

Colonialism, Two-Spirit Identity, and the Logics of White Supremacy

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The Two Spirit We'Wha

Preston Grant, "Who We Were Before We Were Queer"

Abstract

Colonialism as practiced by Western culture is used to erase traditional non-binary roles of gender orientation and systems of sexuality, i.e. the Two-Spirit. This erasure of traditions when countered with a revitalized retraditionalization acts as a method of decolonization. Identifying as Two-Spirit becomes not just a retraditional way of expressing Indigenous beliefs of gender orientation and sexuality but a political identity in resistance of colonialism. Through the use of inherently violent, assimilative measures, these traditions of the Two-Spirit in Indigenous societies are lost in many of our communities and are replaced by the Western gender binary and spectrum of sexual orientation. As this paper will show, this plays into the colonialist logic of white supremacy and how it relates to the Indigenous body, colonizing Two-Spirit identity.

Introduction

When Europeans came to Turtle Island, much of their culture, their ideals, their beliefs and institutions came with them through the continued centuries of settler-colonialism. Building their own nation upon this land, they were able to more permanently construct and impose their culture upon others. The Western colonization of the Americas brought forth many institutions which sought to erase and displace Indigenous cultural traditions and beliefs. Through the use of violence, forced assimilation, demonization of Indigenous beliefs and then appropriation of Indigenous culture, the subjugation of Native sexuality and gender roles have continued unquestioned in the minds of the settler and of our own people. It can be said and will be shown,

that the Western binary is a system of oppression and repression and is actively a form of institutional violence against the Two-Spirit. This is all connected to the idea of white supremacy and domination over Indigenous bodies and beliefs, of colonization of our very selves. Thus an analysis of colonization and white supremacy is not complete without an approach towards Two-Spirit identity in our own communities. In conversation with Andrea Smith's *Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy* and Steve Martinot's *White Supremacy, the Colonial Commodification of the Land, and the Corporate Structure* we can better understand not only the process of colonization but the impact it has had on our traditional concepts of self.

White Supremacist Logics (Colonialism) and White Racial Identity

A logic of white supremacy, colonialism, as described by Andrea Smith "holds that Indigenous peoples must disappear. In fact, they must always be disappearing, in order to enable non-indigenous people's rightful claim to land" (Smith, 2). This is a mentality institutionalized in the very foundation of the United States. Since this nation's inception as a state separate from that of the Royal Crown the purpose was "to transfer control of the land from one people to another" (Martinot, 6). Thus, the very existence of a Euro-American state in the Americas can be described as part of the logic of white supremacy. White supremacy, built around the identity of whiteness is an identity defined by paranoia, white solidarity and consensus, white exclusiveness ("otherizing"), defensiveness, colonial aggression and violence (Martinot, 5). White supremacy and settler colonialism are linked, with racism providing the foundation for the maintaining of settler-colonialism (Smith, 10). For settler-colonialism to maintain itself, it has to rely on the

identity of whiteness and therefore turns anyone who doesn't meet the colonialist's definition of whiteness as "other." This process of creating an "other" has historical implications of violence and exclusion towards People of Color, including Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island.

An Expansion on the Disappearing Native and Assimilation

The act of the "disappearing Native" plays an especially disturbing role in the creation of the Indigenous person as "other." Now this thought that we are an extinct people, an extinct set of cultures is frightening for many reasons. It allows the ideology of domination to continue without question, since the common belief is we no longer exist. In other words, racism against Native Americans is allowed to exist quietly due to societal ignorance. The second and perhaps most frightening result of this belief is how it reflects how normalized European colonialism is; that the very goal of colonialism of the Americas, the ideology of domination and of Manifest Destiny, is seen as successful. So successful in fact that the genocide of Native Americans is something people assume completely wiped out the Native population. We seldom see outrage over this assumed historical occurrence when the logical connection to be made is that European settlers annihilated every last Indigenous person in North, Central and South America. Through this lens we can see why, for instance, violence towards Indigenous communities is accepted. The colonial culture built upon this land makes it so such violence is, normalized. There is a preexisting belief that the Native person is to be dominated and to be brutalized. In a previous paper for this class, I described the process of colonization of Indigenous minds in addition to Indigenous bodies and how the rhetoric of colonization plays a role in this: "The only good

Indian is a dead Indian” in combination with the justification for the atrocities committed at the boarding schools under the mentality of “kill the Indian, save the man” paints us a vibrant picture of colonialist thought. Separately, these quotes give us insight in how low regarded the Indigenous person is in colonist American culture but in analyzing both of them as part of a singular thought process we can come to see the larger frame when thinking of how colonialist thought operates. Firstly, it should be reiterated that alone these historical modes of thought serve different aims. “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” for instance and quite obviously, suggests that all living Native Americans are wicked and thus lesser than the superior White colonial-settlers. So for an Indigenous person to be ‘good’ they must first be dead. This of course, isn’t a suggestion. It’s a threat. As for “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” this thought supports the removal of what makes a person ‘Indian’ from the Indian. Considering the context in which this was used, this meant forced cultural assimilation was the only way to “save” us and that it was the duty of the American government to do this - violently. By removing the culture, the language, the customs and norms from the Indian we could then become fully assimilated into White American society as a fully colonialized piece of clay, ready to be shaped by a society seeking our destruction as human beings. As part of a singular thought process as gears in a culture of domination we begin to open our eyes as to how to the colonialist ‘killing’ us and ‘saving’ us become the same thing. It is not enough to merely dominate the bodies of an Indian. Genocide did little to destroy Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty as persons. Brutalization and relocation didn’t reach their goals of complete domination either. To fully destroy resistance one must also dominate the mind and the spirit. White Supremacy dictates that the Western mind and Western culture is naturally superior to all others, always has been and always will. Assimilation is a facet of white supremacy, it asserts the superiority of Whiteness by

eliminating all that is not white. If killing the Indian means eradicating our cultures and the only good Indian is a dead one, we see how devalued not only the Indian body is but also the Indian mind in the eyes of our postcolonial white supremacist culture of domination.” This plays an especially important role when understanding traditions in Indigenous culture and the impact colonization has had on these traditions, including the existence of Non-Gender Binary gender orientations and sexualities within Indigenous culture. Which bring us to the topic of the Two-Spirit and their role as colonized peoples within our communities.

Two-Spirit Identity as Resistance

Before the colonization of this land, there were as many as six traditional gender orientation roles among numerous tribes (Cameron, 124). However, due to boarding schools erasing these traditions through the Christianization of those who would later become the Elders within our community, the Christianized related the existence of the Two-Spirit as sin (Cameron, 124) and this is because we have internalized the dominant culture’s concepts of gender and sexuality (Driskill, 55). The Western Gender Binary is thus superimposed upon all cultures and their histories seen through the gaze of not only male dominance but a male/female paradigm that does not account for the existence of third, fourth, fifth and even more varieties of non-male/female expressions and identities. Colonization, as previously elaborated upon, brought to Indigenous societies the patriarchy and beliefs of natural male dominance. But an overlooked aspect of the patriarchy - this Western gender binary, also found its way impacting Indigenous thought through the process of colonization. The Western Gender Binary does not see the Two-

Spirit, the Western Gender Binary only sees a Man acting in “Unmanly” ways or a Woman acting in “Unwomanly” ways. What has resulted from this has been our very own communities becoming hostile to Gay, Lesbian, Bi/Pan, Trans* and Two-Spirit Indigenous peoples due to the influence of violent and assimilative colonialism. Many of these people not being accepted by their own families, by their own tribes, even those with traditions normalizing their existences. A further demonizing of Native bodies occurs when the Native refuses to conform to the invading culture’s normative behaviors of gender expression. The influence of Western culture on the erasure of Indigenous “Queer” and Two-Spirit peoples has created a system of sexual assault, homophobia and transphobia used against our peoples, entangled with the history of colonialism (Driskill, 51). As part of the settler mentality, we can see these actions as colonial violence against the Two-Spirit (ibid) and are also the results of genocide (Driskill, 52). To reiterate previous statements, the Western gender binary is a form of superimposed and universalized colonialism upon Indigenous bodies and minds. Often, the fight for decolonization fails to include or may even openly alienate and exclude Indigenous “Queers,” Two-Spirits, non-cisnormative and non-heteronormative individuals. Even amongst those attempting postcolonialism, the adverse effects of gendered colonialism finds itself difficult to erase from the consciousness. Be that as it may one not achieve decolonization without also including an eradication of the Western gender binary. Healing our identities is part of the ongoing process of decolonization (Driskill, 51) because besides our land, our identities are colonized as well (Driskill, 52) and expressing our identities as Two-Spirit peoples is to resist colonialist definitions defining who we are while also proclaiming ourselves sovereign from the identities of the white dominated LGBTQ rights movement (ibid). Two-Spirit is a term used to describe our experiences of intersecting oppressions (race, colonialism, queerness, sexuality,

transgenderism, two-spirit identity) and is therefore a culturally specific term which cannot be transferred into other cultures (Cameron, 126).

Conclusion

Colonization operates as a mechanism of white supremacy which as previously defined is built around paranoia, white solidarity and consensus, white exclusiveness (“otherizing”), defensiveness, colonial aggression and violence. As has been described, white supremacy and settler-colonialism not only colonizes the bodies of Indigenous peoples, but their minds as well. This has effectively been done through the erasure of traditions and introduction of patriarchy imposed upon Indigenous peoples in the boarding schools. Settlers want the Indigenous person to “disappear” and history has shown they’ve attempted this not only through physical genocide but cultural genocide as well. This disappearance of Native peoples includes those often most threatening to patriarchy and Western culture, the Two-Spirit. White supremacy through violence has sought the destruction of the Two-Spirit. White supremacy through paranoia, considering the Two-Spirit to be sin have sought the destruction of the Two-Spirit. White supremacy through white solidarity and consensus has imposed its Western concept of sexuality and gender upon Indigenous peoples, seeking the destruction of the Two-Spirit. White supremacy through exclusivity, has defined white in ways incompatible with Indigenous life and therefore has sought the destruction of the Two-Spirit. Assimilation and annihilation have been tools at the hands of the settler-colonialists to erase Indigenous peoples as people and as a unique set of cultures residing in the United States. Existing is therefore resistance.

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