



Madison Pearlman

Madison Pearlman graduated from the University of Winnipeg in 2013 with a BA in Human Rights and Global Studies and Conflict Resolution. She has held various research assistant positions with the Global College and the Public Interest Law Centre, focused on local and global human rights issues and prison overcrowding. She has also worked at the *Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM)* in the child and youth After School Program. In October of 2014, she began her *Masters of Science in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* at the University of Oxford in the UK. Just prior to this she worked as a research assistant for the Cultural Studies Research Group (CSRG) in connection with the *Museum Openings* workshop.

Greetings from Oxford! I have settled in just fine, and am looking forward to beginning classes next week. This week has been an induction/orientation week to the program, with many great social and academic events already. For me personally, as I transition from being an undergraduate student to a graduate student, my Research Assistant position with the CSRG was helpful in the sense that it gave me the opportunity to re-engage with academic literature (having taken a year off) as well as with other academics and my fellow RAs/other masters students. It was also a learning curve, that challenged me, but in the end it was rewarding. Cultural studies and curatorial studies is/was very new to me, and I feel lucky to have had some exposure to the fields. I have never participated in a multi-day workshop, so I am glad for the experience. In particular, I liked that we met as a team on several occasions and were given background reading and a chance to have the blog workshop beforehand. This helped to give me a sense of purpose during the workshop. All of the RAs were great to work with!! Being away now, I am also happy to have gone to the museum before I left and hope to visit Winnipeg and the museum again soon! Here is a reflection of some of my thoughts on the workshop and visit to the CMHR:

I applied for a Research Assistant position with Cultural Studies Research Group and to attend the workshop *Museum Openings: Caring for Difficult Knowledge Within and Beyond the Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, because I have an interest and background in human rights. The curatorial and museological lens through which the museum content – being human rights – would be analyzed, was for me, a new way to understand human rights. The readings and further discussions were sometimes challenging: new terminology, new authors and new explanations. However this helped me see the museum and human rights from new perspectives. I also think the community of accomplished academics who were present at the workshop, was a positive opportunity to better prepare me for workshops/lectures/events here at Oxford. As I sit down to think about and write about my time at the workshop as well as my time on a tour of the newly opened CMHR on September 20th, there is a central question I keep coming back to: “Who are museums for?” I was confronted with this question during presentations (illustrated by the fact that I have it written several times in my notes) specifically in regards to the CMHR but also museums in general, as well as during and after my tour.

During the Workshop

In Jennifer Carter's presentation, the role and mission of human rights museums is differentiated from other museums, which evidently has its achievements and challenges. What stood out for me here was, the apparent move away from the "us vs. them" or in other words the "expert vs the uneducated visitor" that many human rights museums have undertaken. Monica Patterson's presentation was a particular favourite of mine, because it focused on museums engaging with children as creators and the audience of exhibits of a museum. It illustrated that a museum should take into account different audiences just as they are taking into account different stories and experiences of human rights. This again made me question who is a museum for? Content is no doubt presented differently depending on that target audience.

The same could be said from a geographical perspective. Many presenters including Tina Mai Chen, Florencia Marchetti and Andrea Witcomb, explored different forms of museums in different regions. Geography, culture and history play significant roles in shaping the creation of different museums for different people. As I reflect, I do not yet know or understand the implications of exploring 'who' a museum is targeting.

Overall, I really enjoyed hearing the multiple analyses of the CMHR and museums in general. Participants spoke from different backgrounds: law, anthropology, politics, gender, geography, rhetoric (just to name a few), which reminded me that there is not just one answer and not just one perspective. I think that the workshop panels and presenters came together in such a way that I gained valuable insight into disciplines I have little knowledge of. Furthermore, I was able to bare in mind the arguments and discussions from Day 1 of the workshop as I went through the CMHR tour the following day. This better prepared me to really engage with what I saw at and in the museum. I felt I had a heightened awareness of where I was, and what I was seeing and hearing and feeling. From the perspective of an RA, I felt included from a formal, academic perspective during the workshop, and in the social aspects of the workshop. I also felt included in the functioning of the workshop ie: helping with the day-to-day tasks. I just want to add that there was good communication throughout the position. I did not feel out of the loop or unclear about my role, or the expectations.

At the CMHR

With these thoughts in mind, I went on my tour of the museum. Underwhelmed and uncertain are two emotions that hit me when we reached the Garden of Contemplation and as I walked out of the museum doors. Much of the museum was unfinished, leaving me wondering what the actual content: depictions of the past, present human rights issues looked like. With all of the controversies surrounding months and years of curating exhibits, I was exposed only to what several of the workshop panelists described as a 'spectacle' of human rights that showcased the building and space we were touring more than anything. The word spectacle did not come to my mind when I left the tour, but during our debrief when this was discussed, I realized this is what made me uncomfortable during and after the tour. I almost felt as if the museum was a bit of a parade of human rights, and the museum building itself was the shining star of it all. I also think this could have been the timing of when I took the tour, and the tour's goal being to get the public excited about the museum opening.

Given this, I still ask myself who is the CMHR for? The interesting thing about the field of human rights is that it is constantly evolving and adapting. The name of the museum for me, suggests agency and advocacy so even beyond who, I also ask myself the question *what* is the museum for? As such, I hope that the museum is and will be for many people

and for many purposes including: for young budding social activists, for the growth of the city, for those who identify with what is being displayed at the museum, for those struggling to achieve justice and human rights, for those who are being introduced to issues of human rights for the first time and for those who are critical, skeptical and seek to challenge the status quo. I am trying not to shy away from the concept of difficult knowledge and the museum as a contested space, and would like to see the museum do this as well. Once again, as a museum *for* human rights, I would like to think that part of the museum's identity and mission would be active and participatory. Ultimately if it is not, its title is essentially meaningless.

With that, I hope to return to the museum in the future, when it is in full operation. I am extremely interested whether my questions posed here will be answered, and if and how my experience at the museum will change.

As a quick side note: One of the students in my class asked me: "isn't that where a human rights museum just opened is?" after hearing that I was from Winnipeg.