

QtM Audio Guide
By Thomas Fields

Audio Guide Script

Sound of walking on stone.

I took an official “limited edition” pride tour of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. The tour takes you to specific areas in the museum where they have exhibits for queer content, parceled into 12 short, well-summarized stops.

I liked that the Museum didn’t contain all queer content to one designated space. This gives room for potential intersectionality between queer studies and other human rights topics found in the museum such as migration, refugees, race and gender. The exhibits are positioned as part of an overall journey towards the top. Eventually ending with the Israel Asper Tower of Hope. The museum is direct in its intent for the architecture which is described as “a metaphor for the struggles towards fully realized human rights for all.” (CMHR, architecture).

What struck me from the tour was the last stop. It was built up to be a hopeful ending, which focuses on Gareth Henry, a queer refugee of colour from Jamaica who has fled to Canada in his attempts to defend LGBTQ rights.

Music

He is placed near the top, on the 5th floor. In an exhibit called “Human Rights Defenders”. One of the many banners there features Gareth Henry, In the center of a wall of banners we find Gareth Henry. He is pictured sitting, well dressed, basked in sunlight, and looking into the distance.

On this banner, the text on a deep green background reads, “I’ve been a victim of homophobia and at times paralyzed by fear. I decided to take a stand and do what’s right” (CMHR, Human Rights Defenders). And bellow, “Rights defender for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, Jamaica and Canada. He has risked his life to support individuals threatened by homophobia or living with HIV/AIDS” (CMHR, Human Rights Defenders).

And that's it. *Pause*

The content that is presented, like the banner, just hangs there, without delving into potential intersection between queer migration or present-day homophobia here in Canada and Jamaica. It focuses simply on a singular identity of LGBTQ rights activism (Ritchie 68).

Where is his story of persecution in Jamaica? Or his experience coming to Canada? Asking these questions disrupts the museum’s smooth presentation of Henry’s role a human rights defender.

The exhibit is limited in presenting Henry’s story as a something to inspire us or make us happy. Especially were it is positioned in the museum. There is no mention of how in 2007 he was chased and

beaten by police in Kingston Jamaica, in front of 200 people. (Bowcott). Or of his experience fleeing to Canada and needing to re-establish himself in Canadian society where homophobia is still present.

Henry's story offers an interesting opportunity to look at the intersections of race, queerness, and migration in Canada and Jamaica. Yet, what it is doing fits into the overall narrative arch found throughout the museum and is shaped by the architecture. Starting with a rise from darkness and ignorance finishing in light and inspiring change (CMHR, architecture), we are supposed to see Henry's story as a positive one.

The exhibit represents a happy moment, fitting with the rest of the Museum's narrative. This produces a "lovely knowledge". Critic Nicole Ritchie is worried this lovely knowledge creates a "Disneyfication of human rights" (Ritchie, 70). That is to say, Henry's difficult story as a human rights activist does not fit because of its location near the Tower of Hope (Bowcott). The museum focuses on his role as a leader. It implies a specific trajectory for queer migrants coming to Canada. This presentation of him as a successful refugee can deceive visitors in general representations of queer migrant experiences coming to Canada.

Theorist David Murray states that a common narrative for Queer migration is the story of people fleeing anti-gay countries to the sexual freedom of northern countries. It is important to note that the museum does not explicitly make this trajectory evident. However, the average museum goer, having experienced a progression towards completed human rights, can read Henry's story of success directly tied to his new-found home in Canada.

I wonder if placing Henry's story in the Canadian Journeys gallery could open up a discussion that nuances his experience coming to Canada. And disrupt the idea that his story, as it is currently presented, is somehow closer to the idea of "fully realized human rights."

Pause

A few weeks after taking the pride tour. I keep coming back to how Gareth Henry was curated as a symbol of hope, despite his difficult experiences. I think the vagueness sounding the exhibit can be misleading. Passing the Canadian Museum for Human Rights on my way to work, I spotted graffiti text on the fence. Underlining the silhouette of the museum, it reads Deception Designs. I think this critique of the museum raises questions about how the museum curates its content to fit the larger, overarching narrative of hope and progress.

Does getting away from lovely knowledge into difficult knowledge add a certain complexity that is needed in these stories? How would moving away from lovely knowledge to difficult knowledge change our perception of queer migration?

Perhaps to get closer to the ideal of "fully realized human rights for all," we need to start by addressing difficult knowledge