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19. NATIVE AMERICAN MEN-WOMEN, LESBIANS, TWO-SPIRITS

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the beginning of European colonization of the Americas, there have been reports of male-bodied individuals in indigenous cultures taking up the work tasks of women, often also entering into relationships with men. To a lesser extent, chroniclers (and, from the early twentieth century onward, ethnographers) also documented cases in Native North America—the subcontinent with which the present contribution is concerned—where female-bodied persons adopted a masculine role and entered into sexual relationships or marriages with women. While they were accepted and sometimes even revered by their respective indigenous societies, the status and role particularly of the “feminine males” was usually met with disdain by the colonizers, to the extent that the Spaniards—the first Europeans (after the Vikings’ brief sojourn in Newfoundland several centuries earlier) to set foot on American soil—attempted to physically exterminate the supposed “sodomites,” committing what has been termed gendercide on them both in Middle America and California (cf. Miranda 2010; see also Lang 1998: 323–325; Trexler 1995). In the works of early Spanish chroniclers on the Native cultures they encountered, “sodomy,” which in sixteenth-century Spanish law came directly after heresy and crimes against the king, is often mentioned in connection with idolatry and cannibalism (cf. Guerra 1971: 221), and the presence of that triad of “godless acts” served as a legitimization for conquest, colonization, and forced conversion to Christianity.

In the centuries that followed, Native people who were considered “deviant” in terms of gender and/or sexuality continued to be targeted by missionaries, Indian agents, boarding school teachers, and other representatives of the dominant non-Native society, who used violence and ridicule to make such people conform to European norms. In 1879, for example, the only surviving Hidatsa *miati* (male in a woman’s role) was forcibly stripped of her/his female attire

by the local government agent, who also dressed her/him in men’s clothes and cut off her/his braids (Bowers 1965: 315). The sources indicate that in the second half of the nineteenth century at the latest, the massive impact of colonization and forced acculturation resulted in a decline of the special roles and statuses held by “women-men” (males in a feminine role) and “men-women” (females in a masculine role) in indigenous North American cultures (cf. Lang 1998: 115–127; Williams 1986a: Part II).

This development was exacerbated by the fact that people in many Native communities began to adopt the negative attitude held by Europeans on “homosexuality.” Today, the overall impression is that while indigenous ways are generally cherished, preserved, and in many cases revived in Native American communities, the traditions of gender diversity are quite obviously something most people do not wish to see revitalized. Homophobia was rampant both on the reservations and in urban Native contexts when I did my fieldwork in the early 1990s, and more recent studies, such as Gilley’s (2006) book, Denetdale’s (2009) article on the Diné Marriage Act prohibiting same-sex marriages in the Navajo Nation, and contributions in the edited volumes by Justice, Rifkin, and Schneider (2010) and Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen (2011a) convey the impression that not much has since changed in that respect. Gilley observed that the two-spirited/gay Native men he talked to “see the respect once given gender diversity as a part of the historic traditional values that Indian people now venerate. In contrast, many non-gay Indians see same-sex relationships and gender difference as something that did not exist historically and should not be recognized as associated with contemporary Native peoples” (2006: 61).

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In the most recent academic approaches to the two-spirit, many of whose proponents have Native roots, the term and concept undergoes still another

change. “Two-spirit” becomes a key concept, a liberating icon in a larger political project: a radical vision of decolonizing not only indigenous communities but also the settler states/societies they live in, including the academy and research.¹ As is stated by Driskill et al. in their introduction to *Queer Indigenous Studies*, this project is about designing “practices and futures—both inside and outside the academy—that can both remember and create radical, decolonial LGBTQ2 [the ‘2’ denotes two-spirit people, S.L.] Indigenous communities. (. . .) The book invites looking to Indigenous genders and sexualities—both ‘traditional’ and contemporary—for their potential to disrupt colonial projects and to rebalance Indigenous communities. Beginning to articulate and practice specific LGBTQ2 Indigenous critiques is a way of continuing radical movements and scholarship that work for collective decolonial futures” (2011b: 18). The unifying power of two-spirit as a collective, inclusive LGBTQ Native identity, as well as its potential in developing an indigenist approach to sexuality and gender, are also emphasized by authors who discuss two-spirit issues from the perspective of social work and health (e.g., Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo, and Bhuyan 2006).

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MEN-WOMEN AND WOMEN-MEN: SOME GENERAL REMARKS

Greater honor was paid to her than to the Great chief, for she occupied the 1st place in all the Councils, and, when she walked about, was always preceded by four young men, who sang and danced the Calumet to her. She was dressed as an Amazon; she painted her face and Wore her Hair like the men. (Gravier 1959 [1700]: 147–148; orthography as in the original)

The account by the French Jesuit Missionary Jacques Gravier, from which the above quote is taken, is arguably the first description of a Native American female-bodied person in a masculine role. Being a member of the Houma tribe in what today is Louisiana, the “femme chef” (woman chief) had so distinguished herself in war that she was awarded the highest honors. She participated in the council meetings of

the men and, like members of the nobility, was laid to rest in the temple of the Houma (Gravier 1959: 147). This “woman chief” exemplifies one among several categories of female-bodied people who assumed a status resembling that of men in indigenous North American cultures. Among the Houma and other tribes across the Subcontinent, it was not unusual for women to go to war. In rare individual cases remembered for generations, they would perform such extraordinary feats as warriors that they were assigned a quasi-male status in their respective society (cf. Lang 1998: 303–308; . . .). Far more common and much less spectacular, however, were institutionalized statuses, usually based on occupational preferences, within gender systems that acknowledged gender variability or gender diversity, that is, “cultural expressions of multiple genders (i.e., more than two) and the opportunity for individuals to change gender roles and identities over the course of their lifetimes” (Jacobs and Cromwell 1992: 63–64). Such special statuses for people who were neither women nor men but genders of their own existed in a considerable number of pre-reservation and early reservation Native American tribal societies both for male and female individuals who chose to live—completely or partially—in the culturally defined role of the “other sex.” Due to the massive impact of colonization, missionary work, and forced acculturation, these traditions of gender diversity, which often included same-sex relationships for reasons to be discussed below, have now largely disappeared in indigenous North American communities, to the extent that people will even deny their former existence (cf. Jacobs 1997: 25).

The first to give accounts of indigenous North American males in a woman’s role and females in a man’s role were travelers, traders, and missionaries, followed by representatives of the then budding discipline of U.S. anthropology from the early twentieth century onward. In anthropological literature, the traditions of what is now referred to as gender variability in Native North America were formerly subsumed under the term “berdache.” However, that word has fallen into disuse due to its original Arab/French meaning of male prostitute or “kept boys” (Angelino and Shedd 1955; Williams 1986a: 9–10), which has come to be viewed as inappropriate not

only by contemporary LGBTQ Native Americans, but also by Native and non-native anthropologists (cf. Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997a). In addition, the term becomes downright absurd when applied to females in a man’s role. In academic literature, it has been largely replaced by the term “two-spirit” from the mid-1990s onward as a result of two conferences on “The ‘North American Berdache’ Revisited,” whose participants included Native gay and lesbian activists as well as non-Native anthropologists (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997a). In addition, the term has gained almost universal currency in LGBTQ Native American contexts and activism.

Like “berdache,” however, “two-spirit,” which originated at an intertribal gathering of LGBTQ Native Americans/First Nations people in the late 1980s, encompasses an entire host of identities and sexualities across history, ranging from the pre-reservation and early reservation systems of multiple genders to contemporary LGBTQ indigenous people. While the inclusiveness of the term has great advantages when it comes to uniting LGBTQ Native Americans/First Nations in supra-tribal political and HIV/AIDS organizing, I nevertheless prefer to use the terms woman-man (male in a woman’s role) and man-woman (female in a man’s role) to refer to people past and present who were, and are, neither women nor men.² As I learned in conversations with contemporary women-men and men-women who were raised on their people’s reservation to fulfill their special role, this is very much in line with how they view themselves, as has already been alluded to above. While they will agree to be subsumed under the label of “two-spirit” in intertribal contexts (e.g., at meetings of LGBTQ indigenous people from all over the United States and Canada), they will usually make a clear distinction between themselves and LGBTQ2 Native Americans/members of First Nations. They do neither identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer, nor as transgender, but will refer to themselves by the term appropriate for their specific gender status in their respective culture, such as *nádleeh* (Navajo), *taiima wa’ippe* (Shoshone), *áubads* (Paiute), and so on.

While gender diversity at least traditionally was a widespread trait of indigenous North American

cultures, its individual expressions varied. Women-men and men-women would sometimes adopt the role of the “other” sex completely, sometimes only partially (cf. Lang 1998: 59–90, 261–267). As a rule, however, and regardless of the degree to which they mixed or did not mix gender role components, they were classified as neither men nor women, but as genders of their own within systems of three or four genders, as becomes apparent from the words used [to] refer [to] them. These differ from the terms for man and woman, and often indicate that men-women and women-men are viewed as combining the masculine and the feminine (cf. Roscoe 1988; Lang 1998: 248–251, 263–265). The Shoshone, for example, call both men-women and women-men *taiima wa’ippe*, “man-woman” (Michael Owlfeather, personal communication). Among the Diné (Navajo), there likewise exists a common term for both, *nádleeh* (“someone who is in a constant process of change,” Wesley Thomas, personal communication).³ The Sduk-al-bixw (Quinault) word for men-women is “man acting” (Olson 1936: 99), and the Akimel O’odham (Pima) call women-men *wik’ovat*, “like a girl” (Hill 1938: 339).

As I have argued elsewhere (Lang 2011), the gender statuses of women-men and men-women can be characterized as being “hermaphroditic,” that is, a mixture of the masculine and feminine, and this dual nature—rather than a complete transition from the masculine to the feminine gender role or vice versa—was also emphasized particularly by traditionally raised women-men I talked to. Their ambiguity reflects general patterns found in Native American world views which appreciate and emphasize transformation, ambiguity, and change. For example, humans can transform into animals and vice versa, or beings can be both humans and animals at the same time. Individuals combining the masculine and the feminine are therefore just another aspect of the transformations and ambiguities that are a central feature of indigenous North American systems of thought. Within world views that recognize that the act of creation did not necessarily establish everything in binary categories, human beings who are ambiguous in terms of their sexual features, or display a discrepancy between their physical sex and their occupational preferences, are accepted as part

of the natural order of things. In other words, they are not what in Western culture is termed "deviant." In some cases they are even welcomed as people who have been blessed, or touched, by the supernatural (cf. Lang 2011).

MEN-WOMEN IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES

When the systems of multiple genders were still intact in Native American cultures, the classification of a person as a woman-man or man-woman was usually based on her/his occupational preferences, which often became manifest as early as in childhood. A gendered division of labor, which assigned specific work tasks to either the feminine or the masculine sphere, existed in all tribal societies on the Subcontinent, and while there was some flexibility in gender roles, activities within that division of labor were decisive in defining an individual's gender. Prospective men-women usually showed a profound interest in masculine occupations in childhood. As became apparent from conversations I had with contemporary women-men and men-women, this is still the case today. . . . "Men pretenders" among the Ingalik (autonym: Deg Xit'an) in Alaska, for example, refused to learn women's skills when they were children, so their fathers would take them under their wings and teach them men's work. They joined the boys and men in the *kashim* (men's house), and are said to have concealed their female physical characteristics during the sweat bath. As adults they assumed the complete social role of a man but only rarely married women (Osgood 1958: 262–263). Female-bodied *nádleeh* also began to behave like boys in childhood (Hill 1935: 273). Young Cocopa *warthameh* played with the boys, made arrows and bows for themselves, and went hunting for rabbits and birds (Gifford 1933: 294).

In some cultures, girls' entrance into the role and status of men-women was not due to their personal inclinations; parents would decide to raise daughters as sons in the interest of the respective community. This was the case in the Arctic and Subarctic, where the diet was largely composed of meat obtained by the men by hunting, and vegetable food gathered by

women played a less important role. If there were not enough boys in a community or family, some fathers would teach their daughters hunting skills and raise them to fulfill a hunter's role. Among some Inuit groups, for example, such girls learned to hunt seals from a kayak, acquired a quasi-masculine status, and wore men's garb (Mirsky 1937: 84; Kjellström 1973: 180). . . .

From time to time, parents among the Canadian Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) whose only child was a girl decided to raise her as a boy, and sometimes fathers would choose their favorite daughter to fulfill such a man-woman role. Such girls were treated like boys in every respect and, like boys, were sent on a vision quest to summon a guardian spirit, or supernatural helper (Landes 1937: 119, 121). Masculine occupations of men-women in Native American cultures included hunting, fishing, trapping, trade, and participation in warfare. Sometimes they practiced specialized occupations in their tribal societies. In some California groups such as the Achomawi, Klamath, and Tolowa, as well as among the Mohave living in the Mojave Desert, they were traditionally curers or "shamans" (Lang 1998: 286). This might or might not be related to their gender status. In some indigenous North American cultures, curers were predominantly men, and men-women chose that specialization as part of their masculine role. In others, there is no predominance of either women or men in healing, and men-women probably became healers if they were gifted for it but were not expected to pursue that profession if they did not possess that gift (cf. Lang 1998: 286–289). Among some tribes, men-women and women-men were believed to possess special powers due to their specific nature. Mohave *hwame* were said to be particularly powerful "shamans" (Devereux 1937: 516), and according to Michael Owlfeather (personal communication) Shoshone *tainma wa'ippe* of either sex are born with the gift of being medicine people. In some cases their dual nature predestines them to be mediators between the human and supernatural worlds, and women-men in particular were sometimes popular as matchmakers and mediators between women and men (Grinnell 1962, II: 39; Hill 1935: 275; Mead 1932: 189, Fn. 2).

INDIGENOUS DEFINITIONS OF HOMOSEXUALITY AND HETEROSEXUALITY

Both women-men and men-women often entered into sexual or even marital relationships with members of the same sex. Hence, their roles have long been interpreted as institutionalized homosexuality in anthropological writings. This "homosexuality" was usually considered innate, and sometimes classified according to Western psychiatric concepts of perversion and deviance,⁴ even though some authors early on pointed to the fact that definitions of "deviance" vary widely between cultures: behavior considered deviant in one culture may be part of social norms in another (cf. Benedict 1934: 60; Mead 1961: 1454). In addition, this interpretation of gender variability as a way to culturally integrate, or accommodate, "homosexual" people ignores the fact that by no means all men-women and women-men entered into same-sex relationships. The sources, as well as conversations I had with people who are familiar with their tribe's traditions of gender variability, reveal that women-men had sex, or partner relationships, with women in a number of tribes, and men-women had relationships with men (Lang 1998: 189–195, 190–291). In some tribes women-men and men-women were, and still are, apparently free to have relationships with both women and men. With regard to Shoshone *tainma wa'ippe*, for example, Michael Owlfeather (personal communication) commented: "Some of those [male-bodied] two-spirited people were married people. They dressed in feminine clothes, they dressed in women's things, but they were married. Some of them even had children." The same is true of female-bodied *tainma wa'ippe*.

What, then, is the implication of cultural systems of more than two genders for possible concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality in indigenous North American cultures? Given the presence of multiple genders, sexual relationships between a woman-man and a man or a man-woman with a woman are "homosexual" on the level of physical sex, but not on the level of gender. If a man-woman has sex with either a man or a woman, he/she is having sex with

someone whose gender differs from his/her own; the same is true for sexual relationships between women-men and either women or men. Regardless of whether they are of the same sex or not—the partners in such relationships are never of the same gender. Within such systems of multiple genders, Native classifications of sexual partner choice are based on the gender rather than the physical sex of those involved in a relationship.

In most cases, little is known about the details of these classifications, but thanks to the work of Wesley Thomas (Diné) and information generously shared by Michael Owlfeather (Shoshone/Métis) in personal conversations it is possible to compare Diné and Shoshone concepts of appropriate and non-appropriate sexual relationships. Among the Diné (Navajo), there traditionally existed four genders—women, men, women-men, and men-women. As has been mentioned above, the latter two genders were called *nádleeh*. The same term is, by the way, also applied to intersex people; the latter's supernatural prototypes feature in the Diné Origin Story, and the human *nádleeh* (whether physically ambiguous or not) are viewed as the worldly likenesses of these mythical hermaphrodite beings. Within the Diné classification, the equivalent to a homosexual relationship is a sexual relationship between people of the same gender (two women, two men, two female-bodied *nádleeh*, two male-bodied *nádleeh*), or of closely related genders (woman and male-bodied *nádleeh*, man and female-bodied *nádleeh*).

Among the Shoshone, *tainne-wa'ippe* of both sexes are viewed as acting on a vision that demands them to adopt the occupations, ways of behavior, and garb of the "other sex." However, their gender status does not limit their partner choice. In contrast to *nádleeh*, they are free to have relationships with both men and women. The same is true for women-men and men-women in some other Native cultures, as has been pointed out above; we can thus assume that the Shoshone classification of sexual relationships is representative of other indigenous North American cultures as well. The only type of relationship that was at least traditionally forbidden—not only among the Shoshone and Diné, but universally in Native American cultures—was between two women-men and

two men-women. Where multiple genders continue to exist, women-men, for example, are still believed to be connected by a bond of kinship, sometimes referring to each other as “sisters.” Hence, a sexual relationship between them is considered incestuous (Michael Owlfeather, personal communication; Thomas 1997 and personal communication; Williams 1986b: 93–94).

...

A distinction between themselves and gay/lesbian Native Americans is also made by contemporary women-men and men-women. This distinction is based on varying criteria. Among the Shoshone, a “gay” Native person as opposed to a *tainna wa’ippe* is defined as lacking the spiritual component that is so essential to the *tainna wa’ippe*’s role and status:

One person told me, “Well, those old-time ‘berdaches,’ they were nothing but drag queens, weren’t they?” And I said, “No, they weren’t,” because they didn’t dress in women’s clothes just because of personal preference. It was because of the manifestation of Spirit. They *had* to do it. You know, (. . .) they had to act on this vision in order to be a complete person. (Michael Owlfeather, personal communication; emphasis his)

Among the Diné, the distinction between *nádleeh* and gay/lesbian is based on the fact that the *nádleeh* role and status is based on occupational preferences while “gay” is viewed as being based on sexual preference. According to Wesley Thomas (personal communication), “a true *nádleeh* or traditional *nádleeh* is somebody who is one hundred percent—[he pauses to think:] a woman, who was born as a man but is a woman in Navajo society, not in their sexual preferences or sexual persuasion, but as an occupational [preference].”

TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE

The old-time statuses and roles of women-men and men-women have disappeared on many reservations and in urban Native communities. When I talked to members of the first generation of Native LGBT activists in the early 1990s, they told me that the last “true” *winkte*, *tainna wa’ippe*, and so on, had lived on the reservations in the 1930s and 1940s. When one

of my friends grew up as a male-bodied *nádleeh* on the Navajo Reservation in the 1950s, there was no role model around. However, her/his grandmother, who had been born in the early 1920s, recognized her/his special nature. She remembered the *nádleeh*, their rootedness in Diné religion and philosophy, and raised her grandchild to fulfill that special role. The same was true for other people I met; they, too, had been raised by grandparents who still remembered and appreciated the traditions of gender diversity in their respective cultures.

On the other hand, there were a growing number of Native lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, the large majority of them urban, who sought to gain acceptance by their Native communities, began to make their voices heard, and researched into the history of same-sex relationships in their indigenous cultures. From the mid-1970s onward, and largely unnoticed by non-Native anthropologists and historians who began to explore “old-time” gender systems, Native American gay and lesbian writers and activists made their voices heard as well, addressing their concerns and experiences, including the impact of colonialism on gay/lesbian and “straight” indigenous North Americans alike. These authors include Maurice Kenny (Mohawk), Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo), Beth Brant (Mohawk), Chrystos (Menominee), Vickie Sears (Cherokee), Joy Harjo (Muskogee), Janice Gould (Concow), and many others. Native lesbians were represented, for example, in the women of color anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983), Beth Brant’s *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection of Writing and Art by North American Indian Women* (1984), and the first anthology composed (with the exception of one contribution by the non-Native historian Will Roscoe) of writings by Native gays and lesbians, *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology* (1988), edited by Gay American Indians and Will Roscoe. Today, analyses of poetry and prose written by Native LGBT, including the first generation but also more recent authors, are at the focus of literary studies in the context of queer indigenous studies (e.g., Rifkin 2012; Scudeler 2011; Tatonetti 2011, 2014; . . .).

At the same time, the first Native gay and lesbian organization, Gay American Indians (GAI),

was founded in San Francisco in 1975. What was to become the two-spirit identity had been originally emerging in such urban settings as well as in “pan-tribal” contexts such as the annual Two-Spirit Gatherings, not on the reservations. The concept and term of two-spirit are the result of urban gay and lesbian Native Americans’ search for and rediscovery of the cultural roots of homosexual behavior in indigenous North American cultures. Initially, these activists did research into the written historical and anthropological sources, as the traditions of gender diversity were often forgotten or repressed in their communities. While anthropological approaches to multiple genders in Native American cultures are now criticized for ignoring indigenous knowledge and the concerns of contemporary LGBTQ2 indigenous North Americans (cf. Driskill et al. 2011a, b), the emergent two-spirit identity initially reflected, ironically, the very way non-Native researchers interpreted the roles and statuses of men-women and women-men: as ways to culturally integrate “homosexual”/LGBT individuals who, in addition, often held revered and highly respected statuses in their respective communities.

While “two-spirit” has come to be widely used in LGBTQ indigenous contexts and organizations, it needs to be mentioned that not all LGBTQ Native Americans/First Nations people identify as two-spirit. The gay poet, teacher, and social worker Gregory Scofield (Cree/Métis), for example, stated: “First of all, in relation to the ideology of Two-Spirited theory, I always back away from that three-hundred fold. I mean I don’t consider myself Two-Spirited. (. . .) Not that I’m disparaging of it. It’s just that I think it’s very multi-layered insofar as the politicization of the word and how it’s come about and its interpretation and its reinvention and the reinterpretation of things” (McKegney 2014: 218; cf. also Gilley 2006: 90–95, 113–121).

A key feature of the concept, and identity, of “two-spirit” is that unlike for many “white” gays and lesbians, people’s (homo)sexuality is not a prime marker of their identity even though sexuality and desire are, of course, important in their lives. Their primary identity is as Native Americans and/or members of a specific ethnic group, as was stressed again and again by people I talked to. Erna Pahe (Navajo),

for example, commented with regard to GAI: “One of our major emphases is that we are Indian first, we’re Navajo, we’re Pima, we’re Apaches. And we do not divide our group and say that we’re gay, and making us different. We’re all Indians, and that’s the way we portray our feelings, and that’s the priority in terms of our organization.” This was echoed by Randy Burns (Paiute), who told me: “I used to say I was gay first and I was Indian second, and then I, of course, through peer pressure got convinced that, ‘No, you’re Indian! Remember who you are!’ And, you know, ‘When you’re born into this world, you’re born Native, you’re not born queer.’” Another recurrent aspect of being two-spirit is spirituality; the very term/concept of “two-spirit” expresses a connection of contemporary Native American LGBTQ to indigenous spirituality in the broadest sense. As has been observed by Luder Tietz with regard to Canada, “For some *two-spirited people*, the word *spirit* seems to be at the core of the use of the term ‘Two-Spirited.’ (. . .) The concept of ‘two-spirited’ can be seen as the attempt to transcendently substantiate a modern lesbian/gay identity that is specifically First Nations” (Tietz 1996: 207, emphasis his, translation mine).

This priority in identity needs to be seen in the context of two-spirit people’s life experiences and concerns, which have much more in common with those of “straight” Native Americans than with those of white lesbians and gays, or even other LGBTQ people of color (cf. Driskill 2010: 78, 80). With heterosexual Native Americans, they share the experience and impact of five hundred years of colonization, cultural genocide, and forced acculturation. Just like other Native Americans, middle-aged two-spirits raised on reservations still vividly remember the physical and emotional violence they suffered in boarding schools run under the motto of “Kill the Indian, save the Man,” which was given out in 1879 by Richard E. Pratt, the founder of Carlisle Indian School. Given these shared experiences of ongoing historical trauma, which have left a deep, lasting impact on heterosexual and LGBTQ Native Americans alike, and the Native-oriented priority in their identity, most two-spirit people do not wish to set themselves apart from their Native communities. Many of them feel that they are innately imbued

with special spiritual and/or practical gifts that they would like to use for the benefit of their ethnic group and/or the Native American community at large.

This desire to be an integral part of Native communities implies that two-spirit people are not prone to separatism on the grounds of their sexual orientation. For example, they do not strive for any type of new religious community shared exclusively by two-spirit people; for them, Native religions are not a matter to be eclectically trifled with. If they engage in religious practices of their respective ethnic group, they attach importance to doing so in the customary and appropriate manner of their people. An example of this is a women-only Sun Dance founded by a Lakota woman in the mid-1980s (cf. Lang 2013; see also below). Though specifically addressing Native lesbian women, the focus is not on "lesbianism" but on the proper performance of a sacred ceremony. It is also important to note that the Women's Sun Dance was not created out of some lesbian or feminist separatist whim. Its founder would have preferred to continue to participate in the Sun Dances held on her tribe's reservation, but found herself unable to do so because of the homophobia experienced by herself and her partner. While some elements of the ceremony have been modified due to its all-female attendance, others are not supposed to be changed lest the supernatural powers be offended.

TWO-SPIRIT WOMEN/NATIVE LESBIANS

This primary identity as Native Americans influences the way two-spirit women see themselves, and the way they relate to Native gays in particular and their communities in general. For example, the concept of lesbian separatism seemed to hold little appeal for most Native lesbians/two-spirit women I talked to. While they acknowledge that some of their experiences, identities, and goals differ from those of male two-spirits, there is an emphasis on solidarity due to shared experiences of colonization, racism, and social marginalization. In addition, a very common concept in North American indigenous cultures is that the feminine and masculine qualities are

complementary, and that it is advisable to combine them in both worldly and spiritual matters for efficiency. Similar observations were made by Walters et al. (2006), and summed up by one of their Native lesbian respondents:

A lot of times in the White community, lesbians will say, you know, "I just don't like men." Actually, I think that identifying as two-spirit, I have more of an alliance with Native men (. . .) because they're Native men and they have experienced a lot of similar racist attitudes as well as homophobic attitudes on the reservation that I have. Um, we seem to bond together better, the male and the female sides sort of complement one another. I have difficulty explaining it to White lesbians who would say, "Well, why would you want gay men at an event?" Because Native gay men are not gay men, they're my two-spirit brothers. (132)

Another feature of both two-spirit women and men is that they do not wish to set themselves apart from their Native communities on the grounds of their sexuality, as has already been pointed out above. There are specific roles they assume, or wish to assume, for the benefit of these communities; these roles are culturally attributed to two-spirit people in general, so it makes no sense to treat women and men separately in the present context.

One of the specific gifts attributed to two-spirit people is caretaking. The caretaker role was already associated with the traditional women-men and men-women, and continues to be stressed both by contemporary two-spirit people and their communities (Evans-Campbell, Fredriksen-Goldsen, Walters, and Stately 2007; Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997; Lang 1998). Michael Owlfeather told me: "We have always been the caretakers, we have always been the cultural keepers," and went on to elaborate on other culturally ascribed roles of two-spirits/men-women/women-men: "We are the ones that people go to when they want to know how to do things right, be it funerals, be it giveaways, be it a way of dressing, a style of beadwork, a song. We are the people that keep those things. We always have been, and we always will be." The role and contribution of two-spirit people as caregivers for the elderly and children, and positive reactions to these activities by

families and Native communities, have been stressed by the respondents in Evans-Campbell et al. (2007). The authors conclude:

Caregiving is perceived as an important and integral role of two-spirit people, and it is clear that many two-spirit people already engage in caregiving or expect to provide care for others at some point during their lifetime. (. . .) Based on culturally proscribed roles, two-spirit people may be asked to care for the elderly, relatives, or children. In some communities, they may be asked to care for the community as a whole as they take on specific social or ceremonial responsibilities. (88)

This role was also emphasized by people I talked to. A Nez Percé woman pointed out in a conversation that elders will pass on their knowledge to the two-spirit people who take care of them, and who thus become keepers of their tribe's traditions. Being caretakers of children in particular was an important aspect of the role of women-men and men-woman. In Native American communities, it is not unusual for children to be raised by people other than their parents. Navajo *nádleeh* of both sexes are traditionally expected to adopt and raise children (Wesley Thomas, personal communication). George (pseudonym), a Colville *wenatcha* (woman-man) I talked to, had raised no less than twenty-six children from her/his extended family, and Michael Owlfeather raised three of his nieces because their parents had alcohol abuse problems and could not properly take care of the girls.

Another recurrent aspect in the lives of Native lesbians/two-spirit women is motherhood. Many of those I met had become pregnant "the natural way," as one of them said with a wink, that is, the children were not conceived by artificial insemination but by intercourse with men. Quite a few of the Native lesbians I talked to had started out having sexual relationships with men, or had had such relationships at some time in their lives. Within their Native American cultural frames of reference they would stress motherhood as an essential aspect of womanhood, regardless of whether a woman identifies as lesbian or straight. George told me that the female-bodied *wenatcha* of his tribe usually give birth to and raise children, explaining that this is just part of their

nature, which requires a balance of the feminine and the masculine rather than switching completely from one to the other. Erna Pahe (Navajo), who was married twice and has two children, stressed the importance of children to Diné women:

There is a special role that women play, too, as the bearers of the next generation. There is a very distinct position that women play within our tribe, so even though *nádleeh* [used by Erna in the meaning of "lesbian," S.L.] women exist, it's of a different level. They're *mothers*. I mean, like myself, I am a mother. The first thing is you're a child. And you become the young woman. And then you become a mother, so whether you're *nádleeh* or not, the first, before anything else, is you are a mother. And then you become a grandmother. (. . .) So when you speak about *nádleeh* women, the thing is that they're mothers first. (Erna Pahe, personal communication; emphasis hers)

Other two-spirit women, rather than subscribing to rigid European categories of "gay," "lesbian," or "straight," will rather self-label as bisexual due to their recognition of the fact that sexual preferences may change in the course of an individual's lifetime. In other cases, they will use the term "lesbian" in a sense that includes the possibility of having sexual relationships with both women and men; in still others, they will use "lesbian" synonymous with "man-woman," referring to contemporary mainly women on the reservations including their relationships that are by no means exclusively homosexual.

The role of two-spirit women as parents, and the Native definition of "lesbian" as not excluding sexual relationships with men, was also emphasized by Michael Owlfeather in one of our conversations. Among the Shoshone, there were mainly women of his grandmother's generation who would have male husbands and female lovers: "My grandmother was a two-spirited person herself, and it's known among the lesbian people here. (. . .) [Women like her] took pride in doing anything a man could do, and doing it better, you know? But these women also had children, got married. But they had their 'women friends' and were always respected for that and everything else. It was nothing overt, they didn't hold it out to the community, but everybody knew what was going on."

Most Native lesbians/two-spirit women I talked to were acutely aware of the triple discrimination they are exposed to as women, lesbians, and Native Americans. Recent studies address the impact of historical trauma, discrimination, and other stressors on the health and wellness of Native American lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and two-spirit men and women (see, e.g., Burks, Robbins, and Durtschi 2010; Walters et al. 2006; Walters 2010). The health status of LGBTQ2 Native Americans/First Nations people reflects, in many ways, that of the indigenous population of the United States and Canada in general. Issues related to physical and mental health include a high prevalence of chronic illnesses and premature mortality related to these, disproportionately high levels of poverty and socioeconomic deprivation, exposure to racism, and the persistent impact of colonization.

Given the discrimination and racism they encounter even within the "white" lesbian subculture, some lesbians of Native American or mixed descent have come to prefer partners who share the same, or at least a related, ethnic background. One of the reasons for this is doubtlessly the fact that, no matter how sensitive the white partner of a Native woman may be as far as matters of racism are concerned, racism often seems to become an issue in a relationship between a Native American and a white woman. White lesbians may also have a yearning for Native spirituality and a romanticized image of their Native partners, which is likewise annoying to the latter (cf. Chrystos' poem "I am not your princess," 1988: 66–67). Native lesbians may feel that they do not want to cope with these issues in their relationships anymore, having to deal with them already in all spheres of their lives. They may reach the conclusion that it will further their personal growth if they are in a relationship with a woman where no strength and energy is consumed by suffering from and educating their partner on racism and related issues.

In some cases, Native lesbians/two-spirit women have become so disenchanted with the culture and values of the colonizers that they have established small communities restricted to Native women or women of color. And in spite of the fact that many two-spirit women emphasize and appreciate

cooperation with Native gays in projects and organizations, they feel that their specific experiences and needs sometimes require women-only gatherings. One example is the Women's Sun Dance founded by a Lakota woman in the mid-1980s (Lang 2013). While white women and non-Native women of color are welcome to attend as long as they behave respectfully toward the ceremony and its participants, only Native women may pledge to actually be Sun Dancers. The Women's Sun Dance has meanwhile become integrated into a larger project called Kumsi Keya Tamakoce (the Lakota term for "Grandmother Turtle Land") located in a remote rural mountain area. Its mission is very clearly outlined in terms of indigenous knowledge, a decided stance against heteronormativity and racism, and a focus on ecology. According to its homepage, it "preserves indigenous religious heritage and fights against racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism and ecological violence experienced in tribal populations and the world at large" (<http://www.kumsikeya.org/about.html>), . . .

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

From the above discussion, it becomes apparent that Native traditions of gender variability lent themselves for diverse interpretations, and these interpretations, in turn, served diverse purposes. The Spaniards invoked particularly women-men and their "sodomite" practices in attempts to justify colonization and forced conversion to the Christian faith. Several centuries later, two-spirit people became exactly the reverse in recent academic indigenous approaches, which credit LGBTQ2 indigenous people with what might be termed the "queer" potential needed to create a decolonial future in settler states. Up to the 1970s and from a psychological perspective, women-men and men-women were viewed as examples of the cultural integration of innately "homosexual" individuals in tribal societies. In the 1970s, a new look at their roles and statuses opened researchers' eyes to the non-universality of Western concepts of sexual relationships and gender. Research refocused away from sexual behavior towards transcultural studies of gender constructions. And from the 1980s onward particularly the roles of women-men became

devaluated by some non-Native scholars to some universal supreme spiritual status held by people who were not heterosexual. While Native two-spirit/lesbian women significantly contribute to the field of interdisciplinary queer indigenous studies, and while contemporary LGBT Native activists and writers have made their voices and concerns heard from the 1970s onward, earlier non-Native historical and anthropological research tended to focus on women-men in pre-reservation and early reservation times; there was, and still is, a shortage of research on men-women.

All these non-Native and Native perspectives have in common that they largely relegate the traditions of gender variability to the past. But men-women and women-men do still exist. They keep their tribes' traditions alive and pass on their knowledge to two-spirit and other Native people largely outside urban academic and political activist contexts.

NOTES

1. With regard to its research agenda and desiderata, this approach is situated within a larger current of efforts toward decolonization in the academy and beyond as outlined, for example, in the pioneering book *Decolonizing Methodologies* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012 [1999]). On decolonization strategies in research with/on contemporary two-spirit people see, for example, Walters and Simoni (2009).
2. This differs from the way these terms are used in other anthropological writings (e.g., Roscoe 1991; Fulton and Anderson 1992), where "man-woman" usually refers to male-bodied persons in a woman's role. However, in Native American cultures more importance is attached to an individual's gender status than to his/her physical sex. Hence, it seems logical to follow Bleibtreu-Ehrenberg (1984), who titled her monograph on male gender diversity in various cultures *Der Weibmann* ("The Woman-Man"), and to put the gender to which the chosen gender role belongs first and the physical sex second.
3. Michael Owlfeather (Shoshone/Métis) and Prof. Wesley Thomas (Diné) are experts in the

traditions of gender diversity in their respective cultures. On the *nádleeh*, see also Hill (1935); Thomas (1997); Epple (1997). In Shoshoni, *tainkwa* or *tainna* means "man," and *wa'ippe* "woman" (Miller 1972: 136, 172).

4. For a discussion of anthropological interpretations of gender diversity, see, for example, Lang (1998: 17–56).

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