balances of our federal government work?”), free expression (“Is it ever appropriate for the US Government to censor speech?”), gender and minority rights (“Will a woman play in Major League Baseball in the next decade?”), and more. Infrequently, questions that specifically address Jewish issues are also presented (“Can Israel be a Jewish and a Democratic State?” and “Should Ryan Braun be stripped of his Most Valuable Player Award for admittedly doping?”).<sup>3</sup> The CIF questions are more than probes meant to elicit responses; they are agenda setting, media-generated content, that publicly lay out the topics-of-the-hour for audiences to consider and address. Here is how the museum—as a media/mediating institution—marks what is worthy of public debate (and what isn’t) and how it is to be discursively articulated and physically displayed.

The museum’s polar questions are interesting also *interactionally*. Consider that while polar questions typically invite a one word

<sup>2</sup> On broader discussions of the moral value of conversation, see the special issue of *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, 1998 (vols. 3–4), dedicated to *Morality in Discourse*.

<sup>3</sup> Braun is a famous Jewish baseball player, who was involved in a scandal regarding alleged use of illegal performance-enhancing drugs in 2011–2012. More museum questions and visitors’ responses are available at <http://cif.nmajh.org/>

<sup>1</sup> The scanned notes are available online at <http://cif.nmajh.org/>.



Fig. 1. The Contemporary Issues Forum (image by author).

answer, only 2% of the notes I've seen did not include texts by visitors. Put differently, it is clear to visitors that their responses are incomplete unless they use the space of the sticky notes for *written articulation*, and that merely posting an 'empty' (Yes/No/Um) note does not qualify as a sufficient moral response.

### 3.1. Texts and analysis: A dramatic reading

I have been studying the NMAJH and the CIF ethnographically since 2011, visiting the museum 3–4 times a year, observing visitors and analyzing their participatory discourse (texts). I add to this also interviews with visitors and museum staff (curators, docents, technicians, volunteers). At the CIF I observe visitors read, discuss and respond to the museum questions, and I have recorded so far 1193 texts that visitors wrote and posted. The majority of the texts are in English (texts in Hebrew, Chinese, and Spanish amount to less than 3%), and both my observations and visitors' signatures indicate that most visitors are domestic travelers (mostly from the larger Philadelphia and the Northeast US areas), with a minority of international tourists.

In the ensuing analysis of visitors' responses, I firstly view the museum's questions as a *semiotic part* of the public sphere. Huovila and Saikkonen (2015) define the rhetorical resources that are employed in public debates as "situationally employed resources," that "lead readers to engage with particular arguments and evoke one way of perceiving reality over others" (p. 7). I go on to argue that, interactionally, the *questions themselves* supply situated resources for visitors' strategies of responding. My discursive analysis of both the questions and the responses rests on analyses of argumentative moral reasoning in the public sphere (Eronen, 2014; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1951, 1969/2000; Tileagă, 2012). As a result, I outline a triadic structure typical of social moral drama from the Greek tragedy to Kant (and beyond): *im/moral actor*, *im/moral action*, and *im/moral motive*.

I focus on one question, "Does America have a responsibility to promote democracy abroad?" This question was presented repeatedly between 2011 and 2014, receiving a relatively high number of responses (188 notes, with an average text length of 13.1 words). About 35% of these responses used Um notes, 34% used No notes, and the remaining 31% used Yes notes. Besides its popularity, this question's themes are characteristic of the museum's liberal agenda, and the ways it seeks to foster a public sphere. In this

question, the triadic moral structure consists of a. America as the *moral actor* (*protagonist*); b. the activity of promoting democracy as the *moral action*; and c. (global) responsibility as the *moral motive*.

### 3.2. America. Im/moral actor

The museum's question presents America as the protagonist of a moral drama, which accords with the exhibition where America—the harbinger of liberal values—is celebrated. The first thing to note here is that nearly half of the responses (42%) use the pronoun "we" (also "our" and "us") to correspond to this protagonist. In terms of collective identification, this figure may well have been anticipated because the museum and its questions address the (mostly) American public who visits it. This is the "national 'we-group'" or "national we," as Wodak et al. (2009, pp. 33, 131) observe in their study on the discursive construction of national identity. In this way, moral language is made to relate not to "America" in any abstract way, but specifically to the visitors who present themselves as the public which the question designates. Interactionally, the responders who use the first-person plural pronoun are showing their *authority* and claiming their *entitlement* and *reciprocity* (Noy, 2016a): these visitors are not simply 'identifying' with what the proper name America represents in terms of their national identity, but are publically attesting that their role, responsibility and positioning in regards to *this* discussion is that of Americans.

Consider a few of the responses, where America-as-actor is indexed by "we":<sup>4</sup>

- (1) <Yes> Emphatically!!/ We are the/ Shining City/ on the Hill
- (2) <Yes> Sure we should!/ Light unto the nations/ *George Bush/ Or la-Goyim*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Transcription: Forward slash/represents a line break (a double forward slash// appears as such in the original text); <words in angle brackets> are the words printed on the sticky note; [words in square brackets] indicate paratextual and graphic signs, and clarifications; *italicized words* indicate text that wasn't originally written in English; two question marks ?? indicate an undecipherable word.

<sup>5</sup> *Or la-Goyim* (lit.: light to the Gentiles) is a biblical phrase, usually translated as 'Light unto the Nations'. The signature ("George Bush") interjects some humor and opens the door for an ironic reading.

- (3) <Yes> we should appreciate &/ use our resources & power/  
as Free citizens to/ promote all types of/ freedom for those  
who/ are not as lucky./ you should do whatever/ this means  
to/ you.
- (4) <No> not everyone/ wants our help, and we/ need to con-  
sider that./ we're not better than/ everyone else, and our  
white/savior complex often does/ more harm than good.
- (5) <No> IF ANYTHING/ IT'S A PRIVILEGE/ WE SHOULD NOT/  
ABUSE.
- (6) <Um> There are so/ many oppressed/ people... if we/ can  
help them,/ maybe we should?
- (7) <Um> We have a/ responsibility to/ SAFeguard ??/ & human  
dignity/ For ALL

In these texts, which vary in the answer they support and the arguments they present, the protagonist is made to shift from “America” to the public (indexed by the use of first person plural forms). In the first two responses (1–2) America is depicted as *moral in itself*. In such texts the moral evaluations are highly positive and typically support a Yes answer. Hence America should promote democracy worldwide because America (“We”) is morally good, or better yet, it is morally superior to other international actors (“Light unto the nations”). These are foundational texts that rest on transcendent religious authority—“The Shining City on the Hill” is an expression from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, and “Light unto the nations” is an expression from the Book of Isaiah—and moral discourse supplies the resources for explaining why America should be active globally. The third response, which also supports a Yes answer, promotes a similar argument, yet one that rests on acknowledging liberal-capitalist success. Now “our resources & power as Free citizens” is the account supplying legitimacy for promoting “all types of freedom for those who are not as lucky.” Responses 4–5 support a negative (No) answer, and America is indexed frequently by first-person plural form (consider the four separate occurrences in Response 4). Perhaps more accurately, America now is depicted as a *harmful* actor—more a villain than a hero—whose actions are morally disprovable and who needs to be guarded. The vocabulary is morally explicit: “white savior complex” causing “harm” (4), and a “privilege” that should be guarded from “abuse” (5).

Responses 6–7 support an Um answer and further show how everyday moral language is pervasive in this scene, where visitors’ identity is made to correspond to America: to “help” the “many oppressed people” (6) and to protect “human dignity For ALL” (7), clearly mark an approvable ethical action, or course of action, in the public sphere. These responses share the participants’ expressive understanding that i. the museum question *addresses them*, ii. it does so as *members of a public*, and iii. it does so *morally*. Visitors’ self-positioning is performed vis-à-vis the corresponding category of the actor/protagonist. As I indicated, this is important both in terms of participants’ *accountability*—if “America” is acting morally good or bad, Americans are accountable, and in terms of participants’ *epistemic authority* to competently respond to the question—if they are Americans they should know what’s going on.

I observed only one variation in relation to the public who visitors index, where “we” does not index Americans but American Jews: “<Yes> We as/ Jews have an/ obligation to accept/ all equally but not/ necessarily to agree/ to their ideas” (signed by a visitor from nearby New Jersey with the last name Klein). In this text a different public is indexed, and the use of the specifier “as Jews” suggests that when a different social actor is indexed (not Americans), there emerges a need to specifically delineate this. Considering that the CIF is located in a Jewish museum, one might have expected more references to Jewish collective identities and more explicit positioning of moral claims along Jewish identifications. In

any case, the text reverses the museum’s narrative in that rather than being thankful to American culture and political system for allowing Jewish immigration, integration and success, it suggests that Jews *themselves* are now the ones who need to be accountable for their moral actions.

If nearly half of the texts use the plural pronouns “we,” “our” and “us” to correspond to America, in 38% of the texts no reference to an actor is made, and the visitors’ moral discourse shifts to the Action and/or the Motive (more on this later). In the remaining 20% of the texts, the term “America” (and “USA” and “US”) is used by visitors, in which case visitors simply repeat/reuse the museum’s term (perhaps distancing themselves compared to the use of first-person pronouns).

### 3.2.1. Antagonist: The protagonist outside-in

Where there is a protagonist, an antagonist is often also to be found, presently designated by the word “abroad.” I use the term antagonist to refer to a second actor who is involved in the moral drama concerning the promotion of world democracy, yet as an object. While the term “abroad” commonly means foreign countries/destinations, at stake here is not a geographical location but a political actor: the entity whose democracy America may have the responsibility to promote. The term “abroad” is quite amorphous, and visitors’ responses do not usually reveal an explicit identity indexed by it, and the antagonist is schematically referred to in the third person. Consider the terms used above: “those who are not as lucky” (3), “everyone” (4), “many oppressed people [...] them” (6), and “ALL” (7). In other responses the words “country” (“Every country have their own Rules”) and “the world” (“We are not the world’s police”) are similarly used. In the few texts that specifically evoke proper names, Iraq, North Korea, the Middle East, ISIS and the Hamas are mentioned. In these texts visitors are demonstrating their knowledge of relevant world affairs and geographies of conflict, building their authority on epistemic discourse.

Addressing the antagonist is important for a moral analysis also because sometimes visitors’ texts *subversively conflate* the protagonist and the antagonist. The rhetoric of these texts critically propose that the object/destination of the moral deed of promoting democracy is not a faraway location/nation:

- (1) <Um> why not work on/ our troubles here/ first? Drive  
through/ North Philly & tell me/ there’s equality.
- (2) <No> AT PRESENT/ NEEDS TO SORT/ ITSELF FIRST
- (3) <Um> SORT DEMOCRACY/ HERE!/ MAKE IT EASIER/ TO  
VOTE!
- (4) <Um> Only if America/ can maintain/ democracy in our/ city  
– #Blacklives/ matter
- (5) <No> WE/ NEED TO/ WORRY ABOUT/ OURSELVES FIRST

In these texts the antagonist, i.e. the receptor of US’s global liberal project of democracy-promotion, is *reversed* in an *outside-in move*: it is the US who “NEEDS TO SORT ITSELF” (as the second text articulates). This group of texts is expressive and explicit in its critical moral position, whereby democracy should not be promoted abroad but instead “here,” and not in relation to others but instead to “OURSELVES.” In some cases the alternative destinations are specifically named (“North Philly”), and the corrective action is detailed (easing the voting procedure).<sup>6</sup> Moral discourse is performed not just by lexical choice of explicit moral vocabulary, but by the rhetorical reversal of one of the question’s presuppositions. The critical voice that these texts inject is ideologically cohesive,

<sup>6</sup> Addressing voting procedures might touch on current debates about political re-zoning of voting districts, pursued (effectively) in the aim of hindering voting of mainly minority groups.

and builds on post-colonial discourse. Indeed, it is only in this group of texts that reference is made to political activism outside the context of the museum (#Blacklivesmatter). Note also that contrary to the pervasive use of “we” in relation to America in visitors’ texts above, here the pronoun “ITSELF” serves the same function, yet with the effect of distancing or alienating the relations connection between protagonist and visitor. These critical arguments make use of civic and psychological discourses to explicitly argue that US’s democracy is itself flawed, questioning the motives underlying its moral-cum-liberal foreign policy.

### 3.3. Promoting democracy. Im/moral action

Most of the responses posted at the CIF center on the *moral action*, namely “to promote democracy.” Visitors’ texts show different lay interpretations of and disputes with the perceived meanings that this action may entail, which is expected and is in line with studies in the active-visitor approach (Sandell, 2007). In the context of the NMAJH, “democracy” denotes freedom, which, I noted, is the museum’s main theme. In other words, while expressing support or critique of the action of promoting democracy globally, visitors also express *their* interpretation of the action “to promote” (which is quite vague), at times offering their own terms and definitions. We have already encountered a few such examples, where additional verbs, such as “help,” “safeguard” and “accept” capture moral action and (re)interpret it positively. The following texts, wherein im/moral action is at the center, offer further variations.

- (1) <Um> To promote? Sure./ To force it upon others?/ No
- (2) <Yes> TO PROMOTE/ NOT/ ENFORCE
- (3) <Yes> Although “promote”/ doesn’t = war// military/ intervention. Economic &/ political means should/ be used to promote
- (4) <Um> we should/ encourage other/ countries to be/ democratic but/ the US should not/ force the other country/ to be democratic
- (5) <Yes> but that/ doesn’t mean/ we have to go/ to war!
- (6) <Yes> SEND TEACHERS/ SEND PEACE CORPS/ SEND FOOD/ NO TANKS<sup>7</sup>

Responses 1–3 address the action-verb “promote” explicitly: they repeat the term *intertextually* in order to offer a *different* moral action that it does, or does not, entail. The rhetorical structure of the first two texts (1–2) is similar, presenting a symmetric, chiasmus structure, which contrastively highlights the verb “to promote.” We learn that to “force” or “enforce” are possible (disprovable) interpretations of the (approvable) verb “to promote.” Response 3 illustrates this point with a bit more articulation and a pedagogic tone, highlighting the verb by placing it inside quotation marks and giving it a dictionary-like definition. This text argues that the verb “promote” should not necessarily be taken to mean military intervention and that other effective forms of pursuing the same goal are available and are (morally) preferable. This argument might be a response to texts that support a negative answer, equating “to promote” with brut military force. If this is the case, a compromise is sought, where the action it to be pursued yet by alternative, more morally approvable, “means” (see Noy, 2015a, pp. 111–115 for illustrations of visitors’ texts that negotiate other texts to arrive at a ‘compromise’).

Similarly, responses 4–6 offer clarifications of the museum’s moral action-verb, but without mentioning it explicitly. These texts suggest not only that the US shouldn’t be using military force to advance democracy, but that “to promote” might entail civic

aspects, such as “encourage” rather than “force” (4). The texts basically support US global action, yet the disjunctive “but” (implicit in 6), together with other rhetorical means, suggest a caveated Yes; a ‘yes, but’ type of endorsement of the proposition that the museum’s question makes. This is a discursive move that illustrates how the verb “to promote” is *itself* part of what is being *publically negotiated*. As studies of argumentative moral discourse (and ethnomethodology more broadly) observe, discourse is often reflexive in that the terms that are used are themselves continuously negotiated in meta-discourse. Note also the creative rhetorical means that responders employ in these short texts, such as the use of rhetorical questions and directives: response (6) consists of three consecutive double-underlined directives, capitalized and inscribed on separate lines, which culminate in a non-underlined negative directive: “NO TANKS.” This rhetorical structure is a common political rhetorical structure (called “trap-clap,” Atkinson, 1984), which serves the aim of presenting support to a positive answer, while simultaneously offering moral courses of action that are radically different. The writers of these texts know that they are arguing politics in the public sphere.

### 3.4. Responsibility. Im/moral motive

The third and last theme is the moral Motive, which refers to a mental (abstract) quality that is commonly assumed to have *motivated the actor* to act, and can thus *account* for the moral action. In his discussion of morality in the public sphere, Tileagă (2012) observes that “in the explanation of people and human action, social actors draw upon ‘vocabularies’ of motive as explanatory devices” (p. 218, n. 2). Motives are crucial in and to some moral discourses, as different motives can account for the same action executed by the same actor as either heroically moral or glaringly immoral. In everyday argumentation, motives are often ascribed to individuals, and are part of what Tileagă (2012) calls “ethics of human relations,” and are essential to “moral and motivational societal schemes for understanding the person” (p. 209). Yet motives are often also ascribed to non-humans, such as technologies and institutions (Huovila and Saikkonen, 2015). As part of the debate on public politics that the CIF promotes, the museum suggests “responsibility” as the main moral motive with regard to the *nation-state*: it both drives US action on the global scene and accounts for it.

Responsibility is a polysemiotic motive, carrying at least two types of meanings. The first type builds on rationality and is quite morally neutral. It is defined as “[t]he state of being the person who caused something to happen” and “being the primary cause of something.”<sup>8</sup> This definition accords with a rational-liberal worldview, which rests on Enlightenment sensibilities, and which underlies the NMAJH’s questions and the Habermasian view of the public sphere. Members of society, who convene to discuss public issues addressing the State and its agencies, do so responsibly in the sense that their words and deeds are connected by rational argumentation. Individuals do not offer sporadic or chaotic arguments, and their opinions supposedly lead to (“cause”) action. The second type of meaning the word responsibility primarily concerns *morality*: “Something that you should do because it is morally right” and being “morally accountable for one’s behavior” (ibid). Here, responsibility is steeped in morality, and talking and acting responsibly is first and foremost a moral matter.

Texts that center on the motive treat responsibility as a powerful moral theme, the consequences of which need to be weighted carefully. The first four responses below generally support a posi-

<sup>7</sup> Underlined words have double underlining in the original text.

<sup>8</sup> The Merriam-Webster online English dictionary, and the New Concise Oxford English Dictionary, respectively.

tive response, while the later six responses generally support a negative one.

- (1) <Yes> because we/ made ourselves/ have that respon- sibility
- (2) <Um> Given our history and/ unique struggle to become/ who we are today, we bear/ the burden securing and/ pre- serving to those ??./ yet it's [deleted word] not needed/ to use force to do so.
- (3) <Yes> America has a/ responsibility to promote/ democracy because of/ its values and needs.
- (4) <Yes> if we've got the/ power// influence/ we need to/ use it— but more/ responsibly [deleted word] & w// more/ thought
- (5) <No> because/ America doesn't/ have responsibili- ty for abroad!
- (6) <Um> Helping some/ how but full/ responsibility/ that should come/ from people
- (7) <No> Absolutely/ NOT! We are/ not the world's/ police and have no/ right to impose on/ other people.
- (8) <Um> IF ANYTHING/ IT'S A PRIVILEGE/ WE SHOULD NOT/ ABUSE.
- (9) <No> BUT/ As one of the most/ powerful & wealthiest/ coun- tries in the world/ we should fight for/ human rights for/ ALL
- (10) <No> AS A WORLD LEADER,/ IT HAS THE OBLIGATION/ TO SHOW & ALLOW/ OTHERS THEIR FREEDOMS/ AS A PEOPLE

A few familiar qualities are immediately noticeable, including the use of the collective/plural pronoun (“we made ourselves”), and the occasional repetition of the words used in the question. The first four responses (1–4) supply accounts that draw an intrinsic connection between actor and motive, suggesting *why* America has the responsibility to act. The explanations that the first couple of texts supply are of a *historical* nature, culminating in the moment of the present at which point the protagonist is recognized as bearing global responsibility. These historical explanations range from America’s civic struggles to its success as “a great place to live.” These texts correspond with the exhibition, which chronologically conveys how America has historically “become who we are today.” Responses 3–4 do not turn to America’s history, but point instead at its “values and needs” and “power//i nfluence” as accounts for its responsibility. Again, note that a meta-discussion of the meanings of the word responsibility is taking place, where response 2 offers “bear the burden” as corresponding with responsibility, carrying a stronger and more morally committed meaning, and response 4 uses the pair “powe r//influence,” accompanied by “responsibly” as an adverb.

Responses 5–10 support a No answer, establishing *incongruence* between motive and actor/action. Responses 5–6 are simple and straightforward in laying out two accounts, namely that America does not bear responsibility to act aboard, or that it’s the antagonist’s responsibility to take full action. The next two texts (7–8) are highly critical and ideologically articulate, and altogether avoid the use of the word “responsibility.” They focus on the *motive* by using overt moral language: “no right to impose” and “A PRIVILEGE [...] ABUSE,” which address the implications that emerge from designating America as an actor that bears global responsibility. Put differently, these texts discursively *reframe* the museum’s question, whereby “to promote democracy” is viewed negatively as imposing and policing, expressing America’s own political interests and tensions (“white savior complex”). By using overt moral language, the texts are not only stating their position on the matter at hand, but also publically revealing it as essentially moral. Finally, these texts (and a few others, like “NO TANKS”) can also be read as *complaints* made in regards to moral transgression, which are suggested along with their remedies (Drew, 1998).

The last two responses (9–10) are similarly structured caveated negatives. Both begin by establishing the protagonist as special and outstanding (“the most powerful & wealthiest” and “A WORLD LEADER”), which in turn accounts for why America *should* be active globally. While these texts sound like Yes responses, what might have made the visitors write them on a No note is that instead of “promoting democracy,” they offer “fight for human rights” and “SHOW & ALLOW [...] FREEDOMS.” Here, again, visitors are negotiating everyday moral vocabulary, suggesting their moral understanding and lexical preferences vis-à-vis the choices of the institution.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study joins recent works that look into “everyday uses of morality found in social interaction and communication” (Tileagă, 2012, p. 217), where morality in the public sphere emerges as “both a prerequisite and a product of the engagement in dialogue” (Linell and Rommetveit, 1998, p. 472, cited in Tileagă, 2012). While Habermas noted that different moral scenes are sustained in different contexts and settings, many of the studies that followed overlooked this point (works in museum studies included. Barrett, 2011). This study thus responds to Adut’s (2012) call to look into the “black box” of the public sphere (p. 242), as it takes shape in and through diverse apparatuses: modes of access, and architectures of display, mediation and participation.

One of the main conceptual contributions the study offers in this regard concerns reading moral drama in the public sphere. Since antiquity, morality has been intertwined with social drama (and vice versa), and the tripartite analytic approach I offer attends to visitors’ discourse about the moral Actor (protagonist/antagonist), the moral Action and the moral Motive. The analysis points at the dramatic and narrative quality of morality in everyday life, and perhaps more generally suggests the dramatic nature of the public sphere as such. The drama concerns the ongoing negotiation of moral vocabulary and attribution of agency (Actor-Action-Motive) in public moral spheres. In any case, the study supports works that diverge from the rationalist-deliberative Habermasian view of the public sphere, stressing instead, or in addition, its dramatic and theatrical nature. Further research can explore dramatic conventions and discursive characteristics in and of public spheres outside the confines of museums—in other ‘black boxes’. Such research can productively illuminate how public media selectively attribute agency and account for action across actors and across platforms that mediate moral drama. At stake is how museums and other public media shape the moral underpinnings of ‘the public’ and define notions of the public sphere.

As media and museums turn publics into audiences and audiences into publics, they offer predesignated roles not only in the moral narrative that they mediate but also, crucially, in the narration itself. Hence another contribution this study offers concerns issues surrounding apparatuses of moral discourse, which also point our attention to the morality *of the order of the interaction itself* and of the actors partaking therein. The questions now are how moral public spheres are being animated and how apparatuses are used/abused in order to ‘draw in’ the public<sup>9</sup>. In other words, in these scenes visitors are not only negotiating moral themes and norms, but constantly also their positionality and relations vis-à-vis the media institution, which they address in moral terms. Visitors arriving at the CIF are informed that “Expression and debate are

<sup>9</sup> Commending Hymes’ (1975) work, Scollon and Scollon (2009) note a shift in moral discourse, from “conceptualization of classical Greek and Latin literature as if it had been miraculously burned onto stone tablets to a conceptualization of such literature as likewise having its roots in the oral performances of humans living their lives” (p. 278).

essential to American and Jewish culture,” and that “There are no right answers, only discussions.” These texts stress the moral value of *participation itself* as civic action that comes with the role of being a visitor (perhaps also implying something about the moral character of those preferring not to visit/participate).

Shifting the analytical perspective to media apparatuses embodies a recast of the triadic analysis of moral drama onto the museum itself.<sup>10</sup> Now the museum takes the role of the moral Actor (protagonist)—the authorial voice addressing audiences with “current issues we face”; the visitors are casted as the antagonists who are the addressees and the targets of the action (the CIF allows visitors to ‘turn active’ and “lend your voice”); the moral Action is the visit and specifically participatory public (inter-)activity in the shape of engaging the CIF. And lastly, the moral Motive embodies being a demonstratively good and sociable citizen: joining the conversation and lending one’s voice. In recasting how moral discourse is scripted and materialized, the media institution itself is revealed from its invisible role of the omniscient narrator and is scrutinized as a vested actor in a moral scene.

Research both in museum studies and in communication studies has recently begun addressing radical restructuring of ‘participation’. In museum studies this debate entails suggestions to alter the authorial curatorial voice, in order to truly democratize public spaces and spheres (Kidd, 2014; Pollock and Zemans, 2008). In communication studies, too, the question of radically restructuring media has recently been raised, as effectively evinced in the discussions Carpentier (Carpentier, 2009; Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013) stimulates around participation. In specific regards to the CIF apparatus, an obvious beginning would be to let visitors shape the questions, not only the answers, and preferably to do so publically. The next move would be from themes to media, where visitors can shape the apparatuses themselves.

Of course, as cultural and educational institutions whose character is to offer “a clear space for polite, cosmopolitan discourse, by constructing popular culture as the ‘low-Other’, the dirty and crude outside to the emergent public sphere” (Stallybrass and White, 1986, p. 87, cited in Bennett, 1995, p. 27), museal discourse—unlike mass media and many online platforms—rarely evokes transgressions of moral order. Focusing on moral scandals is tricky for museums because it runs the risks of sensationalism and of promoting discourse in which “personal preferences—instead of the negotiation of civic or religious moral norms—guide participation” (Eronen, 2014, p. 281). Indeed, at the NMAJH the questions typically address governmental norms and procedures, which are the other side of the moral-scandal coin: they ask about the norm and not about its transgression. This choice conceals the centrally moral quality of this discursive scene, presenting exchanges at the CIF as part of ‘political culture’, which is widespread in US public-liberal discourse. Interestingly, these are a few of the texts that visitors compose and post, that highlight this scene’s moral character, pointing at potential or actual moral transgressions. These range from the mention of “ISIS” and “Hamas,” at one end, to pointing out the pretentiousness and expansionist dimensions of US liberal-democratic ideology: “SORT DEMOCRACY HERE!”, at the other end.

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