

Hope Without Consolation: Prospects for Critical Learning at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights
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Submitted to *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, Volume 37, Issue 2-3, 2015

From atop the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) juts the Tower of Hope, a 23-story illuminated glass architectural feature meant to symbolize “the goal of the human-rights journey” (CMHR [2014f](#)), namely, “hope for a changed world” (CMHR 2014d). The prominence of hope as an ideal is here concretized, literally set in stone. But in wider public discourse hope for the museum itself is less secure. Sentiments ranging from casual cynicism to outright protest over its prospects and plans suggest that not everyone is convinced of whether or how hope is befitting. Indeed, some have raised concerns at the prospect of an institutionalized version of hope standing in the way of opportunities for visitors to learn about human rights, evidenced by public criticism of a rumored directive from the museum's federally appointed board of trustees to implement more “positive stories” and an “optimistic tone” (“Human Rights Museum Board” [2012](#)). I take this criticism to be a useful starting point for thinking about hope not as a shared belief in the promise of a better future but instead, to borrow Andrew Benjamin's terms, as a “structural condition of the present” (Benjamin [2007](#), 2). Hope in this sense is not a universal dream for tomorrow. It is a symptom, or clue, as to the circumstances of here and now. To illustrate this idea my paper considers various expressions of hope by and about the CMHR that reflect the specific situation of the museum, located in Winnipeg, Manitoba on Treaty One territory, as well as the particular cultural, political, and economic stakes that invest the museum and its diverse publics in differing versions of a desired future and ways of getting there. I draw examples from official statements and promotional materials by the CMHR, mainstream news media coverage, and aesthetic responses made by artists Kevin McKenzie, Paul Zacharias and Rebecca Belmore in anticipation of the museum's opening. These examples not only provide a glimpse into the affective life of a cultural institution at its inaugural moment, they help expand the range of what it could mean to be hopeful in relation to it. The artworks, in particular, offer a version of hope that does not rely on the comfort of “positive stories” or “optimistic tone,” but wherein the future is held open to change through critical and unsettling engagements with present and ongoing histories of colonial violence in Canada. This is a version of hope that I call, after Roger I. Simon, “hope without consolation,” and that I argue opens a generative framework through which to explore the potential of a human rights museum.

Education theorists are interested in hope because hope orients us in particular ways toward pedagogy, to what and how we teach and learn (Britzman [1998](#); Freire [1994](#); Giroux [1997](#); R. I. Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert [2000](#)). How then might hope orient museumgoers or an imagined public toward the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, described as “a centre of learning where people from around the world can engage in discussion and commit to taking action against hate and oppression” (CMHR [2014a](#))? To some extent, hope has already been made to matter here as it represents the promise of a human rights education to inspire social change. In other words, through encounters with exhibits that tell stories of human rights struggles and triumphs, it is expected that museum visitors will be encouraged to make a difference.¹ But how, exactly, does this happen? In practice, how does learning inspire hope, or hope inspire learning? Are there versions of hope better able to do this than others? Might some versions of hope actually impede critical learning about human rights? Conversely, might some versions of a human rights education impede the potential for critical forms of hope? I raise these questions to flag what may otherwise be a taken for granted relationship between pedagogy and hope (the positing of teaching and learning as inherently hopeful), and to prioritize the capacity for both critical learning and hope as central to the prospect of the CMHR serving as a meaningful site of cultural production, pedagogical encounter, and public exchange.

As a museum dedicated to human rights education and awareness whose mission includes “contributing to the collective memory and sense of identity of all Canadians” (CMHR 2014a), the CMHR is, among other things, tasked with facilitating public engagement with legacies of trauma and violence. What kind of hope is needed to meet the pedagogical challenges of such a task? This task requires more than a hope founded upon the well-worn claim that a better future involves learning the “lessons of history” to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Rehearsing familiar phrases like “never again” as wars, militarized occupations, and other more “everyday” forms of systemic violence wage on, it becomes clear that raising historical consciousness must be sought upon new and different terms. Rather than adopting clichéd proclamations of hope and futurity, this article looks to “remembrance as a hopeful practice of critical learning” (R. I. Simon et al. [2000](#), 6). In this practice the singularities of diverse and complex histories of suffering can be acknowledged for their living force in the present as a premise for hope; they need not be minimized or overcome for the sake of cultivating positive visitor experiences or narratives of community and national pride. How might this version or practice of hope find expression at the CMHR, and what prospects for critical learning would be possible if it did?

The challenges associated with turning to legacies of trauma and violence as a basis for collective memory and learning are, of course, not unique to the CMHR. Museum scholars and practitioners have identified these challenges across the globe in various spaces dedicated to public engagements with histories including slavery, apartheid, genocide, and other instances of “difficult heritage” (Arnolde-de Simine [2013](#); Hansen-Glucklich [2014](#); Karp et al. [2006](#); Lonetree [2012](#); Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson [2011](#); MacDonald [2009](#); R. I. Simon [2014](#); Williams [2008](#)). Inherent to these spaces are delicate negotiations related to curating and exhibiting contested histories and ideas, and to the inclusion of violent or traumatic subject matter in museum displays. An additional challenge or tension emerges when these spaces come under pressure to package and instrumentalize knowledge in forms that reflect the political and economic interests of sponsors and privileged stakeholders, compromising the efforts of curators and other museum staff to grapple with and arrive at nuanced ways of presenting complex and sensitive topics (Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson [2011](#), 11; see also Bunzl [2014](#)). Such pressures have a direct impact on chances for museum audiences to learn from representations of fraught histories or experiences of difficult knowledge that one might expect to encounter at a museum dedicated to human rights issues. My article traces these pressures and their attendant challenges as they manifest in expressions and instrumentalizations of hope by and about the CMHR.

Consolatory Hope: Not a Killjoy Museum

In a well-circulated *Winnipeg Free Press* article from November 30, 2012 titled “Atrocities Gallery ‘Too Much’: Museum to Revamp Content; Ex-Workers Disparage Move,”² Bartley Kives reports on a decision by the CMHR to scale back its original plan to feature more than eighty mass atrocities in a single gallery. The revised plan, he notes, is to focus on five historical events that the government of Canada officially recognizes as cases of genocide (CMHR 2014b).³ According to Kives, the impetus for the museum's scaling back came from pressure by its federally appointed board of trustees who were worried about upsetting the government and its potential trade partners with too much “negative content,” a claim that he says is corroborated by former employees of the museum. The CMHR's then-President and CEO, Stuart Murray, denied the claim (again, according to Kives), explaining that the downscaling happened because

curators could not properly represent eighty mass atrocities in one space. “How could we possibly do them all justice?” he asked. In the same article, the museum's communications staff present yet another side of the story. According to Communications Director Angela Cassie, the museum's original plan had drawn negative feedback not from the board of trustees or the curators but from members of the public during a consultation process wherein it was deemed that eighty “serious incidents” were “too much.” “People said the gallery felt like a little shop of horrors,” Cassie is quoted as saying, with Communications Manager Maureen Fitzhenry adding, “Planners don't want visitors to get so depressed they would be compelled to leave.”

Beyond the varying accounts here of who responded “negatively” to the museum's original plans, an overarching, twofold narrative emerges. This narrative is not unique to Kives’ piece or those cited therein, but recurs in mainstream public discourse by and about the CMHR to suggest that a central problem facing the CMHR is mitigating the risk of eliciting “horror” or “depression” among museumgoers, and that more than a certain amount of exposure to representations of “serious incidents” can be assumed to be “too much.” In other words, the narrative implies that both horror and depression are undesirable or inappropriate affects in the context of the museum, and that exhibitions dedicated to too much seriousness will inevitably cause museumgoers to be affected negatively (Ahmed [2010a](#), 2).⁴ Negative affect is also herein deemed an incongruous response (as in, a museum of human rights shouldn't make you feel wrong), and one that a museum can or should be able to anticipate, measure and control. It becomes the job of the museum, then, to sense the gap between so-called negative responses and positive ones and to close it, if possible, so that museumgoers are affected in idealized hopeful and inspiring ways.

Kives goes on to cite Murray's account of having been confronted about the museum's plans by an unnamed scholar who leveled at him: “I hope to hell this is not a museum of human wrongs” (Kives [2012](#)). The unnamed scholar's hope, along with Kives’ report of Murray's recounting it, repeats this narrative where being perceived as not closing the gap between horror and inspiration risks disappointment in the object that is supposed to make people hopeful about human rights—namely the museum—which is now itself to blame for a sense of despair. Not only do these terms work against an appreciation of the fact that “You cannot always close the gap between how [people] feel and how [you think they] should feel” (Ahmed [2010a](#), 3), they fail to realize that the CMHR may never, really, “get it right” in the eyes of museumgoers or members of the public given the range of opinions and experiences held by the diverse communities it aims to serve. And yet closing the gap and getting it right persist within conversations by and about the CMHR as common-sensical interpretations of what the museum can and should be expected to do.

This interpretation is reiterated during a public talk given by Stuart Murray for a lecture series hosted by the Centre for Human Rights Research at the University of Manitoba on September 9, 2011 (predating Kives’ article). Murray here expounds on two main points: the museum's contribution to what he calls “civic upswing” wherein the CMHR is named alongside Winnipeg's returning National Hockey League team, a new football stadium, and airport renovations as a “major invigorating force” for the city; and the museum's own understanding of its role as a human rights center. On the latter point, Murray would seem to anticipate the “atrocities gallery” controversy and the concerns of the unnamed scholar, as well as a later and ongoing controversy

over the museum's reluctance to refer to Canada's deliberate extermination of First Nations peoples and cultures as “genocide.”⁵

There's a misconception ... that the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is primarily a centre for the commemoration of genocides. Or in other words, a museum not of human rights, but of human wrongs that looks back at all the terrible things humans have done to each other over the years. Well, no. That's not our role. And yes, it's vital that we pay close attention to the lessons of history, but memorializing human atrocity isn't what we're about. (CMHR 2011f)

Although Murray leaves unclear exactly who is thought to perceive the museum as a space dedicated primarily to genocides, by characterizing this perception as a “misconception” he communicates a desire to set the public record straight about what the CMHR is not. It is not, primarily, a space for memorialization, commemoration, or remembrance of the “terrible things that humans have done to each other over the years.” That is not, he repeats, its role. This series of repudiations (or “negative definition” in rhetorical terms),⁶ where the museum is defined by assertions of what it is not, is consistent with other statements issued by the CMHR in anticipation of its opening, including this one from a promotional brochure circulated in the same year:

Museum or Movement? The conversation has begun. The Canadian Museum for Human Rights does not define human rights—it invites people from all walks of life into a dynamic discussion. This Museum is not here to entertain, memorialize or horrify; it is here to empower people to change thought and action, to build a world where everyone is respected and valued. (CMHR 2011d)

While this time emphasizing some “positive” statements about the museum (the museum “invites people from all walks of life ... ” and “is here to empower people ... ”), negative definition is again used to elucidate the museum's purpose: “The Canadian Museum for Human Rights does not define human rights ... [it] is not here to entertain, memorialize or horrify” (CMHR 2011d).

In each of the above instances (the news article, the lecture, the brochure) the CMHR's publicity apparatus appears to be working hard to essentially reassure stakeholders and prospective museumgoers that the CMHR is not a killjoy museum. I borrow the term *killjoy* from cultural theorist Sara Ahmed's description of those so-called “willful” figures who are blamed for killing the joy, hope, or happiness of others by continuing to draw attention to injustices such as sexism, racism, and xenophobia in what some believe is a time of gender equality and postracial, multicultural harmony (2010a, 2010b). Ahmed gives as examples of killjoys as “the feminist,” “the angry black woman,” and the “melancholy migrant.” These figures are not only imagined to be killjoys because of what they are unhappy about, they themselves are read as unhappy beings such that situations of sexism, racism, and xenophobia become reflections of their unhappiness rather than of the injustice of these situations. In an ironic turnabout, killjoys are blamed not only for sabotaging the happiness (or hopefulness) of others, but also for bringing unhappiness upon themselves by refusing to accept the belief that “we've come a long way.” In other words, they refuse to be consoled by certain narratives of progress or promises for the future that fail to recognize how the past continues to bear upon the present unjustly, and are thereby rendered “affect aliens” in the eyes of those who wish to maintain the status quo (2010a, 2010b).

Ahmed's account of the killjoy comes from her scholarship on the cultural politics of emotion wherein she assesses the role and regulation of affect within efforts to challenge oppression including equity or “diversity” work undertaken in institutional contexts (2010a, 2010b, 2012). In particular, she notices how the dominant cultural injunction to “happiness” promoted within frameworks of (neo)liberal multiculturalism leans on this work in such a way as to constitute any perceived negative affect as pathological and threatening to its goals. Her analysis is applicable to an understanding of the pressures facing the CMHR as an institution whose mandate, as already noted, includes “taking action against hate and oppression” (CMHR 2014a), and that is arguably subject to a similar injunction to model unambiguous positivity and hope. That is, the CMHR, in its mandate to explore the subject of human rights and include a diverse range of histories and experiences (and thus to presumably raise critiques of sexism, racism, and xenophobia), finds itself vulnerable to the alienation and accusations faced by the killjoy figure—that is, of being seen as inappropriately attached to horrifying or depressing histories (“all the terrible things that humans have done to each other over the years”) and of eliciting inappropriate affect (horror, depression) among its audiences. In light of this vulnerability, the CMHR's repeated use of negative definition (“we're not ... we're not ...”) might be understood as a strategic defense against the daunting prospect of negotiating encounters with difficult knowledge at the museum. After all, it's hard to contribute to “civic upswing” if you have a reputation for bringing people down.

This either/or (up/down) framework takes shape in popular discourse about the museum's use value and economic feasibility (keenly described in Heather Milne's contribution to this special issue), epitomized in the following on-line post by *Winnipeg Free Press* reader “Blue Rod Blog” (a frequent contributor to the *Letters to the Editor* section) in response to Kives' article concerning the museum's exhibition plans: “What a train wreck. Who's going to drop good coin to be made to feel awful about themselves?” Upon first glance, this seemingly glib comment expresses a crude yet commonsensical economics: either the museum provides people with good feelings, or it pays the price. Bad feelings, it would seem to suggest, do not result in good coin. Upon closer analysis, the comment gestures to a complex set of assumptions with broader significance concerning expectations and hopes for the museum. By positing the museum (the “train wreck”) as, itself, the potential source of people's bad feelings—and not merely at the prospect of calling museumgoers to bear witness to atrocities, but more specifically at the prospect of people being made to feel awful about themselves in the act of doing so (who's going to pay for that?)—the success of the CMHR is imagined to hinge upon museumgoers not feeling personally implicated in the stories that they may encounter at the museum, particularly the terrible ones. In other words, this commonsensical account imagines not only that the “average” museumgoer or member of the public to whom the CMHR is addressed is someone who can position themselves at a distance in relation to the histories on display (a neutral or unaffected subject),⁷ but also that there is, literally, no value, or hope, in the experience of getting upset over someone else's suffering.

Another strategy, then, to counteract perceptions of the CMHR as a killjoy museum is to promote consolatory hope. Consolatory hope, as I am defining it here, offers comfort or consolation in response to the prospect of “bad feelings” that may or may not arise upon exposure to evidence of past and present violence, suffering and traumatic loss. Consolatory hope is enacted through a moralizing pedagogy that sets narratives and images of the past against an imagined future time in which the past “must never happen again” (R. I. Simon et al. [2000](#), 4).

At the CMHR, consolatory hope promises visitors and stakeholders that the museum is going to get the right “balance” of tragedy and triumph so that people ultimately come away feeling inspired, not depressed or awful about themselves. Consider the following excerpt from a speech again given by Stuart Murray, this time at the CMHR's Annual Public Meeting held at Sisler High School in Winnipeg on December 6, [2012](#):

If your museum is intended to memorialize and commemorate, then it might be appropriate to focus only on tragedy. But if your museum is intended to educate and inspire action, then you must also include examples of where action has led to progress on human rights ... This is what we mean when we say that we're striving for a balanced approach. We're not talking about sugar-coating history or covering up abuses. We're talking about *injecting hope*. (CMHR 2012, emphasis added)

Although Murray's speech presumably means to convey optimism and possibility on behalf of the museum there are a number of limiting, even cynical impressions one might draw from this excerpt. To start, it gives the impression that to focus on tragedy or “human wrongs” at the CMHR would be intrinsically antithetical to cultivating hope and inspiring action, as if the museum's content in and of itself determines the potential for what might be learned or taken away by museumgoers. This is as if to say that exhibition design, curatorial strategies, educational programming, translation, and the knowledge and experience that museumgoers bring to the museum themselves have no bearing on how people might encounter or appreciate the content or issues represented therein. It assumes that the museum's prospects for cultivating hope and inspiring action are bound up solely in what is displayed, rather than how displays might be made meaningful through the creative agency of museum staff and the participation of museumgoers (Simon [2012](#)). By this rationale, if you display “horrors,” for instance, people can be nothing other than horrified, regardless of the ways in which stories of the horrors are contextualized and told. The museum, in this view, becomes a mere storehouse of information rather than a complex institution made up of people, objects, and ideas that are situated in and responsive to shifting dynamics of power, changing social contexts, and varying interpretations of human rights (Failler and Simon, [in press](#)). Museumgoers or an imagined public are here treated as a homogenous group of indiscriminating recipients capable only of experiencing the museum's contents at face value.

Reiterating that “looking back” is not really what the museum is about, Murray's speech also assumes that the practice of remembrance or memorialization can only hinder the capacity for education and progress. Memorialization, in this view, stands in the way of moving forward toward “the future of human rights” (CMHR 2014a). Reflecting on the past is equated with a backwards or regressive orientation, and the pedagogical value of memorialization or remembrance that is recognized by historians, educators and curators alike is effectively ignored (more on this below). In casting memorialization as antithetical to progress, an untenable separation between past and present is posited wherein history is seen as not really having to interfere with people's lives here and now but can be imagined, instead, as “absolute past” (Dick [2008](#), 37). In the imaginary of an absolute past, Canada's own so-called “dark chapters” are more or less over, safely sealed off from the present. Status quo fantasies of an unimplicated “now” and a hopeful future are thereby preserved, along with feelings of national pride. In the imaginary of an absolute past we can be cured of the dis-ease brought on by evidence of continuing suffering with a “hope injection,” a quick and painless antidote that rids us of having

to sit uncomfortably with difficult memories or take the time to learn new ways of relating to the past and “others” in the present as a means of possibility. In this curative version of consolatory hope, we are to be comforted by the notion that a future-oriented human rights education, along with a positive attitude, are enough to empower people to “change thought and action, to build a world where everyone is respected and valued.”⁸

Difficult Knowledge: The Terrible Gift

Curative or consolatory versions of hope signal a resistance to thinking through traumatic histories and violent pasts as a basis for critical judgment concerning the inadequacies of the present. For the CMHR this resistance may be symptomatic, at least in part, of being subject to the pressures of a neoliberal market logic that prioritizes “good coin” over the less tangible value of more abstract concepts such as remembrance or even human rights. It is also, undoubtedly, a symptom of the pressures faced by the CMHR, as a state-funded institution, to reflect certain benevolent narratives of nation building and progress. Indeed, the museum seems caught between a logic of nationalist neoconservatism and a mandate “to explore the subject of human rights ... to encourage reflection and dialogue” following the *Museums Act* (Government of Canada [2008](#)).⁹ For the purposes of this discussion, however, I am particularly interested in how resistance to thinking through traumatic histories and violent pasts signals a pedagogical dilemma for both the museum and its publics.

Education theorists Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman ([2003](#)) use the phrase “difficult knowledge” to describe encounters with representations of traumatic or violent histories that challenge our fundamental frameworks for making sense of our selves and the world around us. What is difficult about difficult knowledge, they say, is not the terrible fact of these histories in and of themselves but, more precisely, the problem of *what to do* with such knowledge when it triggers our fears, confusion, aggression and/or hopelessness, bringing us up against the limits of what we may be willing or capable of understanding. Difficult knowledge is thus not a *thing* (as in a terrible fact) so much as it is an *experience* where coming into awareness presents a crisis in learning for the learner. In other words, the difficulty in difficult knowledge does not belong to the “contents” of history or its representations but is provoked by the affective force of these encounters threatening our ability to settle the meaning of past events, undoing our sense of certainty or mastery over the stories of our lives and the lives of others (R. I. Simon [2011](#), 433–434).

Said otherwise, difficult knowledge is difficult because it does not confirm or consolidate reality for us in the way that “lovely knowledge” does (Pitt and Britzman [2003](#), 766). Where lovely knowledge “reinforces what we already know and gives us what we are accustomed to wanting from new information we encounter” (Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson [2011](#), 8)—and to be sure, there can be lovely knowledge versions of unlovely histories including those of atrocious violence—difficult knowledge leaves us feeling unfamiliar, fractured, or at a loss. It is not surprising, then, that people resist difficult knowledge. The response of museum visitors encountering representations of traumatic events “to position the [traumatic] experience as something that is ‘other’ ... [where] although I empathize with the trauma, it still happened to someone else, at some other time, in some other part of the world” (Reid, [in press](#)) is an example of such resistance. What the museum visitor's response described here by curator Mary Reid suggests is that even when as spectators we may be willing and able to recognize particular

traumatic histories as sad or regrettable, we are still inclined to maintain a certain distance from them, a sense of them as “not mine” or “not my problem” and, thus, as warranting no further effort on our part beyond what Megan Boler (1999) calls “passive empathy.”

Resistance to difficult knowledge can also take the form of vicarious identification where, for instance, museumgoers are encouraged to “stand in the shoes” of others for whom they are assumed not to share a particular history but whose experiences of suffering are nevertheless imagined to be accessible or even temporarily inhabitable by way of role playing or “immersive” scenarios. I am thinking, for example, of a proposed project called “Embodying Empathy” that seeks to construct a “prototype virtual Indian Residential School (IRS)” or “immersive virtual IRS representation” for use within commemorative spaces including museums like the CMHR (Embodying Empathy 2013; see also Muller, Sinclair, and Woolford, *in press*). Although such a project may be meant to foster responsiveness among museumgoers by positioning them as more than “just spectators,” it can also limit the potential to learn from histories on display by denying the radical alterity of traumatic experiences and assimilating the differences of others. In other words, when witnessing is organized through a framework that encourages a sense of sameness or identification with the memories and experiences of others—assuming that the other's pain can be “masterfully ‘known’” (Eppert 2000, 222)—it becomes all the more difficult to see or imagine oneself as potentially implicated or participating in legacies of power and privilege that may be entwined with the conditions of the other's suffering, and all the more unlikely that responsibility to/for the other will be learned in a way that challenges the spectator's existing worldview.¹⁰

Another related tendency in the face of difficult knowledge is attachment to or identification with consolatory hope. Consolatory hope works both to defend against and smooth over painful or frustrating experiences of learning in order to produce something that can be counted as a “positive learning outcome” or, in venues like museums, a “positive visitor experience.” Drawing again on Britzman (and her reading of Melanie Klein), in a pedagogy where hope is insisted upon “as a strategy to slide over the pain of loss,” hope works to idealize some aspect of the self or other's experience and then to derive a sense of sustenance or satisfaction from that idealized part (1998, 120). Underneath hope's idealization, then, is a wish for “bad affect” to disappear and “good affect” to take its place. But at what cost? What parts of human rights struggle are missed or foreclosed when people or museums are under pressure to convert feelings of despair into hope? Is there another pedagogical framework that can be mobilized in spaces dedicated to human rights education, one with the capacity not only to bear frustration, fear, despair, or hopelessness but to value these affective responses as a basis from which to learn about or from traumatic histories and violent pasts towards envisioning new possibilities for the present? Can some form of hope be cultivated from within difficult knowledge, rather than against it?

In “The Terrible Gift: Museums and the Possibility of Hope Without Consolation” (2006), Roger I. Simon describes the challenges of negotiating difficult knowledge in the process of designing a museum exhibit based on a collection of archival materials and artifacts from the Jewish ghetto in Vilnius created and destroyed by Nazi troops during WWII. Simon and his curatorial team saw their main challenge being how to create a public history from this documentation that would summon museum visitors—particularly those who did not identify this past as their own—not simply to view the exhibit as detached observers, but to recognize their connectedness

to an event beyond their own memories and experiences. They endeavored, in other words, to encourage viewers of the exhibit to feel themselves implicated in the Vilnius history not upon identificatory terms (not in terms of “put yourself in their shoes”), but in terms of a “challenge to undertake ‘our own work’ [that] accepts a responsibility founded on the discrepancy of our experiences” (Boler [1999](#), 164). In this spirit, the curators approached the archival materials and artifacts whence they drew their exhibit as “terrible gifts.” As terrible gifts, these materials offered a means to witness the horrific and unfathomable suffering of those who were exterminated in the ghetto, while at the same time providing an opportunity to “rethink what it might mean to make a relation to and with the past, opening us to a reconsideration of the terms of our lives now as well as in the future” (R. I. Simon [2006](#), 189). In other words, curating representations of “the terrible things that humans [did] to each other” in Vilnius was imagined as a hopeful project without relying upon the promise of identification or a reconciled past; in Simon and his colleagues’ view, allowing people to be “touched by the past” (rather than settling it or being cured of it) *is* to allow them an opportunity to imagine ways of envisioning change. Difficult knowledge is herein recognized for its potential to incite change precisely because the experience of a “shock to thought” (Massumi quoted in R. I. Simon [2011](#), 436) can, in curated (or cared for) settings, serve to productively unsettle our usual ways of understanding the world and our place(s) within it, making room for new ideas and approaches to acting on the conditions that lead to violence and suffering in the first place.

Hope Without Consolation, or, Remembrance as a Hopeful Practice of Critical Learning

In a pedagogy where difficult knowledge is envisioned as a terrible gift, or within a framework of hope without consolation, feelings of horror or depression need not be disavowed or smoothed over but are seen, instead, as integral to appreciating the gravity of historical traumas and violent pasts for our ability to imagine change. Remembrance is vital, not antithetical, to inspiring thought and action. This is a version of hope, in other words, wherein histories of violation and injustice can be connected to circumstances of the present without needing to be minimized or overcome by universalizing, transcendent narratives of empowerment and futurity. How might the CMHR be encouraged to give its curators, educators, and the public the chance to encounter difficult knowledge as a terrible gift, and what opportunities for learning about human rights would be made possible if it did?

Before the CMHR opened to the public in September 2014, artists began responding to the idea of the new museum. I turn now to a selection of their works for what they have to teach us about the potential for seeing encounters with difficult knowledge as a basis for hope. Art, or aesthetic representation, can offer an expanded space within which to consider social dilemmas because it is often (though not always) less bound to convention than more linear forms of expression. In other words, art has the potential to free up our thinking about the relationship of the past to the present because it does not necessarily adhere to “stable epistemologies” in the way official narratives or historiographic accounts of the past typically do (Georgis [2013](#), 5–6). Instead, art can enter us into the less certain realms of affect, fantasy and creativity wherein difficult realities are “imaginatively worked out” (Georgis [2013](#), 77) and other possibilities for relating and making history matter are envisioned. Art, when it challenges us, demands that we step outside of our familiar frameworks for understanding and open ourselves to experiences that we do not already know, or that we know too well but cannot express in words. Art can, as such, provoke difficult knowledge and the uncomfortable feelings that go along with it; but for these same

reasons it can also provide a context within which to tarry with difficult knowledge without having to reconcile one's feelings according to common sense or prescribed frames. Where I have argued, then, that consolatory versions of hope are symptomatic of hegemonic pressures to convert difficult or bad feelings into good ones, artworks that do not exert or ascribe to such pressures might generate hope upon different terms.

In Spring 2013, Urban Shaman Gallery in Winnipeg exhibited Kevin McKenzie's series *Abo Retro*. McKenzie is a Saskatchewan-based multidisciplinary artist whose work is described as being “influenced and inspired by his First Nations background and the ever-changing urban landscape” (“Abo-Retro” [2013](#)). *Abo Retro* is named after the artist's personal collection of vintage and antique objects, including a pair of “Indian boy and girl” salt and pepper shaker figurines and a deck of “Indian Warrior” playing cards featured in the work. Through various creative processes McKenzie remediates these found objects and superimposes their images onto digital photographs of monumental buildings and architecture in the city of Winnipeg including the Manitoba Legislative Building and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

The piece from the series reproduced here features an Indian warrior standing on or against the CMHR (Figure [1](#)). The warrior, wielding a hunting rifle and dressed in stereotypical buckskin, moccasins and head feathers, is an image McKenzie lifted from the deck of collectable playing cards. By way of repetitive silk-screening he drained the original “Disneyfied” figure of primary colors, added grey scale and indigo lowlights, and repositioned him larger-than-life and trigger-ready on a black and white print of the face of the museum, flanked by the tower of hope. Although appearing to float above the horizon upon which the museum sits, the warrior also stands his ground, indicated by his posture and the brushstrokes of undergrowth beneath his feet, gesturing to the contentious site that the CMHR is built upon—traditional land of First Nations and Métis peoples at the fork of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers—and to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from this land in the name of urban development and, now, human rights.

Figure 1 Image from Kevin McKenzie's *Abo Retro* (reproduced with permission of the artist).



In his artist's statement McKenzie explains that the series, using commodified objects from popular culture's "embrace" of Native America in the 1940s–1960s, "[re-]presents this material as a metaphor for our current political state of unrest" ("Abo-Retro" [2013](#)). During a radio interview he adds, "I was trying to find context in the work itself that would relate to what's actually happening today. They're not just pretty pictures and they're not just referencing something from the past. I'm also referencing what's happening, what's actually going on now, politically" (McKenzie and Warren [2013](#)). Urban Shaman's curator Daina Warren recounts that while McKenzie was preparing his series, the Idle No More movement was especially active in Winnipeg, contributing to the significance of the images particularly as the CMHR and the Legislative buildings became sites where protests and round dances were held (McKenzie and Warren [2013](#)). McKenzie's work thereby shows us the past and the present as inextricably entwined, and the CMHR as implicated in and by the continuing project of settler colonialism and its resistance. His re-appropriation of "Indian play" by refashioning the collectables from their original status as fetishized commodity objects, along with his front-and-centre resituating of the warrior figure against this specific urban, cultural and political backdrop, calls to the CMHR and its publics to "face the fire" of responsibility for past and present violence against Indigenous peoples, including ongoing practices of cultural fetishism and tokenization. *Abo Retro*, then, situates hope not in a future that has overcome Canada's human rights "missteps"¹¹ by incorporating "Indigenous perspectives" within the museum as collection/collectables, but in a present that recognizes Indigenous reclamations of territory—

including the territory upon which the museum itself sits—as a necessary starting point for change.

Paul Zacharias's *Study for the Canadian Museum of Human Wrongs* exhibited at Winnipeg's (now defunct) Zsa Zsa West gallery in January [2014](#) offers another creative reflection on the prospect of the CMHR as a site of difficult knowledge. Zacharias is a Winnipeg-based artist whose biographical notes include that he is “proud to reside in the Peg's Point Douglas neighborhood” (Winnipeg Arts Council [2014](#)), an area located north of the downtown on the Red River peninsula, considered part of Winnipeg's inner-city that extends in the other direction (south) toward the forks and the CMHR. In addition to painting, drawing, photography, and installation, Zacharias works as an artist in film, theatre, ballet, and opera (Zacharias [2009](#)). *Study for the Canadian Museum of Human Wrongs* is a multimedia exhibit of still images, video projections and sculptural objects installed in the gallery space as if to stage a museum, or counter-museum, as it were. *Study* re-insinuates the horror that is missing or abjected from dominant conceptualizations of what might be deemed appropriate for display at a human rights museum. Hanging in the center of the gallery is a stylized chrome chainsaw suspended from the ceiling continuously rotating in 360 degrees, casting a menacing shadow across the “museum” walls and its contents. The shadow passes distinctly over a drawing of a map, a trace of an antique original from 1804 labeled “British Possessions in America” (Figure [2](#)). The map shows the borders and territories of the land and waters that would eventually be designated as Canada by British and French colonial rule.

Figure 2 Detail of “British Possessions in America (1804)” from Paul Zacharias's *Study for the Canadian Museum of Human Wrongs* (photo credit: author, reproduced with permission of the artist).



Zacharias's horror aesthetic permeates the other works in the exhibit as well, including a sculpted frozen-looking, shackled, severed foot on an ice-clad pedestal (“True North Strong and Free,” Figure 3), and a painting of a dystopic scene wherein ghostlike bikini-lined bathers stand under a black and blue rainbow on the banks of a tar pond seeping from a fracture in the earth while a futile swimmer (projected as a video loop onto the painting) paddles ceaselessly against tides of oil (“Black Rainbow,” Figure 4). In his proposal for *Study*, Zacharias writes that all of the works in the exhibit are “altars to bad ideas . . . testaments to the seductive nature of violence and imperialism” (Zacharias 2014). In particular the artist draws on critiques of the resource extraction industries (logging, mining, and oil) not only for the ways in which the national economy has come to depend upon their exploits, but for how these exploits have become deep-seated within what he calls the “dark corner of the Canadian Id” (Winnipeg Arts Council 2014). In psychoanalytic terms, the Id is the most primary component of the psychic apparatus and serves as a reservoir of psychical energy (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 197). In other words, it is the source of libido, fuelling our needs, wants, desires, and impulses, particularly those associated with the sexual drive. The id seeks to avoid pain or “unpleasure,” but also harbors the impulses of the death drive expressed as aggression or destruction (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 198). Freud uses the analogy of “a cauldron full of seething excitations” to characterize the id, which he understands as unconscious by definition:

Figure 3 Detail of “True North Strong and Free” from Paul Zacharias's *Study*(photo credit: author, reproduced with permission of the artist).



Figure 4 “Black Rainbow” from Paul Zacharias's *Study* (photo credit: Paul Zacharias, reproduced with permission of the artist).



[The id] is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality ... of a negative character [that] can be described only as a contrast to the ego It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will ... only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle. (Freud [1933](#), 105–106)

The id, plainly stated, is a greedy force, unresponsive to realistic limits, privileging instant gratification over conservation. Characterizing the national psyche as such, Zacharias brings attention to the insensible and ongoing devastation wrought upon the land and its inhabitants by the constant pursuit of economic growth. Mapping this devastation in a “museum of human wrongs” or, indeed, a “little shop of horrors,” Zacharias re-territorializes Canada in a way that refuses to idealize it as “the loveable tough-luck cousi[n] to the empires of Britain and the United

States” (Winnipeg Arts Council [2014](#)). He refuses to console us or to consolidate national identity around a self-image of innocence—an image that allows, for instance, a Canadian museum for human rights to name genocides abroad but not upon its own shores. In Zacharias's exhibit, hope is “stripp[ed] of its utopian garb” (Benjamin [2007](#), 10), its masquerade as eternally providing nature, and we are confronted with the historically and imperially founded environmental crises of the present. There is no clear path to a better future provided here, but rather a call to be present by witnessing the devastating costs of “progress.”

In January 2014, the CMHR announced it was commissioning Rebecca Belmore, “one of Canada's most celebrated contemporary artists,” to create a large-scale, original artwork for the museum (CMHR 2014e). Belmore, who is Anishinaabe from Upsala, Ontario and resided for a period in Winnipeg, calls her subsequent design *Trace*. *Trace* involved the making of over 14,000 hand-pressed clay beads with the help of countless volunteers whom Belmore gathered by extending an invitation to community members, school groups and the general public. She led the volunteers in bead-making workshops over the course of several months at different venues including a temporary studio located at Neechi Commons, an Aboriginal owned and operated food cooperative and cultural center located in the North Point Douglas area of Winnipeg (mentioned above). The beads, each the size of the “negative space” formed by a clenched fist, were made from excess Red River Valley grey gumbo (clay) dug up by municipally contracted sewer and utility workers and donated to the artist. Once pressed, the beads were sent from Belmore's studio to be fired at the Banff Centre for the Arts, and then returned to Winnipeg for assembly and installation in the museum space. Red brick-colored after their firing, the beads were strung on aircraft cable overtop a 40-foot high rebar skeleton structure welded into ribbons of steel. The “finished” sculpture hangs in the Indigenous Perspectives Gallery in a shape that Belmore envisioned resembling “a towel on a hook or a blanket on a doorknob” (Figures [5](#) and [6](#)).¹²

Figure 5 Detail from a maquette (top) and a projected image of the bead-making process (bottom) for Rebecca Belmore's *Trace* (photo credit: author, reproduced with permission of the artist).



Figure 6 Detail from Rebecca Belmore's *Trace* (photo credit: Karen Sharma, reproduced with permission of the artist).



The blanket motif is one Belmore has used in several previous artworks. Lee-Ann Martin, curator of Belmore's *Trace*, notes that Belmore returns to this motif particularly for its reference to “the deliberate impregnation of the smallpox virus into government-issued [Hudson's Bay] blankets distributed to aboriginal people in the 18th century” resulting in an epidemic that destroyed populations of Aboriginal communities (Martin quoted in Charleyboy [2014](#)). In a direct and powerful way, then, the blanket-form of *Trace* is symbolic of the history of genocidal colonial violence enacted upon Indigenous people and their bodies. More curiously, perhaps, is Belmore's comparison of its shape to the rather banal image of “a towel on a hook or a blanket on a doorknob.” During an artist's talk she gave with her studio assistant, Theo Pelmus, in April 2014 at the University of Winnipeg, Belmore explained that she liked the idea of the towel for its absorbent quality and the notion that it might soak up or hold history within its folds, but also that it intimates a certain everyday-ness—unlike what might be conveyed if it were stretched out and framed like a picture on a gallery wall. She wanted the piece to have a more personal, less “precious” feel, a desire arguably in contrast with the qualities ascribed by the museum's architect to its illuminated Tower of Hope, or the highly spiritualized connotations of the other museum spaces dedicated to representing Indigeneity.¹³

Trace also speaks to, as well as re-signifies, the extensive archeological process undertaken in preparation for the museum's construction. From 2008 to 2012 a block excavation of a small portion of the ground underneath the museum site was reported to have yielded more than 400,000 artifacts left behind by Indigenous inhabitants including pottery fragments and agricultural tools as well as animal remains dating back as far as 1100 AD up to a period after European contact (Kives [2013](#)). When the CMHR released the official archeological report,

which they prefaced with a blessing by an Aboriginal elder, they noted that among its significant findings were “a high concentration of sacred materials such as ceremonial pipe fragments, possible sucking tubes and a significant presence of red ochre [to] support theories that the site was a place of peaceful meeting, alliance-building and celebration,” adding, “There was no evidence that the CMHR site has ever been a burial ground” (CMHR 2013). Despite these reassurances by museum officials working to confirm a sense that no conflict or violence ever occurred or was now occurring at this historic site, the process was not without controversy. In 2011, for example, CBC News claimed to have obtained part of an 800-page report by one of the consulting firms hired for the dig whose archeologists complained that museum officials had ignored their recommendations. The report is quoted as stating, “The organizations involved in the construction of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights have demonstrated that they will not be bound by the terms of heritage permits” and that “recommendations for reasonable heritage resource management practices were ignored during and after the mitigative excavation project” (“Archeology Report Criticizes” 2011). Leigh Syms, a retired archeologist privy to the report, expresses worry that the history of the First Nations who originally occupied the area was being buried by the museum project: “[The CMHR] have a responsibility to the First Nations whose heritage it is, and they have a responsibility to the public and researchers to make it available ... and yet they have refused to share it,” he asserts (“Archeology Report Criticizes” 2011).

Belmore's featuring of the earth-sourced clay beads in *Trace* is an intentional nod to precisely what has been dug up, including proof of First Nations peoples' belonging to the land and the land's own testimony to the significance of this place. Where the CMHR has made compensatory gestures in response to concerns over its unearthing practices such as the ceremonial burying of Aboriginal medicine bundles within drill holes made to sink caissons and cement piles into the ground beneath its foundations (CMHR 2013), Belmore offers a very different sign or “gift” of Indigenous presence. Through a labor-intensive process she literally raises up, rather than buries, traces of stolen land. In doing so, she places an opportunity to encounter difficult knowledge at the center of the museum. Moreover, by inviting those who participated in the bead making workshops to leave our mark (or trace) through the imprint of our individual hands in the clay, she implicates hundreds or thousands of us in the work even before its unveiling. This communal gesture resonates with the notion of remembrance or historical consciousness as a social practice rather than a solitary state of mind. In such a practice, learning happens through a “series of interlinked performances through which members of a community ‘pass-on’ and revisit something of the substance and significance of past events” (R. I. Simon 2005, 111). In both literal and figurative ways, *Trace* brings people together to collectively work and rework layers of sedimented history and place-memory in the substance of Red River gumbo. By making the process of *Trace* as much a feature of the artwork as the end-result, the artist locates hope not simply in an abstracted, futural form, but in the present action of collectively reopening the past rather than performing reconciliation or closure.

Similar to McKenzie and Zacharias's engagements, Belmore's *Trace* exceeds a framework of consolatory hope by refusing audiences the experience of being comforted by lovely knowledge. Resisting hegemonic pressures to convert despair into its presumed opposite, all three works offer themselves, instead, as terrible gifts. In doing so they expand a sense of what we might expect from the museum, and what we might hope for the museum beyond “civic upswing.” They also point toward how members of local communities understand the stakes of the CMHR,

distinct from mainstream news media framings or those communicated by leaders and sponsors of the museum. However, unlike McKenzie and Zacharias's works, *Trace* is uniquely positioned as part of the museum's own collection. Its inclusion here raises some questions. How does Belmore's piece, which foregrounds a critique of colonial violence in Canada, function within a museum that in other instances refuses to name this violence? How, exactly, does the museum deploy *Trace* as an index of human rights struggle or triumph? And what significance do museumgoers themselves make of the work?¹⁴ My own initial encounter of *Trace* since being installed in the museum was on a brief opening day tour. Guides whisked masses of curious first-time visitors through the few galleries that were (nearly) ready for public viewing. Our guide gestured to *Trace* (which is partially obscured when approached from the main path through the gallery by a basket-shaped theatre featuring “immersive surround technology”),¹⁵ offering by way of explanation: “This is a piece of art made by an aboriginal woman.” My tour companions recall the guide adding that each bead represented a different “aboriginal tribe.”¹⁶ The didactic panel that has since been mounted alongside the piece reads as follows:

Rebecca Belmore

Trace, clay and steel, 2013–2014

Trace honours the memory of the original inhabitants of the land upon which this museum stands. To acknowledge the depth of Indigenous history, the artist used raw earth from deep beneath the city of Winnipeg. The “beads” made from this clay carry the hand imprints of many local children and adults who collaborated with the artist in the realization of this work.

Conspicuously missing from these framings of Belmore's piece is any trace of a government led smallpox epidemic or controversy over stolen land. Instead museumgoers are presented with an honorific narrative of peaceful collaboration, effectively disappearing the colonial violence of these histories and thereby diffusing the critical force of *Trace*. I venture to say that the museum will have to provide supplementary programming or education around *Trace* to help mitigate the risk of its relegation to decorative backdrop.

This is but one of many examples that highlights the sort of challenges facing the CMHR in its prospects to serve as a meaningful educational forum and site for public dialogue. Limited as the museum's deployments of hope and remembrance have been thus far, particularly in the instances I have discussed through this article, we might nevertheless continue to pay attention to them and the interventions they elicit as realistic evidence of the challenges of negotiating difficult knowledge in the context of a national institution dedicated to human rights and, as such, as fertile grounds upon which to further clarify and develop useful frameworks for precisely such negotiations. In particular, it is worth clarifying and developing modalities of hope that reach beyond compulsory optimism and normative prescriptions of a future represented as a “universalized good life” (Duggan and Muñoz 2009, 276–278). Binding human rights (or any terrain of contentious political struggle) to consolatory promises and moralizing injunctions patronizes and underestimates the knowledge and experience that members of diverse publics bring with them, including that of painful histories and/or vulnerabilities to violence in the present. Moreover, it underestimates their potential to bear encounters with difficult knowledge and find hope from within these encounters if supported by curatorial and pedagogical strategies that explore ways of better “living *with* the negative” (Duggan and Muñoz 2009, 281, emphasis added)—a radically distinct approach from “injecting hope,” which presumes to immunize

people from negativity. Rather than taking hope for granted as the thing we already have, want, or need, what might it look like, instead, to approach hope as an ethical responsibility to be learned through practices of remembrance wherein revisiting the past is not seen as a depressing or hopeless project, but instead as key to keeping the present open to new ideas for change, even when it renders our visions for the future less certain (R. I. Simon et al. [2005](#), 112)? As educators we benefit from considering these questions not only in relation to our expectations of museums and other spaces of public exhibition, but also as we reflect upon encounters with difficult knowledge in the context of our own research and teaching.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to artists Kevin McKenzie, Paul Zacharias and Rebecca Belmore whose works animate and inspire this paper. Thanks also to my co-editors Peter Ives and Heather Milne, as well as Erica Lehrer, Tricia Logan and my external reviewers for comments on this article in development.

Notes

1. This expectation is made apparent, for example, in the description of the final “Inspiring Change” gallery, as well as in the architecture of the museum itself which uses the metaphor of a “journey from darkness to light” to characterize the upward path of ascendance through the galleries via a series of illuminated ramps, arriving at “Inspiring Change.” See “Inspiring Change” ([2014](#)).
2. My characterization of this article as “well-circulated” is based on statistics provided by the *Winnipeg Free Press* on-line version which records 611 shares of this article via social media and 362 reader comments, as of the date of access (August 4, 2014.).
3. This gallery has since been named “Breaking the Silence.”
4. I am extrapolating language here from Sara Ahmed's, “Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)” (2010). A more thorough explanation of her conceptualizations in the context of this work and its relevance for my discussion is described below.
5. For further discussion on the point of the CMHR's refusal to refer to Canada's violation and extermination of First Nations peoples and cultures as “genocide” see, for example, Tricia Logan ([2014](#)) and Larry Krotz ([2014](#)). For local news media coverage see Mary Agnes Welch ([2013](#)). On the call to the UN by First Nations’ leaders to recognize the treatment of First nations people by Canada as a “genocide” as covered by mainstream national print news media see, for example, Phil Fontaine and Bernie Farber ([2013](#)). (This article is adapted from a letter to the United Nations Rapporteur for Indigenous People delivered by Phil Fontaine, a former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and Bernie Farber, senior vice-president of Gemini Power Corporation and former head of the Canadian Jewish Congress). <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/what-canada-committed-against-first-nations-was-genocide-the-un-should-recognize-it/article14853747/>
6. Thanks to my rhetorician colleague Tracy Whalen for helping me name this rhetorical device.

7. See also Karen Sharma's (this issue) contribution wherein the notion of who “the public” that the CMHR presumes to address is deftly unpacked.
8. I have drawn this text again from the promotional postcard/pamphlet cited above.
9. Thanks to the external reviewer who helped me name this tension in such terms.
10. For a helpful discussion on the problematics of witnessing based on empathic identification models and their limits for education see Megan Boler (1999), particularly Chapter 7 on “The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism's Gaze.”
11. My use of “missteps” here is a reference to the language used on the didactic panel that welcomes visitors to the Canadian Journey's gallery at the CMHR in the following depoliticized and neutralizing terms: “There have been steps and missteps on the road to greater rights for everyone in Canada. This panorama of experience reflects continuing efforts to achieve human rights for all.”
12. Much of my description of the process of this work and Belmore's inspiration and vision for it comes from having attended in person a bead-making workshop at Neechi Commons, and an artist's talk she and her studio assistant, Theo Pelmus, gave on April 9, 2014 at the University of Winnipeg.
13. For insightful discussions on the “spiritual” characterizations of the museum's architecture, see both Karen Sharma's (this issue) and Larissa Wodtke's (this issue) contributions to this special issue.
14. Thanks to this special issue's co-editors, Heather Milne and Peter Ives, as well as fellow contributor Amber Dean for helping me work out this line of questioning.
15. For more on the basket theatre go to CMHR (2014g).
16. Thanks to Cultural Studies Research Group members and my museumgoing companions Devon Kerslake, Lauren Bosc and Karen Sharma for helping me recall these details of our guided tour narrative.

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