

Decolonizing Representations of Queerness at the CMHR Script

indistinct museum chatter

When you walk into the Indigenous Perspectives gallery at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, you may notice the spirit panels which decorate the perimeter of the gallery. During a Pride Tour I participated in as a visitor, our guide directed our attention to one panel in particular as representing Two-Spiritedness. The term Two-Spirit was coined in Winnipeg in the 90s. It refers to specifically Indigenous systems of gender and sexuality which operate outside of western, Christian binaries. The panel is symbolic of a sense of balance, centring a medicine wheel between two people, two heads of a raven, and the sun and moon on either side.

indistinct chatter stops

But, the panel is actually described by the museum website as referring to gender equality, and a general wish for less discrimination. To the average museum-goer just strolling through, even that would be unclear. The apparent queerness of it all gets lost, and that person at the museum comes away without really knowing anything about Two-Spirit people, or their experience of colonization.

What if instead of being relegated to a vague reference, queer Indigenous and Two Spirit voices could actually be heard in this space?

Could this space be re-imagined as de-colonial?

ambient chords

A museum that would engage with the fraught history surrounding Indigeneity, sexuality, gender and the state would begin with an acknowledgment of the heterosexism and transphobia which inform the colonial project. Scholar Martin Cannon describes pre-contact Indigenous social systems which unlike the culture of the colonizers, were not structured based on a binary system of gender; before colonial interference, social relations on Turtle Island were much more based on your occupational role in the community than your sexuality (54). Colonizers, upon their arrival in these lands, immediately began to enforce a Christian, patriarchal system through missionary work, a project which has been echoed throughout the centuries in government policy (Cannon 52). A representation of Indigeneity which is entirely divorced from queerness is a colonial representation.

Much of the Indigenous content in the museum is framed in the context of ‘reconciliation’, assuming that any inclusion of Indigeneity works against colonial representations of history. Reconciliation narratives often presume that colonization is something that happened in the past, instead of an ongoing system. This is evident in an ‘Indigenous Perspectives’ gallery which lacks the testimony of actual Indigenous people.

fade out ambient chords, fade in indistinct museum chatter

Elsewhere in the museum, there is an interesting disruption of the settler perspective. In the ‘Share Your Story’ booth, there is a video entitled ‘LGBTQ Aboriginal Woman’, where a queer Indigenous person calls out the the museum for it’s lack of acknowledgement of their existence. In directly resisting the silences in settler narratives surrounding Indigenous sexuality, this

person engages in sexual survivance, a kind of active resistance and survival against the colonial sexual logics seen in the museum (Gilley 130).

A de-colonial museum would work to undo the assumption that queerness and Indigeneity do not intersect. What could the Indigenous Perspectives gallery look like if it had computer banks with dozens of stories like the one buried in the 'Share Your Story' booth? If Two-Spirit people were allowed to speak for themselves? If queer and Indigenous perspectives were not segregated into separate spaces in the museum, but shown to reflect the reality of Indigenous experiences of queerness and Two-Spiritedness?

indistinct chatter fades out

As settlers, we need to decolonize the spaces that we create, without relying on queer Indigenous people to do it for us. Reconciliation is meaningless without decolonization, and that process can only begin with a full understanding of the historical and continued violences of colonialism.

Two Spirit and Indigiqueer narratives must be centred in our educational spaces in order to decolonize the minds in our settler society.