Museums, Decolonization, and Indigenous Artists as First Cultural Responders: A Case Study at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

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Abstract

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) is part of a global movement of human rights-driven museums that commemorate atrocity-related events through exhibitions aimed at communicating a national social consciousness. At the same time, museums in Canada are increasingly understood as contributing to the perpetuation of settler colonial memory regimes through dominant narratives of national identity. Through the analysis of a unique exhibit titled *Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice*, which relies on shared authority and nuanced Indigenous art form, this article explores how museums in settler colonial societies might represent difficult knowledge and act as sites of decolonization. The article posits that by breaking with conventional curatorial and display approaches, the exhibit serves to reduce the institution's traditionally authoritative, nationalistic perspective and offers a model for enacting decolonization in museums across regions.

Key words: museum studies, decolonization, difficult knowledge, affect, art forms, public history, critical heritage studies, national identity, Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls

Introduction

Since their inception, museums have been intimately connected to the trajectory of the nation-state and complicit in the creation of national identities (Anderson 1983/2006; Bennett 2006; Duncan and Wallach 2006; Macdonald 2003, 2006; Rydell 2006). Increasingly, however, in the context of millennial globalization, transnational citizenship, and decolonization, static identities and storylines of the past are being called into question throughout the world. In Canada, this has occurred in parallel with rising anticolonial sentiment in response to two other events: (a) the release (2015) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC)'s final report specifying Canada's history of cultural genocide perpetuated against Aboriginal[1] peoples through state sponsored educational programmes like the Indian Residential Schooling system (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2015: 303); and (b) anticolonial response and reaction in the years leading up to and encompassing Canada's 2017 sesquicentennial celebrations.

Consequently, Canadian museums are ever more understood as actors in the contested processes of national memory-making through which settler colonial regimes perpetuate dominant narratives of national identity (see Ashley 2011; Anderson 2018; Logan 2014; Neatby and Hodgins 2012; Phillips 2011, 2012).

Within this milieu, Canada inaugurated the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 2014. The CMHR is one of six national museums funded by the state which serve to communicate Canadian identity and citizenry through the selective histories they tell. Additionally, the CMHR is part of a global movement of memorial or human rights museums to commemorate atrocity-related events with the aim of raising social consciousness. However, Canada's diverse society, without a common religion, language, or ethnicity, make these goals more difficult than in more homogenous societies, especially in face of its shameful colonial history. Specifically, the Museum has been chastised for not addressing the historical oppression and forced removal, assimilation, and extermination of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and its failure to represent the genocidal nature of Canada's history of settler

colonialism. As a result, on opening day, the CMHR was met with highly-publicized protests and boycotts.

In the context of these debates, I present an analysis of the exhibit *Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice* to explore how museums in settler colonial societies such as Canada might represent difficult knowledge and act as sites of decolonization. Rather than simply critiquing the CMHR shortly after its opening, this paper highlights the asymmetries of power between the state, cultural institutions, and Indigenous peoples, and demonstrates the complexity inherent in the idea of a human rights museum whose mission is to wrestle with difficult histories. The paper suggests that decolonization need not (and cannot be) constructed in neat opposition to colonization and that the nuanced work of Indigenous artists as first cultural responders to decolonization have much to offer museology[2]. This discussion is relevant not only to museum studies, but also to the broad related landscape of heritage sites, memorials, and other (including virtual) spaces that are often considered under the umbrella of critical heritage studies and history education.

The Canadian Context: Museums and Aboriginal Peoples

As tools of imperialism, museums around the world have been key to the classification, collection, and representation of Indigenous peoples that have disconnected them from their language, material, and intangible cultures; prevented their recovery from historical trauma; and perpetuated social injustice. Examples of these processes include exclusionary macro-classifications of art, archaeology, ethnology, history, folk culture, natural science, and science (Phillips 2011, 2012); strict adherence to colonial collecting and exhibiting practices (Ashley 2011); unequal or exploitative relationships with source communities (Lonetree 2012; Boast 2011); lack of scholarship on, and integration of, Indigenous knowledges in the fields of art education (Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr 2014); and failure to acknowledge the genocidal aspects of colonization (Anderson 2018; Logan 2014). For these reasons, museums in colonial societies, like Canada, are accused of complicity with policies of extermination against Indigenous peoples (Smith 2012).

Canada has an extensive and ongoing history of disrespectful treatment of Aboriginal peoples (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit). In their final report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, stated that museums and archives 'have interpreted the past in ways that have excluded or marginalized Aboriginal peoples' cultural perspectives and historical experience' (2015: 303).

Canadian scholars have indicated that museums often serve served evolutionist imperial and settler ,nation-building storylines through the appropriation of the cultural property of First Nations, Métis and Inuit (Battiste and Henderson 2000; Dion 2009; Phillips 2011, 2012). As Indigenous populations declined. As Indigenous populations declined due to starvation, disease and war or were pushed to more remote areas by colonization, growing fascination with 'savage' societies in contrast to Euro-Western civilizations increased the value of their art and artefacts. This resulted in Canadian museums adopting a salvage paradigm of collecting and preserving the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional belongings of Indigenous peoples as remnants of a vanishing race (Mackey 2012). Moreover, when not silencing the visibility of Indigenous people and cultures through a paradigm of last authenticity that extolled the trope of the vanishing Indian, institutions in Canada and elsewhere were complicit in overlooking contemporary First Peoples, preferring to situate them as if frozen in the past. This was further perpetuated through chronological nation-building narratives that communicated 'progress' in Canada's past as originating at the moment of European arrival, propagating a worldview that immortalized the superiority of a Euro-Western culture above all others (Phillips 2012; Stanley 2006).

Although the social movements of the 1960s led to changes in the curation and representation of previously excluded groups (women, Indigenous peoples, the working class, homosexuals, and cultural and ethnic minorities), the literature seems to agree that these efforts simply resulted in a new variation of the Canadian nationalist narrative: Canada as a progressive, tolerant, multicultural, mosaic of human rights (Anderson 2017, 2018). This is enacted in museums that appropriate Aboriginal culture, land, artefacts and belongings into

the larger storylines that communicate nation-state as a generous, broadminded, society of social equality for all. For example, the Canadian policy of '"giving away" land to white Settlers' (Schick and St. Denis 2005: 302) is frequently presented as an act of generosity rather than taken by coercion or meaningless treaties. This narrative is further curated through exhibitions that (a) recognize past policies, actions, and legislation, such as the residential school system, that racialized, harmed, or violated Indigenous peoples; yet (b) emphasize reconciliation by way of government apologies and/or compensation, thereby appropriating and weaving historically harmful policies and Aboriginal resilience into national storylines of social justice (Anderson 2017, 2018).

Scholars agree that curating state-orchestrated narratives of reconciliation risks erasing living histories and could inflict further harm by imposing a new social memory of progress over the injustices and social inequities that stem from the legacies of past wrongdoing (Ashley 2005, 2011; Logan 2014; Mackey 2012; Stanley 2012). Moreover, over the past three decades, the museum literature has challenged the accepted notion of museum neutrality and authority and advocated for institutions to take a more activist approach in their exhibition and curatorial practices (Lonetree 2012; Sandell 2011, 2017; Simon 2011, 2014; Smith 2012; Trofanenko 2011).

Museums as Activists

Curating difficult knowledge

Roger Simon, who grappled with the role of museums in representing injustice, testimony, public memory, and ethical imperatives, offered insights into how museums might become activists and purveyors of a discourse of social justice through curating difficult knowledge (Simon 2011, 2014). Educational theorist Deborah Britzman (1998, 2003) conceived that 'difficult knowledge' is activated when people are exposed to histories of atrocity, violence, racism, genocide, and war that throw into question their self-identity as innocent and good people. Building on Britzman's work, Simon asserted that the role of the memorial or human rights museum was to curate difficult knowledge by presenting audiences with 'significant challenges to their expectations and interpretive abilities' through exhibitions that present 'multiple, conflicting, perspectives on history through narratives whose conclusions remain complex and uncertain' (2011: 194). In the face of such challenges, exhibitions might be 'contested, refuted or may provoke' degrees of anxiety, anger, and disappointment in museumgoers (2011: 194). He further asserted that 'difficult knowledge' does not exist within particular artefacts, images, and discourses, but rather between the affective force of uncertainty provoked by an exhibition, the sense one might make of this experience, and its relation to a person's understanding of the exhibition's contents (Simon 2011: 195). Simon (2014) also posited three frameworks for a curatorial pedagogy of difficult knowledge: (1) exhibitions that counter the politics of recognition and closure by encouraging visitors to examine and reflect critically on their own roles in perpetuating injustice in society; (2) exhibitions that aim to mobilize grief and shame about one's complicity in processes of systemic violence; and (3) exhibitions that emphasize inheritance as an active mode of using testimonies about difficult pasts as educative legacies in the pursuit of social justice (210).

Museums and Decolonization

The literature of decolonization critically analyses the systems of knowledge and power entrenched in colonial structures and institutions such as schools, museums, and the academy; acknowledging how these forces facilitate the subjugation, exploitation, and dehumanization of Indigenous peoples. Decolonization is premised on recognizing Indigenous peoples as 'those who have inhabited the lands before colonization or annexation; have maintained distinct nuanced cultural and social organizing principles; and claim a nationhood status. Indigenous peoples are […] self-identified members of their community' (Castagno and Brayboy 2008: 944). Although decolonization manifests in different forms depending on the place, time, circumstances of colonization, and the priorities of local Indigenous people, the decolonization movement in Canada tends to challenge (a) the assumptions, legacies, and histories of both

settler ('Canadian') and imperial (French/English) colonial systems; (b) the universalization of Euro-Western thought steeped in modernity; and (c) the cognitive imperialism and Eurocentrism that privileges certain cultures and ways of knowing over others (Battiste 1998, 2013; Dion 2009; Donald 2009, 2012; Phillips 2012, 2014; Smith 2012). These scholars and others assert that colonial structures may be effectually deconstructed only through the lens of Indigenous research methodologies, ontologies, and epistemologies. In particular, decolonization in cultural institutions must be enacted through the direct involvement of Aboriginal peoples and communities through: (a) sharing the authority and responsibility of institutional curation practices; or (b) what Dion (2009) has labelled '(re)tellings of testimony', through which survivors of colonial harm and injustice can tell their stories to the public as acts of social justice. Although the decolonization movement has triggered academic and institutional responses, most mainstream museums have failed to decolonize their exhibitions satisfactorily through direct consultation/collaboration with Aboriginal peoples and communities. Instead, colonial agendas continue to inform exhibitions and curatorial practices.

      The CMHR exhibit *Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice* will therefore be interrogated not only through the historical lens of Canadian museums' historical disrespect of Aboriginal peoples, but also within the current movement towards the decolonization of Canadian cultural institutions. Hence, before moving to the analysis of the exhibit, a brief historical overview of controversies that arose during the evolution, construction, and opening of the CMHR as they relate to Aboriginal peoples is necessary.

The CMHR: Evolution, Politics of Recognition, and Indigenous Peoples

Since the CMHR's creation through amendments to the Museums Act in 2008, public debate has ensued around two distinct yet interconnected controversies: (a) the role and responsibility of the CMHR as a settler colonial structure in presenting the historical and persistent human rights violations against Indigenous peoples in Canada and its refusal to identify settler colonialism as genocidal; and (b) competing Euro-Canadian interests around representations of victimhood. In what follows, I trace how these issues emerged during the conceptualization, construction, and opening of the CMHR.

      The CMHR sits on a stretch of land at the convergence of the Assiniboine and the Red Rivers known as The Forks. Today this area comprises nine acres of picturesque parks, including The Forks National Historic Site, one of Winnipeg's premier tourist destinations. This location was also where Indigenous peoples - the Anishinaabe, Cree, Dene, and Dakota - traditionally met. Thus, as bulldozers broke ground for construction, artefacts left by receding floodwaters were uncovered and construction was halted. The ensuing archaeological dig recovered close to 600,000 artefacts, however, only two per cent of the fill was sifted. Thus, when construction moved forward in December 2008 there was public outcry[3] (Wong 2014). A major concern was that the small sample size would never be able fill the gaps in knowledge about First Nations at the Forks[4]. Meanwhile, the CMHR asserted that it had complied with all federal and provincial heritage requirements and had involved Aboriginal communities in its processes (Cassie 2010).

      A second controversy erupted in 2009 around whether the CMHR would use the term *genocide* to describe aspects of Canada's settler colonial history[5] (Welch 2013). *Genocide* is the term coined by Polish-Jewish legal scholar Raphael Lemkin to communicate a form of crime against groups of people undertaken in two phases: 'one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor' (1944: 79). Lemkin's work led to the codification of genocide as a crime against humanity by the United Nations. The Canadian government officially recognizes five genocides: the Armenian Genocide (1915–1923); the Ukrainian Holodomor (1932–1933), the Holocaust (1933–1945), the Rwandan Genocide (1994), and the Srebrenica Massacre (1995). However, scholars have long critiqued historiography's deliberations on the term,[6] which limit definitions of genocide to a singular event or exclusively to killing. A particular concern is that the processes used against European Jews have long been used by imperial powers and settlers to oppress Indigenous and African peoples (Moses 2015). During the construction of the CMHR, new research emerged in 2013 that exposed government-sponsored biomedical and nutritional experiments

on Aboriginal children at six Canadian residential schools in northern Manitoba (Mosby 2013). At the same time, Canada's TRC was entering its fourth year of survivors' stories of violence, humiliation, and other suffering at residential schools. The long-lasting cumulative effects on the children of survivors featured prominently in the Canadian media. As Busby et al. noted,

> for those scholars who have sought to revive Raphael Lemkin's originary insights into the concept of genocide, what matters is that Canada sought to destroy Indigenous groups as groups, not whether this ambition was achieved through physical, biological, or cultural means or some combination thereof (2015: 14)

Thus, the CMHR's refusal to let curators use the term *settler colonial genocide* exploded in national debate, as Indigenous leaders, academics, and journalists publicly criticized the Museum for its presumptuousness (Moses 2015). At the same time, a firestorm of public controversy erupted over competing Euro-Canadian interests for space and the representation of other atrocities in the CMHR, particularly over the prominence granted by the Museum to the Holocaust[7]. At 4,500 square feet, Gallery 5, 'Examining the Holocaust'*,* occupies 10 per cent of the Museum's total gallery space, 1,400 square feet more than 'Breaking the Silence'*,* which features the Armenian and Rwandan Genocides, the Ukrainian Holodomor, the Holocaust, and the Srebrenica Massacre. Ukrainian Canadians and Canadians of Eastern European heritage (Slovakian, Lithuanian, Polish, and Armenian) took strong exception to what they perceived as the privileging of Jewish suffering over that of others, and accusations soon turned to charges and counter-charges of racism and intolerance (Busby 2015).

Former CMHR curator of Indigenous content Trish Logan has noted that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities never lobbied the same way that other Canadian groups did because Aboriginal peoples were dealing with more pressing real-life emergencies like clean drinking water and the high incidence of Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls (MMAWG) (Logan 2014). The Museum's water comes from Shoal Lake, from which members of the Shoal Lake 40 First Nation had been relocated over 10 years earlier to accommodate the construction of a water reservoir for the city of Winnipeg. The community's consistent lack of clean drinking water over the last two decades is a symptom of this displacement. Moreover, in the month before the CMHR opened, less than one kilometre to the north of the Museum's location, the body of 15-year-old Tina Fontaine was found murdered and wrapped in a plastic bag. Fontaine became yet one more of several dozens of Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls.

Upon its official opening in September 2014, and despite the subsequent release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report in 2015 that described the nation's residential school system as a form of genocide, the CMHR initially maintained that it could not publicly label what happened to Indigenous peoples as genocide until the Canadian government did so.[8] However, at the time of publication the Museum changed its stance. In a Tweet on May 16th, 2019, the CMHR wrote "We would like to share that the Museum does recognize the genocide against Indigenous people and considers the entire colonial experience in Canada, from first contact to today, as genocide. We are always learning and growing." Louise Waldman, the CMHR's manager of marketing and communications further clarified the Museum's stance stating; "I think we recognize as a museum that our lack of clear acknowledgement of the genocide against Indigenous Peoples has caused hurt, and we've listened and we are working to do better."[9] In the following, I consider how the CMHR communicates the difficult knowledge associated with Canada's colonial legacy and explore the Museum's role as a potential site of decolonization through analysis of the exhibit *Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety*[10].

Situating the exhibit

The exhibit *Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice* is housed in the Canadian Journeys gallery, the largest in the CMHR. The gallery's extensive representational content and vast chronological span suggest an attempt to appease everyone: all of Canada's previously persecuted or marginalized individuals, communities, and groups. This 9,500-square-foot space contains 17 exhibit halls, each of which showcases a thematic history of Canadian human rights; a 'Share Your Story' booth, where visitors can record their own personal human

rights narratives; a glass-enclosed theatre that plays two films in rotation; a 29-metre screen that relays different digital stories and an image grid of close to 30 stories; an interactive floor exhibit with games centred on social inclusion; and three interactive digital stations that expand upon the stories found throughout the gallery. The gallery eschews a prescribed path through the space; its circular layout allows visitors to choose which exhibits to engage with and in what order.

Figure 1. A view of the Canadian Journeys Gallery (author photographs)

Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice the largest of the gallery's 17 exhibits[11], addresses the lives of Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls (MMAWG) in Canada and is one of four exhibit halls in the Canadian Journeys gallery to focus exclusively on Aboriginal content. The other three, not included in this study, are *Indian Residential Schools and Their Legacy*, *Inuit Rights in the North*, and *Asserting Métis Right*

The Exhibit: *Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice*

A brief history

Although Aboriginal women and girls make up only 4 per cent of Canada's female population, 16 per cent of all women murdered in Canada (over 500 individuals) between 1980 and 2012 were Aboriginal, and Aboriginal women aged 25 to 44 are 'five times more likely to die a violent death than other women'[12]. According to Amnesty International and the Native Women's Association of Canada, cases involving vulnerable - and especially Aboriginal - women are treated by police with inaction and indifference (Pearce 2013). Murdered or missing Aboriginal women and girls also received three-and-a-half times less media coverage than their non-Aboriginal counterparts in shorter stories less likely to make the front page (Gilchrist 2010).

 This invisibility, systemic prejudice, and inequality, along with the TRC's June 2015 recommendations, prompted the Canadian government to launch the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls (NIMMAWG) mandated to 'inquire and report on systemic causes of all form [sic] of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada, and to make recommendations on concrete actions'. On June 3, 2019, after nearly three years of hearings and information gathering, Canada's National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls released its 1200-page report that concluded the violence, death and disappearance of Indigenous women and girls amounts to race-based

genocide[13]. The report, which contains 231 recommendations, exposes how the media, politics and racism has bred indifference toward female and LGBTQ2 Indigenous peoples lives allowing for the Canadian genocide of Indigenous peoples to thrived unnoticed; "not as a spectacle of mass killing, but rather as imperceptible parts working independently towards the same goal" (Coburn, 2019)[14].

Figure 2. A close up of the exhibit Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice *(author photograph).*

Figure 3. Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice *exhibit's positioning in the Canadian Journeys Gallery (author photograph)*

The introductory (left) text panel

The introductory text panel, titled 'From Sorrow to Strength', suggests that the exhibit will communicate a narrative of triumph. The panel's first two paragraphs highlight the 'disturbing frequency' with which Aboriginal women and girls go missing in Canada and the scant mainstream

attention this receives, noting that many of these murders remain unsolved. Referencing statistics, the copy also notes the amount of violence and the number of homicides committed against First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women in contrast with other Canadian women, stating '[t]heir fundamental rights to safety and justice are at stake'. Since the plight of Aboriginal women and girls has only recently received the attention it deserves in Canada, this introductory panel has the potential to reveal knowledge that might otherwise be absent from, or beyond the historical purview of, non-Indigenous museumgoers, thereby disrupting one of Canada's most pervasive national narratives: Canada as a progressive, tolerant, multicultural mosaic of human rights. It may therefore provoke resistance in museumgoers to histories that Canadians may view as 'not ours' or 'not our fault' (Reid 2014: 173).

Alternately, the information in this opening panel may trigger guilt by association or inheritance and feelings of doubt around questions of identity related to ideas of 'self-innocence' and 'self-goodness' (Britzman 1998, 2003). They may also challenge the legacy of settler history and confront the Eurocentric bias inherent in the Canadian media and justice system that privileges certain people and ways of knowing over others. These paragraphs therefore offer difficult knowledge by 'confront[ing] visitors with significant challenges to their expectations and interpretive abilities…resulting in narratives whose conclusions remain complex and uncertain' (Simon 2011: 194).

The panel's final paragraph, however, highlights Aboriginal peoples and their allies who are confronting this tragic pattern of violence by 'targeting poverty, racism, and bias in the media and the justice system'. The last sentence states, 'Voices are calling for every woman to be treated with dignity'. The curatorial decision to end the panel with concerned Canadians working for justice potentially nullifies the difficult knowledge found earlier on the panel by suggesting Canada's benevolence as expressed through its socially active citizenry. Scholars contend that too often the dominant narratives in museums of countries with colonial pasts such as Canada are celebratory discourses of appeasement and redemption that gloss over existing violations against Indigenous peoples (Logan 2014; Phillips 2012)

Notably absent from the introductory panel are the actual voices of Aboriginal women. Moreover, the copy - written entirely in the third person - includes no recognition of the continuing injustices the Canadian state's colonial legacy imposes on Aboriginal women and girls. In this way, the panel absolves museumgoers of critical reflection and moral responsibility by affirming an enduring national narrative: Canada as a progressive, tolerant, multicultural nation of human rights. Thus, although this portion of the exhibit works hard to acknowledge
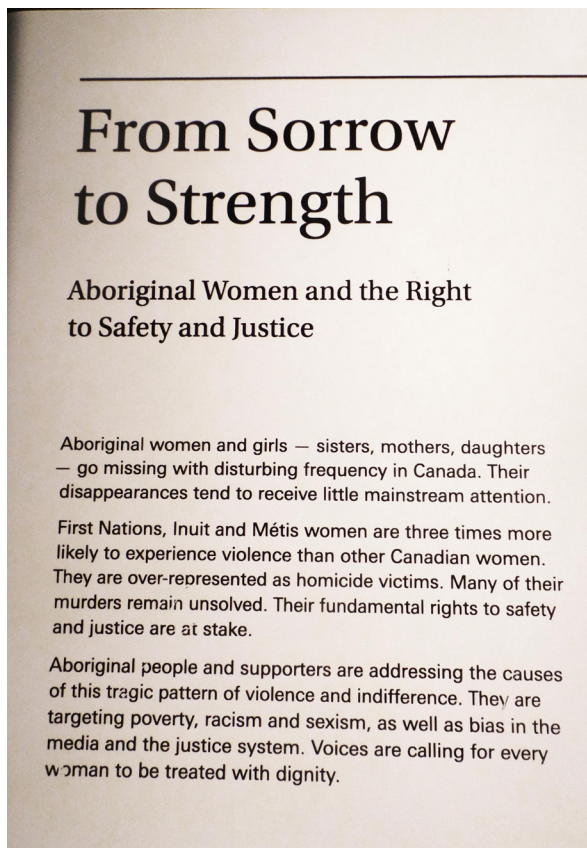

Figure 4. Opening text panel of the exhibit Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice *(author photograph).*

the link between Canada's colonial history and present-day injustices towards Aboriginal peoples in general and Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls in particular, it does not fully embrace a decolonizing approach to curation. Rather, the panel's authoritative tone presents MMAWG as pre-read texts.

The focal area

The focal area of the exhibit was curated by Winnipege Métis artist Jaime Black. Black's internationally renowned REDress project, initiated in 2010, gathers community-donated red dresses and installs them in public spaces to draw attention to Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls[15]. In October 2015, in honour of the Day of Vigils to Remember Murdered and Missing Aboriginal Women, Black invited all Canadians to display their own red dresses[16]. The response was overwhelming. Red dresses in the hundreds were hung in yards, public spaces, and business areas, photographed, and posted on social media with the hash tag #REDressProject. Most recently, in March 2019, the National Museum of the American Indian presented a special installation of Black's REDress Project as an outdoor art exhibit to commemorate Women's History Month.

The focal area is beautiful, yet also eerily haunting. It features six community-donated red dresses suspended from the ceiling on wooden hangers. In the background are six large-scale panels of a leafless birch forest superimposed with the images of 12 more red dresses hanging in the woods. The ruby red dresses against the white birch trees contrast the bloodshed and brutality of the fate of the MMAWG with their innocence. Suspended in the display and lit from above, each red dress flutters with the air currents in the Gallery, casting a dancing shadow on the floor below. The dresses' movement and emptiness give the area a desolate feel, emphasizing how many Aboriginal women are still missing and how invisible they remain to Canadian society.

By hiring Black to create an artistic rendering for the focal area of Aboriginal Women and the Right to Justice, the CMHR shared curatorial authority through the direct involvement of Aboriginal communities and people. As a result, several elements of the focal area reflect Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges and serve to decolonize the space. For example, the curatorial decision to use a birch forest as a prominent feature recalls Aboriginal habitation of the lands before colonization and annexation. This supports decolonizing historiographies and suggests a narrative cycle beginning with the primacy of the landscape, exposing the

Figure 5. The focal area of Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice *(author photograph).*

modernist structures of colonization and development (Castagno and Brayboy 2008; Marker 2015). Dwayne Donald (2009) has discussed how certain Canadian landscape features are significant places of learning about Aboriginal culture and identity. Donald (2009, 2012) and Calderon (2014) aim to decolonize education by highlighting that all places in Canada were once Aboriginal lands and remain so today thereby shifting the focus from traditional Euro-Western place-based notions of geography and history to land-based ones. Black's use of the birch forest as a backdrop for the red dresses also references an Indigenous worldview that sees the land as a source of wisdom and knowledge, inextricably bound to histories and memories (Marker 2011). As Donald (2009) articulates through the lens of Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges, landscapes and land features in Canada are '"living vestiges" fecund with contested interpretations of culture and identity' (11). Moreover, since resource extraction, particularly forestry, allowed land in Canada 'to be redefined in ways more conducive to Euro-Canadian notions of land use and ownership' (17), the focal area's treed backdrop serves as a subtle reference to modernist structures of colonization. And finally, Black's rendering also eschews any form of linear textual or visual chronology, thereby referencing Indigenous cyclical, or circular understandings of time and reality (Marker 2011).

Figure 6. A close up of the focal area of the exhibit. (author photograph).

The work of artists in museums seldom follows traditional practices which serve to explain dense topics to audiences. This makes analyzing their presence, as an alternate method of interpretation in museums, both interesting and significant. Moreover, in contrast to the text panels and guided tours, art forms rarely endeavour to conceal their subjective nature and are not generally known for being a straightforward mode of communication. This is certainly the case for Black's rendering of the focal area. Because there are no text panels to read or nostalgic objects or renderings to view, her nuanced artistic display creates a deeply affective experience rather than a realist or positivist one. The focal area requires that audiences connect imaginatively with its aesthetic features and spatial display where meaning is not instantly available. In doing so, the visitor's gaze creates an ethical relationship between the self and the other. Thus, the focal area of *Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice* moves beyond sympathy to implication. Black's artistic rendering featuring the spatial placement of the dresses in the woods, combined with knowledge of the systemic violence inherent in the lives of Aboriginal women and girls not only provokes visitors to reflect intimately on their own relationship to Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls; it raises questions and uncertainty around Canada's reputation as a progressive, tolerant, innocent nation. The focal area therefore has the potential to cause Canadian audiences

to rethink who they believe they are and who they think they are viewing, reflecting Simon's (2011) assertion that difficult knowledge resides in the uncertainty an exhibit provokes in a viewer, rather than in any of its contents. The focal area also speaks to Simon's (2014) first and second frameworks for a curatorial pedagogy of difficult knowledge in that it has the potential to encourage visitors to examine and reflect critically on their own roles in perpetuating injustice in society, and to mobilize grief and shame at their own complicity with processes of systemic violence.

Black's artistic rendering also has the potential to stimulate sentimental, non-rational, and emotional responses in museumgoers. Non-Indigenous visitors might feel shock, revulsion, grief, and shame at their own complicity with the ongoing systemic violence and colonization borne by Indigenous peoples. Recent considerations of 'affect' in education (Atkinson 2011; Massumi 2011) have also been extended to museums (Witcomb 2013; Trofanenko 2011). Australian researcher Andrea Witcomb (2013) writes that affective encounters aimed to heighten visitor engagement can enable critical reflection in audiences; an element of surprise or shock in historic exhibitions gives visitors a sense of the historical differences between past, present, and future. Such affective knowledge can evoke involuntary memories in visitors, and the 'shock of recognizing something as other than what you thought it was can bring the past into radical tension with the present' (269). Witcomb posits that curatorial forms of critical thinking might make the exhibition itself a practice. She has called for a 'deep ethnographic analysis of [the] audience' to further investigate this proposed pedagogy and visitor responses to it. Witcomb has discussed several Australian museums' exhibits that deal with histories of contact and migration, but do not rely on linear narratives. For example, at Greenough, in Western Australia, curators have used coiled barbed wire fencing wrapped in packaging with the label: 'Settler's Own: ideal for disrupting nomadic lifestyles and keeping people out' (261). Describing her reaction, she wrote: 'I instinctively recoiled, almost in horror at the matter-of-fact way in which this simple prop was made to stand for the process of colonization' (261). This presentation transformed the form of knowledge offered by the exhibit from cognitive to affective.

Since the 1990s, historical museums have increasingly commissioned artists to mediate between collections and audiences, often with the goal of addressing increasing demands for both representation of and reconciliation with previously marginalized groups. These reciprocal contracts often result in exhibitions that expand the possibilities of meaning-making by curating difficult history and using affect to counter the 'official' historical interpretations traditionally offered to museumgoers.

One of the most enduring and seminal examples of this methodology is Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992-93) for the Maryland Historic Society, in which he drew from the institution's archives to create a juxtaposition of artefacts. In one exhibit, Wilson placed a pair of rusty slave manacles in a vitrine with repoussé silverware, with a label that read: 'Metalwork 1793-1880'. In another, he placed a Ku Klux Klan hood (found in the archive with its donor listed as anonymous) in a nineteenth century perambulator and labelled it 'Maker Unknown' (Robins 2016).

Other works by American Indian artists in historical museums have addressed the objectifying gaze of museums and the colonial attitudes shown in their displays of Indigenous peoples' histories. For instance, in his performance, *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* (1991-2001), Luiseño Indian James Luna offered himself up for a photo opportunity with visitors to the Natural History Museum in New York City. The 'catch' was that museumgoers had to decide whether they wanted their photograph taken with him wearing conventional clothes or wearing traditional regalia (Robins 2016). In another example, American Indian Erica Lord stood motionless as a human artefact in a display cabinet at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, in New York City. Lord's 2008 performance titled *Artifact Piece Revisited*, was reprising James Luna's previous work, *The Artifact Piece*, first presented in 1987 at San Diego's Museum of Man.

Thus, although the insertion of contemporary artworks into collections and exhibitions as detailed above are distinct from Jaime Black's more nuanced work, they nevertheless often turn audiences from passive recipients to active constructors of meaning in the museum.

The right side panel

The right side panel of the exhibit features four images with corresponding text panels. The first image shows a large billboard from a 2009 Vancouver Sisters in Spirit Vigil displaying the smiling and solemn faces of some Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls. Image 2 features Bernie Williams and Reta Blind (family of MMAWG) dressed in detailed ancestral clothing in shades of black, cream, and vibrant red, leading the Vancouver Women's Memorial March in 2011. The corresponding copy asserts that 'Family members of missing and murdered Aboriginal women take a prominent role in campaigns for their rights'. Image 3 depicts the seventh annual (2012) Montreal Sisters in Spirit Memorial March and Vigil and features a woman with a sign that reads 'My heart is with you who have disappeared'. Although this photograph highlights Canadian allies in the fight for justice for MMAWG, the text states that '[a]bout 40 percent of murders of Aboriginal women in Canada remain unresolved', thereby emphasizing the inaction and general indifference towards Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls their lives, and the dangers they face. The fourth and final image of the panel features Walk4Justice co-founder, Gladys Radek, demonstrating for rights with a caption stating that she and many others were demanding a national inquiry into missing and murdered women.

As a whole, the panel puts a human face on the issue of MMAWG and the fight for justice by raising questions about Canada's reputation as a leader in human rights. It potentially unsettles museumgoers' 'expectations and interpretive abilities' (Simon 2011:194). Hence, while the first few photographs communicate information that might be unknown to museumgoers and could provoke 'anxiety, anger and disappointment' (Simon 2011:194), the last photograph appears to suggest a better future through social action. In sum, the right side panel brings to mind Simon's (2014) idea that a curatorial pedagogy of difficult knowledge should foster hope, not as a wish for some abstract better future, but as a pedagogically structured 'affective driven force' (5) that 'inculcate[s] a singular sense of responsibility in and for the unfinished state of the present and its possible forms of futurity' (208, 205).

At the same time, the panel highlights the measures activists and allies throughout Canada have taken to call attention to Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls. This appears to suggest a better future through social action. Nevertheless, despite that the panel features the faces and voices of Aboriginal people and/or community-members, it may also be critiqued for not doing enough to decolonize. One wonders about the many other MMAWG not featured? Why not include a fully registry of those who were murdered and are still missing here? Further, who are
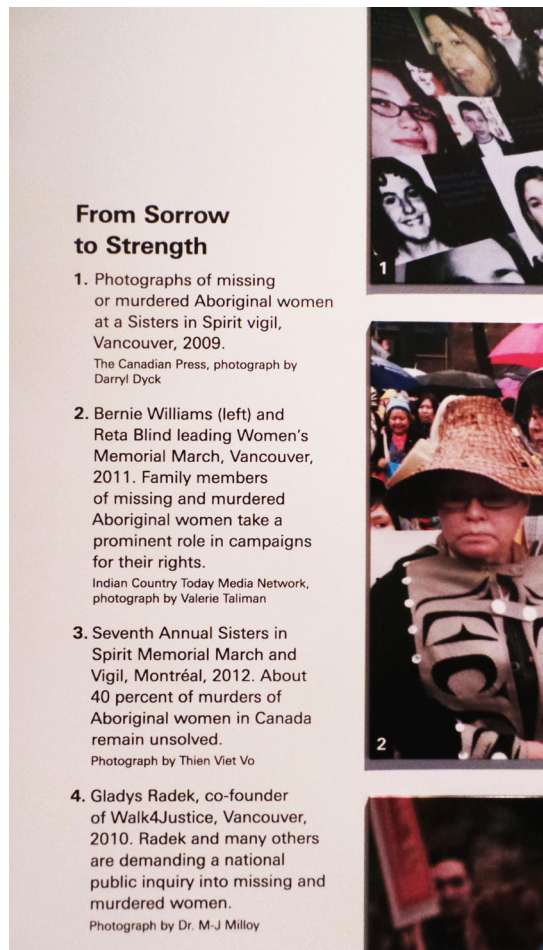

Figure 7. The right side-panel featuring four photographs and corresponding text (author photograph).

these women and girls, and what did they do before they met their tragic fates? Why are there no suggested links between Canada's colonial policies of cultural genocide (Indian residential schools and the Sixties Scoop) and the issue of Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls? Instead, the limited information offered in the right side panel leaves museumgoers at an alienating distance from the subject. Moreover, the curatorial decision to write the copy entirely in the third person fails to acknowledge the culpability of the Canadian state in the tragic pattern of discrimination, disappearance, violence, and murder of these Aboriginal women and girls.

Figure 8. Photograph 1 from the right side-panel (author photograph).

Figure 9. The second photograph on right side-panel (author photograph).

Figure 10. The third photograph on the right side-panel (author photograph).

The exhibit as a whole

As outlined above, although the introductory and right side-panels of *Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice* are problematic, the unique curatorial and display approach taken in the exhibit's large focal area, suggests a model for decolonization in museums. Co-curated by Métis artist Jaime Black, it not only reflects the movement in Canadian museology towards decolonization through sharing authority, it also offers a bridge between Indigenous epistemology and knowledges to audiences who do not identify as Indigenous. This is accomplished through an artistic rendering that eschews linear chronology, marks the land as a source of wisdom and knowledge, connects to distinct First Nations through landscape, and communicates the tragedy of Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls through a non-representational, affective form of knowledge rather than through simple representation or cognition. This not only simulates an ethical relationship between the self and the other, provoking visitors to reflect intimately on their own relationship to Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls, it also raises questions about one of the nation's most pervasive meta-narratives: Canada as a progress-oriented, generous, tolerant, multicultural leader in human rights (Anderson 2017, 2018).

Discussion

By tracing the inherited asymmetries of power shared between the state, museological institutions, and Indigenous peoples at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights this article highlights not only the difficulty inherent in confronting and acknowledging the violence and trauma associated with Canada's historical and contemporary treatment of Aboriginal peoples, but also that of decolonizing curatorial practices. This article suggests that decolonization need not (and cannot be) constructed in neat opposition to colonization and that the nuanced work offered by Indigenous artists has much to offer. By breaking with conventional curatorial and display approaches, *Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice* locates itself firmly within the current conversation about the position of museums as authorities of objective truth, and the significant role Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges might play in decolonizing the museum in settler colonial societies. Moreover, it takes a firm stance on the place of the museums as activist. The approach taken for *Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice* at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights not only suggests a model for decolonization in museums, it also illuminates a new range of functions and possibilities for institutions to become viable and relevant. First, affording curatorial authority to Métis artist Jaime Black has resulted in an exhibit that communicates Aboriginal perspectives, knowledges, and epistemologies in

Figure 11. The fourth photograph on the right side-panel (author photograph).

relationship to Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls. Second, the use of art forms in the museum as opposed to cognitive and 'rational' spatial and textual displays serves to reduce the institution's traditionally authoritative, nationalistic perspective. By stimulating visitors' sentimental, non-cognitive faculties, such forms potentially create a heightened level of engagement that: (a) stimulates a sense of difference between the past, present, and future that promotes interpretations counter to 'official' historical interpretations; and (b) encourages an ethical exchange through which audiences may examine and reflect critically on their own roles in perpetuating injustice and their complicity with the processes of systemic violence. Indeed, if human rights-driven museums like the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in settler colonial societies like Canada are to continue to grow and evolve, they must do more than merely stage difficult histories under the pretext of detached commemorative hosts. They must re-assess the policies, practices, and priorities that involve their sharing authority with Indigenous people's communities, and they must consistently examine the colonial logics and inventions that permeate colonizing and decolonizing exhibitions.

Notes

[1] Throughout this paper, I use the term Aboriginal to denote Aboriginal peoples within the borders of Canada. That is, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. I use the term Indigenous to denote the original inhabitants of a land in countries other than Canada, or, when I am referring to a grouping that includes both Aboriginal peoples living in Canada and Indigenous peoples from other lands.

[2] As a non-Indigenous scholar attempting to work within a decolonizing framework, I am conscious of the fact that I embody a privileged position. Moreover, I acknowledge that I am not equipped to fully understand and explain Indigenous experiences, values and knowledges.

3   Wong, K. (2014) Human rights hypocrisy: The Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Global Research. Retrieved on February 7, 2018 from http://www.globalresearch.ca/human-rights-hypocrisy-the-canadian-museum-for-human-rights/5401336

4   Syms, L. (2010) Accelerated Destruction of First Nations Heritage Beneath the Canadian Museum of Human Rights, 2009. Retrieved on January 29, 2018 from http://www.manitobaarchaeologicalsociety.ca/archive

5   *Canadian Chart of Rights and Freedoms*, s 27, Part I of the *Constitution Act*, 1982, being Schedule B to the *Canada Act 1982* (UK), 1982), c 11, http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-15.html; *Canadian Multiculturalism* (Library of Parliament, 2009), p. 4.

6   Lord Cultural Resources. (2016) 'Canadian Museum for Human Rights Wins 24 Awards.' News. Retrieved on May 5, 2018 from http://www.lord.ca/Pages/Lord_News.php

7   Tapper, J. (2014). Critics Say Canada Museum Favors Holocaust Over Other Genocides. JWeekly.com. Retrieved on May 7, 2018 from http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/72783/critics-say-canada-museum-favors-holocaust-over-other-genocides/

8   Taylor, J. (2015) CMHR waiting for residential school system to be labelled "genocide". CBC News. Retrieved on May 15, 2018 from http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/cmhr-waiting-for-residential-school-system-to-be-labelled-genocide-1.3101530

9   Monkman, L. (2019) Genocide against Indigenous Peoples recognized by Canadian Museum for Human Rights". CBC News. Retrieved on May 20, 2019 from https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/cmhr-colonialism-genocide-indigenous-peoples-1.5141078

10   The analysis of this exhibit serves to highlight the inherited asymmetries of power shared between the state, museums, and Indigenous peoples, rather than as an indictment of individual curators or museum staff.

11   Each exhibit measures eight by eight by eight feet, except Aboriginal Women and the Right to Safety and Justice, that measures eight by eight by 14 feet.

12   http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/lbrr/archives/cnmcs-plcng/cn30343-eng.pdf http://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca

13   http://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/EN_-PressRelease_June-5-2018_VF.pdf

14   Coburn, V. (2019) Why are the deaths of Indigenous Women and Girls Ungrievable? Retrieved on June 11, 2019 from https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/june-2019/why-are-the-deaths-of-indigenous-women-and-girls-ungrievable/

15   http://globalnews.ca/news/2257745/red-dress-campaign-looks-to-raise-awareness-about-missing-murdered-indigenous-women/

16   http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/mmiw-mmaw-missing-murdered-indignous-women-canada-march-1.3256366

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