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# Dance to the Two-Spirit: Mythologizations of the Queer Native

AF MARIANNE KONGERSLEV

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## ABSTRACT

In 1998, the American anthropologist Will Roscoe referred to pre-colonial North America as “the queerest continent on the planet” (Roscoe 1998, 4), expressing a more universally accepted idea that before settlers arrived in North America, Indigenous peoples embraced and celebrated queer and trans people. Building on this anachronistic assumption, this article investigates the historical and anthropological constructions of the ‘Sacred Queer Native’ trope and argues that its attendant discourses perpetuate an idea of the ‘Sacred Queer Native’ figure as a mythological Noble Savage doomed to perish. The anthropological accounts therefore serve as settler colonial tools of elimination, relegating (queer) Indigenous peoples to the past, while emulating their ‘queerness’ in order to legitimize modern Lesbian and gay identities. At the same time, Indigenous poets celebrate(d) the same figuration as a strategy for empowerment, reclaiming historical positions of power and sovereignty through celebratory and often erotic poetics that directly and indirectly critique settler colonial heteropatriarchy. The article concludes that the contentions over the figure of the Sacred Queer Native and its anti-colonial, Indigenous counter-construction, Two-Spirit, illustrates both the constructedness of gender and sexualities and the need for continued critique in the field.

## KEYWORDS

*Indigenous people, queer theory, Two-Spirit, mythologization, settler colonialism, poetry, North America*

Marianne Kongerslev, PhD, is assistant professor at the Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University.

When visiting the North American plains tribes in the 1830s, the American painter George Catlin (1796-1872) encountered the tradition of the *berdache*,<sup>1</sup> a gender phenomenon often cited as specific and central to many North American Indigenous cultures. Catlin memorialized his experience in a watercolor painting titled “Dance to the Berdache” (ca. 1835), which depicted several people in exaggerated red tones performing an honorary dance to the bashful-looking figure. In his narrative of his time spent among the plains tribes, Catlin describes the plains cultures’ gender system as “one of the most unaccountable and disgusting customs that I have met in the Indian country” (Catlin 1841, 215). The painter was horrified at the thought that the third gender persons of the tribes were not banished and disgraced but apparently honored and valued members of their societies (ibid).

Catlin’s accounts are not singular. Early missionaries, explorers, and conquistadores of the North American continent often remarked on these customs as horrific, disgusting, or strange. Some early historians note that only certain tribal cultures seemed to revere their *berdaches*, while others mocked or even shunned them (Williams 1992; Stevens 2010). However, later anthropologists have tried to reclaim the honorable status of the *berdaches* to their respective cultures.

It is beyond the scope and purpose of the present paper to determine the historical accuracy of the accounts of the Queer Native figure. Rather, this article analyzes how “the sacred queer entity” (Stevens 2010, 185) has been mythologized in two distinct ways: 1) as an anthropological argument for the naturalness and innateness of homosexuality and queerness, an argument that has been extended to mainstream discourses and tends to romanticize a (potentially anachronistic) historical,

stereotypical Noble Native; and 2) as a cultural symbol of anticolonial empowerment and struggle against oppressive gender and sexuality discourses. Thus, the article reviews the scholarly work about this ‘sacred queer entity’ in order to contextualize poetic forms of empowerment produced in continuation of or in response to these anthropological constructions.

The two mythological constructions result in very disparate representations. On the one hand, the anthropological constructions have contributed, ironically, to the structural and discursive elimination of Native peoples, despite the attempt by many of the scholars to collaborate with Indigenous scholars and to reclaim traditional forms of and attitudes to gender and sexuality. On the other hand, the poetic constructions – the poetic dances to the Two-Spirit – serve the opposite purpose of discursively celebrating, empowering and attempting to reclaim and re-map safe spaces for queer and LGBTQIA2+<sup>2</sup> Natives.

The term mythologization in this context should be interpreted doubly, as first the discursive, academic construction of an almost legendary ‘Queer Native’, and secondly, as a self-determination process engaged in actively by Native poets in order to carve out spaces for themselves outside the queer/LGBTQIA+ community as well as within it. ‘Two-Spirit’ is a term that was invented academically (Driskill 2004; Tatonetti 2014), and it serves the dual purpose of creating space within language and discourse for non-western conceptions of queerness<sup>3</sup> and non-binary gender constructions, and (re)articulating Native traditions to contemporary practices.

The necessity of such a term for Native LGBTQIA2+ peoples centers on the notion of sovereignty, which is a historically fraught concept, and its relevance for discussions about gender and sexualities cannot be overstated. As several Queer Indige-

nous scholars have noted, reclaiming gender customs and sexuality practices (both figuratively and literally) is a sovereign act of self-determination (see for instance Driskill 2004; Allen 1981). Poet, weaver, and scholar Qwo-Li Driskill (of Cherokee descent<sup>4</sup>), explains the term's intersectional potential: "[Two-Spirit] does not make me splinter off sexuality from race, gender from culture. It was created specifically to hold, not diminish or erase, complexities. It is a sovereign term in the invaders' tongue" (Driskill 2004, 62). Similarly, Kai Minosh (Métis) explains the significance of the term, as it allows Natives to give "ourselves a new name" (Minosh 2016, np). As they explain, "[i]t was meant to be a home for queer and trans Native people in the English language, in a time when that is the language most of us know best. It was meant to encompass all of the things we experience that cannot be summed up in any other way" (Minosh 2016, np).

Thus, sovereignty should be understood, not only in its traditional, juridical sense of national sovereignty, but in its cultural, linguistic, and imaginative senses as well. Sovereignty matters, because since its founding, the United States has carried out an ongoing, systematic, genocidal conquest of the Indigenous nations and their land, an erasure of the Indigenous population that also included elimination of customs and traditions, such as non-binary conceptions of gender and sexuality (e.g. Morgensen 2011; Rifkin 2011). These settler colonial strategies of erasure have often relied on specific narratives about 'Natives'; either as obstacles for settlement (Wolfe 2007; Veracini 2010), as legitimization of settler presences (Deloria 1998; Huhndorf 2001), or even as semi-mythical material for nation-building (Deloria 1998; Scheckel 1998).

One of the consequences of this narrative as well as of the material and institutional aspects of colonization has been the 'straightening' (Rifkin 2011) of the Indige-

nous peoples, so that, as Qwo-Li Driskill (2004) notes, Indigenous genders, sexualities, and bodies have been colonized alongside the (ongoing) colonization of Native lands. Furthermore, in the aptly titled *When Did Indians Become Straight?* (2011), Mark Rifkin explores this colonial process of 'straightening' Indigenous genders. Using a Foucauldian genealogical survey of 'kinship', Rifkin argues that in the process of colonizing the American continent, settlers imposed a sense of family and kinship alien to Native communities, and he explores the way master narratives constructed "heteronormative logics of settler governance" (Rifkin 2011, 12). Rifkin argues that discourses about sexualities and the notion of kinship have played a significant role in interpellating Natives into "Euroamerican hegemonies" (Rifkin 2011, 9).

The hegemonic construction of heterosexuality that Rifkin discusses arose through colonial discourses and (symbolic) violence, so that by imposing what Rifkin calls an ideology of "heterohomemaking" (Rifkin 2011, 8), the colonial discourse of the US settler state interpellated Indigenous peoples into a discourse of kinship suited to this settler state. Thus, Indigenous kinship, perceived as deviant and incapable of governance, became at once queered and targeted for straightening. 'Kinship', Rifkin points out, is an anthropological invention specifically aimed at describing *Indigenous* peoples' family and political organization, and, as such, it differs from the compulsory heterosexuality required for white inclusion into the dominant polity. Similarly, in *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (2011), Scott L. Morgensen states that:

White settlers promulgating colonial heteropatriarchy queered Native peoples and all racialized subject populations for elimination and regulation by the biopolitics of settler colonialism (Morgensen 2011, 31).

In this way, elimination of the Native presence on the continent was justified as an elimination of ‘deviant’ Others, whose ‘deviance’ could later be emulated and supplanted.

If heteronormativity legitimizes the settler state and interpellates Natives, a critique of heteronormativity challenges the naturalized and apparently self-evident ideological process of settler colonialism. Thus, thinking with Rifkin and Morgensen, I argue that anthropologists have supported this construction of Natives as first deviant and later ‘natural’ in ways that romanticize and distort, for the purpose of legitimizing historical settler conquest and modern (white) settler sexualities. By contrast, Native poets have used these historical constructions as anti-colonial weapons, effectively turning the settler discourse on its head.

#### POETIC DANCES TO THE TWO-SPIRIT

One of the first Native authors to thematize queerness and Two-Spirit centrality, Mohawk poet Maurice Kenny (1929-2016) often focused on the connection between reclaiming traditional Native sexualities and decolonization. Probably the most well-known and oft-cited Two-Spirit poem, *Winkte* (originally published in 1976), performs a celebratory poetic dance to the Two-Spirit.

The poem begins with a joyful exclamation of cultural centrality: “We are special to the Sioux!” (Kenny 1988, 153). The usage of the tribally specific term for the Lakota (Sioux) word for Two-Spirit, ‘Winkte’, by Kenny, a Mohawk, produces an effect of the universal. ‘Winkte’ is perhaps the most well-known of the terms that existed among the tribes in pre-colonial times (Tatonetti 2011), and as a Plains nation, the Lakota have a particular place in the American collective imagination. Heroes of the 19th century ‘Indian Wars’ and imagined popularly as a nation of warriors,

the Lakota signify historical strength, resilience, and resistance.

“They gave us respect for strange powers,” the poem continues and, as a comment on non-Native society’s treatment of Lesbian and gay people, adds: “They paid us with horses not derision.” The communal “we” that Kenny constructs is significant, as it positions the narrator as part of a larger whole. As Lisa Tatonetti (2011) argues:

The construction of a collective is a particularly useful narrative move as it belies the rhetoric of ‘deviance’ that situated any individual who fall outside of dominant heteropatriarchal hierarchy as dangerous outlier (Tatonetti 2011, 122).

Horses, furthermore, also signify strength, wealth, and power, and to receive a horse as a gift is a great honor.

Kenny’s poem responds to its time and the ways in which settler colonial discourses have affected Native communities, becoming simultaneously a call to arms and a mythologization of the Queer Native. Importantly, Tatonetti states that:

at a time when the hypermasculinized warrior ethos reigned supreme in representation of the American Indian Movement and white was still right for the vast majority of the gay rights movement, Kenny spoke of the complex and longstanding traditions in American Indian communities to create a space for Two-Spirit people who fit in neither of those often limited and limiting categories (Tatonetti 2011, 122).

The poem, furthermore, expresses the healing power of the erotic and ties Winktes to Indigenous nationhood:

And we were accepted into the fur robes  
Of a young warrior, and lay by his flesh  
And knew his mouth and warm groin (...)  
And if we cared to carry the lance, or dance

Over enemy scalps and take buffalo  
Then that, too, was good for the Nation  
(Kenny 1988, 154).

By constructing this tie between Winktes and nation, Kenny also creates a sense of separation. The nation that benefits from the Two-Spirit presence is a Native nation, not the enclosing settler nation.

Another poem published in the same collection, aptly titled *United*, also illustrates Kenny's notion of this centrality to the tribe and a sense of Two-Spirit power to create unity:

Moon music moved them together;  
breechclouts left at the door,  
straight firs ... ponderosa to cedar ...  
naked, crossed in the star-burst of dawn :  
bent, spent, broken in deep valleys.  
Wovoka shook hands with Cornplanter.  
Each parts for the seed of their firs (Kenny  
1988, 156).

Kenny stresses the sense of unity by tying the mythological creator-figure, Cornplanter, with the 19th century holy man, Wovoka, who led the spiritual resistance movement known as the Ghost Dance, the first trans-tribal movement, centered on a belief that Natives could stop white encroachment into their homelands. Thus, the poem combines queer, anti-heteropatriarchal symbolism with a decolonial critique.

Contemporaneously with Kenny, Laguna Pueblo/Sioux poet and scholar Paula Gunn Allen adopted an anti-colonial poetic aesthetic that sought to re-center Native gender traditions and practices. In a 1981 poem, she parallels lesbians in the present with Natives in the past. *Some Like Indians Endure* (1981/1988) articulates queerness as related to the earth and healing through the trope of the 'Medicine Dyke' (Allen 1986, 259), much like Kenny and other contemporary LGBTQIA2+ Native scholars who, as Indigenous queer theorist Chris Finley (Colville Confederated Tribes)

states, attempt(ed) to bring "sexy back" (Finley 2011, 41).

Allen's poetry critiques contemporary Native lesbian identity formations by linking lesbianism, queer desire, sovereignty, and indigeneity. As Arianne Burford (2013) notes, Allen's poetry performs a specific form of theoretical 'survance'<sup>5</sup> through its use of imagining (queer) possibilities and futurities. Calling for the healing of cultural traditions by articulating lesbian identity to Native identity, the narrator muses, "i [sic] have it in my mind that / dykes are indians". The metaphorical comparison invokes a shared invisibility, an effect of colonial as well as patriarchal erasure the poem attempts to refuse ("they're a lot like Indians (...) they were massacred / lots of times / they always came back"), while lamenting the loss of historical powerfulness: "they used to live as tribes / they owned tribal land (...) they got massacred again". By moving from references to gynocratic history and cultural tradition to "massacre" without pause, the poem comments on US settler colonialism's 'gynocide' as a gendered process as well as military weapon against Native tribes (cf. Wolfe 2006; Morgensen 2011; Rifkin 2011). However, the poem does not only express trauma; it also expresses Vizenorian survance and resistance to erasure. As Burford further notes, Allen reclaims the usually derogatory terms 'Indian' and 'dyke' in order "to insist on survival" and draw attention to the "overlapping destructive constructions of these two identities" (Burford 2013, 170). The "dykes and Indians (...) bear witness bitterly"

because they reach  
and hold  
because they live every day  
with despair laughing  
in cities and country places  
because earth hides them  
because they know  
the moon  
(Allen 1988, 10).

The poem's use of the words "live" and "laughing" illustrates this sense of survival which is intricately tied to resistance:

Like indians dykes  
are supposed to die out  
or forget (...)  
they don't anyway – even  
though the worst happens  
they remember and they stay (...)  
(Allen 1988, 12-13).

Thus, survival and resistance are intertwined. The 'Indians' and the 'dykes' resist and, as Allen continues, they:

struggle – defying even death:  
because they gather together  
enclosing  
and spit in the eye of death.  
(Allen 1988, 10).

This appeal to futurity, in this context, seems rebellious and radical because it contradicts dominant settler discourses of elimination (Wolfe 2006) as well as the trope of the Vanishing Native. But 'Indians' will rebuild, and the *idea* of liberation and healing will potentially tear down old systems to make way for the Native of the future:

it might even take your  
whole village with it  
stone by stone  
or leave the stones  
and find more  
to build another village  
someplace else  
(Allen 1988, 11).

Moreover, the poem specifically ties women to land and nation-building, while centering lesbians in village-building; ultimately, it states that "we never go away". Thus, the poem conveys the centrality of Native lesbians to culture – creating, maintaining, and surviving. In other words,

an idea  
like Indians  
endures  
(Allen 1988, 11).

Allen's poetic project cannot be separated from her scholarly and political work of reclaiming Native gender ideologies. In one of the foundational anthropological works on Native North American lesbians, for instance, she attempts to reclaim historical traditions by arguing for the historical centrality of female and lesbian existences to tribal nations. Her arguments have often been taken up by other scholars who, unlike her, have often failed to articulate historical practices to contemporary ones. In *Beloved Women: Lesbians in American Indian Cultures* (1981), Allen critiques what she calls "a Western patriarchal world view" (Allen 1981, 68) of Native peoples, a worldview that selectively constructs "the history of Native America" by leaving out the 'queer' aspects of Native cultures that might be seen as contradictory to a stereotypical or patriarchal notion of these cultures (ibid.). Instead, she seeks to reclaim Indigenous gender systems.

Foreshadowing many twenty-first century scholars, Allen states:

Christianity has imposed certain imperatives on the tribes, as the growing tendency to 'mainstream' Indians through schooling, economic requirements, and local, state and federal regulation of their lifestyles (Allen 1981, 69).

According to Allen, this regulation or mainstreaming in its capacity of colonialist tool obscured the multiple and complex roles women in particular play(ed) in tribal societies:

Any discussion of the status of women in general, and of Lesbians in particular, cannot hope for accuracy if one misunderstands women's power in tribal societies. (...)

women in general have not been taken seriously by ethnographers and folklorists, and what explorations have been done have been distorted by the preconceptions foisted on us by a patriarchal world-view, in which Lesbians are said not to exist, and women are perceived as oppressed, burdened, and powerless (Allen 1981, 70-71).

Thus, she argues, by omitting the stories about and by women, and especially queer and lesbian women, these master narratives in anthropology and folklore contributed to the construction of patriarchy and the internalization of patriarchal values within Native societies.

In this way, like her poetics, Allen's scholarly project consists of a recovery of the traditions of these:

Woman-centered tribal societies in which matrilocality, matrifocality, matrilinearity, maternal control of household goods and resources, and female deities of the magnitude of the Christian God were and are present and active features of traditional tribal life (Allen 1981, 3-4).

In addition, she offers a call-to-arms of sorts, saying: "We must not let ourselves be deluded by patriarchal perceptions of power which inexorably rob us of our true power" (Allen 1981, 84). The true power of Native women, and in particular, in Allen's view, of Native lesbians, lies in the ability to rebel and reconstruct – recover and endure. She states, "Under the reign of patriarchy, the medicine-dyke has become anathema; her presence has been hidden under the power-destroying blanket of complete silence" (Allen 1986, 259). In *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986), Allen explores and in the process helps to mythologize the long history of Native women in powerful positions, such as women chiefs and warriors. But her most relevant contribution, in this context, is her

exploration of "Hwame, Koshkalaka, and the Rest" (Allen 1986, 245), an essayistic survey of lesbians in Native cultures. Her most salient point is the link between lesbianism and spirituality (or medicine/power) in Native cultures:

Because tribal civilizations (like all others) function in entire gestalts and because they are based on the life-enhancing interconnect-edness of all things, it is my contention that gayness, whether female or male, traditionally functions positively within tribal groups (Allen 1986, 246).

Her discussion centers on the concept of kinship in tribal societies, because "spirit-related persons are perceived as more closely linked than blood-related persons" (ibid., 247), which problematizes the notion of kinship as biologically constituted. Thus, 'womanculture', which "is unregulated by males" (ibid., 259), signifies a form of power that Allen argues has been misunderstood by ethnographers in the service of settler heteropatriarchy.

For lesbians in Native societies, this female power and the spiritual ties that come with it are not differentiating or deviant features, but an "acceptable and respectable" position to occupy (ibid., 255). In other words, a Medicine-Dyke "could find safety and security in her bond with another woman because it was perceived to be destined and nurtured by nonhuman entities" (ibid., 255). In fact, within Allen's own tribe, the Laguna Pueblo, the origins of humankind and the world are attributed mythologically to the 'creatix' named Thought Woman (Allen 1986, 14), who sang the co-creatrices Uretsete and Naotsete into life; and these sisters' war bundles contained all the ingredients of creation. This spiritual sanction of lesbian unions, argues Allen, has been misrecognized by scholars, and erased as a result of the arrival and dominance of European settlers.

## THE QUEEREST CONTINENT

Contrary to the poetic dances to the Two-spirit that serve as anti-colonial survivance narratives, anthropological constructions of the Queer Native perpetuate the (symbolic) displacements and erasures produced by settler colonial discourses. This kind of erasure of the Native takes many forms, and many Native scholars have pointed out the example of cultural appropriation, such as ‘playing Indian,’ as a way for non-natives to claim ownership of and imagine an entitlement to the land (Deloria 1998; Huhndorf 2001; Arvin, Tuck and Morrill 2013). Finley, furthermore, argues that inherent in the settler colonial logic is a genocidal stipulation that “Native people need to disappear” (Finley 2011, 36), and Maile Arvin (Kanaka Maoli), Eve Tuck (Unangax) and Angie Morrill (Klamath) discuss this disappearance and various appropriations of Native cultures and performances of ‘Indianness’ as “a fundamental condition of life within settler colonialism” (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill 2013, 19).

This appropriative logic of colonialism also manifests in the anthropological records and explorations. By appropriating Native historical genders, settlers can reinvent this history as if it is their own, an example of the discourse of entitled ownership which constructs the settlers as the rightful inheritors (see also Driskill 2004; Morgensen 2011; and Minosh 2016). Consequently, there is a parallel between, on the one hand, settler entitlement to ownership and playing Indian (Deloria 1999; Huhndorf 2004), and, on the other, romancing the Third Gender/Queer Native (Towle and Morgan 2006). By using the ‘sacred queer’ trope, gay non-Native anthropologists and New Age spiritualist movements helped construct a sense of belonging for LBGQTQIA+ people within the settler state. Because the land itself was constructed as having a long tradition of queerness and gender-bending, those same practices in the present become naturalized

and legitimate, demonstrated by Will Roscoe’s statement that the North American continent was once “the queerest continent on the planet” (Roscoe 1998, 3).

The rhetorical omission of the *people* of the continent as the ‘queer’ ones symbolically transfers the property of queerness to the land, removing that bothersome Native presence and constructing it as an inherent, natural characteristic rather than a culturally situated praxis. Morgensen (2011) makes a similar argument when he states that:

Berdache became a naturalized backdrop to scientific and activist claims on sexual modernity, and even its absence from citation remained consistent with its function: to offer a Native past that sexual minorities could incorporate in their quest for sexual modernity (Morgensen 2011, 48).

Furthermore, the anthropological constructions of the Queer Native figure rest on a sense of pastness that is potentially problematic. By relegating the queerness of the Natives to the past, anthropologists and historians thereby produce, perhaps inadvertently, the trope of the Queer Native as a tool of the settler state and succeed in perpetuating the popular genocidal idea that Natives are extinct.

For instance, in *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology* (1988), editor and contributor Will Roscoe compiles one of the earliest attempts to approach academically the theme of gayness, queerness, lesbianism, and transgender identity in Native societies and cultures. In general terms, the contributors to the anthology attempt to revive traditions, restore honor and respect to LGBTQIA2+ natives, and protest the effect of colonialism on Native gender systems; however, almost all of them focus on *past* practices. Roscoe’s own contribution, *Strange Country This: Images of Berdaches and Warrior Women*, offers a historical overview of gender-variant individuals throughout Native American history,

such as We'Wha, the Zuni *Ihamana* (Two-Spirit) and the Blackfeet 'boy girl' called Running Eagle (Roscoe 1988, 70), a theme he further elaborates on in the book-length studies *The Zuni Man-Woman* (1991) and *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (1998). Roscoe focuses on individuals seen as integral to the tribes, the heroes, heroines, mediators, and warriors, and he conveys a stereotypical, almost mythological, image.

The notion that cross-dressers, gays, lesbians, and other gender and sexual 'non-normative'<sup>6</sup> individuals played significant, or even essential economic roles in Native communities is further mythologized by scholars such as Judy Grahn (1984) and Walter L. Williams (1986). In her overview of Native LGBTQIA2+ peoples, *Gay Is Very American* (1984), Grahn also tells the story of We'Wha, the revered cultural ambassador, weaver-artist, and keeper of traditions, as well as provider of "a major source of income for the Zuni people" (Grahn 1984, 57). Echoing Paula Gunn Allen's writings on 'medicine-dykes' and providing reviews of ethnographic collections and writings about "the Gay crossover" (Grahn 1990, 59), Grahn presents examples meant to confirm this centrality of LGBTQIA+ individuals to Native societies. The sacredness of the Queer Native is enhanced when she argues that women who choose to dress and live as men, "are dykes, in other words, not alienated modern dykes, but *dykes with a well-defined and respected social function*" (ibid., 59, my italics). Grahn conflates gender and sexuality in unproductive ways, but her discussion of non-binary genders in Native cultures helped popularize the issue among non-Native LGBTQIA2+ people, as well as straight people from the 1980s onwards. The title of her chapter, however, illustrates the appropriative logics of settler colonialism: by claiming a cultural connection to a pre-invasion period, she claims this history as her

own as a way to legitimize the existence of gay people in her own contemporary time.

Similarly, in one of the most widely cited texts on native queerness, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (1986), anthropologist Walter L. Williams explicates the role of the *berdache* in Native societies. Williams stresses that the third gender position in Native communities seems entirely codified in mythology and custom. He states:

Berdaches [have] a clearly recognized and accepted social status, often based on a secure place in the tribal mythology. Berdaches have special ceremonial roles in many Native American religions, and important economic roles in their families (Williams 1986, 2).

Thus, the sacred sanction of *berdachism*, according to Williams, results from many Native tribes' perception of Nature and humans' role in the natural world:

Despite the usual pattern in Indian societies of using ridicule to enforce conformity, receiving instructions from a vision inhibits others from trying to change the berdache. Ritual explanation provides a way out. It also excuses the community from worrying about the cause of that person's difference, or the feeling that it is society's duty to try to change him (Williams 1986, 30).

William's conflation of the hundreds of Native societies and cultures into "Indian societies" is hugely problematic, as it perpetuates an idea of Natives as a monolithic group. Although he uses empirical data from many tribes, there are obvious pitfalls in relying on historical sources and early ethnographic texts. Writing in 2010, Williams himself inadvertently comments on the inherent unreliability of the anthropological sources:

Some documentary sources suggest that a minority of societies treated two-spirit persons

disrespectfully, by kidding them or discouraging children from taking on a two-spirit role. However, many of the documents that report negative reactions are themselves suspect, and should be evaluated critically in light of the preponderance of evidence that suggests a respectful attitude. Some European commentators, from early frontier explorers to modern anthropologists, also were influenced by their own homophobic prejudices to distort native attitudes (Williams 2010, np.).

Settler anthropologists themselves have no claim to speak for 'Native attitudes' and many studies from the 1970s onwards exhibit their own ideological anchoring. As Sue-Ellen Jacobs states, "many contemporary retrospective studies have become voices of the present, generating images of the authors, who are usually white male descendants of colonizers" (Jacobs 1997, 35). Furthermore, the romanticization of other cultures, in this case, Native American cultures, risks relegating these cultures to a fetishized "primordial location" (Towle and Morgan 2006, 477), a move that only exacerbates the already ongoing colonial erasure of Native existence and sovereignty.

This type of mythologization is not unique, however, to the first wave of the American gay rights movement. In 2010, singer and songwriter Anohni, of Antony and the Johnsons fame, guest edited *The Guardian's* music section, and as a special feature, she invited Walter L. Williams to write an article about the term Two-Spirit. In this article, Williams perpetuates the same mythologization. Williams writes: "Native Americans have often held intersex, androgynous people, feminine males and masculine females in high respect" and that, furthermore, the Native Queer was "doubly blessed" (Williams 2010, np.). This characterization is not neutral and performs a specific kind of ideological and cultural work. As James Thomas Stevens notes:

*[Two]-Spirit* is too often used as a pan-Indian term for queer-identified Native peoples, even where no such terms existed before. It glosses over the many autonomous views that individual nations held concerning their queer members (Stevens 2010, 184).

#### SOVEREIGN EROTIC AND THE POETICS OF SURVIVANCE

Responding to anthropological constructions of the 'Berdache,' contemporary poets and artists carry on Kenny and Allen's legacies by continuing to re-map Native presences and liberate Native sexualities and genders from colonial erasures. A milestone in Indigenous literature, the anthology *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* (2011) showcases myriads of literary expressions of decolonial love and desire. Poets such as Kim Shuck (Tsalagi/Sauk/Fox), Craig Womack (Musgogee Creek), Janice Gould (Concow), Deborah Miranda (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation/Chumash), Daniel David Moses (Delaware), Chrystos (Menominee), and Indira Allegra (of African American and Cherokee descent), to mention only a few, thematize queerness and survivance in multiple ways. Their poetries often express and utilize a Two-Spirit aesthetic as a way to demonstrate how queerness and queer desire act as healing and empowering devices. In *Stolen from Our Bodies*, Driskill asks: "How do we as Two-Spirits remain whole and confident in our bodies and in our traditions when loss attempts to smother us? I return to our stories" (Driskill 2004, 56). Coining the phrase 'sovereign erotic', Driskill uses poetry as an anticolonial strategy. They explain:

When I speak of a Sovereign Erotic, I'm speaking of an erotic wholeness healed and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive, rooted within the histories, traditions, and resistance struggles of our nations (Driskill 2004, 51).

As a poet, weaver, and scholar, Driskill transcends modes of writing to reconstruct traditions and re-map Native presences. The poetry collection, *Walking with Ghosts* (20050), for example, contains several poems that articulate communal trauma and queer desires. For instance, in the poems *Back to the Blanket* and *Map of the Americas*, Driskill directly links land, sovereignty, queer desire, and healing. In *Back to the Blanket* a genderless and ageless narrator speaks to their lover of healing through the potential of the erotic:

Come here. Let me kiss your wounds  
away, the mark  
on your body of terror we could not lock  
out (...)  
Let me wrap you in ceremony, a giveaway  
of straining muscle  
the soft whispered  
stories of our flesh. Let me suck the sick-  
ness out with this oldtime medicine

Similar to the way Paula Gunn Allen conceptualizes the Medicine Dyke, Driskill plays with the idea of the erotic as medicine, in the traditional sense.

Similarly, *Map of the Americas* skillfully articulates colonial trauma and personal trauma, while rejecting victimhood by remapping the Two-Spirit body onto the colonized continents. Like Allen's *Some Like Indians Endure*, the first stanza starts with an imagining, a hopeful vision for and potentiality of the future:

I wish when we touch  
we could transcend history in  
double helixes of dark and light  
on wings we build ourselves

The poem quickly slips into an expression of collective memory of colonial violence:  
But this land grows volcanic  
with the smoldering hum of bones  
All that's left  
of men who watched beloveds

torn apart by rifles  
Grandmothers singing back  
lost families  
Children who didn't live  
long enough to cradle a lover

This violent colonial imagery is framed by bodies and body parts, simultaneously expressing violence and sensuality:

arms around waist  
lips skimming nape  
legs twined together  
like a river cane basket.

The articulation of violence and eroticism in this stanza illustrates the interconnectedness of sexuality, colonial erasure, and embodied history. That is, in Rifkin's words, "linking the most private of moments to the ongoing dynamics of conquest provides a dialectic through which to reconceptualize the meaning of sovereignty" (Rifkin 2011b, 179). The long middle section of the poem, a stanza constructed typographically as a map of the Americas, inscribes the narrator's body onto the land, claiming ownership of it. From the "landscape of ice" in the north, down through the plains and "the deserts / and green / mountains / on my belly's / topography," and "legs wrapped with the / Amazon the Andes the Pampas," ending with "feet that reach to touch Antarctica," the Two-Spirit body maps itself onto the land, playfully inverting the rhetorical erasure resulting in the perception of the continent itself as queer, while rejecting erasure and embodying survivance.

While poets such as Driskill do not romanticize the Noble Queer Native in the same way as their predecessors, like these earlier poets, they do utilize the Two-Spirit aesthetic to offer similar anti-colonial critiques and to call for an interrogation of heteronormative settler colonial logics by bringing "sexy back" (Finley 2011, 31). This poetic as well as scholarly "two-spirit

critique” (Driskill 2010) challenges and unsettles settler colonialism and its attendant discourses of erasure.

## CONCLUSION

Although my discussion above only cursorily touches upon a few of the examples of the way that the Two-Spirit figure has been appropriated and mythologized, it illustrates the ongoing struggles for self-determination and sovereignty for Native and Indigenous peoples in the US. Despite the risks of fetishization and romanticization, the anthropological and poetic constructions and critiques of gender illustrate the continual struggles over and changing attitudes to gender. Parallel to the anthropological mythologization, Native LGBTQIA2+ poets used and continue to use poetry and, to some extent, a mythologized history to legitimate queerness in their present. However, unlike the anthropological mythologizations, Native reclamations of the traditional, sacred queer figure functions as more than a universal justification of gay and lesbian identity. By reclaiming – whether historically accurate or not – an ancient identity, Native LGBTQIA2+ people reclaim futurity and critique colonial erasures. By subverting the expectation of the ‘Vanishing Native’, they carve out a space for themselves in American society. Thus, the mythologization of the Queer Native is not only a colonizing endeavor undertaken by Anglo-American anthropologists whose prejudices and preconceptions of the ‘Noble Savage’ tainted their narrative constructions. Indigenous peoples themselves, both poets and scholars, have attempted to reclaim roles and positions traditionally associated with honor and privilege, by reimagining decolonial aesthetic dances to the Two-Spirit.

## NOTES

1. “*berdachism*” and “*berdache*” are contested terms, widely considered to be offensive, as the term ‘berdache’ seems to come from ancient Persian, meaning ‘young, male prostitute’ or “kept boy” (Boag 2011, 233). I italicize the terms as an attempt to avoid endorsing the term without leaving it out.
2. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, and more. For brevity’s sake, I have used a + to indicate that the acronym is not exhaustive.
3. Two-Spirit does not signify queerness, as many tribal cultures did not conceive of their non-binary members as outsiders or contrary to traditions. The western notion of queerness here is inaccurate and insufficient for understanding the term. Two-Spirit people served central purposes within their nations and cultures, and are thus not ‘queer’. It is also noteworthy that not all Native LGBTQIA+ people identify as Two-Spirit (Tatonetti 2011).
4. Tribal-national affiliations are given simply in parenthesis, e.g. “(Métis)”, or when no official enrollment status was available at the time of writing as “(of Métis descent)”.
5. The term ‘survivance’ has a central position in Native American studies, and as Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) states, it refers to “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name” (Vizenor 1999, vii). In narrative terms, “Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry” (ibid.).
6. The term ‘non-normative’ is problematic in a context where the norm does not necessarily entail a binary understanding of gender (and sexuality). I have used it here for lack of a better term.

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