

Reclamation and Recognition: A Story of Two-Spirit Peoples

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Two-spirit is a relatively new term which describes a queer identity within the Indigenous communities. Since European settlers arrived in North America two-spirit individuals have had a tumultuous history of forced assimilation into European Christian culture. Today they are beginning to rebuild their identities that were lost during this period. Two-spirit individuals face both racism against their Indigenous identities and homophobia and transphobia against their queer identities. Despite this challenge, they are a resilient group that has developed a community and a discipline of study to examine their history, traditions and current place in the world. The story of two-spirit individuals is a story of reclamation, in that they reclaim both their Indigenous and queer identities. Indigenous-queer people are claiming the label of two-spirit through recognizing their history as Indigenous and queer persons, uniting under the term to address intersectional discrimination, creating Indigenous-queer studies as a discipline, and inventing a term that is created by them to represent their community.

Indigenous-Queer History and Origin of Two-Spirit

Two-spirit is an Indigenous-queer identity that is used to describe individuals who do not fit within the settler gender binary. It is an inter-tribal and unifying term used to describe dual feminine and masculine spirits.¹ It is not a traditional or historical label, but rather was created in 1990 at the third Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference in Winnipeg.² This term is meant to be used as an umbrella term for queer Indigenous individuals and many Indigenous communities have traditional names for different gender identities that they use in

¹ Jessica H. L. Elm, Jordan P Lewis, Karina L Walters, and Jen M Self, "I'm in This World for a Reason: Resilience and Recovery Among American Indian and Alaska Native Two-Spirit Women," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 20, no. 3-4 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2016.1152813>.

² Lydia R. Cooper, "Straight Talk: Two Spirit Erasure as the Price of Sovereignty in James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 30, no. 3-4 (2018): <https://doi.org/10.5250/studamerindilite.30.3-4.0096>.

conjunction with two-spirit.³ This label can be used as a term for Indigenous people to unite under, gain recognition for, and create an Indigenous-queer community and discipline. Prior to the term two-spirit being used, a now offensive term, *Berdache*, was used by anthropologists to define Indigenous individuals who do not fit into settler gender and sexuality customs.⁴ This term is imprecise and offensive.⁵ It defines their identities as different and something to be studied, rather than as unique, and as part of a separate culture. The term two-spirit is defined by Indigenous people, and is intentionally vague. By using the term two-spirit, Indigenous people are reclaiming both their Indigenous and queer identity and building a community of Indigenous-queer individuals.

Prior to colonization Indigenous communities had a variety of identities that are now encompassed under the term two-spirit. Individuals that fell into this category were highly respected and were often given a spiritual role within the community.⁶ They were considered to hold healer status and possess sacred powers, as well as holding distinct roles in traditional ceremonies.⁷ These individuals were thought to be not strange or different, but simply a part of the community. While not every nation had two-spirit people, they did have a widespread influence and presence in pre-colonial Indigenous life.⁸ When settlers arrived, they brought with them European standards of the family. This included a man and woman bound in marriage with the purpose of having children. Through a variety of methods, the European settlers attempted to

³ Qwo-Li Driskill, "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances Between Native and Queer Studies." *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (2010): 72, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2009-013>.

⁴ Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 60.

⁵ Cooper, "Straight Talk: Two Spirit Erasure as the Price of Sovereignty in James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*."

⁶ Qwo-Li Driskill et al., *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 11.

⁷ Nancy Leclerc, "Berdache," *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, (2006): <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952453.n104>.

⁸ Driskill et al., *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, 11.

assimilate Indigenous individuals and families. Indigenous people were sent to residential schools that had strict gender roles defined through dress, hairstyles and separation of genders into single-sex dormitories.⁹ The loss of Indigenous language through forced assimilation meant that many traditions and expressions surrounding two-spirit identities were lost.¹⁰ There was also a bribe of straightness as Indigenous people exchanged their sexualities and unique gender identities in return for gaining status, rights and being recognized as a person.¹¹ Through the introduction of Christianity, Indigenous individuals were assimilated into Christian teachings through forced, coerced, and violent conversion.

Identity Today

The identity of Indigenous-queer individuals is an intersectional one. Indigenous-queer people and two-spirit people face two forms of discrimination. The first is homophobia and transphobia against their queer identity from within the Indigenous community and the general public. The second is racism within the queer community, against their Indigenous identity. These individuals face discrimination from the wider community, Indigenous community and the queer community.

The impacts of settler colonialism and the effects of assimilationist policies are pronounced in the way that Indigenous communities treat their two-spirit members. In Indigenous communities, the impacts of Christian conversions can still be seen, as homophobia and transphobia remains in many communities.¹² Indigenous communities no longer expect a

⁹ Sarah Hunt, *Introduction to the Health of Two-Spirit People: Historical, Contemporary and Emergent Issues* (Prince George, British Columbia: National Collaborating Center for Aboriginal Health, 2016), 9.

¹⁰ Ibid, 9.

¹¹ Cooper, "Straight Talk: Two Spirit Erasure as the Price of Sovereignty in James Welch's *The Heart Song of Charging Elk*."

¹² Hunt, *Introduction to the Health of Two-Spirit People: Historical, Contemporary and Emergent Issues*, 22.

variety of genders and sexualities and have instead converted to settler Christian values.¹³

Indigenous communities are willing to address the discrimination that these individuals face being Indigenous people, but they fail to acknowledge the gender and sexuality discrimination present in their own communities.

Queer communities today have a difficult time recognizing the identity of two-spirit individuals. While they recognize the sexualities and genders of two-spirit individuals they fail to recognize how this intersects with their Indigenous identity. Queer communities tend to focus on white middle-class individuals and fail to recognize intersectional discrimination of being both queer and Indigenous. When minority cultural groups like Indigenous peoples are mentioned it is often in passing, without much attention to how they experience their queer identity differently.¹⁴ Queer research often fails to recognize the impact of colonialism on Indigenous people and fails to acknowledge the importance of the land on their queer identities.¹⁵ Queer studies struggle to understand intersectional discrimination, and how culture interacts with a queer identity. They fail to understand and recognize the experiences of two-spirit peoples.

Two-spirit people have intersectional identities, but they often struggle to get both queer and Indigenous aspects of their identities recognized. Indigenous studies focus on their Indigenous connections while queer studies focus on LGBTQ2+ identities. Both are ignorant to the interrelation of being Indigenous and queer. Progress on this front has been made. The creation of the term of two-spirit has allowed for a community of two-spirit people to emerge and gain recognition for both aspects of their identity.¹⁶ Community meetings and gatherings of

¹³ Ibid, 22.

¹⁴ Driskill, "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances Between Native and Queer Studies," 76.

¹⁵ Ibid, 76.

¹⁶ Hunt, *Introduction to the Health of Two-Spirit People: Historical, Contemporary and Emergent Issues*, 22.

these individuals contributes to supporting individuals and resisting the discrimination seen in Indigenous communities, queer communities, and the general population.

Queer-Indigenous Study as a Discipline

There has been a movement towards increasing the study of Indigenous-queer and two-spirit individuals in order to reclaim their identities. Indigenous studies and queer studies frequently fail to sufficiently address these unique gender identities and sexual orientations. Queer studies often fail to recognize intersectional relationships between gender, sexuality and culture. Queer studies are Eurocentric and focus mainly on white individuals. Indigenous-queer studies is similar to queer studies in that they both focus on challenging heteropatriarchal dominance, gender binaries, and the policing of gendered and sexualized bodies. Indigenous studies also fail to fully understand two-spirit individuals. They often focus on governance structures and general traditions. This failure of recognition is likely due to both the priorities of communities and the loss of information. Indigenous-queer people were not served well by either of these disciplines as their experiences are intersectional as their Indigenous and queer identities interact with each other and cannot be separated.

Due to the fact that Indigenous-queer people were not served by existing academia, a new discipline of Indigenous-queer studies emerged. It focuses on history, politics and decolonial struggles.¹⁷ It first emerged in the 1990's by increasing literature being published with *Series Q* from Duke University Press.¹⁸ This book series examined sexuality, and one focus point was the intersection of culture and queer identity.¹⁹ In 2009 when they stopped publishing, the discipline

¹⁷ Driskill, "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances Between Native and Queer Studies," 79.

¹⁸ Michael Hames-García, "What's After Queer Theory? Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies," *Feminist Studies* Vol. 39, Issue 2 (2013):

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A350577334/AONE?u=ocul_thomas&sid=AONE&xid=6faed4d8.

¹⁹ Ibid.

of queer studies was well established. From there, queer studies have expanded and have begun to look at intersectional interactions. More recent publications including *Perverse Modernity's* from Duke University Press have introduced the idea that queer identities cannot be studied fully without understanding race, political economy, and colonialism that surrounds these identities.²⁰

Queer-Indigenous studies has also begun to put Indigenous people and their viewpoints first. Rather than the Berdache era of settler anthropologists studying Indigenous people, the new disciples include Indigenous-queer people.²¹ This is done by including them as researchers and inquiring about their viewpoints when studying them.²² When studying them a method of social theory is employed. This entails including conversations with Indigenous-queer people and centring this within the research.²³ This is seen as a way to decolonize knowledge as it puts Indigenous people in control of the knowledge and information provided.

The emergence of an Indigenous-queer discipline does not mean that this discipline receives enough attention, research or funding, however, since the 1990's it has grown greatly. Research on two-spirit individuals has been influential in that they are now commonly recognized by the community, both formally through the government and informally through queer acronyms such as LGBTQ2+, with the two standing for two-spirited. The progress made in this discipline has been significant and gives hope for further study on this topic.

Reclaiming their Identities

Another aspect of Indigenous-queer reclamation is the origins of the term two-spirit. Two-spirit is a manufactured term created to replace the label of Berdache. The term Berdache

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*, 58.

²² Hames-García, "What's After Queer Theory? Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies."

²³ Ibid.

was used primarily by anthropologists and is now considered to be offensive.²⁴ It was used to describe sexual deviancy where people either did not identify with the gender binary or were engaged in non-heterosexual relationships.²⁵ By taking back labelling control of their identities Indigenous-queer people were able to define their own identities in a way that fits them and does not have negative or scholarly connotations.

The term *Berdache* was first used by French explorers and was applied to male assigned female-dressing Indigenous individuals.²⁶ It was later adapted to mean queer Indigenous people and was used primarily by anthropologists.²⁷ Anthropologists and explorers originally believed that these people were transvestites, homosexuals, and hermaphrodites.²⁸ This assumption is untrue as they were more than crossdressers, their sexual orientation was unrelated to gender presentation, and there was no evidence that those born with female and male genitalia were two-spirited.²⁹

While anthropologists later learned the significance of two-spirit identities the term of *Berdache* was still an imposed one with a history of oppression. Through creating a new term, two-spirit, Indigenous people are able to identify themselves. The flexibility within this term also allows them to identify both as two-spirited and as the traditional label for their identity within their community. This label, while not fixing all of the issues present for Indigenous-queer persons, helped to create community, and remove negative connotations of other labels.

²⁴ Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*, 60.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁶ Cooper, "Straight Talk: Two Spirit Erasure as the Price of Sovereignty in James Welch's *The Heart Song of Charging Elk*."

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Nancy Leclerc, "Berdache," *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, (2006): <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952453.n104>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Indigenous-queer individuals have suffered a great deal of discrimination, from assimilationist policies, to ignorant anthropologists, to being discriminated against by the very communities that are supposed to protect them. Two-spirit people were once respected and admired in their communities, but through the influence of settler colonialism, this has been lost. Since the 1990's however two-spirit people have begun to reclaim their identities, their knowledge, and their history. While they still experience discrimination, the unification under one umbrella term of two-spirit has created a label to identify with, research for, and form community under. Over the last 30 years, significant progress has been made and this progress shows no sign of slowing. The resilience of two-spirited individuals is remarkable and has created a basis for their identities to be recognised, respected and reclaimed.

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