



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic

Qwo-Li Driskill

Studies in American Indian Literatures, Volume 16, Number 2, Summer 2004,  
pp. 50-64 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press  
DOI: [10.1353/ail.2004.0020](https://doi.org/10.1353/ail.2004.0020)



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/170742>

# Stolen From Our Bodies

First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic

QWO-LI DRISKILL

This is a Warrior Song  
From one poor Skin to another  
And I don't know what I'm lookin' for  
But I know I've found you

These words will shuffle across concrete  
Will float across the Rockies  
To the Smokey Mountains  
We were stolen from  
We were stolen from

We were stolen from our bodies  
We were stolen from our homes  
And we are fighters in this long war  
To bring us all back home

And this is a Warrior Song  
From one poor Skin to another  
And I don't know what I'm lookin' for  
But I know I've found you

U-ne-la-nv-hi U-we-tsi  
I-ga-gu-yv-he-yi  
Hna-quo-tso-sv Wi-yu-lo-se  
But I know I've found you

And this is a Warrior Song  
 From one poor Skin to another  
 And I don't know what I'm lookin' for  
 But I know I've found you<sup>1</sup>

This song came to me one night a few years ago as I began to understand that healing our sexualities as First Nations people is braided with the legacy of historical trauma and the ongoing process of decolonization. Two-Spirits are integral to this struggle: my own resistance to colonization as a Cherokee Two-Spirit is intimately connected to my continuing efforts to heal from sexual assault and the manifestations of an oppressive overculture on my erotic life. Like other Two-Spirit people, I am making a journey to a Sovereign Erotic that mends our lives and communities.<sup>2</sup>

I mention my experiences with trauma in this essay because sexual assault, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are entangled with the history of colonization. Sexual assault is an explicit act of colonization that has enormous impacts on both personal and national identities and because of its connections to a settler mentality, can be understood as a colonial form of violence and oppression. My own journey back to my body, and the journeys of other First Nations people back to their bodies, necessarily engage historical trauma. In her book *Shaking the Rattle: Healing the Trauma of Colonization* Barbara-Helen Hill (Six Nations, Grand River Territory) writes:

All of the abuse and addiction that we are seeing in communities are symptoms of the underlying cause, the oppression and the stress of living in isolation on reservations or in Native communities within the larger non-Native communities. . . . Healing the spirit of the individual will eventually spread to healing the spirit of family and this in turn will spread out into the communities. . . . (36)

When I speak of a Sovereign Erotic, I'm speaking of an erotic wholeness healed and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive, rooted within the histories, traditions, and resistance struggles of our nations. I am in agreement with Audre

Lorde when she writes, “Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning in our lives” (57). I do not see the erotic as a realm of personal consequence only. Our relationships with the erotic impact our larger communities, just as our communities impact our senses of the erotic. A Sovereign Erotic relates our bodies to our nations, traditions, and histories.

The term “Two-Spirit” is a word that resists colonial definitions of who we are. It is an expression of our sexual and gender identities as sovereign from those of white GLBT movements. The coinage of the word was never meant to create a monolithic understanding of the array of Native traditions regarding what dominant European and Euroamerican traditions call “alternative” genders and sexualities. The term came into use in 1990 at a gathering of Native Queer/Two-Spirit people in Winnipeg as a means to resist the use of the word “berdache,” and also as a way to talk about our sexualities and genders from within tribal contexts in English (Jacobs et al. 2). I find myself using both the words “Queer” and “Trans” to try to translate my gendered and sexual realities for those not familiar with Native traditions, but at heart, if there is a term that could possibly describe me in English, I simply consider myself a Two-Spirit person. The process of translating Two-Spiritness with terms in white communities becomes very complex. I’m not necessarily “Queer” in Cherokee contexts, because differences are not seen in the same light as they are in Euroamerican contexts. I’m not necessarily “Transgender” in Cherokee contexts, because I’m simply the gender I am. I’m not necessarily “Gay,” because that word rests on the concept of men-loving-men, and ignores the complexity of my gender identity. It is only within the rigid gender regimes of white America that I become Trans or Queer. While homophobia, transphobia, and sexism are problems in Native communities, in many of our tribal realities these forms of oppression are the result of colonization and genocide that cannot accept women as leaders, or people with extra-ordinary genders and sexualities.<sup>3</sup> As Native people, our erotic lives and identities have been colonized along with our homelands.

My family is diasporic, descendents of so many removals of so

many kinds it becomes difficult to count them all. Survivors of so many genocides that one simply bleeds into the next. As a Red-Black person, the Trail of Tears and other forced relocations are not the first removals of my peoples.<sup>4</sup> I find myself obsessed with the notion of “home” on many levels. I have not only been removed from my homelands, I have also been removed from my erotic self and continue a journey back to my first homeland: the body. “We were stolen from our bodies / We were stolen from our homes.”

Sexual assault was not something that was tolerated in most of our cultures before invasion. In Lakota custom, for example, the “Rare Knife” was given to Lakota women to use only to cut off the heads of men who abused her or her children.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, abuse was rare in Lakota lifeways before white supremacist patriarchy enforced violence against women and children. Wilma Mankiller reminds us,

Europeans brought with them the view that men were the absolute head of households, and women were to be submissive to them. It was then that the role of women in Cherokee society began to decline. One of the new values Europeans brought to the Cherokees was a lack of balance and harmony between men and women. It was what we today call sexism. This was not a Cherokee concept. Sexism was borrowed from Europeans. (20)

Sexual violence is rampant in all communities in the United States. Recent events within the Catholic Church show how often sexual abuse of children is silently condoned. Sexual abuse must be seen with an understanding of the history of colonization, which uses sexuality as a tool to gain power over others and to control women’s bodies. In this country the *white wing* attempts to make abortion illegal at the same time women of color and poor women continue to survive forced sterilization. It is no accident that white masculinity is constructed the way it is in the United States, as European invasion of the Americas required a masculinity that murders, rapes, and enslaves Native and African peoples. It is a masculinity that requires men to be soldiers and conquerors in every aspect of their lives. A masculinity rooted in genocide breeds a culture of sexual abuse. It is vital to remember that most of our traditions did not allow such behavior. Healing from assault is

intimately joined with decolonization and the reclamation of indigenous understandings of the world.

We were stolen from our bodies  
 We were stolen from our homes  
 And we are fighters in this long war  
 To bring us all back home

A colonized sexuality is one in which we have internalized the sexual values of dominant culture. The invaders continue to enforce the idea that sexuality and non-dichotomous genders are a sin, recreating sexuality as illicit, shocking, shameful, and removed from any positive spiritual context. Queer sexualities and genders are degraded, ignored, condemned, and destroyed. As people often raised under dominant culture's values through our homes, televisions, or teachers, Two-Spirit erotic lives continue to be colonized. Native people survive a legacy of spiritual and sexual abuse at the hands of soldiers, missionaries, clergy, and teachers who have damaged our senses of Self and wounded our sacred connection to our bodies. The boarding school systems in the United States and Canada are one example of the ways our sexualities, genders, and spirits have been colonized by the invaders. Boarding schools continue to have severe repercussions on our communities, including colonized concepts of gender and sexuality. To decolonize our sexualities and move towards a Sovereign Erotic, we must unmask the specters of conquistadors, priests, and politicians that have invaded our spirits and psyches, insist they vacate, and begin tending the open wounds colonization leaves in our flesh.

I have seen no study that tells how many Two-Spirit people commit suicide or turn to drugs and alcohol to cope with the shame colonization brings to our sexualities and genders.<sup>6</sup> How many Two-Spirit people are forced to leave their families and thus their primary connection to their traditions because of homophobia and transphobia? How many of us grapple with deep shame because of our sexualities and/or genders? Our sexualities harbor bruises left by a white supremacist culture. We find ourselves despising our bodies and sexualities, unable to speak of our own erotic lives and desires even with our lovers. We see dominant culture's concepts of the erotic and know they have nothing

to do with our Two-Spirit bodies, often causing us to dissociate from our erotic selves or assimilate dominant culture's concepts into our lives. Marilou Awiakta (Cherokee/Appalachian) writes, "Thinking of sex as an it and women as sex objects is one of the grooves most deeply carved into the Western mind. This groove in the national mind of America will not accept the concept of sex as part of the sacred and generative power of the universe—and of woman as a bearer of the life force" (252). It is not only First Nations people who have internalized dominant culture's concepts of sexuality and gender. The legacy of colonization seeps into every aspect of life in this country, even if only Native folks and other people of color recognize it.

Beth Brant (Bay of Quinte Mohawk) writes about the importance of Two-Spirit engagement in a process of healing from historical trauma:

Much of the self-hatred we carry around inside us is centuries old. This self-hatred is so coiled within itself, we often cannot distinguish the racism from the homophobia from the sexism. We carry the stories of our grandmothers, our ancestors. And some of these stories are ugly and terrorizing. And some are beautiful testaments to endurance and dignity. We must learn to emulate this kind of testimony. Speaking ourselves out loud—for our people, for ourselves. To deny our sexuality is to deny our part in creation. (63)

To understand our place in creation, I look at the stories within my tradition that celebrate difference. To my knowledge as a non-fluent Cherokee speaker, there is currently no term in Cherokee to describe Two-Spirit people. We simply *are*. However, within our stories are roadmaps for contemporary Cherokee Two-Spirits. Many of our stories address difference, the embodiment of dichotomies, and journeys between worlds. Craig Womack (Oklahoma Creek-Cherokee) reminds us, "Rather than disrupting society, anomalies actually reify the existing social order. . . . That which is anomalous is also an important source of power. The Southeastern belief system is not an oppositional world of good and evil" (*Red on Red* 244). Our stories as First Nations people keep us alive in a world that routinely destroys and discards us. Though our stories were present as survival cartographies before the invasion

of Turtle Island by Columbus and the crowned power of Spain, our stories are perhaps even more vital to our survival now, during the European occupation of our homelands.<sup>7</sup>

It is in our stories, including our written literatures, that I search for meaning and reflection of my Two-Spirit body in order to survive a world in which people like me are routinely killed. How do I make sense of the murder of F. C. Martinez Jr., a Diné/Cheyenne Nádleeh youth killed in June 2001 in Cortez, Colorado? How do I make sense of the February 2002 murder of Amy/Raymond Soos, a Two-Spirit of the Pima Nation whose naked body was found in Phoenix, Arizona? How do I make sense of the strangled and beaten body of Alejandro Lucero, Hopi Nation, whose body was found on March 4, 2002, also in Phoenix? How do I make sense of the slaughter of “Brandon Teena,” always spoken of as white, who was actually of mixed “Sioux” and white ancestry, his life erased by transphobic murderers and his Nativeness erased by white Queer and Trans folks?<sup>8</sup> How do we as Two-Spirits remain whole and confident in our bodies and in our traditions when loss attempts to smother us? I return to our stories.

Many Cherokee stories deal with characters considered outsiders, who live in liminal spaces, help bring about necessary change, and aid in the process of creation. In one story, a water spider brings fire to the other animals after many larger and stronger animals attempt to retrieve it and fail. She creates a bowl and straps it to her back with spider silk in order to carry fire across the water. In another version of the story, a dragonfly assists her by pushing the bowl from behind (Mooney 431). This story is significant to Cherokee Two-Spirits because so much of it deals with the embodiment of opposites. Spider is specifically a water-spider, and in Mooney’s recording of the story, a species of spider that is black with red stripes, opposite sacred colors in Cherokee cosmology (Mooney 241). Dragonfly also dwells between worlds of water, air, and earth. In Cherokee cosmology, fire is associated with the female principal and water is associated with the male principal. Dragonfly and spider become beings that help join these realities.

A Sovereign Erotic is 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. Oppression is used by the “settlers” to “tame” our “wild” and “savage” understandings of our Selves, to injure our traditional understandings of the world, to pit us against each other along divisions of gender, sexuality, skin tone, geography, “blood-quantum,” (dis)ability, and class so that the powers that be have less work to do in maintaining control over our homelands, our bodies, and our spirits.<sup>9</sup>

In discussing the colonization of Queer African and First Nations bodies and sexualities, elias farajajé-jones writes:

My . . . African ancestors stood on auctioning blocks in this country where their bodies were offered for sale. They were subjected to the white “gaze” quite literally; their genitalia were touched and inspected in a very public way. The bodies of my First Nations (Tsalagi/Cherokee) ancestors were forcibly removed, infected, massacred, locked up. They were so effectively removed and locked up that they do not even enter into the erotic fictions of the dominating culture. (Kay et al. 328)

Knowing this, Two-Spirit writers, artists, and scholars should turn to and create our own Sovereign Erotic literatures.

*In Our Oldest Language*

Tsuj’/ Boy, you are ga-lv-lo’/sky  
 continually above me  
 I am eloh’/earth your hands reach  
 inside to aching molten rock  
 Your fingers gilded wings  
 that rise and thrust against  
 dark muscle rhythms  
 rock me until I am coiled  
 around you blooming

Your lightning tongue  
 summons me to skim  
 the sweltering expanse of your back  
 tempts me to nv-yo-i/the rocky place  
 between your thighs where

you are hard as a cedar flute  
 a-s-da-ya/taut  
 as a drum

Water swells at your bank  
 threatens to break loose  
 But I am slow  
 so slow  
 and steady as a panther  
 Nibble and suck  
 strawberries  
 Flick my tongue across their dark tips  
 u-wa-n-sv ale tsu-wo-du/ripe and beautiful  
 Lure their flavor to the surface of your skin

My mouth hungry for your pulse  
 even and soft on my lips  
 My hands blanketed by your hair  
 Your chest silvered and wet  
 against mine

V:v/Yes  
 Our moans a low fierce rumble  
 a coming storm<sup>10</sup>

Two-Spirit people are creating literatures that reflect Sovereign Erotics, and in doing so participate in the process of radical, holistic decolonization. The erotic within First Nations literatures is rarely examined, and Two-Spirit erotics are often ignored. Womack observes, "I would speculate that a queer Indian presence . . . *fundamentally* challenges the American mythos about Indians in a manner the public will not accept. Deeply embedded in the romanticism about Indians are ideas regarding gender. . . . The queer Indian fits none of these popular imaginings" (*Red on Red* 280).

*In Her I Am* by Chrystos (Menominee) has received praise from other Two-Spirit, Lesbian, and Queer identified women, but has been

largely ignored by critics. Not only is this due to the fact that unapologetic Lesbian erotica threatens heteropatriarchal culture, but also because the Sovereign Erotic set forth in her book deals with histories of abuse and colonization that deeply complicate the text. *In Her I Am* demonstrates radical Two-Spirit woman-centered erotics as tools for healing from colonization. The poem “Against” grapples with genocide, abuse, and homophobia and their effects on sexual relationships:

We're survivors of childhood violence with black eyes  
 in common from mothers who hated our difference  
 [. . . . .]  
 Your people as well as mine slaughtered in millions  
 Queer we're still open season  
 My fingermarks on your ass are loving you  
 [. . . . .]  
 Desire red & raw as wounds we disguise  
 we're open season. (Chrystos 4–25)

It is poems such as this, which examine the complexities of sexuality within an abusive culture, that are needed in order for Two-Spirit people to engage with healing and (re)creating Sovereign Erotic spaces in our lives and work. Chrystos writes,

Because sex has been split off from us as women in a colonizer culture, we ourselves police our pleasure. . . . We need to engage in a radical discussion & redefinition of our sexuality, a discussion which has been co-opted to issues of biology (abortion & conception), rather than sexual freedom, remembering that freedom needs the bones of responsibility to flourish. (83)

Chrystos undertakes this redefinition through the creation of erotic poems for other Native Two-Spirit women that encompass First Nations traditions and histories. In “Woman” the gathering of wild rice is eroticized:

will you come with me moving  
 through rivers to soft lakebeds  
 [. . . . .]

Will you go with me  
down the long waters smoothly shaking  
life into our journey. (Chrystos 1–6)

Likewise, “Tenderly Your” situates the erotic within historical memory:

We’re in the grass of prairies our grandmothers rode  
Sweet smell of distant cookpots edges the blue  
Your kisses are a hundred years old & newly born. (Chrystos 3–5)

The poem continues by discussing the erotic as a tool for healing from trauma:

Flaming ride us past our rapes our pain  
past years when we stumbled lost  
[ . . . . . ]  
This  
is why we were made by creation. (9–14)

Sovereign Erotics are also reflected in Craig Womack’s *Drowning in Fire*. Through the narrative of Josh Henneha, lines between historical memory and contemporary lives spiral into one another. The erotic relationship that develops between Josh and Jimmy weaves itself into a history of Creek resistance to allotment and Oklahoma statehood. Snake motifs throughout the text represent both the supernatural tie-snake, an embodiment of opposites, and the Snake faction in Creek resistance history. During a sexual encounter between Josh and Jimmy, snakes appear:

There were snakes everywhere, shimmering rainbows of color and motion, circles and circles. . . . A copperhead was dancing around one of Jimmy’s Air Jordans lying on the floor. A giant rattlesnake sat coiled around the copperhead and the tennis shoes, shaking his tail like an accompaniment to the swaying dance inside the circles they had made, the snakes within snakes. . . . The whip snake came down from the lamp, crawled over our way, placed his head on the edge of the sparse white sheet, and flicked his tongue at us. (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 200)

Womack also connects the erotic to the sacred through the relationship between Josh and Jimmy. After the couple makes love in a creek, Josh dreams:

I dreamed that I came back a year later with him and the pond was no longer there, only a large, shimmering mud flat. . . . In the dried-up creekbed, at the exact spot where Jimmy had come in the creek, had grown a red cedar. My Aunt Lucy stepped out from behind it, and she laughed at the way she'd startled us. "See, boys," she said, nodding at the cedar, "now you know where those trees come from. (*Drowning in Fire* 279)

The Sovereign Erotics created by Two-Spirits are part of the healing of the wounded bodies of ourselves, our lands, and our planet. Collections of First Nations erotic writing that include the work of Two-Spirit writers such as *Without Reservation: Indigenous Erotica* edited by Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm (Anishanaabe) and Red Ink Magazine's Love & Erotic Issue (Volume 11:1) are quickly emerging in North America. We were stolen from our bodies, but now we are taking ourselves back. First Nations Two-Spirits are blooming like dandelions in the landscape of a racist, homophobic, and transphobic culture's ordered garden. Through over 500 years of colonization's efforts to kill our startling beauty, our roots have proven too deep and complicated to pull out of the soil of our origin, the soil where we are nurtured by the sacrifices that were made by our ancestors' commitment to love us.

And we are fighters in this long war  
to bring us all back home

#### NOTES

This paper was originally presented as a keynote speech to Portland State University Queers and Allies on April 26, 2002.

1. The Cherokee used in the poem is a translation of "Amazing Grace."
2. My use of the term "sovereign" is in no way an attempt to challenge or replace the legal definitions of sovereignty. As Native nations, sovereignty specifically refers to the legal relationships our nations have with other governments and nations, including the United States. By using the terms "sover-

eign” and “sovereignty” in relationship to tribally specific and traditional understandings of our bodies, sexualities, genders, erotic senses of self, terms employed in the formation of identities, or other non-legal contexts, I’m using the words as metaphors for relationships between Native people and nations and the non-Native nations, people, values, and understandings that occupy and exist within our traditional lands.

3. While I am choosing to focus on erotics as a site of decolonization and sovereignty, it should be made clear that I do not think of the term “Two-Spirit” as a pan-Native term synonymous with “Gay,” or “Lesbian.” The various traditions being called “Two-Spirit” are often much more about gender identity and gender expression than about sexual orientation. I also realize the problematic nature of using one term for our various and vastly differing tribal traditions, understandings, and identities. I am choosing to use the term “Two-Spirit” throughout this essay because it does not make me splinter off sexuality from race, gender from culture. It was created specifically to hold, not diminish or erase, complexities. It is a sovereign term in the invaders’ tongue.

4. It should also be remembered that Cherokees and other First Nations people were sold into slavery. For a thorough discussion of the enslavement of First Nations peoples, see Cherokee/Assateague-Gingaskin scholar Ron Welburn’s essay “The Other Middle Passage: The Bermuda-Barbados Trade in Native American Slaves” in *Roanoke and Wampum: Topics in Native American Heritage and Literatures* (2001).

5. Dagmar Thorpe’s (Sauk and Fox/Potawatomi/Kickapoo) interview with Charlotte Black Elk (Lakota) (157).

6. As of the writing of this essay, there is a study being conducted, however, through the University of Washington’s School of Social Work called the Two-Spirit Honor Project.

7. An invasion, it should be remembered, rooted in the murder and expulsion of Sephardi Jews and Muslim North Africans during the Inquisition.

8. While he used the names Billy and Brandon, “Brandon Teena” is a name created by activists by switching the first and last names given to Brandon at birth. I learned of Brandon’s mixedblood ancestry through an unlikely text, *All She Wanted* by Aphrodite Jones. The book is widely criticized in Trans communities for its transphobia and sensationalistic “true-crime” style. In a particularly racist passage that at once romanticizes Brandon’s Native features and celebrates his light skin and eyes, Jones writes, “Their grandfather on their father’s side was a full-blooded Sioux Indian, so Teena . . . was an exotic-looking infant. To JoAnn (Brandon’s mother), she almost looked black, even

though it was only her hair that was dark. Teena was beautiful, blessed with the bluest Irish eyes" (Jones 29). Besides "Sioux," Brandon's tribal affiliation is not mentioned. *All She Wanted* is the only book about Brandon's life and murder, and in some ways remains more factual than the highly popular film *Boys Don't Cry*.

9. (Dis)ability, as an alternative to "disability," was coined in 1999 by radical activist and writer Colin Kennedy Donovan and appears in the 'zine *Fuck Pity: Issue Number One: Not Yr Goddamn Poster Child*. I have chosen to use this term because it draws attention to "disability" as a social and political construct rather than an inherent "condition" blamed on our bodies and minds.

10. By the author, originally published in *Red Ink Magazine*.

#### WORKS CITED

- Akiwenzie-Damm, Kateri, ed. *Without Reservation: Indigenous Erotica*. Cape Croker Reserve ON: Kegedonce Press, 2003.
- Awiakta, Marilou. *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom*. Golden CO: Fulcrum, 1993.
- Brant, Beth. *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk*. Toronto: Women's Press, 1994.
- Chrystos. *In Her I Am*. Vancouver BC: Press Gang, 1993.
- Donovan, Colin Kennedy. *Fuck Pity: Issue Number One: Not Yr Goddamn Poster Child*. Seattle: Independently Published, 2000.
- Driskill, Qwo-Li. "In Our Oldest Language." *Red Ink Magazine. Love & Erotics*. Volume 11.1. Tucson: University of Arizona, Fall 2003.
- Hill, Barbara-Helen. *Shaking the Rattle: Healing the Trauma of Colonization*. Penticton BC: Theytus Books, 1995.
- Jacobs, Sue-Ellen, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds. *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality and Spirituality*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1997.
- Jones, Aphrodite. *All She Wanted*. New York: Pocket Books, 1996.
- Kay, Kerwin, Jill Nagle, and Baruch Gould, eds. *Male Lust: Pleasure, Power, and Transformation*. Binghamton NY: Harrington Park, 2000.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Freedom CA: Crossing Press, 1984.
- Mankiller, Wilma. *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People*. New York: St. Martin's, 1993.
- Mooney, James. *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*. Ashville NC: Bright Mountain Books, 1992.

Thorpe, Dagmar. *People of the Seventh Fire: Returning Lifeways of Native America*. Ithaca NY: Akwe:kon Press, 1996.

Welburn, Ron. *Roanoke and Wampum: Topics in Native American Heritage and Literatures*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001.

Womack, Craig S. *Drowning in Fire*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2001.

———. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.