



Time to Act: Rohingya Voices

Armando Perla & Yasmin Ullah

To cite this article: Armando Perla & Yasmin Ullah (2019): Time to Act: Rohingya Voices, Museum Management and Curatorship, DOI: [10.1080/09647775.2019.1682807](https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2019.1682807)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2019.1682807>



Published online: 22 Oct 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Time to Act: Rohingya Voices

Armando Perla^a and Yasmin Ullah^b

^aSwedish Museum of Movements, Malmo, Sweden; ^bRohingya Human Rights Network, Surrey, Canada

ABSTRACT

More and more museums are engaging with historically marginalized populations to better tell their stories. Developed through activist curatorship, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights' exhibition *Time to Act: Rohingya Voices* represents an attempt to move towards a more inclusive and democratic museum practice. It also raises important questions for institutions trying to engage ethically with historically marginalized communities. What strategies can museums adopt to better address the needs of the historically excluded people they intend to serve? Are museums meaningfully opening up spaces for new actors to participate in their work? This article describes the development of an exhibition co-curated with the Rohingya community in Canada and the challenges arising from both the lack of diversity of museum personnel involved in decision-making processes and the absence of institutional anti-oppression and social justice frameworks. This article concludes that increasing diversity in museum leadership; providing adequate anti-oppression and social justice training; openly discussing racism, implicit biases, whiteness and other forms of privilege; as well as adopting clear ethical guidelines for engaging with historically marginalized communities are a necessary starting point towards redressing historical injustices and the unequal distribution of power in museum institutions.

KEYWORDS

Representation; historically marginalized; exclusion; institutional racism; empowerment; white gaze; whiteness; anti-oppression; human rights; privilege

As museums around the world become more attentive to engaging with, and presenting the stories of, historically marginalized populations, there is an increasing need for the professionals caring for these stories to reflect the diversity of these groups. However, historically marginalized people hardly ever hold positions of authority in the institutions that are meant to serve them.

In 2015, the Mellon Foundation released the *Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey*, the first comprehensive survey of diversity in American art museums. Even though this study is focused primarily on American art institutions, some Canadian museums also participated in the survey. The study found that 84% of the people holding positions of power in these museums were white (AWMF 2015, 3). In January of 2019, the Foundation released its second study on diversity. While the study found 'some meaningful progress in the representation of people of color in a number of different museum functions', (AWMF 2018, 3) a worrisome finding is that the most senior leadership positions continue to lack diversity.

A similar study of Canadian art galleries released in 2017 found that out of 184 senior positions, 92% were occupied by white people, less than 4% by Indigenous people and just more than 4% by visible minorities (Maranda 2017). There are no similar studies regarding history, social justice and human rights museums, neither is there a study about the diversity of senior staff in Canada's national museums. However, a search on Canada's national museums' staff pages shows an alarming lack of diversity in senior positions. Canada's population is becoming more and more diverse, with 19% of the population belonging to the visible minority category, however, the leadership positions that are directly responsible for researching, collecting, interpreting, and presenting people's stories are generally not filled by people representing Canada's diversity. While some institutions in the United States are making the fostering of diversity in museums a priority (AAM 2018) –allocating resources to encourage it and in some cases even linking the future of museum funding to employees and board members' diversity- (Pogrebin 2018) Canada still has a long way to go in this respect. For instance, in the last trimester of 2019, out of 26 managerial and executive positions listed in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights website (CMHR), only one was occupied by a person belonging to a visible minority.

The combined lack of diversity in the personnel involved in decision-making processes and of institutional self-reflection about these processes continues to support colonial frameworks and different forms of privilege from going unchallenged in many Western museums. Decolonization can only happen when we take an honest look at the hard truths of colonialism and its impact on Indigenous and other racialized people. And, in order to understand privilege in contemporary institutional frameworks, we need to understand where privilege comes from. Colonization created privilege based on a false belief of white supremacy that dominates and shapes all aspects of our society. Museums and universities validated and advanced these ideas. In order to understand the need to challenge the status quo and the dominant frame of reference in many museums, we need to understand what this frame of reference is.

Charles W. Mills argues that white supremacy has created a system of European global domination, bringing into existence whites and non-whites, full persons and sub-persons. White supremacy, he further explains, is 'the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today'. (1997, 122) Prominent Maori lawyer and Indigenous rights expert Moana Jackson argues that this idea is at the base of colonialism. He elaborates:

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. (2019)

In her book *Decolonizing Museums: Representing America in National and Tribal Museums*, Amy Lonetree supports the argument that museums are inherently colonial institutions and that they are 'intimately tied to the colonization process'. (2012, 1). This argument is also reflected in museum professional and scholars Lynch and Alberti's words:

Consciously or not, many who staff museums and galleries have been trained and socialised to think and know in those ways, a reminder that museums are not set apart from global injustices and the realities of racial conflict and prejudice ... Encounters between museum professionals and external individuals, particularly those from Diaspora communities, still bear traces of coloniser meeting colonised. (2010, 14)

This privileging of a dominant way of knowing within societal structures can lead to institutional racism. The concept was defined by Stokely Carmichael in his book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* as a form of racism that is subtler and less identifiable than overt racism in terms of 'specific individuals committing the acts'. (1967, 20) William McPherson, in his inquiry to identify the lessons to be learned from the investigation and prosecution of racially motivated crimes in the UK, further unpacks the concept, stating that institutional racism is:

(t)he collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (1999, 6.34)

He also observes that

Unwitting racism can arise because of lack of understanding, ignorance or mistaken beliefs. It can arise from well intentioned but patronising words or actions. It can arise from unfamiliarity with the behaviour or cultural traditions of people or families from minority ethnic communities ... Often this arises out of uncritical self-understanding born out of an inflexible police ethos of the "traditional" way of doing things. (1999, 6.17)

In her book *White Fragility. Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, White sociologist scholar Robin DiAngelo argues that White people have a white frame of reference and a white worldview and thus, they move through the world with a white experience. Whiteness is not a universal human experience. 'It is a particular white experience in a society in which race matters profoundly; a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race'. White people are taught from an early age not to see themselves in racial terms, not to draw attention to their race and to behave as if it didn't matter at all (2018, 7). However, an essential part of successful cross-racial relations that is needed in the type of museum work that engages racialized populations, is the requirement for the White people sitting around the table to recognize their own race. As DiAngelo has further argued, this prerequisite for meaningful cross-racial work demands

the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially, of having to proceed as if our race matters (which it does). Being seen racially is a common trigger of white fragility, and thus, to build our stamina, white people must face the first challenge: naming our race. (2018, 7)

The same self-reflection applies to cis, hetero, gender, able-bodied, class and other forms of privilege.

Based on the exhibition *Time to Act: Rohingya Voices* recently inaugurated at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), this article uses a critical race, anti-oppression and other social justice frameworks to describe the extensive curatorial process that underlay a partnership between the Museum and members of the Rohingya community that were the focus of this exhibition. This article has two principal aims: (1) to consider how a

curatorial practice informed by social justice and anti-oppression frameworks can help address inequities in museum practice and more specifically, promote a culturally sensitive engagement with, and representation of, historically marginalized communities and groups; and (2) in the specific instance of an exhibition, demonstrate how joint curatorial and community activism during the development of this exhibition broadened a museum's response to a community need.

To this end, the authors believe that it is important to first describe their roles in the *Time to Act* project and their positionality and experience in their respective fields of practice, so that the reader can better understand the perspectives and backgrounds that have informed their writing of this article, its analysis and proposals. Perla was the main curator assigned to this project until the moment he left the CMHR in 2018. After he left, he continued as a contractor until the exhibition's opening on 15 June 2019. Perla has over 20 years of lived and professional experience of migration and human rights. Trained as a human rights lawyer, Perla looks at museum practice through a human rights lens, and sees the meaningful participation and empowerment of historically marginalized populations, as a way of redressing discriminatory practices and the unequal distribution of power in museums. This means challenging the status quo; advocating for the representation and self-representation of historically marginalized groups; facilitating the meaningful participation of, and co-creation with, excluded groups; and encouraging institutional self-reflection on implicit biases, racism and different forms of privilege inherent in museum practice. As a queer person of color and former asylum seeker, he believes that his personal and professional experiences provide him with both a different framework of reference from the one dominating current museum practice and an added sensitivity when working with people who have had similar experiences. In writing this article, Perla was inspired by Lonetree's arguments in support of decolonizing museums:

This decolonizing project involves more than moving museums away from being elitist temples of esoteric learning and even more than moving museums toward providing forums for community engagement. A decolonizing museum practice must be in the service of speaking the hard truths of colonialism. The purpose is to generate the critical awareness that is necessary to heal from historical unresolved grief on all the levels and all the ways that it continues to harm native people today. (2012, 6)

Ullah is a human rights and social justice activist who has been advocating for Rohingya people in Canada and internationally since 2017. She was born in Burma, and fled the country at a young age and remained a stateless refugee until 2011 when she was resettled in Canada along with her family members. She was one of the Rohingya activists who approached the CMHR over concern arising from this national museum's display of the portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Museum's positioning of Suu Kyi as a human rights champion, while Rohingya people and many ethnic minorities in Burma suffer from Suu Kyi's complicity with the military's policy of oppression. After meeting Perla in person, and several discussions with her Rohingya Canadian community, Ullah agreed to work alongside other community members to explore the possibility of developing an exhibition about Rohingya people whose premise would evolve beyond a depiction of the genocide against Rohingya and of her people in a state of fear and misery. She was determined from the start to tell the story of Rohingya people, and to frame this story in all of its humanity – filled with struggles *and* resilience – rather than strictly

victimhood, as it has been presented repeatedly in other platforms. She also wanted to convey the harsh reality of the Burmese military's systematic campaign of genocide against Rohingya from a transgenerational perspective.

Time to Act: Rohingya Voices – engaging in activist curatorship

A recent exhibition at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights illustrates how a particular form of curatorial activism enabled an opportunity to challenge traditional museum practice within a national institution. In an institution like the CMHR, in which work on the research, collecting, archiving and dissemination of stories from historically marginalized populations within a human rights perspective is routinely conducted, there is a need for ethical approaches to ensure the respect for human dignity, the minimization of harm and the empowerment of the people with whom the institution intends to collaborate. One such approach is activist curatorship that considers the meaningful participation of historically excluded voices in the curatorial process as a prerequisite for their empowerment and the sustainability of the project. In addition to requiring the joint advocacy of curator and community, activist curatorship takes into account the social and cultural differences of all parties involved, as well as the structures that maintain injustices and unequal distributions of power in museums, while drawing on anti-oppression, human rights, and social justice frameworks as the basis of this curatorial work. Drawing on a collaboration with members of the Rohingya community in Canada, the approach described here was key to challenging, among others, unwitting forms of institutional racism when people of color and historically marginalized communities are represented only through a white frame of reference.

Time to Act: Rohingya Voices, an exhibition about the ongoing genocide perpetrated against the Rohingya people in Burma, opened on 15 June 2019, at the CMHR. The exhibition was the result of a first-time partnership between the Museum and members of the Rohingya community in Canada, and arose as a response to the urgent need to raise awareness of this ongoing genocide and its devastating consequences. The exhibition also became an opportunity to implement curatorial activism and to reflect on the institutional challenges originating from historical injustices and the unequal distribution of power within North American museums. Curatorial advocacy served to challenge a white frame of reference and implicit biases, that typically go uncontested within institutions that lack diversity in the staff involved in decision-making processes, through a partnership aimed at the creation of a platform for members of the Rohingya community to tell their own stories. The specific nature of the curatorial partnership that ensued required developing and nurturing a relationship of trust with the community and cultural sensitivity at all levels of the Museum's staff. This exhibition also demonstrates how a group of Rohingya activists, through their involvement in the curatorial process, influenced and changed the course of the exhibition from its initial intent.

The Rohingya people

Rohingya are a group of people indigenous to the land called Arakan – the name in use prior to this land's colonization by Burma (also known as Myanmar)¹, and the British

empire. Today the area is known as the Rakhine State. Rohingya are one of the ethnic groups who are predominantly Muslim and living in Northern Arakan. Rohingya trace their ancestry to ancient Indian people of the Chandra dynasty of Arakan, as well as to Arabs, Turks, Persians, Bengalis and some Indo-Mongoloid people. Thus, ethnic Rohingya evolved from different ethnic backgrounds over the centuries (Haque 2017).

The term Rohingya itself derives from the ancient name of Arakan, 'Rohang', and when translating literally, the word Rohingya means 'of Rohang' or 'from Rohang'. Rohingya have lived in the region for many centuries. In contrast to the rising hate rhetoric in Burma of the recent years, Rohingya have been part and parcel of Burma and integral to the very fabric of Burmese society, as declared by U Nu, Prime Minister of the Union of Burma, in his radio address on 25 September 1954:

... the people living in Maungdaw and Buthidaung regions are our nationals, our brethren. They are called Rohingyas. They are one on the same par in status of nationality with Kachin, Kyah, Karen, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. They are one of the ethnic races of Burma.²

An ongoing genocide

Following a military coup d'état by General Ne Win in 1962, Rohingya began to be subjected to government policies that weakened their status in Burmese society. Eventually, in 1982, a new citizenship law was enacted as a way to exclude, deny and delegitimize Rohingya citizenship altogether, as described by Haque in his article 'Rohingya Ethnic Muslim Minority and the 1982 Citizenship Law in Burma':

Myanmar Government intentionally conducted a campaign undermining the Rohingyas' existence in Burma following operation Naga Min that culminated in the 1982 Citizenship Law, thus ensuring the refugee exodus that followed. (Haque 2017)

The discriminatory law has been one of the subjects of the investigation of genocidal intent³ by the United Nations Independent International Fact Finding Mission on Myanmar, which reiterated in its 18 September 2018 report that:

... all Special Rapporteurs assessed that the 1982 Citizenship Law was discriminatory, in violation of Myanmar's obligations under international law, and created conditions that promoted statelessness, in particular for the Muslim population⁴ of Rakhine State.⁵

Although there had been oppression exerted on the Rohingya community by the military government prior to 1982, the Citizenship Act sealed the fate of Rohingya for the next few decades to come. The Rohingya people have essentially become stateless in their own homeland, and are required to perform several impossible tasks to acquire some form of legal documentation to remain in their own homes, or to access basic services such as education or health care. Several massacres have been carried out by the ruling Burmese military junta since 1975, the most recent in August 2017. The military campaign to annihilate Rohingya from Rakhine State involves torching homes, slaughtering innocent lives, planting landmines and gangraping women, among many other dehumanizing tactics. Over one million Rohingya – the majority of whom are women and children – have fled to the border of Bangladesh since 1975 and have now sought refuge in the country. They are confined to small and destitute refugee camps.

Reaching out to the Canadian museum for human rights

The Rohingya Association of Canada (RAC) and the Rohingya Human Rights Network (RHRN) first reached out to the CMHR early in 2017. They requested that two portraits of Aung San Suu Kyi be removed from two galleries in the museum where she was featured as a human rights defender. After continuous community advocacy and media attention, the CMHR formed an internal committee to address the situation. The committee included members from the CMHR's leadership team as well as curators with expertise relevant to the issues under discussion. As a curator who had consistently engaged in activist curatorship in his work at the CMHR, Perla understood that the lack of diversity in the composition of the committee could pose a challenge to the inclusion of different frames of reference during the discussions. Not reaching consensus, the committee recommended contextualizing Suu Kyi's role in the genocide against the Rohingya, without removing her portraits, and exploring other opportunities for including content related to the Rohingya people in the Museum's galleries. The ongoing genocide against the Rohingya had not yet been addressed by the CMHR in its broader treatment of mass atrocity or migration flows occurring around the world.

In early 2018, the CMHR organized a meeting with members from the Rohingya Canadian Community. This meeting, which first brought together a core team from the CMHR and Rohingya from across the country, provided an opportunity to this community to advocate for the development of a relationship with a national museum, following their continuous activism raising awareness about the ongoing genocide with other institutions in Canada. One of the points of discussion included the development of an oral history project that would allow for increased representation of Rohingya content in the Museum and thereby address some of their concerns. The specificity of this project would be the participation of community members in all facets of the oral history project: from identifying participants to conducting the interviews. Significantly, this was the first time that the CMHR would engage in the coproduction of an oral history project of this scale.

Discussions about the development of a possible exhibition also took place at the Museum. The initial idea, prior to engaging meaningfully with the community as would be the case as the project evolved, was a photographic exhibition showing the exodus of the Rohingya from Burma in an aesthetic, yet minimally contextual, format. The budget for this exhibition would be quite limited, since this art gallery type exhibition was intended to be modest in scale and required little contextual research. Featuring approximately two dozen photographs, the exhibition would be limited to one introduction panel and a personal statement written by the photographer. Accompanying labels would only name the image and give the date of the photograph, with no captions to provide an enhanced understanding of the social, political and cultural context of the genocide against the Rohingya. Nor were audiovisual or digital components – traditionally used to display oral history in museum exhibitions – to be included. In this form, the proposed approach was a departure from other exhibitions previously developed by the CMHR premised upon significant research and in some cases, community engagement.

Perla volunteered to work on the exhibition and was designated curator. The original vision for the exhibition – as previously described, and which did not include community participation – risked engaging with the story of a racialized group only from one frame of

reference and worldview: captured through the eyes of a White photographer, interpreted by a mostly White museum team and presented to a majority White audience.

When images of racialized people are exhibited only through a white gaze omitting the layering of perspectives that a diversity of other frames of reference can bring, they risk furthering or reinforcing stereotypes, tokenizing or misrepresenting, rather than benefiting the community they intend to represent. This type of representation helps to maintain the racial comfort of a majority White audience, by keeping a comfortable distance and disconnect from the subject exhibited. This overarching power attributed to the dominant gaze recalls the words of Toni Morrison as cited by the Guardian Australia's Indigenous affairs editor on an article published on 31 December 2015: 'Our lives have no meaning, no depth without the white gaze', However, in this exhibition, the curatorial objective was to ensure that there would be a space for members of the Rohingya community to craft their own narratives, using more than one frame of reference and worldview. On 16 October 2018, during his criticism of the racial make up of a mostly white jury adjudicating the Taylor Wessing Portrait Prize, scholar of African history and the history of photography John Edwin Mason's clearly argued on his twitter account that representing people of color only through a white gaze does 'nothing to disrupt established ways of seeing – and, thus, knowing – black and brown people. Ways of seeing and knowing that are the product of societies in which white supremacy is a given'. Furthermore, during the development of the curatorial approach, it was strongly felt that processes about the depiction of racialized survivors of genocide must involve members from beyond the museum in addition to museum professionals, for, as Bernadette Lynch and Samuel Alberti have argued, 'rarely is it appropriate for professionals to tackle such issues without considerable engagement with the communities affected by the iniquities in question' (2010, 13). And, as Susan Sontag has importantly argued, presenting photographs of 'other people's pain' as if they were displayed in an art gallery and without any additional inclusion of context, as was the original intent for this exhibition, presents various ethical challenges:

It seems exploitative to look at harrowing photographs of other people's pain in an art gallery. Even those ultimate images whose gravity, whose emotional power, seems fixed for all time. A portrait that declines to name its subject becomes complicit, if inadvertently in the cult of celebrity that has fueled an insatiable appetite for the opposite sort of photograph: to grant only the famous their names demotes the rest to representative instances of their occupations, their ethnicities, their plights ... making suffering loom larger, by globalizing it, may spur people to feel they ought to "care" more. It also invites them to feel that the sufferings and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any local political intervention. With a subject conceived on this scale, compassion can only flounder—and make abstract. (2003, 93)

Time to Act: Rohingya Voices – the need to tell a full story

The curator started to meet members from the Rohingya community from across the country in the spring of 2018 to discuss the possibility of an exhibition that would raise awareness about the ongoing genocide in Burma. Some of these meetings were organized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Vancouver, with whom the curator had an existing relationship and from whom he had received input in previous

exhibitions related to refugees and asylum seekers. Meaningful participation, as required from the type of activist curatorship used in this exhibition, required that community members be asked how they would like to tell their own story. They were also shown some of the photographs that the CMHR had planned for the exhibition. Community members found the images powerful; however, they also felt that Rohingyas' perspectives were lacking, and that the images only focused on people's journeys when fleeing Burma and missing important parts of the bigger story. They were concerned that the images would contribute to the depiction of their people only as victims and not as multifaceted human beings. They also expressed concerns about the photographs not speaking to the realities of the context that had pushed the Rohingya to flee their homeland. The community members felt that it was important for the exhibition to include their voices as well as photographs taken by themselves both in Burma and in the refugee camps. They felt that if the visitors were introduced to the Rohingya as a people, it would be harder to dehumanize them and to categorize them only as victims.

As recorded in the notes from a meeting in Vancouver on 12 March 2018, Ullah stated: 'We want people to know that we aren't just victims. We have a history, traditions, music, culture. We built towns, markets and mosques in Burma. We are wholesome human beings'. Other community members stressed the importance of showing Rohingya culture, food, clothing, music, and poetry as a way to transcend their victimization. They also emphasized the need to show the experiences of women and children as well as the perspectives of other community members. Toward this end, they spoke about the development of the previously discussed oral history project that would serve to gather additional community voices beyond those already present in the meetings with the CMHR.

The in-person and phone meetings with various members from the Rohingya-Canadian community, discussions with the UNHCR, and research on the current situation in Burma served as the basis for the exhibition's concept brief that was produced in late spring 2018. The curatorial brief raised the issue of presenting the story from only a white frame of reference and suggested numerous ways of working closely with the community in order to bring their voices into the exhibition development process. Drawing from curatorial activism, the initial brief stated that the primary objective for the exhibition was to address community concerns about the representation of the Rohingya in the Museum regarding the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. The brief further explained that the original vision of the project risked putting the perspective of the photographer over the interests of the community. However, the concept brief was later edited and the main objective became the use of the work of an award-winning Canadian photographer to address the genocide against the Rohingya. Neither the curator nor the community were informed of the edits made to the concept brief. Wittingly or unwittingly, the new wording effectively not only removed including the community's voice from the main objectives of the exhibition and placed the focus on the photographer, it also reduced their ability to influence important decision-making processes in the exhibition development that underlies the collaborative framework of activist curatorship.

Rohingya curatorial committee: a shared responsibility

As activist curatorship requires that the curator act as an advocate between different departments of the institution and the community, the curator proposed a curatorial committee as

a means of ensuring that the exhibit development process would be a shared responsibility between members of the Rohingya community and the CMHR. The committee would be formed by members from the larger Rohingya-Canadian community, bringing them together from across the country. It was clearly understood that the curatorial committee did not represent all of the Rohingya or Rohingya-Canadian community; nor did they intend to speak on behalf of this wider community or to represent its views.

Assembled to ensure that the exhibition would be a truthful representation of the community members involved in this project, the curatorial committee was tasked with carrying out research, identifying and sourcing community images and artefacts such as clothing and jewelry; the development of the oral history project; providing input in content direction; and the curation of the photographic images that would be on display. The curatorial approach also required that members of the committee documented the reasons behind the curation of the images as the basis of the content for the captions which would provide some context for the exhibition.

Constant communications unfolded as the exhibition took form through the work of the curatorial committee. This is important because meaningful collaborations require significant time to be allocated to develop and cultivate a relationship of trust between all museum staff involved and community members. Finding time to do so is often a challenge for museums that typically operate on tight deadlines and where several staff are involved in the project. One example where taking the time to further cultivate this relationship of trust with members of the community might have facilitated consensus and understanding relates to different ideas of how to represent a racialized community who has experienced forced migration. This became a point of contention within the exhibition development process when the lived experience of refugees risked being left under addressed in favor of a more aesthetic approach to the exhibition. Another challenge arose when the Museum's team started having difficult internal conversations about implicit biases; the prioritization of a white framework of reference over that of the community; tokenism; stereotyping of migrant populations; and respect for the dignity of victims and survivors represented in the exhibition. The lack of a reflective institutional practice as well as the absence of a safe space for personnel to openly discuss these challenging issues highlighted a larger institutionalized problem, one that was also aggravated by the absence of diverse frames of reference and worldviews in the Museum's leadership.

Embarking on an oral history project across the country

Between March and June 2018, the curatorial committee identified members of the Rohingya-Canadian community in Surrey, Winnipeg, Kitchener and Quebec City who represented a diversity of perspectives and who were willing to share their stories through the Museum. Members of the curatorial committee met with, and explained the oral history project and exhibition to possible interviewees to ensure that if they chose to participate, the committee and Museum would have their clear and informed consent. Members of the curatorial committee and the curator developed the guiding questionnaire and arranged the venues for the interviews. From June to August 2018, members from the curatorial committee, the curator and two videographers embarked on a journey across the country during which they would document and collect 23 oral histories with Rohingya-Canadians and Rohingya living in Canada (Perla 2018, 26). While

there were many late nights organizing, planning and working on the interviews, members from the community and the team members from the CMHR also had time to continue to strengthen the trust-building relationship by getting to know one another over meals, BBQs, and other social activities.

In Surrey, Ullah reached out to several community members and organized meetings with them. She collected the names of possible interviewees for the oral history project based on their diverse backgrounds. Unfortunately, a few members declined to participate in the end due to their fear of complicating the lives of their family members still living in Burma. The distrust of an outsider, or of an organization offering help, runs deep within the Rohingya community owing to how many of their stories have been misconstrued and exploited in the past. Notwithstanding, the interviews took place with five members of the community: three Rohingya women and two Rohingya men from various backgrounds participated.

During the development of the interviews, new themes began to emerge, themes that had not yet been mentioned during the meetings and phone calls with the curatorial committee. Because oral histories provide an opportunity for everyone involved to hear from different sectors and layers within a community, the curatorial approach must ideally remain flexible and open to incorporate potential new findings. For instance, interviewees continuously referred to the need for family reunification and the effects of family separation experienced by members of the Rohingya community in Canada.

As one of the interviewees, Ullah feels that her experience organizing the oral history project and working on the exhibition helped her solidify her own identity as a Rohingya, a community whose members have experienced the erasure of their names, history, culture, and their existence by the Burmese authority. Having lived in exile for sixteen years, Ullah has had to hide the fact that she is Rohingya. The statelessness that she experienced serves as a barrier to learning about her history and her community altogether. After the August 2017 massacre, the genocide of her community briefly captured global attention, and Ullah realized that this might be her last opportunity to spread awareness of who the Rohingya really are. In the process of researching artefacts for the project with the CMHR, she found that her mother had kept some official documents belonging to Ullah's family members issued by the Burmese government prior and subsequent to 1982. One of these precious items is Ullah's Burmese birth certificate detailing her race as a Rohingya and reaffirming the State's official recognition of the existence of Rohingya in Burmese society. Life in exile inevitably conditioned Ullah to internalize the oppression (David 2013, 284–286) of being an illegitimate and inferior human being, and not as a genocide survivor, woman of color, and a Muslim in an antagonistic Buddhist majority nation. She considers it a breakthrough in her experience of working with the CMHR that she was able to finally learn who she is as a person and reconnect with her own roots through the process.

As Paulo Freire affirms in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 'Solidarity requires that one enters into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity: it is a radical posture'. (Freire 2018, 49) A curatorial activism influenced by anti-oppressive practice requires museum professionals to stop seeing members from marginalized communities as an abstract category and to place themselves in their situation. This position demands that museum workers become vulnerable and relate their own experiences of oppression, exclusion and persecution to those of the communities they intend to serve. An example of this

took place when, on the last day of interviews in Surrey, the curator and the community bonded over dinner, sharing experiences of forced migration and difficult integration in Canada. A significant moment happened when Perla came out as queer to the community as he shared his own story of forced migration. Coming out is an ongoing process for LGBTTTQI people; they continue to come out multiple times over their lifespans, making themselves vulnerable every time. Showing this vulnerability and sharing an experience of persecution and forced migration reinforced the relationship of trust between curator and community, which had come a long way since the initial meetings in March. This was only possible because the activist curatorship used in this exhibition had allowed for the relationship of trust to flow both ways, in this instance providing a safe space for the curator to become vulnerable with a community he had also come to trust.

In Kitchener, Ontario, Anwar Arkani, Zainab Arkani and Raees Ahmed were the members of the curatorial committee who organized the interviews. A new and recurring theme came up during almost all of the interviews conducted at this location when interviewees repeatedly talked about how the Rohingya in Kitchener formed a community and how they have helped each other to integrate into Canadian society. They spoke about a thriving community working every day to meet the needs of their members. An important accomplishment for the Rohingya community in Kitchener was the development of after-school support groups for their children. Access to education is particularly valued, because after the citizenship law of 1982 stripped Rohingya of their Burmese citizenship, most parents had never had the opportunity to go to school. Interviewees spoke about women empowering each other to obtain their driving licence, their children's performance in theater where they would honor their difficult past so they would not forget it, as well as about the many community BBQs and parties where members of the Rohingya-Canadian community would laugh and dream about the future. During his oral history interview, a 15-year-old member of the community spoke about how he longed for the day when people would associate the word Rohingya not only with images of people fleeing persecution or in refugee camps, but also with people eating and laughing at parties because that is what his community represented to him (Rafique 2018).

As noted in an article on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation website on 1 August 2018, and while the team was still in Kitchener, the CMHR finally dimmed the lights on Suu Kyi's image in the Honorary Canadians exhibit. That day, after a meeting discussing other forms of activism between members of the curatorial committee and while the team was conducting oral history interviews, both Arkani and Ahmed were approached by the media asking for their commentary on the CMHR's decision to alter the portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi in response to requests from the Rohingya community. The event received widespread media attention and was discussed in over 500 news stories in Canada and abroad. Members of the curatorial committee spoke about how they considered this to be one of their biggest victories in terms of their advocacy and awareness raising regarding the ongoing genocide and Suu Kyi's role in it.

The extensive collaborative work behind the development of the oral history project was done *with* and not *for* the community, and it was aimed at trying to address ethical challenges faced by museum professionals working with historically marginalized communities. At present, there are no ethical guidelines in the museum sector regulating the research, collection, archiving and/or dissemination of personal narratives by museum

professionals. Nor is there a universal or widely agreed mechanism in place that can guarantee respect for human dignity and the mitigation of harm to participants in research projects conducted by museum professionals while also preventing conflicts of interest that may arise from this work.

Opening the exhibition

Time to Act opened at the CMHR on 15 June 2019, with members from the Rohingya community coming to the CMHR, located in Winnipeg, Manitoba, from across the country. Having a community-centred opening elicited positive feedback from the people attending. This was the first time that the CMHR let a community lead the opening event of an exhibition and it certainly paid off. The opening was heartfelt: members of the community presented their stories in their own words and on their own terms and felt a tremendous sense of pride, accomplishment and ownership when viewing the exhibition. They also drew a number of important lessons from their experience that would serve them well going forward: first, an increased awareness of the level of agency that the community can have when engaging with institutions that hold power; and second, the power of the media coverage around the opening that provided members of the community involved in the exhibition with a platform to speak up and to raise awareness about the ongoing genocide. The CMHR came a long way from the idea of having only a photographic exhibition with no text or contextual information to represent a persecuted people's story. Due to the activism and perseverance of a group of Rohingya activists, *Time to Act: Rohingya Voices* became an exhibition curated by community members that featured photographs about the ongoing genocide in Burma, while also including an interactive space displaying community members' testimonies and stories from across the country. These stories, which were developed in collaboration with the community, are now part of a Rohingya oral history collection at the CMHR. The exhibition also includes artefacts researched and sourced by community members and images taken by them in Canada, Burma and Bangladesh. However, even if the community voices were successful in moving the CMHR from its starting point, some members still felt that the exhibition had compromised too much and that their contributions were relegated to a 'community corner' space. When walking through the exhibition, the focal point is not the part co-developed with the members of the community involved in the exhibition development process, but the photographs that were the starting point of the exhibition. It is all the more significant, then, that during the opening of the gallery to the public, people immediately gravitated towards the community corner of the exhibition.

Conclusions

As museums increase their efforts to engage meaningfully with historically marginalized groups, adopting a form of curatorial activism could help addressing some of the structural challenges faced by institutions that are predominantly led by a homogeneous workforce. Diversity and intersectional types of lived experience provide museum personnel with different frames of reference and worldviews that facilitate meaningful engagement with diverse and racialized populations. These points of reference can also help

institutions add more multilayered and nuanced approaches to the way a story is interpreted and presented. However, numbers show that most museums in the Western world still have a long way to go when it comes to opening spaces to include additional frames of reference to guide their work.

Exhibitions like *Time to Act* demonstrate that even museums seen as progressive still struggle with these issues. While their efforts to more meaningfully engage with diversity are well received by the communities they intend to serve, some practices that continue to prioritize only the dominant perspective keep away the challenges that threaten to disrupt the white equilibrium inherent in museums. These practices that allow for the status quo to go unchallenged, bring back racial comfort and reinforce the supremacy of whiteness within the racial hierarchy, thus still making cross-racial relations between museum staff and external actors difficult.

Wittingly or not, museum staff can contribute to the social exclusion of the groups that they are trying to include. Without the expertise brought to the table by diverse museum staff, museums can also inadvertently further tokenistic, victimizing or stereotyping views of the communities they try to represent. Therefore, developing ethical guidelines, in partnership with excluded communities, to guide their collaborative work should be a priority for museums wanting to reflect a society that demands of its institutions to become more transparent, democratic and accountable.

While there is an obvious and pressing need for museums to include a more diverse leadership to better reflect the communities they work with and to bring different frames of reference and worldviews to the table, they also need to provide their current staff with education and training on the skills needed to make these initiatives more meaningful for their intended beneficiaries. The hiring of diverse and racialized personnel is often met with the answer: there are not enough people with the 'right skills' to work in a museum. Instead of passively waiting for racialized people with the 'right skills' to come knocking at the museum's doors, human resources and hiring processes must adapt to this pressing need and become flexible by including people with expertise in different areas, such as community organizing, human rights, and activism. Museums can also benefit from involving community organizers in their hiring practices to help them identify suitable candidates within communities who possess these skills.

Anti-oppression and social justice training would help museum staff identify implicit biases and actions that can further alienate those communities with whom they are working. Lack of adequate training impedes critical self-reflection on privilege, implicit bias and institutional racism preventing museum leadership from fostering an environment for open critical thinking, where these discussions are welcomed.

Advancement opportunities for museum employees belonging to historically marginalized groups must be made available by museums. Grounding museum practice in anti-oppression, human rights and social justice frameworks would help museums place values such as respect for human dignity, non-discrimination, participation and inclusion at the heart of their work. It would also promote sustainability in museum projects involving members of historically marginalized communities, empowering them to participate in policy formulation while also holding cultural institutions accountable. Meaningful stakeholder participation means ensuring that they have genuine ownership and control over all museum processes in all phases of a project: assessment, analysis, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. If, as stated by Freire, true solidarity means

fighting side by side with historically marginalized and oppressed communities in order to achieve transformation (2018, 49),⁶ museums working on issues of human rights and social justice must aim above all at furthering the causes and activism embraced by the communities they intend to serve rather than their own interests.

Notes

1. The reason for the use of the name Burma is in reference to the timeline from 1948 to 1989 when the country was called Burma. The ruling military junta officially changed the country's name, from Burma to Myanmar, after violently suppressing the uprising of a pro-democracy movement in 1988 where thousands were killed. The international community, at the time, had a mixed reaction; some welcomed the change, but some, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the military junta. The use of the name Burma then was seen as an act of defiance against the military by the pro-democracy movement who rejected the name Myanmar and any other changes made by the military regime.
2. Radio speech by Prime Minister U Nu on 25 September 1954 at 8 pm. A similar public speech was made by the Prime Minister and Defense Minister U Ba Swe at Maungdaw and Buthidaung respectively, on 3 and 4 November 1959.
3. The UN International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar concluded in its September 2018 report that there were 'reasonable grounds, that the factors allowing the inference of genocidal intent are present. It is now for a competent prosecutorial body and court of law to investigate and adjudicate cases against specific individuals to determine individual guilt or innocence.' The Mission was created to investigate the systematic persecution of Rohingya by the Myanmar military.
4. Referring to Rohingya.
5. Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (2018).
6. Freire (2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Armando Perla is Project Leader in the team developing the new Swedish Museum of Migration and Democracy. He was also part of the curatorial team that developed the inaugural exhibitions of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, where he worked as a curator for 9 years. Perla is a board member of the ICOM International Committee on Ethical Dilemmas (IC-Ethics).

Yasmin Ullah is a Rohingya human rights activist who fled from Northern Rakhine state as a child in 1995. She remained stateless in Thailand until she resettled in Canada as a refugee. She has been advocating and raising awareness about the Rohingya genocide since 2017. Ullah currently serves as the president of the Rohingya Human Rights Network.

References

- AAM (American Alliance of Museums). 2018. *Facing Change: Insights from the American Alliance of Museums' Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Working Group*. <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AAM-DEAI-Working-Group-Full-Report-2018.pdf>.

- AMWF (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation). 2015. https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/ba/99/ba99e53a-48d5-4038-80e1-66f9ba1c020e/awmf_museum_diversity_report_aamd_7-28-15.pdf.
- AMWF (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation). 2018. <https://mellon.org/resources/news/articles/art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-2018/>.
- Carmichael, Stokely. 1967. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. New York: Random House.
- David, E. J. R. 2013. *Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- DiAngelo, Robin. 2018. *White Fragility. White it's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Boston: Bacon Press Boston.
- Freire, Paulo. 2018. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 50th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Haque, Md. Mahbulul. 2017. "Rohingya Ethnic Muslim Minority and the 1982 Citizenship Law in Burma." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37 (4): 454–469. doi:10.1080/13602004.2017.1399600.
- Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar. 2018. *Report of the Detailed Findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*. United Nations Human Rights Council. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/A_HRC_39_CRP.2.pdf.
- Jackson, Moana. 2019. *The Connection between White Supremacy and Colonisation*. Auckland: Press Patron. <https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/the-connection-between-white-supremacy/>.
- Lonetree, Amy. 2012. *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. Chapel Hill: The University of South Carolina Press.
- Lynch, Bernadette T, and Samuel J.M.M. Alberti. 2010. "Legacies of Prejudice: Racism, Co-production and Radical Trust in the Museum." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 25 (1): 13–35. doi:10.1080/09647770903529061.
- Maranda, Michael. 2017. *Hard Numbers: A Study on Diversity in Canada's Galleries*. Toronto: Canadian Art Magazine. <https://canadianart.ca/features/art-leadership-diversity/>.
- McPherson, William. 1999. *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*. London: Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty.
- Mills, Charles W. 1997. *The Social Contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Perla, Armando. 2018. *The Canadian Rohingya: Telling the Full Story*. Toronto: Ontario Heritage Trust. Heritage Matters: Shifting the Narrative, Autumn 2018.
- Pogrebin, Robin. 2018. *With New Urgency, Museums Cultivate Curators of Color*. New York: New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/08/arts/design/museums-curators-diversity-employment.html>.
- Rafique, Mohammed. 2018. Interview with Armando Perla. Canadian Museum for Human Rights interview. August 31, 2018.
- Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Pan Books Limited.