LOCATING AUTHORITIES: PUBLIC EXPERTISE, HERITAGE INSTITUTIONS AND THE RECENT PAST

STEVEN SCHWINGHAMER is an Historian at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, where he conducts research related to Canadian immigration history in order to support the museum's programs and exhibitions. He has been with the museum since 2000. His recent projects include explorations of the built heritage of immigration sites and research on constructions of desirability and undesirability in Canadian immigration practice. He is affiliated with the Gorsebrook Research Institute at Saint Mary's University and the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University. He holds an MA in History from Saint Mary's University.

ABSTRACT

Public expertise operates in historic sites in deep and important ways whether it is engaged by the institution or not. Moving that intersection of disciplinary and organic historical knowledge into an open exchange is important: this will enable institutions to learn from their visitors' organic knowledge of the past. Opening that exchange entails certain challenges. Visitors to heritage institutions, especially those co-located with sites of memory, have to negotiate a set of authorities and tensions as part of entering into a participatory relationship with the institutions. Valuing and mobilizing the organic knowledge of the past carried in our publics requires deliberate cultural and methodological shifts by heritage organizations.

The relationships between historians or historical institutions and their publics are lively issues in current debate.[1] Based on these conversations, there is an opportunity to expand current approaches to the relationships between museums and members of the public. First-person forms of historical evidence are enjoying priority in many institutions and exhibitions, whether through the inclusion of oral history or other sources that document and reflect personal experience. This is a sensible extension of the influence of the explorations of social historians and the development of museums' willingness to explore multiple historical narratives about an event. This work is valuable and important, and documenting experiences across many perspectives enriches our canon of source materials. Further, memory-based inquiries can create new resources for the museum and for other researchers. Collaborative exploration of the past also builds upon a host of discussions on the shared construction of meaning around historical sites.[2] In the case of historical projects whose mandates include the past eighty years (the recent past, for the purposes of this paper)[3], the distributed public expertise on their subject area is not just an asset or an avenue for expansion: it is an essential resource.

The need for expanding our concepts of the authority relationships between public and cultural institutions may be best appreciated through reference to an analogy for describing a participatory project at a museum: baking a cake with a child.[4] This analogy may not be the best model for implementation in historical institutions dealing with the recent past. In these cases, participation with a public is not analogous to baking a cake with a young helper. The locations of authority, expertise and experience in that analogy are fairly straightforward. Even the collaborative co-creation that can be imagined is understood to be highly mediated and predicated on the museum's permissions and capacities: the museum is the senior partner and sets the parameters. This transmissive model of the pedagogical relationship around museums persists in sections of museum practice and also in the public. Susan Crane reflected on responses to this, pointing out that "[t]he more curators or historians make themselves visible to museum visitors, the more the visitors react warily, unsure if they are really being asked to engage in discussion (which would necessarily involve opinion), or whether they are simply being instructed in a new way."[5] To overcome this hesitation, there are all sorts of existing participatory structures that encourage creativity and expression on the part of museum visitors. For example, Simon provides many suggestions and points to the substantial social, learning and work value of participatory work to museums.[6] Our challenge is to consider and expand our concept of collaborative work to encompass the needs of institutions that identify first-person narratives as central historical resources. The methods, ethics and results of collaborative inquiry methods make definitions of expertise that heavily favour disciplinary knowledge very problematic and probably untenable in public historical settings. Certain expertise and knowledge of recent historical events is broadly dispersed: it is held in the memories of individuals. Therefore, many visitors may themselves carry relevant knowledge and expertise into a site.

This situation has a particular resonance with the well-known work by Michael Frisch and Dwight Pithcaithley dealing with Ellis Island, a "landmark/shrine whose history, in the broadest terms, already has meaning and familiarity to most of those visiting it", which creates "a very special public-historical interpretive challenge".[7] The challenge, created in no small part by the intersection of disciplinary and organic knowledge of the past, may be engaged through Kathleen McLean's proposal that we "embrace the contributions of expert knowledge and at the same time expand our definitions of 'expert' and 'expertise'."[8] Crane points to some of this organic knowledge with her notion of an "excess of memory"[9] and the concept certainly implicates individual relationships with collective memory and the enactment of public histories. Most current theories of learning in museums have embraced a constructivist approach – people make meaning by situating new information in relation to their existing internal canon.[10] This means that public expertise operates in historic sites in deep and important ways whether it is engaged by the institution or not. Moving that intersection of disciplinary and organic historical knowledge into an open exchange is important: this will enable institutions to learn from their visitors' organic knowledge of the past.

Opening that exchange entails certain challenges. Visitors to heritage institutions, especially those co-located with sites of memory, have to negotiate a set of authorities and tensions as part of entering into a participatory relationship with the institutions. In part, this arises from the site's location. Sophie Forgan has pointed to several aspects of museum buildings proper in relation to their subject matter and their visitors, including the notable consideration of the "particularity of place".[11] In the case of Pier 21, "place" is central to the institution in its exploration of historical immigration. Questions of origins, destinations, routes and ports are the framework of policies and personal narratives alike in the history of immigration. Beyond this, the physical place of the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21/ Pier 21 National Historic Site is a designated place with attached histories that are still new enough to overlap with individual and collective memory among many visitors. Many of the site's visitors have connections to the peak years of the site's historical immigration operations in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Other visitors have personal memories or experience linked to immigration at other times or through other sites. The site, as an artefact and memory aid in its own right, is evocative of those connections.

Further on the place of Pier 21, it embodies place-based historical tensions. When the facility was under construction in the 1920s, immigration authorities angrily rejected the possibility of moving into "shed 21". The very use of the site for immigration only came after more than two years of bureaucratic cat-fighting, from

late 1925 through the end of 1927. Resentment among agents and officials in various departments over the move simmered for years after arrival, as is well-expressed by the pointed refusal to pay a single utility bill for what was billed as the "best immigration facility on the continent" over the span of almost four years.[12] The site's current heritage designation captures the tension well – although perhaps inadvertently – in saying the site embodies the policies, practices and procedures of early-twentieth century immigration to Canada. Given the numerous examples of what were, even in that era, ethically and legally problematic exclusions in Canadian immigration, the description underscores the complexity of Pier 21's history. Further, as Doreen Massey has argued, place is built out of articulations of social relations with both local and wider contacts and context.[13] Substantially different understandings of the social relations around the building – not the "best facility", but a contested facility – make Pier 21 a notably different historic site.

This brings us to the second area of authorities bearing on historic sites: those of the people in the space, staff and visitors alike. Frisch has recently commented on the need to "enact an active dialogue between experience and expertise, between people working together to reach new understandings."[14] For a site bearing on recent history, visitors may bring significant and unique historical authority into the space every day. At Pier 21, that authority relates to personal experiences of the immigration process, but this kind of specific content is not the catalyst for shifting the valorization of organic knowledge of the past. Perhaps a regimental museum greets a veteran of service, or an agricultural museum welcomes a family of farmers, or a pilot visits a transportation museum. These visitors are all creating meaning through a process that has significance to the institution beyond goodwill, effective visitor learning or riveting opportunities for social and media engagement. They are unique and valuable learning partners for the institutions: a participatory approach to interpretation may open the possibility for the museum to appreciate some aspects of the meanings created by these people in the museum space. The autobiographical aspect of this history, its personal anchoring amid illumination of larger events, cements the site's relevance and prevalence in people's personal archives.[15] The resulting memories and artefacts are dispersed across Canada and can only be opened to the institution through the participation of the individual holders. This underscores the importance of a re-imagination of the role of the public and the locations of authorities for sites exploring the recent past.

If the museum has appropriate programs, new disciplinary historical resources can be created from the visitors' organic knowledge of the past. To return to the example of Pier 21, some visitors come on a pilgrimage to the site to recollect their first steps in Canada, and when they arrive at the site, many wish to share and explore their memories with others, including staff. Their conversations on tours reshape almost every single visit, and each visit is a learning opportunity for the museum. As is indicated by the fact that much of this is revealed in conversation, however, guests of the museum at Pier 21 interpret the site history in relationship to the staff. For example, potential oral history participants occasionally align current staff with the interests of the historical department of immigration. Visitors also make more routine assumptions about museum authorities and expertise, and sometimes de-value their own experience based on presuming that museums would not acknowledge their authority or expertise. These visitor responses are complicated by the emotional situation of being present in an interpreted historic space that also is placed in memory. The intersection shapes the stories that emerge both from the past and present places at Pier 21. Plaques and exhibits – authoritative displays, but also interruptions of remembered space – can alter visitor expression, unfortunately, sometimes resulting in a "text echo" embedded in their storytelling as experiences are filtered through over-valued museum presentation.

Gaynor Kavanagh, in *Dream Spaces*, asks in opening his discussion, "[i]f an exhibition makes someone cry, either then or later, or laugh with derision, what is this and what should this mean to the museum?"[16] This is real dilemma for sites that engage with living history. Certainly, visitors cry at Pier 21. The transmissive, novice-expert dynamic gets overturned in cognitive, affective and social spaces within the museum because of the distributed expertise and experience in its public. Those experiences often have a substantial affective component. The emotional relationship we establish with the past is difficult to inscribe within traditional historical methodologies, but is no less transformational or profound in its impact on our personal process of making meaning than knowledge assembled through disciplined inquiry. To respond to Kavanagh's question: when a visitor has an experience

that is this profound, it is a signal to open collaborative learning opportunities. After all, that response of crying or laughing may point to a powerful meaning rooted in the visitor's organic knowledge of the past.

This organic knowledge of the past is a crucial resource for historical interpretation of the recent past. Its incomplete nature does not make it less valuable: we accept incomplete documentary evidence collections all the time as historians, and often invest them with substantial authority. The two are complimentary within a holistic approach to the human past, modifying each other as they interweave. For example, the original Pier 21 Society was founded in part on a vision of the site as a pilgrimage destination for those with personal connections. That understanding of the space can be transformed by disciplinary inquiry, from a space of nostalgic aura to a conflicted and challenging heritage space. However, the transformative power is equally impressive in the other direction, controverting or problematizing meaning built from use of the traditional historical canon.

Ausma Rowberry née Levalds came to Canada as a young girl in 1949, after fleeing with her family from Latvia in October of 1944. Prior to her arrival, she was selected by immigration officials to be the symbolic fifty-thousandth Displaced Person admitted to Canada. The press and public information on this event show a smiling eight year-old girl accepting a beautiful doll, a book of birds and a silver locket from the mayor of Halifax and an immigration inspector.[17] Setting aside questions regarding her selection to represent the movement of Displaced Persons after the Second World War, Rowberry's organic knowledge of the past troubles the implied narrative of the documentary sources. As she states of this photo opportunity, her tone sad and her cadence slow: "It was a frightening experience because – not really understanding enough to… Up to then most of us had found that if we received something, there was a price tag attached to it. And I guess in a child's mind, wondering, 'what is the price tag of this?'" [18]

The informative and transformative value of oral history and of personal experience is not a particularly new position in the historical profession. Asserting that the organic knowledge of the past that we treasure in our collaborators for oral history exists throughout the museum-going public seems to be rather less accepted. For sites delving in the recent past, the experience and expertise of visitors is a real and important resource that elevates participatory museum practices from advantageous to essential. The bulk of historical resources for these sites are likely to reside as intangibles or dispersed artefacts in the personal archives and internal canons – and access to these will most likely come only through strongly inclusive and participatory approaches to museum practice. Valuing and mobilizing the organic knowledge of the past carried in our publics requires deliberate cultural and methodological shifts by heritage organizations.

NOTES

1 Among other recent examples, the theme of the National Council on Public History's 2013 conference is "Knowing Your Public(s) – The Significance of Audience in Public History". As an example of the topics this theme is intended to develop, the Call for Proposals specifies examinations of "changing approaches to public participation, reciprocity and authority". Call for Proposals, 2013 Annual Meeting, National Council on Public History.

2 Michael Frisch's key work in this field opened a running conversation among historians that has spanned two decades and more. Michael Frisch, A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

3 Inquiries based in oral tradition may have longer reach. However, the experience of the Museum's oral history project bears up the specific observation by Thompson and Bauer that information in oral histories reaches back, generally, to the grandparents' generation. Paul Thompson and Elaine Bauer, "Recapturing Distant Caribbean Childhoods and Communities: The Shaping of Memories of Jamaican Migrants in Britain and North America", *Oral History*, 30(2) (Autumn 2002): 51.

4 Nina Simon, The Participatory Museum (Santa Cruz, California: Museum 2.0, 2010): 197.

5 Susan Crane, "Memory, Distortion and History in the Museum", *History and Theory*, 36(4) (December 1997): 48.

6 Simon, Participatory Museum: 195.

7 Michael Frisch and Dwight Pithcaithley, "Audience Expectations as Resource and Challenge: Ellis Island as a Case Study" in Frisch, A Shared Authority: 215-224.

8 Kathleen McLean, "Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?" in Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene and Laura Koloski, eds., Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011): 71.

9 Crane, "Memory, Distortion and History": 46.

10 For a useful introduction to theories of learning in the museum context, see George Hein, "The Constructivist Museum", *Journal for Education in Museums*, 16 (1995): 21-23.

11 Sophie Forgan, "Building the Museum: Knowledge, Conflict, and the Power of Place", *Isis*, 96(4) (December 2005): 579.

[12] Steven Schwinghamer, "'Altogether Unsatisfactory': Revisiting the Opening of the Immigration Facility at Halifax's Pier 21", *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society*, 15 (2012): 61-74.

[13] Doreen Massey, "Places and Their Pasts", *History Workshop Journal*, 39 (Spring 1995): 185-6.

[14] Michael Frisch, "From *A Shared Authority* to the Digital Kitchen, and Back" in Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene and Laura Koloski, eds., Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World (Philadelphia: The Pew Centre for Arts & Heritage, 2011): 136.

[15] This concept is developed in Peter Fritzsche, "The Archive", *History And Memory*, 17(1-2) (Spring-Winter 2005): 22.

[16] Gaynor Kavanagh, Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum (London: Leicester University Press, 2000): 5.

[17] See, for example, "50 000th DP scheduled to enter Canada", *The Globe and Mail*, 23 February 1949, 1, as well as coverage in the same paper on 17 and 26 February 1949. The event was covered elsewhere nationally and internationally, with the farthest-flung reference encountered thus far being "Latvian Girl For Canada", *The Canberra Times*, 19 February 1949: 2.

[18] Ausma Levalds Rowberry, interview with the author, 31 July 2002. Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 Oral History Collection, 02.07.31ALR, 01:14:01. The author would like to thank Mrs Rowberry for her kind agreement to include her experience in this paper.