Two Spirit: Miscomprehensions of Indigenous Constructions of Gender in the Early Modern Atlantic World

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Those who travelled across the Atlantic Ocean in the Early Modern period to the American continent and made the first contact with its Native people had only understood gender as a binary: man and woman. However, they soon learned that not all cultures had this particular worldview. For many Indigenous cultures, both historically and today, there exists a much more fluid understanding of gender. "Two-spirit," a modern term to describe a type of "third gender" that exists in many Indigenous cultures, moves between "the boundaries of man and spirits and also the boundaries of gender."[1] Historically, two-spirit represented much more than a personal identity; it was also a crucial position with unique responsibilities within Indigenous communities across the Americas. However, expedition documents reveal that the identity and the role in the community of two-spirit people long perplexed European explorers. Their attempts to comprehend conceptions of gender and sexuality within Indigenous societies were clouded by their prejudices rooted in European and Christian beliefs. Regardless of the blatant homophobia and personal prejudice, explorer documentation provides important anecdotes that inform modern historians about what it meant to be a two-spirit person on an individual and a communal level in the pre-colonial era across varying cultures and regions. However, misunderstanding and mass generalizations surrounding the two-spirit identity have caused the erasure of many of its aspects and origins and have excluded many people who do not fit the narrow Western definition.

[1] M. Carmen Gomez-Galisteo, "Subverting Gender Roles in the Sixteenth Century: Cabeza de Vaca, the Conquistador Who Became a Native American Women," in *Gender and Sexuality in Indigenous North America, 1400-1850*, ed. Sandra Slater and Fay A. Yarbrough (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 11–29.

The term "berdache" will be frequently referenced throughout this essay. It is important to contextualize this word when discussing Indigenous conceptions of gender and sexuality. "Berdache" has long been used to refer to Indigenous people who deviated from the Western gender binary or who participated in homosexual acts. The term is a French word that translates to "kept boy" or "male prostitute." Therefore, due to its negative connotations, it is considered derogatory among modern Queer and Indigenous scholars. However, until "two spirit" became popularized, it was the primary term used in scholarship to refer to gender-diverging Indigenous people. The term "berdache" is very generalizing because acceptance and understanding of binary gender deviation vary depending on region, culture, and tribe.[2] "Two-spirit" is a modern term that has replaced "berdache" as the primary term used among historians and within the Queer community. Indigenous people coined the word to tie Indigenous Queer folk today to their diverse histories.[3] However, historically, "two-spirit" was not only a gender identity but an important social role in many Indigenous cultures. Therefore, today there exists a historical pressure on those who wish to identify as such to play more active roles in their communities as their ancestors may have done. In a 2017 article in *Indian Country Today*, author Tony Enos states, "claiming the role of the Two spirit is to take up the spiritual responsibility that the role traditionally had. Walking the red road, being for the people and our children/youth, and being a guiding force in a good way with a good mind are just some of those responsibilities." [4] Though, two-spirit scholar Kai Pyle argues that many traditional roles and identities have changed over

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[2] Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds., *Two-spirit People* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

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

[4] Kai Pyle, "Reclaiming Traditional Gender Roles: A Two-spirit Critique," in *In Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms*, ed. Sarah Nickel and Amanda Fehr (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 118.

time. Two-spirit should be no different. There should not be a pressure to "conform to unreasonable standards of tradition," for those who wish to identify as Two-spirit.[5]

While modern definitions of "Two-spirit" may be more focused on individual identity, traditionally, Two-spirit people were often defined by their role in their communities. Based on descriptions from European explorers, a person could "become" berdache in two ways depending on the culture: either their community chose them as children, often based on their skill set, and brought up into the role, or they received a calling from a supernatural or divine force.[6] Perhaps a more modern understanding of the second explanation would be that they realized their body did not match who they were internally. In other cases, like a community outside the kingdom of Ceuola described by Fernando Alarchon (1884), the role of Two-spirit people was hereditary. There were always four Two-spirit people in the community. When one passed, the next male child born into the community would be raised as the next Two-spirit.[7] The specifics of the "berdache" role depended on the community to which they belonged, but generally, they transcended gender boundaries. Two-spirit people often adopted the day-to-day tasks of the women in the community, including cooking, fire-making, agriculture, and food distribution.[8] However, according to several accounts from European explorers, they may have

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[5] Pyle, "Reclaiming Traditional Gender Roles: A Two-spirit Critique," 118.

[6] Roger M. Carpenter, "Womanish Men and Manlike Women: The Native American Two-spirit as Warrior," in *Gender and Sexuality in Indigenous North America, 1400-1850,* ed. Sandra Slater and Fay A. Yarbrough (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 147–58.

[7] Fernando Alarchon, "Chap. 7: It Is Tolde Him That They Are Ten Dayes Iourney Distant from Ceuola, and That There Be Christians There, Which Make Warre against the Lords of That Countrey. Of the Sodomie Which Those Indians Vse with Foure Young Men, Appoynted for That Seruice, Which Weare Womens Apparel. Seeing They Could Not Send Newes of Their Being There to Them of Ceuola, They Went Backe Againe Downe the Riuer to Their Ships.," in *The Principall Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation*, ed. Edmund Goldsmid, vol. vol 14 (Edinburgh: E. & G. Goldsmid, 1884), 408–10, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4587829#page/2/mode/1/chapter/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4587834.

[8] Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

also participated in “masculine” activities, including hunting, carrying heavy loads, and warfare. Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish explorer who spent time with Indigenous tribes in the Southern United States, described the various, seemingly antagonistic duties of the Two-spirit people he encountered: “These go habited like women, and perform their duties, use the bow, and carry heavy loads.”[9]

European explorers also struggled to comprehend that Two-spirit folk were not effeminate, impotent men but often had unique roles within their communities. In some cultures, Two-spirit people played an important role in death ceremonies and warfare. For example, in the Outine tribe of Florida, as well as others, it was considered honourable for their dead to be carried off the battlefield by Two-spirit persons.[10]

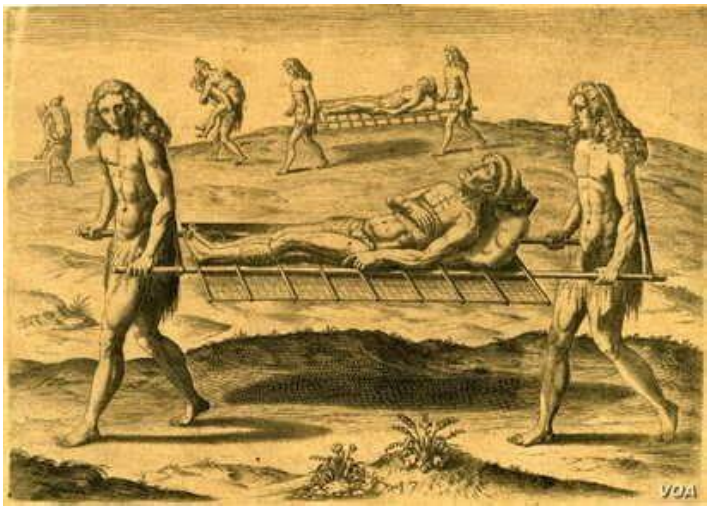

Figure 1. Two-spirit people carrying deceased warriors off a battlefield.[11]

[9] Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, “Chapter 26: Of the Nations and Tongues,” in *Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States, 1528-1543*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge and Theodore H Lewis (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907), 97–98.

[10] Sandra Slater, “‘Nought but Women’: Constructions of Masculinities and Modes of Emasculation in the New World,” in *Gender and Sexuality in Indigenous North America, 1400-1850*, ed. Sandra Slater and Fay A. Yarbrough (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 30–53.

[11] Theodor de Bry and Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, “Employments of the Hermaphrodites.,” Archive, State Library and Archives of Florida, Florida Memory, 1598 1528, https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/254224.

Europeans were also baffled by Two-spirit peoples' participation in war. In some cultures, who believed that Two spirits were chosen by divinity or a supernatural force, it was thought that Two-spirit people were gifted with spiritual power that aided warriors in battle. Not too dissimilar to the way a religious figure often accompanied European explorers during their travels. While they had a valuable role in war, they did likewise in peacekeeping. Two-spirit people may have also acted as diplomats within their communities. Due to their gender-fluid nature, they could act as third parties in disputes between men and women.[12]

French Jesuit missionary Joseph Francois Lafitau described the "berdaches" he encountered in a similar way that a religious figure may be described. He observed that they "never marry, they participate in all religious ceremonies, and this profession of an extraordinary life causes them to be regarded as people of a higher order, and above the common man." [13] This is a mass generalization. The role of Two-spirit people varied between tribes, and they were not always so accepted in their communities to receive such distinguished positions. However, it exemplifies how many Indigenous cultures transcended Western understandings of gender. Lafitau's mention of Two-spirit participation in religious ceremonies aligns with other European experiences. Artist George Catlin observed a Sauk and Meskwaki ceremony involving a Two-spirit person. He said, "This is one of the most unaccountable and disgusting customs that I have ever met in Indian country," and "I should wish that it [the berdache] might be extinguished before it be more fully recorded."[14] His harsh comments are a testament to the prejudices of Western culture and demonstrate the lack of willingness to open-mindedly explore cultural differences that most European explorers maintained in their encounters with Two-spirit people.

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[12] Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*.

[13] Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*.

[14] Gregory D. Smithers, "Cherokee 'Two spirits': Gender, Ritual, and Spirituality in the Native South," *Early American Studies* 12, no. 3 (2014): 626–51.

However, the visual product of Catlin's experience at the ceremony provides some insight into the spiritual role of some Two-spirit people.

Figure 2. Ceremony of the "Sac and Fox Indians" observed by George Catlin, featuring a Two-spirit person.[15]

Similarly, George Grinnell describes witnessing a traditional dance of the Cheyanne people in which Two spirits appeared to be leading the dance: "The halfmen-halfwomen took their places in the middle of this square and were the managers of the dance. No one was allowed in the middle of the square except these persons."[16] Grinnell's comment about the "halfmen-halfwomen" being the only members of the group who seemed to be allowed in the middle of the square points towards their spiritual and cultural importance in some Indigenous nations.

[15] George Catlin, "Dance to the Berdash," Museum, Smithsonian American Art Museum, 1835-1837, https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/dance-berdash-4023.
[16] George Bird Grinnell, "Scalp Dance," in *The Cheyenne Indians: War, Ceremonies, and Religion*, 2nd ed., vol. II (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 41.

Many descriptions of Two-spirit people from the historical record speculate and assume their sexuality and its role in their communities. While modern definitions of "Two-spirit" categorizes the identity as a gender rather than a sexuality, early European understandings of "berdache" people closely associated gender with homosexuality. It was difficult for explorers from societies with strict gender binaries to understand the concept of gender fluidity. As mentioned previously, "berdache" has derogatory connotations in relation to male homosexuality. Early explorers also used similar terms such as "male prostitute," "sodomite," and "hermaphrodite," in an attempt to describe, in European terms, what they observed.[17] For example, one section of the manuscripts of Alexander Henry and David Thompson that features a Two-spirit figure is titled "Swiftness of the One-Eyed Sodomist," [18] which shows the significant lack of understanding of what it means to be a Two-spirit person. Moreover, Pierre Liette, a French trader and soldier who observed the Indigenous people along the upper Mississippi river valley, was very presumptuous and prejudiced regarding homosexual relations within the tribe. He argued that young boys were groomed to be male prostitutes from a young age to serve the men of the community because the women were unable to satisfy. He described the Two-spirit folk as "men who were bred for this purpose since childhood."[19] It cannot be said for sure what exactly Liette observed. However, due to his narrow worldview, he failed to consider that rather than have the role forced upon them to perform sexual services, the people

[17] Carpenter, "Womanish Men and Manlike Women: The Native American Two-spirit as Warrior," 147-58.
[18] Alexander Henry and David Thompson, "The Park River Post, 1800-01 Part I: The Red River: Chapter III," ed. Elliot Coues, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry, Fur Trader of the Northwest Company, and of David Thompson, Official Geographer and Explorer of the Same Company* 1 (1897): 163–65.
[19] Carpenter, Roger M. "Womanish Men and Manlike Women: The Native American Two-Spirit as Warrior." In *Gender and Sexuality in Indigenous North America, 1400-1850*, edited by Sandra Slater and Fay A. Yarbrough, 147–58. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011.

he observed may have chosen to present themselves in the way they did because it had advantages in the community or because it is how they felt most like themselves. It is likely examples from the historical record such as this that popularized the term "berdache."

Early Europeans did not realize that they were observing a gender identity, not a sexuality. While many accounts observe Two-spirit people participating in homosexual activity, to assume that all Two-spirits are homosexual would be a generalization. There is evidence of Two-spirit people presenting as bisexual or asexual, and some even parenting children.[20] Only the Western fixation with binaries caused early Europeans to associate femininity with sexual deviance. Although the assumption that all Two-spirit people are gay should not be made, it does not mean that homosexual relations involving Two-spirit people do not appear often in historical records. On his expedition in the South-west of the United States, Cabeza de Vaca recorded, "during the time I spent with these people I saw one wicked thing, and that was a man married to another man." [21] Either the use of the word "marriage" was used in translation, or the best way he could understand their relationship through a Western, Christian lens was as a marriage. However, the implication that the relationship resembled a marriage to a European indicates that some Indigenous cultures not only tolerated homosexual acts but normalized gay relationships. This is not to say that all Indigenous societies accepted these relationships. During his expedition to Florida in 1564, Jacques Le Moyne noted that those who partook in homosexual activity were "considered odious by the Indians themselves."[22] In this case, it is hard to determine whether it is

[20] Carpenter, "Womanish Men and Manlike Women: The Native American Two-spirit as Warrior," 147-58.
[21] Gomez-Galisteo, "Subverting Gender Roles in the Sixteenth Century: Cabeza de Vaca, the Conquistador Who Became a Native American Women," 11-29.
[22] Smithers, "Cherokee 'Two spirits.'"

accurate, or if Le Moyne's comment was purely a reflection of his own beliefs. Either way, the statement was no doubt true of many Indigenous cultures.

There is often a misguided assumption that all Indigenous nations were accepting of sexual and gender fluidity, but this is far from the truth. While Two-spirit people were important members of many communities, early Europeans also observed Indigenous groups that only tolerated or even outright discriminated against their Two-spirit community members. In some patriarchal societies, their femininity and associations with womanhood put Two-spirit people at a subservient level comparable to women. In some cases, parents of male children would try to raise their sons to be "masculine" so they were not chosen, literally or metaphysically, to be Two-spirit.[23]

For early Europeans, the difficulty in understanding and accepting Two-spirit people comes from narrow Western conceptions of gender and sexuality, much of which stems from racist ideologies and Christianity. In the early modern period, Christianity taught that homosexuality was a rejection of Christ and the devil's work. Not only did many Indigenous cultures accept homosexuality as normal, but they also practised pagan religions and spiritualities. Furthermore, in Christian societies it was understood that men held the role of "head of the household, the church, and the faith;" [24] homosexuality was considered a rejection of this Western male identity. In particular, gay sex was considered degrading for the man or Two-spirit person in what was established as the "feminine" role in the relationship. It was understood in European society that within a pair there must be a "male" and a "female," which

[23] Carpenter, "Womanish Men and Manlike Women: The Native American Two-spirit as Warrior," 147-58.
[24] Slater, "'Nought but Women': Constructions of Masculinities and Modes of Emasculation in the New World," 30-53.

would mean that in a homosexual couple one man would have to sacrifice his masculinity. Although perhaps even more outrageous to early Europeans was that a "man" would voluntarily choose to perform feminine duties like food collection and cooking rather than take on a more masculine role such as a hunter or a warrior. From societies that value the "glories of warfare" and other masculine duties above all, it was nearly impossible to understand that other cultures may place a higher value upon women's work. Western homophobia also had racial connotations. In early modern Spain, Jewish and Arab people were frequently labelled as "sodomites." It was a way to emasculate racialized groups of people and justify their expulsion during the Spanish Inquisition. The weaponization of homophobia was used in the same way by the Spanish and other colonizing powers to justify the colonization of Indigenous people. Soon after Europeans arrived in Central America, they began implementing laws criminalizing homosexuality that directly affected Two-spirit peoples. For example, cross-dressing for all genders was punishable by death. Spanish explorer Vasco Núñez de Balboa recorded the first execution for homosexuality in the Americas in 1516. In *De Orbre Novo*, he recalls that he "quickly threw some forty of these transvestites to the dogs."[25] This example also demonstrates that there was more of a concern about compromising masculinity than the sexual acts themselves, as none of the men that performed the "male" role in the acts were punished.

Despite the "feminine" characterization of Two-spirit people created by Europeans, the Two-spirit identity was a complex blend of masculine and feminine. Roger Carpenter describes the "berdache" status as having a "permeable quality." For example, in communities like those along the Miami River, Two-spirit people regularly dressed in women's clothing and performed

[25] Slater, "'Nought but Women': Constructions of Masculinities and Modes of Emasculation in the New World," 30-53.

women's tasks. However, in periods of war, they put on warrior's armour and fought alongside the men.[26] A specific example of Two-spirit permeability comes from the Manuscripts of Henry and Thompson. On their travels, they encountered a person whom they describe as both very masculine and feminine: "He is a man both as to members and courage, but he pretends to be womanish and dresses as such. His walk and mode of sitting, his manners, occupations, and language are those of a woman."[27] They then describe the man as both "very swift" and a skilled archer and warrior.[28] Furthermore, regardless of their roles or clothing Two-spirit people are frequently described physically as "traditionally" masculine. For example, Explorer Cabeza de Vaca, while he criticized Two-spirits' "effeminate" traits, could not help but notice that "they are more muscular than other men, and taller: they bear very weighty burthens."[29] This comment may indicate that in cases where Two-spirit people were chosen for their roles, they were so due to their physical characteristics.

Two-spirit people have long been misunderstood and misrepresented in Western writing. The first encounters with Two-spirit people perplexed early European explorers because they challenged their perceptions of gender and sexuality. Their documentation of Two-spirit people reflects their ignorance and created mass generalizations that still impact Two-spirit people today. Today, those who identify as Two-spirit struggle to connect with their historical roots and create a space for Two-spirit people in the modern world. Most people outside of Indigenous cultures still fail to understand the gender dynamics of the Two-spirit identity. There is also a long history of observing Two-spirit people for their "usefulness,"[30] which puts pressure on

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[26] Carpenter, "Womanish Men and Manlike Women: The Native American Two-spirit as Warrior," 147-58.
[27] Henry and Thompson, "The Park River Post, 1800-01 Part I," 163-65.
[28] Henry and Thompson, "The Park River Post, 1800-01 Part I," 163-65.
[29] Cabeza de Vaca, "Chapter 26: Of the Nations and Tongues," 97-98.
[30] Driskill et al., *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*.

Two-spirit people today to fulfil a role that does not necessarily exist in modern Indigenous communities. As many parts of the world continue on a path towards normalizing gender fluidity, we can turn to historical and contemporary Indigenous examples to shift our thinking away from binaries and reconsider our definitions of masculinity and femininity.

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