

There is considerable debate about almost all aspects of modern transgender identities. One segment of this argument is centered on whether there is a historical precedent for cross-gender identification. In the scramble to validate these identities with deep historical roots some people have turned to the records of gender diversity among Native American tribes. While it is uncertain whether this is helpful or harmful for any group involved it cannot be denied that there is a rich tradition of gender multiplicity in some tribes, stretching discontinuously from pre-Columbian times to the present. In fact, over 150 Native American tribes have documented roles for gender diverse people.¹

It is likely that many more tribes formerly had these roles as well, but they were not documented either because of later European prejudice being incorporated by the tribe or because of the enormous reduction in the indigenous population from epidemic diseases. Any attempt to further study historical two-spirit people is hindered by the European abhorrence of non-normative gender expression, poor survival of records, and later the justifiable suspicion with which indigenous peoples came to view the anthropologists who were attempting to study them.² Most existing accounts are very brief and difficult to analyze, such as that of an unnamed traveler through Cherokee Territory in 1825 reporting “There were among them formerly, men who assumed the dress and performed all the duties of women and who lived their whole life in this manner.”³ This comment was preserved in an unpublished manuscript, and only found in an archive over a century and a half after it was recorded.

Bearing these limitations in mind, this paper looks at longer accounts of encounters between three geographically discrete native nations and early European travelers from three less geographically isolated but culturally discrete nations. Unfortunately, only the European accounts of these meetings have survived, therefore most of the conclusions drawn here will have more to do with what the texts say about the Europeans who authored them than the Native tribes about whom they were written.

The Spanish and the Joyas in Alta California

The well-documented encounters between Native Americans and the Spanish in Alta California produced by Catholic missionaries provide an important resource to study gender diversity there.⁴ It is likely that the high rate of literacy among priests and the continuity of record keeping by the Catholic Church are responsible for the breadth of information surviving from this area of colonial contact. The Spanish called the non-gender-normative native people 'Joyas', which is Spanish for jewels. Whether this term was meant to be interpreted sarcastically in light of the Spaniard's low opinion of the joyas, or meant to indicate the high esteem in which the native tribes held them, or possibly both at the same time is a matter of extensive scholarly debate.⁵ It is also worth noting that this erasure of the existing indigenous terms for two-spirit peoples was part of a broader attempt to erase Native cultures. One example of this erasure can be found in tribal funerary practices. In many California tribes an important and longstanding cultural aspect of third-gender people was their role as undertakers; a function which was usurped by the Spanish priesthood.⁶ One account in the Spanish territories referenced in several sources comes from Mission San Antonio in 1776 or 1777, the priest who recorded it did not include his name or that of the missionized tribe, however both might be recovered with access to the mission records in the future. Several nearly-identical translations were available⁷, the translation below was written by a woman who identifies as both Chumash and two-spirit.

"...the priests were advised that two pagans had gone into one of the houses of the neophytes, one in his natural raiment, the other dressed as a woman. Such a person the Indians in their native language called a joya. Immediately the missionary, with the corporal and a soldier, went to the house to see what they were looking for, and there they found the two in an unspeakably sinful act. They punished them, although not so much as deserved. The priest tried to present to them the enormity of their deed. The pagan replied that that joya was his wife."⁸

While the reaction of the priest to this revelation is not recorded we can assume his response was not positive. In order to live in the mission these Native Americans would have been required to undergo a Catholic baptism. Despite this they were still called pagans in order to continue to dehumanize them and justify the punishment of native people. The Spanish priests usually relied on humiliation or whippings to re-orient the gender of the Joyas. Spanish soldiers are widely reported to have instead used trained mastiffs to kill the Joyas, though this is in some accounts disputed. If true, the disparity reflects the priestly training to be patient and educate as opposed to the soldier's training to instill fear in those who oppose him.⁹ The attempt to eradicate the Joyas specifically for being their gender led the translator cited above to describe the Spanish missions in Alta California as "waging gendercide".¹⁰ This particular excerpt from Alta California has been interpreted many other ways as well, including as proof of gay marriage within Native nations, though this seems a misinterpretation of what being a Joya meant. More particularly, that interpretation fails to recognize the distinction between biological sex and gender identity. Neither historians nor social scientists have found much in the way of hard rules regarding who two-spirit people were permitted to marry¹¹. It seems to have changed with both tribe and time period; the only thing which is consistent is that there are no documented cases of gender diverse people marrying other third gender people. Of course, this may be related to poor preservation of documents.

The Illinois and the French in the Midwest

Most accounts of two-spirit people in the Americas focus on adults, and in particular the sexual relationships of adults.¹² Both early European travelers and later anthropologists are equally prone to this conflation of gender and sexuality, which has a long precedent in European tradition. This account makes the same conflation; it was written as part of a travelogue that was meant to function as an advertisement for the French territories in America. It was recorded in a formerly anonymous volume,

since attributed to Pierre Deliette, the cousin of a commander at one of the French forts in the Great Lakes region somewhere near modern-day Chicago. This translation was written sometime in the 1930s.

“The sin of sodomy prevails more among them than in any other nation, although there are four women to one man. It is true that the women, although debauched, retain some moderation, which prevents the young men from satisfying their passions as much as they would like. There are men who are bred for this purpose from their childhood. When they are seen frequently picking up the spade, the spindle, the axe, but making no use of the bow and arrows, as all the other small boys do, they are girt with a piece of leather or cloth which envelops them from the belt to the knees, a thing all the women wear. Their hair is allowed to grow, and is fastened behind the head. They wear also a little skin like a shoulder strap passing under the arm on one side and tied over the shoulder on the other. They are tattooed on their cheeks like the women and also on the breast and the arms, and they imitate their accent, which is different from that of the men. They omit nothing that can make them like the women. There are men sufficiently embruted to have dealings with them on the same footing. The women and girls who prostitute themselves to these wretches are dissolute creatures.”¹³

This account is unusual in that it focuses on the process by which two- spirit children adapted to the social roles they would have as adults and gives an unconventionally well detailed description of tribal customs. Interestingly this Illinois custom mirrors what many trans* activists today have concluded would be the best practices for the mental wellbeing of transgender children; allowing the child to dress and behave as their preferred gender. This accommodation was cast by Deliette, as with other Frenchmen, as a way of crafting a subgroup of infinitely debauched and therefore inviolable sexual

service providers. This interpretation seems at odds with the description of these male-bodied children as having a preference for women's work from early childhood. It is also unclear how he came to the conclusion that indigenous women were treated any differently by their own tribe if they formed relationships with gender diverse people. It seems very likely this is his own prejudice speaking, given the lack of evidence. Additionally he dehumanizes the men who would engage in relations with third-gender people by calling them "embruted", literally more bestial than other men, though it is unclear whether this connotation was present in the original French writing or was read into the text by the translator.

A Jesuit Traveller and the Plains Tribes

This 1844 account of multiple two-spirits individuals comes from Pierre-Jean de Smet, who immigrated to the United States from Belgium, and became a Jesuit here before traveling across the territories to set up missions.¹⁴ This specific account was translated from the original French in 1905, I have inserted in brackets some corrections noted by Hemilla in her article, all of which further clarify the account or correct omissions by the original translator.¹⁵ The original French was also presented in the article, and this translation appears very accurate.

"Among the Crows I saw a warrior who, in consequence of a dream, had put on women's clothing and subjected himself to all the labors and duties [demanded] of that condition, so humiliating to an Indian [man]. [On the contrary] there is a woman among the Snakes who once dreamed that she was a man and killed animals in the chase. Upon waking, she assumed her husband's garments, took his gun and went out to test the [effectiveness] of her dream; she killed a deer. Since that time she has not left off man's costume; she goes on the hunts and on the war-path; by some fearless actions she has obtained the title of "brave" and the

privilege of admittance to the council of the chiefs. Nothing less than another dream [would] make her return to her gown.”¹⁶

As Hemilla points out it is very interesting that while the Crow individual is referred to in demeaning terms, subjecting himself to unmanly toil, the Snake individual is displayed in a much more positive light. This probably reflects the bias of De Smet specifically, and European men more generally, that masculinity was superior and normal while femininity was deviant and inferior. It is underscored by European myths of women transforming into men.¹⁷ While these myths were not held to be literally true it might have made the idea of a woman taking on the role of a man not as unimaginable as a man willing taking on the role of a woman. At the very least the idea of a woman becoming a man, then as now, would be seen as an improvement in her status while a man becoming a woman would be seen as a degradation in his status. There may have also been a deeper sense of revulsion on De Smet’s part at the Crow individual, whom he explicitly states he saw, as opposed to the Snake individual whom he may or may not have met.¹⁸

Caveats

One of the difficulties in researching this paper was tracking down more information about the authors. While DeSmet left some biographical traces there were two men named Pierre Deliette in the Illinois territory at about the same time. Ironically a full-text version of his writings was also the easiest to locate. Meanwhile the Spanish account cited above has no named author, but was preserved in the voluminous mission archives of the Catholic Church. The loss of deeper biographical information about the authors makes it harder to analyze the intentions behind what they wrote down, as well as more difficult to assess what information they may have excluded. As noted previously it is also difficult to give a full analysis of these texts when only the hegemonic perspective has survived. All of the primary documents here are written by white, Christian men who are part of colonizer societies. However, by

telling us what they found to be abnormal they do tell us quite a lot about what was considered by them, and by extension their societies, to be normal. This is valuable because norms are often hard to pin down as they are defined negatively, by what they exclude, rather than positively by what they are.

Cross-Textual Analysis and Conclusions

Surviving accounts of early encounters between European men and gender diverse Native Americans tell us at least as much about their authors as they do about their subjects. By reading these quotes for what they say, how they say it, and what is left out it is possible to gain a deeper perspective on what these accounts really have to tell us. They tell us explicitly of the negative reactions that white men had upon finding male-bodied individuals living as women.¹⁹ It often seems, given the extensive sense of outrage expressed by the writers, that to them the idea of a male-bodied person desiring to live as a woman was unthinkable, literally a thing which they could not previously have imagined.²⁰ A good example of this is the description by a mission priest of consensual sex between a man and his joya wife as “an unspeakably sinful act”. Another aspect which consistently shows through is the mutual bafflement, by both indigenous people and colonizers, at the social customs and values systems of each other. Deliette was the least confused by what he saw among the Illinois, which is hardly surprising as he spent part of his early life around the tribe²¹. De Smet’s account hints that female-bodied two-spirits were held to be more acceptable, at least for a Belgian Jesuit in the 1840s. The Spanish missionaries, on the other hand, were so outraged and embarrassed that they occasionally apologized to future readers of their papers for mentioning the sinful practices of the indigenous peoples they described.²² All of the accounts are very negatively judgmental of the cross-gender practices they observed, and eliminating these practices became part of the Euro-American mission to ‘civilize’ the Native people they encountered. Relatedly, all of these accounts are colored by having been written by men who were part of a colonial enterprise, either religiously or militarily attempting to eradicate the very people they

wrote about. These biases were, seemingly, absorbed by the Native American tribes themselves. In many cases, including the Illinois and the Chumash described above, the gender diverse roles which they previously had disappeared within a few generations of first contact.²³

In other ways the reactions of the authors are varied, as should be expected given that these authors were from different countries and whiteness had not yet become the monolithic concept that it is now.²⁴ Each author most likely would have thought of himself as having a nationality and a religion over a race. This is clear in the difference between DeSmet, the Belgian-American Jesuit, and the unnamed Spanish priest. Though both were men of the cloth only one conveyed a blanket disapproval of gender diversity. More unusually for a priest DeSmett also allows room in his narrative for the spiritual side of two-spirit identity, explicitly detailing that both of the cross-gender identified people he wrote about had taken on the role after a sacred dream. Contrasted with both of the other authors the Frenchman focused as much on elaborate description as on moral outrage, though he shares with the unnamed priest the specific use of dehumanizing language to describe both third-gender people and anyone who would enter into a sexual relationship with them.

Finally, the amount of information gleaned from these small fragments of writing about gender diverse Native American people suggests that there is much more scholarship to be done on the matter. These are only three short excerpts out of many. It is not hard to imagine that to focus on all existing writing on a single tribe would yield a great depth of knowledge. It could be a particularly rich field of research if anthropological evidence could be integrated and modern members of the specific Native nation were respectfully consulted as well.²⁵ This paper might be considered as an appetizer, and an invitation to further study.

Notes

¹ This statistic is cited in “LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History” from the National Parks Service. It cropped up a few other times in the research process, but then proved impossible to track down in the PDF documents.

² See Sandra Faiman-Silva, “Anthropologists and Two Spirit People: Building Bridges and Sharing Knowledge” for a more complete discussion.

³ As quoted from Smithers, “Cherokee “Two Spirits” Gender, Ritual, and Spirituality in the Native South”, pp 626-7.

⁴ These records serve as source material in the articles by Miranda, Hurtado, Lang, and two of the chapters in *Archaeologies of Sexuality*.

⁵ As elaborated in Miranda, “Extermination of the Joyas : Gendercide in Spanish California”, pp. 261-262.

⁶ See Miranda, ““Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish California”, pp. 266-8 and Voss *Archaeologies of Sexuality*, chapter 10. For a similar role among the Cherokee see Smithers, ““Two Spirits”: Gender, Ritual, and Spirituality in the Native South”, pp. 638-640.

⁷ The only major difference between this translation and others was the choice to explain the term *joya*, then use it in place of the more offensive ‘berdache’ or the anachronistic ‘two-spirit’.

⁸ Miranda, “Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish California”, pp. 261.

⁹ Miranda, “Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish California”, pp. 257-260.

¹⁰ Miranda, “Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish California”, pp. 256-7.

¹¹ Hauser, ““The Berdache and the Illinois Indian Tribe during the Last Half of the Seventeenth Century”, pp. 50, Hemmila “Ancestors of Two-Spirits: Historical Depictions of Native North American Gender-Crossing Women through Critical Discourse Analysis”, pp. 422, Smithers, “Cherokee “Two Spirits”: Gender, Ritual, and Spirituality in the Native South”, pp. 633-4, and Lang, “Native American men-women, lesbians, twospirits: Contemporary and historical perspectives”, pp. 310-317 for more on marriage and two-spirits people

¹² This subject takes up a good chunk of Hauser’s article, a small part of Hurtado’s article, and considerable space in *Archaeologies of Sexuality*.

¹³ Deliette, *Memoir of De Gannes Concerning the Illinois Country*, pp. 329-330., background information above taken from Hauser, “The Berdache and the Illinois Indian Tribe during the Last Half of the Seventeenth Century.”, pp. 47.

¹⁴ Hemmilä, "Ancestors of Two-Spirits: Historical Depictions of Native North American Gender-Crossing Women through Critical Discourse Analysis", pp. 412.

¹⁵ Hemmilä, "Ancestors of Two-Spirits: Historical Depictions of Native North American Gender-Crossing Women through Critical Discourse Analysis", pp. 417-418. Translation partly verifiable after taking 6 years of French classes.

¹⁶ Hemmilä, "Ancestors of Two-Spirits: Historical Depictions of Native North American Gender-Crossing Women through Critical Discourse Analysis", pp. 417.

¹⁷ These myths concerned gender roles more than physical embodiment.

¹⁸ Hemmilä, "Ancestors of Two-Spirits: Historical Depictions of Native North American Gender-Crossing Women through Critical Discourse Analysis", pp. 417.

¹⁹ For more examples of this heavy censoriousness see Hauser, Miranda, Lang, Hemmila, Hurtado, and/or Smithers.

²⁰ Explanation of the concept of the unthinkable from Bloch, "The Unthinkable and the Unseen: Community Archaeology and Decolonizing Social Imagination at Okeeheepkee, or the Lake Jackson Site," pp. 86.

²¹ See Hauser, "The Berdache and the Illinois Indian Tribe during the Last Half of the Seventeenth Century", pp. 47 and Deliette, "*Memoir of De Gannes Concerning the Illinois Territory*."

²² Hurtado, "When Strangers Met: Sex and Gender on Three Frontiers", pp. 56.

²³ See Miranda "Extermination of the Joyas : Gendercide in Spanish California", pp. 268-274 for the Chumash and Hauser, "The Berdache and the Illinois Indian Tribe during the Last Half of the Seventeenth Century", pp. 56-59.

²⁴ As thoroughly gone over by Schliebinger's "Theories of Gender and Race".

²⁵ See Bloch, ""The Unthinkable and the Unseen: Community Archaeology and Decolonizing Social Imagination at Okeeheepkee, or the Lake Jackson Site," pp. 71 for an especially interesting example, where an archaeologist gives a very thoughtful presentation on whether several artifacts do not depict birdmen or birdwomen but bird-third-gender-people, only to have a tribal member explain that they depicted moth-spirits. Another exploration of cooperation between anthropologists and Native communities can be found in Faiman-Slivia's article.

References

Lee J. Bloch, "The Unthinkable and the Unseen: Community Archaeology and Decolonizing Social Imagination at Okeeheepkee, or the Lake Jackson Site," *ARCHAEOLOGIES* Volume 10 Number 1 April 2014. pp 70-106. DOI 10.1007/s11759-014-9251-x

Deliette, Pierre. *Memoir of De Gannes [Deliette] Concerning the Illinois Country*. Included in *Why Were Illinois Indian Women Attracted to Catholicism, 1665-1750?*, Documents selected by Tracy Neal Leavelle. (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, 2007).

Sandra Faiman-Silva, "Anthropologists and Two Spirit People: Building Bridges and Sharing Knowledge," Anthropology Faculty Publications. Paper 23. (2011)

Hemmilä, Anita. "Ancestors of Two-Spirits: Historical Depictions of Native North American Gender-Crossing Women through Critical Discourse Analysis." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 20, no. 3-4 (2016): 408-426. 10.1080/10894160.2016.1151281

Hauser Raymond E. "The Berdache and the Illinois Indian Tribe during the Last Half of the Seventeenth Century." *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Winter, 1990), pp. 45-65.

Hurtado, Albert L. "When Strangers Met: Sex and Gender on Three Frontiers." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 17, no. 3 (1996): 52-75. Accessed April 1, 2020. doi:10.2307/3346876.

Sabine Lang, "Native American men-women, lesbians, twospirits: Contemporary and historical perspectives," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, Vol 20, Issues 3-4,(2016) 299-323, DOI: 10.1080/10894160.2016.1148966

Deborah A. Miranda, "Extermination of the Joyas : Gendercide in Spanish California," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 16, Number 1-2, (2010), pp. 253-284.

Robert A. Schmidt and Barbara L. Voss. *Archaeologies of Sexuality*. New York City: Routledge, 2000.

Gregory D. Smithers, "Cherokee "Two Spirits": Gender, Ritual, and Spirituality in the Native South," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Volume 12, Number 3, (Fall 2014), pp. 626-651. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eam.2014.0023>