

Two-Spirit Lives and Stories as Resurgence

Two-spirit¹ and queer Indigenous² people and scholarship have contributed much to contemporary theorizing on decolonization and resurgence, but are still often excised from mainstream Indigenous studies, and Indigenous nation-building movements. Recently, queer and two-spirit scholars have begun articulating critiques of these practices in order to unseat the heteronormativity ensconced within the Indigenous scholarship (and within Indigenous communities) and move towards decolonization. Simultaneously, there has been a turn in academic theorizing on decolonization away from state mechanisms of redress and nation-state models of Indigenous nationhood towards resurgence. Though both two-spirit writing and theories of resurgence make strong arguments for the revitalization of tradition as a key element in healthy nations, there have been limited analyses across these two fields together. The contribution this paper aims to make is an articulation of the shared commitments of two-spirit and resurgence theorizing — commitments which, if recognized by both fields in one another, could produce rich and substantive avenues for strategizing and creating change.

This paper will describe Indigenous scholars' conceptions of resurgence as a practice, examine two-spirit and queer critiques of other nation-building practices, and argue for an interpretation of contemporary two-spirit writing, theorizing, and community-building as key parts of resurgence practices. In so doing, it will intervene into the scholarly discourses on nationhood and resurgence that, at times, leave unexamined myriad effects that the imposition of

¹ In this essay, I use two-spirit as an inclusive term that holds many meanings for many different people. I distinguish **two-spirit**, as a signifier of identification with Indigenous worldviews and nation-specific gender roles, from **queer** as an identifier and mode of critique steeped in Euro-American paradigms of thought. They hold different significances for different people, and are used in different ways in academic and popular writing.

² Throughout this essay, I use Indigenous to mean those people whose ancestors have lived on Turtle Island since time immemorial and are responsible to this land.

European gender systems has had on Indigenous nations. This intervention is critical not only in order to include two-spirit people in resurgence movements, but to the viability of these undertakings themselves — because the European gender binary and heteropatriarchy negatively impact everyone in our nations, not just those whose bodies, spirits, and lives fall outside of these rigid structures. Drawing on the work of Taiaiake Alfred, Jeff Corntassel, Glen Sean Coulthard and Leanne Simpson, I will sketch a portrait of resurgence as a practice that foregrounds living authentically as Indigenous peoples. To elucidate the ways in which two-spirit expression and existence is resurgence, I will engage with the work of scholars Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, and Saylesh Wesley, and activists Jessica Danforth and Beverly Little Thunder³. By tracing the relationship between gendered violence and colonialism (one that is well-established by Indigenous feminist scholars) before turning to contemporary scholarship on the concept of resurgence (and situating it within other forms of Indigenous nationhood), I will illuminate the ways in which the concerns of bodies, land, and relationships that resurgent politics addresses are the same concerns addressed by two-spirit writing and criticism, and argue that two-spirit people living their teachings is an act of decolonization. First, I will give some context to the role heteropatriarchy plays in upholding the settler-colonial state, and how these hierarchies of power have been interpolated into Indigenous communities on Turtle Island.

Gender, Colonization, and Heteropatriarchy

As editors Chris Finley, Qwo-Li Driskill, Brian Joseph Gilley and Scott Lauria

Morgensen note in their introduction to *Queer Indigenous Studies*, Indigenous feminisms

³ Although further exploration of the ways in which non-academic writing by two-spirit people is exemplary of resurgence would be fruitful, such an exploration is beyond the scope of this paper.

consistently place sexuality, gender, and embodiment at the centre of decolonization (9). In particular, Andrea Smith's work makes explicit the connections between gender, heteropatriarchy, violence, and colonization. Smith articulates how sexual violence against Indigenous women was a key vehicle for the colonization of the United States, and continues to play a key role in the dispossession of Indigenous land. In *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, she articulates how many First Nations' structures of kinship and governance that emphasized and relied on balanced gender systems were a barrier to European colonizers' imposition of their dominion. Because the hierarchical structures of power and dominance that characterize European governance were unacceptable to Indigenous folks on Turtle Island, colonizers were forced to naturalize these hierarchies on a small scale first, which they did through violently introducing patriarchal family structures (Smith 27).

Leanne Simpson puts the impact of heteropatriarchy on two-spirit, gender-diverse and queer Indigenous people plainly:

Heteropatriarchy places cis-gender heterosexual men and their bodies, their politics and their ideas at the top of the social hierarchy. It then normalizes and replicates this hierarchy in all aspects of Indigenous societies, especially in our most intimate spaces – in ceremony, in our relationships, in our families. This is supported and maintained by the state through the Indian Act, Indian policy and the infiltration of Indigenous thoughts systems as a key mechanism to destroy the building blocks of Indigenous political systems and replaces them with the building blocks of state nationalism, capitalism and settler subjectivity. (“Anger” n.p.)

The state requires heteropatriarchal nuclear family units in order for settler colonialism to continue, because these units disrupt Indigenous structures of governance that, in many cases, hinge on specific relationships between children, youth, adults and Elders of various genders. In other words, settler colonialism requires the breaking of the relationships between women, men, and people of other genders to disrupt the fabric of the nation. The subjugation of Indigenous women primed Indigenous nations for settler infringement into their territories by disrupting traditional family and governance structures; by naturalizing men's domination of women within family unit, the hierarchical structures of colonial capitalism seem were presented as logical, allowing settler-colonial expropriation of Indigenous lands to flourish.

As Smith clearly shows, gender has played a key part in the mechanics of establishing the settler-colonial state; heteropatriarchy has been so thoroughly enforced in Indigenous communities that these communities have internalized the hierarchical European gender binary, making gendered violence against women and two-spirit people an everyday reality for many. One way in which heteropatriarchy was inscribed in Indigenous communities in Canada was through the Indian Residential School system. Mohawk scholar Dawn Martin-Hill writes that traditional gender relationships were disrupted when children were separated by sex at residential schools, and these effects were compounded by the abuse many children suffered at the schools (115). Some scholars have noted that Elders, especially those who are residential school survivors, have internalized Christian values that were not part of Indigenous cultures, leading to the canonization of homophobia and transphobia in Indigenous communities. The key role that Elders play in teaching and leadership roles in their communities means that these values and attitudes become ingrained in Indigenous communities as traditional (Cooper 139; Martin-Hill

110; Wilson “Body Sovereignty,” n.p.). When these colonial versions of tradition is deployed in nation-building movements, two-spirit and queer-identified people are often excised.

It is in response to this ongoing dispossession of land and life that contemporary movements for Indigenous nationhood have emerged, and although many of these political practices seek to undo the ripping apart of traditional political, philosophical, economic and kinship systems that colonialism continues to enact, concerns of gender and sexuality are often not prioritized. Because of the way in which heteropatriarchy is continually reinscribed in Indigenous communities on the scale of individual, family, community and nation, it is often present even in movements for Indigenous national sovereignty — a fact which illustrates the insidious way in which heteropatriarchy, as a pillar of settler colonialism, propagates itself. If not overtly excluded by homophobic and transphobic rhetoric by community leaders, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people are simply not mentioned in discussions about revitalizing tradition and nationhood — while women’s and men’s distinct, crucial and sacred roles are elaborated on, the very existence of two-spirit and queer people is often ignored. One stream of thought and praxis that transcends (for the most part) this reinscription of colonial heteropatriarchy is Indigenous resurgence. I will now give a brief overview of how Indigenous scholars theorize resurgence, in order to show how these principles are embodied by two-spirit writing.

Resurgence: Doing Indigenous Nationhood

Broadly, resurgence can be described as a mode of Indigenous political practice characterized by disengagement from the state and re-engagement with traditional lifeways. Articulations of resurgence in academic writing emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century,

critiquing the politics of rights and recognition championed by most state-sanctioned band governments as inadequate. These critiques locate appeals to state mechanisms of recognition as inappropriate solutions to the problem of the dispossession of Indigenous land and lifeways because they fundamentally rely on the power structures of the state as a remedy to the problem — when in fact it is these very power structures that maintain this dispossession. In his book *Red Skin, White Masks*, Glen Sean Coulthard lays out a framework for resurgence and decolonization which focuses on building relationships between Indigenous communities and Indigenous individuals instead of engaging with state mechanisms of redress. Indeed, Taiaiake Alfred writes that Indigenous nationhood movements are, at their core, about restoring our presence on the land and returning to the principles and systems of governance which our ancestors left for us (348). Rights that are articulated through the state cannot do not address the state’s encroachment onto our territories (Corntassel 92). In contrast, resurgence asks Indigenous people to live their teachings and traditions in the ways that fit their diverse lives, and honour their responsibilities to their ancestors and their relations (Simpson, *Dancing* 6). In this way, the revitalization of Indigenous relationships with land and relatives disrupts the machinery of settler colonialism.

Resurgence is theorized by Leanne Simpson as a deeply personal concept rooted in each individual’s physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual being (*Dancing* 7). Similarly, in their article “Being Indigenous: Resurgences Against Contemporary Colonialism” Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel state that “[t]here is no concise neat model of resurgence in this way of approaching decolonization and the regeneration of our peoples” (612). However, Alfred and Corntassel go on to emphasize that decolonization and regeneration are “shifts in thinking and action that emanate from recommitments and reorientations at the level of the self that, over time

and through proper organization, manifest as broad social and political movements to challenge state agendas and authorities” (611). They also offer some concrete actions Indigenous people can take towards decolonization, including rebuilding relationships with their land and their language, and fostering personal relationships with Elders and teachers for guidance. Simpson situates her understanding of resurgence in her Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg personhood and worldview — a worldview which, importantly, holds self-determination and respect for diversity at its core. Drawing on Alfred’s work, she articulates a politics that entails conservation of our energy by not engaging with state systems of recognition, and focusses on individual acts of living truthfully as both the process and the goal of decolonization; in this way, we live up to the responsibilities we have to our ancestors and to our relations who have yet to be born (as well as those to our non-human relations). Simpson also notes the limits of “resurgence” as an articulation of these philosophies of living in a good way, because it is an English word which, as a vessel, cannot hold all of the meaning encompassed by Indigenous concepts of living in a good way (51).

Within the scholarship on resurgence, some scholars (Alfred, Corntassel, and Coulthard) make mention of gender as an axis of analysis, but do not substantively engage with the role heteropatriarchy played (and continues to play) in the dispossession Indigenous lands and lifeways. Although in *Red Skin, White Masks* Coulthard does position the work of Indigenous feminists as critical to the development of resurgence movements and calls on Indigenous men to speak and act their commitment to ending violence against Indigenous women, he only engages with queer critiques of resurgence insofar as they appear in Leanne Simpson’s 2012 blog post “Queering Resurgence.” Though all of the resurgence theorists discussed thus far advocate for a

resistance to assimilation, including the interpellation of Euro-American values as tradition, none except for Simpson engage directly with the homophobia and transphobia interpellated into Indigenous communities. Throughout her theorizing on resurgence, Leanne Simpson argues for gender as a core pillar in resurgence work. Responding to Andrea Smith's call for rooting discussions of sovereignty in an interrogation of heteropatriarchy, she declares that resurgence "requires a decolonization of our conceptualization of gender as a starting point" (*Dancing* 60). More generally, Simpson articulates a framework for understanding belonging and nationhood that, while in line with the analyses offered by Alfred, Corntassel, and Coulthard and their foci of collective courage and fulfilling our responsibilities to our relations, places a renewed focus on the diversity of lived experiences and modes of engagement with Indigenous thought and the key role of love in building strong nations. Through a closer examination of her works — those that explicitly challenge heteropatriarchal forms of nation-building, and those that do not — we can see more clearly how two-spirit theorizing and storytelling is an expression of resurgence.

Throughout *Dancing on our Turtle's Back*, Simpson follows the teachings of her Elders who reject "rigidity and fundamentalism as colonial thinking" (19). She unequivocally states that in her understandings of these Elders' teachings, individual Nishnaabeg must interpret the teachings they have been given "within a broader set of collective values that placed great importance on self-actualization, the suspension of judgement, fluidity, emergence, careful deliberation and an embodied respect for diversity" (20). Indeed, Simpson goes on to explain that, because her understanding of the Nishnaabeg creation story literally names the individual to whom it is being told as the first human being lovingly lowered to mother earth by Gzhwe Mnidoo, the responsibilities one assumes by this naming are taken on in accordance with one's

own personal gifts, abilities, clan affiliations, and diverse lives. Simpson puts it simply: “our collective truths as a nation and as a culture are continuously generated from those individual truths we carry around inside ourselves. Our collective truths exist in a nest of individual diversity.” (43). There can be little doubt that this nation-building through embodied truth is inclusive of two-spirit and queer-identified community members.

Simpson takes on interpellated heteropatriarchy and its effects more directly in other work — her 2012 blog post “Queering Resurgence” and a 2015 paper entitled “Anger, Resentment & Love.” In the former, she explicitly critiques the internalization of heteropatriarchy in Native communities and resurgence movements, including the deployment of “tradition” in order to reinforce colonial gender binarism and the resultant excision of queer and trans people from Indigenous national narratives. These ideas are further developed in “Anger, Resentment & Love,” where Simpson notes that, although decolonization is frequently theorized as centring around land as the single most important issue, a renewed focus in Indigenous studies and within decolonial praxis on caring for two-spirit, gender diverse and queer-identified relations strengthens the struggle against the machinery of settler colonial capitalism. Simpson says that “[g]ender variance and fluidity is seen by the settler state as an extreme threat to the kind of consolidated state control that is required for assimilation and the effective and continual dispossession of Indigenous bodies from Indigenous land” (“Anger” n.p.). As mentioned above, such state control relies on the destruction of forms of Indigenous governance that operate outside of a patriarchal binary system — as people who hold specific roles and responsibilities within these structures, folks outside of this binary are key to the governance and health of their communities. Indeed, Simpson states that “there is not just room for everyone in the circle, but

that our circle is not complete and functional without everyone present, in fact the circle cannot be in motion if it is not complete” (“Anger” n.p.). On a fundamental level, Indigenous nations cannot operate as they are meant to without including all members.

Simpson’s writing around gender, motherhood, and the rebuilding of Indigenous nations helps to illuminate how the core underpinnings of Indigenous resurgence are reflected in the ways two-spirit people exist, reclaim their traditions, and tell their stories. Simpson notes that in pre-colonial Nishnaabeg society, there were fluid understandings of gender outside of the male-female binary (60). As elaborated above, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* focuses on existing as Indigenous peoples while living diverse lives in many different places; for Simpson, living fully and truthfully as Nishanaabeg *is* resurgence. If one extrapolates this logic, then two-spirit people are doing resurgence by restoring their place in their communities, accessing teachings, and living in the best way they can. In returning to and living their teachings, they are rebuilding their place in the circle. If, as Andrea Smith suggests in “Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Colonialism,” nation-state forms of sovereignty are necessarily hierarchical, and thus rely on the logic of heteropatriarchy to function, it stands to reason rejecting the domination logic of heteropatriarchy is a necessary step towards different forms of nation-building. What we can glean from all of the above theorization, in the explicit inclusion of questions of gender, and the exclusion of these questions, is that for Indigenous nations to thrive, the frameworks upon which these nations are built must be, (in alignment with most Indigenous traditions of governance) non-hierarchical; one example of the realization of a resurgence framework is two-spirit people existing, as they are, in their nations and communities. If the damage caused by the enforcement of heteropatriarchy in Indigenous communities and the

associated desecration of our families and territories is to be undone, then the tools we use in this project must be attendant to concerns of gender. I will now turn to some examples from within the emerging body of scholarship on two-spirit contributions to and critiques of nation-building in order to further demonstrate that the emergence of two-spirit writing and community-building is resurgent action.

Two-Spirit People Living and Writing Resurgence

Métis scholar June Scudeler has argued that urban Indigenous queer and two-spirit people participate in decolonization by living their traditions and creating new ones, and through storytelling in written, oral, and visual forms (6). This is expression of a self grounded in relationships with land and community is a countering of the erasure of Indigenous life from Indigenous lands, which, as discussed above, is the core function of settler colonialism. Of those writings on two-spirit life and community that have been produced within the academy, many include the life experiences of the authors as key pieces in their discussion, challenging the academy's myth of scholarly objectivity by using storytelling, a form of knowledge production found in many Indigenous political and intellectual traditions. One example is Beverly Little Thunder's first-person essay "I Am a Lakota Womyn." In the text, Little Thunder describes her experience of being a woman-loving woman, and the ostracization from her community that she endured after coming out. She asserts that her mothering praxis – in which she is surrounded and supported by two-spirit community – is a continuation of Lakota child-rearing practices that encourage community involvement and collective responsibility (106). By raising her children as a self-described "Lakota womyn" who, because of the homophobic residue of colonialism in her

Lakota community, has deep and meaningful parenting relationships with her fellow womyn, Little Thunder is practising an everyday resurgence. And, as Simpson suggests, playing a foundational role in the rebuilding of nations, outside of the suffocating film of heteropatriarchy.

Among those scholars who have explicitly engaged with the principles of nation-building through the lens of two-spirit critique (of which there are markedly few), Cherokee scholar Qwo-Li Driskill has written most extensively on the interconnections between language, tradition, nationhood, and two-spirit people. Driskill describes hir 2016 monograph, *Asegi Stories*, as a political and activist project that challenges master narratives of the Cherokee nation that obscure same-sex desire and gender diversity — narratives which also obscure the sexual and gendered nature of colonialism, past and present. S/he notes in the text that the absence of scholarship surrounding sexual and gender diversity has been used by some to argue for two-spirit people being outside of Cherokee tradition (like, for example, the same-sex marriage ban passed by the Cherokee nation in 2004). Driskill names projects of two-spirit presence both in the academy and in Cherokee communities as the part of the rebuilding of the nation. Driskill uses data from a qualitative research project that collected personal narratives of two-spirit and queer Cherokee people in concert with historical research uncovering asegi⁴ stories. Two common themes that emerged in the interviews Driskill conducted were a turn toward language as a tool to recover the way gender and sexual diversity was a part of pre-colonial Cherokee life, and assertions that exclusion and normativity are antithetical to Cherokee values and ontologies. Many research participants contended that they (as queer and two-spirit people) had always been “a part of the circle” and healing the trauma of colonialism and rejoining the circle benefits not

⁴ Possible translations of D4Y (asegi) offered by Driskill in the text include strange, odd, or queer. S/he uses the term asegi stories to refer to historical permutations of sexual and gender diversity.

just two-spirit people but the circle itself (105). By asserting that they belong in communities and that their gender and sex doesn't define their role in those communities, Cherokee two-spirit people perform a critique of those models of nationhood that mirror the power structures of the state. These critiques of nation-state styles of Indigenous nationhood are in the same vein as those made by scholars like Corntassel, Alfred and Coulthard. What's more, the work of returning to the "circle" of their communities and turning to the Cherokee language to find words to describe themselves are iterations of resurgence as return to tradition as described by Simpson.

Chris Finley engages queer theory to examine the ways in which Indigenous sexuality has been shaped by processes of colonialism, and gestures at how sexual expression can act as a tool to name and subvert structures of settler colonial power. She asserts that talking about sexuality as a site and effect of colonial power can help expose the ways in which Indigenous communities have internalized colonial logics — which is key for decolonization and building strong Indigenous nations (33). As we can see from Driskill's research above, two-spirit people's activism, writing, and writing-as-activism renders legible the relationship between sexuality and colonial power in myriad ways. Along with co-editors Qwo-Li Driskill, Brian Joseph Gilley and Scott Lauria Morgensen, Finley discusses the contributions two-spirit organizing and scholarship make to decolonization. They note that many two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities see two-spirit identity both as articulations of nation-specific traditions and as expressions of inter-nation (and international) movements for Indigenous life; they go on to argue that "[r]ecalling and defending Indigenous traditions of gender and sexuality makes Indigenous GLBTQ2 people a central part of the decolonization of Indigenous communities" (10). By

returning to expansive and diverse traditions of gender and sexuality, and identifying the processes through which they were disrupted, two-spirit people enact resurgence.

The idea of tradition is taken up extensively in the writing and activist work of Jessica Danforth, founder of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network. Like Finley, Danforth notes how the sexual shame now endemic in Indigenous communities can be traced, through intergenerational trauma, back to both the curriculum and the abuse in residential schools (McKegney 117). Like Simpson, she remarks upon the ways in which the English language is unsuitable for the expression of Indigenous ontologies, since the gender binary is deeply embedded into it (McKegney 120); in this way, English stands in stark contrast with many Indigenous languages (like, for example, Swampy Cree) in which gendered pronouns do not exist (Wilson 2008, 193). While reflecting some of the same principles of resurgence espoused by Alfred, Cornstassel, and Coulthard (namely, the importance of revitalizing of language and ceremony), Danforth asserts that tradition should be deployed with caution, since it can be used both to oppress and to empower, and is constantly evolving. She notes that it is important to talk about the ways in which colonialism has been interpellated into traditions, and about how traditions are policed and enforced, and the necessity of turning to core values and nation-specific intellectual and political traditions for guidance (McKegney 121). By acknowledging the ways in which heteropatriarchal values have seeped into traditional practices, Danforth sets up a framework for applying resurgence responsibly for two-spirit and queer people, putting the the core values of our nations into action in order to make them more inclusive, and thus stronger.

Not unlike Simpson and Driskill, Saylesh Wesley situates her contribution to decolonization and scholarship in a nation-specific framework in her article “Twin-Spirited Woman: Sts’iyóye Smestíyexw Slhá:li.” She situates the project of two-spirit resurgence within the context of the Stò:lō matrilineal law-making culture by issuing a call to action for all living Sto:lo grandmothers to support their two-spirit grandchildren. Wesley writes that for two-spirit communities, restoring lost gender identities (and the language that describes them) is part of a greater project of reconciliation with themselves and their nations (339). In Wesley’s Stò:lō context, this meant a small-scale but meaningful restoration the matriarchal governance system through the act of having her grandmother translate the word two-spirit into Halq’eméylem, giving a name to her experience as Sts’iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li (twin-spirited woman). She notes throughout the text that this work was challenging, in part because of the transphobia her grandmother learned as a child in a Catholic-run residential school. This work is the resurgence that Alfred writes about — the restoration of traditional structures of governance — using the methodology of language use and relationship building he offers in his writing with Cornassel (also articulated by Simpson). By restoring her relationship with her grandmother, and in doing so, revitalizing part of Stò:lō legal and political culture, Wesley disrupts the machinery of settler colonialism.

Within the contemporary moment that has produced the academic turn towards resurgence as the path to right relationships between Indigenous people, the land, and settler populations, there has been a proliferation of narratives by, for, and about two-spirit and queer Indigenous people. Both of these responses to the ongoing violence of settler colonialism centre around challenging this violence through living our lives in accordance with the philosophies our

ancestors left for us. As it is variously articulated by Simpson, Alfred, Corntassel and Coulthard, resurgence is about a return to ourselves and the way we are meant to be in relationship with our bodies, the land, and one another; it is realized through revitalization of our traditional governance structures and the core philosophies behind our ways of being in the world, which in turn are accessed through language, stories, and ceremony. As Little Thunder, Driskill, Finley, Danforth, and Wesley show in their writing, Indigenous communities include two-spirit people, and the ways in which they are asserting their belonging in these communities involves learning Indigenous languages, restoring traditional governance structures, and fulfilling responsibilities to all our relations. Two-spirit critiques are fundamentally about returning to our communities and returning balance to them. In this essay, I have argued that the values and practices articulated in two-spirit criticism and embodied by two-spirit narratives reflect the core tenets of resurgence movements, and demonstrated how two-spirit people reclaiming their place in the circle is itself a form of resurgence. If we take Alfred and Corntassel's assertion that resurgent approaches to decolonization can be characterized by attention to language revitalization and personal learning journeys, then two-spirit people are enacting resurgence by recovering the words that describe their community roles from Elders; by returning to the circle, they are making it stronger.

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