Deterritorializing the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

Adam Muller

Abstract:

This article asserts the value of assemblage theory to making sense of a museum like the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), which has struggled with the formidable challenge of comparatively representing human rights in 'difficult' cultural and historical contexts. While acknowledging the many merits and productive outcomes of the relatively recent intersectional and interdisciplinary turn in 'new' museology, I argue that a fully realized assemblage theory such as that developed by the Mexican-American filmmaker and philosopher Manuel DeLanda holds the potential to substantially refine and extend the explanatory power of this kind of approach. With particular reference to the CMHR's interactions/intersections (and so positionality) with the various legacies of Canadian settler colonialism, and more specifically debates over the question of genocide and the nation's commitment to upholding the right to water, I argue that 'assemblage thinking' permits us to appreciate more richly, and in a more nuanced way, the museum's evolving identity, representational strategies, and growing accumulation of expressive power. More broadly, I contend that assemblage theory is ideally configured to map the dynamic interaction/intersection of overlapping clusters of large- and small-scale objects, spaces, ideologies, memories, feelings, structures, histories, and experiences constitutive of institutions and sites of conscience such as the CMHR.

Key words: Assemblage; Canadian Museum for Human Rights; deterritorialization; curation

Order is the key both to the accessibility of materials and to the appreciation of such facts and inferences as these materials afford. […] Nothing can be more disheartening to a research student, except absolute chaos than a complicated 'system'

Joseph Grinnell (1921: 62)

Assemblage is thus a resource with which to address in analysis and writing the modernist problem of the heterogeneous within the ephemeral, while preserving some concept of the structural so embedded in the enterprise of social science research.

George E. Marcus and Erkan Saka (2006: 102)

Introduction

Joseph Grinnell's 1921 article 'The Museum Conscience' aims to specify the personal and intellectual qualities required of curators working in what had by then become known formally as 'new' museums. Museums of this type eschewed static exhibitions and conspicuous displays of individual taste typical of 'mere collections' arranged for public viewing in so-called 'conventional' museums (Dana 1917), and instead sought to create stimulating and carefully crafted educational exhibits in spaces understood less as temples than as kinds of schools.

As institutions with a mandate both to preserve and to cultivate beauty and knowledge, 'new' museums required highly competent and worldly people to serve as curators and administrators. Such people would prove themselves suitable for museum employment by showing they possessed what Grinnell thought of as a special kind of professional sensibility, a 'museum conscience', that expressed itself through an almost spiritual devotion to maintaining the accuracy and order of the various collections in their care.

I wish to make this idea of the museum conscience my point of departure for the following reflections on the nature of museums and the spatiality of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR). Most of the existing commentary on the museum has been devoted to making sense of the conflict between various ethnic communities that arose prior to the CMHR's opening, and which constituted responses to plans for representing traumatic histories both on their own terms (as when, for example, controversy arose over the CMHR's unwillingness to refer to Canadian settler colonialism as genocidal) and relationally (as, for example, when various Ukrainian-Canadian advocacy groups complained that the decision to create a permanent Holocaust gallery in the museum amounted to preferential treatment). The resulting 'Pandora's box of irreconcilable traumatic memory competition', as Moses (2012: 218) describes it, or 'Oppression Olympics' to use Hankivsky's and Dhamoon's (2013: 902) term, was highly charged but seldom productive. In large and small ways the conspicuousness of these disputes has served to hinder more penetrating and nuanced analyses of the museum's design, role, and functioning. This explanatory deficit has become more acute since the CMHR officially opened in September of 2014 and began to settle in to its role as Canada's 'first museum solely dedicated to the evolution, celebration and future of human rights'. While recently critical attention has turned to consider such comparatively neglected facets of the museum's ambitions and functioning as its coverage of indigenous rights and worldviews, and the fuzziness of its human rights-specific metanarrative (Pelletier 2015; Busby *et al*. 2015), relatively little has yet been done to view the museum through what Lehrer (2015: 1197) has called 'a wide-angled lens'.

It's within the wider context of a more encompassing and broadly 'distributed' (Lehrer 2015: 1198) reading of the CMHR that my own remarks may be located. I remain less concerned with tracking the developmental history of the museum and its attendant crises and ruptures than I am with acknowledging and exploring the explanatory possibilities inherent in an alternative way of conceptualizing the CMHR's spatial relations, and thus its location within (and dependence on) the tactics, structures, forces, and languages that have combined to give the CMHR its always-already 'emergent' identity and meaning. The way I will be discussing space and emergence here relies heavily on a variant of *assemblage theory* that has been refined over the last decade or more by the Mexican-American artist, filmmaker, and philosopher Manuel DeLanda. In its earliest guise, as found in the work of the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, assemblage theory dates back to the early 1980s. However, in museum and heritage studies circles it is not well known and has received only limited attention, although its use by those working in these areas is slowly increasing (Waterton and Dittmer 2014).

Even so, there has yet to arise in the secondary literature anything like a coherent and generally accepted sense of what a museum assemblage is, or how museological practice could be further refined via a deeper, more sustained, and more systematic consideration of the theoretical literature on assemblages. For example, although Sharon Macdonald and her co-editor Paul Basu devote part of the introduction to their collection *Exhibition Experiments* to considering assemblages, they make no reference to any of the canonical theoretical works on the topic such as Deleuze's and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. Nor do their contributors, only one of whom references Deleuze and then only his writing on cinema. Instead, the vision of a museum assemblage that Macdonald and Basu proffer is theoretically underdeveloped and conceptually indistinguishable from any other kind of social or institutional construction or representation 'assembled' from component parts. Following Anne Lorimer they argue that 'as the apparatus of the exhibition is assembled, in the museum workshop as much as on the gallery floor, so the different components interact with each other, generating new and unanticipated outcomes' (Macdonald and Basu 2007: 9). All this is to say that an assemblage

so conceived is really only the additive process whereby discrete components are brought together and aligned in such a way that they create expected and unexpected syntheses (i.e. 'assemblage' = 'construction'). As I will go on to show via sustained consideration of DeLanda's ideas and arguments, assemblages are more than just congeries, concatenations, or aggregates: they are heterogeneous, dynamic, and irreducibly emergent (and so forever constituting and reconstituting) fields of action and interaction comprising larger and smaller items and structures, themselves also assemblages. The meanings/outcomes/byproducts and reach of these assemblages are in some important sense 'real' and present (and so they are not 'mere' constructions) while at the same time they remain emergent and incomplete. As DeLanda rightly cautions, 'Allowing the possibility of complex interactions between component parts is to define mechanisms of emergence, but this possibility disappears if the parts are fused together into a seamless web' (DeLanda 2006: 4-5).

I hope to explain through this writing why I think DeLanda's realist and neo-materialist variant of assemblage theory is especially well suited to making sense of a museum like the CMHR that has struggled with the formidable challenge of comparatively representing human rights and their violation in dynamic (often strained) cultural and historical contexts. Briefly, several features of DeLanda's account are attractive. First, his is arguably the only fully elaborated theory of assemblages we have. While Deleuze and Guattari inaugurated the concept of the assemblage, they did so very broadly and episodically, and with a view to explaining heterogeneous phenomena. As DeLanda correctly notes, 'the relatively few pages dedicated to assemblage theory in the work of Deleuze (much of it in partnership with Félix Guattari) hardly amount to a fully-fledged theory (DeLanda 2006: 3). Subsequent scholarship drawing on *A Thousand Plateaus* – while often insightful and generative in its engagement with specific objects, actors, practices, or contexts – is seldom metatheoretically nuanced and/or robust.

What DeLanda provides in *A New Philosophy of Society* (2006) and *Assemblage Theory* (2016) is a more completely realized and systematically justified account of assemblages than is available anywhere else. It is also more accessible than the work on assemblages produced by his French precursors. As DeLanda puts it,

> The definitions of the concepts used to characterize assemblages are dispersed throughout Deleuze's work: part of a definition may be in one one book, extended somewhere else, and qualified later in some obscure essay. Even in those cases where conceptual definitions are easy to locate, they are usually not given in a style that allows for a straightforward interpretation (DeLanda 2006: 3).

Accordingly, anyone taking up the matter of assemblages via *A Thousand Plateaus* is left with the occasionally quite daunting task of making sense of what Deleuze and Guattari have to say, turning the job of theorizing into one first and foremost of translation, thereby blunting the explanatory and transformative force of assemblage-driven inquiry. For DeLanda, 'This would seem to condemn a book on assemblage theory to spend most of its pages doing hermeneutics' (DeLanda 2006: 3). Working in a more systematic and reader-friendly way from first principles, DeLanda is able to avoid the worst of Deleuze's and Guattari's rhetorical and conceptual excesses while still respecting and further developing the core elements of their insights. As DeLanda asserts, 'I will give my own definitions of the technical terms, use my own arguments to justify them, and use entirely different theoretical resources to develop them. This manoeuvre will not completely eliminate the need to engage in Deleuzian hermeneutics but it will allow me to confine that part of the job to footnotes' (DeLanda 2006: 3-4).

More generally, I am attracted by assemblage theory's ability to account philosophically for the interactions of factors internal as well as external to the museum that bear on, because they serve to constitute and configure, the CMHR's form (i.e. its spaces) and content. Indeed I will be arguing somewhat counterintuitively that the museum results from and coincides with these interactions; it neither precedes nor succeeds them since they serve to call the CMHR into being (i.e. they act together to 'interpellate' it). Assemblages interact 'horizontally' with each other and with other assemblages within and without the museum's physical structure to produce highly contingent forms of identity and meaning. Recognizing and appreciating the implications of this contingency requires an outlook that geographer Ben Anderson and

his colleagues refer to as 'assemblage thinking'. On their view assemblage thinking 'allows us to: foreground ongoing processes of composition across and through different human and non-human actants; rethink social formations as complex wholes composed through a diversity of parts that do not necessarily cohere into seamless organic wholes; and attend to the expressive powers of entities' (Anderson *et al.* 2012: 172). I agree with Anderson and want here to try to demonstrate how assemblage thinking permits us to appreciate more richly the way in which the expressive power of the CMHR, and so in effect the museum itself, arises from the dynamic interaction/intersection of overlapping clusters of objects, spaces, ideologies, memories, feelings, structures, histories, and experiences. The precise character of these intersections points to how assemblage theory is more than just another species of social constructivism, a theoretical stance that DeLanda (2006: 5) eschews as unduly essentializing and reductive. What assemblage does – or at least promises to do – 'is provide analytical access to a large number of intermediate levels between the micro and the macro, the ontological status [of which] has not been properly conceptualized' (De Landa 2006: 5). More than this, it asks us to understand these levels not as separate entities per se but as variably scaled networks of relations that overlap as well as pull apart.

Assemblages lie in important ways beyond the scope of formal agency such as that exercised by curators and museum administrators. Accordingly, assemblage thinking asks us to conceive of museums as fundamentally unable to guarantee the integrity and perdurability of their own structures and meanings, and indeed to recognize these meanings (and a museum's identity) as irreducibly open-ended since they are unceasingly emergent and provisional. Rather than see the museum as in any way bounded, fixed, and stable, then, an assemblage theorist sees it as an acutely provisional and dynamic 'jumble' (Lehrer 2015: 1199) as essentially a complex *network of relations* of varying intensities, 'not defined by essential traits but rather by the morphogenetic process that gave rise to it' (DeLanda 2002: 10). Crucially, such morphogenetic processes serve both to territorialize and deterritorialize museums, as well as the exhibits they contain, thereby allowing a museum's public meaning and political significance to change over time for reasons that are neither intrinsic nor extrinsic, but instead fluid and deeply relational.

'Traditional' and 'New' Museology

To understand a museum like the CMHR and its exhibits as literally constituted from the intersections comprising an ever-changing network of zones, structures, and relations, not all of them located within the museum's walls, requires a shift in thinking not just about what museums are – where they begin and end, for example – but about the role played by administrators and curators in making them meaningful: in shaping the tone and message explicitly and implicitly conveyed through the way collections are exhibited. What strikes me about Joseph Grinnell's view of good curation requiring a 'museum conscience' is that it rests on the idea that professional curators are the primary sources and guarantors of the meaning of exhibits, and so are in a position to manage their pedagogical and semantic effects. This view conceives of the curator as being like the author of a novel in so far as they are responsible for assembling various meaningful items and arranging them in such a way as to tell a felicitous story. In their account of this 'traditional' way of conceiving of the curator-visitor relationship, Vikki McCall and Clive Gray explain that:

> Traditional ideas around museum practice […] were functionally based around collections and held curatorship as being central to the museum enterprise. The original idea of a museum as a collections-focused, building-based institution prevailed, with the existence of a general public understanding that the museum is a 'cultural authority' – upholding and communicating truth (McCall and Gray 2014: 20).

As cultural and scholarly authorities, curators are held by traditionalists to possess privileged insights into the meaning of the objects in their care. Visitors are not expected to interact dynamically with or otherwise 'trouble' museum exhibitions, but instead to do their best to learn any lessons they are intended to teach. Something close to this view belongs to early

museum educator Carolyn Rae, who explains in a 1907 article that exhibition collections 'are, first of all, not to be considered as a collection of objects merely, but as a collection of ideas, fully illustrated by objects. These are planned, arranged, and labelled wholly with a view to their educational possibilities' (Rae 1907). For Rae and other early museologists, administrators, curators, and visitors, the meaning of an exhibition reduced to its curatorially intended meaning, the visitor's relation to which was ideally one of deference.

The idea of an author being the sole locus of interpretive authority gradually declined in literary-critical circles following World War Two. This decline accompanied the rise of first structuralist and then later post-structuralist literary and cultural theory that actively sought to restrict the role played by the author in settling the meaning of texts. In his celebrated 1966 essay 'The Death of the Author', for example, French semiotician Roland Barthes responded to the question of whose voice could be heard in works of fiction as follows: 'We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing' (Barthes 1978: 142). Just two years later, French social theorist Michel Foucault reduced the author even further to a disembodied 'author-function', or series of tasks performed with reference to his or her proper name such as the payment of royalties or the organization of works into a unique corpus. Animating both the Barthesian and Foucauldian projects was a desire to release the literary text from the iron grip of a transcendent interpretative authority and open it up to the creative gambits of readers engaged in semantic play.

A similar attempt to invert the top-down 'authorial' power structure of museums arose following the institutionalization of post-structuralism in Europe and America in the 1960s and 1970s, a process that lead to the consolidation and proliferation of deeply anti-hierarchical perspectives and methods across the humanities and social sciences – what Paul Ricoeur famously called a 'school of suspicion' – that by the 1980s had changed the way museums were understood, managed, and curated. This 'New Museology', as it has come to be called, explicitly sought to challenge prevailing museological orthodoxy by democratizing and multiculturalizing museums, at the same time decentering (or inverting) the power imbalance at the heart of the curator-audience relation as traditionally understood. According to Andrea Witcomb (2003: 79), 'New Museologists question a museology that focuses on museum processes and ask instead for a focus on the political dimension of museum work'. What this political focus means in practice is, according to Witcomb, 'a greater focus on the relation between museums and communities', since by

> placing 'community' at the heart of the museum enterprise … it will be possible to overcome the role of museums as hegemonic institutions. In giving voice to the powerless, a process of self-discovery and empowerment will take place in which the curator becomes a facilitator rather than a figure of authority (Witcomb 2003: 79).

Conceived in New Museological terms, a museum is open to influence from the world around it. It is therefore no longer intact in the sense of possessing a single location, stable identity, or distinctive mission. Hauenschild (1988) notes that consequently the 'new' museum is often referred to as a 'fragmented museum'.

A Strained Bifurcation

Notwithstanding these real differences in outlook and approach, specifying just two broad museological tendencies or moments is reductive and risks obscuring significant overlaps – as well as tensions and contradictions – in museums' actual administrative and curatorial practice, even within a single institution ostensibly organized around new or traditional conceptions of the museum. Any similarly 'thin' description also fails to account in a meaningful way for complexities that might, for example, shed light on reasons for the gap that some commentators have observed between New Museological theory and its practical application in real museums. For example, following a survey of staff working in 23 museum services and 39 different museums located throughout Great Britain, McCall and Gray conclude that

'these polarisations do exist within museums but they are not particularly fixed. The discourse related to the old and "new museology" is dynamic' (McCall and Gray 2014: 32). This dynamism continues to fuel debates and disagreements about what museums are and how they work. More productively, it has also fuelled the development of novel curatorial strategies and the proliferation of new kinds of museums, most recently non-artifactual or experiential 'ideas' museums like Washington D.C.'s Newseum and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

One additional point of conjunction between these two perspectives involves their shared investment in a museum's *territoriality*. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, territorialization – in part via acts of *enunciation* (i.e. willed creation or performativity, in the pragmatic sense of the latter term) and differentiation (i.e. othering) – creates spaces or 'zones' capable of nourishing and channelling shared discourses and practices, as well as inhabitants' 'horizons of significance'. Brian Schroeder (2012: 256) explains that 'Territorialization is, to use Guattari's fertile term, a "chaosmosis" – an infinite process of enunciative acts, lines of flight, and becomings-other continually creating new territories and new regions'. The word 'territories' here signifies more than just spatial coordinates, however. It also suggests something about the distinctive arrangement of structures and forces within spaces: their coalescence in particular places and at specific times. For Deleuze and Guattari, territories produce and support entire regimes of meanings and values that legitimate, even as they arise from interactions between, distinct forms of social and political conduct. In Cæmeron Crain's words, territory is 'structured by some kind of *nomos* – custom, habit – where this is defined by forms of behavior and their function within the territory'. Maybe most importantly, territories have an outside. Something lies beyond them, delimiting and giving them their distinctive forms. These boundaries determine modes of ingress and egress into territories, and so assist in structuring relations between them. They also serve as the conditions of possibility for what Deleuze and Guattari term 'lines of flight', or experiences of 'deterritorialization' and change. It is through these lines of flight that assemblages change and either alter or else, through the introduction of additional homogenous elements (or expulsion of heterogeneous ones, or both), become more sedimented and therefore well-defined.

In exactly the same way that they are shaped by their explicit formal properties, territories are shaped by their fields of possibility and so their latent or virtual properties (Manuel DeLanda terms these 'universal singularities'). This power to shape can be seen, for example, in our ideas concerning risk, or about possible futures, which can play an important causal role in territories by rendering some choices, ideas, objects, and practices that are available within them preferable to others. These potentialities thereby contribute to constituting a territory's distinctiveness at any one moment in time. According to DeLanda (2011: 188), 'Every assemblage must be treated as a unique historical entity characterised by a set of actual properties (making it an individual singularity) as well as by the structure of possibility spaces defining its tendencies and capacities (a structure defined by universal singularities)'.

Territorialization/Deterritorialization/Assemblage

To conceive of 'the museum' as metaphorically a mausoleum, a temple, a school, a playground, or some combination of all of these things, is to assign it a specific territory. Within this territory a museum's roles, functions, and representational strategies are regularized, acts and practices become habituated, and its institutional identity coalesces. Within territories, some values are inevitably privileged over others. Even conceiving of museums as functionally and spatially open-ended, or as primarily organized around the contingencies of visitor or community interactions, is still to understand 'the museum' as about or intended for some primary purpose. Such ontologizing territorializes the museum, a process of identity construction often facilitated by appeals to categorical approximations such as 'the visitor', 'the community', 'the economy', and 'the State'. Manuel DeLanda refers to these sorts of conceptual aggregates as 'reified generalities', a term I propose extending to 'the museum' itself as it is understood both by traditional and new museologists. According to DeLanda, such generalities distort rather than reveal their referents, and 'should also be replaced' by the idea of the assemblage.

DeLanda draws our attention to four primary characteristics of assemblages. First, they are 'fully contingent', individual entities. Accordingly, they interact with one another as individuals, although often operating at different scales. An assemblage is therefore part of a non-hierarchical ontology. Ontologically, assemblages differ only in terms of their relative scale. In this way they are like human beings, who are still human whether large or small, male or female, or members of a particular race. And like human beings, assemblages are born, age, and then die. As with us, they exist in a state of constant making and unmaking which in an ongoing way alters the shape of their boundaries as well as relations between their component parts. Second, assemblages are always constituted from heterogeneous elements (DeLanda 2011: 20). These elements include material as well as expressive items such as,

> in addition to persons, the material and symbolic artefacts that composes communities and organizations: the architecture of the buildings that house them; the myriad different tools and machines used in offices, factories, and kitchens; the various sources of food, water, and electricity; the many symbols and icons with which they express their identity (DeLanda 2011: 20).

Third, assemblages may combine to become parts of other, larger, assemblages. Therefore 'some entities may get caught in larger molar wholes, while some may remain free, composing a molecular collectivity' (DeLanda 2011: 21). And, fourth, assemblages are created through the interactions of their component parts. However, once formed, assemblages act to constrain those parts in order to preserve a stable identity. Assemblages can thus be seen to 'emerge in a bottom-up way, depending causally on their components, but they have a top-down influence' (DeLanda 2011: 21) on the way these components are arranged, and even sometimes replaced, within any given territory.

DeLanda's description of an assemblage introduces us to a structure that is at one and the same time a form, a process, and a potential or 'virtuality'. It possesses stability, and therefore its identity, in virtue of its relative degree of territorialization and in virtue of the latent possibilities (for becoming other than it presently is) that it contains/constrains. In addition to marking spatial boundaries, DeLanda understands territorialization to designate 'the degree to which an assemblage's component parts are drawn from a homogenous repertoire, or the degree to which an assemblage homogenizes its own components' (DeLanda 2011: 22). The more homogenous the assemblage, the greater its degree of territorialization and the more distinct its boundaries and identity. DeLanda notes how conflict between assemblages (communities or other social groups, for example) can often intensify the degree of an assemblage's territorialization since such strife is typically accompanied by the more rigorous policing of an assemblage's borders.

In addition to territorialization, and crucially implicated in its workings, are the processes of 'coding' and 'decoding'. These help to create and sustain an assemblage's identity. For DeLanda, 'Coding refers to the role played by special expressive components in fixing the identity of a whole' (DeLanda 2011: 22). The presence of rituals and rules, along with norms, canons, and traditions, helps give an assemblage its unique character by coding and therefore representing it externally in a way that makes it available, at least conceptually, to itself. DeLanda understands these forms of expression to be code produced by different sites, themselves assemblages of varying scales, interacting within an assemblage's territory. One may thus for example think of 'the nation' as coded by those agencies charged with defining its limits (in law, politics, norms of social acceptability, the composition of educational curricula, museums and their collections, etc.). One may also think of museums as coded by the policies, mission statements, and other formal declarations of an institution's history, scope, and ambitions. According to DeLanda, in such institutions 'the legitimacy of an authority structure is in most cases related to linguistically coded rituals and regulations'. In organizations such as churches, authority will derive from some text or object highly coded through traditions and rituals. In organizations like museums that are 'governed by a rational-legal form of authority, they will be written rules, standard procedures, and most importantly a constitution defining the organization's rights and obligations' (DeLanda 2011: 22).

Following these rules requires adopting habits, and DeLanda explains that 'Habit itself constitutes the main form of territorialisation, that is, the process that gives a subject

its defining boundaries and maintains those boundaries through time' (DeLanda 2016: 27). He cites Deleuze and Guattari, who think of habit as performing 'a synthesis of the present and the past in view of a possible future' (DeLanda 2016: 27). Habits on this view help assign meaning to the present as it is experienced and lived, in this way contributing to identity formation by suturing the past to the future in the present moment. When habits are broken and the beliefs and expectations hinging on them disrupted or destroyed, identities weaken in a process DeLanda labels 'deterritorialization':

> A process of deterritorialization, on the other hand, would be any process that takes the subject back to the state it had prior to the creation of fixed associations between ideas, that is, the state in which ideas and sensations are connected as in a delirium (DeLanda 2006: 50).

DeLanda uses conversation to model territorialization and deterritorialization in so far as participants in a conversation can regulate not just the topics they discuss, but also the parts of themselves that they express through an exchange, their feelings and thoughts about their interlocutors, and their ideas about who may be considered legitimate conversational partners (i.e. quite literally who can be heard). Over the course of a conversation the boundary between insiders and outsiders is established, and other identities, most obviously those of the interlocutors themselves, asserted and acknowledged (i.e. either recognized or not to some degree). Conversations between neighbours help to make communities; conversations can also sustain networks of friends or colleagues (as 'friends' and 'colleagues') who might otherwise remain widely dispersed. Conversations can contain ritual elements such as the casual and largely phatic utterances that pass between people who meet regularly on a walk, say, or at the bus station. In these contexts conversation serves to acknowledge the recurrence of events as well as the intimacies and expectations made possible by habit.

As a construct the assemblage requires us to think 'outside a distinction between the structured and the unstructured', and to keep the processes of composition and the forces of instability operating within and without the assemblage in view. According to Ben Anderson (2012: 175), engaging critically with assemblages requires a special ethos of engagement, one that 'attends to the messiness and complexity of phenomena; an ethos that is committed to process-based ontologies that challenge conventional explanations by focusing on materially diverse configurations; and an ethos that emphasizes the open-ended, unfinished nature of social formations'. This ethos would, according to Anderson, allow us to understand more about the modes of composition responsible for holding structures and processes together, often in a state of considerable internal tension; it explains how distinct activities become enmeshed, yielding effects that exceed the frame of that enmeshment and which may then help constitute other assemblages; and it offers 'a sustained account of the different ways in which orders endure across differences and amid transformations, in addition to a sensitivity to how orders change and are reworked' (Anderson *et al.* 2012: 172-3).

The Museum Assemblage

Understood as assemblages, museums can be seen as sites of the active intersection, dismantling, and creation of other assemblages. In effect an organization like a museum is what DeLanda terms an 'assemblage of assemblages' (DeLanda 2011: 3), and the task of mapping its many parts in their interaction and mutual self-transformation is the primary challenge facing critics using assemblage theory to make sense of museums. To be clear: I am not taking up this challenge here. Working as a theorist, and not as a critic or museologist per se, my intention is instead to make the case that assemblage theory, once its basic parameters are better understood, can be taken up and applied more rigorously by dedicated museum scholars aware of its ability to support nuanced and dynamic 'readings' of the past, present, and future of specific heritage and other institutions.

What might these nuanced readings actually look like? As noted above, assemblage theory perhaps counterintuitively refuses to conceive of museums narrowly as brick-and-mortar edifices within which structured curatorial activity takes place with the intent of providing museumgoers with an 'experience' of one kind or another. Instead, museum-assemblages

(like all assemblages) are pulsing, contingently variable networks of relations that cannot be confined to any one particular location, and which remain irreducibly diachronic, emergent, and therefore incomplete. Assemblages, including museum-assemblages, can never quite come into sharp focus, at least not for any length of time. What Ong and Collier (2005: 3) claim for assemblages generally holds for the museum-assemblage specifically, namely that it 'is the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. The temporality of an assemblage is emergent. It does not always involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake' (Ong and Collier 2005: 12).

What does all this movement mean for the practice of museology? Minimally, it means accepting what many museologists already presume: namely that museums cannot be studied or 'read' in isolation, as distinct sites of untrammelled curatorial agency, outreach, and display (Macdonald 2008; Fuentes and Zavarce 2013). This is because making sense of museums requires coming to terms with institutions' constantly evolving complexes of zones of intensity, territorializations, deterritorializations, reterritorializations, and lines of flight. It means acknowledging that the physical location and built presence of a museum fail to mark the entirety of its spatial relations. It means working to explain the museum as the by-product (rather than point of origin) of the sum of its extended network of (spatial and other) relations. And it means accepting that any explanation or description of this network can only ever be provisional, subject to revision as the different nodes comprising the network pulse in and out of significance, and into new interactions and (re)alignments with other networks and nodes. Hence the vital need for ongoing and active forms of intersectional museum scholarship. (Maybe I'm preaching to the choir).

In short, assemblage thinking obliges us to remember that the inside and outside spaces of a museum – minimally, an institution's exhibitions, collections, archives, audiences, programming, representational technologies, temporal and socio-political context, and physical coordinates – interact to produce not just meanings but alterations to the constitutive elements characterizing both of these spatial zones, in the process transforming them. Like Hegel's dialectically entwined Master and Slave (or as elsewhere in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, like the Self and the Other), a museum's inside and outside importantly depend on and help to constitute one another. Each contributes to the identity of the other, imbuing it with moral/political salience while helping to settle the terms and limits of its institutional agency (and the agency of its main actors).

Insofar as the Canadian Museum of Human Rights is concerned, the location of the museum building at the conjunction in Winnipeg of the Red and Assiniboine rivers has given rise to an overlapping series of interactions between a variety of material, political, architectural, economic, and ethnocultural assemblages whose effects may be felt far beyond the spaces within which they are principally located, and which have rendered key parts of the museum (particularly its indigenous narratives) fundamentally precarious and unstable. The site chosen for the museum's location is known as The Forks, and prior to European settlement it had been a meeting place and sacred site for indigenous people from across North America for many thousands of years. The physical location of the building dictated many of its design and architectural features, such as the use of large caissons or cement pilings rather than a more typical poured foundation in order to minimize the removal of potentially sacred indigenous remains and artefacts from the excavation site. These external site-specific considerations, along with the inner logic and aesthetics of Antoine Predock, the building's architect, in turn limited the museum's internal and external design possibilities, ultimately leading to the creation of many awkward and overly-large internal volumes that have dictated important aspects of the CMHR's exhibition design, and by extension some of the conditions of possibility of curatorial practice. Tricia Logan, the CMHR's first curator of indigenous content, writes about how she experienced great difficulty bringing decolonizing curatorial strategies to bear on indigenous materials slated for exhibition in a monumental space. On Logan's view the richness and grandeur of the museum's structure, along with its scale, failed to find a meaningful equivalent in indigenous spiritual or storytelling traditions devoted to mediating and palliating 'difficult' experiences and histories more intimately (Logan 2014: 122).

A wider set of spatio-political adjacencies, such as the location of the CMHR relative to Winnipeg's French-speaking district St Boniface, which is steeped in Catholicism as well

as the memory of Métis revolutionary (and indigenous independence) icon Louis Riel, or else the city's 'core' and North End neighborhoods, which house Winnipeg's highest proportions of indigenous and impoverished residents and have relatively high levels of crime, further the museum's identity and meaning, and – via external programming and the way indigenous rights issues are handled within the museum – have some bearing on the CMHR's curatorial and archival strategies as well. These adjacencies can also reveal inconsistencies or hypocrisies within the CMHR, such as when the museum (like the rest of Winnipeg) makes use of fresh water that originates more than a hundred kilometres away on territory once owned by residents of the Shoal Lake No. 40 reserve. Following the construction of an aqueduct to transport water from Shoal Lake to Winnipeg just over a century ago, the Ojibway inhabitants of this territory found themselves cut off from easy road access to their community and without potable water (or, relatedly, any means for processing the raw sewage dumped into the lake by nearby cottages). The infrastructural deficit marking life in many Canadian indigenous communities, and particularly the lack of clean drinking water in these places, has long been a national disgrace.

During the 2015 federal election clean water also became a prominent campaign issue, with both Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party and the left-leaning New Democratic Party making its provision to indigenous communities a key component of their respective platforms. Trudeau visited Shoal Lake No. 40 and similarly afflicted communities several times during the 2015 campaign, following a prominent protest campaign that took aim (and occasionally place) at the CMHR and which catapulted the issue of the right to clean drinking water onto the national stage. Shortly after his election as prime minister funds were allocated by all three levels of government (federal, provincial, municipal) to improve conditions on the Shoal Lake reserve. The federally-funded 'Freedom Road' project got underway in 2017 and took two years to complete. It now provides a permanent land link between the Shoal Lake No. 40 community and the Trans-Canada Highway, Canada's primary interprovincial roadway (the community was previously accessible only by boat in the summer months, and by an extremely hazardous ice road in the winter). With Freedom Road now open, a new water treatment facility is planned for completion in the community by December 2020. Until then, as they have for nearly 25 years, the indigenous residents of Shoal Lake No. 40 will continue boiling their water to make it potable or else will import bottled water at a cost of $80-100,000 per year.

In the one location within the CMHR where water is most conspicuous, the museum's tranquil first-floor Garden of Contemplation, there is no reference to Canada's water crisis or to the specific hardships suffered by the residents of Shoal Lake No. 40 following their forcible displacement from their traditional land. Instead, the CMHR has installed a spigot outside on a small hill some distance from the museum and placed a sign on it indicating that the water emerging from the tap, like all of Winnipeg's water, comes from Shoal Lake. Although I know the museum site very well, it still took me some time of active searching to locate the spigot when I first became aware of its existence. For many of the CMHR's visitors who are concerned about indigenous rights issues, the museum's near-total silence on the exploitation of indigenous resources is striking, as well as darkly ironic. For even as it has had nothing to say about the origins and costs of the water it uses, the CMHR has loudly trumpeted its care in quarrying the Garden of Contemplation's basalt columns from Mongolia, and not China, so as to avoid any suggestion that it might be complicit with a government well known for its human rights abuses.

This irony (itself a consequence of the museum's selective moral attention) has not been lost on the members of the Shoal Lake No. 40 community. In 2014, under the leadership of Chief Erwin Redsky and in response to the opening of the CMHR in September of that year, the community opened its own Museum of Canadian Human Rights Violations containing archival photos, documents and newspaper clippings documenting the community's historical connection to water as well as its current development plight. Ironically, the one time I visited the Museum of Canadian Human Rights Violations with an Australian colleague, the historian Dirk Moses, not only did we have to drive across several kilometres of frozen lake in order to reach Shoal Lake No. 40, but once we arrived there we were informed that nearly all water in the community was unavailable for use due to broken supply lines (although the water in the community isn't potable, it is still taken from the lake and used for toilets, bathing, etc.). The

only place in the whole community with functioning toilets was the local arena, to which all of the community's schoolchildren had been relocated for the week so that plumbing repairs to their school and homes could be carried out. As part of our guided tour of the museum and surrounding community, we were taken to sites where unprocessed raw sewage was being dumped near enough to the lake to leech into it, further polluting what would otherwise have been fresh water.

My own and others' criticisms of the CMHR's opening stance on matters of indigenous rights and related justice issues, along with negative publicity generated by Chief Redsky and the people living on the Shoal Lake No. 40 reserve, have all contributed to the identity and functioning of the museum in a number of ways. Partly, criticism has contributed to the view that as a national museum responsible for conveying some 'official' version of Canada's human rights story, the CMHR is unable to do justice to the depth and intractability of rights abuses suffered by the country's indigenous peoples. According to Angela Failler (2018: 361), 'the Museum has been critiqued for inadequately addressing Canada's colonial past and present, privileging narratives of state benevolence and downplaying "missteps" when it comes to Canada's own human rights and Indigenous rights record'.

Aware of these criticisms, not least because the CMHR has also become since its opening a major site for public demonstrations relating to a wide variety of indigenous (and other) issues by protest groups such as Idle No More, the museum's leadership has initiated a number of changes not just to the way information about indigenous history is presented in exhibitions, but also to the way museum staff are trained to understand that history and share it with visitors. At a talk given before an indigenous audience at the Atamiskakewak National Gathering on 26 April 2018, CMHR President John Young explained that while 'Many of us are rightly proud of Canada's achievements […] we also need to acknowledge our wrongs, otherwise our collective memory as Canadians isn't complete'. To this end Young has instructed the museum's curators to be more forthright in their depictions of the brutality of European settlement, and to avoid smug and morally complacent representations of indigenous suffering and human rights abuses. Accordingly, in a move that would have been unthinkable at the time of the institution's opening (due not least to the moral and ideological priorities of the then-governing Conservative regime of Prime Minister Stephen Harper), the CMHR now explicitly designates Canadian settler colonialism as 'genocidal'. Young has also directed the CMHR's staff, all of them, to undergo retraining with a view to providing them with a more nuanced and accurate view of colonization's costs as they are understood from an indigenous perspective. As he put it in his Atamiskakewak talk:

> We introduced mandatory training for all staff – and I mean all – on working with Indigenous people and communities. […] We set up an internal staff working group, to get together quarterly and report on different reconciliation initiatives. […] We looked for ways to work meaningfully with our partners in federal, provincial and municipal government, and in 2016, became a signatory to the City of Winnipeg's Indigenous Accord […]. We developed new programming streams – for school children in different grades, as well as those in post-secondary education programs. […] Our programming looks at colonization, Indian Residential Schools, the 60s scoop, the child welfare system and Indigenous rights. […] With our archives team, we reviewed and discussed our policies around Indigenous community with respect to archives and access to information, data and objects. […]. We looked at new ways of doing business – ways that incorporated ceremony and protocol led directly by community – and we looked at different ways of learning and knowing.

Without going into it in too much depth, I wish to note that Young's Atamiskakewak statement, with its explicit commitment to embracing new forms of knowing and transmitting knowledge, reveals the extent to which the CMHR's ideas about its own internal and external functioning – about what it is as an institution and about the work it is required to perform as a result – has evolved in an explicit dialogue with other agents, forces, structures (e.g. the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls; the Museum for Canadian Human Rights Violations, etc.) responsible

for solidifying indigenous cultural (especially traumatic) memory. Whatever the museum is, which is of course a consequence of its 'hard' resources, how it chooses to present itself, and how it is actually seen and interacted with through the dynamic operations of its constituent assemblages, has not remained the same since the CMHR first opened. Nor should it ever have been expected to remain settled and constant, though of course the precise outcome of its evolutionary transformations (always provisional, emergent, and incomplete) can never be precisely ascertained.

Conclusion

I could of course go on, but my point is not to do much more here than begin roughly sketching relations between intensities within a few of the nodes contributing to the network of entities, discourses, and forces comprising the CMHR. In doing so I hope to have shown how these relations are present and interact both within and without the museum's walls, and indeed how in many ways they serve to give those walls their meaning, as well as fix their limits and lines of flight. Overlapping in other assemblages, these relations produce contingent zones of intensity that occasionally exert force on, and further territorialize, the CMHR-assemblage. To seek an explanation for the meaning and functioning of any of these assemblages without first acknowledging the lines of flight marking their permeability and spatio-temporal contingency, and thus the dynamic and irreducible relationality of their identities is, in a way, not to see the trees for the forest. It's by presenting a compellingly realist and finely granulating alternative to such reified and vaguely mystical aggregations (essentially metaphors) as 'community', 'culture', 'space', and 'the museum' that comprise the conceptual substructure both of traditionalist and New Museological conceptions of the museum that the true value of an assemblage-theoretical explanation may be seen. And unlike other more dynamic relational perspectives such as actor-network theory or intersectional analyses of the sort found in fields such as Critical Race Theory, assemblage thinking doesn't restrict the scope of our understanding of causation and agency, and so fall victim to a way of conceiving of structures in their interactions that still reifies by presuming a priori differences between entities and their relations.

In short, assemblage theory offers a way of accounting for phenomena like museums that allows for reference to explicit as well as latent structures and interactions which secure and/or change their originary contexts as they occur, stabilize, transform, decline, and eventually disappear. According to Emma Waterton and Jason Dittmer, assemblage theory supports 'a move to extend the discursive analyses that have tended to dominate the field [of museum studies], easing the grip of representational approaches which, while bringing to the fore a needed emphasis on discourse, ideology and marginalization, have tended to downplay the productive and actualizing work of the more-than-human and more-than-representational in the museum (Waterton and Dittmer 2014: 137). For Waterton and Dittmer, museums contain and are surrounded by a vast amount of 'background noise' that affects without ever being fully registered by visitors by creating atmospheres and providing other subtle clues about appropriate forms of conduct and comportment. This noise is impossible to control, and it cannot be engineered. Accordingly, it produces what they refer to as 'wayward encounters and unintended consequences' in museums, the uncanny and occasionally corrosive effects of which requires 'reference to the ideas of more-than-human agency, affect and the haunting virtual' (Waterton and Dittmer 2014: 124). An assemblage-theoretical reading of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is in my view able to provide a more generously 'wayward' reading of the museum, one that doesn't tackle it head-on and thus importantly avoids criticizing the CMHR for failing to live up to some reified and *a priori* conception of its proper role and function. The real value of any theory, after all, lies not in what it licences an inquirer to stipulate, but in what it coaxes its objects to reveal.

Notes

1   Cf. The influential nineteenth-century museum theorist George Brown Goode (2009: 133), who believed that the museum joined with the library, learned society, and school 'in the custodianship of learning and in extending the boundaries of existing knowledge'.

2   It is often noted that the Latin root of 'curate' means 'to take care of' or 'look after'. Curation is therefore fundamentally an expression of caring, and so understanding and love.

3   Canadian Museum for Human Rights, 'About the Museum', 2016. https://humanrights.ca/about, accessed 30 January 2020.

4   Which may not finally be 'human rights' per se. See Peter Kulchyski (2013).

5   I do not mean to single Macdonald and Basu out, and my remarks should not be taken as a general criticism of their otherwise very fine essay collection. My issue is more generally with the relatively ad hoc way assemblage theory has been taken up in the secondary literature on museums, at least as I have encountered it.

6   See also Moira Simpson (2001).

7   See for example the theoretical approaches, emotions, and institutions discussed by the contributors to Smith et al. (2018). See also the museums and heritage sites covered in Lewi et al. (2020).

8   See Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004).

9   Cæmeron Crain, 'What is a Territory?', The Mantle. http://www.mantlethought.org/philosophy/what-territory, accessed 28 January 2020.

10   DeLanda follows Deleuze and Guattari in using 'molar' and 'molecular' to mean 'macro' and 'micro' respectively.

11   See the 2016 report issued by Human Rights Watch entitled *Make it Safe: Canada's Obligation to End the First Nations Water Crisis*. https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis, accessed 30 January 2020.

12   'Waiting for a century: Shoal Lake 40 celebrates Freedom Road'. https://aptnnews.ca/2019/06/04/waiting-for-a-century-shoal-lake-40-celebrates-freedom-road/, accessed 28 January 2020.

13   For a more thorough account of the history of Winnipeg's water supply and the damage done to the indigenous residents of Shoal Lake No. 40, see Adele Perry (2016).

14   The visibility of indigenous issues in Canada has increased generally since the CMHR's opening, and now claims a significant amount of space in public life. Reasons for this change (for the better) include the issuing of final reports (with their attendant Calls to Action) by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which looked into abuses that took place in the country's Indian Residential School System, and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The latter's report was issued in the summer of 2019.

15   John Young, 'Keynote speaking points'. Atamiskakewak National Gathering 2018, Heritage Inn, Moose Jaw, SK. Thursday, April 26, 2018.

References

Anderson, B., Kearnes, M., McFarlane, C. and Swanton, D. (2012) 'On Assemblages and Geography', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2 (2) 171–89.

Barthes, R. (1978) 'The Death of the Author', translated by S. Heath, in *Image-Music-Text*, 142-148, New York: Hill and Wang.

Busby, K., Muller, A., and Woolford, A. (eds) (2015) *The Idea of a Human Rights Museum*, Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.

Dana, J. (1917) *The New Museum, Woodstock*, VT: The Elm Tree Press.

DeLanda M. (2002) *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, London and New York: Continuum.

        (2006) *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, London: Bloomsbury.

        (2011) *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason*, London and New York: Continuum.

        (2016) *Assemblage Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by B. Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Failler, A. (2018) 'Canada 150: Exhibiting National Memory at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights', *Citizenship Studies*, 22 (4) 358-80.

Fuentes, A. and Zavarce, G. (2013) 'Action-exhibition: Museums, Art, and Communities: Notes on the New Museology', *International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*, 6 (2) 21-7.

Gadamer, H. (2004) *Truth and Method*, translated by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, London: Bloomsbury.

Goode, G. B. (2009) 'The Relationships and Responsibilities of Museums', in Hugh H. Genoways and Mary Anne Andrei (eds) *Museum Origins: Readings in Early Museum History and Philosophy*, 111-24, London: Routledge.

Grinnell, J. (1921) 'The Museum Conscience', *Museum Work*, 4 62-3.

Hankivsky, O. and Dhamoon, R. (2013) 'Which Genocide Matters the Most? An Intersectionality Analysis of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights', *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique*, 46 (4) 899-920.

Hauenschild, A., (1988) *Claims and Reality of New Museology: Case Studies in Canada, the United States and Mexico*, Washington, DC: Center for Museum Studies, Smithsonian Institution.

Kulchyski, P. (2013) *Aboriginal Rights Are Not Human Rights: In Defence of Indigenous Struggles*, Winnipeg: ARP Books.

Lehrer, E. (2015) 'Thinking Through the Canadian Museum for Human Rights', *American Quarterly*, 67 (4) 1195-216.

Lewi, H., Smith W., Lehn, D. and Cooke, S. (eds) (2020) *The Routledge International Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Heritage Sites*, New York: Routledge.

Logan, T. (2014) 'National Memory and Museums: Remembering Settler Colonial Genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada', in Nigel Eltringham and Pam Maclean (eds) *Remembering Genocide*, 112-30, New York: Routledge.

Macdonald, S. (2008) 'Museum Europe: Negotiating Heritage', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 17 (2) 47-65.

Macdonald, S. and Basu, P. (eds) (2007) *Exhibition Experiments*, London: Blackwell.

Marcus, G. E. and Saka, E. (2006) 'Assemblage', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23 (2-3) 101-6.

McCall V. and Gray, C. (2014) 'Museums and the "New Museology": Theory, Practice and Organisational Change', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 29 (1) 19-35.

Moses, D. (2012) 'The Canadian Museum for Human Rights: The "Uniqueness of the Holocaust" and the Question of Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 14 (2) 215-38.

Ong, A. and Collier, S. (eds) (2005) *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Pelletier, J. (2015) 'Insider-Outsider Ambiguities and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights', *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, (37) 251-3.

Perry, A. (2016) *Aqueduct: Colonialism, Resources, and the Histories We Remember*, Winnipeg: ARP Books.

Rae, C. (1907) 'The Relation of the Museum to the Schools', *Bulletin of the Charleston Museum*, 3 (3) 21-32.

Schroeder, B. (2012) 'Reterritorializing Subjectivity', *Research in Phenomenology*, 42 (2) 251-66.

Simpson, M. (2001) *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-colonial Era*, London: Routledge.

Smith, L., Wetherell, M. and Campbell, G. (eds) (2018) *Emotion, Affective Practices, and the Past in the Present*, London: Routledge.

Waterton, E. and Dittmer, J. (2014) 'The Museum as Assemblage: Bringing Forth Affect at the Australian War Memorial', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 29 (2) 122-39.

Witcomb, A. (2003) *Re-imagining the Museum*, London: Routledge.

Author

Adam Muller

Dr. Adam Muller is Professor of English, Theatre, Film, and Media and Director of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Manitoba, Canada, where he studies the representation of genocide, human rights, and mass violence. He is the editor of *Concepts of Culture: Art, Politics, and Society* (2005), as well as co-editor of *Fighting Words and Images: Representing War Across the Disciplines* (2012) and *The Idea of a Human Rights Museum* (2015). Dr. Muller has a special interest in photography, and in 2014 curated *Photrocity*, an exhibition of never-before seen Soviet wartime atrocity photographs.

University of Manitoba
Canada

adam.muller@umanitoba.ca