
The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Heritage Centre

National Museums, National Narratives, and Difficult Knowledge

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Horse in shadow. Microsoft Stock Photography, 2023.

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Introduction

The purpose of museums is, generally, to provide “varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. (“Museum Definition”). In the context of exhibits aimed at children, the goal of education and knowledge sharing become increasingly complex, especially when that knowledge is “difficult”. Difficult knowledge refers to knowledge which can be emotionally painful, and which can, often, be quite upsetting to process. Some topics that can be classified under difficult knowledge include human rights violations, such as histories of atrocity and genocide (Anderson 326).

Approaching these topics with young people is, understandably, quite challenging, due to the fact that it can involve confronting their preconceived notions and world views. In the Canadian context, difficult knowledge is built into the goals of education, particularly with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Call to Action 62 which calls upon the governments involved to, among other things, work together with “Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to . . . make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students” (“Education for Reconciliation”). Museums, as spaces for education and knowledge sharing, play a role in doing this important work, especially when they focus on history within Canada.

The TRC’s Call 67 calls for the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) “undertake, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, a national review of museum policies and best practices to determine the level of compliance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and to make recommendations” (“Museums and Archives). The review, completed in 2022, includes standards put forth by the CMA such as “9. Ensure that UNDRIP compliance is the responsibility of all museum departments and reflected in all museum experiences, including outreach

and engagement activities” and “10. Museums need to ensure an environment free of discrimination and built on understanding, dignity and respect (“Moved to Action” 33).

With this in mind, I will give a brief overview of scholarship in museum studies about difficult knowledge, particularly in the Canadian context. Then, I will focus on the Canadian context, including the ways in which national narratives impact dealing with difficult knowledge, before finally, looking at the case study of the RCMP Heritage Centre, and some recommendations for the Centre and museum curators dealing with issues of Canadian history and difficult knowledge.

Brief Literature Review

Heather Milne argues that ‘Difficult knowledge’ is “not located in the content on display, but rather in the process of engagement, a process that involves denial, discomfort, resistance, and a sense of feeling fundamentally challenged or undone (118). In the context of Canadian education and Canadian history, S. Anderson speaks of the roles that Canadian national narratives play in potentially undermining the work of difficult knowledge (324). Anderson refers to two national narratives at play. National Narrative 1.0 is described as the progressive European and Western “colony-to-nation storyline” that “[highlights] Canada’s seamless transition from British colony to ally in the imperial enterprise as an independent nation” (Anderson 324). Anderson describes National Narrative 2.0 as the representation of Canada as “a progressive tolerant, and multicultural mosaic” which “emerged in the mid-twentieth century” and which “includes [stories of Indigenous and ethno-cultural minorities] through a storyline of appropriation, reconciliation, and redemption”(324). This problematically “offers a compelling storyline of social cohesion that includes tying present-day Canada to a longer course of events linked to a trajectory of human rights” (Anderson 324). Since these two national narratives present Canada benevolently, it is important to look to other narratives to more accurately, and truthfully, portray Canadian history. Anderson proposes National Narrative 3.0, a counter-national narrative that “presents storylines of competing, forgotten, or silenced aspects of Canada's past and present through alternative forms of Canadian identity that contest, rebuke, or intervene against [the other two national narratives]” (324).

In the process of curating museum exhibitions, these different national narratives can lead to important national issues being smoothed over, turning difficult knowledge into what Heather Milne, working with Deborah Britzman and Alice Pitt's definition, refers to as "lovely knowledge" (118). Lovely knowledge is knowledge which generally focuses on celebration and positive experiences with challenging subject matter (Milne 118-119). Giving the example of an exhibit celebrating gay marriage, Milne contends that such an exhibit is "likely to inspire feelings of lovely knowledge in visitors, who can experience a surge in national pride as they commend Canada for its policies of tolerance and inclusion (120). Milne, then, posits that having an exhibit that outlines Canada's human rights abuses against those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community might "challenge museum-goers to think more critically about the role of the Canadian state in human rights abuses against LGBTQ people" (120). In this example, curators' desire to present a story that affirms "National Narrative 2.0," could omit important and difficult elements of the nation's history with the LGBTQ+ community that lead to a fuller understanding of the issues involved in the fight for and legalization of gay marriage. Angela Failler and Roger I. Simon contend, "the difficulty of difficult knowledge" is not in understanding these facts, but in how to deal with the knowledge and how to learn from it (qtd. in Milne 116-117). Simon offers three frameworks for a curatorial pedagogy of difficult knowledge that look at hope "as a pedagogically structured 'affective driven force' to 'inculcate a singular sense of responsibility in and for the unfinished state of the present and its possible forms of futurity'" (Anderson 327; Simon 205). In these frameworks, Simon suggests that exhibitions should, firstly, motivate visitors to reflect on the part they play in maintaining societal inequities, secondly, deploy shame and discomfort about visitors' implications in systemic oppression, and thirdly, educate and compel visitors to consider their inheritance and to pursue social justice (Simon 208).

Canadian Context: RCMP Heritage Centre and Ideas for Handling Difficult Knowledge

The act of contending with difficult knowledge supports the development of a fuller understanding of the current state of affairs within a nation. Canada's colonial history is intrinsically connected with the mistreatment, marginalization, and cultural genocide of the Indigenous peoples. Canada's history of residential schools and current crises regarding a lack of clean water and increased rates of suicide in First Nations

communities bring to light some of the difficult knowledge that is involved in understanding and bringing about change (“Ending Long-Term Drinking Advisories”; Kumar and Tjepkema).

Anderson asserts that “national museums, like other sites of pedagogy such as classrooms, textbooks, [and] monuments . . . both preserve and define nations and their collectives through national narratives” (320). In this case, it is valuable to look at the RCMP Heritage Centre as a potential space for curating difficult knowledge, (re)defining the nation, and affirming the counter-national narrative that presents often silenced and unheard stories. The RCMP Heritage Centre in Regina, Saskatchewan is a museum dedicated to the past and present of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). In 2019, the decision to make the RCMP a national museum was made, with the eventual responsibility for, as the Centre puts it “preserving and promoting [Canadian] heritage at home and abroad, [and] contributing to the collective memory and sense of identity of all Canadians, being a source of inspiration, research, learning and entertainment that belongs to all Canadians” (“National Engagement”). During this period of transition, the Heritage Centre has been undertaking “national engagement” to make the new national museum a “place full of stories . . . that inspire and unite expose difficult issues . . . and that open the door to a deeper understanding” (“National Engagement”). The focus that the Centre places on exposing difficult issues and opening doors to deeper understanding are definitely steps in the right direction in terms of curating a space that is dedicated towards the work of difficult knowledge.

To expose truths and to open doors requires that museum visitors look hard and walk through such doors. Similarly, the Heritage Centre will need to address the RCMP’s relationship with members of marginalized communities, such as Indigenous peoples who represent 4.1% of Canada’s population, yet represent a third of provincial and federal correctional services admissions, with Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan seven times more likely to be an inmate at a correctional facility (Stelkia). Historically, the RCMP played a major role in removing Indigenous children from their homes and communities to residential schools, acting as truant officers to ensure children did not escape. These actions (and inactions) have caused and continue to cause trauma to Indigenous peoples and communities (“RCMP ‘Herded’”). To work on the path towards reconciliation and trust will require a lot of work on behalf of governmental agencies and the federal

government who are historically implicated in the removal and dispersal of Indigenous children, as well as the cultural erasure that came with the goal of assimilation.

In the article “Teaching Trauma Without Traumatizing: Holocaust Exhibits, Children, and a Triad Model Approach”, Rebecca Ford highlights “the problem faced by classroom and museum educators . . . [is] making the learning enjoyable enough the children want to learn it” as “[m]useums cannot simply present uninterpreted, vivid trauma to very young children” (61).

Ford’s analysis focuses on Holocaust exhibits designed for children, but I will be exploring how her work can be applied to exhibits that were designed to shed light on systemic violence towards and marginalization of Indigenous peoples and ethno-cultural minorities in Canada. I will be examining this aspect, as it pertains to the role of policing, specifically policing by the RCMP. Ford states that for exhibits “to remain impactful for youth ages 8-13, [they] must provide opportunities for participant agency and self-direction” (62). Such participation and self-direction is also at play at The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, where children can enter a replica of Anne Frank’s annex and are invited to “ask questions of and learn positive messages from an actress playing Anne Frank” (Ford 62-63). Cornélia Strickler and Sabrina Moisan have found that testimonies from survivors are particularly engaging for children and that they allow children to understand “the impact [of the Holocaust] on individual lives”(qtd. in Ford 63). With this in mind, to incorporate testimonials from residential school survivors and Sixties Scoop survivors, to ensure their stories are heard, would be particularly meaningful.

One travelling exhibit held at the Centre in 2023 is the “The Witness Blanket Exhibit,” Survivors were included during the opening of the exhibit at the Heritage Centre, and an elder advisory committee provided guidance (“The Witness Blanket”). Since I have not had the opportunity to visit the exhibit in person, I watched a video posted to the RCMP Heritage Centre, which showcased the Witness Blanket and the opening of the exhibit. The narrator of the video states that “the RCMP Heritage Centre hopes to help educate and foster learning of a difficult part of our past” (“The Witness Blanket” 00:00:51 - 00:01:00). The Witness Blanket is made of hundreds of objects that tell individual stories, but which come together to tell a larger story about residential schools (“The Witness Blanket” 00:00:35-00:00:47).

While I believe that this exhibit has the potential to provide participatory and meaningful ways for children to learn and engage with difficult knowledge, the video did not provide any examples of audio elements to contextualize or explain stories told by objects or in text format. Similarly, it is not clear if there are Indigenous program leaders, or staff to discuss the contents of the exhibit with children and to answer questions, such as the previous example in the Anne Frank Museum, which included testimonies and opportunities to ask questions of staff. Although the blanket provides authenticity, which Ford states is important to provide more direct connections through the experience of engaging with the authentic object, it is also critical that children are able to discuss and work through the things they are learning, through a mediated or, preferably, self-guided process, which could involve more hands-on activities than were evident in the video (62). The Centre demonstrates a commitment to working with Indigenous community members by including them in the opening ceremony of The Witness Blanket exhibition. Community members were invited to speak and share their stories and their truths. This commitment marks a crucial step in addressing the effects of colonization and the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples. The RCMP Heritage Centre's commitment to including Indigenous community members in its exhibitions is doubly important when one considers the roles that museums, national museums especially, play in validating national narratives.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is important for museums, particularly nationally-funded museums that deal with difficult knowledge, to be aware of the narratives they are sharing and promoting. In the case of the RCMP Heritage Centre, it is important that dominant ideologies and national narratives not privilege “lovely knowledge” over the important work of difficult knowledge. In the case of exhibits aimed at children (and the general public, including young people), it is crucial that children are given the opportunity to work through this knowledge through participation, rather than just through transmission. It is also helpful for children to be able to engage with stories in a more direct manner - that they are able to discuss what they are learning and to share what they are feeling and learning. That the stories children are hearing are authentic and honest, is also important.

Similar to the importance of engaging children in the process of discussion, it is important that children's experiences are given

consideration, including both their responses to information, but also the way they experience the museum space (Yates et al. 3). It is important that children's lived experiences are highlighted and that they are able to engage with the exhibits in a way that will allow them to make connections with their own lives and experiences, also allowing them to better understand and deal with subjects of difficult knowledge (Yates et al. 4).

Keely Maddock highlights that museum staff and exhibit animators should employ trauma-based approaches when dealing with difficult knowledge (314). Maddock states that using strategies such as "turning off [sensors that trigger specific audio]; conducting non-verbal check-ins; leading grounding exercises; and providing reflective space" were helpful for establishing safe environments (314). I believe that providing these experiences demonstrates to children that the knowledge is expected to be difficult to deal with, which gives them space to accept those feelings and to work through them in the moment, rather than feeling embarrassed at having an "overly emotional" response, or a response that might be viewed as awkward. Through the creation of more self-guided experiences, children would be better able to leave spaces that might be distressing (which they may not be able to do with a performance, or a video being projected to a whole group at one time). By employing trauma-guided approaches, museum educators can engage children in difficult knowledge while also demonstrating that doing so requires both time and space to learn, incorporate and engage with previously unknown narratives. Ultimately, however, there should be an understanding that though change regarding systemic injustices will not be easy or quick, things can change for the better because we all have the ability to choose to be better than our national history.

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