

**Doubleweaving  
Two-Spirit Critiques**  
*Building Alliances between  
Native and Queer Studies*

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In the beginning of the twenty-first century, Indigenous Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people are asserting uniquely Native-centred and tribally specific understandings of gender and sexuality as a way to critique colonialism, queerphobia, racism, and misogyny as part of decolonial struggles. Radical Two-Spirit cultural work in the United States and Canada during the late twentieth century cleared a path for Two-Spirit people to form our own modes of critique and creativity suited for Native-focused decolonial struggles.<sup>1</sup> While our traditional understandings of gender and sexuality are as diverse as our nations, Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people share experiences under heteropatriarchal, gender-polarized colonial regimes that attempt to control Native nations. These experiences give rise to critiques that position Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ genders and sexualities as oppositional to colonial powers. Necessary in this process are critiques of both the colonial nature of many GLBTQ movements in the United States and Canada, and the queer/transphobia internalized by Native nations. Two-Spirit critiques—through theory, arts, and activism—are a part of larger radical decolonial movements. Decolonization in most of the United States and Canada is a process that looks very different from decolonial and postcolonial movements in other parts of the world. By using the term *decolonization*, I am speaking of ongoing, radical resistance against colonialism that includes struggles for land redress, self-determination, healing historical trauma, cultural continuance, and reconciliation. I don't see

decolonization as a process that necessarily ends in the clearly defined “post-colonial” states of South Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world. Our colonial realities in most of the United States and Canada are substantially different, as colonial governments are still here and still maintain power and control over Indigenous communities.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith points to the problem with the concept of postcolonial:

Post-colonial discussions have . . . stirred some Indigenous resistance, not so much to the literary reimagining of culture as being centered in what were once conceived of as the colonial margins, but to the idea that colonialism is over, finished business. This is best articulated by Aborigine activist Bobbi Sykes, who asked at an academic conference on post-colonialism, “What? Post-colonialism? Have they left?” There is also, amongst Indigenous academics, the sneaking suspicion that the fashion of post-colonialism has become a strategy for reinscribing or reauthorizing the privileges of non-Indigenous academics because the field of “post-colonial” discourse has been defined in ways which can still leave out Indigenous peoples, our ways of knowing and our current concerns. (*Decolonizing Methodologies* 24)

It is impossible to generalize about the decolonial needs of each Indigenous community, but it is possible to imagine together what decolonization means and could look like, within our particular political contexts. It is this imagination that is the strongest part of our decolonial struggles. As Joy Harjo states in her poem “A Postcolonial Tale,” “Our children put down their guns when we did to imagine with us. We imagined the shining link between the heart and the sun. We imagined tables of food for everyone. We imagined the songs.”<sup>2</sup> Instead of seeing decolonization as something that has a fixed and finite goal, decolonial activism and scholarship ask us to radically reimagine our futures. For Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people and our allies, part of imagining our futures is through creating theories and activism that weave together Native and GLBTQ critiques that speak to our present colonial realities. Within queer studies, critiques examining the intersections of race, sexuality, and empire—what Martin F. Manalansan IV names “the new queer studies” (*Global Divas*)—have at once held promise, and then disappointed, those of us concerned with bringing Native studies and queer studies into critical conversations, or what Malea Powell calls “alliance as a practice of survivance” (“Down by the River” 38).

Our hope for these emergent critiques lies in the thought that perhaps a turn in queer studies to articulate more carefully issues of race and nation

will open up conversations about ongoing decolonial struggles and the relationships between sexuality, gender, colonization, and decolonization. Our disappointment lies in the recognition of an old story within “the new queer studies”: Native people, Native histories, and ongoing colonial projects happening on our lands are included only marginally, when included at all.

This disturbs me. It disturbs me because I think that the radical potential of these critiques is dissipated through all but ignoring Native people. It disturbs me because I think that this erasure colludes with, rather than disrupts, colonial projects. It disturbs me because I think that this work is brilliant scholarship that is deeply necessary, and I *want* it to do better in its relationship with Native people and Native struggles than other intellectual movements in the academy. Sadly, I think it presently falls short of my own impossible desires.

If you are reading this in the United States or Canada, whose land are you on, dear reader? What are the specific names of the Native nation(s) who have historical claim to the territory on which you currently read this article? What are their histories before European invasion? What are their historical and present acts of resistance to colonial occupation? If you are like most people in the United States and Canada, you cannot answer these questions. And this disturbs me. This essay is meant to challenge queer studies not only to pay attention to Native people and Native histories, but also to shift its critiques in order to include a consciousness about the ongoing colonial reality in which all of us living in settler-colonial states are entrenched. Further, my goal is to challenge queer studies to include an understanding of Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ resistance movements and critiques in its imagining of the future of queer studies. Finally, this essay articulates specific Two-Spirit critiques that are simultaneously connected to and very separate from other queer critiques. Two-Spirit critiques share commonalities with queer critiques that challenge heteropatriarchal dominance and notions, gender binaries, and the policing and control of sexualized and gendered bodies. Emergent queer of colour critiques are imagining theories that place queer people of colour at the centre of discussion and arguing that “nonheteronormative racial formations represent the historic accumulations of contradictions around race, gender, sexuality, and class,” a stance that Two-Spirit critiques can draw from to understand how heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity are a part of colonial projects (Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black* 17). However, Two-Spirit critiques diverge from other queer critiques because they root themselves in Native histories, politics, and decolonial struggles. Two-Spirit critiques challenge both white-dominated queer theory and queer of colour critique’s near erasure of Native people and nations, and question the usefulness to Native communities of theories not rooted in tribally specific traditions and not thoroughly

conscious of colonialism as an ongoing process. Two-Spirit critiques, and this essay, ask for queer studies in the United States and Canada to remember exactly on whose land it is built.

## Two-Spirit Critique

The term *Two-Spirit* was chosen as an intertribal term to be used in English as a way to communicate numerous tribal traditions and social categories of gender outside dominant European binaries. Anguksuar (Richard LaFortune) explains: “The term *two-spirit* . . . originated in Northern Algonquin dialect and gained first currency at the third annual spiritual gathering of gay and lesbian Native people that took place near Winnipeg in 1990. What we who chose this designation understood is that *niizh manitoag* (two-spirits) indicates the presence of both a feminine and a masculine spirit in one person” (*Two-Spirit People* 221).

In 1993, a conference funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for anthropological research titled “Revisiting the ‘North American Berdache’ Empirically and Theoretically” was held during the American Anthropological Association meetings. During the conference, participants challenged the use of the word *berdache* as “being derogatory and inappropriate and as not reflecting gender roles, identities, and sexualities as lived by Native Americans” (10). Because of this, *Two-Spirit* has become both a term for contemporary communities and identities and an alternative to colonial terms such as *berdache*.

I am choosing the term *Two-Spirit*, rather than other terms I could use, such as *Native queer* or *Native trans people*, for several reasons. The term *Two-Spirit* is a word that is intentionally complex. It is meant to be an umbrella term for Native GLBTQ people, as well as a term for people who use words and concepts from their specific traditions to describe themselves. Like other umbrella terms—including *queer*—it risks erasing difference. But also like *queer*, it is meant to be inclusive, ambiguous, and fluid. Some Native GLBTQ folks have rejected the term *Two-Spirit*, while others have rejected terms such as *gay*, *lesbian*, *bi*, *trans*, and *queer* in favour of *Two-Spirit* or tribally specific terms. Still others move between terms depending on the specific rhetorical context.<sup>3</sup> The choice to use the term *Two-Spirit*, as well as the numerous tribally specific terms for those who fall outside dominant Eurocentric constructions of gender and sexuality, employs what Scott Richard Lyons calls *rhetorical sovereignty*: “The inherent right of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (*Rhetorical Sovereignty* 449). Further, contemporary Two-Spirit politics, arts, and movements are part of what Robert

Warrior terms *intellectual sovereignty*, “a decision—a decision we make in our minds, in our hearts, and in our bodies—to be sovereign and to find out what that means in the process” (*Tribal Secrets* 123).

*Two-Spirit* is a word that itself is a critique. It is a challenge not only to the field of anthropology’s use of the word *berdache*, but also to the white-dominated GLBTQ community’s labels and taxonomies. It claims Native traditions as precedents for understanding gender and sexuality, and asserts that Two-Spirit people are vital to our tribal communities. Further, *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. This is not an essentialist move but an assertion that Indigenous gender and sexual identities are intimately connected to land, community, and history.<sup>4</sup>

*Two-Spirit* is also useful because it recentres discussion onto gendered constructions, both from within and outside Native traditions. While important work is being done around transgender, genderqueer, and other “gender non-conforming” people and communities, *queer* too often refers to sexualized practices and identities. *Two-Spirit*, on the other hand, places gendered identities and experiences at the centre of discussion. Indeed, many of the traditions that scholars and activists such as Brian Joseph Gilley, Beatrice Medicine, Will Roscoe, Wesley Thomas, and Walter L. Williams have identified that fall under the category of Two-Spirit are not necessarily about sexuality; they are about gendered experiences and identities outside dominant European gender constructions. No understanding of sexual and gender constructions on colonized and occupied land can take place without an understanding of the ways colonial projects continually police sexual and gender lines. Two-Spirit critiques, then, are necessary to an understanding of homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia in the Americas, just as an analysis of queerphobia and sexism is necessary to understand colonial projects.

## Doubleweave

To contribute to decolonial and tribally specific theories, I would like to look to Cherokee doublewoven baskets as a model for articulating the emergent potential in conversations between Native studies and queer studies. As a rhetoric scholar and a basket weaver, I am particularly interested in the rhetorical work involved in *doubleweaving*.<sup>5</sup> For my purposes here, I would like to conceive of the conversation between queer studies and Native studies as a doubleweaving that can result in emergent critiques both within and between these disciplines.

Doubleweave is a form of weaving in Cherokee (and other Southeastern Native) traditions that has its origins in river cane weaving. Sarah H. Hill writes: “One of the oldest and most difficult traditions in basketry is a technique called doubleweave. A doubleweave basket is actually two complete baskets, one woven inside the other, with a common rim” (*Weaving New Worlds* 44).<sup>6</sup> Doublewoven baskets can have two independent designs as a result of the weave, one on the outside and one on the inside. Doubling is likewise employed as a Cherokee rhetorical strategy outside basketry, in which two seemingly disparate rhetorical approaches exist concurrently.<sup>7</sup> Using doubleweave as a metaphor enables me to articulate a methodological approach that draws on and intersects numerous theoretical splints—what Smith calls *dissent lines* (13)—in order to doubleweave queer and Native concerns into a specifically Indigenous creation.

I draw the concept of doubleweave as a feature of Cherokee rhetorical theory and practice through Marilou Awiakta’s book *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother’s Wisdom*, which is deliberately constructed after doublewoven baskets. She explains, “As I worked with the poems, essays and stories, I saw they shared a common base. . . . From there they wove around four themes, gradually assuming a double-sided pattern—one outer, one inner—distinct, yet interconnected in a whole” (34). The Cherokee scholar and creative writer Daniel Heath Justice uses doubleweave as an interpretive device in an essay focusing on the balance created between homeland and identity in Awiakta’s work. He writes, “The Cherokee philosophy of balance . . . is the basic foundation upon which Awiakta crafts her work. Intimately connected with the concept of balance is that of *respect*—one cannot exist without the other” (“Beloved Woman Returns” 74).

Native and queer studies, when conceptualized as intertwined walls of a doublewoven basket, enable us to see the numerous splints—including Native politics, postmodern scholarship, grassroots activisms, queer and trans resistance movements, queer studies, and tribally specific contexts—from which these critiques are (and can be) woven. Such a weaving, then, moves beyond a concept of intersectional politics. Though intersections do take place in doubleweaving, the weaving process also creates something else: a story much more complex and durable than its original and isolated splints, a story both unique and rooted in an ancient and enduring form. The dissent lines of Native studies and queer studies can be used as splints to weave what I am calling Two-Spirit critiques. It is from this stance that I wish to look a bit at “the new queer studies” in order to put these analyses in dialogue with Native studies and build stronger alliances between our disciplines.

## Disidentifying with the New Queer Studies

In his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz writes: “Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production. For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy” (25). Muñoz’s work has been instrumental in the emergence of what Roderick A. Ferguson calls “queer of color critique” (*Aberrations in Black* 3) and what Gayatri Gopinath calls “queer diasporic” critiques (*Impossible Desires* 3). Ferguson says that, “queer of color critique employs cultural forms to bear witness to the critical gender and sexual heterogeneity that comprises minority cultures. Queer of color analysis does this to shed light on the ruptural components of culture, components that expose the restrictions of universality, the exploitations of capital, and the deceptions of national culture” (24). One of the strongest aspects of these critiques is their ability to employ a multiplicity of tactics to decode nationalist (both colonizing and colonized) strategies.<sup>8</sup> These critiques employ both queerness and race as a tactic to disrupt white supremacist heteronormative strategies that constitute themselves through marginalizing people of colour, nonheterosexuals, and people outside rigid gender norms. Further, they seek to employ queerness as a tactic of resistance to heteronormalizing nationalist discourses.

Another important feature of these critiques is their insistence on drawing from a variety of intellectual and political genealogies, including “women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique” (Ferguson 149). By drawing on numerous locations, queer of colour critique is able to simultaneously speak from multiple locations to numerous audiences. Such critical interventions are necessary to reimagine queer studies as a space that focuses on intersecting experiences of oppression and resistance. What queer of colour and queer diasporic theorists offer to queer studies, as well as the numerous interdisciplinary fields they are connected with, is of the utmost importance because they help us understand the very specific ways empire is built through heteropatriarchal control and how queer people of colour resist empire and heteronormative nationalisms.

However, the fact that Native people have largely been left out of these critiques points to major ruptures in queer theories. Not only are Native people and Native resistance movements rarely a subject of analysis, the specific political and historical realities of Native people seem outside queer studies’ purview. This means that—at best—analyses of race, nation, diaspora, history,

sexuality, and gender are deeply lacking and that—at worst—these critiques risk colluding with master narratives both inside and outside the academy that, as Powell describes, *un-see* Native people: “Material Indian ‘bodies’ are simply not seen so that the mutilations, rapes, and murders that characterized . . . first-wave genocide also simply are not seen” (“Blood and Scholarship” 3).

When Native people are mentioned in the new queer studies, it is usually only in passing, and often within lists of other people of colour.<sup>9</sup> Even while Gopinath locates her notion of “the impossible” in José Rabasa’s interpretations of Zapatista resistance, the connections between Zapatista decolonial movements and similar movements in the United States and Canada remain *un-said* and *un-seen* (*Impossible Desires* 19–20). While it may be true that “through the lens of queer diaspora, various writers and visual artists such as Nice Rodriguez, Ginu Kamani, Audre Lorde, R. Zamora Linmark, Richard Fung, and Achy Obejas . . . can now be deciphered and read simultaneously into multiple queer and national genealogies,” a lens of queer diaspora—as it is currently imagined and formulated—does little to elucidate the work of Native (and arguably diasporic) writers and artists such as Clint Alberta, Louis Cruz, Thirza Cuthand, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, or Craig Womack (27–28).

Though this may be contrary to the intent of the authors, the mere inclusion of Native people within lists of other groups of colour unwittingly contributes to the erasure of the specificity of Native claims to land and to the particular relationships Native people and Native nations have with Euro-American colonial governments. People who are Indigenous to the places now called the United States and Canada complicate notions of queer diasporic critique in important ways. While many of us are indeed diasporic, notions of diaspora must be deeply questioned and revised in order to be inclusive of our experiences.

Queer of colour critique and queer diasporic critique have rightly looked at the misogyny and queerphobia too often present in nationalist struggles and have offered queerness as a tool that deconstructs and reformulates concepts of nation. Gopinath argues: “A consideration of queerness . . . becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora. Indeed, the urgent need to trouble and denaturalize the close relationship between nationalism and heterosexuality is precisely what makes the notion of a queer diaspora so compelling” (11). Such a critique is important for Two-Spirit people as well, but needs revision to include Native nations. The current legal place of federally recognized Native nations within the United States as “domestic dependent nations” and the many struggles for sovereignty both within and outside this legal category troubles concepts of nation and nationalism that fall under these queer critiques. For Native people in often-tenuous relationships to colonial

powers, nationalist struggles and politics are a centre of resistance against colonialism. Andrea Smith offers Native feminist critiques as a way to think of nationalism and sovereignty “beyond the nation-state”:

Whereas nation-states are governed through domination and coercion, Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood are predicated on interrelatedness and responsibility. In opposition to nation-states, which are based on control over territory, these visions of Indigenous nationhood are based on care and responsibility for land that all can share. These models of sovereignty are not based on a narrow definition of nation that would entail a closely bounded community and ethnic cleansing. So, these articulations pose an alternative to theories that assume that the endpoint to a national struggle is a nation-state and that assume the givenness of the nation-state system. (Smith, “American Studies without America” 312)

Native Two-Spirit/queer people position ourselves and our identities as productive, if not central, to nationalist, decolonial agendas. Within Native politics, being part of nationalist struggles is not an assimilationist move but instead a move against the colonial powers that have attempted to dissolve or restrain Native sovereignties. As I discuss below, Two-Spirit critiques can simultaneously push queer studies to a more complex analysis of nation while also incorporating the critiques of heteropatriarchal nationalisms that queer studies offers in order to fight against heterosexism, homophobia, and rigid gender binaries in decolonial theories and activism.

Siobhan B. Somerville does include some analysis of the portrayal of Native people in literature, specifically in Pauline E. Hopkins’s *Winona* and Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*. However, her analysis tends to look at how Indianness signifies race more generally, rather than examine how constructions of race in the United States are built on constructions of “the Indian.” Somerville disclaims an analysis of race inclusive of Native people by writing:

My analysis of “race” in this study is limited to constructions of “blackness” and “whiteness,” primarily because prevailing discourses of race and racial segregation in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American culture developed this bifurcation more pervasively than other models of racial diversity. . . . I do not specifically interrogate the cultural constructions of Asian, Jewish, or Native American bodies, for instance, but recent work by scholars such as Lisa Lowe, Sander Gilman, and others suggests that this line of inquiry deserves further research. (Somerville, *Queering the Color Line* 13)

While Somerville at least addresses the limitation of her analysis, what remains troubling is the question of whether constructions of “blackness” and “whiteness” can actually be meaningfully analyzed without an attention to constructions of “Indianness.” I would argue that—in fact—they cannot, especially within the contexts of US colonialism. And while dominant discourses of race that focus on a black-white dichotomy may indeed be those that consciously prevail, this is certainly not because of a lack of discourse around Native people and politics from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. US politics are rooted in the “Indian Problem,” the question of exactly what to “do” with the Indigenous people already living on land that the United States wants. This is a central political debate throughout US history, and certainly central to racial politics, creating voluminous “documents and histories written *about* Native peoples by folks who had something to lose if Indians were seen as fully human” (Powell, “Dreaming Charles Eastman” 116). The “Indian problem” was (and continues to be) a central dilemma of US empire. Race cannot be understood in this country if Native people, Native nations, and Native bodies are un-seen.

Does this mean that I expect the writers I mention above—or those in the new queer studies that are not mentioned—to focus their work on Native people? Of course not. We each have our work to do, and it is perfectly understandable to me that Gopinath’s work focuses on diasporic South Asian communities, that Manalansan’s work focuses on diasporic Filipino gay men, or that Somerville’s work focuses on black-white constructions of race. What is troubling, however, is the way that an analysis of an ongoing colonialism and a Native presence is made absent in these critiques. This un-seeing—even if unintentional—perpetuates a master narrative in which Native people are erased from an understanding of racial formations, Native histories are ignored, Native people are thought of as historical rather than contemporary, and our homelands aren’t seen as occupied by colonial powers. This brings us to question whether Native people, histories, and decolonial struggles are actually part of scholarly and political consciousness and imagination. While I don’t think that scholars need to change the focus of their work, I *do* expect scholars to integrate Indigenous and decolonial theories into their critiques.

Native people are not only another group of colour that “new” queer critiques should include. The experiences of Native people differ substantially from other people of colour in North America, and these differences give rise to very particular forms of resistance. Chrystos writes: “It is not a ‘simple’ (I use this term sarcastically) war of racism, which is the struggle of other Peoples of Color living here, although we also fight racism. This continent is morally and legally our land, since no treaty has been observed. . . . Logically, then, we

remain at war in a unique way—not for a piece of the ‘white pie,’ but because we do not agree that there is a pie at all” (*Fire Power* 127). While I do not necessarily agree that all non-Native people of colour are fighting for inclusion in an already existing system, Chrystos brings up a major paradigm shift that must take place for solidarity work to happen with Native people: *the United States and Canada are not postcolonial*.

I am suspicious of emergent queer critiques, as valuable as they might be, because of the startling absence of Native people and the colonization of Native nations in these theories. Native people must *disidentify* with the very critiques that claim to be decolonial and counterhegemonic interventions for queer people of colour in order to make them viable for our communities. Through disidentification, other critiques emerge that centralize Native peoples, nations, identities, land bases, and survival tactics, which can be called Two-Spirit critiques. Two-Spirit critiques emerge from this disidentification to create theories in which Two-Spirit people and decolonization are centralized. These critiques not only serve to disidentify with queer of colour and queer diasporic critique; they also create more robust and effective interventions in systems of oppression from which both Native studies and queer studies can benefit. By pulling together splints from both disciplines, we can doubleweave Two-Spirit critiques that challenge and sharpen our scholarship and activism.

As part of this doubleweaving, I would like to invite an alliance between queer studies and Native studies that can interrupt the un-seeing of Native people that serves to bolster the colonial project. Powell writes:

We cannot separate scholarship in the United States from the “American tale.” We cannot separate the material exterminations of first-wave genocide in North America (beginning in 1492) from the intellectual and cultural exterminations of second-wave genocide, a process that has been ongoing since the Indian Removal Act of 1830. But we can begin, by consciously and explicitly positioning our work within this distasteful collection of narratives, to open space for the existing stories that might run counter to the imperial desires of traditional scholarship, stories that have been silenced by its hegemonic drone. (“Blood and Scholarship” 4)

Part of the colonial experience for Native people in the United States is that we are constantly disappeared through the stories that non-Native people tell, or don’t tell, about us. Too often, other people of colour are as complicit in acts of un-seeing Native people as Euro-Americans. Native studies poses a challenge to queer studies, including its most recent waves of scholarship, because it problematizes many of the theories that queer of colour critique draws from.<sup>10</sup>

Native people often have an uneasy relationship with other struggles for social justice because the specificity of our struggles—rooted in sovereignty and a claim to land—is too often ignored. This uneasiness pertains to many of the radical theories that queer of colour critique draws from. For instance, women of colour feminisms—which Gopinath (*Impossible Desires*), Muñoz (*Disidentifications* 21–25), and Ferguson (*Aberrations in Black* 4) have all articulated as central to queer of colour critiques—certainly have an important place in the struggles of Native people. But, like postcolonial theory, they do not necessarily include Native concerns in their formations. Native feminist analyses often see patriarchy as a tool of colonization and understand our current situation as colonial, not *postcolonial*. Chrystos writes, “What we experience is not patriarchy, but the process of colonization, which immigrant women have profited from right along with the greedy boys. Patriarchy is only one of many tools of colonizer mentality & is often used by women against other women” (128). Similarly, Smith addresses how patriarchal violence is used in genocidal projects launched against Native people: “The extent to which Native peoples are not seen as ‘real’ people in the larger colonial discourse indicates the success of sexual violence, among other racist and colonialist forces, in destroying the perceived humanity of Native peoples” (*Conquest* 12). Native feminisms, while allied with other women of colour and radical feminisms, have very clear decolonial agendas, see patriarchal violence as a tool of colonialism, and see themselves as part of struggles for sovereignty, land redress, and cultural continuance.

If queer of colour critique claims intellectual genealogies with traditions that un-see Native people, what can it offer to Two-Spirit communities? I am not saying it has nothing to offer us. On the contrary, it has immense potential for Two-Spirit scholars and activists. Queer of colour critique is an important means to disrupt discourses of empire, hold nationalist agendas accountable, and build theories and practices that understand racism, queerphobias, and gender oppressions as always entwined. Two-Spirit critiques push queer of colour critique to pay attention to the unique situations and politics of Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people living under US and Canadian colonialism.

### **Doubleweaving the Splints of Two-Spirit Critiques**

I want to make clear here that I am not attempting to posit Two-Spirit critiques as new or singular. There isn't *a* Two-Spirit critique. And, while I use Two-Spirit critiques as an umbrella term, it is meant to open up possibilities for tribally specific, Two-Spirit/queer critiques rather than to create a single, pantribal critique.<sup>11</sup> And these critiques are already being theorized not only in

scholarship but also in artistic and activist movements. While the work of Two-Spirit activists, artists, and scholars has largely been left out of queer studies, we have been present and writing and resisting in various activist, artistic, and academic communities for what is now decades (and more). What I would like to do here is tug on a few of the splints of this work, our dissent lines, to doubleweave Two-Spirit critiques into the centre of a conversation.

While these are not the only features of Two-Spirit critiques, there are several things that I think Two-Spirit critiques *do* that are important to ongoing struggles for social justice and radical scholarship. I would like to outline these practices and briefly address them.

***Two-Spirit critiques see Two-Spirit people and traditions as both integral to and a challenge to nationalist and decolonial struggles.***

While Two-Spirit critiques hold Native nations and peoples accountable for misogyny and homophobia, they simultaneously see Two-Spirit people and traditions as necessary—if not central—to national and decolonial struggles. Or, in Womack’s words in his discussion of Southeastern Native conceptions of difference, “Rather than disrupting society, anomalies actually reify the existing social order. Anomalous beings can also be powerful; queerness has an important place” (*Red on Red* 244). Two-Spirit critiques see Two-Spirits as valuable participants in struggles for sovereignty and decolonization, even while they call into account the hetero- sexism and gender oppressions taking place in Native communities. In addition to seeing “queerness” as deconstructive of some nationalist agendas, Two-Spirit critiques see Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people as necessary to nationalist struggles for decolonization and sovereignty.

***Two-Spirit critiques are rooted in artistic and activist work and remain accountable to overlapping communities.***

Two-Spirit critiques are created and maintained through the activist and artistic resistance of Two-Spirit people. Contemporary Two-Spirit movements take place in spaces cleared by Two-Spirit activists and artists who work in numerous communities including their nations, Native urban spaces, non-Native GLBTQ communities, feminist movements, and non-Native communities of colour. Many of our most important poets have been, and are, Two-Spirit and/or GLBTQ-identified, including Beth Brant, Chrystos, and Paula Gunn Allen. Through collections such as Brant’s *Gathering of Spirit* and Gay American Indians and Will Roscoe’s *Living the Spirit*, Two-Spirit people have used arts as Two-Spirit critiques. Two-Spirit critiques within academic writing, then,

should not only look to these artists as models but also remain accountable and accessible to Two-Spirit people outside the academy. Native studies insists on methodologies and theories that are rooted in, responsible to, and in service of Native communities. Like women of colour feminisms, Native studies positions itself as activist scholarship that centralizes the relationship between theory and practice. Unfortunately, queer and feminist theories in the academy have a history of “theorizing” themselves away from grassroots communities. Many feminists of colour have offered useful critiques of academic appropriations of radical grassroots movements. For instance, bell hooks has this to say about academic feminism:

While academic legitimation was crucial to the advancement of feminist thought, it created a new set of difficulties. Suddenly the feminist thinking that had emerged directly from theory and practice received less attention than theory that was metalinguistic, creating exclusive jargon; it was written solely for an academic audience. . . . As a consequence of academization of feminist thought in this manner undermines feminist movement via depoliticization. Deradicalized, it is like every other academic discipline with the only difference being the focus on gender. (*Feminism Is for Everybody* 22)

A similar critique is offered by Aurora Levins Morales:

My intellectual life and that of other organic intellectuals, many of them women of color, is fully sophisticated enough for use. But in order to have value in the marketplace, the entrepreneurs and multinational developers must find a way to process it, to refine the rich multiplicity of our lives and all we have come to understand about them into high theory by the simple act of removing it, abstracting it beyond recognition, taking out the fiber, boiling it down until the vitality is oxidized away and then marketing it as their own and selling it back to us for more than we can afford. (*Medicine Stories* 69)

Not only do Two-Spirit critiques remain accountable to both academic and nonacademic audiences, they are informed by Two-Spirit artist and activist movements. Being Two-Spirit is a tactic of resistance to white supremacist colonialism. Two-Spirit critiques see theory practiced through poetry, memoir, fiction, story, song, dance, theatre, visual art, film, and other genres. Theory is not just about interpreting genres: these genres *are* theory. Warrior argues that Native poets provide a model of the practice of intellectual sovereignty and should be used as a model for Native critical studies (*Tribal Secrets* 115–22). Two-Spirit critiques remember that “the only difference between a history, a

theory, a poem, an essay, is the one that we have ourselves imposed” (Powell, “Listening to Ghosts” 15).

***Two-Spirit critiques engage in both intertribal and tribally specific concerns.***

The growing number of Two-Spirit organizations and gatherings in the United States and Canada focus on creating Two-Spirit communities across tribal nations, using the common goal of (re)claiming Two-Spirit identities as a way to bring Native people together.<sup>12</sup> While intertribal, Two-Spirit critiques also insist on tribally specific approaches as a way to create intertribal alliances and coalitions. Just as there is no such thing as a generalized “Native” person, there is no such thing as a general “Two-Spirit” identity. Thus, while Two-Spirit people come together across lines of region and nation, Two-Spirit identities and tactics are “rooted in a solid national center” (Womack, *Red on Red* 223).

Kathy Reynolds and Dawn McKinley’s legal battle against the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma (CNO) to be legally married under Cherokee law, for example, was specifically a Cherokee struggle not only to validate a same-sex union under CNO law, but also—through the hearings that resulted in this attempt—to reestablish specific Cherokee cultural memory of same-sex relationships and unions and challenge the notion that community recognition of same-sex relationships is outside Cherokee cultural precedent.<sup>13</sup> Non-Native radical queer movements might misunderstand Two-Spirit efforts to position ourselves within nations as assimilationist, or, as what Lisa Duggan calls *homonormative*, rather than acts of intellectual and rhetorical sovereignty (*The Twilight of Equality?* 50). The stance that we are—and should be—an integral part of our communities, that our genders and sexualities are something that actually *are* “normal” within traditional worldviews, marks Native Two-Spirit/queer politics as very separate from non-Native movements. Being *a part* of our nations and communities is actually an anti-assimilation stance against colonial projects—such as boarding/residential schools and forced Christianization—that have attempted to assimilate Native people into non-Native culture and tried to eradicate Indigenous sexualities and gender systems. Two-Spirit critiques call into question, then, how radical queer politics replicate colonial taxonomies and realities even as they attempt to disrupt them.

Does this mean Two-Spirit critiques don’t call into account Native nationalisms that replicate colonialism? Of course not—the legal challenge to the definitions of marriage in the CNO mentioned above did just that. But it does mean that the challenges against homophobic and heterosexist Native nationalisms are not seen as antinationalist but as part of larger nationalist and decolonial struggles.

***Two-Spirit critiques are woven into Native feminisms by seeing sexism, homophobia, and transphobia as colonial tools.***

While queer of colour critique draws on and expands women of colour feminisms, Native feminisms are central to Two-Spirit critiques, which see heterosexism and gender regimes as manifestations and tools of colonialism and genocide. Homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny are part of colonial projects intent on murdering, removing, and marginalizing Native bodies and nations. As Smith argues: “U.S. empire has always been reified by enforced heterosexuality and binary gender systems. By contrast, Native societies were not necessarily structured through binary gender systems. Rather, some of these societies had multiple genders and people did not fit rigidly into particular gender categories. Thus, it is not surprising that the first peoples targeted for destruction in Native communities were those who did not fit into Western gender categories” (*Conquest* 178). Such Native feminist analyses, already critiquing heteropatriarchy and colonialism, are crucial to Two-Spirit critiques. The theories of Two-Spirit and queer Native women—such as Chrystos, Brant, Janice Gould, and Miranda—establish Two-Spirit-centred feminist critiques that challenge misogyny and queerphobia (Gould, “Disobedience (in Language)” 32–44).

As mentioned earlier, the enormous presence of queer women in Native studies as central to arts and scholarship has meant that these women can’t be ignored. However, they are often included without queerness being discussed. Out queer men in Native studies are only recently being published to a degree that intervenes in the field, and too often the queerness of these artists and scholars remains in barely tolerated margins. The presence of trans people in the field, as in much of academia, remains largely underrepresented. In queer studies, Native people are largely ignored unless as “subjects” of anthropological and historical research that demonstrate an idealized “queer” past that can bolster non-Native queer identities.<sup>14</sup> Native feminisms offer critiques and activist agendas that work for decolonization by understanding heteropatriarchy as a colonial tool.

***Two-Spirit critiques are informed by and make use of other Native activisms, arts, and scholarship.***

Two-Spirit critiques use the materials available to weave radical and transformational critiques. Native Two-Spirit/queer people are already participating in several Native activist, artistic, and academic movements. These movements—even if not “Two-Spirit”—are part of the splints that doubleweave Two-Spirit

resistance. Within our scholarship, critical theories in Native studies help strengthen Two-Spirit critiques. American Indian literary nationalisms, for instance, can aid in developing Two-Spirit critiques that are simultaneously tribally specific and speak to intertribal concerns (Weaver, Womack, and Warrior). To offer another example, both Winona LaDuke's (*All Our Relations; Recovering the Sacred*) and Melissa K. Nelson's (*Original Instructions*) scholarship and activism can push Two-Spirit critiques to articulate how issues of environmental justice and traditional knowledges intersect with and inform Native Two-Spirit/queer identities and struggles.<sup>15</sup> Two-Spirit critiques contextualize themselves as part of decolonial work already in motion.

***Two-Spirit critiques see the erotic as a tool in decolonial struggles.***

Two-Spirit critiques see the erotic as a power that can aid in decolonization and healing of historical trauma. Miranda speaks to how Native women's erotic lives disrupt genocidal misogyny and holds colonial powers accountable for past and present abuses: "If Native women, who bear the scars from five hundred years of erotic murder in this country, suddenly become visible, there is hell to pay. . . . The living history of Native women's bodies reveal that the mythic foundation of the United States is not a bedrock of democracy and freedom, but a shameful nightmare of unstable and treacherous sandstone, crumbling with each true vision of a Native woman's erotic existence" ("Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy" 145).

Miranda also calls for an Indigenous-centred, healing erotic that she calls *grace*, which "has a particular context for this particular continent: the perpetual act of *balancing*—always working toward balance through one's actions, intent, and understanding of the world" (*The Zen of La Llorona* 4). Similarly, I have suggested that a *sovereign erotic* can be used as a Two-Spirit tactic for healing historical trauma and as a tool in decolonial struggles ("Call Me Brother" 223–34; "Stolen from Our Bodies," 50–64). Numerous Native Two-Spirit/queer writers and artists, such as Alberta (*Deep Inside Clint Star*), Brant (*Mohawk Trail* 31–35), Chrystos (*In Her I Am*), Justice ("Fear of a Changeling Moon" 87–108), and Gregory Scofield (*Love Medicine and One Song*) have likewise formulated the erotic as central to Indigenous resistance. Two-Spirit critiques pay close attention to our erotic histories and lives, the way colonization attempts to disrupt and injure Indigenous erotics, and examines how Indigenous erotics disrupt colonial power over our sexualities and bodies.

***Two-Spirit critiques see Two-Spirit identities in relationship with spirituality and medicine.***

This, I think, is an important difference between Two-Spirit critiques and (other) queer critiques. Two-Spirit critiques position Two-Spirit identities as part of responsible spiritual relationships with Native communities, land bases, and historical memory. LaFortune asserts that the term *Two-Spirit* “in no way . . . determine[s] genital activity. It does determine the qualities that define a person’s social role and spiritual gifts” (“Postcolonial Colonial Perspective” 221).

The stance that Two-Spirit people carry very *particular* medicine—which is not to be misunderstood as more (or less) important than men’s or women’s particular medicines—is one rooted within Native worldviews and land bases, and separates itself from non-Native belief systems as part of larger practices of maintaining and continuing Native cultural practices. 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. This is not a way to desexualize our identities in order to be acceptable to non-Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people, as non-Native radical queer movements might argue. It is a way to acknowledge our specific roles in cultural continuance. Two-Spirit oppositional politics are oppositional to colonial powers and to colonial values and epistemologies, including those internalized by Native communities. However, while radical non-Native queer movements formulate queerness as oppositional and antinormative, Two-Spirit critiques locate Two-Spirit and queer Native identities as integrated into larger Indigenous worldviews and practices. Two-Spirit activism works to mend and transform the relationships Native communities have with Two-Spirit and queer people. In this way, radical Two-Spirit politics are not oppositional in the way radical queer movements are; they seek to create and maintain balanced relationships and power dynamics in our communities as part of decolonial activism.

Taking these splints of Two-Spirit critiques and doubleweaving them into a conversation with queer studies pushes queer studies in the United States and Canada toward decolonial work that is responsible to the land and lives it builds itself on. Two-Spirit critiques simultaneously challenge and strengthen work in queer studies that seeks to decentralize white, male, middle-class formulations of queerness.

David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and Muñoz have asked, “What does queer studies have to say about empire, globalization, neoliberalism, sovereignty,

and terrorism? What does queer studies tell us about immigration, citizenship, prisons, welfare, mourning, and human rights?" (2). While these moves in queer studies are creating productive theories, they haven't addressed the complicated colonial realities of Native people in the United States and Canada. In an attempt to answer the questions posited above within specifically Native contexts, Two-Spirit critiques point to queer studies' responsibility to examine ongoing colonialism, genocide, survival, and resistance of Native nations and peoples. Further, they challenge queer studies to complicate notions of nationhood and diaspora by paying attention to the specific circumstances of nations indigenous to the land bases the United States and Canada are colonizing. To push the above questions farther, I would like to ask what Two-Spirit critiques can tell us about these same issues. In addition, what can Two-Spirit critiques tell us about nationhood, diaspora, colonization, and decolonization? What do they have to say about Native nationalisms, treaty rights, citizenship, and noncitizenship? What can they tell us about the boarding/residential schools, biopiracy, the Allotment Act, the Removal Act, the Relocation Act, the Reorganization Act, and the Indian Act? How can they inform our understandings of the roles of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism in colonization? What do they have to say about Native language restoration, traditional knowledge, and sustainability? What do Two-Spirit critiques teach us about survival, resistance, and continuance?

Two-Spirit critiques are part of ongoing weavings to resist colonialism. "On our separate, yet communal journeys," Brant tells us, "we have learned that a hegemonic gay and lesbian movement cannot encompass our complicated history—history that involves so much loss. Nor can a hegemonic gay and lesbian movement give us tools to heal our broken Nations. But our strength as a family not only gives tools, it helps *make tools*" (*Writing as Witness* 45). Two-Spirit critiques are a *making* that asks all of our disciplines and movements to formulate analyses that pay attention to the current colonial occupation of Native lands and nations and the way Two-Spirit bodies and identities work to disrupt colonial projects.<sup>16</sup> By doubleweaving splints from queer studies and Native studies, Two-Spirit critiques can aid in the resistance struggles of Native communities and help create theories and movements that are inclusive and responsive to Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people.

*Wado to my ancestors for getting me here alive. Wado to the People of the Three Fires, the Tawakoni, and the Tonkawa Nations whose lands this essay was written on. Wado to the editors, the outside reviewers, and to Lisa Tatonetti for their comments and feedback on earlier versions of this essay. Wado to all of the Native Two-Spirit and queer folks whose conversations, art, and activism deeply inform my work.*

## Notes

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1. My discussion in this essay focuses on Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ politics in the United States and Canada, and—because of my own geographic and political locations—mostly the former.
2. Craig S. Womack, in writing about Harjo’s work, has likewise talked about the centrality of imagination in decolonial processes. He writes, “The process of decolonizing one’s mind, a first step before one can gain a political consciousness and engage oneself in activism, has to begin with imagining some alternative” (*Red on Red* 230).
3. My own slippage between numerous terms in this essay is intended to move to reflect these practices.
4. This is not because Two-Spirit people are somehow more spiritual than non-Two-Spirit people, as the appropriation of the term by New Agers might suggest. Rather, spiritual and ceremonial traditions are part of a continuance of cultural memory that Two-Spirit people, like other members of Native communities, are often a part of. Beverly Little Thunder writes, “In the non-Native community of lesbians and gay people I have been told that being two-spirited means that I am a special being. It seems that they felt that my spirituality was the mystical answer to my sexuality. I do not believe this to be. My spirituality would have been with me, regardless of my sexuality” (“I Am a Lakota Womyn” 207).
5. Wado to both Angela Haas and Malea Powell to their ongoing work on material rhetorics.
6. While I understand Hill’s description here, it is also a bit misleading. Doublewoven baskets are not two complete baskets with a common rim, though they might look this way. The process of doubleweaving—in brief—involves weaving the inside base and walls of the basket, then turning the same splint back down over itself to weave the outside walls and base. Doublewoven baskets are one continuous weave.
7. While there is not space to articulate this line of thought in this article, my ongoing work examines doubleweave as a Cherokee rhetorical theory, practice, and methodology.
8. Michel de Certeau distinguishes between *strategies* and *tactics* that are based in power differentials. He writes that a *strategy* is “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power . . . can be isolated. . . . It is an effort to delimit one’s own place in the world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other.” A *tactic*, on the other hand, “is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. . . . The space of a tactic is the space of the other” (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 35–37). This distinction is important because it pays attention to the specific ways in which those in power engage in practices to stay in power (*strategies*) and those who are oppressed employ practices that subvert those in power and resist oppression (*tactics*).
9. For instance, Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 29; Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 15, 17.
10. While this article focuses on the interventions Two-Spirit critiques can make in queer studies, Two-Spirit critiques also offer important challenges to both Native

studies and Native nations by pushing at who exactly is included within current formations and movements of Native nation building and sovereignty struggles.

11. Part of my current work, for instance, is to theorize Cherokee-centred Two-Spirit and queer critiques. Because *asegi* is a Cherokee word that means “strange” and is being translated as *queer*, I am thinking of these particular critiques as *asegi stories*. The intersections of Native and queer studies can help us imagine numerous tribally specific Two-Spirit/queer critiques.
12. For an in-depth discussion of these movements, see Brian Joseph Gilley’s *Becoming Two-Spirit*.
13. For further information on the Cherokee same-sex marriage case, see N. Bruce Duthu, *American Indians and the Law*, 147–50.
14. For further analysis of this pattern, see Scott Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (U of Minnesota P, 2010).
15. More information on LaDuke’s activism can be found through the Native Harvest/White Earth Land Recovery Project: [nativeharvest.com](http://nativeharvest.com). More information on Nelson’s activism can be found through the Cultural Conservancy: [www.nativeland.org](http://www.nativeland.org).
16. The use of the term *making* here to describe an intellectual and rhetorical practice is drawn from Powell’s work on Material Rhetorics and personal conversations with her during and after visiting her Material Rhetorics graduate course at Michigan State University in the spring of 2008.