GENERAL ARTICLES

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Democratizing Museum Practice Through Oral History, Digital Storytelling, and Collaborative Ethical Work

Abstract: The museum as an institution can trace its origins to the colonization process. Many are still undemocratic and exclusionary institutions by nature. This article explores how digital collections, digital storytelling, and ethical guidelines for museum professionals working with historically marginalized communities can contribute to democratize museum practice and theory. Making use of two case studies: 1) the creation of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights' (CMHR) oral history collection; and 2) the planning of the Swedish Museum of Movements' (MoM) ethical guidelines – this piece

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proposes a shift from theory to practice in human rights museology to help institutions be more attuned and responsive to the communities they intend to serve. Both case studies demonstrate that implementing human rights museology in national museums is not an easy task and still faces multiple challenges. Yet, they also indicate that this concept can be more productively informed through practices developed by the marginalized groups which have been historically excluded from taking part in the decision-making processes in museums.

Keywords: oral history, ethics, human rights museology, digital storytelling, collecting

Expanding Our Understanding of Human Rights Museology

Museums are intimately tied to the colonial project.[1] Colonization refers to the process of European invasion that created a social classification based on the false idea of race; imposed an oppressive system of white supremacy and dispossession of land and wealth; and established policies of genocide and enslavement.[2] Maori lawyer and Indigenous rights expert Moana Jackson argues that white supremacy, the idea that white people are inherently superior to everyone else, is the founding presumption of colonialism.[3] He elaborates as follows:

> Some of Europe's greatest thinkers contributed to the development of this presumption, and it eventually encompassed everything from the superiority of their form of government to the greater reason of their minds and even the beauty of their bodies. They were merely warped fantasies posing as fact, but they were eventually learned as the "truths" that enabled Europeans to assert that they had the right to take over the lands, lives, and power of those they had decided were the "lesser breeds". The consequent dispossession of indigenous peoples was a race-based process that led to the genocide and deaths of millions of innocent men, women and children around the world.[4]

Maori professor of Indigenous education Linda Tuhiwai Smith directly links these colonial ways of doing and thinking to museums: "This collective memory

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[1] A. Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2012, p. 1.

[2] W.D. Mignolo, C.E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, and Praxis*, Duke University Press, Durham 2018, p. 16.

[3] M. Jackson, *The Connection between White Supremacy and Colonisation*, "E-Tangata", 24 March 2019, https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/the-connection-between-white-supremacy/ [accessed: 09.11.2020].

[4] Ibidem.

of imperialism has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized".[5] However, the United Nations' Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) has affirmed that advancing a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) in museum practice can play an essential role in decolonizing museums.[6] The HRBA is a conceptual framework based on international human rights standards, directed to advance human rights.[7] The HRBA promotes empowering people – especially those most marginalized – to participate in all processes and phases of a project and to hold accountable those who have a duty to act.[8] Under this framework, human rights are not considered as just one element or dimension in mainstream processes. Rather they constitute the foundational framework and basis for the entire process of socio-political organization and development.[9]

But How Does the HRBA Approach Relate to Human Rights Museology?

At the beginning of the 2010s, professor of new museology Jennifer Carter and legal scholar Jennifer Orange defined human rights museology as:

> an evolving body of theory and professional practices underlying the global phenomenon of museums dedicated to the subject of social injustices, one that is fundamentally changing the form, and nature, of museum work. Human rights museology acknowledges the potential for museums to engage in campaigns against human rights violations, at the local, national and international levels. This work means that museums are required to take a public stand on political issues, which may situate museums in conflict with their funders.[10]

They affirmed that human rights museology is a form of practice that proclaims the social vocation of museums and incorporates practices other than

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[5]   L.T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books, New York 1999, p. 1.

[6]   Human Rights Council, *Repatriation of Ceremonial Objects, Human Remains and Intangible Cultural Heritage under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 21 July 2020, A/HRC/45/35, https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/45/35 [accessed: 09.11.2020].

[7]   United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *The Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies*, 2003, https://unsdg.un.org/resources/human-rights-based-approach-development-cooperation-towards-common-understanding-among-un [accessed: 09.11.2020].

[8]   Ibidem.

[9]   J. Packer, S. Balan, *A Genuine Human Rights-Based Approach for Our Post-Pandemic Future*, Open Global Rights, 27 July 2020, https://www.openglobalrights.org/genuine-human-rights-based-approach-for-post-pandemic-future/?lang=English [accessed: 15.09.2020].

[10]   J. Carter, J. Orange, *Contentious Terrain: Defining a Human Rights Museology*, "Museum Management and Curatorship" 2012, Vol. 27(2), p. 112.

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those traditionally identified with such institutions.[11] However, this definition, mostly drawn from human rights museums' mission statements and programs at the time,[12] needs to be updated. Human rights museology must reflect current museum practices; be more attuned to the current needs and realities of our societies; and be closer and more useful to historically marginalized groups. Developed a decade ago, Carter's and Orange's definition remains a theoretical exercise that unfortunately fails to take into consideration how practitioners[13] and historically marginalized groups in all types of museums have used human rights as a method of work. Thus, instead of analyzing *what* institutions say they do, I want to focus on *how* practitioners, in collaboration with historically-excluded communities, are advancing human rights in all phases of their work and in all types of museums. Rather than centring institutional discourses, I intend to focus on the *human* in human rights museology.

Because I want to consider human rights not just as one element of museum work but as the foundation of all its processes, I propose to move the current definition of human rights museology from theory to practice. In doing so, I want to reaffirm the idea that theory is derived from practice and that practice can only be improved through theoretical reflection.[14] Thus, I intend to analyse how museum practitioners have, intentionally or not, used a HRBA to help them prioritize the meaningful participation and empowerment of historically-marginalized voices in all processes of museum work. Therefore I will examine how practitioners are shaping a still-evolving field of human rights museology. To do this I use the HRBA as one tool to frame several methods of practice, in order to help expand the definition of human rights museology. The use of a HRBA in museum practice requires that we move away from the colonial ways of doing and thinking that still hold sway in many museums. This type of participatory museum work is what I am interested in practicing and analyzing. EMRIP explains that:

> Historically, museums were geared to house and showcase items of "exotic" cultures for the viewing pleasure of dominant societies, and the concept of indigenous peoples as visitors or partners was unfamiliar. Moving towards a human rights-based approach may therefore require a dramatic shift. In many instances, this transition begins with

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[11]   J. Carter, J. Orange, *The Work of Museums: The Implications of a Human Rights Museology*, presented at the Federation of International Human Rights Museums Conference, International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, 2011, https://www.fihrm.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/JCarterJOrange-Paper-2011.pdf [accessed: 24.10.2020].

[12]   J. Carter, *Human Rights Museums and Pedagogies of Practice: The Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos*, "Museum Management and Curatorship" 2013, Vol. 28(3), pp. 324-341.

[13]   By practitioners I understand museum and cultural workers; those who are not formally recognized as cultural workers; those who engage with any type of organizations that carry out cultural work; and community members and other stakeholders involved in this type of work with different types of organizations and institutions.

[14]   B. Brulon Soares (ed.), *A History of Museology. Key Authors of Museological Theory*, ICOFOM, Paris 2019.

museums exploring cooperation with indigenous peoples as constituents, employees and stakeholders. As museums increasingly embrace indigenous peoples' cultural rights, along with repatriation, they are also able to develop more extensive relationships, better information about collections, and collaborative programming consistent with museums' current goals to be inclusive, diverse and relevant to today's societies.[15]

Strong Objectivity as a Tool to Expand Human Rights Museology

Thus, in order to disrupt Western/modern colonial frames of theory, knowledge, research, and academic thought, I wish to challenge scientific principles of distance, neutrality, and objectivity. In doing so I must pause here to make myself visible and to identify how my own positionality influences the perspectives from where I practice and then theorize. This decolonial shift in the way in which I understand theory and practice requires that I make myself visible and recognize how my presence influences my way of doing and thinking. I identify as a cisgender queer man of colour who is living with an invisible disability. I arrived in Canada as an asylum seeker fleeing homophobia in El Salvador, my country of birth. Before working in the museum sector, I gathered significant experience in the field of human rights. Having been trained as a human rights lawyer, I initially framed my museum practice through a HRBA. In doing so, I have sought to prioritize the meaningful participation and the empowerment of the communities I work with. In challenging academic principles of distance, neutrality, and objectivity, a peripheral approach rooted in "strong objectivity" is an excellent base for a more sustainable way of working. Strong objectivity, a term coined by the feminist philosopher Sandra Harding, describes an alternative method of analysis that emphasizes the subjective realities of the members of a group.[16] The integration of these subjective realities results in a more accurate and nuanced representation of that group. I have chosen this way of working to redress discriminatory practices and the unequal distribution of power historically embedded in many museums. Yet, community work in the museum sector has made me realize the limitations of a HRBA and of understanding human rights exclusively as a construct of positive/codified law. And thus, as an effort to move beyond the Eurocentrism and positivism embedded in modern understandings of human rights, I have expanded my use of this concept to include other frameworks such as anti-oppression, anti-racism, liberation, Indigenization, and decoloniality.

Influenced by these experiences and different types of knowledge, I have come to understand human rights museology as a museology from below, a set of museum practices and a corresponding body of theory that aim to further human

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[15]   Human Rights Council, op. cit., para. 61.

[16]   S. Harding, *'Strong Objectivity': A Response to the New Objectivity Question*, "Synthese" 1995, Vol. 104(3), pp. 331-349.

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rights through the prioritization and participation of historically excluded voices in all museum processes that directly affect them. Human rights museology goes beyond using codified articulations of human rights and includes anti-oppression, anti-racism, decolonization, and Indigenization as the tenets of museum work. Under a human rights museology, participation means ensuring that historically excluded voices are empowered to have genuine ownership and control over all phases of a project: assessment, analysis, planning, design, setting of goals, objectives and strategies, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. This promotes the development and cultivation of long-standing relationships while also ensuring the sustainability of projects.

Human rights museology sees communities as the legitimate rights holders, and institutions as duty bearers. It works towards strengthening the capacity of all parties to make their claims, and to meet their responsibilities. At times this may challenge the status quo and force institutions to acknowledge, repair, and redress the damages of unjust and unequal distributions of power historically embedded in their structures. Human rights museology not only understands the potential for museums to engage in campaigns against human rights violations at the local, national, and international levels, but it also recognizes the right of museum workers to mobilize against oppressive regimes, even if that means going against their own institutions. This focus on practice is essential because it responds to a conscious desire to break away from the tyranny of theory over practice.[17]

However, human rights museology must move away from relying exclusively on the term "human rights" as conceived by the West. Criticizing the universality of the UN discourse on human rights is a valid criticism. The perspectives of Indigenous peoples and those of the Global South have remarkably been excluded from the discourses that originated the international legal order of human rights. Positivistic constructs of human rights often prioritize individual rights, something that can be perceived as in direct opposition with the need to prioritize community ones. The use of a HRBA can become a hindrance when working with many historically marginalized communities outside of the Western paradigm. Thus, human rights museology can be better served by using an interdisciplinary approach – combining fields such as social justice, Indigenous studies, critical race theory, and decoloniality to expand the Western understandings of human rights while also developing new critical methodologies of museum work that can be applied by all museums.

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[17]   W.D. Mignolo, C.E. Walsh, op. cit., p. 28.

The Role of Oral History in Advancing Human Rights Museology

As Smith explains: "the need to tell our stories remains the powerful imperative of a powerful form of resistance".[18] Human rights museology recognizes museums as having the legal obligation to find ways to redress past and present harm done to vulnerable groups within society at large, as well as within their walls through their collections, programming, and governance systems. Thus acknowledging the right of communities to determine their own forms of identification and self-representation within institutions is a starting point in the process of decolonization. Revisiting the purpose of museums within a human rights and decolonizing agenda means constantly working to remove barriers so that everyone can feel like they belong. As African American poet and professor Camille Dungy reminds us, "when you belong, you can overlook the totality of otherness, the way that being other pervades every aspect of a person's life".[19]

Because the colonized have been ignored and misrepresented in traditional historical written sources, this has contributed to their exclusion and erasure within many museums. Oral history can help correct incomplete narratives and make room for the historically excluded to tell their own stories in these institutions. As explained by several staff of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) in the article *Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights*:

> Oral history is the act of interviewing individuals about historic events and activities to which they were witness or involved in order to gain a more comprehensive – and personal – view of the past. It is as critical as other sources such as newspapers, government documents, and personal papers researchers might consult when conducting rigorous inquiry. In fact, oral history offers something other sources lack – perspectives from often-marginalized groups and individuals, including many who have suffered human rights violations. These stories are often excluded from the historical record.[20]

> Oral historian Paul Thompson states that oral history is:

> a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but also from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow-workers. It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged […] towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact – and hence understanding – between social classes, and between generations.[21]

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18   L.T. Smith, op. cit., p. 12.

19   C.T. Dungy, *Guidebook to Relative Strangers: Journeys into Race, Motherhood, and History*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2018, p. 7.

20   H. Bidzinski et al., *Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, "Oral History Forum d'histoire orale" 2017, Vol. 37, p. 2.

21   P.R. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, Oxford University Press, New York 1978.

Thus, oral history is consistent with the principles of equitable distribution of power and prioritization of meaningful participation of the historically marginalized voices in processes that directly affect them, which are at the heart of a human rights museology.

"Nothing about us without us" is a mantra that has been employed by the disability rights movement since it was first used in the 1980s in South Africa by people with disabilities.[22] Its purpose is to demand inclusion in policy and decision-making processes that directly affect the lives and environments of people with disabilities. In the present day, other historically marginalized communities have also used the mantra "Nothing about us without us" to assert their agency, self-empowerment, and self-determination. Borrowing language from the human rights movement allows communities to position themselves as legitimate claim-holders vis-à-vis institutions like museums. Therefore, a museology based on a HRBA can help historically-excluded groups engage with museums to achieve their goals of participating in policy formulation while holding institutions accountable.[23]

Oral history, as a strategy for participation and for the democratization of museum practice, can contribute to embed a HRBA into museum practice. While oral history represents an invaluable resource in building digital collections, its biggest contribution to the field of human rights museology lies in its capacity to allow human rights museums' workers to transform it into an applied discipline. Oral history can be used as a tool of human rights museology to create meaningful partnerships with community members that can lead to the type of collaborations needed to challenge hierarchical structures and practices that are deeply rooted in museum thought and practice. This implies cultivating an ongoing process of dialogue and sharing authority with those who have been excluded in the past. Sharing authority in museum practice, a core ethical principle of oral history, implies an ongoing process that goes beyond merely speaking or consulting with new audiences.[24] It requires taking the time to build trust, developing meaningful collaborative relationships, and sharing decision-making between museums and the communities.[25]

Dialogue with diverse communities and experts has shown that using oral history in museum activities like researching and revisiting the past may prove deeply emotional or distressing for historically-marginalized people who have

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[22] J.I. Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us. Disability Oppression and Empowerment*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2000, p. 3.

[23] O. Zabalueva, A. Perla, *Activist Museology: Implementing Museum Theory Through Action*, in: K. Smeds (ed.), *The Future of Tradition in Museology*, ICOFOM, Paris 2019.

[24] S. High, *Research Ethics*, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Concordia University, http://storytelling.concordia.ca/toolbox/ethics [accessed: 09.11.2020].

[25] Ibidem.

experienced trauma.[26] Consequently, under a human rights museology, the terms of engagement must be set and agreed collaboratively between all parties affected. Ethical guidelines developed with the active participation of community experts are a first step in ensuring minimization of the harm that many of these projects can cause.

To respect the principle of participation, at the core of both a HRBA and a human rights museology, oral history collections should not be developed only by museum staff; this should be done collaboratively with or by community members themselves. If needed, museums should focus on capacity-building to develop the skills needed for communities to collect, archive, and preserve their own stories. Museums should support archiving efforts by community members even if it means collections will be hosted by the community and outside institutions. When museums develop collections of communities' stories and material culture, their purpose should be to respond to communities' needs before institutional interests.

An archiving process that prioritizes a community's needs requires that institutions rethink traditional nomenclatures and classification systems and replace them with new models that benefit the historically-excluded. Respect for interviewees' privacy should be at the forefront of a museum's archival practice. Communities' expectations of privacy, as well as that of the people who may be mentioned in archival materials, must be respected when providing access to collections.

Interpreting and exhibiting the stories and histories of historically-marginalized communities demands that institutions look at their governing structures and examine the diversity of their work forces. Because historical injustice and the unequal distribution of power are strongly present and rooted in museum management structures, opening spaces within leadership positions is a necessary step in fostering the empowerment and agency of historically-marginalized communities. Respecting their right to tell their own stories and deciding how these stories are told must be a priority for museums working with vulnerable groups. This would help institutions build trust with communities and ensure that their stories are interpreted and exhibited with the rigor they deserve.

The use of oral histories and material culture belonging to historically--marginalized communities in programs and exhibitions also needs to be a participatory and collaborative process. Co-curation has proven to be a key strategy of a human rights museology, and it must be established as the standard for developing exhibitions. This means involving community members in all steps of the curatorial process. From the development of concept briefs, curatorial approaches, and interpretive plans, to researching and sourcing assets, to design approval.

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[26]   Ibidem.

Similarly, museum programming should help meet community's priorities and offer an opportunity to fulfill their needs. Community members should lead programming calendars while museums should provide the needed support for these events to be successful.

Oral History at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

In April 2003, the Government of Canada, the Province of Manitoba, the City of Winnipeg, The Forks North Portage Partnership, and the Asper Foundation announced a joint partnership to establish the CMHR in Winnipeg, Canada.[27] The Parliament of Canada amended the Museums Act in 2008[28] to create Canada's fifth national museum. Additionally, the CMHR was also the first national museum to be created since 1967 and the first national museum in Canada's history to be located outside the nation's capital Ottawa. The Museums Act entrusts the CMHR with exploring "the subject of human rights, with special but not exclusive reference to Canada, in order to enhance the public's understanding of human rights, to promote respect for others and to encourage reflection and dialogue".[29] As expressed by the CMHR's Director of Research and Curation Jodi Giesbrecht:

> The CMHR was established in a context shaped by two key trends in museological practice. One was the advent of the so-called "New Museology", which encouraged a fundamental rethinking of museums from sites of authoritative knowledge that presented grand narratives of scientific and cultural evolution, to places of public dialogue, democratic engagement, and popular participation. The second and related development was the rise of sites of conscience and museums dedicated to human rights-related subject matter. We can see the relationship between these two trends; as museums desired to reassert their relevance in a rapidly changing world, they increasingly embraced matters of pressing social and political concern.[30]

Similarly, Jennifer Carter links human rights museums to the tenets of new museology,[31] thus drawing a direct line with her own definition of human rights museology.

The CMHR started hiring staff members in 2009 and it initially planned to open its doors in 2012, a significant overestimation on the part of its leadership at

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27   The Asper Foundation, *The Asper Family: A History of Giving*, http://asperfoundation.com/the-asper-family/ [accessed: 17.10.2020].

28   *An Act to Amend the Museums Act and to Make Consequential Amendments to Other Acts*, Statutes of Canada 2008, c 9, http://canlii.ca/t/52mk8 [accessed: 17.10.2020].

29   *Museums Act*, Statutes of Canada 1990, c 3, http://canlii.ca/t/52b5v [accessed: 17.10.2020].

30   J. Giesbrecht, *Reports from New Directions in Active History: Memory, Museums, and the Politics of the Past*, 2 June 2016, from https://activehistory.ca/2016/06/reports-from-new-directions-in-active-history-memory-museums-and-the-politics-of-the-past/ [accessed: 17.10.2020].

31   J. Carter, op. cit.

the time. The museum did not fully open until December 2014. The first leadership team had the intention to develop an ideas museum. This concept was used in the early stages of the project to describe a museum that begins with a concept and not a collection.[32]

I arrived in the museum when the first curatorial team came on board in February 2010. The museum's leadership made an audacious and bold decision when they hired mostly human rights professionals who did not have traditional museum backgrounds. The leadership also made the decision to use oral history as the main method of research and collection building. Storytelling and story-gathering were key to the development of the museum through its initial public engagement consultations.[33] It was clear from the beginning that people who had attended these open meetings wanted the museum to look at human rights through the sharing of personal stories and narratives. Thus the CMHR's Oral History Program was created to critically support the museum's mandate,[34] build its collections, and develop its exhibitions and programs. This is clearly explained by some of the museum staff involved in the development of the CMHR's Oral History Program, as follows:

> An important goal of the Oral History Program, like the CMHR more broadly, is to present and preserve an array of voices and experiences. Essential to this is a commitment to inclusivity – in terms of gender, age, language, ability, economic, ethno-cultural, religious, sexual identity, and other intersecting subjectivities and categories of oppression – which can support and facilitate complex and meaningful dialogue about human rights. The potential for a diversity of voices is one of the greatest strengths of oral history; indeed, it is what makes it crucial to fulfilling the CMHR's mandate in promoting respect for others.[35]

Having such goals, instead of favouring the creation and/or acquisition of analogue collections the CMHR embarked in the development of digital assets such as oral histories, which would become the core of the museum's collection. Curators were tasked with conducting oral histories in the early stages of the program. Staff from the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS) at Concordia University travelled to Winnipeg to train the curatorial team on the ethics of oral history and on how to use digital technology to conduct the interviews and develop the collection. We also held several discussions regarding ethics, and a study to develop a "Research Ethics Policy Framework" was commissioned from

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[32]   *Speech Delivered by Mr. Patrick O'Reilly to the Chambre de commerce francophone de Saint-Boniface on Thursday April 2, 2009,* Canadian Museum for Human Rights, https://humanrights.ca/news/speech-delivered-by-mr-patrick-oreilly-to-the-chambre-de-commerce-francophone-de-saint [accessed: 17.10.2020].

[33]   H. Bidzinski et al., op. cit.

[34]   Ibidem.

[35]   Ibidem.

the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs (CCEPA). On 20 October 2010, I conducted the first oral history interview for the CMHR's collection with human rights lawyer Thomas Berger in the city of Vancouver. Internally, the curatorial team continued to discuss ways to ensure that we would not perpetuate harmful research practices that many museums have carried out when engaging with historically-marginalized communities. We knew that these principles needed to be ingrained in our oral history work ethics. We held group and individual discussions with the consultant from the CCEPA about these issues, hoping that they would be included in the policy document. Because of my own experience of forced migration, I was concerned about the exploitation of vulnerable groups and the extraction of their stories and suffering only to be displayed and consumed by the colonial gaze.

The report by the CCEPA was handed to the museum in March of 2011, and it reflected the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human Subjects (TCPS2)* (2010), a pan-Canadian policy that applies to all research involving human subjects that is funded by the three national granting councils – the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the Canadian Institutes for Health Research. The ethics framework recommended for the CMHR also included principles such as respect for human dignity, shared authority, inclusiveness, fairness, substantive equality, and informed consent. However, a centralized and official policy on ethics for those of us working with historically-marginalized communities was never adopted by the museum. Those of us engaging in this type of work were left alone to determine the most ethical way to do it. Except for a failed attempt to review the oral history framework on ethics in 2015, the document was never revisited. Recommendations, such as the establishment of an independent ethics board, were never implemented. Over the years I was at the museum, the Oral History Program continued to decline and less resources were allocated to it in each fiscal year.

Nevertheless, the CMHR has continued to be regarded as a role model in the sector. Its mission statement contributed to shaping the early notions of a human rights museology.[36] Some of us, as curators, were using the collecting of oral history and digital storytelling for the democratization of several exhibitions and programs, as well as with the aim of building trust and establishing and cultivating long-lasting relationships with historically-marginalized communities. For instance, the last exhibition I worked on at the CMHR was a co-curated project with the Rohingya community in Canada. Developed through an activist curatorship, *Time to Act: Rohingya Voices* represented an attempt to move towards a more inclusive and democratic museum practice.[37] It also raised important questions for institutions trying to

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[36]   J. Carter, J. Orange, *Contentious Terrain…*

[37]   A. Perla, Y. Ullah, *Time to Act: Rohingya Voices*, "Museum Management and Curatorship" 2019, Vol. 34(6), pp. 577-594.

engage ethically with historically-marginalized communities. I was repeatedly told by community members that they wanted to tell their story in their own terms. While they wanted the world to know about their suffering, they also did not want to be portrayed in an exhibition only as victims. To better tell their stories we decided to embark on the co-development of an oral history and digital storytelling project to include in the exhibition. This project documented the experiences of the Canadian Rohingya across the country. Between July and August 2018, together with the community we conducted 23 oral history interviews from coast to coast.[38] It was community members who co-developed the questionnaires; who chose who would get interviewed; who presented and explained consent forms to interviewees; and who mostly conducted interviews. After completing these oral histories, they were digitally archived as part of the CMHR's collection and were later used in an exhibition to nuance the Rohingya experience. We used an artificial intelligence (AI) software in the exhibition to deliver the content, which had been created together with the community. In this way visitors to the exhibition asked questions related to the Rohingya experience, while the AI software provided responses obtained from the oral histories contained in the CMHR's digital collection.

Most of the exhibitions at the CMHR used oral histories and digital storytelling to present human rights content. Some other projects in which I was the curator included an exhibition that featured an augmented reality component presenting three *arpilleras*, patchwork pictures created by women during the Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, telling the story of Carmen Gloria Quintana.[39] She was an 18-year-old student protester who was drenched with gasoline and set alight in 1986. After surviving the attack Carmen became an international activist fighting the dictatorship. Another project included the co-development with Indigenous women from Guatemala of a virtual reality film telling the story of how the founding of a women weavers' cooperative helped them claim some of their economic, cultural, and social rights after the genocide. The cooperative was born out of Guatemala's civil war, which lasted from 1960 to 1996 and left 200,000 dead – 83% of whom were Indigenous Mayan.[40] There were many more projects in which the use of digital technology – from the way we collected and developed content to the way we delivered it in the gallery – was essential to democratize the storytelling and to prioritize historically-excluded voices in these processes.

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[38]   A. Perla, *The Canadian Rohingya: Telling the Full Story,* "Heritage Matters" 2018, p. 20.

[39]   *Latin America's Political Art*, Galleries West, 2 January 2017, https://www.gallerieswest.ca/magazine/stories/latin-america-s-political-art/ [accessed: 06.11.2020].

[40]   C. Sanders, *Museum: A Portal to Guatemala*, "Winnipeg Free Press", 2016, https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/arts/museum-a-portal-to-guatemala-387557981.html#_=_ [accessed: 06.11.2020].

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Even with all these successes, internally the museum has struggled and failed to attain its mission's values and to abide by its commitment of ensuring that human rights would be respected for all. During the development of each exhibition, power struggles over prioritizing community voices and maintaining the CMHR's colonial ways of doing sometimes presented insurmountable challenges. This became particularly evident when, soon after the killing of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, the CMHR joined museums around the world making public statements of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. However, hundreds of current and former museum employees, artists, and community members around the world reacted by exposing many of those institutions where racism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of oppression did harm.[41] At the CMHR, harrowing accounts of abuse caused a national and international media frenzy that spanned months.[42] After more than a decade of failed attempts at negotiation inside the museum, frustration led dozens of current and former employees to take direct digital action to seek change.[43] As the only curator from a visible minority ever hired by the CMHR, I joined in too. BLM-Toronto co-founder Janaya Khan affirms that direct action is about forcing the powerful to respond to public demands instead of ignoring them; it is an "effort to leverage, seize, or demonstrate power against oppressive systems" when negotiations have failed.[44] For me, taking part in these mobilizations represented a way to use human rights museology to also fight against the injustice and oppression that I had experienced for years at the CMHR. The lack of interest from museum leadership to ethically engage with historically-marginalized communities inside and outside the museum contributed to the crisis.

Human rights values and principles are not just content to be displayed on the walls of a museum, but also a way of operating that can help institutions work responsibly with historically-excluded communities. In the case study below, I will explain how the work around the ethics of oral history can contribute to this methodology.

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41   A. Perla, *The Museum Sector is in Crisis*, "Active History", 31 August 2020, http://activehistory.ca/2020/08/the-museum-sector-is-in-crisis/ [accessed: 17.10.2020].

42   A. Perla, *Canada's Institutional Racism Problem is Also Embedded in Its Museums – How Can We Address It?*, "Muse Magazine" 2020, p. 20, https://museums.ca/site/reportsandpublications/museonline/fall2020_institutionalracism [accessed: 09.11.2020].

43   A. Randle, *We Were Tired of Asking': Why Open Letters Have Become Many Activists' Tool of Choice for Exposing Racism at Museums*, "ArtNet News", 15 July 2020, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/museum-open-letters-activism-1894150 [accessed: 17.10.2020].

44   R. Diverlus, S. Hudson, S.M. Ware, *Until We Are Free. Reflections on Black Lives Matter in Canada*, University of Regina Press, Regina 2020, p. 118.

Ethical Guidelines at the Museum of Movements in Sweden

The development of the Museum of Movements (MoM) in Sweden represented an opportunity to rethink why and how a museum comes into being. With this in mind, the MoM focused its work on a supple process to allow civil society to appropriate its development and to help shape it using a bottom-up approach. This approach prioritized relationships and trust-building over bricks and mortar. The idea of developing a museum focusing on the themes of migration and democracy was introduced by the Malmö City Council in early 2016. Soon after, it was presented to the Minister of Culture, who financed a feasibility study to investigate the possibility of developing the museum. As a starting point, the Swedish Government provided support for an international gathering to take place in Malmö. Malmö University held the conference "Museums in Times of Migration and Mobility" in the spring of 2016. Researchers and museum practitioners from Australia, Canada, Great Britain, South Africa, Sweden, and the United States contributed their knowledge and made presentations. I was invited to present my work in co-developing an exhibition with migrant workers at the CMHR in Canada.

That fall, the City of Malmö held a series of dialogue meetings to hear what the people in Sweden had to say about the project. These roundtable discussions were conducted with individuals, activists, civil society organizations, the museum sector, and academics from across Sweden. Participants were invited to think critically about five ideas: museums, national status, democracy, migration, and location. In addition, the project organizers held several national and international study visits to museums and cultural institutions in the United States, Canada, Sweden, and other European countries in support of the feasibility study. Finally, they organized a workshop to discuss the museum project with the Swedish Association for Museum Education and Forum för utställare (the Exhibitor Forum). The dialogue meetings revealed the desire of several historically-excluded communities in Sweden to tell their own stories. During the consultations, they spoke about the need to construct a new narrative that would allow for the forgotten and invisible to be written into Swedish history. They shared their hopes for the creation of an institution with a national mandate, one where they would be able to meaningfully participate in the construction of history, so that their communities could understand their past, their present, and their future. Much as in the case of the CMHR, it was clear that many of the communities who had participated in the consultations wanted the MoM to prioritize story gathering and storytelling. It was then decided to conduct another series of public consultations to test the idea of using oral history as a method in the new museum and to focus on building a digital collection. The response was overwhelmingly favourable, and thus it was agreed that instead of building up large collections of artifacts to develop its exhibits and programs, the MoM would instead rely mostly, but not exclusively, on the development of a digital oral history collection.

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The challenges faced by the CMHR because of its lack of a standardized institutional framework for ethics steered the work of the MoM in ensuring that an adequate ethics policy would be put in place. In early 2019, I commissioned a study on ethics which included the participation of 12 different organizations working with interviews and personal narratives in Sweden. The organizations that participated in the study included: The Swedish Museums Association; the Swedish Heritage Board; the Swedish Institute for Languages and Folklore; ICOM Sweden; and five museums which had collected interviews in the past. During this benchmark study, it became apparent that there is a lack of ethical guidelines in the museum sector – both in Sweden and elsewhere in the world – regulating the research, collection, archiving, and dissemination of oral histories by museum professionals. The findings of the study also showed that there is no official mechanism in place that can guarantee respect for human dignity and the mitigation of harm of vulnerable populations in research projects in museums, while also preventing conflicts of interest. Since the MoM was supposed to work with vulnerable and historically-marginalized groups such as migrants and racialized communities, the team understood the need to work ethically and responsibly, especially with groups that have been harmed in the past by museums. Thus, the MoM wanted to ensure that it would do things differently, and that these concerns would be at the forefront of its work. Because ICOM's Code of Ethics is also silent when it comes to oral histories and personal narratives, the MoM identified a need to develop such frameworks before it could start conducting interviews and collecting oral histories.

During this time, the MoM continued using participatory methodologies to create an open and public safe space for its communities. The objective was to encourage their meaningful participation and to encourage honest and public dialogue around difficult issues, and for the MoM to listen and learn to put the interests of its communities ahead of its own. For this, a prototyping space was opened in August 2019 in a temporary location in a multicultural and diverse neighborhood in Malmö called Möllevången. In this space, the MoM continued to engage with existing and new stakeholders at the local, national, and international levels, with the aim to collaboratively open a full-scale museum. Communities were able to freely use the space as they saw fit. It was imperative that they would not be required to align their activities with the museum's mandate or needs, but instead that they could use the space to advance their own needs. It was hoped that the co-sharing of the space with museum staff would help build trust and contribute to future museum collaborations.

The opening event for that space was a half day conference on the ethics of oral history. That seminar was the first event that the MoM ever held. The intention behind doing this was to send a clear message about what would be at the core of the museum's work. This meant challenging traditional ways of thinking and acting in museums by centring ethical work with historically-excluded communities; prioritizing their voices; fostering their meaningful participation in all decision-making

processes as a means of empowerment; and tackling the injustices and unequal distributions of power historically embedded in most museums. In the fall of 2019, the MoM conducted an ethics workshop that brought together 35 experts from civil society, academia, and museum sectors already working in these issues at the local, national, and international levels. Choosing the right mix of geographical representation, frames of reference, and academic and practical experiences was crucial to the success of the workshop. The experts were divided in six groups, according to their skills and expertise. Each group was assigned an area of museum practice: Community Participation, Researching, Collecting, Archiving, Interpreting, and Exhibiting, for which they were asked to develop a principle and corresponding guidelines. Those three days of intensive work together resulted in the first draft of the MoM's ethical guidelines. These guidelines are meant to be flexible and to continue to be informed by museum professionals, academics, and community members, and thus be able to adapt to the changing needs of our societies.

Ethical Principles and Guidelines – Draft 1

1) Community Participation

Principle

Community participation is the core of the museum, and in order to ensure its sustainability and trusted position within society, must be reflected in all functions, activities, and programs.

Guideline

Community participation begins with the establishment and administration of policies and protocols of the museum and is then reflected in its projects and activities – detailed within each milestone of a project and/or activity's development and production.

2) Research

Principle

The museum shall recognize that any knowledge production is the result of collaborations across differences and therefore needs to build on mutual recognition and in respect for different modes of knowledge and experiences. The museum shall strive for research that builds sustainable partnerships – including in terms of time and resources – as well as partnerships that are socio-economically and environmentally sustainable.

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Guidelines

The museum shall continually re-assess and evaluate both entry points and barriers for participation. In order to prioritize missing and untold stories, the museum shall employ empowering practices (i.e. affirmative listening).

When needed, the museum shall provide safe spaces where certain experiences can be articulated and explored on their own terms. Projects shall prevent harm and promote sustainable, continuous relationships.

At the start of the research process, every stakeholder must discuss and decide how research shall be undertaken, documented, and evaluated. Dissemination and documentation of museum research and exhibitions will promote and support changes to ethical guidelines and principles over time. A board and/or committee shall assure ethical guidelines and principles are being maintained and improved over time.

The museum shall renounce any form of exploitation and hierarchical structures of power and labour – both within the institution and between the institution and collaborating partners. It shall not depend on unpaid labour. Research shall acknowledge the knowledge(s) of partners and present these knowledge(s) in reciprocal, appropriate, and accessible ways.

The development of new research and access to knowledges created shall be maintained through the respect of different perspectives, ongoing discussion, and through decolonial and collaborative approaches. Knowledge production and the transmission of knowledge should be reciprocal and provide clear benefits to communities and partners alike. The dissemination of knowledges shall acknowledge the roles and contributions of all partners/communities.

Safe, respectful, and inclusive research shall be supported by sustainable and adaptable time limits, financial support, resources, and internal structures.

3) Collecting

Principle

Collecting is a people-centred and collaborative process inside and outside the museum that includes the gathering, archiving, and caring of tangible and intangible heritage. Collecting also requires capacity building for the museum's staff and its stakeholders.

Guidelines

Oral history gathering is at the heart of the museum's collecting. The museum prioritizes the protection and care of the interviewee and its/their centrality in the collecting process while recognizing their authority and ownership over their story.

The museum must be mindful that institution–community partnerships can also produce undesired effects. Therefore, the museum must avoid predatory

practices towards communities and essentializing populations into postures of vulnerability or marginalization.

4) Archiving

Principle

The museum is committed to maintaining well-informed consent that protects people's rights and dignity; and which establishes shared ownership by balancing accessibility and privacy. By cultivating sustainable, long-term relationships we will establish shared authority with our donors, ensuring transparency in how we conduct our archival process. We will foster a culture of mutual trust, with a living, consistent process of community engagement and review.

Guidelines

The Museum will ensure that all material collected is accompanied by a release form that comes out of a consent process that is easy to understand. Sharing authority of how interviews and materials are used will be managed between the museum, the donor, and the community.

The Museum is committed to practicing professional standards as they relate to the preservation of archival material to ensure future access by communities and researchers. The archival process must blend standard archival language with culturally appropriate terms/tags/language that is developed through community engagement.

The Museum will establish terms of relationships that are mutually beneficial, long-term, and sustainable in order to manage responsible access and dissemination consistent with its mission.

5) Interpreting

Principle

All interpretation and programming should be grounded in the principle of sharing authority. This means that all initiatives will be community-based and community-led, with support from the museum, as needed.

Guidelines

The goals of interpretation and programming shall be to engage different ways of communicating and understanding while fostering partnerships between groups as appropriate. Communities should not only be partnered with, but its members should also be part of the staff.

The museum shall ensure that all programming and interpretation conforms to the institution's values and mission statement. These processes will always be rooted in dignity, respect, and empathy with the explicit purpose of facilitating accessibility and inclusion.

6) Exhibiting

Principle

Exhibitions are people-centred and process-oriented: they value voice, difference, and the agency of individuals in society. Reflective and reflexive, exhibitions are meeting points in which to reflect, to respond, and to include; to critique, to protest, and to rebel. They are spaces for complex, contentious, and "unsafe" ideas.

Guidelines

Exhibitions are negotiations of power. They should be people-centred as well as meaningful and ethical responses to the needs and realities of society. Participatory and collaborative, they should aim to dignify, to retribute, and to create channels of connection in society.

Exhibitions are process- and not product-oriented. They are sites of storytelling attuned to the communities who develop them, and which they serve. Exhibitions should be accessible, intersectional, polyvalent, and porous processes with multiple modes of engagement for presenting complex and nuanced narratives and different ways of knowing, being, and doing.

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The discussions that took place at each table were recorded and were intended to serve as *travaux préparatoires*, guiding further discussions, articulation, and the implementation of the guidelines. In addition to producing a first draft of ethical guidelines for the MoM, the goal of the workshop was also to establish a network of museum professionals, academics, and members from civil society working in these issues as a reference group.

On the last day of the workshop, the MoM organized a public event where several workshop participants spoke about the work carried out in the previous days and answered questions from the public. It was important for the MoM to give access to and include every stakeholder with whom it had collaborated at every stage of the process. The ethical guidelines workshop exceeded the MoM's expectations. Having experts with both lived and professional experience in the issues that were tackled during the workshop allowed everyone to quickly start working on developing the principles and guidelines. Several of the participants stated that they were able to use their time more effectively than in other workshops because they did not need to sensitize or educate others on concepts such as privilege, white supremacy, oppression, discrimination, and vulnerability. Everyone invited to the workshop arrived with a solid understanding and lived experience of these concepts.

However, despite its undeniable success and engagement with many historically-excluded communities in Sweden, on 15 September 2020 the Swedish government announced that it would no longer finance the activities of the MoM.[45] Even though community and activist organizations continued to stress the need for such an institution and kept the MoM's calendar filled with events, the project became another example of the difficulties in reconciling democratic, inclusive, and community-led museum practices with government priorities.

Conclusions

Both of the presented case studies illustrate the difficulties in reconciling the prioritization of historically-marginalized voices in the telling of their own stories with that which is currently possible within national museums and in light of governmental interests. However, they have also acted as experimentation labs allowing for a new type of museology to become a reality. This practice-based museology is premised on an expanded notion of human rights that goes beyond positive law and is still evolving. Even though national museums might not be the most fertile ground for this type of community-oriented work, the current crises facing the world today are a clear indication that their involvement is needed now more than ever. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has not only forced us to rethink our daily lives and the way in which we work, but also the way in which our institutions maintain inequality and oppression. It has exposed the shocking impoverishment existing in all sectors of our societies: civil, political, economic, social, and cultural. Under this new reality, those who were already vulnerable must now fight to simply stay alive. Human rights defenders have repeatedly pointed out how vulnerable groups such as the elderly, asylum seekers, refugees, members from the LGBTTQI+ community, undocumented workers, those with low incomes, and people experiencing homelessness have been disproportionately affected.

For museums, the lockdowns required to contain the spread of the pandemic have been devastating. Their reckoning with institutional racism has also brought to light an unsustainable system of oppression and abuse of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour in these institutions. The size of the problem facing our sector is simply too large for the status quo to continue to go unchallenged. These circumstances require that museums reconsider their role and their position as agents of social change in the societies in which they are located and in the communities that surround them. As a sector, we currently have the opportunity to collaboratively build a new reality for ourselves. However, in order to achieve this we must first

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[45] J. Gillberg, *Chockbeskedet: Rörelsernas museum i Malmö avvecklas*, Sydsvenskan, 15 September 2020, https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2020-09-15/chockbeskedet-rorelsernas-museum-i-malmo-avvecklas?fbclid=IwAR22xs-EL9hBOIjLFGmrWn890QsLsY6fPxPp0g015NevJvG8XtAhhl1d2Is [accessed: 06.11.2020].

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learn to prioritize, include, listen, and respond to the most vulnerable and excluded members of our societies. If we really want to transform these failed structures under which we find ourselves today, we must erase their limitations using new tools to radically rethink the whole sector.

As human beings we have the responsibility to face the frightening inequalities created by a system that has disproportionately favoured the elites and that has left the most vulnerable within our societies to their fate. As museum professionals we have an obligation to radically rethink our sector. We must favour the social role of museums and position them not as elite institutions but as community spaces capable of being something more than a white box. In a time when museums are finding it hard to justify their existence, human rights museology offers a more just, more human, and more equitable alternative to a museum sector that has already been exposed for its decay. As Brazilian professor Mario Chagas reminds us: "a museology which does not serve people's lives, does not serve anything".[46]

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[46]   B. Fulchieri, *La museología que no sirve para la vida no sirve para nada*, 11 December 2017, https://www.lavoz.com.ar/numero-cero/la-museologia-que-no-sirve-para-la-vida-no-sirve-para-nada [accessed: 17.10.2020].

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