# Two-Spirits: The Fluidity of Gender in Native American Communities and How We Can Learn from It

Mary Shandley

Dr. Ewington

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One of the oldest and most revered traditions of hundreds of Native American nations is the recognition and celebration of two-spirit people – or, in the simplest of terms, those who do not conform fully to any gender binary.[1] Although now widely acknowledged as essential to the functioning of these communities before colonization, these two-spirit Native identities are rarely recognized in the historical documents written by colonizers, and were not given an overarching name until the 1990s. As scholars of two-spirit people have documented, during the centuries of oppression and persecution following early contact with European colonialist powers, Native people who did not conform to European ideals, including two-spirit people, were tortured and brutally murdered.[2] Violence, fear, and forced assimilation led to a significant loss of culture that, according to documentation by Westerners, Native peoples have only begun to reclaim during the past sixty years, specifically through the Red Power Movement.[3] As Native nations are beginning to find themselves again, the tradition of celebrating multiple genders is reemerging. The language – and, as I will argue, the pronouns in particular – that Native

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[1] "Gender," as it is used in the language surrounding two-spirits, actually encompasses the Western concepts of both gender and sexuality, but for the purposes of this paper, I will just call it gender.

[2] *Two Spirits,* directed by Lydia Nibley, (Cortez, Colorado: Cinema Guild, 2010), iTunes, 1080p.

[3] Since the 1980s there has also been a shift in the LGBTQ+ movement. The creation of the term "two-spirit" is an example of how the Red Power Movement and the LGBTQ+ movement have collided. More information on the Red Power Movement is available in Blansett, Kent, *Journey to Freedom: Richard Oakes, Alcatraz, and the Red Power Movement*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2018), accessed April 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv5cgbqj.

American societies use to describe two-spirit people reflects a fluid understanding of gender, an understanding from which Western society has much to learn. The two-spirit tradition offers a valuable way of conceiving gender, but, as we will address, there are some serious obstacles to Western culture coming to understand its value.

The first and largest obstacle we will come across is the fact that the vocabulary that Native nations use to describe gender cannot be translated perfectly into English terms, as they reflect a conceptual scheme that is entirely foreign to Western perspectives. As we will address later, the fluid use of pronouns within some Native nations is an illustration of this incommensurability of translation. We will also discuss the obstacle of cultural multiplicity behind the term "two-spirit," and how those differences between cultural gender traditions affect the ways in which we can use "two-spirit." Next, we must acknowledge the need for a paradigm shift in order to abandon our reliance on the Western gender binary, but also accept that major cultural shifts such as these are difficult and unlikely.

To be able to understand the conversations surrounding Native American gender identities, we must first gain a rough understanding of the term "two-spirit."[4] To those who are accustomed to Western, binary-influenced terms such as "gay," "transgender," "bisexual," et cetera, two-spirit is not a simple concept to define, especially when confined to the English

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[4] In this paper, I use the phrase "Native American" rather than "American Indian" because while "American Indian" refers to Indigenous people within the contiguous United States, "Native American" encompasses all of the Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Since Jean Balestrery mentions Native Alaskan nations that practice two-spirit traditions in her article, I decided to use "Native Americans" in order to include those peoples as well.

language. In their edited volume on two-spirit theory, politics, and literature, scholars Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen define "two-spirit" as "inclusive of Indians who identify as GLBTQ or through nationally specific terms."[5] They and other academics, such as Jean Balestrery, group the term together with "queer," as these are both "contemporary constructs that defy standard classifications and specific definitions."[6] However, we cannot exactly equate "two-spirit" with "queer." As we will discuss below, "two-spirit" is an umbrella term that encompasses the gender vocabularies of hundreds of independent nations, each with different ways of categorizing and valuing gender.[7]

"Two-spirit" is an English derivative of the term *niizh manitoag* from the Northern Algonquin dialect, according to anthropologist Jean Balestrery.[8] The International Native Gay & Lesbian Gathering adopted it in 1990 as their official term for those who possess both feminine and masculine spirits.[9] Between 1997 and 2010, it became more widely used and understood

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[5] Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, "Introduction," in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature,* edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011), 3.

[6] Jean L. Balestrery, "Intersecting Discourses on Race and Sexuality: Compounded Colonization Among LGBTTQ American Indians/Alaska Natives," *Journal of Homosexuality* 59, no. 5 (2012): 635.

[7] Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, "Introduction," 3.

[8] Balestrery, "Intersecting," 635.

[9] Balestrery, "Intersecting," 635.

among Native nations whose traditions celebrated multiple genders, according to the data represented in *Queer Indigenous Studies*.[10] Given that it was created from the words that Native peoples used for themselves long before European colonialism introduced its strict binary system, it provides one way to reclaim the narrative that has always been written by their oppressors.

The obstacle language presents to understanding the two-spirit identity in English can be illuminated by two philosophical ideas: Quine's indeterminacy of translation and Kuhn's incommensurability of conceptual schemes. According to Quine's concept of the indeterminacy of translation, there is no correct way to translate, only a range of possibilities among which we choose subjectively.[11] Therefore, the translation of a concept such as two-spirit into English naturally leaves much out, given that there is no perfect way to translate an idea from one language that does not already exist in the other. Furthermore, since two-spirit is an identity unique to the Native cultures from which it draws its roughly-translated name and characteristics, there is an entirely different system of conceptual schemes attached to it that conflict with those of the West. As Thomas Kuhn explains in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* rival paradigms, or systems of conceptual schemes, are "incommensurable," meaning that they essentially speak different languages and have uncomparable terms.[12] Eurocentric and Native

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[10] Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, "Introduction," 17.

[11] Scott Denham, Amanda Ewington, and Marija Jankovic, "Translation" (lecture, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, September 26, 2019).

[12] David Boersema, *Philosophy of Science: Text with Readings* (New York: Pearson Education, 2009), 273.

views on gender exemplify such incommensurability, which explains why it is difficult to use the terms of one system of thought to explain those of another. Even if there were a paradigm shift in which the Native school of thought became universally dominant, it would still be impossible to combine the meanings of the two different gender vocabularies, since these vocabularies merely speak past one another. However, even though these specific traditions and vocabularies are incommensurable, Native people's fundamental characterization of gender as fluid could potentially influence the dismantling of the Western gender binary.

When examining the way these nations understand gender, we must remember that gender is a conceptual scheme imposed by tradition. While Eurocentric culture defines a person's gender by their genitalia – their biological sex – many Native nations instead define it based on how people present themselves and what role they take up in the community, according to Navajo people interviewed in the documentary *Two Spirits*.[13] The Navajo nation, for example, categorizes its people into four genders: women, men, *nádleehí* (feminine men), and *dilbaa* (masculine women).[14] A *nádleehí,* as described by the Navajo interviewees, usually shows skill in the responsibilities typically taken up by a woman, such as agriculture, and a *dilbaa* shows skill in male responsibilities, such as warfare.[15] The recognition of multiple genders is, according to queer activist Will Roscoe's survey, "among the most widely shared features of North

[13] *Two Spirits.*

[14] *Two Spirits.*

[15] *Two Spirits.*

American societies," thus demonstrating that the Western binary is far from the only way of viewing gender.[16]

Because two-spirit people blend both masculinity and femininity, they are able to take on their own highly valued roles in the community. For instance, according to the interviewees in *Two Spirits,* in Navajo communities, two-spirit people traditionally serve as counselors, negotiators, herbalists, healers, matchmakers, spiritual leaders, and caretakers of orphaned children.[17] Since men and women typically have opposite roles, two-spirits act as mediators, thereby creating "a stronger, healthier, more vibrant culture," in the words of a Navajo leader.[18] Focusing on a different nation, historian Laura Jane Moore's profile of revered Apache warrior Lozen highlights this special role. Lozen was female in sex, but took up the male role of warrior after demonstrating immense skill in riding, shooting, fighting, and war strategy.[19] Traditionally, the Apache community had practiced strong separation and little interaction between the sexes, but since Lozen "combined the most respected aspects of Apache femininity and masculinity,"

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[16] Gunlög Fur, "Weibe-Town and the Delawares-as-Women: Gender-Crossing and Same-Sex Relations in Eighteenth-Century Northeastern Indian Culture," in *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America,* edited by Thomas A. Foster (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 34.

[17] *Two Spirits.*

[18] *Two Spirits.*

[19] Laura Jane Moore, "Lozen: An Apache Woman Warrior," in *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives,* edited by Theda Perdue (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2001), 97.

she was able to bridge the gap and foster more connection.[20] As indicated by these representations of both the Navajo and Apache communities, two-spirit traditions are the glue that holds many Native communities together.

One of the questions that arises when converting the two-spirit identity into English is whether or not this should encompass the loaded concept of sexuality, and to what degree.[21] It is widely agreed upon that the term emphasizes the spiritual aspect of gender over the "homosexual persona," since, historically, according to Roscoe, two-spirit traditions are "less about sexual identity and more about the cultural categories of Indigenous communities."[22] Some scholars argue that this emphasis removes political analysis of sexuality, thereby helping to hold off internal homophobia in the communities that are less accepting of multiple genders.[23] However, many two-spirit Indigenous people, along with Driskill and Sophie Mayer, argue that there is more power in the "decolonizing gesture of reclaiming the erotic."[24] In return, several other academics point out that even the concept of sexuality is a "colonial discourse produced through biopower."[25] It seems that both of these ways of approaching the two-spirit identity are fraught

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[20] Moore, "Lozen," 97.

[21] The work done by Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen provides a thorough summary of and response to several contrasting viewpoints in Native gender studies, and is therefore cited frequently here.

[22] Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, "Introduction," 12.

[23] Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, "Introduction," 15.

[24] Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, "Introduction," 16.

[25] Driskill, Finley, Gillen, and Morgensen, "Introduction," 16.

with remnants of violence against Native Americans. Both the sexualization and desexualization of Native peoples have generational trauma attached to them.

A key debate surrounding the two-spirit classification addresses the generalization that necessarily occurs when we use one word to describe the belief systems of hundreds of vastly different nations. As highlighted in *Queer Indigenous Studies,* in order to unite two-spirit Indigenous peoples across all of these nations, the creators of this term applied "pan-tribal concepts to highly specific local practices," thereby cutting out any ideological diversity.[26] However, scholars seem to have found a solution. Tol Foster, using the phrase "relational regionalism," explains that, in the way it is used now, the term centers nations' interdependence, but still allows for individual diversity – meaning that every nation still uses "two-spirit" according to their own traditional definitions and practices within their gender system – an idea for which there seems to be general consensus.[27] Therefore, the term encompasses both the shared understanding of multiple genders and the individual traditions of each nation at the same time. Clearly, there is even fluidity in the ways that Native people talk about fluidity. This fluidity leads to a more thorough understanding of the abstract concept of gender, an understanding which Western culture seems to lack. We need only to bridge the gap between Native and non-Native perspectives in order to shift the paradigm of the gender binary.

One area of discussion that does not seem to be addressed in any of these scholarly conversations is the use of pronouns. This seems unusual given that in Western queer theory, pronouns are a central focus of gender identity. There must be some linguistic or cultural

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[26] Driskill, Finley, Gillen, and Morgensen, "Introduction," 14.

[27] Driskill, Finley, Gillen, and Morgensen, "Introduction," 7.

explanation for the absence of discussion of pronouns in Native queer theory. In my search to uncover the meaning of this hole in the conversation, and, consequently, how Native peoples do use pronouns, I relied on the story of Fred Martinez in the documentary *Two Spirits*.

Fred Martinez was a two-spirit Navajo teenager from Southwest Colorado who, although accepted and celebrated by his family and tribal community, was tragically murdered in a hate crime by a non-Native man at the age of sixteen.[28] The documentary consists mainly of interviews with Fred's mother, Fred's teacher, several two-spirit leaders of the Navajo community in the Four Corners, and various individual activists of the larger Native American two-spirit community. In these interviews, when referring to Fred or other two-spirit people, the interviewees used both feminine and masculine pronouns, sometimes in the same sentence. For instance, when one of the community leaders was describing the historical figure We'wah, a highly respected ambassador to George Washington for the Zuni people, he said, "He was a transgender person beloved by her people."[29] This fluid use of pronouns indicates that when Navajo people refer to two-spirits, there is no particular "correct" pronoun to use.

Qwo-Li Driskill, a two-spirit scholar who identifies with the Cherokee nation, uses the pronouns s/he, hir, hirs, which combine the feminine and masculine pronouns while suggesting at the same time that either "she" or "he" is acceptable.[30] Driskill's pronouns provide a possible explanation for the way Navajos reference two-spirit people; both feminine and masculine

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[28] *Two Spirits.*

[29] *Two Spirits.*

[30] "Qwo-Li Driskill," College of Liberal Arts, Oregon State University, accessed April 6, 2020, https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/users/qwo-li-driskill.

pronouns seem to be acceptable. We must remember, however, that there is a distinction between using both masculine and feminine pronouns and using gender neutral pronouns, such as “they,” which has become popular in Western queer theory and identity. “They/them/theirs” pronouns imply not identifying with either side of the binary, while pronouns such as “s/he, hir, hirs” imply identifying with both sides at the same time. The decision not to use a single gender pronoun implies fluidity in the way Navajo people think about gender, which contrasts heavily with our rigid separation of gender into two categories. In other words, the Navajo practice of using both "him" and "her" when speaking English appears to be evidence of willingness to recognize more than two genders, and to see gender as distinct from sex.

An important indication that the Native interviewees’ fluid use of pronouns is meaningful and intentional is the fact that two-spirit people are so widely revered in the Navajo community.[31] If, as is quite common today, a white American father were to constantly intentionally misgender his transgender daughter that would constitute a refusal to accept her identity, which, from a Western stance, we might consider “traditional.” However, Fred Martinez’s mother using masculine pronouns for her two-spirit child has completely different implications, given the cultural context. Given how revered two-spirits are in Navajo communities, her using masculine pronouns for Fred does not have the discriminatory implications that it would have in the West. While the people interviewed in *Two Spirits* use both feminine and masculine pronouns for Fred Martinez in a seemingly nonchalant manner, the reason for this appears to lie entirely in the discrepancies that occur when attempting to translate certain cultural concepts into the language of a culture which lacks these concepts.

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[31] *Two Spirits.*

The issue of cross-cultural translation is presumably the largest obstacle to understanding the concept of two-spirits as a whole, and, in this particular instance, how to use the correct pronouns for them. Coming back to our question of why the Native interviewees used masculine and feminine pronouns interchangeably, one might ask whether this occurs because the Navajo language does not base its pronouns on gender. According to Young's overview of the Navajo verb system, however, they do indeed use gendered pronouns that include only two genders.[32] While this may suggest that the Navajo language is limited to the same binary that English is, one must take into consideration the ontology of the Navajo gender system. Even though their pronoun structures may appear rigid, their use of these pronouns is fluid when they talk about two-spirit people, as are their views and presentations of gender. Therefore, in Navajo culture, the idea of a gender binary in their language becomes insignificant when confronted with their coexisting understanding of gender as fluid. However, since this conclusion is based on my specific case study, it is not necessarily representative of all Native nations' linguistic approach to translating their traditions into English. The reason why pronouns are rarely mentioned in overarching Native queer theory might be that each nation uses pronouns for two-spirits in entirely different ways. Nevertheless, examining the words of this group of Native people has indicated that for two-spirits, gender is more fluid than neutral, and is best explained in concepts that we cannot accurately translate into the English language.

As Western culture comes into a new era of accepting different identities and minds are beginning to open, perhaps this is the time to expand and reshape our understanding of what

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[32] Robert W. Young, *The Navajo Verb System: An Overview,* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 23.

gives a person gender. Perhaps this is the time for our paradigm to shift. Recently, we have started confronting the gender binary that Eurocentric culture has imposed on us for centuries. We are beginning to realize that this binary is not fact, but merely tradition, just like the Native gender systems – and a problematic one at that. In order to fully understand and dissolve the gender binary, we need to find a way to abandon the Western terms attached to this conceptual scheme. In other words, we need a paradigm shift within the realm of how we verbalize and categorize gender identities. The conceptualization of gender of Native communities may be giving us the means to do that.

However, as with many paradigm shifts, this would impact social functioning outside of the realm of queer theory. It would require an almost entirely clean slate for terminology, to which the general public (particularly non-Natives and non-academics) would take a great deal of time to adjust. Academics must now ask themselves how realistic it would be to attempt to shift this paradigm, especially in a time in which many are still adjusting to the idea of queer existence to begin with. Every cultural revolution takes a period of some kind of enforcement and reinforcement, a period of acceptance, and a period of adjustment. Beginning a revolution also takes widespread attention, commitment, and care, three things which are rarely given to Native studies, even less to Native gender studies. A shift in Western ideology that is founded by the beliefs of Native American groups is especially unlikely, given that the colonizers rarely take the time to learn from those they have colonized.

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