



Chapter 6

Gender in BIPOC and Subaltern Cultures

6.1. Recentering on BIPOC and Subaltern conceptions of gender

“BIPOC” is a fairly recent acronym, meaning “Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.” It was developed by some BIPOC groups in Canada as an expansion of the “POC” (People of Colour) acronym in order to make explicit some of the distinct ways in which Black and Indigenous people have historically experienced racialization and colonialism in Canada. In particular, both Black and Indigenous people were enslaved in Canada, and (at least for the first Black people in Canada) neither were immigrants in the way that other POC were. While the term “BIPOC” originated in Canada, it is starting to be taken up in other parts of the English-speaking world. “Subaltern” is a technical term that refers, most broadly, to those peoples most excluded by colonial imperial systems of power, but is often used to denote the colonized peoples of the Indian sub-continent.

The title of this chapter is an uneasy compromise. “BIPOC” is an umbrella term for non-white racializations, but a racialization is not a culture. There is, in strictness, no such thing as a BIPOC culture. However, the conceptions of gender and sex that we have discussed over the last few chapters have mostly derived from white, European cultures. In this chapter, we survey a variety of conceptions of gender in Indigenous, Black, and subaltern cultures and subcultures. Arguably, the only terms that capture that conjunction of categories are “non-Western” or “non-European,” but it would be a shame to prominently use “European” or “Western” in the title of a chapter that aims to shift the focus away from Europe and the West.

It is tempting to follow Lugones (discussed below), who uses the term “non-modern” to name an alternative framework to colonial modernity. However, not all members of Indigenous, Black, and subaltern cultures see themselves as non-modern. Alternatively, we could say “majority cultures” since the majority of human beings alive today are BIPOC and live in non-Western cultures. However, many of us have been conditioned to think about BIPOC people as “minorities”; so, “majority cultures” would be too confusing in a title. The difficulty of getting around white Western conceptions is telling, isn’t it?

Across cultures, gender, as expressed in organizing principles, linguistic practices, and identity categories, plays out very differently. For instance, a central organizing principle for the Quechua people of Peru is “warmiqhari”—*woman-man*—which represents balance and completeness. According to the warmiqhari principle, men and women must both take part in community decisions. Thus, for many political and community events, men and women must pair up to participate since a man or woman without the other is seen as incomplete. Another example: while many people in the West continue to cling tight to gendered pronouns like “he” or “she,” most Austronesian languages do not have gendered pronouns, and instead refer to all people with the equivalent of English “they.” Finally, many Indigenous and non-Western cultures embrace a range of third genders, with members of those genders holding respected roles in society. Among these are the *machi* gender of the Mapuche people of Chile, the *muxe* of the Zapotec people of Oaxaca, Samoa’s

fa'afafine and *fa'afatama* genders, the *bakla* gender in the Phillipines, and the *nádleehí* in Diné (Navajo) culture.¹

In this chapter, we will focus in particular on third gender and Two Spirit people Indigenous to Turtle Island, the hijras of the Indian sub-continent, and aggressive/AG identities in Black American queer culture.

As we do, it is important to avoid treating BIPOC cultures as monolithic, or as unchanging and historical. There is enormous variation both within and between BIPOC cultures, including in their gender concepts and norms. Further, while museums and textbooks sometimes seem to portray Indigenous and colonized peoples and cultures as “from the past,” those peoples and cultures continue to exist and change with the times, as all peoples and cultures do. Further, those changes occur in the context of colonialism and variously reflect the effects of colonialism, resistance to colonialism, or reclaiming from colonialism.

Argentinian feminist philosopher María Lugones is one of several BIPOC scholars who argues that one of the effects—or, more strongly, one of the *methods*—of colonialism was (and is) to impose a “categorical, dichotomous, hierarchical logic” on colonized peoples and cultures.² Lugones argues that the central dichotomy of colonial modernity is the hierarchy between humans and non-humans. On this view, colonial powers imposed the modern, colonial gender system as part of a framework that established white Europeans as civilized and fully human. By contrast, colonized peoples were represented as falling outside of the modern gender system, and were thus constructed as uncivilized and non-human. Indigenous peoples’ non-modern gender frameworks thus both excluded them from the category of human, and exposed them to violent efforts to eradicate those frameworks in order to civilize and ultimately humanize them.

Lugones maps out modes of resistance to the coloniality of gender for racialized women. For Lugones, resistance to the

1 The Los Angeles County Natural History Museum has an informative and accessible series on some of these genders: <https://nhm.org/stories/beyond-gender-indigenous-perspectives-muxe>.

2 María Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 742.

coloniality of gender is not the goal of political struggle but its beginning.³ On this account, the reclamation of non-modern conceptions of gender is at the core of resistance to colonialism. For Lugones, non-modern “knowledges, logical, economic, and spiritual practices” are not pre-modern, although colonial modernity treats them as pre-modern. Rather, they are at odds with the categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logic of colonial modernity.⁴

An influential example of the kind of reclamation Lugones describes is Oyèrónkẹ̀ Oyěwùmí’s *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997). Focusing on Yoruba society, Oyěwùmí argues that gender as an organizing principle is a Western imposition rooted in “biologization,” the Western practice of deriving social meaning from biology. On Oyěwùmí’s account, Yoruba society does not ground social legitimacy in biology. For the Yoruba, Oyěwùmí argues, the main organizing principle is not gender but relative age conceived in terms of relationships rather than biology. Oyěwùmí’s critique targets not only Western colonialism but also Western feminism, which, she argues, paradoxically takes gender to be socially constructed even while assuming the subordination of women to be universal across human populations.

6.2. Gender on Turtle Island

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Turtle Island, the continent currently called North America, was home to an amazing diversity of Indigenous nations. While five hundred years of European colonization enormously disrupted that diversity, there remain many distinct Indigenous peoples. In Canada alone, there are more than seventy Indigenous languages, belonging to twelve language groups. Unsurprisingly, then, the understanding of gender was and is incredibly varied within Turtle Island Indigenous cultures. This section provides only a brief glimpse of that variety.

3 Lugones, 746.

4 Lugones, 743.

6.2.1. Inuit gender diversity

French-Canadian anthropologist Bernard Saladin d'Anglure has for many decades worked closely with the Inuit peoples of Canada's far North, producing invaluable audio-video recordings of ethnographic data (that is, scientific data about the customs of people and cultures). While Saladin d'Anglure is not himself Inuit, he has long maintained close relationships with Inuit communities, with especially deep connections to Igloolik, Nunavut, where his work to preserve Inuit thought and culture is deeply valued. For instance, he was a consultant for Inuk director Zacharias Kunuk's award-winning feature film, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001). *Atanarjuat*, the first film ever to be written, acted, and directed in the Inuktitut language, brings to the screen a five-hundred-year-old Inuit story. As you will see, some of Saladin d'Anglure's source material for his study of Inuit genders likewise comes from centuries-old Inuit oral tradition.

In a 2005 article on what Saladin d'Anglure calls the third gender of the Inuit, he argues that other anthropologists have, for various reasons, wrongly regarded the Inuit as recognizing only two genders. Among those anthropologists Saladin d'Anglure is criticizing, he names the influential French anthropologist Michel Mauss, who held that Inuit society, like all societies, "oscillates between two poles, an individualist pole and a 'communist' pole," where this overarching duality marks "the totality of the social, economic and religious life of a people."⁵

For Saladin d'Anglure, matters of gender are more fundamental than the individual-community division. (See the Chapter 9 discussion of Shulamith Firestone for an elaboration of a very similar view.) Saladin d'Anglure proposes that anthropologists like Mauss failed to detect the complexities associated with gender in Inuit culture precisely because they did not properly understand that gender distinctions form the basic conceptual framework for society. By contrast, Saladin d'Anglure takes these complexities seriously, and he maintains that in Inuit culture, the male-female divide is itself mediated by a third gender.

5 Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, "The 'Third Gender' of the Inuit," 134.

Saladin d'Anglure argues that even anthropologists who have recognized the role of “religious transvestism” among the Inuit have nevertheless tended to neglect it, usually as a result of the broader theoretical frameworks they bring to bear on their research. On the one hand, Marxists, committed to evolutionary accounts of society, regarded Inuit transvestism as a mere remnant of an earlier matriarchal culture. On the other hand, Freudians’ overemphasis on sexuality, and their binaristic understanding of sexual desire hampered their attempts to understand the phenomenon.

A note on transvestism

In mainstream Western culture, “transvestism” is sometimes associated with the practice of cross-dressing in order to experience sexual pleasure. This sense of the term is owing to its usage as a diagnosis by the American Psychiatric Association, which classes “transvestic disorder” as a paraphilia (basically, a condition characterized by unhealthy sexual desires). According to the APA, erotic cross-dressing itself is not a paraphilia; it only crosses that threshold when it causes emotional distress or functional impairment.

In any event, this is not the sense of the term “transvestism” as employed by Saladin d'Anglure. For Saladin d'Anglure, “transvestism” is simply the anthropological term for dressing in the clothing of a different gender, without any psychiatric or sexual connotations.

Saladin d'Anglure attributes to Marxist anthropologists the view (which he does not hold) that religious transvestism—that is, transvestism that plays a part in a religious tradition—is merely a remnant of ancient matriarchal cultures. It is worth noting that there is today considerable skepticism among anthropologists over whether there have ever been any genuine matriarchies.

While “transvestite” and “transvestism” are still used by the APA and by some anthropologists, these terms are infrequently used outside of those contexts, and are often considered offensive, especially in 2SLGBTQ+ contexts.

The phenomenon Saladin d'Anglure seeks to explain, and which gives rise to his theory of an Inuit third gender, is the Inuit practice

of raising some biological females to dress and act as boys, and some biological males to dress and act as girls. Saladin d'Anglure traces this practice both through interviews with Inuit people and, indirectly, through two striking oral tales.

Saladin d'Anglure's interviews provide evidence of two broad motivations for gender-swapping among the Inuit—one economic and one, as he says, “cosmological.” With respect to the former, Saladin d'Anglure reports that in families with a gender imbalance among offspring (i.e., all girls or all boys), it is common for one child to be raised as a member of the other gender in order to perform the duties associated with that gender. Thus, for instance, in an all-girl family, one daughter might be raised as a son so that she can help with the hunt. Conversely, in an all-boy family, one son might be raised as a daughter so that he can help with food preparation and clothing manufacture.

The cosmological motivation is rooted in Inuit spirituality, especially the role of ancestors within that spirituality. Sometimes, writes Saladin d'Anglure, a deceased ancestor will appear in a dream to a child's parents-to-be. This is interpreted as a sign that the ancestor wishes to return and live again through the child. In this case, the parents name the child after the ancestor and the child, regardless of its biological sex, is raised according to that ancestor's gender.

Saladin d'Anglure recounts two oral tales that provide further evidence of an Inuit third gender. In the first, a “strange man” dresses as a woman and adopts feminine gender roles, even giving birth, thanks to supernatural intervention. However, the strange man's child is a baby whale, who ultimately helps the man by luring other whales to shore to be hunted by the man's brothers. Saladin d'Anglure discerns both economic and cosmological aspects in the tale of the strange man. On the one hand, the strange man is one of many brothers, and rather than hunting takes up the female-gendered task of sewing. He thus contributes to gender role balance in the family. However, he also insists that he can't hunt: “I can't! I can't! I am like a woman. How can I when I'm made like this?”⁶ His gender role identification would suggest that his gender-swapping is not

6 Saladin d'Anglure, 135–36.

just economically practical, but is grounded in his deeper sense of self, one Saladin d'Anglure traces to a deceased ancestor.

In the second story, Itijjuaq too is incapable of performing the gendered tasks associated with her sex. She “could neither scrape skins, nor cut them to shape for making into clothes, nor sew. Nor was she capable of having children.”⁷ However, with the assistance of her deceased grandparents, she develops magical powers, and in particular the power to heal. Thanks to these powers, she acquires a status in the community more in keeping with a great man than with a woman. She has two husbands who love her, and other women scrape the skins her husbands bring back from the hunt, make clothes for her family, and even give her children to adopt. Again, while this story has clear economic aspects, the role of deceased ancestors is clear.

A third aspect of Inuit gender-swapping is also evident in both stories—namely, a connection to shamanism. Both the strange man and Itijjuaq have supernatural powers and communicate with supernatural beings. The strange man parlays with the Maker of All, while Itijjuaq communicates with her dead grandparents. On Saladin d'Anglure's account, there is a higher incidence of shamanism among Inuit raised as the other gender than among the population overall. His explanation for this is at the heart of his claim that the Inuit third gender serves a mediatory function. For the Inuit, says Saladin d'Anglure, one who could straddle genders in this way “was also capable of straddling all boundaries, between the world of humans and that of animals, between the dead and the living.”⁸

Saladin d'Anglure's work provides a rich and fascinating glimpse into Inuit systems of gender. However, some cautions about anthropology are in order.

Audra Simpson, a Kanyen'kehà:ka (Mohawk) political anthropologist, points out that anthropologists' ethnographic study of Indigenous peoples served the political aims of colonialism, which “required more than military might, it required the methods and modalities of knowing, in particular: categorisation, ethnological

7 Saladin d'Anglure, 139.

8 Saladin d'Anglure, 138.

comparison, linguistic translation and ethnography.”⁹ Simpson writes that she finds ethnographic documentation of Indigenous peoples “strange in light of the deeply resistant, self-governing and relentlessly critical people” she belongs to and works with.¹⁰ She describes some of the ways in which Indigenous research subjects engage in “refusal”—using vagueness and misdirection to avoid sharing the whole story with interviewers. Simpson interprets an informant lacing his replies with “No one seems to know” as cover for “I know you know, and you know that I know I know ... so let’s just not get into this.”¹¹ Simpson echoes this refusal in her own ethnographic calculus of “what you need to know and what I refuse to write in.”¹²

We’ll see refusal used as a mode of research/resistance in scholarship about and by Two Spirit people in the next section. For now, it is well to remember both that anthropology has served the colonial project of documenting and containing Indigenous subjects, and that the documentation so produced can bear subtle traces of those subjects’ refusal.

6.2.2. *Turtle Island Indigenous voices and Two Spirit Identities*

Throughout this volume, I use the acronym “2SLGBTQ+” as the umbrella term for the queer community. The “2S” stands for Two Spirit.¹³ “Two Spirit” was coined in Winnipeg, Canada in 1990 at the third annual intertribal Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference. On some accounts, the phrase comes from the Anishinaabemowin “niizh manitoag” (*two spirits*).¹⁴ The term was

9 Simpson, “On Ethnographic Refusal,” 67.

10 Simpson, 68.

11 Simpson, 77.

12 Simpson, 72.

13 Among the various acronyms for the queer umbrella, I now use this one because, for me, as a white settler scholar living and working on Indigenous land, it is important to use framing that centres Indigenous peoples.

14 Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes*, 108.