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Thinking through the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

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Thinking through the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

Erica Lehrer



Figure 1.

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights is shown behind a tipi on Thursday, September 18, 2014, ahead of its official opening on Friday. Photograph: Black Powder / Red Power Media. Used with permission.

The National Museum, Distributed

“This ice you’re standing on, this is what you’ll be drinking down in Winnipeg next spring. For you, this is life. For people here, it can be death.” I am shivering along with a dozen Winnipeg-based academics and students listening to Cuyler Cotton, a policy analyst and media relations specialist, in the community of Shoal Lake No. 40 on a mid-January day, looking out across the frozen lake that separates the local band of Ojibway First Nations, inhabitants of Shoal Lake, from access to the nearest highway. One hundred years ago the Canadian government sold this portion of First Nation terrain to the city of Winnipeg to build an aqueduct to supply the urban residents with clean water. As collateral damage, the Shoal Lake No. 40 peninsula was sliced into an island. This intrusion into the landscape left the local people to drink boiled or bottled water and traverse the lake by boat or winter road—treacherous in late fall and early spring with the insufficiently

frozen surface—and living amid their own trash and sewage, which leaches into their water supply.

The people of Shoal Lake No. 40 have struggled to draw attention to their community's plight for years. They were elated—in savvy political terms—when they heard that Antoine Predock, the star architect of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), would feature the theme of “healing waters” in the museum's eye-catching, \$351 million building, to invoke Indigenous values. Nowhere in the museum, however, is there a reference to the dark side of these “healing” waters—the life-threatening burden placed on the Shoal Lake No. 40 community so that clean water is at the fingertips of Winnipeg residents. Shoal Lake's activists used the occasion of the CMHR's opening weekend to highlight what they saw as rank hypocrisy. They transformed their community into a “living museum”—billed as the Museum for Canadian Human Rights *Violations*—welcoming visitors to see the island and its vulnerabilities firsthand, complete with a brochure, website, and Facebook page.¹

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights, the first national museum built outside Canada's capital, opened to the public on September 20, 2014, despite having completed only four of eleven galleries.² If by three months later the permanent exhibition was complete, the museum's best-known feature remains the controversy it has managed to generate. Shoal Lake No. 40 is not the only group to capitalize on the media coverage surrounding the museum's fraught birthing; protesting groups have dotted the grassy grounds around the museum before and since its opening. Some of these have criticized the CMHR directly, such as the other Indigenous parties who sat by pitched tipis and tents on opening weekend, the community groups who signed an open boycott letter protesting the museum's lack of attention to World War I internment camps, or the creators of a petition to revoke a Canadian mining company's “friend of the museum” title because of accusations of violence perpetrated against Indigenous Mayan people.³ Others have used the museum as a staging ground to leverage visibility for their own causes, like a pro-Palestinian contingent whose July 2014 protest march began, symbolically, at the CMHR's entrance, or anti-abortion activists who tried to engage the captive audience in the visitors' waiting line on the museum's opening day with signs demanding rights for the unborn.

This array was unsurprising, as the very idea of the museum had been plagued with conflict long before its doors opened. Countless press articles over the years and at least two scholarly volumes draw attention to its major detractors and take the museum to task for its many perceived flaws.⁴ Central to the fray were the intercommunity disputes that inevitably broke out over

the relative visibility—or perhaps “grievability,” to use Judith Butler’s term—of various ethnic groups based on the particular historical atrocities privileged in the museum. Erroneous assumptions about the Holocaust’s paradigmatic role in the development of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights,⁵ and a venomous campaign by representatives of Ukrainian nationalist organizations demanding equal recognition vis-à-vis the Holocaust for the Holodomor (famine) under Stalinist repression, were focal points in the museum’s pre-opening fracas.⁶ But more quietly—although gaining prominence with the recent release of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission final report—were the accumulating questions raised by Indigenous groups and supporters about the representation of their suffering caused by colonialism.

I open this review with the Shoal Lake project and other protests as they draw attention to both unacknowledged limits to and unanticipated possibilities for realizing the museum’s own mission, which is “to support the broader understanding of human rights and to encourage reflection and dialogue.”⁷ First is the way the museum’s design and discourse inhibit visitors with settler backgrounds from encountering “difficult knowledge” about themselves: namely, that their own social and material well-being is connected to a history, and continuing present conditions, of Indigenous abjection. Beyond numerous critiques of the human rights paradigm,⁸ visiting the institution makes visible continuities with retrograde museum traditions: the colonial museum that aestheticizes indigenous people and curates them in a framework of “perfect [Western] law and order,”⁹ and the self-aggrandizing national museum that is by nature the antithesis of self-critical. A museum dedicated to dialogue and debate about the capacity for human atrocity, the CMHR thus risks being what Edward Linenthal calls “comfortable horrible”—allowing us to cringe, sigh, and rebuke, but not be challenged on how our own cultural beliefs and political systems may be bound up in the suffering of others.¹⁰ There are simply too few gaps where one can get under the CMHR’s very smooth skin, a condition that encourages intellectual and affective somnolence and inhibits discomfort and cultural criticism.

Second, a wide-angle lens helps see CMHR and other national museums in a broader landscape that “encompass[es] heritage sites, memorials, and other (including virtual) locations along the increasingly interlinked spectrum of spaces” that define contemporary heritage practice.¹¹ This approach helps make legible the larger state-building projects of which such museums are implicated. This is particularly relevant in the case of the CMHR, as this new museum emerged in the context of a major project of historical and cultural politics that Canada’s current conservative government is presently enacting

through the building, reshaping, and funding (and defunding) of national cultural institutions across the country including museums, monuments, and public archives, celebrating national history while constricting alternative projects—particularly Indigenous programs.¹² But this more “distributed” view of the museum allows sites of resistance to come into view as well, highlighting museums as *processes*: monumental gestures that catalyze broader conversations in multiple directions and spur the development of an array of other social spaces that form their own frames of meaning, resulting in productive tensions that have ongoing impact over time.¹³

Thus, despite built-in architectural and narrative limitations that inhibit the sort of critical thinking that might challenge the CMHR’s self-congratulatory frame, this newest of Canada’s national museums retains the potential—even if unwittingly—to catalyze Canadians’ critical attention to questions of human rights, their limits, and their abrogation, and to serve as a focal point for necessary debates about social justice and historical memory.

Highlights and Blind Spots

Like most of the newly emerging global landscape of peace, rights, and memorial museums such as the Hiroshima Peace Museum, Chile’s Museum of Memory and Human Rights, Hungary’s House of Terror, or the new National September 11 Memorial and Museum, the CMHR defines itself as an “ideas museum.” It is perhaps uniquely expansive in its scope. From the ground up (in the order they are meant to be visited over the building’s six levels), the ideas it seeks to treat include “Human Rights over Time,” “Indigenous Perspectives,” “Canadian Journeys,” “Protecting Rights,” “Examining the Holocaust,” “Turning Points for Humanity,” “Breaking the Silence,” “Actions Count,” “Rights Today,” “Expressions” (a gallery for temporary exhibits), and “Inspiring Change.”¹⁴ The themes are arrayed through ten exhibit “zones” covering 447,000 square feet of exhibit space, connected by an ascending web of softly glowing alabaster ramps.¹⁵

The museum has been deemed a success by conventional measures; it has won top international awards for architecture, digital technologies, and universal accessibility.¹⁶ And it is undeniably impressive. The view from the tower is majestic. The galleries are packed with multimedia content embellished with the latest bells and whistles. And the bistro is delicious, sustainable, fair trade, and locally sourced (“Visitors with an appetite for human rights will also get a taste of Manitoba”).¹⁷ More significantly, there are informative, and occasionally moving displays about human evil, suffering, and resistance.

Yet the overall result has a “kitchen sink” feel, where inclusivity takes precedence over coherence, and the global strife over first-world definitions of rights and justice is nowhere debated. If the content is a bit of a jumble, the clearest single idea the total museum communicates is one of a singularly heroic Canada: a safe haven and an international arbiter of justice vis-à-vis mostly foreign atrocities. Both Canada’s official multicultural policy—which encourages all citizens to “keep their identities” and “accept those of others”¹⁸—as well as the origins of the CMHR in media magnate Israel Asper’s vision for a Canadian Holocaust museum, are relevant contexts for understanding the configuration of the galleries. While the Holocaust remains at the museum’s core, with a large dedicated gallery emphasizing “the fragility of human rights,” through fraught political negotiations the museum was gradually expanded to the “human rights” theme *tout court*.¹⁹

The opening gallery, “Human Rights over Time,” features an undulating, open-ended time line that includes various “moments in Human Rights history” from the early moral systems (e.g., the Code of Hammurabi) and organized religion to twentieth-century political movements. A floor-to-ceiling screen features diverse Canadians talking about their own conceptions of rights, from forming unions to making art. Some of the museum’s few objects also dot this gallery, including slave shackles, salt from Gujarat, India (symbolizing Mahatma Gandhi’s efforts to inspire popular self-governance), a ballot box from South Africa’s first post-Apartheid election, a bentwood box from Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and fragments from the Berlin Wall. This cabinet of human rights curiosities gives a general sense of progressive human achievement. Yet as Dominique Clément, a University of Alberta historian, said recently in Canada’s *National Post*, “I’m not sure you know what human rights are when you leave that museum.”²⁰

The very next gallery gives pride of place to “Indigenous Perspectives,” signaled by an imposing circular theater in the shape of a woven wooden basket housing “a 360-degree film that shares stories of Indigenous rights and responsibilities, as told through four different generations.” “I deserve clean water” is among the affirmative statements voiced in the upbeat, spiritually-oriented film. Following the curvilinear edge of the basket-theater’s beautifully sculptural form, my attention was drawn to the sizable artworks: a long beadwork-embroidered cloth hanging down the wall parallel to carved wooden elements featuring nature and animal themes, poetry, and finally the Anishinaabe Canadian activist artist Rebecca Belmore’s *Trace*, a massive clay-beaded “blanket” hanging from high above on the side wall. Interspersed among these elements are small, decontextualized photographs depicting scenes of apparent

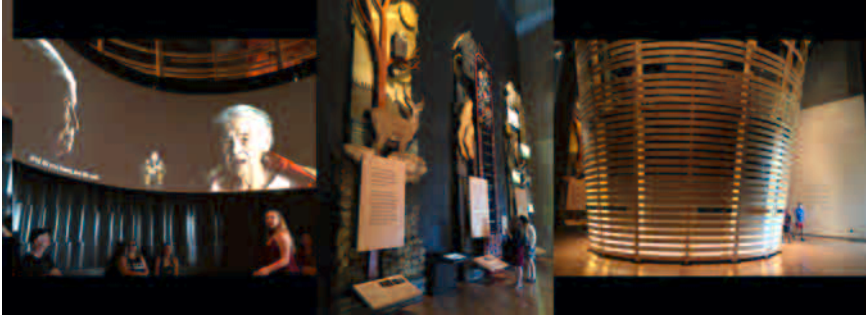


Figure 2.
 “Indigenous Perspectives” gallery.
 Photograph: Erica Lehrer.

Indigenous activism, including an image of young protesters holding a sign calling for “water rights.” While Indigenous communities were engaged in producing the content for this gallery, Tricia Logan, a former curator of Indigenous content, described being asked to remove the word *genocide* from display materials during her tenure at the museum, as well as limiting coverage of Indigenous suffering and balancing it with information about compensatory gestures by the Canadian government.²¹ Seen in a single frame with Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s comment at the 2009 G20 summit that Canada has “no history of colonialism,”²² it is hard not to wonder about the immediate visual appeal of this gallery, which forefronts predictable, palatable tropes of arts and crafts and spirituality rather than historical and ongoing marginalization by and struggle with the Canadian government.

The audio track in the first gallery tells us that human rights are what “connect us all to each other.” A museum dedicated less to national self-aggrandizement might take the opportunity in the “Indigenous Perspectives” gallery to highlight the pipeline that connects Winnipeg to Shoal Lake, with tragically different outcomes for each end. What are the Indigenous perspectives on this and other pressing human rights issues they face as marginalized Canadians? A (self-)critical perspective might also make links across various violent events over time, drawing attention to how ideologies and processes of racism, nationalism, and colonialism—just as much as frameworks of social justice evolving from the UN Declaration on Human Rights—form enduring historical continuities. This, in turn, could help shed light on more diffuse and long-standing forms of state-sanctioned violence, including Canada’s own ongoing disenfranchisement of its Indigenous populations.

Much has been made of the CMHR’s “starchitecture,” and the museum’s audio tour tells us that Predock “intended every part of the building to have mean-



Figure 3. The CMHR's "Garden of Contemplation." "The First Nations sacred relationship to water is honored, as a place of healing and solace amidst reflections of earth and sky" (www.predock.com/CMHR/CMHR.html). Photograph: Erica Lehrer.

ing for human rights."²³ Described on the museum's website as a dove whose wings encircle a cloud, the building has inspired diverse caricatures, compared in press articles and Internet forums to a German World War I helmet, a giant water slide, even "a turd." It nods to Indigenous presence by way of its "roots" embedded in the earth and the aforementioned "healing waters," which flow through the airy "Garden of Contemplation" in the museum's center point. One can see in this hall echoes of a biblical Garden of Eden where humanity gains knowledge of good and evil, and also discern a progressive journey of universal Enlightenment rising up from the specificity of place-based traditions via the prescribed path from the museum's terrestrial entrance to the lofty heights of the radiant "Israel Asper Tower of Hope."

But the CMHR's material presence must be considered in terms not only of its shape but also of its location in geographic space. The building has had a dramatic impact on Winnipeg's otherwise modest, generally low-lying postindustrial skyline. Built at "The Forks," the intersection of the Red and Assinaboine Rivers on a piece of Treaty 1 land (a legal relationship between

several First Nations and the Crown, established in 1871), it is a location with deep Indigenous history, and the thoroughness of the CMHR's required archaeological excavation of the site was yet another point of contention.²⁴ This geography must also be understood in terms of the broader shifts in the Canadian government's national museum- and memorial-scape. The repositioning of institutional mandates and collections has been concurrent with the rise of the Idle No More Indigenous resistance movement and growing discussions of settler colonialism.²⁵ Such a macro view helps put the CMHR's curatorial choices in dialogue with these emerging social processes, as well as keeping in view the collateral damage that Western notions of "progress" have wrought on the human and environmental terrains to which it has been applied.

Even before the museum's opening, activists and scholars were vocally criticizing how it framed the protection of human rights as most fully realized in a state-sanctioned discourse of "officially-recognized genocide," a narrative that diverts attention from Canada's own history of colonial abuse of Indigenous people.²⁶ Once Asper accepted the Harper government's offer to transform his Holocaust museum plan into a national museum addressing human rights more broadly, it necessarily came under quasi-federal government control as a Crown Corporation, and perforce accepted the official federal government's definitions.²⁷ The museum's approach to its genocide gallery has been one of deference to the Canadian government, which has recognized five "official" genocides—the Holocaust (1933–45), the Holodomor (1932–33), and the ethnic atrocities in Armenia (1915–23), Rwanda (1994), and Srebrenica (1992–95)—all occurring outside Canada and the Americas.²⁸

A fundamental challenge in exhibiting settler colonial genocide is the differently configured nature of its violence—rather than a discrete time period of mass murder, the calculated oppression and dispossession of Indigenous people happened over centuries. And while discrete episodes of human rights violations against Indigenous groups are exhibited (residential schooling, the disproportionately high rate of murder and abduction of Indigenous women), they are not tied together in the context of the larger processes of nation building in which they are implicated.²⁹

Part of this can be attributed to the way genocide consciousness is framed as developing specifically through Holocaust consciousness. A text panel in the "Examining the Holocaust" gallery—a large central gallery with its own theater—notes, "We examine the Holocaust to learn to recognize genocide and try to prevent it." But this suggests that all genocides will look like the Holocaust. The idea that Holocaust consciousness will create universal vigilance is made dubious if one compares the pointed references in the purpose-made



Figure 4. Welcome-graffiti projected in the CMHR lobby (left). “The Donor Wall is generously supported by Gail Asper, OC, OM, LLD.”

film that examines Canada’s own experiences with anti-Semitism both past and present (“As a nation, We must recognize our failures then and now”; “The stain of anti-Semitism still remains”) with the far more oblique language about Canadian treatment of its own Indigenous populations.

Despite a superficial celebration of debate, activism, and diversity, the museum downplays the kinds of contemporary discord and strife that underlie such radical differences in the grievability of various social groups—necessary components of progress toward social justice. Difference is framed instead as uniformly colorful and enriching, not challenging. The enormous projection wall in the museum’s entryway lobby, for example, features silhouettes of people graffiti-ing welcome messages in twenty-four international and twelve Indigenous languages, in what anthropologist Shelley Ruth Butler calls a “simulacrum of participatory civic action.”³⁰ A more influential form of civic action is suggested by the donor names inscribed prominently throughout the galleries and on the digital “sponsorship wall” listing large dollar contributions.

On the opening weekend, Canada’s diversity was celebrated front and center with enthusiastic Latino, turbaned Sikh, and female guides and greeters. The visitors were similarly diverse—accompanying me at the coat check were a black couple and three Muslim girls—two in hijab and one in full face niqab. At the same time, the Indigenous band Tribe Called Red canceled a planned performance at the weekend’s “Rights Fest” because of ongoing critique of the museum’s treatment of Indigenous issues.

Angela Failler has written about the CMHR’s affective regime, and particularly how the museum privileges *optimism* as the expected and desired emotional response to its contents.³¹ On opening weekend, the cheerleading was palpable. “Be Inspired!” commanded the T-shirts that the CMHR employees

Interactive

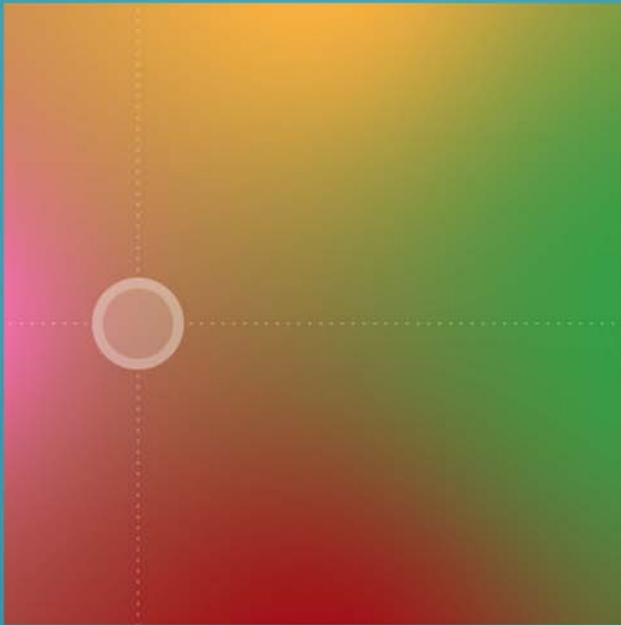
Mood Map

After visiting Buhler Hall, how do you feel?

MOVED

SURPRISED

THOUGHTFUL



INSPIRED

Next →

and volunteers wore as they herded the throngs of visitors through the short visitation loop. They responded to challenging questions—which were myriad, given how little of the museum was yet complete—with a seeming attempt to allay whatever concern was voiced: “Yup, we address that, too!” and “It’ll be included!” were the most common replies I heard. The tour I took several months later during a full-day visit in January 2015 when the final exhibits were in place felt similarly designed to impress and “inspire” rather than to affect or open to question. Our guide implicitly discouraged difficult subjects by continually stressing the “fun” we were going to have.

The upbeat tone continues on the CMHR website, where the downloadable self-tour smartphone app offers an interactive “Mood Map” that asks how you feel after visiting each gallery. The options on offer are limited to “moved,” “thoughtful,” “inspired,” or “surprised.” While the museum implicitly celebrates Canada as a human rights champion in its very constitution, this self-satisfaction is particularly unabashed in the “Breaking the Silence” gallery in descriptions of each of the five recognized genocides. In relation to Armenia:

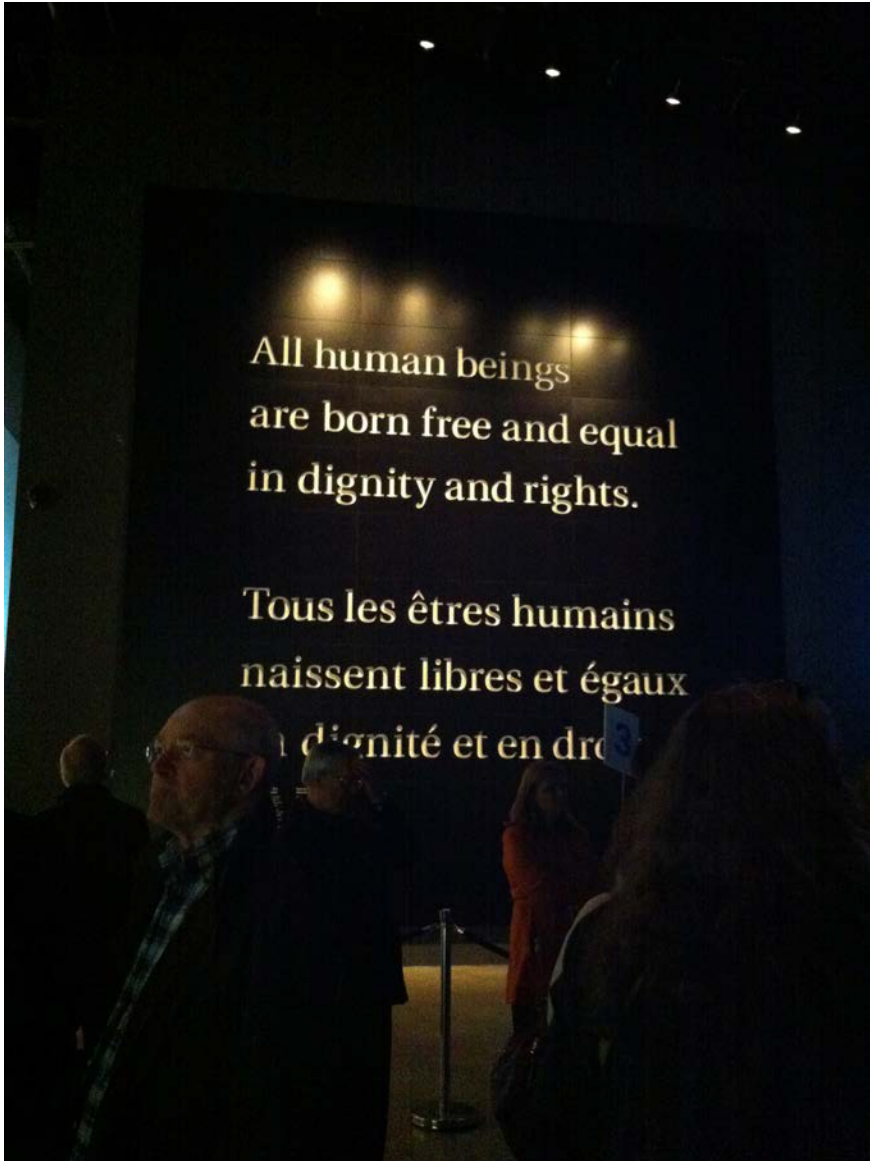
Figure 5.

“Interactive mood map” included in CMHR downloadable self-guided tour app. Screen capture.

“Canadians raise awareness.” For the Holodomor: “Canadians Expose and Honour Truth.” The Holocaust: “Canadians Bear Witness.” Rwanda:

“Canadians Call for International Responsibility.” Srebrenica: “Canadians call for accountability.”

The CMHR’s more and less subtle sanctioning of certain emotions communicates whom the museum is really for. Museums do not only serve their audiences; they also call them into being. In more and less subtle ways—through the modes of address embedded in their advertising, interpretive texts, tours, and the narratives implicit in their architecture—as well as what “museumness” itself communicates—they help create the normative visitor they desire, one who will engage with the museum’s messages in cooperative ways. The “museum gaze” itself is a powerful mode of identity building and exclusion; “who looks at whom” has long been recognized as a defining question of power and privilege, and teaching societies to see from a dominant point of view has been shown to be a key tool in shaping appropriate colonizing subjects.³² If the CMHR anticipates only positive reactions to (or surprise at) its content, where do visitors who are all too familiar with the human rights violations on display fit in this institution’s ostensibly transformative journey? Where might one find the space to acknowledge pain or righteous anger? How does it feel to those who suffered at the hands of the very government that is now requiring their affective obedience?



To be sure, strife, politics, and Indigenous suffering are not entirely silenced in the CMHR galleries. Digital technology allows the layering of multiple stories and images in kiosks, films, and self-navigable touch screens. But this creates a hierarchy of information in the crowded museum; main messages are prominently repeated and additional facts risk being neutralized by their dispersion, aestheticization, or standardization. “Canadian Journeys,” the museum’s largest gallery, “explores dozens of Canadian stories, from democratic rights to language rights, from freedom of conscience to freedom from discrimination.” A kind of Benjaminian “arcade” through which flâneurs may stroll and enjoy the bourgeois pleasure of idle spectating, some of the museum’s most interesting and moving materials are nevertheless here, presented in eighteen minimalist, equidimensional “niches”: a set of hanging red dresses commemorating murdered and missing aboriginal women; a convex lens onto which a story of colonial contact, self-sufficiency, and the human and ecological threats to the Inuit North is projected; Quebec’s October crisis depicted by a ransacked room and videos of police brutality spurred by the War Measures Act; the

Figure 6.
Human Rights Statement. Photograph: Erica Lehrer.

personal stories of the hard and often invisible lives of Canada’s migrant workers. These “samplers” can also be problematic in their shorthand; less successful niches include gay rights reduced to a large wedding cake built of photos of happy couples; and the Chinese Head Tax display, whose use of diorama makes it seem artificially distanced, with no contemporary legacy for Chinese Canadian diasporans today.

“Reading” the museum for its embedded ideology is useful and necessary. Yet as an anthropologist and ethnographer, I remain skeptical of analyses that treat museums simply as texts, or too deterministically as socializing environments, without investigating the range of ways they are experienced by visitors who make meaning in dialogue with (and sometimes in direct contradiction to) what is presented.³³ Eavesdropping as best I could on the conversations around me during my visit in January 2015, I got a somewhat heartening sense of possibility for productive audience engagement.

In the “Breaking the Silence” gallery, which enshrines the “five genocides,” but offers touch screens that enumerate a long list of other human rights violations globally, a late-teen boy remarked to his friends, “A comfort women system in Imperial Japan? What was *that*? Did you know about that?” Another read aloud: “Mayans in Guatemala,” adding, “I didn’t realize how *recent* that was.” These were signs of the productive encounter with new facts. But visi-

tors are infrequently satisfied with being passive receptacles; they often bring great skepticism to authoritative presentations of history and seek fissures in gallery texts where questions are raised that exceed the institutional framework offered. As the boys continued scanning the screen, they offered in a tone of deep sarcasm: “The Taliban . . . *okay*, because the US and Canadian forces had *nothing* to do with it. I want to see what they say about Rwanda—I’m curious.”

In the alcove devoted to residential schooling, a middle-aged woman stood with two kids, probably around eleven and fifteen years old. They watched the loop of excruciating video testimonies from the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission detailing the intergenerational transmission of social pathologies stemming from that history of systematic abuse. “How do you feel when you hear that?” the woman asked. “Sad,” replied the girl. “I’m not sure,” said the boy, “it’s kind of *messed up*.” “I wonder why people allowed that to happen,” the woman asked the air, explaining to her young charges: “That’s why some native people hate white culture.” I felt that I was witnessing here the sort of affective encounter theorists of “difficult knowledge” praise, where information unsettles because it exceeds the museum’s ability to contain audience response in a predetermined narrative—here the CMHR’s universal viewpoint of optimism and progress.

And in the “Examining the Holocaust” gallery, two twenty-something women lingered at the display case containing a beer stein engraved with anti-Jewish scenes. One said to the other, “The people who bought this or received this as a gift at the time maybe didn’t even see it as anti-Semitic, but just as a cool mug. They didn’t have the benefit of our big picture. It makes me wonder what *we’re* doing right now that *we* don’t even realize.” This exchange suggests that CMHR visitors are capable of actively implicating themselves in ethical or political dialogue with the material presented, “learning not only about but *from* the stories and histories represented,” as Angela Failler and Roger Simon eloquently call for.³⁴

Yet if in the constant tension between structure and agency—between ideology and resistance to it—these moments suggest the potential of the latter, the museum’s brick-and-mortar connotations and its many forms of discursive suggestion still work to corral visitor experience within the limits of a neat, upbeat, pro-Canadian story. And unquestioned, indeed enshrined in the very fabric of the CMHR, is the same teleological narrative of progress and civilization that has underpinned many genocidal regimes, as well as being a core driver of Western imperialism.

Indeed, the “Expressions” gallery housed the blatantly propagandistic traveling exhibit “Peace—the Exhibition,” developed by the Canadian War Museum

to showcase how “Canadians have defined, made and kept peace at home and around the world.” While past events and issues like the Suez crisis and nuclear armament are presented in terms of debate, organization, and demonstration, the richly illustrated section on Canadian intervention in Afghanistan—including its combat role—is framed in singularly positive terms, despite the major divisions over the actions in Canadian society.

Revisiting the Museum as Catalyst

Yet perhaps some of its failures—particularly because of the trenchant way that scholars’ and citizens’ groups called the CMHR out on these—speak to the deeper sociopolitical potential of this and other contemporary museums. That is, if we think of today’s museums in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s terms, as “catalysts,”³⁵ then perhaps this museum should be viewed less as a shining tower of hope than as a kind of gritty national sparkplug for long-overdue debates about “human rights” as social justice, and how in Canada both the rights of and justice for certain groups have been and continue to be abrogated. Such a development may not be how the CMHR’s creators envisioned their museum: as a gleaming, inspiring “temple” of human rights. Rather, because of the committed, tireless, and savvy work of social activists, the museum may despite itself turn out to serve as the engine of a more raucous, down-to-earth “forum,” the latter in Duncan Cameron’s famous binary model of what museums could be.³⁶ Taking such a “distributed” view of the museum’s impacts repositions the arbiters of knowledge, which “rather than being disseminated outwards from a center point, is discovered in its intersections and interstices, through the (sometimes surprising) juxtapositions.”³⁷

Large, centralized monuments are increasingly challenged by the rise of more local, intimate, participatory forms or actions—from Germany and Austria’s “countermemorial” projects to the Montreal performance group *Entrepreneurs du Commun*’s invitation to artists to propose designs for a “Memorial to the Victims of Liberty” as prompt to critical public reflection on Ottawa’s heavily criticized Memorial to the Victims of Communism.³⁸ Such projects “speak back” at establishment initiatives—albeit on a very unequal playing field—in ways that amplify dissonant voices and other layers of experience. Beyond the creative protests with which I opened this review, the CMHR has incited new energies around the human rights issue in various cultural sectors. The nearby Winnipeg Art Gallery marked the opening of its imposing new neighbor with the show *Seeing Rights and Liberties: Celebrating the Canadian Museum for Human Rights*.³⁹ Despite its obsequious title, the exhibit was nonetheless

stimulating, using artworks that opened the notion of “human rights” to ambiguous interpretations unseen in the CMHR itself. In a different way, the “memoranda of understanding” the museum has signed with the Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg have the potential to generate additional sites of critical dialogue; indeed, U of M hosted a 2011–12 speaker series, *Critical Conversations: The Idea of a Human Rights Museum*, resulting in an interdisciplinary volume analyzing the CMHR.⁴⁰ Such a systemic view of the museum’s influence allows us to see it as a generator of different kinds of spaces, meanings, and discussions far beyond its own walls, and its own terms. These other sites and energies may play an essential role in the museum’s own ethical activation.

Looking from my hotel on the edge of Winnipeg’s Red River during the museum’s opening weekend last September, the CMHR rose to dominate the city skyline at the waterway’s bend. In the other direction, toward the Alexander Docks—a modest boat landing below the hotel—a small fire burned on the shore in a rough pit surrounded by lawn chairs, a flimsy tent protecting it from the rain. Along with a scattering of bouquets and a teddy bear, these formed a memorial for Tina Fontaine, a fifteen-year-old Sagkeeng First Nation girl whose sexually violated body had been found in the river a month earlier, wrapped in a plastic bag. From my window in the hotel, I could see that the fire burned at night as well, in vigil. A single case in a plague of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada (over 1,181 from 1980 to 2012),⁴¹ the police had contact with Tina the day before her death, but let her go, despite her name being on a list of missing persons. Indigenous activists have been lobbying the local government to dredge the river for more bodies, but political will has been lacking.⁴²

It is the contrast of the CMHR’s primarily aesthetic treatment of Canada’s Indigenous populations—its effective “othering” of their ongoing suffering, even here in Canada’s most populous Indigenous city—that spoke most loudly. Consultation with Indigenous leaders resulted in a small outdoor “sacred terrace” in the Indigenous Perspectives gallery, Belmore’s intimate yet monumental sculpture *Trace* (unfortunately obscured by its poorly chosen location),⁴³ and the undeniably powerful alcove exhibiting the personal legacies of residential schooling. But until the museum can account for the systematic human tragedy of settler colonial, or “cultural” genocide,⁴⁴ which it declines to name but whose twenty-first-century effects are still unfolding on its very doorstep,⁴⁵ we must approach it critically as a nationally aggrandizing monument instead of the forum for dialogue on today’s moral challenges that it styles itself to be.

In the end, the museum will be defined by what it enables: the alternate narratives it catalyzes, the challenges to its own blind spots that it engenders.

Can it do more than serve as a traffic cop for competing claims to victimhood, containing a rainbow of multicultural Canadians in equal, nine by twelve cubes of injustice? Will diverse visitors find both meaningful and challenging places for themselves in its galleries? What new knowledge—or better still, what new ways of knowing, ways of understanding—can the museum provoke? What cracks can people find in its very smooth surface to spin out their own ideas about justice or ask challenging questions about the triumphant stories national museums inevitably tell? Will audiences grasp the struggles involved in today's apparent achievements, the factors that challenge, stretch, and push notions like human rights forward? Canada—through a painful learning process—has developed some of the most avant-garde museological approaches to Indigenous cultures. Along with First Nations communities' own exhibition initiatives,⁴⁶ the University of British Columbia's ongoing partnerships with local Indigenous groups has resulted in sensitive, relevant, innovative labeling and open storage techniques at its Museum of Anthropology, testifying to the ongoing debates, negotiations, and difficult questions surrounding the very museumizing of Indigenous culture, heritage, and history.⁴⁷ Why can't the same be true for Indigenous suffering and struggle?

Self-critical museums on a national scale are still a rarity. Museums have traditionally served to aggrandize their owners (or these days, their donors), and national museums serve, no less, to celebrate the nation. Moreover, the CMHR is emerging at a time of increasing control of messaging put forth by the conservative Harper government. In 2012 the Canadian Department of Heritage announced the planned renaming of the Canadian Museum of Civilization to the Canadian Museum of History, with a corresponding narrowing of scope, collections, and staff. The site-specific Pier 21 museum, a former immigration shed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, has also been elevated to national museum status, with a mandate to enshrine the story of all of Canada as a fundamentally immigrant nation.⁴⁸ And major new Holocaust and Victims of Communism memorials are planned for Ottawa's Parliament Hill, both of which decidedly celebrate Canada's role in giving refuge to asylum seekers and survivors (just as the Daniel Liebeskind sculpture commemorating the 937 Jews turned away from Canadian shores as they fled Nazi Europe was taken off display and put into storage).⁴⁹ In this context, can we take the CMHR at its own name—a museum not only *about* but *for* human rights? Can we experience it as a site for active and activist “thinking through,” where painful issues can be aired and new solidarities can be formed across ethnic communities around ongoing injustices like the plague of missing and murdered Indigenous women? To do so, the CMHR must welcome and engage with those who challenge its own exclusions.

Museums do not change on their own. It is due to the activist efforts of community groups—the kind of lobbying that, as the museum notes in its own galleries, gave rise to the designation of “genocide” for those events featured on its walls—that they evolve. The recent release of the summary final report of Canada’s seven-year-long Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, and particularly Chief Justice Murray Sinclair’s designation of the residential schooling system as cultural genocide is one such challenge, to which the museum will inevitably respond.⁵⁰ They are also not monoliths; there is behind-the-scenes dissensus, and forward-thinking museum workers depend on pressure from the outside to make change happen within museum walls.⁵¹ And change will come partially and painfully, as individual curators and staff members inside museums leverage, or accede to, the external pressures with which they are inevitably in dialogue.

The delivery by museum staff of food and water to protestors on the opening weekend and the visit of Clint Curle, head of stakeholder relations for the CMHR, to Shoal Lake No. 40 and his description of what he saw there as “a whole cascade of human rights issues” reveal the kinds of cracks that must be further pried open for the museum to rise to its uncertain potential.⁵² If museum critics today recognize the weaknesses of analyses that see national museums as sites of discipline and control in totalizing, unified ideological terms,⁵³ and increasing attention is being paid to museums as both contested and contestable spaces,⁵⁴ the work that remains is to envision mechanisms by which these institutions might encourage and engage with the critiques they generate. To do so would be to practice a form of constructive criticism that treats museums like the CMHR as potential—if reluctant—partners, and holds them to their own idealistic mandates.

Notes

I am a co-investigator on the research project “Difficult Knowledge in Public: Thinking through the Museum,” funded by the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council. The project is dedicated to exploring the evolving CMHR as a case study into how to “think through” the museum as a technology that offers specific yet underdeveloped potential for public pedagogy and civic dialogue (see thinkingthroughthemuseum.org). I thank my co-investigators Angela Failler, Heather Igloliorte, and Monica Patterson, as well as colleagues Shelley Ruth Butler, Nadine Blumer, and Cynthia Milton, with catalyzing and enriching my observations in this text. Special thanks also to Ruth Phillips for her constructive suggestions. The final text reflects my own perspective.

1. See <http://sl40.ca/>. On June 25, 2015, Shoal Lake No. 40 won a preliminary victory when the city of Winnipeg began construction of a bridge linking the community to the main road (www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/city-of-winnipeg-to-begin-bridge-construction-at-shoal-lake-40-first-nation-1.3126767).

2. During the opening weekend, nine thousand visitors were issued first-come, first-served tickets from the museum's online system.
3. For the petition to remove Hudbay Minerals' special donor plaque in the museum and its recognition as a "friend" of the museum, see myemail.constantcontact.com/Petition-The-Canadian-Museum-for-Human-Rights--Remove-Hudbay-Minerals-from-Museum-of-Human-Rights.html?soid=1103480765269&aid=hQ4lcA_dkt8. For the internment boycott letter, see www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/some-ukrainian-european-groups-want-boycott-of-human-rights-museum-1.2767541.
4. See Angela Failler, Peter Ives, and Heather Milne, eds., "Caring for Difficult Knowledge: Prospects for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights," special issue, *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 37.2–3 (2015); and Karen Busby, Adam Muller, and Andrew Woolford, eds., *The Idea of a Human Rights Museum* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014).
5. Dirk Moses, "Does the Holocaust Reveal or Conceal Other Genocides? The Canadian Museum of Human Rights and Grievable Suffering," in *Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, and Memory*, ed. Doug Irvin, Alexander Hinton, and Tom LaPointe (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 21–51.
6. Karyn Ball and Per Anders Rudling, "The Underbelly of Canadian Multiculturalism: Holocaust Obfuscation and Envy in the Debate about the Canadian Museum of Human Rights," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 20.3 (2014): 33–80.
7. See humanrights.ca/research-and-collections/collections/what-we-collect.
8. Critiques of the "human rights" paradigm flowing from the UN declaration have been leveled by numerous scholars, for example, for the ways this framework depends on flawed notions of "humanity" (Jack Donnelly, "Human Rights: A New Standard of Civilization?" *International Affairs* 74 [January 1998]: 1–24); and how it makes justice criminal and individual, rather than political and collective (Mahmood Mamdani, "Beyond Nuremberg: The Historical Significance of the Post-apartheid Transition in South Africa," *Politics and Society* 43.1 [2015]: 61–88).
9. Constance Classen and David Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts," in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums, and Material Culture* (New York: Berg, 2006), 209–10.
10. Edward Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
11. Erica Lehrer and Cynthia Milton, introduction to *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4. See also Nadine Blumer, "Expanding Museum Spaces: Networks of Difficult Knowledge at and beyond the Canadian Museum for Human Rights," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 37.2–3 (2015): 125–46.
12. On the "rapid shrinkage and, in some cases, the disappearance of [Aboriginal heritage] initiatives" under the Harper government, see Ruth Phillips, "Can National Museums Be Postcolonial? The Canadian Museum for Human Rights and the Obligation of Redress to First Nations," *Museum Transformations*, ed. Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 545–73, esp. 558–59. The planned "Mother Canada" monument honoring Canadian war dead in Cape Breton, cosponsored by Parks Canada, is one example of the other side of the equation. See thechronicleherald.ca/novascotia/1294683-parks-canada-gave-100k-to-firm-financing-green-cove-plan.
13. Corinne Kratz has described museums as "event, object, and interactive process at one and the same time" (*The Ones That Are Wanted: Communication and the Politics of Representation in a Photographic Exhibition*, [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002], 91). See also Ray Silverman, ed., *Museum as Process: Translating Local and Global Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
14. The galleries are summarized on the museum's website at humanrights.ca/galleries.
15. Their space comprises 100,000 words of original text, 2,543 images, 100 hours of video in 512 clips, 160 objects and works of art, and 19 digital interactive elements (humanrights.ca/explore/architecture/building-museum/museum-details).
16. See www.chrisd.ca/2014/05/29/antoine-predock-canadian-museum-for-human-rights-architect/; humanrights.ca/about-museum/news/museum-wins-top-international-awards-innovation; <http://mytoba.ca/news/human-rights-museum-wins-award-for-accessibility/>.
17. See humanrights.ca/about-museum/news/cmhr-unveils-plans-flagship-destination-restaurant.
18. See www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/citizenship.asp.
19. For a discussion of the politics behind the development of the museum's idea from a Holocaust museum to an "all-inclusive Canadian genocide museum," see Dirk Moses, "Protecting Human Rights

- and Preventing Genocide: The Canadian Museum for Human Rights and the Will to Intervene,” in Muller, Busby, and Woolford, *Idea of a Human Rights Museum*.
20. Joseph Breaun, “Why Human ‘Rights Inflation’ Could Spell ‘the Beginning of the End of Social Change,’” *National Post*, June 1, 2015.
 21. Tricia Logan, “National Memory and Museums: Remembering Settler Colonial Genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada,” in *Remembering Genocide*, ed. Nigel Eltringham and Pam Maclean (London: Routledge, 2014).
 22. See www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/26/columns-us-g20-canada-advantages-idUSTRE58P05Z20090926.
 23. Downloadable CMHR digital self-tour application.
 24. See www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/digging-up-dirt-on-museum-48144282.html.
 25. See www.idlenomore.ca. Karen Sharma points to echoes of the colonial civilizing project in the language used in discussions of the museum’s placement in Winnipeg and on the Indigenous land at the city’s “Forks” (“Governing Difficult Knowledge: the Canadian Museum for Human Rights and Its Publics,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 37.2–3 [2015]: 184–206).
 26. See Logan, “National Memory and Museums,” and Moses, “Does the Holocaust Reveal.”
 27. It is unclear what actual latitude Crown Corporations’ “arm’s length” status technically permits in such decisions; in any case, the CMHR has chosen to interpret its mandate narrowly. For an interesting discussion of this status, see Sharma, “Governing Difficult Knowledge”; and Failler, Ives, and Milne, “Caring for Difficult Knowledge.” The CMHR’s clear link to current government priorities—while disclaiming activism in any form—was most egregiously revealed in its censoring of the historian Veronica Strong-Boag’s invited International Women’s Day blog post, which criticized current Harper government policies. See www.themanitoban.com/2014/03/human-rights-museum-accused-of-censorship/19640/.
 28. Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission made its final report on June 2, 2015, as this review was being written. It describes the treatment of Indigenous people in Canada as “cultural genocide.” CMHR communications officer Angela Cassie stated that “the CMHR will be taking a close look at the TRC recommendations to try and integrate the new information into its exhibits,” but that it will wait to see if the term *genocide* is adopted by the federal government before using it in the museum (“CMHR Waiting for Residential School System to Be Labeled ‘Genocide,’” *CBC News*, June 4, 2015, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/cmhr-waiting-for-residential-school-system-to-be-labelled-genocide-1.3101530).
 29. Logan, “National Memory and Museums”; Audra Simpson, “The State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gendered Costs of Settler Sovereignty in Canada,” (lecture, Concordia University, Montreal, October 31, 2014). See also Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
 30. Shelley Ruth Butler, “Mixed Metaphors, Herding, and Burning Issues at the CMHR,” October 18, 2014, cerev.concordia.ca/blog/shelley-ruth-butler-on-mixed-metaphors-herding-and-burning-issues-at-the-cmhr#more-4975.
 31. Angela Failler, “Hope without Consolation: Prospects for Critical Learning at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 37.2–3 (2015): 227–50; and Failler, Ives, and Milne, “Caring for Difficult Knowledge,” 227–50.
 32. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970); Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. I. Karp and S. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 25–32; Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Phillips, *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums, and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2006).
 33. Eric Gable, “How Do We Study History Museums? Or Cultural Studies at Monticello,” *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2008); Lois Silverman, “Visitor Meaning Making in Museums for a New Age,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 38.3 (1995): 161–70.
 34. Angela Failler and Roger Simon, “Curatorial Practice and Learning from Difficult Knowledge,” in Busby, Muller, and Woolford, *Idea of a Human Rights Museum*.

35. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Museum as Catalyst" (keynote address, Museums 2000: Confirmation or Challenge, organized by ICOM Sweden, the Swedish Museum Association, and the Swedish Travelling Exhibition/Riksställningar, Vadstena, September 29, 2000).
36. Duncan Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 14.1 (1971): 11–24.
37. Nancy Proctor, "The Museum as Distributed Network," www.museum-id.com/idea-detail.asp?id=337. See also S. Bautista and A. Balsamo, "Understanding the Distributed Museum: Mapping the Spaces of Museology in Contemporary Culture," in *Museums and Higher Education* (University of Brighton, 2013).
38. James E. Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18.2 (1992): 267–96. For a provocative recent example, see www.themissingimage.at/home.php?il=2&l=en. For Ottawa's memorial, see www.rcaaq.org/html/en/appels_details.php?id=21811.
39. See wag.ca/about/press/media-releases/read,release/388/wag-celebrates-canadian-museum-for-human-rights-opening-with-special-exhibition. The Canadian War Museum opened an exhibition on the Ukrainian Internment Camps in Canada during World War I—one of the topics the CMHR was criticized for excluding, in October 2014 (see www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/life-at-home-during-the-war/enemy-aliens/the-internment-of-ukrainian-canadians/).
40. See Busby, Muller, and Woolford, *Idea of a Human Rights Museum*.
41. *Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview*. HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN IN RIGHT OF CANADA as represented by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014, www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/pubs/mmaw-faapd-eng.pdf.
42. See Amber Dean, "The CMHR and the Ongoing Crisis of Murdered or Missing Indigenous Women: Do Museums Have a Responsibility to Care?," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 37.2–3 (2015): 147–65.
43. See humanrights.ca/blog/rebecca-belmores-trace-hands-generations-past-and-those-will-come.
44. "Cultural genocide" is the term used in the newly released final report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC): "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Report on the Genocidal Consequences for Aboriginal Peoples of Canada of Residential Schools." See www.ctvnews.ca/canada/residential-schools-amounted-to-cultural-genocide-trc-report-says-1.2402093. In June 2015 the word *genocide* was added to one display case in the museum in reference to Canada's treatment of the Indigenous population. It appears at the very end, in the section "Taking Action for Change" on the fifth floor, on a small panel that reads: "In June 2015, the TRC concluded the residential school system was a form of cultural genocide and delivered 94 recommendations to redress this legacy." Thanks to Nadine Blumer for this observation.
45. Winnipeg is home to Canada's largest urban Indigenous population, with 25,970 First Nations people reported by the 2011 National Household Survey, making up about 3.6 percent of the population, as well as 46,325 Métis, or 6.5 percent. A recent cover story in *MacLean's* magazine reported an epidemic of what it described as "disdain for poor, inner-city Natives" in the city ("Welcome to Winnipeg: Where Canada's Racism Problem Is at Its Worst," *MacLean's*, January 22, 2015).
46. For example, the Cree Cultural Institute at James Bay (www.legacyofhope.ca/projects/we-were-so-far-away) or the Legacy of Hope's "We were so far away" exhibit (www.legacyofhope.ca/projects/we-were-so-far-away).
47. See Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011).
48. For observations on that process, see cerev.concordia.ca/blog/thinking-about-immigration-at-canadas-newest-national-museum.
49. See www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/11/17/halifax_monument_to_the_none_is_too_many_vessel_looking_for_new_home.html.
50. See www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/cmhr-waiting-for-residential-school-system-to-be-labelled-genocide-1.3101530.
51. Heather Igloriote, a consulting curator for Indigenous content at the CMHR, raised this point in the workshop "Museum Openings: Caring for Difficult Knowledge within and beyond the Canadian Museum for Human Rights," University of Winnipeg, September 19–21, 2014.

52. See www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/for-our-first-nations-new-museum-a-monument-to-hypocrisy/article20784499/. Chief Erwin Redskye told our visiting group, "We are good friends with the CMHR. They have been here. They will be changing their exhibits."
53. Now-classic works that treat national museums as institutions of social regulation include Tony Bennett's *Birth of the Museum* and Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*.
54. See, e.g., Eric Gable, "How We Study History Museums: Or Cultural Studies at Monticello," in Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice*, and Kirsty Robertson, "It Takes a Lot of Wrongs to Make a Museum of Rights (paper presented at "Museum Openings: Caring for Difficult Knowledge within and beyond the Canadian Museum for Human Rights," September 19–20, 2014). Cf. Robertson, "Titanium Motherships of the New Economy: Museums, Neoliberalism, and Resistance," in *Imagining Resistance*, ed. Keri Cronin and Kirsty Robertson (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011), 197–214.