



White Feather



Duane Isaac

Mi'gmaq Writer's Award

Back in 2008, the Chiefs and Councils of Gesgapegiag, Gespeg and Listuguj decided that there was an urgent need to uncover and reward talented Mi'gmaq writers within Gespe'gewa'gi. They noted that it is imperative for the survival of the Mi'gmaq as a people that we identify members who possess a special aptitude and a keen interest in pursuing writing as a hobby or as a career. We have been an oral story telling people for thousands of years, and a number of our ancestors were some of the greatest storytellers, keeping our culture and traditions alive. This tradition of story telling must continue; however, we must be mindful of the use of today's digital technology inherent in the written word and the benefits this can accrue to future generations of Mi'gmaq.

Prix d'auteur Mi'gmaq

Les chefs et les conseils de la nation Mi'gmaq de Listuguj, de la nation Micmac de Géspeg et des Micmacs de la bande de Gesgapegiag ont établi qu'il y a un besoin urgent de dénicher et de récompenser les auteurs Mi'gmaq talentueux. Il est impératif pour la survie des Mi'gmaq, en tant que peuple, qu'on puisse identifier les membres ayant une aptitude et un intérêt pour l'écriture, que ce soit pour le plaisir ou pour en faire carrière. La transmission orale a fait partie de notre culture depuis des millénaires. Plusieurs de nos ancêtres étaient d'excellents conteurs. Cette tradition doit continuer. Par contre, nous devons être conscients de l'usage de la technologie inhérente aux paroles écrites, et des avantages que cela procure aux générations à venir.



An initiative of the Mi'gmawei Mawiomi Secretariat.
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We present to following selection for your reading enjoyment and hope that you become inspired to write with creative style and continue the Mi'gmaq tradition of storytelling.

Nous présentons les textes suivants en espérant que cela vous donne le goût de la création littéraire et le goût de continuer la tradition Mi'gmaq des contes.

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I initially wrote this to get my own feelings out there. Now I see it as a possible tool to help others who may also feel they do not belong. I only hope that my efforts to express myself can inspire others to say the things they want to without fear of persecution. As a community we should not only aspire to be our best but help each other do the same.

The Navajo known as “White Feather” once said: “Native American isn’t blood, it is what’s in the heart; the love for the land; the respect for it and those who inhabit it; and the respect and acknowledgement of the spirits and the elders. That is what it is to be Indian.”

I am more than inclined to agree with White Feather.

Growing up gay in a small town is like walking around expecting at any moment that someone will spot your sexuality like sign hanging over you. It’s something that makes you think about your choices in a way that would make neurotics ask, “What’s the big deal?” You always start measuring things by how “gay” they are. From the songs you listen to, to the things you wear. Eventually your whole life becomes a masquerade. It becomes about remembering to talk a certain way, while thinking another or expressing something, but feeling the opposite. I felt like I never belonged and that by being who I am, I somehow brought dishonor to my culture. I thought there was no such thing as gay natives and that there was something wrong with the idea.

What taught me to think this way, and why would I believe it to be the norm? Am I less Mi'gmaq because of who I choose to love? Influenced by some modern image of what a Native American should look, sound, and act like, I drifted from it all. After many years of observation, and discussion, I thought to myself "What does it mean to be a Native American?" What is a "true Native" and "Was there gay Natives?" In order to answer these questions I began to look into my culture.

After reading a variety of books, all it took was a quick search on the computer. A concept/term that I hadn't heard of fills the results page. The concept I speak of is "Two-Spirit", a term used to describe any Aboriginal people who were homosexual, transsexual or transgender. It was also used to describe "Men who had female qualities" and "Women who had male qualities." In a spiritual sense a "Two-Spirit" had the medicines of a male and a female, making them an integral part of the community. However, by the time colonialists were finished instilling their beliefs into us the concept had sort of disappeared from everyday use, or was marred with taboo.

Upon finding this term I thought to myself how great it was to find evidence of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) Natives in our history. I became increasingly pleased when I learned that the “Two-Spirited” people were thought to have spiritual insight and were held in high esteem. However, my original joy over the discovery I had made quickly became an overwhelming sadness. It bothered me knowing that these people were highly respected and even influential to their tribes, only to be considered “something wrong” by the colonialists’ religious beliefs.

In Pre-colonial history, the “Two-Spirit” were thought of as a “Third Gender” and therefore took on roles inhabited by both men and women. When the Mi’gmaq people raised their children there was no pressure for them to assert their gender to your physical sex. Meaning that if a boy wanted to cook, craft and clean, he would join the women in doing so, while at the same time have the strength to track and hunt large animals. The same would go for women who wanted to hunt. They were taken on hunting trips but could also participate in crafts, and storytelling. If this proved to be a phase, the children would return to the roles they ‘normally’ inhabited. But if they wished to stay where they were, it was perfectly acceptable. Therefore, gay men and women were able to go between sexes because of their involvement on both sides. Eventually these people were considered genderless due to their connection to the Creator. After colonialism, sexual orientation became “organized” and put into the confines of the heterosexual “Male” and “Female”. This made the

concept of the two-spirit seem 'flawed' by the new standard of thinking. Because of this, the Europeans believed the gay men and women to be sinners, forcing them to leave their villages as they were hunted, tortured, and killed.

So began the "closeting" of the Two-Spirit. As a result of this, any future Two-Spirit became the subject of ridicule and bullying. At some point or another, there comes a moment where 'closeted' LGBT people must take attention away from their difference in sexuality. In other words, they must either "act straight" or face being publicly "outed" as a homosexual.

The tricky thing with Native men is the idea that they were all expected to be Warriors. Strong, honorable, skillful providers for their families. Trying to meet these standards could lead to attempts at making themselves seem more "macho". In no literature does a warrior's definition include a man who loves another man, thus creating an internal struggle for those who are homosexual. On the other end of the spectrum one would think that being a well known matriarchal society would make it easier for a woman to come out as a lesbian, but they too face similar and possibly worse struggles.

The reluctance to accept sexual orientation comes from the terms applied to them. For the longest time the term “Gay” has had the immediate implication of “sexual acts”. However, many modern LGBT Natives do not consider themselves “Two-Spirit”, as this again has the confines of any other label and carries more of a spiritual implication. This implication goes back to the history of “Two-spirits” being healers, and personally connected with the Creator. Such a term denotes a spiritual aspect that cannot be applied to every LGBT native.

Why does the history of the Two-Spirit struggle to translate into modern times? A change of mind is seemingly impossible for those who are “set in their ways”. Which is ironic, as the two spirit is an aspect of native culture. Who are we to pick and choose which parts of our culture we choose to honor? Nonetheless, like most of Western society, homophobia has become an accepted and normal way of thinking. In its simplest form, it comes down to one thing, and that is a clear division of “Identity”.

The division here suggests that LGBT natives must choose between a “Native Identity” and a “Gay Identity”. Another side to this dilemma of identity is that we have to live with the fear that people probably won’t be as accepting to the idea as we would like. While it is naive on our part to think that we can give them this information without some initial backlash, we only want to be loved, and accepted for who we really are. Those of us who are lucky have families who eventually come around to being supportive and loving,

as they were before. Those who are not must find healthy outlets, and support systems that work the best for them, because the alternatives lead to bouts of trouble, personal pain and a hindering imbalance. This imbalance may lead to a life of drugs, alcohol and other escapes. It seems to this writer that the last thing the Aboriginal People need is to be divided against each other.

Acceptance needs to come from the heart; it must have a face. It need not come from the “facts of the past”. Nor should it come from the “spiritual connections” and “mysticism” once attached to the way we lived, and the way we love. In these modern times, people are always saying that we must get with the times when it comes to things like sexual orientation, suggesting people must bring about a new attitude. What they do not know and seemingly forget is that the idea isn’t new to begin with. Like many other things apart of Aboriginal history, the teachings of acceptance towards the two-spirit are a concept that we just forgot along the way. You must remember that we are your brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers and friends. We are made the same way, to walk the same Earth as you. We have no other home, or intentions of leaving, so you might as well adjust. I only wish to inspire others to keep an open mind. It is my belief that no one can tell you what a true Native is, if you do not believe it for yourself.

Are there gay natives? Of course there are. They are ordinary people who lead rich, fulfilling lives. These people do not wish for pity, they just want to be able to be proud of who they are, no matter which part of them that may be.

“We who are clay blended by the Master Potter, come from the kiln of Creation in many hues. How can people say one skin is coloured, when each has its own colouration? What should it matter that one bowl is dark and the other pale, if each is of good design and serves its purpose well.”

~Polingaysi Qoyawayma

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