Two-Spirits: Identity and Culture

Historical truth about the diverse gender expressions and fluid sexuality of some Native peoples has almost been lost amidst favored stereotypes of overtly masculine warriors and the soft-spoken, silken-haired beauties they fought over; however, anthropological records—though touched by personal bias and unfair exclusions—offer good evidence of Native societies that wholly embraced and even revered those within their community who fell outside the gender binary: in English, the contemporary cross-cultural term for these people is “two-spirit.” The implications of this term are vastly different than might be assumed; as such, it is often dealt with apart from the Western LGBT umbrella. A thick line justifies the separation here: a line of diverse yet comparable cultures, traditions, and even spirituality that, by its very nature, cannot be tossed together with a globalized notion of alternative gender and sexuality. In essence, to dissolve the term “two-spirit” (and all the more numerous traditional terms implied there within) into the Western LGBT umbrella is to assimilate a wealth of connected cultural identities; however, this cannot be understood without first examining the role of two-spirits in the historical records of their peoples, and in turn, acknowledging their post-colonial need to reclaim this identity.

In Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America, Will Roscoe provides an extensive overview of Native terms with literal translations that would, in English,
be herded together under the “two-spirit” banner. Outside cultural context (some of which has been lost), these terms may be comparable to our own: for example, the Aleut “ayagigux’, man transformed into a woman” and “tayagigux’, woman transformed into a man,” (213) respectively, seem potentially reminiscent of a transgender identity. There is also the masculine term “tuyayap” from the Owens Valley Paiute, which means to “dress like other sex” (220), which would be interpreted as mere “cross-dressing” in contemporary English. For the Flatheads, there are terms such as “tcinés-koeumisti-l-isnkuskaltemig, homosexualism between men” and “tcinés-koeumisti-l-isnksmé’em, homosexualism between women” (219), of which the contemporary English implication is perfectly clear. These, however, are perhaps some of the more apparently “straightforward terms.” What can be made of the more obscure definitions outside of cultural (and indeed, often spiritual) context? For example, there is the feminine term “lila witkowin” from the Hokan/Siouan language family, which is defined as “crazy woman” (216). Also, the masculine Apache term “Na-yénnas-ganné,” meaning “man-woman warrior” (215), or the masculine Inuit term “sipiniq, infant whose sex changes at birth” (213). This sample is a fraction of the existing terms for alternative gender and sexuality among Native peoples across all language families, and yet already there is something to be desired in these definitions. It is cultural and spiritual context that is lacking here—a context that is foreign to contemporary non-Native concepts of identifying outside the gender binary or engaging in a same-sex partnership. What is most crucial then, beyond acknowledging the multitude of Native terms for “two-spirit” identity, is to understand the varying historical roles and expectations of these people within their communities.

There is considerable bias in the anthropological record, particularly concerning early reports of Native customs that challenged the Judeo-Christian mindset. For example, as Sabine
Lang points out in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, “because male two-spirits often entered into sexual relationships with men, anthropologists… for a long time interpreted two-spirit roles as institutionalized male homosexuality” (100). She points out, as well, that “females taking up the ways of men were usually not included in discussions of the two-spirit, with some exceptions” (100-101); however, a lack of evidence is not a lack of occurrence, and that much will be illustrated shortly. Now, concerning the misconception of a two-spirited individual cleanly translating into the Western idea of a homosexually-oriented individual, Lang considers “the implications [of] systems of multiple genders… on cultural constructions of homosexuality and heterosexuality” (104). In other words, she illuminates the fundamental stumbling block in this translation: the intertwined Western sex and gender binary versus the “alternative, or mixed, gender” (104) categories of the Native cultures in question. With respect to the latter categories, Lang notes that “a same-sex relationship in many Native American cultures, at least traditionally, is not necessarily at the same time a same-gender relationship” (104). Although the contemporary Western LGBT community has done much to challenge the belief that sex and gender are hopelessly intertwined, it is obvious that historical accounts of two-spirits have nonetheless been affected by that mindset. Despite this, sufficient truths can be sifted out from biased accounts—truth enough to begin reconstructing an image of what two-spirited individuals meant to their various communities and what unique roles they had to play.

In their article “Two Spirit: Counseling Native American gay, lesbian, and bisexual people,” Michael Garrett and Bob Barret point out that “many Native people do not value individualism the same as does mainstream [North American] culture,” and furthermore, that “in Native culture, the role of a Two Spirit is more of a spiritual/social identity than a psychosexual
identity” (133). But what is the significance of such an identity and how does it contribute to the larger community? Garrett and Barret relate a “traditional Native worldview,” which indeed has cross-cultural truth, that “men typically see the world from a male perspective, whereas women typically see the world from a female perspective” (134). By extension, a two-spirited person, “[possessing] both male and female spirit, were looked on as having unique abilities to view both… perspectives and therefore be able to see beyond the ordinary boundaries of limited human existence” (134). Such a unique perspective, according to Garrett and Barret, was much of the reason that two-spirited community members were “highly revered as Medicine persons, leaders, and intermediaries” (134), and they were seen as fluid between the two worlds—physical and spiritual—and as such, in a special position to “learn and teach about balance” (134). In considering all this, it is clear where the correlation between two-spirited people and shamans arose from, but Walter L. Williams states in The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture that “shamans are not necessarily berdaches [two-spirits], but because of their spiritual connection, [two-spirits] in many cultures are often considered to be powerful shamans” (35). Now, Williams notes that “shamans gain their high status on the basis of how well they can relate to the spirit world” (33), but he also points out that shamans are not meant to compete, that with higher status comes greater responsibility to the community, and that shamans ultimately receive their respectable statuses by first being selfless towards others (33). In other words, there is a certain amount of subtext to shamanism—a subtext of caring for the community. Two-spirited individuals are elsewhere connected to roles that put them in service to the community at large, as related in the article “Caregiving Experiences Among American Indian Two-Spirit Men and Women,” which says the following: “…these community members [two-spirits] tended to be well integrated within Native communities and often occupied highly
respected social and ceremonial roles which included caregiving” (Evans-Campbell et al. 78). In a contemporary interview on the subject of two-spirits as caregivers (historically and into the present), a person identified only as “Terri” expressed the following:

The two-spirits, we were responsible for the village. We were the ones who took care of the infirmed. We were the ones who raised the children, not because they were unwanted, or abandoned… We were the ones who stayed behind, and protected the village; we’re the last form of defense against, protecting the women, the children, and the village. (qtd. in Evans-Campbell et al. 81)

Apart from their perceived natural ability to straddle the fence between worlds, two-spirited people were able to gain access to opportunities not typically afforded to their birth genders. The implications of this vary from society to society, but it would often appear to come about from a child’s own suggestiveness. For example, in the case of “Woman Chief” from the Crow tribe, it was said of her that “‘this child… desired to acquire manly accomplishments’ [and] she was ‘taller and stronger than most women’” (Roscoe 78). It interesting to note that while “she did not… cross-dress” (79), her career allegedly “[included] not only participation in hunting, warfare, and leadership, but a sexual dimension as well—she married four women” (78). Through the experience of “Woman Chief,” two things are clear: again, the opportunities that arise for an individual balancing masculine and feminine qualities, but moreover, the increasingly obvious fact that the term “two-spirit” is so broad that if, indeed, it accurately encompasses all the many historical terms that exist for this diverse social identity, it does so just barely. With the Navajo, certain prestigious activities that were considered strictly male or female could be accessed via an open third gender, which was called “nadleehi” (Roscoe 41). It is reported that “many nadleehi combined activities of men and women, along with some traits
unique to their status” and, in doing so, it appears directly related that “they were often among the wealthier members of the tribe” (41). Now, as often is the case with Native societies, there is an emphasis on collective benefit; taking this into consideration, a two-spirited individual might gain such a status largely because of their family’s wishes. For instance, “early observers [of Alaskan natives] reported that some feminine boys were raised as girls from childhood by families lacking a daughter” (Roscoe 15). It is easy to imagine that various economic benefits attached to either the male or female gender might otherwise be lost, but with the option of a “third gender” in society, parents and/or the individual themselves gain a certain power over the typically uncontrollable (that is, a person’s biological sex).

Times and traditions changed with “contact.” Through poetry and prose in her book, She Walks For Days Inside A Thousand Eyes, Sharon Proulx-Turner draws contemporary eyes back into colonial history: “…for there are several gender choices / at least there were until the arrival of the white man” (116). Though not an academic record, her words are compelling and succinctly address the two-spirit plight with the arrival of Christian missionaries in North America:

this [male/female] is the kind of union the white man enforced among his people before and after his arrival to this land as his judeo-christian [sic] religions dictate, without heart and mindlessly label the union of the two-spirits an abomination (117)

There is an engraving by Theodor de Bry which depicts one of the more terrible happenings that befell two-spirited individuals come colonial times; it is “based on an account by Girolamo Benzoni in the 1540s” and shows “Spanish explorer Balboa [ordering] Indians accused of sodomy to be eaten alive by dogs” (Williams NP). A single glance into the anthropological
record surrounding contact makes it all too easy to imagine why “among some tribes, the condemnation by whites led berdaches [two-spirits] to commit suicide” (Williams 181). An unnamed Sioux traditionalist, quoted in The Spirit and the Flesh, reported that “missionaries had a lot of power on the reservation, so the winktes [two-spirits] were ostracized by many of the Christianized Indians” (183). What were the effects of this on the practice? Williams says that amidst the Navajo, for one, “nadle [two-spirits] were beginning to realize that white society considered them ‘queer,’ and the object of jokes rather than respect. By the late 1940s anthropologists were reporting that the remaining berdaches [two-spirits] were all middle-aged or older” (183). This latter point would appear to suggest that two-spirited people had lost their place in society, and certainly it may have occurred in specific Native societies who were—more or less—successfully assimilated into a Western, Judeo-Christian worldview; however, the best evidence for revealing the ultimate fate of “two spirits” lies not with any anthropological record of history, but with the collected voices of contemporary Natives.

“Two-spirit people are not a typo / but are here for good, for all time / to ensure balance in body, mind, heart, spirit” (177) writes Proulx-Turner, one of many authors who presently seek to celebrate the lives and history of specifically two-spirited Native women. She is not alone. Native people are stepping forward one by one to reclaim their identity, and it appears that many have found their sexual orientation to be so intimately connected with their cultural identity that they have no choice but to seek out the dusty history of their two-spirited ancestors. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that “Native American concepts usually prefer circles to lines. If one takes the line of a male/female, gay/straight, and bends it into a circle… there are theoretically an infinite number of possible points of gender and sexual identity for an individual that can shift and differ over time and location” (Garrett and Barret 131). The worldview here is
essential; the circular versus the linear, themes of emphasis on community over individuality…

these all contribute to why a Native individual who might otherwise fall comfortably under the
LGBT umbrella cannot be content there. If Western society asks such a person, in contemporary
times, to abstain from identifying as “two-spirited” because it is entirely more complex to
understand and interpret given its diverse cultural ties, Western society is essentially asking such
a person to maintain a pattern of assimilation. How easy would it be to gloss that request over
with talk of “unity” while ignoring the fact that such apparent “unity” implies, despite any good
intentions, oneness under a banner of Eurocentric ideas? I would argue that there is room for
two-spirited people in the LGBT community, but I would just as soon argue that there is room
for anyone who is an ally of diversity. Unity and diversity are possible to uphold simultaneously,
in fact, and the picture they create may turn out to be far more beautiful than diversity sacrificed
to more simplistic unity: it is the difference between a stained glass window and a solid-colored
wall. It is essential that members of Western society overcome their ancestors’ fear of diversity
and re-discover the power of human differences, for as Will Roscoe says, “gender and sexual
diversity in North America and elsewhere were once differences that served. If we can remember
the stories told [about two-spirits], they may yet serve again” (212). I reiterate the importance of
acknowledging how intimately connected a two-spirited person’s gender and cultural identity are
proven to be (the two things cannot rightfully be separated), and that not much can be assumed
of anyone who identifies as two-spirited other than the mixing and/or balancing of masculine and
feminine traits within them. All this is quite clear in the anthropological record. Finally, I think it
important to state that while the two-spirit identity is alive and well, there are more than battle
scars to consider on the skin of those who embrace that term—there are fresh wounds. “Two
Spirit is who I am,” says Jaynie Lara in Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature,
“I pick and choose which of my / people to tell” (Driskill et al. 93). The Western, Judeo-Christian worldview has taken its toll on Native societies since colonial times; for myself, I realize that with knowledge comes responsibility. While I cannot reverse the historical oppression of two-spirited individuals, I am certainly capable of supporting their contemporary fight for unique recognition.

Works Cited


Evans-Campbell, Teresa, Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen, Karina L. Walters, and Antony Stately.


