

ReMatriate's ReImagining of Indigenous Futurity

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On March 2, 2015, settler-Canadian brothers Dan and Dean Caten, known as Dsquared², released a new clothing line titled #Dsquaw, which their website stated was inspired in part by "Canadian Indian Tribes."¹ After its debut at Milan Fashion Week, the brand received widespread backlash against the collection's racist and homogenizing appropriation of Indigenous styles and removed the campaign. This incident with Dsquared² is not unique in its appropriative nature, but relevant for the response it catalyzed. Later that month, born out of a longstanding frustration with mainstream misrepresentation and homogenization of Indigenous cultures and identities, Two-Spirit interdisciplinary artist and educator Jeneen Frei Njootli (Vuntut Gwitchin) and architect Kelly Edzerza-Bapty (Tahltan) officially founded the ReMatriate Collective. ReMatriate is a volunteer-led group of Indigenous womxn² and Two-Spirit folks living across the northern and

western regions of Canada with the shared goal of providing platforms to empower Indigenous self-representation. The collective focuses their efforts on the use of photography and social media, intertwining their decolonial ideologies—which centre the wisdom and embodied knowledge of Indigenous womxn—with the rematriation of Indigenous land. Shortly after the collective formed, they launched the “We Are” campaign: an ongoing, photo-based project that resides on ReMatriate’s Facebook³ and Instagram⁴ pages. This campaign functions as an open call for submissions to which Indigenous individuals can send in their stories, or nominate someone who has inspired them, along with a photograph in which they feel empowered.

Through a mutual exploration of this campaign format and influential works of Two-Spirit and queer theory, I address how ReMatriate creates space for a reimagining of Indigenous futurity through continual “disidentification”⁵ with colonial conceptions of Indigeneity and womxnhood. Employing the work of Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee), Alex Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree), and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), I unpack ReMatriate’s decolonial activist praxis and address the ways this campaign creates space for what Wilson calls “coming in”⁶ through instances of empowering self-representation. Then, exploring the inseparable nature of land and body sovereignty in Indigenous self-expression, I unpack how this continual coming in becomes a “disidentification” with hegemonic representation, which in turn, makes for a broader reimagining going forward.

I would like to acknowledge that as a cis woman of Turkish Canadian descent, I do not hold the same lived experiences of systemic oppression as the Indigenous and Two-Spirit peoples who have inhabited so-called Canada since time immemorial. As such, my

intention with this writing is to amplify rather than represent Indigenous and Two-Spirit experiences, and to relay the importance and destabilizing potentials of Indigenous-led forms of visual representation, such as ReMatriate.

Through their online presence, ReMatriate seeks to provide an ongoing platform for representation of Indigenous womxn by Indigenous womxn, while highlighting the variety of Indigenous positionalities and ways of being. They centre the lives and work of Indigenous womxn as the backbone of their collective’s methodology. Rather than “repatriation,” which holds colonial heteropatriarchal undertones within this process of returning something that has been taken, “rematriation” focuses on the important roles womxn play in Indigenous ideological structures, as well as their embodied relationship to the earth. In this way, rematriation re-orientates the focus of this decolonizing process from a returning of objects to a broader re-turning towards a non-hegemonic ideology. This shift in perspective by the collective works to create space to oppose the homogenization of Indigeneity that is perpetuated in the mainstream media, while (re)foraging connective threads to weave a stronger community mentorship and support system overall. This methodology is highlighted in the “We Are” campaign through the continual presentation of self-told narratives. Once a submission is received, volunteers from the collective share this image on social media with the “ReMatriate” trademark and a “we are”⁷ phrase that describes the image. Some of the photos come with stories, while others stand on their own; regardless, every post includes the subject’s name and which Indigenous (First Nation, Métis, Inuit) community they are part of. This simple and transparent format effectively communicates the collective’s intentions to reclaim visual representation of Indigenous womxn—one part in the ongoing process of reimagining

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In Canada, the term “decolonization” has become diluted to such a point that it is often hard to differentiate its use as performative allyship versus an active desire for change. In “Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies,” Two-Spirit writer, activist, and performer Qwo-Li Driskill speaks about how an active decolonial praxis can be embodied specifically in the context of North America. They explain that decolonization

is not a means to an end, but rather an ongoing process of “radical resistance against colonialism,” a process that includes reconciliation, struggles over land and body sovereignty, and creative reimaginings of Indigenous futurity.⁸ They stress that “it is impossible to generalize about the decolonial needs of each Indigenous community, but it is possible to imagine together what decolonization means and could look like, within our particular political contexts.”⁹ Driskill is clear that decolonization is not a fixed state to be obtained, but rather an active and involved process, one that must be

taken up as a continuous and community-specific praxis. They are aware of the societal inclination towards blanket solutions and instead advocate for a methodology that takes into account the diverse range of identities present among Indigenous communities while acknowledging their shared oppression under colonialism.¹⁰

In an interview shared on the New Journey website, collective members Kelly Edzerza-Bapty and Denver Lynxleg (Tootinaowaziibeeng) address how mainstream representations of Indigenous womxn often take on a victimizing,

historicizing, and homogenizing lens. They expand on the “We Are” campaign’s role in shifting this perception towards one that empowers a reimagining of Indigenous futurity and reflects individuals’ lived realities, values, and cultures.¹¹ Edzerza-Bapty urges for broader recognition of the range of ways in which Indigeneity exists, noting that “Canada is an extremely diverse landscape and so are its Indigenous peoples ... It is important that people distinguish this and step out of the simple classifications of Pan-Indianisms, or in representing us as historic black and white photos. All of the photos in ReMatriate brightly portray that we are ‘Living Cultures.’”¹² Lynxleg extrapolates on the integral highlighting of both the differences and connectivity in and among Indigenous cultures, addressing how the multiplicity of Indigenous cultures can be shown in a non-homogenizing way. By taking into account the power imbalance present in mainstream representation, and by using this active and community-specific method of decolonization, “We Are” provides a platform for continual and unmitigated self-representation. Furthermore, the decolonial activist praxis with which ReMatriate engages is not working under the assumption that any one of these images will reverse the ongoing damages of colonialism—it instead calls for a radical reimagining of Indigeneity moving forward.

By providing a platform for unmitigated self-representation, “We Are” creates space for what Two-Spirit scholar and community activist Alex Wilson calls “coming in.” Wilson explains that compared to the mainstream notions of “coming out” in the LGBTQ community, “coming in is an act of returning, fully present in our selves, to resume our place as a valued part of our families, cultures, communities, and lands, in connection to all our relations.”¹³ Coming in qua returning, as Wilson describes it, implies there is something pre-existing to come back to. This notion is a powerful pushback

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to colonial intentions of cultural assimilation as it reiterates that, despite imperial efforts of erasure, there is and will always exist an Indigenous way of being before and despite these hegemonic structures. This returning, present in processes of coming in, is also reflected in the very nature of Two-Spirit methodologies.¹⁴ Wilson explains that “as a self-identifier, two-spirit acknowledges and affirms our identity as Indigenous peoples, our connection to the land, and values in our traditional cultures that recognize and accept gender and sexual diversity.”¹⁵ The term “Two-Spirit” acknowledges the inherent entanglement of body sovereignty to land sovereignty for Indigenous peoples, while affirming pre-colonial notions of gender diversity. Thereby, for Wilson, coming in affirms not only this return to community and culture, but also a re-turning towards Indigenous methodologies and ways of being. Through this coming in—this turning towards Indigenous ways of being—there is a distinct turning away from colonially imposed structures such as heteronormativity.

Scholar, artist, and writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson speaks about the inherently colonial nature of heteronormativity throughout her book *As We Have Always Done*. She addresses the entanglement of gender and sexuality in projects of colonial control and unpacks the ways in which the Indian Act—a piece of legislation enacted in 1876 that gives the Canadian government decisive control in regards to Indigenous governance, education, cultural practices, and identity—disproportionally impacted womxn and Two-Spirit people. Addressing the work of Audra Simpson (Kahnawake Mohawk), Betasamosake Simpson explicates that the foundation of Canadian nation-building was to assimilate Indigenous people and their cultural methodologies into Western middle-class conceptions of gender roles.¹⁶ She explains that this was critical as “Indigenous body sovereignty and sexuality sovereignty

threaten colonial power” because they provide an alternative to hegemonic Western norms.¹⁷ Additionally, this cultural assimilation occurred simultaneously to the physical dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land. Betasamosake Simpson iterates that “there is a strong parallel between the dispossession of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg from our homelands and the dispossession of Indigenous bodies from our grounded normativity.”¹⁸ Thus, it is through the invalidation of Indigenous norms that heteronormativity gained validity, and through these simultaneous attacks on Indigenous bodies and homelands that the seeking of sovereignty for both becomes inherently enmeshed.

This multi-layered system of oppression and dispossession—of which I have only begun to brush the surface—is extensive and continues to be unpacked and embodied as time goes on. ReMatriate’s “We Are” campaign honours the evolving reality of these colonially imposed systems, and creates space for Indigenous womxn to articulate their own stories and experiences under colonialism. By reallocating the power of representation to the individual—centring the facets of their lives and work that each person wishes to share—the campaign fosters what Jeneen Frei Njootli calls “image sovereignty.”¹⁹ In the Instagram posts, the text that accompanies each photograph ranges from the subject’s name to longer didactic texts. This inconsistency in the posting format is intentional, as it affirms the essential uniqueness of these processes of coming in, in all the term’s connected meanings.

Additionally, coming in qua re-turning can be seen as what Cuban American academic José Esteban Muñoz calls “disidentification.”²⁰ Disidentification functions as a third option beyond the binary of identification or counter-identification with mainstream ideology. It can be seen as a “mode of tactical recognition” of mainstream

ideology: one that neither entirely accepts nor wholly rejects the dominant modes, but rather subverts them on the subject's own terms and for their own benefit.²¹ Furthermore, through disidentification, individuals employing this tactic are able to contribute to a "counterpublic sphere"—a prospective world beyond the constraints of hegemonic binary oppositions, including colonially imposed notions of heteronormativity.²² While ReMatriate's "We Are" campaign clearly does not identify with the representations of Indigeneity and Indigenous womxnhood in mainstream media, it also does not simply reject visual representation; rather, the campaign creates space for self-representation on the terms of each individual subject, for their own benefits going forward.

It is through ongoing and active disidentification with mainstream representations of Indigeneity and Indigenous womxnhood that "We Are" carves out space for a potentially much larger re-imagining within hegemonic mindsets. Driskill stresses that active decolonial practices, including scholarship, must call for ongoing efforts of reimagining, because "it is this imagination that is the strongest part of our decolonial struggles."²³ By centring narratives of coming in, returning, and existing as whole subjects and valued members of community, the campaign fosters a greater awareness in mainstream media of the importance of re-turning towards the multiplicity of Indigenous ways of being that have always been and continue to be present across so-called Canada. Furthermore, this re-imagining—the continuous active rejection of prescribed narratives and fostering of Indigenous image sovereignty—incites a shift away from perpetuating the conditions of coloniality and toward further conceptions of Indigenous futurity. ✱

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NOTES

1. CBC News, "Dsquared2 under Fire for #Dsqaw Women's Fashion Collection," March 4, 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/dsquared2-under-fire-for-dsqaw-women-s-fashion-collection-1.2980136>.
2. The collective uses the spelling "womyn" or "womxn" on their social media platforms to express the inclusion of gender non-conforming, Two-Spirit (2S), queer, and trans women in their campaigns. I honour these spellings here to reiterate their intentions of inclusion.
3. Facebook: @ReMatriate
4. Instagram: @rematriate_
5. José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction: Performing Disidentifications," in *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
6. Alex Wilson, "Our Coming In Stories: Cree Identity, Body Sovereignty and Gender Self-Determination," *Journal of Global Indigeneity* 1, no. 1 (2015): 3.
7. Some examples of these phrases include: "We are strong womxn," "We are generations strong," and "We are maternal blood and paternal bone, we are two-spirit."
8. Qwo-Li Driskill, "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1 (April 2010): 69.
9. Driskill, 70.
10. Driskill, 69.
11. "WE ARE: the ReMatriate Collective," *New Journeys*, October 12, 2016, <https://newjourneys.ca/en/articles/we-are-the-rematriate-collective>.
12. "WE ARE."
13. Wilson, 3.
14. Wilson, 1.
15. Wilson, 2.
16. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "The Sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples' Bodies," in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 104.
17. Simpson, 107.
18. Simpson, 106.
19. Jeneen Frei Njootli, "At Low Temperatures Air Can No Longer Hold on to Water OR Brushed Theory, Post-Rematriate and Aesthetic" (Lecture, the Social Justice Institute 2020–21 Noted Scholars Series, Zoom, February 10, 2021).
20. I think it is important to note that in developing this term Muñoz took inspiration from the notion of "identities-in-difference" with mainstream society—a facet that was being developed by women of colour feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga in the 1980s. For a further unpacking see his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*.
21. José Esteban Muñoz, "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag," *Social Text* 52–53 (Autumn–Winter 1997): 83.
22. José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction," 7.
23. Driskill, 70.

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