

Two-Spirited Aboriginal People

Continuing Cultural Appropriation by Non-Aboriginal Society

MICHELLE CAMERON

Voici l'histoire des femmes autochtones bi-spirituelles qui ont connu des oppressions dans leur communauté à cause de leur orientation particulière. Cet article raconte comment cette bi-spiritualité a été perçue comme un ajout à d'autres sexualités "queer" comme bisexuelles ou transsexuelles plutôt qu'à leur spécificité culturelle et leur unicité. Un fossé s'est créé dans la communauté "queer" entre les non-autochtones qui croient avoir droit à cette appellation et ceux qui croient que c'est un exemple de l'appropriation d'un élément culturel par la société dominante.

"I understand what you're saying," she said. "But saying non-Aboriginals shouldn't use the term two-spirited reminds me of a lawsuit I heard where Xerox sued someone to make them quit using the word Xerox as a verb." I looked at her and saw hundreds of years of colonization at work. This woman was queer, educated, and feminist, yet still was not questioning her own privilege. How could she compare cultural appropriation to corporate copyright infringement? She was completely missing the point.

I have noticed an increasing trend of non-Aboriginals beginning to self-label using the term two-spirited. "So what's the problem?" you may wonder. A non-Aboriginal self-labelling as two-spirited is an example of continuing cultural appropriation by mainstream society.

The term two-spirited has a *specific* cultural context, and removing it from that context simply because one likes the meaning of it is an act of colonization and must be resisted. Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran discuss the need for Aboriginals to "create counterhegemonic discourses" (27). The term two-spirited is part of our counterhegemonic discourse and reclamation of our unique histories.

Aboriginal people coined the term two-spirit and are using it to reflect our past, and the direction of our future. We are using the term. It is ours. Paula Gunn Allen discusses the Native American concept of ownership, when she states, "possession was seen as a matter of *use*, not a matter of eternal right" (19, my emphasis). She continues, "People couldn't steal something that belonged to someone else because only one person can use something at a time" (19). My assertion is that Aboriginal people are using the term two-spirited, and out of respect, other groups should refrain from self-labelling with it while we are using it.

Two-spirited Aboriginal people experience intersecting oppressions that impinge upon their unique identity in the queer community. Two-spirited people have typically been seen only as an add-on or subset of other queer categories like

bisexual or transsexual, rather than as their culturally specific and unique selves. For example, in the LGBTQ component of one of my third year social work classes, two-spiritedness was not adequately discussed, and the term was left dangling unexplained under the term bisexual up on the blackboard. Then in our Aboriginal-specific social work class, there was *no* two-spirit content at all. Two-spiritedness tends to fall between the cracks in academic curriculum. University courses do not adequately cover the concept of two-spiritedness in their LGBTQ content, which only adds to the general lack of knowledge within the queer community and society at large.

This also has created a rift in the queer community between non-Aboriginals who feel entitled to use the term two-spirited freely, and Aboriginals who believe it is yet another egregious example of cultural appropriation by the dominant society. In this paper, I will analyse the history of two-spiritedness, the identity politics operating behind the use of the term, and articulate why it is inappropriate for non-Aboriginal queers to self-apply the terminology.

Historical Context

Prior to European contact, many

(but not all) Aboriginal groups had two-spirit members who were integral parts of the community, occupying positions of honour and communal value. Sabine Lang states that two-spirit people were “seen as being neither men nor women, but as belonging to genders of their own within cultural systems of multiple genders” (114). Aboriginal sexuality was based on

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multiple genders, at least three, but up to six. For example, there were male, female, and not-male/not female (two-spirited). Some groups conceived of six genders. For example, a two-spirited woman who had a female partner was a different gender than a two-spirited woman who had a male partner.

Terry Tafoya states, “gender orientation and sexual orientation are two separate categories” (194). The difference between the modern constructs of gay/lesbian/bi is that they are based on *sexual orientation*, whereas two-spiritedness is based on *gender orientation*. This can be difficult concept for people indoctrinated with western binary (male/female) concepts of sexuality. Sexual orientation is based on physical sex characteristics. Gender orientation is not based on physi-

cal sex characteristics, but rather on the roles the person chooses to align with. I will use myself as an example to clarify the distinction here. Whether I choose to be with a man or a woman, in the context of the original meaning of the term two-spirited, I would continue to be considered two-spirited despite my “male” choice of gender role. Yet, because my partner is a woman, I am considered homosexual in the western sexual dichotomy. Sabine Lang states, “a same-sex relationship in many Native American cultures, at least traditionally, is not necessarily at the same time a same-gender relationship” (104). This is because a female with a male gender role was considered to be a completely different gender than a female with a “normal” female gender role. As such, traditionally my partner and I would not be considered homosexual, because we have two different gender roles.

Paula Gunn Allen, a First Nations scholar, states that “we do not fit easily into pre-existing officially recognized categories is the correlative of our culture of origin” (6). She continues, “neither does our thought fit the categories that have been devised to organize Western intellectual enterprise” (6). Two-Spirited Aboriginals do not subscribe to or neatly fit into the western dichotomies of human sexuality. We are not either/or; we are neither/nor. Traditional western discourse is not an adequate framework for the complexities involved in two-spiritedness.

Analysis of Effects of the Residential School System

Gil Lerat has pointed out that “the religious dogma of the Residential Schools have erased a proud and rich history of Two-spirit people in most Aboriginal communities” (5). This is one of the unacknowledged side effects of the horrific sexual, emotional, and physical abuse that many Aboriginal

children encountered in the residential school system. Many Aboriginals who experienced same-sex sexual abuse as a child equate this abuse with being gay, or gay sex. It is well established that pedophilia is not the same thing as being gay, lesbian, bi, or two-spirited and that, in fact, most child molesters identify as heterosexual men (Groth and Gary 147). However, in the mindset of three generations of residential school survivors, this distinction has not been drawn. As Fiona Meyer-Cook and Diane Labelle state, “Two-Spirited people are seen in the same light as sin and sexual abusers” (39).

Our Elders—the gatekeepers of knowledge in Aboriginal communities—have not passed down their teachings regarding two-spirited people’s place in our communities. Either there is complete silence on the issue, or there is blatant denial and homophobia incorporated in their teachings. This has had the unfortunate effect of generations growing up with no concept of what it historically meant to be two-spirited and this has led to the erasure of this history from the collective mindset of the residential school generations, and subsequent generations thereafter. Heterosexist and homophobic thought has permeated the teachings of some of our Elders due to the imposition of Christian values imposed on them in the residential schools. These sentiments often remain unchallenged when spoken by an Elder, due to the respect they have in the community.

Colonization and the residential school system wreaked havoc on traditional Aboriginal beliefs and customs. The dehumanization suffered by our elders and our communities in the residential schools has had an intergenerational effect on Aboriginal communities, and especially on two-spirited members of the community. The association of two-spiritedness with sin, and the erasure/denial of their very ex-

istence is the dominant culture/colonizer speaking with the voices of our Elders.

Reclaiming as Resistance

Kathy Absolon, a First Nations academic, urges us to “decolonize our minds and hearts” (16). Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s text *Decolonizing Methodologies* describes various approaches to achieving this decolonization of mind, heart, and work. Smith is a Maori academic, and as such her writings and discourse can be relevant and transferable to the Canadian Aboriginal context.

Smith discusses the concept of *claiming*. She states that claiming and reclaiming “teach both the non-indigenous audience and the new generations of indigenous peoples an official account of their collective story” (144). Aboriginal two-spirited people are in the midst of reclaiming their stolen history and identity within their communities. More Aboriginals are identifying as two-spirited and embracing the history behind the term. They are digging out their history from obscurity, and creating an official account of their collective history through academic discourse and writings (see especially Jacobs, Thomas and Lang), and gatherings such as the Second Annual Saskatchewan 2-Spirit Conference in June 2005 to share ideas and knowledge that was withheld/unknown by the gatekeepers.

Another concept discussed by Smith is *remembering*. She states: “This form of remembering is painful because it involves remembering not just what colonization was about but what being dehumanized meant for our own cultural practices” (146).

Our elders, our communities need to remember the way things were *before* the imposition of the dominant culture and religion. Decolonizing our collective minds includes an acknowledgement of the way things were, and of the

valued place two-spirited people should have in our communities.

Smith also states: “To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves” (4). The concept of two-spirited encapsulates this perfectly. As stated in the introduction to *Two-Spirit People*, Aboriginals attending the Third Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference in Winnipeg coined the term two-spirit in 1990 (Jacobs, Thomas and Lang 2). Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas and Sabine Lang explain the decision “to use the term two-spirit was deliberate, with a clear intention to distance themselves from non-Native gays and lesbians” (3). The term two-spirit is thus an Aboriginal-specific term of resistance to colonization and non-transferable to other cultures. There are several underlying reasons for two-spirited Aboriginals’ desire to distance themselves from the mainstream queer community.

Lang explains that for Aboriginal people, their sexual orientation or gender identity is secondary to their ethnic identity. She states, “at the core of contemporary two-spirit identities is ethnicity, an awareness of being Native American as opposed to being white or being a member of any other ethnic group” (115). I agree with Lang’s statement. My core identity is First Nations; being two-spirited is wrapped and surrounded by this core identity and cannot be separated from it.

I identify as a Carrier First Nation two-spirited woman when I am talking to other Aboriginals. When talking to non-Aboriginals, I identify as a lesbian. This is a very conscious decision on my part because it gets tiring to explain the concept to everyone who is unfamiliar with the term two-spirited. However, I do not feel the term lesbian adequately represents the whole reality of my experience.

Lang states, “whereas white gay and lesbian activists often feel al-

ienated from white society and its homophobia, two-spirit activists will usually not reject Native American cultures, even though such cultures may manifest homophobia” (115). At queer conferences that I have attended, none of the discussions with other two-spirited people involved rejection of their communities, no matter how homophobic or hostile these communities were.

In her book *Outlaw Culture*, bell hooks discusses the “demand that difference be appropriated in a manner that diffuses its power” (16). The term two-spirited was chosen to emphasize our difference in our experiences of multiple, interlocking oppressions as queer Aboriginal people. When non-Aboriginal people decide to “take up” the term two-spirit, it detracts from its original meaning and diffuses its power as a label of resistance for Aboriginal people. Already there is so much of First Nations culture that has been exploited and appropriated in this country; must our terms of resistance also be targeted for mainstream appropriation and consumption?

There is a long history of debate around the issue of cultural appropriation. Vine Deloria states, “Be-

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fore the white man can relate to others he must forego the pleasure of defining them" (174). Two-spirited is a reclaimed term designed by Aboriginals to define our unique cultural context, histories, and legacy. When people do not see the harm in "sharing" the term, they are missing the point and refusing to recognize that by appropriating the term they will inevitably alter its cultural context.

There are many reasons why cultural appropriation occurs. Vine Deloria's book, *God is Red*, examines the issues of cultural appropriation of indigenous culture and religion. Deloria criticizes "the intense interest in tribal religions by non-Indians and the seemingly wholesale adoption of some of their beliefs and practices by significant segments of white society" (38). Loretta Todd comments,

Nothing is authentic or autonomous, therefore everything is fair game. Couple this with a still-vague yearning for meaning and for the past and what do you get? Most often, appropriation of "tribal" cultures throughout the world. (74)

There is an inherent beauty in the term two-spirited that others identify with. If you Google the term two-spirited, it is unfortunately extremely easy to find some "New Age" non-Aboriginals who feel they are entitled to use the term two-spirited. Some trot out alliance with an actual First Nations person who condones their appropriation of the term. Nevertheless, I see this as a form of "cultural invasion." Paulo Freire states,

the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression. (152)

When the colonizer or dominant society culturally invades Aboriginal society, it must be resisted; otherwise meanings are lost or distorted. This is how the original words for the concept of two-spirited were lost in so many Nations to begin with. Beatrice Medicine states that we

must be aware of the ways language is changed and the meaning of Native terms altered and then used to meet the needs of disenfranchised groups and individuals as a possible response of self-interest. (147)

In her book *Outlaw Culture*, hooks mentions "the ways differences created by race and class hierarchies disrupt an unrealistic vision of commonality" (75). Some would argue that focusing on differences contributes to the fracturing of an already vulnerable and marginalized queer community. The myth of a hegemonic queer community needs to be dispelled. We are *not* all the same. Our diversity should be celebrated, honoured, and respected. For two-spirited First Nations, this means respecting our jurisdiction over the term two-spirited, a *culturally specific* term we created to reclaim our unique heritage.

Conclusion

Aboriginal two-spirits have identities that operate outside of the western dichotomy of sex orientation and gender. Many of the words for two-spirited were lost from various First Nation groups due to the imposition of Christianity, and dominant society. Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran state: "The process of self-determination starts with the ever-evolving processes of self-identification and self-construction" (156). When Aboriginal queers decided to begin using the term two-spirited again, it was a sign of reclamation of the histori-

cal legacy that is unique to our First Nations. Two-spirited identity can thus be viewed as a counterhegemonic identity, and as a term of resistance to colonization.

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KARYNA MCGLYNN

The New Mothers

Now my young daughters are made-up and strutting
from the dark conspiracy of the closet, buggy in hand,
boundaries of that small kingdom defined
by what they are not: they will not be like me.

They have solemnly sworn it, a spit n' shake
over the dusty Hoover. There is an articulated resolve
in their swagger: how to stay sexy despite the children.

The answer is my antithesis: shadow of lost potential
moving modishly thin and dark behind me.

Specters of wishful women appear through the shifting
plastic of garment bags, skins begging to be filled,
they are going as fast as they can, stuffing cotton balls
into the loose cups of a bra and holding their breath...

now they are Birmingham women
who smoke mentholated cigarettes when they pee.

One scissors commando across the golf-course:
short orange skirt, lucky lotto ball nipples rolling.
Where is her house? There!

Watermelon stucco lost in the duckweed.
Nights spent ordering unnecessary things
out of catalogues, her nails cracking long over a diet soda.

Across town a sister's body snuffles and contorts;
she is a yogurt pretzel in a world without breakfast.

I see: two stewardesses who take sex seriously,
who hate one another and send Chablis on birthdays,
who wear sporty-fresh deodorant and black stockings,

two women who keep their children's faces clean and turned
away from cameras, whose bodies, upon careful inspection
hold the physical memory of a girlhood spent mapping

their future from the mouth of this closet, hours learning
to turn like hell on the dime of my old stilettos, blue shadow

crumbling down, before there is any lover to scorn but me,
sour lips pulled away from the gum when I say that I love
them:

four faithful compass eyes that always roll north now
before walking abruptly through the door.

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