

## Introduction

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### Essential Museums

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*Sarah Pharaon*

Years ago, while talking with Elizabeth Silkes, executive director of the International Coalition of the Sites of Conscience, the organization's founder, Ruth Abram, expressed her dismay with our field's pursuit of relevance. To be relevant, she argued, was short selling our potential. Instead, Abram posited, museums and historic sites needed to make themselves essential to the lives of their visitors and, moreover, to the health of their communities. Some might argue it's a matter of semantics, but to be essential in someone's life, in the life of a community, implies not only that a community cannot function as well without us, but that we as institutions will be there when we are most needed. It requires that we do what is often most important when people are hurting. We need to show up. Reliably. Quickly.

The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, founded in 1999, is a worldwide network of places of memory—museums, historic sites, memorials, or memory initiatives—that confront both the history of what happened in these places and their contemporary legacies. Sites of Conscience, like the Levine Museum of the New South and President Lincoln's Cottage, both of whose experiences are discussed here, foster public dialogue on social issues to build lasting cultures of human rights. Since its founding, the Coalition has grown to include almost 240 member sites in fifty-five countries. Each of these sites combine practices of documentation, reflection, and dialogue to catalyze communities to identify and address shared tensions, laying the foundation necessary for community members to repair the social fabric through personal and collective action.

At the 2017 American Association for State and Local History annual meeting, I participated on behalf of the Coalition in a session titled "Rapidly Responding to Events in Our Communities," along with staff from Coalition member sites President Lincoln's Cottage, who described programming put into place in response to the presidential election of 2016, and the Levine Museum of the New South, who shared their experience developing an exhibition to respond to the September 2016 uprisings in Charlotte, North Carolina. Their work is featured here alongside that of the Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando, Florida,

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the collecting institution for the Pulse Nightclub Massacre, whose chief curator was in attendance at the session.

These institutions remind us that essential museums cannot say we don't have the time or that our staff is swamped. Both of those are inevitably and systemically true. The staff of the Orange County Regional History Center did not have the time, yet for months after the shooting at the Pulse, staff and volunteers collected and catalogued over six thousand objects from four separate memorial sites.

Essential museums cannot say that we don't have space in our buildings or in our exhibition schedule. The Levine Museum of the New South has one changing gallery in which they opened *K(NO)W Justice K(NO)W Peace*, a community-created exhibit within five months of Keith Lamont Scott's death from an officer-involved shooting.

Essential museums cannot fear being perceived as political in a world where all actions are becoming politicized. The team at President Lincoln's Cottage, opened their doors in the evening hours of November 9, 2016—offering Abraham Lincoln's space of reflection for the healing of a deeply divided country—within hours of Donald Trump's Electoral College victory.

And essential museums do not say that we can't prepare because we can't predict. There were 317 mass shootings from January to mid-November 2017.<sup>1</sup> Law enforcement officers killed 909 people from January to December 7, 2017.<sup>2</sup> There will continue to be vitriolic elections in our communities and across our nation. Our institutions value history and data more than most. We know that these events will happen again.

This is not easy work. The historians and educators who write here speak openly of their fears, of the emotional toll the work has had on themselves and their teams, and of the challenges of maintaining objectivity while doing work of the heart. Like many of us, the writers live in the communities they serve. And though all of the writers are careful to discuss the unique nature of their sites, the communities they serve, and the incidents that necessitated their institutional response, their case studies sketch out preliminary answers to the questions of "How do we best respond in the short term?" and "How do we prepare in the long term to do better the next time?" In doing so, they are beginning to lay the ground work of a rapid-response plan to take care of our most essential asset—people.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Gun Violence Archive, a mass shooting is described as four or more individuals being shot or killed in the same general time and location; see <http://www.shootingtracker.com/>. Also Courtland Jeffrey, "Mass Shootings in the U.S.: 317 Mass Shootings Have Occurred in 2017 So Far," ABC15 Arizona, <http://www.abc15.com/news/data/mass-shootings-in-the-u-s-over-270-mass-shootings-have-occurred-in-2017>.

<sup>2</sup> See "Fatal Force," *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2017/>.

*Sarah Pharaon*, senior director of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, leads Coalition efforts in building a global community of practice across the fields of museum studies, public history, human rights, and transitional justice. She directs the Coalition's work in North America specifically on issues of immigration, race, education equity, and mass incarceration and has led two national dialogue initiatives, "From Brown v. Board to Ferguson" and the "National Dialogues on Immigration." Prior to her work at the Coalition, Sarah worked as director of education at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and was the founding curator of the Arab American National Museum. She is a consulting expert on dialogue and community engagement for the National Park Service and serves on the Leadership Council for the American Association of State and Local History.