Discerning the Human Rights Museum

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically engages with the growth of cultural actions among governments, urban policymakers, and various kinds of cultural institutions to find ways to translate human rights into accessible ideas and practices for the public. Researchers have noted an increasing interest in the utility of “cultural well-being” for promulgating a common understanding of rights in conflict-ridden times. An important type of relevant project seen in the last three decades is the construction of human rights museums. As a public cultural institution, a “human rights museum” (HRM) is defined in this paper as one that engages in collecting and curatorial exhibition of artifacts with a threefold mission to educate/advocate for the mainstreaming of rights, memorialize past events of trauma, and engender a legal common sense. This definition is consistent with the International Council of Museums’ general definition, according to the ICOM Statutes (adopted in 2007). Added to this generality are two important dimensions pursuant to HRMs, namely their relation to cultural governance and to human rights sociolegal norms. In this paper, I introduce a “juris-cultural” theoretical approach and use it to chart a conceptual framework for discerning the social, cultural, and political role played by HRMs in their vision of social memorialization and cultural transformation.

Keywords: Cultural Governance, Human Rights Museums, Legal Common Sense, Juris-cultural Approach

I. INTRODUCTION

“The work of museums is changing, radically. As the global rise of museums and museum networks dedicated to the subject of human rights over the past few decades has confirmed, museums can be beneficial to the dialog and ongoing negotiation of human rights between civil society and government institutions,” remarked Carter and Orange (2012, p. 2111). Indeed, environmental damage, immigration, identity-based struggles, and social justice, minority rights, among others, are pressing contemporary problems that are changing the foundational roles of museums. Both opportunity and risk, the work of human rights museums (HRMs) as a special type of cultural institution would need to develop their ethical sensibilities carefully, as their work will affect the human rights of future generations (Duffy, 2001; Murphy, 2016).

The cry of “never again” (Hamber, 2012) has now built international networks of museums through an increasingly transnational flow of memorial museum aesthetics and design, professional skills of museum management, urban policy development, etc. that reflects the global, transcultural nature of this kind of museums. Supporters of HRMs have indeed banded together to form the Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM) since 2010. The origins of its institutional partners range from established to newer democracies in post-conflict societies, such as the South African Holocaust and Genocide Foundation, which runs Holocaust centers in Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg. Led by the National Museums Liverpool under the directorship of David Fleming, FIHRM is an international initiative with over two dozen partners and supporters in five continents (https://www.fihrm.org/).

Yet long ago, Tony Bennett warned us in his important book The Birth of Museums (1995) that the public museum should be understood not just as a place of instruction, but as a reformatory of conduct in which a wide range of regulated social routines and performances take place. Drawing on the Foucauldian perspective, Bennett places the modern museum at the centre of modern relations between culture and government (Bennett, 2005). In this way, if HRMs exist to educate and memorialize past atrocities, how will they negotiate with the political conduct of the government, and with how that government wants to manage public memories?
HRMs matter, precisely because they are constructed with one foot on the people’s side, and the other on the government’s. Scholars have coined the term museums of negative memory (or museums of conscience) to call attention to historical trauma that these museums focus on (Assmann & Schwarz, 2013; Halpin, 2007; Hamber, 2012; Opotow, 2011, 2011b; Sandell, 2017; Sevcenko, 2002; Williams, 2008). Instead of celebrating achievements of the past, they memorialize histories of marginalization, injustice, violence, and violations of human rights; in doing so, they attempt to enjoin governments and peoples in a kind of social contract that prevents the trampling of the people’s basic rights. Amy Sodaro in her book Exhibiting Atrocities (2018) places memorial museums as part of the ever-growing trend of “dark tourism,” reflecting a significant shift in the late twentieth century in how societies, nations, and groups memorialize past violence. From the United States, Australia, and Taiwan to Cambodia, Uruguay, Chile, South Africa, and Israel, memorial museums reveal the truth about the past and seek to harness the perceived power of memory to heal communities and promote reconciliation.

To date, a holistic framework for discerning the role of the HRMs for cultural governance and social transformation does not exist. This paper attempts to bring together the insights of critical museum studies, cultural studies, and legal theory to attempt to chart a conceptual framework that is capable of addressing several key questions. While these questions are not exhaustive, they should adequately reflect the concerns of museum practitioners who have had to face the task of developing HRMs that are nestled in complex historical, political, and cultural geographic contexts:

- How do HRMs articulate, manage, and execute their visions of social memorialization and cultural transformation, if not reparation?
- How does the underlying universalistic impulse of human rights form a sociopolitical framework that impels the work of HRMs?
- What legal norms and mandates do they attempt to meet in order to help shift nations and groups toward a justice-oriented and “truth-telling” understanding of past violence?
- What political issues inform the museological practices employed by the HRMs?
- What are the consequences of seeing HRMs not as separate entities, but as an interconnected assemblage of a cultural force capable of speaking to shared atrocities?

Overall, the conceptual framework to be developed in this paper is centered on the effectiveness of the HRMs’ utility of culture to deliver social benefits to the public and how (or whether) their capacity to do so can be increased.

II. THE “JURIS-CULTURAL” APPROACH TO HRMs

A fundamental reality of the HRMs has to do with the way they are entangled in the relationship between a jurisprudence of past trauma and a modern public memorialization project. Put in another way, HRMs are squarely caught between law and culture. Because of the ambiguity of the place of politics in the HRMs – after all, governments are hypersensitive about how these museums portray the problems of state power, old and new – they must learn to strategically develop along the law/culture axis.

Indeed, there are compelling arguments to say that conceptually separating law from culture is absurd. Law is not something that exists outside of culture and hence must be included in it. Law is culture, a set of experiences, and a collection of institutions and practices that are inextricably linked to the larger structures from which they originate. Yet, in some ways, the very concept of culture, especially as it is articulated in cultural studies, lends itself to standing aside from, scrutinizing, and criticizing, law (Erni, 2010, 2011, 2012). We must expand on the idea of the inseparability of law and culture and investigate various conceptualizations of law and culture's mutual composition.

Raymond Williams (1983) famously labeled culture “one of the two or three most difficult words in the English language” when speaking in genealogical terms that have become familiar conceptions in cultural studies (p.87). Clifford Geertz (1973) adds, “culture is a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without” (p.10). Culture is essentially an ever-changing term since it is susceptible to situations, indicating meanings, and activities. The same may be said of the legal system: it is complex and highly tainted. According to Peter Fitzpatrick (2005), law is “a moving horizon—the horizon both as a condition and quality of law’s contained existence, and the horizon as opening onto all that lies beyond this existence” (p.9).

Menachem Mautner (2011) lists nine types of entanglements between law and culture from the perspective of legal scholarship, including the law and anthropology approach, law and development, the legal system as a distinct cultural system, intellectual property law, the historical school in seeing law as national culture, the legal culture approach, law and multiculturalism, law as constitutive of social relations, the legal consciousness approach, the law and popular culture approach, legal branches/doctrines that
constitute the law/culture nexus, and law as an autopoietic system. The law and literature approach, the law and social movement approach, and the law and cultural studies approach might all be added to this list.

In fact, following the line of argument from Marx to Negri and Baxi, it is clear that the energy and creativity that give rise to a rethinking of law is always partly the result of socio-cultural and political interactions outside of the circuits of those legal institutions, rather than being directly engendered by formal legal innovations within the judiciary and law schools. Formal legal knowledge, in this view, must always feed off of this energy and creativity in order to transform itself into genuine legal capital, but it is not a direct source of legal worth in and of itself. This is perhaps a vital reason for HRMs to exist. It is likely that the law must enable the cultural zones marked by HRMs to exist to some extent; the former requires the latter’s “change laboratory” to survive. Indeed, courts and tribunals have increasingly mandated the establishment of museums as part of the remedial package in settlement agreements concerning mass human rights violations, recognizing the social value of museums engaged in practices of archiving and memorializing past human rights abuses, as well as educating subsequent generations on human rights law and best practices. Let us explore this more deeply.

III. TRANSLATING LAW INTO HRMS: TOWARD A LEGAL COMMON SENSE

HRMs are cultural institutions in a concrete way: they are often created in accordance with human rights legal norms or mandates (Orange, 2016; Ulph, 2015). A clear example is the prevalence in museums of linking the Holocaust to human rights and genocide awareness as a response to various legally-derived motivations, including, for instance, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights report on Holocaust and Human Rights Education; the Committee on Conscience of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM); the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research, etc. In all these cases, attempts had been made to build museums so as to strengthen a broad, common legal consciousness surrounding genocide in general, and the Holocaust in particular.

In her essay “Translating Law into Practice: Museums and a Human Rights Community of Practice,” Jennifer Orange (2016) points out that although states, as well as transnational legal bodies, have agreed to an impressive array of international human rights law in the form of treaties and declarations for over 70 years, the way that these laws impact local communities is inconsistent. Increasingly, legal norms and mandates are linked to HRMs in a direct way: the former has initiated the latter in order to search for ways to change values, norms, and practices of human rights in everyday lives. Orange uses the community of practice framework to demonstrate how museums are forming communities to support practices that aim to improve the human rights legal common sense around questions of marginality.

A “legal common sense” evokes mutually recognized standards of behaviour in a community and is something that is established, strengthened, and disseminated among communities so as to help them learn and reinforce legal norms both locally and globally (de Sousa Santos, 2002). Orange adds: “By engaging in specific human rights practices and interacting with other authoritative communities, museums are purposefully and inadvertently influencing legal norms” (p.710). Indeed, because courts and tribunals have recognized the social value of museums engaged in practices of archiving and memorializing past human rights abuses, as well as educating subsequent generations on human rights law and best practices, they have increasingly mandated the establishment of museums as part of the remedial package in settlement agreements concerning mass human rights violations.

For instance, the Museo de la Memoria y Los Derechos Humanos (the Museum of Memory and Human Rights) (MMDH) in Santiago, Chile, was built in part as a result of a recommendation made by a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (known as the “Valech Commission”) was established to document the crimes that occurred under the Pinochet regime from 1973 to 1990. The Valech Commission recommended reparations to individuals and families, as well as collective symbolic measures. The MMDH was supported as one of these measures (Andermann, 2012; Estefane, 2013; Frazier, 1999, 2007; Hite & Collins, 2009; Opotow, 2015). The District Six Museum in South Africa is another example of how museums can support the practice of initiating legal claims (Rabley, 2008). The Land Restitution Act under South Africa’s new constitution became the legal mechanism through which people could return to the homes from which they had been removed. Researchers show us that the museum provided space for community gatherings as an institutional partner for the District Six Beneficiary Trust and the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform which orchestrated the legal process of land restitution and the Land Claims Commission.

Therefore, studies of HRMs can approach the question of the relation between these museums and the popularizing of “legal common sense” by asking, for instance: How have museums helped to realize some legal goals and recommendations issued by courts? (e.g., the National Human Rights Museum in Taiwan was established as a direct result of the National Human Rights Act passed by the country’s Legislative
Yuan in 2017, see “Taiwan,” 2017, 2018). How have they used their archival expertise to support the evidentiary work of legal investigations of rights abuse, e.g. performed by truth and reconciliation commissions or domestic and international criminal tribunals? Have they been created as memorial sites themselves where legal tribunals did their work, by becoming a placed-based visual and documentary archive of the tribunals’ work even after the latter’s legal work has been completed? (E.g. the Sierra Leone Peace Museum is an example of a museum that stands after the tribunal closed. It was a project of the government of Sierra Leone and the Special Court for Sierra Leone, which was established to adjudicate crimes against civilians that occurred during the decade-long civil war).

Legal anthropology scholar Rosemary Coombe (1998) reminds us that law-and-society scholarship has long looked closely at law in everyday life, in quotidian practices of struggle, and in consciousness itself. She cites sociological studies scholars Austin Sarat and Tom Kearns as saying that “a focus on law in everyday life can help to bridge the gap between so-called ‘constitutive’ and ‘instrumentalist’ views of the law, providing a powerful means by which everyday is understood and experienced, but also a tool that enables people to imagine and effect social change” (as cited in Coombe, 1998, p. 34).

Therefore, by “juris-cultural,” I mean a type of critical cultural analysis that looks into the mutually constitutive nature of law and culture by dissecting “law as culture,” in which cultural signifying practices can be traced back to the presence or absence of legal norms, and “culture as law,” in which contested meanings of cultural communities, their practices, and politics can shape or even dictate social norms and regulations. The label “juris-cultural” aims to create a language that avoids dividing law and culture while confronting their awkward entanglements. It is hoped that this theoretical language will be useful, as it is worth considering what this theorizing could mean for the legal scholarship that deals with the complexities of society, history, economics, and culture, as well as what cultural studies could do for legal studies (Erni, 2011, 2019). It is now feasible to frame the study of HRMs as a “juris-cultural studies,” within which we can consider HRMs as sites of law, which enact the very signifying forms that constitute socially salient distinctions, adjudicate their meanings, and even provoke new practices through which the meanings of rights might be debated, even disrupted. Rather than being static establishments, HRMs are dynamic legal institutions in the quest for social influence.

With the juris-cultural approach, we may now approach HRMs as institutions that are conceptually constituted by a number of key juris-cultural factors, including (a) the underlying universalistic impulse of human rights beliefs, (b) the aesthetic and story-telling role in the museological practices, and (c) the interlinked nature of HRMs as possible regional formations for a comparative understanding of shared atrocities and conflicts. Let us explore each in detail.

IV. THE “RIGHTS TALK” IN THE HRMS: CONFRONTING THE BAGGAGE OF UNIVERSALISM

Visitors of HRMs are commonly introduced to the subject of human rights through the familiar narratives of rights as a global and universalistic world order. But interestingly, what is most desired to achieve during the growth of human rights as the high-order moral and political language of modern life turned out to be what tormented it the most. Much of the public understanding of the subject is motivated by a critique of the widespread globalism and universalism of human rights.

Human rights’ aspirational power, the power to set in motion the potentiality of “civilization” for all of humankind, maybe the one key political capital provided to it in order to make it a feasible modernity project. Globalism and universalism are the two primary variations of human rights, both of which are motivated by an aspirational framework that attempts to reanimate international relations, the law, and civic life in general as part of a desirable common human destiny. They are the primary theses for uniting the world around a shared philosophical and political perspective. The proponents of the human rights universalism thesis focus on the concept of a “shared inheritance of humanity.” This very thesis is ensured for HRMs insofar as an aspirational imaginary is created by the museums as the driving force behind their wish to make the world more civic, cosmopolitan, and compassionate.

In his book Freedom in the Ancient World (1961), historian Herbert J. Muller claims that early law codes, written or unwritten, conferred a sense of freedom through shared obligations such as respect for religion and authority, bourgeois property ownership, protection of the vulnerable, and so on. Obligations were demanded through systems of punishments in these standards of behavior. It is worth noting that these early notions are supposed to foreshadow democratic principles of justice, which HRMs enthusiastically support. When universalism is couched in the context of humanity’s common heritage, it advances rather thick archaeology that spans ancient Egyptian scriptures, the Code of Hammurabi of ancient Babylon, the hymns of the Vedic religion in the Middle Kingdoms, the pantheistic religions of India, the scrolls of writing by early Jewish prophets, the doctrines of Islam, and the many philosophical teachings of the Greeks, the Arabs, the Chinese, to name a few. The point is that the HRMs often embrace the historians, jurists, and political proponents of modern human rights, who frequently consider themselves as the ones who preserve
the heritages that provide the concepts, rules, and inspirations for a long journey toward the formation of contemporary human rights for all humanity.

To put it in another way, what appears to be universalistic is actually the result of a lengthy and windy route of universalization. Defenders of human rights universalism would not be opposed to admitting that one of the hallmarks of human rights is a history of “pan-culturalism,” which seeks to unite Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, Catholicism, and Christianity (e.g., Laqueur & Rubin, 1989; Ramcharan, 2015). This understanding of human rights, from connectedness to commonality to universalism, once again helps to explain its defining ethos as an ambitious humanist enterprise.

However, as previously stated, aspirationalism is the foundation for haunting human rights. Human rights are accused by critics of masking political dominance and imperial aggression under the pretense of pan-culturalism, or the so-called “shared heritage of humanity.” They claim that even when human rights are viewed as a legacy of religious pluralism and unconventional political practices, they end up bolstering Eurocentrism, which tramples on other modernization attempts outside of Western modernity.

The pan-cultural heritage is thus seen as a pretext for a dramatic compression of humankind into a universal imaginary, that of a particularistic European cultural and political order. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) has pointed out that the question of the universality of human rights belies the universality of what it questions by the way it questions it because the notion of universality is a particular question, a Western cultural question (p.12). The charge of this made by some Asian nations in the “Asian values debate” is well recognized. I won’t rehash the Asian values argument here; nevertheless, readers can discover much writing on how the issue elicits, among other things, the never-ending dispute over cultural particularism and cultural relativism. The entanglements of human rights cultural politics today include how and when cultural particularism and cultural relativism are utilized as weapons against universalism, for what political purposes, and against whose cultures they are leveraged. The political consequences of these entanglements are difficult to predict because there is a wide range of so-called political settlements in specific cultural debates of rights, ranging from progressive anti-imperialism tendencies on one end to regressive re-imperialization tendencies on the other.

There are numerous important questions to consider in the context of HRMs. How can we foster cultural relativity in human rights without degrading it to relativism in human rights? How can we establish a sense of “balance” in the museums between a global, aspirational, and universalistic validity of rights and legitimacy of rights that is local, complex, and sociologically grounded? What might a notion of “comparative cultural isomorphism” look like in the museums, one that, given enough hermeneutical methods, could make some common human rights issues translatable, and therefore legible, across cultural and political systems?

V. THE MUSEOLOGICAL PRACTICES OF HRMS

Fundamentally, HRMs represent human rights triumphs and failures primarily through story-telling. Likening the attendance of an HRM as a “type of pilgrimage to a scared landscape,” art historian Louise Purbrick (2011) observes that representations of human rights violations can lead visitors to feel helpless as such events are inevitably in the past, too late for visitors to take reparative action. Yet, the exhibition narrative often addresses visitors as if they were jurors learning details of what happened. Visitors can therefore respond by developing their interpretive and empathic connection to the victims. In this way, museum practices can help to forge an intellectually and affectively inclusionary orientation among the visitors toward people who were excluded, harmed, and unjustly killed in the past. Thus, we need to examine closely the HRMs’ museological techniques in engendering the desired moral responses. For instance, how do they create their exhibitions that offer historical evidence of acts and events such as violent events, the passage of laws, and their effects? What interpretive strategies are encouraged of the visitors through exhibition narratives illustrated with selected archival documents, images, and objects? How do these narratives help to clarify the historical trajectory of inclusion/exclusion, regulation/emancipation, etc.? How do the roles of curators and historians differ or converge with the views and feelings of community members?

Indeed, over the last twenty years or so, museums have tried to forge new relationships with their public by problematizing issues and encouraging visitor reflection (Busby et al., 2015; Dean, 2013; Frazier, 1999). To some, political agendas have come to the fore, such as a commemorative museum that memorializes atrocities, or an activism-oriented one with an agenda to combat racism and other sorts of prejudice. Some of them are not easily commensurable agendas (e.g. Adams, 2011; Opotow, 2011a). But there are examples of reconciliation, such as the Caen–Normandy Memorial for History and Peace in France and the Beit Hashloah Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

However, researchers speak of a strange phenomenon of “memory competition.” This arises when different groups vie for strong memorialization of their trauma and compete for significance. Some scholars
who study intersectionality politics have even coined the provocative terms “Oppression Olympics,” “victimization Olympics,” or “memory wars” to describe the intergroup competition and victimhood whereby groups are pitted in a morbid competition over historical oppressions (e.g. Hancock, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2012). The Canadian Museum of Human Rights (CMHR), for instance, experienced a troubling period of criticism made by various immigrant community leaders who struggle for adequate recognition in the museum (Adams, 2011; Moses, 2012; Hankivsky & Dhamoon, 2013; Busby et al., 2015). These leaders tend to invest their groups with “primacy of memory,” so that they view their histories ontologically, as more significant bearers of human rights and memory than others. There is, then, the difficulty of combining atrocity memorialization with human rights education/activism, in an entrenched culture of identity politics. The CMHR became a lightning rod for competing for claim-making on the stories of suffering and victimization by the Indigenous people, Chinese and Ukrainian immigrants in Canada, and Jews, Armenians, and Rwandans abroad (Basen, 2011; Busby et al., 2015). Moreover, this “memory competition” intensifies in debates about a government-sponsored Holocaust or genocide section of the CMHR ever since the 1990s. Therefore, special attention should be paid to scrutinizing how the management of HRMs works through and negotiate with various stakeholders in the community.

Working with HRMs as a group across the transpacific region, this project will also be able to think through linkages, especially among immigrant groups and their rights struggles, from the pacific countries through North and South Americas. Besides the politics of “memory competition,” what other anxieties exist in museum practice and how can they productively lead museum organizers and operators to develop a rupture in practice and theory?

VI. THE INTER-LINKAGES OF HRMs

HRMs should be seen as networked institutions because by joining hands, they share human-focused stories more powerfully, and mobilize transnational sentiments for cultural diversity more effectively. So, the final conceptual call for HRMs is to map them as a geographical assemblage, and through it, to theorize networked memories of rights struggles. I will take the transpacific region and some of the key museums in the region as an example.

In discussions about trade and geopolitics, the importance of a critical understanding of transnational rights – the changing meanings, values, and identities that shape people and groups in mobility due to military conflicts, migration, and other geopolitical and economic changes – is often side-stepped. But the recent discord over international trade surrounding the now-defunct Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) makes explicit the necessity and timeliness for a “gateway” region to play an impactful role in shaping the region’s understanding of human rights struggles. Dynamics of rights influence societal attitudes: from how citizens treat new migrants and refugees to whether there is public support for geopolitical alliances and cross-cultural connections (Newman et al., 2005). Moreover, it is often in the cultural sense of human rights where potentially controversial social issues from racial justice to gender and sexual diversity gain initial exposure. Such exposure leads to mainstream visibility and broad awareness and debates that, in turn, can create the conditions for inclusive public policies and social innovations starting in cities of countries and then spreading across a region.

To take Canada as an example of an important country in the transpacific region, a 2012 report from Citizenship and Immigration Canada projects that by 2031, 59% of the population of the gateway city of Vancouver will be “visible minorities” who are predominantly Chinese, South Asians, Filipinos, Koreans and West Asians (Hiebert, 2012). Vancouver’s School Board successfully implemented a leading-edge sexual orientation and gender identity inclusion (SOGI) policy which is now being widely adopted in other municipalities in the province. This successful mainstreaming of social inclusion should not be taken for granted, considering the long history of exclusionary practices in the province of British Columbia: from the Komagata Maru incident in 1914 when South Asia migrants were denied entry, to the imposition of a head tax on Chinese migrants leading to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923, to the dispossession and internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II, to the banning of books depicting same-sex intimacy by a municipal school board in 1997. The city’s remarkable emergence from a history of discrimination to become a so-called “model inclusive city” owes in no small part to its cultural landscape, which includes rights-inflected Asian Canadian cultural activism, vibrant culture of film and many other creative practices, and importantly, vocal support to the construction of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in nearby Winnipeg.

Other important nations and their key cities along the transpacific corridor have similar histories of transformation on their citizens’ rights consciousness due to the impact brought about by various kinds of cultural and political responses, including the making of archives, libraries, and museums. Melbourne and Perth in Australia, Wellington in New Zealand, Guangju and Seoul in South Korea, New Taipei City in Taiwan, Santiago in Chile, Bogota in Colombia, Los Angeles and San Francisco on the west coast U.S.,
and so on and so forth: these represent important cities dotting the transpacific region. Some are connected through rough episodes of discriminatory and exclusionary government policies against immigrants, refugees, and political dissidents; many went through waves of racism, xenophobia, and homophobia as they experienced social and economic changes; and most share dark histories and memories of colonialism, the Pacific War, and the Cold War. Within this region, some of the important HRMs include the Immigration Museum Melbourne (Melbourne, Australia, 1998), the National Human Rights Museum (New Taipei City, Taiwan, 2018), the War & Women’s Human Rights Museum (Seoul, South Korea, 2012), The Museum of Memory and Human Rights (Santiago, Chile, 2010), The Beit Hashloah Museum of Tolerance (Los Angeles, USA, 1993), the Canadian Museum of Human Rights (Winnipeg, Canada, 2014), and so on. Some of these museums are pioneers before the current trend of memorial museums. Together, they address a unique set of human rights issues that shape the transpacific region, in particular immigration, resistance movements, gender, and sexual mobilities, indigenous issues, and the Cold War.

It is possible to investigate the local as well as the transnational cultural impact of HRMs in forming a kind of transpacific cosmopolitan citizenship stemming from rights consciousness. In doing so, this approach connects with the new vibrant field of Transpacific Cultural Studies (TCS). Briefly, the emergent field of TCS has been a direct response to the global developments concerning the circulation of people, capital, and ideas that has been theorized as a fundamental dimension of modernity (Appadurai, 1996) and critiqued for fostering economically unequal conditions (Sassen, 2014). It fosters interdisciplinary research on the impact of mobility on notions of identity, cultural belonging, rights, and community. The field builds on previous critical interrogations of how the “Pacific” has been variously imagined historically and in the contemporary world (Dirlik, 1998; Sakai & Yoo 2012; Wilson, 2000). The term transpacific was initially used in Yunte Huang’s (2008) study of Asian and North American literary encounters as a corollary to transatlantic, a well-known concept in works such as The Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993) that unsettles nationalist epistemologies and calls attention to histories of chattel slavery and racial capitalism. The field-defining anthology, Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field (Hoskins & Nguyen, 2014), uses transpacific to refer to a “history and pattern of flows across the Pacific” that signals “an inherently critical and often times oppositional approach” to political and economic uses of the term (3). More recent publications (Dürr & Schorch, 2016; Patterson, 2018; So, 2016; Yoneyama 2016; Wong 2018) and book series (Brill’s “Gendering the Trans-Pacific World”) attest to the timeliness and continual relevance of transpacific inquiries. However, while the field of TCS explicitly claims to attend to alternative histories and narratives that signal the possibilities of “collaborations, alliances, and friendships between subjugated, minoritized, and marginalized peoples who might fashion a counter-hegemony to the hegemony of the U.S., China, Japan, and other regional powers” (Hoskins & Nguyen, 2014, p. 3), the field has nonetheless been dominated by U.S.-based area studies scholarship. Researchers of HRMs in the transpacific, such as the ones mentioned above, will need to re-map TCS through an ambitious multi-country research protocol.

To briefly conclude, museum studies are often approached from an information and library science perspective, adopting a systems approach to analyze museums as dynamic organizations. The result is an understanding of museums as related to libraries, archives, and other information entities, emphasizing object-based learning in museums. But if museums are to continue to help us understand the past and navigate our future, then museum studies must engage critically with legal and cultural governance debates in local and global contexts. This paper has hopefully contributed to a reframing of museum studies as a field, by mobilizing a non-information-oriented, hybrid juris-cultural mode of analysis. For HRMs, the way they negotiate with the political conduct of governments and with how those governments want to manage public memories will critically depend on the detailed juris-cultural analysis made by the museums themselves.

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