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Gestures of closure: A small stories approach to museumgoers' texts

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Abstract: Museums are familiar public institutions whose primary mode of mediation is narration. They are geared toward narrating collective stories that are authoritative, linear, and grand in scope. Yet with the historical turn museums have recently taken from collection-centered to audience-centered institutions – coupled with a participatory mode of mediation – more than ever museumgoers are now invited to participate in these grand narrations. This article examines the institutional interaction between museums and museumgoers, and the texts that the latter produce *in situ*. It analyzes over 3000 texts that visitors wrote at the Florida Holocaust Museum, between 2012 and 2015. It employs the “small stories” framework to explore the interactional narrative structure and features within which museumgoers’ written comments are elicited and displayed in museums. The analysis highlights the narrative functions and authorial roles that museumgoers are ascribed institutionally, and whether and how they discursively occupy them. Three main narrative strategies of/for participation are discerned, through which museumgoers variously perform gestures of closure of their visit. These narrative gestures index ways, in which visitors signal the approaching end of the museum’s narration, employing diverse discursive resources, while adding a coda or a resolution to the institutional narrative.

Keywords: narrative analysis, small stories, museums, visitor studies, participation, mediation

1 Introduction

“We don’t need more museums that try to construct the historical narratives of a society, community, team, nation, state, tribe, company, or species. We all know that the ordinary, everyday stories of individuals are richer, more humane, and much more joyful.” (Pamuk 2012: 141)

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Museums' public role involves mediation in the form of narration. This is emphatically the case with history museums, where events and periods are chronologically narrativized; but in fact, all museums are founded on the premise that they can deliver an encompassing, meaningful, and coherent narrative. This view is not new, and it is widespread among museum personnel, cultural critics, academics, and the public. Many examples are available, such as the one offered by Nobel Literature Prize laureate Orhan Pamuk. In the epigraph above, Pamuk (2012) reconstructs a dichotomous view of the differences between museums' large-scale "historical narratives" and people's "ordinary, everyday stories." His critique highlights the comprehensive nature of museums' institutional narratives, which are often of epic nature and speak about – and importantly also on behalf of – groups and collectives.

Yet the picture is not as simple or clear-cut as these dichotomies suggest, especially not in interactional settings where institutions elicit and display audiences' "ordinary, everyday stories," as part of their mediation of the "historical narratives of a society." As museums have been turning in the last three decades from collection-centered to audience-centered institutions (Macdonald 2006), so have their narratives become more interactional, increasingly incorporating museumgoers' contributions. This process has resulted in the "textualization of museums" (Andermann and Arnold-de Simine 2012: 5), suggesting current museums as rich research sites for examining narrative institutional interactions (Katriel 1997; Noy 2015). Along the lines laid out by the "small stories" approach in narrative research, issues concerning diversity of narrative genres, activities, and functions, and more elaborate accounts of narrative contexts, material settings, and authorship are now at the forefront of research (Georgakopoulou 2007b; Vásquez 2012).

The paper examines texts that museumgoers produce *in situ*, by employing the small stories approach. It argues, firstly, that these texts can and should be analyzed and understood within a narrative context, and as fulfilling narrative functions. Secondly, it argues that paying attention to interactional features reveals how authorial roles and functions of museumgoers' texts are ascribed institutionally. The next section reviews the narrative turn museums have taken, reconceptualizing museumgoers' texts in light of the small stories approach. The following section focuses on the materiality of onsite media that serve to elicit museumgoers' participation, after which the Methods section details the corpus, the research practices, and the history museums studied. It is followed by analyses with subsections that detail both museums' use of interactional onsite media, and the narrative analysis of texts that these media elicit. The Discussion and conclusions tie the findings together and point at the politics of participation and narrative entitlements in museums and beyond.

2 Literature review: Museumgoers' (small) narrative gestures

Scholars in the fields of museum studies and proximate disciplines – often those interested in communication and mediation – have studied museums as narrative institutions to a limited degree (Bedford 2001; Nielsen 2017). This research examines questions regarding visitors, and the special communicative environments that museums sustain (Hooper-Greenhill 2013 [1995]; Luke 2002). Some of this research is critically attuned to the power relations between museums, which are part of the cultural industry of mass media and possess the resources required to mediate “grand narratives” (Lyotard 1984), on the one hand, and museumgoers, on the other hand (Carter 2016; Reading 2003; Thumim 2009). Studies focus on the mediational resources through which museums convey their stories, which range from the semiotic relations between artifacts and narratives (Bal 1996), to museums' architecture and internal spatial designs, which shape their ability to narrate (Lu 2017; Rotem 2013). This last point is significant for us, due to museums' distinct “institutional sequencing of ideals,” which amounts to what Russo and Watkins (2007: 158–159) term “spatial storytelling.” This physical affordance allows museums to generate an effective sense of narration, conveyed not only representationally (pictures, artifacts, labels), but also as embodied in walkaways visitors must traverse as part of the ritual of the museum visit.

This brief review of museums as narrative institutions supplies the background against which I reorient from museums to museumgoers or museum audiences (Macdonald 2005). This shift expresses my interest in how ordinary visitors articulate small stories vis-à-vis museums' “grand” narration, and relatedly, what are their institutionally ascribed narrative roles, and how they perform them. The inquiry touches in part on power-relations between museums and their audiences, as played out in a narrative context. The move from museums to museumgoers entails also a shift from a narrative approach to grand and neatly expressed institutional accounts, characterized by “strong narrativity” (clear and linear temporal structure and closure, see Page 2010: 427), towards much smaller stories, anecdotes, and fragments thereof, which museumgoers communicate publicly.

I reference here the emergence of the small stories framework, which presents a post-Labovian/post-classical turn in narrative studies (the so-called “second narrative turn,” Georgakopoulou 2007b; see also Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2006, 2014). In a recent review of small stories research, Georgakopoulou (2017) observes that this framework resists defining narrative according to narrow textual criteria, and rejects the traditional privileging of the

“long, relatively uninterrupted teller-led accounts of past events” (p. 266). I bring to the current research a few points that this framework advances, which I find specifically compelling.

The first point concerns an expansion of the scope of communicative events, settings, and texts that can be fruitfully addressed *as* narratives. This concerns “a growing recognition,” in Vásquez’s (2012: 105) words, “of the diversity of narrative types and narrative activities.” While it is obvious that museums narrate epic stories, it is worthwhile examining if, and to what extent, museumgoers’ texts can *themselves* function as stories, or as parts thereof. I am not arguing that visitors’ texts amount to formal narratives; in fact, with an average length of 16 words per text, they most likely do not (they are not “distinct, fully fledged [narrative] units,” Georgakopoulou 2007a: 36). Yet these texts are composed in tight semiotic relations to museal narrations, comprising a “dialogical encounter between ‘visitor narratives’ and ‘museum narratives’” (Andermann and Arnold-de Simine 2012: 5).

The second point concerns an essentially *interactional view* of narratives and of their contexts of elicitation. As Bamberg (2007: 167) contends, a small stories framework is productive in emphasizing “the situated and contextual nature of narrating as activities,” currently the context of the museum visit ritual. This, in turn, helps attune us to “dimensions of narrativity,” such as tellability and tellership, where authorship is not assumed or taken for granted (Georgakopoulou 2007b: 148). An interactional view stresses the ways that different genres, interactional designs, affordances, and participation frameworks (Goffman 1981) shape the telling of small stories. In other words, paying close attention to museums’ material and mediational settings helps re-center a narrative inquiry by shifting focus from the structural organization of the narrative text *per se* to exploring texts as *elements* within the structural narrative organization of communicative events (Blum-Kulka 1997). Relatedly, recent studies nicely show how small written stories and story particles function interactionally in ways that have been previously seen as characterizing only synchronous interactions: they are responsive, reactive, and interactive as in spoken interaction (Vásquez 2012; Noy in press).

2.1 Eliciting participation: Museum commenting platforms

The shift from museums to museumgoers is not only an analytic shift in scholarly focus, but concerns a historical transformation that museums have been undertaking during the last few decades. Propelled by global economic and cultural change – from the advent of neoliberal economy and the rise and perfusion of new media – museums have been shifting from collection-centered to audience-

centered institutions (Macdonald 2006). This transformation manifests in part in a move away from a dissemination model of communication, whereby museums have been seen as authoritative agents that “broadcast” information in a one-way/top-down manner, to an interactive and participatory model, whereby museums engage audiences more collaboratively and democratically. Macdonald (2005: 120) observes that nowadays museums “seek to access visitors’ own active meaning-making, and the assumptions, motives, emotions and experiences that this may involve,” and Landsmann (Landsmann 2017: 205) concludes that the current “museum visitor experience [is best seen] as an act of communication and interaction.” Critically viewed, without a structural change in media power relations, under the term “participation” museums can co-opt audience’s voices and texts, incorporating them in/to an apolitical, audience-friendly (co-)narration (for a critical debate on the definitions of “participation” and on what is “democratic” in media studies, see Black 2005; Carpentier 2009; Carpentier, Schröder and Hallett 2013; Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2014; Witcomb 2006).

As a result of the participatory turn, museum-visitor interactions are now proactively elicited, documented, and publicly displayed. This is accomplished onsite (and increasingly online as well) by designated media devices, or museum commenting platforms. These range from traditional visitor/comment books, to newer and trendier interactive digital platforms (Noy 2016b, 2018).

3 Site, data, and methods

This study builds on an ethnography I conducted at the Florida Holocaust Museum (FHM) between November 2012 and July 2014. The FHM is a medium-size regional museum, established in 1992 and located in the tourist area of downtown St. Petersburg, Florida. The museum is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, and serves the entire southeast region of the United States, receiving approximately 30,000 visitors per annum. The museum’s building occupies three-stories, the first of which spans the core exhibition, where most of the visitor activity takes place, and the second and third floors host an art gallery, offices, and space for public talks, often given by Holocaust survivors.

Typical of Holocaust museums, the FHM’s core exhibition portrays the roots of European anti-Semitism, moving chronologically from the Middle Ages to the events leading to the rise of the Nazi Party, anti-Semitic legislation, and the Holocaust. In this way, the FHM joins Holocaust museums and memorials worldwide that supply an “established global narrative of the history of the Holocaust” (Reading 2003: 71), which offers a “contained account” of the past (Macdonald

2008: 173). Most artifacts are historical documents, with a few non-textual items, markedly a huge railroad boxcar used to transport Jews to Auschwitz and Treblinka.

The average visit takes about an hour (the recommended length) and follows a circular path running through the core exhibition: visitors enter the museum on the left side of the main entrance and leave it on the right side. Located just by the exit is the museum's commenting platform, bookstore, Meditation Hall (a quiet space in which visitors are invited to ponder what they have witnessed), and a small donation box. After the museum's chronological exhibition, but before the commenting platform, a small section titled *Lessons for Today* is exhibited, which is dedicated to genocides worldwide. This small display is a recent generic addition to the core exhibition, reflecting a broader "national American Narrative" of Holocaust education and mediation, relying on American democracy as a "solution to the return of a second Holocaust" (Rotem 2013: 130). It is aligned with the exhibition's title: *History, Heritage and Hope*, which the current Executive Director coined, and which references a narrative move from past to future orientations, and an analogous move from "history" to "hope."

3.1 The Florida Holocaust Museum commenting platform

The FHM uses a comment book as its commenting platform. This is a heavy volume consisting of 150 pages of large, plain white paper, conspicuously displayed on a designated pedestal in a small passageway at the exit. Near the book, a sign addresses visitors directly, instructing them to "Tell us about your Museum experience!" and in smaller letters, "Thank you for your visit." The sign is important because it is here that museumgoers are explicitly offered a task, namely to contribute to, and thus publicly participate in, the museum's narration. The sign's first sentence is a directive that instructs visitors to express how the museum has affected them. It presupposes that visitors share an understanding of what the term "experience" means, that they have had one specific to this visit/museum, and that it is reportable or narratable. It is no coincidence that the MCP is located near the exit, because from the museum's perspective, it is only there and then that visitors gain the opportunity – obtain the right, that is – to narrate. This act of granting a communicative entitlement concerns authorship, and those museumgoers now signing the book become (co-)authors in and of the museum's narration.

The museum sign serves additional functions. Firstly, indexing visitors' experiences – especially with the words "Thank you for your visit," that immediately follow the instruction – serves to discursively demarcate the conclusion of the visit.

Museumgoers cannot contribute publicly to the exhibition as it unfolds chronologically but only at its end, where structurally, a *narrative resolution and/or coda can be performed*. In this sense, too, museumgoers' stories are small: not only quantitatively, but also in terms of their restricted narrative entitlements. Secondly, the term "experience" is closely associated with the museum ("Museum experience"), hence serving as a mediating concept: Visitors can reveal their inner (otherwise private and invisible) experience, and in this way say something about the museum. To employ concepts that Vásquez (2012: 115) uses in her study of small evaluative stories in TripAdvisor, visitors are asked to share "one's cognitive or affective states," which "are normally 'hidden' or unavailable." This mode of narrative communication serves as "a metaphorical way of granting readers privileged access to the internal workings of the mind of the reviewer [or visitor]" (Vásquez 2012: 115). All this occurs in an institution that is founded on the notion of display and visibility.

Behind the book and the sign, a large esthetic gray wall arises, where engraved inspirational quotes are presented: "Be the change that you want to see in the world. Mahatma Gandhi," "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless. Mother Theresa," and more. Visitors often read these texts before, or while, writing in the book, and docents, who end the museum tour near the museum commenting platform, sometimes read aloud a few of these sayings. The museum's Curator of Exhibitions and Collections told me that donors' names were presented there in the past (Blankenship, interview, June 14th, 2013). As this came to be seen as tactless, the engraved wall replaced the earlier installation in 2008, augmenting the museum commenting platform, and supplying examples of the kind of texts expected of visitors: brief, optimistic, universal and signed/attributed (which gives them a narrative quality).

Likewise, the museum's Executive Director indicated that the function of the engraved wall is to inspire hope in museumgoers, as they end their visit and feel "crushed" (Gelman, interview, November 6, 2014). The Director said that, by reading the quotes and actually writing in the book, visitors will feel empowered and hopeful, and will "tell themselves, 'I can make a difference in the kind of world we have'." As a result, visitors will be "forward looking, instead [of feeling crushed]." This perspective is closely in line with the exhibition's hopeful title (*History, Heritage and Hope*), and with the fact that nowhere near the exit is the museum's main theme mentioned – a lack that clearly echoed in visitors' texts, less than 5% of which mention the word Holocaust. This omission echoes the pervasiveness of "redemptive accounts" in Holocaust museums, which offers moral relief and "fail[s] to pay attention to their [the museums'] own situation and history" (Macdonald 2008: 192).

The comment book I studied includes 3023 texts, 98% of which are in English, with a few texts in Spanish, German, and Hebrew. The average text length is 16.3 words, not counting signatures (similar to findings reported in Stamou and Paraskevolopoulos 2003, and Noy 2009). I observed that while all the visitors leaving the museum could not avoid noticing the texts inside the large open book (which is always left open), about a third stopped to read the book, and about 10% both read and wrote therein (these figures are similar to those reported in Macdonald 2005; Noy 2016, in historical sites in Germany and Israel, respectively).

4 Analysis: Narrative gestures of closure

I mentioned that the location of the FHM comment book is typical of museum commenting platforms, which are among the last artifacts museumgoers encounter. In her study of museums as sites of narrative performance, Katriel (1997: 71) writes that comment books invite “audience-contributed gestures of closure.” From the museum’s perspective, this closure functions structurally as a *resolution or coda*, and visitors may participate in articulating this narrative function as a public text. To paraphrase Katriel – now from a small stories framework – in what follows I examine museumgoers’ succinct texts as formulations of narrative “gestures of closure.” I analyze these texts interactionally as reactions, most of which are too brief to be structured as even small/partial narratives. The texts are viewed instead as narrative particles, i. e., evaluative comments, anecdotes, additions, and summaries, formulated vis-à-vis the “master” institutional narrative which the museum recounts.

The following discussion of these texts is arranged in three subcategories that address how (and if) museumgoers perform gestures of closure, or how they see fit to mark the end of the museal narration. These categories include: (i) Qualifying experience: Affirmations; (ii) Expressing present and future orientations and actions: (De)stabilizing; and (iii) Articulating anecdotes of personal experience: Narrative additions. This threefold distinction is analytic, and what is important to keep in mind is that museumgoers’ texts are – as they must be – structurally produced at, and as part of, the end of the museum narration. In this fashion, they are statements that “signal” the impending end of a narrative by “returning the verbal perspective to the present” (Labov and Waletzky 1997 [1967]: 35). If structural approaches to narrative shed light on the museum and the role of its commenting platform, the small stories framework is best attuned to highlight bits of narrative activities that are “functionally embedded in sociocultural practices” (Bamberg 2007: 167), presently the museum visit.

4.1 Qualifying experience: Affirmations

The most recurrent type of texts in the comment book are those which repeat the terms the museum presents in the sign: “experience” and “thank you.” These words are the second and third most frequent words in the book (right after the intensifier “very”; “Museum” occurs almost as frequently). Consider these examples (see Appendix for transcription notation).

4.1

- i. Excellent Expierience/ Thanks very much !/ E
- ii. It was a/ really educational/ and heart feeling/ experience — KL/ 2013 ☺
- iii. Thank You/ Alot it/ was a good/ learning experience/ -Cotton [surname]
- iv. 8/30/2013/ An experience that/ serves as a testimony/ to horror and the humanity/ that can overcomes the/ atrocities of fear and hatred./ Thank you/ ??
- v. Profound 8-16-2013
- vi. 8-18-13/ Moving, Life affirming/ Life changing./ Mary

These short texts illustrate a common type of evaluative gesture of closure that visitors offer. It is done by repeating the museum’s terms (what conversation analysts call “format tying,” Goodwin 1990: 177–188), with little variations and additions. One effect of this repetition is that the subject of these short texts is closely aligned with the one proposed in the sign (“museum experience”). This is how these texts accomplish precisely the kind of participatory narrative work that the museum asks its visitors to pursue: they relate to and reflect (back) on the museum. These texts clearly do not possess a narrative structure, and seem to suffice as a coda token.

Specifically, the first three texts respond to the museum’s sign through repetition, without adding much. They describe their authors’ experiences by using positive qualifying adjectives (“Excellent,” “good,” “educational”), and then sometimes also express gratitude. In text 4.1.iv, “experience” is qualified as a “testimony” – i. e., a positive evaluation that suggests an experiential genre whereby “humanity ... can overcomes the atrocities of fear and hatred” – which in turn may correspond with what the expressed gratitude addresses at the end of the text. It is as if the museumgoer writes, “the experience is so and so, and for that thank you.” Texts 4.1.v–vi are even briefer, and do not include a subject: “Profound” likely refers to the “experience,” and so does “Life affirming.” These types of single-word or otherwise extremely brief expressions are contextually comprehensible precisely because of the highly interactional and responsive nature of the texts induced by museum commenting platforms.

The basic form or formula of responding to the museum's directive is, then, publicly marking the end of the institutional narration by supplying a positive evaluation (experiential qualification), often combined with tokens of gratitude. Expressing gratitude serves to further strengthen the positive evaluation, and to signal the end of the visit, as the museum does in the sign. Publicly evaluating one's experience at the end of the visit can be viewed as a narrative entitlement. Recall Sacks' (1992: II: 244–246) discussion of entitlements for experience, which he associated with entitlements for telling stories. For Sacks, telling a story is special in part because it requires showing first-hand access to the narrated events. While it is the museum that is entitled to narrate history (specifically Holocaust history, through artifacts as its authentic/firsthand possessions), museumgoers are entitled to *narratively evaluate the visit*. In Sacks' terms, formulating a coda and/or evaluation is the narrative gesture over which museumgoers may obtain ownership. In this sense, too, visitors' texts can be seen through a small stories framework – they function as “fillers” in and to the grand institutional narration.

While from a Labovian structural perspective, the museum affords visitors public participation only in the capacity of articulating a coda, the small stories framework highlights these texts' sense of “immediacy” and “pull of the present,” rather than a retrospective/past orientation (Georgakopoulou 2007a: 40, and Page 2010: 429, respectively). These succinct personalized summaries typically employ present tense (“serves,” “moving”), and in any case they are understood to be produced in tight vicinity to, and in fact as part of, the spatiotemporal ritual of the museum visit. Lastly, in terms of narrative authorship, through these textual repetitions, “compliant and dutiful museumgoers” (Noy and Hamo 2019: 16) *share authorship* with the institution. This is somewhat surprising with regard to museum commenting platforms, which are at least seemingly dedicated to affording authorship to visitors.

4.2 Expressing present-future moral orientations and actions: (De)stabilizing

Because visitors are afforded participation at the very end of the museum's narration, any writing in the comment book performs a shift from the time of the narrated events to the present, the “time of the visitor” (Blair and Michel 2000: 47). This is the case even when museumgoers sign the book nominally by merely indicating their names and dates. Yet a few texts explicitly reference both the present and the future, in which case they offer a *continued narration* in that the past events are “brought” to the present and are made to bear on it and on the future.

This point connects with another development that the short stories framework offers. Georgakopoulou (2007b) notes a narrative shift from a mode of describing past events, to a mode of projecting towards future events: “Stories become rehearsals for later action more than reconstructions of the past; they are more about imagining the future than about remembering the past” (p. 150). This is evident in the following texts, which, while surely not well-structured narratives, do possess more “narrativity” than the texts presented above.

4.2a

- i. One of the most profound and/ spiritual experiences of my life./ I vow to never again sit by and allow/ antisemitism to go unnoticed. History/ cannot be allowed to repeat itself./ Thank you for creating a beautiful/ space for memories to be/ preserved. ??
- ii. It was a/ intresting/ experience & I had/ a wonderful time,/ Don't be a bystander/ – Taylor [Surname]/ 2K13 ☺/ [drawing of lips/kiss]
- iii. Lest we forget. ... !

4.2b

- iv. This level of violence and/ hate is overwhelming – but/ the worst part is that it/ Continues today./ May we learn./ KeNtucky/ Somerset/ 2-10-14
- v. A momentous testment to the honor of/ man's inhumanity to man. Have we really learned/ the lesson we need to learn from this period/ of history – the world in so many areas here/ in 2014 is suffering in the same way.
- vi. Never take/ freedom for granted -/ pay attention to policies/ of the government. I? Gass
- vii. I FEAR WE ARE ON/ THE PATH TO HISTORY/ RepeATIng ITSElf.
- viii. America is an angry/ place today. The Holocaust/ experience occurs many times in/ varyous forms Thru out

These texts function as museumgoer-authored codas, which tie the narrated events to the present and/or the future. The common denominator is moral: the stories the museum tells address a major historical atrocity which generates a visible sense of accountability among museumgoers – at least those who choose to write (as evinced by their taking the literal action of writing in the museum). As Bamberg (2007: 170) emphasizes, the point with small stories is “making past actions accountable from a particular *moral* perspective for particular situated purposes” (emphasis added). Compared to the previous texts, this group of texts makes the moral discourse explicit, and the moral claim central.

The first two texts are similar to those presented earlier, yet they are longer and offer variations and additions to the basic “experience – thank you” formula. Experience is highlighted and positively evaluated not only by using intensifiers

and positive adjectives, but also by first person pronouns, which bring the texts to the present moment of writing and presences their author(s) (the narrative I). First person pronouns add a personal touch, and serve to validate their authors' positive experiences.

After describing the experience, the authors are themselves indexed, and additional related themes are introduced, which bring the texts to bear on the present. It can be said that these texts use the “experience – thank you” formula to elaborate and expand on the coda. In text 4.2a.i, between addressing experience and expressing gratitude, the visitor makes a moral pledge (“I vow to never”), which corresponds with a powerful evaluation of the experience. Vows and pledges are common in this comment book, as in museumgoers' texts in other museum commenting platforms in other Holocaust museums and sites. Most evince variations on the “never again!” cliché, serving a “talismanic activity that can contribute towards warding off a bad future” (Macdonald 2005: 170). Vows and pledges are future-oriented, suggesting that the coda serves not so much to signal the ending of the narrative, but to extend and project it – through museumgoers' voices – to the future. This accords with the museum's aim for hopeful and agentic written expression, and analytically with the small stories framework, with its narrative emphasis on the future (not the past). These authors/visitors are *remediating* the museum's message: they do not only attest to their experiences and express gratitude, but also draw implications of a moral nature, extending in this way the reach of the museum's narrative beyond the spatiotemporal confines of the exhibition.

Text 4.2a.ii similarly offers a pledge in the form of a directive, which is offered right before the signature: “Don't be a bystander.” The animated text (it is encircled and includes two little drawings), begins with qualifying the author's experience, continues with presenting herself or himself (“I had”), and concludes by dramatically shifting from first to second person and making a generalized moral directive. This museumgoer's text indexes the past by referring to the experience she or he has undergone during the visit (“I had a wonderful time”), to then reorient to the future, moving beyond the museum. In this way, “Don't be a bystander” is more of a narrative resolution than a coda, suggesting a possible positive future resolution, again, very much in line with the museum.

Text 4.2a.iii (“Lest we forget”) is telegraphic and reminiscent of texts 4.1v-vi in its brevity, in that no explicit allusion needs to be made to the museum, the experience, or the Holocaust. We are reminded that in light of a situated and interactive appreciation of stories, narrative particles can be telegraphic, and yet richly communicative. The text expresses the moral lesson this museumgoer takes away from the FHM. Using directives to connect the present and the future also calls to mind Vásquez's (Vásquez 2011: 112) findings, which indicate that coda

sections of online evaluative texts typically include “advice, suggestion, warning, directive, or admonition.”

Besides connecting the past, the present, and the future, an additional function a coda can fulfill concerns “precluding the question,” as Labov (2010: 547) writes, “and what happened then?.” It is one thing to say that the experience was beautiful and profound, and another to say that visiting this museum was worthwhile; or that there is a collective moral lesson that the public should pursue. From the perspective of storytelling rights, or at least rights to participate in the museum’s Holocaust mediation, the above texts evince shifts that range from simple repetitions to different ways of understanding the museum’s narrative, commenting on it, and offering gestures of closure.

Texts 4.2b.iv–viii take a step further in their moral gestures, and barely mention experience or express gratitude. These are more critical and political texts, which immediately and directly reference other sites of both historical and contemporary atrocities (actual and possible). Consider the first two texts (4.2b.iv–v) which begin by indexing the Holocaust and *not* the museum, the exhibition, or visitors’ experiences. They do so by using a specific proximal deictic term (“This level of violence,” “this period of history”), and not by repetition and alignment (as did the earlier texts). Indexing the Holocaust provides a springboard from which the *present* is *critically evaluated*, not the past. Compared to most texts in the comment book, noting that something is worse than the Holocaust, even potentially (“the worst part”), is infrequent, as are rhetorical questions (“Have we really learned”).

Texts 4.2b.vi–viii are also critical, diverging from the kind of coda that the FHM seeks in its hopeful terminology and inspirational quotes. The first advocates approaching governmental policies with suspicion, and refers to “freedom” in a universal civic sense that is not restricted to Jews, Europe, or World War II. The second text expresses fear of future events by employing the motif of the recurrence of history (the Holocaust as recur-able). The third text 4.2b.viii commences not with Europe, Germany, or the Reich, but with “America” (note that the term “experience” addresses the Holocaust and not the museum or the visitor). Referencing “America” and “today” *recalibrates* the place of the narrated events and their timeframe. Together, a different chronotope emerges: here-and-now rather than there-and-then. The narrative focus is altered. Moreover, a change is taking place in the emotional register: while the exhibition evokes fear, hopelessness, and pity, and near the exit the inspirational quotes offer hope, *anger* is now introduced. The text is urgent and offers a (non-)resolution – the Holocaust is *not* depicted as historically singular, ultimately horrific, or even potentially recur-able, but as, in effect, recurring.

To summarize, the texts that explicitly express present and future moral orientations/actions entail more narrativity than those we saw before, which is a result of the presencing of the narrator, the use of commissives and directives, and an avoidance of the terms used in the museum sign (not repeating them or using them as a springboard). While not comprising small stories in and of themselves, these texts evince a preoccupation with ‘nowness’ and recency, as opposed to “pastness and reflection” (Vásquez 2012: 106). They tell different small stories: a few offer extended validations of the museum’s narration that serve to stabilize it (4.2a), while others are critical and in fact political, and offer *destabilizing in-validations* (4.2b). The latter type of texts do not address the subject matter of the Holocaust, but the effectiveness of its educational and moral mediation, resisting the museum’s redemptive narrative closure.

4.3 Anecdotes of personal experience: Narrative additions

The third category of closing gestures differs from the two previously discussed in that these texts possess a recognizable formal narrative structure. In and through these texts, museumgoers signal narrative-ending by using a different set of resources, only rarely making pledges or repeating the terms the museum offers. This category includes the longest texts on average (with 25 words per text), yet reflects a very small portion of the overall number of texts in the comment book (1%).

4.3

- i. I witnessed the Kristalnacht/ I was 11 years old/ Fimi? [Surname]
- ii. I was living near Amsterdam and/ witnessed deportation of the Jews to/ camps (includes a family friend./ ??
- iii. DP Camp/ at Landsburg/ is where I was/ born and as I/ walked around/ this building -/ there was a/ picture of it -/ I stared at/ it – oh my./ it really exists/ Evelyn [Surname]/ 12/22/13/ [drawing of a star]
- iv. ABSOLUTLY AMAZING!/ GUARDeD RUDOLPH HeSS/ AT SPANDAU PRISON IN/ BeRLIN 1982/ MICHAeL [SURNAME]/ SFC (ReT) U.S. ARMY/ 2ND BATTALION 6TH U.S. INFANTRY/ BeRLIN, GeRMANY

I refer to these texts as anecdotes of personal experience because they present the only category of texts that include actual biographical recollections, and that qualify as small stories *bona fide*. Without the sensitivity and sensibility that the small stories framework offers, such “snippets of talk” (or presently of writing, Georgakopoulou 2007b: 146) could have easily been overlooked. Importantly, these very small stories address, or relate to, the Holocaust, and *not* the museum or the exhibition (these are only occasionally mentioned: 4.3:iii–iv). In other words,

these texts do not remediate the exhibition but *add* to it firsthand recollections and testimonies. In this way, the narrative action they perform puts them on a par with the museum's testimonial texts, and not with museumgoers' reflections and summaries. These biographical anecdotes establish authorship as possessing direct access to historical places, figures, and events, which underlines quite a different narrative entitlement than that of other texts.

Texts 4.3.i–ii establish their authors' credible access to iconic Holocaust events: Kristallnacht (specific) and deportations of Jews (general). They use first person pronouns and past tense, and explicitly mention the act of giving testimony. To witness is more than to see or to hear, because it morally positions the narrator in relation to the historical event. This is true for Holocaust discourses (Felman and Laub 1992), and more broadly for the mediation of genocides and traumatic pasts (Arnold-de Simine 2013). The first of the two texts consists of a complicating action ("I witnessed the Kristallnacht"), followed by an orientation ("I was 11 years old"); the second text consists of an orientation and a complicating action ("witnessed deportation of the Jews to camps," and further includes a clarifying clause that morally associates the author with the event). The reference to the family friend who was deported personalizes the testimony. As historical anecdotes, these narrative snippets attest to the reality of the Holocaust, and to those (few) who are alive and are willingly able to bear witness.

The next two texts (4.3.iii–iv) are interesting because, while focusing on the Holocaust, they also address the museum. However, they do so differently than the texts we saw previously. The first is a survivor's text, commencing in a post-war displaced persons' camp in Landsberg, near Munich. The word museum is not mentioned but implied by "this building," which makes the text particularly intense (palpable). This small story begins with an orientation, after which the museum visit supplies a complicating action (walking, staring). The story reaches crescendo when the museumgoer conveys her visit-induced realization that her birthplace truly exists, which she recognizes with surprise: "oh my. it really exists" (dramatized through a reported speech/mental state sequence). In this way, Evelyn's story establishes a direct, historical, and material connection between the museumgoer and the exhibition.

Text 4.3.iv is also an anecdotal narrative that attests to the direct access the undersigned has to the narrated events. The large space that is reserved for affiliation details confers the author's small story entitlement, attesting to his firsthand knowledge of the events and his institutional identity.

To summarize, although these texts are performed at the museum's exit, anecdotes of personal experience do not offer a coda or a summary, and they are *not* aligned with the museum's instructions. Had these visitors the opportunity to interact in earlier chronological segments of the exhibition, they would have most

likely added their stories there, and not by the exit. Importantly, these are the only texts in the corpus that qualify as small stories, and their authors' entitlements for sharing them are similar to the museum's entitlements, and not to those of "ordinary" museumgoers. Holocaust survivors, relatives, and witnesses perform the public role of (small) storytellers, and not of conferers, validators, or critics of the FHM's mediation. These visitors understand and practice their role as culturally and conventionally ascribed to survivors, i. e., sharing first person testimonies.

5 Discussion and conclusions

Museums have enthusiastically embraced the narrative turn of the second half of the twentieth century, and have more recently seized the shift towards audience participation. Juxtaposing the two, museums' current *modus operandi* entails communicating "grand narratives" (Lyotard 1984) by engaging their visitors proactively. This research presents theoretical advances from the small stories framework, looking at brief narrative snippets or particles where they are perhaps least expected, i. e., in proximity to grand institutional narratives. It joins recent works that expand the diversity of narrative genres, activities, and functions (Vásquez 2012), paying close attention to context, setting, authorship, and other "dimensions of narrativity" (Georgakopoulou 2007b: 148). The small stories approach is productive in helping conceptualize these texts not only quantitatively, in that they are (much) shorter than previously studied narratives, but also qualitatively, in that they are seen as micro-elements *vis-à-vis* encompassing historical narratives. Indeed, a small stories informed inquiry highlights these texts' salient interactional and contextual character. While these a-synchronous inscriptions are written on a medium almost as old as paper, they show resemblances to small stories in synchronous digital environments (commenting platforms and social networks, see Page 2010; Vásquez 2012). The small stories framework is further helpful in recognizing instances where very brief texts actually possess a biographical narrative structure. Below I discuss the two related questions concerning museumgoers' small stories: What are the narrative roles that museums ascribe institutionally, and if and how do visitors fulfill them?

The institutional interaction between museums and their visitors is embedded in power relations which, in a participatory context, are implicit. They are embodied in institutional affordances that shape the strict settings that afford if, and to what degree, audiences can partake in the historical narration (conditions which are more restricted in Holocaust museums, due to the sensitive topic). Critical questions regarding power relations in interactions, and museumgoers' available (small) narrative resources, present an important challenge to the small

stories research framework. They suggest not only that resource for formulating narratives are differentially available, but that as part of the storytelling context institutions shape how museumgoers will both receive the narrative and participate therein. Moreover, museums' spaces are meticulously organized, and as we have seen, museumgoers may publicly engage in the narration only in a specific spatiotemporal point during their visit, and only through predesignated devices. At the FHM, the museum commenting platform is strategically located at the end of the chronological exhibition. The museum-museumgoer interaction is structurally and materially circumscribed, geared to afford a resolution and/or coda to the institution's narration – one that is morally redemptive and emotionally hopeful.

Issues of power relations reflect shifts that museums are undergoing, from collection-centered to audience-centered institutions, resulting in a wave of participation and democratization practices. Critical media and museum scholars have addressed these shifts, and the degree to which participation can effect structural social change (Carpentier 2009; Thumim 2009; Witcomb 2006), a question which also concerns museum staff. In light of the small stories framework, I conclude that regardless of whether museums do or do not afford “participation,” the turn towards consumers, and with it the heightening of museums' interactional platforms, results in the messenger gradually overshadowing the message.

It has been critically argued that Holocaust memorialization has undergone processes of Americanization and globalization (Huysen 2000). I concur and offer that, more generally and with more nuance, the FHM shows that museums are increasingly evaluated for the way they tell a story (a competent narrative performance), and decreasingly for the actual matter at hand. The fact is that the Holocaust is not mentioned anywhere near the commenting platform, and only rarely in museumgoers' comments. Actually, when visitors mention the Holocaust, it is mentioned in the texts that diverge from the institutionally-led resolution – the texts that resist the hopeful and redemptive narration or that register survivors' and witnesses' biographical anecdotes. To put it strongly, visitors need to remind the museum of its topical and moral mandate, and of the essentially *political* (rather than *apolitical*) nature of both the historical events *and* their mediation.

As for the visitors, for the overwhelming majority a brief and positive coda suffices as a public token of participation. This is accomplished by utilizing immediate semiotic resources, notably repeating the terms the museum offers: “experience” and “thank you.” The museum commenting platform becomes an evaluation platform where epideictic rhetoric serves to praise the museum and its exhibition for a well-performed historical narration, and ultimately to affirm it. In other words, through its commenting platforms, participation in the FHM's narrativization of the Holocaust serves to support and stabilize its “grand” narrative

(hence Affirmations). A much smaller group of museumgoers' texts uses the opportunity to participate in the narration by offering resolutions that explicitly associate the narrated events with the present and/or the future ([De]stabilizing). In these texts, moral discourse is explicit, and it is the Holocaust that is centrally at stake, and not its mediation. Furthermore, evaluations in these texts are not left to the past, but are brought to bear on the present, sometimes in explicitly political terms. In the latter case, museumgoers' resolutions by no means resolve the historical narration in a Labovian sense, but urgently and sometimes angrily point to both the fear and the danger of its recurrence. Yet other museumgoers, whose texts amount to 1% of the entries, perform closure by offering brief biographical anecdotes. Texts in this category – authored by survivors and witnesses – are the only ones that actually qualify as small stories. Akin to the previous category, history's mediation is not at their core, but the Holocaust, and they do not offer reflections on or summaries of the exhibit, but additions to it, paralleling the museal own mediational vehicle, i.e., historical narration (hence, Narrative additions). All in all, the museumgoers' texts illustrate a variety of activities that overwhelmingly affirm and stabilize grand narratives in the context of public (co-)narration, and only rarely challenge critique or destabilize them.

A productive way I offer to look at participation in institutional narration concerns formulation of narrative entitlements (Sacks 1992; Blum-Kulka 1997). To repeat the museum's words "experience" and/or "thank you" is one thing; to maintain that the Holocaust "occurs many times in various forms throughout" is quite another; and so is to narrate one's direct biographical relation to the past ("I witnessed the Kristalnacht"). These differences index museumgoers' entitlements, types of resources they can and do employ, and claims they make when participating in the museal narration through the museum commenting platform. From the perspective of the small stories framework, this suggests that entitlements are as important for narrative snippets as they are for larger stories. It also suggests that while the institution is evidently more powerful, visitors' voices embody different narrative activities and entitlements.

Things would have been much simpler had the difference between narratives and stories been as dichotomous and clear-cut as commonly viewed (see epigraph, Pamuk 2012). If instead of taking a romanticized view of museums-museumgoers or institutions-clients, we look at their interactions, we can address the critical ways in which institutions of mediation, presently museums, narrativize audiences in and through their texts, and learn of the latter's strategies for participation in grand narrations. As audiences "inscribe themselves into the museum text" (Katriel 1997: 71), the separation between their texts and the museum's narration becomes purely analytic or academic, while an individualistic, apolitical and redemptive narrative is effectively being performed. With emerging trends is

museology that embrace stronger audience engagement, inclusivity and activism, the question of how Holocaust and genocide museums and memorials will view mediation, and the participatory contract they will hold with their audiences, remains open for critical discussion and beseeches empirical inquiry.

Appendix

Transcription notation: a forward slash (/) represents a line break and backslash (\) represents cases where a forward slash appears in the original text; one question mark in a word indicates an unclear letter; two question marks (??) indicate an undecipherable word; square brackets [] indicate non-verbal signs, additions and clarifications. To ensure anonymity, I use [surname] instead of the original surname.

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