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# Two-Spirit Indigenous Americans: Fact not Fiction

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# Two-Spirit Indigenous Americans: Fact not Fiction

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the narratives of Two-Spirit Indigenous Americans who have been oppressed by heteropatriarchal norms of colonization. Two-spirit creation stories are explored to show the prevalence and importance of their identities prior to contact with Euro-American settlers and the evolution of violence, exclusion, and marginalization due to colonization. The term "Two-Spirit" is examined as a cultural identity of the Indigenous Americans. Finally, the paper looks at how Two-Spirit scholars are looking to combine Queer Theory with Indigenous Studies to deconstruct colonial heteropatriarchal America.

## **Keywords**

two-spirit, queer, indigenous americans

## **Disciplines**

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Indigenous Studies | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Women's Studies

## **Comments**

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### Two-Spirit Indigenous Americans: Fact not Fiction

Native American beliefs on gender and sexuality contrast with Euro-American heteropatriarchal views on gender and sexuality. Indigenous identities are fluid and seek gendered structures to benefit the larger community, which is alien to most Euro-Americans who rely on gendered structures to oppress a demographic of the population. Two-Spirit individuals are Indigenous people who find themselves especially fluid in their performance of their identity; the fluid gender of Two-Spirit individuals allows them to transgress roles they would normally have in their gender category in Indigenous communities and perform a role more suitable for them. Two-Spirit is a recent term that serves as an umbrella for a spectrum of Indigenous identities that differ based on gender, geographical location, and sexuality. European colonizers who “discovered” North America were baffled at the sight of Two-Spirit Indigenous Americans. Homosexuality, more specifically sodomy, was perceived as evil and unholy in European heteropatriarchal cultures, which colonizers brought with them. In order for successful colonization, the colonizers had to remove the fluid gendered structure of Indigenous communities, as well as removing the women from their centric position, to instill European heteropatriarchal ideals into the communities. Some Indigenous communities “conformed” to these ideals to survive, or simply hid their traditional practices, though many two spirit Indigenous individuals did not. Heteropatriarchal notions were

internalized in Indigenous communities, which led to effacing Two-Spirit narratives and oppressing Indigenous women who once held powerful positions in their community. As Queer Theory is emerging in western culture, many Indigenous Two-Spirit scholars are critiquing the discipline due to its essentialist notions. Two-Spirit Indigenous Americans are in an intersectional fight with the “Vanishing Indian myth” and the “Two-Spirits never existed/were never accepted” myth.

North America primarily had egalitarian social structures before colonizers intruded on Indigenous land. Indigenous nations were gynocratic, or woman centric, which placed women as central to their society. Paula Gunn Allen refers to this gynocratic social structure as the “sacred hoop” in which the women of Indigenous nations were at the center of this communal hoop (Allen 2). The “hoop-shaped” social structure of Indigenous cultures calls for a unification and equality spread evenly across all societal, cultural, and spiritual functions of all beings. Every living being in this type of social structure must perform its role to keep the harmony of the hoop intact. The roles Indigenous individual’s play in the “sacred hoop” depends on their gender identity. Gender roles are sociocentric, which mean that Indigenous men, women, and Two-Spirit peoples (who fluctuated between these roles) are defined by their role in the community and depended upon one another for stability. Allen comments on this twinning system of gender roles stating that it was a “tradition among numerous tribes of a two-sided complementary social structure” (18). This system of twinning relies on both halves to pull their weight but also relies on a gynocratic system to function. Males have their power and status through the fair distribution of power of their twinned partners, the females. “Men’s status in all tribes that use clan systems...came to them through the

agency of women, who got their status from the spirit people” (Allen 203). It is the role of women to use their power and share it with men if they are worthy of acquiring great spiritual responsibility. The Creation stories of Indigenous nations are oral histories and truths that promote these gynocratic ideals, such as the twinning system, which promote the continuation of matrilineal ideals. Creation stories such as the Pueblo’s “Thought Woman” produce ideas that women are powerful and central to the creation of society. Thought Woman is “the necessary precondition for material creation, and she, like all of her creation, is fundamentally female-potential and primary” (14). Paula Gunn Allen states that everything that Thought Woman creates is “fundamentally female” which then broadens one’s interpretation and understanding why the Native Americans would place women in the center of their social structure. It is important to note that Thought Woman is the Supreme Spirit in many creation stories among Indigenous cultures and this means that she is “both Mother and Father to all people and to all creatures” (15). This fluidity in Thought Woman’s gender presentation as “Mother” and also “Father” is also reflected in the cultural values of the Indigenous nations.

Two-Spirit Indigenous Americans are individuals who identify outside the male/female sociocentric binary. The sociocentric binary of Indigenous nations is far more fluid than the Euro-American patriarchal binary. The sociocentric binary is for the wellbeing and communal functioning for the sacred hoop society (everyone must play their role for the hoop to stay intact) where patriarchal boundaries rely on the strict oppression and exploitation of half of the binary for the other half to thrive. Two-Spirit individuals have many names for their identity depending on location and personal identification such as Yaawaa, Alyha, Tuvasa, Koskalaka, Winkte, and many more

(Beauchemin, Levy, and Vogel 1991). Two-Spirit people often “realize their alternate gender status when young, and in many cases, this realization was prefaced by dreams or visions” which is celebrated by the community with a ritual “performed as a rite of passage, to acknowledge publicly the individual’s transition from a heterosexual status to the status of Two-Spirit” (Elledge xv). Two-Spirit refers to the gender identity of the individual, having both masculine and feminine spirits inside them. Sexualities of the Two-Spirit individuals vary, some are heterosexual, some are homosexual, some are asexual, but regardless, their community values their sexual and gender identity with high spiritual and communal responsibilities. Men and women have their communal obligations and roles and Two-Spirits fluctuated between these obligations, some chose to do the men’s work, some did the women’s work, but also had spiritual obligations to be healers or medicine people. Having both male and female qualities allowed Two-Spirit people to “transcend the physical and spiritual worlds” and “become a conduit between the physical and spiritual worlds” for their communities (Beauchemin, Levy, and Vogel 1991). Two-Spirits had a communal role to embody the physical and spiritual worlds and act as a bridge between the two to heal others in their community. Creation stories such as “Arrow Young Men (Creation of the World)” cement the spiritual power and responsibility of Two-Spirit individuals. The Arrow Young Men were the first men to walk the Earth, and a powerful medicine man that traveled through space and time appeared before the men and sacrificed himself to have his blood bless the blooming Earth (Elledge 4). A Two-Spirit medicine man appearing as a powerful presence to promote the creation of the world promotes positive portrayals and depictions of Two-Spirit Indigenous individuals in native communities.

Colonizers believe in a gender binary of rigid gender roles for men and women who cannot transgress these roles for the sake of keeping the patriarchy intact. The European patriarchal system, according to Andrea Smith, depends on suppression, domination, and violence to create a marginalized population to be effective (Smith 17). This correlates with the many power binaries that Euro-American patriarchal societies create such as man/woman, white/black (or any other non-Western race), and heterosexual/homosexual. These pervasive power dynamics that are embedded in patriarchal societies have existed in European cultures since the rise of the Dominator Model of governing around 4500 B.C.E. (George 36). Native nations are built upon gynocentric ideals, placing the woman as central in society, which is a polar opposite from how European colonizers lived, so it threatened them in their conquest of the “New World”. It was crucial for the success of the Euro-American Empire to target the women of the Indigenous World due to the centrality of women in holding together their communities. Ojibwa communities “considered gender roles to be mutually supportive” by respecting women’s labor and legal rights; however, when fur traders who originated from “European societies dominated by much more patriarchal views of gender” came into contact with Ojibwa society, it was “nineteenth-century values and codes of conduct in Europe and the United States and Canada” that “diminished the standing of native (Ojibwa) women” (Child 46). The suppression of the Native American woman’s identity weakened their cultural ties to the community and therefore weakened the community itself. Colonizers used violence as a tool to remove women from the center of the sacred hoop society to instill patriarchal ideals into Indigenous communities to complete their conquest. One of the most powerful tools at the disposal of Euro-American patriarchal

society that causes identity stripping, demoralizing, and dehumanizing behavior is rape. Rape is a violent act used against an individual to demoralize and oppress their identity; this violence is usually catalyzed by inequality via gender, sexuality, race, or class. Euro-American patriarchal society has used rape as a vehicle and tool to create an empire by targeting Native American societies. This tool was used to attack primarily Native American women which Andrea Smith addresses this sexual violence as an “attack on (a Native American woman’s) identity as a woman and an attack on her identity as Native” this intersectional attack of identity of “race and gender cannot be separated” (Smith 9). Removing gynocratic ideals and instilling patriarchal ideals not only affected the social status and identity of women, but also largely affected Two-Spirit Indigenous people.

Two-Spirit individuals were important members of Indigenous communities; however, when European colonizers invaded Indigenous land, they saw Two-Spirit people as a threat to European standards of gender. Europeans used violence and re-education to impose their gender roles onto Indigenous communities and to destroy the sacred hoop. Indigenous scholar Roger M. Carpenter states, “by the beginning of the twentieth century Christian missionaries and government educators had achieved a great deal of success in imposing European notions of gender on native societies” and Indigenous “boys who dressed as females were punished, and in some cases boys who ran away from boarding schools were forced to dress as girls as a form of punishment” creating the image of Two-Spirit identities as humiliating and degrading (Carpenter 161). Europeans, mostly the French fur traders, created a term for the Two-Spirit Indigenous people, *berdache*, which is a term that comes from Persia and was a term for a male slave for sex (Beauchemin). Europeans brought the term back during the crusades and used it



to describe the Two Spirit people in a negative light (Beauchemin). Two-Spirit Indigenous Americans were abused, terrorized, and belittled by the colonizers; however, once patriarchal ideals seeped into Native societies, Two-Spirit individuals were shunned and punished by their own communities. Indigenous nations tainted by patriarchal influences began to rewrite creation stories that portrayed positive images of Two-Spirit individuals. Creation stories such as "The Hermaphrodite (1906)" portray Two-Spirit individuals as embarrassing and as an illness. A young Pawnee boy wakes up from a dream of the Spider-Woman deity informing him that he must become a woman and seeks out a medicine man to "cure" him by going to the "creeks, springs, or any streams of water and get the green moss from the bottom of the stream". The boy was unable to retrieve any green moss and was deemed incurable and the boy "was so ashamed that he committed suicide rather than be half woman and half man" (Elledge 101-102).

Heteropatriarchal values have influenced Indigenous Nations to the extent of marginalizing and rewriting the histories of Two-Spirits that once held important roles "in the governing of the community, often being 'summoned to the Councils' where 'nothing can be decided without (Two-Spirit) advice'" (Carpenter 152). The parallels between the oppression of Indigenous women and Two-Spirit individuals is not coincidental; it is the goal of the colonizers to assimilate the Native Americans and to act in violent and oppressive ways to destroy Indigenous traditions from within for the sake of the Euro-American heteropatriarchal empire.

Two-Spirit individuals in contemporary times are looking to Queer Theory and Native American Studies to combat the heteropatriarchal ideals that have been forced onto Indigenous nations. Queer Theory challenges the notion of heteronormativity while

Native American Studies critique patriarchal and colonial ideals. Indigenous scholars, Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Gilley, and Scott Morgensen believe that the combination of Queer Theory and Native American Studies is productive to link “heteronormativity as a colonial project, and decolonizing Indigenous knowledges of gender and sexuality as one result of that critique” and that bringing “Indigenous-specific critiques of colonial heteropatriarchal gender/sexuality into broader conversations within queer and Indigenous studies that link queer Indigenous people within and across Indigenous nations, colonial borders, and global networks” (Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen 3). Queer theory and Native American studies can learn much from each other by working together to combat a similar opponent, heteropatriarchal colonial America. Queer theory exists only because of the effects of colonization. Indigenous nations hosted gender and sexual diversity, which makes the heteronormative ideals of European colonizers “queer” in this context. Queer individuals can look back to positive images and representations of Two-Spirit Indigenous individuals to learn about the effects of colonization on gender and sexual identities; much like first-wave feminists looked to gynocratic models of Indigenous nations to build arguments against the patriarchy. Native American studies can learn from queer theory’s challenge of a cohesive subject, as Andrea Smith states,

“A subjectless critique can help Native studies (as well as ethnic studies) escape the ethnographic entrapment by which Native peoples are rendered simply as objects of intellectual study, and instead can foreground settler colonialism as a key logic that governs the United States today” which also “requires us to challenge the normalizing logics of academia rather than simply articulate a politics of Indigenous inclusion within the colonial academy” (Smith 46).

Two-Spirit scholars are caught in-between these two discourses, but Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen believe the linking of them will be productive in deconstructing

colonial heteropatriarchal America. Deconstructing the current state of our colonial nation will make the country an inclusive salad of true equal identities: Indigenous Americans, Two-Spirit individuals, women, queer identified individuals, racial minorities, and many more.

Two-Spirit Indigenous Americans are not fiction, they are living, breathing, humans who have prevailed despite colonial America and heteropatriarchal ideals within Indigenous nations that attempt to erase their history. In a gynocratic social system, Two-Spirit identities flourished and were well respected rather than oppressed in a heteropatriarchal society. Getting back to the Sacred Hoop is essential for Two-Spirit individuals to thrive again. To return to the Sacred Hoop it is important to challenge notions of colonial heteropatriarchal America that are imposed on society, to challenge the “Vanishing Indian” myth, to challenge a “post colonial” narrative, challenge what Euro-American academia has validated as the “truth”, and to open up our minds to new modes of thinking.

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