



# EmoryReport

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## Panel analyzes museums and violence

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What role and responsibility do museums have when it comes to exhibitions that deal with the harm people do to one another? That was the topic of the panel discussion, “Displaying Violence: Museums and the Politics of Representation,” held Nov. 5 in the Carlos Museum reception hall.

The event centered around three exhibits and/or museums: the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington; the “Without Sanctuary” exhibit of lynching photographs currently on display at Atlanta’s Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site; and a new photography exhibit in Schatten Gallery, “A Long Look Homeward,” which chronicles the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet from 1950 to the present.

The panel featured five Emory scholars and one visitor. Paul Courtright, professor of Asian studies, moderated. In order of their addresses, the other Emory participants were Bonnie Speed, new director of the Carlos Museum; Randall Burkett, African American studies bibliographer in Special Collections; Deborah Lipstadt, Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish and Holocaust Studies; and Ivan Karp, director of the Center for the Study of Public Scholarship. Also speaking was Michael Ginguld, former director of the Tibet Museum in Dharamsala, India.

Each speaker touched on the particular exhibit or museum with which he or she was most familiar, except for Speed, who opened the panel with her views on museums as thought-provoking, educational institutions. Too often lately they have become “museums of consensus,” Speed said, offering only material that is likely to appeal to the most—or offend the fewest—viewers. She cited the furor over the Smithsonian’s 1995 “Enola Gay” exhibit as evidence.

“How do museums prove their worth today?” Speed asked. “Attendance. Never mind that attendance has nothing to do with enlightenment. It’s not how many or how long are the museum visits; it’s how valuable are those visits?”

Burkett described in detail the long and painstaking process by which James Allen's and John Littlefield's collection of lynching photographs (on permanent loan to Special Collections) came to be exhibited first at a small private gallery in Manhattan, then at the larger New York Historical Society, then at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh and finally—with a great deal of help from Emory—in Atlanta at the MLK National Historic Site.

Burkett didn't draw a direct connection, but ever since the photographs were first publicly shown in 2000, he said there has been an "explosion" of scholarly research on lynching and racial violence.

Lipstadt, who served as an advisor to the creation of the Holocaust Museum, talked about its "skewed" architecture—features such as a skylight of barely uneven panels and stairways that narrow like railroad tracks in perspective—that is intended to leave visitors feeling curiously, almost subconsciously, uneasy.

"I was in the building many times but couldn't articulate these things," Lipstadt said. "Things are just somehow askew."

Ginguld said that, unlike the events depicted in the Holocaust museum or the "Without Sanctuary" exhibit, the occupation of Tibet is an ongoing situation. In exhibits that deal with violent oppression, he said, designers and curators are remiss if they pay attention only to one side.

"You're trying to affirm identities and reconcile the feelings of the oppressed and the oppressors—but what do you do with the oppressors?" Ginguld said. "If you don't give them an avenue [for expression], you don't have reconciliation."

Finally, Karp talked about the Holocaust Museum and why it is successful even though it is very "authoritarian"—visitors are directed around the space in a designed, deliberate fashion—and goes against his own views of how a museum should be structured. He spoke particularly of one room, full of thousands of shoes formerly worn by victims of Nazi concentration camps.

"First, there is the immensity of the situation that is implied, and then there is the musty smell of these old shoes," Karp said. "This is where the museum 'hit me.' My reaction and response was not just a visual experience, but a broad sensory array on the one hand, and then a reaction of the whole person on the other."

Karp also commented on the delicate negotiations involved in bringing "Without Sanctuary" to Atlanta, saying that not a single potential corporate sponsor in town even replied to the first appeal for support. Karp compared the situation to that of Birmingham, Ala., which hosts the National Civil Rights Museum.

“How is it,” Karp asked, “that ‘Bombingham,’ a city associated with some of the worst racial violence this country has ever seen, can see its way to building a museum dedicated to civil rights, while in ‘The City Too Busy to Hate,’ an exhibit like [“Without Sanctuary”] has to be brought about by walking on eggshells?”