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*Making Reality Virtual:
Improving Holocaust Education through Digitized Material Culture*

ABSTRACT: *This article proposes a qualitative approach to examining the archeological methods traditionally utilized at various concentration camp sites in conjunction with contemporary educational tools. Based on results from previous fieldwork and anthropological/educational theories concerning the Holocaust, its goal is to attain a better understanding of how material culture and memorialization through digitization influence collective memory. It argues that, by focusing on the contemporary collective memory of the Holocaust and its relationship to material culture and virtual reality, anthropologists and educators are better equipped to educate the public on the history of the Holocaust.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; United States (U.S.); Europe; Jewish Studies; Holocaust; archaeology; material culture; education; digital history; virtual reality*

Introduction

The influence of memory on history is a much-debated topic in contemporary scholarly analysis, but historians generally agree that memory has a considerable impact on how individuals think or feel about historical events. While most Americans would like to believe that the United States has the best education system in the world and that historical events like the Holocaust are, on the whole, approached with their due respect, this is not always the case. As of 2023, only twenty-three of fifty U.S. states require teaching about the Holocaust in their respective public-education curricula,¹ and according to a poll published by the Anti-Defamation League in 2020, nineteen percent of the adult population in the United States believe that “Jews still talk too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust.”² Thus, even though a number of states require Holocaust education, statistics and surveys like these suggest that educational mandates are no safeguard when it comes to curbing antisemitic thought or behavior.

However, this situation might change in the future, as there are many who encourage and advocate for educational and curricular reforms to include Holocaust education. But even if more states should require Holocaust education, there is no guarantee that teachers will have the time to fully cover these lessons. Individual teachers bear no blame for this, as standardized tests lead to a prioritization—in teaching—of those topics that appear on said tests.³ Given the

¹ “Where Holocaust Education is Required in the U.S.,” *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, [online](#).

² “Anti-Semitic Stereotypes Persist in America, Survey Shows,” *Anti-Defamation League*, published January 28, 2020, [online](#).

³ Ana Maria Klein, Andrea A. Zevenbergen, and Nicole Brown, “Managing Standardized Testing in Today’s Schools,” *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET)/Revue de La Pensée Éducative* 40, no. 2 (2006): 145–157.

current state of the U.S. public-education system, there is, realistically, little room for meaningful Holocaust education in a traditional school setting.

While public schools largely neglect Holocaust education, there is an argument to be made that museums and parents or grandparents are indeed more or better qualified to teach children about historical events such as these. This brings us to the relationship between memory and history, and it directly relates to the material culture found at concentration camp sites and the field of Holocaust archaeology as a whole, because there is a demand to have tangible items in museums and accessible to the public. Museums provide a great service to society, but relying solely on collective memory to tell the story of the Holocaust creates issues of its own. Due to the Holocaust's relatively recent place in the grand trajectory of human history, there is a lot of emotion involved in learning about it, to say nothing of the immense degree of trauma faced by survivors and their families.⁴ In addition, as the Holocaust predominantly targeted Jews, a population that has experienced persecution time and again throughout human history, their trauma has been compounded by recurrent cases of Holocaust denial.

Concentration camp sites could even be classified as tourist attractions, with over two million people visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau in 2019 alone.⁵ The perception of such sites as tourist attractions influences the memory that people associate with them. While concentration camp sites are recognized as preserving the memory of one of the most violent crimes against humanity, Holocaust memorials are also viewed as tourist attractions, especially in places like Poland. While those visiting these sites may be doing so with no ill intention and may even desire to learn more about the Holocaust, the immense traffic at these sites adds even more complications to the issue of how memorializing the Holocaust ultimately impacts the collective memory on this atrocity.

There are two main schools of thought when it comes to the relationship between collective memory and the history of the Holocaust: one, that the general population should memorialize the material culture left behind to learn from it; and the other, that one should not interfere with these socio-historical sites due to their sacredness and the topic's inherent complexity. While scholars are debating these approaches, antisemitic hate crimes are on the rise, even in Europe.⁶

Based on the existing data, Holocaust archaeology and the material culture found at sites of conflict play a pivotal role in shifting collective memory, which in turn impacts the quality and effectiveness of Holocaust education. This article argues that—in order to improve the quality and effectiveness of Holocaust education through collective memory—educators and policymakers should

⁴ Caroline Sturdy Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution," *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 7, no. 2 (2012): 70–104, here 77.

⁵ "2 million 320 thousand visitors at the Auschwitz Memorial in 2019," *Memorial and Museum: Auschwitz-Birkenau*, published January 7 2020, [online](#).

⁶ "Monitoring Antisemitism," *European Commission*, [online](#).

prioritize digitization and immersive historical experiences (like virtual reality). This would provide students with a holistic approach to analyzing the historical record, including verbal testimonies and material culture, and lead to a more well-rounded understanding of the Holocaust.

I. Literature and Theory Review

Caroline Sturdy Colls, one of the most influential scholars on the topic of Holocaust archaeology and material culture at concentration camps, has detailed the technical aspects of archaeology without neglecting the educational significance of culture and memory. In a 2012 article, "Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution," she discusses the invasive archaeological methods that have already been utilized at concentration camps, but also the non-invasive techniques.⁷ What separates Colls's article from others is that she proposes Holocaust archaeology as a subfield of conflict studies. Colls stresses the importance of moving away from the need for material remains to be collected to reinforce the value of Holocaust memory. The theme of providing primary analysis from archaeological projects in addition to considering the cultural and historical significance of these sites characterizes much of Colls's work.

A collection of essays that reflects research interests similar to the ones expressed in this article is Alexander Hinton's *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (2002),⁸ which summarizes contemporary perspectives on genocide. Bridging the gap between anthropologists and human rights activists, Hinton's collection provides a blueprint that combines the thorough research methods of anthropology and the "power of exposing the truth."⁹ An exceptionally useful essay in Hinton's collection is John Bowen's "Culture, Genocide, and a Public Anthropology,"¹⁰ in which Bowen explains the links between hate crimes, hate speech, and so forth, with regard to an understanding of human variation and conflict.¹¹

A recent monograph that provides a theoretical basis, or at least inspiration, for the research outlined in this article, is Dara Horn's *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present* (2022).¹² Horn provides an extensive analysis of how collective memory is shaped by education relating to a given event. Her analysis

⁷ Colls, "Holocaust Archaeology," 70-104.

⁸ Alexander L. Hinton, ed., *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁹ Hinton, ed., *Annihilating Difference*, xi (foreword by Kenneth Roth).

¹⁰ John R. Bowen, "Culture, Genocide, and a Public Anthropology," in *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*, ed. Alexander L. Hinton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 382-396, here 382.

¹¹ Bowen, "Culture, Genocide, and a Public Anthropology," 382.

¹² Dara Horn, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021).

indirectly converses with Colls's work, as both Horn and Colls address the cultural relevance of collective memory. Horn's analysis asserts that Jewish history and memory have been exploited when most convenient for those in power.

At the intersection between applied anthropology, archaeology, and memory is an essay in Ruth M. Van Dyke's and Reinhard Bernbeck's seminal collection, *Subjects and Narratives in Archaeology* (2015):¹³ analyzing the limits and exploitations of excavations at concentration camps, Isaac Gilead's essay, "Limits of Archaeological Emplotments from the Perspective of Excavating Nazi Extermination Centers," argues that the primary limitations to these projects are Holocaust denial and general sensitivity pertaining to Holocaust history.¹⁴ This intersects with the previously mentioned literature as it addresses how the issue's sensitivity is an integral part of its memory culture.

II. Memory as History

In the context of Holocaust archaeology, specifically the archaeology at concentration camp sites, the theoretical analysis of the significance of landscape and places is extremely important. In his 1994 monograph, *A Phenomenology of Landscape Places, Paths and Monuments*, Christopher Tilley proposes that

[n]ew geography and new archaeology considered space as an abstract dimension or container in which human activities and events took place. [...] The attraction of this perspective was, no doubt, its purity and simplicity and the potential it offered for comparative studies of the organization of artefacts, sites, populations, and flows of information and exchange across regions and landscapes.¹⁵

Tilley examines the meaning of space in culture and what makes space meaningful. He argues that the

alternative view starts from regarding space as a medium rather than a container for action, something that is involved in action and cannot be divorced from it. As such, space does not and cannot exist apart from events and activities within which it is implicated.¹⁶

In the case of concentration camps and Holocaust archaeology, this perspective is especially true. Holocaust scholars and archaeologists cannot examine locations like concentration camps without considering the historical circumstances.

In a 1989 article, "Excavation as Theatre," Tilley compares the archaeological process to baking a cake.¹⁷ He asserts that "much of the work appears to be a frantic attempt to accumulate more and more information 'because it is there, in

¹³ Ruth M. Van Dyke and Reinhard Bernbeck, eds., *Subjects and Narratives in Archaeology* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015).

¹⁴ Isaac Gilead, "Limits of Archaeological Emplotments from the Perspective of Excavating Nazi Extermination Centers," in *Subjects and Narratives in Archaeology*, ed. Ruth M. Van Dyke and Reinhard Bernbeck (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 235–256, here 252.

¹⁵ Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments* (Providence: Berg Publishers, 1994), 9.

¹⁶ Tilley, *Phenomenology of Landscape*, 10.

¹⁷ Christopher Tilley, "Excavation as Theatre," *Antiquity* 63, no. 239 (June 1989): 275–280.

the erroneous belief that some day the cake will bake itself.”¹⁸ The trend of excavating for the sake of being able to, then hardly publishing or making that information accessible, appears to be a common theme in archaeological studies. The number of unpublished excavations is greater than the number of those published, which is a disservice to the field of study as well as to public history.¹⁹ Anthropology is a field that depends heavily on theory, and Tilley’s theory should be seriously considered when deciding whether to excavate a site or not.

When it comes to the archaeology at concentration camp sites, the theory of excavation as theater, or performance, could easily be applied. Tilley asks,

What is the relationship of excavation to ‘real’ history and contemporary society? All excavation, and indeed the very practice of excavation, is value-based. Value systems and ideologies do not neatly circumvent the practice of excavation and its relation to the present.²⁰

This, combined with the notion that excavations have a reputation of finding their way into publications less than expected, questions the ethics of excavating or doing archaeological projects at concentration camp sites.

Analyzing material culture, like artifacts and forensic remains, is not the only way to supply the public’s perception of concentration camps. Colls assesses that

[t]he presence of marked mass graves seemed to convince some visitors it was worthwhile making the trip and highlighted the disappointment of some visitors that they were unable to see marked graves at the extermination camp. Almost certainly, some visitors do not visit the labour camp on the basis that fewer people were killed there, suggesting a somewhat worrying belief that the importance of a site is measured by the number of people killed.²¹

Here, researchers can see that the number of people visiting can be quantified through an understanding of how they view the given site. This goes hand in hand with how the public memorializes and understands the history at these sites. According to Colls,

[r]esearch suggests that there are many people who would like to visit Treblinka, but they are unable to for a variety of reasons. The site is very remote and, although it is around two hours’ drive from Warsaw, it is not on a major route. Many people from abroad may be unable to visit, including those whose relatives died in the camp. For some Orthodox Jews, visiting Treblinka is also difficult. They believe in not disturbing the remains of the deceased and, on the basis that human remains are scattered across much of the former extermination camp area, some feel that it is not appropriate for them to walk there. Currently, for those unable to visit Treblinka who want to find out more information about it, there is no central resource where they can find detailed information about the camp’s history.²²

One can observe that the collective memory at these sites varies from group to group. However, this also points to the reasons why there is a demand for material

¹⁸ Tilley, “Excavation as Theatre,” 276.

¹⁹ Tilley, “Excavation as Theatre,” 276.

²⁰ Tilley, “Excavation as Theatre,” 279.

²¹ Caroline Sturdy Colls, “Uncovering a Painful Past: Archaeology and the Holocaust,” *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites* 17, no. 1 (February 2015): 38–55, here 42.

²² Colls, “Uncovering a Painful Past,” 42.

cultural remains to be utilized in educational settings. There are many who are physically or morally unable to visit these sites but would like to for educational purposes. This is why there has been a growing demand for pieces from these sites to be utilized in educational institutions.

III. Personalization and Memory

Memory has its own unique history. One would expect that memory and history go together, but this is not always the case. In the instance of Holocaust memory and material culture, there is a wide variety of ways in which memory manifests itself in real-world applications. As James Young, a scholar on memory, argues,

the best memorial to the fascist era and its victims in Germany today may not be a single memorial at all—but only the never-to-be-resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end.²³

While this analysis is specifically tailored to German memory, the same principle can be applied to American memory of the Holocaust.

One of the most well-known museums and memorials dedicated to the Holocaust in the United States is the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)*. There is much to analyze with regard to this specific site: its location in Washington, D.C., its relationship to other buildings and establishments in the area, and its actual exhibitions. One experience that *USHMM* offers is giving visitors identification cards at the beginning of their visit. As described by the museum,

[t]hese identification cards describe the experiences of people caught up in the Holocaust in Europe. Designed as small booklets to be carried through the exhibition, the cards help visitors to personalize the historical events of the time. [...] The final section describes the fate of the individual and explains the circumstances—to the extent that they are known—in which the individual either died or survived.²⁴

Since its conception, *USHMM* has been innovating ways of teaching and learning about the Holocaust. Its commitment to making its archives and resources publicly and digitally available is a feat that should not go without recognition.

The main idea behind this didactic approach is likely to promote empathy in younger visitors, as most of the identification cards are of school-aged children. However, such a perspective centers on the World-War-II era and not that of modern American visitors. While it is well intended, it arguably does not encourage visitors to learn about the Holocaust from a modern perspective. At its core, the identification cards are intended to engage visitors. As interactive and tangible items, they are a memorable part of the museum experience. Their downside is that their microhistories offer only a small portion of the larger history

²³ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 81.

²⁴ "Identification Cards," *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, published October, 24 2012, [online](#).

of the Holocaust. Digitized material culture would bridge the gap between tangibility and engagement by providing an actual item rather than an abstract idea.

The importance of individual stories of the Holocaust should not be neglected: they offer incredibly important lessons in history, especially to school-aged children. Finding the perfect medium for Holocaust education is incredibly difficult. Utilizing individual stories of the Holocaust can be a useful tool for case study-like lessons during classroom teaching. On the other hand, this brings us to the issue of “Holocaust icons” and what they mean for collective memory.²⁵

A perfect example of this phenomenon is Anne Frank. The tangibility of her diary in a classroom setting is obvious, and her story is one that relays the horrors of the Holocaust but not in a manner that is *too* tragic for young children. She was not imprisoned at a camp while writing her famous diary, but the reader knows the outcome of her story. She has been memorialized as a child who fell victim to the terrors of fascism, and her legacy reflects that. However, this leaves the innocence of her childhood up for interpretation, as some might find themselves thinking of what her adulthood could have been like. According to Dara Horn,

[t]he problem with this hypothetical, or any other hypothetical, about Frank’s nonexistent adulthood isn’t just the impossibility of knowing how Frank’s life and career might have developed. The problem is that the entire appeal of Anne Frank to the wider world—as opposed to those who knew and loved her—lay in her lack of future.²⁶

One of Frank’s most notable quotes comes from one of her last diary entries, which reads, “It’s really a wonder that I haven’t dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart.”²⁷ While it was more than likely not her intention while writing, this offers a quasi-redemptive ending to the reader. Since her diary did not accompany her to Bergen-Belsen, the horrors of living in a concentration camp are not recorded. This, coupled with the tangibility of a diary, gives teachers a resource to teach younger children about the Holocaust.

The downside of “Holocaust icons” is that it is their image or story that usually resonates with students the most and, consequently, will be the image that they carry with them for the rest of their adult lives.²⁸ This is not an inherently negative thing but, at its core, the diary is a primary source about life in hiding before being taken to a concentration camp. While Frank’s diary is a material source that

²⁵ Oren Baruch Stier, *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

²⁶ Horn, *People Love Dead Jews*, 8.

²⁷ Anne Frank, *Diary of a Young Girl*, trans. Barbara B. M. Mooyaart-Doubleday (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 263.

²⁸ Stier, *Holocaust Icons*.

provides valuable insight in its given context, it does not reflect the vast history of the Holocaust, despite its cultural significance across the world.

The muddiness of memory becomes even more apparent in a museum setting when private and personal memories are intertwined. As historian and director of the University of London's Holocaust Research Institute Dan Stone asserts that "the clash between private memories and public memory is nowhere clearer than in a state-funded museum."²⁹ There are lots of areas in public history that shape our memory that are not apparent to the naked eye: for example, *USHMM*'s location in relation to other iconic American institutions; its funding sources; which exhibitions it introduces and displays at a given time; why such decisions are made; and the list goes on. *USHMM* plays a pivotal role in shaping the collective memory of the Holocaust in the United States, which is why the public history sector should not be ignored when analyzing the collective memory of the Holocaust.

IV. Material Culture and Culture as Memory

While there is a good deal of controversy surrounding them, archaeological projects routinely provide more information. In a project in Treblinka, a concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland, research

has allowed the original camp boundaries to be detected at both the labour and extermination camp, and it has allowed the various layers of the camps' post-war history to be uncovered. In fact, this research has demonstrated that, contrary to popular belief, a wealth of physical evidence relating to both the extermination and labour camps does in fact survive.³⁰

Thus, there are considerable physical remains of concentration camps that continue to be uncovered. While popular belief may lead some people to suspect that not much remains from this era, there are, in fact, extensive amounts of physical remains to research further and to enhance Holocaust education. The materials found at these sites can be extremely valuable to our collective understanding of concentration camps. Yet while these remains are incredibly useful for memory and educational purposes, there is a degree of uncertainty about some of the material remains. As Colls notes in her work,

[s]ome archaeologists may well be inclined to omit such materials from discussions concerning sites – relegating them only to a line in a finds database perhaps. Instead, these items should be viewed as an important part of Holocaust historiography, since their multiple interpretations can provoke valuable discussions regarding the value placed upon objects, the development of cultural memory, and the implications of a failure to investigate crimes at the point at which they occurred.³¹

²⁹ Dan Stone, *History, Memory, and Mass Atrocity: Essays on the Holocaust and Genocide* (Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006), 159.

³⁰ Colls, "Uncovering a Painful Past," 42–43.

³¹ Caroline Sturdy Colls and Michael Branthwaite, "'This is Proof?' Forensic Evidence and Ambiguous Material Culture at Treblinka Extermination Camp," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 22, no. 3 (September 2018): 430–453.

Colls indicates that there are material remains at concentration camp sites that are typically neglected in the wider scope of Holocaust historiography. A shift in focus from traditional Holocaust historiography to focusing more on these material remains could largely shift our collective memory and our understanding of the Holocaust. If the topic were to be taught through physical objects (rather than traditional educational means), its history would be much more tangible.

The trials and tribulations of the forensic process can muddy the waters for anthropologists and other researchers trying to utilize the material culture found at these sites. This exemplifies how contemporary memory plays an important role in the utilization of material culture as an educational tool. While this process can be problematic in some situations, the push for more evidence to be uncovered has not gone unnoticed. According to Colls, since the end of the Holocaust,

material culture has not featured in historical narratives and so it has only been possible to realize a partial account concerning how the camp [i.e., Treblinka] operated, what it looked like, and what those who encountered it experienced. Therefore, in 2007 a forensic archaeological investigation was launched to locate, record, and interpret any surviving physical evidence at Treblinka in association with other information derived from archives, witness testimonies, and modern digital data. Non-invasive surveys, using a wide range of techniques, were undertaken in 2010 and 2012 at the extermination and labor camps respectively. Following this, in 2013, a further survey and excavation at the extermination camp uncovered jewelry, hair clips, tools, pots, pans, and other domestic items, thus confirming that mass murder on such a scale had left behind a considerable body of evidence.³²

In recent excavations, non-invasive methods have been utilized to examine concentration camp sites. There are substantial material remains located at these sites. This begs the question how these excavations can be utilized in the grand scheme of public knowledge and education. While publishing and making the respective findings available to the public is of the utmost importance, there is the issue of how these findings are presented to the public.

Museums and the public education system have a difficult time creating the best presentation method for these topics. Colls explains the importance of remains from concentration camp sites, stating that

their rarity combined with the absence of above-ground material traces bestows a unique educational value upon them and offers the potential to provide new information to visitors about the events and experiences pertaining to the camps. At Treblinka, effectively exhibiting these items without either embellishing their importance or overshadowing it, represented a challenge to which other curators at Holocaust sites will undoubtedly relate."³³

There is no easy solution or method of presenting this information to the public, especially if young children will be visiting the museum or site.

In her extensive research on the Harbin Jews of northern Manchuria (China), Dara Horn describes the exploitation of Jewish history and stories as follows:

³² Colls and Branthwaite, "This is Proof?," 431.

³³ Colls and Branthwaite, "This is Proof?," 444.

This attempt to 'attract business investments' by researching Jewish history seems, to put it gently, statistically unsound. Among the tens of millions of tourists to China each year, forty thousand annual Israeli visitors and even fewer Jewish tourists from elsewhere amount to a rounding error. And the idea that Israeli or other Jewish-owned companies would be moved to invest in Heilongjiang Province out of nostalgia for its Jewish heritage seems unlikely at best. The only way to understand this thinking is to appreciate the role Jews play in the Chinese imagination.³⁴

This case study does not explicitly cover Holocaust archaeology, but it does exemplify how there is a present social phenomenon of cultures utilizing Jewish history and suffering for tourism and non-educational purposes.

The idea that antisemitism and Jewish history are "done deals" and do not require modern remembrance is not only a typical antisemitic notion but also one that can be applied to other areas of "hard history." With regard to Native history in the Americas, there has historically been an extreme lack of accountability and education. For example, Native Canadians have had a particularly difficult time getting the proper treatment and remembrance for their past traumas. According to the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, "[d]espite having high levels of human development as a country, Canada's indigenous peoples 'live in conditions akin to those in countries that rank much lower and in which poverty abounds.'"³⁵ The Canadian government has made efforts to build a bridge to the country's Native population, like the 2008 federal apology for residential schools, but the work does not end there.³⁶ In 2021, one Indigenous community reported that they found the remains of two hundred and fifteen children from a forced-assimilation school.³⁷ According to an article in the *New York Times*, "[t]he office of Carolyn Bennett, the federal minister responsible for Indigenous relations, said in a statement that the 'discovery reflects a dark and painful chapter in our country's history.' Her department and health officials in British Columbia will set up support services for the First Nation, it said."³⁸

Canada has since acknowledged their wrongdoing with regard to the establishment of residential schools, a dark part in the country's history, but there have been few efforts on the government's part to increase remembrance and solidarity for the Native communities. Upon the discovery of the mass graves, there were immediate protests. According to one news report, the Canadian educator Egerton Ryerson (1803–1882)

³⁴ Horn, *People Love Dead Jews*, 27.

³⁵ Terry Mitchell and Charis Enns, "The U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Monitoring and Realizing Indigenous Rights in Canada," *Centre for International Governance Innovation Policy Brief* no. 39 (April 2014): 2, [online](#).

³⁶ Mitchell and Enns, "U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," 7.

³⁷ Ian Austen, "'Horrible History': Mass Grave of Indigenous Children Reported in Canada," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2021, [online](#).

³⁸ Austen, "Horrible History."

has been called an 'architect' of the residential school system in Canada. His statue was vandalized and splattered with red paint last week. There are hundreds of pairs of shoes at the base at the statue, and they form a memorial to the children whose lives were lost at the Kamloops Indian Residential School.³⁹

A similar lack of official recognition characterizes the Jewish history at Harbin, as well as the United States and its historical treatment of minorities.

The mass graves in Canada had connections to the country's forced-assimilation schools, yet little action has been taken thus far to preserve the memory of the lives lost at these residential schools, which speaks volumes about the priorities of the federal government when it comes to human rights and remembrance. Even with remains and physical evidence at these sites, there has been little recognition by the federal government. However, the memory of those who lost their lives is being upheld by those protesting the Canadian government as well as the Native communities and their supporters.

Material or physical remains play a large role in the cultivation and preservation of memory. Canada's recent uncovering of the mass graves of children who were sent to residential schools reveals aspects that the material culture that is being utilized as a tool for Holocaust education does not face. For instance, the material remains that are utilized in Holocaust education are not uncovered in the United States, and the respective human remains are typically not whole human remains. However, the overarching power of material culture as a method for education (including raising awareness for the given cause) is extremely valuable and provides weight to the call for memory and preservation.

Culture has undoubtedly played a critical role in understanding antisemitic behavior. As academic Herbert Hirsch has put it:

The longer I study violence and human behavior the more suspicious, and perhaps cynical, I become about academic prescriptions to halt the violence or to replace one morality with another. [...] People are not born with political ideas. As far as it is discerned, everything we know about politics, and this includes genocide and/or human rights, ethics, morality, is learned or taught to us either formally, as, for example, through the process of education, or informally, through the process of cultural transmission.⁴⁰

How we view genocide and human rights violations can be seen through a cultural lens. From this, researchers can attain a more thorough and holistic view of why certain population groups in this world hold certain beliefs.

Conclusion

More education on the Holocaust and other genocides is of the utmost importance. However, the way in which information is presented makes or breaks the respective didactic efficacy. One example of how an institution can go about

³⁹ "Hundreds Gather in Toronto to Honour 215 Indigenous Children Found Buried in B.C.," *CBC News*, June 6, 2021, [online](#).

⁴⁰ Herbert Hirsch, *Anti-Genocide: Building an American Movement to Prevent Genocide* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 161–162.

educating the public about the Holocaust by utilizing material culture is Rowan University's V.R. (Virtual Reality) project on the Warsaw Ghetto. As it stands now,

[w]orking on a core team of 20 history, engineering and art students under the direction of Professors Jenny Rich (sociology), Shreekanth Mandayam (electrical and computer engineering) and Amanda Almon (biomedical art and visualization), the group has spent almost a year developing a V.R. experience to educate visitors about the ghetto. Expected to open next year at the South Jersey Technology Park, the experience also will be available virtually so that anyone—anywhere—can learn about the lives lived, and lost, during the Holocaust.⁴¹

The *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* is in the process of developing a similar project. And

[t]hrough the projects are different, the results of the interviews, focus groups and written feedback about them were remarkably similar. Teachers who viewed the recreated spaces from the Warsaw Ghetto were enthusiastic, because many had struggled to engage all learners in their (often brief) units about the Holocaust.⁴²

In both of these projects, educators are utilizing material culture in a virtual setting. They do not disturb or use any physical material remains but, rather, rely on technological advances.

However, this method comes with its own set of unique shortcomings. Material culture places heavy emphasis on the physical objects themselves. While virtual and digital tools facilitate the viewing of these objects, the tangibility of the items is lost. With technology becoming more advanced and at a faster rate, the appeal of utilizing features like virtual reality is understandable. Digitization can look different depending on the artifact. For a flat piece of paper, it is as simple as scanning the document, whereas more complex artifacts require 3D renderings (assuming the goal is to extend beyond an uploaded photograph of said artifacts). Since this is such a new area of study in the greater scheme of educational research as well as Holocaust studies, there is a gap in the literature on this specific topic. It would certainly be a great benefit to educators to have more options when teaching the Holocaust, especially options that are more engaging to students.

There are other projects that focus on specific concentration camp sites, like Treblinka. According to Caroline Sturdy Colls, a new digital project

will provide a sustainable educational resource, which can be used by members of the public, teachers, students, and researchers. Based around a 360-degree tour of Treblinka and a catalogue of the materials uncovered during archaeological research, this resource creates a virtual environment that incorporates the history of Treblinka as an extermination and labour camp landscape, alongside information concerning its post-war history, which includes of course the archaeological research undertaken there.⁴³

⁴¹ "Exceptionally Driven," *Rowan Today*, May 7, 2020, [online](#).

⁴² Jennifer Rich, Michael Haley Goldman and Sara Pitcairn, "Opinion: How Best Do We Teach Kids about Holocaust Horrors? Show Them What It Was Like," *The Hechinger Report*, July 26, 2021, [online](#).

⁴³ Colls, "Uncovering a Painful Past," 44.

The growing demand for accessible and reliable educational materials regarding the Holocaust and concentration camp history has found itself at an intersection between the use of material culture and digital history.

These projects are innovating the way in which the Holocaust is taught in schools and, most importantly, are doing so in a respectful and responsible manner. Projects like this do rely on material cultural items that have been previously excavated, which implies a dependence on archaeological projects at concentration camps. Virtual projects like these appeal to the desire to have tangible pieces of history without having to physically obtain the respective remains. They provide an alternative to the desire for physical remains and artifacts without encroaching on sacred spaces. These V.R. projects also integrate the want and need for innovative educational tools in a museum setting.

The issue of systemic ignorance regarding the Holocaust and Holocaust education in the United States stems from a lack of standardized Holocaust education across all U.S. states. In recent years, more states have proposed legislation to integrate Holocaust education into their public-school curricula. While this is a step in the right direction, it will take years for researchers to properly gauge how effective these policies and curricular requirements are. Without more immediate action that addresses the lack of understanding about the Holocaust and levels of antisemitism in the country, researchers are in an awkward state of limbo while waiting for more data. This is not to discredit the trend to integrate Holocaust education into public-school curricula, but it is not an immediate solution, and there is no immediate solution that would curb antisemitism. By advancing new methods, like virtual reality, in Holocaust and genocide education, students can learn about material culture without the burden of relying on physical excavations.

Researchers are certainly aware of the systematic ignorance with regard these “hard histories,” as exemplified by the Canadian government and their response, or lack thereof, toward Indigenous people’s history, or by the treatment of Jewish history in Harbin, China. By examining how other governments and societies recognize tragedy and how they prioritize memory within their cultures, new methods can be introduced to the United States and its public memory of past atrocities. A better understanding of how collective and contemporary memory of atrocities—like the Holocaust—works can assist educators, researchers, and policymakers in realizing the importance of Holocaust memory and history.

History holds a great place in contemporary society and memory. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that memory holds more weight and social influence than history. There have been recent surges in antisemitic behavior and ideology both in the United States and around the globe. While this does not directly touch on Holocaust and genocide education, especially the use of material culture, it does exemplify a shift in cultural understanding. These instances reflect our societies and cultures, and education plays a crucial role in forming cultures and cultural understandings. History that is taught in schools or in a formal

educational setting, like museums, plays a major role in shaping collective memory. The recent politicization and rise in right-wing extremism have proven to play an even larger role in shaping collective memory throughout our society. To counteract this, especially at a time when the world is increasingly enamored with technology, educators should embrace new opportunities to make historical reality virtual, thereby more accessible, and – ultimately – a transformative force for good.

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