# 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."<sup>2</sup> 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 twospirit with respect and understand gender fluidity "as signifying an individual's proclivities as a dreamer and a visionary."<sup>3</sup> Historically, twospirit 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



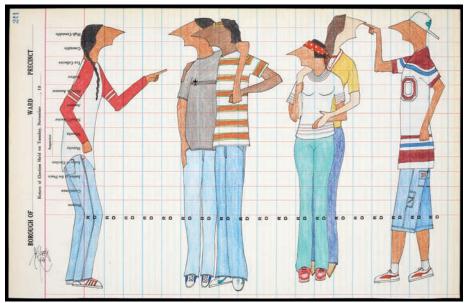
leaders, seers, and healers due to their increased ability "to discover alternative ways of seeing [themselves] and the world."<sup>4</sup> Yurok artist Coyote Park embodies the role of seer in their selfportrait titled *In Their Image*. Coyote's portrait offers an intimate and powerful look into their 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.

Violence and suppression defines much of the history of the two-spirit community and its living legacy. In her tintype print Holding On Through Grief, Kaska Dena photographer Kali Spitzer captures her and her partner in a firm embrace. The couple's visual majesty and intensity, combined with their partial obscurity, speak to the interrelated experiences of apocalypse and utopia present in post-colonial two-spirit love. For two-spirit peoples, artistic platforms create space to rewrite their visual histories beyond the colonial lens. Spitzer's depiction of herself and her partner exemplifies the sovereignty of self-representation. Artists like Spitzer strengthen the two-spirit cultural revival by encouraging Indigenous communities to reimagine the role of queer Natives in contemporary Indigenous society. As Cherokee author Qwo-Li Driskill explains, "Two-Spirit people are currently involved in a complex process of asserting our identities through strengthening memories of our past, committing to who we are in our present, and imagining who we want to be in the future."5 Something that makes two-spirit people unique within the queer community at large is that gender diversity is written into Indigenous heritage, making twospirit expression "a literature of survival and affirmation."6 By reconnecting to and reclaiming traditional two-spirit ways, queer American Natives are cultivating a distinctive vision of what it means to love expansively.

Despite gender-diversity's role in Indigenous heritage, two-spirit communities continue to face homophobia within tribal communities and beyond. The legacy of colonial creed still plagues isolated Indigenous communities and undermines traditions that were once respected. Artist Dwayne Wilcox confronts this phenomenon in his drawing Winkta (Gay), which depicts Native and non-Native spectators ridiculing two queer couples. By illustrating how Native communities have forcibly adopted colonial ideology, Winkta (Gay) acknowledges tradition while simultaneously demonstrating the ways in which contemporary two-spirit culture remains unique. The post-colonial world has much to learn from the resurgence of two-spirit culture and the widespread healing that is achieved through queer power and queer love. Thanks to oral history traditions, we know that creation stories of several North American tribes feature two-spirit characters. As such, gender diversity is not only part of the natural order of the universe but also crucial to the improvement of society and survival of humanity. As queer author Will Roscoe states, "These are some of the traditions we live up to in our everyday lives, and for which we consciously and unconsciously strive. As we look at the future, these are some of the things we see, which, as it turns out, are old and were never completely forgotten."7

> Moonoka Begay '23 Conroy Intern



### 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.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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A Space for Dialogue: Fresh Perspectives on the Permanent Collection from Dartmouth's Students, founded with the support from the Class of 1948, is made possible with generous endowments from the Class of 1967, Bonnie and Richard Reiss Jr. '66, and Pamela J. Joyner '79.

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Copyedited by Danielle Weindling

Designed by Cara Borelli

Printed by Puritan Capital

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.

