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Precarious Memory in the Post-Axial Age: The Structures of Feeling in Human Rights Museums

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Abstract

This paper locates itself in a "post-Axial age," extending Karl Jaspers's Axial Age thesis to read our moment of climate collapse, nuclear precarity, geopolitical volatility, and neoliberal governance. Human rights museums are recast not as repositories of artifacts but as laboratories for emergent "structures of feeling" in Raymond Williams's sense. Centring on the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (HPMM), the paper traces a specific museology organized around two entwined tropes: finality and afterlife. Finality names the "zero-hour" of atomic detonation and instantaneous incineration as scenes of irrevocable closure and temporal rupture. Afterlife figures Hiroshima as dialectical testimony in which annihilation at once obliterates and sanctifies survival, transcendence, and hope, crystallized in the *hibakusha* as bearer of "sacred memory." Treating memory as impossible, haunting resonance, the HPMM stages vulnerability at the edge of times and activates its spaces as affective arenas of what I call "negative justice museology," whose "negative aesthetics" force visitors to confront the precarious moral terrain of the present.

Keywords: precarity, post-Axial age, structures of feeling, negative justice museology, tropes of finality and afterlife

An Imagined Site

The visitor enters through a door that is not quite a door—more like a pause in the wall where the concrete simply stops pretending to be whole. The hallway ahead curves left, then doubles back, and you think of the testimonies you have heard about how survivors would start with the taste of bread and end with the color of atomic ash. The lights here flicker not because they are broken but because someone decided darkness, too, could teach. When the lights cut out, you find yourself holding your breath—not from fear but from recognition. This is how memory works in the aftermath, isn't it? The way it appears and vanishes, leaving you grasping at what the incinerated once knew. A sound comes from somewhere—or maybe everywhere. It could be rain on rubble or it could be the last conversation before the flash. You cannot tell the difference, which perhaps is the point. The victims once said the body remembers what the mind refuses, and now you understand they meant places like this.

Between the exhibitions, there are gaps. Not absences exactly, but spaces where entire cities used to be. In one, a mirror catches your eye, and for a moment you see your face reflected among shadows that could be the remains of those who became light itself. Their testimonies begin quietly, voices speaking over and under each other like radiation finding its way through the open air. A directional speaker traces slowly across the gallery, repeating a single line in multiple languages; the moving beam of sound creates the sensation of testimony wandering, lost, always just out of reach. A child describes the morning the sky caught fire. A pilot explains why he did not look down when he dropped the payload. Their words do not align into neat passages of meaning. Instead, they pool and scatter, the way the fallout does when it meets the wind.

You stop at an exhibition booth where a warning sign appears: "This contains accounts of radiation sickness." You could walk away. The museum offers this kindness—the choice to not know everything at once. But you stay, the same way you stay when the atomic survivors

speak of their keloid scars, their voices growing smaller with each remembered degree of heat. In the central room, objects rest in cases lit too brightly. A fragment of a concrete slab with a human shadow burned into it in extreme heat. A paper crane folded by hands that shook from cellular damage. These things are not symbols of anything larger than themselves. They are simply what remains when matter betrays itself.

You think of the *hibakusha*, the atomic bomb's so-called survivors, how they could never describe the flash straight, always approaching from the corners of what the bomb had taken. Voices continue in languages you almost recognize—the rhythm of Japanese mixed with something that could be Korean, could be the sound of any people trying to say the unsayable before the atoms split. You catch fragments: "The taste of metal in the air." "My son's school bell." Words that float and sink before you can hold them. On one wall, dosimeter readings scroll endlessly—not just of the dead, but of their contaminated neighborhoods, their irradiated playgrounds, the radiation levels where the last children played before the sirens. You look for patterns, for something to make sense of the mathematics of the nuclear fallout. There are none. This is how physics fails us in the face of loss. The final room asks a question you have been avoiding: "What will you carry from here?" Below, journals wait with their blank pages, patient as the empty spaces where human shadows once marked the pavement. You think of the atomic survivors again, how they never told the whole story at once but parceled it out in recipes for treating burns, and in their silences when the scientists asked about the moment of impact.

Leaving the museum the way you entered, you are quietly changed. On the street, the sun continues its ordinary work of lighting what remains of the world, and you marvel at how it does this even now, even knowing what so-called humanity learned to do with mass murder. Your hands smell faintly of the building's concrete dust. This too is a kind of witnessing. Later, someone will ask what the museum was like. You will struggle to answer, the way the *hibakusha* struggle to

describe their city becoming light. Some things resist translation.

Human Rights Museums in the Post-Axial Age

In the late summer of 2025, I, along with a group of humanities scholars from my university, went on a week-long writing retreat. The environment of the retreat was so inspiring; there I formulated my ideas for this paper, in the calm, quiet space of the retreat, while Gaza burnt, while Ukraine recorded its deadliest month for civilians in September with more than 200 killed and over 1,000 injured, while Sudan faced the world's largest humanitarian crisis with over 30 million people needing aid and famine spreading across multiple regions, while Myanmar's Rohingya refugees marked seven years of displacement with over one million still living in overcrowded camps in Bangladesh, and on and on.

In this paper, I attempt to undertake a reckoning at the unsettling crossroads of memory, violence, and loss troubled by the ruins of a world unravelling beyond mere critique. I will traverse the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (HPMM)—one of the most iconic spaces forged through a certain pedagogy of trauma that nonetheless speaks through the idiom of human rights, that is, a public institution that contains the torturous mix of suffering with commemoration and social learning, despair with empowerment and even hope. At this site, human rights were not simply violated but extinguished, flickering briefly before being consumed in flames. It is a site that summons the visitors into an abyssal encounter with loss while mixing with the very idea of an afterlife, leaving many unresolved questions at a confusing crossroads of fractured memory politics that utter hope and hopelessness in the same breath. Moreover, beyond the museum walls lies the broader, more harrowing context of the contemporary era, often spoken of as "end times," where the crises of injustice and precarity unravel into something far graver—an epoch in which the very fabrics of human decency, morality, and survival are fraying

at the seams.[1] Against this catastrophic backdrop, human rights museums emerge not as repositories of memory but as sites where contestation and care intersect—spaces that insist, through their very curatorial practices, on the possibility of justice even as its foundations crumble. I propose reading these institutions through the lens of "negative justice": a mode of societal "negative learning" structured not by aspirational narratives of progress but by affective attachments to what remains—the fragments, silences, and ethical imperatives that persist within post-apocalyptic imaginaries.

These "structures of feeling" envelop the museum visitor in a pedagogical practice centered on the irresolvable: the simultaneity of human rights advocacy and their ongoing violation, the memorial impulse and its inevitable insufficiency, the demand for accountability in an age of systemic failure. To understand human rights museums as sites of negative justice is to pursue three interconnected ends: (1) to explain the HPMM as a site of public pedagogy about difficult/impossible memories and care; (2) to feel the trauma of "the end of human rights" within the very walls of a type of cultural institution dedicated to their preservation and public education; and therefore (3) to rethink human rights museums (HRMs) as sites of "the dialectics of hope" for "end times apocalypse." I hope to accomplish these in this paper.

In a more normative sense, HRMs have emerged in recent decades as vital cultural institutions situated at the intersection of memory, law, culture, and governance,[2] reflecting a profound institutional shift in how states and societies engage with human rights—no longer confined to legal standards and political activism, but increasingly materialized as lived, affective memories demanding public reckoning and education. Governments, urban policymakers, and cultural institutions are deploying museums, exhibitions, and galleries to translate abstract legal concepts into accessible social practices—what I have termed the "culturalization of human rights."[3] This strategic response to contemporary social conflicts aims to foster popular

understandings of rights and justice through culturally resonant narratives and memorials.

HRMs thereby redefine the social purpose of museums themselves, expanding their remit from custodians of heritage to active agents in cultural governance.[4] This transformation necessitates new museological practices—"human rights museology"—that foreground social justice and public empowerment. Yet this institutional expansion is neither neutral nor uncontested. Following Tony Bennett's Foucauldian analysis that museums are active participants in governing cultural and social behaviors,[5] HRMs must be understood as operating at the fraught interface between state agendas and public memory: they negotiate how governments seek to shape collective remembrance, even as they serve publics' interests in acknowledging painful histories and pressing for social transformation. This dual positioning renders HRMs politically complex institutions—what museum studies scholars term "museums of negative memory" or "museums of conscience" that contest dominant narratives by centering injustice, violence, and exclusion.[6]

The global consolidation of HRMs reflects the force of the "Never Again" imperative following atrocities. The "Never Again" imperative following global atrocities—from the Holocaust to Rwanda to Cambodia—has catalyzed transnational collaborations among HRMs. This principle, originally emerging from Holocaust survivors at liberated concentration camps in 1945 and subsequently institutionalized in memorial sites worldwide, has evolved into a universalized pledge against all forms of genocide.[7] The International Federation of Human Rights Museums (FIHRM), established in 2010, now encompasses over 90 members across 35 countries. This transnational network underscores HRMs as interconnected sites for mobilizing peace and justice internationally, fostering knowledge exchange on museum aesthetics, management, and urban policy.

Fundamentally, HRMs operate in a contentious terrain.[8] Museum managers and curators have increasingly recognized that museums

are being reimagined as catalysts for social advocacy and activism—sometimes in direct opposition to the state actors whose collections historically served to demonstrate institutional power. Within the late modern museological turn toward inclusion and diversity, museums are evolving into settings where publics are empowered to address violations of human rights.[9] This shift stems from a liberal theory of social intervention that repositions museums from banal apolitical institutions to what Robert Janes calls "key agents in civil society."[10] Scholars such as Richard Sandell, Amy Sodaro, and Jennifer Orange have theorized this transformation as the rise of the "issues-based museum" or "activist museum"—institutions seeking to fundamentally transform both the societal role of public museums and the professional practices of curators and managers.[11]

Post-Axiality

We find ourselves positioned beyond what might be termed the "post-Axial age," a conceptual horizon that both extends and transcends German philosopher Karl Jaspers's seminal Axial Age thesis. Jaspers developed and introduced his Axial Age thesis in the late 1930s, with the term "Achsenzeit" (Axial Age) appearing in his writings by around 1941. He elaborated on the concept in his 1949 (republished in 2010) book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (*The Origin and Goal of History*).[12] The thesis is interesting for a critical conjunctural analysis in a number of ways. The Axial Age framework (a) identified a transformative historical epoch (roughly between 800 and 200 BCE); (b) introduced axiality as a critical turning point in epistemological shifts (by separating pre-modern mythic worldviews from modern rational and moral consciousness); and most importantly, (c) proposed a simultaneous emergence of transformative philosophical and spiritual developments across multiple, widely disparate civilizations (during which diverse civilizations spreading across Persia, India, China, the Levant, and Greece gave rise to foundational spiritual

and philosophical developments independently but synchronously). Epistemologically, the thesis joined philosophy, history, religion, and sociology to offer a broad framework for understanding sweeping cultural transformations beyond simple historical narratives.

This framework proves particularly generative when extended to contemporary transformations. Ken Baskin and Dmitri Bondarenko's *The Axial Ages of World History: Lessons for the 21st Century* draws a compelling comparison between the original Axial Age (800–200 BCE) and the era of Modernity (1500 CE to the present), portraying both as pivotal epochs of profound social, cultural, and technological transformation.[13] Each period arose in response to escalating complexity within societies, necessitating new modes of thought, governance, and social organization. Baskin and Bondarenko identify a set of recurring patterns during these axial ages, including political fragmentation, social experimentation rooted in foundational narratives, intensified warfare, the rise of new philosophical and spiritual worldviews, continuous adaptation of evolving narratives to meet new challenges, and the eventual formation of empires or large-scale social systems. These interconnected dynamics are complex, not reducible to simple cause-and-effect, and serve as disruptive transitional phases amidst longer stable periods in history. Looking toward the present and future, Baskin and Bondarenko contend that twenty-first-century crises—whether social, ecological, or physical—reflect ongoing tensions between the imperatives of order and the inevitability of relentless change, intensified by globalization and rapid increases in systemic complexity.

There have been other notable philosophical formulations that address historical discontinuity, rupture, or great transformation.[14] But the Axial Age thesis, while somewhat controversial, is most interesting for a critical conjunctural analysis.[15] It aligns with conjunctural analysis's emphasis on understanding the balance of power and the dynamic interplay between social forces within specific historical contexts.[16] Moreover, the thesis has inspired subsequent scholars to

explore multiple axial ages (the Second Axial Age, the Third Axial Age, and so on)[17] or to identify ongoing axial-like transformations, seeking to understand the complexity and precarity inherent in such transformative moments and to dissect how contradictions between existing and emerging worldviews, alongside political fragmentations, interact to produce long-lasting shifts—a perspective central to understanding and intervening in contemporary crises.

I argue that human rights museums operate as distinctly "axial" institutions in post-Axial times—sites where the epistemological work of the original Axial Age is recapitulated and intensified under conditions of contemporary precarity. Just as the Axial Age represented a civilizational rupture, marked by the simultaneous emergence of universal moral principles and new worldviews that fundamentally challenged existing power structures and social orders, HRMs function as transformative conjunctures where historical injustices, human suffering, and systemic violence are simultaneously excavated, mourned, and reframed as catalysts for ethical renewal. The parallel is almost precise: both moments produce what might be called "axiality in crisis"—instances when societies must radically reconceive their moral and political foundations because inherited frameworks have become untenable.

What distinguishes HRMs as axial institutions is that they do not merely preserve narratives of past atrocity; rather, they instrumentalize memory as a pedagogical force that makes the universal principles of human dignity and equality *epistemically available* to contemporary publics, rendering them intelligible not as abstract ideals but as urgent imperatives born from concrete historical failures. In this sense, HRMs perform the same civilizational work as the original Axial Age philosophers and contemporary thinkers like Baskin and Bondarenko: they interrupt existing moral common sense, expose the contingency of current social arrangements, and insist upon the necessity of ethical and political transformation. In this way, HRMs function as what we might call laboratories of moral reconstruction—spaces where

societies practice difficult care in the axial dynamics of historical transformation.

Our current conjuncture—what has been called the post-Axial age—denotes a rupture and rearticulation beyond earlier paradigm shifts. Far from the focus on more or less uniform moral consciousness, post-axiality signals the appearance of multiple apocalyptic forces unprecedented in scale and complexity: accelerating climate collapse that threatens planetary systems, nuclear precarity that maintains the possibility of existential annihilation, escalating geopolitical volatility marked by multilayered conflicts and power realignments, and the totalizing reach of neoliberal governance that permeates economic, social, and cultural life with pervasive market logics and systemic inequalities. In this light, HRMs in the twenty-first century occupy a singularly urgent position in the post-Axial age. Indeed, no more mere sites of commemoration, these museums must become dynamic platforms for public ethics, collective memory, and civic activism, serving as living laboratories for rearticulating the Axial Age's enduring questions—about human responsibility, the possibility of transcendence, and the foundations of moral community—in the face of planetary-scale precarity.[18] This contemporary conjuncture signals not merely a continuation but a profound transformation in the human condition and world order—where the foundational questions posed in the Axial Age about human existence, ethics, and transcendence now unfold in an era of profound urgency and precarity.[19] The post-Axial age therefore reflects a historical juncture in which the spiritual and intellectual legacies of the Axial Age confront the challenges of late modernity's deep crises, beckoning new epistemic and ethical re-orientations.

The gravitas of this conjunctural demand is that we engage critically not only with the historical legacies that shape our present but also with the emergent "structures of feeling" that define collective sensibilities amid these crises. As Raymond Williams posited, such affective structures orient how societies collectively sense, emotionally

invest in, and respond to their historical moment.[20] In the post-Axial age, HRMs do not merely exhibit the artifacts and histories of trauma; they embody the very structures of feeling that shape how societies collectively experience and process those traumatic histories. Through carefully designed narratives, emotional engagement, and spatial arrangements, these museums actively inhabit and express the shared sensibilities—such as outrage, empathy, moral urgency, and solidarity—that underlie communal understanding of justice, suffering, and human rights. But how exactly do HRMs transform visitors from passive spectators into participants immersed in the affective frameworks of post-axiality, in other words, *feeling* the apocalypse? How does this embodiment of "end times" structures of feeling position the HRMs as an analytical space for grappling with the multifaceted pressures that characterize our time—where inherited modernities intersect with planetary-scale precarity and proliferating vulnerabilities?

Feeling "Negative Justice": Toward a New Museology

By immersing visitors in the "end-times" sensibility of our planetary precarity, the charged affective design of post-Axial HRMs lays the crucial groundwork for a more exacting political project: one that channels the collective structures of feeling into a rigorous discipline I call "negative justice museology." By shifting from an emphasis on cathartic encounter to an insistence on the uncompromising presentation of past harms, I am thinking of a negative justice museology that can furnish the museological grammar needed to translate visceral engagement into a sustained ethical encounter. Specifically, I suggest that the negative justice museology adopts a political stance that refuses facile reconciliation to enact a "negative aesthetics" of struggle—one that acknowledges ongoing conflict as essential to preserving the future possibility of hope. In many ways, I am imagining a Nietzschean political project for HRMs, one rooted

in what Nietzsche termed the necessity of a "revaluation of values,"[21] wherein museums become sites of intellectual courage where visitors confront unvarnished, painful historical realities not as pathways to comfort or closure, but as rigorous exercises in moral cognition that demand perpetual ethical vigilance. Precisely through this unflinching confrontation with unvarnished truths—what Nietzsche insisted upon as the prerequisite for genuine cultural and spiritual transformation—such an approach might reshape HRMs' pedagogy of truth and justice in "end times."

To operate within the political space of negative justice, HRMs need to articulate their claims to truth, justice, peace, and reconciliation through a meticulous exposé of domination, exploitation, and violence rather than through a straightforward celebration of normative ideals. The point is hardly that the museums have no positive idea of representing justice, truth, peace, or reconciliation, but that any such representation would have been crucially shaped by negativity, such as domination, exploitation, and violence. In practice, HRMs—especially those conceived "in the national interest"—often feel compelled to temper or sugar-coat state and societal failings so as not to alienate official stakeholders or broad publics.[22] At the core of a negative justice museology lies a radical redefinition of justice itself: justice is first and foremost the refusal to conceal harm or to offer facile redemption. Rather than presenting justice as an aspirational project of future institutions, negative justice demands rigorous non-maleficence and an unrelenting spotlight on past injustices, however uncomfortable.[23] In this way, an HRM's curatorial program transforms from an ideological affirmation of national unity into an active interrogation of how violence has determined the current social and political orders. Building on the Nietzschean conviction that genuine growth arises from confrontation with harsh realities, a negative justice museology therefore embraces a pedagogy of discomfort. Educators and designers structure museum encounters around disturbing artifacts—unvarnished testimonies, fragmentary archives, and stark

statistical displays—eschewing narrative closure in favor of sustained moral questioning.[24] By resisting the temptation to console visitors with tidy resolutions, HRMs seek to foster deeper critical reflection and prevent premature closure on historical wounds.

A negative justice museology is brutalist; it positions the HRM itself as an uncompromising political actor. This human rights museology takes the dark, painful past not as a regrettable liability to be glossed over, but as the very foundation of educational truth and justice.[25] In her influential book *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, anthropologist Sharon Macdonald examines how the city of Nuremberg, a place deeply linked with Nazism, grappled with the legacy of perpetrating atrocity and how contemporary identities are shaped around difficult pasts that many wish to forget.[26] In an essay a few years later titled "Is difficult heritage still difficult," Macdonald reminds us that:

> difficult heritage in the sense of publicly acknowledging crimes in one's own history is becoming more prevalent and internationalised, and regarded as a positive development for contemporary identity. Even so, it remains fraught with problems over how to best achieve this, in particular, how to do so without deploying containment of various forms. This is a major challenge for museum and heritage professionals.[27]

In this way, the museum has become a growing challenge to dominant nationalist narratives and a catalyst for ongoing engagement of the conscience—approaching the kind of forceful, transformative intervention that Nietzsche envisioned when he urged a confrontation with reality as the precondition for genuine cultural renewal. In adopting negative justice as a coherent, robust political project, HRMs can activate a shared structure of feeling marked by moral urgency, insurgent empathy, and the tension between despair and the will to persevere. This charged affective framework—simultaneously

unsettling and galvanizing—lays the groundwork that can harness collective structures of feeling to fuel a disquieting experience.

In the following, I attempt to enact an experience of "negative justice" for the readers by journeying through the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (HPMM). Specifically, I suggest that through the lens of negative justice as post-Axial learning, we read the museum through "negative aesthetics" to offer a structure of feeling organized around two interwoven tropes: finality and the afterlife.

Feeling the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum

The atomic bomb that tore through the skies 580 meters above central Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, was not merely a weapon of mass destruction—it was a cataclysmic rupture in human history that obliterated a vibrant city and claimed the lives of some 140,000 people within months. In the aftermath, amid the ashes and silence, Japan grappled with how to channel collective grief into meaningful action. In its wake, the city enacted the Hiroshima Peace Memorial City Construction Law of 1949, which was more than a reconstruction effort; it was a provocative declaration from a society unwilling to let this horror fade into forgetfulness. Garnering overwhelming consent from over 90 percent of voters in Japan's first-ever public referendum, it revealed a noble resolve to confront the horror and transform suffering into a platform for peace.[28] The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, born from this mandate, refuses to be just a somber warehouse of relics. Instead, it dares visitors to face the unbearable truth of nuclear devastation and compels the world to reckon with an irreversible apocalypticism cast by atomic weapons.

When the museum opened its doors in 1955, it was under the leadership of Shogo Nagaoka. The museum later came under the directorship of Akihiro Takahashi in 1979, himself an atomic bomb survivor, whose personal experience as a *hibakusha* lent profound authenticity to the museum's mission during his tenure.[29] The initial

exhibitions were humble—simple displays of scattered artifacts, photographs, and the belongings of victims, painstakingly collected by Hiroshima's citizen volunteers. These early efforts to catalog and exhibit the remnants of destruction were complemented by occasional survivor testimonies, creating a solemn space that invited visitors and students to bear witness to the horrors endured. As the city of Hiroshima and its museum evolved, so too did the narrative conveyed, reflecting shifting historical, political, and social dynamics. A significant renovation from 1973 to 1975 expanded the museum's space, allowing it to accommodate a growing collection fueled by continuous private donations. The renewed museum, reopened in 1994, introduced two interconnected buildings—the West and East Buildings—each taking a distinct approach to the story of Hiroshima.[30] The West Building immerses visitors in the visceral, emotional aftermath of the bombing, emphasizing the immense human suffering through displays of personal effects, photographs, and graphic descriptions of phenomena like "black rain." It paints a harrowing picture of the immediate catastrophe, seeking to evoke empathy and a sense of the lived experience of victims. In contrast, the East Building contextualizes Hiroshima's history before and after the bombing, tracing its origins as a fishing village, its wartime role as a strategic military port, and the rationale behind its selection as an atomic target. The narrative broadens from the particularities of Hiroshima to a universal call for peace and anti-nuclear activism, positioning the city as a symbol of hope and resistance. Yet this portrayal is not without controversy; Japan's responsibility in initiating and perpetuating the Pacific War is only marginally addressed and often veiled in passive language. This selective recounting reflects ongoing tensions, turning the museum into a controversial site where political agendas, the quest for reconciliation, and selective memory intersect.

Entering

As visitors step into the West Building, they are immediately enveloped by a suffocating silence that hangs heavily in the air, steeped in the residue of lives erased. The dim corridors stretch ahead like wounds that refuse to heal, each hesitant footstep a fragile intrusion into a space where absence dominates. Here, negative aesthetics shape every moment—this is no sanctuary, no place for comfort or redemption, but a raw, unflinching confrontation with the void left where entire lives and futures were incinerated in an instant.

Near the entrance, visitors encounter the haunting image of a watch frozen at 8:15—the exact moment of the bomb's detonation.

Its stopped hands hold time captive, refusing to move beyond annihilation. This frozen instant marks the beginning of a journey through the museum's transformed spaces, where walls painted in deep black and somber grey swallow visitors into persistent gloom.

Figure 1. Watch frozen at 8:15 a.m., Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, West Building entrance. Source: Photo by author.

Figure 2. Black and grey interior, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, West Building. Source: Photo by author.

Spotlights isolate each artifact, illuminating fragile remnants while casting shadows, with white text sharply contrasting against the dark background, forcing a focused engagement with the harrowing narratives. Moving deeper inside, light is scarce and interrogative. Narrow slits in the ceiling cut thin shafts of feeble illumination that do little to dispel the darkness. These patches of light do not reveal any sense of comfort but demand acknowledgment of the surrounding shadows. Empty spaces between exhibits echo with silence as powerfully as the vitrines themselves, a stark reminder of how absence speaks as loudly as presence.

The museum itself takes on the shape of a living body—its steel beams form the skeleton, its stories the beating heart beneath glass and cold concrete. Corridors wind like veins, guiding visitors through chambers heavy with loss and memory. Light filters through windows

like lifeblood, threading deep sorrow in fragile illumination. Overhead, the arched ceiling rises like a ribcage, sheltering the profound silence that follows every whispered name. The museum's body is scarred but unbroken; its wounds remain open, singing the melancholic echoes of suffering. Visitors become cells within this living organism, carrying fragments of its story outward so that memory endures, multiplies, and resists erasure.

As visitors navigate this embodied space, they pass relics charged with unbearable weight. The melted milk bottle, once a banal vessel of daily life, now ripples in tortured glass waves, defying recognition and jolting the viewer into an embodied confrontation with violence. Nearby, vitrines encase fused and twisted metal, shards of shattered glass, and a charred schoolboy's lunchbox, transforming ordinary objects into unsettling icons of disrupted innocence. Along the way, microscopic glass beads scattered like gems along Hiroshima's shores reduce the immensity of the bombing to fragile, handheld fragments of ruin.

Nearby, the display of a watch frozen at 8:15, a repeated reminder, shows it as a witness to a moment when time itself unraveled. A silent punctuation mark, the watch stops the sentence of life mid-word. The watch does not tell time anymore, because time has been destroyed, incinerated, materially cremated in the very object of the broken watch itself. Indeed, the watch does not tell time anymore; instead, it tells loss, because the only thing gained after the bomb is loss—a terrible oxymoron. It is the only "profit" from the violent rupture of continuity, a cruel "earning" or "revenue" after the atomic blast had bankrupted temporal existence itself. To look at this watch is to feel the weight of a moment stretched into an absolute void. It is a language of stillness, where the watch's frozen hands gesture toward a motionlessness so profound that it cancels everything: the sound of ticking, the rhythm of daily life, the conversations that once filled rooms.

Further on, the charred remains of school uniforms lie on the floor like ghostly avatars of childhoods abruptly ended. Their ragged

seams and seared collars rupture the tenderness we associate with youthful rituals, confronting visitors with the brutal transmutation from innocence to finality. These garments—worn previously by mannequins that was deemed too uncanny and haunting and therefore removed—joined the disfigured artifacts as catalysts of negative aesthetics, drawing spectators into what can be called "negative learning" through an energized moral confrontation with the atrocities preserved within these walls. A little farther still, the twisted frame of a bicycle leans against the floor like a body bent by excruciating pain. This bicycle once carried a child to school. Now, it is a sculpture of violence, its metal ribs warped and blackened, its wheels bent into impossible shapes. Like the watch, the bicycle is also a silent scream, a visual cry that speaks of interrupted mobility stolen in a flash. The bicycle's twisted frame tells a story of childhoods ended before they began, of unborn future dreams aborted by the blast. It is a testament to the lives that once moved forward with hope and now lie frozen

Figure 3. Charred remains of school uniforms, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Source: Photo by author.

Figure 4. Bicycle twisted and blackened by the atomic bomb, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Source: Photo by author.

in the museum's hush. The bicycle, like the watch, becomes a letter in the alphabet of loss, demanding that we read without language, speak without speech, and narrate without stories.

Through this haunting walk through the West Building, visitors learn to listen with their eyes, breathe with their hands, see with their ears, sense with their skin, and die with their hearts—engaging every part of themselves in a choreography of a disorienting sensorium that I call "negative sensations." In another register, the destruction wrought by the atomic bomb transcends physical annihilation to obliterate human time and human language, leaving behind a jumble of unutterable silence, absence, and loss. Furthermore, in the muted, shadowed light of the museum, the artifacts pulse with an inaudible undead life. They hold the memory of everything unsayable, asking visitors to linger in the fragile space between natural, sorrowful silence

and deep, still silence—to embrace a mourning in disbelief.

In the East Building, the story broadens, positioning Hiroshima as both a particular tragedy and a universal warning. The city, recast as a global symbol of peace, embodies an idealized nobility, bearing witness not only for itself but for all humanity. Yet this universalizing gesture glosses over the complexities of historical culpability, staging a reconciliatory narrative of global peace-making that risks smothering out the jagged realities of war, aggression, and memory.[31]

Ultimately, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum constructs what can be called a "pedagogy of annihilation"—an affective architecture designed to memorialize not merely historical loss but the rupture of humanity itself at a singular, catastrophic moment. The museum's spatial choreography enacts a carefully managed descent into the abyss of August 6, 1945, such that visitors' emotional trajectory culminates not in ongoing responsibility but in confrontation with the absolute threshold of human extinction. Grief, in this structure of feeling, becomes a form of *terminal witnessing*: an encounter with the moment when the continuity of human civilization was violently arrested, when the very conditions for ethical community dissolved into nuclear flash.

Re-entering

Like the discursive journey through the museum space enacted above, Alain Resnais's important 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (with the screenplay written by Marguerite Duras) opens with the camera taking the audience through the early exhibitions of the same museum. There are many ways in which the film and the museum are bounded together. Few films have provoked the feverish critical obsession—and frustration—as *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Decades after its release, critics continue to wrestle with its cryptic meditation on memory, trauma, and the impossibility of representing atrocity. This is not a film that hands over meaning easily: its tangled narrative folds a charged,

erotic affair into the scorched ruins of Hiroshima, daring viewers to disentangle the personal from the historical. Scholars swarm around its poetic conflation of desire and destruction, seduced and unsettled by its refusal to grant closure.[32] More than just difficult, the film is willfully elusive—spurning straightforward historical retelling for a fragmented, affective language that throws its contempt at linearity and the usual comforts of historiography.[33] Its fractured temporality—those jarring flashbacks and time slips—seems almost designed to thwart any attempt at narrative mastery.[34]

At the core of the critical discourse is the film's confrontation with the limits of memory and representation: how do you show the unshowable, speak the unspeakable? Nina Varsava, among others, argues that *Hiroshima Mon Amour* exposes the impotence of both documentary and fiction to capture the bomb's horror, forcing us to contend with a deliberately broken aesthetic—narrative and visual forms shattered by the enormity of trauma.[35] In the end, the film's heady fusion of intimacy and catastrophe, and its relentless interrogation of language's failures, make it a continuous fascination for philosophers, memory scholars, and feminist theorists alike.[36] *Hiroshima Mon Amour* does not just resist interpretation—it devours it, leaving critics to circle, unsatisfied, around its haunting silences.

I have no intention to retread the well-worn paths of critical commentary that have already swarmed around *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Instead, my aim is to place the film in dialogue with the negative aesthetic practices found in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, revealing important convergences.

Resnais's film doesn't ease viewers in; it confronts them from the first frames with extreme close-ups: lovers' bodies encrusted in ash, glistening into sweat under the lights—an image that uncannily echoes the Hiroshima museum's displays, where objects are frozen in time, skin replaced by fused metal and charred cloth. In both film and museum, ash is not just residue from fire; it is a living scar at the

leftover of desire, a palpable trace that fuses memory with horror. The museum isolates the ruined normality of the everyday—twisted milk bottles, charred lunch box, blasted porcelains, blackened bicycles—while the film obsesses over flesh, concrete, and dust, turning the human body and sentient life into volatile archives. This insistence on the tactile—what Christopher Schliephake calls "dynamic material processes"—marks both as sites where trauma is written in the stubborn persistence of matter, in sweat, ash, and debris.[37]

Ash is the most delicate residue of catastrophe—what remains when fire has consumed everything: flesh, wood, and memory itself. In Hiroshima, ash is a spectral language through which loss announces itself through the exhibits of the Peace Memorial Museum and the luminous close-ups in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. When museum visitors look at the artifacts—watches stopped at 8:15, bicycles twisted out of recognition, scorched fabric, etc.—the spectral ash that coated those objects reveals a hidden presence that cannot be directly seen. Ash represents both a wound and a witness at once: it is the fragile residue of what was destroyed but refuses to disappear. Ash is also a symbol of mourning and a weight of remembrance. In Resnais's film, ash gently falls on the lovers' bodies, draping them in shimmering grief. Ash clings to both their skin and their souls, perhaps marking a fragile boundary between the touch of remembering and the flight of forgetting. Being covered in ash means carrying history's wounds and the lasting pain of what cannot be erased. Though silent, ash acts as a muted testimony that nonetheless endures when words fail, urging us to perceive with a multitude of our senses, and through our breath, our own vulnerability.

Ultimately, ash embodies a powerful paradox. Reduced to dust and decay, all things eventually pass away, yet this very residue gives rise to new, spectral possibilities. These haunting possibilities form the foundation of what I call negative justice. Traditional ideas of justice focus on repair, closure, or restoring order—but negative justice lives in what cannot be undone. It inhabits the persistent presence of

loss and refuses the comfort of easy answers or consolation. Within the museum, the burnt artifacts and their brokenness nurture a deeper, more enduring call for renewal. The justice they evoke is not about restitution or punishment; rather, it is about engaging with the remaining traces of destruction and bearing ethical witness to loss that can never be fully repaired or redeemed. Negative justice acknowledges that some wounds remain open, some absences can never be filled.[38] A museology rooted in negative justice demands that visitors confront the irreparable. It challenges them not only to recognize the limits of restoration but to carry the heavy burden of apocalyptic history without relief or closure. In both museum spaces and film, negative justice becomes a practice of holding space—allowing grief, memory, and fragile hope to coexist within the lingering presence of ash. This coexistence may even hold the possibility for peace, but it never offers a simple resolution. In this way, *negative justice reveals itself as deeply ethical.* It resists the easy temptation to "just move on," insisting instead on a continuous, uncomfortable engagement with trauma that endures silently—in real ash and in metaphorical ash alike. Through this persistent witnessing, negative justice honors the truth that some losses shape us forever, and that ethical responsibility requires never forgetting, never smoothing over, but always remaining present to the pain, memory, and complexity of trauma.

The ash in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is never inert. Under Resnais's gaze, it morphs—turning into sweat, sliding off skin, refusing to settle, glistening to eroticism—just as the museum's artifacts throb with what can only be called an undead pulse. But at the core of both film and museum lies a more corrosive tension, perfectly captured in the film's infamous refrain: "You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing." This refrain names the fundamental crisis of atrocity: the inability to see, to know, to witness, or to remember. The epistemic possibilities derived from seeing, knowing, witnessing, and remembering are all partial, always teetering on the brink of erasure.

"You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing." is the refrain that expresses the profound impossibility of truly witnessing atrocity. It is a line in the film that both accuses and mourns, circling the paradox at the heart of all catastrophic remembrance: to see is not to know, and to know is always, in some measure, to fail to know. Imagine saying to the visitors to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum: "You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing." Visitors move through the hushed galleries, eyes lingering on artifacts, with each one appearing but only as traces of obliteration, each one radiating the abrupt silencing of lives. Yet no matter how long one gazes, no matter how closely one studies the evidence, the reality of what happened in Hiroshima remains, at its core, unseeable. The museum curates fragments but it cannot restore the whole; it displays the aftermath but the lived horror of the blinding flash, the searing heat, and the instant annihilation remains out of reach, suspended between presence and absence. *In Hiroshima, we only see spectrality.*

Yet, this is where negative justice begins to take shape, through the refusal to claim that the past is accessible, that memory can be complete, or that understanding is ever total. By acknowledging the limits of empathy, the boundaries of representation, and the difficulty of standing before suffering that cannot be made whole again or fully comprehended, negative justice situates us in the gap between what is shown and what can never be seen. Put more directly, *negative justice begins to emerge through an epistemology of ash.*

No promise of restoration, ash remains the enduring trace of what has been lost but not erasable, signifying that some wounds are not meant to heal, some stories are not meant to be resolved, and some histories not meant to be fully knowable. Negative justice reminds us that what matters most often escapes the grasp of our gaze or our archives. Negative justice works with that which lingers as a residue of trauma, and then attempt to turn it into a marker of ethics, producing witness without closure, remembering without mastery, and even mourning without hope. To encounter ash-as-truth is to be confronted

with a justice that is negative in its very essence—a justice that neither redeems nor repairs, but insists on the presence of absence. This form of justice does not erase suffering or offer reconciliation, but instead holds open the wound, insisting that the void left by destruction must not be papered over or forgotten. In the ash seen in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and in the ash unseen in the artifacts in the museum, there is a call to vigilance, a reminder that memory's work is never finished and that the past resists finality. In this way, negative justice asks us to inhabit the discomfort of what cannot be resolved, and to accept the fragility of all attempts to represent or redress historical violence.

Thus, the epistemology of ash is a mode of knowing that accepts fragmentation, uncertainty, and haunting as intrinsic to understanding historical catastrophe and its aftermath. It calls for a willingness to dwell with difficulty—cultivating awareness not just of what can be seen or said, but also of what remains unseen, unspeakable, and enduring in silence. Ultimately, ash as a mode of knowing—material, fleeting, unsettled—embodies justice as a somber medium through which the unspeakable is registered as a structure of feeling. Ash's negative justice is thus a solicitation: to remain attuned to what eludes us, to honor the ungraspable, and to let the dust of memory fall—softly, relentlessly—on the skin of the present.

Where ash marks the epistemological limit—the point at which direct knowledge fails—its "afterlife" marks a beginning, what may be called a tropological beginning, when figurative imagination and ethics become necessary to navigate what literal discourse cannot contain. I suggest that both the museum and the film grapple with this same fundamental challenge: how to construct political and ethical responses to events that exceed the capacity of representation itself. Their different deployments of what I call the "afterlife of hope" reveal how aesthetic and institutional choices shape the political and ethical possibilities that emerge from encounters with radical negation.

The Afterlife of Hope

Yet against the museum's pedagogy of annihilation—its sealing off of Hiroshima as a moment of absolute rupture—emerges a second trope: the afterlife of hope. This afterlife operates not as consolation or redemption but as the stubborn persistence of ethical demand within the very feeling structures of finality itself. To theorize how this paradox functions museologically, Maurice Blanchot's literary philosophy becomes indispensable. Blanchot was concerned throughout his work with literature's capacity to preserve experiences that exceed ordinary temporal and representational structures—what he called the space of literature as distinct from communicative or instrumental language. His concept of disaster is particularly generative: disaster "ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact."[39] This formulation describes not merely philosophical abstraction but a precise phenomenological condition: certain catastrophic events destroy the very frameworks through which we comprehend experience, yet paradoxically generate entirely new modes of temporal existence and ethical address. The atomic bombing represents exactly this structure—an event designed to end all future events, yet one that created what Blanchot calls "the interminable," forms of experience that cannot be contained within normal narrative temporal structures of beginning and end.[40]

What Blanchot theorizes for literary space, the HPMM enacts for memorial space. The *hibakusha* embody Blanchot's concept of "dying without death" (*mourir sans mourir*)—they testify to what should have ended, bearing witness from a position suspended in "the time of the 'there is'" (*le temps du il y a*), characterized by the persistence of what should have ceased.[41] Just as Blanchot argued that literature preserves experiences that ordinary language cannot capture, the museum preserves testimonies and artifacts that ordinary historical narrative cannot integrate. The HPMM's curatorial choices—its dimmed galleries, sparse arrangement of objects, and refusal of narrative closure—translate Blanchot's literary strategy into spatial

and affective practice. Where Blanchot used fragmented prose, interrupted narratives, and recursive temporal structures to stage the impossibility of adequate representation, the HPMM uses architectural void, material absence, and episodic display to achieve the same end: not to communicate what happened (an impossible task) but to stage the encounter with what *cannot be adequately said or seen*. This is why Blanchot's work proves crucial for negative justice museology: both projects refuse the fantasy that catastrophic experience can be mastered, explained, or resolved through representation. Instead, they insist that certain truths can only be approached through sustained engagement with representational failure itself.

This is the work of what I have called an *epistemology of ash*: a way of knowing grounded not in recovery or restoration but in the acceptance that certain historical truths can only be accessed through fragmentation, through the acknowledgment of irreducible gaps between representation and reality. The ash in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* morphs and refuses to settle, just as the museum's artifacts throb with what can only be called an undead pulse. When the film's refrain insists "You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing," it names the fundamental epistemological crisis of atrocity: the impossibility of adequate witnessing, the inevitable failure of representation. Yet this failure—this *negation*—becomes generative. It is precisely through the acceptance that we cannot fully see, know, or comprehend what occurred that visitors encounter Hiroshima not as a closed historical chapter but as an opening toward perpetual ethical assignment to future generations.

The afterlife of hope thus operates through the HPMM as *a refusal of finality masquerading as finality*. The HPMM appears to seal off the past—the darkened galleries, the exhausted chapter, the sanctioned melancholy all suggest closure. Yet within this structure of apparent termination persists an interminable wound, an insistence that the museum contains something that cannot be contained. The fragile ash of annihilation becomes, paradoxically, the very substance through

which hope survives: not as optimism or transcendence, but as the stubborn demand that we remain responsive to what history has revealed, that we refuse to let destruction have the final word. In this sense, the afterlife of hope and the pedagogy of annihilation are not opposites but dialectical partners—the museum sustains both the recognition that humanity approached total cessation *and* the insistence that from that abyss, something essential persists and calls us to account.

Exiting

The contemporary experience of apocalypse has transformed from distant religious prophecy to an urgent, embodied condition. In our post-Axial age, end-times are no longer abstract but lived realities that reshape how communities perceive trauma, justice, and collective responsibility.[42] It is precisely against this fraught conjuncture that human rights museums emerge as axial cultural catalysts—living laboratories where the post-Axial tension between inherited universal ideals and contemporary crises is enacted and contested in real time.

Negative justice museology is indispensable for post-Axial museums precisely because it aligns curatorial and pedagogical practice with the ethical imperatives and affective realities of our time. Rather than positioning museums as sites of consolation or progressive reconciliation, negative justice museology insists that these institutions remain vital sites of what we might call transformative discomfort amid planetary precarity. Crucially, this approach acknowledges what Akira Mizuta Lippit theorizes as the epistemological crisis of atomic testimony: the atomic bomb created new forms of "avisuality"—experiences that are visual yet remain fundamentally unseen, represented only as shadows burned into concrete, X-ray impressions of vaporized bodies.[43] The museum thus faces an aesthetic impossibility: how does one exhibit hope's afterlife when the very conditions of representation have been altered by catastrophic light?

Negative justice museology responds not by attempting transparent representation but by embracing what Susan Sontag calls "the sensuous surface" of testimony—attending to the irreducible specificity of experience that resists predetermined meaning.[44]

To operationalize negative justice museology, I suggest that three intertwined curatorial strategies become essential. First, spatial disruption and architectural provocation can transform galleries into labyrinthine paths marked by dead ends, sudden shifts in light or sound, and deliberate disorientation designed to evoke the existential vertigo of historical and ecological collapse. Between exhibits, empty or semi-obscured voids serve as metaphors for erasure and the limits of representation, creating "memory gaps" that invite reflection on what cannot be fully known or shown. Mirrors embedded in display cases can implicate visitors in ongoing ethical witness, reminding them that they too are entangled with survivors' testimonies and the residues of history.

Second, fragmented multivocal narratives must resist reduction to master narratives. Survivor testimonies can appear in digital booths or audio stations where conflicting voices coexist without resolution, preserving memory's polyphony.[45] Museums must expose their own institutional choices—funding sources, curatorial framing, political pressures—acknowledging complicity and positioning the museum as a contested negotiation space rather than a site of foregone conclusions.[46] This transparency positions visitors as critical participants in the construction of meaning, not passive consumers of predetermined lessons.

Third, affective pedagogy of discomfort embraces shame, outrage, and grief as legitimate pedagogical tools rather than emotions to be managed away. Displays can be designed to favor stark, unmediated evidence: photographs of devastated communities, casualty lists, remnants of destroyed objects. Ethical care would simultaneously require trigger warnings, quiet spaces for processing, and counselling access—ensuring that discomfort fosters genuine reflection

and relational care rather than re-traumatization or spectatorial voyeurism.[47]

Through spatial provocation, multivocal storytelling, and affective pedagogy grounded in discomfort, post-Axial museums can sustain moral tension without surrendering to either despair or false hope. Visitors would navigate fragmented architectures, encounter discordant voices, and bear the weight of testimony uneasily—experiencing museums not as destinations of understanding but as thresholds where the limits of comprehension themselves become palpable. In this staged discomfort, museums shift from passive consumption sites to active participants in what we have called the work of *negative justice*: the work of refusing to let destruction have the final word, of insisting that the afterlife of hope persists precisely through our refusal to abandon the impossible demands that history places upon us.

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