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Research

Of Two-Spirit and Indigenous Queerness: Indigenous Queerness Today

by Nicolas Côté-Saucier

Abstract: This article examines Indigenous queerness by moving beyond the literal definition of "two-spirit" to explore the diversity and commonalities of Indigenous queer identities. Through detailed analysis of three distinct examples—the Diné/Navajo *Nádleehi*, the Shoshone *Tainna wa'ippe*, and the Inuit *Sipiniq*—this article demonstrates the vast differences in Indigenous gender systems while identifying four unifying characteristics: spirituality, fluid notions of gender/sexuality, connections to tradition, and a state of "in-betweenness." This article concludes by examining contemporary indigiqueer realities, highlighting ongoing challenges such as historical disconnection, community homophobia, racism in queer spaces, and lack of intersectional approaches, while acknowledging positive social changes and increasing representation in mainstream media.

Keywords: colonialism; Indigenous queerness; indigiqueer; intersectionality; sexuality and gender diversity; two-spirit

Résumé : Cet article examine l'altersexualité autochtone (Indigenous queerness) en allant au-delà de la définition littérale de « bispiritualité/Two-Spirit » pour explorer la diversité et les points communs des identités altersexuelles autochtones. À travers une analyse détaillée de trois exemples distincts - les Nádleehi Diné/Navajo, les Tainna wa'ippe Shoshone et les Sipiniit Inuits - cet article démontre les vastes différences dans les systèmes de genre autochtones tout en identifiant quatre caractéristiques unificatrices : la spiritualité, la fluidité de genre/sexualité, le rapport à la tradition et l'état d'« entre-deux » (in-betweenness). Cet article conclut en examinant les réalités indigiqueers contemporaines, en soulignant les défis persistants tels que la déconnexion historique, l'homophobie dans les communautés, le racisme dans les espaces queers et le manque d'approches intersectionnelles, tout en reconnaissant les changements sociaux positifs et l'augmentation de la représentation dans les médias populaires.

Mots clés : colonialisme; altersexualité autochtone; indigiqueer; intersectionnalité; diversité de sexualité et pluralité de genre; bispiritualité

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Many academic works explain the origin of the concept of *two-spirit* as well as define it in different—sometimes contradicting—ways (Adams and Phillips 2006; Anguksuar 1997; Brown 1997; Driskill 2010; 2016; Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen 2011; Driskill, Justice, Miranda, and Tatonnetti 2011; Gilley 2006; Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997; Justice, Rifkin, and Schneider 2010; Meyer-Cook and Labelle 2004; Morgensen 2011; Roscoe 1998; Walters et al. 2006; Wilson 2011). The term is also critiqued for imposing foreign cultural concepts, erasing the diversity of Indigenous forms of queerness, evicting sexuality and/or presenting a "noble magical savage" im-

age (Driskill 2010; 2016; Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen 2011; Driskill, Justice, Miranda, and Tatonnetti 2011; Gilley 2006; Justice, Rifkin, and Schneider 2010; Laing 2021; Lépine-Dubois 2018; Meyer-Cook and Labelle 2004; Roscoe 1998). For these reasons, the term two-spirit is increasingly rejected especially among activist groups and, in recent years, a new word—*indigiqueer* (sometimes spelled *indigequeer*)—has emerged and has become increasingly popular.

In this present article, I take the critiques of the two-spirit concept and look into Indigenous queerness and indigiqueer identities. Bridging older and more recent literature, I will focus on Indigenous queerness today, on the diversity of identities, roles, and models it can take, as well as the similitudes. This is important because, working on Indigenous queerness with indigiqueer individuals, (non-Indigenous) queer organizations, and academic researchers over the past decade, I have noticed a recurring confusion when it comes to the subject of defining Indigenous queerness. This confusion comes from a decontextualized use of the literature, with people sometimes disregarding the age of the accounts (using decades-old accounts as if they portrayed today's realities), sometimes focusing on a problem rather than on the general lived experience (thus magnifying the importance of the problem), and, especially, often treating Indigenous Nations as one homogenous cultural group and consequently treating "two-spirit" as one homogenous queer category/reality.

Therefore, the objective of this article is to explore and contextualize the recent literature on Indigenous queerness to paint a portrait of current indigiqueer realities. This objective is three-fold: 1) presenting how the "two-spirit" label groups very different realities under its umbrella that should not be lumped together; 2) presenting how, beyond their diversity, the many queer Indigenous identities, roles, models, and traditions still have four main characteristics in common (queerness, indigeneity, spirituality, and in-betweenness); and 3) presenting a few common elements that emerge from the more recent literature as shaping the current indigiqueer experience (disconnect to the past, homophobia, racism, the lack of intersectionality, dire vulnerability, and social change). This three-fold objective of presenting Indigenous queerness today translates into three sections.

First, I will present three very different examples to show the immense diversity amongst Indigenous cultures: the Nadleehé of the Diné/Navajo, the Tainna wa'ippe of the Shoshone, and the Sipiniq/Sipiniit of the Inuit. These examples show how the roles and models create very different experiences and identities although they are often—wrongfully—seen as "the same thing" by most researchers and policy makers.

Once the diversity is acknowledged, clarified, and exemplified, I will enter the second section of this article in which, using the same three examples, I focus on the similarities of experience and identification of indigiqueer individuals. I will draw out the main characteristics that are at the core of all or most indigenously queer roles, models, and identities as presented in the literature.

This article culminates in a presentation of the current realities and, especially, struggles experienced by indigiqueer individuals today as recurrently expressed in the literature and observed in the fieldwork of my own research on the experience of queer Indigenous individuals in Québec.

Three Very Different Examples

One recurrent critique of the term *two-spirit* is the way it reduces a very large diversity of roles, models, and lived experiences to one limited concept, thus erasing difference (Driskill 2010; 2016; Gilley 2006; Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997; Meyer-Cook and Labelle 2004; Roscoe 1998). In his book *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*, Roscoe (1998) documented over 155 tribes in North America that have more than two genders.

To present the diversity of the different sexuality and gender roles and models under the two-spirit umbrella, I will explore three examples of sexuality and gender norms in three different Indigenous cultures of North America. These are not meant to be complete and exhaustive presentations of Indigenous gender systems but overviews to help un-

derstand the full complexity of Indigenous queerness. The following examples are among the most documented and still represent a living cultural practice in their respective cultures (although the practices may have changed to reflect current realities).

Example #1 : Nádleeh (Diné/Navajo[1])

The first example is from the Diné Nation (formerly known as Navajo) which is situated at the border of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah, and for which the gender system is well documented. The presentation of this example is based on the works of Roscoe (1998), Lang (1997), Epple (1997) and, foremost, the works of Jennifer Nez Denetdale (2006; 2009; 2020), Carrie House (1997), and Wesley Thomas (1997), who are themselves Diné/Navajo.

Thomas explains that Diné culture had a sex-based gender system with five genders although Roscoe (1998) saw only three, since three of these genders bear the same title. "Sex-based" here means that biological sex is the primary marker for assigning gender roles. There is (1) the feminine female gender called '*asdzáán*, which is translated as "woman" and (2) the masculine male gender called *hastiin*, which can be translated as "man." Then there are three genders called *nádleeh* (also spelled *nadle* and *nadleehi*) which means "person who changes." The (3) masculine-female *nádleeh* is female-bodied and has a masculine social role with a masculine gender expression; (4) the feminine-male *nádleeh* is male-bodied and has feminine social role with a feminine gender expression and (5) the intersex *nádleeh* is born with a physical configuration that is not clearly one sex or another and can have any gender role.

This sex-based system is similar to the western one where *'asdzáán* and feminine-male *nádleeh*, the western equivalent of trans-women, follow feminine gender norms wearing feminine clothing and having associated occupations like gathering and weaving, while *hastiin* and masculine-female *nádleeh* (trans-men) follow masculine gender roles, wearing masculine clothing and working masculine occupations like hunting. One can see the word *nádleeh* as similar to "trans" in western cultures. Epple cites a *nádleeh* informant who sees herself as "a complete woman, just without a vagina" (Epple 1997, 181). But another *nádleeh* informant refers to themself as a "queen" but not a "woman," rather a man attracted to men with a "womanly" occupation (Epplie 1997, 181). Epple confirms that "drag queens" are *nádleeh,* no matter how they live their lives off the stage.

Except for the intersex *nádleeh,* no one is born *nádleeh;* everyone is assigned a sex-concordant gender. When a child grows older, if they develop interest in occupations and behaviour associated with the other gender, they become *nádleeh*. This can also come later in life. Epple (1997) gives the example of an informant who became *nádleeh* after the death of their mother to take on the role of mother for their young siblings.

This gender system also has a spiritual aspect to it, although minor. A *nádleeh* plays a big part of the Diné origin story and, therefore, they are seen as important and spiritual. Children or teenagers who are identified as *nádleeh* will often be steered towards spiritual, leadership, or mediation adult roles. Roscoe (1998) quotes a recorded comment from the 1930s stating, "They are leaders just like President Roosevelt. […] We must respect a *nadle*. They are, somehow, sacred and holy" (Roscoe 1998, 43 quoting Hill 1935, 274).

One interesting point is how the Diné conceived of homosexuality and relationships with five genders. While gender was sex-based, norms regarding sexuality and relationships were gender-based. Homosexuality was therefore seen as "inconceivable"(Roscoe 1998, 162) but defined as a relationship of two persons of the same gender, not the same sex, as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Diné Sexual Relationships and Classifications I: Traditional and Transitional as found in Thomas 1997, 162 (colour-coding added)

Gender categories	Feminine female	Masculine male	**Masculine female (*nádleehi*)**	**Feminine male (*nádleehi*)**
Feminine female	inconceivable	heterosexual	heterosexual	relationship rare
Masculine male	heterosexual	inconceivable	relationship rare	heterosexual
Masculine female (*nádleehi*)	heterosexual	relationship rare	inconceivable	relationship rare
Feminine male (*nádleehi*)	relationship rare	heterosexual	relationship rare	inconceivable

Thomas (1997) explains that this conceptualization no longer existed at the time of his study but more recent works like Denetdale (2006; 2009; 2020) and Estrada (2011) show that the term *nádleehi* is still used and the Diné's conceptualization and classification of gender and sexuality has merely changed yet remained mostly the same. With western colonial influence and the impacts of HIV in the Diné communities, the relationship norms and classifications shifted to a more sex-based and binary classification. With this shift, any relationship between two individuals of the same sex, no matter their gender, is now considered homosexual, while any relationship between two individuals of the same sex, no matter their gender, is considered heterosexual. Thomas (1997) also notes that the intersex *nádleeh* has virtually disappeared from the contemporary gender system as intersex babies are now generally and automatically assigned a binary sex through surgery. Much in the same way as it was then, the term *nádleehi* is now used for gender non-conforming individuals which includes effeminate men, "half woman half man" (Estrada 2011, 169) non-binary gender identities, trans-gendered individuals and drag queens (Denetdale 2020; Estrada 2011).

Another way the Diné gender system has changed is in the inclusion of bisexuality. Interestingly, in the Diné gender system, there is no prescriptive sexual behaviour: nothing says that a masculine male has to be the penetrator (the "top") and that being penetrated is a feminine behaviour. Consequently, although homosexual relationships were "inconceivable" as romantic unions, homosexual intercourses were seen as inappropriate at worst; they were "permitted although rare" (Thomas 1997, 167). This might explain the absence of pre-colonial formal models of bisexuality. However, as Thomas notes, bisexuality is now "practiced among contemporary [Diné/]Navajo males and females" (Thomas 1997, 167) and it is part of today's relationship norms and classifications. Therefore, the lack of pre-colonial documentation is of little importance.

Example #2 : Tainna wa'ippe (Shoshone)

The second example I will explore is the Shoshone three-genders system. The Shoshone are situated in the Plateau region in the North West of the United States, geographically close to the Diné and yet culturally very different. The presentation of this example is based on Lang's works (1997; 2016).

The Shoshone have three genders: a masculine gender called *tainna* which translates to "man," a feminine gender called *wa'ippe* which translates to "woman," and a third gender called *tainna wa'ippe* which translates literally to "man woman." This third gender is seen as both a man and a woman, masculine and feminine.

In Shoshone society, gender has a strong spiritual aspect which takes form as visionary experiences. *Tainna wa'ippe* experience a powerful vision about their identity, their role in the community, and their gender: "The vision causes them to adopt the ways and clothing of the other sex […]" (Lang 1997, 106). No matter their sex, *tainna wa'ippe* have their own gender norms which blend the two others. They are seen as born with the gift of being medicine people and will often have elevated status and social roles linked to healing, leadership, and war.

There is also no sexual prohibition regarding homosexuality. *Tainna wa'ippe* are not seen as "gay" or "lesbian" since they engage sexually and romantically with the two other genders. However, *tainna wa'ippe* cannot have a sexual or romantic relationship with another *tainna wa'ippe* not because it would be homosexual but because it would be incest: All *tainna wa'ippe* are seen as spiritual sisters. Homosexual relationships among *tainna* (men) or among *wa'ippe* (women) are permitted but are seen as "gay" and "lesbian" relationships not as *tainna wa'ippe* because of the absence of spiritual calling: "A gay person, as opposed to a *tainna wa'ippe*, is defined as lacking the spiritual element, acting on personal preference instead of a manifesting spiritual power" (Lang 1997, 106).

While occupation was central in the Diné gender system, for the Shoshone it is the spiritual aspect that is central. Biological sex is inconsequential and the gender expression of *tainna wa'ippe* is not a full or partial switch of gender norms as it is for the *nádleeh*, but rather a mix closer to western non-binary or gender-queer gender models along with a strong spiritual aspect.

Example #3 : Sipiniq (Inuit)

Before we get comfortable with a premature idea of Indigenous queerness, let us look at a third example which differs radically from the two discussed above and has no western cultural translation. The third example comes from Inuit cultures of the Arctic Circle in the north of Québec, Canada's northern territories, Alaska, and Siberia as researched by Bernard Saladin d'Anglure since 1960 (Saladin d'Anglure 2006, 6). For this example, I will concentrate on his more recent book *Inuit Stories of Being and Rebirth: Gender, Shamanism, and the Third Sex* (2018). In this book, Saladin d'Anglure revisits, summarizes, and updates his life's work. I will also use Lang's (2016) summary of other works on the topic.

In Inuit culture, there are, technically, only two genders, masculine male (man) and feminine female (woman). And yet there are individuals called *sipiniq* (plural: *sipiniit*). *Sipiniq* means "an infant whose sex changed at birth" (literally "split infant" from the verb sipi (to split) for the fetus' penis that "split" to become a vulva). When a baby is born, one of the two genders is attributed to the newborn, not based on genitalia and physical configuration but based on spiritual (reincarnation) and practical reasons (necessity). One can also become *sipiniq* through shamanic transformation.

Reincarnation is very important in Inuit culture and a newborn is seen as a reincarnation of a deathly ill or deceased family member. If the newborn is of the opposite sex from this person, there is "sipiniuniq (change of sex): a fetus or baby can choose a sex other than the one of the person it is reincarnating" (Saladin d'Anglure 2018, 174). This change happens in the womb or at birth. For example, a grandmother may have died very recently while expressing the wish to be reincarnated as a human baby. Days/weeks/months later, a grand-daughter may be giving birth. The baby would be seen as the reincarnation of grandmother regardless of the sex and would bear the name of the grandmother (and of all the previous incarnations) in addition to their own; her parents would call her "grandmother." The person being reincarnated can even express the wish to be reborn in the opposite gender. Saladin d'Anglure gives the example of *Iqallijuq:*

> I was a *sipiniq* because *Savviurtalik* [her grand-father of whom she is the reincarnation] had wanted to live again as a woman and not as a man. He no longer wanted to hunt because hunting took too much effort and for him meant a high risk of getting cold. So, I had become a girl after changing sex at birth. I previously had a penis but then got a vulva; this is how it is with sipiniit. (Saladin d'Anglure 2018, 174)

Sipiniit babies are raised as the gender of their previous incarnation until they reach puberty, at which point they can choose to remain as the gender which they were raised or be reassigned as the opposite gender. From that moment on they will follow their new gender's norms but they will still be considered *sipiniit*.

A more practical reason not to assign gender based on the sex of the infant is when there are not enough people of a given gender in the village to allow for the reproduction of the labour assigned to that gender (for example: not enough men to have a full hunting party). As Lang (2016) explains:

> If there were not enough boys in a community or family, some fathers would teach their daughters hunting skills and raise them to fulfill a hunter's role. Among some Inuit groups, for example, such girls learned to hunt seals from a kayak, acquired a quasi-masculine status, and wore men's garb. […] While the "man-woman" featured in [Saladin] d'Anglure's 1992 article bore no less than six reincarnation-related masculine names, he/she was raised to fulfill a man's role due to a lack of boys; his/her father decided that he "needed a helper to support him in hunting." (Lang 2016, 306)

Like the reincarnation-based *sipiniit*, once the child reaches puberty, they could choose to remain of their labour-assigned gender or be reassigned the gender corresponding to their sex. From that moment on they would follow the chosen gender's norms. However, Saladin d'Anglure explains in recent works (2018) that the assignation of gender for labour needs is no longer practiced.

Non-*sipiniq*—meaning individuals whose gender "matches" their gender assigned at birth—cannot normally change gender once they reach puberty; it only happens in the womb or at birth. But there is an exception to this rule. A person, usually a child, could have their gender changed after birth through a shamanistic transformation: "A shaman could also authorize a gender change to heal a seriously ill child. The child would receive a new name and identity from someone of the opposite sex or even from one of the shaman's helping spirits to prevent evil spirits from recognizing the child" (Saladin d'Anglure 2018, 222). The child will then be considered *sipiniq.* They will be dressed according to norms of the new gender, their hair will be cut or left to grow, their name will be changed to a new one, and they will be encouraged to engage in activities of their new gender, including adopting boyish/girlish behaviour and associating with other children of their new gender.

Sipiniit often have roles of mediation and spiritual or political leadership and have specific roles in certain ceremonies. This is not necessarily because of a "spiritual power," as with the *tainna wa'ippe,* but because their unique life experience puts them in an ideal situation to understand both man and woman, act as mediators, or make decisions understanding all aspects of a society in which everything is divided in two genders. *Sipiniit* are not automatically shamans, and shamans can be of any gender (*sipiniit* or not). But there is certainly a spiritual aspect to being *sipiniq*.

As for sexuality in Inuit culture, it is strongly heteronormative—meaning heterosexuality is enforced and homosexuality is forbidden: "Homosexuality, for example, was severely disapproved of even though the transgender shamans who sometimes practiced homosexuality were thought to be the most powerful" (Saladin d'Anglure 2018, 221). Homosexuality is allowed only if one of the partners is *sipiniq* (of the same sex). S*ipiniit* who have changed gender at puberty are even seen as better partners than non- *sipiniit* because they understand the burden of the gender norms of their partner. Two *sipiniit* together as a couple is considered the best pairing and communities will often try to pair *sipiniit* together.

So, the "Inuit two-spirit" is not a gender role in the classic sense since it conforms to binary man or woman gender roles in their society. It is not really a "third gender" since *sipiniit* do not have a specific gender role and are never both at the same time. Yet, it is clearly a form of gender queerness that does not fit western heteronormative and heteropatriarchal models. It does not fit even the non-heteronormative western models, which allow for a certain fluidity.

These are merely three examples showing the vast diversity of Indigenous queerness. These are *not* three main categories of gender systems among Indigenous societies in North America but three cases within a plethora. Many past and

present gender systems and gender roles and models are understudied, some even lost, but more are being documented in the present, not just as pre-colonial systems. Readers are invited to explore how these examples of Indigenous queerness have changed and how they are lived today. I used these three examples but could also have drawn examples from the Zuni *lhamana* (Roscoe 1992), the Lakota *winkte* and Dakota *winkte* (which integrated very differently in their communities) (Cooper 2018; Little Thunder 1997), and the Cherokee Asegi *udanto* (Driskill 2016) among others.

Main Characteristics of Indigenous Queerness

The three examples presented above show how diverse Indigenous forms of queerness can be but, beyond their differences, key elements unite them and allow us to delineate what Indigenous queerness is and is not. In this section, I will focus on these similarities using the three examples presented above to illustrate how these common characteristics are expressed in various ways. Of course, indigeneity and queerness are two fundamental elements of these three examples but other recurring elements arose from the literature as a "core" or "essence" of Indigenous queerness. I grouped these elements into four main characteristics: (1) spirituality, (2) gender over sexuality, (3) relation to tradition, and (4) in-betweenness. I decided to focus on characteristics that differentiate Indigenous queerness from non-Indigenous queerness.

Spirituality

Spirituality is central to the concept of "two-spirit" (Anguksuar 1997, 2010; Driskill 2010, 2016; Lang 1997; 2016). As explained above, this focus on spirituality was an important strategic tactic to help the acceptance of queer individuals in otherwise homophobic and conservative communities. However, this tactic did not invent or fabricate the importance of spirituality, rather it magnified a significance that was already there.

Almost all Indigenous alternative gender (meaning other than the man/woman binary) and sexuality (meaning other than heterosexuality) identities have a spiritual component. This spiritual aspect is not always central or important but is still present. As we have seen with the three very different examples presented previously, spirituality is central in the Shoshone three-gender system and the Inuit *sipiniq* while being a minor aspect of the Diné five-genders system. Throughout the literature, spirituality is often presented as the source of the distinction between gay, lesbian, and transgender identities and the two-spirit identity: "Two-Spirit and gay clashes. Gay is flesh-centered; Two-Spirit is spirit-oriented" (Lépine-Dubois 2018 57). As in the example of the Shoshone gender system, queer individuals who are not *tainna wa'ippe,* like cis-gendered gay men (*tainna*) and cis-gendered lesbian women (*wa'ippe*), lack the spiritual calling of the *tainna wa'ippe*. This begs the question of whether these queer Indigenous individuals, the gay *tainna* and the lesbian *wa'ippe,* are considered two-spirit or whether only the *tainna wa'ippe* identify as two-spirit—a question that is unfortunately not answered in the literature. Nevertheless, spirituality affects all Shoshone genders and the fact that the gay *tainna* and the lesbian *wa'ippe* identities are defined in relation to spirituality (as lacking or rejecting it) shows that spirituality is still important. One common symbol of spirituality is the feather which, in many Indigenous cultures, at least in the northeast of North America, is associated with spirituality. This is why one can often see feathers in "two-spirit" imagery. It is a subtle yet ever-present symbol.

The importance of spirituality is emphasized in the literature to the point of incurring counter-discourse. As with the gay *tainna* and the lesbian *wa'ippe* Shoshones, queer Indigenous individuals who prefer to use labels like "gay," "lesbian," "trans," and "non-binary" sometimes reject cultural-specific terms and labels or the two-spirit label because of the pressure of spirituality. As Meyer-Cook and Labelle (2004) explain, most Indigenous people have converted, often by force, to a form of Christianity and live with a legacy of multi-generational trauma relating to religion and spirituality. Their traditional spiritual language is not something that is accessible everywhere and for everyone but many still express aspects of spirituality in other terms.

The main way queer Indigenous identities, roles, and models are associated with spirituality without using the spirituality language is through the caregiving/caretaking language: "Caregiving is perceived as an important and integral

role of two-spirit people, and it is clear that many two-spirit people already engage in caregiving or expect to provide care for others at some point during their lifetime" (Evans-Campbell et al. 2007, 88). Meyer-Cook and Labelle use similar language stating, "Many people who are Two-Spirited are active in their communities today, and are using the gifts they have been given. […] They use their gifts in the service of community […]" (Meyer-Cook and Labelle 2004, 36). For Driskill (2010; 2016) and many others, it is clear that caretaking/caregiving is part of the spiritual medicine role of queer Indigenous individuals: "Two-Spirit asserts ceremonial and spiritual communities and traditions and relationships with medicine as central in constituting various identities, marking itself as distinct from dominant constructions of GLBTQ identities" (Driskill 2010, 73).

Gender and/or Sexuality

The distinction between gender conceptualization and sexuality conceptualization in the many forms, roles, models, and identities under the "two-spirit" umbrella is quite complex and convoluted. One cause is that, for over a century, anthropologists did not differentiate between gender pluralism and sexuality diversity (Jacob, Thomas, and Lang 1997; Roscoe 1998; Saladin d'Anglure 2006, 2018). For example, the Inuit *sipiniit* were thought to be homosexuals: "Cross-dressed individuals were long believed to be homosexual, but only a tiny minority actually were. In fact, they should be viewed through the lens of gender rather than sexual orientation" (Saladin d'Anglure 2016, 221). Although this has changed in the light of Queer Studies, the umbrella "two-spirit" still mixes every form of queerness almost indifferently: "The term Two-Spirit is presently used to describe Aboriginal people with different roles or identities, including gays, lesbians, other genders (not-men, not-women), those of multiple genders (hermaphrodites and bisexuals), transvestites, transexuals, transgendered people, drag queens and butches" (Meyer-cook and Labelle 2004, 30).

Gender and sexuality, previously undifferentiated, became separate in the literature after the 1990s. In an attempt to differentiate, the literature split into two sides: the spirit and the flesh. That is, there are those who place "emphasis on gender as constitutive or two-spirit identity (in opposition to any notion of a sexual minority identity)" (Hames-Garcia 2013, 393) and those on the other side who embrace "sexuality and desire as central to the project of queer indigenous studies" (Hames-Garcia 2013, 393). Since the 1990s, the literature on "two-spirit" as a gender concept has become more prevalent in academia thus downplaying sexuality. This conscious focus on gender aimed to distance the "two-spirit" label from sexuality amidst the HIV crisis and aligned with queer portrayals in the media in the 1990s and 2000s as non-sexual, "inoffensive" funny gay best friends (Hames-Garcia 2013; Rothmann 2013).

A new wave of literature emerged just before the 2010s (Brown 2014; Driskill, Finley, Gilley and Morgensen, 2011; Driskill, Justice, Miranda and Tatonnetti, 2011; Justice, Rifkin, and Schneider 2010; Morgensen 2011; Wilson 2011). This wave addressed sexuality *and* gender. This shift recognized that downplaying sexuality misrepresented reality and painted a false image of the two-spirit lived experience, even causing erasure: "Many Indigenous GLBTQ2 people testify to the erotic being central to their definition and experiences of Two-Spirit identity, community, and spirituality" (Driskill, Finley, Gilley and Morgensen 2011, 16). This division of gender and sexuality was helpful to break from hetero-patriarchal practices that plagued the "berdache studies," but did not represent Indigenous worldviews in which spirituality, gender, and sexuality are integral aspects of being in the world (Cooper 2013).

This shift is political and ideological. By bringing sexuality back into focus, Two-Spirit Studies connects with Queer Studies and its critiques of (hetero)patriarchy, modernity, and colonialism to create the Queer Indigenous Studies. It connects to queer activism and queer struggles. In *Sovereign Erotics*, Driskill, Justice, Miranda and Tatonetti use the concept of the "erotic" as a way to connect sexuality, spirituality, and decolonialism: "The erotic, then, is not only about sexuality—though it is certainly about that—but also […] a return to our bodies as whole human beings [which] can disrupt colonial gender regime that have attempted to disavow and colonize indigenous genders and sexualities" (Driskill, Justice, Miranda and Tatonetti 2011, 3). Through this concept, they recognize that the control of Indigenous sexualities and genders "is a central tactic of colonial oppression" (Driskill, Justice, Miranda and Tatonetti 2011, 3-4) and resistance to colonialism, past and present, must include sexuality and gender.

Because of these shifts in the literature, any study on Indigenous queerness must pay attention to the context of each publication. What seem like contradictions on the importance of sexuality are most likely a result of emphasis on gender, and a resultant downplaying of sexuality, caused by political climates and ideologies.

Relation to Tradition

A recurrent element that often arises in the literature is how queer Indigenous individuals relate to tradition differently than non-Indigenous queer individuals. As Driskill explains:

> While radical white-dominated queer movements often attempt to reject religion because of institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism or—on the other hand—create spiritual movements and communities that often appropriate Native practices, Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people insist that we already have a place within traditional religious and spiritual life. It is this part of our identities that many Two-Spirit movements emphasize. (Driskill 2010, 86)

It is common among queer people of colour to have to choose between their queer identity and their ethnic identity (Driskill 2010; Lang 2016). Indigiqueer individuals tend to see themselves as Indigenous first, queer second: "One of our major emphases is that we are Indian first, we're Navajo, we're Pima, we're Apaches. And we do not divide our group and say that we're gay, and making us different. We're all Indians, and that's the way we portray our feelings, and that's the priority in terms of our organization" (Erna Pahe (Diné/Navajo) about GAI in Lang 2016, 312-313) Driskill (2010) explains this by the fact that Indigenous cultures have a traditional place for queer individuals and, therefore, queer individuals do not really have to choose queerness over their Indigenous tradition. On the other hand, if they choose white-dominated queer communities or identities, their indigeneity is erased.

The erasure of Indigenous queerness in queer communities is real and critiqued by many (Adams and Philips 2006; Driskill 2010; Driskill, Finley, Gilley, Morgensen, 2011; Gilley 2006; and others). According to Adams and Philips's (2006) study, "Despite feelings of acceptance in the lesbian or gay community, all participants thought that their ethnicity was invisible within these communities" (283) The racism is real and leads many queer Indigenous individuals to find they "have much more in common with those of 'straight' Native Americans than with those of white lesbians and gays, or even other LGBTQ people of color" (Lang 2016). But Lang (2016) also states that the peer pressure to "be Indigenous first" is just as real.

In the end, it is a recurring element that queer Indigenous people are much more often connected to tradition than non-Indigenous queer individuals. For them, tradition not only represents their indigeneity but also spirituality, history, community, and traditional practices.

In-betweenness

The last recurring element is both ubiquitous and rare. While other elements like spirituality or tradition are explicitly stated in the literature, the in-betweenness is a very frequent recurring element that is almost never directly stated. I first encountered this concept transposed to Indigenous Studies in a geography thesis by Lépine-Dubois (2018) on the movement of two-spirit individuals in cities. Drawing from Baas (2010; 2013), Lépine-Dubois (2018) places "in-betweenness" as a desired position characteristic of queer Indigenous individuals. In-betweenness is a state that is not belonging to one or another category and is a bit of both at the same time: not woman but not man either, both and neither at the same time, in-between the Indigenous identity and the queer identity, in-between cities and communities, between the spirit world and the material world, between the past and the future. As Meyer-Cook and Labelle state:

> They are of two worlds, the world of the differently gendered, and the world of being Native. […] To achieve a sound identity, Two-Spirited people need to simultaneously follow two tracts of identity formation: first as Native people or people of a minority group; and second, as people who are differently gendered." (Meyer-Cook and Labelle 2004, 38)

Gilley further states: "Two-Spirit men must, as Ben put it, 'keep one foot in the gay world' where their sexuality is accepted, and 'one foot in the Indian world' where their cultural heritage lies" (Gilley 2006, 89).

This state of in-betweenness is also a state of constant change, shifting from one identity to another, navigating communities, and it is the reason Roscoe (1998) titled his seminal book on Indigenous queerness *Changing Ones*. More concretely, Lang talks of

> two-spirit women, rather than subscribing to rigid European categories of "gay," "lesbian," or "straight," will rather self-label as bisexual due to their recognition of the fact that sexual preferences may change in the course of an individual's lifetime. In other cases, they will use the term "lesbian" in a sense that includes the possibility of having sexual relationships with both women and men; in still others, they will use "lesbian" synonymous with "man-woman," referring to contemporary manly women on the reservations including their relationships that are by no means exclusively homosexual." (Lang 2016, 315-316)

This in-betweenness is even found in concrete examples like in the high proportion of queer Indigenous people in urban settings, how they move from reserves to cities and back (Lépine-Dubois 2018; Medicine 1997; Ristock, Zoccole, and Passante 2010), how they engage in intertribal concerns (Driskill 2010), and the number of "mixed heritage" individuals among Indigenous individuals who identify as queer indigenous individuals (Lépine-Dubois 2018; Lang 1997). This in-betweenness is the reason intersectionality is absolutely necessary when talking Indigenous queerness.

Current Realities and Struggles

So far, I have addressed diversity and difference among Indigenous forms of queerness but also how, despite their differences, some elements emerge in the literature as recurrent. The four main characteristics of Indigenous queerness are not always agreed upon by all authors but are recurrent enough to provide a set of unifying characteristics. However, these characteristics tend to focus on past realities and on identity rather than experience. To create a more accurate portrayal of the current situation of indigiqueer realities, we need to switch from a focus on identity to a focus on the lived experience of indigiqueer individuals. Recent literature emphasizes the struggles and hardships impacting indigiqueer lives but there are occasionally silver linings of positive experiences that are also documented.

It is important to remember the diversity of socio-cultural contexts that shape indigiqueer experiences. The realities reported in the recent literature should never be looked at without a cultural and social context. The reality of one Indigenous group can be very different from the reality of another, as we have seen above. Therefore, although I have tried to remain as general as possible, the elements presented below are based on indigiqueer realities in Québec. These elements are not only applicable to Québec and have been chosen because they resonate with many other accounts and studies on indigiqueerness.

Disconnect with the Past

The body of literature on two-spirit and Indigenous queerness is quite meagre because of the queer models, roles, and traditions in specific Indigenous cultures – and even in given multi-nations territories—only a few have been studied and recorded, and thus the knowledge is incomplete. Much of the literature is decades old. Older research can still provide contextual historical information but it is often riddled with biases. Outside academic sources, while some Indigenous nations may have many historical accounts and oral stories on queer Indigenous traditions, roles, and models but, for most, there is little historical information with which to work and the rare accounts that can be found are often two or three centuries old, and are not very reliable because they are biased or describe very little (Bousquet, Hamel-Charest, and Mapachee 2020, 117). These accounts, academic or otherwise, are critical and necessary to create a continuum. The absence of a documented historical past creates a disconnect between the past and present and hinders the recognition and sense of belonging of queer individuals (Bousquet, Hamel-Charest, and Mapachee 2020; Laing 2021).

The problem is enhanced by the Residential Schools system which erased whatever (and whoever) did not fit "Christian values"—including heteronormativity, heteropatriarchy, and binary notions of gender—and taught homophobia and transphobia. This is paired with an AIDS crisis which saw the death of a large proportion of a generation of queer individuals and even more violent acts of homophobia. More than a loss of knowledge and tradition, these events led to the literal killing of queer Indigenous individuals which results, today, in an absence of queer elders and mentors (Laing 2021; Lépine-Dubois 2018; Pullen Sansfaçon, Lee and Faddoul, 2022). Without historical accounts and queer elders and mentors, many queer Indigenous individuals have no means to connect their queer identity and their Indigenous identity. One of Liang's participants stated:

> [I am] on a constant quest to find our lost stories and teachings and ceremonies and languages specifically in my Haudenosaunee community. I feel kind of envious that there are other nations and other communities who retained that, and who have those words to describe two-spirit people in their language, and who have the teachings of what it means and what your roles were, and what your responsibilities were." (Liang 2021, 121)

Homophobia/Transphobia in Indigenous Communities

Many authors speak of the presence of homophobia and transphobia in Indigenous communities (Adams and Philips 2006; Anguksuar 2010; Bousquet, Hamel-Charest, and Mapachee 2020; Meyer-Cook 1998; Meyer-Cook and Labelle 2004; Lépine-Dubois 2018). Homophobia and transphobia are still a reality for most queer Indigenous individuals today but, in general, acceptance has increased. Although no recent works talk about this growing acceptance, it can be seen in the way people on reserves are more open to discussing the subject, as witnessed by Bousquet, Hamel-Charest, and Mapachee (2020). But these authors also note that the openness to discussing queerness is limited, slow, and often uncomfortable. Where academic literature fails, non-academic literature (Chacaby and Plummer 2016; Whitehead 2017; Whitehead and Abdou 2023; Youssef 2020) provides many accounts of this greater acceptance. The best example comes from current events: on July 3rd 2021, Kahsennenhawe Sky-Deer became the first woman and the first openly queer person to be elected as Grand Chief of the Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke. This is a major change as the Kanien'keha:ka is one of the two most powerful and influential Indigenous nations in Québec.

Racism in Queer Communities

While they are sometimes victims of homophobia in their Indigenous communities, indigiqueer individuals are also sometimes victims of racism in queer communities (Lépine-Dubois 2018; Meyer-Cook and Labelle 2004; Pullen Sansfaçon, Lee, and Faddoul 2022). This situation is far from unique to Indigenous people: racism in queer communities is a problem that has been identified throughout the literature.[2] As Lang (2016) explains, this racism leads many queer Indigenous individuals to choose Indigenous or other queer persons of colour as partners.

I have observed a recent wave of interest towards Indigenous inclusion and representation that arose following the Truth and Reconciliation movement which led to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (September 30th), and the creation of many committees, in addition to extensive media coverage of a conjecture of Indigenous events in the early 2020s (mainly the discovery of unmarked graves in residential schools, the death of Joyce Echaquan, and the Wet'suwet'en resistance). This wave and its impacts have yet to be documented but it has raised awareness and created opportunities for Indigenous peoples.

In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation movement, many queer organizations are making an effort toward representation of Indigenous people in different ways. Although these efforts matter, queer Indigenous individuals still face racism in their everyday lives when they interact with the local and global queer communities (Adams and Phillips 2006; 2009; Lépine-Dubois 2018; Pullen Sansfaçon, Lee and Faddoul 2022). Non-Indigenous queer organizations are often poorly equipped to address Indigenous issues and queer Indigenous individuals are, therefore, often left feeling like they do not belong.

Settler Colonialism and the Lack of Intersectional Approaches

The racism mentioned above leads many queer Indigenous individuals to feel out of place in queer communities, and homophobia leads them to feel they do not belong in Indigenous communities. This stems from a systemic lack of recognition of intersectionality and intersectional approaches. Intersectionality is a concept from Crenshaw (1989; 1991; 2015) which explains that discriminations are not parallel but rather overlap and intersect: "Intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking" (Crenshaw 1989, 149). Consequently, a queer Indigenous cis-woman is not just a victim of racism, homophobia, and sexism separately but all of these together, at the same time, and intertwined in a way that shapes these discriminations differently than for a white trans woman, or a disabled queer indigenous woman, or a queer indigenous cis-man.

Indigiqueer literature is full of examples of a lack of recognition of intersectionality and of intersectional approaches, such as the fact that queer organizations rarely address Indigenous issues, Indigenous organizations rarely address queer issues (although now it is increasingly common for them to do so), and that even organizations working on anti-racism activism almost never address Indigenous issues (Driskill 2010; Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen 2011; Hames-Garcia 2013; Lépine-Dubois 2018). Many struggles and issues mentioned earlier in this paper are caused by the lack of intersectional approaches, such as the feeling of erasure and the pressure to choose between queerness and indigeneity.

Moreover, in Crenshaw's intersectionality, power is used and maintained in treating inequalities separately without considering the compounding overlap (Crenshaw 1989; 1991; and 2015). A lack of intersectional approaches and even the impossibility of working on settler colonial projects through an intersectional lens is prevalent in decolonial literature (Driskill 2010; 2016; Driskill, Finley, Gilley and Morgensen, 2011; Greensmith 2018b; Hames-Garcia 2013; Hawley 2001; Larouche 2010; Lépine-Dubois 2018; Lévesque 2016). The lack of intersectional approaches is not accidental as it is in line with settler colonialist ideologies and practices that shape queer communities (Greensmith 2018a; Hames-Garcia 2013; Morgensen 2011). This lack of intersectional awareness hinders indigiqueer inclusion in queer communities and contributes to the erasure of Indigenous presence in queer spaces.

Isolation, Homelessness and Suicide

The historical and cultural disconnect, the lack of mentors and elders, the homophobia and transphobia, the racism, the lack of intersectional approaches, and the feeling of erasure all generate a dire situation of exclusion and isolation (Lépine-Dubois 2018). Indigiqueer individuals often do not feel like they belong in any community; they do not have a place to call their own, a place to meet, to find people to support or help them, to unify and organize. Queer Indigenous individuals often feel isolated, alone, and powerless in the face of their experienced homophobia, discrimination, and violence (RCAAQ 2016).

Amplified by a cultural barrier and, for some, a linguistic barrier, all the issues and struggles discussed above can lead to situations of vulnerability which can sometimes result in homelessness, addiction, and death/suicide (Patrick 2014; Pullen Sansfaçon, Lee, and Faddoul 2022). Meyer-Cook and Labelle (2004) write about how these compounded vulnerabilities lead to high HIV infection and high suicide rates: "Suicide becomes the only option for many, especially among youth. Suicide among Native youth is several times greater than for other adolescents" (40). Coupled with the already higher-than-average suicide rate among vulnerable queer youth, the intersectional situation for queer Indigenous youth becomes dire. More recent publications by Patrick (2014) and Pullen Sansfaçon, Lee, and Faddoul (2022) show that the problem is still present and that there is a higher-than-normal proportion of queer individuals among the homeless Indigenous population (Patrick 2014). But, as Patrick (2014) explains, the lack of intersectionality approaches in most research on either queer homelessness or Indigenous homelessness generate incomplete data on indigiqueer homelessness. Unidimensional research often fails to account for multiple and compounding identities and vulnerabilities, beyond occasional surface-level quantitative data.

Times are Changing

This section paints a grim portrait of the situation and, since this is a review of the literature, one must remember that a lot of the literature focuses problems and struggles thus skewing the representation. The most recent academic works (Bousquet, Hamel-Charest, and Mapachee 2020; Denetdale 2020; Driskill 2016; Laing 2021; Lépine-Dubois 2018) as well as non-academic accounts (Chacaby and Plummer 2016; Whitehead 2017; Whitehead and Abdou 2023; Youssef 2020) paint a more positive picture of indigiqueer realities. Although more positive, they still present many of the elements discussed above. There are not enough recent publications to allow for a general conclusion other than the observation that things are changing for the better: there is a greater recognition of indigiqueer identities in many queer communities as well as many Indigenous communities. This is also supported by the growing presence of indigiqueer figures in mainstream media such as Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs (queer Kanien'keha:ka actor), indigiqueer couple Anthony Johnson (gay Navajo-Diné) and James Makokis (two-spirit Nehiyô/Plains Cree) (winners of Canada's Amazing Race season 7), Kent Monkman (queer Cree artist/artivist), Jeremy Dutcher (queer Wolastoq/Malicite musician/signer), two-spirit Drag artists Ilona Verley (Nlaka'pamux/Thompson), Venus (Red River Métis), and Jaylene Tyme (Métis) who brought unapologetic indigiqueer representation to the *Drag Race* franchise. Laing (2021), who worked with indigiqueer youth, talks about the use of online groups and hashtags such as #twospirit. Social change was also noticed in my own research with indigiqueer individuals living in urban centers in Québec in the way that younger participants had a much more positive narrative and outlook and experienced less violence than older indigiqueer participants.

Conclusion

In this article, we have seen how Indigenous roles, models, and identities of queerness can be very different: from the Diné *nádleeh* whose gender is based on sex and on occupation, interests, and talents, to the Shoshone *tainna wa'ippe* who is both man and woman but different, called by a powerful spiritual vision, to the Inuit *sipiniq* whose gender is given through reincarnation. Beyond their differences, four characteristics emerge from the literature on the indigiqueer lived experiences: a place for spirituality, a fluid notion of gender and/or sexuality, a stronger relation to tradition than non-Indigenous queer individuals, and a very important "in-betweenness." To this, I add an overview of the current realities and struggles of queer Indigenous individuals, with the magnitude varying greatly: "Today, some are greatly respected in their communities, but many others suffer violence and worse" (Anguksuar 2010, 46).

A great deal of activism and research is currently taking place. More works are being published on this topic each year. More Facebook groups, more unofficial meetings are on the verge of becoming official and queer organizations are starting to decolonize themselves, decolonize their practices, and be open to ethnic diversity. This answer to the question "what is two-spirit?" was researched and written as a response to our own struggle to find a clear answer to the question. I hope that a review of the scattered and often contradictory literature on the topic will help present and future researchers as well as community organizations and activist groups understand the situation and have the tools to engage with and understand queer Indigenous individuals in their capacity as experts.

Endnotes

1. In 2017, the Navajo Nation changed its name to Diné Nation. Many of the sources refer to them as Navajo since their publication pre-dates this change.

2. Solely looking at racism towards Indigenous people, see Adams and Phillips 2006 and 2009; Brown 1997 and 2014; Cooper 2018; Driskill 2010 and 2016; Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen 2011; Driskill, Justice, Miranda, and Tatonetti 2011; Hames-Garcia 2013; Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997; Justice, Rifkin, and Schneider 2010; Lang 2016; Lépine-Dubois 2018; Lehavot, Walters, and Simoni 2010; Medicine 1997; Meyer-Cook and Labelle 2004; Miranda 2010; Morgensen 2011; Pullen Sansfaçon, Lee, and Faddoul 2022; Ristock, Zoccole, and Passante 2010; Smith 2011; Walters et al. 2006; and many more.

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