

# IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, BREAK CONVENTION: A CASE STUDY OF A HUMAN LIBRARY PROJECT IN AN ART GALLERY

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## Abstract

*The Human Library (HL) is an educational activity that brings together living 'Books' and 'Readers' in one-to-one dialogue to begin to bridge differences, challenge stereotypes and build new understandings. Using a survey, observations and individual interviews our case study explored a HL project organized in collaboration with a portraiture exhibition at a public art gallery in British Columbia as a critical, dialogic space of engagement. Findings showed the majority of Readers and Books as Caucasian, female, and well educated. Some participants were perplexed by the paradox of this activity, and its disconnection from traditional understandings of 'art' and arts institutions. Further, as the HL activity and portraiture exhibition were in different parts of the building, few were able to make the 'identity' connection between the two. Yet the majority of participants saw the HL as an extremely valuable opportunity to call into question problematic notions of the 'other', and to explore gender as well as the role and place of the arts and artists. The majority believed it was a highly appropriate activity for an art gallery and saw real value in this "risky" dialogic approach.*

## Résumé

*La Bibliothèque de l'homme (HL) est une activité éducative qui réunit vivre «Livres» et «Readers» dans le dialogue un -à-un pour commencer à combler les différences, lutter contre les stéréotypes et de construire de nouvelles compréhensions. Utilisant une enquête, des observations et des entretiens individuels de notre étude de cas examinés un projet de HL organisé en collaboration avec une exposition de portraits dans une galerie d'art publique en Colombie-Britannique, un espace dialogique critique de l'engagement. Les résultats ont montré que la majorité des lecteurs et des livres de race blanche, femelle, et bien éduqués. Certains participants étaient perplexes par le paradoxe de cette activité, et sa déconnexion de la compréhension traditionnelle de*

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*«l'art» et les institutions artistiques. En outre, comme l'activité de HL et exposition de portraits étaient dans différentes parties du bâtiment, peu sont capables de faire le lien « identité » entre les deux. Le majorité des participants croyait que le HL était une occasion en or de remettre en cause les notions problématiques de «l'autre », et d'explorer le genre ainsi que le rôle et la place des arts et des artistes. La majorité a estimé qu'il était une activité très approprié pour une galerie d'art et a vu la valeur réelle de cette approche dialogique «à risque».*

### Introduction

Historically, art galleries and museums have a well-deserved reputation for elitism, colonialism, racism, sexism, exclusion, paternalism, and classism (e.g., Janes, 2009; Nightingale & Sandell, 2012). Hooper-Greenhill (2007) added that, despite a long-standing commitment in these institutions to education and learning, there have been serious limitations to its enactment which has created "confusion in the public mind about the role of museums as educational institutions" (p. 5), and Mayo (2012) drew attention to how infrequently they appear on any "lists of sites of adult education" (p. 101). Another problem is the neutrality stance so often taken by these institutions, a position that they are value-free sites where "taking on an issue is none of our business – our museum has to be seen to be fair and impartial" (museum director cited in Janes, 2009, p. 61). This led Janes to conclude that their "irrelevance as social institutions is a matter of record" (p. 26).

Yet Kaplan (1996) reminded us that, since their inception, these public art and cultural institutions have aimed to be spaces where "elites and other social groups could express their ideas and world views and access was tolerated, and even encouraged, among a large and differentiated population, making accumulated knowledge widely available" (p. 3). Against this backdrop of challenge, failure, and irrelevance, and in the face of increasing social and cultural problems, many public art institutions are reconceptualizing and expanding their educational roles and purposes, resulting in a shift of issues such as diversity, justice, and human rights "from the margins of [their] thinking and practice to the core" (Nightingale & Sandell, 2012, p. 1). Indeed, these institutions are not simply "neutral spaces that speak with one...voice. [They] are about individuals making subjective choices" (Marstine, 2006, p. 2). One of these subjective choices is to become "agents of change" by bringing "important, challenging and controversial points of view to a democratic, free thinking society" (Cameron, 2004 p. 61).

One example and the focus of this article is the Human Library (HL), an approach to non-formal education first conceived by a group in Denmark who wanted to do something to challenge the rapidly rising phenomena of homophobia and anti-Islam.

In November 2013 an art gallery in British Columbia hosted a Human Library in conjunction with a temporary portraiture exhibition. The HL is an educational process that brings together living "Books" and "Readers" in one-to-one dialogue to begin to bridge differences and challenge stereotypes. Although the HL is now ubiquitous across the globe, it remains understudied save a few descriptive pieces (e.g., Kudo, Motohashi, Enomoto, Kataoka, & Yajima, 2011). Further, as the term *library* connotes, this activity habitually takes place in a public or university library. In Canada, however, there is a practice whereby museums or art galleries organize an HL, at times in parallel with a library, to coincide with

a special and related art or artifact exhibition. These non-conventional adult education initiatives have yet to be explored.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the HL on the Readers and Books who took part. We were also interested in the value of combining the HL – conversations and dialogue – with the portraits and what this could mean for the art gallery and its social and critical education directions. We begin this article by outlining some of the philosophical assumptions regarding identity, anti-oppressive education, dialogue, and the arts that provide the analytical lens for our study. Next we outline our research procedures and describe the process and aims of the HL at the art gallery. We then present our findings and analysis and conclude with a discussion of the implications of the HL project to adult education work in and through the gallery.

### **Anti-Oppressive Adult Education, Dialogue, and the Arts**

Anti-oppression educators such as Lopes and Thomas (2006) and Kumashiro (2000) argued that, to move beyond intolerance, stereotyping, and the ignorance of identity politics, we need to find means to challenge the comfort and safety of resting assuredly on existing knowledge and catapult ourselves into an unfamiliar space where we can be challenged to learn, unlearn, and relearn. Newman (2006) referred to this as a “practice of discomfort,” creating a space to explore the unknown and the controversial. Kumashiro (2000) called this coming to terms with the partial nature of our knowledge and our own unconscious complicity “with different forms of oppression” (p. 31). She cautioned, however, that stepping into the unfamiliar can be difficult, as people are often invested in the status quo and what is “considered to be common sense, despite the fact that common sensical ideas and practices can be quite oppressive” (p. xxxviii). Others suggested that education needs to happen “in a place that seems safe, where information presented... is complex but not overpowering” (Hiss cited in Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 113). For Falk and Dierking, this place is a cultural institution, which, with its essence of neutrality, makes it highly conducive for activities aimed at meaning making. Indeed, learning “is the reason people go to museums, and learning is the primary ‘good’ [they] derive from their experience” (p. 2).

But what makes a “good” learning experience? Allman (2001) suggested it is one that places an emphasis on authentic dialogue. Authentic dialogue goes beyond “what often passes for dialogue, such as the sharing of monologues [where] people take turns telling each other what they already know” (p. 175). Authentic dialogue is radically different because it entails a more creative exchange aimed directly at generating new understandings to be made use of. For Rule (2004), authentic dialogue is an intentional “unfolding process, a search or quest for knowledge...presented and disputed not in isolation but with other knowledge seekers” (p. 321). It is realized by turning toward the other, a movement or breaking through that acknowledges others as particular, concrete, existing people. But it also involves conflict and tension as essential elements of growth and change.

Yet the emphasis on dialogue finds some criticism. Foucault (1972) suggested it implies that rationality is the *telos* of humankind and verbal engagement the optimal means to constructively interact. Howells (2003) suggested we re-value the notion of visual learning and take it more seriously because combining “the visual with the verbal [is a better way to get] multi-layered messages across” (p. 5). Indeed, Freire set precedence through

his "culture circles" with literacy learners, augmenting dialogue with images to visualize inequity and power into consciousness. Through artworks and images, people are able to think symbolically and metaphorically (i.e. Freire & Macedo, 1995). Contemporary arts-based adult education scholars add that teaching and learning through the arts stimulates imaginative critique and enhances people's abilities to comprehend the complex and often invisible processes and practices that exclude, marginalize, and disempower (e.g., Butterwick & Dawson, 2006; Clover & Stalker, 2007). Imagination and creativity bring not only joy to learning, but also a plurality of consciousness. Moreover, it is the imagination that can best break through the inertia of habit, recalcitrance, and resistance and allow people to give credence to alternative realities (Greene, 1995). Dialogue can render the invisible visible, but this can equally be done through the power of visual art, through images that call into question assumptions we make and beliefs we maintain (Clover, 2012). Gallery educators Burnham and Kai-Kee (2011) added that an encounter with an artwork "is as much a matter of the heart as of the mind, that learning [about and through] artworks is motivated and held together as much by emotion as by intellect" (p. 15). Feminists argue that emotions have constituted a very powerful resource for liberation in the women's movement and that they can and must be seen as "critical ways of knowing, and inner knowing; the source of true knowledge (Chan, 1996, p. 205). Yet, typically and problematically, many art galleries have maintained steadfast "control [over] the viewing process" (Marstine, 2006, p. 5), relying on practices of what Hooper-Greenhill (2007) described as regimented walking and telling that disallow discussion and remove individuals from any meaning-making process. For Hughes (1998), this has made art galleries less accessible as social institutions and even less "effective as educational institutions" (p. 11).

### **Research Process**

Who attended the HL at the art gallery? What new perspectives, learning, and understandings resulted? What sense did Books and Readers make of this type of event in general and its place in the gallery in particular? How effective was the portraiture exhibition to exploring the issue of identity? What were the major challenges? To answer these questions we used a case study approach, combining observations, a survey, and interviews.

We employed a case study approach because it is something Merriam (1988) called "ideal for understanding and interpreting...educational phenomena" (p. 2). A case study is bounded in time, as was the HL event, allowing for an in-depth snapshot of, in this case, an adult education activity aimed at playing some part in social change, broadly speaking. A case study also countenances the use of a mixture of data collection procedures to understand the story an event has to tell (Creswell, 2009).

We began with a meeting with the education director to identify the aims and design of the study. We then attended the evening briefing meeting along with the 10 Books who had agreed to take part. Here we introduced ourselves and discussed the HL objectives and process and our study. The Books ranged from artists, organic farmers, and burlesque dancers to community police officers and representatives from anti-poverty and sex trade-worker organizations. Following this briefing we were all taken on a guided tour of the portrait exhibition. In total, 10 Books and 16 Readers took part in our study. Everyone who participated did so voluntarily, giving us permission and their contact details at the time of the HL. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

We used three data collection strategies. The first was a survey to collect statistics from both Readers and Books regarding age, gender, ability, education level, ethnicity, gallery visitation frequency, and type of employment or volunteer activities. The second was observation. We milled around the tables where Readers and Books were conversing to observe their interactions and the Books' educational approaches. Occasionally we entered the portrait exhibition space to observe Readers' interactions with the paintings – a necessity given that the HL dialogue and the portraits were in separate locations in the building. In the exhibition space we observed and recorded in our journals Readers' individual interactions with the portraits and the practice of the volunteer educator who was taking small groups on interpretive talks. Our third data collection method was brief interviews with Books and Readers to garner immediate impressions of the event followed by in-depth individual interviews using semi-structured questions regarding their learning, the educational process, the portraits, and the overall connections to the gallery.

Survey data were compiled in Excel and then developed into figures. We include two of these in this article in our opening discussion on demographics and gallery practice. As suggested by Merriam (1988), for the qualitative and observational data we individually read and re-read our field notes and the transcripts, making notes in the margins and assigning codes to themes we saw emerging in relation to the research questions and the literature. We then came together to compare and contrast our interpretations and create the final categories.

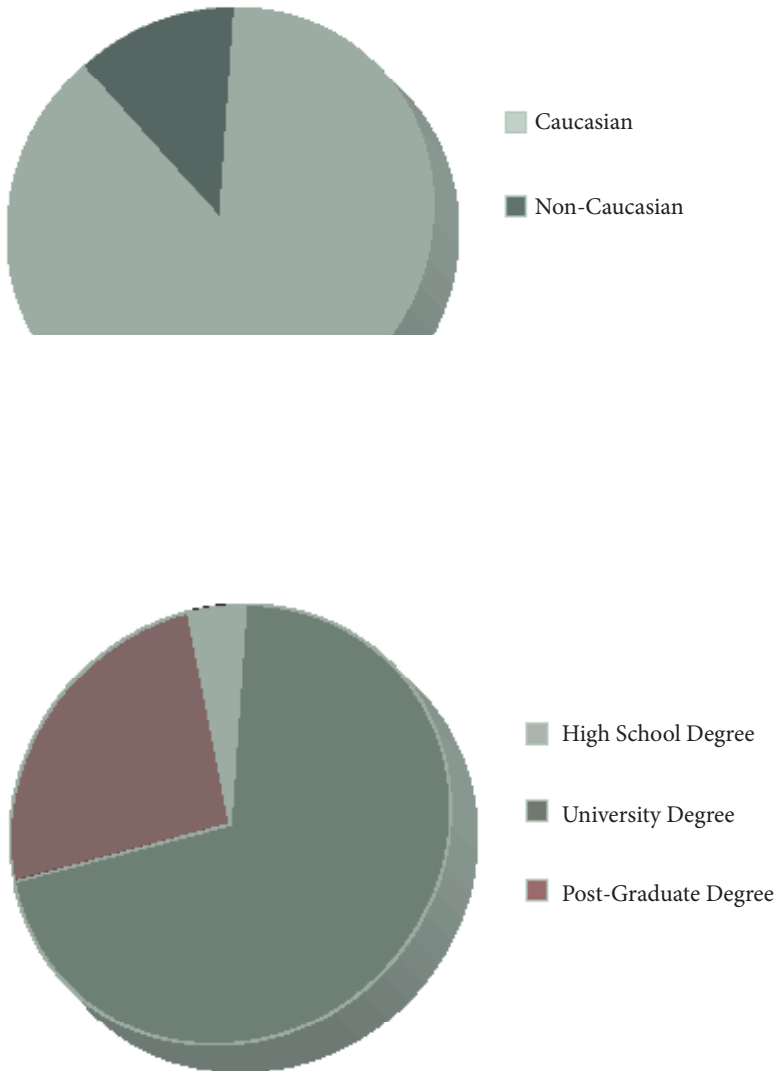
### **Identity and the HL at the Art Gallery**

The HL took place at the art gallery on a Saturday and was free to all. This latter point is important, because the art gallery normally charges an entrance fee due to major funding cuts in Canada to arts and cultural institutions in the 1990s that ended the practice of free entry for the majority. The aim of the HL, as alluded to earlier, was to bring together people in the community who would not normally meet in dialogue to explore the complexity of identity, of how we, as the art gallery called it, “judge the book by its cover.” This is what James and Shadd (2001) called the practice of stereotyping, and they argued it is ubiquitous, used by people “to categorize a vast amount of received information about others. They argued, however, that stereotyping and in effect essentializing individuals' identities often lead to blatant misrepresentations which can have serious, negative consequences on individuals and groups” (p. 6). Further, they noted people live in the same community with “lives intertwined socially, culturally, economically and politically” but know little about one another and what they do know is frequently shaped by “rumour, gossip or fear” (p. 4). Yet identities and subjectivities are complex, evolving, and often resistant to representation. No person is one-dimensional (Marcuse, 1964); rather, a person is a constellation of race, gender, ability, class, and sexuality shaped and constructed by experience (Crenshaw, 1991; Manicom & Walters, 2012). Yet Plantenga (2012) cautioned against the practice of focusing solely on “socially constructed differences” (p. 29). She added that “if we want our struggle for social change to be a political one, participants should be given the tools to analyse the underlying systems of power that institutionalize and manipulate these identities and justify oppression, discrimination and often violence” (p. 29).

Like other HL processes (e.g., Kudo et al., 2011), the HL at the art gallery consisted of Readers borrowing for 20 to 30 minutes a “living” Book, a person who had previously

agreed through a community consultation to come and speak about her or his experiences, work, passions, and so forth. Although an HL is a very non-conventional activity for a gallery, a key staff member argued it fit the art gallery as a modern-day agora where divergent communities can engage with the visual arts and culture as a medium through which people can determine who they are not only as individuals, but also as a community and as a society. The HL also fit with a temporary portraiture exhibition entitled *Beyond Likeness*. The various art forms also portrayed identity – both individual and collective – as complex, socially constructed, and unfixed, shaped by personal biography, by the artist,

Figure 1: Ethnicity of Study Participants



and even by the viewer. It was therefore hoped this exhibition would provide an additional space for a dialogue about identity, stereotyping, and exclusion.

### Demographics and Gallery Visitation Practice

As *Figure 1* illustrates, the majority of Readers and Books were Caucasian, born in Canada or Western Europe. One Reader was a university student from China, one Book had recently emigrated from China, and another Book was Muslim of South Asian heritage. And as *Figure 2* shows, all but one Reader, a self-identified waitress, had a college or university degree, often at the master's or PhD level. Approximately 65% of the Readers and Books identified as artists—musicians, writers, painters, sculptors, and/or graffiti artists. Yet the most common response to the frequency-of-visitation question on the survey was “seldom.” Reasons for this were a combination of economics and perceived elitism, captured in this comment by John: “I have been [to the gallery] two or three times in 20 years. Funny because I am an artist but I do not think to go [to the art gallery], maybe because it costs so much to get in. That makes it a place where rich people can enjoy works of art, but not a place for artists like me.” The few who did attend frequently were drawn by the art exhibitions, but equally by “the social engagement opportunities like this where you meet people and learn things” (Lorna, Reader). Further on the statistical data continuum, the majority of Readers and Books were between the ages of 21 and 45 years, with a few in their 50s and 60s and two around 80 years of age. Although one of the two elderly people was in a wheelchair, no one identified as disabled. Finally, 80% of participants were female.

The data tell us a number of things. First, despite decades of commitment to equal access, the art gallery still seems to cater, as Janes (2009) noted, “to society's elite – the most educated and most well off of our citizenry...an obstinate characteristic that continues, albeit unfairly at times, to undermine the public perception and the value of museums” (p. 21). Yet even to these “elites,” the gallery is seen as exclusionary, which raises the issue of economics mentioned earlier. Most Canadian galleries must charge admission fees since free access was discontinued in the mid-1990s through draconian budget-balancing undertakings by the federal and provincial governments. Indeed, the arts are an easy target for governments who seldom “see the value in providing consistent financial support for what [is] considered to be the frivolous pursuit of art” (Whitelaw, Foss, & Paikowsky, 2010, p. 7). Fees essentially place a barrier between the cultural sector and much of the population by privatizing – and by this we mean restricting access to those who can afford it – a public institution and allocating culture as a privilege rather than a right. Second, and less bleak, although Victoria has a large retirement community, the HL attracted a number of younger adults. This is important because if institutions such as galleries cannot attract a younger audience, they will become redundant (e.g., Janes, 2009; Wyman, 2004). This means hosting more events such as the HL, as it was relevant and important to the participants. Third, Levin (2010) and Ellis (2002) suggested the bulk of gallery volunteers, staff, and visiting public has been and continues to be women. This is represented in the HL, but also, as Book Gwen suggested, “more women than men work in the social service sector [in Victoria] with the marginalized and stereotyped and are willing to volunteer their time for an event like this.” We will return shortly to the issue of gender.

### Intentionality and Openness

While some Readers were drawn to the HL out of simple curiosity – “What could this activity be?” many asked – others attended because it had what Linda called “a real goal, a real purpose. It was very different from other things I have attended [at the gallery], but you sense it was organized to matter, to really push people in directions few of us go.” This comment is about intentionality, about the value placed on a deliberate forum of debate and dialogue regarding critical social issues, “irrespective of how seemingly remote these issues may appear” (Janes, 2009, p. 22) to what the institution is “supposed” to do – a point we will return to later. Indeed, adult educators and cultural theorists argue that social justice work must not be left to chance, that it must be a measured, facilitated opportunity to reflect critically on problematic social situations and issues (Lopes & Thomas, 2006; Newman, 2006). For Edith, this meant a place “to put myself out there a bit, to have to ask questions and to have to listen and think about new things.” Although Edith and many other Books and Readers talked about feeling nervous, they realized they were in a space where they could push themselves,

because the books were completely open – “ask me anything. I want to hear your thoughts.” We actually got into a conversation. A lot of time people fail to make a connection because they have a preconceived notion. But with someone saying “I am open,” you begin to question your own assumptions and beliefs, and through the questioning the person does become three-dimensional. (Louis)

Dimensionality is interesting, as it was something many Readers touched upon in diverse ways – such as John, who was astonished by the burlesque dancer: “You know, when you say ‘burlesque’ I think strip club. But she was a social worker going for a PhD, and I said, ‘Wow, did I miss that one!’”

Hilda took this further when she talked about her preconceived supposition of the Muslim Canadian artist:

I expected her to be middle-aged and dressed in black. “Where did that come from?” I asked myself. It probably had to do with the images of elderly Muslim women crying over dead bodies in places like Palestine that you see all the time on television. So I guess I had that in my subconscious and that is kind of limiting, don’t you think? When I told what I had expected she was kind. But the media has a lot to answer for and so do I.”

A number of things about these comments are interesting. Hilda was able to recognize what James and Shadd (2001) described as the personal or individual culpability of ignorance. Indeed, until we come to recognize our own complicity in perpetuating myths, even if subconsciously, little will substantively change (Lopes & Thomas, 2006). But Hilda also came to an understanding of the larger social picture, in this case the culpability of mainstream media, influenced heavily by ideological and economic interests, to instill stereotypical images that unconsciously govern what we expect to see. Indeed, Brookfield (2006) argued that ideological obfuscation is frequently so successful that the only way people will learn to perceive its existence is if it is actively brought to their attention. So while the dialogue



between the two women did not intentionally raise the issue of the media, it was a space of critical and active questioning.

### Questioning Gender

The common refrain that “women have already attained equality so feminism is no longer needed” (Taber & Gouthro, 2006, p. 59) makes it easy to forget how problematic social constructions continue to inform how we understand women. As noted, the majority of Books and Readers were women, but this does not automatically translate into a feminist consciousness or framing. Yet there were many critical conversations about gender. Lorna spoke of how her time with the woman from the sex trade organization changed her views of this population: “It was so fascinating how she talked about prostitutes. She talked about [their need for] food, shelter, health, and safety, things we all want, so they are no different. It was very different from the moralizing way I have been accustomed to hearing sex trade workers talked about. You see, I am even calling them workers!” As Freire argued, dialogue “is something fundamental to the process of becoming a human being” (cited in Rule, 2004, p. 323) and we would add in this case, to seeing others as human.

Other male and female Readers talked about being “dazed” and “intrigued” by discussions on everything from gender roles and masculinity to women, aging, and sexuality, leading Patrick to state, “I was a bit surprised by this, but in a good way. It [gender] is not something you get to talk about every day.” It may not be, but of course it should be. However, what Patrick called attention to is the lack of intentional non-formal adult education spaces and activities that raise issues of gender, that allow for women to speak for themselves and to challenge sexist stereotypes. For some of the older women who came as Readers, such as Anita, the dialogue was empowering:

She asked to think about “what is beautiful and what part of me is beautiful?” We know what is beautiful because we see it on the advertisements every night and it’s not me [laughs]. It [the conversation] was strange, embarrassing but actually, I’m not quite sure how to describe it. Perhaps fulfilling is the word, but it was more than that.

There are two important things here. The first is that words such as *strange* and *a bit embarrassing* speak to a lack of comfort or familiarity with hearing unsafe ideas, which speaks to a lack of opportunity for dialogue. The second is, of course, the plight of older women in society. Roy (2005) argued that adult educators need to better include the concerns and experiences of older women who are marginalized, excluded, and devalued in a world of anti-aging cosmetics, soaps, hair dyes, and treatments.

### Cultural Literacy

A primary role of an art gallery is to facilitate cultural dialogue regarding aesthetics, the role of the arts, and the place of artists in society. Including artists in the HL enabled what we came to see as cultural literacy, and this was manifest in a number of ways. Through her conversations with visual artists, Edna learned

how art can be used as a vehicle in terms of personal growth and to straddle two cultures. She [the artist] uses art to explore the cultural divide...She also talked about how art comes from adversity and has the

ability to make that visual in accessible ways. I am not an artist, so it was a whole new world for me. It was a whole new idea to see how she uses what she calls "art as life." I thought art was just art.

Building on this, perhaps the most misunderstood, maligned, and controversial art form is graffiti. Many municipal governments, in fact, have anti-graffiti departments. The inclusion of a very articulate graffiti artist as a Book provided a unique cultural learning opportunity, with many interviewees using words such as "astonished," "gobsmacked," and "mind-expanding" in terms of how

he...challenged my preconceived ideas about graffiti. I didn't have any idea that graffiti was about the image and not just the word. And to be honest I did not see art in it. Yet he called himself a "graffiti writer," so it is complex. When he talked about the history of graffiti, it had never occurred to me anyone would know the history. (Lydia)

Edith, too, spoke of the new side of graffiti that she had been introduced to, which moved her from "thinking they [graffiti artists] are a bunch of idiots" to this:

He talked about the fact that for him graffiti is a political act – it is about making a political statement. He talked about the fact that by putting his writing on the wall he was claiming that wall. This practice is about saying, "I am here." He compared it to advertising on billboards. They pay for that space and there it is in front of you and you are not given the option of it being there. So why should graffiti, street art, not have the same rights to claim public space? He is also not ever paid to do what he does. He does it for political and artistic reasons. We need a space for art and for people to express themselves.

Again we see here a melding of the person and the social – a change in an assumption about the intrinsic value of graffiti, but also a questioning of something beyond, of who has the aesthetic right to the public sphere.

Yet in spite of the inclusion of artists and the powerful learning about art, a number of Readers remained perplexed that the gallery would host the HL. Many questioned the relationship between this event and the role of the gallery: "I was not sure what the gallery wanted to get out of this project. They have to decide how it fits with their mandate I guess. But maybe I don't know what their mandate really is? I thought it was to show art," said one Reader. To be fair, the term *library* stands in marked contrast to the visual-arts orientation of the art gallery. However, it also brings us back to Hooper-Greenhill's (2007) notions of a confused public unclear of the educational role these institutions are meant to play. And of course many of these institutions are unclear as well about what they should be doing. Addressing social issues is new, and they are very much, to borrow from the poet Antonio Machado, making the road by walking. But more complex and perhaps problematic is the fact that the majority who challenged the legitimacy of this type of event were artists. It is perhaps their preconceived notions of what a gallery should be doing that will cause the most friction.

Yet many Books and Readers, whether they completely comprehended the HL or not, overwhelmingly endorsed it, talking about how it

made me think about the gallery differently. It is not just about art topics. It is very diverse in terms of its educational work. I like that. I thought it was just about art. But this is an innovative service to the public. It was a neat idea...this is the kind of activity an art gallery should be doing. (Angela)

Confused the public may be, but this openness to radical practices as part of a gallery's mandate is a good sign for the future.

### Picturing Identity

Although the portraiture exhibition was to play a major role in the HL event, this was relatively unsuccessful. Approximately 90% of Readers did not understand there was a link between the HL and the exhibition, as this comment illustrates: "I thought the portraits were proposed as something to do while you were waiting on your next Book. It was nice it was free, though" (Sharon). In later interviews several participants said they wished someone had helped them, because "I just walked through but I had no idea what to think about what I was looking at" (Claire).

A volunteer educator took people on interpretive tours through the portraiture exhibition. When we asked the five people who had actually taken the tour if the educator had made a connection between the HL and the portraits, all stated she had not, and Catherine actually questioned whether she even knew "there was one, or does she just do this [the tour] all the time and so does what she does?" When we questioned the volunteer educator about making the link, she stated she had her "own way of doing tours, and I have been doing this for many years." We took this to mean that, although she was aware of the HL, she had decided against changing her routine. This is not surprising, given Grenier's (2007) findings that volunteer gallery educators were often instructed to update their education practices, but that many continued to rely on traditional methods. But we must also recognize that these educators are volunteers and question how much can be asked of them. This disconnection does not mean Readers were unappreciative of the tour, as many did appreciate it; however, this statement by Ian reflects a common feeling: "I did not get too much out of the portrait stuff. She did not help me to bond with it, and not with the Books part at all."

Building on this, Elizabeth made an interesting comment about the portraits and the Books: "The Books had soul. The portraits do too. But most people don't know how to read the soul in a painting. Most educators don't know how to educate about the soul of a painting. That was true today." Indeed, Howells (2003) and Clover (2012) recognized that, although we are surrounded and bombarded by visual images, we are seldom taught to read them, and we need to begin in earnest to pay remedial attention to visual literacy. And there was a suggestion of how this could happen in the gallery next time:

They should put the Books amongst the artworks. They [the conversations with Books] were in an empty room with one person talking to another. It [the HL] could have been anywhere since it was not linked to the exhibitions. I mean, you've got Emily Carr [a BC visual artist] who is a larger-than-life personality. That woman had an amazing identity – well,

identities. Imagine a conversation with a burlesque dancer or forester with her [Emily's] artwork surrounding you! (Lydia)

This is an important point we will raise later in this article.

### **Control, Confrontation, and Skill**

There were two risky confrontations at the HL. The first was between a Zen Buddhist nun and an elderly Reader, Charlotte, whose brother had been a Catholic priest. Charlotte demanded they move from the space where all the Books and Readers were to a different area, and the conversation we observed seemed quite heated, although the nun never became angry or flustered. What we discovered in our interview with Charlotte was a person who had internalized the enforced paranoia characteristic of this post-September 11 world. Indeed, her broad sweep of all religions into her framework of distrust and hatred mimicked media and government messages we have all been subject to: "Well, we have to be wary of these other religions. They want to destroy our way of life. They are jealous of what we have." However, in the brief interview we were able to have with Charlotte she acknowledged the nun seemed "a kind and caring sort of person."

The second confrontation, not surprisingly, involved the graffiti artist. Similarly, he was forced to change location to accommodate the visibly hostile Jane, whom the Book felt came "from a place of real resentment and preconceived ideas and judgments." However, after 30 minutes of conversation the Book felt "we were able to both challenge each other a bit. At the end I felt good and we agreed more discussion was needed on the topic and that this [the HL] was a good opportunity." Jane admitted she belonged to a group who cleaned up graffiti and had come to the gallery with "an agenda. I wanted to find out just what he thought he was up to!" Her explanation, however, of the outcome of her dialogue with the artist illustrates a major and important shift: "[My understandings] greatly expanded. I learned from his point of view about graffiti art. He said things I had not expected. I am thinking on how to bring the community [her group] and graffiti artists together [because] the community needs to understand who graffiti artists are and why they do that."

These confrontations illustrate the HL as a space of struggle, of power and control, of aggression and patience, and of skill and movement. The images burned into the mind of the elderly Charlotte control her ability to see beyond her own fear and delusion and propel her to confront "the other." However, as Newman (2006) argued, "all we have is the present, a moment in which we can choose, in which we can either give in to our pasts or face up and deal with...our futures" (p. 6). The shift to seeing the Zen nun as human – and this is also applicable to the graffiti artist – speaks to the ability of the HL to be that moment, but also to the nun's skill to defuse the situation by being what Newman called "in control of the moment" (p. 5).

### **A Sense of Education**

The HL is in many ways a pedagogical process, a dialogic space of encounter. But is this how the Books and Readers would describe it? When asked what pedagogical sense they made of the HL, participants mustered arguments for and against. Firstly, and not surprisingly, we found the conventional perception of education: "When I think of education it is linked to school [or maybe] job training and not about just having a conversation with someone.

So I would have to say no, I don't make sense of this as education" (Denise). This implies that dialogue, the very basis of the HL, is not "real" education. Linda gave us a glimpse into what she considered real education to be when she talked about her interaction with the organic farmer: "She gave me lots of facts and figures and information. Some of the others just talked about their lives; about how they came to be where they are and what beliefs they held. So, to me, the farmer was the only teacher." In a later interview the organic farmer described her identity as an educator like this: "Yes, I am an educator. I just tell them like it is and if you want to know more here are some websites, books, authors... just read Vandana Shiva and your life will change. There are a lot of misconceptions about food security out there." This comment raises a number of issues. The first is about the notion of expertise. On one hand, when it comes to social justice, educators need to use what Freire and Macedo (1995) called their "knowledge authority." The organic farmer was clearly knowledgeable, able to deconstruct environmental myths and provide a different perspective on the world. However, the exchange between this Book and the Readers reinforced many narrow conceptions of education.

Yet there were cracks as a few others' descriptions and understandings of education stood in marked contrast. For example, Gwen defined education as "a mutual exchange... a conversation... a dialogue and [seeing the world] from a different point of view, respectfully. I do not know how change happens, but I know it is not simply by providing people with information about something." Other Readers described the HL process as "learning and teaching through a conversation. They really encouraged me to ask questions even though it worried me a bit to do this. That is education, or at least it should be" (Lydia). These types of understandings of adult education respond to Smith's (n.d.) notion that "to educate is to set out to create and sustain informed, hopeful and respectful environments where learning can flourish. It is concerned not just with knowing about things, but also with changing ourselves, and the world we live in" (p. 1).

### **Implications and Final Thoughts**

The HL had a decidedly positive impact on both Readers and Books. Although not without its problems, it was a space of consciousness, an opportunity to trouble simplistic views of "the other," expand cultural and social literacies, and, in the case of the graffiti artist and the woman from the "cleansing group," spur ideas for action, something Allman (2001) believes is critical to authentic dialogue. Given the nature of this case study we do not want to draw any hard and fast conclusions or make any generalizations. Rather, we offer here a discussion of the implications of this project for social change-oriented adult education work in this gallery.

The fact that the majority of Readers were Caucasian and well-educated is a concern. If the aim of the art gallery and the HL was to attract a more culturally diverse population, this event was unable to do so. The lack of ethnic and class diversity does little to quell lingering charges of elitism that plague public art galleries, whether, as Janes (2009) argued, this is founded or otherwise. However, we must acknowledge that it was the first occasion of an event like this and it did attract many non-artists and younger adults. We should also view this event through the maxim "dig where you stand." Where the art gallery stands, whether they wish to or not, is still on the cusp of elitism, and this can be seen as an advantage. Few social institutions have such critical access to the middle and upper classes. This is

a powerful group of people who influence society both consciously and unconsciously and perpetuate the stereotypes, othering, and ignorance the HL aims to test. As Ferguson claims, "Compassion, generosity, solidarity and sensitivity to others are crucial values; that they are more often found in the oppressed than among the oppressors indicates that it is the dominant social order that devalues these traits and distorts them to serve the interests of the powerful" (cited in Lopes & Thomas, 2006, p. 21). This does not mean the gallery should not seek to reach out to a more diverse population, and it is trying to do so with events like this. But it does acknowledge the unique educational niche this institution can play in the pursuit of social change by working with this privileged population in this very unconventional way.

The HL provided an interesting balance between the two somewhat paradoxical things adult and cultural educators call for to address difficult social issues such as bias. Although some argue there are no safe places, the HL provided a feeling of safety in which to articulate and challenge one's own and others' assumptions. On the other hand, it was a space of discomfort and confrontation full of unsafe ideas. Indeed, the HL invited a relatively large group of people to step into the unfamiliar – both in terms of people and artworks – into what Newman (2006) called the challenging but "magical mix of the rational and non-rational, the telling of stories" (p. 3). To this we add the asking of questions. People came knowing they would have to ask questions and that this would show their ignorance; they came knowing they would hear stories that were very different from their own. The question, then, is do people simply want to remain comfortably in their bias, their ignorance, or do they in fact want to be challenged to learn? Is ignorance simply a shortcoming on people's part or is it a lack of these types of adult education opportunities? We argue that in this case it is the latter and suggest the gallery has a critical role to play in continuing with this type of activity or something similar. Yet we need to be cautious of what Black (2012) called "being torn in all directions," which constructs arts institutions as "unable to define for themselves their own role, let alone broadcast this to their potential audiences" (p. 4). The art gallery is confident in its self-vision as a cultural space for critical learning and reflection; however, there is work to be done to convince the public, particularly artists. The physical distance between the HL proper and the portraiture exhibition did not assist this. Falk & Dierking (2000) suggest that "physical context" is important and has an impact on learning. The physical separation reinforced the distance between the concepts of books and visual arts, between the dialogic activity and the viewing. Although we recognize there are issues around the safety and protection of the art, there may also be an unconscious understanding of keeping the art beyond instrumentality (Tiller, 2013). The gallery will need to think this through in the future if it aims to truly cross borders and open new possibilities for art in the eyes of artists and the community.

With the courage and broad vision to host an activity like the HL, the art gallery demonstrated a far greater social value than we believe is currently realized in British Columbia. We concur with Janes (2009) that if "something is worth doing, it is worth doing [less well] until you can do it well" (p. 19). This type of critical, social activity is definitely something worth doing, and the art gallery is to be commended and encouraged to continue to push conventional constraints and probe our humanness, to create a critical adult education space of discomfort in the interest of social justice and change.

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