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Making Traditional Spaces: Cultural Compromise at Two-Spirit Gatherings in Oklahoma

BRIAN JOSEPH GILLEY

Since the early 1990s, two-spirit people from a variety of tribal backgrounds have been coming together for social and spiritual meetings. *Two-spirit*, a term adopted by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) Natives, represents an emerging new interpretation of “traditional” Indian identity. Like most mainstream Indian events and ceremonies, two-spirit gatherings emphasize Native traditions, cultural participation, and personal survival. Gatherings offer a way to maintain friendships, find other “Indians like them,” and gain access to cultural experiences that are not available within their tribal communities because of homophobia. Two-spirit gatherings provide a place for the assertion of two-spirit identity within supportive spiritual and social contexts. By transcending contemporary mainstream Native ideological regulations on sexual identity and gender roles, the two-spirit gathering emphasizes the self-acceptance and the gender diversity that were historically a part of American Indian culture. During these events, men mix gender roles by dressing in women’s dance regalia and taking on female ceremonial and social roles. Gatherings not only create an alternative to the masculinized and hetero-focused social structure of tribal and Native American society but also provide a place for two-spirit persons to assume the role of cultural participant.

In this article, I examine the ways in which men in the Green Country Two-Spirit Society of Oklahoma use the annual gathering to compensate for the lack of opportunities to express sexual identity and gender difference within mainstream Native cultural contexts.¹ I also explore how the gatherings reveal two-spirit identity as a compromise of one’s sexual, gender, and racial identities.² First, I will discuss the development of two-spirit identities, societies, and gatherings. Second, I will look at the manner in which two-spirit

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gatherings draw on Native cultural traditions. Two-spirit men have developed alternative communal spaces in which to express both their indigenous and their sexual and gender identities. The cultural practices of gatherings represent the crossing of established boundaries, as well as the reconfiguring of what it means to participate in traditional Native practices. Two-spirit gatherings also illustrate the complex role played by sexual and gender identity in the shaping of social identities in public contexts.

TWO-SPIRIT IDENTITY AND SOCIETIES

The development of a contemporary gay indigenous identity began to emerge in the late 1970s as part of the rise of gay activism in major cities in the United States. As the HIV/AIDS crisis galvanized the political efforts of the gay community in general, it also boosted the solidarity of GLBT Natives. The 1980s and early 1990s saw the renaissance in Native cultural awareness among urban GLBT Natives spread to smaller cities, rural areas, and reservations throughout the United States and Canada.

The largest surge in the growth of the indigenous gay movement came by way of the Internet (discussed below) and use of the term *two-spirit*. Activist Native academics introduced it into everyday speech as a way for GLBT Natives to identify with both historic Native gender diversity and contemporary Indian identity.³ Many adopt the term *two-spirit* simply to identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, as well as indigenous. However, over the last ten years the term *two-spirit* has developed a more complex usage among GLBT Native peoples. In its most fundamental sense, *two-spirit* refers to the mixing of male and female traits or “spirits” within an individual. This definition draws on the sex- and gender-role blending found in the history of most Native North American peoples.⁴

Two-spirit people strategically use the term *two-spirit* to integrate contemporary GLBT Native identity and “traditional” values. It is well established that, prior to the introduction of the European understanding of gender, most Native American cultures had conceptual categories for multiple gender, a mixed-gender status in which male and female social characteristics were embodied by one individual. In many Native societies, individuals of multiple gender also were considered to possess special spiritual talents and were respected for their differences. The influence of Christian missionaries, United States government oppression of Native social customs, and the penetration of Western social values all account for the decline in Native acceptance of gender diversity among Native peoples. By the late nineteenth century, most Native communities had adopted American popular ideas about sexuality and gender difference. In the current atmosphere of intolerance among non-gay Natives, two-spirit people have fashioned an identity rooted in the historical Native acceptance and incorporation of gender difference.

Two-spirit societies are a crucial element of contemporary GLBT Native cultural, social, and political life. The San Francisco-based Gay American Indians (GAI) is recognized as the first GLBT Native organization, as well as

the first to address the problems faced by urban GLBT Indians. GAI began in the late 1980s as a cultural and political association for GLBT Natives living in the San Francisco Bay Area.⁵ As word about GAI spread, similar groups began to form in other major cities such as Minneapolis, Toronto, Seattle, and New York. These organizations were instrumental in giving many GLBT Natives alternative social outlets to the white-dominated gay scene that still supported their cultural identity.⁶ Despite the successes of these urban groups, until very recently the indigenous GLBT movement remained relatively unknown to Natives living in smaller cities, on reservations, and in rural areas.

By the 1990s, it was apparent that most nonurban areas with high Indian populations were not receiving the funding necessary to prevent the spread of HIV. To meet the needs of both urban and rural gay Indian men, outreach prevention programs were established by several health organizations. The Green Country Two-Spirit Society had its origins in one such facility, a small Indian health clinic that sought to address the special problems faced by Native gay men infected with HIV. Programs in the Green Country Society focus on gay men, bisexual men, and transgender men. Society members support the inclusion of women, but the group's funding for activities is earmarked for men who have sex with men. Nevertheless, a small number of women often attend the annual Green Country Society Gathering. Other two-spirit societies across the United States have a larger number of women who participate in their activities and contribute to operations.⁷

As specialists in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention recognized that awareness was the key to preventing further infections, two-spirit outreach activities began to focus on providing support for gay Native men regardless of their HIV status. The assumption that individuals who are more involved with Native cultural practices will be less likely to put themselves at risk for HIV/AIDS is fundamental to the approach of the Green Country Two-Spirit Society. By coming to accept oneself as both Native and gay, individuals will be less likely to engage in risky behavior that would increase their chance of contracting HIV/AIDS or otherwise harming themselves.⁸ Open discussions and activities geared toward prevention are incorporated into social and spiritual activities at meetings and workshops.

Two-spirit societies in general serve as a place for individuals to learn cultural practices and meet other people facing the same struggles with family, partners, and self-image, as well as participate as a two-spirit person in collective activities not available among their families and tribes. The Green Country Society provides a supportive atmosphere where men can gather with other Natives without surveillance by their tribal communities. As a result, men from a variety of tribal backgrounds travel up to three hours to attend meetings twice a month, and others will travel up to a thousand miles to attend the yearly gathering. The society also sponsors outings to museums, powwows, and gay community events. The hope is that a supportive atmosphere will decrease the negative feelings that many two-spirit men have about being gay. Gatherings reinforce this goal by bringing together men who identify with a variety of gender and sexual orientations and tribal traditions.

GATHERINGS IN OKLAHOMA

Gatherings represent one of the most important aspects of the two-spirit social world.⁹ Two-spirit engagement with American Indian culture resides in what Vivian Patraha would characterize as the difference between “space” and “place.”¹⁰ Gatherings occur in a “space” that is defined by two-spirit men and informed by Native traditions. Mainstream Native “place” is one where roles for men and women are predetermined as traditionally heterosexual, and the gender-mixed person is explicitly absent. Accordingly, the cultural practices that define a particular event, ceremony, or social position as “Indian place” do not welcome alternative performances of gendered Indianness. Most two-spirit men assume that the majority of non-gay Native peoples and tribal societies do not recognize same-sex relations or gender mixing as an aspect of Indian identity.¹¹ As a result, two-spirit men feel unwelcome at ceremonies, powwows, and other culturally important events. Therefore they designate a two-spirit space where transgressions in dominant gender relations are welcome, and they provide the social relations that are critical to maintaining GLBT Native identity. However, it is important to recognize that two-spirit space still occurs within the realm of Indian tradition, which does not allow for wholly new interpretations. When two-spirit men perform female ceremonial tasks and dress in women’s dance regalia, they still adhere to rules governing traditional female behavior. By creating a two-spirit space within Indian traditional values, they both forge a connection with Native customs and bring back the historical roles of gender-different people in Native culture.

Gatherings among two-spirit groups nationwide have assumed two forms—those that are primarily spiritual and those that are mostly social. Overall, there are more social gatherings held each year than there are spiritual ones. Each type serves a different purpose for each two-spirit person. Some Native gays and lesbians see their participation in two-spirit activities as ordinary socializing. For other people, two-spirit cultural practices are deeply rooted in spiritual values. Despite their differences, both social and spiritual gatherings have the same goal: to help Native gays and lesbians respect themselves as both gay and indigenous. The spiritual gathering accomplishes this by focusing on the historic and contemporary importance of two-spirit people’s role in Native ceremonial contexts, giving them access to ceremonial practices, rare but meaningful contact with elders, and instruction in Native culture. The social gathering can serve the same purpose, but it provides a more relaxed environment in which aspects of both Native and mainstream gay cultures are expressed.

The Green Country Two-Spirit Society began to hold an annual social gathering in 1995, initially with fewer than fifteen participants, mostly from Oklahoma. It was a way for two-spirit men to get together outside of the bar scene and away from intolerant Natives and family. Participation in the Green Country Society grew through gay Native e-mail lists, websites, and public outreach and, by 2000, the group had well over seventy people on its mailing list. The Green Country Society expanded its reach and began to open the yearly gathering to people outside the state. In 2000, the society invited gay Native

men from all over North America through a large-scale mailing, e-mail, and public outreach effort.

The 2000 Oklahoma Gathering was significant for several reasons. First, the Green Country Society had to raise 80 percent of the money for the gathering because the health clinic that sponsored the group refused to fund an event open to men outside Oklahoma. Eventually the society obtained the money by holding garage sales, auctioning a quilt, and soliciting donations. The fund-raising and retreat planning process unified the two-spirit group and the gathering became a point of pride for everyone involved. Second, the gathering transformed the Green Country group from a regional two-spirit organization to one of national renown. The 2000 gathering was so successful that in 2001 they reached their maximum attendance during the advance registration period and had to turn people away. Ben, one of the organizers of the gathering, said: "The gathering is so popular because of the balance between Native and gay cultural practices. Some of these queens have never been around traditional activities and we can't shove it down their throat. We are also here to have fun and to show people how to be healthy two-spirits." The Green Country group makes a concerted effort to create a welcoming atmosphere for people from various tribal backgrounds and levels of traditional participation by hosting a range of events, such as a drag show and a traditional powwow.

The hospitality of the Oklahoma Gathering is another reason for its popularity. The Green Country Society provides cabin housing and brings in professional cooks for the meals. Participants are responsible only for their transportation to and from the gathering. The gathering itself has a relaxed atmosphere with only a few scheduled talks on serious topics, such as HIV/AIDS, self-image, relationships, and substance abuse. In recent years, Native celebrities have come to the gathering to give presentations on Saturday afternoons. Gathering participants are expected to help wash dishes and keep things clean around the camp area. Most of the gathering is spent socializing, making and learning about Native crafts, hiking on the nearby trails, and participating in small ceremonial activities.

The gathering begins on a Friday afternoon as Green Country Society members are hurriedly setting up the registration table, putting food away, and smudging the ten or so cabins at the campsite. As cars pull into the gravel parking lot, friends are met with choruses of "lululu" and "sister!" and hugs from the waiting group. Many of the people who attend have traveled from the two-spirit societies of Colorado, Minnesota, Texas, Kansas, and Washington, while others, who heard about the gathering through the Internet, come from reservation areas in Montana and the Dakotas where they have little opportunity to be around other gay Native people. By dinner-time on Friday, most of the participants have arrived and the excitement of the participants is overwhelming.

FREEDOM TO MAKE CAMP "INDIAN"

In contrast to the reserved manners required at Indian cultural events, the gathering provides an opportunity for participants to be "campy" around other Natives. *Camp* refers to a form of expression in popular gay culture that flamboyantly exaggerates verbal and nonverbal feminine behaviors. Camp is often associated with female impersonators, but it also functions as a lingua franca among most gay men. Camp takes on many forms, such as exaggerating feminine hand movements, tilting the hips when making a point, and using such terms as *sister* or *girl* in reference to another male.¹² Combining gay cultural notions of camp and Native cultural practices integrates two worlds that most two-spirit men have been told are incompatible by non-gay Indians in their families and tribal communities. "Indian camp" can best be described as Indian teasing and humor combined with the flamboyance of popular gay attitudes. Indian camp takes on many manifestations, for example, the Miss Indian Hills Princess competition in which camp draws from the cultural traditions of female impersonation shows and powwow princess competitions. As the winner will be required to dance in Grand Entry in the following night's powwow, Miss Indian Hills constitutes both a drag queen title and an Indian princess title.¹³

Shortly after the Friday evening meal, preparations begin for the "no talent show," which over the years has developed into a drag show competition for the title of Miss Indian Hills. The National Park Service's stone building on the campground is transformed into an auditorium with a stage. A karaoke machine is brought in; someone is appointed as disc jockey and put in charge of coordinating music with the performers. The role of emcee, who is also in drag, combines the glamor of drag show announcer with the subtle Indian humor of a powwow emcee. The performances themselves include no reference to Native regalia or traditions. Participants make a point not to "kitschify" traditional female Native symbols in the drag show. As one person pointed out, "As tempting as it is, it would be disrespectful to do a Pocahontas routine." Rather, participants' parodies of women follow typical drag show performances. Unlike popular gay drag shows that emphasize the perfection of parody, however, the two-spirit "no talent show" puts less emphasis on the quality of the act and more on the courage it takes to perform. The routines use pop music by "divas" such as Barbara Streisand, Diana Ross, and Celine Dion. The emcee introduces each performer by a stage name, usually a feminized form of a male name, such as *Christique* for *Chris*.

Most of the performers "do drag" only once a year at the gathering and have no professional performance experience. Some people begin to practice their routines and assemble their outfits months in advance. Others are more spontaneous and decide to perform just hours before the contest. While a few performers do drag professionally in gay bars, most two-spirit men see the gathering as the only safe place to do drag. As many Native gay men point out, popular gay culture is predominantly "white," which discourages most Indian men from drawing attention to themselves through drag performance. Gathering performers see the talent show as an opportunity not to be evaluated by judges according to their race, class, and social position, as they would

be in popular gay contexts. Instead, performers assume that their acts will be evaluated according to a gay Native standard.

For the last three years, Jolene, whose offstage name is Joe, has emerged from the back kitchen door to face vibrant pop music and bright lights in the large dining room turned stage. Jolene, a six-foot-three Apache drag queen, begins miming the words to “I Will Survive” and walks elegantly around the stage area. As emcee, she both introduces the performance of “the lovely Visa DeCarte” and makes a joke about “how you get Indians to line up for a photo ... you say cheese.” The performers are announced and come on to the stage, and the audience claps along to the music, gives dollar bills to them, and applauds encouragement. Performers are usually dressed in sequined gowns, heels, wigs, and heavy makeup. While lip-synching to the words of the music, they walk and dance around the stage using the mannerisms of female pop singers. These performances turn a musty campground dining room into a space in which being two-spirit is the norm, not the exception.

After the final performer’s act, Jolene tallies the judges’ scores. While the audience is taking a smoke break, Jolene and the performers are backstage changing their outfits for the announcement of the winner. Once the break ends, all of the contestants line up and Jolene announces the third- and second-place winners, who are given flowers. At the 2002 gathering, a Cherokee won the Miss Indian Hills princess competition. She was given a sash that said “Miss Indian Hills 2002” in the style of powwow princesses. In addition, a tall and elaborately beaded crown, similar to the ones worn by female powwow dancers, was placed on her head. The princess will wear her crown and sash during the Grand Entry at the gathering powwow on the following night. The rules of the competition also dictate that Miss Indian Hills will create the sash and crown to be given at the next year’s retreat.

The princess competition is a good example of the sort of cultural compromise fostered by the gathering. By integrating elements of popular Native culture with popular gay culture, two-spirit men are making “camp” Indian. To be Miss Indian Hills in this context represents a critical understanding of how the elements of one’s sexuality and gender identity are specifically Native. Wanting a place to comfortably express their gender and sexual identity, many gay Indian men secretly “come out” in gay society while still attempting to pass as straight among Native peoples by masking “campy” behavior in public.¹⁴ As Jim said, “At powwows I try to behave as well as I can, even though sometimes when I get around the girls [other two-spirit men] we start to cackling. I still try to be a little, well I hate to say ‘butching it up,’ but I try to behave. I put on my church attitude. If Indians are prejudiced to me because of my behavior, then they are the ones throwing the circle out of balance.”

At most mainstream Indian and tribal social events, behavior is closely observed and the way you act in public is considered a reflection on your family. Masking one’s gay identity becomes an obligatory way to protect one’s reputation in Native contexts, such as powwows and ceremonies. Because gay Native men assume Indian intolerance for gay cultural behaviors and a general homophobia, they fear recognition of their sexual orientation and gender difference. The result is a forced separation between the gay and Indian

aspects of their lives. Social participation and performance at gatherings reconciles the tension between gay and Indian identities by allowing a place for the performance of both. In this way, Indian camp is distinctly two-spirit.

MEN “SHAKING SHELLS”

On Friday night, after the Miss Indian Hills competition, everyone slowly gathers in the courtyard outside the dining hall for the annual gathering stomp dance. Stomp dance is a ceremonial dance practiced by the peoples originally from the Southeastern United States, such as Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole. These societies brought the stomp dance ceremonies with them to Oklahoma upon removal, and the dances have become a point of solidarity.¹⁵ Stomp dances in Oklahoma take place in the late evening at out-of-the-way localities known as *grounds*. Gender roles at most grounds are strictly defined: men lead the ceremonial songs and women “shake shells.” *Shells* refers to the rattles made of turtle shells or evaporated-milk cans filled with river rock that women wear around their calves. During the ceremony, a line of dancers snakes around a ceremonial fire, following a male song leader who calls out the words to the songs. The women shake their rattles by stomping behind the men. At most stomp grounds, dancers fall into the line alternating between male and female. When dancing at their family’s grounds, two-spirit men adhere to the traditional gender roles. Most men assume that taking on the female role of shaking shells at the stomp grounds would be met with considerable disapproval. Although many of the gathering participants are from tribes in the Southeast, they often do not feel comfortable participating in the stomp dance. However, at the gathering stomp dance, two-spirit men are offered an opportunity to change their ceremonial roles.

After dark, the first song leader, usually Sean, begins by striding around the fire and calling everyone to the dance with a loud “Ohhhh” and the sound of shells. This task falls to Sean because he is a frequent leader at his ancestral stomp ground. Sean may mix gender roles at the gathering by shaking shells at the same time that he leads songs. In addition, he may mix the gendered symbols of the stomp dance by wearing a skirt, shells, and a hat with a heron feather attached at the top, which is a common symbol worn to indicate a man as a song leader. As Sean begins to circle the fire, other two-spirit men fall in behind him, in no specific gender-role order, calling out the words of the songs. Many of the men will wear shells and stomp skirts, while others will adhere strictly to the male roles throughout the dance.

For some of the two-spirit men, the gathering is the only place that they stomp dance. Despite being of Southeastern descent and having families involved in “grounds life,” some of the men never felt welcome to participate in their ground’s dances. Zach, a two-spirit Creek, told me that when he was a child and adolescent he preferred to do women’s work and ceremonial roles at the grounds. As he grew older, he felt continual pressure to perform male-defined roles, such as learning to lead songs. By the time he was to be initiated into grounds life as an adolescent, he had lost interest in participating with his family. As a young adult, he stopped going to the grounds altogether and had

not been to a ceremony in many years. Like many two-spirit men, Zach felt that his family and stomp community did not accept his gender identity or sexual orientation and that “there was no place for him there.” Conversely, many two-spirit men find ceremonial roles for themselves at the gathering. Before heading into the circle to shake shells, Zach said, “I can dance here at the gathering how the creator intended me to ... as a two-spirit person.”

When I asked why it was important for him and other two-spirit men to be able to wear shells, Sean confidently stated that he sees his two-spiritness as giving a special meaning to shaking shells. He and other two-spirit men ground their perspective in historical documentation of the important ceremonial role of the “alternate gender” among their specific tribe.¹⁶ Accordingly, Sean feels that by mixing gender roles he is “bringing together” the spiritual separation between male and female in the stomp dance. He said, “Two-spirits shaking shells helps create a balance between the female and male energies at the ceremony. It is how it used to be at the grounds a long time ago.”

Like the non-two-spirit community stomp dances, the Friday-night stomp dance at the gathering is a social and spiritual community event. The rules governing gender roles may be loosened, but participants strictly adhere to the ritual of stomp dance performance. The gathering stomp dance provides a space within which two-spirit men can express their gender identity in a specifically Native context. This point is crucial because two-spirit men do not intend to modify the basic religious purpose of the stomp dance. Rather, they believe their version retains the fundamental elements of traditional practice, while at the same time they rearrange the components of the stomp dance to express their own ceremonial and Native identity.

DANCING IN SOUTHERN CLOTH

The first time Ben entered the gathering’s powwow arena in his female Southern Cloth regalia, he beamed with satisfaction. Everyone seemed impressed with his ease as he stepped, and his shawl swayed to the grand entry song. Along with the recently crowned Miss Indian Hills, Ben and other two-spirit men, dressed in both female and male regalia, followed the flag and eagle staff carried by two-spirit veterans into a powwow arena set up in the former dining hall. The singers at the drum—two-spirit men and friends or family—pounded out the grand entry song at a volume matching that of an important contest powwow. Some of the men who wear female regalia at the gathering’s powwow are accustomed to living full time as women; for them, this moment does not represent a change. For the other men dressed in female regalia, however, the gathering provides an opportunity to express an aspect of their identity that is generally unacceptable in Native family and community contexts. Ben had spent the last year not only perusing pawnshops around Oklahoma, looking for a Southern Cloth dress, moccasins, and the other necessary items for female regalia, but also sought advice from female dancers on how properly to combine the various elements of his regalia. Ben assembled a yellow women’s trade-cloth dress, purchased matching moccasins, had a few things made, and adapted a beaded belt from his male regalia. Knowing the

significance of this moment for Ben, a few people gave him shawls to match his regalia at the gathering giveaway during the powwow.

At powwows around Oklahoma, Ben is usually a straight male dancer, but at this event he was fulfilling a long-held desire to powwow dance in female regalia. For Ben, this self-described “switch” culminated and resolved years of struggle to adapt his sex and gender identity to his Native culture. Ben often pointed out that his family suppressed his desire to dress in a feminine manner or participate in female-oriented activities, such as sewing, cooking, playing with dolls, and joining in with women at social events. Ben saw his participation as a woman in the gathering powwow as a way to “take back” the years of shame he endured because of his gender identity and to honor “the child who knew what gender it wanted to be.” He easily fell into women’s powwow roles and seemed to be quite comfortable in his new regalia.

Gender mixing in contexts defined as Native is not viewed as a form of drag. Rather, the redefinition of traditional gender roles at the gathering is rooted in the symbolic content of expressions of gender within Native culture. That is, as Ben told me, gender at the gathering is not as much about switching from one gender to another as it is about feeling free to express one’s degree of maleness or femaleness outside the confines of contemporary Native gender ideals. Two-spirit men see their choice of regalia as a reflection of their gender, as well as something fluid that can be modified according to context. A few two-spirit men adopt female roles or dress at various times during a gathering, while many will mix gender-coded components of dress, such as wearing a woman’s beaded awl case with a man’s regalia.

Like most powwows around Oklahoma, the gathering powwow has a grand entry, round dancing, giveaways, an emcee, and specials, or honor dances. What distinguishes the gathering powwow is the way traditional gender roles are modified while still adhering to traditional powwow rules. In recent years, more two-spirit men are wearing female regalia at the gathering powwow. Since most men who identify as two-spirit do not wish to dress as women, not every two-spirit man feels the desire to don female regalia. As the number of people who wore regalia at the powwow increased from just a few to thirty-five or so in 2004, the number of men dancing in female regalia also increased. Many men have begun to see the gathering as an appropriate place to express their gender difference in a traditional way, while not risking retribution from their other Natives or their families.

Being able to express one’s gender identity through the powwow is important for two-spirit men because the powwow is a culturally sanctioned source and reflection of one’s Native identity. Powwows are used to introduce people “entering the circle” of Native society and for teaching traditional values.¹⁷ By holding a powwow at the gathering, two-spirit men are using this multitribal practice in the same way as other Native peoples. However, for two-spirit men, the powwow tradition is also a forum in which to express their experience as gay Native and “gender-different” men. Through Ben’s wearing of female regalia, “the powwow,” as a cultural practice, is transformed from a mainstream Native-sanctioned source of identity to one that emphasizes two-spirit interpretations of Indianness, both public and felt. In this way, the gathering

powwow, like any other powwow, becomes a space in which traditional Native identity is created and reinforced.

Ben's dancing in Southern Cloth is an example of how the gathering also acts to give a public space for representations of two-spirit identity, a space that is lacking in most contemporary Native ceremonies and practices. Two-spirit men can publicly be not only "Indian" but also "two-spirit." Ben characterizes his "switch" as embodying the same symbolic power as other public expressions of Indian identity. Two-spirit men are publicly "Indian" in their regalia and thereby redefine the meanings associated with traditional practices. Foreseeing a time when his gender switch will be accepted, Ben said, "Someday, through our persistence, we [two-spirit people] will make it okay for me to go into the arena in my female regalia, and I won't have to fear other people's reactions."

TWO-SPIRIT MEN, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

The gathering—a shared space defined by two-spirit men—especially reveals its importance as a venue for cultural compromise when outsiders are present. Two-spirit men's fusion of Native and gay social attitudes and practices is important not only for the expression of two-spirit male identity but also for making that identity intelligible to friends, family, and communities. The use of stomp dancing, powwow regalia, and Indian-infused "camp" reflects a proficiency in Native culture that is immediately recognized by other Natives. When two-spirit men bring outsiders into a realm that they define, they have the opportunity to associate their sexuality and gender identity with Indian identity in ways generally not seen since the nineteenth century. Therefore, the aspects of two-spirit identity that Native peoples are reluctant to accept as part of Indian identity—gender blending and same-sex relations—are explicitly integrated through the careful use of traditional symbols and behavior.

Inviting friends and family to the gathering accomplishes two things. First, it introduces two-spirit social practices and identity to a group of people who are completely unaware that there is such a thing as two-spirit, much less that it is an organized community. Non-two-spirit people who attend may be aware of someone's sexual orientation, but typically they are unaware of the complexity of two-spirit social practices. Secondly, it provides an opportunity for two-spirit men to "prove" themselves and receive approval from family and community members. Evidence of such regard may come only in the fact of attendance or a passing nod of acknowledgment. In rare instances, respected elders have voiced their recognition and support publicly. Such occasions become folklore, cited numerous times to explain why the two-spirit lifestyle should be welcomed by Native peoples. Occasionally—such as the time when a non-two-spirit drum group was invited to the gathering powwow—disapproval comes in the form of snickers and subtly disrespectful behavior. Outright disrespect is rare, since the people who attend are nearly always either relatives or close friends of a two-spirit man.

The Green Country Society encourages two-spirit men who attend the gathering to invite gay-friendly family and friends to various gathering

activities, particularly the Saturday-night powwow. By inviting family, two-spirit men hope to remove the mystery from the two-spirit “lifestyle.” Most relatives and non-gay friends of two-spirit men rely on stereotypes of popular gay culture in America for their information on same-sex relations and gay culture. To counter such stereotypes, two-spirit men feel it is important that family and friends see how they maintain their commitment to traditional Native identity and practices. As Ben states, “Our Indian people and our relatives need to see that we are being healthy ... that we are traditional and that being two-spirit isn’t just about sex.” Accordingly, many two-spirit men feel that the gathering is one of the few places where they enjoy a supportive environment in which to discuss sexuality and gender issues with their families.

Frank invited his mother, aunt, and wife to attend a recent gathering. While he had already revealed to his wife that he was gay, his mother and aunt did not know. Strategically, Frank chose the gathering as the place to come out to his mother. He had invited the women in his family as helpers for a ceremony that he was conducting. Late in the afternoon on the first day, Frank revealed his orientation to his mother and aunt. Frank told me that he wanted his family to see that being two-spirit was not the same thing as being gay in ways associated with white-oriented popular gay culture—two-spirit people were “traditional” people who behaved in “respectful” ways. Although their reactions to this information were not obvious, Frank’s mother and aunt continued to participate in the gathering events and even directed the cooking of the Saturday afternoon traditional meal.

At another Green Country Society Gathering, Sean received immeasurable support from his mother and aunt. Sean’s mother and aunt judged the Friday-night drag show, shook shells in the stomp dance, cooked a traditional meal, and danced in their dance regalia during the powwow. For all of their efforts, the Green Country Society honored them during the powwow. Sean’s mother returned the honor in a tearful speech at the gathering powwow during their family giveaway. She spoke of struggling with Sean’s orientation and her concern for the “unhealthiness” of the gay lifestyle. She joked, however, that after he came out, Sean had established a long-term relationship with another Indian man, which “gave her a son that knew how to change tires and repair things around the house.” Many people were touched by her story, and the talk afterward resonated with awe for the public support and acceptance that Sean’s mother had given her son. In the following weeks, I heard people say on numerous occasions, “My mother would never do that for me.” Nonetheless, Sean’s mother’s speech gave hope to many of the men and reaffirmed that their efforts were, as they said, “gaining the approval of elders.”

Two-spirit men speak of family and friends’ participation in the gathering as a form of reconciliation. The gathering allows two-spirit men to prove their ongoing loyalty to Indian identity and culture while reconciling the two-spirit world and the world of Indian culture. When family, friends, and community members become familiar with the two-spirit way of life in the social setting of a gathering, it becomes more likely that they will be able to accept, understand, and incorporate two-spirit men into mainstream tribal life. The two-spirit men with whom I spoke agree that their goal is to create an awareness

that will eventually lead to their reincorporation into Native social practices and customs. The gathering seems to be a step in that direction for both organizers and attendees.

CONCLUSION

Social acceptance and self-acceptance are inextricably linked in the life of GLBT Indians. Two-spirit social relations are thus meant to achieve the dual goal of community and self-acceptance, which many GLBT Natives feel cannot be found in mainstream Indian society. The desire of GLBT Indians to participate in their culture and be accepted by individuals who share that culture is to a great extent responsible for the appearance of two-spirit identity and, thus, gatherings. While the gathering gives participants an opportunity to define a space for themselves, it also provides an atmosphere in which two-spirit men can safely negotiate the cultural influences of their sexuality, gender, and racial identity. One of the gathering's most important functions is the transmission, creation, and maintenance of two-spirit men's identity.

This article has suggested that the Oklahoma Two-Spirit Gathering is a venue where powwow princesses, stomp dance, and powwow regalia are used by two-spirit men in an attempt to find a place of compromise for themselves among contemporary Native cultural practices. I would also argue that gatherings provide unique opportunities for men to engage in the ongoing process of realizing a specifically two-spirit identity. Because two-spirit men are no longer incorporated into most Native cultural practices, they have had to adapt their sexuality and gender to their racial identity in ways that are informed by tradition but also of their own making. I would go further to say that gay Native men are incorporating a set of social practices—the gatherings are just one example—and ideological interpretations, such as Indian camp, into their lives as two-spirit people. In this way, “two-spiritedness” embodies social relations and values that can be incorporated into an individual's tribal, sexual, and gender identities. Therefore, two-spirit can be thought of as a worldview that informs one's social interactions, politics, and notions of Indianness. Unfortunately, most non-gay Indian people are unwilling to publicly recognize two-spiritedness.

Gatherings are important because they allow free expression of sex and gender. More importantly, they also challenge mainstream Native control over access to cultural experience and identity. Two-spirit men seek out opportunities to feel good about their racial identity and sexuality in forums that their communities cannot provide and that are unavailable within popular gay social contexts. Two-spirit men do not seek to isolate themselves entirely from Indian cultural practices. As many two-spirit men often remind me, the ultimate goal of two-spirit social, cultural, and ceremonial practice is the reincorporation of their public role in tribal and Native societies. Gatherings serve this purpose by giving space to interpretations of Indian identity, while at the same time maintaining that space by encouraging other two-spirit and non-two-spirit Indians to participate in and engage with this community.

NOTES

1. I have disguised the true names of this society and its members at the request of participants.

2. The information in this article is based on five years of ethnographic field research among several societies in the United States. During this time I attended five annual gatherings of the Green Country Society and numerous other society events. The information discussed here is based on interviews, casual conversations, and participant observation.

3. For a complete account of the origins of the term, see Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998) and Wesley Thomas and Sue-Ellen Jacobs, "... And We are Still Here": From Berdache to Two-Spirit People," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 23, no. 2 (1993): 91–107.

4. Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, and Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) present extensive documentation that the majority of Native peoples in Native North America recognized some aspect of gender variation.

5. Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 98; Walter Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 3.

6. The lack of tolerance for Natives within the gay community is well documented. See Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds. *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

7. The Green Country Society is a largely male organization. Because its events do not attract many female participants, I did not collect a significant amount of data on women. Therefore, I often will use the phrase *men* in preference to *people* in this article. Note that the content of this discussion represents only a small portion of the larger community and culture.

8. Irene S. Vernon, *Killing Us Quietly* (University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 27–28.

9. For a broad account of the history of two-spirit gatherings, see Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 97–102.

10. Vivian M. Patraha, "Spectacles of Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence and Historical Memory at U.S. Holocaust Museums," in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (New York: Routledge, 1996).

11. The majority of the research and writing on contemporary gender diversity in Native America uses the very few remaining instances of community acceptance for the gender-different or intact mixed-gender traditions to generalize for the whole of Native society. See Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*; Thomas and Jacobs, "... And We are Still Here." However, I have found that most two-spirit men assume that their own tribe, their families, and Native society in general do not condone their sexuality and gender difference. For further information on two-spirit identity and homophobia in Native communities, see Brian Joseph Gilley, "Becoming Two-Spirit: Difference and Desire in Indian Country" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 2002).

12. Kim Michasiw, "Camp, Masculinity, Masquerade," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2–3 (1994): 146–70.

13. Gay society usually has city or regional titles for professional female impersonators. Gay bars and organizations will often sponsor a competition and include their name in the title. These competitions follow the format of beauty pageants,

award prize money, and require public appearances from the winner for one year. Individuals are judged on their ability to parody women, their talents, and their commitment to the social and political causes of gays and lesbians. Among female impersonators, these titles command a significant amount of respect and are highly competitive. Drag and other titles are not unlike powwow princess titles; they are not based on the same criteria as popular beauty pageants but rather emphasize one's commitment to Native ideals.

14. The majority of the two-spirit men with whom I spoke had participated for many years in the "gay scene," primarily a bar-based culture. Most of the men were fully out in a gay social context while remaining highly secretive at work and around family, friends, and other Native people.

15. James Howard, *Oklahoma Seminoles: Medicines, Magic, and Religion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984); Jason Baird Jackson, *Yuchi Ceremonial Life: Performance, Meaning and Tradition in a Contemporary American Indian Community* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

16. The most common works that two-spirit men draw examples from are Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, and Roscoe, *Changing Ones*.

17. Mark Mattern, "The Powwow as a Public Arena for Negotiating Unity and Diversity in American Indian Life," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 20, no.4 (1996): 183–201.

