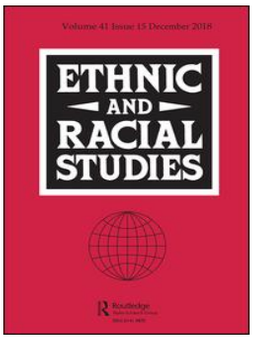

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Radical sovereignty, rhetorical borders, and the everyday decolonial praxis of Indigenous peoplehood and Two-Spirit reclamation

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Rhetorical imperialism: re/defining the edges of Indigenous

Scott Richard Lyons (Ojibwe/Mdewakanton Dakota) (2000) defines rhetorical imperialism as "the ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of debate. These terms are often definitional – that is, they identify the parties discussed by describing them in certain ways" (452). Lyons goes on to point out that metaphors used to describe Indigenous people – like "wards" and "pupils" – in early U.S. Supreme Court cases are instances in which Indigenous people were "completely redefined by their interlocutors;" which then become entrenched in U.S. jurisprudence, leading to the paternalism that has marked U.S. relations with Indigenous peoples. Such rhetorical imperialism has transformed Indigenous peoples from "sovereigns" organized as "nations" who negotiate "treaties" to "wards" clustered in "tribes" who enter "agreements" (453). Thus, rhetorical imperialism is the use of language, connotation, and categorization in service of the settler-colonial imperative, as an implement of elimination.

Rhetorical imperialism is exercised to define and re/define the political borders around who is categorized as Indigenous, with U.S. federal recognition upheld as the hallmark of tribal legitimacy. Flora Price (2003) offers the similar concept of "situational (re-contextualized) identity": the notion that aspects of a people's cultural identity may be re-positioned, unacknowledged, or diminished by the dominating society for its own benefit, though to the detriment of the people (150). To illustrate the concept, Price highlights the case of the Mashpee Wampanoag who, not being a federally-recognized tribe at the time, brought a federal suit in 1976 for the possession of "Cape Cod's Indian Town," otherwise known as the 16,000 acres of Mashpee Township, which had become highly sought-after by retirees, vacationers, and luxury developers over the previous century. Over the course of the suit, as the crux shifted from rightful ownership of the land to the veracity of Mashpee claims of continuous tribal status, the Mashpee found themselves having "to prove that they had been themselves in the past … in order to be themselves in the present" (155). Thus, the pivotal question became whether or not a tribe known as "Mashpee Wampanoag" has continuously existed. The legal definition of "Indian tribe" in effect at the time – established by *Montoya v. United States* (1901) – states that a tribe is "a body of Indians of the same or similar race united in a community under one leadership or government and inhabiting a particular, though sometimes ill-defined, territory" (Clifford 1988, 334; qtd. in Price 2003, 156). By this definition, each of the critical constituents of race, governance, and territory were set to be interpreted, measured, and evaluated according to the agenda of the settler-state to ascertain their continuous presence. Based on this assessment, a jury determined that the Mashpee Wampanoag had only continuously existed as an "Indian tribe" in the eight years between March 31, 1834 to March 3, 1842, after which they were no longer a tribe. In considering the rhetorical imperialism enacted in this case and, in fact, in most settler-contrived characterizations of Indigenous identity, Price observes the following: "Alongside the Mashpee witnesses' narrative of their history and identity stood the American narrative of the history of Native Americans. In the historical narrative, Native Americans either died or changed; and if you changed, you were no longer an Indian and no longer a tribe" (158).

Two-Spirit: self-naming as resistance and reclamation

> Although naming ceremonies among North American Indians followed many traditions, varying according to tribe and often even by band or time period, what has never changed is an acknowledgment of the sense of power inherent in a name or in the person performing the act of naming, and the consequent right to produce self-names as utterances of empowerment.
>
> Deborah Miranda (Ohlone Costanoan Esselen) (2010, 260)

In 1990, at the third annual Native American/First Nations Gay and Lesbian Conference in Winnipeg, North American Indigenous LGBTQ+ and gender expansive people elected to use the term *Two-Spirit* to refer to themselves and their current and past roles (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997, 2). While the precise origins of the term are not clear, for many, the self-identifier indicates that an individual embodies multi-gendered spirits; underscoring a belief that, while each new life is at least imprinted by the combination of the energies that united to create it, in some people the diversely-gendered attributes of all these energies are more wholly manifested (Anguksuar/LaFortune 1997, 221). Other understandings of the term are that *Two-Spirit* marks one as both queer and Indigenous (Wilson 2018, 168); or "spiritually meaningful" in ways that are reflected "in all aspects of who we are" (Wilson 2008, 193). Capable of containing a vast diversity of Indigenous LGBTQ+ identities, adapting over time and space, *Two-Spirit* is suffused with many meanings by the Indigenous people and communities who have imbued it with their lived experiences and affirmed it with their stories. Still, as one Two-Spirit person observed, the term "is a placeholder until something comes along that more accurately fits the full continuum of who we are in a contemporary context" (Wilson 2018, 168).

As a self-identifier, *Two-Spirit* is an Indigenously defined, pan-tribally applicable term; a manifestation of self-naming as oppositional identification and rhetorical sovereignty, in that it supplants the oppressively inaccurate and homogenizing term *berdache*. *Two-Spirit* also rejects the settler imposition of a racialized and rigid gender divide that seeks to erase any beyond-the-binary conceptualizations of gender. The term challenges the settler-defined categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, or LGBTQ; nomenclature that, despite its demarcations, invisibilizes a range of Indigenous genders and sexualities. By foregrounding Indigenous conceptualizations as the bases by which to define the identifier, *Two-Spirit* further

distinguishes itself from LGBTQ (Driskill 2010, 73; Davis 2019, 66). The term is a "journey to a Sovereign Erotic," described by Two-Spirit poet and scholar Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee Descent) (2004) as "a return to and/or continuance of the complex realities of gender and sexuality that are ever-present in both the human and more-than-human world, but erased and hidden by colonial cultures" (56). *Two-Spirit* is grounded in the interdependent elements of Indigenous peoplehood and it emphasizes the significance of relationships with land, language, history, and ceremony. While *Two-Spirit* is not interchangeable with *LGBTQ*, many people make situational choices about when to don the pan-tribal designation alone, in combination with an LGBTQ-identifier, and/or with tribally-specific terms. As Jenny L. Davis (Chickasaw) (2019), a Two-Spirit poet and linguist, explains, "Two Spirit individuals frequently employ all of these terms more or less synonymously in order to highlight what they hold in common: gender and sexuality outside of a binary norm" (80). Whether applying *Two-Spirit* or tribally-specific names for their roles, these acts of reclamation are rhetorical sovereignty.

Two-Spirit people employ rhetorical sovereignty as a contrast mechanism by resisting ostensible accommodation in the subsuming hegemony of *LGBTQ* and instead asserting a multiply-marginalized identity as Indigenous and queer in a cis-heteronormative and white-supremacist settler society. The acts I term contrast mechanisms are exercises of conscious differentiation; practices and modes of expression that demonstrate a group's intentional distinction not only from settler society but also among the subcultures or other groups with whom they may otherwise be assumed to share similarities. The choice to assert a pan-tribal identifier like *Two-Spirit* is a means of strategically aligning with other Two-Spirit people, in strategic contrast to the homogeneity of LGBTQ designations.

As Beatrice Medicine (Standing Rock Lakota) (1997) has suggested, "The use of 'two-spirit' as a Pan-Indian term is not intended to be translated from English to Native languages … To do so changes the common meaning it has acquired by self-identified two-spirit Native Americans" (147). The use of the self-identifier in English, the enduring language of settler colonization in North America, undermines a primary instrument of the settler-colonial imperative. The English language has been deployed to control, regulate, categorize, and assimilate Indigenous peoples; therefore, the creation and use of an English-language self-identifier as a pan-tribal rejection of such rhetorical imperialism is inherently subversive. *Two-Spirit* is thus akin to what Cindy Patton (1990) describes as "dissident vernaculars": " … meanings created by and in communities [that] are upsetting to the dominant culture precisely because speaking in one's own fashion is a means of resistance, a strengthening of the subculture that has created the new meaning" (Patton 1990, 148; qtd. in Tafoya 1997, 194). The utility of *Two-Spirit* as resistance in this context is made especially meaningful

because, though it is an English-language term, it not a term for non-Indigenous people to apply to themselves, regardless of the languages they speak.

Two-Spirit scholar Alex Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree) (2008) talked with other Two-Spirit people about their journeys of reclamation. Wilson describes "coming in" as the process in which Two-Spirit people affirm an interdependent identity "that integrates their sexuality, culture, gender and all other aspects of who they understand and know themselves to be," as contrasted by the mainstream notion of "coming out" which centres on declaring an independent identity (197). Coming in, therefore, expresses a Two-Spirit person's emerging understanding of their place in the peoplehood of their own community. One participant described their experience of coming in: "It has taken me a long time to see that I am valuable. Now that I see it and feel it, everything seems possible. I looked so many places … But here the answer was right within me and the answer is in our communities. We are our communities and they are us. Being two-spirited means I am always at home" (197).

Two-Spirit people, and other Indigenous queer and gender-expansive people who do not don the pan-tribal identifier, are substantially engaging with the elements of their peoplehood. They are learning and recounting the sacred histories of their roles among their communities; engaging in ceremonies for which their roles have been designated. They are gathering on their homelands throughout the continent to build, heal, and nurture relationships with Turtle Island. They are learning and speaking tribal languages, tribally-specific terms for their roles, and terms for other genders in their traditional systems. "Two-spirit identity is about circling back," Wilson (2008) writes, "to where we belong, reclaiming, reinventing, and redefining our beginnings, our roots, our communities, our support systems, and our collective and individual selves" (198).

Radical sovereignty and everyday Indigenous futurity

Like upholding peoplehood as the unifying framework of Indigenous nationhood rather than settler conceptions of nation, the assertion of Two-Spirit identity is an act of radical sovereignty, of everyday decolonization. Both evoke Harjo's (2019) notion of este-cate sovereignty, in that they are "a type of action and freedom realized in everyday and vernacular spaces against the grain of the politics of settler colonial elimination" (39). Both overwrite erasures, fill in silences, and counteract the settler colonial logic of elimination by radically multiplying, rather than subtracting or dividing, the everyday spaces of Indigenous agency and self-determination: the "intimate geographies" (Hunt and Holmes 2015, 157) within communities and homes, among friends and partners, and within the "the vernacular interstices" (Harjo 2019, 53).

Radical sovereignty is enacted everyday; as Sarah Hunt/Tłaliłila'ogwa (Kwakwaka'wakw) and Cindy Holmes (2015) observe, "Indigenous peoples' resistance to colonialism has unfolded in daily acts of embodying and living Indigeneity, honoring longstanding relationships with the land and with one another" (157). The everyday decolonization of foregrounding and enacting peoplehood and of asserting a Two-Spirit, queer Indigenous identity are practices of Indigenous futurity. Laura Harjo (Mvskoke) (2019) describes the concept of Indigenous futurity as "the enactment of theories and practices that activate our ancestors' unrealized possibilities, the act of living out the futures we wish for in a contemporary moment, and the creation of the conditions for these futures" (5). Practiced both in the daily present and in the time to come, Indigenous futurity involves generative dialogue "with the unactivated possibilities of our past, present, and future relatives," actuates those potentialities, and continues "an archive of knowledge and possibilities" (Harjo 2019, 30, 216).

Indigenous futurity as a praxis of radical sovereignty evokes the seven-generations structure that Two-Spirit scholar Kai Pyle (Métis/Nishnaabe) (2018) notes is reflected in *aanikoobijigan* (Ojibwe) and *âniskotâpân* (Plains Cree), terms that each indicate great-grandparents and great-grandchildren and the seven generations between them (576). Pyle theorizes the concept of "trans*temporal kinship" to consider the "ability of transgender and Two-Spirit Indigenous people to establish kin relations across time, with both ancestors and descendants" (575–576). Similarly, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg) (2017) reflects on *kobade*, a Nishnaabeg word to refer to great-grandparents and great-grandchildren and the significance of being "a link in the chain between generations, between nations, between states of being, between individuals" (8). In each of these frameworks, the practice of Indigenous futurity is countering the settler-authored "terminal narratives" of Indigenous peoples that depict only their diminishment and disappearance (Wilcox 2009, 11–15).

In order to facilitate its primary objective – the acquisition of Indigenous lands and resources – the settler-colonial imperative has necessarily sought the diminishment of Indigenousness by disrupting Indigenous cultural systems, dismantling distinct and collective cultural identity, and demonizing Indigenous conceptualizations of gender, sexuality, and kinship. Nevertheless, Indigenous peoples have never simply acquiesced, using the means that are available to them to overtly or covertly defy these attempts. Often this has meant working within enforced assimilation and under the demonstrated threat of violence and loss. It has meant transforming settler-colonial institutions into sites of resistance. In this requisite opposition, Indigenous communities have long co-opted many of the instruments that have been used to subjugate and dehumanize them, including language, to change the narrative.

Just as rhetorical imperialism, with its eliminatory re/definitions and categories, has real and tangible consequences for Indigenous peoples, exercises of rhetorical sovereignty continue to be an effective challenge to the subtractive logics of settler colonialism. Settler schemes for the function of Indigenous nationhood explicitly erode sovereignty and self-determination; settler definitions of who gets to be Indigenous are blatantly eliminatory. Settler-imposed cis-heteropatriarchy and its accompanying gender binary, when mapped onto Indigenous cultures, marginalizes and erases particularly those whose genders cannot fit a rigid binary construction. However, Indigenous radical sovereignty responds to counter and unravel these oppressions: by upholding peoplehood as a unifying framework that predates and outlasts settler conceptions of nation, by self-naming and asserting an identifier like *Two-Spirit* to overwrite histories of erasure and condemnation. Such acts are the everyday praxis of decolonization.

Notes

1. Deculturization is defined by Joel Spring (2013) as "the educational process of destroying a people's culture and replacing it with a new culture" (9).
2. The pursuit of settler colonialism's inherent objectives is yet underway as its ramifications continue to unfold. I use the present participle *dominating* to connote the active and ongoing work of colonizing, settling, dominating, and subjugating and to indicate that settler colonialism is a necessarily dynamic structure that must be vigorously and systematically maintained.
3. Chris Andersen (Métis) (2015) notes that it is necessary differentiate the notion of Indigenous nationhood from that of settler nationhood by stripping the term of its "western teleology and apparently natural links to modern state building" (17).
4. Indigenous scholars note the necessity of both types of sovereignty, as evidenced by the case of the Mashpee Wampanoag. For example, Lyons (2000) calls for "an understanding of the twin pillars of sovereignty: the power to self-govern and the affirmation of peoplehood" (456). Laura Harjo (Mvskoke) (2019) observes that while "formal tribal sovereignty" is essential "to block the dispossession of Mvskoke land, gain fair access to health, education, and housing, and ensure the security of one's body, I still insist that tribes and Indigenous communities have always enacted and continue to enact a form of estecate sovereignty bound up in local community knowledge and practice" (50).
5. For an extended discussion of Jeffersonian assimilationist tactics, the marginalization of Indigenous modes of kinship, and formation of the nuclear family as a settler strategy of Indigenous diminishment, see Rifkin 2011, 45–77, wherein the author observes that " … the coalescence in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century of the ideal of the nuclear, sentimental family can be understood partially as an effect of the emergence of an imperial hegemony that helped legitimize the exertion of settler state authority over indigenous peoples and territory" (47).
6. Richard Pratt founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879.