

## Indigenous Ambiguities Podcast

### Episode One: Meanings

NARRATOR: Over the past four months, I have spent most of my free time researching the lives of Indigenous people within a set of borders we collectively call the United States of America. But, as Thomas King has pointed out in *The Truth about Stories* (2008) borders are imaginary, after all, “a figment of someone else’s imagination” (102). Drawn and redrawn over time, borders reflect the desires of those who have power over the desires of those who do not. Their history, like any history, is interesting because of what is left out instead of what is recorded.

Indigenous peoples seem to be in a constant state of rewriting. First there is the contemporary narrative, which places them in such a small minority that they seem almost non-existent. Therefore, every depiction of them is firmly rooted in a past from which no one could possibly still be living. Second, they have to counter those old stories of the frontier. These frontier stories of the Wild West and the Lone Ranger shootouts mix with Columbus and the Conquistador expansionisms which lead to Indigenous peoples becoming a beloved subject for Anthropologists, Sociologists and missionaries determined to document and then destroy these vestiges of “uncivilized” peoples. More on that later. Finally, they must preserve *and* rediscover the stories and histories of their ancestors—even if the last native speakers of their language have died. They are piecing together what has been taken from them, things non-natives like myself take for granted.

In all of this recovery work, there has been a specific group which has been amongst the first to be targeted for erasure. There have been different names for them—Conquistadors called them “Joyas,” anthropologists called them “berdache.” Up until recently, what they called themselves was unknown to the world outside the indigenous community. They call themselves

Two Spirit. This podcast is dedicated to exploring the history, literature and lives of Two Spirit people. Welcome to Episode One of the Indigenous Ambiguities podcast.

[Theme music]

I want to quickly lay down some ground rules before I dive in. First, I am not a native scholar. I want to make this very clear. I am a white male at a Northeastern University in the United States, without any Native ancestry I can lay claim to as far as I know. Where possible, I have used (and cited) the work of Indigenous scholars over non-Indigenous scholarship. This is out of respect for the communities we will be talking about. Also, even though this podcast will run several episodes and try to include as much as possible about Two-Spirit and Queer Indigenous identity, it will not even attempt to be the last word on the subject. How could it be? This isn't some static story. This is something that people are living all around us. One of the reasons it's so difficult to be comprehensive is because there is no endpoint for this kind of research.

Episode One: Meanings.

If we're going to have an entire podcast focused around Two Spirit, we should probably get defining it, shouldn't we?

Some context: Two Spirit arrived as a replacement of anthropological terms which were derived from pejorative slang. Two Spirit is a label which Indigenous queer people created to describe themselves. There is a realization that Two Spirit people are often "othered" in the same way that non-Indigenous Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ+) people are "othered." In or out of Indigenous communities, LGBTQ+ is a concept which often brings about marginalization and alienation. Some groups can be "othered" for multiple reasons—a black

woman can be othered because she is black and female, or a man who uses a wheelchair can be othered because he is both Hispanic and needs the use of a wheelchair in a society where most people do not. The realization of how these different experiences connect and influence each other is called Intersectionality. Two Spirit rests at the intersection of queerness and Indigenous identity.

The term Two Spirit originated at the 1990 Gay and Lesbian Native American Conference in Winnipeg. The Early 1990s were both an exciting and nerve-wracking time for LGBTQ+ people. On the one hand, media depictions of LGBTQ+ characters were becoming more positive, and transgender activists like the late Leslie Feinberg were reaching back into the history books to show that LGBTQ+ people (especially transgender and gender nonconforming people) were always a part of the historical record, even if the terms to describe them that we use today were not around yet. On the other hand, communities everywhere were still being ravaged by the damage done from AIDS, and random acts of violence were much more frequent than they are now. One of the agendas in the 1990 Gay and Lesbian Native American Conference was an attempt to come together under a term which would allow for nontraditional gender identities and sexualities to be expressed within an Indigenous context—outside of the poisons of colonialism and occupying forces.

Let me back up a minute to explain why this was so important. When explorers came to the land we now call North America, they found many tribes of Indigenous people. Every tribe was different, and every tribe had its own customs and religious practices. This may seem obvious, but for a long time scholars tended to lump all of these so-called Indians (so named after Columbus' mistake) together under a single identity, as though they were all one thing, so it bears pointing out. In some tribes, the explorers noticed people who dressed in a way which they

considered odd. A few people who otherwise appeared to be male-bodied would dress like women and behave like and fulfill a woman's role in the tribe. A few other people (though not many) wore men's clothing and fulfilled men's roles, even though they appeared to have female anatomies. This behavior confused and troubled the explorers, who were not particularly open-minded to these sorts of things. These were some of the people we used to call the berdache.

For most of history, western societies have been riddled with misogyny and sexism. This, in conjunction with papal orders that allowed them to claim any land where the people were not Christians in the name of the church, poisoned the interaction between the Indigenous people and the Westerners before they had a chance. As Peter D'Errico wrote in "American Indian Sovereignty: Now You See it, Now You Don't," "The underlying assumption was that there is only one reality, and it is Western" (252). As a result, the blurring of gender lines by Indigenous peoples was too much for the colonizers to handle. The colonizers responded to these people with mockery, referring to them as berdache.

In the "Introduction" to *Two-Spirit Peoples* by Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, the three authors deconstruct the negative history of "berdache," which show that the term has meant "kept boy," "male prostitute," "the passive homosexual partner" and "boy kept for unnatural purposes" (4). In other words, to use the term berdache is to suggest something seedy and inappropriate is going on here.

There were times in which gender and sexual variance were respected as just another aspect of life. The novelist Leslie Marmon Silko wrote about the shifting nature of gender identity in her collection *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit* (1996). This is a short excerpt:

“When I was growing up, there was a young man who wore nail polish and women’s blouses and permed his hair. People paid little attention to his appearance; he was always part of a group of other young men from his village. No one ever made fun of him. Pueblo communities were and still are very interdependent, but they also have to be tolerant of individual eccentricities because survival of the group means everyone has to cooperate.

In the old Pueblo world, differences were celebrated as signs of the Mother Creator’s grace. Persons born with exceptional physical or sexual differences were highly respected and honored because their physical differences gave them special positions as mediators between this world and the spirit world. The great Navajo medicine man of the 1920s, the Crawler, had a hunchback and could not walk upright, but he was able to heal even the most difficult cases.

Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, a man could dress as a woman and work with the women and even marry a man without any fanfare. Likewise, a woman was free to dress like a man, to hunt and go to war with the men, and to marry a woman. In the old Pueblo worldview we are all a mixture of male and female, and this sexual identity is changing constantly.” (66)

I know what you’re thinking—all of this background and context is great, but what does Two Spirit mean?

Two Spirit is a gender identity, a sexual identity, a synthesis of the two, a way of existing outside of western concepts like “gender” or “sexuality altogether. Here is a clip of Two Spirit

scholar, Qwo-Li Driskill, describing Two Spirit identity in an audio essay recorded as part of the *Beyond Masculinity* project, “Shaking our Shells: Cherokee Two Spirits Rebalancing the World”

DRISKILL:

Two-Spirit liberation is part of a larger process of decolonization. Many of the current conversations and activism in both radical Queer and Trans communities as well as mainstream GLBT movements tend to ignore the colonial realities and contexts that are the center of struggles for Two-Spirit people. As Native feminists such as Beth Brant, Chrystos, and Andrea Smith have pointed out, current systems of gender oppression and homophobia in the Americas are part of ongoing colonization and genocide against Native people. Non-Native Queer movements often place sexuality and gender as oppositional to heteronormative practices, and with good reason. While similar politics certainly come into play in Two-Spirit movements, the more central argument that we are making is that our lives and identities—including, but not limited to issues of sexuality and gender—are integral to Indigenous struggles for decolonization, self-determination, and cultural continuance.

[...]

As a male-embodied Two-Spirit, part of my work is to move back and forth between different gendered spaces, taking information about those experiences with me and sharing them with others. People see me as countless genders including a Queer man, as a Gay guy who wears skirts, a Queer woman, a straight woman, a drag queen, a Trans woman, a Trans man, a transvestite, a cross-dresser, an androgynous person, and a straight man. Moving through these spaces has taught me that most of these are deadly

dangerous. One of the gifts of experiencing gender from multiple angles is gaining knowledge to work against sexism and gender regimes in all of our communities. Transforming this knowledge into radical, non-violent action against sexism and transphobia is a Friendship Dance that helps restore *duyuktv* to gender systems. (Driskill)

NARRATOR: Qwo-Li Driskill is, by the way, one of the founding thinkers of the Indigenous Queer studies movement whose work is utterly astounding, moving and mind-opening on so many levels that I cannot even begin to explain it. We'll be building off of some of these remarks and Driskill's work more generally in our next episode.

I want to end by reading a poem by an Indigenous writer, called "Something Wants to be Said." This poem was collected in the anthology *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, and Lisa Tatonetti (2011). This poem is called "Something Wants to be Said" by William Raymond Taylor, a descendant of the Osage Nation:

"Duane, how are you? I owe you a letter, my favorite cynic, a cynic  
 Who played hopeful for me, your young lover, wary of scaring me off  
 With the bitterness that edged your heart. The white world was your enemy  
 Has that changed? You said a lot of people in Oklahoma look like me,  
 It was reassuring. I owe you a letter, I owe you an explanation  
 Why I turned away when the pleasure in my body mirrored yours and your words  
 Rang with integrity. How I loved your mind! Yet when we sat down  
 To that salmon dinner, my voice froze in my chest—a mystery. You did not know  
 Or understand why I turned cold, and I could not explain. Perhaps

It was your insistent suggestion of penetrating me, perhaps  
It was the appetite of your smile. Something touched the permanent shadows  
Of the sexual assault I endured as a child, making me  
Unable to open my vulnerability to you. I hesitate even now to risk my heart,  
Broken so many times. *Something wants to be said*, you spoke through the receiver  
Of my telephone, two weeks later, but nothing would come.  
I owe you a letter, but there's too much I cannot say. (83)

[Closing Theme]

Credits: The Indigenous Ambiguities Podcast is written, narrated and edited by James Carraghan. Music is by Rx Huxley. I want to take a quick moment to acknowledge and thank the following people for their support in taking on this project and for the inspiration their work has given me during this time: Curtis, A. Moss, Liz, Joshua, Judy, Colgan, Jody, Jacob “the Schwoosie,” Dr. Amanda Morris and Dr. John Ronan for their support this semester, and my comrades in Indigenous Rhetorics. On an academic front, I would like to thank, remember, and highly suggest you check out Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Andrea Smith, L. Frank, Vine Deloria, Charlie Hill, John Turdell, Leslie Feinberg, Leslie Marmon Silko, Vaughn Eagle Bear, Gerald Viznar and Lisa Tatonetti. Join us next time for Episode 2.



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