



# TWO SPIRITS

> GENDER AND  
SEXUALITY IN  
THE INDIGENOUS  
TRADITIONS &  
IDENTITIES  
OF NORTH  
AMERICA

GEN AYD

# PURPOSE

This inter-genre work seeks to explore the nature, history, contemporary manifestation and identity politics that affect and have regulated Two-spirit people and their communities. This is neither exhaustive nor intended to be comprehensive, rather designed as an introductory piece on the topic for those in alternative communities or identity categories.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When faced with documenting, collating material and commenting on identities rendered in (and by) minority / unfamiliar cultural contexts, one must be aware of the oft-inadvertent tendency to "recolonize" the subject material of one's writing by making claims from a position (of power) in or of any encompassing or external power. As a young, white, cis-gendered, gay male born in New Zealand, I enter into the creation of this zine as much as possible from the role of a curator rather than commenter. I must acknowledge, nonetheless, that in creating this work I bring to it the bias and perspective of someone with the identity I have; neither being a Two-spirit person myself nor steeped in any of the cultural contexts in which the concept, tradition and roles this umbrella term describes, have manifested and continue to manifest themselves.

- Benjamin A.N. Ayto

# WHAT IS A TWO-SPIRIT?

→ The term and definition ←

TWO-SPIRIT - A modern umbrella term chosen (and created) in the 1990s and subsequently used by (some) indigenous people in North America to describe or label gender- and sexuality-varient individuals in their communities with regard to traditional tribal roles.

The concept of being "two-spirited" applies and refers to any Native American person who feels that their body either simultaneously manifests both a masculine and feminine spirit, or exhibits a different balance of the typical masculine and feminine characteristics that are usually observed in masculine men and feminine women.



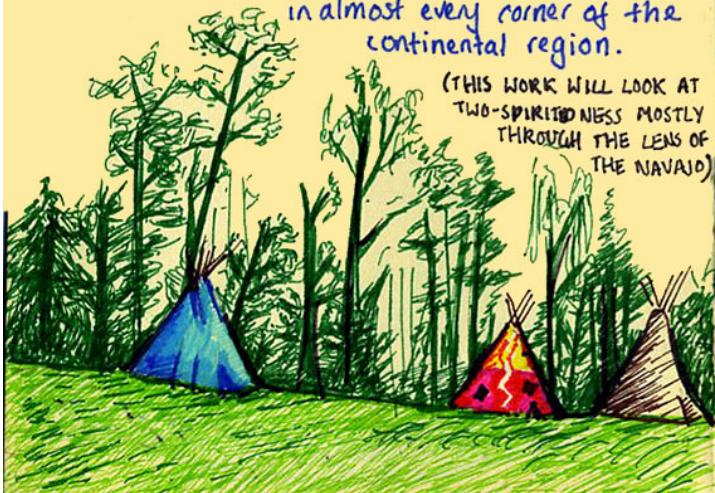
"The masculine and feminine are sometimes reflected so completely in the body of one person, it is as if they have two spirits!"  
- RICHARD IMPORTUNE



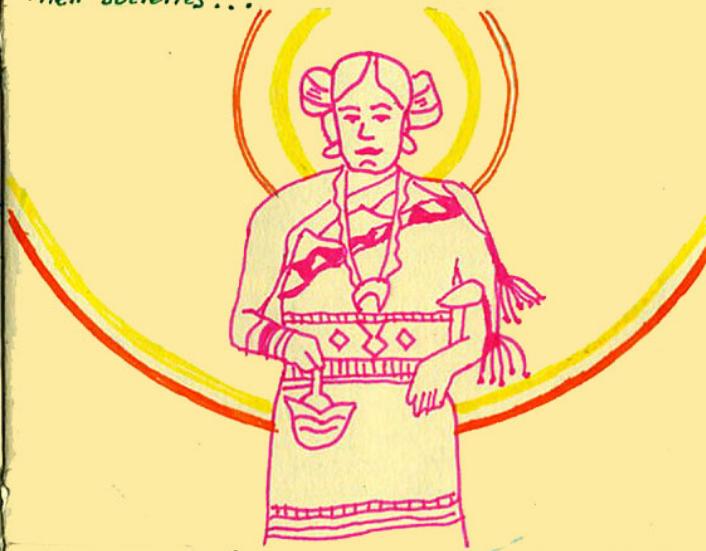
# A COMMONPLACE IDENTITY

What scholars generally refer to as "Native American sexual and gender diversity" - in particular, the presence of male-bodied Two-Spirits - was not only "an everyday aspect of life" but also a "fundamental institution amongst most indigenous tribes and peoples" (Gilley). In fact, according to William Roscoe, both male and female two-spirits have been documented in over 130 North American tribes, in almost every corner of the continental region.

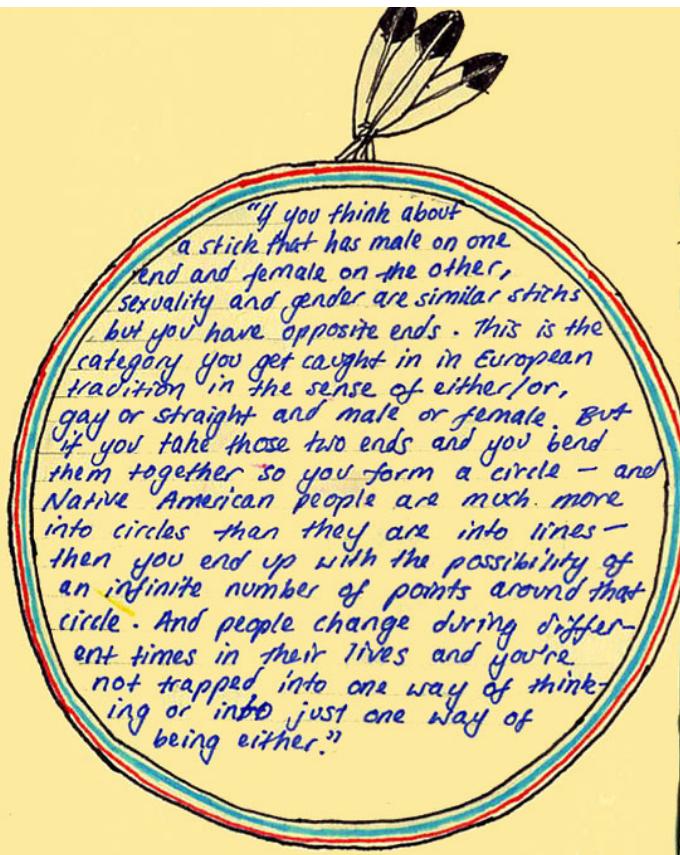
(THIS WORK WILL LOOK AT TWO-SPIRITEDNESS MOSTLY THROUGH THE LENS OF THE NAVAJO)



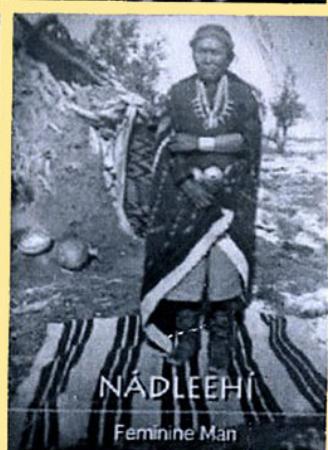
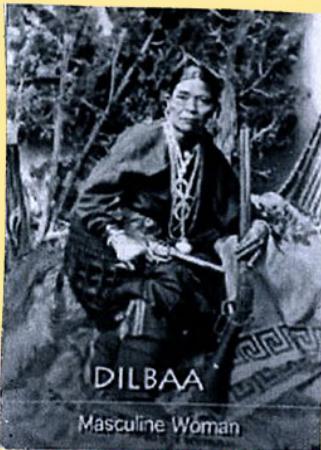
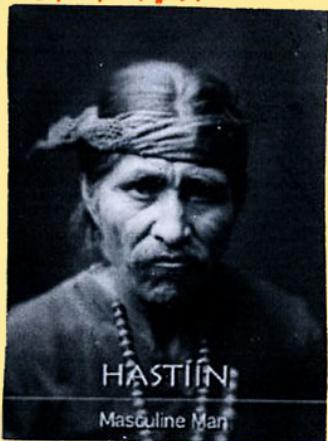
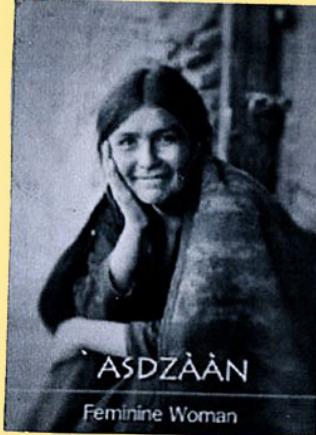
Traditional Native American ideas about gender did not utilize the binarized, bodily-sex-equals-gender view commonly found in European thought. Rather, male- and female-bodied persons fulfilled a "myriad" of gender roles within their societies...



... "Genders, as social categories of persons, were a malleable part of an individual's identity and alterable throughout a person's lifetime." — Gilley



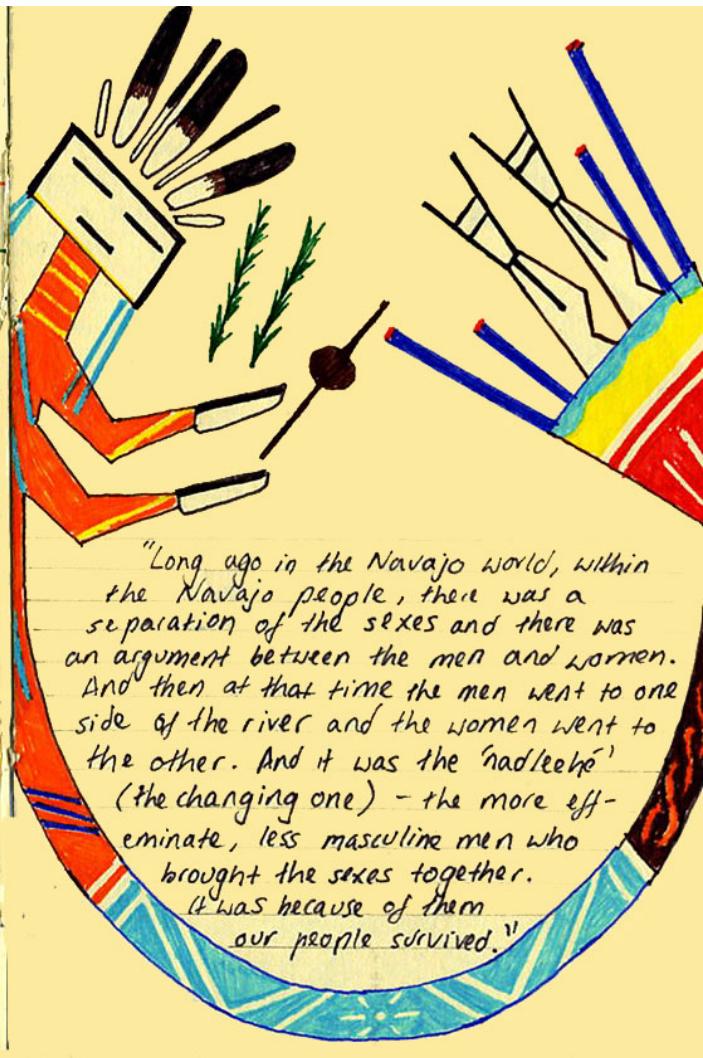
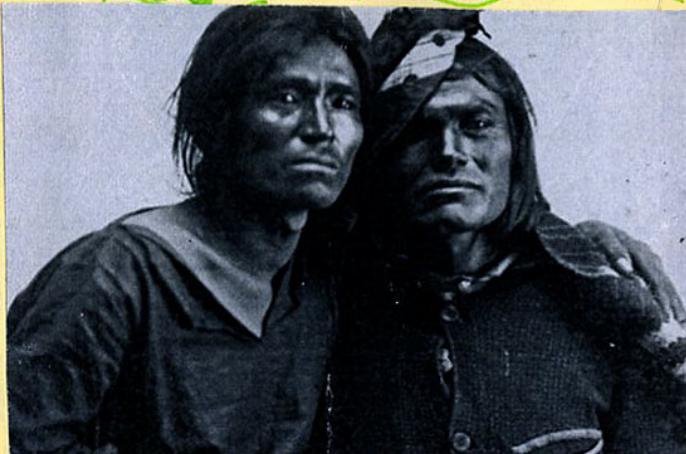
## THE FOUR TENDERS



IN NAVAJO TRADITION

Not all tribes had historically rigid gender roles (the Iroquois being one such example), but some amongst those that did, consider there to be as many (if not more) than four different genders.

Since people who fell into the third or fourth gender categories were neither considered to be men nor women, but their own gender entirely, "they were not bound by the same expectations or responsibilities" and often embodied "a mixture of the social, ceremonial, and economic roles of men and women" (Guilley)



"Long ago in the Navajo world, within the Navajo people, there was a separation of the sexes and there was an argument between the men and women. And then at that time the men went to one side of the river and the women went to the other. And it was the 'had'leeké' (the changing one) - the more effeminate, less masculine men who brought the sexes together. It was because of them our people survived."

In most societies, male-bodied two-spirits did not participate in the masculine prestige system of hunting and warfare honours required of men. Nor did they have to engender the respect of their people through masculine acts of courage or bravery. They gained prestige instead, through fulfilling the obligation - built into their societal role - to their people.



Male-bodied two-spirits were oftentimes domestic craft specialists (particularly Lakota 'Winkte', Navajo 'hadzheehe' and Zuni 'Thamana') whose work also included taking on particular roles in community affairs and traditions (particularly in regard to ceremonies performed regarding menstrual taboo).

## TRIBAL ROLES

If a woman was seen to have a masculine nature, in some tribes she would begin taking on the role of a more masculine identity such as pursuing interests in 'manly activities', such as hunting, building and warfare.

"I perform both roles as male and female. I help in ceremonies where I do more female roles where I help to cook and organise and I also do more male roles where I will chop wood, haul wood and bring in wood. But people see it as that special gift that we're seen to have and it is well accepted."



"In Navajo culture, there is a saying that we don't throw our people away. People who are... were born differently - whether mentally, physically, emotionally... - are considered sacred or holy people. There was a reason the Creator made them different."

The gender different were often seen to be possessed of a special relationship with 'the Creator' and as such were subjects of reverence.

"In our belief systems, a person who has the qualities of both male and female is someone who can transcend the physical and spiritual world, and therefore is a conduit - beyond what most people would call a shaman..."

"To be such a medicine person means that you see more than the ordinary man."

To be two-spirit means you can see further because you can see in both directions and bridge the personal and spiritual gap between the sexes."

The Cheyenne

'hemahéh'

Were said to

have come to the

Creator with a

'neutral heart' and as

such were sought out as

'go-betweens', providing

services in courtship and marriage.

Amongst the Lakota, the

would often aid in the naming of children. Two-spirits were herbalists,

negotiators, healers and caretakers.

By being enabled to fully participate in society,

two-spirits were able to observations and a

more vibrant culture.

"It is because of this symbolic

standing in the middle - in the crossroads of these

two places - that you are in the best position to help people" - Richard LaFortune

## COLONIALISM - HISTORICALLY

When European settlers - as far back as the Spanish conquistadors - arrived in North America and began the process of colonization on the indigenous inhabitants, Native American sexual and gender diversity was amongst colonialism's first and most targeted institutions.

The conquistadors, as the first colonizers would take two-spirit people - who were accepted if not revered in their communities with complete visibility - and thrust them into pits where there were dogs, to be literally torn from limb to limb.

The systematic alienation of Two-Spirits from their identities was only just beginning. Despite being referred to regularly in colonial reports and accounts in records made before 1850, Two-spirit individuals and cultural practices seemed to disappear from the record entirely as the 19th century progressed.



## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Even before the federal government banned all indigenous cultural ceremonies in 1925, and even before the racist and sexist advent of Indian Act was passed in 1876, Two-Spirit identities and traditions were already near eradication.

Although policy and legislation were employed as colonial tools to further prevent the indigenous peoples of North America from practising their cultures and traditions, it was preceded (and subsequently occurred alongside) by conversion and forced assimilation to colonial gender norms by settlers and missionaries.

Through the utilization of inherently violent assimilative measures - such as Balboa's massacre of Two-Spirits in Panama, as depicted on the previous page, as an early example - the traditions of the Two-Spirit in aboriginal societies were hidden, suppressed or stamped out and replaced with the Western gender binary and subsequent spectrum of sexual orientation.

## THE MISSION SCHOOLS

"It is a matter of fact and history that gay marriage and valuing people with different gender identities has been taking place in the Americas long before they were ever glimmers in the eye of Stonewall."<sup>28</sup>

"The concept of the Nadleehé as it was defined within the culture was killed off and the Navajo people [as with many other tribes] didn't carry on their identity from one generation into the next."<sup>29</sup>

"The introduction of Christianity, western education and patriarchy had a massive role in that."

## KILL THE INDIAN, SAVE THE MAN:

After the civil war the American government set up federally run missionary schools in which - by 1920 - 10,000 native children had been placed having been forcibly removed from their families, communities and culture. Forced assimilation was the method of 'saving' and the native school children had their Indianness violently 'rubbed out of them': severing ties to native languages and interrupting the intergenerational transmission of information.

"This one old man told us a story of when they separated the boys and the girls. They stripped all the children down - because they'd always strip your Indian clothes off to put white clothes on you - and so when they stripped all these girls down, they found one girl that had a penis and it really upset the nuns and all that. They just couldn't believe that a Seminole would allow their child to dress like a woman when it was a boy. They forced him to move to the boys' dormitory, forced him to cut his hair, and to dress like a boy. The old man told us that when that man got older he always had problems in life; he was always lost and everyone knew that it was because they had forced him to live as something that he wasn't".



# DOMINATE

Assimilation is a facet of White supremacy, which asserts the superiority of the Western mind and culture by eliminating all that is not White. It is not enough to merely dominate the bodies of the Indians to mould them into a fully malleable piece of colonialised clay. Genocide, brutalization and relocation did little to quash indigenous self-determination and achieve complete domination.

If 'killing the Indian' meant eradicating the culture, the language, the customs and norms from the Indian, and "the only good Indian is a dead one", we are able to see just how devolved not only the Indian body is but also the Indian mind and spirit in the eyes of our postcolonial White supremacist culture of domination. The cultural genocide attempted in the boarding schools, compounded with the use of violence, the demonisation of indigenous beliefs and then appropriation of indigenous culture has caused the subjugation of Native sexuality and gender roles to continue unquestioned in the minds of settler and colonized. The imposed western binary is an active form of institutional violence against Indigenous

# TWO-SPIRIT

## AS RESISTANCE

- Decolonization

Many indigenous communities now assume colonial notions of rigid, binary gender and evangelical

Christian notions of sexuality and gender variance assim.

"There are a lot of reservations that are throwing queers off and won't let them come back. I know people who have been banished from their tribe and declared dead. It is pretty horrifying because we are still going through all the agonies of colonization and the remnants of the colonial mind that has been imposed on us" "to create a counterhegemonic discourse that resists colonialism,

"It has taken a very long time for Native communities to begin to repair that cultural genocide and start to dispel internalised binarism and

(racism by colonizers). Identifying as 'Two-Spirit' becomes not just a 'retrotraditional' way of expressing indigenous beliefs of gender and sexuality, but a political identity in resistance of colonialism and a tool in the decolonisation of the native mind and body. The coinage of the term was never meant to create a monolithic understand-

ing of the array of Native traditions regarding gender and sexuality, rather to create a counterhegemonic discourse that resists colonialism,

- Joey Cridge

# TWO-SPIRIT ≠ GAY

"By definition two-spirit people are not gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender - they're just who they are. Two-spirit is definitely a spiritual designation, and it's our spirituality that identifies us as people."

"TWO-SPIRIT is not simply an indicator of sexual orientation" - it doesn't describe a monolith - it has much specificity and particularity as Cree, Salteaux, Dine, Navajo, Lakota, Zuni et al all do...

"The Western term gay is not what we're about... our traditions are based on the spiritual, and with the word gay on the other hand, in the west means a lot more than that... It isn't based on the spiritual, it's based on the physical. And that is the difference between night and day." The term was selected to reflect indigenous

a relationship/resistance to western gender roles, and queerness." Being indigenous, therefore, and having pre-contact gender traditions in one's culture is an important part of what the two-spirit term was developed for"



Square



Boxes

"I think American society is really caught up in the boxes, in the labelling of who individuals are. And that the allowing of individuals to be who they are is not seen as socially acceptable. That we have to define individuals in square boxes..."



Native



Bisexual

... that is something that has been historically ingrained in Natives and Americans. When we try to take away from that and understand the true Native, we begin to understand that those boxes never existed."

## APPROPRIATIONS

A non aboriginal self-labelling as two-spirit is an example of continuing cultural appropriation by mainstream society. The term two-spirit has specific cultural contexts and removing it from those contexts simply because one likes the meaning of the term - is an act of colonization that further aesthetizes indigenous bodies and cultures. "It must be resisted".



It was a different way of conceptualising gender, so by continuing to impose colonial sexuality conceptions on it, you're continuing to erase native identities.

"It is kind of fucked up. It is the difference between identifying a concept within its culture and trying to pry the concept away from its culture."

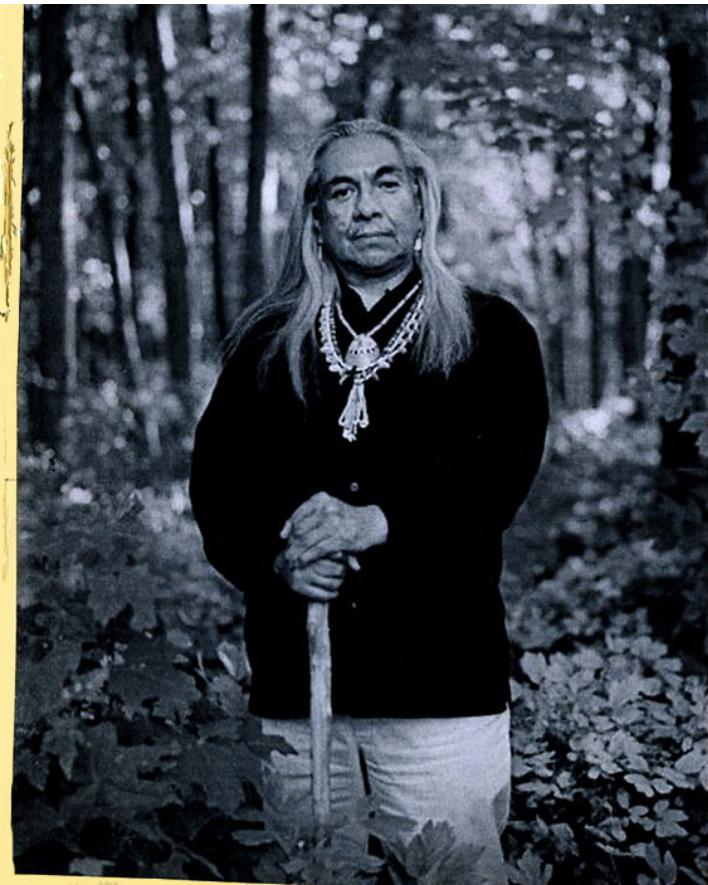
"When non-natives call themselves two-spirit, IT IS APPROPRIATION"

A version of native appropriation that is perhaps less enraging than a non-native person wearing a headdress on Halloween, but nonetheless prevalent in trans ~~and~~<sup>and</sup> LGBT communities, is the white trans/LGBT<sup>x</sup> person who points to and appropriates American Indian cultures as a more accepting space for people with dysphoria/GID, because many of these societies had a 'third gender'.

For many indigenous peoples, this represents a vast misunderstanding of what, exactly, it means, economically, culturally and socially to be a two-spirit. Moreover, such an identification also represents a neo-colonial reduction of Native American nations and their distinct cultural conceptions into one monolith.

"It's very strange to watch the contemporary trans movement attempt to incorporate American Indian cultural conceptions of gender non-conformity, because it is so clearly an attempt to shoehorn people of the past into modern cultural labels."

In almost none of the societies did two-spirit people born male-bodied, identify as 'women'. They tended to identify as a different kind of man, or something between masculine and feminine.



"Before colonisation we existed, we were part of a community, we were part of a society. There was no discrimination against who we were, no misunderstanding of our role in society."