Colonialism and National Myth-Making in Canadian Museums
Grace Kwan

Abstract

Canadian national mythology promotes the widespread idea of a peaceful, tolerant, multicultural nation built by and composed of immigrants. This mythology functions to sustain the ongoing settler colonialism and genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Using a case study of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba, I demonstrate how such a national mythology denies Indigenous claims to the space, relegates Indigenous peoples to the pre-modern or already extinct, and erases their resistance to and struggles with colonization from the here and now. Institutions such as the Museum operate as part of a larger national and political context which nurtures and sustains nationalist mythologies establishing Canada’s white settler society.

Canadian national mythology promotes the widespread idea of a peaceful, tolerant, multicultural nation built by and composed of immigrants. This mythology not only advances a false image of white settlers as the “original immigrants” to Canada or the rightful inhabitants of Canadian land, but also functions to sustain the ongoing settler colonialism and genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada. This is achieved by denying Indigenous claims to the space, relegateing Indigenous peoples to the pre-modern or already extinct, and erasing their resistance to and struggles with colonization from the here and now. In this essay, I begin with a discussion of spatial analyses in examining settler colonialism and Canadian nationalist myth-making, reflecting on Razack’s (2002) theory.

I move on to an analysis of Canadian museums as a mode of national memory formation which sustains and upholds the colonization and genocide of Indigenous communities. I will delve into a case study of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba and examine how collaborative efforts between the museum and local Indigenous groups shaped the development/architecture of the building and content. I compare the CMHR’s claims and values regarding representation of human rights with its treatment of Indigenous peoples and issues, drawing on accounts by Logan (2014) and Lehrer (2015). Finally, I draw connections from the Canadian Museum for Human Rights to other exhibits of Canadian nationalist myth-making which work together to uphold the white settler society.
Background

The white settler society is not only a racial phenomenon but also a spatial narrative (Razack 2002). Razack (2002) emphasizes the importance of spaces in sustaining unequal social relations and social relations in shaping spaces. Canadian nationalist mythology especially benefits from a spatial analysis. Nationalist mythologies are stories about a nation’s origins and history which allow citizens to conceptualize themselves as part of a community (Razack 2002). National stories that establish the groups that belong in the space of “Canada,” and subsequently the groups that do not belong, implicate a racial story as well as a spatial story (Razack 2002). Such stories, including multicultural narratives that attempt to unify racial and ethnic groups or claim reciprocity and equality in stories of European settlement in Canada, overlook the displacement and extermination of Indigenous populations (Razack 2002; Mackey 1998). The white settler society, established by Europeans on non-European land, originates from the dispossession and near extermination of Indigenous populations by colonizers who saw themselves as the rightful and entitled inhabitants of the land (Razack 2002). National mythologies in North America continue to deny this violent conquest and cultural genocide, selling in its place the fantasy of a peacefully settled North America whose settlers, white Europeans, are natural inhabitants of the land (Razack 2002; Mackey 1998).

Such mythologies not only promote ideologies of white settler belongingness in Canada as rightfully earned, but also relegate the existence of Indigenous peoples, societies, cultures, and issues to the past and the pre-modern (Razack 2002). The erasure of Indigenous peoples and the entitlement of European settlers to Canadian spaces are achieved through the imagining of “already inhabited nations” as “uninhabited if the people were not Christian, not agricultural, not commercial, not ‘sufficiently evolved’ or simply in the way” (Razack 2002:3) in the doctrines of discovery and terra nullius. The doctrine of discovery, the doctrine of terra nullius, and the “dying race” paradigm which situates Indigenous populations as already on their way toward extinction and therefore not a living, modern population (Logan 2014) work together. These doctrines push Indigenous peoples out of the temporal space of modernity, discursively and physically*. This exclusion of Indigenous cultures and populations from modernity then functions to justify and entitle white settlers occupying the Canadian space. “Space” includes properties and institutions such as schools. Schick (2000), for instance, writes about how white academics who claim liberal values of equity and tolerance reconfirm a university space as white and white-dominant even when the university population
is not composed of a white majority. Schick's (2000:71) research focuses on students of a teacher-education program at the University of Saskatchewan, where a multicultural course was mandated as part of the program to “produce teachers who can teach 'students from majority and minority backgrounds.’” Students had negative responses to the course and took up moral and ethical issues with it, stating that they felt alienated or saw it as “a form of reverse discrimination” (Shick 2000:74). Multicultural education challenges Canadian national narratives which establish and legitimate European settlers as “original inhabitants” of the land and silence the claims of Indigenous peoples (Schick 2000). But in the context of white-dominated institutions such as the university, such education also functions to legitimate white entitlement and dominance by centring white knowledge and rationality and establishing white students as credible, non-racist, liberal individuals (Schick 2000).

Canadian museums are another important institution where this spatial erasure takes place. Museums in Canada have historically relegated Indigenous peoples to the position of the marginalized “Other” (Logan 2014). Indigenous peoples have struggled to have their stories and histories represented in Canadian museums — most significantly, their narratives of settler colonial genocide committed against them (Logan 2014). Today, Canadian museums work more closely with Indigenous communities on exhibits involving Indigenous heritage than they did in the past (Logan 2014). As they come under scrutiny for their responsibility in public advocacy and civic engagement, museums and their contributions to national identity and social conscience have been charged with the imperative to build “positive action” and include more marginalized voices (Logan 2014:117). Canadian museums have moved forward from simply stealing and appropriating Indigenous artefacts as remembrance of a “dying race” and assisting in the neglect of Indigenous populations by promoting the logic that these populations were just going to perish anyways (Logan 2014:116). But although Canadian museums increasingly involve Indigenous communities in their institutions, museums still stand as barriers to proper representation of Indigenous narratives of their own heritages (Logan 2014). Museums regard Indigenous artefacts, and by extension, Indigenous cultures and struggles, as relics of the past (Logan 2014). This shapes the way in which museums represent Indigenous heritage and settler colonialism, working to uphold national mythologies that legitimize white entitlement to Canadian space while erasing Indigenous claims to land and relegating Indigenous peoples to the pre-modern.
Case Study: The Canadian Museum for Human Rights

Indigenous narratives of settler colonial genocide live on in Indigenous oral histories and stories, but Canadian museums fail to accurately portray settler colonial genocide in North America (Logan 2014). Unlike their framing of “official” genocides such as the Holocaust, museum representations of atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples depict single, discrete episodes that are not a part of a larger genocidal intention or pattern (Logan 2014; Lehrer 2015). According to Logan (2014), a curator at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), the CMHR matches every mention of state-perpetrated violence against Indigenous peoples in Canada with a statement indicating an act of reconciliation or apology by the government. This framing — or, lack of framing — is one of many ways that the state erases Indigenous voices and absolves itself of responsibility in cultural genocide. As Lehrer (2015:1197) remarks, the CMHR’s human rights discourse allows us “to cringe, sigh, and rebuke, but not be challenged on how our own cultural beliefs and political systems may be bound up in the suffering of others.” These framings do not only acquit Canada of ongoing colonization; they also work to naturalize past European colonization as peaceful settlement that did not involve the violent displacement of Indigenous populations and cultures. In the process, Indigenous narratives, land claims, and struggles are delegitimized and rendered invisible in the space that was stolen from them.

Even before the CMHR first opened its doors to the public, it became a site of controversy and multiple conflicts. The first national museum built from the ground up since 1967, the CMHR was modelled after other human rights projects such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Logan 2014). The museum sits at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, a position that comes at the cost of the archaeological excavation of a piece of Treaty 1 land that constitutes a sacred space and ancient meeting place for First Nations and Metis (Logan 2014; Lehrer 2015). The museum did not seem to make much effort to consult with First Nations and Metis communities regarding the archaeological digs, as the digs occurred from 2008 to 2012 but the museum only planned a meeting with First Nations and Metis experts in late 2013 (Logan 2014). The literal foundations of the CMHR’s building form the basis for the museum’s contentious treatment of Indigenous issues. The building of the CMHR is a concrete, vivid instance of the disregard for Indigenous claims to land that operates to push Indigenous communities out of spaces which are then constituted as rightfully Canadian land. In line with the Holocaust museum, which inspired its development, the CMHR conceptualizes an
understanding of human rights centred around the Holocaust and other officially recognized genocides (Lehrer 2015; Logan 2014). In contrast to the narratives and framings of these overseas genocides, the CMHR touts features such as the “Indigenous Perspectives” gallery, an “imposing circular theater in the shape of a woven wooden basket housing” in which films about Indigenous rights and stories as well as hanging Indigenous artworks can be viewed (Lehrer 2015:1199). Visitors in this gallery may also see a series of small photographs depicting “scenes of apparent Indigenous activism,” such as protesters calling for “water rights” (Lehrer 2015:1200). These features emerge from a context in which Logan (2014), as a curator at the CMHR, was asked to remove the label of “genocide” from different displays and to balance coverage of Indigenous suffering with the government’s reconciliatory gestures. The organization of the CMHR builds upon colonial and Westernized methods of memory and knowledge transfer, even when it is challenged to do otherwise by collaborators such as Logan (2014). Lehrer (2015:1200) critiques the gallery for its engagement with “predictable, palatable tropes of arts and crafts and spirituality rather than historical and ongoing marginalization by ... the Canadian government.” The gallery shrouds pressing issues that many Indigenous communities suffer from, such as the lack of access to clean water, in aestheticized modern-art renderings, effectively distancing Indigenous struggles from the here and now.

In addition to the “water rights” motif peppered throughout the “Indigenous Perspectives” gallery, the CMHR’s architecture itself “nods to Indigenous presence” with its “roots” embedded in the earth and “healing waters” which flow through the museum’s central installation, the Garden of Contemplation (Lehrer 2015:1201). When the Ojibway First Nations of Shoal Lake No. 40 found out before construction started that the CMHR would feature the theme of “healing waters,” they were excited about the opportunity afforded by the museum to bring attention to their plight (Lehrer 2015). A century ago in 1915, the government had sold a part of this First Nation terrain to the city of Winnipeg to build an aqueduct to supply urban residents with clean water (Lehrer 2015; Malone 2019). The aqueduct cut Shoal Lake No. 40 into an island, leaving the people there trapped with their own trash and sewage, with no access to clean water, and with no safe way or convenient way to traverse the lake (Lehrer 2015). Shoal Lake No. 40 residents were under a boil-water advisory for over twenty years (Malone 2019). Only in 2019 did Shoal Lake get Freedom Road, a year-round accessible connection from the community to the Trans-Canada Highway (Malone 2019). Yet even with its thoughtful, artistic
interpretations of the “healing waters” theme, the CMHR never references the plight of its neighbours, the Shoal Lake No. 40 community (Lehrer 2015). The Museum functions as it is meant to — as a space built to colonize Indigenous land and replace narratives of resistance to settler colonialism with narratives that both spatially and temporally distance Indigenous struggles. The Museum’s treatment of Indigenous issues, taken within the context of the Museum’s focus on genocides, situates Canada as an equitable and progressive nation where genocide and injustice does not happen on the same scale as other countries (Logan 2014), upholding the nationalist myth of a peacefully settled Canada. Lehrer (2015) sees the CMHR's framing of Indigenous issues as part of a larger political climate in which Canada actively perpetuates a tolerant, post-colonial and post-racial image of itself that disregards the ongoing injustices occurring within its borders. Understanding the CMHR in this context allows us to make connections to similar happenings across the country, such as the settler homonationalism project of Pride House in Vancouver. Pride House, a space built for LGBT people to convene and view the 2010 Olympic Games, was made possible with military and police violence and the colonization of unceded Coast Salish territory (Dhoot 2015). It reflects the increasingly prevalent strategy of the Canadian government to position itself as a “gay-friendly” nation and as enlightened human rights leaders even as it perpetuates these injustices against Indigenous populations (Dhoot 2015). Like Pride House, the CMHR promotes a concern with human rights while it stands on effectively stolen land, without ample effort to acknowledge this or to bring attention to injustices occurring on Canada's own soil.

In 2019, the CMHR stated that it recognizes Canada’s treatment of Indigenous peoples as genocide, changing from its labelling of “cultural genocide” to an identification of the “entire colonial system in Canada” as genocide (Monkman 2019). Although this long-awaited change was welcome, people such as Pam Palmater, a Mi’kmaq lawyer and advocate who also wrote about the CMHR's non-framing of settler colonial genocide in Canada in 2015, want to see more substantial advancements: “To me, you shouldn't be able to walk two feet into that museum without first seeing an exhibit on genocide … They need to include it in all of their education materials, and they need to have a prominent and permanent exhibit on genocide in Canada” (Monkman 2019). Nationalist projects such as the Canadian Museum for Human Rights and Pride House work to embed the racial stories involved in the nationalist mythology into public consciousness by replacing histories of resistance against colonization with decontextualized exhibitions of
Canadian multiculturalism and tolerance. The nation also achieves this through educational processes and on other sites of intellect, sustaining an ignorance of settler colonialism and Indigenous issues in Canada (Villegas 2019). Even when cultural education is implemented, such education in white spaces tends to uphold white dominance. See, for example, how the compulsory multicultural course examined by Schick (2000:76) reaffirmed the whiteness of the university space by allowing the white students to rely on the constitution of the “not-Other” and racialized identity to produce themselves as dominant, elite, and legitimate intellectuals. The students used white liberal notions of rationalism to pronounce their displeasure with having issues of race and ethnicity “forced on them” (Schick 2000:78) and secured “white entitlement to the university ... by identifying themselves with physical space and the normative designation of who is likely to be found there” (Schick 2000:79).

Conclusion

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights has won multiple international awards for architecture, digital technologies, and accessibility (Lehrer 2015). The museum stands as a pinnacle of museum innovation and promotes progressive values of inclusion and philanthropy. But a closer look at the museum reveals tensions and conflicts which have sparked a great deal of controversy, and which speak to a larger political context that still functions to uphold the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Palmater 2017). This is illustrated by the CMHR's difficulties with identifying settler colonialism in Canada, even as it comfortably condemns other “official” genocides outside of the country (Logan 2014). We see this function also in the museum's almost pretentious renderings of Indigenous issues as art projects, even as an Indigenous community in the near vicinity (Shoal Lake No. 40) actively suffers from and protests the deadly effects of settler colonialism.

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights, whose name rings hollow in light of these situations, constitutes only one of many instances in which we see the way that apparent progressiveness can obscure ongoing projects of settler colonialism and stagnate actual progress in resisting these projects. Institutions such as the Museum operate as part of a larger national and political context which nurtures and sustains nationalist mythologies establishing Canada's white settler society. These institutions contribute to a patchwork of narratives which invisibilize Indigenous peoples from Canada's foundations and naturalize European settlement
of the land. They displace Indigenous peoples not only from the physical space of Canada but also from the temporal space of modern civilization, banishing Indigenous peoples to the pre-modern and thereby disregarding their resistances and their claims to the physical land. In doing so, such institutions and the mythologies they reinforce establish and fortify white dominance in their spaces as well as in Canada at large.
References


