

Ahkii: A Woman is a Sovereign Land

GWENDOLYWN BENAWAY

*Don't ask why of me
Don't ask how of me
Don't ask forever
Love me, love me now*

*This love of mine
had no beginning
It has no end*

*I was an oak
Now I'm a willow
Now I can bend
-Buffy Sainte Marie, *Until it's Time for You to Go**

Author's Note: *Waciye, Aaniin. I was asked to write a creative non-fiction piece around my writing practice. I couldn't imagine writing about my writing practice without writing about my relationship to gender and land, so I have woven these threads together. As a poet, I'm particularly interested in how Anishinaabe oral tradition moves between voices, mediums, and narratives in order to create a space for questioning. This is my intention within this piece, to not author truth but write a space where we can question and explore as a broader community of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Miikwec, ka'kina awiiyaak.*

Ahkii: A Woman is a Sovereign Land

Gwendolywn (*Mitikomis*ⁱ) Benaway,
*Makwaa doodem*ⁱⁱ, *Anishinaabe/ Métis, Niizh Ode*ⁱⁱⁱ

i walk on dirt roads
in a nowhere land.

it is deep night,
the middle of summer

inside dreams my bones
remember river water.

once we had names
no one can say.

the land and i
hold a soft wonder

between us
as I would lift

water to my lips,
dust and the smell

of lilacs is how
I taste in this sleep-

a girl hunts
her wholeness,

underground my *gookum*^{iv}
dissolves to memory,

i will find her grave
in me soon.

a black bear follows me,
she watches as i

come back to
what I lost.

this is how *ahkii*^v
finds me now,

by spaces in my body
she has not surrendered.

My early memories of my *gookum*'s farmhouse are rooted in the land. She lived at the end of an unpaved gravel road in Northern Michigan. The land around her farmhouse was sparsely populated, filled with giant stretches of bush, which seemed infinite. The boundary between the farmhouse and the land outside felt fragile. The house leaned into the bush during the day and the bush crept through open windows at night. I grew up caught between fascination and a quiet terror of the bush around my *gookum*'s house. The wild in me has always warred with my desire to be safe.

My *gookum* kept a garden, planted with vegetables, which never grew as expected. There were nightly incursions by foraging deers. Snakes surrounded the house, often laying coiled in the pantry and traveling through holes in the hallway to the bedroom. Several pairs of eagles nested close by. My *gookum* left them scraps and waved whenever she saw them flying. When I think

of her and my father’s family, I think of that land. When I imagine myself as a child, I am running through the back fields towards the dark border of the bush, alone and boundless.

I hesitate to name my gookum as a traditional or a non-traditional Anishinaabe woman. She was publicly Christian and prayed at her kitchen table. She listened to polka music on the radio. She had diabetes and a huge jar of pink Sweet n’ Low packets. She walked her land every morning, leaving bread, chunks of lard, and meat scraps behind her. Her favorite route the trail beside the house, which ran towards the edge of the bush. On her walk, she would pause and speak to every living thing she encountered. Was this ceremony? Or simply her relationship to the place she was responsible for? Is there a difference between these two acts?

She remains complicated for me. I witnessed her abuse by my grandfather as a child. He would come home drunk and yell or hit her. We know some of her children were by products of her rapes in their marriage bed. She lived with him for most of her life until he died. She raised her children, including my father, in an atmosphere of continual violence. I am the product of the trauma, my father abusing me in a cycle that has flowed around my family as long as I have stories of us. I feel she let me down, gifting all of her children and grandchildren with her pain. She saved us also, working 3 jobs to cover my grandfather’s debts and feed my uncle, aunts, and father. She gave love in balance to my grandfather’s rage. She suffered while she triumphed. Victim, hero, Anishinaabe woman.

I remember talking to an Anishinaabe elder about my gookum. Like my grandmother, she had spent much of her life living in a very abusive relationship. I asked her why she stayed, raising her children in the middle of such violence. She answered me by speaking about how she tried to protect her children, taking a majority of the violence on her own body. She laughed while telling me about how her husband once broke a wooden broomstick over her back. “I must be some tough woman to survive that, eh?” she said, lifting her left hand to cover her mouth as she laughed. I’ve never forgotten what she said next because I felt like it was the first time I could accept my gookum’s choices. She looked directly in my eyes, something we almost never do in Anishinaabe culture, and said “well, in that time, there was nowhere to go. No one would help an Indian woman, so you did what you had to do. I feel bad about what happened and what my kids saw, but that’s how it was”. Anishinaabe women accept, Anishinaabe women laugh in the face of violence. How long have we learned to survive on nothing?

When I remember my gookum, I don't think about the violence I witnessed or the bruises on her face when we buried her. I see her standing on the path to bush, whole in her blue floral apron. When I write, I travel in my mind to my gookum and that land. This is one of the landscapes I inhabit, the Great Lakes and the woods around our waters. One of the features of my work is the central relationship of land and water imagery to my body and sexuality. There are many reasons for my attachment to this particular landscape, including race, relationship, and the foundational nature of my childhood connection to it. For me, the strongest association between the land and my writing is the complicated and metaphysical way which the land connects to our bodies and spirits as Anishinaabe women.

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I remember one of my elders teaching us the word for vagina in Anishinaabemowim (Ojibwe). He cautioned us that any word for vagina could never be used as an insult in Anishinaabe worldview. The word for vagina, Ahkiitan, he told us while lighting up a third cigarette, comes from the word, Ahkii, which means the land. Anishinaabe know that a woman is sacred because she comes from this earth. She is rooted in. She carries it within her and like the land sustains us, she sustains her community and family. This is why vagina can never be an insult to Anishinaabe, because a woman is the heart of our people. He continued on to tell us several different ways to insult people using variations of the word penis, including my favorite, pijakaans or little prick in English.

There are many gender-based teachings in my culture. Anishinaabe worldview does not include notions of identity construction or even free will. We come from creation. We carry responsibilities rooted in our clans, our names, and the ceremonies we participate in. This includes our gendered responsibilities as well. In the teachings I've heard, our spirits choose the families we will be born into. I've always struggled with this conception as an abuse survivor. My spirit chose to be abused? I'm not certain I can accept that, but I do accept the concept that we came to this land from spirit with specific responsibilities.

What are specific responsibilities I carry? Like all Anishinaabe women, I have a responsibility to the land and its waters to guard their sacredness. I am meant to hold up the centre of my nation, to carry language, culture, governance, and our systems of knowledge forward to future

generations. As a niizh ode woman, I am responsible to facilitate between men and women in relationships and conflict, to protect and nurture other women around me, and to hold my sacredness in all my relationships. I am a Bear Clan woman, the ones who guard and protect our communities. We are supposed to be fearless in our love. Brave, defiant, stubborn, ready to sound the alarm at the first sign of danger. We call out violence within and without our communities. We challenge people who hold power and we question oppression. We nurture through plant and land medicines. We heal ourselves in private.

There is no way to separate my gender from my responsibilities in Anishinaabe worldview. One gives birth to the other in an infinite loop. Western culture is polarized between understandings of gender that either root it as determined by biological “sex” or a more feminist framing that sees gender as social performance. As a trans woman, I negotiate these conflicting perspectives. Most people, regardless of their ideological association, believe both of these viewpoints to some degree. I can be a woman to them but a different kind of woman because of my body. I am eligible for certain portions of femininity (activism, dress, expression) while denied access to other portions (desirability, heterosexuality, socialization). It is a complex landscape. No one tells me how they view my gender in explicit terms, so I read their positions by their behavior towards me. Does the pronoun “she” have an upper vocal inflection when they use it to describe me, as if they’re making mental effort to remember my gender? Do men respond to my body and sexuality as if I am a woman or a man? How do the unspoken rules around my gender present themselves in my daily conversations with friends?

My race is rarely factored into how people perceive my gender. Because I am white passing (light skin, brown to blonde, blue eyes), I am often erased as an Indigenous woman. In ways similar to my erasure as a woman, I’m reduced to a lesser category of “Indianness”. It’s fine that I assert an identity as an Indigenous woman to others, but they never factor matters of race or history into their interactions with me. The public acceptance of my race and gender contrasts the inner erasure of my race and gender. People won’t vocalize this discomfort or confusion because they don’t want to wear the label of racist or transphobe, so I can’t challenge or question how I’m read. I can only guess based on their responses.

This form of mind blindness, not knowing how I’m being read or the borders of my believability as myself, is a pervasive violence. It leaves me vulnerable to misreading people’s responses to

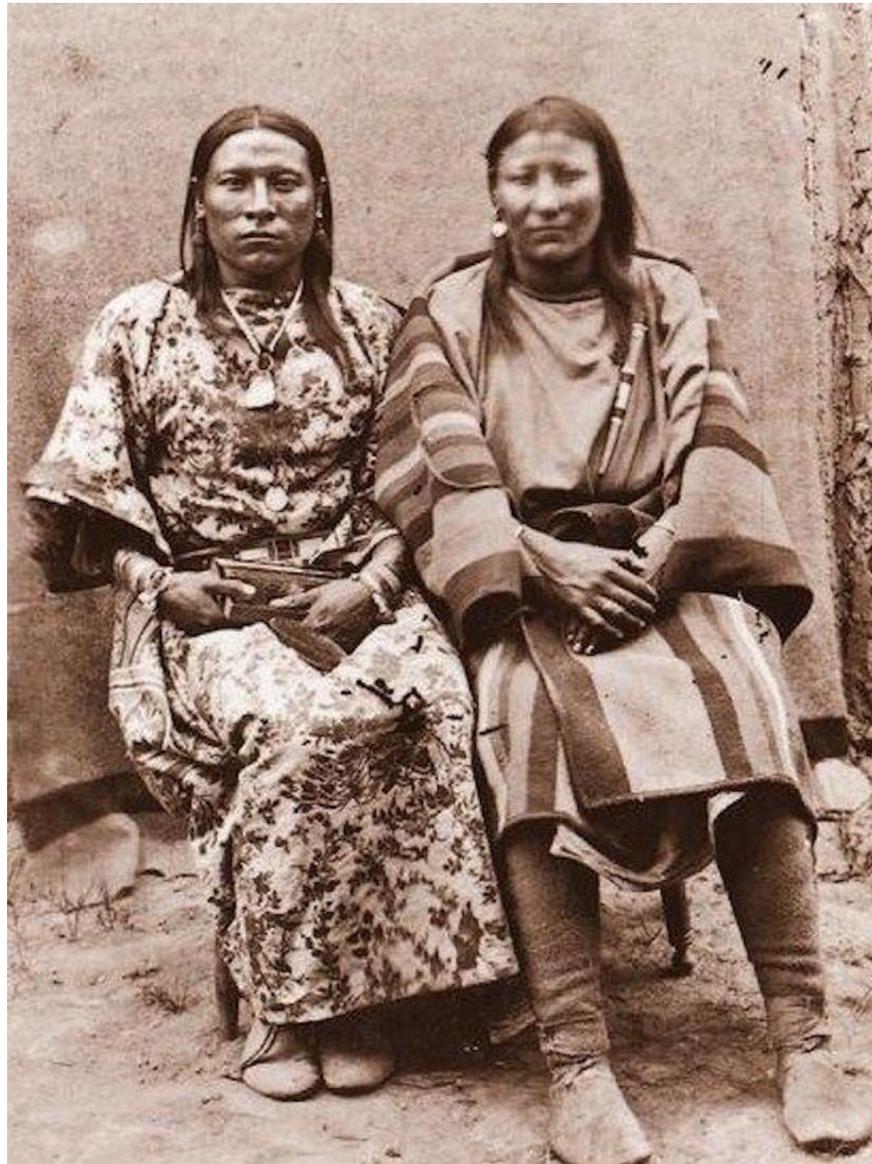
me as prejudice when they may not be. It prevents me from undertaking the vital work of education and engaging across difference. More importantly to this conversation, it covers my life in a shroud of nothingness. What is a woman if she is never touched nor seen? What am I if I have no language for my body? The tension of living caught between the constant reality of harassment in public and the careful neutrality of my intimate relations with friends and coworkers is the most disempowering force in my life.

Of course, I know what I am. A woman, a traditional and sometimes non-traditional Anishinaabe woman. What is missed in the arguments for self love and internal validation of your gender is that social agency is dependent on other human beings. My self-understanding matters, but it doesn't grant me access to positive sexual and romantic relations, the privilege to have meaningful engagements with other people where my gender and race isn't invalidated, or the shared benefits of emotional and material resources which come through relationships. Wholeness is shared and created in relationships between bodies.

Inside Anishinaabe worldview, I am whole and free of the contradictions of Western mentalities. Anishinaabe worldview does not exist within the social space I navigate. My friends are mostly non-Indigenous. My romantic partners are usually white men. I participate and engage within a Western social context in a majority of my life. Anishinaabe worldview only exists in little spaces within Toronto and across Ontario. We are cut off from intellectual engagement with each other and the dominant thought systems. Even within Anishinaabe spaces, trans women aren't always welcome. Western systems of gender and sexuality assert themselves. The only place I am free is within my writing. Within a conversation between land, my gookum and ancestors, and my body, I sew myself together. A half-life, a second truth, working with the only power I have, the same as every Indigenous woman I know.

We're the ones who hold the circle of our nations together but no one holds us together as whole women. We're seen and loved in pieces.

~



Two Spirit women, Cree, date and subject unknown

wiindigo^{vi} looks
for my heart

i'm hidden in
folds of land

i carry her
in my mind

a prayer
is longing

for this sweet
earth breaking

open in hands
like the budding

of my body,
I am here

and not here,
I am holy

and not holy
in equal measure.

to love is to know
loosely call by

blood memory,
ancestors sing

at dusk to dawn
in every breath-

i breathe stars,

exhale truth.

this is a gift
to be born

inside two hearts
to believe in

the moon rising
as if I am

a heron lifting
up from clear water.

this is how *ahkii*^{vii}
births me.

As a transgender 2 Spirit Anishinaabe woman, I do not have a vagina yet. I plan on undergoing surgery to create one within my body in the next 8 months, but in this moment, I am Ahkiitan less. In Anishinaabe worldview, this does not negate my role as a woman. Often when we speak about being 2 Spirited, we are talking about being gay or lesbian. My understanding of the 2 Spirit teachings I've received are mainly focused on gender, not sexuality. What we think of as trans women in the Western world seems like a close parallel for conceptions of 2 Spirit in the Anishinaabe world of my ancestors. We were born into male identified bodies, perceived by our grandmothers as carrying a special set of responsibilities, and were raised from a young age as women within our communities. We carried the responsibilities of any other Anishinaabe women, but had some additional ones related to our unique attributes.

We raised children who had lost their parents or kin. We often worked for the community directly in a variety of roles, including political and ceremonial. We usually had several husbands. We were the last line of defense in our communities if we were attacked while our

men were hunting. We were celebrated as orators and storytellers. We cared for other women during pregnancy and menstruation. Some ceremonies are centered around our participation and leadership. We were as sacred as any Anishinaabe woman is. We did not have vaginas, but we always had our responsibility and relationship to land.

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One of my favourite traditional stories is about Nanabush or Aayash, our first ancestor and the being who populates many of our legends. He often reflects our humanity back to us, making mistakes or illustrating worldviews through his behavior. Our stories are not moral parables but were often recorded by Western anthropologists as such. They usually stripped the sexual content from our legends due to their bias or discomfort. The original stories, told through our worldview and language, are rich depositories of knowledge and sites of inquiry. Storytelling was our version of Anishinaabe university, the space we constructed and discussed the complex frameworks of belief and insight.

In this story of Nanabush, he is wandering through the bush when he sees a young Anishinaabe man in the distance. He finds the man very desirable and decides to seek sexual contact with the man. To achieve this desire, Nanabush feminizes himself, taking on the dress and mannerism of a woman. He makes himself into the form of what he imagines the man will find sexually pleasing. Once she is changed, Nanabush approaches the young man and solicits him for sex. She is successful and after some foreplay, they begin intercourse. Within the story, Nanabush participates as the receptive anal partner to the man. She lets him penetrate her.

The story changes once the young man is penetrating Nanabush. She finds the sex uncomfortable. She realizes this isn't what she wants and for whatever reason, she becomes afraid of her sexual contact with the man. She breaks away from him and runs off into the bush. She returns to her male body as Nanabush. The story ends there and is often told in a humorous structure. I have many questions about this story and what it illustrates about my worldview.

Gender is performance in the story or a fluid state. Nanabush moves between gendered embodied within the narrative. He alters his gender in response to desire, becoming what he thinks the man wants. She initiates sex very directly and her partner is responsive. There doesn't appear to be any mismatch between their desires, but their sexual contact is still relational to their bodies.

Nanabush doesn't grow a vagina. It's highly probable that she could, as a being of immense spiritual power, but she doesn't need a vagina to elicit sexual desire in her partner.

Why does the story centre Nanabush's gender in relation to sexuality and desire? What about her partner draws her to him? What changes in her desire once she begins intercourse? Is the humor because she is “crossdressing” or because she doesn't know what she wants? We can observe that Anishinaabe worldview has different comforts with sex, about a woman initiating sexual contact or about a man having sexual contact with a woman who possesses a penis. Gender is clearly not rooted in biology in this story, but it does not also position their sexual practice as homosexual. What's the lesson here? Is it wrong to become a woman or that understanding what you desire is complex?

I don't think it's useful to look for simple moral teachings from the story. The traditional use of stories was to generate questions, not answers. The value is that it shows Nanabush, our most significant legendary being who often represents us as Anishinaabe people, moving between gender states and sexual practice. It is profoundly sex positive. If Nanabush represents our ancestor, we are directly implicated in her desire and sexuality. To Indigenous people who suggest transgender and same sex relations are a Western corruption, Nanabush isn't a foreigner.

She is literally our humanity, questioning and exploring herself within sexual practice and gender. I perceive the story as a message coded within our worldview: yes, it is normal to question your gender, to move between gendered expressions, to have desire and seek sexual fulfillment, to decide what you thought you wanted is not what you want, to experiment, to have sexual partners who possess bodies different from your other sexual partners, and that anal sex is not something outside of our culture. I also wonder if the story is a form of sexual education, a way of our ancestors saying “hey if you're going to take a dick anally, it might be painful the first time. Practice first?”.

~

I have spent
half my life

denying the girl

I carry inside.

now I spend
my life being

denied as her,
double talk

wiindigo^{viii} white boys think
I'm not whole,

tell what I'm worth,
half a woman

not meant to be
held like other girls,

here in the bush
I move like rivers

across a land
which wants

me as I am,
as close and deep

as starfall over
the spruce trees.

no one tells me
who I can be,

denies me

the love

I hold like breath

inside hollow bones.

windigo^{ix} boys

can't hurt me

under the light

of my grandmother's moon,

nothing is denied,

no artificial boundaries

white boys make

around my body's land

can survive the wonder

of this new earth.

I am the girl

the wild made me.

ahkii desires me

as much as I desire her,

together we sing

this sky *apane*^x.

Colonization, Christianity, and Residential Schools have eroded much, if not all, of our responsibilities and stories as Anishinaabe trans women. We are the most vulnerable and stigmatized members of our communities. 2 Spirit identified youth have the highest rates of suicide and harm in our communities. We suffer unparalleled violence and are often forced into sex work as a means of survival. I have never heard any Anishinaabe public figure speak about transphobia or Anishinaabe trans women. Despite this separation of culture and spirit, we remain holy.

While the Canadian government was stripping us of our humanity and responsibilities as 2 Spirit Trans women, they were also stealing and appropriating our traditional lands. We come from two distinct violations, the degradation of our gender and the separation from our land. Like other Anishinaabe women, we carry responsibilities for our waterways and stewardship of our environment. When an Indigenous woman is forcibly relocated from her land or denied basic governance of her territory, it is a spiritual rape of our bodies. Land sovereignty is directly linked to body sovereignty. You cannot break apart Anishinaabe womanhood from our land. We are connected by spirit into a web of relationships, which stretches back through time to our first ancestors. We carry those relations into the future in our bodies.

I lack the fundamental power to reclaim my lands. Most of us as Anishinaabe women lack the fundamental power to reclaim our lands. The Indian Act was designed to disenfranchise Indigenous women and their descendants from traditional territories and community governance. We have been caught in a cycle of violence, murder, and poverty for generations. We have resisted in profound ways. We fought the government of Canada in court and forced modifications to the Indian Act. Any moment of Indigenous resistance in Canada and the United States has been fueled and powered by Indigenous women. We broke academic barriers. We wrote books and made art. We forged new nations. Still we suffer from a profound separation from our bodies and land.

This is why I write to and from my land. My writing is a response to the violence I have experienced. I centre my body in my land. I approach my sexuality and gender in the same way I used to run towards my gookum's bush. I lean into my land by day and at night, my land leans into me. The connection is not broken. My womanhood is whole. By situating my writing and

poetry within a bed of sweetgrass, I call my ancestors to me. This is not a metaphor, but a daily practice.

One of the best pieces of writing advice I ever received was from my elder. He looked at me and said “it’s not wrong to long for your ancestors”. I take this as permission to reach back to them, to draw them into my life and my work. Every time I write, I ask for help. This is not like Joseph Boyden’s recent claims to author his stories from the ancestral voices in blood. I do not use my ancestors to deny responsibility. I am more responsible because I write with and to them. It is not a refusal of my agency as a writer, but embracing the ways I am situated in a profound set of responsibilities and relations. I remember the same elder asking a group of Anishinaabe youth what being Anishinaabe means. People had great answers about our art, our spirituality, and our history as warriors. He waited until everyone offered an opinion and replied, “To me, being Anishinaabe means being responsible”.

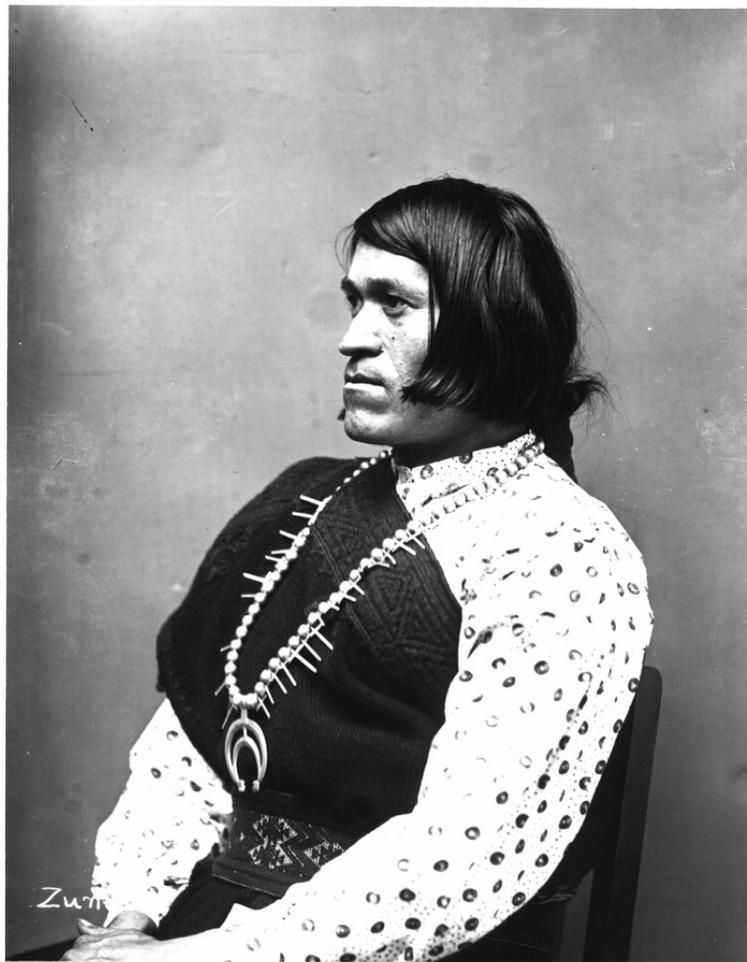
Writing is responsibility. Being an Anishinaabe woman is responsibility. Being a trans Anishinaabe woman is a greater responsibility. The land sits beneath me. I carry life within me. I am connected to the whole. This is what makes Indigenous trans women sacred. Not our vaginas or our sexual practice, but our relationships to our ancestors and the many diverse beings who inhabit the world we walk in. One of the many things taken from us by state violence is the understanding of our bodies as holy and the vital need for our men to reflect that sacredness in their relationship to us.

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I remember when I began my transition. I expected difficulties, but I assume my natural resilience would overcome them. I trusted in the relationships that populated my life. I naively believed that I knew what would come as I went through hormone treatment and into my womanhood. I didn’t plan my transition as many other women I know did. I blurted out I was transitioning in a staff meeting at work. A few days later, I announced it on Facebook even though I had no idea what it meant for me. The day after I told the wider public world my transition, I came home from work defeated. There was a new intensity of fear around me, which I had never felt before. Was I making the right decision? What would my life become? Did I want hormones knowing the medical risks?

I walked into my apartment that day and lay on my bed. I started crying, something I rarely do, and felt as far away from myself as I've ever come. There was a sudden sense of presence in the room, a weight of energy moving towards me. I had the sensation of women singing, a warmth which enveloped me in the uncanny feeling of my gookum's personality. I don't frame this as mystical experience in a Western sense, but in that moment, I knew I was walking a path which my grandmothers had set before me since I was born. Blood memory and spirit pulls me. This is my connection.

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We'wha, Zuni 2 Spirit, 1849–1896

There are almost no visible Indigenous trans women in the wider public. To my knowledge, I am one of the only published Indigenous trans woman authors in North America. I know of two other Indigenous trans women in the city I live in. All of us are disconnected in some way from our communities, often moving in white or other racialized trans spaces without an inherent recognition of our Indigenous nationhood. The phrase 2 Spirit is almost always applied to gay or lesbian Indigenous writers. They are well represented in our literature and art. Recently, there was a special Indigenous centered issue of a major Canadian literary magazine and none of the published writers were transgender. Indigenous and transgender are not allowed to be connected in our communities or in mainstream Canadian society. We are the invisible descendants of the 2 Spirit women I only know through historical photographs.

I am enriched by the work of many gay and lesbian Indigenous writers and thinkers. I am not arguing for their exclusion from the label of 2 Spirit nor am I disputing the space they've built through their activism. The work of 2 Spirit writers and artists is central to our regeneration as Indigenous peoples, but so is the recognition of Indigenous trans women. We need to remember that Western understandings of sexuality and sexual practice do not define our understandings as Anishinaabe. Homosexuality and heterosexuality are recent inventions of Western society rooted in economic and social distinctions. We did not have the same framework for naming the relationship between gender and sexual practice. The disruption of our cultures and language makes it difficult to identify what our understandings were, but there are some values that we know from oral tradition and Jesuit writings.

We did not have a system of monogamous marriage in Anishinaabe culture. We had flexible extended family systems and often had romantic triads. Sister wives, multiple husbands, a summer and a winter partner, a relatively uncomplicated system of decoupling from romantic partnerships, and ardent intolerance for sexual violence or abuse are some characteristics of traditional Anishinaabe sexual and gender based relations. We were perceived by Western audiences as immoral because of open and often public sexual practice. We lived in very close proximity to each other and often with several generations together. Sexuality was not seen as shameful, functioning as key plot element of our traditional stories. In other words, our system of sexual practices and relations did not bear much, if any, resemblance to Western societies.



2 Spirit Women, Nation and date unknown

Gender remains a more complicated facet of our culture. We know through teachings and traditional stories that gender based responsibilities were central to our governance and spirituality. Gender appears to function separate from our physical bodies in Anishinaabe culture, at least in regards to 2 Spirit women. We take on gender-based responsibilities because of our spirits in Anishinaabe worldview, not our genitals. There is agency involved and a wider community recognition of our unique embodiment. From all the teachings I have heard in my life, 2 Spirit Anishinaabe women were not perceived as different from other Anishinaabe women. We had the same opportunities for sexual and romantic partners. We were not paired

with other 2 Spirit women as our romantic partners, but men from within our communities. What does this mean in terms of sexuality and gender in Anishinaabe culture? We weren't queer in a Western sense, but naming what our role was complicated.

Why does it matter to identify a cultural framework for 2 Spirit women in relation to contemporary transgender identity? It doesn't to non-Indigenous people and perhaps to the wider Indigenous 2 Spirit community. For women like me, embodied as Indigenous and transgender, it is an attempt to connect the pieces of our identities into the bodies we currently possess. I see my gender as an extension of my nation. My body is a literal descendant of my Indigenous ancestors. How do I connect these parts of myself within the heart of my culture without disconnecting myself from the land I come from? Not possessing a language to name your gender and body is to be dehumanized. This is what colonization has always sought to do to Indigenous nations, to kill our ability to speak and understand ourselves within our own worldviews.

This is the space I write to. I take the pieces of culture and language I have and weave them into my writing. I hold my land around me. In my mind, I see the 2 Spirit women before me, the ones I only know through archival research and academic theorizing. Often they do not have names. Often they are described by non-2 Spirit Indigenous writers or claimed by gay or lesbian Indigenous communities. They look like the Indigenous trans women I know. They have our faces, our complicated bodies, and above all else, they have our souls. We know from historical records that the first ones killed by the European invaders were 2 Spirit women. Out of the many aspects of Indigenous nations that terrified them, we represented the deepest threat.

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The most famous 2 Spirit Anishinaabe trans woman is Ozaawindib or “Yellowhead”. She is often represented by white and Indigenous academics as a gay Anishinaabe man, but it's clear from the description of her attributes that she was analogous to being a trans woman today. The language used to describe her by the white observers is eerily similar to how many transphobes describe trans women today, “one of those men who make themselves women.”^{xi} She was a war chief, responsible for leading incursions against rival communities and defending her community. This is principally a male gendered role in Anishinaabe community, so it is an interesting example of how complex our traditional embodiments were. Why does no Indigenous

scholar claim her as a trans woman? It seems unusual to argue that transgender bodies are not part of Anishinaabe worldviews by asserting that gay men are. Who are her descendants, the gay men who identity and present as male or the trans woman who present as female within society? She is as much our ancestors as theirs.

We know of her because she was romantically interested in John Tanner, a white settler who writes about her in his diary. He is apparently horrified and disgusted by her, claiming to reject her romantic advances. Throughout the recorded details of their interaction, it becomes clear that Tanner may be recording her as disgusting in order to placate his sense of self about their likely romantic and sexual contact. In essence, the most famous Anishinaabe trans woman in history is only known because of her romantic engagement with a white man, a white man who goes to great length to defame and deny his desire for her and their connection. I find this parallel to modern narratives of trans dating and sexuality uncanny. How many times in my romantic life have I been Ozaawindib, visible only through my partner's public denial of my gender, desirability, and sexuality. They are ashamed to love or sleep with us but drawn to our unique power. Holy, defiled.

When I look at the rates of murder and sexual violence against Indigenous trans women in Canada, I see we still terrify them. I think of how many times since I've transitioned that my life has been in danger. How many times I've come close to rape. How many times someone has mocked me or told me I'm not a real woman. How many times a man rejected my femininity as real. The violence we are surrounded by is a direct extension of the violence brought against our lands. When a society lacks a fundamental respect for women and their bodies, they lose connection to respecting the world that sustains us. Indigenous trans women stand in front of so much hate. Racism, sexism, colonization, misogyny, transphobia, and homophobia define the scope and shape of our lives.

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How do we respond? How do we survive? More importantly, how do we reclaim our bodies and relationship to creation? The answer is returning to a profound love. As author Junot Diaz states in an interview with the Boston Review (2012), "The kind of love that I was interested in, that my characters long for intuitively, is the only kind of love that could liberate them from that

horrible legacy of colonial violence. I am speaking about decolonial love”. This is a conception of love that resonates with me as an Indigenous trans women. I want to return to a space in my intimate and sexual relations where my body is approached as sacred and complete, where my Anishinaabe heart can rest with my partner’s whiteness and not be consumed, where the love I give and receive is open to possibilities and my relationships are not defined by heterosexuality or Western monogamy.

I like Leanne Simpson’s simple framing of Decolonial Love best in her poetic song about cultural reclamation, “under her always light”. She instructs her listener, “get two husbands and a wife. Make them insane with good love”. This is closest to the relational space I want to inhabit in my body. If my body is holy as an Anishinaabe niizh ode, then I don’t need to hide the parts of my body that move outside Western binaries of being female. If my love is an extension of creation, then it must be given freely to those in my life without shame, jealousy, or price. If my sex and pleasure are celebrated within my culture, then it is central to my wholeness. I can’t change how others see me, the lines of their erasure and desire, which write my body out of the story of womanhood, but I can write myself into the world as sacred.

I see decolonial love as an answer to the separation of Indigenous trans women from our communities and land. Much of the burden of living within this body is rooted in fundamental absence of love, which surrounds me. When I transitioned, I realized no one touched me anymore. Soon after starting hormones, I stopped having sex with men because I felt a pervasive othering of my body in sexual relations. I feel the violence of desirability as an intimate weapon. Sometimes it overwhelms me. Sometimes I long for a love that is given freely, that I don’t earn through my gender performance or the fetishization of my body. I want to be free from a world that doesn’t see or value me, so I build within myself a lodge of my culture, a space where the words and hostility directed at me is met with a fierce love. I imagine Makwaa embracing me. I seek every small love in any opening in the borders of whiteness and gender I can find. This is what my ancestors taught me to do, surviving for generations in a cold and changing land by being adaptable and brave.

A decolonial love flows from creation and through the land to our bodies. This is not a platitude but a spiritual reality. In Anishinaabe culture, an orphaned child is considered very powerful. Because they have been severed from their kin relations, the spirits come closer to them. The

land reaches out as our original mother to hold them up. I think the same relationship exists for Indigenous trans women. Severed from our community role, in danger and under attack, the ancestors walk with us. Our land responds to our need. We become more holy in our pain, not less.

This what I work to do in my writing. Author us as Indigenous trans women as powerful and connected to creation. Write over the slurs and shame surrounding our bodies. Transmit what I know of my culture and our value into words to carry across the land. Reconnect us back to where we come from. Imagine our lives as filled with love and trust. Challenge and question masculinity, threaten Western conceptions of sexuality and gender, and demand our communities stand with us. Lee Maracle, a celebrated Sto'lo author, says that Indigenous poetry is prayer. I am praying in every line I write.

In ceremony, we name the forces of creation and call those beings to sit with us. Every poem is a ceremony. Every image of land is a request for those ones to join us again. I write the way back to my gookum's farmhouse. I am longing for my ancestors. My life is difficult, but I am not broken in this work because I carry the waters of my grandmothers with me. I imagine a new future for my people, a space where we return to our bodies as whole beings. I see us standing together, interwoven with stars and cedar, as a vibrant circle of light around this land. This is not mythology, but prophecy.

I come back
to every bush

I've lost,
as if promise

is my destiny,
as if nothing

they have done
is great enough

to take this
woman

from me,
she rests

in kiizhik^{xii} groves,
she dreams

her spirit
home.

she dreams
all our spirits

through lakes
inside storms

she is singing
and the sound

of her voice
travels to echo

in me as if
I am the shape

of her entire dreaming.

I remember an elder telling me I was contaminated. He looked at my blue eyes and said I was infected by the enemy. This is how I often feel as a trans woman. Filthy, corrupted, inviolate, a woman who hides a sickness. When I'm intimate with men, I often try to hide the parts of my body which don't conform to what they expect of a woman. I am paying a surgeon to erase the male parts of my face. I'm training my voice to fall into female ranges. This fall, I will be booking a surgery date to change my genitals. I never told any of my casual partners that I was native. I let them assume whiteness. I pretend to be always female.

Of course, I used to be a man. Of course, I am Anishinaabe. Who we are is often who we are allowed to be. I keep the dangerous parts of me a secret. I learned men's medicines from many of the elders I worked with. For several years, I was a regular firekeeper, making and maintaining the sacred fire which sits at centre of many of our ceremonies. I moved through the world of men without ever feeling part of them. I still hold both parts of me somewhere.

I learned quickly in my transition that any signs of masculinity would erase you to the world. Display masculinity in any context as a trans woman and you will be thought of as a pervert. I have to always be feminine or risk retribution and shame. I remember wearing a sweatshirt to work one day. A female coworker stopped me in the hall and said "Well you don't look very feminine today, do you?". Her scorn followed me for weeks. I realized the only way to be desirable to my male partners was to inhabit my femininity as deeply as I could. Hide what couldn't yet be changed, disguise what wasn't right. Highlight my eyes to draw attention away from my nose.

This is where Anishinaabe worldviews differs from Western understandings of being a trans women. 2 Spirit women were allowed to pick up male medicines and responsibilities when they chose to. Sometimes, we picked them up because there was no men around and it was needed. If our women and children were attacked when the men were away hunting, it was the 2 Spirit women who went first to battle against the invaders. We needed to know both sides of gender, to kill and to give life. I have some of him in me still, as much as he feels like someone I knew a long time ago.

I find this imbalance relational to my perceived whiteness. I am read as white by the world so I hide the Anishinaabe in me. Other half breed women have tricks to make their race visible, beaded jewelry, dying their hair black, or heavy black eyeliner. I've watched these racial modifications play out in many ways. Sometimes pride, sometimes shame. How similar am I in my transness? Playing with presentation, looking for way to blend in. Do you celebrate your unique humanity or carefully disguise the parts no one wants?

I find my body fascinating in its current state. I like the shifts between male and female in its form. A woman's breasts, a man's ribcage, a woman's hips, a man's penis. There is something soft in my body. There is something hard in my body. I am both, leaning slowly towards the feminine but holding on to the masculine. Why is this not beautiful? Why is this not desirable? Why must everything be simple for white people to value it? Why can't I be as complicated my 2 Spirit ancestors? Why do I have erase myself in order for men to see me as real? I miss Anishinaabe worldview. I am contaminated, but not by my white ancestor's skin colour or eyes. I am infected by their dreams, what they are willing to embrace.

I imagine a love where I am a girl who becomes a boy when she wants to. I imagine a love where I am an Anishinaabe who takes the parts of whiteness which are useful. I refuse to be loved in pieces. I am already whole.

~



2 Spirit/ Trans educational posters, Native Youth Sexual Health Network, Toronto

When I received my Anishinaabe name, I was wearing long floral dress. I was introduced to creation as a woman. This is one part of my identity, which has not changed since I transitioned. I remember my gookum teaching me to make bread in her kitchen. She did not make go outside to play with my male cousins. She let me stay with her, learning the borders of her world. We never spoke of it before she died, but I think she knew what I was before anyone else did. I come to my body through her body. I pass through every woman in my family to return to myself. This is what is sacred in me.

There many fears and misunderstandings of what it is to be a trans woman. Everyone I meet carries some of these misconceptions. I often feel like an educator, explaining and naming my body to the world. Despite the increased visibility, we are not known as ourselves to the wider world. Similar to how the non-Indigenous world mythologizes Indigenous peoples as savage and primordial, trans women are demonized and misunderstood by the cis world we walk in. To live between both of these erasures, as a woman and as an Indigenous citizen, is a strange and lonely

path. Being Indigenous separates me from the non-Indigenous world and being trans often separates me from the Indigenous world.

One of the great traumas of colonization is the separation of Indigenous peoples from our worldviews. By breaking apart our families and repressing our languages, colonization deprived us of our intellectual inheritance from our ancestors. My ancestors spent thousands of years learning and theorizing what gender and sexuality meant to them. They built profound systems of kinship and sexual practice designed to create loving and health family units. They must have made mistakes as well, insights we could have learned from now. I cannot reconnect all of the threads which have been severed.

My elder told us that nothing is lost. To him, our languages and worldviews were living beings that inhabited a space separate from time. He wasn't worried about appropriation or language loss. I remember him saying, “If Anishinaabe needs those things, they only need to ask for them and they'll be here”. At the time, I didn't believe him. Now, having walked through this transition to come back to myself, I understand the power in seeking wholeness. When you ask, they answer. We need to, as Indigenous writers and communities, ask for those 2 Spirit teachings to return to us. We need to find new ways to form romantic and sexual bonds between and within our genders. We must hold up Indigenous trans women if we are to come back to ourselves.

In the heart of my writing, I am standing on a lakeshore watching a heron dive. I am walking through a low brush of cedars by a swamp bank. I am drifting through an estuary towards a wide muskeg. I am standing in the dark of spruce trees in winter. I am building a lodge out of willow branches. I am peeling layers of birch bark off my skin. I placing tobacco alongside a river while thunders move overhead. This is not mystical. This is not imagining a spiritual destiny. This is the only way I know to be a woman: on my land, in my waters, through my grandmothers, working on behalf of my relations, and sustaining my worldview one metaphor at a time. This has always been the responsibility of an Anishinaabe 2 Spirit woman. I am responsible.

some day

I will return

to the land
I carry.

some day
my sisters

the murdered
the raped

all of us
Indian women

will return
to the holy earth.

until then
I sleep inside

the softness
of my land

I will speak
us whole,

kill *wiindigo*^{xiii}
with truth,

be a girl rooted
in *ahkii*^{xiv} like

an oak tree.

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ⁱ Oak Tree

ⁱⁱ Bear Clan

ⁱⁱⁱ Two Hearts (2 Spirit)

^{iv} Grandmother

^v Earth

^{vi} Legendary being, a cannibal, one who is hungry/consumes others to feed self, the spirit of starvation (whiteness)

^{vii} Earth

^{viii} Legendary being, a cannibal, one who is hungry/consumes others to feed self, the spirit of starvation (whiteness)

^{ix} Legendary being, a cannibal, one who is hungry/consumes others to feed self, the spirit of starvation (whiteness)

^x Forever, always

^{xi} A narrative of the captivity and adventures of John Tanner, (U.S. interpreter at the Saut de Ste. Marie,) during thirty years residence among the Indians in the interior of North America, ed. Edwin James (New York, 1830; repr., intro. N. M. Loomis, Minneapolis, Minn., 1956)

^{xii} Cedar

^{xiii} Legendary being, cannibal, a spirit of hunger, (whiteness)

^{xiv} Earth