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**Middle of Nowhere:**

**Contesting Rural Heritage at the World Famous Gopher Hole Museum**

‘We are a small museum in a small town in the middle of nowhere. Yet we are known all over the world.’ Dianne Kurta, curator of the Gopher Hole Museum in Torrington, Alberta, Canada, expresses pride in her accomplishments during an interview with me on a Sunday morning in August 2016.[[1]](#endnote-1) From our vantage point at a picnic table just outside the museum, we can see cars full of people begin to arrive for the 10 am opening time (figure 1). These visitors line up in front of the building, eager to pay the two dollar entrance fee to see displays of taxidermied gophers—otherwise known as Richardson’s ground squirrels— dressed as firemen, beauticians, farmers, and picnickers (figures 2, 3 and 4). While some have driven a short distance from neighbouring towns, many have come from as far as Europe or Japan, stopping in Torrington on their way to visit larger venues in southern Alberta, including Banff and Calgary. According to Dianne, more than 5,000 tourists arrive between May and August each year. This strikes me as remarkable because the hamlet of fewer than 200 people is relatively isolated, located 30 km off the main highway and an hour’s drive away from a metropolitan centre.

Reflecting on the popularity of the Torrington Gopher Hole Museum, Dianne Kurta notes that she and her colleagues do not advertise the museum in any way. All of its publicity has been free, another point of pride. The curator explains that the museum gained notoriety before it opened in the spring of 1996. In 1995, officials from PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) sent letters of protest to the mayor of Torrington, asking that prefabricated models be used in the exhibits, instead of gopher corpses. After Dianne and other museum organizers sent PETA a card advising its members to ‘get stuffed,’ the ensuing debate attracted global media coverage, inspiring people from as far away as the United Kingdom and Germany to write letters both in favour of and opposed to Torrington's new museum (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 122-23). Thousands of visitors were initially attracted by the media frenzy, but the Gopher Hole Museum continues to garner attention twenty years later in newspaper reports, fan web sites, and a short documentary film released in 2015.

This article considers how the Torrington Gopher Hole Museum acts as a popular site of contested heritage, with locals and tourists negotiating its meaning in vastly different ways. In part one, I analyze how the creators of the museum appropriate the techniques of conventional natural history museums to reproduce the history of Torrington, highlighting the value of rural life and women’s work. In dialogue with the heritage museums that dominate the Alberta landscape, the Gopher Hole Museum restages typical scenes of homesteading and civic events, but does not strive to preserve historically significant objects or archival documents. Instead, the Gopher Hole Museum legitimates local forms of knowledge with the creation of contemporary material culture, most of it quite humourous. For Dianne and other local contributors, the Gopher Hole Museum is part of a continuous Torrington tradition of do-it-yourself community organizing, hard work, adaptability, and hospitality. The social events held in relation to the museum encourage the production of histories aimed primarily at residents. At the same time, visitors from outside of the region are invited to ‘rest a spell’ in the hamlet, eat at the pizzeria, and chat with the museum volunteers.

While these visitors typically react favourably to the museum, they represent it in diverse ways, sometimes crafting their responses in online reviews, promotional web sites, and, in one case, a documentary film. The second part of this article analyzes how the Torrington Gopher Hole Museum is portrayed in these interpretations of it. For the most part, the museum is considered quirky and unique―a form of marginal outsider art―rather than an extension of local culture and longstanding efforts to organize for change (McMullan 2015). Visitors often express admiration for the innovative handwork and dedicated volunteers at the Gopher Hole Museum, but view it as a homespun testament to the decline of Torrington and the inevitable disappearance of a former way of life in Alberta. According to this romantic lens, rural heritage is already in the past, not part of the present; it is strange, unfamiliar, and removed from modernity. In some ways, such reactions are based on misunderstandings of and stereotypes about rurality, but in other ways they attest to the popular appeal of the museum, which is an engaging and open-ended text able to convey mixed messages to different audiences.

I will examine and interpret these competing views of the Torrington Gopher Hole Museum in terms of my own training in visual and cultural studies, relying on analyses of the site of representation―the material displays within the museum itself―as well as the multimedia responses to it (Rose 2001, 16-28). My characterization of the museum as an ‘open text’ is based on the arguments of John Fiske, a media scholar who contends that texts, a broad term that includes books, television shows, and films, among other things, become popular when they are ‘producerly,’ that is, when they challenge readers or viewers to recreate those texts, participating in the construction of meaning (1989, 103-6; Storey 2010). The Gopher Hole Museum is just such an inviting ‘text’ that enables visitors to make their own meanings, some of which are at odds with the understandings offered by the creators of the museum. I have long been committed to examining the struggle over meaning within museums, focusing on smaller or marginal ones. In the past, I studied the function of early natural history museums across Canada, but my recent research turns to the small town and rural museums in Alberta (McTavish 2013). My assistant, Misa Nikolic, and I have visited 220 of the 314 museums in Alberta, grouping them by region and theme before embarking on more detailed case studies of the ways in which selected organizations involve local communities, creating a sense of place. The goal is to evaluate these small town and rural museums on their own terms, not as inferior versions of large, urban institutions.

Initial research revealed that around 60% of the museums in Alberta are devoted to the last 200 years of history in the province, usually highlighting the early fur trade, hardships faced by pioneers, and efforts to urbanize, while reproducing white settler-colonial narratives about the growth of civilization and sad inevitability of Aboriginal decline (Nikolic 2015). This content pushed the project into what are for me relatively unknown realms: critical heritage studies and theories of tourism. In this chapter I address some of this literature, noting how the Gopher Hole Museum diverges from what Laurajane Smith has called the authorized heritage discourse, which typically privileges monumentality, innate artefacts, the significance of site, nation building, scholarly expertise, and social consensus (2006, 25-28). The museum in Torrington instead celebrates an apparently trivial rodent in handmade displays located inside a modest double wide trailer. It is run by local women with no official museum training. This disregard for dominant norms enables the Gopher Hole Museum to surprise and entertain visitors, but it also sends important and possibly subversive messages about museums, gender, and rural life. Visitors are encouraged to participate in the construction of rural heritage, a subject the museum deems worthy of creative debate.

**Local Matters**

When visitors enter the Gopher Hole Museum, they find a dimly lit room lined with two rows of rectangular boxes that measure approximately 50x 30 cm. Each of the 47 boxes is open at the front, its interior theatrically lit to reveal scenes of local life both past and present: patrons enjoy a meal in the diner, players engage in a game at the curling rink, children cavort in the playground. The townspeople, however, are played by gophers, their dead bodies stuffed and dressed in tiny clothing, arranged in decorated settings complete with miniature chairs, tables and curling brooms. Though many of these dioramas are funny―for instance, one churchgoing gopher is asleep―some are overtly political. One striking display depicts a protest taking place on the sidewalk outside of the Village Office in Torrington (figure 5). Two gophers play tug of war with the body of a third animal. A figure dressed in a navy vest, bow tie and top hat insists that ‘This one is needed for the museum,’ while his rival, a bearded gopher adorned with a long ponytail and a purple poncho, shouts ‘Save the endangered species!!’ The handmade sign beside this hippy gopher proclaims his affiliation with G.A.G.S., or Gophers Against Getting Stuffed. This invented lobby group alludes to the criticism that the Gopher Hole Museum has received from animal rights groups. In the diorama, the Torrington mayor is a conservative gentleman in nineteenth-century garb, forced to battle a 1960s hippy. As an outsider to rural Alberta, the hippy gopher attempts to take not only the animal that he grasps, but also the right to determine its meaning. Although the diorama favours the residents of Torrington and ridicules critics, it is accompanied by many of the protest letters sent over the years. Visitors can read these letters in full, consider how the Gopher Hole Museum remains subject to debate, and take up their own position.

Their position may not be the same as that of past or present residents of Torrington and the surrounding region. In a 1999 interview about the controversy at the museum, Dianne Kurta argued that gophers are hardly endangered and that: ‘We have problems with gopher damage to crops, to fields, and damage to cattle’ (Osenton 1999). The curator of the Gopher Hole Museum reframed the debate by focusing on the rights of local farmers rather than gophers. From the farmers’ point of view, gophers are a nuisance causing economic damage, not creatures worthy of protection. This emphasis on the perceptions of those who live with and experience gophers suggests that the significance of gophers is informed by everyday life and is not absolute, a point misunderstood by outsiders. In tandem with the G.A.G.S. diorama, the statement made by the curator of the Gopher Hole Museum aligns the residents of Torrington with local knowledge and values, against the presumptuous moralizing of the museum’s critics.

People from the Torrington area may well have participated in trapping gophers. In Alberta, and indeed throughout the western prairies, the gopher has been considered an agricultural pest since at least the late nineteenth century, second only to grasshoppers (Calder 2003). Governmental policies attempting to limit or even eradicate gophers include the bounties placed on them during the early twentieth century—by 1913 in Saskatchewan and 1924 in Alberta. Putting a price on injurious pests was commonplace during the twentieth century and such government campaigns reinforced the practice of viewing the landscape primarily in terms of economic opportunity, while providing financial relief to impoverished residents (McTavish and Dickison 2007). For decades, monetary rewards encouraged citizens, especially rural children, to hunt and kill gophers (Isern 1988). Children living in and around Torrington took advantage of this government program, describing how they collected gopher tails and submitted them to officials for payment (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 571). In this light, the use of stuffed gophers in the museum is far from random or insensitive. It both invokes and continues the practice of collecting gopher bodies for economic purposes. It was furthermore inspired by another form of government intervention. The Gopher Hole Museum was initially funded by a $3,000 start-up grant from the Government of Alberta’s 20/20 Vision program, designed to help small towns diversify and improve their economies (Osenton 1999). By choosing to work with gopher corpses, the museum organizers opportunely drew on an established survival mechanism, transforming it into a cultural spectacle.

The organizers’ decision to place the gopher bodies on display in a museum had no precedent in Torrington, but it resonates with the longstanding collection of natural history specimens. Natural history museums were formed in cities and towns across Canada during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when societies of amateur naturalists voluntarily amassed collections of stuffed mammals, dried insects, plant cuttings, minerals, and fossils, exhibiting them publically in order to celebrate and promote the natural riches in their particular regions (McTavish 2008). They adhered to what historian Steven Conn has called ‘naked eye science,’ promoting authentic learning directly from specimens, without resorting to books (1998, 32-73). In keeping with traditional natural history practices, the Torrington museum organizers gathered specimens from their own landscape, presenting them in the museum to communicate information about life in rural Alberta, without adding elaborate labels or explanatory pamphlets.

Taxidermy is a key element in such natural history displays, and precisely what critics have found most offensive about the Gopher Hole Museum. The practice of mounting animal skins on frameworks produced to mimic a lifelike appearance was developed to transport exotic animal bodies from the colonies to Europe during the early modern period, but reached its zenith in the nineteenth century, when birds and mammals were arranged and exhibited in glass cases inside homes as well as museums (Wakeham 2008). The organizers of the Gopher Hole Museum extended this strategy by creating dioramas, a display format developed during the early twentieth century, usually featuring stuffed animals placed within elaborate recreations of their native flora and fauna. The most famous examples were made during the 1920s and 1930s, when mountain gorillas and elephants were arranged inside life-sized dioramas inside the Carl Akeley Hall of African Mammals at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (Haraway 1989). While these dioramas strive to recreate the lives of magnificent animals, other dioramas seem to celebrate death, notably those produced by Walter Potter and installed in his museum in Sussex, England, during the late nineteenth century (Morris 2008). Potter anthropomorphized his specimens, portraying such small creatures as rabbits, birds, and guinea pigs in human social settings. A particularly striking example shows 17 taxidermied kittens enjoying a tea party, creating an effect that some viewers found playful and others ghoulish or cruel. In keeping with this nineteenth-century precedent, the organizers of the Torrington Gopher Hole Museum use dead animals to represent the social life of their own region.

Although the Gopher Hole Museum reshapes nineteenth-century museum practices and aligns the town with that era in a number of dioramas, the institution hardly constitutes a step back in time. Nor does it desperately attempt to preserve the past against modern incursions. The museum points to its own construction in the present, drawing attention to the skills and knowledge of the people who made it. One of the most appealing aspects of the Gopher Hole Museum is its homemade quality, which is immediately highlighted in the hand-painted script on the building’s exterior, and the accompanying image of a maternal gopher who sits knitting as three gopher children gaze adoringly up at her (figure 6). This representation alludes to the matriarchal social structure of the gopher species in question, but is also emblematic of the contents inside the museum, which indicate a respect for female labour. In contrast to conventional dioramas like those in New York, the Torrington dioramas do not strive to appear ‘natural;’ they proudly reveal imperfect sewing, hand-written captions, and glue-gunned miniature roses. The intricate taxidermy, made especially difficult by the small size of gophers, was contracted from local craftsmen, but local artist Shelley Haase Barkman painted the interiors, and the female members of the museum committee either found or fashioned the tiny clothes for the figures, sometimes adapting Barbie jewelry and combs, along with other toys (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 122-23). In the beauty shop diorama, for example, a gopher with long blonde hair wears an elaborate lace dress and gazes into a pink Barbie hand mirror, listening to the aproned aesthetician behind her state: ‘I’m a beautican, not a magican [sic]’ (figure 3). The beauty parlour contains a window delineated with a wooden frame, miniature pictures, a tiny potted plant in the corner, and wall paper topped with a border. This scenario resembles a girl’s doll house, highlighting the women’s design skills and fashion sense. The emphasis on women’s work extends to the overwhelmingly female administrators and volunteers at the Gopher Hole Museum, as well as to the contents of its gift shop, which feature knitted dish cloths and homemade dolls. All proceeds from the sale of these items return directly to the rural women who made them (McTavish 2016).

Every aspect of the Gopher Hole Museum relates specifically to the people living and working in Torrington and the surrounding area, past and present. The beauty shop diorama is not an idealized version of town life; it is based on the Torrington Beauty Salon, which was operated between 1980 and 1998 by Evelyn Bauer, in a building that had previously housed a post office, drug store, machine dealership, town office, and insurance office (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 65). Along similar lines, the GAGs diorama portrays the Village Office as it looked from 1979 until 1997, when it was vacated because the town had dissolved into a hamlet (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 63). In another scene, a gopher tends a field embellished with real sheep droppings covered in plastic, remarking that ‘the real fertilizer is the best’ with reference to the fertilizer dealership that existed in Torrington from 1989 until 2013 (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 62). A handful of dioramas feature the now defunct train station, post office, gas station, and grain elevators, while others represent social events that no longer occur, including the spring fashion show and annual ‘old tyme’ music jamboree (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 130-32). At the same time, the gophers tripping over a hose in the fire hall portray the Torrington Volunteer Fire Department (figure 2), an organization that continues to exist, as does the curling rink. As of this writing, the most recent diorama celebrates a new business in the hamlet, Jesse James Coating Ltd, which in 2015 moved into the remains of the old Viscount Torrington School. This addition was launched with a social event at the Gopher Hole Museum to which everyone was invited, including its latest business operator. Clearly the museum is based on Torrington’s past but also commemorates how the region has changed over time and continues to survive in the present.

As an outsider to Torrington, I had initially missed this crucial content in the museum. I had assumed that the blacksmith scene was based on a generalized vision of rural heritage in Alberta, not a representation of Alex Rueb’s Blacksmith Shop, which opened in 1929 (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 77). Along similar lines, I had presumed that the dioramas showing gophers entering log cabins, plowing fields of grain, and preparing picnic lunches were contributing to an idealized narrative of rural history in Alberta, one I had seen repeated in heritage museums and pioneer villages throughout the province. The historically specific aspects of the dioramas in the Gopher Hole Museum were revealed to me only after I had made several visits to Torrington, chatting with the curator and other volunteers. A weighty tome called *Torrington and District History 1890s-2015*, published in 2016 by the Torrington Historical Society was another key source. Many members of the Historical Society are also contributors to the Gopher Hole Museum, binding the organizations together. The book was officially launched at an event held at the museum, designed to celebrate its 20th anniversary. Both the volume and the museum have similar goals, with overlapping messages that are directly addressed to former and current residents of the region.

In the foreword of *Torrington and District History 1890s-2015*, the local authors and editors dedicate the book to the families and individuals who have formed the central Alberta farming community of Torrington, with special gratitude to the hardworking homesteaders of the early 1900s (2016, 1). The book does not, however, offer a chronological account of settlement in the region, explaining that many Germans who had emigrated first to Russia then moved to the northern United States before striking out to Alberta, enduring harsh weather and inhospitable terrain along the way (15-17). Nor does the book provide an overarching narrative to explain how mixed family farms were created and businesses set up. There is no economic overview of the effect on Torrington of changing agricultural technologies, declining opportunities, or expanding oil field industries. Instead, the tome is a collection of oral histories gathered from people who once lived or are still living in the area. Hardship is present here and there in their genealogical tales: the ancestors of one family had lived under a wagon until a sod house was built (580); the men in another homesteading group initially sheltered in a hole along the bank of Kneehill Creek, while the women slept in an unheated granary (564). Loss is also present. One author regrets that no one recognized the historic value of the five grain elevators that operated in the once booming town of Torrington before all of them were demolished (43). His account nevertheless moves quickly to what was most important about the elevators: their role as a social hub for local farmers, who met there for a good visit, to chat, smoke cigarettes, and drink coffee. *Torrington and District History 1890s-2015* remembers the core values of the community, and the ways in which those values have endured.

The local history book sheds light on both the contents and spirit of the Gopher Hole Museum. Despite the diversity of voices in the oral histories, a pattern emerges from the book, summed up in the account written by Laural Kurta, Dianne’s daughter: ‘Torrington isn’t about fancy houses, great jobs, prestige or culture. Torrington has always been about community and that community becomes your family and a part of your memories. Indeed, it becomes part of you.’ (442). Her story and a hundred others in *Torrington and District History 1890s-2015* recall the benefits of growing up in a small town or farm, favourite teachers and bus drivers, high school antics, the close friendships formed, such leisure activities as hunting, sledding, and camping, and regularly held community events. The locations of these events are key. Many tales highlight the fun had in restaurants, diners, and pool halls that are no longer active in Torrington, but are vividly remembered by the people who frequented them. The narrators draw particular attention to the role of women, noting how hard their mothers worked on the family farm, tending gardens, sewing clothing, cooking, and teaching children. Both men and women are praised for having persevered in an independent fashion, using the limited resources available to them; they always helped neighbours during tough times, managing to draw out of challenging situations a funny story worth repeating to others. All of these elements—social events, important places, women’s work, friendship, leisure activities, humour—are fundamental to the structure and contents of the Gopher Hole Museum.

The museum is a material manifestation of the heritage of Torrington and the surrounding area, from the point of view of past and current residents. The scenes selected, places reconstructed, and methods used in the museum are part of a longstanding tradition proudly linked with surviving against all odds. The museum extends this process, constructed from a former teacherage and a grain elevator office that were combined and moved to the current site in the hamlet, it was funded by one small grant but otherwise the result of local grit, determination, and ingenuity (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 80). The museum does not preserve a golden age that will never return. It enables Torrington to continue into the present without abandoning the values that built it, including the act of repurposing both the human made and natural elements of the environment. Though the museum is meant to be funny and appeal to tourists, it is not a joke or a tourist gimmick. It is a serious testament to hard work, cooperation, good humour, and hospitality. The museum and its staff make it clear that outsiders are always welcome to Torrington, whether they are new business owners, families who buy affordable houses while continuing to commute to Calgary, or tourists who make the trek into the countryside during the spring and summer months.

**Outsiders React**

The visitor’s book and wall map inside the Gopher Hole Museum indicate that people come from all over the world to see the museum, uniformly enjoying it. The main source of information about and promotion for the museum is found, however, in online reactions. Short reviews of the museum appear in the usual places, including tripadvisor.ca and yelp.ca. The 50 comments made by visitors are remarkably similar. While several praise the Gopher Hole Museum as well made, creative, and ingenious, by far the most common terms used are quirky, weird, hilarious, adorable, bizarre, and unique (<https://www.tripadvisor.ca/Attraction_Review-g3404958-d3397419-Reviews-World_Famous_Gopher_Hole_Museum-Torrington_Alberta.html> 2016). One reviewer labels the museum ‘oddly delightful,’ while others note their surprise at its contents: it is ‘not the Louvre.’ Apparently some visitors had expected a conventional heritage or natural history museum that would provide educational lessons about prairie rodents. Much to their relief, they instead discovered a ‘red neck doll house,’ ‘theatre of the absurd’ and ‘furry freak show’ (Tschetter and Collins 2013). These visitors recognize the Gopher Hole Museum as a site of collecting and display, placing it within a nineteenth-century framework, but allude to such precedents as P. T. Barnum’s American Museum, which exhibited a range of attractions including people deemed ‘freaks’ in New York City from 1841-1865 (Bogdan 1988; Dennett 1997). From these visitors’ point of view, the museum in Torrington is monstrous and even ‘insane’ (Anon. 2013). Seeming to lack a unifying structure and regard for conventional heritage artefacts, the Gopher Hole Museum makes no sense to the visitors, leaving them simultaneously confused and entertained.

The location of the museum is equally portrayed as aberrant in these online reviews. The Gopher Hole Museum is classified as a ‘weird roadside attraction’ that people visit by accident, while on their way somewhere else, usually the mountains, Calgary Stampede, or Badlands in the southern part of Alberta. Torrington is not described as a tourist destination, worth visiting for its own sake (<https://www.yelp.ca/biz/gopher-hole-museum-torrington>). It is ‘nowhere,’ recalling Dianne Kurta’s characterization of how others see the town. To be nowhere means to have no place, no prospect of progress or success, or to be remote, uninteresting, or nondescript. These entirely negative understandings of the term are worth exploring, linked with stereotypes about rurality, as I will discuss below. There is, however, more to this concept of being ‘nowhere’ in Torrington. It relates to the confusion felt by visitors when they do not have their tourist expectations met. The Gopher Hole Museum does not provide a standard tourist script; it does not adhere to any aspect of the authorized heritage discourse, seeming to be unscholarly, artificial, and remote. As a result, the museum offers an experience that can be unsettling and disturbing, displacing visitors even as they find the sensation ‘unique’ and pleasurable.

According to tourism scholars Simon Coleman and Mike Crang, particular sites emerge as ‘tourist places’ when they are appropriated, used, and made part of the living memory and accumulated life narratives of people performing tourism (2002). Visitors to Torrington bring what John Urry has called ‘the tourist gaze’ to the Gopher Hole Museum, a set of expectations that tourists place on local populations when they participate in heritage tourism, in the search of an ‘authentic’ experience (1990). Tourists are ready to find a conventional heritage museum, look at something related to natural history, have a meal, and make a purchase. They are not entirely disappointed by the Gopher Hole Museum, for visitors are encouraged to take pictures of the theatrical dioramas inside the museum and pose with the wooden gopher figure placed just outside of it. Visitors to Torrington can and do take up the tourist gaze described by Urry, looking at the hamlet and its museum with an apparent sense of superiority, characterizing them both as strangely ‘other.’ For the most part, however, tourists do not have their expectations met. Torrington is not particularly picturesque, with few places to shop or eat. The museum is small, lacking conventional artefacts or educational displays. By celebrating a commonplace rodent, it runs counter to the tourist narrative about Alberta officially promoted to international audiences. The province has been marketed to tourists as a place to experience natural wilderness and a rough, more ‘primitive’—with all the connotations of this term—way of life in the mountains (Perry et. al. 1993). Unlike the majestic grizzly bears and mountain goats pictured in postcards and pamphlets, readily seen in Banff and Jasper national parks, the museum in Torrington offers up the lowly gopher, removed from its dull, remote prairie setting and posed in a set of small but elaborate dioramas.

The unexpected and artificial aspects of the Torrington Gopher Hole Museum are nevertheless the most memorable and enjoyable aspects of the museum for tourists. While contemporary tourists still desire to encounter that which is ‘authentic’ and ‘off the beaten path’ while travelling, they are also well aware that many attractions are constructed, and gleefully consume the simulacra on offer. Many tourist sites address these contradictory expectations, by offering genuine experiences with the marvelous alongside staged kitsch. In Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada, for instance, tourists are incited to view the sublime waterfalls before exploring the shrunken heads and two-headed calf at the Ripley’s Believe it or Not Museum (Dubinsky 1999). In a similar fashion, signs advertising the World Famous Gopher Hole Museum lure travelers away from the highways bound for Banff or Calgary, enticing them into the ‘back country,’ and then reward them with a spectacle of ‘authentic’ rural life that includes real gophers but has been clearly staged for their amusement. The experience at Torrington is described as ‘insane’ and ‘bizarre’ because tourists were not expecting such a theatrical construction to be offered in a rural setting ‘in the middle of nowhere.’

The scholarly field of critical rural studies focuses on, among many other things, the concept of rurality in the popular imagination. The rural is not so much a geographical location as a category of thought imbued with social and cultural values (Cloke and Little 1997). Although construed in a binary nature, the rural is not simply opposed to or other than the urban. Both categories are overlapping and mutually informing, difficult to distinguish, though cultural hierarchies consistently favour the urban (Thomas et. al. 2011). The rural is often defined as a residual space not enclosed by urban boundaries (27). It is therefore somehow ‘nowhere,’ available for possession, considered ready to be moved into in a colonizing way rather than already functioning within broader social and economic systems (64). Yet there are a number of different, often contradictory ways in which the rural is imagined. For an urban tourist, the rural appears to be a simple wild place suitable for temporary escape (Cloke, Marsen and Mooney 2006; Crouch 2006). The English countryside in particular is envisioned as idyllic, a place of leisure for elites seeking a simpler lifestyle and unmediated encounter with nature (Short 2006). In contrast, rural Alberta is more often represented as either a wild frontier or sparsely settled and therefore backwards, romantically subject to inevitable decline in the face of new technologies. To a large degree such understandings of the rural as simple, rustic, irremediably mired in the past, and dying are challenged by the Gopher Hole Museum, which is arguably a commercial and cultural success, displaying local creativity, sophistication, and survival skills that have endured. According to the online reactions, tourists do not, however, take the opportunity to reconsider their assumptions about rural life. Instead they gravitate toward another established way of understanding the rural, namely as a strange and frightening place located outside the boundaries of civilization (Bell 1997). A standard location for horror movies, the rural small town can produce freak shows that are both disturbing and thrilling to encounter.

The ‘strange,’ ‘bizarre,’ and ‘insane’ Torrington Gopher Hole Museum furthermore appeals to visitors precisely because its lack of a clear tourist script allows them to improvise, making their own meanings at the site. According to experts, tourism is a fully sensorial practice contributing to the continual cultural production and reproduction of heritage. Tourists do not passively gaze at spectacles; they enact embodied performances in response to the possibilities and limitations of the location in question (Baerenholdt et. al. 2004). Although these limitations are expected and can be reassuring, they are also restrictive. Cultural studies scholar Tim Edensor argues that ‘tourists are rarely left to draw their own conclusions about objects or places before them. Instead, they more often confront a body of public discourse—signs, maps, guides, and guide books—that repeatedly mark the boundaries of significance and value at tourist sites’ (2001, 73). The lack of such directive material at the Gopher Hole Museum renders it confusing but also accessible and open to appropriation. Visitors are warmly welcomed into the museum, with volunteers who are willing to answer questions and allow tourists try on the papier mâché gopher mask worn during parades. The friendly staff might provide a brief history of the museum, but never tell visitors what it means, offering little explanation and no written guidance. They do not take up the role of museum expert. Many tourists find joy in the museum precisely because it is a challenging and strange ‘open text’ that invites their participation.

One fan of the Gopher Hole Museum created an elaborate web site that appears to be official, complete with a pull down menu noting the museum’s location, hours, and history, as well as photographs of the dioramas (<http://gopherholemuseum.ca>). The site was created, however, by travel and lifestyle blogger Raymond Walsh, otherwise known as Man on the Lam, who left the corporate world to commit himself to escapism (<http://manonthelam.com>). His identity is not immediately evident, linked only with the photography credits. A small disclaimer on the home page indicates that the web site is not official, and was created as a tribute by fans of the Gopher Hole Museum. The material on the site is narrated from the point of view of the gophers, who invite visitors to come and see them. Moving beyond a mere reproduction of the museum and its contents, the unofficial web site offers interactive areas, including downloadable drawings of gophers for children to colour, not provided at the museum. Most striking, however, is the way in which the creator or perhaps creators of the site are identified with gophers, creating new characters not endorsed by the Gopher Hole Museum. Five gopher characters are listed under the heading ‘Meet the Team,’ including Jonathan, a graphic designer who likes Kanye West. These inventions might be inspired in part by the wider rebranding of Torrington, which, in addition to the museum, features Clem T. GoFur, a 12 foot high fiberglass mascot installed near the campground in town, along with 11 fire hydrants painted as gopher characters (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 120-21). Although the gopher characters on the web site are creative inventions inspired by the founders of the Gopher Hole Museum, they are not linked with Torrington. Instead, these new gopher characters participate in a more globalized popular culture, as hip city gophers wanting to escape from their desk jobs.

The most sophisticated response to the Gopher Hole Museum is a 14-minute-long film called *World Famous Gopher Hole Museum* (<http://www.cbc.ca/shortdocs/shorts/world-famous-gopher>). Debuted by directors Chelsea McMullan and Douglas Nayler at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2015, it was nominated for an award for best short documentary. According to an online interview with McMullan, the directors were relocating from Vancouver to Toronto when they stopped in at the museum, and felt compelled to make a film about it (2015). The resulting work uses such documentary conventions as hand held cameras and awkward, unrehearsed interviews with Dianne Kurta to present information about the foundation and contents of the Gopher Hole Museum. Many scenes move outside the museum to show the town of Torrington, focusing on its decline: a torn flag blows in the prairie wind, wide empty streets are lined with shabby storefronts no longer in use, old railway tracks are pulled up and abandoned in the middle of a farmer’s field, a school crossing sign is spray painted over because the school is now closed. Interviews with longtime residents record them remembering the excitement of the CPR train coming to town, and the bustling nature of Torrington, which once had two general stores, a machinery dealership, three service centres, a blacksmith shop, and a restaurant. The film’s overall theme of irremediable loss becomes unmistakable with an extended shot of an old fashioned TV which screens what appears to be a 1950s documentary about the decline of ancient Egypt. The female narrator explains that Egyptians had believed in cyclical time, with an inevitable rebirth and renewal, but finally had to recognize that the good times were not coming back. Although this comparison between an ancient civilization and a contemporary hamlet in rural Alberta is unexpected, the filmmakers stress the cyclical nature of the seasons in Torrington, beginning with shots of the Gopher Hole Museum during the summer and ending in winter. The final scene shows the older inhabitants of Torrington square dancing in slow motion, with an overlaid musical score that helps to create a surreal, melancholy effect. In the end, the museum is depicted as the last gasp of a dying culture that will soon be lost forever.

Though the film by McMullan and Nayler is beautifully made and recognizes the intricate relationship between the Gopher Hole Museum and its location in the hamlet of Torrington, it ignores the optimistic and playful aspects of the museum. The film highlights death, loss, and mourning rather than approaching the museum as a beneficial addition to a place that has continued to adapt and persevere, while maintaining the values of hospitality and cooperation. The film potentially reinforces stereotypes about the backward nature of rural life, with a heritage that is always already in the past, not remade in the present. The short documentary is not, however, simply mistaken; nor has it been rejected or criticized by the organizers of the Gopher Hole Museum. In fact, the film was praised by Dianne Kurta during our interview in 2016 for having drawn renewed attention to the museum, providing another round of free advertising. The filmic response was also enabled by the openness of museum itself, and by the lack of its organizers to constrain or control its meaning. The museum volunteers had welcomed the urban film makers and accepted the results, being well aware of the rather mournful tone that emerged from the final version (Torrington Historical Society 2016, 123). By not attempting to control how the museum is represented or viewed, not correcting their own image, the museum organizers appear to realize the way in which their heritage is a negotiation that depends on others. In an apparent recognition of what John Fiske has characterized as the considerable freedom of audiences as producers in the cultural economy, they allow the meanings and pleasures made within the museum to circulate without worrying about distinguishing between producers and consumers (1987). The founders of the Gopher Hole Museum nevertheless take a risk with this approach. It is possible that visitors will continue to circulate stereotypes about rural Alberta, in spite of diverse and contrary messages created at the museum itself.

**Conclusions**

Heritage is not contested in an aggressive or overt way at the Gopher Hole Museum, except perhaps in the GAGS diorama. For the most part, the museum acts as a site for the negotiation of meaning and the participation of outsiders, reasons for its popular success. The organizers of the Gopher Hole Museum are unremitting in their hospitality, encouraging the active role of visitors to Torrington, aware that the significance of the museum depends on the contributions of outsiders who may nevertheless have different stakes in the institution. As an outsider myself, I have tried to understand the Gopher Hole Museum as a complex cultural production, viewing it from the position of local insider as well as an urban tourist. I contend that the museum organizers, mostly rural women who have been traditionally excluded from museums, have built something that highlights their own skills and values, celebrating their understanding of heritage as a way of life that continues against all odds, mostly in memories and stories told and retold, not material buildings or artefacts that must be preserved. In my self-appointed role as the museum’s defender, I insist that the institution is a legitimate cultural centre, despite its neglect of aspects that would lend it more authority, including an educational mandate, historic artefacts, and certified museum experts as staff. At the same time, I bring my own interests in the history of museums and visual culture to the Gopher Hole Museum. Unlike me, Dianne Kurta and other museum organizers do not worry about whether or not people will misunderstand or misrepresent the Gopher Hole Museum, potentially disrespecting them. Dianne explains that the museum is ‘her baby’ and she is proud of it, as are all of her collaborators in Torrington.

**Notes**

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