

Love as Ceremony: Legacies of Two-Spirit Liberation



A **SPACE** *for* **DIALOGUE** 114

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH

"...Our stories exist in a space that does not know the definition of fiction, myth, or lore. Our stories are truths, our stories are knowledge. Our stories are a birthright. We weave them into our being, we lay that blanket out and we will let you rest in it."

—Coyote Park, Preface, *Behind Shut Eyes: QTBIPOC Dream Anthology*

Gender is a construct. While the hooks of hegemony and the casualties of colonialism do their best to convince us that the gender binary is a product of nature, our experience of gender is socially situated. The rich history of gender fluidity in Indigenous North America provides evidence and support for the theory of social constructionism, stating that "gender roles, sexualities, and identities are not natural, essential, or universal, but constructed by social processes and discourses."¹ The erasure of diverse gender expression within Native American tribes is a devastating example of the internal violence perpetrated by settler colonial forces to disempower Indigenous peoples. Traditionally, gender-fluid individuals in Indigenous America occupied mediator roles "to hold the polarities together [and] to keep the world from disintegrating."² At a time in which hatred, division, and animosity are responsible for some of the biggest global events in history, it has become increasingly important to invest and commit oneself to understanding the diversity of the human experience. *Love as Ceremony: Legacies of Two-Spirit Liberation* is an ode to traditional two-spirit ways, which encourage acceptance and love.

The pan-tribal term "two-spirit" was established in the 1990s and refers to sexuality and gender-based fluidity in Indigenous American society. While each tribe has its own customs, gender diversity is a prominent facet of many North American tribal communities. Today, tribal communities widely regard two-spirit with respect and understand gender fluidity "as signifying an individual's proclivities as a dreamer and a visionary."³ Historically, two-spirit are regarded as clairvoyant figures, their dreams and visions valued as salient sources of information and divination. Prior to colonization, they often served important roles as ceremonial



leaders, seers, and healers due to their increased ability "to discover alternative ways of seeing [themselves] and the world."⁴ Yurok artist Coyote Park embodies the role of seer in their self-portrait titled *In Their Image*. Coyote's portrait offers an intimate and powerful look into their expression of transmasculinity. They meet our gaze with ethereal ambiguity and disrupt cultural expectations of the hypermasculine.

Following European invasion, Indigenous North American society endured the devastating impacts of both church and state. Settler colonists' purity-based binary ideologies led to the demonization of "deviant" expressions of gender and sexuality. To justify its persecution, settlers labeled two-spirit identity as vulgar and sexually perverse. Anthropologists, reservation Indian agents, residential schoolteachers, and Christian missionaries alike targeted and attacked the two-spirit community. On several reservations, two-spirit people were rounded up and forced to cut their hair and wear clothing to match their biological sex. Organized ceremonies and healing rituals were prohibited, and two-spirits were forced to operate underground or to give up their identities entirely. The projection of Christian patriarchal doctrine onto Indigenous peoples destabilized traditional ways of life and ultimately formed factions within tribal communities between traditionalists and assimilationists. Western Judeo-Christian tradition became the arbiter of normative American culture repressing two-spirit people and their kin.

NOTES

1. Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 5.
2. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, 21.
3. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, 25.
4. Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 110.
5. Driskill, *Shaking Our Shells*, 122.
6. Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 115.
7. Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 111–112.

CHECKLIST

Dawyne Wilcox, Oglala Lakota/American, born 1957, *Winkta (Gay)*, 2010, crayon and ink on 1936 Cumberland County Election Return, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, ledger paper, page 241. Gift of the artist; 2011.62.3.

Sierra Teller Ornelas, Diné/American, born 1981, *Forbidden Love (Two Weaving Set)*, 2009, wool, vegetable dye. Purchased through the Alvin and Mary Bert Gutman '40 Acquisition Fund; 2009.54.

Rose B. Simpson, Kha'p'o Owingeh (Santa Clara Pueblo)/American, born 1983, *Creature Comfort*, 2015, ceramic. Purchased through the Claire and Richard P. Morse 1953 Fund; 021.25a–e.

Kali Spitzer, KaskaDena/Jewish, born 1987, *Holding On Through Grief*, 2022, chromogenic print. Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund; 2023.5.4.

Kali Spitzer, KaskaDena/Jewish, born 1987, *Be&Madeline*, 2022, chromogenic print. Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund and the Elizabeth and David C. Lowenstein '67 Fund; 2023.5.5.

Coyote Park, Yurok/Korean/German, born 1999, *Weekly Ritual*, 2021, chromogenic print. Purchased through the Anonymous Fund #144; 2023.7.1.

Coyote Park, Yurok/Korean/German, born 1999, *Pacific Diaspora Kin*, 2022, chromogenic print. Purchased through the Anonymous Fund #144; 2023.7.4.

Coyote Park, Yurok/Korean/German, born 1999, *In Their Image*, 2021, chromogenic print. Purchased through the Anonymous Fund #144; 2023.7.3.

Virgil Ortiz, Pueblo, born 1969, *Woman Figure with Ice Cream*, 1996, clay, slip, and pigment. Gift of the Lorlee and Arnold Tenenbaum Family; 2022.71.101.

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The exhibition *Love as Ceremony: Legacies of Two-Spirit Liberation*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, August 19–October 14, 2023.

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Cover image: Kali Spitzer, *Holding On Through Grief*, 2022. © Kali Spitzer. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Inside left: Coyote Park, *In Their Image*, 2021. © Coyote Park. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Inside right: Dwayne Wilcox, *Winkta (Gay)*, 2010. © Dwayne Wilcox. Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel.

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