

**Introduction: Caring for Difficult Knowledge—Prospects for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights**

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From September 19–24, 2014 the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) held its grand opening with a multiday “RightsFest” featuring music, dance, speakers, and spectacle, not to mention controversy, protest, and boycott. The museum also conducted free preview tours for thousands of people who bid for tickets in an online lottery. This was a chance to finally see inside the highly anticipated building and get a first glimpse at its inaugural exhibits. For the contributors to this special issue, the museum's opening was particularly long awaited. We have followed the developments and debates surrounding the CMHR closely since 2011 as members and affiliates of the Cultural Studies Research Group (CSRG) rooted at the University of Winnipeg. We are a diverse network of scholars from various disciplinary and interdisciplinary backgrounds including anthropology, art history, disability studies, education, gender studies, indigenous studies, literary studies, rhetoric and communications, sociology and political science.

In the years leading up to the museum's opening, we participated in numerous local conversations and events related to and hosted by the CMHR. We attended the museum's annual meetings, public tours of the museum's build site, “hard-hat tours” inside the museum under construction, lectures and presentations by museum curators and staff, and off-site exhibitions by locally based artists and communities who produced their own responses to the prospect of a human rights museum. We established an archive of news media coverage and speeches by museum leaders reaching back ten years. We also developed a close partnership with the Centre for Ethnographic Research and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Violence (CEREV) at Concordia University in Montréal whose affiliates enrich our group's cultural studies approach with their expertise in critical museology and curatorial practice. We hosted two workshops at the University of Winnipeg, the second alongside CEREV and coinciding with the CMHR's opening. These workshops included scholars and graduate students from across Canada and beyond, as well as museum staff, curators, and educators from the CMHR and other galleries and museums.

Back in 2011, our newly formed CSRG decided that the CMHR would serve as a rich initial focus for research, learning and public engagement—a site that could be approached in a variety of ways and through a diverse range of questions. The CMHR had already by then accumulated layers of social and political significance and bore numerous historical tensions that can be traced, in part, through its genealogy beginning with proposals in the late 1990s led by the Canadian Jewish Congress for a government-sponsored national Holocaust or genocide museum, followed by a proposal for a human rights museum to be located in Winnipeg and privately funded by the affluent Asper family featuring but not limited to Holocaust remembrance, to the present version—a publicly funded, broadly interpreted ideas museum that is “dedicated to the evolution, celebration and future of human rights” (CMHR 2015) and exists as the first Canadian national museum constructed outside of the National Capital Region (Moses 2012). Other layers of significance apparent to us were the museum's involvement in global debates concerning the relationship between Holocaust singularity and universal human rights (see Blumer, this issue), more institutional matters such as the impact on the CMHR by the change in federal government in Canada from a Liberal to a Conservative one during the museum's nascent phase (see Milne, this issue), and the relationship of the museum as a Crown corporation to the federal, provincial, and municipal governments and the private sector (see Sharma, this issue). We also saw that such a major institution and its monumental presence would have deep and complicated effects

within the local context of downtown Winnipeg, including how local activists and communities engaged and protested the museum.

Along with the rest of Winnipeg, the contributors to this issue watched the \$351 million building materialize over years of construction following the architectural competition won by Antoine Predock, an Albuquerque-based “starchitect” (Wodtke, this issue). We saw local backlash against the spending of “taxpayers’ money” and heard the protests of those who would have preferred to see a water slide park on the site (Milne, this issue). We noticed differences between local and national news coverage of debates over the museum. We paid particular attention to various community-based mobilizations such as the campaign to advocate for adequate representation of the Holodomor, Stalin’s strategy of using famine in the early 1930s that led to the death of millions of Ukrainians (see Blumer, this issue), and efforts by various First Nations and Métis groups concerning not only how the CMHR represents (or misrepresents, or downplays) historical atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples by the Canadian government, but also how the museum responds to ongoing crises and hypocrisies concerning water, land, Aboriginal Rights, and the very location of the museum at the important meeting place of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers (see Blumer, this issue; Dean, this issue; Failler, this issue; Sharma, this issue; Wodtke, this issue). From this perspective, the 4-year (2008–2012) archaeological dig conducted at the building site remains a point of significant interest and criticism. Considered by some an act of “cultural violence” in and of itself (Wong 2014), the choice of the museum site and its location on Treaty One Territory is inextricable from a critical discussion of the museum’s stated ideals and its practices.

All of these layers make the CMHR more than a mere object of academic interest or an isolated case study of how one particular institution is (or is not) fulfilling its mandate through its various methods of representation and modes of operation. For us, the CMHR offers a chance to explore a diverse set of issues that extend beyond the museum itself, encapsulating local and national questions and their interconnection with more global dynamics including how human rights discourses relate to genocide, colonialism, neoliberalism, capitalism, and equality, plus questions of national narrative and more general issues of social justice, representation, and public space. Moreover, as educators, we are keenly interested in the museum’s potential as a site of learning. The museum currently provides educational programming and a resource “tool kit” for school-aged children, promises to be an important resource for postsecondary students and instructors in a variety of disciplines, and will undoubtedly become a site of engagement for many college and university students. The CMHR has a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Winnipeg, for instance, to “[develop] joint projects to promote human rights learning in Winnipeg, at the University, the CMHR and beyond.” Reflected in this special issue, our work as the CSRG takes this agreement seriously. We aim to contribute in intellectual and practical terms to increased access, awareness, and learning at the CMHR, and to seek out modes of productive intervention that encourage the museum’s reflexivity and responsiveness to diverse publics.

The concept of “difficult knowledge,” a term derived from educational theory, is particularly useful for exploring the CMHR’s potential as a site of learning. We have chosen to focus this special issue and the debates outlined herein through the specific lens of care for difficult knowledge. “Difficult knowledge” is an invaluable concept both in its contrast with the idea of self-assuring or “lovely knowledge” (Britzman 1998), and in its emphasis not on the isolated

substance or contents of knowledge but on its effects; that is, “difficult knowledge” points not only to the difficulties of learning about troubling histories of human rights abuses but also, as Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson put it, to “questions of what such knowledge does to us—or what we do with it” (2011, 7). The challenge inherent to difficult knowledge, in other words, lies not in acquiring the “facts” of particular painful past or present realities but in how to incorporate knowledge of these realities into our own lives, thoughts, and actions in ways that matter. Lehrer and Milton noted further that the root meaning of “curate”—a term used in museum and exhibition contexts to describe the collection and presentation of ideas and materials—is to “care for,” and thus understand the act of curation as one that implies “a kind of intimate, intersubjective, interrelational obligation.” Curation, in this sense, becomes a way to “re-frame and activate the past anew” to explore the ethical potential of representing or retelling difficult stories (Lehrer et al. 2011, 4). Drawing on these ideas as our own starting point, we are especially interested in how the museum and museumgoers together might engage in an ethics of caring for difficult knowledge whereby such challenges and potentials can be met.

As a psychoanalytic concept developed within the field of education, Britzman (1998) defines difficult knowledge as the experience of encountering an idea or representation that disrupts our fantasies of coherence and mastery, along with familiar ways of knowing the world, ourselves, and “others” around us. These fantasies or ways of knowing include commonly held beliefs and dominant cultural narratives such as the notion that human rights injustices are being valiantly fought against (particularly by “us” in the West), and that ignorance and bigotry can be overcome by enlightenment, courage, and good will. Others have further developed this concept (see, e.g., Pitt and Britzman 2003; Simon 2005, 2006, 2011, 2014; Failler and Simon in press), to argue that difficult knowledge necessitates engagements that are divested from such predetermined narratives or fantasies of reconciliation and closure, and that are instead open to continued confrontations and breakdowns in experience and meaning that promise no easy answers, epistemological securities, or hope for a utopian future. This emphasis has some parallels in the CMHR's own claims to be a museum that welcomes controversy and diverse opinions in its attempts to inspire and provoke action on behalf of human rights. But caring for difficult knowledge is necessarily complex and self-reflexive, and perhaps too easily compromised by an institution under pressure to satisfy governmental and corporate sponsors and attract revenue-generating audiences (see Failler, this issue; Milne, this issue; Sharma, this issue). How, then, might care for difficult knowledge be generated and sustained at the CMHR?

This special issue is indebted to foundational scholarship on “difficult knowledge” by Britzman, Pitt, and others, but also endeavors to expand the concept into new territory. Thinking through difficult knowledge in the context of a human rights museum highlights, for instance, the particular risk or tendency for human rights discourse to be presented as lovely knowledge, knowledge that while recognizing certain historical “wrongs” attempts to set them to rest, to yield them as difficult primarily in their past-ness. The concept of difficult knowledge also prompts us to take pause at being congratulated for simply visiting the museum, for being Canadians, or for believing in an inherent difference between rights and wrongs. It is precisely the reiteration of these types of comfortable narratives, even when they admit to certain “negative” histories, which limit the museum's prospects for providing museumgoers opportunities to learn from difficult knowledge. Larissa Wodtke's contribution to this issue works through this problem by focusing on the impact of the CMHR's architectural design on

museumgoer experience. Angela Failler makes a similar point concerning how hope is mobilized by the CMHR in predictably uncritical ways, contrasting this theoretically to Roger Simon's notion of "hope without consolation" and looking to artistic engagements, both inside and outside the CMHR, for examples of how such limited imagining might be reoriented.

As is evident in each article in this special issue, we are invested in understanding the CMHR not merely as a destination-event but as an ongoing site of struggle and negotiation with publics and counter-publics. Nadine Blumer (this issue) most explicitly calls for placing the CMHR within the "networked spaces" of other museums, memorials, and narratives of commemoration. Hee-Jung Serenity Joo (this issue) problematizes the CMHR's engagement with the issue of "comfort women" by situating it in contrast to other artistic and curatorial approaches, and by showing how certain forms of public engagement can function to reinforce problematic stereotypes and to re-objectify survivors of militarized sexual slavery. Heather Milne's article (this issue) explores the reception of the museum among a local public as a site of ideological conflict. Amber Dean, Angela Failler, and Hee-Jung Serenity Joo all place significant emphasis on the role of affect and the contribution of artists within and beyond the CMHR to demonstrate forms of witnessing that exceed or challenge more linear and official historiographic accounting. Despite the CMHR's tendency toward silence on certain issues (see Dean, this issue) or claims of neutral objectivity (see Sharma's [this issue] discussion of the museum's interpretation of its role as a Crown Corporation), the museum also functions as a site of activism and political engagement. For example, Larissa Wodtke, Amber Dean, Karen Sharma, and Nadine Blumer all reference the work being done by Shoal Lake No. 40 First Nation, who have used the CMHR's opening as an occasion to raise awareness of the ongoing injustices faced by their own community. Shoal Lake supplies water for the City of Winnipeg (including the CMHR), and yet the community itself has been under a boil-water advisory for almost two decades. The aqueduct that diverts clean water to the city isolates Shoal Lake No. 40, turning it into an island accessible only by a barge in the summer and a precarious passage over the frozen lake in the winter. By launching its own Museum for Canadian Human Rights Violations, a "living museum" that is open to tourists for a view of the community's uninhabitable conditions, Shoal Lake No.40 has already shown us how to approach the CMHR as a catalyst for renewed engagement with the world around us, and a forum for taking action on injustices in our midst (Failler and Lehrer 2014).

We recognize that the CMHR is a complex institution. It cannot be said to possess a single voice or perspective, even if museum officials and the architecture itself tend to evoke universalizing notions such as the "common language of human rights" (see Sharma, this issue; Wodtke, this issue). The CEO and Board of Directors, the research and curatorial staff, the programming and education department, external curators and peer reviewers, not to mention the communications and PR office all ostensibly have differing roles and capacities to impact the direction and responsiveness of the museum. The articles featured in this special issue acknowledge this reality, reflecting on the museum not as a fixed and static site but as a site of dynamic and shifting encounters that will continue to evolve through dialogue with the communities it is situated within and the publics it aims to serve.

In addition to the seven, peer-reviewed articles that comprise this special issue, we have included five shorter essays as reflections in the form of Erica Lehrer's Preface, Mavis Reimer's Afterword, and three other Discussions based on differing themes of indigenous representation

and ways of knowing (Julie Pelletier), pedagogy as it relates to the University of Winnipeg's Cultural Studies graduate program and its Curatorial Practices stream (Kathryn Ready and Serena Keshavjee), and feminist intersectionality (Rita Kaur Dhamoon and Olena Hankivsky). These short essays provide perspectives and contexts beyond those encapsulated by the articles. They also represent contributions by some of the CSRG's key interlocutors that have extended our understanding of museum's significance.

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