

**DECOLONIZING INFLUENCE:
AN EXPLORATION OF QUEER SEXUALITY IN THE
FILM STRYKER**

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ABSTRACT Through an analysis of Noam Gonick’s independent Canadian film *Stryker* (2004) as public pedagogy, and in comparison to real life narratives, the authors illustrate how queer sexualities and genders are constructed according to Western hetero-colonial tropes that either silence Indigenous Two-Spirit people or position them as an exotic ‘other’ in queer and non-queer Canadian contexts. Through this comparison the authors shed light on problematic (mis)representations of Indigenous Two-Spirit people in cinema and how this may impact ‘real life’ encounters and assumptions about Two-Spirit people, and suggests some implications for decolonizing Western influence on Indigenous sexuality and gender identity.

KEYWORDS decolonization, public pedagogy, queer studies, self-reflexivity, North American Indigenous

Introduction

Michael Horswell (2005) writes in the book, *Decolonizing the Sodomite*, that “[transculturation] is a multifaceted process in which hegemonic cultures *influence* subjugated ones, in which subjugated cultures give up old and acquire new values and meanings, and in which completely new cultural forms are created [emphasis added]” (p. 7). It is this process of *influence* that we seek to disturb through this paper by examining some of the effects when one culture regulates or dominates another. We unpack *influence* in this analytical paper through Noam Gonick’s film *Stryker*¹ (2004), which explores notions of Indigeneity, queerness, and power. Meanwhile, we generate a critical analysis that illustrates how same-sex desire and gender

¹ The term “stryker” is a Canadian slang term designating a prospective gang member.

expression is constructed largely based on Western influence of rigid hetero/homo and male/female binaries, and point out opportunities for resistances and resist-stances, decolonization, and deconstruction in the film.

As definitions of decolonization are complex and always evolving, and given the focus on cinema in this paper, we draw on Beth Blue Swadener and Kagendo Mutua's (2008) notion of 'decolonizing performance' which they explain is "the process in both research and performance of valuing, reclaiming, and foregrounding indigenous voices and epistemologies" (p. 31). Swadener and Mutua further explain that this notion presents "possibilities of forging cross-cultural partnerships with, between, and among indigenous researchers and 'allied others' (Rogers & Swadener, 1999) and working collaboratively on common goals that reflect anticolonial sensibilities in action are important facets of decolonization" (*ibid*). We draw on this particular definition partly to recognize intercultural discourse and analysis, but also for creating opportunities to examine the multiple layers of decolonization from an Indigenous and allied perspective, and introduce narrative beyond what is presented in the film. Likewise, we also recognize that the term Indigenous "is a broadly inclusive and internationally recognized term" (Justice, 2018, p. 7), and for the sake of this paper we acknowledge the broader, global implications of this catchall term. Although we use this term throughout our paper, we largely apply use of this term to include and focus on the Indigenous peoples of Canada, comprising of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. We acknowledge that there are challenges to using non-specific terms such as Aboriginal, Native, and Indigenous, and as such recognize the ongoing struggle to identify and disidentify the political, social, cultural implications of language.

As part of our analysis, this paper integrates personal narratives of the two authors, one of Indigenous background and one of mixed European background, and how they first encountered a 'celebration' of sexual and gender diversity (i.e., Toronto Pride Parade) and how this event impacted their emergent queer ontologies in a second narrative. What is also offered, for comparative and counter-hegemonic purposes, is an investigation of Indigeneity and allyship in relation to urban space, and how gender, sexuality, and queer identity are framed through the lens of cinema. We examine how queer Indigenous

identity and gender are scripted in contemporary independent Canadian cinema by turning a critical focus on the film *Stryker*, including its content and some of the public comments made about the film. We refer to the space (i.e., the land, streetscapes, venues, and so forth), characters, and points of contention in the film. This exploration of the real *and* imaginary realities in this paper seeks to disrupt the real/imaginary binary that often nuances queer Western literature and deepen understanding of the influences of Western systems on Indigenous sex/gender arrangements as represented in film.

In this analysis we question if and how queering can potentially offer a decolonizing lens, particularly in relation to the interracial “look” (Kaplan, 1997). In her work, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, Kaplan (1997) examines notions of the interracial “look” in film, and how looking operates as a form of control and power, while questioning “What happens when white people look at non-whites?” and “What happens when the look is returned – when black peoples own the look and startle whites into knowledge of their whiteness?” (p. 4). Similarly, we raise the following question in this paper: how can a queer “look” decentre the hetero-colonial dominance? We discuss and conclude with the point that although *Stryker* does present opportunities to examine, problematize, and decolonize hetero-colonial perspectives, there are problematic encounters with (re)presentations of queer and Two-Spirit expression that continue to illegitimize trans bodies, if not ignore trans realities, and cast queerness as parody and property that reinforce heterodominant tropes.

This paper is highly significant to educational practitioners, performers, and cultural workers. We feel it is important to allow for discussion of cultural representations in film, and to view these moments as public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000). As Giroux explains, public pedagogy are sites of education that take place beyond formalized educational systems, and include places, such as popular culture, where people publicly share their lives. Meaning is then being produced and contested through observing and participating in daily acts and relations. As we demonstrate below, viewers (educators, learners, filmmakers, actors, community members, and so forth) can write themselves into film in order to show different realities, which can be facilitated through important tools of post-colonial critique

such as blogs, posts, film, or other forms of interactive and digital media and texts. Learning of the past and decolonizing the present through film and supplementary texts provides a useful way to visualize oppression, and seek out strategies to challenge and disrupt hegemony.

Indigenous people, film, and (mis)representation

Historically, Indigenous people and cultures have been portrayed in broad brushstrokes in film, with little to no regard for the range of ethnic and cultural variations. Indigenous people are often depicted in film as being stuck in a sepia past, adorned in feathers and beads, preserved in the static frame of an ecological landscape. One only needs to look at the canon of classic Westerns or the plethora of patriotic feel-good movies to gain a better understanding of how such an extensive filmography has fuelled North America's often racist portrayals or otherwise romantic imaginings of Indigenous life. Consequently, historical and contemporary representations of Indigenous people and culture in cinema have to a large extent been two-dimensional and stereotypical. There is much to scrutinize given there are such deep-seeded colonial tropes and misrepresentations of Indigenous people originating as far back as the silent film and Vaudeville era where Blackface and redface (a custom in which actors smeared cork or shoe polish all over their face to portray Black or First Nations people) were common practice in racist minstrel shows (Cockrell, 1997; Gibbs, 2014; Lott, 1993; Maher, 1997). For example, Harvey Young (2013) posits that "redface" is one of the oldest ongoing forms of racial impersonation, citing the North American practice of role-play during annual Thanksgiving holidays.

Similar to the Blackface and redface trend, it was also a common practice for film production teams to "paint down" non-Indigenous actors to appear darker and accessorize them with beads, buckskin, and bows and arrows as a means to enhance visual 'authenticity'. Examples include: Jeff Chandler in *Broken Arrow* (1950), Burt Lancaster in *Apache* (1954), Chuck Connors in *Geronimo* (1962), Tom Laughlin in *Billy Jack* (1971), and, more recently, Johnny Depp in *The Lone Ranger* (2013). Consequently, the myriad of images depicted of Indigenous peoples in cinema have largely served the colonial gaze, where fantasies of violence and misogyny are re-enacted time and again toward women and girls, and queer Indigeneity

remains in the periphery. Such cinematic representations of the “Other” have been used to uphold dominant articulations of hetero-colonial power, while simultaneously distorting and erasing Indigenous peoples and cultures.

In recent decades there has been a growing response to the distortion and erasure of Indigenous (in)visibility in scholarship, but also a growing body of criticism on cinema and queer Indigeneity. Scholars have been investigating Two-Spirit identities and representations within and beyond arts, culture, and literature, producing critical essays and anthologies on relevant Two-Spirit topics (Driskill et al. 2011a; Driskill et al. 2011b) addressing notions of heteronormative gaze (Tatonetti, 2010) and Two-Spirit gaze (Estrada, 2011). Adding to these intellectual developments, Indigenous artists have been making significant contributions to the arts, education, and cultural ecology within cities, which has brought significant visible representation to Indigenous nations and cultures. Lorinc (2006) notes that “Native artists have thrived in urban settings, setting up theatre companies and visual arts spaces where they’ve been able to connect with broader audiences with an interest in the ethnocultural diversity on offer in big cities” (p. 49). For example, we only need to consider the exponential growth of Indigenous film festivals in Canada (e.g., imagineNATIVE) in order to see how this medium is garnering global and national recognition with regards to Aboriginal storytelling and cinema.

There have also been a number of contemporary artists, writers, and scholars such as Chrystos (1988; 1993), Paula Gunn Allen (1992), Gregory Scofield (1999), Alex Wilson (1996), and Muriel Miguel (2013) who have been writing on topics relevant to Two-Spirit identity and expression for some time. Similarly, artists like Kent Monkman and Thirza Cuthand have also explored gender and sexuality in new media, video, and performance. Monkman’s work (e.g., *Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece*, 2013; *Séance*, 2010; *Dance to Miss Chief*, 2010) investigates impacts of colonialism and representation by deconstructing classic Western art and subjectivity through video, drag and performance art. Cuthand’s work (e.g., *2-Spirit Introductory Special \$19.99*, 2015; *Are you a lesbian vampire*, 2008) as a video artist draws on autobiographical material to examine interconnected themes and topics including queer sexuality, identity, and mental health issues.

Like many queer, Two-Spirit artists and writers suggest in their work, Two-Spirit identity and culture has largely been, and continues to exist in the periphery of social consciousness both internal and external to Indigenous and queer activism. However, theories about the inherently politicized aspects of identity are quite often attributed to Indigenous experience, which Bonita Lawrence (2004) argues: “Identity, for Native people, can never be a neutral issue. With definitions of Indianness deeply embedded within systems of colonial power, Native identity is inevitably highly political, with ramifications for how contemporary and historical collective experience is understood” (p. 1).

Certainly, the question of identity in relation to queer Indigenous people is not a neutral issue, as these groups are more likely to experience gender based violence, sexism, and homophobia (Gilley, 2010; Ryan, 2003). It could be argued, therefore, that perceptions of Indigenous identities (namely gender and sexuality) are often perceived more broadly as being queered through the colonial imaginary. Dénommé-Welch (2018) scrutinizes such ideas, by looking at expressions of Indigenous identity (queer, Two-Spirit) in theatre and performing arts, and asks “what then does queerness mean exactly in relation to descriptions, definitions, and categories of Indigenous theatre and performance in Canada? Furthermore, do these categories reinforce or challenge the continual erasure of (queer) Indigenous North America?” (p. 257). Dénommé-Welch takes up the question of Indigeneity being queered through effects of colonialism, while expressions of queer Indigeneity continue to be marginalized as a form of queered-queer, othered-Other. Building on this notion, Dénommé-Welch posits that “while articulations of Indigenous theatre are already frequently queered by the very nature of it being Othered through marginalization, the visible and even non-visible dissident queer Indigenous is by default a whole other queered-Queer that threatens such establishments and is thus cast as the othered-Other” (p. 258).

Indigenous realities are considerably complex; for instance, one does not need to look too far into the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (see www.amnesty.ca), the starlight tours (Reber, 2005), or the events surrounding the Highway of Tears (see www.highwayoftears.ca) in Canada to get some scope of the gravity surrounding forms of violence

aimed at Indigenous people. But increasingly, Indigenous artists and activists, and their allies are engaging in these difficult conversations and turning the lens on these important topics in rural and urban settings, which can be witnessed in actions and social movements such as *Stolen Sisters* and *Idle No More*. Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and filmmakers have now been started exploring stories and subject matter that are relevant to urban experience. Noam Gonick's film *Stryker* examines gang turf wars in the central Canadian city of Winnipeg's north end, and the interlocking forms of oppression between race, queer identities, and class struggle. Winnipeg is a multicultural city, and is the home of the Métis nation and is Treaty 1 territory. Police presence is political given the high number of incarcerated Indigenous people, but with community action groups, such as the Bear Clan Patrol, urban Indigenous people have been assisting each other with safety and security (see <https://www.bearclanpatrolinc.com/>). The film, *Stryker*, attempts to speak back to some of the realities faced by Indigenous people living in urban settings.

**Stryker: A site for two-spirit re-emergence?,
or, where no one is sure of their ground**

The masculinist desire of mastering a new land is deeply linked to colonial history and even to its contemporary companion, philosophy, in which epistemology partially modelled itself on geography. (Ella Shohat, 2006, p. 25)

As illustrated in the Shohat (2006) statement, land ownership is a powerful concept, and is a construct that has been appropriated by people and nations as a way to exercise control and domination over other people and nations. Land is also a way of negating where people are situated on the social and political spectrum of power in relation to how people and resources have been colonized over centuries. Land has also been used to reinforce heteropatriarchal norms, to create racial and ethnic borders, and has been used to define who people are and where they fit in the social, economic and political spheres. Leanne Simpson (2011) raises similar points concerning Indigenous territory and the decolonization of gender, stating "I have been taught that in the past, gender was conceptualized differently than the binary between male and female expressed

in colonial society” and that “this requires a decolonization of our conceptualization of gender as a starting point” (p. 60). Proprietorship is also a marker of social status, and forms of white hetero-masculinity. Similarly, Driskill et al (2011a) write that “Queer Indigenous people have been under the surveillance of white colonial heteropatriarchy since contact” (p. 212).

How Indigenous lands and spaces are represented in cinema is most prominently seen through the lens of Western ideology – the colonial gaze – and the imposition of hetero-masculinity. Like Horswell’s (2005) articulations around transculturation and the impacts of hegemony, Ella Shohat (2006) notes that “the ‘birth’ of cinema itself coincided with the imperialist moment, when diverse colonized civilizations were already shaping their conflicting identities vis-à-vis their colonizers” (p. 24). *Stryker* draws on symbolic and literal imagery in its opening presentation; the opening credits reflect images of early treaty agreements and exchanges between European explorers, settlers and Indigenous peoples. These images go on to depict the pilfering of Indigenous lands and people, to residential schools, and finally takes the viewer into the present day realities of gang and interracial warfare in Winnipeg’s north end. In a mere two minute credit sequence, the film establishes an historical context that examines some of the overarching forms of systemic oppression and racism, and seemingly attempts to turn a critical lens on Canada’s role in the subjugation of Indigenous people.

As we see in *Stryker*, the ethnic and cultural struggle over land and turf is especially visible between the Indian Posee gang, led by Mama Ceece who is of First Nations background, and the Asian Bomb Squad, led by Omar who is of mixed-raced (Asian and First Nations) ancestry (see trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnfTcg_diPU). There seldom are queer Indigenous sexualities represented in mainstream feature films, and yet there are many queer moments and encounters that simultaneously push against and reinforce the heteropatriarchal narrative that exists in the independent film, *Stryker*. Here the viewers experience some of the distinct counterparts of the colonial cityscape and its effects on queer Indigeneity, where intersections of race, class, sexual ambiguity, and masculinity are brought to the foreground, and homoeroticism becomes embodied in characters such as Omar. Rarely are these

intersections portrayed in film and thus making this film an important contribution. Noam Gonick addresses some of these intersections in his director's notes, stating:

Omar is all about masculinity in crisis – a failure to live up to the archetypal movie thug. The idea of gangsters pimping for and carousing with other men dressed as women might seem like a stretch, but I've taken little artistic liberty here. Nightlife in the core area of this frontier town is wilder than anything I've managed to get on film. As someone says in the film: 'A hole's a hole'. (Stryker press kit, 2004, p. 8)

Winnipeg, Toronto, and Vancouver are some of the cities in North America where Indigenous people, life, and culture are described as being “one of deep ambivalence – a mix of opportunity, invisibility, and segregation, accompanied by an internal struggle to carve out an Aboriginal vision of urban living” (Lorinc, 2006, p. 45). In this way, the Indigenous protagonist, a teenager nicknamed Stryker surveys the cinematic landscape by moving and traveling through his cityspace, filtering the pandemic of social and political strife. Here, he reveals aspects of contemporary Indigenous life, and contemporary forms of geo-political colonialism in the city. Stryker does not simply represent a figure strolling through the streets of Winnipeg in the heart of gang turf wars, but rather he signifies the role of a teacher to Western viewers. He teaches viewers how to perceive Western influence, and to reinterpret and dismantle notions of poverty, oppression, and systemic corruption that we might have otherwise overlooked, ignored, or disregarded within the details of rundown buildings, boarded-up houses, coffee shops, youth detention centers, streetscapes, and crack houses. He teaches through having viewers observe his life experiences unfold over time and learn how he developed a sense of resilience to dominant power. Having life experiences function as public pedagogy illustrates how complex encounters can be accidental, messy, intentional, informal, and uncertain.

The cinema, at this point, becomes our celluloid landscape, our pedagogical lens, and our memory and pathway into the psychological and physical remnants of colonial Canada. Introducing our earlier memories in narrative form provides an opportunity to engage and speak back to *Stryker*, and highlight another

urban space where Indigeneity was considered or marginalized, which is Toronto Pride.

Spy's narrative: Take one

Some years ago I attended the Toronto Pride Parade for the very first time. Up until that point I had never been to anything like it; I grew up in northern Ontario and the geographic distance made it impossible for me, a car-less teenager. In fact, I only ever had the chance to see the parade if and when it was broadcast on TV, which usually took place at a friend's house where they had a Toronto station. There we huddled around the television screen and watched with amazement, as thousands of people all packed along Yonge Street celebrated as floats passed by.

Reflecting on this now, it would seem that my early experience of this event had a filmic quality about it, wherein the television screen captured street level and aerial views, bringing to bare the scope of this parade. It was not until I left for university that I finally had an opportunity to experience the parade in-person. I was curious to know what it would be like to see this event in real life, in real time, and how it attracted different people regardless of whether they were gay or straight, resident or tourist. What would it be like to be one of thousands of people all crowded on the streets like ants, I wondered, much like I had seen on TV?

My time came in university. With my old 35mm SLR camera in hand, I caught a ride with some friends to the big city, where I found myself in the mecca of urban queer expression. I stood in the crowd with my camera pointed at the passing parade, and suddenly everything came to focus when there appeared a float of a dozen or so Indigenous people carrying a banner with the words 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, representing a Two-Spirit organization based in Toronto. One of my friends pointed while saying something to the effect of "look, it's your community." Although I did not immediately grasp what the term "2-Spirited" meant, as it was a word that had only really emerged some ten years prior and hadn't yet carried the same currency that it does today, I read the words First Nations and that knew the statement could not be too far off. More importantly, in that moment what I was seeing for perhaps the first time in my life a reflection of my Indigenous culture being celebrated, cheered and acknowledged by a sea of people. I

instantly captured that moment on my roll of black and white film, just to not forget it.

Robert's narrative: Take one

Like Spy, I was also raised in a northern Ontario community. My world too was very small; it consisted of long car rides to other remote areas, childhood games in the forests, and being sharply aware of the beauty - and power - of nature and its creatures. I never really knew of queerness, and although I was sharply aware that my effeminate nature casted me as different to those around me, I was not one to understand (or, may not have wanted to) the roots of this treatment. Later on as a student at the University of Windsor, I was able to meet my first queer friends. Actually, 'queer' was not the word that was used at that time; we used Western labels like 'gay,' 'questioning', 'lesbian,' and 'bisexual.' I was surprised how easily people grabbed hold of these labels as declarative statements without questioning who or why these labels were used and why new labels could not be created. I was also surprised at how it became a hot conversation topic when someone changed their sexual identification. What was the big deal? And so to try to understand these tensions, I often walked down the street to a neighbouring house shared by gay male, graduate students in psychology. I was in awe of their chic and wit. They reminded me of Greta Garbo and Marilyn Munroe as they taught me the queer icons of the cinematic and literary world and shared with me the legal and political knowledge important to queer activism. It was through these interactions that I learned of and became excited about Toronto pride.

I attended my first Toronto pride later on in that year, and, rather unexpectantly, became a representative of the Windsor Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) youth group, and had to walk in the parade. I never actually got to see the parade and learn of the different groups and representations. So the spectators became my parade; there were many types of people watching me as I walked by, of different colours, abilities, ages, genders, and religions. Two-Spirit people were not visible among the spectators in my parade. The thousands of these diverse bystanders, as they stood there watching and smiling, were my pride parade, and I watched 'them' with great interest and amusement.

As we reflect back on what things were like, then and now, there has been some legal changes over the span of the

past ten to fifteen years. For example, there were no same-sex marriage rights in Canada, and we were still a ways away from introducing laws aimed at protecting gender identity and gender expression. Also, this was before either of us saw any form of queer Indigenous sexuality represented in film or documentary, plays, performance, and art. Moving forward to current day, as Spy observed in the parade, how has the notion of contemporary Indigeneity disrupted and impacted urban space through expressions of gender and sexuality? This question also begs the question how has queer Indigenous identity been shaped through contemporary urban space and structures? A possible response this second question surfaces in Robert's narrative, whereby as John Lorinc (2006) argues: "Many Canadians simply don't associate Aboriginals with cities" (p. 45). Much of this can be attributed to the historical reserve system, where Indigenous peoples were segregated from larger society. Lorinc (2006) further posits: "While places such as Winnipeg and Saskatoon have predominantly Aboriginal neighbourhoods, most of us link the First Nations with rural images and issues: remote reserves, treaty claims over large tracts of northern land, disputes over fishing rights" (p. 45).

A part of this pedagogical lens is identifying the theme of (mis)representation as being a Euro-colonial trope. In her pivotal work *The Sphinx and the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (1991), Elizabeth Wilson examines Euro-colonial tropes that are embedded within Western aesthetic discourses of the urban environment, which often excluded non-Western perspectives. Wilson (1991) writes: "[...] the city they discussed was the western city. Theoretical writings usually either defined the city in such a way as to exclude all but western cities, or simply did not take non-western cities into account" (p. 121). By drawing on the intersections between culture and class issues we begin to trace some of the discourses that allow us to reflect on existing tensions and conflicts that potentially exist through Indigenous cinema.

In capturing and documenting the complexities of our colonial past and present through the eyes of the film's characters, namely the protagonist Stryker, Gonick plays with the idea of fact and fiction. The layering of an Indigenous hip-hop track is used to juxtapose images we typically see in "cowboy and Indian" spaghetti Western flicks, making for

a social statement about our colonial Canadian history. This (re)presentation also plays on the blurry notion that fact and fiction are very subjective, and that fact is often told by the “victor,” which reinforces colonial notions of our Canadian past. We now explore a queer analysis of *Stryker*’s main characters in order to point out their complex realities and impacts on queer Indigenous representations.

***Stryker*’s characters as queerness/queer**

Part of the decolonizing project is recovering the relationship to a land base and reimagining the queer Native body. (Finley, 2011, p. 41)

Queering Daisy and the deconstruction of “transface” Ruthann Lee (2015) notes that “By queering the portrayal of gang life in Winnipeg, *Stryker* complicates, re-imagines, and opens up new possibilities for the racialized, sexualized, and gendered dynamics of gang culture” (p.79). Like Lee, it is through the film’s characters that we recognize queerness: unwanted and othered, and yet teaching and resilient. For instance, on one hand, the transgender character of Daisy seemingly confirms our queer impulses and indications, and teaches us how queerness can be overt and covert as well as public and private, which in turn becomes a form of social documentary that blurs the lines between reality and imaginary.

On the other hand, we view an age-old pattern of ‘mainstream’ representing the ‘periphery’ through the presence of actors being cast in trans roles who are not members of the community that is being represented. In the case of Daisy, she is portrayed by non-Two-Spirit actor (Joseph Mesiano). Expanding beyond the redface phenomenon described earlier, the use of cisgender actors playing non-cisgender roles continues to be a dominant theme in cinema, unapologetically and with much accolades (e.g., Hilary Swank in *Boys Don’t Cry*, Felicity Huffman in *Transamerica*, Jared Leto in *Dallas Buyers Club*, or Jeffrey Tambor in *Transparent*), which further marginalizes trans actors to receive work opportunities and to perform a role that may deeply resonate with them.

Though there are very few examples in television where queer/trans people are cast in more prominent roles (e.g.,

Laverne Cox in *Orange is the New Black*, Jamie Clayton in *Sense8*), cisgender actors cast in non-cisgender roles remain the dominant practice to a point that there is now a creation of a move towards a *transface* that is similar to Blackface and redface in fictional films. Put differently, there is very little portrayal of trans actors playing cisgender roles, which leaves the cisgender identity undisturbed and in a dominant position. What may have helped disrupt the real/imaginary further is if an actual Indigenous transgender actor was given the opportunity to bring her story to the mainstream. Gonick (2004) points “Daisy is the one person who gets out of the violent cycle, out of the city that is the child poverty and murder capital of Canada. She is the center of goodness in the film” (Stryker press kit, p. 7). Gonick appears to hold a level of reverence on Daisy’s role through this statement. Gonick speaks to the importance of Two-Spirit people, but maintains a boundary around this depiction by reinforcing the cisgender norms by casting a male actor to play, as Gonick describes, without explanation, a “trannie”² (Stryker press kit, p. 4). Similarly, there is a sense of romanticism in Gonick’s description of the Two-Spirit, transgender person as being “magically gifted” (Styker press kit, p. 7), which again restates and reinforces colonial tropes about Indigenous sexual and gender expression as ancient and simple. This characterization casts Two-Spirit, transgender as a form of exotic other in harmony with nature. Does this perspective, if anything, uphold a colonial perspective that could potentially silence queer Indigenous people? A possible response to this question can be found in the counter-narratives shared below.

Spy’s Narrative: Take Two

When I relocated to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) as a young adult I became acutely aware of the intersections of colonialism, homophobia, and transphobia within the urban context. Throughout the years I came to witness different degrees of homophobia and transphobia aimed at LGBT and Two-Spirit people, everything from the subtle “I wouldn’t be caught dead on Church Street” to the more in-your-face bigotry of drive-by homophobic/transphobic catcalls. But perhaps the most troubling element of all this has been the level of hate and intolerance that I have seen hurled at Two-Spirit transgender women working

² The term “trannie” is an offensive, derogatory word used against transgender people.

in and around my neighbourhood by all types of people. It was not unusual to find evidence of such assaults from the previous evening, such as remnants of cracked eggs and dog excrement splashed across the sidewalk. The intended target was clear to me: transsexual and transgender, Two-Spirit sex workers who worked in and around my neighbourhood. Much of this response has been the result of transphobia, anti-prostitution laws and urban gentrification. I never quite understood why people hold such resentment towards systemically and socially marginalized groups of people such as transgender sex workers and Two-Spirit people.

Controlling and regulating land, urban space, and neighbourhoods is an ironic perpetuation of colonialism, especially when these displays of power are aimed at First Nations, Two-Spirit people and sex workers. As with my neighbourhood, when eggs and animal feces were not enough to push these women out, residents in my area began their own version of a “neighbourhood watch” by banding together at night and standing on the street corner to intimidate the sex workers. I remember walking home late one evening and coming upon a sizable group of people (10 - 12 people) standing on the corner like a mini mob. Further down the street were two, maybe three sex workers, who were First Nations (Two-Spirit) and a Person of Colour. I suspected that the mob was the “neighbourhood watch,” confirmed when I overheard another person ask them who and what they were doing on the corner. Someone from the group responded along the lines of “we’re just standing here, hanging out enjoying the night,” and the passer by replied “Oh, well you guys are scaring me. You look like a gang.” Similarly I found myself uncomfortable with the mob mentality and atmosphere they imposed on our residential street, and their presence in such numbers was an obvious mark of intolerance.

In all their intentions to clean the streets, there was little to no regard for the missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people who have been victims of extremely violent hate crimes and deaths. These issues, nor the serial murders of trans/queer sex workers that occurred in the area back in the 1990s, were ever mentioned or acknowledged when trying to recruit neighbours to join them on their “night walks,” under the pretence of ‘safety’. It never seemed to occur to this group that by pushing these women further into the periphery they could

actually be endangering or jeopardizing their lives. I'm not sure that they cared at all about their welfare.

The subjugation of Indigenous people, and the association of colonization with the land, is significant. In contrast to *Stryker*, our second narratives suggest policing/regulating as a form of queer subjugation. These forms were largely unexplored in the film. Although the director himself is non-Indigenous, Gonick attempts to incorporate Indigenous cultural signifiers. For instance, the number seven on Stryker's jersey appears to be used as a symbol of the seven generations and seven grandmothers and grandfathers' teachings, and the presence of the buffalo seem to represent the historical aspects of colonialism while observing the chaos and conflict at the opening and closing of the film. Furthermore, Gonick draws on queer themes to examine notions of resistance and "rebirth" of Indigenous traditions. In the film's press kit, Gonick states:

With the fastest growing aboriginal population in the country, Winnipeg is not only a centre for Native struggles – but also for the rebirth of ancient traditions, like the concept of the 'two-spirited people'. The transgendered, inter-sex individuals were originally revered in pre-colonial North America, regarded as magically gifted. I see an echo of this in the trannie crack whores of the low track. (Stryker press kit, 2004, p. 7)

When thinking about such issues we must take into account the ways in which these characters are being described or depicted (e.g., "trannie crack whores of the low track"), and the potential negative implications and outcomes this could have towards transgender people. Similarly, the fact that there are so few films with Two-Spirit characters it is important to ask these questions, and if or not these portrayals happen to slip into a particularly stereotypical space about race and sexuality? For example, Gonick's assertion that Two-Spirit people are regarded as magically gifted is problematic and presumptuous. Alex Wilson (1996) contests this very notion, and states:

Today, academics argue over whether or not two-spirit people had a 'special' role or were special people in Native societies. In my community, the act of declaring some

people special threatens to separate them from their community and creates an imbalance. Traditionally, two-spirit people were simply a part of the entire community; as we reclaim our identity with this name, we are returning to our communities. (p. 305)

Wilson's point addresses the importance of Two-Spirit people to their communities, but argues that declaring such individuals as special, or "magically gifted" as per Gonick's description, could run the risk of further separating and potentially fracturing communities.

Furthermore, Daisy's de-transition to a male gender at the end of the film is problematic, as it indicates that gender identity needs to conform to social expectations, and something that can be 'corrected' on a whim. In a follow up interview about the film, Gonick explains: "I wanted to get that shock that it was a boy the whole time. Joseph's so beautiful as both a man and a woman, I thought we had to show him both ways" (Mookas, 2005, n.p.). This suggests that 'beauty' is perceived and judged externally, and that being transgender in film involves a necessary 'shock and awe' as part of their identity expression. This treatment has been displayed elsewhere in film, such as *The Crying Game* (1992), *M. Butterfly* (1993), and *Transamerica* (2005). In her work *Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires and Gay Cowboys*, Barbara Mennel (2012) explains that representations of transgender, transsexual, and intersex bodies has been used as "metaphor to negotiate political border crossings in a globalised world" (p. 115). She further states: "The cinematic preoccupation with different configurations of lived bodies and embodied desires in their many sexed and gendered variations continues to proliferate, particularly in independent queer cinema" (*ibid*). In *Stryker* we recognize this idea of metaphor as a form of subjugation, as cisgender people rarely have to display their gender in ways that 'shock and awe' the viewer. It further strips subjectivity away from and perpetuates an othering practice of transgender portrayal in films, which as we see displayed in *Stryker* is a device used to fracture gender and race identity.

Mama Ceece and Omar's queer tropes and triumphs

In the film we recognize Indigenous matriarchy, and its brush with patriarchy, through the characters of Mama Ceece and Omar – and their constant battle for control of the land, which

is (re)enacted through turf and drug wars, and their on-going feud for sexual domination over characters such as Daisy and Ruby (also known as Spread Eagle). This conflict is symbolic of internalized colonialism, and re-enactments of conquest through power dominance and expressions of masculinity that emulates New World and Eurocolonial tropes. Sandra Slater (2011) explains “[...] native and European men attempted to undermine the masculinities of one another and how these moments of contact directly impacted the course of events in the New World” (p. 30). Through these two characters (Mama Ceece and Omar) there is a binary firmly established in their activities and encounters with one another: queer as romantic/queer as humiliation.

First, queer as romantic is clearly depicted from Mama Ceece towards her girlfriend, Spread Eagle, even when Spread Eagle became ‘territory’ of Omar. Although Spread Eagle is seemingly property, and therefore her subjectivity questioned, by the end of the film there is clearly an intimate relationship between Mama Ceece and Spread Eagle. Such tensions become a visual representation, echoing Chris Finley’s (2011) articulations about “sexualisation, gendering, and racialization of the land” (p.34), which she argues that “the conflation of Native women’s bodies with racialized and sexualized narratives of the land constructs it as penetrable and open to ownership through heteropatriarchal domination” (p. 35). Invariably, these characters are symbolically and metaphorically juxtaposed with the land, but their shifting power is masked by a thinly layered hetero-veneer. We see Mama Ceece as being tender and caring, which is a side rarely seen publicly and in front of her adversaries.

On the contrary, queerness is depicted as humiliation in the film, when Omar is forced to striptease at a local bar, in front of mainly heterosexual men. Unlike Mama Ceece, where her expression of queerness is acceptable in front of her posse, the laughter and ridicule that targets Omar is obvious. Not only is his masculinity the object of ridicule, but throughout the film he is made the subject of racial taunts and slurs, with descriptors such as “Flip” and “half breed,” which both emasculates and shames his identity. This depiction of the bar as a being a tense space harkens to historical and contemporary understandings of the “gay bar”, where the bar was an important safe space for

expression, relationships, and connection, but could also be dangerous, addictive, and perhaps fatal to some.

In her work, *Straightjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies* (2012), Celine Parreñas Shimizu examines the complexities of Asian (inter)racial subjectivities and queer expression as a form of shame/shaming, articulating that such images in cinema “[...] capture a crisis on and off screen in how Asian American men are excluded from normative definitions of masculinity, and a wider range of representation. (p. 28). Similarly, these binaries uphold heteropatriarchy’s power, where a queer woman (Mama Ceece) aligns herself with straight men by targeting women as objects of desire and expression of male same-sex sexual desire through Omar’s striptease is perceived by his posse as a disgrace. What unfolds is a violent battle between Mama Ceece and Omar on the stage. The stage is metaphoric; it is not on the land, and yet the land is implicated by holding up the stage. Being on the stage may mean less restriction for queerness, and gives it freedom to ‘perform’ however it wants. In this scene, the performance meant Mama Ceece challenging patriarchy in a violent struggle. After Stryker’s fiery intervention, it becomes clear that Mama Ceece has won the battle, and her authority is re-confirmed when she is back on the land.

Robert’s narrative: Take two

Since experiencing the invisibility of Indigeneity at my version of Toronto pride, I continued the theme of being situated in the margins, rather than stand on the outskirts as a spectator, but also include my desire to share voice and work with queer indigenous people. I have been privileged enough to receive some extensive travel experience in my work on queer education and activism in the global South. Engaging and building relationships with Indigenous cultures around sexuality and gender difference is commonplace in this work, and their voices are brought to the fore since they are often left out of any kind of ‘development’ paradigms. For example, while working in post-conflict Kosovo, I frequently would meet with Albanian male sexual minorities who would share their stories with me. I heard of their difficulties struggling to find love and sex with a male partner, but still negotiate the social expectations to be heterosexually married. When I mentioned important health issues, such as HIV transmission, they were often unaware of

what this infection was and how it was transmitted. They were 'forgotten' by development agencies working in this area. And so I had a brochure from back home in Canada translated into Albanian language and we would have conversations about the infection and how to protect our bodies and those around us. The only catch to this educative work is that it was at night, next to a library, and in the dark. These conversations were not taking place in an office, centre, or clinic. If they had taken place in such locations, no one would show up as it is too risky to be exposed as a queer individual.

On one particular night I was listening to the men share and laugh at their stories of love and lust when we were approached by United Nations police, led by an Irish police officer. I sat in silence as I heard the police officer question everyone's motives for sitting next to a library after closure. There was no reason to suspect wrongdoing and the land was 'public' by official designation. The Irish police officer looked at each of us as though we were guilty first, and (maybe) innocent later. The Albanians never once turned to me for rescue or intervention. They can handle themselves, and I knew that. For what seemed like forever, we stood in silence, waiting for some 'official' decision on whether we can stay and continue our conversations. Should I speak up and share that this is an informal learning exercise, necessary for community development and support? If so, would this police officer 'get it'? I eventually spoke up (as the police officer was clearly not taking the Albanians seriously), and in my Canadian accent and clear English, I explained, "We were just talking. I'm new here, working on a project funded by the Canadian government, and I'm learning about the life of this group of Albanians." And with that, the Irish police officer left and did not bother us again. His sudden appearance and quick departure after I spoke was negatively felt among the group. All eyes were on me as the men desperately wanted to know what I said, and, importantly, if I 'outed' them. I never did, but the signal was raised that Western interventions and colonialisms can be problematic for queer organizing on the streets of Kosovo.

The above narrative brings attention again to the role authority plays in the subjugation of Indigenous people on the land, and how queerness is subsumed into this practice and becomes an afterthought. Yet, the narrative also casts the role of the ally as suspect, and how easily this role remains fluid, whereas

Indigenous queer people may not enjoy the same “freedom.” This is different than the portrayal of Two-Spirit people in *Stryker*, who have their queer sexualities and genders thrust to the fore without opportunity to choose what becomes (un)masked. The role of the ally is seemingly invisible in *Stryker*, which makes one wonder where and how alliances can be forged.

Given Mama Ceece’s homosexuality and her role as leader, it is clear in *Stryker* that hetero/homo and good/bad binaries can be flipped; queer can be powerful (victorious leaders like Mama Ceece), and queer can conquer “bad” (disgraced leaders like Omar). Two-Spirit identities like Mama Ceece’s expressions of female masculinity are rarely considered in social situations (fictional or not), and therefore disrupts (hetero)normative underpinnings of decolonization. Although a binary remains in tact, (e.g., the hero still gets the ‘girl’ [i.e., Spread Eagle]), queerness can *still* be humiliating and weak (e.g., Omar’s striptease in front of men who consider him a joke; Daisy’s embattlements and her positioning as a ‘trannie’ and her de-transition towards the end of the film; Spread Eagle’s bisexuality as property). When compared to our narratives, we see further how the queerness remains firmly suppressed by a militant patriarchy, through Indigenous sexualities and genders being invisible and policed. This was not so prominent in *Stryker*, and if it were introduced, then perhaps a fulsome representation of Two-Spirit realities may be closer to ‘real life’ experiences. It leads us to wonder if this flipping of binaries functions more as a trope of counter-resistance, or a form of “settler solipsism” (Rifkin, 2014), rather than a disturbance of Western, heteromasculine systems.

The implications of binaries are persistent and deeply rooted within the settler-colonialism and Western-heteromascularity, and have affected Two-Spirit realities in terms of self-identity, land, and belonging. As queer Indigenous peoples and communities have profoundly felt the impacts of colonization, the notions of “safe” and “home” too have become unsettled and disturbed. We witness moments of these felt impacts in *Stryker*, particularly at the home of Daisy and her fellow Two-Spirit friends. This space functions as a surrogate home, in which people can safely engage with different sexuality and gender expression. However, as soon as they step outside of this space, their lives become complex and challenged, which misleads

viewers to think that there are safe/unsafe boundaries around queerness, and that these boundaries are based on private/public spaces. One could consider, for example, the lives of Two-Spirit youth and how their homes can be considered as unsafe, and in this case, question if this binary in *Stryker* is an accurate depiction. Furthermore, in scenes where Omar and members of his Asian Bomb Squad gang are within the “home” they interact with Two-Spirit people through partying and dancing, while seemingly disrobing their heteromascularity. Yet, upon leaving this private space, such moments of emancipatory gender and sexuality expression disappear, and the Western, heteropatriarchal image of masculinity remains intact.

Heteropatriarchy is maintained during the many instances throughout the film where Omar’s gender and sexuality is challenged, if not cinematically mocked, which gives the impression that queerness is a parody and weak.

What may be some direction for future cinematic representations is to provide a more comprehensive depiction of Two-Spirit realities within feature film, including their invisibility in non-queer and queer circles, and to challenge areas where sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia meet at the crossroads. Ultimately, *Stryker* offers a necessary pedagogy about gender, race, and sexuality in urban Indigenous contexts, while complicating the intersections of colonialism. This work has promise, but remains incomplete, with considerations of authority, alliance, and agency being invisible in the film, and these notions are necessary to consider a more fulsome representation of Two Spirit/queer realities.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful comments.

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