

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Participatory Media and Discourse in Heritage Museums: Co-constructing the Public Sphere?

Chaim Noy

Department of Tourism Studies, Ashkelon Academic College, Ashkelon, 78211, Israel

This article examines public discourse that visitors produce as part of their visit to a heritage museum. With the turn to the “new museum” of the 21st century, with its extensive reliance on new media, mediation, and an interactive-participatory agenda, museums are community generators that invite and display public participation. The article inquires ethnographically into the settings offered by a new and large Jewish heritage museum in Philadelphia, for the pursuit of “ordinary” people’s participatory discursive practices. The article then asks how visitors actually pursue their participation discursively, in the form of texts written on notes in response to the museum’s questions. Finally, visitors’ inscriptional activities are theorized in terms of current views of participation and the public sphere.

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During the last 2 decades, participation has become a core concept in Communication Studies and proximate disciplines. With the prevalence of both analogue and digital mediated forms of communication, interactivity, and discourse, participation becomes key to how we understand anew pertinent concepts such as culture, identity performances, and community. More so as older and newer media institutions and technologies are currently shifting from a one-way, top-down model of broadcasting (viewed broadly) to a model that seeks involvement and presents participation on behalf of audiences, or at least presents themselves as doing so. The term has a rich history within and outside the discipline, and has generated prolific, and of recent also highly critical, discussions (often when issues of heritage and the empowerment are at stake). Participation emerges as a two-edged term, which potentially carries highly positive meaning yet has been adapted and co-opted by various cultural

Corresponding author: Chaim Noy; e-mail: chaimnoy@gmail.com

and other institutions. The “participation paradigm,” Adell, Bendix, Bortolotto, and Tauschek (2015) summarize, “has been re-politicized in the service of a neoliberal agenda” (p. 11).

This study extends the line of research on audience participation in the public sphere to museums and their audiences: It explores commentary produced by visitors to a heritage museum, who are invited to interact and, in return, choose to publicly participate in the institution’s narration.¹ Museums are powerful institutions whose authority derives from “the power to represent: to reproduce structures of belief and experience” (Karp, 1992, p. 1). At stake is not only the power to represent by displaying, but power embodied in a *range* of museal (defined as the function of the museum) practices, including collecting, sorting, preserving, studying, interpreting, and cataloging, which are all “enacted within a power system” (p. 1). Furthermore, as Foucault (1977) critically remarked—and discussed influentially within Museum Studies by Hooper-Greenhill (1992) and Bennett (1995)—museums, unlike mass media, are essentially spatial, and the power they exert also involves disciplining and shaping visitors’ moving bodies.

Because this study follows the tradition of viewing museums *as media institutions* and the visit as a media(ted) event, I also draw on a discursively rich body of research that studies participatory discourse in the context of *broadcast talk*. This line of research explores how media institutions invite, afford, and frame audience participation in the public sphere, and in a complementary way, how audiences understand and actually pursue participation therein (Scannell, 2001; Thornborrow, 2001). The focus of these studies is on how “ordinary” citizens access public spheres made available to them in and by radio call-ins, televised interviews, and web-based platforms. By attending to discursive detail and interactional nuances, they reveal the intricate and constructed nature of “doing participation,” and the spontaneity and authenticity with which laypeople imbue the media. Montgomery (2001) calls this type of participation “authentic talk,” and critically points out that it serves in “displacing the voice of the politician into the voice of ‘ordinary people’ and adopting their ‘authentic voices’ to ventriloquate the political message” (p. 460). Public participation here is an echo, a citation of sorts—a ventriloquation, as Montgomery phrases it. Methodologically, these studies view interaction and discourse as always socially situated, and so understanding their meanings requires close attention to the institutional contexts of elicitation and production: materiality, sequentiality, semiotics, and participatory affordances.

Transitioning from study of participatory discourse “in the media” to mediating spaces and apparatuses in museums is productive because both institutions essentially rely on communication and mediation (for a communicative view of museums see Dicks, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Karp, 1992; Kidd, 2014; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Runnel, 2011). Mediation becomes exponentially more powerful in the context of the “new” museum, embodying a paradigmatic shift from displaying authentic artifacts to “the substitution of a copy for the original object” (Gans, 2002, p. 372), and from “being collection-centred towards being

visitor-centred” (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Runnel, 2011, p. 260). Visiting museums, with their heightened architecture of visibility and representation, and nowadays also their multiple screens and interactive digital installations, amounts to a powerful meditational setting, which offers unprecedented opportunities for audience participation.

As in broadcast talk, “ordinary” members of the public visit the museum and attend to its display and narration. Furthermore, when visitors actively engage and participate in museums’ narration, their participatory actions may be recorded and displayed publicly as part of that narration itself (Macdonald, 2005; Thumim, 2010). This mirrors the way media audiences’ (re)actions are recorded and (re)presented when they call in to a TV or a radio program, or post a comment on an article published on the web. Museums can be “accepted,” as Dori-Hacohen (2012) puts it, “as an arena for the public sphere” (p. 153). Finally, like institutions of mass media, museums are increasingly fighting for public relevance and attractiveness, and in this respect too, the move from the modern to the postmodern museum encompasses deploying audience participation in ever new creative ways (Kjolberg, 2011).

Transitioning from the study of mediated participation “in the media” to the study of the same in museums is productive for yet another reason, namely, that both institutions are perceived as sustaining the *public sphere*. Habermas (1989) famously defined the public sphere as a communicatively constituted space for rational and public exchange of opinion. For Habermas, the public sphere lies at the heart of liberal democracies because it allows a communicative space for sensible deliberations. Appearing in a dazzling array of material and communicative settings, the public sphere is a space where individuals assemble into a public body to discuss, criticize, and eventually challenge and change the conduct of the powers that be—usually their governments. Habermas’s writings, notably his early publications, have prolifically informed models of democracy and have received their share amount of critique (Benhabib, 1996; Fraser, 1992). In Communication Studies, Habermasian theorizing has been downright formative because it builds on communicative processes and practices, and promotes studies of settings for occasions of democratic deliberation. It is through *specific communication technologies and institutions* that public media offers both symbolic and material shared spaces for self-presentation, debate, and deliberation. Moreover, Habermas (1984) so-called “linguistic turn”—his emphasis on language and pragmatics and his move from Cartesian views of the individual toward a communicative subject—has made his theory all the more appealing for inquiries into the ways that discourse and interaction shape the public sphere.

In what follows I turn to examine participatory discourse that museum audiences produce by using an onsite, inscriptive medium. I focus on a corpus of written comments that visitors wrote in a heritage museum I have been studying since 2011. The study is part of a larger multisite research project, comparatively exploring participatory discourse and material settings for its production in museums and similar cultural institutions (Noy, 2009, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, in press-a).

Ethnography of communication at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia

I look at texts that visitors publicly inscribe at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) in Philadelphia. The NMAJH is an ambitious heritage museum that was founded in 1976, then relocated and comprehensively restructured in 2010. It comprises a beautiful five-story building, centrally located in the historic and touristic district of Philadelphia. The building stands on Independence Mall, symbolically marking the museum's message: the successful integration of Jewish communities in American democratic history and values. The museum, which hosts some 80,000 visitors annually, narrates the history of Jewish immigration to, and livelihood in, the United States from a liberal perspective. It portrays the high levels of integration and accomplishments of Jewish individuals and communities in U.S. culture, society, and politics, and the security, freedom, and prosperity they have enjoyed. Along these lines, only little space is reserved for the Holocaust (which is mentioned as part of the "Dreams of Freedom: 1880-1945" section) and Israeli statehood, which are central themes in Jewish heritage museums worldwide.

The museum's large, yet cozy, and neatly designed spaces are full of digital interactive installations, amounting, as a *Washington Post* reporter put it, to "a civic-minded ... state-of-the-art museum-education-entertainment ... distressingly focused on ephemeral multimedia displays" (Kennicott, 2010, para. 8). Similarly, in the museum's Mission Statement video, a visitor attests that "I couldn't get over all the technology that was in here. I didn't expect it to be so moving and so grand."² The abundance of technology serves the NMAJH not only as "means" for delivering "content" or even for inviting interaction, but also as an integral part of the exhibition that celebrates Jewish success in the United States. It maps the museum's spaces within the "global scene" of interactive and participatory present-day museal technologies (Barry, 2001, p. 130), and attests to the status of Jewish communities nationwide.

My first visits to the NMAJH took place in 2011 and were motivated by the prevalence of both older and newer media, and specifically by the museum's main interactive installation, the Contemporary Issues Forum (CIF). I have been studying the museum and the CIF since, visiting it three or four times a year, trying—as media ethnographers do—to attend special cultural events and celebrations. I spent cumulatively a month in the museum, speaking with staff (docents, volunteers, curators) and many visitors. At the CIF hall I observed visitors read and respond to questions that the museum presented, recording and later transcribing 1,132 texts that the visitors wrote. My observations focused on the materialities and semiotics of the CIF and on visitors' museal texts and writing practices (Noy, in press-a).

My method draws on the Ethnography of Communication tradition (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Noy, in press-a, in press-b; Saville-Troike, 2003). This holistic research tradition nicely weaves together the study of the media, the situated practices of discourse production, and actual segments of discourse. I complement it with more recent methodological developments, which address the study of media affordances



Figure 1 The Contemporary Issues Forum.

in Communication Studies (Gitelman, 2015; Hutchby, 2001; Scollon, 2001) and Linguistic Anthropology (Manning & Gershon, 2014). While at the NMAJH, I always wore a large badge with my name and academic affiliation, and I introduced myself to staff and visitors as a scholar studying museums and media. I also gave my academic business card with my full contact information, in case visitors wanted to contact me after they left the site for whatever aim (and a few did).

Mediation and affordances at the CIF

Before we address visitors' texts, we need to look closely at the museal context where participation is elicited and how the meaning of participation *is itself* institutionally framed. The CIF is a darkened interactive hall, on which walls four questions are brightly projected: one on each wall (one such question is visible in Figure 1). The questions are yes/no questions, and are composed by the curatorial team with the aim of addressing contemporary public issues and debates (hence the name of the hall). At the center stands a large, black round table, of which surface is well lit. Black markers and colorful Post-it Notes (sticky notes) are offered. The notes (4.5X4.5 inch each) are made of thick paper and have three colors: pink, yellow, or blue. The colors correspond with text that is printed in bold at the top of the notes: "Yes," "No," and "Um," respectively. Two more words: "Name:" and "From:" are printed at the

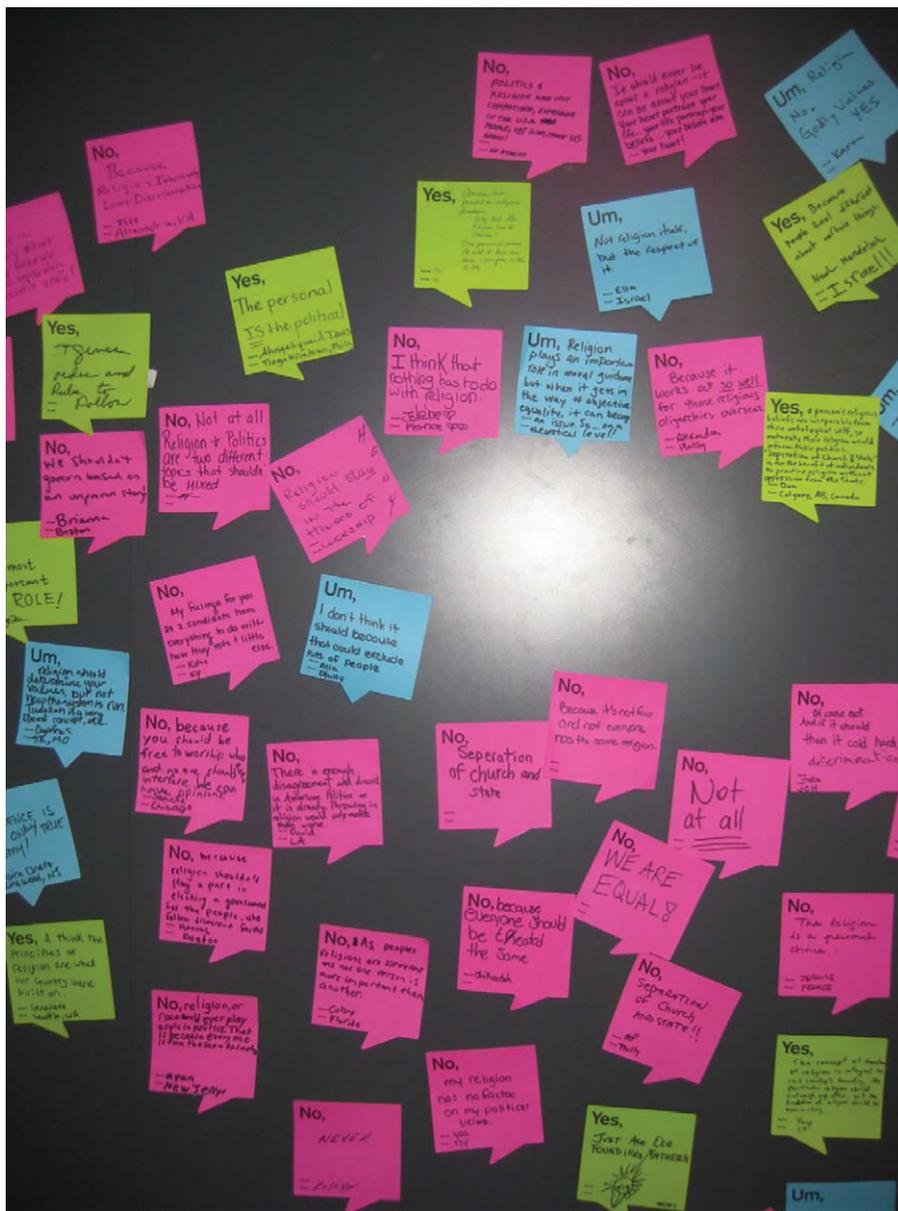


Figure 2 Posted texts: Sticky Notes on a Wall in the Contemporary Issues Forum.

bottom in smaller print, reminiscent of signing conventions associated with visitor books (Figure 2). Visitors enter the CIF hall from the right and leave from the left (Figure 1), and the hall, its utensils and display, present themselves before them.

I understand the material features of the CIF in terms of *participatory affordances*. Gibson (1979) popularized the concept of affordances, suggesting that technologies

and materialities offer—and restrain—different possibilities for action. Gibson was interested in natural environments (ecologies), where objects invite different behavioral possibilities to the inhabitants. Along these lines I see the CIF as inviting written discourse on behalf of the visitors passing through its space. Visitors may of course ignore the invitation, yet 42% of those I observed read and wrote notes, 31% only read them, and the remaining 27% indicated that for various reasons they were in a rush and did not have time to spend in the hall. In any case, the invitation to participate is visibly there, serving like a summons or a phone ringing. This kind of soft power calls to mind Barry's (2001) Foucauldian-Žižekian observation: While traditional "disciplinary technology is associated with the injunction 'You must!'" current "interactive technology has come to be associated with the injunction, highlighted by Slavoj Žižek, 'You may!'" (p. 31).

I note that unlike other interactive installations in museums (Heath & Lehn, 2008), both the (museum's) questions and the (visitors') responses are *presented publicly* at the CIF. The installation affords participatory activity by multiple participants simultaneously, and the interactive "game" here (as Heath & Lehn, 2008, call it) is not intended for one, two, or three participants. Indeed, there is never a line at the CIF, because the hall's round physical design is purposely immersive, and everything that visitors post immediately becomes public display.

The museum's invitation is also conveyed discursively. On a large sign located at the entrance to the CIF, its objectives and its semiotic connections to the exhibition are stated: "History is filled with debate and discussions and those conversations continue to be relevant today. Join in and lend your voice!" This text invites visitors to shift from learning about the past ("History is filled with"), which is what they have been presumably doing as heritage audience, to participating in the present ("Join in"). Here is a shift from consuming discourse to (re)producing it, or from "passivity" to "activity," which can occur at this location precisely because museums' mediation is spatially organized (museums' spatial "sequencing of ideals"; Russo & Watkins, 2007, p. 159). Beneath this text, a longer text supplies visitors with further context and instructions:

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 current 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.

At this point the meaningful connection between past and present—which lies at the crux of heritage discourse and of the participatory agenda of the institutions that pursue it—is further tightened. So are the similarities between American and Jewish "cultures," for which, it is argued, expression and debate are essential. The terms the museum employs to frame participation are interesting, and consist of action-verbs (Join in, lend, Pick, Write), that allow for the symbolic joining of individual visitors, on one hand, and the imagined/mediated community ("your fellow visitors"), on the

other hand. The term “voice” here is crucial, because it serves to demarcate the communicative nature of this sphere, and the actions that visitors may take (public “speech acts,” in Habermas [1984] terminology). In this discursive configuration, “voice” is where visitors’ agency lies, and it supplies the public currency through which people’s participation in the liberal public sphere is supposedly registered. Also note that while the text suggests that each question “weaves together key themes from this exhibition,” rarely do the CIF questions deal with historical events or with explicit Jewish concerns. It is the latter half of the sentence (“and current issues we face”) that they address, where the use of first-person plural form (“we”) sets an alignment between the museum and the visitors.

Three more points about the CIF’s semiotics and affordances. The first concerns the location of the hall inside the museum’s space: The CIF is located at the *very end* of the museum’s core exhibition, in a place reminiscent of the location of traditional museum visitor books, where “an audience-contributed gesture of closure” is elicited (Katriel, 1997, p. 71). Visitors descending from the museum’s fourth floor, where the exhibit begins (“Foundations of Freedom: 1654–1880”), to the second floor, where it ends (“Choices and Challenges of Freedom: 1945–Today”), *must* pass through the CIF hall on their way out. This location is strategic because visitors are approached with questions *after* they have taken in the information in the historic exhibition, and these questions are presented as being connected to what visitors have supposedly learned (see below). In other words, here is where visitors can show what they have learned, while also literally inscribing themselves into the very heritage that this museum narrates.

The second point concerns the notes that serve to facilitate responses. I mentioned that they have “Yes,” “No,” and “Um” (a “basket” category) printed on them, and in this participation structure answers are not the end of the interaction but its beginning: The space underneath the printed answer offers a blank space for writing. It is materially bounded between the printed word at the top of the note, and the smaller words at the bottom. In one exchange I had with an adult visitor, who began writing on the note by first signing her name at the bottom, she explained: “It’s very good that they printed on the bottom [of the note]. I’m verbose and if I don’t start by signing my name, I won’t remember to leave room for signing when I finish writing.” The point is that despite the questions’ yes/no syntax, the parties involved share a cultural understanding whereby responses are not complete unless they contain some *written articulation* that visitors produce. Merely posting sticky notes does not appear to qualify as participatory action, and only about 2% of the posted notes are empty.

I regularly saw parents encouraging their children to write, sometimes explaining the questions and instructing how to reply. Encouraging her 10-year-old daughter to respond to the question “Is it ever appropriate for the U.S. Government to censor speech?” a mother explains the question by (re)forming the kind of reply her daughter should consider: “What do *you* think? Should there be censorship? Can they tell us what to say?” Other parents encourage their children in a more general way, viewing writing positively as a literate activity to be pursued as part of the visit to the museum

(Noy, 2015b). In a typical interaction, a family of four enters the CIF hall and the father immediately tells his young son: “You can write a note and put it on the wall, Max. [pause] You can stick it up on the wall [points at the top of the wall on the right].” In another interaction between a father and his 4-year-old son, the boy wants to write a response to the question “Can Israel be a Jewish and a Democratic State?” but the father dissuades him by saying “it’s a little over your level, Cass,” which implies a perceived level of political literacy involved in responding to the museum’s questions (or at least argued so by the father).

These interactions are similar to those that I saw taking place near museum visitor books, where docents, teachers, and parents encourage visitors to participate by sharing their experiences and impressions *in writing* (“what did you think about the museum?”; “this [book] is for writing, do you want to write here something?” Noy, 2015a, 2015b). In other words, at the CIF, the questions become *a task to be addressed*, and writing on the notes is a participatory action that visitors undertake jointly.

The third and last point with regards to the CIF is that when visitors write on the sticky notes, they do not only expand the answer they have already chose (in different ways that I will address in detail later), but importantly leave an enduring physical mark of their being at the museum. In other words, visitors’ handwritten inscriptions accomplish participation not only symbolically—conveyed in the meanings of the words they wrote, but also indexically—conveyed in the physical association between the material sign and that which it represents (Peirce, 1991). The “voice” of the visitors, which the museum both invites and displays, possesses qualities that physically tie it to the visitors, and to their onsite (situated) writing activities. Discussing broadcast talk, Montgomery (2001) observes that “when an ordinary member of the public is given a voice within the public sphere,” what makes this voice authentic isn’t fluency or eloquence but by its “virtue of an unstudied naturalness of delivery” (p. 452). At the CIF, these are the qualities of visitors’ orthography, misspellings, corrections, miscapitalizations, and so on, which presents them as “authentic voices” (*vox populi*), and it is the enduring technology of writing “enshrines” them in the museum.

Co-constructing the public sphere? Posing questions and posting responses

I now turn to the texts that visitors write in reply to the museum’s questions, and I present a taxonomy of three types of responses that establish the visitors as participants engaging in the public sphere. This taxonomy addresses the discursive-participatory function that the responses supply: (a) *Confirmation, qualification*, and *intensification*; (b) *Arguments*; and (c) *Illustrations*. These functions are not mutually exclusive, and sometimes more than one function appears in the same text. I offer them as a tentative perspective on how to see and discern, from an interactional perspective, the texts that visitors compose and what type of participation they publicly pursue. Before proceeding, however, observe the range of the questions that the museum presents in its efforts to establish a discursive space of public debate and exchange.

During my ethnography at the NMAJH, 15 different questions were presented at the CIF. They addressed matters of liberal concern, such as the relations between the public and the State (“Do the checks and balances of our federal government work?”), the intersections of law and religion (“Should government regulate where houses of worship are built?”),³ and minority and gender rights (“Will same-sex marriage still be a controversial topic in ten years?”). Questions that explicitly address Jewish concerns were also presented, though infrequently (“Are Jews white?”, and arguably, “Can Israel be a Jewish and a Democratic State?”). These questions are in effect texts that are an integral part of the museum’s narration and display, serving what broadcast scholars call “agenda setting.”

Indeed, in a review of discourse studies of questions in institutional contexts, Tracy and Robles (2009) conclude that posing questions “is one of, if not *the*, central communicative practice of institutional encounters ... a central vehicle for constructing social worlds and reflecting existing ones” (pp. 131–132, emphasis in the original. See also Raymond’s [2003] overview of the role questions play in interactions from a conversation analytic perspective). The heritage museums I studied previously use different appeals to invite their audiences to participate, usually employing direct requests and not questions. Yet with no exception, *all* the museums *frame* the interaction they anticipate, suggesting what needs to be done by the audiences when interacting with and through public media. For instance, in one museum, a sign near the visitor book reads, “Please indicate your impressions in a concise and respectful manner as fitting this Site,” and in a different museum, a similar sign reads, “Tell us about your Museum experience!” (Noy, 2015a, p. 49, and Noy, 2015b, p. 203, respectively). Requests and questions are speech acts that require (re)action on behalf of their addressees, and while these museums’ requests invite impressions and experiences (emotional register), the CIF questions are more articulate, specific, and open to opinions and arguments (rational/epistemic register).

“Is there a connection between religion and morality?”

The above question was presented repeatedly at the CIF (during 2011–2014), receiving the largest number of responses for any single question (228 notes). I focus on the responses it received because it is representative of the museum’s liberal agenda, which fosters deliberative processes and rationalistic/universalistic themes, and because it implicitly ties the embeddedness of Jewish issues with good (American) citizenship (for instance by not mentioning “Jewish Religion” but the unspecified signifier “Religion”). More than half of the responses to this question are positive (124 texts or 54%), and the rest are negative responses (63 texts or 28%) and “Um” responses (41 texts or 18%). The average text length is 13.2 words (excluding name, date, and place of origin).

I begin by noting that most of the responses (84%) include either or both of the terms that appear in the question: “Religion” and “Morality” (often both appear in the same text, and often more than once). This strong quantitative figure suggests a qualitative norm with regards to participation: Visitors are basically “playing along” and are doing so by repeating and (re)using the key terms the museum presents.

This repetition is a form of *format tying* or parallelism, which is typical of conversational argumentative exchanges and question-answer sequences, where the response repeats elements that appear in the previous utterances (usually performed by children; see Goodwin, 1990, pp. 177–188; Tannen, 1987). From a literacy perspective, this repetition evinces a kind of ventriloquism and perhaps also constitution of a *speech community*, where members come to share the museum's vocabulary and a "set of shared [speech] norms" (Labov, 1972, p. 120). Thus viewed, the museum is successful in establishing a shared discourse around the notion of public and democratic "debate and discussions." Most of the responses that are not included in the 84% are telegraphic replies ("Absolutely!"), and rarely also responses that do *not* appear to engage the museum's discourse ("the sushi was great!"). The latter type is not a "type-related" reply, as conversation analysts would put it, and the lack of mention of the key terms presented in the question is adverbial and illustrative: these responses do not partake in the speech community and/or in the rational debate the museum fosters.

1. Confirming, qualifying, and intensifying texts. One of the basic discursive-participatory functions that the texts written on the Post-its perform is that of confirming, qualifying, or intensifying the answer that was chosen. These actions amount to a third (about 33%) of the overall number of utterances written on the notes (220)^{4,5}:

1. <Yes> There is.
2. <Yes> There is an/immense/connection/ [heart]
3. <Yes> Absolutely!
4. <Yes> Off course there/is! And it is a/very big connection/[smiley]
5. <Yes> WHY NOT/?
6. <Yes> There is a/connection between/morality and life./why wouldn't there/be?
7. <No> you're/religion has/nothing to do/with your/morality.
8. <No> There doesn't/have to be a/connection. You/can be a moral/person & being/ religious.

Texts of this type confirm and often also intensify or otherwise qualify the answer the visitors chose (Yes/No/Um), often also adding a tone of enthusiasm and certainty to their choice, or alternatively hedging it. Put differently, as discursive participation these texts do not present *arguments* or *reasons* in support of the answer that was chosen, nor do they offer *illustrations* to validate it. These responses rather reiterate and emphasize the positive and negative answers the visitors chose, and they do so both verbally and by the use of paratextual features including capitalization, exclamation marks, font size, and graphic signs (such as smilies). If response 1 is rather minimal, other responses convey tone: response 4, for instance, supports the answer that was chosen by pointing out that it is obvious ("Off [sic] course there is!"). The quality of obviousness here is *epistemic*, as if the visitor is rhetorically asking, "Who wouldn't agree

with this? It's common knowledge." Indeed, responses 5–6 augment the answer precisely by presenting rhetorical questions, suggesting again that the answer the visitors chose is more than right: it is obvious ("why wouldn't there be?"). Responses 7–8 refer to a negative answer, and they likewise reiterate, augment or qualify the choice the visitors had made. In response 7, the word "nothing" serves to ascertain the negative answer, pointing at a strong *disconnection* between Religion and Morality. In response 8, the word "connection" is repeated (as well as the words "moral" and "religious"), and caveat is added, whereby the No stands for the fact that Religion and Morality *can* be connected but not necessarily.

It is interesting to observe texts that accompany Um answers, because Um is not merely a "basket" (non-yes/no) reply. It is also a discourse marker that often serves in turn-taking moments in conversation, where it can mark hesitation or an expected (lengthy) pause. As such, it helps the CIF mimic a naturally occurring (spoken) interaction. Typically, texts written on Um notes are a kind of caveated or qualified Yes responses.

1. <Um> yes, but you don't/have to be a religious/person to be a/moral//ethical/ person.
2. <Um> Sometimes/Yes/(but not always)
3. <Um> Maybe
4. <Um> I don't/know
5. <Um> "How do you expect me/to answer that if you/have the nerve to ask/it!"
Bob Dylan

These texts reveal how visitors understand and use the museum's Um answer-option, and how they construct their texts once they chose it. In responses 1–2, the texts evoke one of the yes/no answer-words as well as the contrastive conjunction "but" ("however," "yet," "still," and "depends" appear in similar responses). They do so to present exceptions, suggesting that the more the Yes is caveated, the more the answer Um is appropriate. The idea is that there is or there can be a connection between Religion and Morality, but this is not the general case. In response 1, for instance, the text introduces people (a category that is absent from the question), and proceeds to suggest that while there is a connection between the concepts, it is not invariably the case when it comes to people. Overall, these responses reveal that compared to yes-no answers, the Um is a more ambiguous choice, which demands a different account that builds on mentioning yet hedging the positive answer. Note the use of parentheses in response 2, which add a subsidiary voice to the text (and functions to strengthen the hedger "sometimes").

Only a few Um responses do *not* present caveated Yes responses. Response 3 represents instances that express visitors' hesitation and unwillingness to commit to a definite yes-no response. In similar texts, the words "depends" and "may" are likewise used. Responses 4–5 are nearly singular, yet I discuss them because they are telling: In response 4, the visitor admits to a state of *lack of knowledge* as an account for not

choosing a different answer. This is a rare acknowledgment in the context of rational “debate and discussions,” because after visiting the museum visitors are assumed to have gained an informed perspective. Admitting that she/he “don’t know” what to reply can be read as expression of what we can call “situated ignorance,” alluding that the visit has not contributed to this visitor’s ability to reply intelligently (a critique on the museum). Response 5 is more a subversive metacommunicative comment than a response per se, and it conveys a critique of the question itself. It is not, in terms of conversation analysis and interaction, a type-conforming response, because it does not accept the question’s terms and presuppositions (Raymond, 2003). Grammatically, this is done here by responding with the visitors’ own question, whereby a third turn in this exchange is opened (as if it is now the museum’s role to reply to the visitor’s question). This text also evokes a different source of cultural (counter)authority, namely Dylan, yet we are not supplied with the grounds for the rejection of the museum’s question.

2. Argumentative texts. The most common discursive-participatory function that visitors’ texts accomplish is that of supplying *arguments in support and validation of the chosen answer*, and nearly half (about 45%) of the Post-its include argumentative utterances. These texts are the *raison d’être* of the CIF, because it is here that rational public “debate and discussions” (liberal rationalism) are most clearly manifest. In other words, it is here that writing visitors reason publicly. One of the most commonly used words in these texts is “because,” which serves as a causal connective:

1. <Yes> because your/religion helps form/your belief in morality
2. <Yes> morality is/nurtured by/religious practice/we need this more/than ever.
3. <Yes> absolutely./I believe that religion/teaches morality, or/at least helps to/shape morals.
4. <Yes> Absolutely!./They are of course/mutually independent./However, religion is/based on defining morality/and for good or bad/morality has been shaped/by religion.
5. <Yes> because religion can/lead to a moral set of/choices, but it can also/inspire immoral behaviors./religion is a total that must/be used responsibly.
6. <Yes> Without God’s/standard — who/says what is/right and wrong?
7. <Yes> RELIGION/IS THE/source OF/MORALITY
8. <No> a specific/religion does/not define what/is right or/wrong. Morality/is universal religion/is not.
9. <No> Morality:/DO WHAT IS RIGHT/NOT [W]HAT THEY TELL YOU/Religion:/DO WHAT THEY TELL U/NOT WHAT IS RIGHT.
10. <No> people confuse/spirituality with/organized religion./There is no morality/in organized religion.
11. <No> It is how/you are/ raised!!
12. <Um> Morality is a measure/of the soul./Religion is a measure/of government.

Most of the arguments that visitors articulate affirm a positive answer. These texts argue that religion is in itself moral, and hence not only are Religion and Morality connected, but their connection is causal: The latter is *founded* on the former. Responses 1–7 affirm the casual connection, yet a few offer qualifications, suggesting that the connection is more complex than can be communicated by a yes-no answer. Response 5, for instance, indicates that religion is not moral in its essence but in the way it is “used,” implying that the connection can yield negative moral outcomes. Compared to these responses, responses 6–7 are unequivocal about the primary role that religion plays in forming morality. According to the foundational view that these texts hold, morality—and with it authority and knowledge—lies squarely in the realms of religion (“God’s standard”).

Most of the responses that validate No answers (responses 8–11) argue the contrary, which is to say that morality precedes religion as a source of authority: “Morality is universal” and is “WHAT IS RIGHT,” while religion is “WHAT THEY TELL U.” A few responses claim religion to be necessarily immoral because of its authoritative, indoctrinating, and institutional nature (“organized religion”), while others suggest that liberal practices and institutions, including education or individualism, are what shape civic morality (“how you are raised!!”).

Last, arguments validating an Um answer (response 12) are in effect arguing for a lack of connection between Religion and Morality. If read outside the Post-its on which they are inscribed, it would be difficult to defer that they support an Um and not a No answer. Such responses supply a contrasting view of the terms, offering morality as foundational because it is intrinsic (“inherent” and “of the soul”), while religion is external to one’s character or interiority (“a measure of government”). With regards to all the answer-choices, it is worthwhile to consider how frequently visitors’ texts repeat the museum’s terms: Ten of the above 12 texts mention religion or morality, and these terms recur 26 times within these examples!

3. Illustrating texts. The third and last discursive-participatory function is evident in texts that supply *examples* that *validate* the chosen answer (and appears in about 23% of the utterances). I refer to them as “Illustrating texts” because the action they perform is that of pointing at occurrences that transpire in different times and places, and—instantiating them as relevant—infusing them into the museum’s discourse. Illustrating texts usually evoke knowledge presumed to be shared (“common” knowledge), knowledge of the universal kind (“natural-law”), and sometimes, when conveyed in the first person, personal knowledge (in which case they reference the visitors themselves and bring their experiences into the public sphere). In all of these cases, the epistemic discursive function that visitors perform is that of showing (“doing showing”; Sacks, 1992).

1. <No> Just look at/what ISIS is doing.
2. <No> Religion has/caused many immoral/ actions. Examples:/* Suicide bombers/* The crusaders/* Female mutilation

3. <No> NOT NECESSARILY/MANY IMMORAL ACTIONS/have taken place in the/ name of religion./Remember the [word deleted]/ CRUSADORS
4. <No> google/ "Atheist/ Philanthropy"
5. <No> because all/My life—now in/my 70's I've exper-/ ienced hurt & hate/because of other/peoples' beliefs.
6. <No> well my dad isn't/a religious person/and he doesn't/cheat or steal,/he's not bad
7. <Yes> both/come together. See the Torah,/Talmud
8. <Yes> The Torah, when/followed properly/prompts morality!
9. <Yes> Of course many/good and bad morals can come/from religion. For example,/loshon hara⁶ means gossip/and the Bible says to/ not gossip.

Visitors who supply examples or illustrations in support of their answer-choice do so mostly in relation to a negative answer. From a discourse analytic perspective, this could be the case because where there is a cultural preference to reply positively to questions (Pomerantz, 1984, and a dis-preference to reply negatively), more "proof" needs to be shown when answering refutably. The most important feature of these examples is that by referencing various occasions, they show the relevant knowledge that visitors possess and that they feel is shared by the speech community. Whether the examples are drawn from general knowledge of history and current affairs ("CRUSADORS," "ISIS"), or framed as originating from personal knowledge and experience ("all my life"), visitors show that they know and can readily draw on instances that are related to the discussion and that provide *evidentiary support* to the answer they chose. Referencing activities are pursued by such terms as "look at," "Google," "Remember," "See," and "For example," and they account for what is the unique contribution that these visitors offer to the public sphere: validating illustrations. Some of the responses are minimal and offer only an illustration (responses 1, 4), while others proceed with a claim ("MANY IMMORAL ACTIONS have taken place ...") followed by a supporting illustration.

A noteworthy variation within this group concerns the semiotic origins of the illustrations vis-à-vis the chosen answer: While all the examples written on Yes notes draw exclusively on sacred texts (specifically *Jewish* texts), none of the examples supporting a No answer refers to texts whatsoever. This discrepancy is telling because it shows how different audiences relate to the authority of different rhetorical resources when addressing the museum's questions. For the larger group of nay responders, current and historic affairs is a legitimate (re)source from which to draw on when illustrating the lack of connection between religion and morality; while for the yeah responders, texts (scriptures) provide the same.

Conclusions

At the onset of this article, I argued that how museum goers are invited to, and are framed as “participants” in the public sphere resembles ways in which lay audiences partake in the media (broadcast talk, for instance). Museums are essentially mediating institutions, and when their audiences publicly contribute discourse to their display they may be productively thought of as going “on air” or “on display.” Looking closely into how audiences’ participation in museums is institutionally afforded and framed, on one hand, and how it is actually pursued, on the other hand, sheds light on how cultural institutions both embody and mediate the public sphere and on the politics of the discourses that occupy and animate them. In examining visitors’ texts, I did not refer to visitors’ cognitive states or “opinions,” but to the different discursive “objects” that they produce interactionally during—and importantly as part of—their museum visit. The material context and the interactional affordances by which museum visitors can partake in the museum’s public narration cannot be left outside the inquiry into their discourse. Rather, museums offer stages where visitors’ inscriptional practices come to serve as physical traces of their visits, and of how they variously position themselves as participants engaging in public-civic expression.

Inside the CIF hall, the questions presented to the visitors appear to *simulate rather than stimulate* “conversations” and “debate and discussions,” seeking to create an aura of live authenticity (contra to authenticity associated with historic artifacts on display). As Tracy and Robles (2009) note, questions in institutional contexts are “buttressed by the relevant discourses marshaled by that institution” (p. 132). This is especially noteworthy in museums, where questions presented publicly are part and parcel of the museum’s ideological narration and display, as much as they are means of inviting participation (Thumim, 2010). As part of the core exhibition, the CIF questions present discourse that is judged as legitimate, suggesting what is and what ought to be publicly discussable. From an interactional perspective, one of the features of institutional use of questions is actually for *constraining* respondents, so that they “produce only type-conforming responses” (Raymond, 2003, p. 957). At the CIF, this is accomplished both by the posing of specifically worded questions (agenda setting), and by the materiality of the medium of the Post-its: No visitor that I am aware of responded *not* through the use of the sticky notes, on which the “preferred” and “type-conforming” response is already printed: Yes/No/Um.

Indeed, the museum is quite successful in establishing a *shared discourse*, with 84% of the texts repeating and (re)using the main terms the museums presents, often multiple times, and addressing the questions (i.e., the display) without questioning them. This suggests a museums-induced “speech community.” So while the CIF turns visitors into writing interlocutors, they are mostly “convenient interlocutors” with limited potential for contestation (Bellier, 2013, in Adell et al., 2015, p. 12).

As a medium, the CIF's cool and colorful Post-its do little in terms of advancing "debate and discussions," to use the museum's terms. No texts respond to other texts, nor does the museum offer a platform for responding to visitors' contributions (not to mention affording visitors the possibility to shape the contents of the questions that are displayed). All this raises the question of whether "participation" is the most suitable term to describe this medium. In a number of recent explorations of participation in (and outside) museums, Carpentier (2009, 2011) distinguishes between interaction and minimalist and maximalist modes of participation. Carpentier argues that a critically informed view promotes that the term participation cannot be equated with "mere" interaction. Rather, participation is best seen as comprising two facets: participation "through the media" and "in the media." The former concerns opportunities for self-representation in public debates and spaces (laypeople voicing their opinions), and the latter concerns opportunities to shape the production of media output through involvement in media decision-making (see also Tatsi and Aljas [2012] interesting elaboration on these concepts). A minimalist mode of participation is closer to participation "through the media," where the emphasis is on the "ritual and symbolic forms of participation" (Carpentier, 2009, p. 409), which usually involve mediated rituals (a museum visit is a good example). A maximalist mode of participation is closer to participation "in the media," where "more intense forms of media participation" are pursued, and where laypeople are "effectively involved in ... management and policy development of content producing organizations (structural participation)" (Carpentier, 2009, p. 409).

If in sites of minimalist participation curators—amongst other media professionals—are in control of structure and process, in maximalist participation power is shared, potentially enabling polyphony and structural change. Carpentier (2009) concludes that participation "through the media" is "relatively limited, and one may wonder whether the term (mediated or symbolic) interaction ... is not more appropriate" (p. 409), which would apply, I argue, to the CIF. Yet what is interesting to observe at the CIF is that visitors' discourse accomplishes different types of symbolic functions: from contributions that confirm, qualify, and intensify the answer visitors chose to more elaborate texts that supply arguments and illustrations in support of their political alignments. In other words, while at stake is surely a symbolic and ritualistic setting (not an activist one), where discursive interaction is structurally limited and monitored and moderated by the institution, visitors can still produce discourse of their liking and understanding, which is worth listening to.

I (re)turn now to the Dylan fan ("How do you expect me to answer that if you have the nerve to ask it! Bob Dylan") to see what we can learn about a few of the shortcomings of liberal imagination in public institutions, and if these are related to the museum's Jewish agenda. First, as Mittleman (2002) notes, "because the liberal state must content itself with a minimal, rules-of-the-game sort of public morality, we must rely on communal institutions of civil society to provide moral texture and depth in our lives" (p. 6). Heritage museums attempt to fill this

gap, and especially interesting are those which push a liberal agenda, such as the NMAJH. These establishments' manifest charter is that of supplying resources for the foundation of progressive communal life, and as we see at the NMAJH, this rests on both moral and epistemic discourses of heritage and its implications for current debates ("those conversations continue to be relevant today"). Yet, again, one of the salient issues here is the depoliticization of the liberal public sphere and liberal public institutions: "[B]ecause of its constitutive incapacity to think in truly political terms," Mouffe (2002) critiques Habermasian liberalism, the liberal public sphere "always has to resort to another type of discourse: economic, moral or juridical" (p. 57). Most of the discourse at the NMAJH, inside and outside the CIF, and most of the visitor discourse are *not political* in this sense, and are "privileging consensus" (p. 57).

An exception is the question, "Can Israel Be a Jewish and a Democratic State?" It is no coincidence that this question, and this question only, was met by antagonism on behalf of a few of the staff members and of the visitors. Both groups removed No notes, repeatedly posted Yes notes, and protested the question to the museum's management. This question reveals the structural tensions between the NMAJH's celebration of Jewish integration and accomplishments in the United States, and the fact that the institution is, after all, an *ethnic* heritage institution. In other words, while the museum embodies a powerful celebration of the integration of Jewish communities in U.S. liberal-democratic ideas, to the point where these communities enjoy a hegemonic state, for other members of North-American Jewry, ethnic-communal Jewish-American identity and heritage carry more traditional and conservative affiliations and obligations, revolving around the Israel-Holocaust identity axis.

A related point can be observed when *foundational texts* are referenced. We saw that the *only* foundational voices inscribed at the CIF are those that address sacred Jewish texts. One can only speculate what would have been the case if instead of the authority of the Torah, the foundational authority of the Quran would have been referenced, or in a complementary manner, examples of immoral religious behavior would have been drawn not from the Crusaders or ISIS, but from, say, Israeli military or the U.S. Army. And the reason one can only speculate here concerns precisely the exclusion of publics from the "public" sphere and its debates and discussions.

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Notes

- 1 For a historical review of the changing dimensions and definitions of participation in museums, see Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel (2011), and Cooke and Kothari's (2001) "Participation: The New Tyranny?"
- 2 <http://www.nmajh.org/MissionStatement/>.
- 3 This question echoes the public controversies over the building of the so called "Ground Zero mosque" in downtown New York, near the 9/11 Memorial Site.
- 4 The number of notes (228) and the number of utterances analyzed (220) are not identical because there are empty notes and notes whose texts I could not decipher.
- 5 Transcription convention: Forward slash/ represents a line break occurring after the slash (note that double forward slash// appears as such in the original text).
Text in <angle brackets> indicates words printed on the sticky notes.
Text in [square brackets] indicates paratextual and graphic signs, additions, and clarifications.
- 6 Lashon Hara (from Hebrew, lit.: evil tongue) refers to gossip and defamation, which Jewish law prohibits. It is written here according to Ashkenazi (Jewish-European) pronunciation.

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