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To cite this article: Ian Khara Ellasante (2021) Radical sovereignty, rhetorical borders, and the everyday decolonial praxis of Indigenous peoplehood and Two-Spirit reclamation, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 44:9, 1507-1526, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2021.1906437

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1906437

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Published online: 07 Apr 2021.

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

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ABSTRACT
As settler colonialism has forcibly constricted vast expanses of Indigenous lands, criss-crossing them with superimposed borders, it has sought to redraw the boundaries of Indigenous identity by imposing definitions and categories that invariably lead to Indigenous diminishment. Strategic and eliminatory categorization is essential to the settler-colonial imperative. This essay explores settler-colonial exercises of rhetorical imperialism that deploy language, connotation, and categorization to dismantle Indigenous cultural systems. The author discusses the political stake in who is designated Indigenous, the drive to remake Indigenous nations in the image of the settler-state, the enforcement of cis-heteropatriarchal capitalist norms, and assimilationist strategies aiming to disrupt Indigenous formations of gender and kinship. The author argues that Indigenous assertions of peoplehood as a definitional and unifying framework and Two-Spirit as a self-identifier are acts of resistance that they term “oppositional identification” and “contrast mechanisms.” They are exercises of rhetorical and radical sovereignty, tantamount to everyday decolonization.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 11 May 2020; Accepted 15 March 2021

KEYWORDS Two-Spirit; LGBTQ; Indigenous; peoplehood; settler colonialism; decolonization

Settler colonialism plots borders and imbues them with meaning. These borders do more than delineate state lines, city limits, and reservation boundaries; more than span the continent to demarcate the domains of nation-states. These are the borders that safeguard national inheritance, designate capital, and proclaim private property; borders that, thus, declare alien, criminal, and trespasser. These are borders that began to take shape with the first European footprints pressed into Caribbean shores; when the invaders first cast their gazes about, seeking to lay claim. These borders have relentlessly

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unfurled throughout the Americas from 1492 onward. They have altered the
countenance of the land by un-naming, renaming, and rewriting the narra-
tives of Indigenous homelands; forcing drastic changes in the relationships
between the people and the lands to which they have belonged for countless
generations. Congressionally-imposed borders have apportioned commun-
ally-held Indigenous homelands into privately-held allotments; turning heri-
tage into real estate, into slices of private property to which tribal members
are required to apply capitalist heteropatriarchal rules of inheritance, into
parcels of land that are then slivered and fractionated to the point of infeasi-
bility among subsequent generations.

Similarly, the double-pronged settler-colonial imperative – to appropriate
and annihilate – driven by its primary objective to acquire Indigenous
peoples’ lands, has attempted to fragment Indigenous cultural identity. It
has drawn borders that are surveilled, guarded, and policed around what it
means to be Indigenous – e.g. constrictive designations of in/authenticity
and the “Anglo-American discourse on Indianness” (Wiget 1992). The
settler-colonial imperative has stratified borders between rigid categories
of race and gender. It has established hierarchical delineations between nor-
mative settler society and Indigenous social formations. While traversing
these settler-imposed borders demands a degree of assimilation, many
have been beckoned across by assurances of safety, security, and all
manners of salvation; many have been forced to cross under demonstrated
and active threat.

As settler colonialism has forcibly constricted vast expanses of Indigenous
lands, criss-crossing them with superimposed borders, it has sought to com-
press and redraw the boundaries of Indigenous political and cultural identity
by imposing definitions and categories that invariably lead to Indigenous
diminishment. Strategic and eliminatory categorization has been crucial to
the settler-colonial imperative, evident in designations of federally-certifi
Indigenousness and the enforcement of a cis-heteropatriarchal gender
binary. In this essay, I explore settler-colonial exercises of rhetorical imperial-
ism that deploy language, connotation, and categorization to dismantle Indi-
genous cultural systems. In this context, I discuss the political stake in who is
designated Indigenous and the drive to remake Indigenous nations in the
image of the settler-state, as well as the enforcement of cis-heteropatriarchal
capitalist norms and federal assimilationist strategies that aim to disrupt Indi-
genous formations of gender and kinship. Conversely, I argue that Indigenous
assertions of peoplehood as a definitional and unifying framework and Two-
Spirit as a self-identifier are acts of resistance that I term oppositional identi-
fi cation. They are exercises of rhetorical and radical sovereignty that are tanta-
mount to everyday decolonization.

Settler colonialism has as its implicit imperative the acquisition and trans-
formation of Indigenous lands into private, productive, and appraisable
property. On the North American continent, it has driven the violent dispossession of Indigenous lands, to which has been applied the brutally enforced labour of enslaved people of African descent, a combination which produces – in a “classically Lockean” (Wolfe 2013, 4) sense – settler private property. In the reckoning of this oppressive arithmetic, the settler-colonial imperative has mandated the elimination of all obstacles to the manifestation of its destiny to lay claim to the continent “from sea to shining sea.”

In order to meet its ends, the settler-colonial imperative calls for an eliminatory accounting and categorizing, seeking always to diminish Indigenous peoples, especially the numbers of those who would make claims to their Indigenous peoplehood in respect to their connection and right to a particular land. Such practices of numerical termination are apparent in blood quantum regulations and the practices of “pencil genocide” (Coleman 2018) or “statistical genocide” (Lawrence 2004) that systematically manipulated racial designations and government documents. Patrick Wolfe (2006) outlines such a “logic of elimination” as a tendency of settler colonialism (388). The logic of elimination induces settler society to uproot any present-day and future-facing indicators of Indigenous permanence and, importantly, to fragment their collectivity, their peoplehood, reducing them from peoples to individuals. Settler colonialism is concerned with stripping away the collectivity of Indigenousness; thus, as Wolfe observes, “the tribe could disappear while its members stayed behind” (397). This is evident in policies that make Indigenous peoples into official private citizens of the nation-state, deculturalize1 them in residential schools, and relocate them from tribal communities to isolate them in cities. Such strategies prove that settler colonialism is indeed not an event; it is a structure (Wolfe 2006, 390).

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).

Who is Indigenous? Peoplehood, resistance, and rhetorical sovereignty

As the settler-state wields rhetorical imperialism to establish categories, re/define borders, un-name, and rename to suit its own ends, there are clear consequences – political, economic, social, and corporal sanctions – for daring to exist outside of the structures it has imposed. In the following section, I discuss notions of peoplehood: an Indigenously-defined concept
that, among its many purposes, serves as a response to the question of “Who is Indigenous?”; a question too often asked and answered by the settler-colonial imperative and its eliminatory agenda. I argue that the assertion of Indigenous peoplehood as definitional is an act of oppositional identification and radical sovereignty that resists the rhetorical imperialism of settler-defined notions of nationhood. I argue that just as radical sovereignty is inherent in a people, it is an act of radical sovereignty to assert peoplehood.

Tom Holm (Creek/Cherokee), with coauthors J. Diane Pearson and Ben Chavis (Lumbee) (2003), advances a model of peoplehood designed to be both a “recognizable central core assumption” for the field of Indigenous studies and a framework for defining Indigenous cultural identity (11). The peoplehood matrix is comprised of four interrelated and interdependent elements – language, land or territory, sacred history, and ceremonial cycle – that are each alone important to Indigenous cultural, political, and historical identity. Yet, it is the perpetual interaction among these elements that is the vital crux of what the peoplehood model represents and that drive what it accomplishes, including its efficacy as a theory of Indigenous cultural identity. Peoplehood as a means to define Indigenous identity can expand to encompass the broad and often self-coalescent body of global Indigenousness just as easily as it can contract to pinpoint distinct communities with precision. Thus, the notion of Indigenousness itself – and not merely as it is defined “in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centres of empire” (Alfred and Corn-tassel 2005, 597) – can be illustrated by the holistic peoplehood matrix.

A peoplehood is comprised of those who share a relationship in common with these elements and, within this shared relationship, describe their histories and origins, define their interactions with their environment, outline the timing and methods for their ceremonies, and structure their kinship networks (Holm 2000, 43). Peoplehood designates a community united for the purposes of surviving and thriving as a people (Lyons 2000, 454). The strong attachment a people maintain to their unique cultural identity and the distinctiveness of their particular relationships to these elements also remind a people that their culture is endangered by external assimilative and acculturating forces; that, in the face of settler colonialism, their persistence as a people will require their concerted effort.

I contend that the settler-colonial imperative induces two separate perspectives on the elements of Indigenous peoplehood and the cultural identity systems they delineate. First, there is the perspective of Indigenous peoples who see in them the interrelated expressions and reflections of themselves and their ancestors, the symbols of what they have held dear, what creates community and belonging among them, what necessarily sets them apart and has defined them as a distinct people. On the other side, there is the perspective of the settler-colonizer who sees in these elements
what can be claimed and what must be either exploited or destroyed in order to facilitate this claim – and, therefore, the various institutions and systems that must be positioned and strategically engaged – from legislation, to education, to media that corroborates the settler-authored archive – in order to justify both the claim and the right to destroy. In relation to the peoplehood of Indigenous peoples, the settler-colonial imperative is thus to appropriate and annihilate.

Due to the force of the settler-colonial imperative, Indigenous peoples wield less political power than the dominating society; yet, despite ongoing pressure to assimilate, peoplehood persists because the people manage effective separation from the dominating culture to maintain their differentiation. Therefore, a defining and imperative attribute of persistent peoplehood is Indigenous peoples’ continuous resistance to assimilation and absorption by the dominating society. The peoples’ perpetuation of this “oppositional process” (Spicer 1971, 797) is resistance as boundary maintenance that carves out a peoplehood, a cultural identity, distinct from that of the dominating or even surrounding peer societies. The act of resisting can be thought of as standing in wilful opposition. Since oppose shares a similar derivation as the term opposite (“late Middle English: via Old French from Latin oppositus, past participle of opponere ‘set against’”), the act of opposing can also be conceptualized as actively contrasting, as intentionally positioning oneself on the opposite side relative to the other entity, as being persistently contradictory or at odds with the interests of another. Thus, in this sense, maintaining resistance and opposition requires an Indigenous people to be willing and able to continually change and shift in relative counterposition to settler society. The mechanisms of such resistance and opposition comprise manifold exercises and enactments that range from subtle to subversive, from involuntary to intentional, from covert to conspicuous. Below, I discuss a method of resistance that I term oppositional identification.

In too many contexts, Indigenousness is re/defined in the settler image by exercises of rhetorical imperialism. For example, the notion of peoplehood is more definitionally accurate and durable than nationhood, as peoplehood both precedes and outlasts nationhood (Holm 2000; Holm, Pearson, and Chavis 2003). Indigenous concepts of nationhood are, in fact, constructed and sustained from within the framework of Indigenous peoplehood (Lyons 2000, 454; Justice 2008, 151–152; Holm 2000, 44; Simpson 2017, 8–9; Andersen 2015, 11). However, rhetorical imperialism enacted as legislative and economic coercion (e.g. the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, with its federally supervised self-governance and tribal constitutions modelled after the U.S. Constitution) aims to compel Indigenous peoples to reject a notion as “primitive” and “basic” as peoplehood (Holm 2000, 44) and commit themselves to organizing in the image of the settler-state; to view federal recognition as essential to legitimacy (Harjo 2019, 137); to build and construct
nations and governance structures that mimic the very ones that have sought to dispossess and dehumanize them. It would induce them to establish coercive governance of private citizens and private property rather than structures that support and care for the people, their land, and their myriad resources as a collective network. Likewise, the settler logic of elimination demands the redefinition of peoples “from autonomous to derivative existence” and “away from cultural practices and community aspects of ‘being Indigenous’ towards a political-legal construction as [for instance] ‘aboriginal’ or ‘Native American’ …” (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 598–599). Such political-legal diminishment and redefinition of Indigenous identity aims to compel peoples to reproduce the very rhetorical designations by which their identities have been re/defined (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 600).

Despite pressures to do otherwise, when Indigenous peoples identify themselves according to the holistic structures delineated by their peoplehood, rather than according to notions of private citizenship or allegiance to a nation-state, they are exercising oppositional identification. The settler-colonial imperative deploys rhetorical imperialism to re/define and modify what it means to be Indigenous; however, the people continuously engage in strategic choices related to their identity in order to defy erasure, maintain their distinct and collective selfhood, and resist. On the one hand, such acts of oppositional identification are part of a requisite boundary maintenance process in which the people must resist assimilation and subsumption by the dominating society. On the other hand, these are also acts of sovereignty. Lyons defines rhetorical sovereignty as “the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires … to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449–450). As a mechanism of resistance, oppositional identification is a vital assertion of rhetorical sovereignty. It is directly connected to the right of a people to determine their own name and is a means by which a people assert their own identity in resistance to settler-imposed definitions of who they are.

**Radical sovereignty**

There tend to be two ways of considering the concept of sovereignty (Holm 2000; Lyons 2000, 456; Harjo 2019, 56). One type of sovereignty – that of empire-building and settler-nationhood – is concerned with the power not only to make laws, but to compel compliance with those laws; with who is permitted to govern and how much coercive authority they have to do so. The power imbuing this brand of sovereignty is legitimized based on its recognition by other sovereigns and political entities (Lyons 2000, 450). This is the type of political sovereignty held and exercised by nation-states like the United States and that, regarding Indigenous peoples, the nation-state
has at first recognized, then undermined, and then meted out according to its own interests.

Despite at least two hundred years of sovereign-to-sovereign treaty-making between North American Indigenous peoples and European states, as the newly formed United States gained fiscal and military might, the settler-state began to erode Indigenous political sovereignty through legal maneuvering, economic coercion, and brute force (Lyons 2000, 451; Holm 2000, 42). After a series of U.S. Supreme Court cases, in particular those known as the Marshall Trilogy, Indigenous peoples were left with dejure sovereignty, a legally prescribed list of sovereign rights that must be either explicitly delineated or granted by the federal government (Holm 2000, 42; Lyons 2000, 451).

Conversely, there is another way to consider sovereignty: de facto sovereignty, which is inherent to peoplehood (Holm 2000, 43). This is a type of sovereignty that Indigenous peoples have always indisputably possessed and exercised, prior to and without permission from the settler-state. It comprises rhetorical sovereignty, or the right of a people to determine for themselves the manner in which they will be represented, both among themselves and to others; in other words, the right of a people to define themselves for themselves, rather than capitulate to settler-imposed definitions. As well, in contrast to state-regulated sovereignty, this can be conceptualized as radical sovereignty, which, as Laura Harjo (Mvskoke) (2019) observes, “does not have to wait for the nation-state to recognize it or deem it legitimate” (50). Harjo also interprets this as “este-cate sovereignty”: “a type of action and freedom realized in everyday and vernacular spaces against the grain of the politics of settler colonial elimination … a tool to find our way back to the ways in which community is already performing sovereignty and enacting energy and kinship governed by love for the community” (39). In considering practices of radical resurgence, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg) (2017) conceptualizes “radical” as “a thorough and comprehensive reform, and I use the term … to channel the vitality of my Ancestors to create a present that is recognizable to them because it is fundamentally different than the one settler colonialism creates” (48). Thus, I contend that not only is peoplehood inherently imbued with radical sovereignty; the assertion of peoplehood as an Indigenous nation’s unifying framework is itself an act of radical sovereignty.

**Cis-heteropatriarchy administered and enforced**

I have discussed the eliminatory exercises of rhetorical imperialism in redefining the borders of Indigenousness and the peoples’ resistance and oppositional identification in the assertion of peoplehood as radical sovereignty. I shift now to explore the ways in which rhetorical imperialism has
been enacted in the imposition of cis-heteropatriarchy and its requisite binary conceptualization of gender. The application and enforcement of these categories as rigid borders necessarily changes the terms of identification by coercing a gender hierarchy and invisibilizing those whose genders will not be pared down to fit a strict dichotomy. I demonstrate such exercises of rhetorical imperialism in U.S. settler contexts in federal assimilationist strategies, residential school settings, and the homogenizing renaming of gender expansive roles. I then introduce the concept of rhetorical appropriation to consider the ways in which the settler-colonial imperative manipulates an imprint of Indigenousness to serve a queer settler agenda.

With the explicit goal of the expropriation of Indigenous lands, the U.S. government embarked upon an official campaign to assimilate Indigenous peoples. Cultivating a desire to accumulate personal wealth and private property was key to early plans to deculturalize Indigenous peoples with the hope of discouraging cultural practices like sharing and collective ownership. Ideally, they would learn to be contented agriculturalists who lived on private family farms and had little need for large tracts of communal lands for hunting. With a farm of one’s own and as one begins to amass wealth, Thomas Jefferson noted, one would necessarily adopt a nuclear family model, followed by a cascade of corollaries including inheritance, accumulation, commerce, property law, and criminal law (Spring 2013, 9). The imposition of such settler-heteropatriarchal capitalist norms sought to demolish Indigenous cultural systems, in particular those related to gender and kinship, and reconstruct them in the image of the settler.

When, in his 1805 presidential inaugural address, Jefferson called for teaching Indigenous peoples “agriculture and the domestic arts; to encourage them to that industry which alone can enable them to maintain their place in existence …”, he was, in fact, calling for a complete overwrite of the gender-role structures of most North American Indigenous cultures in order to re/define them in terms legible by settler society (Justice, Rifkin, and Schneider 2010, 15). In an analysis of U.S. federal Indian policies as articulated in inaugural addresses, Bethany Schneider (in Justice, Rifkin, and Schneider 2010) observes of Jefferson’s directive that the existence of Indigenous farming was “conveniently invisible” to settler observers, since such agricultural work was typically performed by women and was a foundation of their cultural authority. If men were to become farmers, rather than hunters, such a shift would disorder many gender systems and dispossess Indigenous women of their cultural standing and authority (Justice, Rifkin, and Schneider 2010, 15).

Thus it becomes clear that in Jefferson’s notion of “enabl[ing] them to maintain their place in existence,” his insistence that “agriculture and domestic arts” are to be conducted according to settler formations of gender is
intended to shift the terms of Indigenous gender identification. This is a strategy of the settler-colonial imperative and an enactment of rhetorical imperialism. It is also clear, therefore, that his invoking the precarious prospect of their ongoing “existence” should they not undertake this drastic cultural shift is an ultimatum, meant to mark an insecure futurity for Indigenous peoples within the settler-state.

Similarly, in his 1821 inaugural address, James Monroe said of his Indian policy that “…the right of soil should be secured to each individual and his posterity in competent portions . . .,” rather than Indigenous peoples continuing to maintain “sovereignty over vast territories” (Justice, Rifkin, and Schneider 2010, 16). In addition to calls for the disruption of long-established Indigenous relationships to land, the insistence upon heteropatriarchal norms of inheritance and a nuclear family model is evident in the rhetoric of these presidential pronouncements.

These executive ultimatums, and others like them, are further codified by the 1887 Dawes Act, also known as the General Allotment Act, which fractured hunting territories and forced Indigenous men, many traditionally hunters, into the key agricultural roles most typically held by Indigenous women. It also sought to dismantle and reconstruct societies, which had functioned within more egalitarian structures, into legibly and hierarchically patriarchal cultures – deeply disrupting long-held social aspects of gender and essential patterns of kinship. Thus, rhetorical imperialism was codified by the state with the intent to demolish tribal collectivity and to coerce a cis-heteropatriarchal structure, framed by settler values and norms regarding private ownership, the nuclear family model and patrilineal inheritance (Justice, Rifkin, and Schneider 2010, 20).

In these cases, the boundaries within which Indigenous people can “maintain their place in existence” are designated by a cis-heteropatriarchal binary, inconsistent with the gender and kinship systems that structured their relationships with each other and their lands, histories, and ceremonies. The imposition of these boundaries required the administration and enforcement of gender categories, ways of being classed and ranked as women or men – and, in particular, as racialized Indian women or men – as assigned by the settler-colonial imperative. Noteworthy in this binary construction is the erasure of Two-Spirit people. This is rhetorical imperialism, as the terms of identity are defined and described by settler authorities, with demonstrated penalties for noncompliance.

Among the apparatuses of the settler-colonial imperative, education has taken many forms, with the explicit goal to expropriate Indigenous lands by deculturalizing the people and establishing cis-heteropatriarchal binary norms among them. Most notorious among these is the deployment of residential schools, which required that Indigenous children be separated from their families, homelands, languages, histories, and ceremonies.
Settler authorities, as agents of both the church and state, amassed children from diverse Indigenous cultures in residential schools and systematically stripped them of their distinct cultural identities and, importantly, the varied gender conventions of their respective peoples. Indigenous children were separated according to their perceived sex and trained correspondingly, in one of two distinct genders, to emulate the gender norms of settler society. As Sarah Hunt/Tlaliila’oqwa (Kwakwaka’wakw) (2015) points out, “at the same moment as Native children became ‘Indians’ through their institutionalization at residential schools, they were simultaneously gendered as Indian boys and girls as systems of race and gender were mutually articulated” (106). Residential schooling and the categorization that it enforced thus aspired to create a racialized and homogenized “Indianness,” that was then bifurcated according to an Indian-inflected and settler-imposed cis-heteropatriarchal binary. In this way, the settler-colonial imperative sought to fragment the collectivity and peoplehood of Indigenous peoples, by penalizing distinct tribal identities and replacing them with a brand of pan-Indianness encompassing an amalgamation of detribalized private individuals; an attempt to fulfil Richard Pratt’s mission to “kill the Indian and save the man.”

The settler-colonial imperative employs rhetorical imperialism in the act of renaming: the erasure of an Indigenous name to replace it with one that better serves the settler agenda. Of Columbus’s renaming of the Indigenous lands he encountered, Stephen Greenblatt (1991) writes, “The founding action of Christian imperialism is a christening. Such a christening entails the cancellation of the native name – the erasure of the alien, an exorcism, an appropriation, and a gift … [it is] the taking of a possession, the conferral of identity” (quoted in Miranda 2010, 260). Renaming and mis-naming manifests rhetorical imperialism wherever settlers have trod among Indigenous lands and cultures.

In the enforcement of a strict gender binary, not only did settler authorities systematically terrorize and condemn Two-Spirit individuals among Indigenous peoples, they also disregarded the vast range of tribally-specific terms for these roles. Berdache – a term with meanings that include “a boy kept for unnatural purposes,” “male prostitute,” and “passive homosexual partner” – was first used to refer to and condemn Indigenous gender-expansive people in an eighteenth century text titled Jesuit Relations. The word originated in Persia (bardaj) and extended to Arabia before spreading consecutively to the Italian, Spanish, and French languages by the sixteenth century (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997, 4). Berdache was later popularized by anthropologists and ethnographers to describe the “gender variance” they observed in North American Indigenous cultures. Rather than tribally-specific terms like boté or badé (Crow), winkte (Lakota), ‘aqi (Ventureno Chumash), nádleeh (Navajo), kwídó (Tewa), tainna wa’ippe (Shoshone),
dubuds (Paiute), or lhama (Zuni), berdache sustained its prominence as the sole term for hundreds of designated roles in an exercise of rhetorical imperialism that necessarily imagined a static, homogenized, and settler-defined mode of Indigenous gender variance.

Rhetorical appropriation

By design, the settler-colonial strategies of erasure and replacement are often not a complete obliteration of Indigenousness. Instead, as Patrick Wolfe (2006) observes, “the process of replacement maintains the refractory imprint of the native counter-claim”: an imprint necessary for settler society to articulate adequate differentiation and proclaim its independence from the mother country and, ultimately, to assert settler nationalism, so that “the native repressed continues to structure settler-colonial society” (389–390). Following this logic, the denotative work of the indelible imprint of Indigenousness in service of the settler-colonial imperative can be considered what I describe as rhetorical appropriation.

Rhetorical appropriation is manifested in the strategic retention, often with an anglicizing modification, of Indigenous place names (e.g. Tanasi in Cherokee becomes Tennessee; misiziibi in Ojibwe becomes Mississippi) or the misuse of Indigenous symbols as corporate branding, caricatures as team mascots, and depictions prominent in numerous official seals of cities and states. It is also apparent in the choice some non-Indigenous people have made to claim the identifier Two-Spirit for themselves. Any such displays of rhetorical appropriation are shorthand for Indigenous subjugation; meant to serve as evidence of a settler claim fulfilled.

One context in which rhetorical appropriation manifests is in the institutionalization of settler heteronormativity, as it was and continues to be formed and normed against Indigenous cultural patterns deemed abnormal, aberrational, abject. This is evident in the phenomena that Scott Lauria Morgensen (2010) terms “settler sexuality” and “settler homonation-alism,” (106) in which the imprint of Indigenous formations of kinship, gender, and sexuality is invoked to give significance and shape – even by way of contrast – to settler formations of both heteronormativity and, subsequently, homonormativity. Another context for rhetorical appropriation lies among the proclaimed historical roots of modern queer settler genders and sexualities, wherein Indigenous forms of gender and sexuality are appropriated as proof of a long-standing queer(ed) presence on these lands, a model for entrenched social acceptance of diverse genders and sexualities, and as Mark Rifkin (2011) observes, “a counter hegemonic symbol of resistance to heterohomemaking” (8). Here, rhetorical appropriation manifests in the enfolding of Indigenous histories and systems of gender and sexuality into queer settler history in order to validate
and affirm various forms of modern queer settler identities and expressions; despite the explicit and centuries-long operation of the settler-colonial imperative to stamp out such patterns of “deviance” from settler norms.

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 is 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/Tlaliliila’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 aanikoobiijigan (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. Deculturation 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 este-cate 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).

7. For example, Rifkin (2011) argues that the novel Stone Butch Blues (1993), by Leslie Feinberg, “positions native peoples as a tool for raising the consciousness of non-natives about the presence and need to include gender and sexual minorities, presenting indigenous polities as a pedagogical and imaginative resource for reconfiguring non-native publics …” (42).

Acknowledgements

For their invaluable feedback on this article, I thank the three anonymous reviewers for Ethnic and Racial Studies. And to Hilary, I offer my gratitude always.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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