

Ancestors of the **RAINBOW**

**A Spectrum of Gender
Before Colonization**

This zine is dedicated to the 2SLGBTQ+ youth of Florida and beyond.

Gender Before Colonization

Maybe you've heard the term "third gender" before—it's often used to describe people who don't fit neatly into the categories of "man" or "woman." But what we learn when we look back at history is that beyond a third gender, many cultures recognized a variety of gender identities, and these identities weren't necessarily fixed or rigid. What follows are examples of different gender expressions from precolonial societies who didn't just accept these identities; they celebrated them as sacred, wise, and essential to the community. This incredible diversity in how people understood and experienced gender challenges the strict rules and expectations that uphold patriarchal systems, showing us just how powerful and transformative gender flexibility can be.

This zine is just the tip of the iceberg. There are so many examples from cultures all over the world, throughout history and prehistory, that observed multiple genders, that it would be impossible to include them all here. This tells us that the expression of multiple genders is a normal and natural aspect of humanity. Let this be your reminder: there's nothing new or wrong about being who you are. You're part of a long, beautiful legacy.

What is Colonization?

Colonization happens when one country or group takes control of another land, often far away, and the people who live there. From the time Christopher Columbus reached the Americas in 1492 until the early 1900s, Europeans colonized about 80% of the world. Typically, colonizers move in, impose their own rules, and use the land and resources for their own gain. This happened frequently in history as countries like England and Spain sought more land, resources, wealth, and power.

Colonization was a violent process. Colonizers stripped indigenous people worldwide of their freedom, resources, cultures, and even their lives. This history of exploitation helps explain the global inequality we see today, where some countries are very powerful while others are still dealing with the lasting harm caused by colonization. In the United States, the effects of colonization—including slavery—are still visible today, especially in the struggles faced by the descendants of Indigenous and African people.

**Thank you for
reading!**

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Pre-colonial societies were not perfect, but they did include many valuable elements that have been lost over time. Colonialism imposed rigid, binary ideas about gender and sexuality, dismantling inclusive systems that honored diverse identities and replacing them with laws, stigma, and exclusion. Yet, despite centuries of erasure and repression, these identities endured. Today, as trans and gender-nonconforming people face escalating government exclusion, discrimination, and violence in the U.S., reclaiming these histories is an act of resistance. The persistence of third gender identities across pre-colonial societies reminds us that our existence is not new, nor is it a deviation—it is a testament to the resilience and beauty of human diversity.

Resilience in the Face of Repression

Knowing this history is not just an academic exercise; it is a lifeline. It proves that you are not alone, and you never have been. 2SLGBTQ+ people have always existed, and have always been essential to the fabric of the world. In the face of systemic oppression, your identity is valid, your feelings are real, and you are worthy of love, acceptance, care and liberation. Just like the communities that came before you, you are here because you are meant to be. You can't have a healed, holistic society without everyone being able to fulfill their purpose and contribute their specific gifts. Gender expressions in pre-colonial societies helped define our different roles and therefore our purpose. Your gender is much more than a personal identity, it can be a gift to society.



NATIVE AMERICAN GENDER SPECTRUMS

When talking about Native Americans, it's important to realize how many different tribes there are and how different they are from each other. There are 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States (referred to by many natives as Turtle Island), and at least another 400 that are unrecognized by the government. Out of these thousand tribes, many have distinct languages and social customs.

TWO-SPIRIT

You may have heard Two-Spirit identity described as a Native American third gender, the embodiment of both masculinity and femininity, or an equivalent to transgender identity. That's partly correct, but there's more to it. First of all, Two-Spirit is not a traditional term. It was coined in the 1990s to bridge Native and Western ideas of gender. Two-spirit is one term used to describe the thousands of different gender identities observed by different Native American tribes. While many Two-Spirit identities correspond to non-binary genders, some Two-Spirit individuals historically lived as the "other" gender in a way that aligns with modern transgender identities.

For instance, Among the Diné (Navajo), four genders are acknowledged: Asdzáán: (feminine female), Hastíin (masculine male), Nádleehi (feminine male, English translation "changing one"), Dilbaa: (masculine female, English equivalent unknown.) Asdzáán is considered the first gender because Diné society is matrilineal. (In a matrilineal society or relationship, the fact of someone belonging to a particular family depends only on female relatives.)

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Ma-Nee Chacaby, author of *A two-spirit journey* the autobiography of a lesbian Ojibwa-Cree elder



In Diné culture, gender is viewed as a spectrum where fluidity is permitted and some of these categories also have sub-categories. In other words, the identity of Nádleehi can be expressed through multiple identities with different names.

What would it be like to grow up in a society where the existence of multiple genders is treated as a natural fact instead of a political controversy, where people are accepted for who they are instead of bullied for not fitting into prescribed categories?

MUXE

(PRONOUNCED Moo-SHAY))

Another example of Indigenous American non-binary gender expression are the muxes of Oaxaca, Mexico. Muxe is a Zapotec word, a language of an indigenous group of the same name in Mexico. In this case, the term “third gender” actually fits, and muxes embrace this description. They are people who are assigned male at birth, who dress and behave in ways associated with traditional femininity.

Muxe identity predates Spanish conquest and, similar to British colonizers, they punished anyone who did not fit into binary and heteronormative identities of gender and sexuality. It has been a struggle to maintain muxe identity and place in society, but in 1976 they began a festival called “La Vela de las Auténticas Intrépidas Buscadoras del Peligro,” which can be translated as “the Vigil of the Authentic Intrepid Danger Seekers,” and they’ve been celebrating annually ever since. The festival attracts tourists from all over the world.



According to Hinaleimoana Kwai Kong Wong-Kalu, an indigenous Hawaiian Māhū activist,

“Māhū could be someone that looks like you or me. Māhū is not restricted to males. It is also female, although it is not recorded as such in historical documentation or even the oldest dictionaries. So clearly, the definition of Māhū is a little skewed... People in the Pacific don't look at you for just your physical element or your physical aspects. They look for your mental, emotional, and spiritual place in this life.”

Māhū's role as healers was commemorated in an 2022 exhibit at the Bishop Museum in Hawaii called “The Healer Stones of Kapaemahu.” Over 500 years ago, four boulders had been placed on a Waikiki beach to commemorate each of the four healers that had lended their powers to heal the sick and ailing. As in all of the other examples of non-binary genders in this zine, the embodiment of both masculine and feminine qualities was considered to be powerful. This exhibit was a beautiful commemoration of Māhū and their traditional role in society.



Māhū Magic

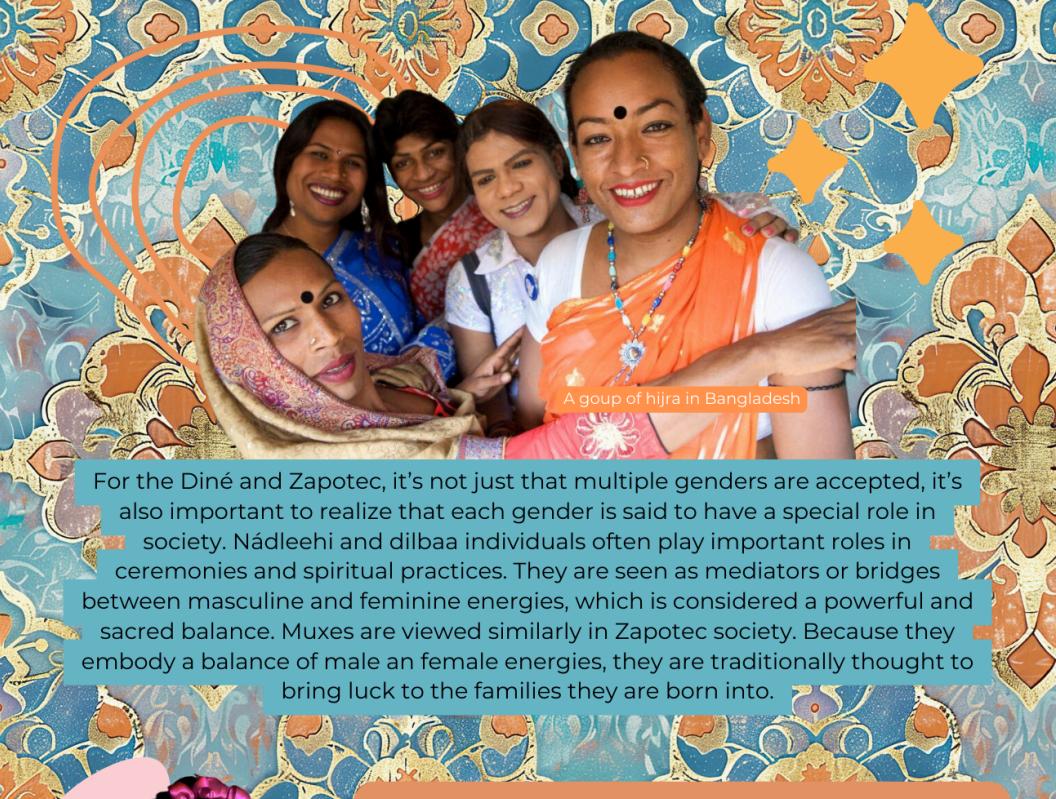


If you watched Season 15 of RuPaul's Drag Race, you may have noticed a hot Hawaiian queen named Sasha Colby. Sasha was the first native Hawaiian to win the show. Since winning Drag Race, Colby has gone on to perform at a Vegas show called Māhū Magic. What is Māhū, you may ask? In Hawai'i and Tahiti, Māhū are individuals who you guessed it—embody both masculine and feminine energy, holding essential roles in indigenous Hawaiian spiritual life and preserving cultural traditions.

Māhū Magic was set to coincide with a Native Hawaiian convention in Las Vegas, aiming to highlight the long-standing reverence for gender fluidity in Hawaiian culture over centuries, while also contributing to the broader national dialogue on transgender rights. What a fun and engaging way to start a political dialogue, take up space and push back against oppression!



Sasha Colby



A group of hijra in Bangladesh

For the Diné and Zapotec, it's not just that multiple genders are accepted, it's also important to realize that each gender is said to have a special role in society. Nádleehi and dilbaa individuals often play important roles in ceremonies and spiritual practices. They are seen as mediators or bridges between masculine and feminine energies, which is considered a powerful and sacred balance. Muxes are viewed similarly in Zapotec society. Because they embody a balance of male and female energies, they are traditionally thought to bring luck to the families they are born into.



Lukas Avendaño, a Zapotec muxe performance artist

Hijra: A Secret Subculture

In South Asian countries such as India and Pakistan, there exists a community of third gender individuals called hijras. Hijras are people who embody a unique blend of gender traits. Most are assigned male at birth (some are intersex) and they look and dress in traditionally feminine ways. Hijras have existed for thousands of years and have played important roles in religious ceremonies, like blessing newborns or marriages. They typically leave home and form their own communities—a subculture—that they are initiated into. Many elements of their culture are kept secret, including their language, Hijra Farsi, which is spoken only by hijras.

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Hijra identity is attached to Hinduism. They're connected to the deity Bahuchara Mata, who represents courage and transformation. Many Hindus consider hijras to be quite powerful. However, when India was colonized by the British in the late 18th century, they tried to erase the Hijras' significance and in 1871 finally made the identity of hijra illegal. Nevertheless, hijras still resist this oppression and continue to exist. By 2014, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh had all officially recognized third gender people as citizens deserving of equal rights and by 2015, the first hijra mayor in India was elected in the city of Raigarh. Like them, you have the strength to rise above anyone who doesn't see your worth.

Balancing Act: Yan Daudu Identity in Nigeria

Yan daudu is a unique gender identity in Hausa society, primarily found in northern Nigeria. They are people who have been assigned male at birth, who adopt roles, behaviors, and appearances traditionally thought of as feminine. For some, this corresponds to transgender identity, but others identify simply as male crossdressers or transvestites. Like many of the genders you'll read about in this zine, an individual's gender and sexuality are independent. In other words, being yan daudu doesn't automatically mean that person is gay or queer.

Not only did yan daudu exist before British colonization, but they existed even before Islam arrived in Nigeria, before the 11th century. Their existence symbolizes a rebelliousness toward organized religion. Yan daudu were said to resist Islam and continued with their traditional animist beliefs. Like other third gender identities from all around the globe, yan daudu had a spiritually powerful role in pre-Islamic society. However, today, many yan daudu practice Islam. Modern life for yan daudu individuals appears to be a delicate balancing act: avoiding persecution in one of the world's most homophobic nations, conforming to societal norms tied to religion and family expectations, and still finding ways to authentically express their true selves.

The Chibados of Angola and Queen Nzinga

The Chibados (also spelled "Quimbandas" or "Chibais") were a group of spiritual leaders and diviners in the Kingdom of Ndongo and Matamba, located in present-day Angola, a country in the southwestern part of Africa. They were respected for their spiritual gifts rather than judged for their gender nonconformity, which highlights how their community valued their contributions over rigid gender roles. The Chibados served as intermediaries between the physical world and the spirit realm. They were known for their healing abilities, divination practices, and guidance in matters of war, governance, and community well-being. They played a crucial role in maintaining the spiritual and cultural fabric of their society, often advising kings and queens on important decisions.

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Even Europeans Were More Chill Back Then

Did you know that even pre-colonial Europe had hints of non-binary vibes? In Norse culture, there was a term called ergi, used to describe people assigned male at birth who embraced traditionally feminine roles or behaviors. While the term could sometimes be used as an insult (thanks to patriarchal thinking), it also shows that gender-nonconforming folks existed way back then in Europe, too. Additionally, there were male practitioners of seiðr, a magical practice usually associated with women and the goddess Freyja—sometimes, these men were also referred to as ergi. And let's not forget Loki, the ultimate gender-fluid icon of Norse mythology—this trickster god was all about shapeshifting and flipping between genders like it was no big deal. In Celtic mythology, the god Brigid was said to embody both masculine and feminine qualities, reflecting a kind of divine gender fluidity.



Loki as the Goddess of Stories and God of Lies in Agent Of Asgard. Photo: Marvel Comics

Remember, at one point, the European continent was populated by tribal people who practiced earth-based religions—just like everywhere else on the globe. A lot of this history got buried under centuries of Christian colonization and rigid gender norms. There isn't a lot of direct evidence about the existence of non-binary gender in pre-colonial Europe, and most of what is referenced comes from myths, legends and interpretations of archaeological findings.

Another aspect that resonates deeply is the role of griot-like storytellers and healers in these cultures—people who moved between worlds, whether between the seen and unseen, spiritual and physical, or even gendered spaces. These figures remind me that my existence is part of a lineage of those who bridge past and future, carrying ancestral memory while shaping new possibilities.

Q: In your activism, how do you approach educating others about gender diversity, especially in a community that might not be familiar with terms like non-binary or Two-Spirit? What challenges have you faced, and what successes have you celebrated?

My approach is rooted in storytelling, artistic expression, cultural connection, and community engagement. I find that meeting people where they are and grounding conversations in shared cultural histories allows for deeper understanding. Instead of focusing solely on terminology, I center the discussion on how diverse gender roles existed in our cultures before colonialism. This approach allows people to see gender expansiveness as something inherently ours, rather than something “imported” or “imposed” by the West.

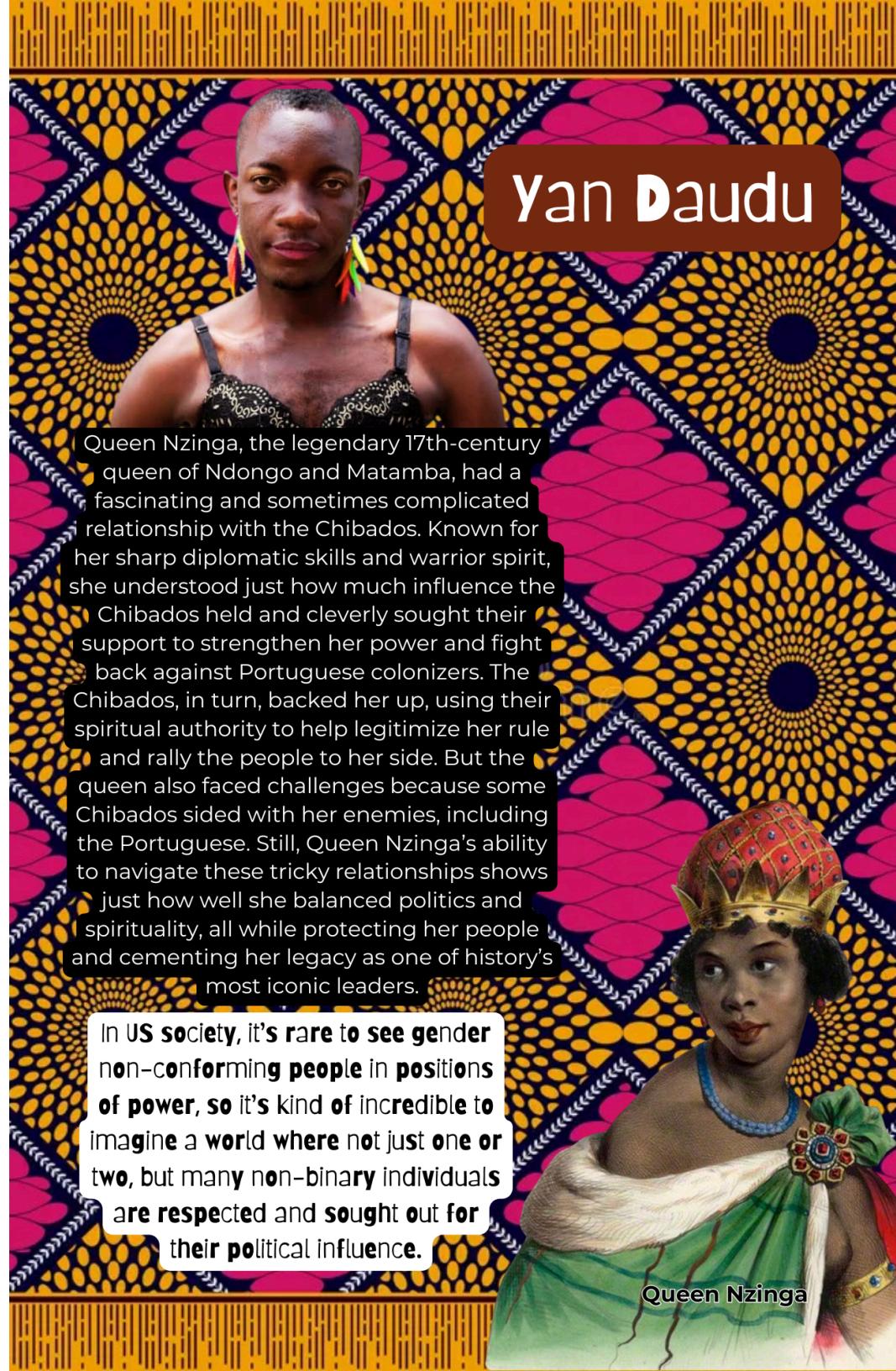
The challenges, of course, are many—from religious opposition to generational divides and deeply ingrained colonial gender norms. But I've also seen beautiful transformations. One of my greatest successes has been witnessing elders and young people alike reconnect with their histories and rethink their assumptions about gender. Another has been building safe, affirming spaces where queer, trans, and non-binary BIPOC individuals feel seen and empowered, whether through artistic storytelling, community organizing, or educational initiatives.

Q: If you could share one thing with teens who are exploring their own gender identities or learning about gender diversity for the first time, what would it be? How can they support themselves and others in this journey, especially through this difficult political moment?

I would tell them: You are not alone, and you are not new—your existence is part of a long, powerful lineage of those who have resisted, thrived, and reimagined possibilities. The world may try to convince you that you are an anomaly, but in reality, you are a continuation of something beautiful and necessary.

To support themselves, I encourage them to seek out community, learn their histories, and embrace their identity as an evolving journey rather than a fixed destination. Find spaces—whether in-person or online—where they can express themselves without fear. To support others, they can listen, uplift, and advocate, ensuring that no one in their circle feels isolated or unheard.

In this political moment, where trans and non-binary identities are under attack, it's even more crucial to stay connected, stay informed, and resist erasure. Their identity is an act of defiance and a testament to the resilience of those who came before.



Yan Daudu

Queen Nzinga, the legendary 17th-century queen of Ndongo and Matamba, had a fascinating and sometimes complicated relationship with the Chibados. Known for her sharp diplomatic skills and warrior spirit, she understood just how much influence the Chibados held and cleverly sought their support to strengthen her power and fight back against Portuguese colonizers. The Chibados, in turn, backed her up, using their spiritual authority to help legitimize her rule and rally the people to her side. But the queen also faced challenges because some Chibados sided with her enemies, including the Portuguese. Still, Queen Nzinga's ability to navigate these tricky relationships shows just how well she balanced politics and spirituality, all while protecting her people and cementing her legacy as one of history's most iconic leaders.

In US society, it's rare to see gender non-conforming people in positions of power, so it's kind of incredible to imagine a world where not just one or two, but many non-binary individuals are respected and sought out for their political influence.

Queen Nzinga

Duality in Balance

An interview with

Yoleidy Rosario Hernandez

Yoleidy Rosario-Hernandez is an artist, community organizer, and advocate for social justice, dedicated to uplifting BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and LGBTQ+ communities. Originally from the Bronx, NY, Yoleidy moved to Sarasota, Florida, in 2019, serving as the Inaugural Associate Dean and Director of the Center for Diversity and Inclusion at Ringling College of Art and later as the Chief Diversity Officer at New College of Florida. In these diversity, equity, and inclusion leadership roles, ze developed impactful programs, events, and resources, including a Queer Closet, food pantry, and facilitated training on justice-centered topics such as pronoun usage and inclusive practices.

Following the dismantling of these programs in Florida, ze transitioned into grassroots organizing, now leading as the Program Director of The Freedom School and Founder of Mosaic Movements, an interdisciplinary arts organization supporting BIPOC and LGBTQ+ artists across Sarasota and Manatee Counties.

Q: Can you share a bit about how you identify in terms of gender and what the terms you use to describe yourself mean to you? How do these identities relate to your Dominican and Jamaican ancestry?

A: I identify as trans non-binary, which for me signifies a fluid, expansive, and deeply ancestral way of being. These identities are not separate from my cultural roots but rather deeply intertwined with the histories and traditions of my Dominican ancestry, though I feel like I haven't had the opportunity to connect as deeply with my Jamaican heritage. Growing up in the Bronx, within the diasporic mix of Caribbean and Latinx cultures, I have always navigated spaces that both celebrate and challenge gender fluidity.



In the Taino (the indigenous people of Dominican Republic) traditions of the Dominican Republic, there were understandings of gender that were expansive, where individuals could embody multiple spirits or roles within their communities. I see my identity as a reclamation of these erased histories, a way to honor my ancestors while forging new pathways for self-determination and belonging. While I don't know as much about my Jamaican ancestry, I recognize that both the African and Indigenous legacies of the Caribbean hold deep traditions of gender fluidity and spiritual duality. My journey has been one of reconnecting, learning, and unearthing these stories that colonialism tried to erase while also embracing the possibility of defining my own truth.

Q: Many pre-colonial societies around the world recognized more than two genders and celebrated diverse gender identities. How do you think learning about these histories can help us challenge modern ideas about gender?

Understanding these histories is a liberatory act—it dismantles the idea that strict binary gender roles are "natural" or universal. Colonialism and Western imperialism forced rigid, oppressive gender norms onto societies that once embraced fluidity and multiplicity. By reclaiming the knowledge that many African, Indigenous, and pre-colonial Caribbean cultures honored gender diversity, we challenge the notion that trans, non-binary, or Two-Spirit identities are "new" or "Western concepts." These histories remind us that our existence is not a deviation but a continuation of ancestral wisdom. They also offer models for more inclusive, communal, and affirming ways of being, where identity is not confined but recognized as a dynamic, relational experience.

Q: Are there any traditions, stories, or cultural practices from your ancestry that resonate with your experience as a trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit person?

Yes, many. The Taino and African spiritual traditions of my ancestors recognize a balance of energies within individuals—a duality and fluidity that aligns with how I experience my own gender. In Taino cosmology, the concept of "duality in balance" is present in deities and creation stories, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all things rather than strict binaries. Likewise, in African diasporic spiritual practices like Vodou, Santería, and Obeah, spirits and orishas often embody both masculine and feminine energies, rejecting rigid gender roles.

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