

*Becoming Two-Spirit
Gay Identity and Social Acceptance
in Indian Country*

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For Patrick

selves within their tribal communities and Native society. The men conceptualize creating roles for themselves in terms of being useful. Two-Spirit men feel they must make themselves useful to communities through taking care of the needs of the people. Therefore, once they are recognized as valuable members of Native societies, non-gay Indians will see the value in accepting them, and attitudes will change. To reach this goal Two-Spirit men critically engage Indian community values in their attempts to address social issues they perceive are not fully dealt with by Indian peoples.

Statements in previous sections explained that Two-Spirit men place the blame for the decline in acceptance of sexuality and gender diversity on the lack of public roles and incorporation for them in Indian society. Two-Spirit men also clearly connect their lack of public roles to the social problems of Native communities. Many people feel that without Two-Spirit men there to create balance, Indian society will continue to suffer. Ron echoed this when he told me one night in an intense conversation, "The spirit of the people has been broken by white ways. This is why we don't have Two-Spirit people anymore. This is why Indian people have so many problems. You understand that life is a hoop, and our people are a hoop. We need to repair that hoop." Two-Spirit men see part of Indian society's ills or the lack of completeness in the medicine wheel as a result of the intolerance for difference. Sheila, Glen, Andy, and Ben all felt that Indian society's domestic problems and the problems of the youth were related to a lack of stability between masculine and feminine energies in Native communities. A conversation with Glen demonstrates this idea:

— Brian: *Some of the people I spoke with tell me that the reason that Indian people have problems is because they have lost a sense of diversity in their communities and purpose for all kinds of peoples. Would you agree with them?*

— Glen: *Yeah, I would agree with them. That reminds me of the guy I was telling you about that runs the Sun Dance. He told me, "In the old times we never had child abuse, we never had spousal abuse, because we had the Two-Spirit men there to stand between the men and the women." One of*

the roles of the Two-Spirit men was to protect the women and the children from the men. We know how men can be aggressive. In the old days just the presence of a Two-Spirit person in camp would calm the men down. Now that there aren't Two-Spirit men in our communities like the old days, we have child abuse, spousal abuse, and so much divorce. One of the big reasons for that is there are no Two-Spirit men in the communities to stand between the men and the women because we know what it is to be both.

The theme of the medicine wheel is repeated through the ways that Two-Spirit men's presence and activities are felt to create a societal balance. By representing a combination of male and female traits, Two-Spirit men seek to balance the forces that men and women bring to a society.

As with Two-Spirit cultural performances, they conceptualize their social roles as flexible according to the specific needs of the community. Two-Spirit men see themselves as balancing not only the energies between men and women but also the various "things that need to be done" in Indian communities. They see their ability to transcend the gendered aspects of the social, spiritual, and political as allowing them a freedom of movement between various roles that communities need filled.

— Ben: *If we can become people who can help ease the load on some of our medicine people, politicians, chiefs, old ladies, then more power to us. It's what you do to benefit the society.*

As I was frequently reminded, "It is not enough just to show up." Rather, Two-Spirit men assume Indian people are not going to welcome them without their having a function in communities. Therefore, Two-Spirit men perceive that they must prove themselves to non-gay Indians as a way to negate the complications created by their sexual and gender identity.

— Glen: *We have to prove to the community who we are. If people come out first they may never get a chance to prove who they are. People may cut them off and not let them be a ceremonial leader. When people find out you're gay, you already have so many strikes against you. If you come to*