

Michelle Josef and Transgender (In)visibility at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights:

Audio Guide Script

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Speaker playback sound fade in and out, continues to play in background throughout guide.

Nestled into a corner alcove of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is an eye catching display of wedding photos from same-sex marriages. Each photo is surrounded by a crisp white frame, and the portraits are arranged in the shape of a three dimensional wedding cake. This exhibit commemorates the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada, and celebrates the couples who have chosen to marry (*Taking the Cake*). At first glance, *Taking the Cake* appears to be the only exhibit with queer content in the museum's large Canadian Journeys Gallery. However, there is more to be seen if you know where to find it.

Pause. Wedding bells play and then fade into ambulance siren. Siren fades.

Several free standing computer banks can be found in the centre of this gallery. These computers function as electronic exhibits and allow visitors to scroll through a plethora of human rights narratives. Buried within their archives is a story about Canadian musician Michelle Josef. (*Short pause*). In 1997 Josef came out as transgender and was fired from the Toronto band *Prairie Oyster* ("Michelle Josef"). The following year, the Ontario government decided that being transgender was a "lifestyle choice" and stopped funding transition related medical costs (*Transgender Canadians*). Josef was part way through her surgical transition, and was not able to pay for the rest of her procedures. She fought back against the new legislation, and argued that the cut in funding discriminated against her. Before Josef's case made it to trial, a new government was elected and sex reassignment funding was reinstated (*Transgender Canadians*).
Pause. Drum solo plays and fades out.

If you didn't already know about Michelle Josef and the politics surrounding her transition, would you choose this narrative from the CMHR's electronic archives? Would you sit at a computer and dig through several digital menus to find a story about transgender Canadians? Or would you be drawn to the impressive, and well lit, wedding cake at the back of the Canadian Journeys Gallery? Because of its discrete location, you might spend hours in the large museum before stumbling across Josef's story. In some ways, the location and display of the *Transgender Canadians* exhibit reflects Jennifer Tyburczy's discussion of "exhibitionary silences" and the "secret museum" (23, 28). Tyburczy argues that there are "silences [around queer] lives in mainstream archives and museums," and that queer stories are often missing from curated institutions (23). At this museum, homonormative content like same-sex marriage is openly displayed and celebrated. However, a queer narrative that conflicts with mainstream ideologies is stored in an optional interactive exhibit (Tyburczy 28). (*Short Pause*). Josef's story may not be a full fledged exhibitionary silence, but the exhibit's secretive location keeps it hidden from many of the museum's visitors.

Pause. Drum solo plays and fades into wedding bells and traffic sounds. Wedding sounds fade.

When I think about how Josef's story is displayed, I can't help but compare it to the extravagant wedding cake celebrating same-sex marriage. The photos of happily married couples reflect Canada's enthusiastic acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships, but the political barriers that halted Josef's transition are far less visible. (*Short pause*). These curatorial choices imply that only certain queers have the right to be themselves, and that only certain Canadians have the right to be recognized as acceptable members of the queer community. (*Short pause*).

As Winnipeg artist Shawna Dempsey argues, the "gay rights movement [in Canada] has created structures and rights for the most normative of gay people. [We must] not forget our

transgender [siblings, or] the full spectrum of queerness” (*One Gay City*). (*Short pause, speaker playback gets louder and then fades*). What if the museum dedicated an entire exhibit alcove to the story of Michelle Josef, and made the “full spectrum of queerness” more visible? (*One Gay City*). This imagined alcove could challenge homonormative constructs, and create an accessible space to talk and learn about non-normative gender identities. Maybe the museum could also highlight Josef’s personal accomplishments and life’s work, instead of focusing on the political complications of her transition. (*Short pause, drum solo plays and then fades out*). In an open letter to *SooToday.com*, Josef states that her “identity as a musician is [just] as important ... as [her] gender identity” (“Michelle Josef writes us”). (*Short pause*). Perhaps a new version of this exhibit might show visitors that there’s more to Michelle Josef than trans activism, and that there’s more to transgender Canadians than gender affirming surgeries.

Speaker playback begins and then fades into drum solo. Drums fade out to end of audio guide.

Works Cited

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