



**The Arts of Social Justice and the Cultures of Human Rights  
Scholars Workshop**

**The Trudeau Foundation Conference on Public Policy**

Organized by Lucas Crawford and Joshua Lambier

November 18, 2010, 8:30 am – 4:00 pm

Fort Garry Hotel, Winnipeg, Manitoba

**Objectives and Rationale:**

While artists, cultural critics and scholars have been historically divided over the controversial question of the “utility” of the arts and cultural disciplines, recent years have seen a promising resurgence of interest in developing creative forms of public scholarship on pressing social and political issues, including alternative forms of scholarship and advocacy for human rights and social justice. The objective of offering a Scholars Workshop on “The Arts of Social Justice and the Cultures of Human Rights” is twofold. Firstly, the meeting intends to move beyond the institutionally entrenched opposition between academic research and public participation by exploring interdisciplinary methodologies of public scholarship, activism and arts engagement that integrate a multiplicity of groups and communities. Secondly, the workshop will investigate how scholarly research and public engagement in the cultural disciplines can make collaborative, interdisciplinary contributions to current debates concerning human rights and social justice. In focusing on the theoretical and practical convergences between rights discourses and the interpretive practices closely associated with the cultural disciplines, this event will raise a number of framing questions to orient the discussion. 1) In what ways can the study of arts, culture, and the humanities offer alternative, critical perspectives and new methodological approaches to human rights discourses? 2) If the cultural disciplines have historically been concerned to question what is “proper” to the human and human experience, how can the critique of subjectivity address the incommensurability between traditional conceptions of the subject of rights and those who are remain unrecognized? 3) How are human rights research projects taking place in the cultural disciplines translated within and beyond the university community to produce engaged, interdisciplinary research outcomes? 4) While many disciplines have historically developed strong links to policymaking processes, where do the Canadian arts and humanities fit in current models of knowledge translation, public scholarship, and policy development?

Open to the entire Trudeau community, “The Arts of Social Justice and the Cultures of Human Rights” aims to provoke a general discussion on the place of the arts and cultural disciplines in human rights and social justice research. The Workshop brings together an impressive group of 30 – 35 presenters and participants, including members of the research team at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) as well as a diverse group of Trudeau Fellows, Mentors, Members, and Scholars. To organize the discussion, this one-day event will focus critical attention around four thematic sessions:

- 1) “The Cultures of Rights,” which will reexamine the conceptual and historical legacies of human rights discourse from an alternative, cultural perspective, one that will force us to question and re-imagine our normative ideas of social justice and human dignity;
- 2) “Putting the Human in Human Rights,” which will investigate the historical presuppositions underpinning the concept of the “human” in contemporary human rights research;
- 3) “Affect and Activism,” exploring the under examined, but no less important, contribution of affect, feeling, and emotion to various forms of engagement and activism;
- 4) “Knowledge Translation,” which will address the role of knowledge translation and public scholarship in the study of arts and culture in relation to human rights, including the vital place of “untranslatable” forms of artistic and humanistic knowledge.

## Schedule of Events

### **8.30-9: Introductions**

### **9-10.30: Session 1, “The Cultures of Human Rights”**

*Chair:* Ed **Broadbent** (Trudeau Mentor)

- ❖ James **Bartleman** (Trudeau Mentor): “As Long as the River Flows and a Writer’s Responsibilities to Literature and History”
- ❖ Renée **Dupuis** (Trudeau Mentor): “Literature and Human Rights”
- ❖ Rosemary **Sullivan** (Trudeau Fellow): “Lives on the Line: The Writer's Role in the quest for Social Justice and Human Rights”

For many of us, the ongoing development and extension of human rights seems like a matter of enlightenment; that is, we believe that rights are enshrined through a slow but inevitable march towards rational thinking that is led by affinity groups and defined by the project of “fighting ignorance.” In this schema, the roles of artists, critics, and aesthetic production in general are relegated to the realm of consciousness-raising – of helping to simply popularize or communicate the thinking and progress achieved elsewhere through political discourse proper. Very rarely, then, are the realms of aesthetics and culture imagined as displacing these discourses or intervening in them in any unique way. To the end of remedying precisely this kind of “genre trouble” that leaves cultural histories of rights untold, the aim of this session is to suggest that 1) the vitality of aesthetics and the non-utilitarian objectives of humanities research can each pry open the very epistemological assumptions of rights debates, and that 2) contemporary human rights discourse have and can be extended by figures of our collective cultural histories. These are two general responses to the overarching question of this session: who put the idea of “right” in “human rights” – and to what effect?

### **10.30-10.45: Health Break**

### **10.45-12.15: Session 2, “Putting the Human in Human Rights”**

*Chair:* Judith **Dueck** (Director of Content, Research, & Scholarship, Canadian Museum for Human Rights)

- ❖ Laura **Madokoro** (Trudeau Scholar): “World Refugee Year: Commodifying the Refugee Experience”
- ❖ Patricia **Bovey** (Trudeau Foundation Member): “Arts & Culture: Real Impacts on Social Issues”
- ❖ Lisa **Szabo** (Trudeau Scholar): “Displacing the Human in Human Rights: Environmental and Social Justice through Comix Reportage”

In his 2001 essay “the Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Come),” Jacques Derrida calls for renewed attention to the division between the animal and the human that is posited continually throughout the history of Western thought. It’s far from a new idea: for philosophical, literary, and historical-scientific authors alike (from Heidegger to Arendt, from William Blake to Jeanette Winterson, from Darwin to Bergson) the trope of “the animal” is used to define precisely what is human and what humans deserve. Cary Wolfe goes as far as to call this “speciesism” the original form of discrimination, insofar as the rhetoric of “human rights” and the definition of “the human” rely for meaning on their constant juxtaposition with animality. In addition to calling our attention to the actual treatment of animals, Wolfe and Derrida also remind us of the effects of this rhetorical figuring for we humans. Accusations of animality are crucial in the historic (and current) denial of rights, from the association of people of colour with “savagery” to the possibility that one gender or another is “closer to nature.”

Writing in the wake of the atrocities of WWII, Hannah Arendt also observed how the “refugee,” the figure most in need of basic human rights, had been stripped of human dignity and reduced to “the abstract nakedness of being human,” an abject form of human life without political freedom that threw into question the very idea of “inalienable” rights. With these injustices at the forefront, this session will invite us to rethink what is achieved by the “human” in “human rights.” Specifically, how have the arts and humanities – as a history of what it means to be human – questioned the outcomes of these rhetorical strategies and their practical consequences? This session begins to trace an alternative history of the relationship between both parts of this phrase—“human *and* rights”. This session considers the ways in which rights discourse may be extended by the movements of posthumanism, biopolitics, and humanities-based eco-criticism. We will also discuss the place of cultural creativity in our political and social life, and question whether culture should be reconsidered as a distinct and fundamental human right, not unlike health and education.

**12.15-1.15: Lunch**

**1.15-2.45: Session 3, “Affect and Activism”**

*Chair:* Lucas **Crawford** (Trudeau Scholar)

- ❖ Jessica **Dempsey** (Trudeau Scholar): “Tracking grizzly bears in British Columbia’s environmental politics”
- ❖ Victoria **Dickenson** (CMHR): “Museums, Affect, and Activism”
- ❖ Sarah **Kamal** (Trudeau Scholar): “The project glitters, the researcher burns: The under acknowledged impacts of human rights and social justice research on field work”

If, as suggested by the previous panel description, rights discussions are conventionally adjudicated in the even tones of rational and utilitarian discourse, it’s little wonder that the life of emotions and affect are seldom considered serious activist strategies – even though feeling permeates all public discourse on rights and social justice. If media (both popular and explicitly “activist”) are designed to generate sympathetic – that is, felt – responses, then a style of reading that pays attention to affect will help us question the role of the body in social change. By looking awry at the ways in which emotion and affect animate rights discourses, this session aims to help us develop a sense of how genre, rhetoric, and public emotion make up our felt experiences of activist conversations and communities – to develop, in other words, an affective hermeneutics. The premise of this session is that by offering what Paul Ricoeur calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” humanities inquiry can let us: 1) question how certain emotions are mobilized by certain groups, productively or otherwise; 2) call out the dissimulation of emotional investment in both mainstream media and some rights discourses; and ultimately, 3) situate the body as a crucial part of the material life of rights. This project is shared by a number of humanities interventions: Deleuze and Guattari’s instructive division between radically non-narratable “affect” and controlled “feelings;” what Jean Haley calls the recent “affective turn” in queer theory; Sara Ahmed’s recent work on feminism and happiness; Ann Cvetkovich’s analysis of how sentimentality and sentimental Victorian novels in particular are associated with women; the persistence of maudlin autobiographies and slam poetry of marginalized people; and, Jose Esteban Munoz’s work on “feeling brown” in the US are just a few examples of variously recent affective accounts of social justice and rights. With such specifically aesthetic/affective interventions in mind, this session asks: how does aesthetic production allow a different affective life for rights? Similarly, how do we come to – quite literally – feel differently about rights discourse and our lives as activists and academics?

**2.45-3.00: Health Break**

### 3.00-4.30: Session 4, “Knowledge Translation”

*Chair:* Josh **Lambier** (Trudeau Scholar)

- ❖ Leila **Qashu** (Trudeau Scholar): “Listening to understand a local perspective: the songs and voices of Arsi Oromo women (Ethiopia) concerning their place and power in society”
- ❖ Mark Lawrence **Santiago** (Trudeau Scholar) / Darlyne **Bautista** (Aksyon Ng Ating Kabataan [ANAK]): “From Manila to Manitoba: Oral History Project and Exhibit”
- ❖ Clint **Curle** (CMHR): “Reading rights with Bergson: translating time into space into justice”

“Knowledge translation” is rightly the focus of not only the hybrid activist/academic conversations generated at Trudeau Foundation meetings but also, increasingly, of funding bodies such as SSHRC. In a cultural climate where humanities inquiry is called upon continually to justify not just its funding but its very existence and purpose, the importance of keeping the terms of “knowledge translation” open cannot be overstated. Appropriately, various branches of humanities inquiry take up both terms of this popular phrase: epistemology asks us to hold the very definition of “knowledge” in suspension, while the literary/linguistic concept of “translation” has been complicated both by literary translators and by the many lives and afterlives of post-structuralism. Following these wider redefinitions of “knowledge” and “translation,” this session asks: what epistemological assumptions underpin the commonplace insistence for “translatable” research in the humanities and cultural disciplines? How can we, as academics and activists, reject the versions of social justice that see value only in utilitarian public discourse and actions – all the while still pursuing social justice? How can we better navigate the demand that humanities inquiry account for itself? What is at stake in imagining an untranslatable kernel lying at the heart of not just the humanities and other cultural disciplines, but of all thought, inquiry, and affect?

#### **Contact Information**

If you have additional questions, please contact Lucas Crawford ([lcrawfor@ualberta.ca](mailto:lcrawfor@ualberta.ca)) or Josh Lambier ([jlambie2@uwo.ca](mailto:jlambie2@uwo.ca)).

#### **Participants**

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