

Please Do Not Touch. Into the Worlds of Museum Guards¹

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Figure 1: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON / Maman, Louise Bourgeois (1999) © Christa Nemnom

By means of oral history and research creation, this paper engages with typically unacknowledged personal narratives, particularly turning to National Gallery of Canada (NGC) museum guards. Rather than focusing on gender equity and racial diversity in exhibition programming and artist representation, my research delves into the less publicized realm of staffing, namely of security guards. Despite contributing to the operation of a national institution, the NGC guards' unique insights are rarely taken into account or given a voice. To begin to redress this lacuna, this paper presents three oral interviews that draw directly from the guards' perspectives and knowledge. Issues of diversity and visual representation arise, as do discussions around visitor patterns, curatorial decisions, and operational strategies. Stemming from the guards' stories, I then suggest two collaborative projects, curatorial and organizational, in an effort to provoke reflections on inclusive and progressive solutions to longstanding systems of marginalization within art museums.

Keywords: museum guards; Oral History; interviews; curatorial project; institutional critique.

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Introduction and Methodology

One of the biggest challenges faced by art museums in contemporary society is the persistent lack of diversity, representation, and inclusive histories in regard to exhibited works, programming, staffing, and administrative governance of the institutions. To this day, museums remain overwhelmingly European, White, and male-dominated. Yet, their unwavering authority as “guardians of art history and definers of aesthetic quality” (Becker, 1992: 5) reinforces their cultural and pedagogical role on an increasingly global scale, while also perpetuating conventional – and oppressive – social hierarchies (Golding, 2009: 3). Taking a closer look at gender equity and racial diversity in her 2019 book, *Diversity Counts: Gender, Race, and Representation in Canadian Art Galleries*, scholar Anne Dymond (University of Lethbridge, Alberta) presents an analytic and critical overview of the current situation of select large-scale Canadian galleries and museums. Her fascinating in-depth statistical studies uncover consistent patterns of exclusion throughout the history of renown Canadian institutions (Dymond, 2019: 87), highlighting in the process the intricate, intersectional nature of gender and race (Dymond, 2019: 64). While Dymond’s work focuses primarily on exhibition programming and artist representation, my research delves into a less publicized realm of the museum: that of staffing – specifically, as they will be referred to, museum guards.

As a national cultural institution, the National Gallery of Canada³ in Ottawa, Ontario aims to represent the diversity of cultures, peoples, and voices included within the vast geographical borders of Canada. As per the *Summary of the Corporate Plan for 2019-20 to 2023-24 and Operating and Capital Budgets for 2019-20*, the NGC expresses its vision as follows:

"The Gallery strives to provide Canadians with a sense of identity, and to foster pride in Canada’s rich visual-arts heritage. (...) Through collaboration with national and international institutions, it seeks to make art accessible, meaningful and vital to diverse audiences of all ages" (National Gallery of Canada, 2018: 5).

The mandate, also found in the same document, reads:

"The *Museums Act* (1990) mandates the Gallery to *develop, maintain and make known, throughout Canada and internationally, a collection of works of art, both historic and contemporary, with special but not exclusive reference to Canada, and to further knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of art in general among all Canadians*" (National Gallery of Canada, 2018: 5) [original italics].

Do these claims truly represent the entirety of the nation, down to the very individuals who call the NGC their workplace? Stemming from years of personal observation during my numerous visits to the Gallery, my interest in the guards mainly regarded diversity, especially vis-à-vis race, gender, and language. To put

³ The National Gallery of Canada will hereafter be abbreviated as Gallery or NGC.

it bluntly, the large majority of the guards at the NGC have been Black, francophone men for as long as I can remember. This observation is far from being ground-breaking or specific to Ottawa. In fact, except perhaps for the linguistic factor, it seems to have become a standard in North American art museums, as enunciated by Marcia Tucker (art historian and founder of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City) back in 1992: “The truth is that the most visible people of color in a majority of art museums are the guards” (Becker, 1992: 9). Nearly thirty years after such a frank affirmation, barely any literature or sustaining data can be found addressing this problematic reality in large-scale museums. Thus, my project strives to highlight, through three oral interviews, the NGC guards’ personal experiences with the space of the Gallery, its art collection, its visitors, and its administration. Despite contributing to the operation of a national cultural institution, museum guards’ insights are rarely taken into account or even asked for. As researchers and academics generally rely on personal interpretation of statistical analyses based on official reports, falling into the “terrible habit of speaking for others, rather than listening to others” (Becker, 1992: 11), I resorted to the methods of oral history in order to draw directly from first-hand accounts. Through this research, I intend, to the best of my capacities, to give an empowering voice to museum guards by bringing attention to their alternative perspectives and knowledge in the areas of cultural and artistic institutions.

I worked at the Gallery during the summer of 2019. During my time there, I had eye-opening one-on-one conversations with some of the guards. Our talks inspired me to dig a little deeper into their unique perspectives as both visitor service providers and safety law enforcers. I was therefore already familiar with the participants I wished to interview. Through old NGC contacts, without whom this project would not have been realized, I reached out to the selected participants and invited them to partake in my research. To my great joy and gratitude, all three agreed enthusiastically. Interestingly, all three participants chose to remain anonymous, using preferred aliases for the recordings. I conducted my oral interviews in Ottawa, in October 2019. Through the interview questions, and as mentioned previously, I was hoping to discover the guards’ relation to the Gallery as a physical and symbolic space, to the art collection it houses, to the visitors it welcomes, and to the administrative operation of the institution. My interviewees were Jerry, male, who has been at the Gallery for six years; Guard 2, female, who had started a little over a year ago at the time of the interview; and Depasco, male, who has spent sixteen years working at the NGC (as of 2019). I specifically reached out to these three individuals in my aim to include a diversity of voices in regards to gender (Guard 2 being the only woman), race (Depasco self-identifies as a visual ethnic minority) as well as language (two of the three guards responded to me in French).

Throughout the initial process, I experienced some difficulty getting hold of a contact who would be able to help me with my project and I started getting the feeling that this type of work has perhaps not been done before. Was I the first person to do an oral history of the NGC guards’ perspective? My attempts to contact the guards were therefore informed by the thought that my request might appear as unusual.

Which is where the concepts in Stacey Zembrzycki's pivotal 2015 article, "Sharing Authority with Baba," became extremely relevant to my project. My status as a graduate student imparted an inevitable impression of authority and political motivation. Although I did embark on this project with a thesis in mind, as exposed in my introduction, I wanted the interviews to focus on the guards' personal narratives in the most unbiased way possible. As Zembrzycki notes, "[e]mphasizing the collaborative nature of the discipline, the term ['shared authority'] forces us to think about how we may make oral history a more democratic cultural practice" (2015: 55). Thus, Zembrzycki's shared authority meant recognizing each other's authority and reshaping my own assumptions. An example of said assumptions was my surprise at the guards' responses to their favourite space in the Gallery. All three participants mentioned specific rooms in the galleries, down to their number, theme, or even wall colour, whereas I expected a general architectural space such as the Great Hall or the Garden Court, each a recognizable feature of architect Moshe Safdie's landmark building. Visibly, the guards' lived experiences within the building differ greatly from those of the visitors, yet we unknowingly impose our preconceptions on them. During the interviews, the importance of previously established trust also became evident, as I was able to draw from past conversations in order to go beyond the surface of each answer whenever appropriate. In this way, using Zembrzycki's oral history methods as a conceptual framework fueled my desire to ensure my interview process was one of sincere co-creation.

Interviews

The content of the interviews themselves, particularly the common threads between all three interviewees, helped me identify the main themes and issues brought up by the guards. In what follows, I will be linking some of these ideas to a few of the NGC's fundamental principles as listed in the 2019-20 *Summary of the Corporate Plan*. For fear of categorizing and, consequently, belittling the guards' narratives and experiences, I will be using the Gallery's priorities as a reference point to examine the accuracies or divergences of the institution's corporate values in comparison to the guards' views. Are the guards' narratives and experiences taken into account or fundamentally neglected in the way the institution runs?

My first questions related to the guards' favourite spaces and artworks in the museum. What was most interesting was the way each guard's answer reflected their own creative practices, beliefs, and identity traits. For instance, Jerry is a self-proclaimed history enthusiast whose hobbies include amateur theatre. This was his answer:

"I like room C204, it's the baroque period. I just find that the paintings are large and colourful and beautiful and I find it's just amazing what materials they had way back then, what beautiful artwork that they made. It's just... I find it incredible. And [the] Canadian gallery, I like the paintings from the late 1800s and the European gallery, I'd say 1700s and 1800 period, it's very enjoyable to be around

and look at. (...) Well, one of the paintings in that European gallery is *The Death of Wolfe*.⁴ I enjoy that painting very much and I'm a history buff so I know quite a bit about the battle."

Guard 2 favours colourful, vibrant materials in her own art practice at home. When asked about her favourite spaces, she thus responded:

"I would say the European [galleries]. I would say all the European [galleries], where there is the baroque. I find that the amount of work seems to be more intense than in the contemporary. I give it more merit but that's my personal opinion. (...) When I'm told that that's where I'm working for the day, I prefer to be there. It's bigger, it's more colourful..."⁵

Depasco ties his appreciation of religious art and music to his faith. He affirmed:

"I often like... I feel more at peace in the European galleries upstairs, the first rooms. I love really old art, from the Renaissance on. So I feel really comfortable when I am in front of religious paintings. (...) I am a fervent believer and churchgoer so just being there is like living my faith, in a way."⁶

My next question pertained to visual representation and self-identification in the Gallery's collection. As previously presented, museums are historically White, male-dominated institutions. More and more, however, central issues of race, gender, social class, and access shape contemporary museum studies. Indeed, one of the Gallery's main priorities, as listed in the *Summary of the 2019-20 Corporate Plan*, is diversity. The document reads:

"The Gallery believes that all forms of visual art making should be represented in its collection, exhibition and educational programs to the limits of its mandate, expertise and capacity. Moreover, the Gallery strives to ensure that collections and exhibits reflect every effort to be accommodating and inclusive" (National Gallery of Canada, 2018: 6).

I was curious to know my interviewees' positions as employees of a national institution but also as individuals with critical opinions of their own. Jerry first admitted to never having experienced a moment of self-identification with an artwork of the NGC collection during his career, despite it not being crucial to his enjoyment of the art. He then pointed out the lack of Black or Asian representation in the European

⁴ Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770. Oil on canvas, 152.6 × 214.5 cm. National Gallery of Canada.

⁵ Translation by author from the original: "Je te dirais l'Européen. Je te dirais tout l'Européen, style où est-ce qu'il y a le baroque. Je trouve que le montant de travail semble être plus intense que le contemporain. Je donne plus de mérite, mais ça, c'est mon opinion personnelle. (...) Quand on me dit que c'est là que je travaille pour ma journée, je préfère être là. C'est plus grand, c'est plus coloré..."

⁶ Translation by author from the original: "J'aime souvent... je me sens plus en paix dans les galeries européennes, en-haut, au début. J'aime l'art vraiment ancien, depuis la Renaissance. Alors je me sens vraiment confortable quand je suis devant les tableaux religieux. (...) Je suis un fervent croyant et pratiquant aussi alors juste être là, c'est comme je vis ma foi, en tout cas."

and American as well as the Canadian and Indigenous galleries, at least among the commonly displayed works. Similarly, Depasco talked about the unescapable prevalence of the White man in art history and brought up the small number of women artists and artists of colour represented in the galleries. Depasco further linked visual diversity to the public's appreciation of the collection, suggesting visitors might establish a stronger connection with the artworks were they more inclusive. For her part, Guard 2 noticed a gap in non-Catholic, and even non-Christian, religious art to which she proposed, for instance, the incorporation of esoteric productions. Despite referring to different issues, the guards' answers foreground their common agreement on the lack of diversity and visual representation in the NGC's collection. Interestingly, the guards' hopes for a more egalitarian art history seemed to rely on contemporary art, both its production and curation. Their vision of the more traditional, classical galleries gives these spaces an immutable quality, almost as if the artwork selection has, for the most part, remained untouched and uncontested over the years – a sentiment confirmed by Jerry and Depasco as well as Dymond's extensive overview of the NGC's standing in terms of gender and racial diversity from 1970 to 2017 (2019: 24-88).

The last two points I will touch on in relation to the interviews also link back to the Gallery's core values. I asked the guards to describe their relationship to the visitors, hoping to somewhat reverse the conventional dynamics of customer service in which the visitors' comfort is placed at the forefront, rather than the employees' personal positions. Traditionally, the institution trains its staff to embody its organizational vision and objectives, but how do the employees feel about them? Do they agree with their workplace values? The NGC's priority, titled "Public," goes as follows:

"As a national institution, one of the Gallery's key roles is to serve the public. Seeking to understand the interests and needs of various audience segments is important to design relevant experiences, foster engagement, attract new audiences and retain repeat visitors" (National Gallery of Canada, 2018: 6).

Through the three interviews, it became apparent that fostering a positive and harmonious relationship with the visitors was essential to the guards. In this excerpt from Jerry's interview, his genuine concern for the visitors' experience shines through:

"As far as the guards are concerned, I think generally we have good relations with the visitors. But as I say, most of the time, I tend to try to have a sense of humour, and, you know, you sort of get a feel for the person you're speaking with and if you think they'd appreciate a humorous comment. But I usually don't try to just walk up to anybody and say something, but, you know, there's certain things that I've found consistently people would appreciate, just a comment about a painting or something. It adds to the enjoyment of their day."

Depasco also argued that the guards are the only employees in permanent contact with the visitors. This interaction then becomes representative of the relationship between the museum itself and its visitors. He added that these interactions inform the visitors' experiences and ultimately ensure future visits from both new and repeat visitors.

The final concept I will be discussing is the guards' personal motivation to work at the NGC. This question was not originally part of the interview but after having it come up in conversation with Jerry, I decided to add it for Guard 2 and Depasco as well. Aside from the guards' individual interest in the arts, all three interviewees raised the distinction between intellectual work and physical effort. The guards' position at the Gallery requires them to stay on their feet for the best part of their eight-hour shifts, which can get very taxing physically. In the following excerpt, Guard 2 addressed this division between her demanding past work experiences and her current job at the Gallery:

"Well, I wanted to have a job... you know, I had a job that was quite demanding before, so stress-wise, I can say that this is not too stressful. And I like the arts, so it's perfect."⁷

For Depasco, after having gone through years of university education at three different institutions, the physical quality of the job was gladly welcomed:

"I've been through a few universities so I've had a lot of experience in that sense, in a university setting, but when I have to work in the galleries, it's another experience here. It's an experience that doesn't require a lot of intelligence or anything like that, it's mostly a little physical. It's more physical than intellectual. I'm in the best physical conditions, I can handle it, so it's like... I don't put too too much effort. If we can make a living in this way too, I think it's not bad."⁸

In no way does this intellectual versus physical duality prevent the guards from sincerely appreciating their access to art, and more importantly, to knowledge. Whether for general knowledge, personal appreciation, or one's personal creative practice, this access to art fulfills another one of the NGC's principles. Under "Knowledge," the 2019-20 *Summary of the Corporate Plan* affirms: "The Gallery is a center of knowledge and learning, not only about art, but also about every aspect of human culture and history to which art bears witness" (National Gallery of Canada, 2018: 6). Indeed, all three interviewees

⁷ Translation by author from the original: "Ben moi, c'est que je voulais avoir un travail... tu sais, j'ai eu quand même du travail qui était assez exigeant avant, fait que ça côté stress, je peux dire que c'est pas trop stressant. Puis j'aime les arts, fait que c'est parfait."

⁸ Translation by author from the original: "Je suis passé par quelques universités alors j'ai eu beaucoup d'expérience dans ce sens, dans le milieu universitaire, mais quand j'ai à travailler dans les galeries, c'est une autre expérience ici. C'est une expérience qui ne demande pas beaucoup d'intelligence ou quelque chose de pareil, c'est surtout un peu physique. C'est plus physique qu'intellectuel. Je suis dans les meilleures conditions physiques, je peux les supporter, alors c'est comme... je ne fournis pas trop trop trop d'effort. Si on peut gagner son pain dans ce sens aussi, je pense que c'est pas mal."

acknowledged the work of the NGC's education team, the school tours, and the docent's talks as being an important and enjoyable advantage of their job. The guards gain information about the artworks, the artists, and the depicted subjects while fulfilling their regular role, which further shapes their appreciation of the NGC's collection and of art history altogether, as expressed by Jerry's anecdote:

"There's a painting in the Canadian gallery, it's just a very non-descript painting of a woman in a yellow outfit, and she's looking at a flower. But then I found out later that the fella who painted that, he landed on D-Day with the troops. He was from South Africa. So, it's made me... even though, you know, I wasn't that fussy about the painting, but it gave me a deeper appreciation of it. (...) I heard several other tour guides mention the same thing.

[Do you know if it's written in the little label, the wall text?]

No, no, I just heard it several times."

Ultimately, the Gallery's emphasis on different notions such as diversity, the public, and knowledge through its organizational priorities evidently fashions the guards' lived experiences in their workplace. The three interviews highlighted the participants' critical insight into many of the museum's dimensions. But how can this oral history project grow beyond the scope of three specific subjectivities, to allow for alternative narratives to be shared in the seemingly unyielding setting of an art museum?

Curatorial Proposal

My research led me to reflect more deeply on the ways I could share the guards' knowledge and perspectives with the NGC and its public, the same way they had so generously shared them with me. As my topic deals with cultural workers in an artistic institution, I naturally turned to curatorial research creation, or rather co-creation, as a proposed solution. In the introduction to her book, *Learning at the Museum Frontiers: Identity, Race and Power*, scholar Viv Golding (University of Leicester, UK) presents her "feminist-hermeneutic research circle of interpretation and understanding" in order to illustrate the possible shift from "prejudices from past histories and traditions" to "self-reflection and change" (2009: 8) through a collaborative and inclusive approach between museums and marginalized voices. I believe this method can be applied to my proposed project to the NGC which puts the Gallery, the guards, and the visitors in dialogue with one another.

The first proposal consists of co-curating a temporary exhibition of staff picks. During the interviews, two participants mentioned favourite artworks that have been taken down for some time. Since many of the guards have been working at the Gallery for years, they most certainly have memories linked to works that used to be displayed. This project also has the potential to expand beyond museum guards and include the perspectives of installation and media technicians, or janitors and cleaners, to name a few. While contributing to the operation and the image of the NGC, each staff member experiences and

interacts with the spaces of the Gallery differently. This multiplicity deeply enriches the panoply of interpretations to which artworks are subjected. I therefore suggest having each employee write the descriptive label of a work they select; this could either be a justification of their choice, a prominent memory with the work, a marking interaction with a visitor, or small details noticed with time. The purpose being to give voice to alternative readings of artworks by those who equally spend time with the art but under different circumstances.

Granted, some of the works that have been replaced might be damaged or on loan, for example, so I propose an alternate, smaller-scale project of the same nature. Perhaps, in order to co-create space representative of the employees' experiences, simply adding labels of absent artworks directly in the place they occupied, either on the walls where they used to hang or in-between similar works, would be enough. The guards in particular embody the living memory of the galleries and their history. In the same way their relationship with the works is rooted in personal recollection, the floating labels of 'ghost' works could also point to past curatorial decisions and rationales. This is especially important in the European and American as well as the Canadian and Indigenous galleries, due to all three interviewees only expecting progressive change in the Contemporary sections. By offering new critical points of view on canonical artworks and drawing attention to which/whose works are not exhibited, visitors would inevitably be confronted with the historical lack of diversity in museum displays and narratives, only to realize that this gap in gender, race, and class representation still persists today.

My second proposal concerns organizational initiatives promoting access to knowledge across the NGC's departments. A series of educational programs for non-administrative staff could give employees a sense of personal fulfillment by understanding curatorial processes or familiarizing themselves with the NGC's collection and available resources. The programs could take the form of organized tours of special and temporary exhibitions, permanent collections, the Gallery's Library and Archives, the Curatorial Wing, and the Restoration and Conservation Laboratory. The activities are meant to put structural hierarchies aside and democratize the space of a national institution by allowing various employees of different departments to learn more about their workplace beyond initial training sessions. Additionally, the interviewees had mentioned not having enough contact with other employees of the museum. The NGC could then host 'company' events during which staff are invited to mingle and share their own experiences within the same environment, perhaps around an artistic workshop, with the intent of giving value to individual perspectives and subjectivities. These collaborative workshops could encourage the guards to share their unique insight with curators and administrators, drawing attention to observed successes or failures of certain curatorial choices, for example, or to visitor patterns and interactions with artworks, which guards witness first-hand.

My rationale behind these curatorial and organizational proposals draws, once again, from the Gallery's core principles by anchoring the projects in a pedagogical objective. The NGC's entry for "Access" claims: "The Gallery strives to make Canada's national art collection, the expertise of its staff, and information about art, museology and conservation accessible to all audiences with diverse interests through direct contact and/or digital connection in multiple locations" (National Gallery of Canada, 2018: 6). The first proposal contributes to furthering the public's knowledge about the galleries' past curatorial layers while simultaneously highlighting the guards' multidimensional knowledge of the spaces. Their daily reality differs from the theoretical intentions and floorplans of curators. Letting different voices be heard might open up new and stimulating curatorial strategies. As argued by critical museum scholars, the nature and quality of museum exhibitions depend on *what* is shown, and *how* it is exhibited (Becker, 1992: 37). Incorporating learning opportunities within the galleries truly resonates with the public, as visitors will forge new connections and insights into the plural identities that constitute a museum (Golding, 2009: 32).

What's more, these proposed curatorial methods and concepts will situate the Gallery at the forefront of inclusive and progressive museum narratives. The final fundamental priority I will be referring to is "Creativity." The NGC describes this value as follows:

"The Gallery believes that art plays a leadership role in the creative economy, not only as a pure manifestation of intellectual and cultural advancement, but as a practical source of ideas, inspiration and example for creative pursuits of all kinds in every field that values innovation" (National Gallery of Canada, 2018: 6).

Not only will the suggested projects assist the National Gallery of Canada in fulfilling its social, cultural, and pedagogical responsibilities as a national institution, but its corporate leadership in the sector of employee development opportunities will surely distinguish it amongst contemporary museum initiatives.

Thus, much like oral history relies on co-creation to achieve a more democratic practice, these proposals resort to collaboration in their effort to democratize the museum, starting with its own staff. So please, do get close. Do talk, do ask, do question, and do listen. Do touch and dive into the worlds of museum guards so that you too may contribute to your fellow visitors' experience and participate in the co-creation of a more egalitarian and inclusive future, both in the arts and beyond.

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