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Our Coming In Stories: Cree Identity, Body Sovereignty and Gender Self- Determination

Alex Wilson
Universtiy of Saskatchewan

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Abstract
This presentation will share an understanding of Cree traditional law and discuss its contemporary application in relation to gender and sexual diversity. I will offer a brief history of how the sexuality and bodies of Indigenous, specifically Cree two spirit (LGBTQ) people became regulated through governmental and church policy and discuss how the social movement Idle No More has validated traditional understandings and practices. Through research and examples, personal observations, stories and experiences, the meaning and importance of body sovereignty and gender self-determination and expression will be presented as necessary aspects of undoing systemic forms of oppression and revisioning as a positive 'coming in' process.

Our Coming In Stories: Cree Identity, Body Sovereignty and Gender Self-Determination

Alex Wilson

In Canada, as elsewhere in the world, the process of colonization has advanced itself through a steady attack on the lands, bodies, cultures, identities, and ways of being of Indigenous peoples. And in Canada, as elsewhere, we – and our lands, bodies, cultures, identities, and ways of being – have just as steadily resisted and persisted.

Connected to Body, Connected to Land[1]

I am a two-spirit member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation. My family clan name is *Wassenas*, which translates as 'reflecting light from within'.[2] I recognize that that light is one form of the unextinguishable energy that has been passed to me from my ancestors and through my family and community. In our traditional spirituality, we find guidance in a Great Mystery, that is, that we are connected to everything by spiritual energy, joining us in a limitless circle that encompasses the past, present and future. Following from this are the Cree principles of *kakinow ni wagomakanak* (we are in relationship with the land, waters, plants, animals and other living creatures), *a-kha ta neekanenni miso-an* (we are all equally important), *sakihiwawin* (a commitment to act in ways that express love), and *mino pimatisiwin* (we are responsible to live in conscious connection with the land and living things in a way that creates and sustains balance – or, as my father translates from our dialect, to live beautifully). We understand that the nature of the cosmos is to be in balance and that when balance is disturbed, it must and will return.

Restoring Balance

Two-spirit identity is one way in which balance is being restored to our communities. Throughout the colonial history of the Americas, aggressive assimilation policies have attempted to displace our own understandings, practices and teachings around sexuality, gender and positive relationships and replace them with those of Judeo Christianity (Cannon 1998; Driskill, Finley, Gilley, & Morgensen, 2011; Wilson, Two-spirit identity: Active resistance to multiple oppressions, 2009). To recognize ourselves as two-spirit is to declare our connection to the traditions of our own people.

The term two-spirit first came to the Cree teacher Myra Laramee, who then shared it with a gathering of Indigenous LGBTQI people from throughout North America (held in southern Manitoba in 1990) (McLeod, n.d.). The term was taken up quickly as a self-

[1] "Connected to body, connected to land" is one of the many Indigenous teachings shared the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (discussed later in this article).

[2] The Cree translations and teachings presented in this paragraph (and throughout this article) were shared with me by my grandparents, Beatrice and Charlie Wilson, and my parents, Stan and Peggy Wilson, and other community and family members.

identifier and many two-spirit people (particularly at that time) have taken it to mean that each of us possesses some balance of masculinity and femininity or male and female energy. As a self-identifier, two-spirit acknowledges and affirms our identity as Indigenous peoples, our connection to the land, and values in our traditional cultures that recognize and accept gender and sexual diversity.

The recognition and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity is reflected in the language, spirituality and culture of my own people. Our Cree dialect does not include gender-distinct pronouns. Rather, our language is 'gendered' on the basis of whether or not something is animate (that is, whether or not it has a spiritual purpose and energy). Our creation story takes us back to the stars, and a central figure or character is *Weesageychak*, represented by the constellation other people call Orion. A trickster and a teacher, *Weesageychak* shifts gender, form and space to playfully teach us about ourselves and our connection to the wider universe, land and waters, living things and each other.

Cultural Disruption

When European newcomers first began to explore and settle our lands, they brought with them their commitment (rooted in their own cultures, spirituality and ways of being) to heteropatriarchy and gender binaries. They saw the acceptance of gender and sexual diversity that prevailed in our lands as sinful and threatening. As the Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca stated in the early 1500s, it was "a devilish thing" (1852, p. 538). Historic records show that violence on the bodies of Indigenous people who did not conform to the gender and sexual norms of the European newcomers began soon after their arrival. In 1513, forty Indigenous people whom the explorer Balboa had identified as "sodomites" were executed (Goldberg 1992, p. 180). The imposition of Christianity, laws such as Canada's Indian Act that apply only to Indigenous peoples, and the residential and boarding school systems imposed by the Canadian and American governments continued the work of Columbus and his fellow explorers. As part of an ongoing effort to assimilate Indigenous peoples, we were forcibly separated from each other and from our traditional cultures, lands, spirituality, languages, and ways of being. Throughout, our bodies, genders and sexualities have been regulated in a continuum of violence. Penalized and punished for our acceptance of gender and sexual variance, many of us learned that the most certain way to survive was to take these teachings underground, out of sight of the colonizers.

These experiences continue to affect our people, communities, and nations. Today, some of our traditional Elders and spiritual teachers have adopted and introduced understandings and practices and understandings that were not part of their own cultures prior to colonization and the imposition of Christianity. For example, a recent queer pride celebration in a community that lies within the territory of my Nation (Swampy Cree) included a sweat lodge ceremony. When two-spirit and other participants arrived to take part in the ceremony, the Elder leading the ceremony demanded that some in the group change their clothing to conform with what he perceived their gender to be and added the warning that if he suspected that they had dressed inappropriately, they would be required to prove their gender identity. In the face of this direct assault on their body sovereignty

and gender self-determination, three people left the ceremony[3]. The role of Elders in our communities includes the sharing of traditional teachings with youth that will help them understand their own experiences, including their expressions of gender identity and sexuality. However, in most of our Indigenous cultures where gender and sexual diversity were once accepted and valued, our traditional teachings, ways of being, spirituality, and languages were disrupted and displaced through the processes of colonization, Christianization and assimilation. The result (as the incident described above demonstrates) is that some of our own present-day cultural teachings and practices extend the continuum of violence that two-spirit people have been subject to since colonization began.

In our home communities, two-spirit people are frequently subject to interconnected homophobia, transphobia and misogyny, and in the larger society they are additionally subject to structural and individual racism and classism. This has had devastating impacts on the two-spirit community. The suicide rate for LGBTQ Indigenous youth is ten times higher than that of any other group in the United States. Thirty-nine percent of two-spirit women and 21% of two-spirit men have attempted suicide (Fieland, Walters, & Simoni, 2007). In a recent study of transgendered and gender non-conforming Indigenous people in the United States, nearly one-quarter lived in extreme poverty, elevated rates of HIV were found, and more than half of respondents (56%) had attempted suicide (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2012).

Coming In

There is much work to be done, then, to undo the work that has been done upon us. When we call ourselves two-spirit people, we are proclaiming sovereignty over our bodies, gender expressions and sexualities. In my own research with Cree and Ojibwe two-spirit people, I heard many stories of 'coming in' (Wilson 2007; 2008; 2009). Coming in does not centre on the declaration of independence that characterizes 'coming out' in mainstream depictions of the lives of LGBTQI people. Rather, coming in is an act of returning, fully present in our selves, to resume our place as a valued part of our families, cultures, communities, and lands, in connection with all our relations.

We do not do this work alone. Idle No More is an international grassroots movement that brings Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together to honour the sovereignty of Indigenous people and Nations, and to protect the land and water. Idle No More was organized in resistance to oppressive colonial ideologies and laws, and its activities have included public education on the regulation of sexuality and gender (Idle No More, n.d.; Zahody 2014). The Native Youth Sexual Health Network is an organization by and for Indigenous youth that works across issues of sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice throughout Canada and the United States, with activities that include education, advocacy and outreach with two-spirit and LGBTQ youth (Native Youth Sexual Health Network, n.d.).

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[3] Members of this group contacted me directly to tell me of this experience.

In both these movements, Indigenous sovereignty over our lands is inseparable from sovereignty over our bodies, sexuality and gender self-expression. This is at the root of the very contemporary understanding of identity held by many two-spirit youth today. When the term two-spirit first appeared, the meaning most often attached to it reflected a binary construction of gender identity. As the two-spirit activist Cheyenne Fayant-McLeod states, "Two-spirit means being queer and Indigenous, not that you are half man half woman. Depending on which tribe you're from, who your grandparents are and have experienced, there are many, many different stories about what being queer means in Indigenous communities" (Tyndall, 2013). Someone else observed, our current understandings of the identity of LGBTQI people is "evolving or changing, and the term two-spirit is a placeholder until something comes along that more accurately fits the full continuum of who we are in the contemporary context" (Dylan Rose, personal communication, August 2011).

About the author: Dr. Alex Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree Nation) is an Associate Professor and the Academic Director of the Aboriginal Education Research Centre at the University of Saskatchewan. Her scholarship has greatly contributed to building and sharing knowledge about Two Spirit identity, history and teachings, Indigenous research methodologies and the prevention of violence in the lives of Indigenous peoples. As a community activist and Idle No More organizer, her work also focuses on interventions that prevent the destruction of land and water.

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