

More Than Two-Spirit:
Queer Indigenous Sovereignty and Survivance in Museums

Caitlin S. Cooper

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Committee:

Kristine Morrissey, Chair

Luana Ross

Amanda Lock Swarr

Qwo-Li Driskill

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Abstract

The intention of this study was to identify ways museums represent Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists. This qualitative study included interviews with six Two-Spirit/queer Indigenous artists, using a phenomenological approach. Museums as cultural institutions built upon colonial ideals have the responsibility to amend museological authority that silence the voices of and refuse space to those that traverse intersectional identities.

Two-Spirit artists examine the historical relationship of race, gender, and power as they pertain to material culture, contemporary self-expression, and art. Within this art they are Indigenizing Western academic spaces like museums, demanding accountability from institutions considered vessels of cultural knowledge. Findings suggest that curators' willingness to listen, communicate, and engage in dialog is critical. The study also found that Two-Spirit artists' work confronts heteronormativity by exhibiting shifts in gender roles across cultures and time and embodying the values of community organizing, storytelling, and survival.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Alongside contemporary identity politics and common media, representations of gender and sexuality are significantly emerging in museums before the eyes of the American public (Tyburczy, 2013, p. 107). As exhibitions, collections, and programs are conceptualized, intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality are at risk of being articulated incorrectly through the lens of heteronormativity, for instance, gender and sexual identities that do not fit neatly into common media's perceptions of the homosexual (Mills, 2010, p. 84).

Museums as cultural institutions must abide in shifts of gender roles and identities across cultures within exhibitions. Before being presented, the vast intersections of race, gender, and sexuality need to be understood historically (Mills, 2010, p. 84). Gender historians argue that defining gender variant Indigenous peoples is contradictory throughout literature due to being swayed by contemporary identity politics and romanticizing Native American third or fourth genders (Carpenter, 2011, p. 147). Tyburczy (2013) contests that today's queer scholarship foregrounds the politics of historiography and addresses these issues in its emphasis on constructing, interpreting, and developing archives (p. 107). Ways to disrupt heteronormative interpretation in the public sphere is to decolonize museums by presenting authentic narratives told by the artists and people who experience them. Another way to disrupt the heteronormative tendencies of colonized curation is to queer the styles of presentation themselves; challenging both linear history but also bringing to light the ways the public responds to history (Mills, 2010, p. 85).

Curators, collections managers, and artists alike can curb this culturally censored representation of gender and sexuality in museums. Contemporary Native artist Kent Monkman (Cree), who has paved the way for Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists, deliberately

comments on this underrepresentation through his art. Monkman inflates romanticism through his paintings by recasting historically mythological figures and creatures and juxtaposes them with images of Hollywood's version of the cowboy and Indian (Whyte, 2015, para. 3). A critique of Monkman's work says, "Monkman's queer-culture send-up of the foundational myths of Western patriarchal culture are the thin edge of his critical wedge, forcing open a more fraught conversation about the gross brutalities of colonial culture" (Whyte, 2015, para. 6). Monkman has a Two-Spirit alter-ego christened Miss Chief Share Eagle Testikle, who is himself dressed in stylized Indigenous drag. Miss Chief is only one agent that appears in Monkman's work and helps him work-play with sexuality and gender to discuss power, subjectivity, and colonization. Monkman applies the concept of hybridity internally within his own personal experience as a Two-Spirit, mixed-raced individual and externally through his art. By embracing his unique identity made up of multiple identities, Monkman is then able to occupy a hybrid space – turning the power dynamic of the colonizer on its head and moving outside of the constructs that have been historically built around him (Swanson, n.d., p. 2).

Queer Indigenous artists use their work as a method for cultural navigation and wayfinding, illustrating its transformative impact in expressing new, intersectional identities and historical viewpoints to non-Native audiences in the museum. In a society that so heavily relies on language within Western academia to articulate critical analysis of complex cultural identities, visual, literary, and performance art in the museum can serve as communicating critique of colonization that traverses language and calls upon individual interpretation. Two-Spirit/Queer Indigenous artists lend unique perspectives based on their lived experiences both drawing from the colonial past and imagining a decolonized paradise.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose and intention of this study is to identify characteristics of ways museums represent Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists.

1. Do museums project the voices of Two-Spirit and Queer Indigenous artists?
2. Do museums as cultural institutions hold space for Two-Spirit and Queer Indigenous artists?
3. What characteristics exist within a curator/Two-Spirit artist collaboration that makes it successful?

Chapter II: Literature Review

Identity Terminology and Language

In 2011, editors of *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* came together to develop a definition of Two-Spirit that is embraced among some Indigenous communities, scholars and artists:

Two-Spirit or Two-Spirited is an umbrella term in English that (1) refers to the gender constructions and roles that occur historically in many Native gender systems that are outside of the colonial binaries and (2) refers to contemporary Native people who are continuing and/or reclaiming these roles within their communities. It is also used... within grassroots Two-Spirit societies... [and is] meant to be inclusive of those who identify as Two-Spirit or with tribally specific terms, but also GLBTQ Native people more broadly. (Driskill, et al., 2011, p. 4)

Before European contact, Two-Spirit members of Indigenous communities were acknowledged and respected in many Indigenous communities and sometimes possessed a unique role for the tribe; some transfeminine individuals undertook traditional women's day-to-day tasks such as agricultural labor and some transmasculine individuals undertook men's duties such as participating in warfare (Carpenter, 2011, p. 148). Described in "The Social Construction of Gender and Sexuality: Learning from Two Spirit Traditions", Two-Spirit people "...were ceremonial leaders; they performed the duties of shamans/priests who acted as advisors in conflict resolution, and as medical doctors; they were caretakers and teachers of children; and they served vital economic roles with their cultivation, cooking, and weaving" (Brown 1997; Gilley 2006; Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997; Mayo and Sheppard 2012; Roscoe 1998; Williams 1986).

While older literature is quick to describe the various roles that Two-Spirit people may or may not have fulfilled, more contemporary literature focuses on the many definitions of what it means to be Two-Spirit, drawing on the past while presenting oneself in the present. The term not only fluctuates from tribal community to tribal community but also from individual to individual. Geo Soctomah Neptune, Two-Spirit basket weaver of the Passamaquoddy tribe of Indian Township, Maine, explains that "Two-Spirit has many manifestations," they add. "It means something different to every Two-Spirit" (Brammer, 2016).

Thus, explaining one's identity as a Two-Spirit person can be challenging to those accustomed to Western concepts of gender or sexual orientation. Older bodies of literature regarding the Native American "*Berdache*" were commonly associated with Two-Spirit people. These earlier historical accounts are limited and at times inconsistent and confusing (Slater, Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 147). One consistency in contemporary literature, however, acknowledges the term "*Berdache*" as inappropriate and offensive by Native Americans as well as anthropologists (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang, 1997, p. 3). The word is Persian or Arabic in origin and was used to refer to young boys enslaved and kept for sexual purposes. The term was also used to identify the passive partner in male homosexual relationships (Slater, Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 147).

Native LGBTQIA people have refused and dis-identified themselves from this terminology by turning to specific words from within their Indigenous language to both understand and present themselves (Driskill, et al., 2011, p. 6). This process is individualistic from tribe to tribe and can be complicated in regard to the conflation of sexuality and gender expressions (p. 156). Driskill illustrates with an example of approaching a Cherokee language speaker or elder for a translation for the English word "gay". The elder has the potential of

saying “no”, whereas asking speakers if there are words for individuals who live as a gender other than what they were assigned at birth have the potential of revealing different answers (p. 157). Sometimes the words that emerge from a LGBTQIA individuals’ Native language have no translation in English; that the term alone points to strangeness or ambiguity, precisely that that cannot be –or better yet *need* to be explained.

One historian of gender suggests that defining non-binary Indigenous peoples is contradictory throughout literature due to being swayed by contemporary identity politics and romanticizing Native American third or fourth genders (Carpenter, 2011, p. 147). According to Swanson’s (n.d.) rationale, Two-Spiritedness cannot be considered separate from the colonization, since there would be no need for such a term had colonization not enforced gender identity through the genesis of patriarchal and pious gender norms. And thus, the term “Two-Spirit” can be used productively, as both an organizing tool and a specific political orientation that deflects colonial constructs and that rationalizes a decolonial agenda around topics and issues of gender and sexuality (Driskill, 2011, p. 5).

Decolonizing Museum Curation and Exhibitions

Truth telling has been offered as simple but powerful notion on how to begin and to continue the decolonization of educational, cultural, and state institutions. Taiaiake Alfred asserts,

Decolonization... is a process of discovering the truth in a world created out of lies. It is thinking through what we think we know to what is actually true but is obscured by knowledge derived from our experiences as colonized peoples. The truth is the main struggle, and the struggle is manifest mainly inside our own heads. From there, it goes to our families and our communities and reverberates outward into the larger society,

beginning to shape our relationship with it. In a colonized reality, our struggle is with all existing forms of political power, and to this fight, we bring our only real weapon: the power of truth. (Sleeper-Smith, 2009, p. 326)

During and in the wake of the Civil War, Indian boarding schools ran by the Federal Government were heavily infiltrated with Christian missionaries who forced Native children from their home communities to be assimilated into Western ideals of “civilization”. Part of the boarding school agenda prevented Native students from growing their hair, practicing their ceremonies, and speaking their tribal languages. The boarding school children were taught English haphazardly, as a result, not only were they not able to understand what the authorities expected of them but also they were unable to speak to each other in English or any Native tongue (Nibley, 2009).

Anguksuar or Little Man (also known as Richard LaFortune), member of the Yupik tribe and co-founder of American Indian Gays and Lesbians (Minneapolis), comments on the boarding school experience and the stripping of Native identities,

These children were having the culture rubbed out of them. They could go home and no longer speak to their parents or grandparents. They couldn't speak English well because the schools were badly run. They couldn't speak to their families any longer and so the intergeneration[al] transmission of information; Culture, religion, [and] spirituality –you name it. Everything you need to know to be human and to be at home in your cosmos... it was gone. (Nibley, 2009)

Still, examples of systematic violence like these exist everywhere in culture, in our country's history and across the globe, ingrained into the lives of marginalized minority groups. Dean Spade (2015) explains,

These norms shape how we understand ourselves, others, and the world. They permeate every area of life down to the smallest details of how we chew our food or walk or talk, to the broadest systemic standards of how we keep time, measure productivity, and come to identify and understand human life. (p. 55)

As a result of forced Westernized norms, these atrocities inadvertently continue to affect Two-Spirit people even within the larger LGBTQIA community. The needs and experiences of people of color, people with disabilities, immigrants, poor people, and Indigenous people are often overlooked by the lesbian and gay rights agenda due to preserving the race and class privilege of a select few, elite professionals; typically white gay people with higher education credentials and wealth (Spade, 2015, p. 34).

The effects of the “racialization” of peoples is also a product of the establishing colonial interests in land and labor that founded the United States as illustrated in Dean Spade’s *Normal Life* (2015, p. 8). Racialization is another system of violence born from colonialism and reared by the state. As mentioned before, colonization attempted by assimilation and Indigenous identity erasure was the Europeans’ main strategies to take over Native America. Ethnicization or racialization, by definition, is “the act or process of imbuing a person with a consciousness of race distinctions or of giving a racial character to something or making it serve racist ends (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)” Thus, racialization is a tactic to continue to *disidentify* LGBTQIA people of color from themselves and perpetuate misconceptions of one another within the community. José Esteban Muñoz utilizes this concept of disidentification and provides an in-depth definition on its use in queer theory,

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a

fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (Munoz, 1999, p. 31)

For Indigenous people, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm explains, "To reclaim and express our sexuality is part of the larger path to decolonization" (Rifkin, 2012, p. 28).

Violence is instilled upon gender liminal, gender-nonconforming and trans bodies by the state in a multitude of ways such as the refusal of healthcare, isolation and detainment in prison systems, and biometric surveillance. Trans bodies marginalized by racial minorities, gender, and working class experience even more complex oppressive systems; programs and policies built upon European entitlement that ensure people of color are kept in poverty, that their land is for the taking and abusing, and that they are economically exploited (Spade, 2015, p.61). Micha Cardenas explains that,

Working for justice for trans women of color is a decolonizing effort, as it works against shared histories of colonial violence against black, latina, Asian, and mixed-race women, from slavery as a form of external colonialism, to settler colonialism in the Americas, to the neocolonialism of the drug war. To work for decolonization, these efforts for justice should center the leadership of Two-Spirit people and non-Western non-binary people such as the muxe of Mexico. (Boellstorff et al., 2014, p. 246)

It is important to note this dichotomy; that the acknowledgment of the violent laws imposed by historical settler colonial control upon Native people taught settlers inflicting this

work and other non-Natives witnessing it that modern sexuality is automatically settler sexuality (Morgensen, 2011, p. 35). Therefore, it is difficult to separate the definition of modern sexuality as defined by white-supremacy from the definition understood by Natives, racialized peoples, and those historically assimilated into Western culture as a whole (p. 35). Daniel Heath Justice argues, "To ignore sex and embodied pleasure in the cause of Indigenous liberation is to ignore one of our greatest resources. It is to deny one of our most precious gifts. Every orgasm can be an act of decolonization" (Driskill, 2016 p. 139).

Dion Million emphasizes that "to 'decolonize' means to understand as fully as possible the forms colonialism takes in our own times (Rifkin, 2012, p. 28)." Museums, as cultural institutions built on colonial ideals, possess a critical responsibility of not only accurately transferring historical knowledge, but to incorporate the voices of those cultures that have historically been silenced. Colonial powers have thrived in state institutions by generating shame around certain relations and practices as a "debilitating force of...social control" so to project voices of controversial topics, like the sexual violence sanctioned by the state in Indian boarding schools, exhibits an "alternative truth [that goes] against the same state that is the protector of the civil truth" (p. 60).

Patrik Stoern (2012) argues in his article, "Curating Queer Heritage: Queer Knowledge and Museum Practice",

Museums with ambitions to be queer need to reflect on their role as institutions and as producers of power and of normative meaning. They should allow for queer presences to occur on their own terms rather than co-opt LGBT culture as a way to seem more radical than they really are. Museums should instead facilitate the production of queer meaning in their collections through innovative display, groundbreaking research, and encouraging

subversive social events on their grounds. New ways of involving the LGBT community on queer matters will probably prove to be the path that leads to new directions for the social role of the museum. (p. 364)

Disrupting heteronormative presentation and interpretation in the public sphere is to reflect on the traditional style of presentation born from colonialism. Levin (2010) argues that, Any good work on Western museum history will demonstrate how the institution has been complicit in the construction of white male heteronormativity, whether it be through its role as an emblem of state power and repository of its heritage; its significance as the storehouse of objects gained through colonialism and the creation of empire; its development of a narrative of history that features and polices traditional gender roles; or its evolution from a nineteenth century scientific society dedicated to exploration and discovery. (p. 7)

Don Romesburg (2014) illustrates in his article that queer museum studies scholars have made efforts to identify how museums represent and facilitate queer understanding outside of silenced voices, unrecorded histories and romanticized narratives (p. 136). He asserts that LGBTQIA people have been disconnected from national identities and other normative communities. Part of this results in the museums capability of reflecting ones identity onto themselves. Romeburg cites Anna Conlan in her claim that, “Museums can “demarcate[e] who is legitimate or illegitimate; acceptable or unacceptable; worthy of grieving or not worthy of grieving...Thus, museum practice and theory have responsibilities towards disavowed queer lives past and present” (p. 136-137).

Indigenization as Resistance and Survivance

Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous people are reimagining “decolonization” as “Indigenization” through Native community organizing, storytelling, and art. These modes function as powerful theoretical work towards Indigenizing museum representation while expressing collective and sovereign survivance. Survivance is intentionally used here to differentiate from survival, which insinuates the fulfillment of existence. Survivance was coined by Anishinaabe cultural theorist Gerald Vizenor (2008) as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of Native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of Native survivancy” (p. 19).

Community organizing can create spaces to project voices of the unspeakable violence of the past and present, bringing light to controversial topics. This political platform makes room for understanding the Two-Spirit perspective by tracing a history that transcends through their traditional perspective into contemporary reality, healing themselves and their communities. Scott Morgensen (2008) reviews Brian Joseph Gilley’s book *“Becoming Two-Spirit”*, and focuses on Gilley’s take on centering Two-Spirit organizing. Gilley discusses how Two-Spirit organizers, like participants from the Denver Two-Spirit Society and “Green Country Two-Spirit Society” (a pseudonym for anonymity) in Oklahoma, confront modern anthropologists with demands of holding themselves and previous anthropological records accountable for incorrect historical information regarding Two-Spirits. Additionally, as part of these demands, Two-Spirit organizers signal to the critical importance of Native people speaking upon their experiences in the present.

The two major issues Native American activists and organizers held against most museums in the past were (1) the collection of Native human remains, sacred and funerary objects, and other material culture as patrimony for use by majority culture and (2) the ways in which majority culture disadvantaged participation by American Indian people in representing their own cultures and lives (Sleeper-Smith, 2009, p. 135-6). Gilley's (2006) methodologies challenge those of non-Native academics who feel they must comment on historical and contemporary accounts experienced by Two-Spirit people. Gilley argues for the importance of letting Native conversations rest without a contextualizing analysis by social theory. San Francisco organization Gay American Indians (GAI), the first group of its kind in the United States, is run by Native people but produced collections of literature written by Non-Native LGBTQA authors. White lesbian author, Judy Grahn's book *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (1984) argues that by respecting gender and sexual diversity, Native American Societies and other ancient or Indigenous peoples traditionally recognized a primal truth shared by all gay men and lesbians (Morgensen, 2011, p. 4). Grahn utilized research done by previous white anthropologists who wrote colonial accounts of the *berdache*. This wasn't the only publication or author that caused controversy within GAI. Authors cited earlier in this chapter like Roscoe and Katz were also white people writing about the histories of Native American gender and sexuality and appropriated these multifaceted cultures to white gay and lesbian liberation (p. 11). Both GAI and the publications intended to connect back to historical Native ties, serving Native queer people by helping them understand their own and other people's subjugation to colonial heteropatriarchy, all the while remaining sovereign in their organization, distinct from non-Native queer politics. Because white authors have been involved in influencing non-Native queer politics through the lens of Native queer histories, it can be

argued that GAI telling their own stories in their own words is critical and invaluable to the queer community at large (p. 11).

While there may be similar circumstances experienced among Native and non-Native queer people and opportunities of meeting in a place of compassion and empathy; many times when a Two-Spirit person comes out it means having to make a choice between being Indigenous and straight or revealing and embracing the Two-Spirit identity which can mean that the Two-Spirit individual is left without a tribal community to connect with and is then at risk of being exoticized by non-Native queer communities (Gilley, 2006, p. 66). Alex Wilson (Neyonawak Inniniwak from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation) discusses the difference between non-Native “coming-out” stories and Native “coming-in” stories,

In these narratives, “coming out” is typically a declaration of an independent identity: an glbt person 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. In the narratives of Two-Spirit people, however, “coming in” is not a declaration or an announcement. Rather, it is an affirmation of interdependent identity: an Aboriginal 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. “Coming in” is not a declaration or an announcement; it is simply presenting oneself and being fully present as an Aboriginal person who is glbt. (2008)

Therefore, by carefully acknowledging the differences as well as the similarities within an intersectional community, the community then becomes stronger and the alliances build more effective decolonial movements (Driskill, 2011, p. 214).

In addition to community organization, storytelling, re-storytelling and reimagining notions of nationhood interrupt transphobia brought on by colonialism (Driskill, 2016, p. 5). Interventions like these reverse the violent mobilization of colonization and contribute and strengthen the resistance pathways of Indigenization. For instance, *Two-Spirit Acts: Queer Indigenous Performances* demonstrates the storytelling of three Two-Spirit theater artists sharing their lived experiences through their work (O'Hara, 2013, p. xxii). O'Hara writes "their art is an invitation for us to collectively move away from the dominant paradigm in which logic is valued over intuition/imagination, competition over collaboration, male-centered over life-centered, and hierarchal over shared power."

Afsaneh Najmabadi (2014) poses the question in *Professing Selves*, "How can we move beyond thinking of narrativization as an act of making sense of lives already lived to what makes living lives possible?" (p. 280). She argues that these narratives and stories are significant because by telling them, we live meaningfully during the present moment of our lives. This is also relevant for the survival of Two-Spirit people. Robin Farris believes that Cherokee Two-Spirit people were "a part of the circle" within the Cherokee community but at some point were separated out due to colonial forces (Driskill, 2016, p. 160). She explains, "Now I think we're struggling to get back in the circle... I think we were part of the circle, and it was accepted and it was just a different way of being, and unique to each individual, but all part of the whole community... I think we can get back there. I'm optimistic." Farris' quote points to an ideology that Qwo-Li Driskill addresses in *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory*, when they explain that the art of overcoming decolonial struggles and balancing the present and future is to work to centralize womxn¹, Two-Spirit people, and queer/trans folks back to the circle of

¹ "Womxn" is used here to both refuse the suffix 'man' and encompass all femme presenting individuals especially womxn of color, trans-womxn, and all spectrums of womxn-identified groups.

how we imagine what is possible for our futures - reweaving, remaking, rebeautifying, recovering, regaining, and rebalancing through telling Two-Spirit stories (p. 166).

Morgensen (2011) writes, “Native GLBTQ organizations arose by linking community building to its implications for broader social change. Most writers attest that Two-Spirit groups arose to help Native GLBTQ people find a new sense of identity, community, or ancestral and cultural ties by reclaiming Two-Spirit histories (p. 141).” This is another part of this important work to restore space for Two-Spirit people within their respective communities. Two-Spirit people honor the past in order to honor themselves in the present and imagine the possibilities of the future together. And in order to achieve that, Two-Spirit people must keep telling stories that link them to themselves and to each other.

Once Two-Spirits are able to organize together within their respective tribal communities through storytelling, it is then the responsibility for non-Native LGBTQ people to become involved in critiquing settler colonialism and ways to decolonize Native communities by way of Two-Spirit peoples methods (Driskill, 2011, p. 132). Additionally, non-Native people who wish to become involved in organizing with Two-Spirit individuals must commit first to self-reflexively studying settler colonialism as a condition of their own and Two-Spirit people’s lives and engaging critical theories and practices that surfaced historically in Native LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizing (p. 132-34).

Queer Indigenous people use their work as a method for cultural navigation and wayfinding, illustrating its transformative impact in expressing new, intersectional identities and historical viewpoints to non-Native audiences in the museum. In a society that so heavily relies on language within Western academia to articulate critical analysis of complex cultural

identities, visual, literary, and performance art in the museum can serve as communicating critique of colonization that traverses language and calls upon individual interpretation.

When Two-Spirit and Queer Indigenous artists express themselves through their work, they are at once reflecting upon themselves as sexual beings breaking outside the gender constructs of colonial control and enacting this work to decolonize the same colonial functions of control (Rifkin, 2012, p. 28). Two-Spirit artists embrace the erotic to not only resist shame, trauma, and erasure of Native peoplehood imposed through European assimilation but also survive as a multi-faceted being in the world. Additionally, this work expresses the possibilities of imagining a LGBTQIA community that not only decolonizes heteropatriarchal concepts of sexuality and gender but also simultaneously Indigenizes them.

Two-Spirit artists examine the historical relationship of race, gender, and power as they pertain to material culture, contemporary self-expression, and art. Within this art they are Indigenizing academic spaces like museums built on colonial ideals, demanding accountability from institutions considered vessels of cultural knowledge. Two-Spirit artists' work confronts heteronormativity brought on by colonialism by exhibiting shifts in gender roles across cultures and time and embodying the values of community organizing, storytelling, and survival.

Two-Spirit critiques see theory practiced through poetry, memoir, fiction, story, song, dance, theater, visual art, film, and other genres. Theory is not just *about* interpreting genres, these genres *do* theoretical work. 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.” (Driskill, 2016, p. 34)

Chapter III: Methods

The purpose and intention of this study was to identify characteristics of ways museums give voice to Two-Spirit and Queer Indigenous Artists. The following research questions were addressed:

1. Do museums project the voices of Two-Spirit and Queer Indigenous artists?
2. Do museums as cultural institutions hold space for Two-Spirit and Queer Indigenous artists?
3. What characteristics exist within a curator/Two-Spirit artist collaboration that makes it successful?

Research Methods

I used a qualitative approach and strove to acknowledge and respect the vast intersections of Native American, First Nations, and Indigenous cultures and their individual gender and sexual identities. This phenomenological approach explored the views of participants, Two-Spirit/queer Indigenous artists, through semi-structured interviews. This approach attempted to honor the participant's voice. I chose this approach to ground my study in ethics through research models like Cree scholar, Shawn Wilson's, three R's of Indigenous methodologies: Respect, Reciprocity, and Relationality of the aforementioned cultural and personal intersections without risking misinterpretation or over-generalization. Additionally, participants were able to share historical information about their tribal communities and tell their personal stories. Shawn Wilson (2008) describes the significance of storytelling, "Stories and metaphor are often used in Indigenous societies as a teaching tool. Stories allow listeners to draw their own conclusions and to gain life lessons from a more personal perspective" (2008, p. 17). Wilson also explains,

Dominant system researchers have stated that interviews should be open-ended and dialog based (Spradley, 1979) in order to allow for a mutual sharing of information

(Mishler, 1989). Interviews are focused discussions that allow the researcher to gather information directly from the point of view expressed by the research subject. To re-state this method into Indigenous terms, I talked with other Indigenous people about the subject of my study. In addition to helping me to learn more about Indigenous research, talking with the participants helped me to build relationships with many of these people, who I now consider friends. (p. 41)

“A Two-Spirit Journey” co-written by Ojibwa-Cree elder Ma-Nee Chacaby and Mary Louisa Plummer (2016) provides an afterword including an analysis of Western social science and Indigenous knowledge-sharing. In this analysis the importance of creating a close, multidimensional relationship that fosters a trust is highlighted versus the negative modes of sourcing a bias which is often the nature of Western research paradigms (p. 220).

I also framed my research methodologies within Maori professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s analysis of gender difference linked to Western knowledge. Smith (2012) claims, “Ideas about gender difference and what that means for a society can similarly be traced back to the fragmented artefacts and representations of Western culture, and to different and differentiated traditions of knowledge” (p. 47). She goes on to describe the imposition of Western social institutions of marriage, family life, and class systems on Indigenous peoples and how this enforcement permeates the intense complexities of translating a non-gendered history,

These institutions were underpinned by economic systems, notions of property and wealth, and were increasingly legitimated in the West through Judaeo-Christian beliefs. Economic changes from feudal to capitalist modes of production influenced the construction of the ‘family’ and the relations of women and men in Western societies. Gender distinctions and hierarchies are also deeply encoded in Western languages. It is

impossible to speak without using this language, and, more significantly for Indigenous peoples, it is impossible to translate or interpret our societies into English, French or Castilian, for example, without making gendered distinctions. (Smith, 2012, p. 48)

Interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured with probes. For example, one question asks, “Do you believe that museums as cultural institutions hold space for Two-Spirit artists? Why or why not? With a follow up probe of, “If not, what would this space look like?”

Sampling

I chose purposive snowball sampling due to the nature of close communities and relations that make up Indigenous/Native American and Queer populations. The artists interviewed included Dayna Danger (Metis/Ojibway/Polish), Demian DinéYazhi’ (born to the clans Tódich’íí’nii (Bitter Water) and Naasht’ézhí Tábaqhá (Zuni Clan Water's Edge) of the Diné (Navajo)), Vanessa Dion Fletcher (Potawatomi and Lenape), Freyr A. Marie, Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo), and Storme Webber (Aleut/Black/Choctaw). These artists were purposively selected based on the following criteria: They are contemporary artists that either openly identify as Two-Spirit or a subset of the term and/or whose subject matter expresses issues surrounding Two-Spirit people. I selected artists with expansive gender and sexual identities from different tribal communities, both federally documented/recognized and not, different age brackets, geographical region and art mediums to lend unique perspectives and present voices from various points of presentation and experience. Participants were recruited through introductions made by colleagues and personal research. University of Washington IRB approved all protocol.

Instruments and Protocol

The interviews took place using video conferencing over 30 days and lasting between 30 minutes to 2 hours. All audio interviews were recorded via zoom video conferencing and on a digital recorder except for one interview conducted via email correspondence. The files were uploaded to a research file using NVIVO. Interviews were coded using a combination of a priori and emergent coding.

Interview questions for artists include:

1. What does Two-Spirit mean to you?
 - Probe: Is it/how is it reflected in your artwork?

2. Have museums given you a voice?
 - Probe: In what ways have museums restricted your voice as a Two-Spirit artist?

3. Do you believe that museums as cultural institutions hold space for Two-Spirit/Queer Indigenous artists? Why or why not?
 - Probe: If not, ideally what would this space look like?

4. What issues are predominantly addressed in your subject matter?
 - Probe: Why are they important to you and Indian Country at large?

5. Does your work help retell/reimagine history for Queer Indigenous people?

6. In your experience as an artist, what characteristics exist within an exhibition concept or curator collaboration that makes it successful?

Analysis Protocol

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVIVO software. Interviews were coded using a combination of a priori and emergent coding. The a priori coding was informed by themes in the literature including decolonizing museum practices and modes of community resistance and survival within sovereign Indigenous identities. Most importantly, analysis was drawn from the meaningful dialogue that took place between myself and participants, helping me to shape conclusions by bringing their voices to the forefront and conveying strategies of resistance.

Responses to the question about how museums have exhibited, represented and projected the voices of Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists were coded into six emergent categories:

1. Terminology and Language
2. Voice
3. Space
4. Subject Matter
5. Re-Imagining History
6. Success

Chapter IV: Results and Discussion

Introduction

The intention of this study was to identify characteristics of ways museums represent Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists. This qualitative design consisted of examining views of participants, six Two-Spirit/queer Indigenous artists, through a phenomenological approach, which included semi-structured interviews.

This chapter summarizes the results and themes from the collected data, organized according to the study's research questions and preceded by a description of what a successful exhibition experience looks like from a Two-Spirit/queer Indigenous perspective. Data were analyzed according to emergent themes in both the selected literature and interview responses.

Findings

Terminology and Language

I began the interview by clarifying the sexual and gender identities that the artists wished to be respected as within my study. I also asked each artist to provide me with their tribal affiliation or tribal communities from which they consider home. Following these preliminary queries, I opened with a question that addressed the artists understanding, personal definition and/or association with the term "Two-Spirit".

Artists acknowledged the term Two-Spirit as pan-Indian and an umbrella term coined by Indigenous LGBTQ people to differentiate their cultural experience from the larger community. For instance Demian DinéYazhi' explained, "It comes out of a group of Indigenous folks who gathered in the early 90's and really needed a term for LGBTQ community." Similarly, Dayna Danger illustrated the term's flexibility, "For me Two-Spirit is just an umbrella term just like queer. As far as my understanding is that there were folks that coined the term to differentiate

our experience.” Vanessa Dion Fletcher commented on the term’s usefulness when retrofitted into the English language for many tribes to access,

“I’m aware that the term is a term in the English language that was created fairly recently and I think it is a really effective tool. I’m really glad that the people who got together did that. I think they recognized a need to be able to identify ourselves to each other quickly in what is the language that a lot of natives speak, being English.”

Artists commented that Two-Spirit encompasses both genders within a single being or an individual existing outside or beyond a binary. Within certain tribal communities, this resulted in a unique role for the Two-Spirit person. Rose B. Simpson commented on the balance of Two-Spirit people, “I’ve used the term Two-Spirit off and on in my life. I think mostly for Native people it’s being a whole person. Encompassing both genders is more respected; A long time ago before colonization.” Storme Webber said, “Two-Spirit is a non-binary Indigenous identity, with a spiritual foundation. It is reflective of the non-binary views on gender which are held by many Indigenous cultures.” She went on to explain the cultural and spiritual foundation by adding, “To me it means much more than gender non-conforming, and to me it is not the same as transgender. I do not accept a binary, and I carry an identity which is of my Alutiiq heritage.”

Some answers represent a more complex discussion around the term including breaking down the impacts of colonization and heteropatriarchy and the resulting enforcement of gender roles within these systems. Demian illustrated this,

“Within that whole traditional way of being, each person had a role and I think we’re still trying to figure that out through assimilation. A lot of that was robbed from the culture in a way that was obviously trying to create erasure so I think we’re still trying to figure out what those roles are.”

Some artists commented on the overcompensation of Indigenous masculinity due to intergenerational colonial trauma in tribal communities leading to domestic violence and sexual abuse against womxn², transwomxn, and sex workers. Dayna Danger shared her concerns, “I feel like Indigenous men need a lot of healing as well. I know cos I've fucked with some of them and holy fuck, that's something else like Jesus Christ. You need to get into ceremony. Learn how to treat us better.” Demian DinéYazhi’ shared his struggle in seeing himself in any gender binary,

“I also have a hard time placing myself inside of any of the gender systems. But then that also gets really complex, I'm still trying to figure all this out because then I also realize that Indigenous man’s or Indigenous masculinity is also complex because it's been so fucked with through the centuries, so then you get into this whole conversation about what “traditionalism” is. What traditional culture is, what traditional sexuality or gender or non-gender or non-sexuality or any of this, you know? The further you dig back or the further you try to imagine things or punish yourself inside of this pre-apocalyptic scenario.”

Demian put it more simply when he said, “I feel othered in my masculinity when it comes to Indigenous gender” and went on to explain the impacts of violent colonial forces,

“I'm still trying to figure out how colonization and genocidal violence has completely altered my ability to feel confident in how my being or my gender would function inside of a Diné society. I don't even know how much of it really even mattered. It seems like within this colonial mindset gender is definitely a political point but it's also a very violent way to assert power onto people.”

² “Womxn” is used here to both refuse the suffix ‘man’ and encompass all femme presenting individuals especially womxn of color, trans-womxn, and all spectrums of womxn-identified groups.

Freyr A. Marie discussed the polarity of Two-Spirit people pre-colonization and Two-Spirit people today and the difficulty of communicating that without glossing over important aspects of queer Indigenous life and realities,

“I feel like nostalgia and romanticism is really shitty and hard. And really easy to do. I think that's that other juxtaposition when they're talking about the role of Two-Spirit people in societies and we were honored and I'm like, we probably had really hard times too; Like real relationships with people. That's also not a 'we'. We're all connected. They are the queer and trans and Two-Spirit -whatever the word is that we're using to describe the quality. They are the ancestors and those stories are really important.”

Artists also responded to how language can at once advance and hinder one's understanding and association of a term especially when it comes to multi-faceted gender/sexual identities that also encompass multi-faceted cultures. Freyr reflected,

“Also, the way we're even able to articulate that and I think that's how we use the English language. Thinking about the role of the English language in that I really shied away from trying to use words. There's this poem that I wrote talking about how do we include in our storytelling all that persists but all that doesn't remain unchanged?”

Vanessa Dion Fletcher spoke about her relationship to language and its correlation with her identity,

“The term is very useful and it can be used in different ways. I can translate the words to different parts but there's still- I want a better grasp of my language to have a better understanding of myself as a Two-Spirit person; to be able to put different language to my identity and it's not always possible. It might not really be possible in the way that I imagine.”

Demian doesn't identify as Two-Spirit and relayed intricacies that can occur in various tribal communities, "I don't necessarily identify as Two-Spirit. There has been talk in certain Navajo circles about the term Two-Spirit. I think it's just a language issue. I'm supportive of the Two-Spirit community. I personally don't choose to identify myself as a Two-Spirit person. The term I tend to use is more 'Indigenous queer'."

Voice

Artists described how they inserted their voice into the gallery space along with their work. Demian described how one of his installations involved a declaration in vinyl text that the audience was confronted with before entering the installation,

"When you enter the gallery there was this giant text piece that basically said "By entering this institution you agree to implement decolonial concepts within your daily practice of living. You acknowledge the Indigenous people whose land you are on. You agree to break apart your misconceptions of Indigenous people. And you agree to be an advocate or an agent against environmental disaster or social inequity against Indigenous peoples and strive to help us attain tribal sovereignty."

Additionally, artists spoke about the ways in how they inserted voice from their exhibition via public programming in connection to the exhibition. Rose B. Simpson described a performance program she combined with her exhibition at the Denver Art Museum,

"I was thinking a lot about warriors and what warriors look like. I told the Denver Art Museum I wanted to do a parade with this car I was building and get people who are queer or are gender fluid or who don't represent necessarily as femme but also femme people to be warriors and march with the car and sort of represent the

different side of what empowerment looks like with that. They were totally down. It was cool.”

Demian spoke about how he utilizes programming to insert voice, “That show at the Portland Art Museum, it was very supported but I also do my best while I'm at an institution to do as much public programming as possible.”

Artists shared how sometimes they were able to spur a conversation with their collaborators, audience, and museum curators to insert an Indigenous narrative that otherwise was not being represented. Demian spoke about two exhibition experiences in particular that lacked Indigenous voice

“My other work is about reinserting this Indigenous narrative and voice of the HIV and AIDS epidemic and how that applies to public health. With one of those pieces I recreated this flag based off of this ACT UP poster they had at one point and they had statistics in there that were reflecting Black, Hispanic, poor, and gay people. So I just included Indigenous queer and trans bodies to be inserted into that conversation.”

The other show Demian used as an example was a collaboration with artist, Kali Spitzer. He expressed that while there were really successful aspects of the show, an opportunity to have an important conversation was missed,

“But within that show we were able to address sexuality and gender and we had the space to do it and that felt good. But it was also unfortunate because it was also shown at the same time as this Edward S. Curtis exhibition and all the artists in that Edward S. Curtis exhibition were straight and that kinda sucked cos it's like “Well, comon' let's bring a queer artist, a Two-Spirit, or trans artist into the gallery. We can all be having the same conversation together.”

Some artists expressed their hesitation in asserting their voice as it has the potential of being misinterpreted or projected without the artist's consent. Freyr explained,

“I think that's always a really intense conversation with spaces that are being curated by white people or by museum spaces or by a certain ethic or a standard. I have never experienced interacting with a space where I felt like I got to exist as my full self.. in a museum. I was in that space using my voice and having voice but I was having to check back in, you know?”

Dayna also expressed that the comfortability of a space aids in her ability to project voice,

“When you feel the space is right, that’s when you speak.”

Furthermore, some artists feel that Indigenous voice is present and exists within some exhibitions but is diluted compared to the actual social issues that are taking place today. Freyr shared their emotions when navigating museum spaces and witnessing voice but also noticing a large disconnect from daily reality,

“I see voice happening. I see spaces where they're showing this African American artist that speaks cultural work about being black and we have some native artists that are contemporary that are making contemporary art about native voice but the reality that gets to be exhibited is so reduced to me... Compared to the reality that exists and especially when I think about anti-Blackness.”

Freyr explained, “I feel like there’s often space for a certain voice.”

Space

Artists shared their experiences in showing and interacting with the museum space and whether they felt there was a space within the museum specifically for them as Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists. Vanessa said,

“I've seen Two-Spirit artists physically in museums. I've seen them and their work take up space in museums. I don't know how much museums hold that space for them. I think that phrase kind of means a little bit more and I'm not sure that's being done. So I think the answer is that I've seen them take up space but I don't think that I would say they hold it.”

Storme Webber believes that museum space is gradually shifting for Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists, “This is evolving. I see that Queer Arts Fest in Vancouver has dedicated their exhibition this year to Two-Spirit artists. More such spaces will be positive, as long as the artists and curators have sovereignty over the exhibit.”

Some artists shared that museum institutions only provide space for certain artists; artists that are established in the contemporary Native art cannon and that are more palatable to guests and have been shown regularly. Demian explained,

“I don't think they do. I know they don't. I'm not going to say that they do. I know every now and then they give space to queer native artists like Kent Monkman. [He] has been the most successful, I think, in getting that space. I say that because like he's the one that's been the most subversive and challenging when it comes to imagery. And it is overtly queer; it's very in your face queer.”

Artists spoke about experiences that involved receiving support from some institutions and feeling comfortable enough to simultaneously hold institutions accountable. Artists

expressed their rationale by providing context of past exhibitions and relationships with curators and the institution itself. Demian reflected on a particular experience,

“This was only a year ago - where the artists identified as queer and were talking about queerness within their work and having support from an institution. And so that space felt very good. I felt welcome in there. I felt like I could have this challenging conversation within an institution while simultaneously holding it accountable.”

Freyr described their relationship with museums which circles back to language and voice and the lost translation that’s at risk of one's identity through this space,

“I often feel like when I interact with a museum space, I will have to wear my armor. I would have to be ready for battle on some level -either just with myself in my own trauma or with the space physically and the people running it because it's not at all a given, in fact, it's quite the opposite; that agency and complexity would be even translatable. And that doesn't mean that I don't have voice.”

Artists also spoke about how museum spaces provide limited support for emerging Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists. Artists expressed that many museums open their doors over and over again to the same established artists while keeping them tightly closed to others. Demian describes this obstacle,

“Because art institutions haven't been welcoming enough for Indigenous queer artists or Two-Spirit artists, I don't think that there's enough support in those communities for younger artists or other artists who are even of age of people like Kent Monkman to really feel confident in making that work or even feeling supported to make that work. It gets really challenging to break this down because then you realize that within the larger contemporary art movement there's very limited space for native artists. And so if you

bring queerness into it, if you add another layer of politics into the conversation it becomes even more isolating.”

Dayna’s response dives deeper into the questioning of financial support that involves the allocation and accessibility of arts funding,

“I feel like really for me, I cannot see it as this one little thing. I see it in this long trajectory of historically what has happened. The only way to really fix those systems is to give them more space to give them a solo fucking show. Pump more money into making it so that people living on the fucking reserve actually have drinking water cos so many of our reserves don't. Let’s open our doors to what? Open your doors to who? Cos if those people aren't being lifted up to get that education that you think that they need to get into those space then what the fuck is the point of opening your doors? That's just how I feel. I'm so lucky because of the privileges that I received. Am I the acceptable form of that Metis native person that can walk through your doors? What about the person that fucking has a drinking problem and has had a really shitty life but makes these beautiful fucking works and has had no education? How do they get through the door? How do you even know? They can't write an artist's statement. They don't know how to fucking write a bio. They don't even know how to speak the language that you need. Where's that support? That’s what I would like to see - that being addressed, rather than just opening those spaces, whatever that is supposed to mean.”

My follow-up question asked artists what an ideal space for Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists look like to them. This question resulted in rich dialogue, consisting of many ideas and conceptions of space. Artists spoke not only what this specific space would look like, but also of what conversations could potentially take place there.

Rose said,

“I would like to make space for a larger conversation about identity as a whole in museums that's not disruptive of anyone's life and allows everybody to talk about where they're at and what that means.”

She goes on to explain,

“I'm a person on a journey, super multi-faceted, and I've learned so much about this in myself and I hope that other people that have struggled can learn about themselves, too. I don't want any of these conversations that have been made ugly or scary by colonialism to be dismissed. I want to make space for all these conversations to happen including who I chose to love, or how I choose to represent myself in the world.”

When opening the conversation up to the concept of space in museums and galleries, artists spoke about the different meanings of space, its subjectivity, and the various ways space is created. When discussing space, it was easy to segue into the artist's' subject matter as many artists use their work to create, build, give and hold space for the expression of Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous identities and experiences. Dayna discussed her subject matter and who it affects,

“Issues of sexuality, gender, representation, I think, are all really important. It's just painting a different picture because I feel like there are a lot of stereotypes that exist. The way a body is displayed... or how it's displayed for the consumption of a certain gaze and it's just trying to interrupt that narrative. How do you interrupt that? Certain subjects aren't just Indigenous folks - it's anybody on the street that is affected by catcalling whatever that's supposed to be or anybody affected by the patriarch and I feel like the patriarch affects different genders, different radicalized folks in different ways. So, I'm

trying to at least give space to that to have those kinds of conversations and to put those bodies in positions of power and then also breaking down the binary. Trans folks and non-binary folks and womxn are coming first. That's the centering that's happening, however you identify within that.”

Demian’s work addresses similar issues surrounding gender while centralizing womxn,

“I’m definitely addressing gender through the work. I feel like introducing myself to riot girl, to feminism, to works by Cindy Sherman, Laura Simpson... I tend to favor and look at female artists more and identify with that art with those social concerns more than I do with male artists. And so with that a lot of my work is homage to them and so I try build spaces or bring along other people from my community with me and a lot of the time it's like these really awesome and rad womxn.”

Some artists spoke about how their work provokes an inner discourse with themselves when grappling with their identity. And when this interaction happens the work allows them to hold space for this to occur. Freyr described this,

“When I think about my work, I’m in this really deep dialogue with myself and I’m also in this process of catharsis. I’m in a relationship with a politic that I’m constantly having to be in dialogue with. Realizing whether or not I am actively in that process of interacting with that stuff in a code that is readable to our colonized eye - I’m always interacting with it. My work is always interacting with it because that’s what’s built into the racism of the spaces. And then at the same time it gives me this motivation to hold a bigger space.”

Other artists hope that their work creates a space that inspires their audience to self-reflect. Dayna explained, “I think all this work is coming from a space of trying to make a space for folks just to exist and *be* - be represented but not be the representation. Just to see themselves and be like, “Whoa, I look at this and I'm reflected”.

Subject Matter

I asked artists to tell me about the subject matter their work revolves around. This question was asked to gain background information on the artist's personal need to express themselves and their multidimensional identities and the potential need to reach a specific audience. This question was asked as an opportunity for the artist to express their lived realities and relationships with themselves and to others.

Demian spoke about a specific collaboration with another queer Indigenous artist whose work addresses similar topics,

“Kaylee's queer and she makes these really beautiful tintype photographs of womxn.

When Deana Dartt paired us together we were both two contemporary queer artists of Indigenous descent who are actively alive, present, making work that addresses queerness and sexuality within our work. We had this show called *Dene bāhī Naabaahii* and that show was the contemporary idea of the warrior and how we're taking on the responsibilities of a warrior but we do it through artwork, we're addressing these concerns for our communities whether they're hardcore Indigenous or Diné or Kaska Dena societies or just Indigenous queer societies or queer societies.”

Some artists' work talks about the boxes of various identities they have been placed in and breaking free of them. Be it stereotypes perpetuated by society, the meaning of indigeneity, or the policing of womxn's bodies.

Freyr talks about their art and how it comments on the complexities of tokenization and disposability and the destructive effects Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous people feel from that.

“I’m doing a bunch of textile pieces that are based around this concept of always too much and never enough. And that deeper question of- we’re not only dealing with what we’re able to conceptualize and articulate but we’re also dealing with these really intricate emotional realities that relate to our participation and our relationships with our own selves. And we’re supposed to compartmentalize that in order to be a part of this production and it’s not healthy for us to be that compartmentalized. And that’s sort of this requirement where we don’t get to be all the things we are at once and I think that can be really painful to constantly be in that act of translation.”

Their comments bring to light how difficult it is for Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous people to be tasked with breaking down traditional identities reshaped by the brutal dynamics of colonialism. Rose confronts stereotypes in her work, “I try to deconstruct stereotypes. And that’s any kind of box. Be it culture, gender - mostly those. My work reflects my journey. So I’m trying to deconstruct those things for myself and so hopefully as I do it and reflect that, then other people can also do it too.”

Some artists specifically interrogate indigeneity. Rose asked,

“I think indigeneity... what does that mean really in the end -even to put ourselves in a box of Indigenous? Even though before I would’ve been like, “I don’t really want to play that identity game with 'Indigenous'.” I grew up on the rez. I participate in my culture and stuff but I am nobody to speak for that. I don’t speak for my whole tribe. I’m me. That’s part of who I am but it’s not all I am.”

While Storme discussed the inquiry of Indigeneity with her own multicultural queer familial upbringing,

“At the moment I am exploring social history through the lens of my own multicultural queer family. Through this inquiry I find many more interesting questions about Indigeneity, Two-Spirit & Queer identity, womxn’s lives, lesbian herstory, community, Urban Native stories, mixblood stories, the grand narrative of cities and more. These questions are vital to me & I hope to Indian Country as well, because we Two-Spirits & LGBTQ Natives have always been an important part of our nations. Those of us who have been outsiders, marginalized multiply yet surviving, have much to offer.

Vanessa’s work focuses on womxn’s bodies and its agencies through different lenses,

“I have the whole sphere of work that's thinking about biology and a biological definition of a female body and a cultural definition of a female body, reproduction and, ultimately, in my mind that also comes back to the violence against Indigenous womxn or the potential violence and how it particularly pertains to sex and the ability to reproduce with children.”

History

I asked artists if their work helps retell/reimagine history for queer Indigenous people. I felt compelled to ask it because it was a theme within some of the literature I was reviewing and was also mentioned by contemporary Two-Spirit artist, Kent Monkman during a lecture he gave at the University of Michigan Museum of Art. Furthermore, I hoped this question would allow the artist to elaborate on the motive of their work, be it a self-declaration of survival, a call of resistance, or an act of queer Indigenous sovereignty.

Three artists expressed interest in the notion of their work helping retell or reimagine Two-Spirit histories. Storme responded, “I certainly hope so. It is my intention. I am no expert on anything but my own life and that of my family. There are many mixed blood urban Natives and Black Natives and Two-Spirits out there to hear, and many others who can learn by listening.” Rose said, “I hope so. I hope that by seeing what I do, that I slowly create space and open the door for all kinds of conversations that haven't been had.” Dayna’s response also mentions the importance of conversation and storytelling versus recorded histories,

“I like this idea of re-telling because there's the dominant history that has been told to us which is very linear and there's all these other non-linear ways of all the experiences of other folks that have been affected by this colonial behemoth that came through and told the story in one sort of way. There's my version, your version, and then the truth. What is the truth? Who will ever be able to say the story of the truth because there's so many perspectives that are going on and who has the power to dominate the conversation? They say "history is written by the victors" but honestly, yes, it's in the written word but that's not the most important. We've been passing stories on through many different nations for so long and how important storytelling is.”

Demian expressed concern in losing sight of the larger journey Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous people have endured when reimagining history,

“We're into this place of intersectional politics where this idea of the authentic self is being broken down and disappearing in this really beautiful way; where gender is breaking down before our very eyes in this really beautiful way. I think it's dangerous to reimagine to a certain degree. To reimagine or to fantasize is like to romanticize these ideas. And we all see the dangers of what has come from romanticizing cultures or people

and certain histories. I think what my work tries to do is reflect a little bit on where we were at, what got documented, and where we are now. It is about fantasizing about the future and where we go next and providing the building blocks for the next generation. It's about educating them in the process. Know your history. Know where you're coming from, move past it, and build something better. No matter what tribe you're from or however you are of that tribe or blood or ancestry if you're an Indigenous person if you're part of an Indigenous community you're going to look up those images you're going to imagine and reimagine until the fuckin' sun goes down."

Success

I finally asked artists what a successful exhibition or curator collaboration consists of. Most artists spoke about the merging of multiple conversations, meaningful dialogues, and careful listening playing major roles in successful collaborations. Demian reflected on one particular experience at the Reed College's Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery,

"Stephanie Snyder, chief curator at Reed, was very much wanting to support both Indigenous art but also queer artists. So, it was just a really awesome opportunity because she inserted both dialogues into a primarily hetero and non-Indigenous exhibition space. It wasn't separating the two. It was merging these two conversations and so I think that's the direction we obviously need to head in."

Rose's response weighed the pros and cons of exhibiting in a gallery versus a museum space and how she felt museums are more flexible, however there is still decolonial work to be done within the institution,

"I feel like working with museums is more open and understanding than working for galleries or through the sales world because they're more worried about who you might

upset - “don't be political, don't miss the sale”. Museums are more open to having that conversation but I feel like they have a long way to go. And it's basically because it's still stuck in the institution which is a colonial thing.”

Dayna mentioned the critical ability to express concerns with the people who are representing you as the artist,

“Communication. Being able to have the hard conversations. Being able to call-in people when certain things aren't serving you. You have to be able to learn how to confront it in whatever way you need to. I find that it's that's why I say whatever way you need to because some people maybe they're really angry about it. But I feel like when you are more kind and come from a loving, compassionate place people are more receptive to it. You can be angry and then understand where that reaction is coming from and then how can you move forward in a better way that doesn't just perpetuate the fire that can go back and forth. I don't really find it helpful - it's exhausting to perpetuate the same things that they're doing. Some people just don't even fucking know better in those institutions they are so stuck in their ways. We have a lot of gatekeepers that we have to get through so you only have so much energy. So you have to figure out what best ways are going to serve you in getting through that, honestly, at the end of the day.”

Freyr discussed how queer Indigenous artists can't withstand one dimensional curation,

“Curation, when I think about a museum setting it doesn't contain all of that for us. There needs to be grit. It's multi-dimensional. We're interacting with multiple holograms and somebody changing their clothes 10 times. We're not just one piece that gets put on a wall with words next to it that somebody can read and come visit. What we're doing is we're shaking the fabric of reality by existing. We're literally tearing down walls and

rebuilding them and refiguring. Our existence is resistance. What is that literal quality of resistance? We experience it in our bodies and our consciousness. When we interact with curation, it's not like we're resisting the power we're literally rubber bands... and I would hope that there are spaces that can exhibit our tactile realities versus this expository thing.”

The curator or gallery manager’s capacity to listen is also paramount. Vanessa explained,

“I think that when curators or a gallery staff in general are willing to listen and support the work. When I say listen, I think, they need to kind of understand where you're coming from and it sometimes needs to be a pretty thorough understanding of where you're coming from.”

Storme said, “All artists work differently, curators too. I am reaching to tell a story successfully, to reimagine lives in a relatable way.”

Freyr discussed success in terms of visualizing a space where participating in community assembly and discussing individual relationships results in true cultural production,

“When I think about a successful space like that I'm like, wow... It looks like actual community building. Would it be an installation or would it be a place for people to talk about the different ways they work even if they work better alone. There are so many different ways that we all operate and feel comfortable and then what does it look like to have a space where everybody gets to participate in that way -like in an actual relationship instead of being in special spaces. I think that's where cultural production happens - it happens in relationship and sometimes that means that there are people in that space that maybe don't fit in with the politic but they're active members of that community.”

Demian also talks about coming together in the cultural production of survivance,

“My daily ritual is just to survive... and I think for a lot of native people, queer people, trans people, gender gradient people, people who are thinking outside of sexuality...

That's their daily act or that's their daily fuckin' mode of ritual is just to survive. So, I think all that to say I think my work is more about fantasizing about what the future looks like- where that's headed. Because, we have all the energy and inspiration and knowledge and all of that already tied into our DNA. It's all a part of the ancestral dreaming.”

Discussion and Analysis

Two-Spirit people have existed for centuries but the actual term “Two-Spirit” is relatively new. Almost all artists acknowledged how the term came to be in the early 90’s and how it was and continues to be utilized for Indigenous people when needing to quickly present themselves within a larger LGBTQIA function. However, several artists expressed other personal ways of identifying themselves that associate their gender and sexual identity to that of their tribal community. Some artists indicated lack of commitment to the term Two-Spirit and expressed ways of moving away from using it in relation to themselves. Furthermore, some artists are leaning more towards a different English term that is more inclusive for LGBTQIA Indigenous people like ‘Indigenous queer’.

The role of language was brought up within this discussion often. Artists expressed the disconnect they feel from not being able to translate an equivalent definition of Two-Spirit that is specific to their language and community. Discussions of assimilation were spurred around this question, reaching back to Swanson’s (n.d.) point of Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous people not requiring a term to present themselves if it weren’t for heteropatriarchal norms of colonial power and violent enforcement of Western gender constructs.

The effects of colonial violence still exist today in multidimensional ways to those that identify outside of the binary norms constructed by colonialism. The intergenerational trauma of Two-Spirit and Native American people as a whole permeates from the acts of colonial violence to the present. These acts were designed to strip Native people of anything and everything that connected them to their sense of self, tribal community and cultural identity. Intergenerational trauma that exists in tribal communities today has manifested into the hyper masculinity of the Indigenous man, domestic abuse, and sexual violence.

Artists shared with me their experiences in utilizing voice in the museum and communicating the effects of colonialism and heteropatriarchy on Indigenous people. Strategies to ensure that the artist's voice was projected in the space include literally spelling it out on the walls of the gallery and self-implementing public programming that positions multiple voices to the forefront and creates conversation and dialogue across different identities and concepts. On the other side of inserting voice, there are many obstacles that artists face during this process including not feeling completely safe in the space; both to use their voices without misinterpretation and to exist as their full self. Artists sometimes find themselves in positions of having their identities teased apart and compartmentalized in museum settings, not allowing them to be all the things that they are at once. Artists spoke about how Indigenous narratives are often diluted or completely left out of important exhibition concepts that discuss social issues. This is again, an example of institutions perpetuating colonial erasure tactics on Indigenous people.

Another common thread that artists mentioned was the tendency to project the voices of and hold space for certain artists of high status; artists that are well-known among the contemporary Native art canon and are sought out to be listed on curators' CV's. This becomes

problematic as it inhibits the growth and encouragement of emerging Two-Spirit artists and the distribution of their work. Furthermore, it evokes the larger question of who is the most “acceptable” version of a queer Native artist? Answers to this question bring to light the very real barriers that still exist for Indigenous people that interact with academic and cultural institutions founded on colonial ideals. Lindsay Nixon writes, “The space of the gallery, and the very scaffolding of arts administration itself, has facilitated an erasure of gender-variant and sexually diverse realities from Indigenous art. The fixation on art catalogues as historical record and the attempt to define one singular Indigenous art canon to fit neatly within the white box, are both integral to this system of erasure” (2017).

I asked artists why they chose to focus on specific subject matter in their art and how these themes are crucial to Indian Country at large. This question was asked to better understand the artist's background and context as not only a creator of art but as a warrior declaring a message of self-determination and resistance. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, when discussing space, it was easy to segue into the artist's' subject matter as many Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists use their work to create and hold space for the expression of queer, trans, and gender variant people of color. Artists subject matter consists of homages to feminism, confrontation of colonial constructs, liberation of intersectional and multifaceted identities, marginalized bodies affected by heteropatriarchy, visions of Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous life before European contact and fantasies of a better life for future generations.

I wanted to know the artist's opinion on reimagining and retelling the history of Two-Spirit people, a history that has been Westernized, silenced, and contentious between anthropologists. Most of the artist's' hoped that their work helped them and others move through the fractured histories of their Two-Spirit ancestors. Artists expressed self-reflection in their art,

which points to their ability to obtain sovereignty in their identities. Additionally, artists hope that audiences could see aspects of themselves reflected too, resulting in cultural production and survivance for Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous people. The importance of community organizing lies in its ability to imagine spaces where multi-faceted people feel safe to exist and create relationships as their whole selves. It is critical within these communities to center womxn, femme presenting individuals, and queer and trans people of color. By recognizing the room needed for these voices to resonate, healing can begin to take place for colonial traumas experienced in the past that permeates the present, and serve as medicine for future generations.

When representing Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists in the museum or gallery space, artists expressed that some institutions have a good start however, there is still much evolving to do in the foundation and construct of the institution that still perpetuates colonial values. Decolonial work is ongoing and is an effort that requires telling the story of colonialism over and over. Artists use their work and personal experiences to unsettle the academy and strategize the continuance of decolonizing spaces. They engage and ground themselves in sacred knowledge by questioning and resisting dominant systems, colonizing narratives, and Western curriculum.

One theme that was apparent across all the artists in discussing what a successful exhibition consists of was communication. Artists expressed that the willingness to bring varying perspectives and voices into a single conversation, participating in challenging and sometimes uncomfortable dialogue, and engaging in listening is extremely important. One artist expressed that being transparent with needs and expectations is a two-way street when working with curators and gallery professionals and is ultimately the key in making it through the keeper of the gate. Furthermore, the exhibition is more likely to be successful for the artist and curator if there

is a sound understanding of where the artist is coming from. Without this understanding, representation of the artist and their work may lack important components of the artist's vision and hinder the audience's interpretation.

Chapter V: Conclusions and Implications

This study was intended to document a handful of important dialogues, unique and critical to this political point in time and space. This study was created to inspire not only the continuance of these dialogues but to contribute in telling the story of Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous sovereignty and survivance. Audiences who may benefit from this research are curators, gender and sexuality studies scholars with a focus on intersectionality and Indigenous cultures. I want this study to inform these departments and the museum field at large to remain cognizant of the gradual decolonization that is needed within museological practices by constantly examining the historical relationship of race, gender, and power as they pertain to cultural representation in art.

Moving forward, engaging in these dialogues and relationships would inform what curators should be doing across the field to more holistically represent intersectional artists and simultaneously aid in broadening audiences understanding of their work. Additionally, this would bring forward deeper conversations about welcoming emerging artists; breaking down the meaning of accessibility and strategizing how to lift more barriers for unrenowned artists.

In the meantime, Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists will continue to traverse their experiences - past, present and future, bringing along other people in their communities to create more radically powerful systems of resistance against institutions that deny their existence. During this process, resistance can lead to relationship, creating a collaborative movement where museum professionals and intersectional artists imagine spaces less curated by colonialism and more innovated by indigeneity.

Limitations

Limitations of my study include the different internal policies that exist among national and city museums, smaller community cultural centers, and private galleries. Some of the artists that I interviewed have never been represented in a space that would technically be considered a museum institution; some simply because they have never been recruited or chosen to exhibit their work, and others because of personal choice.

Another limitation is that the views recorded within this study by no means encompass all that Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists and individuals endure. Respecting the beautiful fluidity of gender and sexuality combined with the intricacies of Indigenous communities, I would argue that it is impossible to generalize a queer Indigenous person. According to these artists, that is the very crux of Two-Spirit resistance against Western heteropatriarchy and colonial constructs of identity.

Future Research

Subtopics that surfaced during the interview process that would benefit from deeper research and the furthering of decolonizing/indigenizing queer spaces include:

- Indigenous masculinity/misogyny
- Decolonizing kink culture
- Social policing/call-out/call-in culture
- Authenticity/Traditionalism and its relationship to government documentation
- Including transwomxn and sex-workers into the narrative of missing and murdered Indigenous womxn.

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