

Two-Spirited Sexuality and White Universality

by Margaret Robinson

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When I think of colonialism the issues that first come to mind are residential schools, land claims, fishing rights, self-government and—perhaps most of all—the psychological effects of genocide. These are ongoing issues for First nations in Canada and elsewhere. But this post focuses on a different kind of assimilation: that of two-spirited people to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBTQ) narrative. As a scholar, detailing my social location is expected within the feminist discipline(s) in which I work. Among other things, I am a currently able-bodied, working class, Mi'kmaw cis woman with white skin privilege who identifies as bisexual, queer, and two-spirited. These last three are sexual identities, and it's here that I want to focus.

The addition of a 2 for two-spirited to the “alphabet soup” of sexual identity has become common in Canada (e.g., LGBTTI2QA). Yet this inclusion is problematic, in part because two-spirited does not emerge from within the same sexuality system. Like a Boba Fett action figure incorporated into a child's Star Trek play set, two-spirited identity is the odd man out, for it is not a sexual identity in the same way that gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer are. Rather, it belongs to a system distinct from the categorical sexuality of White culture.

The concept of two-spiritedness emerged in 1990 as a way for aboriginal people to claim cultural significance for our same-sex attraction or gender nonconformity. Two-spirited identity consolidates what was a general pattern of social roles for people with same-sex attraction or gender diversity in First Nations across Canada and the US during the pre-colonial period. A communal identity was made possible because our experience of colonialism, Christianized homophobia, and the threat of AIDS provided common points, transcending our nationalist identities.

There are many objections to the two-spirited movement. Some might argue that the term reinforces a pan-Indian story which is more wishful thinking than cultural tradition. Such arguments are also directed at Neo-pagan traditions and feminist history. While I agree that what actually happened in our past matters, I think we disagree on appropriate ways to determine the actual. Rejections of two-spirited tradition as fiction are rooted in a privileging of written over oral history, and in an expectation that the perspective of socially dominant groups is somehow more objective than that of the cultures they have attempted to destroy.

Some might object that two-spiritedness overwrites the roles found in particular First Nations traditions, furthering the colonial agenda. As a new (some say neo-traditional) identity, two-spiritedness connects people across nationalist identities such as Mi'kmaq, Cree, or Haida, and offers a common name for what were originally discrete identities—perhaps even discrete systems of sexuality. This is, I think a valid concern. Those First

Nations whose cultures are still intact may have more to lose than those of us whose cultures have been heavily damaged by colonialism. As a Mi'kmaq, I long for cultural traditions that relate to my ancestors, yet since the Mi'kmaq have been in contact with White settlers for over four hundred years, I find myself making due with Pan-Indianness instead, which is often more accessible.

Heterosexual traditionalists sometimes view two-spiritedness as a gateway through which gay and lesbian practices and attitudes (such as challenging sex-segregated rituals) threaten aboriginal culture. I have certainly found myself searching through my closet with increasing desperation for something that might qualify as a modest dress in order to participate in a sweat lodge or other traditional ceremony. Yet while White appropriation is a significant issue, it cannot, I think, be conflated with challenges that emerge from within First Nations culture due to indigenous feminism or other political commitments.

Still other First Nations people, influenced by homophobic Christianization, see any such identities as sinful. By positioning itself as traditional, two-spiritedness can claim a legitimacy as part of a competing religious worldview, rather than existing as a marginalized and sinful identity within Christian universalism.

The creation of two-spirited identity has also been a way for aboriginal sexual and gender minorities to distance ourselves from gay and lesbian identity. It is difficult for White LGBTQ audiences to hear about such distancing without imposing a narrative of internalized homophobia upon it. This assumption overlooks the colonial forces at work on our sexuality. There are reasons that a First Nations person—particularly a First Nations woman—might want some distance from White identities and their claims to universality.

The first reason is that the truth claims of LGBTQ identity erase competing or alternate ways of understanding our sexuality. Too often, the sexual identities of gay/lesbian, bisexual, and straight are presented as if they were ahistorical, written into our DNA, and the same across time and place. Yet in reality, how we think of our sexuality is shaped by our cultural, gender, racial and class position(s), to name only a few elements. This is true even if you subscribe to the idea that same-sex attraction has a biological basis. How our attraction manifests and what it means depends on our context, and it is the cultural meaning of our sexuality, and not our genetic makeup, that is the essence of identity.

Western sexuality, with its heterosexual, homosexual and (sometimes) bisexual categories, is based on a two-sex model. This binary model of sex is the foundation of sexual categories that take sex (or its supposed “natural” expression in gender) as its defining characteristic. Such a view has little space for people who are single, asexual, or whose sex doesn't fit neatly into male or female categories. While there are straight, gay, lesbian and bisexual people who challenge this gender binary, to challenge it too successfully risks making nonsense of the very categories themselves. Bisexuals eager to reject gender binaries define the “bi” in bisexuality as referring to same-gender and other-gender attractions. Yet depending on one's definition of gender, a lesbian attracted to both

butches and femmes might qualify as bisexual. If one defines attraction by sex rather than gender, one runs into the problems again, since sex is neither as self-evident as the sexual identity categories suggest, nor as binary as the medical profession attempts to make it.

One doesn't have to read many books about sexuality to encounter alternatives. Concepts of male sexuality that attach identity to active or passive sexual roles has been well-documented, (albeit not unproblematically) among Latino men (Carrier, 1992; Almaguer, 1995; Murray, 1995; Díaz, 1998; Carrillo, 2002; Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004; Finlinson, Colón, Robles, & Soto, 2006, Riesen et. al. 2010). Such a model considers penetration as normatively masculine and sexual receptivity as feminine. In White terms, the male top is "straight," while the male bottom is "gay." Non-White models of sexuality have been taken up within White gay discourse as evidence that homosexuality is a naturally-occurring and universal phenomenon. Yet discussions of alternative models often carry an implicit assumption that such models are lesser reflections of reality. The self-identity of the participants, and the cultural meaning of their sexuality or gender, is overwritten by a discourse with claims to universal truth. In the case of top/bottom models, White discourse often considers both men gay or bisexual, labeling the top as closeted, suffering from internalized homophobia or an underdeveloped identity.

Coming out models, such as the Cass Identity Model, offer a series of steps from initial confusion through to lesbian or gay identity integration. Such models quickly went from being descriptive of how people did develop, to being used as prescriptive pathways to identity by counsellors eager to help their same-sex attracted clients. Yet many researchers have noted that there are groups for whom such linear identity models do not work, most notably bisexuals, women, and racialized men. What we have then, are a series of identity models against which mental health, stability, and progress are measured, which in practice accurately reflect the experience of gay White men.

It is not the existence of these White models of sexuality to which I object. Rather, my objection is to the claims of scientific objectivity made for what is an experience common to a small group. When White models are seen as reflective of universal truth, then non-White models are not simply alternative approaches to sexuality, but are constructed as wrong inasmuch as they fail to reflect the White model.

A second reason to be suspicious of the universalization of LGBT identity is its erasure of spirit. Unlike LGBTQ identities, which are decidedly secular, two-spiritedness assumes that attraction and love are connections of spirit as well as flesh. Within a First Nations framework, spirit has no biological sex, but it can have a gender, such as masculine or feminine. Whereas most children are born with a spirit that matches their assigned sex, this is not necessarily always the case. In First Nations culture one might have both a male and female spirit, and be able to shift between the two. Thus, First Nations sexuality includes female husbands or warriors, male wives and basketweavers, or shamans whose dual spirit enabled them to perform sacred functions.

My third reason for being suspicious of the universalization of White sexual identity is that it erases power differences between White and non-White people. In many instances racialized LGB people are expected to “pick a side,” and declare our sexual identity to be more salient than our racial identity.

Overwriting the power difference between White and First Nations people enables White LGB people to lay claim to First Nations tradition in the name of equal access. As two-spiritedness becomes socially visible, it has become an object of cultural assimilation. A study conducted at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto found that more respondents identified as two-spirited than reported having aboriginal or First Nations ancestry.

Gay-identified published and editor, Bo Young, sees nothing problematic in claiming two-spirited people as ancestors to White gays and lesbians. Young argues that gays and lesbians serve a function like that of two-spirited people in First Nations cultures. Such an argument erases actual cultural differences and co-opts two-spirited identity for White gay and lesbians, arguing that they have a right to such roles due to perceived similarity and political or psychological need. Young despairs that there are First Nations people “who would deny gay brothers and sisters access to a history, to a tradition that would empower us all” (Dooley, 2001). Against the argument that aboriginal traditions, even recently developed ones, are not open to White appropriation, Young posits that such a view is “prima facie racism” (Dooley, 2001). Such entitlement is difficult to argue against, since indigenous concepts of cultural ownership tend to be communal, while White concepts of ownership lean toward the individual. Let me only say that Young's sleight of hand, in which gay and lesbians become the new (and more legitimate) two-spirited people is difficult to distinguish from the sense of entitlement demonstrated by his colonial ancestors.

Some may find it hard to hear arguments for the legitimacy of alternative sexual identity systems without assuming that I am proposing their supremacy. Hegemonic discourse has a difficult time separating the two concepts. I am not arguing that two-spiritedness is the best sexual identity. I am not arguing even that it is the best sexual identity for First Nations people. Rather, I am asserting that racialized sexual identity systems, including two-spiritedness, open new avenues of sexual truth which have been denied, ignored, or closed off by the hegemonic discourse of White sexuality. Many people, like myself, continue to hold identities from multiple sexual systems. To return to the toy metaphor for a moment, while my Boba Fett figure might coexist with the crew of the Enterprise, I must not make the mistake of assuming that their universes are the same.

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