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[2023 Winner] The Reclamation of Two-Spirit Identity

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[The Reclamation of Two Spirit Identity]

Created by: Paige Monier & Kelly Christensen

<<OtterPod theme music>>

[0:07] Paige (Host): Hi I'm Paige Monier, and this is an episode of the OTTERPOD from CSU Monterey Bay.

[0:26] Frameline V.O.: We were considered two spirit people, which means that we are all special because, within us, we have the male and the female, and that gives us a special way to look at the world, to see how things are happening. So, it's important, I think for gay people to look at that tradition of being two spirit people. You're not less than other people, you're more than other people and have a deeper understanding of the whole picture... (:23) (Frameline, 2011)

[0:52] Paige : A two spirit person or a 2SQ person is an indigenous person born with both a male and a female spirit. While the term two spirit is a relatively modern term, being two spirited is not. Research shows that more than 150 different pre-colonial Native American tribes acknowledged third genders in their communities. (Human Rights Campaign, 2021)

Pre-colonization, two spirit people held extremely important positions in their tribes that neither a male or a female could do. But during colonization two spirit people had their identity stripped from them and were forced to conform to the Western gender binary, were abused, and sometimes killed. Now, with the resurgence of Indigenous identities, two spirit people are finally able to not only reclaim their indigenous identities but their queer one as well. Throughout this podcast we will explore the history of Two-spirit people, how their identities were taken from them, and finally, hear testimonies from two-spirit individuals about the resurgence and reclamation of their identity as both indigenous and queer.

[1:52] Before diving into the podcast, we would like to provide a definition of this word "resurgence". Resurgence, in this context, means to revive and revitalize an identity and community that has been lost and suppressed. A part of this, when it comes to Indigenous resurgence includes questioning the settler societies that led to the loss of Indigenous identity in the first place.

During colonization, one of the colonizers main goals was to destroy and control native populations. This was done in order to seize the land that native people lived on and claim it as uninhabited and unused, so that settlers could then come in and claim it for themselves. By eliminating native people and breaking down their social structures, it became easier to take

their land and support colonial settlements. Ian Khara Ellasante, a professor of gender and sexuality studies, said:

Voiceover by Kelly: “The imposition of such settler-heteropatriarchal capitalist norms sought to demolish Indigenous cultural systems, in particular those related to gender and kinship, and reconstruct them in the image of the settler.” (Ellasante, 2021, pg.1515)

[2:51] Paige: Many strategies were employed in order to achieve this goal. One of these strategies was the destruction of cultural practices that were specific to indigenous people, and thus served to give them their own identity separate from the colonizers. An example of this is the extermination of the Joyas by the Spanish in what is now California. The Spanish soldiers forced Indigenous people to fit into the European gender binary by making them do European gendered work. Those who did not fit into the binary, given the Spanish name “Joyas” had to either ignore their identity and disguise themselves amongst their people, or risk being literally fed to the soldiers' dogs. In the words of Deborah Miranda, an Indigenous writer and Professor:

V.O. by Kelly: “Now that the Spaniards had made it clear that to tolerate, harbor, or associate with the third gender meant death, and that nothing could stand against their dogs of war, the indigenous community knew that demonstrations of acquiescence to this force were essential for the survival of the remaining community — and both the community and the Spaniards knew exactly which people were marked for execution.” (Miranda, 2010)

[4:01] Paige: Indigenous people, simply by existing threatened settler-colonialism and capitalism itself. By destroying the communities which threatened them, and the very bodies that made up those communities, settlers attempted to dispossess and eradicate Indigenous people, and especially the queer bodies that threatened their patriarchal society. Following the attempted extermination of queer identities across Indigenous American communities, many people lost a piece of their history and of themselves. It wasn't until the mid 1900's when native resurgence brought back some of the traditional and historical importance of gender non-conforming people in native communities.

[4:45] Bese: “Native American activists in the 1960's unearthed this tradition, and slowly knowledge of Indigenous gender non-conforming people began to spread. So in the late 1980's Native American activists began referring to queer members of their communities with a new term; Two-Spirit.” (:10) (BESE, 2019)

Paige: The resurgence of native queer identities allowed many native people to connect with themselves, with their families, and with their histories in a way that they hadn't been able to before, because it was taken from them long before their birth. This resurgence has brought new and old dimensions of both native and queer identities back into light and back into life.

[5:23] Ma-Nee Chacaby: My name is Ma-Nee Chacaby. When I was born, and I was about

four years old, my grandmother told me I was a two-spirit person, child. I was a two spirit child and that I had... I was gonna have a hard life when I grow up. But I didn't know what that meant. I never knew what 'Two Spirit' meant. Just even that word, until I got older and older. (:17)

Ma-Nee Chacaby: The god's in here. She lives inside of you or he lives inside of you, she said. And that's who you are, she said. (Anishnaabe word), you have two of them that lives inside of you, a male side and a female side, and you're gonna have a hard life, and you have to listen to your heart and your mind, and your tummy. When all that comes together But true road is your journey, she said. You're born with two spirits and you will know when you're born with that, because you'll know when you're born, when you'll know you're different. That's when you know who you really are. (:37) (Our Stories, 2018)

Paige: Chacaby was able to benefit from their grandmother's advice and knowledge of their cultural history. This is something that has been lost to many people as Indigenous knowledge has been taken and stripped from communities.

[6:24] Ma-Nee Chacaby: I mean way back like my grandmother used to say way back seven generations after seven generations. She's been told that two-spirit people exist with

The First Nations people and they did not say, 'Oh, you two, you're living together, shame on you' they didn't say that, she said, they loved each other and, and the rules of two-spirit people had rules. Their rules was never to let the fire go out in the village and then the other, the other one was to learn things from the other elders. Elders would take on, take on the two-spirit person, and teach them how to be in this, what what they should learn about which one is going to be a medicine person, which one's going to be a healer which one I was going to be the one, the visionary person, and then which one was going to be the one that's bringing messages from the great spirit when they go out and they're back to mother's womb and stuff like that. And also just those were our jobs. We were supposed to learn everything. What other people were learning. And our duties was to do those things and then they were regarded, you know, very highly before. They were, they, they were accepted as special people with gifts. And they didn't make fun of them, because some of them would be the parents of the kids that was, didn't have no parents. (2:17) (Our Stories, 2018)

Paige: The first nation people did not think two-spirit and same gender relationships were bad until colonialism. Part of the Native resurgence movement is unlearning Eurocentric teaching forced upon them and relearning Indigenous teachings.

Some Indigenous people didn't have the same knowledge Chacaby grandmother passed on to her and had to wait until later in life to learn more about gender queerness. Now we are going to hear Gina Metallic, a Indigenous social worker, about how they discovered their identity.

[8:39] Gina Metallic: And so I actually took a queer studies class at McGill. That was kind of my way to explore what that community was about and to actually see if maybe I was part of that community. I actually went through quite a big depression in University because I felt like I was combatting this image of who I was supposed to be: being this role model in my community. (:24)

Gina Metallic: Somebody has suggested that I seek help from a traditional healer. When I was talking to this person, he actually informed me of the two-spirit community and what that means and how being two-spirit is an umbrella term, kind of like the umbrella term of being queer. You know that, being in love with a woman, that I can still own that title. And for me the term two spirit is really that spiritual and cultural connection: to the word, to my place and how I walk this Earth. (:28) (United Way East Ontario, 2017)

Paige: Again we can see how Indigenous knowledge and insight into oneself helped someone find their own identity and ease the anxiety of not knowing who they are in a world that already questions and quiets their existence.

[10:04] Gina Metallic: I'm a registered social worker and traditionally the history of two-spirit people was actually helpers of the community – they stood next to the warriors. And so it was kind of ironic that I was in this field that traditionally the roles that I was playing were the roles of two-spirit people. (:13) (United Way East Ontario, 2017)

Paige: Metallic was already doing roles that a two-spirit person traditionally did without being aware of what a two spirit person was. If they were given the opportunity to grow up in a society where two spirit people were embraced then maybe they would not have had to deal with the depression brought on by gender dysphoria.

Bebe Lala, a two spirit drag queen, similarly talked about how the catholic programming forced upon many Indigenous people caused many people like themselves to struggle with who they are.

[10:51] Bebe Lala: Two spirit people are known in the Indigenous community as the carriers or keepers of culture and story, and with a male and female spirit, they're able to take both and share that with our community and pass on that knowledge through generations. And it doesn't matter if they are biologically a male or biologically a female, because that two spirit identity, our culture has recognized it for thousands of years. The Catholic Church had told people that it was not OK to be gay, and when they stripped the people at the residential schools away of their Indigenous culture, they didn't just take away the fact that we are First Nations people. They took away much more than that. They took away the right to be able to be a two spirit person and told our people that that was not OK. (:53)

Bébé Lala: I know it would have made a big difference in my life if I would have been able to see a Queer Indigenous person while I was struggling. Having that sort of mentor or someone to look up to would have made a huge difference for me. And I don't want anyone to have to feel the pain that I felt. And that it is my responsibility to learn more about our culture and the teachings and knowledge and then be able to go on and pass that down to generations. So it continues to live on and I think a part of reconciliation is bringing back the pieces of our identities that were taken from us. (:46) (Shaw Spotlight, 2022)

Paige: Bebe striving to be a role model to two spirit youth is admirable. Especially when we can see with all the speakers that the guidance is/ was much needed. When you look at Chacaby and can see that yes they did have their struggles but they had some type of knowledge of who they are. As well as seeing how the impact of not knowing has been to Bebe and to Metallic.

[13:32] It's important to remember that indigenous resurgence is not only about reclaiming what was lost, but also about questioning the systems that currently dominate our society and inform our identities. Part of the way that settler-colonialism is keeping people from questioning the capitalist patriarchal system currently in place is by trying to still fit people, especially Indigenous people into the same binary boxes that have existed in European society for centuries. Indigenous resurgence questions this system, these binaries, and attempts to stop the spread of settler colonial ideologies.

[14:12] : Amelia Vigil, a two spirited poet, said...

V.O. by Kelly: "There's always two sides to this work. When you're in LGBTQ spaces, you're educating people about Native American or indigenous identity — "hey, genocide and erasure didn't work, we're still here!" — and then when we're surrounded by our fellow Native Americans or indigenous relatives we're constantly educating around two-spirit people and combating homophobia." (Mease, 2019).

[14:39] Paige: Dealing with the resurgence on Indigenous culture is already difficult in itself, having to deal with the resurgence of Native gender identity on top of that can almost make it at times feel impossible. My co-host and I as Gender non-conforming people are honored to have been able to provide a platform for two spirit peoples voices to be heard and acknowledged.

We leave you with the words from Andrea Thompson, a Canadian poet...

V.O. by Kelly : "Don't do it, she says don't apologize and cower. If you have something to say, stand up straight and speak your mind from, your heart from your soul. Let your words hold your power." (Thompson, 2013)

Closing credits

[15:25] Paige: Executive producers of the OtterPod are Dr. Sara Salazar Hughes and Dr. Chrissy Lau. Theme music by Eric Mabrey. Our host has been Paige Monier, with research and scripting by both Paige Monier and Kelly Christensen, and audio editing by Kelly Christensen. We would also like to thank all the two-spirit people who speak out about their experiences and existence, and especially those who lended their voices to our podcast.

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