Red In the Rainbow:

How Queerness Shapes Indigenous Activist Art from the 1960’s to the Present

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**Introduction**

Lee Maracle, an Indigenous artist, **argues that 2-Spirited artists “find free­dom in the con­text [they] inherit.” Indigenous LGBTQ artists find themselves within the contexts of both their native and queer identities, each with their own facets of freedom.**[[1]](#footnote-1) **Some of these artists confront their Indigenous background through explicitly engaging and challenging colonial-rooted homophobia and transphobia whereas others embrace it whether through the medium of art utilized or by following broader movement shifts in their art such as efforts of survivance and confronting stereotypes through humor and parodying tropes and techniques of Western artists. Other artists confront the colonial-rooted whiteness in Queer art mediums and the appropriation of Indigenous culture that presents itself especially within the context of performance drag. Other considerations such as the role Christianity plays within tribal populations for LGBTQ acceptance, the space for the art physically, and geographical location of the artist further impact how queer identity alters how Indigenous artists find visibility through their work.**

**To explore and establish how queerness presents itself through Indigenous activist artwork, primary sources contextualized and provide insight from artists in a variety of mediums. Individuals such as individuals like Landa Lakes, Vizin, and Cris Derksen (many drag performers opt to identify with and be referred to by their stage name, so that desire will be followed in the paper) provided insight on both Queer and Indigenous performance art, more specifically drag and 2-Spirit focused powwows. Influential figures such as Kent Monkman and Jeffrey Gibson show perspectives on the subversion of western tropes and the imaging of a better future in the fine arts of sculpture, and painting. Finally, Sydney Freeland and Patrick Hunter among others show the push for proper representation beyond tropes and a reimagined future through visual arts in the forms of film and digital drawing. Primary sources in Indigenous scholarship are vital not just for the perspective and insight it provides, but also to contribute to the decolonization process. Regardless of how well-intended a non-Indigenous scholar may be, applying Western methodology and perspective to Queer Indigenous art can lead to unintentional silences and misrepresentation of the message and themes of the work.**[[2]](#footnote-2) **As such, primary sources are vital in ensuring that as much as the methodology and arguments as possible are rooted in Indigenous approaches.**

**Beyond utilizing primary sources to understand the intent and themes of the artists, secondary sources provided vital contextualization of the broader developments in scholarship and Indigenous and LGBTQ movements themselves. Theory in Indigenous studies, Queer studies, settler-colonial studies, and museum studies added necessary background and insight into the approaches the artists took. Furthermore, understanding the time in which a 2-Spirited artist produced their work, and how it was viewed by Western historians provided insight into the conditions that the artists were producing this work. Necessary insight into both the overlap of Queer and Indigenous activist movements and the differences further fleshes out the space in which 2-Spirited artists produce their work. In addition, secondary scholarship helps expand the breadth in which queerness influences Indigenous activism through art through inclusions of the space and language considerations as part of analysis. Finally, insight into why and how success is measured, and the conversations sparked by the artists themselves is provided by scholarly analysis showing that even after 2-Spirited art is produced, LGBTQ identity factors into perception and impact. Thus, the primary source perspective is strengthened when provided theoretical and historical context of Indigenous LGBTQ artists from the 1960’s to the present.**

When taken together, more insight into the shared goals and views of success within the 2-Spirited art community is gained. The first is the goal of decolonization, which occurs through the methods of visibility, indigenization of spaces, increase visibility within those with intersecting identities, and through the transformation of space.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although scholarship provides a few different interpretations and strategies for decolonization and the newer terminology of Indigenization, the ultimate purpose is to remove western influence and harm including the gender binary and patriarchy.[[4]](#footnote-4) Colonial roots of power do often overlap in their harm on queer and Indigenous populations, and both identities result in a broader understanding of the issue.[[5]](#footnote-5) A more specific understanding comes from tribal and experience specific framings and approaches to colonial forces and the resistance against them. One of the ways in which settler-colonialism transpired was through the instillment of both monogamous heterosexuality and the gender binary to undermine the spiritual and cultural significance of those fulfilling a 2-Spirited role within their tribe.[[6]](#footnote-6) This art in part seeks to reflect the broader removal of heteronormativity and decolonization of spaces through the promotion of pre-colonial gender and sexuality constructs.

All in all, LGBTQ identity shapes far more than simply the medium utilized by the artists themselves. In is part of a broader effort to reimagine a better future and to challenge the impact Western settler-colonialism had because of the instillment of gender binaries and the heteropatriarchy. Regardless of whether Indigenous LGBTQ artists seek to adopt pre-colonial instances of gender and sexual nonconformity within specifically Indigenous terminology and history or to adopt Western labels for not identifying as heterosexual or cisgender, space to explore both the roots and consequences of the conditions their shared identities create and to portray a better and more hopeful future.[[7]](#footnote-7) In conversation, medium, space, and approach, both unique issues and approaches and modifications of strictly Indigenous artist approaches are utilized to reflect these intersecting identities. As such, LGBTQ+ identity impacts the medium, space, and scholarship of Indigenous artists through the forging of new techniques and adaptations of Indigenous activism within queer contexts to represent both the struggles in the past and hope for the future.

**Medium**

Primarily, the medium or combination of mediums 2-Spirit individuals use is connected to the shared identities they embody whether through the adaptation of explicitly Indigenous or LGBTQ art forms into an intersectional art piece or the adaptation of Western techniques and tropes. To explore how medium is transformed by Queer identity, a combination of performative drag and powwow performances, the fine arts and the genre tropes that come along with them, and digital videos and drawings. While scholars have analyzed these mediums individually, such as how one recent scholar explored cultural appropriation within the Queer television Drag competition RuPaul’s Drag Race, they have missed the potential to explore what they show when placed all together.[[8]](#footnote-8) To do so, both the specificities and histories of each of the above mediums when taken together show that at its core, 2-Spirit art is about visibility and decolonization. This is done through the rejection of Western evaluation of standards for their work and at times standards from within their own tribal or LGBTQ communities.

One medium most often used to represent these struggles and bring attention to the need of intersectionality is that of drag. Now, drag proves a successful medium for calling attention to issues of both the LGBTQ+ and tribal communities for a few reasons. Landa Lakes, a Chickasaw Drag Queen addresses in her opening that they are watching her perform on Indigenous land because “land acknowledgment is a form of activism, you’re making a political statement.”[[9]](#footnote-9) She further explained that stemming from her AIM upbringing and decades of activism, that she wants to use her drag “to tackle Native issues and introduce them to an audience that is not familiar with “Indian Country,” from misconceptions about Natives to real political topics such as NO DAPL, natural resources, and MMIWR.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Lady Shug, a Navajo Drag Queen, further demonstrates this by explaining that her drag is tied to her efforts “for equal rights as an activist for LGBTQ2S [two-spirit] indigenous relatives to create equal rights in rural areas and reservations that do not protect those on indigenous lands.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Though drag has predominantly been a queer art form, the recent rise in Indigenous inclusions demonstrates that it’s been adopted by 2-Spirited artists to tackle individual and trans-tribal issues through drag. Drag is often cited and researched for its tackling of gender and sexuality struggles within queer liberation movements, but there lacks a consideration for how Indigenous identity plays into it. [[12]](#footnote-12)Activism is deliberately incorporated into drag through the adoption of a queer medium to confront Indigenous issues.

Beyond the activism incorporated in the dialogue itself, the name in which drag queens perform under is indicative of their activism. Landa Lakes’s drag name is a parody of the Land of Lakes Butter mascot that utilized an Indigenous woman to sell their product.[[13]](#footnote-13) Landa herself is one of the oldest Indigenous drag queens and was the founder of the first all native drag group Bush Arbour Gurlz in 2005.[[14]](#footnote-14) A huge part of how drag queens develop is through their mentors or “drag mothers,” so Indigenous representation is vital for Native Drag Queens.[[15]](#footnote-15) Given the recency of this development, the lack of scholarship on the subject can be viewed with more understanding. An Arikara Drag Queen, Vizin, explained that her name was a simpler version of her “trying to connect myself to my culture as a Native American,” more specifically the spiritual “vision quest.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Thus, the name a drag queen is an extension of the activism they bring within the medium.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the tendency of cultural appropriation that occurs within the drag scene. Professor Upadhyay argued that Raja, a Drag Queen of African descent, was complicit in cultural appropriation through their function as the ‘Native,’ after Lumbee drag queen Stacy Layne Matthews’s elimination from the show, demonstrates how queer people of color can become complicit in settler colonial processes.[[17]](#footnote-17) In order to properly understand the impact intersecting Indigenous and Queer identities have on drag, the settler-colonial lens recent scholars are framing drag in offers far more potential than the explicitly queer analysis that’s dominated scholarship in the past.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Drag further provides a medium for openness and ownership of Indigenous sexuality. Queer, Native individuals must navigate an overwhelmingly small portion of the population to show pride of their sexual liberation beyond the white supremacist rooted monogamous and heteronormative understanding of attraction.[[19]](#footnote-19) Whether it be reclamation through the drag name the artist performs under, the humor utilized, or another aspect of the performance, drag serves as not only a vessel to bring attention to gender expression and visibility struggles, but that of sexuality too. Openness in queer sexuality and gender expression varies based on the tribe and geography.[[20]](#footnote-20) These drag queens want to increase acceptance within tribal populations in part through the art they are producing. Landa Lakes hopes one day for “there to be fairness that will make the lives of my nieces and nephews and next generations an easier path.”[[21]](#footnote-21) While Indigenous issues are included in drag performances, queer issues are incorporated when addressing Indigenous shortcomings with drag.

Beyond drag expressing visibility and openness, some Indigenous drag queens seek to address the hypermasculinization through camp and humor.[[22]](#footnote-22) Domestic abuse, transphobia, child abuse, etc. are all colonial-rooted issues that many Indigenous men struggle with.[[23]](#footnote-23) The tribal and societal created expectations of masculinity-attributes behaviors and roles can further cause those more feminine-expressing and queer members to struggle with mental health for not matching the construction of what is expected for them.[[24]](#footnote-24) Vizin explains the usefulness here where drag allows her to “feel like a woman” and that is a sensation of “mighty real.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Through a rejection of the western promotion of cisgendered identity and patriarchal privilege through drag’s gender expression part, a connection to pre-colonial gender and sexuality constructs is achieved.

The connection to pre-colonial notions of gender as a means of survivance through art is further upheld through the proliferation of 2-Spirit powwows. Cris Dereksen for instance is a classically trained cellist with Indigenous heritage and queer identity that incorporates both traditional powwow techniques and elements and adds both her own music and the gender-neutral consideration when selecting drummers and dancers.[[26]](#footnote-26) In many tribes, Indigenous men took on the role as drummers and Indigenous women took on the role of performers.[[27]](#footnote-27) By rejecting the colonial-rooted and Indigenous-rooted gender roles through the upholding of an Indigenous-created performance art rather than a queer one, both Western and Indigenous sources of harm are tackles through the artwork.

Further expressive artwork to practice survivance and to create visibility comes with the arts of dance. Dance, besides its cultural roots in techniques, offers the performer full control of their body and prevents a medium to convey sexuality, racial, and gender struggles in a medium.[[28]](#footnote-28) It can reflect both queer standards and cultural norms such as within drag, but also into centuries of tribal ritual and practice.[[29]](#footnote-29) Infusions of techniques of the past and the present serve as extensions of the practice of survivance.[[30]](#footnote-30) Adrian Stevens, a 2-Spirit dancer explained how they were “raised in that creative environment of making [their] own regalia, talking to people within the community that makes certain things, and always just exchanging knowledge.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Dance provided the medium to exchange knowledge on their experiences through dance connected both to Native technique and Western source.

Another type of medium that both Indigenous and 2-Spirit frequent is the fine arts in forms of painting, and sculpture. These art mediums capture irrefutable evidence of the existence and future of 2-Spirited individuals whether through the dismantling western tropes and approaches or through creating work hopeful for the future.

To begin, Kent Monkman exhibits the full potential painting has in its ability to demonstrate 2-Spirit identity. The medium of paint itself was favored by him for its ability to connect to broad audiences, but he became “very interested in European painting when [he] realized that there was an opportunity to paint Indigenous experience and histories and kind of authorize them into this art history that pretty much neglected our perspective.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

One of the strategies Monkman utilized to achieve this effort was through the creation of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle. This alter ego is self-described to “present a very empowered point of view of Indigenous sexuality pre-contact.”[[33]](#footnote-33) This alter ego is gender and sexually fluid, and Monkman explained that its from this influence of queerness that “allows [him] to lighten how [he] treat sometimes very dark subject matter because [he is] looking at effectively a genocide.” [[34]](#footnote-34) In essence, the inclusion of queer identity in Indigenous activist painting provided Monkman both a new perspective and a new sense of agency to bring activism into his work.

Furthermore, secondary analysis of Monkam’s work shows the full scope of flipping western tropes found within his work. Perry argues that “Monkman’s artistic reputation rests on his pushing the boundaries of the acceptable, revisiting Western genres of art and using his work to tell a different story as he sexualizes, decolonizes, and Indigenizes the Western canon.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Further tropes such as the “Dead Indian” and the Western romanticism of the wild west are flipped with each stroke of Monkman’s work.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Now, Monkman’s work is not free of controversy. Most recently, a 2020 piece with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a position of what some have called that of a victim of sexual assault has sparked criticism from Indigenous feminist scholars.[[37]](#footnote-37) However, it is the boundaries that are being pushed and not the methods of pushing them that are deserving of scrutiny.

Jeffrey Gibson is a multi-medium Cherokee sculptor that incorporates queerness in both the colors and messages within their work.[[38]](#footnote-38) Individual pride flag colors denoting specific sexualities such as pansexuality and asexuality are embedded within the work created.[[39]](#footnote-39) The techniques and patters used tend to be Indigenous in origin and both facets of his identity are expressed within his work.[[40]](#footnote-40) Messages such as “making the best out of bad situations” embroidered into his pieces further highlight his efforts and recognition of the struggles his intersectional identity has.[[41]](#footnote-41) Gibson’s work in part seeks to show that much of what is perceived as a precolonial iteration of Indigenous or queer Indigenous art is actually because of recent progress. Rather than fear this disconnect from pre-colonial Indigenous culture, Gibson described it as something that “sort of empowered [him] to feel like there is a trajectory that he’s a part of.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Scholars have failed to confront this new development within the artistic community, which is what Gibson looks to accomplish through his work.

Visual mediums of art further help contribute to understanding of queerness within Indigenous activist artwork. Sydney Freeland, a transgender Navajo filmmaker created an online film called *Drunktown’s Finest*, which explored three Navajo individuals, one of which was transgender, and their struggles both within the reservation and within a predominantly white setting.[[43]](#footnote-43) Through the medium of film, both experiences and insight into Indigenous and Trans identity are confronted together. Freeland herself had not even used a film camera to capture her experiences until she was 23, but she immediately knew “once [she] picked up a camera, [she] knew this is what [she] wanted to do.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Even with no prior experience or knowledge, film provided the medium to capture her shared experiences.

Digital 2-Spirited Artist Patrick Hunter further highlights the power self-creation has through the production of their work. They explained how they “learned early on that designing the things [they] wanted to see brought to life gave me so much more joy than trying to interpret an employer's point of view.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Being able to create art to only one’s own standards is the only way to express one’s experiences and existence fully.[[46]](#footnote-46) Otherwise, artists are simply conforming both their Indigenous and LGBTQ identities to Western standards.

When taken together, each of the mediums is shaped uniquely by LGBTQ identity, but the overall effort of survivance and visibility remains a shared purpose of all of these artists. They highlight the need for art to be created only with the artist’s standards, the individual experiences, and the collective struggle and future hope. As such, the type of medium is essential in understanding the intersecting gender, sexual orientation, and racial dynamics within 2-Spirit art.

**Space**

Beyond the medium itself, considerations to the type and transformation of spaces must be considered to understand how queerness influences Indigenous activists. The four ways in which space is transformed and created comes from traditional fine art spaces, pop cultural art spaces, abstract space to express one’s identity struggles, and the occupation of digital space.

To start, decolonization through artwork and active shaping of museums and galleries is a vital part of 2-Spirited artwork. Museums and galleries prove problematic and at times harmful for many tribal communities because of the questionable ethics of many of the artifact and artwork collections and that they are linked to historical sciences.[[47]](#footnote-47) Research from scholars like Cooper conclude that in part Indigenous artists view success in their artwork not through financial success, but in impact.[[48]](#footnote-48) Museums and galleries are central in creating and invoking dialogues, but only when enabling the art to stand on its own. Queer and Indigenous art are often framed by those that lack one or both identities, minimizing some of its considerations in broader dialogues.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Furthermore, the information found within museum labels and prescriptions of the art and the broader collections the art is a part of the broader power museums must control historical narrative and shift individual narratives.[[50]](#footnote-50) Cooper highlights that language and lack of generalization are two vital components to the visibility and survivance of 2-Spirit individuals, represented in the art itself and by the artists themselves.[[51]](#footnote-51) When they are excluded from the process, regardless of intention, the space embodied in the fine art field no longer becomes supportive of these voices. It is here that another level of decolonization and Indigenization is pushed by both allies and community member.

The structure of presentation further produces silences for 2-Spirit artists. One element of the museum is the emphasis on a linear approach to understanding knowledge and culture. While this linear approach and the understandings of it work well for Western-rooted artwork, it is not a standard desired or looked for by Native artists.[[52]](#footnote-52) This desire carries over to 2-Spirited artists and their activism. Inclusion in a museum goes beyond just the inclusion of more diverse artwork in their eyes. A change in the mechanisms and approaches by museums to share these issues and to change museum studies is required, change that is brought up by the artists themselves to museum leadership. By removing the Western framing of knowledge, a type of decolonization and a more conducive environment for this art is created.

Furthermore, there is a level of influence and classism rooted in the museum field such as from the donation of private collections and galleries. Indigenous populations and queer populations are overwhelmingly given fewer financial opportunities, meaning there is an unequal level of money and power surrounding fine art spaces.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Beyond how information is conveyed at museums, the directors and curators play a huge role in the improper and underwhelming 2-Spirt presence, so they need to ensure they have the proper awareness and education to platform 2-Spirited artists.[[54]](#footnote-54) Trying to frame non-Western Indigenous art within the Western interpretation of a curator particularly at galleries prevents the visibility often of these figures. While museums are rated within the community for being more inclusive and flexible than galleries, decolonization is still necessary in order to prevent its own silences. [[55]](#footnote-55)

     Curators serve as the bridge between the agents of historical production that made the artwork and the public. They historically embody the systems of power and some level of complicity to Western bias.[[56]](#footnote-56) Beyond ensuring existing curators understanding the power they have, the silences of this community within museums reflects the broader shared struggles for increased Queer and Indigenous history in the museum and need for community insight within the exhibit creation process.

To challenge the overwhelming power imbalance of museums, Cooper argues modern queer studies seeks to address the past shortcomings of historiography and scholarship during the production of new archives and collections.[[57]](#footnote-57) For this to occur, a collective effort of artists, curators, and museum leadership must change the balance of power.[[58]](#footnote-58) Curators and museum staff serve as the bridge and interpreters to some of the message of art. If they lack the political, historical, and social understanding of the community the art is standing for, then much of the success of the work itself is lost.

Queerness influenced Indigenous activist artwork in pop culture and other entertainment in both the transformation of Western popular media into an Indigenous interpretation or the creation of new spaces to explore the relation. One source of science fiction media that has received attention is Star Wars. Besides the partnership to translate the original movie into Navajo, there has been some Indigenous representation such as the name “Ewok” to represent the native species fighting against the Empire on their forest moon.[[59]](#footnote-59) This is further evidenced by the creation of “Resistance” galleries in which the theme of rebellion against an empire from Star Wars is transformed into lived or historic experiences such as the original California-based attempt.[[60]](#footnote-60). Added separation of Native and Queer Native populations to represent their identities and voices within just their community comes from the creation of Indigenous Comic Cons. One popular Indigenous brand within this space, the Endwarrior Brothers, seek to challenge colonization and seek gender and native-based empowerment through their self-designed Star Wars/Navajo combinations[[61]](#footnote-61). Further inclusion of their perspective comes from the introduction of new characters sharing these identities and showing the struggles and successes of those within the community.

Beyond the media itself, those that consume the media have a tremendous part in the success of the political side of visibility. Fans create fanart for the show, which sometimes serves as one is first introduction to a particular work of media. Indigenous queer artists bring their visibility here through either creating or writing new characters with Queer and Indigenous identities and further marginalization’s.[[62]](#footnote-62) In addition, they bring visibility of their own existence even through cosplaying of characters. Dezbah Rose, an Indigenous cosplayer, explained how having the space to explore her shared “helped [her] find a sense of being.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Her creations of Indigenous Rey Skywalker and Indigenous Wonder Woman provided critical outlets to address this search for belonging.[[64]](#footnote-64) Collectively, this has at times worked to generate more traction within the companies themselves to give creators the space to create characters not grounded in Western standards.

Space in the abstract sense further is transformed through the production of artwork because of the need for idea development. Queer and Indigenous identified individuals experience even more invisibility in academia. Many faces silence and struggle when compared to Western constructed systems, whether it be the heteropatriarchy, the gender binary, or art standards. To resolve this not only for present members of those with Queer and Indigenous identities, but for future ones, discussions and deliberations without the standards and expectations of the West are vital.

2-Spirit artists face difficulties in even finding space to explore their unique struggles, triumphs, and visibility within their own communities.[[65]](#footnote-65) They face external judgement and influence from scholars and individuals in both their unique tribal leaders and values and from the queer community.[[66]](#footnote-66) It is within this space that new scholarship is explored and understood. Parts of existing framework such as earlier interpretations of intersectionality, queer, and Indigenous studies are approached with modern Intersectional lenses to explore and record this history and present struggle. That alone cannot address the full complexities of these intersectional identities. So, new scholarship is produced to de-Westernize the understanding and approach to this art. This scholarship includes the artwork themselves, art that plays into the historical production process. By making art embracing both identities, they inherently are claiming an abstract space.

Another type of space that has been transformed is digital space. The digital age has brough both new levels of success and visibility and new types of harm for Indigenous Queer individuals.[[67]](#footnote-67) Hashtags and the ability to share content makes content by these artists far more accessible and open to more public audiences. One of the central measures for success for this artwork, because it is inherently political, is to start conversations and these digital mediums increase the frequency and reach of this dialogue.

An added benefit of the digital age is the increased potential for revenue streams and the production of art for a profession.[[68]](#footnote-68) While there are some positions for Indigenous Queer artists, such as in-house artists for certain colleges, and in the museum field, an essential element of this artwork is self-sufficiency.[[69]](#footnote-69) The ability to make money through artwork commissions, the selling of merchandise on art vending sites such as Etsy, and ad revenue from sponsorships ensures the art and messages are that solely of the creator. A huge element of decolonization and indigenization of the museum and professional art fields is showing authentic truths, so removing external bias from western-oriented art standards helps ensure that.

As for harm in the digital age, the silencing of Indigenous 2-Spirited content creators does exist, and creators of color are often treated differently and much harsher by companies than their white counterparts.[[70]](#footnote-70) Such as in the physical world, decolonization efforts are required for social media platforms to give proper space to these artists. Companies have not been completely nonrespondent to this issue.[[71]](#footnote-71) They have supplied both users and the creators themselves have the capacity on many of these platforms to report racist or homophobic accounts and to delete hate-motivated negativity. However, efforts to decolonize space, in whatever form, have been largely led by the artists within the communities they are producing the art to connect with.

Regardless of which of the spaces these artists look to transform, queerness factors into the transformation and creation of space. This is in part because the spaces themselves may be conducive towards one identity but lack the full ability to stand for these identities in the intersectional capacity. It is also because silences in scholarship, society, and the communities themselves that have made difficult the visibility achieved in the present. As the factors that contribute to these silences become increasingly pronounced and understood, it becomes clearer that space is transformed in part because of queer identity.

**Scholarship**

Beyond the mediums and spaces, themselves, the linguistic and intersectional discourse and development within 2-Spirit art history demonstrates how queerness shapes Indigenous activist art. Part of the impact of art is the academic and general audience perception, so the language and lens to analyze the art reflects the complexities of a broader decolonization process.

To start, Queer Indigenous individuals on the transgender spectrum (transgender, nonbinary, 2-Spirit, etc.) confront the societal construct of the gender binary nonexistent in their Indigenous pre-colonial cultural history. While many in the community use the term 2-Spirit, whether to account for the more historical spiritual presence of both masculinity and femininity or the modern pan-Indigenous and LGBTQIA+ umbrella term, others seek to utilize gender neutral language in their specific tribal language or the previous anthropological term.[[72]](#footnote-72) This is far deeper than the semantics of language. It is connected to the broader push to return to precolonial tribal gender and sexuality constructs both in spirituality and identity label. However, the term 2-Spirit itself did not even exist until 1990.[[73]](#footnote-73) Some other popular terms and groups such as the Gay Indians existed too. Though certain tribes have reclaimed the offensive term, recent Indigenous scholars note its colonially traced homophobic roots and push for different terms to be used.[[74]](#footnote-74) Regardless of specific terminology, gender nonconforming Indigenous artists experience amplified struggle because of the gender binary and seek to represent that struggle in their art.

Beyond the term 2-Sprit, further discourse exists within the individual labels used to describe sexuality and gender. There is little consensus on a pan-tribal umbrella term beyond those that use 2-Spirit and others seek to reclaim dated terminology and gender-neutral terminology in their own language. Some tribal elders have spoken against the term of 2-Spirit label if the individual is not fulfilling the cultural assigned role of that label, but there is a growing generational shift of more acceptance towards LGBTQ identities.[[75]](#footnote-75) Both 2-Spirit individuals and the scholars researching them agree that specificity whenever possible is a crucial part in the decolonization proves. Yes, a lack of general agreed upon terminology combined from the vast range of opinions means forming general statements will inherently produce many silences. However, many of these silences can be prevented when the broader context is explored.

Language is further made by the status of bilingualism within many 2-Spirit artists. Many tribes describe non-cisgender identities and nonheteronormative sexualities through their own specific terminology whereas the American LGBTQ+ community utilizes English terms as their source of labeling.[[76]](#footnote-76) This creates a difficult situation in which individuals belong to a tribe with a specific way of defining and covering their experience, but they personally may identify as a different label such as one found in English. This is one of the several ways in which both identities may create different actions. Terms hold a lot of power with identity, as even the terms Non-Binary and Transgender do in part recognize the existence of a gender binary.

The collective intersectional language discourse demonstrates the need for utilizing the correct terminology and identity is vital for proper representation of Queer Indigenous artists and mislabeling only upholds those in power. As such, the term 2-Spirit will be utilized to refer to the shared Indigenous and LGBTQ identities only if the specific tribe an artist belongs to is unknown. Otherwise, they will be referred to as an LGBTQ member of whatever specific tribal, gender, or sexuality identity the artist uses.

Beyond the harm improper labels cause, harm from white scholars’ interpretations of 2-Spirit Indigenous coming out stories. Morgensen explains how LGBTQ nonnative coming out is written as a declaration of identity where one “musters their courage and, anticipating conflict, announces their sexuality to a friend or family member—at the risk of being met with anger, resistance, violence or flat-out rejection or abandonment.”[[77]](#footnote-77) It is the establishment of a different community. Morgensen contrasts this through their framing of Indigenous people as “coming in” rather than “coming out” because it is when an Indigenous person “who is glbt comes to understand their relationship to and place and value in their own family, community, culture, history and present-day world.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Rather than write off the usefulness of the nonnative perspective, present Indigenous studies scholar seek to place them in broader decolonization conversations. Through white Queer individuals face discrimination for their LGBTQ identity, their whiteness provides a far different set of privilege than Indigenous identity with visibility of art and at times do actively uphold systems at power through appropriating aspects of Indigenous culture like these coming out stories.[[79]](#footnote-79) It cannot be understated enough that there are colonial roots to these shortcomings of white LGBTQ individuals, but their complicitly can not be ignored.

Just as how White LGBTQ individuals can uphold the systems of power through appropriation of Indigenous culture, non-LGBTQ Indigenous individuals can uphold heteronormativity and transphobia. Difficultly from the Indigenous aspect of identity comes in part with the hypermasculine expectations certain tribes create. Morgensen argues that there is “intergenerational trauma that exists in tribal communities today has manifested into the hyper masculinity of the Indigenous man, domestic abuse, and sexual violence.”[[80]](#footnote-80) This hypermasculinity further creates gender dysphoria and additional hardship for some transgender and nonbinary tribal members sourcing from the fixation on masculinity. In addition, some tribes lack LGBTQ protection within governance and uphold homophobia and transphobia in belief. [[81]](#footnote-81)Again, these are colonial rooted from the heteronormative patriarchy and the fixation on the gender binary but are afflicted by Indigenous members to their LGBTQ co-members. It makes it difficult with some of these artists to uphold survivance through connection to a pre-colonial past because upholding certain parts of tribal culture harms the LGBTQ community.[[82]](#footnote-82) Through exploring the roots of these shortcomings in both scholarship and the artwork itself, the full impact on queer identity with Indigenous settler-colonialism and in turn its representation in art can be found.

It is important to recognize that the harm within each of the communities of both the LGBTQ+ and Indigenous portions of their identity are rooted in colonial systems and thus the focus should be challenging those forces and not blaming marginalized communities for an issue an oppressive force created. Regardless of the origin of the harm, it is still present within tribal populations themselves and it too requires a degree of decolonization.

Harm and silence further present itself within Queer and Indigenous studies. There is a severe underdevelopment and lack of research on the intersecting of Queer and Indigenous identities, yet alone how class, ability status, etc. all further create different experiences.[[83]](#footnote-83) Not all scholars share the same interpretations of the historiography and understanding of this art. Part of the struggle of scholarship comes from the difficulty in finding sources. More intersectional and representative interpretations of overlapping identity art have been produced in the past few decades, following a broader shift in the cultural shift for more intersectionality.[[84]](#footnote-84) As such, the lack of intersectional considerations for much of Indigenous art scholarship combined with active efforts since the 1960’s to increase 2-Spririt visibility in scholarship and art alike.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, LGBTQ+ identity in Indigenous activist artwork requires explorations far beyond the medium and message of the art itself. This art is part of a broader effort to revitalize pre-colonial Indigenous cultures through returning to non-Western labels for sexuality and gender. Struggles to find representation and visibility presents itself not only within Western historiography and artistic spaces, but within LGBTQ and Indigenous spaces themselves. There is a shared effort, regardless of the individual circumstances and background that influence an artist’s experience, of survivance and future hope. Whether it be the adoption of explicitly queer art forms such as drag and traditional Indigenous powwow and crafts or the utilization of mediums not specific to either community to flip Western tropes and norms, these artists adapt and create space for themselves to thrive.

While this community may not be linguistically unified and experiences cannot be collectivized, there is a collective effort for increased visibility through survivance. Though there are a myriad of other factors such as class, geography, and religion that highlight the need for individual analysis of 2-Spirited Art rather than comparative analysis, they still do fall under the same effort of upholding both identities by creating hope for the future and highlighting both negative and positive figures and events in art. Recent efforts in scholarship to adapt this intersectional presence within Indigenous artwork reflect these efforts because these identities cannot be separated in how they shape experience. By combining both Indigenous artist perspective and methodology with Western approaches, the context and influence LGBTQ identity has on art is established. So, the existing methodology is effective in the present, but can be made more effective with intersectional analysis and indigenization.

As for what specifically should be explored further, there are a few of the other identity factors and historical developments that would serve useful for further research. To start, the role specifically of Christianity on the proliferation of homophobia and how artists confront it would further help explicate how the West instilled heteronormative patriarchy and the gender binary as systems of power. Furthermore, the AIDs crisis hit hard within the LGBTQ Indigenous population, and it was addressed in a myriad of mediums such as plays, song, and painting. Comparing White, Indigenous, AAPI, and POC Queer artwork during the AIDs crisis and how race, gender, and class shaped activist artwork at such a monumental point of their history. Based on the method and source findings, minimal research and scholarship exist on such comparisons at the present, so there is much potential for exploration. In addition, complications in how shared LGBTQ African and Indigenous identities versus explicitly LGBTQ Indigenous shapes artwork and debates over blood quantum and what exactly constitutes a LGBTQ Indigenous artist further need and deserve further analysis. Ultimately, more research is needed to contextualize other identities and experiences to provide more specificity to certain parts of the research findings.

Decolonization and Indigenization is a long and ongoing process. There is no metric for success or for societal evolution of thought. It is an effort of survivance and a fight for truthful visibility that has occurred for decades and for decades to come. Present society has failed to provide proper spaces for just exclusively Indigenous or Queer individuals, yet alone those with intersecting identities. Indigenous artworks bring their political voices with the inclusion of both identity and struggle through the transformation of scholarship, medium, and space. It is up to those with the capacity of historical production and retroactive significance, ranging from allies to institutions such as museums and galleries to educate themselves and to embrace this artwork in the form the artist choses and free of Western bias. These artists are committed to the fight, they just need the proper support and tools to complete the journey. Thus, Queer Indigenous political artwork and the academic writings and conversations sparked around them demonstrate how queerness influences space, medium, and theory through both the adaptation of western mediums and Indigenous techniques as means of survivance and creating visibility.

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