

## **Claiming The Terrible Gift—A Post-TRC Investigation in Praxiological Museology**

My thesis develops a promising curatorial pedagogy conceived by the late Roger I. Simon to enable more effective representations of difficult histories. The pedagogy of ‘The Terrible Gift’ emerged in the course of Simon’s long engagements with critical pedagogy, and later critical curatorial practice, as means of augmenting the force of public history in the present. A ritual of bequest and inheritance enacted in exhibition, The Terrible Gift is intended to both implicate visitors in the difficult histories and legacies that result in and perpetuate iniquitous social conditions in the present, and, to obligate them in the necessity of an ethical response. Envisaged as a hopeful practice, one wherein collective labour toward redemption is unhindered by its impossibility, The Terrible Gift is non-consolatory, recognizing reconciliation not as an end-state, but as an unending process of negotiation. Simon passed away before having had the opportunity to enact the pedagogy of The Terrible Gift in a major exhibition, thus it was never fully theorized or put into practice as a methodology and procedure. Attempting to address these deficits and move The Terrible Gift toward realization, my thesis prepares Simon’s pedagogy for implementation at a test site, the former Shingwauk Indian Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Building on the *Reclaiming Shingwauk Hall* exhibition on which I have worked in the professional capacities of curator, designer, and project manager at the behest of the Shingwauk Indian Residential School Survivor community, I propose a series of museal interventions with the ‘terrible gifts’, aspects of the site’s evidentiary landscape, that remain to be gifted and claimed.

From comparable museal reckonings with difficult histories that can be understood as ‘critical events’ in a community’s history, to use anthropologist Veena Das’ term, analysed through the lens of gift and inheritance, I elicit promising practices that inform my proposed museal interventions. Extrapolating a procedure for enacting The Terrible Gift from Simon’s texts, and further theorizing the operation it is intended to perform, I move a work of critical museology into practice. While such theory-driven endeavors can be described as those of museological praxis, praxiological museology, a concept theorized by Anthony Shelton, is differently and more precisely constituted. Praxiological museology rather, is a critical, decentering, and deconstructive practice that aligns and draws on transdisciplinary knowledges and stimulates critical self-reflexive exhibition development, revealing and simultaneously deconstructing that which is constructed in exhibition and the means of its construction. Occupying the in-between space that separates critical museology from operational museology (the subject of its critique), praxiological museology provides a framework within which experimental exhibitionary practices, such as The Terrible Gift, may be developed, and is thus ideally suited to my investigation. Inspired by the transitive potential of The Terrible Gift, the ethics of praxiological museology, and motivated by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to reckon with Canada’s critical event, the Indian residential school system, my research

goal is to build on the discursive and practical repertoire of the New Museology toward engendering the conscientizing and recursive/reciprocal effects required to improve our prospects for a less violent future.