

“There Are Two Sides to Every Story”: Text and Con-Text at The Mob Museum

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The Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement, better known as “The Mob Museum,” in Las Vegas, Nevada, affords a deeply conflicted rhetorical experience of text and context. On one hand, the Museum’s strict spatial structure, recurrent tropes of justice, and sensory-rich interactive exhibits promote a strongly pro-law enforcement message. On the other hand, the Museum’s con-texts, its externally contracted marketing efforts, independently designed gift shop, addition of a moonshine distillery and speakeasy called The Underground, and location in downtown Las Vegas, all work to transform organized crime into an object of spectacle, entertainment, and consumption. A closing section of the essay explores the implications of our analysis for understanding text-context relations.

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Context matters.¹ So axiomatic is this view that few, if any, critics would question its veracity or importance. Despite the widely shared acceptance of this principle, critics have nonetheless struggled to clearly delineate the relationship between texts and their contexts. What qualifies certain aspects of a rhetorical object or event as context rather than text? Rhetorical scholar Barry Brummett offers a helpful starting point for addressing this question by suggesting that: “A text is a set of signs related to each other insofar as their meanings all contribute to the same set of effects or functions.”² By extension, context might be understood as the sets of signs that circulate *around* or *adjacent* to a coherent set of signs. Setting aside for a moment the way that Brummett’s definition of texts privileges the symbolicity (and meaning) of rhetoric over and at the expense of its materiality (and affect),³ his definition affords a useful insight into the text-context relationship. In this view, context is extra-textual; its meanings and affects do not necessarily contribute to or even align with the rhetorical effects and functions of a given text. But regardless of whether a text and its context align, diverge, or something in between, all texts are situated in contexts.

The matter of text, context, and their complex relationship became especially acute when we began investigating and studying the Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement, more popularly known and referred to as “The Mob Museum,” in Las Vegas, Nevada. The Museum,

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¹ Kristan Poirot, *A Question of Sex: Feminism, Rhetoric, and Differences that Matter* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 12.

² Barry Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 34.

³ Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson, “Redefining Rhetoric: Why Matter Matters,” *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 3, no. 1 (2019): 45-81.

which opened in 2012 and was updated and expanded in 2018, explores the contentious relationship between organized crime and law enforcement. With some 370,000 visitors annually, the space is a popular tourist destination.⁴ Indeed, The Mob Museum, which welcomed its 3 millionth visitor on December 15, 2021,⁵ was selected by readers of *USA Today* as one of the 10 “Best History Museums of 2022.”⁶

The popularity of the site, whose central message clearly and consistently comes down on the side of law enforcement, strikes us as noteworthy given shifting public attitudes toward law enforcement in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd. Following Floyd’s murder, for instance, confidence in the police dropped from 53% in 2019 to 48% in 2020, though it has recovered somewhat since then.⁷ While we visited the Museum prior to the mass protests against racialized police violence in the summer of 2020, those protests and subsequent events make the study of a museum dedicated to celebrating law enforcement especially timely. Indeed, as we look back on our visit, we think that context – in particular “con-texts” that subvert the central message of The Mob Museum – not only help to explain the rhetorical workings of the space, but also its ongoing appeal.

Our aim in this essay is to identify and assess the tension between text and context at the Museum and to highlight how the rhetorical experience of the latter undercuts and, ultimately, overwhelms the former. Specifically, we argue that The Mob Museum outwardly and explicitly affirms a pro-law enforcement message as it retells the history of organized crime in the United States. The Museum strategically promotes this message through the spatial ordering of its narrative, visual depiction of judicial tropes, and highly interactive and affectively compelling law-enforcement exhibits. But, as we further contend, the adjacent context conveys a vastly different message, one that glorifies organized crime and treats the Mob as an object of pleasure and consumption. This second – con-textual – message is evident in the Museum’s externally contracted marketing, independently designed gift shop, subsequently added speakeasy and distillery, and location in “Sin City.” In short, the surrounding context powerfully contradicts and undermines the Museum’s pro-law enforcement message.

To illustrate this conflicted rhetorical process, our essay proceeds in four stages. First, we reflect on the matter of context in rhetorical and critical studies and more specifically on how it functions in relation to places of public memory. Second, we undertake a close reading of The Mob Museum, demonstrating how its central exhibition spaces and design elements foster a pro-law enforcement message. Third, we reread the Museum and its rhetorical efficacy by attending to a series of key con-textual elements, elements that are not part of the Museum proper, including its marketing, gift shop, speakeasy, and location. Fourth, we reflect on the critical importance of attending to the meanings and affects of context to understanding the rhetorical experience of a text.

⁴ “Connected to the Community,” The Mob Museum, 2018, https://themobmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/TMM_2018_CommitmenttoCommunity.pdf (retrieved September 7, 2022), 4.

⁵ “Did The Mob Museum’s Three Millionth Visitor Happen on Kefauver Day?” Anthony Curtis’ Las Vegas Advisor, 2022, <https://www.lasvegasadvisor.com/question/mob-museum-kefauver-day/> (retrieved September 7, 2022).

⁶ “Best History Museum (2022),” USA Today 10Best, March 25, 2022, <https://www.10best.com/awards/travel/best-history-museum/> (retrieved September 8, 2022).

⁷ Catherine Vitro, D. Angus Clark, Carter Sherman, Mary M. Heitzeg, and Brian M. Hicks, “Attitudes about Police and Race in the United States 2020–2021: Mean-Level Trends and Associations with Political Attitudes, Psychiatric Problems, and COVID-19 Outcomes,” *PLoS ONE* 17, no. 7 (2022): 5.

Approaching Context at Places of Public Memory

While rhetorical and critical cultural scholars widely acknowledge the significance of context, there is surprisingly little scholarship, at least in rhetorical studies, expressly concerned with it. The most sustained engagement with the topic to date is Charles Morris and Kendall Phillips's 2020 edited volume titled, *The Conceit of Context*, which was inspired by the 15th Biennial Public Address Conference at Syracuse University in 2016. In the introduction, the editors pose a series of questions about *what* context is, *how* it works, *where* it is located, and *who* invents it,⁸ which subsequent chapters variously explore. The most relevant intervention for our purposes is Carole Blair's chapter, "Conceits of Context: Diffident Relations," in which she argues critics "need to rethink context *not only* as temporal but as spatial."⁹ We are drawn to this chapter, as our concern is specifically with places of public memory, whose rhetorical character and operations differ from other types and modes of rhetoric such as public address and mediated entertainment.¹⁰

Blair begins her exploration of context with several caveats, the first of which is that discussions of context often "become consumed with, the question of what we mean by 'text,'" noting that this is a "a kind of natural response, since the term 'context' is a relational signifier."¹¹ Like Blair, we do not wish to be sidetracked by the considerable literature on texts and textuality. So, we defer to Barry Brummett's conception of "texts" as relatively coherent and distinguishable sets of signs contributing to a common set of functions, a definition that we highlighted in the introduction to this essay. Adopting this viewpoint, museums are relatively computable, if admittedly complex, texts.

Symbolically, museums typically have a coherent purpose related to educating the public about some aspect of our world through the acquisition, preservation, study, interpretation, and exhibition of themed materials. Materially, museums are typically physical sites (though virtual museums are becoming more common) that include the grounds on which they are located, the built structures on those grounds, the various installations within those structures, the objects collected and exhibited throughout those installations, and the attendant design and display practices related to those objects "insofar as their meanings [and affects] all contribute to the same set of effects or functions."¹²

But what, then, of context? In the case of museums, Greg Dickinson, Brian Ott and Eric Aoki proffer the notion of "experiential landscapes" as an interpretive heuristic for engaging the situated character of memory places like museums and memorials.¹³ More specifically, they observe that experiential landscapes are both physical and cognitive, meaning they evoke both the surrounding environs (regions, localities, geographies, topographies, ecologies, scenery, built structures, etc.) and the memory-images related to a site (from print, film, television, and digital media). They

⁸ Charles E. Morris III and Kendall R. Phillips, eds., *The Conceit of Context: Resituating Domains in Rhetorical Studies* (Peter Lang, 2020), 6.

⁹ Carole Blair, "Conceits of Context: Diffident Relations," in *The Conceit of Context: Resituating Domains in Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Charles E. Morris III and Kendall R. Phillips (Peter Lang, 2020), 28.

¹⁰ Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair and Brian L. Ott, *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

¹¹ Blair, "Conceits of Context," 17.

¹² Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, 34.

¹³ Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, "Spaces of Remembering and Forgetting: The Reverent Eye/I at the Plains Indian Museum," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (2006): 27-47.

further note that these landscapes offer subject positions that frame the rhetorical experience of specific memory places.¹⁴

The idea of experiential landscapes emphasizes that which is *proximate*—materially and symbolically—to memory sites (e.g., texts). Limiting context to that which is proximate aids in addressing what Blair describes as the “most troubling and troublesome problem” of context, namely that it “is potentially unlimited.”¹⁵ Context, or rather relevant context, in interpretive work, we are suggesting, is not all that *can* be read into a text, but that which is physically and cognitively *adjacent* to a text. Obviously, the content and scope of a particular museum will influence what is reasonably construed as adjacent or nearby. A national museum, for example, would in most instances invoke broader contexts and, hence, understandings of what is proximate than a local one. In the following section, we begin our analysis of The Mob Museum by concentrating on the text proper.

Reading The Mob Museum

The Mob Museum is the brainchild of Oscar Goodman, a former Las Vegas mayor (1999-2011) and defense attorney who represented organized crime figures. While mayor, Goodman convinced the federal government in 2002 to sell the building at 300 Stewart Avenue in downtown Las Vegas – the 1933 US Post Office and Courthouse – to the City of Las Vegas for \$1.¹⁶ The federal government agreed to the sale under the stipulation that the building, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, be “preserved and used as a cultural center. Preferably, a museum.”¹⁷ With the deal in place, Goodman secured Dennis Barrie, who had developed the Spy Museum in Washington, DC and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum in Cleveland, to oversee the creation of the National Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement. On February 14, 2012, the \$42 million, 41,000 square foot Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement opened to the public.¹⁸

Based on close analysis of the space, we maintain that The Mob Museum fosters and promotes a decidedly pro-law enforcement message, a message that is facilitated through three principal rhetorical mechanisms: the spatial ordering of its narrative, visual tropes of justice, and interactive and affectively compelling law-enforcement exhibits. As the first section of our analysis – Strict Spatial Ordering – concerns the overall organization of the museum, we begin by walking readers through the entire space and the overall experience of that space before undertaking a more detailed analysis of specific exhibits. While this approach means returning to some exhibits multiple times, we believe it is best suited to our purposes.

¹⁴ Dickinson et al., “Spaces of Remembering and Forgetting,” 30.

¹⁵ Blair, “Conceits of Context,” 21.

¹⁶ Oscar Goodman, *Being Oscar: From Mob Lawyer to Mayor of Las Vegas—Only in America* (New York: Weinstein Books, 2013).

¹⁷ “The Mob Museum in Downtown Las Vegas – The Building,” The Mob Museum, April 29, 2022, <https://themob-museum.org/case-files/the-building/> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

¹⁸ “The Mob Museum,” Tourist Pass, 2022, <https://www.vacationpass.com/las-vegas/the-mob-museum> (retrieved September 8, 2022).

Strict Spatial Ordering

Museums are typically created with clear educational missions and aims. In the case of The Mob Museum, its explicit mission is “to advance the public understanding of organized crime’s history and impact on American society.”¹⁹ Based on the Museum’s design and display practices, that impact is openly framed as “corrosive,” one that “demanded action” from law enforcement. Among the central ways this framing occurs is through strategic ordering of the Museum’s narrative and strictly controlled movement through its space(s). Narratively, the Museum follows a simple trajectory that moves from *chaos*, which is associated with the birth of the Mob, to *order*, which is associated with sophisticated law-enforcement efforts to combat organized crime. Consequently, the Museum’s narrative development concludes firmly on the side of law enforcement. Moreover, the layout and structuring of the space strictly controls how visitors move through the space and experience that narrative.

In their analysis of The Counterterrorism Education Learning Lab, or The CELL, in Denver, Colorado, Brian Ott, Hamilton Bean and Kellie Marin define “controlled movement” as “the rigorous direction and monitoring of bodies,”²⁰ attending to the ways this rhetorical feature supports the Museum’s pro-surveillance message. Specifically, the authors analyze how The CELL manipulates, “the aesthetic qualities of its various spaces ... to [create] different atmospheres in different spaces.”²¹ The CELL, then, exposes visitors to a carefully ordered sequence of atmospheres by strictly controlling “the order and pace of movement through them.”²² Like The CELL, The Mob Museum fosters different atmospheres in each exhibit space and controls the order and manner in which visitors experience them, which functions to tie the narrative development of the history being told with a unique unfolding of affective experiences. In short, strategic ordering and controlled movement function at both The CELL and The Mob Museum to invite particular rhetorical experience of their spaces.

The atmospheric intensities at The Mob Museum are organized by floor with each floor telling a piece of the history of the relationship between organized crime and law enforcement. Each floor has clear signage that indicates the primary story told on that floor: the third floor focuses on the Birth of the Mob; the second floor explores the Mob on the Rise; and the first floor narrates the Mob on the Run (see figure 1). After entering the Museum and purchasing tickets in the lobby, visitors are directed to the elevators, where they are greeted by a uniformed museum employee (and symbol of authority) who instructs visitors to start on the third floor and to make their way back down to the lobby. Museum personnel and signage on every floor consistently affirm this order of movement through the Museum and its exhibits. So, it is useful to consider the general atmospheric experience of each floor in turn.

¹⁹ “The Mob Museum,” The Mob Museum, May 18, 2022, <https://themobmuseum.org/> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

²⁰ Brian L. Ott, Hamilton Bean and Kellie Marin, “On the Aesthetic Production of Atmospheres: The Rhetorical Workings of Biopower at The CELL,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (2016): 5.

²¹ Ott et al., “On the Aesthetic Production of Atmospheres,” 6.

²² Ott et al., “On the Aesthetic Production of Atmospheres,” 6.

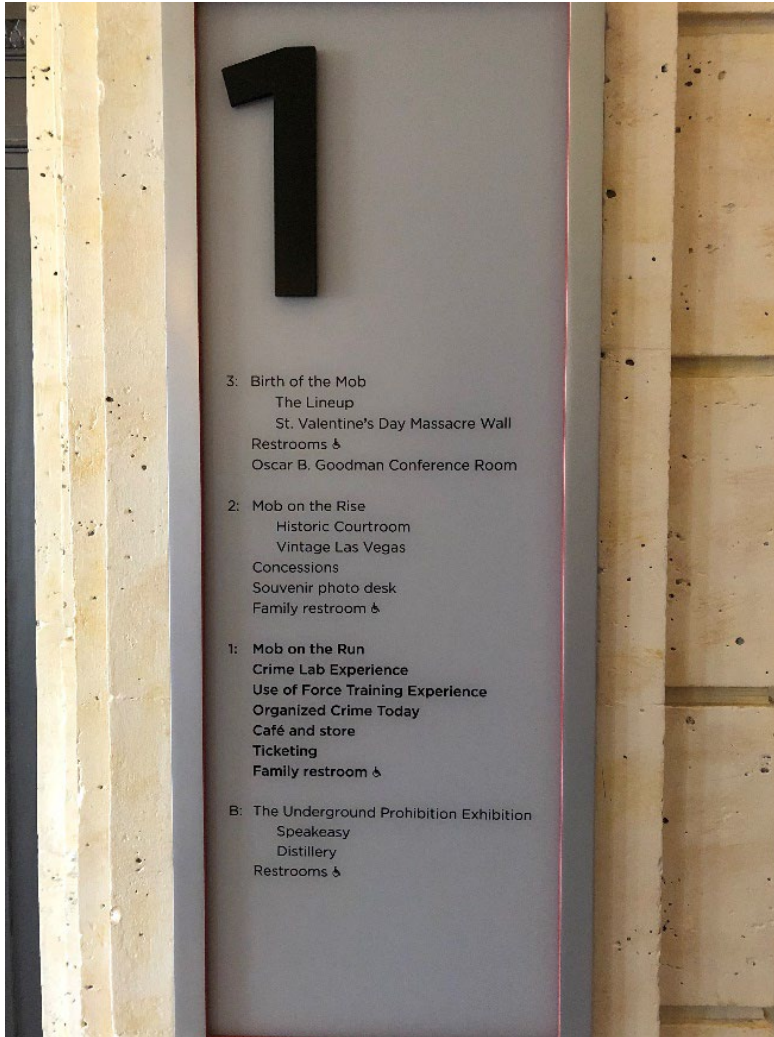


Figure 1. Signage on Level 1 next to elevator. Photograph by Brian Ott.

The third floor – Birth of the Mob – fosters an atmosphere of chaos and disorder by focusing on the origins and spread of organized crime. The first exhibit visitors encounter is The Lineup, a replica of a police lineup room, which invites museumgoers to stand in mobsters’ footsteps. Visitors walk into the lineup area, stand on simulated shoe prints, look at themselves in the two-way mirror, pose for pictures with friends, and then exit. The Museum begins, then, by inviting visitors to imagine themselves, if only briefly, as criminals, which works to charge the experience with fear and anticipation. After participating in the lineup, visitors view police mugshots of the nation’s most notorious mobsters, foreshadowing the Museum’s central rhetorical message: crime doesn’t pay. But the main story of the third floor is one of murder and mayhem and the attendant affect is anxiety, as visitors routinely encounter the “stark reality” of “ruthless violence” through graphic imagery of Mob violence.

Another key exhibit visitors encounter on Level 3 is the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre Wall, a red brick wall protected behind Plexiglas that features seven blood-stained bullet holes highlighted by spotlights (see figure 2). Before arriving at the wall, a video describes its historical importance. Relocated from Chicago, Illinois, it is the actual wall from the famed St. Valentine’s Day Massacre

in which Al Capone allegedly ordered the killing of seven members of Bugs Moran's gang on February 14, 1929.²³ The St. Valentine's Day Massacre was one of the bloodiest events in the early history of organized crime in the United States. As with The Lineup exhibit, visitors can pose for pictures in front of the wall. Throughout the third floor, various artifacts and placards tell the early history of the Mob in the US, a history that is characterized by gruesome violence and the largely uncoordinated and ineffective efforts of law enforcement to bring order.



Figure 2. St. Valentine's Day Massacre Wall. Photograph by Brian Ott.

The second floor, *Mob on the Rise*, continues to explore the role of the Mob in society, but tells the story of a more unified response by law enforcement and the judicial system to organized crime. The overall atmospheric experience of the second floor is best described as tension, creating a tug and pull between chaos and order. The first exhibit visitors encounter is the Historic Courtroom which focuses on the Kefauver hearings. Visitors sit in pews facing the judge's bench in an actual courtroom as a video reenacts parts of the trials. The Kefauver hearings, visitors learn, introduced organized crime to the American public. The Historic Courtroom exhibit conveys a rising

²³ "The Mob Museum in Downtown Las Vegas - The Building."

awareness of organized crime and early efforts to combat it. The next exhibit, Vintage Las Vegas, functions similarly to the courtroom, highlighting law enforcement's responses to organized crime. The rooms in this exhibit feature bright neon lights and purple walls, showgirl costumes, and other flashy items that evoke the feeling of "old Las Vegas" as it emerged as a hub for gambling and often crime. The Vintage Las Vegas exhibit notes that crime syndicates moved to Vegas after law enforcement cracked down on illegal gambling across the nation, but it also conveys efforts to combat it. The exhibits of the second floor continue to create a more balanced atmosphere between chaos and order.

Though the second-floor outlines growing efforts to prosecute mobsters, the final few exhibits on the second floor, including Mob's Greatest Hits, Murder with a Message, and Weapons of Choice, highlight the gruesomeness of the violence conducted by mobsters and crime syndicates. Entering this portion of the Museum, a free-standing sign greets visitors with the warning: "The following area contains graphic content." These exhibits focus, often in disturbing detail, on murder and contain the most violent and unsettling imagery located anywhere in the Museum (see figure 3). The brief reintroduction of chaos and disorder just before leaving the second floor heightens the desire for order and prepares visitors to sympathize with law enforcement, which is the primary message of the first floor.



Figure 3. Image from video on Level 2. Photograph by Brian Ott.

The first floor, Mob on the Run, is dedicated to law enforcement's efforts to combat organized crime today. The main exhibits on this floor include Bringing Down the Mob, Listening In, Crime Lab, Organized Crime Today, and the Use of Force Training Experience. Collectively, these exhibits focus on the tools, technologies, and techniques that law enforcement officials use to catch criminals. The exhibits on this floor are generally more immersive and interactive than the exhibits on the third and second floors, a design shift that we address shortly. These exhibits stress an

atmosphere of order and safety, which offers a welcome respite from the disturbing imagery visitors encountered on Levels 3 and 2. The message of the first floor is strongly pro-law enforcement in meaning and affective experience.

The Listening In exhibit, for instance, allows visitors to hear evidence gathered from the wiretapping of famous Mob bosses such as John Gotti (see Figure 4). The exhibit invites visitors to be more accepting of surveillance by portraying it as something done for the societal good, which affirms a pro-law enforcement ideology and potentially undermines civil liberties and privacy rights. Two of the most important exhibits on this floor are the Crime Lab and Use of Force Training Experience, which invite visitors to step into roles of law enforcement officials and partake in simulations dedicated to combatting crime. Visitors interact with realistic replicas of tools used by officials, including forensic equipment and firearms. The sense of disorder conveyed by the third floor and tempered before being heightened on the second floor dissipates entirely. In short, the Museum's structured narrative, progressing from disorder and fear to order and safety, along with visitors' tightly controlled movement functions rhetorically to encourage a strongly pro-law enforcement message and attitude.



Figure 4. Listening In exhibit on Level 1. Photograph by Brian Ott.

Visual Tropes of Justice

One of the central themes highlighted throughout The Mob Museum is justice, which is consistently represented in terms of efforts by law enforcement to eradicate crime. The frequent repetition of this theme invites visitors to adopt a sympathetic eye towards law enforcement. As Ott, Aoki, and Dickinson explain, museums create regimes of looking that privilege particular sense-making

processes (meanings and affects).²⁴ Specifically, they argue that, “Looking ... entails an attitude, a way of seeing, that is partial. One can look casually or intensely, sympathetically or critically, among many others.”²⁵ The Mob Museum employs visual tropes of justice to encourage visitors to view law enforcement positively and organized crime negatively. The theme of justice and the attendant regime of pro-law enforcement looking it elicits is evident in the building itself, The Feds Fight Back exhibit (Level 3), the Historical Courtroom (Level 2), and the overwhelming majority of exhibits on the first floor.

The Mob Museum, which is housed in the old Las Vegas courthouse and Post Office, is in many ways a typical government building (see figure 5). Comprised of cut stone and brick, it is an impressive and imposing example of neo-Classical architecture. The building’s size is magnified by the absence of other large structures or buildings nearby. As such, the Museum almost seems to stand alone, stalwartly, a symbol of power and authority enhanced by visitors’ relationship to the judicial system. Large faux columns—pillars of justice—frame the oversized windows, signaling seriousness and officiality. On our first visit, we were engaged by an armed security guard on the front steps just before entering the Museum. His friendly greeting was, at once, welcoming and reassuring, a reminder of the comfort afforded by authority. The building invites visitors to view the content of the Museum through the eyes of law and order, tropes it reproduces repeatedly. So, even before visitors enter the space and engage with its exhibits, the building potentially primes them to adopt a scopic regime favorable to law enforcement.



Figure 5. Exterior of The Mob Museum. Photograph by Brian Ott.

²⁴ Brian L. Ott, Eric Aoki and Greg Dickinson, “Ways of (Not) Seeing Guns: Presence and Absence at the Cody Firearms Museum,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 8, no. 3 (2011): 215-239.

²⁵ Ott et al., “Ways of (Not) Seeing Guns,” 217.

As visitors move through the Museum, they repeatedly encounter visual tropes of justice. While the dominant narrative on the third floor concerns the Mob, The Feds Fight Back exhibit foreshadows the Museum's pro-law enforcement stance. The room employs a Dick Tracy comic strip aesthetic to depict "G-Men," a popular idiom that describes government officials working to combat organized crime in the US. The exhibit tells a simple "crime" (mobsters) vs. "law and order" (G-Men) story, accompanied by opposing images. One side of the room features images of famous mobsters like Al Capone, Charles "Lucky" Luciano, and Louis "Lepke" Buchalter, and the other side depicts G-Men. Images of the mobsters, who are framed as "public enemies," are overlaid with the word "target" and accompanied by details of the FBI's case against them (see Figure 6). From the outset, then, the subject of organized crime is crafted in a binary way, locating visitors on the side of law enforcement. While the exhibit acknowledges "Federal agencies and local police faced a steep learning curve," the framing establishes a simple dichotomy that comes down on the side of law and order.



Figure 6. G-Men exhibit on Level 2. Photograph by Brian Ott.

As visitors descend to the second floor, they encounter the historical courtroom. It functions rhetorically in a fashion similar to the building itself, serving as a material trope of justice. On March 2, 1934, when Federal Judge Paul McCormick presided over the first session in the courtroom, he commented, "this building and courtroom are a credit to the genius of the engineering persons who brought it into being and had to do with its construction. It is dignified and elegant. Let us hope that the character of the work done here will be in keeping with this. ... It is hoped that justice may always prevail here."²⁶ As part of The Mob Museum, entry into the courtroom is

²⁶ "Building and the Kefauver Story," The Mob Museum, April 11, 2022, <http://themobmuseum.org/building-and-kefauber-story/> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

timed. As they wait in an adjacent room to enter the courtroom, visitors learn about the history of Kefauver Committee hearings. Once inside, museumgoers witness a dramatic restaging of parts of the nationally televised hearings that took place in 14 cities around the country between 1950 and 1951, including the seventh hearing, which took place in the very courtroom in Las Vegas that visitors occupy. Through appeals to the history of the site, visitors are made witnesses of history.

The most powerful appeal to justice, however, occurs on the first floor, the entirety of which is dedicated to a pro-law enforcement message. The exhibits on Level 1 all concern “Bringing Down the Mob,” stressing the importance of collaboration, expertise, and high-tech resources. An oversized image of the leader of ‘Ndrangheta, a modern criminal organization, being arrested by military officials stresses the importance of collaboration, while the Crime Lab, which is filled with touch screens, fingerprint scanners, and ballistics equipment, highlights the importance of technology. A central and consistent theme of exhibits on Level 1 is criminals being “brought to justice” through a combination of crime fighting and successful prosecution. The Mob on the Run exhibits stress this intersection, noting that, “In the final decades of the 20th century, law enforcement employed new strategies and laws to take down the traditional Mob.” The nod to *laws* is significant, as it stresses the “justness” of law enforcement. In short, the Museum’s central message is deeply value laden. Nowhere are those values more powerfully *felt* than in its sensory-rich interactive exhibits.

Sensory-Rich Interactive Exhibits

Interactive exhibits are those that call for active participation on the part of museumgoers and, in which, visitors’ actions directly shape the experience of the exhibit. Given the breadth of this definition, the degree of interactivity in exhibits varies widely, ranging from simple touch screens and QR codes to fully embodied and emplaced experiences. Typically, the more sensory-rich an interactive experience is (in terms of *intensity*, *immediacy*, and *immersivity* of sense activation), the stronger the affective response it elicits. Commenting on the character of highly sensory interactive exhibits, Gilbert observes, “they are a multisensory experience that allows visitors to walk into the ‘scene’ (unlike a glass-fronted diorama). Such exhibits pull visitors out of the passive, one-dimensional museum viewing ritual and transport them to a different time, place or situation where they become active participants in what they encounter.”²⁷ At The Mob Museum, two exhibits fall into this category: the Crime Lab and the Use of Force Training Experience.

Rhetorically, these two exhibits ask visitors to become active participants in the pro-law enforcement narrative, inviting them to identify with law enforcement officials working to combat crime. The exhibits are part of a three-million-dollar renovation to the Museum that opened in spring 2018.²⁸ While there are certainly other interactive exhibits throughout the Museum, these two exhibits are the most sensory-rich and both require the purchase of a “premier pass” separate from general admission to gain access.²⁹ In making these exhibits more restrictive, the Museum elevates their importance and stature.

The first premier exhibit is the Crime Lab, a space designed to invite visitors to take on the role of a forensic scientist working to solve crimes (see figure 7). The brightly lit space featuring

²⁷ Hallie Gilbert, “Immersive Exhibitions: What’s the Big Deal?” *Visitor Studies Today!*, 5, no. 3 (2002): 10.

²⁸ “The Mob Museum Renovations” LGA Architecture, April 26, 2022, <https://lgainc.com/project/the-mob-museum-renovations/> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

²⁹ “The Mob Museum.”

white walls and stainless-steel cabinetry and workspaces has a clean, antiseptic feel. Museum personnel dressed as lab assistants greet visitors and orient them toward various tasks in the space. As one local news outlet reported:

Guests explore the Crime Lab during the 25-minute facilitated experience, which is guided by a Museum educator and features original multimedia with insights from forensic science experts. While spending time at each station, guests will acquire a foundational understanding of scientific techniques used to conduct death investigation, DNA analysis, fingerprint analysis, crime scene investigation and firearms examination.³⁰

The exhibit prominently features (simulated) technologies used to combat crime and bring criminals to justice. Through its appeals to scientific and technological authenticity, the space asks museumgoers to see themselves as crime fighters. Given the immersive, hands-on character of the exhibit, the space works rhetorically to foster appreciation for and trust in the work performed by forensic scientists and reinforces – in a uniquely embodied and affective manner – the Museum’s pro-law enforcement message.



Figure 7. Entrance to Crime Lab exhibit. Photograph by Brian Ott.

The second premier exhibit is the Use of Force Training Experience, which Granville-Abbott explains, is “an intensive, eye-opening training session using both digital and live role-playing

³⁰ Tracey Granville-Abbott, “The Mob Museum Hosts Sixth Anniversary Commemorative Events,” *KTNV*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.ktnv.com/positivelylv/dining-and-entertainment/the-mob-museum-hosts-sixth-anniversary-commemorative-events> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

scenarios that demonstrate the speed and complexity of use of force decisions.”³¹ The exhibit is especially timely given that public disapproval of police use-of-force has increased over time.³² Upon entering the exhibit, visitors are given a brief orientation in which they are told they will be placed in several simulated scenarios and asked to make real-time decisions about whether to use lethal force. They are also asked to sign a legal waiver acknowledging, among other things, that: “participation in the Museum’s Use-of-Force experience could result in physical or emotional injury, death, damage to myself, to my property, or to third parties.” During our visit, Cari made the decision not to participate after this orientation. While Brian was also leery about continuing, he felt it was important that one of them proceed. Following the orientation, visitors are outfitted with a handgun that looks and feels real. Per the Museum’s website, “Guests receive a simulated firearm and police officer duty belt to use throughout the experience.”³³ Museum personnel briefly train visitors how to handle the weapon and explain that they will participate in two simulations, the first involves a video screen and the second involves a live actor. Visitors are instructed to assess the situation, attempt to de-escalate, and discharge their weapon only if they feel imminently threatened.

In the first of the two simulations, visitors encounter a life-size video screen and are asked to intervene in a home invasion scenario. While this simulation feels a bit like playing a video game, the second simulation, which involves a live actor, is uncomfortably realistic. As visitor Leslie Morris told *The Associated Press*, her heart rate went up during the simulation because it felt so real.³⁴ During Brian’s simulation, he ended up discharging his weapon in “self-defense.” He was so shaken by the experience of firing a gun – even a fake one – at a real person that he needed several hours before he felt comfortable telling Cari what had transpired in his simulation. In an interview about the exhibit, Las Vegas police Captain Robert Plummer said, “he hopes [it] will educate and change some people’s perspectives on what police face when it comes to using deadly force, especially in an era when shootings by police have become a high-profile issue around the country.”³⁵ But the exhibit does more than merely educate; in forcing visitors to make split-second decisions that feel real about whether to use lethal force, the exhibit works to dissuade them from questioning law enforcement officials who must also make such decisions. In short, the Use of Force exhibit functions rhetorically to encourage a sympathetic view of law enforcement, a subject position that is reinforced by the exhibit’s placement at the end of most museumgoers’ visits.

Rereading The Mob Museum

As the preceding analysis suggests, The Mob Museum promotes an overwhelmingly pro-law enforcement message both in terms of meaning and affect. From the history of the building that houses it and strictly controlled movement through its exhibition spaces to consistent images of law and justice and sensory-rich interactive exhibits detailing the techniques and technologies used

³¹ Granville-Abbott, “The Mob Museum Hosts.”

³² Scott M. Mourgos and Ian T. Adams, “Assessing Public Perceptions of Police Use-of-Force: Legal Reasonableness and Community Standards,” *Justice Quarterly* 37, no. 5 (2020): 869-899.

³³ “Firearm Training Simulator,” The Mob Museum, May 17, 2022, <http://themobmuseum.org/exhibits/use-of-force> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

³⁴ Regina Garcia Cano, “Mob Museum in Vegas Lets Visitors Play Police Officer,” *The Seattle Times*, April 21, 2018, <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/mob-museum-in-vegas-lets-visitors-play-police-officer/> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

³⁵ Cano, “Mob Museum in Vegas Lets.”

to combat crime, the Museum is structured to invite visitors to identify with US law enforcement. The Museum's pro-law enforcement message potentially conflicts with a post-George Floyd social world in which public sentiment regarding law enforcement is at historic lows. As Aimee Ortiz reports in *The New York Times*, "Amid waves of civil unrest as protesters across the country continue to demonstrate against police brutality, Americans' confidence in the police has dropped to a record low."³⁶ But despite shifting public attitudes regarding law enforcement in the United States, The Mob Museum continues to be a popular tourist attraction, drawing between 350,000 and 400,000 guests annually, employing over 120 persons, and contributing more than \$20 million in spending annually to downtown Las Vegas.³⁷

In our experience of the space, this apparent tension is resolved by a series of key con-texts, by which we mean symbolically and materially proximate extra-texts that actively undercut the Museum's pro-law enforcement message. In this section, we reread the Museum through four particularly salient con-texts: externally contracted marketing efforts, the independently designed gift shop, adjacent speakeasy and distillery, and location in Las Vegas. Rather than critiquing organized crime's proclivity for violence, these contextual features glorify and commercialize the Mob, which conflicts with and overwhelms the pro-law enforcement message of the Museum proper and potentially functions to reconcile public sentiment with the explicit messages of the Museum.

Marketing The Mob Museum

Following the grand opening of The Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement in February of 2012, the Museum hired The Glenn Group, an advertising and public relations agency located in Reno, Nevada, to market and promote the Museum. Aiming to "help build the brand, create some buzz and attract visitors from around the country," The Glenn Group developed and launched the "Two Sides" campaign.³⁸ Unlike the Museum itself, whose structure and content strongly favors law enforcement, the "Two Sides" marketing campaign treated the law enforcement side of the story and the organized crime side of the story equally.

The campaign was organized around a series of black and white images featuring the tag line, "There are two sides to every story." Each of the advertising images, which appeared widely on buses, billboards, taxi cabs, and more in Las Vegas, featured stark juxtapositions such as a Tommy gun and police revolver, rope and handcuffs, a hammer and gavel, gold jewelry and police badge, fedora and police cap, pin stripe vest and bulletproof vest, and prison outfit and police officer uniform. Striking in their simplicity, the monochromatic images of the advertising campaign were designed to be "arresting and attention grabbing next to cluttered neon glitz and glam" of Las Vegas.³⁹ The suggestion based on the images and tag line was that the Museum offered a balanced view of organized crime and law enforcement, one told from both "sides" or perspectives. For visitors who encountered these advertising images throughout Las Vegas prior to visiting The Mob Museum, they were primed for an experience that was more sympathetic to the Mob than what actually exists.

³⁶ Aimee Ortiz, "Confidence in Police is at Record Low, Gallup Survey Finds," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/us/gallup-poll-police.html> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

³⁷ "Connected to the Community," 4.

³⁸ "The Mob Museum – Two Sides," The Glenn Group, <http://www.theglenngroup.com/portfolio/the-mob-museum-two-sides/> (retrieved January 2, 2019).

³⁹ "The Mob Museum – Two Sides."

The Gift Shop

As with most museum gift shops, design of the retail space at The Mob Museum was independently contracted with a company that specializes in “cultural attraction retail.” Specifically, it was designed by the David Gerken Retail Design Company (DGRDC), which boasts an extensive portfolio of retail store designs for museums, zoos, aquariums, nature and science centers, and historic and military attractions. A few of the company’s other museum clients include the Abraham Lincoln Museum and Library, America’s Car Museum, and The Henry Ford Museum. On its website, DGRDC seems to acknowledge that the retail space at The Mob Museum really focuses on the Mob:

Where but Las Vegas could a Museum dedicated to the Mob exist? With the hearty support of Former Mayor Oscar Goodman, former mob defense attorney and whose business card is a poker chip, of course. Technically, it is known as “The National Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement”, but, really...⁴⁰

The Mob-centric focus of the gift shop is evident both in its design and products. In terms of design, the gift shop features large fingerprints on the walls and silhouettes of Mob-themed weapons such as brass knuckles, ice picks, and baseball bats on the floor. In terms of gifts, the store sells a wide assortment of gangster-themed books, movies, keychains, mugs, and toy guns, as well *The Godfather* t-shirts, hoodies, onesies, and board games. According to Heugel, “top selling items include logo apparel (“I Saw Nothing at The Mob Museum” T-shirts), fedoras, gangster playing cards, Al Capone shot glasses, gun and bullet ice trays and brass knuckle meat tenderizers.”⁴¹ A few of the books on sale included Brian Robb’s *A Brief History of Gangsters*, Massimo Picozzi’s *Cosa Nostra: An Illustrated History of the Mafia*, and Susan McNicoll’s *Gangster Women and Criminals They Loved*. During our visit, we observed no books authored from the perspective of law enforcement or souvenirs representing law enforcement. In short, the gift shop offers up a highly entertaining and commercial view of the Mob, which it sells to visitors.

Moreover, visitors are unable to avoid this message because the exhibits on the first floor of the Museum exit directly into the gift shop. As store director Sue Reynolds explains, “The store is a forced exit store, so guests enter the store directly from their extensive museum tour and are (currently) greeted with a feature table of our best-selling books,” adding that “This is a great area that allows guests a moment to ‘decompress’ from their tour before they realize that they have now entered the store.”⁴² The need for “decompression” suggests that museum personnel are aware of the abrupt shift in tone and tenor between the serious pro-law enforcement message of the Museum proper and the glamorized view of the Mob being pedaled in the gift shop. When the gift shop is treated as an extension of the Museum, the narrative arc and affect of the space shifts from chaos→order (moving from Mob to law enforcement) to chaos→order→chaos (moving from Mob to law enforcement to Mob).

⁴⁰ “The Mob Museum Shop,” Gerken Retail Design Company, June 29, 2018, <http://gerkenrdc.com/iconic-historic-military/the-mob-museum/> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

⁴¹ Abby Heugel, “The Mob Museum Gift Store,” *Gift Shop Plus*, Spring 2013, <http://giftshopmag.com/article/the-mob-museum-gift-store> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

⁴² Heugel, “The Mob Museum Gift Store.”

The Underground Speakeasy and Distillery

In 2016, four years after the Museum's initial opening, the board of directors hired LGA Architecture to renovate the basement level of the building and to add a speakeasy and distillery. Those spaces were completed and opened to the public in 2018. Since movement through the Museum progresses from the top floor to the bottom, many visitors conclude their museum experience by visiting the speakeasy, and, in fact, we were encouraged to do so by the museum guide at the elevator who directed us to begin our tour on the third floor. In keeping with the theme of Prohibition, entry to the speakeasy is constructed as an alleyway with a hidden entrance behind a false storefront. Inside, the speakeasy features a secret room, which is concealed behind a painting that functions as a door. We only learned of the secret room and gained access to it by striking up a conversation with the bar tender. The speakeasy, which includes various objects and memorabilia in a Prohibition-era display, employs historically accurate finishes and glassware, enhancing its appeal to authenticity.

The speakeasy is not merely an exhibit though, as the bar continues to operate even after the Museum closes. To access the bar after museum hours, patrons must locate the sunken external door and provide a password. In design, then, the speakeasy works to create an "illicit" experience, one that transports visitors back to the era of Prohibition. In the bar, patrons can select from a wide range of alcoholic beverages, including cocktails made from whisky, rum, vodka, and moonshine produced onsite in the fully functioning distillery. Indeed, the Museum is now in the wholesale liquor business, bottling and selling its corn whiskey moonshine.⁴³ The relatively recent addition of the speakeasy and its invitation to engage in what feels like illicit behavior creates a con-text that undermines the pro-law enforcement message of the Museum not least of all by encouraging visitors to forget about it altogether.

"Sin City"

Perhaps the most important con-text in understanding The Mob Museum, however, is its location in Las Vegas, Nevada, alternatively known as "Sin City." As Edwards explains:

Las Vegas is often referred to as Sin City because of its numerous adult attractions, which some may see as immoral, or sinful. ... It has numerous venues for adult entertainment, including gambling. Sexual services and adult beverages also are available most of the time. Las Vegas was also considered to be a city under mob rule at one time.⁴⁴

Sin City is, of course, just one of the many popular monikers for Las Vegas, which is also referred to as the "Gambling Capital of the World," "Entertainment Capital of the World," "Desert Oasis," "Adult Disneyland," the "City of Light" (along with Paris), and the "City that Never Sleeps" (along with New York). Regardless of which descriptor one prefers, the image of Vegas as a city defined

⁴³ Bryan Horwath, "Mob Museum Making its Legal Moonshine Business a Success," *VegasInc.com*, November 18, 2019, <http://vegasinc.lasvegassun.com/business/2019/nov/18/mob-museum-making-its-legal-moonshine-business-a-s/> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

⁴⁴ Christina Edwards, "Why is Las Vegas Called 'Sin City'?" *United States Now*, July 14, 2022, <https://www.united-statesnow.org/why-is-las-vegas-called-sin-city.htm> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

by symbolic excesses, hedonistic pleasures, and unscrupulous enterprises, especially the Mob, is widely reproduced across popular culture.⁴⁵

Former mayor Oscar Goodman and author and journalist George Anastasia describe the city as, “a town built on glitz and glitter. Its foundation is an industry that used to be illegal in most other states... millions flock there every year to live the fantasy – to roll the dice. To be, for just a few hours... somebody they’re not: a high roller. A player.”⁴⁶ Vegas is widely viewed as a place where visitors can “let loose,” which led the Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority to develop the famous advertising slogan “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas” in 2003.⁴⁷ Visitors to Vegas are interpellated into this ideology before ever setting foot in The Mob Museum and interacting with its exhibits. The city invites visitors to identify more with the glitzy lifestyle of mobsters like Lucky Luciano and Al Capone than the respectful, law-abiding, pro-law enforcement message conveyed at the Museum.

Implications and Conclusion

In a culture where police violence provokes more anxiety than Mob violence,⁴⁸ The Mob Museum, which constructs a pro-law enforcement message, furnishes a timely and important rhetorical object. In this essay, we argued that the Museum’s strict spatial arrangement of its narrative, repeated invocation of judicial tropes, and sensory-rich interactive exhibits strongly affirm a pro-law enforcement message. But, as we argued further, the Museum’s adjacent con-texts – its marketing efforts, gift shop, speakeasy and distillery, and location in downtown Las Vegas – function rhetorically to undermine and overwhelm that message. As such, The Mob Museum presents a unique opportunity to reflect on the matter of texts and their contexts. Doing so highlights three interconnected lessons related to text-context relations in the study of public memory.

First, our analysis challenges the idea that context exists as little more than interpretive support for critical claims. Indeed, we are skeptical of criticism that selectively poaches context, invoking it only to support critical interpretations of a text. As our analysis of The Mob Museum highlights, context is not simply an extension of the text. While it potentially frames responses to a text, it is not bound by the logic of the text. It can and, in some instances, does function *counter* to the text. As we spent time studying the exhibits that comprise the Museum, we consistently observed visitors engaging in behaviors that indicated they identified far more strongly with the Mob than law enforcement. For instance, we repeatedly witnessed museumgoers posing as gangsters and mobsters in front of artifacts and displays. As they snapped personal photos to share on social media, they routinely used their hands to symbolize weapons and pretended to engage in acts of violence like strangulation. To be clear, all of this was in the service of fun and entertainment.

Our experience reminded us of a pattern that Carole Blair observed while studying the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (the Gateway Arch) in St. Louis, Missouri in which visitors would consistently bring up McDonalds. Like Blair, “By telling this ‘tale of the field’ ... [we]

⁴⁵ Larry Gragg, *Bright Light City: Las Vegas in Popular Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

⁴⁶ Goodman, *Being Oscar*, ix.

⁴⁷ “The True Origin of the Phrase “What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas,” Lyfepyle, <https://www.lyfepyle.com/phrase-origin-what-happen-in-vegas-stays-in-vegas/> (retrieved July 8, 2022).

⁴⁸ Tyler T. Reny and Benjamin J. Newman, “The Opinion-mobilizing Effect of Social Protest Against Police Violence: Evidence from 2020 George Floyd Protests,” *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 (2021): 1499-1507.

intend no disdain for visitors' reactions to the site. There is very little surprising in their reactions."⁴⁹ What visitors' reactions at The Mob Museum suggest to us is that the view of context as background that can simply be "mined" by critics to sense-make what is otherwise ambiguous or unclear in a text is misplaced. Our study suggests that context functions not so much to reveal or disclose a text's secrets, but according to its own extra-textual logic, a that logic may, in fact, run counter as opposed to parallel to the text.

Second, our study points to at least one way to establish meaningful limits on context in rhetorical and critical study. Perhaps the greatest challenge to studying context is its potentially infinite character. How do critics decide what and how much context to include and analyze? In the case of places of public memory such as memorials and museums, we proposed examining context that is materially or symbolically proximate, by which we mean "adjacent" to the text. While the explicitly spatial quality of the term *proximate* is rather easy to compute materially, determining what is symbolically proximate can be more challenging.

In the case of The Mob Museum, for instance, the giftshop and speakeasy are both in the same building as the Museum, while the city of Las Vegas surrounds and encircles it. So, those spaces are obviously proximate. But what of relevant *discursive* extra-texts? Marketing efforts directly related to the Museum afford an excellent starting point, but there are others. As The Mob Museum explicitly concerns organized crime and law enforcement, popular narratives about both seem relevant as well. Indeed, since our initial study of the Museum in 2018, there have been important shifts in national discourse about law enforcement in the United States. These discourses increasingly strike us as relevant, which suggests that what counts as context and as proximate is not stable. Indeed, future research might empirically investigate how the police killing of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter movement shape visitors' understandings of The Mob Museum.

Third, our study highlights the fact that not all rhetorical experiences are created equal, and, therefore, it is incumbent upon critics to analyze the efficacy of experiences in addition to their rhetorical workings. One of the central lessons of The Mob Museum is that the sensory-rich interactive exhibits on Level 1 (Crime Lab and Use of Force) are far more affectively compelling than the exhibits on other levels. And, still, the pro-law enforcement message of those exhibits is drowned out by the most sensory-rich immersive rhetorical experience of all: Las Vegas. Few, if any, visitors have the Museum as their primary destination. Most travel to Vegas for other reasons and, ultimately, The Mob Museum is experienced through those choices. That Vegas is itself a highly simulated environment that works to foster a particular rhetorical experience is well documented,⁵⁰ and, frankly, that environment is far more affectively compelling than anything at the Museum. This suggests to us that it is worth thinking about context as explicitly rhetorical; context is itself suasive and some contexts are more suasive – more symbolically and materially convincing – than others.

Unlike most visitors, we traveled to Las Vegas for the expressed purpose of visiting The Mob Museum. What we found was a state-of-the-art museum that thoughtfully explored the evolution of organized crime in the United States and the evolving response of law enforcement to mob activity. Knowing the tremendous trust visitors place in history museums,⁵¹ we were struck by

⁴⁹ Carole Blair, "Reflections on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places," *Western Journal of Communication* 65, no. 3 (2001): 284.

⁵⁰ Andrew F. Wood, "'What Happens [in Vegas]': Performing the Post-Tourist *Flâneur* in 'New York' and 'Paris,'" *Text & Performance Quarterly* 25, no 4 (2015): 315-333. See also Martino Stierli, *Las Vegas in the Rearview Mirror: The City in Theory, Photography, and Film* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2013).

⁵¹ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (Columbia University Press, 1998).

how actively and openly museumgoers resisted the Museum's pro-law enforcement messages. As we sought to understand why, we consistently needed to look beyond – or perhaps more accurately, beside – the Museum for answers. Ultimately, “looking beside” led us to think about the nature of text-context relations, and the ways that extra-texts surrounding sites of public memory may dramatically alter the rhetorical experience those spaces are structured to invite. In sharing our experiences of The Mob Museum, we hope to have made a meaningful contribution to understanding the particular ways that context matters.