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Living Ancestors and Talking Trees

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Coming In and Connecting Back: An Exploration into Indigenous North American Two-Spirited Peoples

INTRODUCTION

Although there are several hundred individual Indigenous North American groups that can be identified, they have suffered an extensive and ongoing history of cultural genocide and forced assimilation at the hands of colonizers, and as such, the community at large is often generalized and entangled together due to the massive loss of knowledge regarding indigenous traditions. This includes, but is not limited in the slightest, to past genderqueer identities and non-heterosexual relationships within indigenous communities, as well as many of the spiritual roles they were delegated. That being said, there do exist a handful of groups that retained their specific terminology for these identities as well as some of the traditions and practices that were associated with, such as the Diné's *nádleehi* or the Lakǫ́ta's *wíŋtke* (Robinson 2020). However, the term Two-Spirit was coined in 1990 during the Third Annual Native American and First Nations Gay and Lesbian Conference in Manitoba, and has since been widely adopted by the indigenous community to refer to contemporary Indigenous North American LGBTQ individuals (McLeod 2016). Despite functioning as an umbrella term, two-spirit has become remarkable in its determination to gain recognition and stand confidently in opposition to the settler enforced systems in place that actively disrupt and erase authentic indigenous existence. Throughout the course of this essay, I will be covering a brief history of North American Indigenous oppression and provide an extensive investigation into the Two-Spirit identity and the reality of living as a Two-Spirited person today. Following this, I will be delving more specifically into how Two-Spirit fits into and interacts with the larger queer community, and why Two-Spirited people not only need, but deserve, a wider platform of support to amplify their voices.

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

North American Indigenous groups have been subjected to lengthy history of oppression at the hands of colonizers. However, because this essay is limited in word count, I'll mainly be focusing on the long-term effects of more recent attempts to destabilize North American Indigenous communities, particularly the socio-cultural and governmental systems put in place that have largely contributed to generations of ongoing trauma for indigenous peoples today. A prime example of this is what became known as the 'sixties scoop' in Canada, which "refers to the removal of Aboriginal Indigenous children from their homes and placement with white families, either in foster care or as adoptees. Already a common practice in the 1950s, it culminated in the 1960s and 1970s with as many as 15,000 Indigenous children adopted into non-Indigenous families. Children were placed in locales across Canada and the USA, while some were sent further abroad" (Ristock *et al.* 2019, 769). It is worth mentioning as well that this is only one example of the forced migration and assimilation tactics enforced by the settler governments, though it is a significant movement to keep in mind due to its lasting effects; The vast majority of children placed into these families experienced varying levels of abuse, and along with being completely cut off from their culture and community, western concepts of queer and transphobia were internalized to a great extent (Ristock *et al.* 2019).

Beyond that, Ellasante (2021) illuminates the strategies used as large-scale and systemically enforced through means such as "policies that make Indigenous peoples into official private citizens of the nation-state, deculturalize them in residential schools, and relocate them from tribal communities to isolate them in cities. Such strategies prove that settler colonialism is indeed not an event; it is a structure" (Ellasante 2021, 1509). The unfortunate reality of what this has meant for the indigenous community over the years is an understanding that is imperative to grasping the complexities behind what it truly means for indigenous individuals to claim the Two-Spirit identity. They have undergone literal centuries of attempts to strip them of their cultural heritage and community bonds, to erase evidence of their existence outside of the colonizer's grasp. "The imposition of such settler-heteropatriarchal capitalist norms sought to demolish Indigenous cultural systems, in particular those related to gender and kinship, and reconstruct them in the image of the settler," a feat that has been somewhat successful despite indigenous backlash and recent efforts at decolonizing the communities as well as these modes of thought (Ellasante 2021, 1515). The resulting effects of these systems in place have had extremely damaging ramifications on queer indigenous people, primarily by implementing

prejudiced western ideologies that condemn and demonize anyone who fails to meet the expectations of their strict gender binary. Naturally, any form of deviation from this enforced western norm was systematically buried, leaving a “vast range of tribally-specific terms” and spiritual roles regarding two-spirit identities within indigenous communities to be left in the past (Ellasante 2021, 1517).

The indigenous North American worldview is inherently and incredibly different from the globalized western approach to life and individual existence. Their connections to community, both in the past through ancestral relations and in the present with entrusted roles meant to build up and support the group, act in stark contrast to the Euro-American capitalist expectations of individual and self-serving ambition. The relationships they hold to land, to spirituality, and to each other maintain a strong connection to the earth and to life in such a way that develops in opposition to the efforts of the current systems of power in place. These cultural differences are rooted in basic cardinal beliefs and behavioral norms, which remain consistent on some level despite attempts to stomp them out because these cultural traditions are more subtle than outright spiritual or community events – they dictate behavior and influence worldview. It can be something as simple as the expectation to not outwardly show anger in given situations, or it can present itself more solidly through egalitarian approaches to work and behavior towards others (Wilson 1996). In the past, “people who expressed fluid gender roles often had respected ceremonial roles as a ‘spiritual healer’ or a ‘helper’ within their communities,” and were in no way discriminated against like they are today (Ansloos *et al.* 2021, 77). The two-spirit identity in contemporary times provides an opportunity to reconnect to a real and rich cultural past, “offering a link that had previously been severed by government policies and actions,” a reality that is understandably invaluable to the indigenous community as a whole (Wilson 1996, 305).

Unfortunately, there still exists a significant amount of pushback against two-spirit peoples by the indigenous community, and this prejudice extends to the greater North American populace as well due to ingrained and internalized homophobia. The experience of living as a two-spirit person today is, therefore, much of an uphill battle against destructive settler cultural norms. Ristock *et al.* (2019) mentions that this anti-queer prejudice is rampant in the residential school systems in Canada. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to state that “the Christian religious dogma of residential schools erased a proud history of Two-Spirit people in most Indigenous nations where there had been room for alternative genders and sexual identities

beyond that of male/female gender binaries and heterosexual orientations,” a fact that illuminates just how devastating these systems of thought can be when imposed on such a scale (Ristock *et al.* 2019, 770). The need for decolonization is, therefore, critical in attempting to find methods to reverse or at least break down and reform these systems. The act of claiming the two-spirit identity is one way of joining in this effort, contributing to an “ongoing, radical resistance against colonialism that includes struggles for land redress, self-determination, healing historical trauma, cultural continuance, and reconciliation” (Driskill 2010, 69). That is precisely why it is imperative to recognize that the “colonial realities in most of the United States and Canada are substantially different, as colonial governments are still here and still maintain power and control over Indigenous communities” (Driskill 2010, 70). This fact changes the ways in which the situation can be approached and understood, because the long history of colonization that the indigenous communities of North America have faced was never left in the past – it is ongoing and requires an active effort to acknowledge that reality and work towards decolonizing the present to allow room for a healthy future.

TWO-SPIRIT IDENTITY

Reclaiming the indigenous queer identity, and coining it with an indigenous chosen name, was a conscious act of rebellion towards the settler-imposed narrative. The term two-spirit, as Wilson (1996) describes it, “is drawn from a traditional worldview that affirms the inseparability of the experience of their sexuality from the experience of their culture and community,” though Ristock *et al.* (2019) further explains the significance of the term itself through its socio-political functions in that it “is used to reconnect with specific Indigenous traditions related to sexual and gender identity; to move beyond Eurocentric binary categories of sex and gender; to state the fluidity and non-linear nature of identity processes; and to fight against heterosexism in Indigenous communities and racism in LGBTQ communities” (Wilson 1996, 303; Ristock *et al.* 2019, 768). In essence, two-spirit, in its entirety, has grown to become much more than an attempt at categorization the way that other queer identities often are. The term spearheaded a movement that has proven to be indispensable in its goal to better the quality of life for the indigenous queer community in North America, steadily transforming the identity into something that promotes a sense of support, belonging, and unwavering pride in spite of the long history that worked to silence and degrade those who failed to fit into the enforced binary.

The positive progression of the two-spirit movement over the years can hand some of the credit to the two-spirit activist Albert Mcleod. Although the term two-spirit was brought to the table by a Dr. Myra Laramée, Mcleod worked to further this development by helping to create a multitude of organizations meant to offer support and information for the indigenous queer community (University of Winnipeg Archives, 2020). The 1990's witnessed Mcleod co-founding the Manitoba Aboriginal AIDS Task Force as well as the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS network, where he spent a few years working as project manager (The Digital Transgender Archive, n.d.). Arguably the most significant of his work, however, was the co-founding of the organization titled the Two-Spirited People of Manitoba Inc., created in 2006 and still running today in 2022; The initial goals of the group were “to improve the quality of life of Two-Spirited people in Manitoba, which includes raising funds for and assisting in the provision of appropriate advocacy, education, health services, housing, employment training and cultural development,” though today a lot of that looks like group educational workshops, community events, and actively promoting against homophobia and transphobia while supporting the local two-spirit community (The Digital Transgender Archive, n.d.; Loughheed 2016, 60). This type of work is instrumental in the growing solidarity for the two-spirit movement, not only because it allows for a trustworthy source of information to help other North American indigenous people to self-identify, but because it solidifies the reality of a community that uplifts and advocates for each other when homophobia and transphobia can still hold a heavy presence in the wider indigenous community.

In the time between when traditional queer indigenous terms were being utilized by individual indigenous groups in the Americas and now with the term two-spirit being widely adopted as an indigenous queer umbrella term, anthropologists and other white settler forces made use of an extremely offensive term instead. The word, *berdache*, is essentially as far from respectful or understanding as possible, with previous “meanings that include ‘a boy kept for unnatural purposes,’ ‘male prostitute,’ and ‘passive homosexual partner,’” and managed to “[sustain] its prominence as the sole term for hundreds of designated roles in an exercise of rhetorical imperialism that necessarily imagined a static, homogenized, and settler-defined mode of Indigenous gender variance” (Ansloos *et al.* 2021, 1517-1518). This long history, in which the range of indigenous queer identities were systematically erased only to then be studied and recategorized in an offensive generalization, further highlights the cultural and political

significance behind the act of reclaiming the identity for the North American indigenous queer community and providing it with a spirit name in an effort to connect back to their ancestry. McLeod (2016) notes this moment as a critical shift in the community, namely because “the act of *spirit-naming* mirrors First Nations who have renamed their communities using traditional names; the process is affirming and reinforces cultural history and social location,” and considering this alongside “the belief that naming is a political act, which enables discussion and exploration, the group created the term to reconnect with Aboriginal traditional views related to gender and sexual identity, to emphasize the fluidity of identity creation, to fight against colonialism and Eurocentric categorization of sex and gender identities, and to unite Aboriginal LGBT peoples,” the creation of the term two-spirit can be better understood for the power it holds (McLeod 2016, 1; The Digital Transgender Archive n.d., 1).

The reality behind existing as two-spirit today remains a struggle despite the recent improvements that organizations like McLeod’s Two-Spirited People of Manitoba Inc. have made in regard to the overall quality of life for two-spirited people, and these distressing conditions have been perpetuated by the settler-imposed narrative. Ansloos *et al.* (2021) takes a deeper look into the current state of two-spirit health and well-being, of which they warn must be considered “within the dual context of colonial oppression, which is rooted in heteropatriarchy, and the vibrant resurgence of Two-Spirit peoples’ gender roles and sexual identities,” and eventually concludes that “Indigenous queer, trans, and two-spirit young people are reclaiming these traditions and reframing the health and spirituality of Indigenous queer life in new and important ways. Indigenous queer worldings are replete with the radical possibilities of queer political imagination in which Indigenous peoples exist beyond colonialism, while embodying, and indeed, enriching Indigenous life in the colonial present” (Ansloos *et al.* 2021, 76). To consider two-spirit health is to consider the conditions under which they have been subjected to by colonial forces. Inter-generational trauma aside, the experience of growing up indigenous *and* queer in a society that normalizes prejudice based on race as well as gender and sexuality, especially in any cases of cultural or self-expression that do not fit into western binary constructs, all the while under the control of a government that regards indigenous needs as an afterthought makes for particularly harmful environments on the day-to-day that are largely unavoidable. Of course, this is exactly why the topic of two-spirit health is regarded with a sense of urgency and a necessity to break down and re-build foundations of support that can actually

begin addressing the root of the problem instead of only attempting to treat the symptoms. Naturally, I am referring to decolonization efforts, and not just within the community, but also in the mind by breaking down and decolonizing the systems of thought that have been ingrained on a massive socio-cultural scale. Recognizing and re-contextualizing these systems on a personal level will help to break down the physical systems in place on a community level, and organizing the people will eventually provide aid to pick at the oppressive legal systems still in place.

Though this process exists in a bundle of complexities, the goal is to get to a place where oppressed peoples, in this case indigenous and two-spirit peoples, are able to openly celebrate, participate, and express themselves through the cultures, communities, and identities they are a part of without fear of discrimination. As of right now, “despite the desire to participate in Indigenous ceremony, homophobia and transphobia are barriers to accessing and participating in healing methodologies for many Indigenous queer, trans, and two-spirit youth” (Ansloos *et al.* 2021, 82). Robinson (2020) illuminates the current focus of the two-spirit movement as “the restoration of two-spirit people to places of respect” in order to “[help] decolonize Indigenous nations in terms of cultural values, practices, epistemologies (how we understand knowledge), and ontologies (how we think about and understand ourselves and our place in the world). As a result of the history of Indigenous cultural suppression, two-spirit people – for whom there is no exact equivalent within Settler culture – have a key role to play in protecting Indigenous languages, cultures, and the land upon which these all depend” (Robinson 2020, 1677). The beauty of intersectionality is that it makes room for the possibility of widespread change because of its ability to highlight the similarities and overlap of identities between communities. For example, the two-spirit movement’s efforts in decolonization will inevitably create waves that help communities other than their own; Breaking down homophobic and transphobic systems of thought will help the entirety of the queer community, just as the work on racist systems of thought will aid other communities of color in North America. The United States, and often Canada as well, are referred to as melting pots for a reason, the identities, experiences, and backgrounds are as intertwined as they are unique, and shared experiences make way for solidarity in shared goals and against the oppressive forces at play.

Despite the circumstances and the long history of erasure, certain traditions and cultural practices within indigenous communities have survived and are continued today. In many ways, “the growing number of Two-Spirit organizations and gatherings in the United States and

Canada focus on creating Two-Spirit communities across tribal nations, using the common goal of (re)claiming Two-Spirit identities as a way to bring Native people together,” and considering how deeply connected to culture and community the two-spirit identity is, it makes sense that they would become a major contributor to revitalizing traditions and promoting solidarity within the wider North American Indigenous community (Driskill 2010, 83). The settler-enforced cis-heteropatriarchal binary has never allowed for the type of “gender and kinship systems that structured their [two-spirit] relationships with each other and their lands, histories, and ceremonies,” but the two-spirit movement of recent has done valuable work in opening up spaces for two-spirit peoples to exist authentically (Ellasante 2021, 1516). Recognizing what this authenticity looks like requires an understanding of indigenous values; Wilson (1996) states that “we (two-spirit) become self-actualized when we become what we’ve always been, empowered by our location in our communities (versus the micro-management of an individual identity)” (Wilson 1996, 310). In this case, being able to participate in community events, as well as interact with others in indigenous and two-spirit spaces, and using that as an opportunity to share cultural experiences and traditions is an extremely important form of spiritual healing through those connections. Reinforcing indigenous cultural norms and traditions, especially when they stand in direct opposition to the settler binary systems, is an incredible tool that can undermine the very foundations that those systems are built on, even inadvertently. The current binary system in place leaves no room for indigenous or queer identities in an attempt to displace and erase them entirely, which is exactly why the mere existence of these people is an act of noncompliance. Ellasante (2021) places a special focus on this position, defending the statement that the claiming of the term “Two-Spirit as a self-identifier are acts of resistance” that essentially become “exercises of rhetorical and radical sovereignty, tantamount to everyday decolonization,” an impressive though much needed feat of rebellion against the settler narrative.

AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE: TWO-SPIRIT AND THE QUEER COMMUNITY

While the two-spirit identity is considered a part of the wider queer community, it remains its own subcommunity because, unlike most other queer identities, it necessitates a specific cultural background. To be two-spirit is to be Indigenous North American and queer, but those two facets create for a wildly different set of experiences than that of other queer individuals, especially white queer people. Ristock *et al.* (2019) summarizes this by asserting

that “the statement ‘what we face is different from gay people because we are coming from a position of power that was taken’ is important to highlight as the participant is referring to the specific cultural history where Two-Spirit people once had a valued cultural role in pre-contact First Nations that has been lost through colonization. This is a very different experience from that of many non-Indigenous gay people who have gained power in mainstream society in recent decades and generally have no sense of losing a higher social status held in an early period of history” (Ristock *et al.* 2019, 776). Placing this in context with Ellasante’s (2021) analysis on the development of western queer identities while indigenous one’s are still facing heavy amounts of erasure and oppression make way for some uncomfortable truths regarding the continued blatant and ignored racism as well as the subtle underhanded appropriation of said cultures. Essentially, Ellasante (2021) concludes that “rhetorical appropriation manifests in the enfolding of Indigenous histories and systems of gender and sexuality into queer settler history in order to validate and affirm various forms of modern queer settler identities and expressions; despite the explicit and centuries-long operation of the settler-colonial imperative to stamp out such patterns of ‘deviance’ from settler norms” (Ellasante 2021, 1518). The reality behind two-spirit interactions with the queer community can be understood very differently when contextualized with these truths, but I would argue that these layers of complexity are critical aspects of the situation that must be taken into consideration when addressing the work that still needs to be done in regard to decolonization and deprogramming queerphobic systems of thought. If anything, gaining a more accurate layout of the interconnected nature of said issues will help in process of making effective and lasting changes.

The theory and critiques coming out of the two-spirit movement challenge the status quo within queer studies today by addressing the need to include radical decolonization as part of their analysis and deconstruction of the current cis-heteropatriarchal systems in place. In fact, it would not be a stretch to argue that radical decolonization needs to be properly addressed and included in the queer movement’s goals at large, especially considering the queer community holds a significant amount of intersectionality and would not be nearly successful in its movement if it were not for the queer people of color that spearheaded the fight for queer recognition and legal rights. Although “two-spirit critiques share commonalities with queer critiques that challenge heteropatriarchal dominance and notions, gender binaries, and the policing and control of sexualized and gendered bodies,” two-spirit critiques keep a lot of queer

theory in check by challenging white-dominated queer theory as well (Driskill 2010, 71). This process, however, has allowed for quite favorable outcomes, and Ansloos (2021) commends that “both the two-spirit movement and its intersection with Indigenous queer studies have raised the need for considering the health of Indigenous queer, trans, and two-spirit young people who are enduring colonial violence in settler societies like Canada” (Ansloos 2021, 76). Overall, the interconnected nature of the two-spirit indigenous community and the wider queer community may be slightly convoluted, but it also creates an opportunity for growth and the possibility to help queer and two-spirit youth so that they do not have to share in the same cycles of abuse that older generations have been subjected to.

CONCLUSION

The two-spirit movement is, without a shadow of doubt, incredibly impressive in its continual show of strength and resistance against a daunting history of abuse and the oppressors that still maintain it today. Beyond even that, the two-spirit presence in the queer community has ensured more inclusion for intersectional identities while promoting an authentic sense of pride in the diversity of cultural queer history that is often overridden by the white queer community. Decentralizing the queer experience from the cisgender, white-western ideals and stereotypes, and moving in a direction that upholds solidarity and support with queer people of color and the struggles they face is imperative to the progression of the movement as a whole. This especially includes the need for recognizing, uplifting, and amplifying Indigenous Two-Spirit voices, a reality that is long overdue.

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