

(note: this is the last page)

There are many "magpies" who are drawn to latch onto the bright, shiny aspects of Native culture, who misappropriate Native culture, customs, and artifacts in the belief that they are "honoring" Native people by imitating them without understanding them. It is better for non-Native people to follow our example by looking to their own ancestors and reclaiming their own transgendered spirituality. European cultures from the Vikings to the Greeks had and honored transgendered people; even the Christian Church recognized saints that lived as members of the opposite sex or engaged in same sex unions. No European culture lacks a transgendered tradition; white people need to reclaim their own sacred people instead of appropriating ours.

The process of reclamation is an extraordinarily difficult one in which the seeker must come face to face with the atrocities of the past, grieve for what has been lost, and carefully sift through the destruction to recover the little that remains. This is true whether the seeker is examining Native American or Euro-American history. History is not ancient and irrelevant; history is the reason why things are the way they are now.

GARY BOWEN IS A GAY AUTHOR, EDITOR, COWBOY AND A MEMBER OF THE WESTERN WRITERS ASSOCIATION (WWA) AND INTERNATIONAL GAY RODEO ASSOCIATION (IGRA). E-MAIL: FCOWBOY@NETGSI.COM (THE FLYING COWBOY). URL: [HTTP://WWW.NETGSI.COM/~FCOWBOY](http://www.netgsi.com/~fcowboy) (HIGH PLAINS DRIFTER OF THE INTERNET)

From *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*  
Leslie Feinberg 1998

PORTRAIT GARY BOWEN  
*"An entire rainbow of possibilities"*

I'm a gay transman of Apache and Scotch-Irish descent, left-handed, differently abled, the parent of two young children – one of whom is also differently abled – of an old Cracker frontier family from Texas, a person who values his Native heritage very deeply, and who is doing his best to live in accordance with the Spirit, and who keeps learning more about his heritage all the time. I am also the founder and Coordinator-in-Chief of the American Boyz, the largest grassroots f2m organization in North America with affiliates in twenty-three states and provinces, and for two years running now, the Chair of the True Spirit Conference for f2ms. I am also a gay author and editor, with several books in print, as well as numerous short stories.

Arriving at this current place has been a journey not only of self-discovery, but of discovery about my family and my culture. Coming out transgendered was easy; grappling with racism, classism and ableism and other barriers is much harder. Once I figured out that "transgendered" was someone who transcended traditional stereotypes of "man" and "woman," I saw that I was such a person. I then began a quest for finding words that described myself, and discovered that while psychiatric jargon dominated the discourse, there were many other words, both older and newer, that addressed these issues. While I accepted the label of "transsexual" in order to obtain access to the hormones and chest surgery necessary to manifest my spirit in the material world, I have always had a profound disagreement with the definition of transsexualism as a psychiatric condition and transsexuals as disordered people.

My own transgendered state is a sacred calling given to me by Spirit, not a neurosis discovered by white medicine. Further, the battles that rage

in feminist circles and elsewhere about the legitimacy and nature of the transgendered identity smack of racism to me, centered as they are upon white experience and white authors to the exclusion of minority voices and viewpoints, many of which contradict some of the conventional wisdom about what transsexualism is and what it means. It is extremely important to remember that “transsexual” and “transgendered” are terms that have arisen out of the dominant culture’s experience with gender, and are not necessarily reflective of a wide variety of people, cultures, beliefs, and practices relating to gender.

As a person of Native descent I look to my ancestors for guidance in these matters. But the record is broken; trying to learn about the sacred people is like trying to reassemble a million pieces of pottery with only a few hundred potshards as clues. This then is the thing I know: that Spirit gives to each of us Visions of who we are which we must manifest in the material world to the best of our ability. Transgendered people, combining elements of male and female, are at the interstice of the material and spiritual worlds and are thus able to act as mediators for the benefit of our communities. We earn honor for our wisdom and strength, measured by our hard work on behalf of our families and communities. For this reason the sacred people are an integral part of our communities, not alienated or shameful, but often hidden to protect them from the ravages of the dominant culture. And, where white culture has triumphed, they have been almost entirely lost to the contemporary Native world – which means that there are many Native people today who do not know about or who do not value our sacred people.

It is important for Native people to reclaim our sacred people who have been murdered, burned, beaten, hanged, imprisoned, flogged, stripped, humiliated, and otherwise forced into compliance with the dominant standards of gender and sexuality or exterminated when they resisted. It is

common for white people to refer to these people as “berdache” if they have male genitalia, and as “amazons” if they have female genitalia, but these terms are offensive, being foreign terms that depend upon white standards of reference and which ignore Native traditions. I prefer to use the Sioux word “winkte” for those people who are described in English as “m2f” (male to female) and “kurami” (from the Yuma kwe’rham) for people who are “f2m” (female to male). However, while these Native terms overlap in meaning with terminology used by the dominant society, they are not identical because Native concepts of gender and identity differ in significant ways from the dominant culture.

I don’t use the term “two-spirit” to describe myself; where I grew up it was a pejorative term for a person of mixed blood. Further, there is no consensus of opinion as to just who is meant by the term “two-spirit,” and not only that, if translated into Native tongues it acquires unfortunate meanings; among my people it means “ghost-haunted” – a powerful concept and important in many Native spiritual systems, but having nothing to do with gender or orientation.

In my understanding of Spirit, Spirit is not divided in itself, but is an integrated whole. It is not a thing in balance, as implied by dichotomies of male/female, gay/straight, and black/white so prevalent in the white way of thinking; but a complete and complex thing which includes an entire rainbow of possibilities – not just the opposite ends of a spectrum. That is why there are seven cardinal directions: east, west, north, south, up, down, and center, as the Native viewpoint embraces dimensions not normally noticed by the dominant culture; so too does Spirit embrace dimensions of humanity not normally accepted by the dominant culture. There are many names for sexual minorities among Native Americans; two-spirits are a particular community that have elected that term to describe themselves, but I am not one of them.