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The Representation of Two-Spiritness in Contemporary Native American Poetry: Defining Two-Spiritness and Reclaiming Sovereignty

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Abstract

This thesis explores the question if “two-spiritness” and its representation in contemporary Native American poetry aid in reclaiming Native American sovereignty. The term “two-spirit” is defined and contextualised historically and contemporarily in order to create a framework for the analysis of the selected poetry. In this study, I will consider the work of nine “two-spirit” authors to provide diverse representations and include different perspectives. The selected authors include Joshua Whitehead, Luna Maia, Jaynie Weye Hlapsi Lara, Qwo-Li Driskill, D.M. O’Brien, Paula Gunn Allen, Maurice Kenny, Marcy Angeles, and Smokii Sumac. The analysis indicates that “two-spirit” identity and literature have the potential of aiding the reclamation of Native American sovereignty. “Two-spirit” poetry is often thematically in line with broader themes of Indigenous sovereignty: questions of identity, autonomy, self-determination, and tradition form similarities between “two-spirit”-specific experience and wider Native American experience. Consequently, “two-spirit” identity and literature should be recognised as valuable aspects of contemporary Native American culture that can help negate or remove the remnants of colonialism in North American society.

Key Words: Native American literature, two-spirit literature, Native Queer studies, sovereignty, gender identity, sexuality, the erotic.

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Introduction

Gender identity and sexuality are topics that more often than not have found themselves in the margins of society, much like those who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender (someone who feels that they are the same gender as the physical body they were born with),[1,2] and were often discussed by people who have a personal connection to the topics. Today, gender identity and sexuality are becoming part of a mainstream conversation that considers the lack of visibility and acceptance that LGBTQ+ identities have faced. In many Native American cultures, gender diverse or non-heterosexual individuals traditionally held a more visible position in society. However, European settlers condemned this, and large parts of these traditions have been eradicated. Though traditions have been lost, the people have not, and Native people across North America remain aware of the cultural heritage surrounding sexuality and gender identity.

In 1990, the term "two-spirit," also written as "Two-Spirit," "two spirit" or "twospirit," was coined at the third Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba, to offer a contemporary but strictly Native alternative to folks who consider their indigeneity and gender identity/sexuality connected. Simultaneously, this term serves to replace settler-imposed terminology such as "berdache." Though not without push-back, the term has been acknowledged by Native communities and is being used by those who consider it a fitting description of their identity. "Two-spirit" identity is constantly developing and gaining more ground in Native societies, but is also considered insufficient by some, or already outdated by others. In order to find out what "two-spirit" identity entails and what role it plays in contemporary Native American society, reading "two-spirit" literature can provide insight into these questions, from different perspectives.

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[1] "Cisgender," Cambridge Dictionary, accessed May 26, 2021, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cisgender.
[2] Susan Stryker, "Contexts, Concepts, and Terms," in *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (New York: Seal Press, 2017), 28.

The second topic of this study is the theme of Native sovereignty and the struggle to reclaim this in a post-colonial society. Margaret Robinson mentions that "two-spirit" identity can function as a tool to reclaim sovereignty, as it represents a modern development of a traditional aspect of Native American culture.[3] Since "two-spirit" identities were historically not accepted by the colonial settlers, reclaiming the gender constructs as they exist in Native cultures offers a way to resist the dominant Western constructs of gender identity and sexuality, thus resisting colonial forces that are still in place today. The collection *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literatures* engages with this idea by reflecting the complexity of identities within Native Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Two-Spirit communities. The included work in this collection has consciously been labelled as "two-spirit literature" and is the first collection to present "two-spirit" literature exclusively. The topic of sovereignty features in *Sovereign Erotics* as it often does in other Native literatures. First and second wave Native American Renaissance authors gave a voice to the resistance to the ongoing colonial forces at work in North American societies, and the themes of survival and perseverance have remained central to Native literature. Since the reclaiming of Native gender constructs is an active process, it may play a part in reclaiming Native sovereignty.

In order to look into the connection between these two aspects, this research will first focus on defining and contextualising what "two-spiritness" means, and how it differs from Western notions of gender identity. Since Native people also identify with typically Western identities such as those comprised under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, it will be valuable to discover what constitutes "two-spiritness" and which place it takes in people's lives. Additionally, since "two-spirit" is a pan-Indian term, this research will pay attention to the reception and acceptation of the term across different Native communities. Many tribal

[3] Margaret Robinson, "Two-Spirit Identity in a Time of Gender Fluidity," *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 12 (2020): 1681. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1613853.

communities have their own gender constructs and identities, and a distinction has to be made between these more traditional terms and "two-spiritness" as it exists today. With this definition and contextualisation in place, the second part of the study will focus on the representation of "two-spirit" identities in contemporary Native American poetry, as most studies in the field have previously engaged with prose. In addition, analysing poetry allows for a variety of authors to be discussed, thus helping to create a more comprehensive, and diverse image of the representation of "two-spirit" identity. The selection of poetry consists of Jaynie Lara's "The Ascending Circle: A Two-Spirit Poem," poems from Joshua Whitehead's collection *full-metal indigiqueer*, Smokii Sumac's collection *You are enough*, and the previously mentioned anthology, *Sovereign Erotics*. Some work is focused on gender identity and sexuality, whereas other work focusses more on the theme of sovereignty. It will be the combination of these different elements that will help to answer the question if "two-spiritness" and its representation in contemporary Native American poetry aid in reclaiming Native American sovereignty.

The expected answer to this question is that the concept of "two-spiritness" aids Native Americans in taking control of their own identities and narratives in the post-colonial struggle to reclaim sovereignty. The representation of "two-spiritness" in contemporary poetry offers a direct way to engage with current issues of (gender) identity and sexuality and gives Indigenous creators a distinct voice in this conversation. Many developments in understanding of LGBTQ+ issues happen quickly, and it is crucial that diversity is aptly represented, because such identities as Native American "two-spiritness" run the risk of being overlooked or snowed under by the dominant narratives. Since the latter has been a problem for Native communities for centuries, Native authors are in the position to make "two-spirit" voices heard and to claim visibility in society. Taking ownership of something as significant as identity sends a message of steadfastness and continuance of existence, despite the history

of forced assimilation. This study may only display a small part of a larger conversation, but it goes to indicate that change can arise from a place of creativity and self-expression.

Chapter 1: Defining and Contextualising Two-Spiritness

1.1 Historical context

In order to accurately define and employ the term "two-spirit," the word has to be analysed in its historical and contemporary contexts. This chapter will provide a historical overview of the gender identities, constructs, and social roles amongst Native communities in North America which underlie the creation of the pan-Indian term "two-spirit." The chapter contains information from pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial times since European settlers took control of the Indigenous Native narrative and imposed euro-centric terminology on Native concepts. This process plays a vital part in the development of the term "two-spirit." Special attention will be paid to the term "berdache," which has been used extensively throughout social and academic discourse on the topic of Native American gender and sexuality but is now no longer used and considered outdated and offensive, due to both its etymology (from Persian *bardaj* and French *bardache*: meaning "passive homosexual," "kept boy" or "male prostitute") and the fact that European settlers imposed this term on Native Americans.[4,5] Following this historical contextualisation, the issue of sovereignty will be discussed and considered from a social and academic perspective. This provides insight into a more current debate on the topic of "two-spiritness" and introduces the fields of Native studies and Queer studies. These fields both provide background for this research, so their contrasts and overlap will be explained. Since Native people tend to use terminology from both Western and Native constructs of sexuality and gender, this is an important theme to consider and additionally provides a starting point for the analysis in the second chapter.

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[4] J. James Iovannone, ""Mix-Ups, Messes, Confinements, and Double-Dealings": Transgendered Performances in Three Novels by Louise Erdrich," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 21, no. 1 (2009): 41. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20737461.

[5] Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 4.

Before European colonisers settled in North America, the continent was inhabited by a large number of different Indigenous tribes. Today, the United States recognise 574 different Native tribes and Canada recognises 634 First Nations (i.e., Indigenous peoples that are not Métis or Inuit).[6,7] These numbers have been thinned out over the past five hundred years through ongoing oppression and measures such as the Indian Removal Acts and forced assimilation. There is a tendency to group Native Americans together as a uniform population, but the diversity amongst these different Native societies should not be underestimated. This diversity extends to the aspect of gender identity, and in 1987 Will Roscoe published a bibliography of sources which display the multitude of different gender and sexuality constructs that can be found in different Native American tribes.[8] This database makes use of the categories "tribe," "area," "language," "social roles," "religious roles," "myths/folklore," "cases," and "gender."[9] Elements such as "tribe," "social roles," and "religious roles" can help to understand tribally specific constructs, but "gender" as a binary category misses the point as these individuals often do not define themselves as "male" or "female." Though outdated in its views and use of language, the bibliography provides evidence for the differences between tribes and thus goes against the idea of a pan-Indian identity. While a number of tribes recognised more than two genders, not all tribes did, and not everything can be traced back due to a lack of written sources.

A tribal-specific example of gender identity is given by Carolyn Epple in an article that discusses several different terms that are used to describe Native gender and sexuality.[10] The

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[6] Department of the Interior, "Indian Entities Recognized by and Eligible to Receive Services From the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs," Federal Register 85, no. 20 (January 30, 2020): 5462. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-01-30/pdf/2020-01707.pdf.

[7] René R Gadacz, Zach Parrott, and David Gallant, "First Nations," The Canadian Encyclopedia, February 7, 2006, https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/first-nations.

[8] Will Roscoe, "Bibliography of Berdache and Alternative Gender Roles Among North American Indians," *Journal of Homosexuality* 14, no. 3-4 (1987), 81-172. https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1300/J082v14n03_06.

[9] Roscoe, "Bibliography," 84-85.

[10] Carolyn Epple, "Coming to terms with Navajo *nádleehí*: a critique of *berdache*, "gay," "alternate gender," and "two-spirit," *Americacn Ethnologist* 25, no. 2 (1998), 267-290. https://anthrosource-onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ru.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdfdirect/10.1525/ae.1998.25.2.267.

example she uses is that of *nádleehí*, a Diné/Navajo[11] social and ceremonial role that is defined by "certain behaviours […] associated with the gender of the opposite sex."[12] Epple's discussion centres around the appropriate English vocabulary to use when referring to *nádleehí* individuals. English possibilities include "berdache," gay, alternate gender, and "two-spirit." Looking at the Diné gender construct, four genders can be discerned: *asdzáán*, *hastíín*, *nádleeh*, and *dilbaa*, which respectively can best be described as feminine woman, masculine man, feminine man, and masculine woman.[13] This construct shows the fluidity of gender, and Gabriel Estrada writes that "it is perhaps more than chance that one translation of *nádleehé* is 'one who changes repeatedly.'"[14] Other sources mention five different genders that were traditionally recognised by Diné people, with *nádleehí* referring to any individual switching between male and female roles, in addition to "masculine woman" and "feminine man."[15] The Diné origin story features *nádleehí* as an individual who is able to solve problems between men and women, because they possess both a male and a female spirit which allows them to mediate between the two.[16] This concept is also what underpins the term "two-spirit."[17] There are variations of the Diné origin story, and the number of different genders that are mentioned differs between four to six. Lesbian women and gay men are also seen as differently gendered and are respectively called *nádleeh asdzaa* and *nádleeh hastii*.[18] Other Native tribes may also traditionally recognise two, three, or up to six different

[11] Harold Carey, "Navajo People - The Diné," Navajo People - The Diné - Information about the Navajo People, Language, History, and Culture. - Navajo Indians, accessed April 20, 2021, http://navajopeople.org/.
[12] Epple, "Coming to terms with Navajo *nádleehí*," 267.
[13] Gabriel Estrada, "Coming to terms with Navajo *nádleehí:* a critique of *berdache*, "gay," "alternate gender," and "two-spirit," *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 2 (1998), 172. https://doi.org/10.17953/aicr.35.4.x500172017344j30.
[14] Estrada, "Coming to terms with Navajo *nádleehí*," 180.
[15] Navajo Code Talkers, "Najavo Gender Roles," *Navajo Code Talkers*, May 25, 2014, https://navajocodetalkers.org/navajo-gender-roles/.
[16] Mark Carlson, "Nadleehi-Legends of Navajo Two-Spirits," Mark Carlson - Ghost, June 22, 2019, https://www.markcarlson-ghost.com/index.php/2017/12/16/nadleehi-legends-navajo-two-spirit/.
[17] Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998), 18.
[18] Jolene Yazzie, "Why Are Diné LGBTQ+ and Two Spirit People Being Denied Access to Ceremony?," High Country News, January 7, 2020, https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.2/indigenous-affairs-why-are-dine-lgbtq-and-two-spirit-people-being-denied-access-to-ceremony.

genders.[19] In addition to the six gender identities that are mentioned above, distinctions may for example also be made between a masculine woman dating a woman, and a masculine woman dating a man.[20] The Diné gender construct and its variations show how sexuality can also play a role in defining one's gender identity.

In Diné culture, as in other Native cultures, gender is perceived to be on a spectrum rather than a binary. As demonstrated by the different gender identities recognised in Diné culture, sexuality plays a part in defining one's gender. This construct differs from the male/female or masculine/feminine binary that is often dominant in Western society and regards same-sex oriented individuals as differently gendered.[21] In Western constructs, gender and sexuality have traditionally been perceived as two separate binaries: male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. Through recent developments in gender and sexuality theory, biological sex is now understood as separate from gender identity,[22] and gender and sexuality are both perceived to be on a spectrum rather than binary.[23] This may give the impression that Western understanding of gender and sexual identity is moving closer to Native constructs, but the two remain vastly different. The spectra of gender identity and sexuality are considered separate in Western cultures, while Diné culture employs one spectrum that covers both sexual and gender identity. Such a contrast is crucial when it comes to understanding the structural differences between Western and Diné (or other Native) culture(s), and it displays how it can be difficult to express Native concepts of gender and sexual identity in Western terminology.

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[19] Michelle Cameron, "Two-Spirited Aboriginal People: Continuing Cultural Appropriation by Non-Aboriginal Society," *Canadian Woman Studies* 24, no. 2-3 (2005), 124. https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/download/6129/5317.

[20] Cameron, "Two-Spirited Aboriginal People," 124.

[21] Jennifer Nez Denetdale, "Return to "The Uprising at Beautiful Mountain in 1913," in *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies*, ed. Joanne Barker (London: Duke University Press, 2017), 90.

[22] Alex Iantaffi, "Gender and Sexual Legitimacy," *Current Sexual Health Reports* 7, (2015), 104. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11930-015-0044-z.

[23] Iantaffi, "Gender and Sexual Legitimacy," 103.

When European settlers learned of the existence of the different gender constructs as they came into contact with Native societies, they condemned such social structures. Leslie Feinberg quotes Spanish colonialist Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who described the acceptance of sex and gender diversity as "sinful, heinous, perverted, nefarious, abominable, unnatural, disgusting, lewd."[24] Christian values were forced upon Native Americans by European settlers, and they taught Native peoples that sexual and gender diversity were a sin. The 2014 Canadian documentary *Journey of Indigenous Gender Identity* explains how "two-spirit" people were accepted by their communities prior to colonization; they were seen as gifted or sacred and could have social roles such as caregivers to orphan children, medicine people, mediators or chiefs.[25] The residential school system in Canada and boarding schools in the United States were a source of forced assimilation of Indigenous children, who for the first time were being taught about the Western gender binary, and gender diverse people were no longer allowed to exist.[26] Feinberg also writes about Spotted Eagle, a "two-spirit" White Mountain Apache individual who was forced to speak English at a U.S. government mission school.[27] Her "two-spirit" identity was partly defined by her capacity to speak the male, female, and ceremonial variations of her Native language. The mission schools and residential schools forced Native children to distance themselves from their culture and to assimilate, eradicating large parts of their traditions.[28] Western and Christian standards permeated the Native cultures in Canada and the United States, leading to a loss of the teachings on "two-spirit" people.[29]

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[24] Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 22.
[25] *Journey of Indigenous Gender Identity*, directed by Kelly Malone (News Talk Radio's Meeting Ground, 2014), 2:54 – 3:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mITuqQ7jDfs.
[26] *Journey of Indigenous Gender Identity*, 3:59 – 4:42.
[27] Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, 28.
[28] Robinson, "Two-Spirit Identity in a Time of Gender Fluidity," 1680.
[29] *Journey of Indigenous Gender Identity*, 15:26-15:30.

The process of colonisation removed and oppressed large parts of Native American culture over the past five hundred years. Three phases can be discerned in the development of colonialism in North America: killing, removing, and assimilating Native Americans. The arrival of European settlers killed 90 percent of the Indigenous population in its early stages, decreasing the number of Indigenous people from one hundred million to ten million.[30] This extreme number of deaths is due to, amongst other things, a combination of warfare against Indigenous peoples, "European powers pitting one Indigenous nation against another," and the introduction of diseases and alcohol.[31] In the late 19th century, reservations were being appointed for Indigenous peoples to live on. This was framed as the US government "gifting" land to the Native peoples and resulted in the shrinking of Indigenous land "to just 2.3 percent of its original size" by 1955.[32] As a final development of colonialism, Indigenous people were forced to assimilate to Euro-centric culture and society. Indigenous children were obligated to attend mission schools or residential schools where they were "indoctrinated in Christianity" and forbidden from speaking their mother tongues or practicing their religions.[33] As Captain Richard H. Pratt said about the education of Native Americans, the idea was to "kill the Indian, and save the man."[34]

Colonisation took place over centuries, and the white supremacist sentiments such as Cabeza de Vaca expressed in the 16th century were still present in the 19th century, as demonstrated by American artist George Catlin. He stated that Native gender diversity was one of the most "unaccountable and disgusting customs," and "that it might be extinguished

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[30] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, "Two: Culture of Conquest," in *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press Boston, 2014), 50.
[31] Dunbar-Ortiz, "Two: Culture of Conquest," 50.
[32] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, "Introduction: This Land," in *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press Boston, 2014), 23.
[33] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, "Eight: "Indian Country"," in *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press Boston, 2014), 158.
[34] *Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction* (1892), 46-59, reprinted in Richard H. Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," *Americanizing the American Indians: Writing by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880-1900*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 260-271. Accessed via http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929/.

before it be more fully recorded."[35] When talking about what we now refer to as "two-spirit" people, Catlin used the term "berdache," which has been used in the past by colonial settler anthropologists to describe Native Americans who did not seem to fit the Western gender binary.[36] The term comes from the Persian *bardaj* and French *bardache*, which refers to a passive homosexual, and has also been translated as "kept boy" and "male prostitute."[37] James Iovannone writes that the term "berdache" should always appear in quotation marks when it is used, "to indicate its offensive etymological origins and colonial implications."[38,39] Apart from its offensive meaning, and the fact that it was used degradingly by European settlers, it is also exclusively applicable to men, thus excluding other sexes.

Since the term and its meaning are far removed from the cultural and spiritual roles that third or fourth gender Indigenous people fulfil, a single replacement was found in "two-spirit."[40] The word "two-spirit" was coined as a pan-Indian term, which means it does not represent the intricacies of different gender identities that exist across different Native cultures. The Native terms used to describe "two-spirit" individuals in their own cultural contexts are often not easily translated into English, so "there was a need for a universal term that the general population could understand."[41] Similarly, the English phrase "two-spirit" cannot always be translated into Native languages, as for example in the Diné language where "'two-spirit' means someone who is neither living nor dead."[42] Stemming from the idea that third gender individuals possess both a male and a female spirit, as was explained in the Diné

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[35] George Catlin, *Illustrations of the manners, customs, and condition of the North American. Indians*, (London: H.G. Bohn, 1845), 215. https://archive.org/details/cihm_37623.
[36] Iovannone, ""Mix-Ups, Messes, Confinements, and Double-Dealings": Transgendered Performances in Three Novels by Louise Erdrich," 41.
[37] Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang, *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, 4.
[38] Iovannone, ""Mix-Ups, Messes, Confinements, and Double-Dealings": Transgendered Performances in Three Novels by Louise Erdrich," 40-41.
[39] Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men*, 18.
[40] Robinson, "Two-Spirit Identity in a Time of Gender Fluidity," 1677.
[41] The Numinous, "5 Genders: The Story of the Native American Two-Spirits," The Numinous, March 11, 2019, https://www.the-numinous.com/2016/07/06/native-american-two-spirits/.
[42] Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men*, 19.

origin story, the term is now used to encompass all individuals who identify differently than heterosexual male or female. "Two-spirit" identities are diverse and do not depend on specific labels but embrace the fluidity of gender and sexuality as was customary in most Native American communities prior to colonization. In this thesis, the word appears in quotation marks to indicate that use of the term is not undisputed, and that definitions and understanding of the term might differ.

1.2 Contemporary context

The reception of the term "two-spirit" amongst different Native American communities has been mixed. Sabine Lang writes that the term "originated under very specific historical circumstances and […] started out with a very specific meaning."[43] Not all Native Americans feel comfortable using this term to identify themselves because it does not match their traditional, culture-specific understanding of sexuality and gender. The context in which the word was coined is specifically focused on Native Americans who do not identify as heterosexual and/or identify their gender differently. This means that the term groups together a large variety of identities, while some Native people feel the need to distinguish between their sexual and gender identity. However, Lang also writes that

> The term and concept of "two-spirit" is of great importance to contemporary gay and lesbian/two-spirited people. In urban Native American gay and lesbian communities, it has led to the development, and strengthening, of specifically Native American lesbian and gay identities and roles.[44]

[43] Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men*, 18.
[44] Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men*, 19.

This perspective also introduces the idea of reclaiming Native sovereignty by using the term "two-spirit." Despite the fact that traditional notions of gender might be overlooked by employing a relatively new term, the decision to create a term that refers specifically to Native American cultures and identities is a way of taking back control of the narrative that has been dominated by western society.

A potentially unforeseen downside to the more general use of "two-spirit" is the cultural appropriation by non-Native people. After having had Euro-American terminology imposed on Native concepts, Native terminology is now unjustly being used by others who have no right to claim this cultural concept. Michelle Cameron writes that "the term two-spirited is part of our counter-hegemonic discourse and reclamation of our unique histories."[45] Non-Native people now claiming this term forms a parallel with colonial times when settlers took control of Native land, culture, and bodies with no respect for the people themselves. "Two-spirit" people deciding to give themselves a visible position in today's society is a conscious act of reclaiming their cultural heritage, something that non-Native people play no role in and are actively undermining by self-labelling as "two-spirit." Ethnicity is central to the "two-spirit" identity, and Lang even writes that ethnic identity comes before sexuality and gender identity.[46] Cameron reiterates this, "My core identity is First Nations; being two-spirited is wrapped and surrounded by this core identity and cannot be separated from this."[47] This is an example of a personal experience of identity and differs per person; others might consider ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity equally important, or consider their sexuality and gender identity more important than ethnicity, but the "two-spirit" identity is inherently connected to Native American ethnicity. The Native struggle for visibility is a challenge as

[45] Cameron, "Two-Spirited Aboriginal People," 123.
[46] Sabine Lang, "Various Kinds of Two-Spirit People: Gender Variance and Homosexuality in Native American Communities," *Two Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, edited by S.E. Jabobs, W. Thomas and Sabine Lang (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 115.
[47] Cameron, "Two-Spirited Aboriginal People," 125.

colonising forces remain in place, and the cultural appropriation of "two-spiritness" is a contemporary manifestation of these colonial processes.

One of the ways in which Native American people have been reclaiming their narrative is through art. Indigenous artists are finding platforms and more publishers are starting to see the importance of including Indigenous voices in both academic and non-academic publishing.[48] An example of "two-spirit" literature is the collection *Sovereign Erotics*, which is a collaboration of twenty-eight "two-spirit" authors who have written on the topics of "two-spiritness," gender identity, sexuality, and decolonisation. The editors of *Sovereign Erotics* write in the introduction that this is the first collection "published in North America that is explicitly focused on the writing and art of two-spirit people."[49] This publication features work from authors who are taking an active stance against colonial gender and sexuality constructs and who wish to explore and reveal the diversity and continuance of Native "two-spirit" individuals. Such anticolonial writings by Native American authors are what Gerald Vizenor understands as stories of "survivance": "creative acts of resistance to domination, oppression and termination,"[50] writing from a place of survival and continuance rather than acceptance of victimization.[51] The notion of sovereignty is at times confusing as its exact definition is sometimes unclear,[52] but it is here best explained as decolonisation, liberation, or self-determinization. The name "sovereign erotics" is derived from Qwo-Li Driskill's 2004 essay and is "an assertion of the decolonial potential of Native two-spirit/queer people healing from heteropatriarchal gender regimes," with the erotic being recognized as a "creative or

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[48] Michelle Nicole Boyer-Kelly, "Reclaiming Indigeneity: Recent Publications at the University of Arizona Press," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 50, no. 1 (2020), 197. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/753747.
[49] Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, and Lisa Tatonetti, *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 2.
[50] *Postindian Warrior: Creating a New Consciousness in Native America*, directed by Patty Talahongva (Penn Museum, 2011), 0:42-0:47, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tx1uvgmXP48.
[51] Gerald Vizenor, "Introduction," *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 15.
[52] Boyer-Kelly, "Reclaiming Indigeneity," 195.

generative force."[53] This means that the erotic can function as a source to create "two-spirit" art which rejects colonial forces and re-establishes Native autonomy. Through such publications, "two-spirited" Native American authors are able to take control of their identities and reclaim the expressive and cultural space that was taken from them.

1.3 Queer Studies, Native Studies, and Native Queer Studies

Queer studies first emerged as a field in the late 1980s, early 1990s, when the term "queer" still carried negative connotations due to being used as a homophobic slur.[54] In reaction to this, certain people chose to reclaim the term and started self-identifying as queer. As such, a countermovement was formed because "those who self-identified as 'queer' often felt that they had little to lose and everything to gain by reclaiming the term and, thereby, defusing its power to injure."[55] This shows similarities to the background of the term "two-spirit," which was not used as a slur, but does function as a tool to actively reclaim identity after having been discriminated against. Queer studies emerged as queer identities gained social ground. Though first grouped together, Queer studies developed differently from Gay and Lesbian studies, as "Queer" seemed to be a more flexible term in both its definition as an identity, and in its use in an academic context. Not only does "Queer" refer to one who does not identify within heteronormative boundaries, the term also became a sort of verb "signaling a critical stance […] that is skeptical of existing identity categories and more interested in understanding the production of normativity and its queer companion, nonnormativity, than in delineating any particular population."[56] This is a useful point of departure when it comes to a

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[53] Deborah Miranda, "Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy: Searching for American Indian Women's Love Poetry and Erotics," *Frontiers* 23, no. 2 (2002), 145. https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl504trauma/23.2miranda.pdf,
[54] Siobhan B. Somerville, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108699396.
[55] Somerville, "Introduction," 3.
[56] Somerville, "Introduction," 2.

scholarly context, as its inherently critical stance invites discussion into any area that Queer theory might be applied to. Queer studies do not limit themselves to certain frameworks, which allows the field to be multifaceted. The interdisciplinarity that is found in Queer studies makes it a valuable addition to other fields as well, as for example Native studies.

Native studies as a discipline is still a young academic field, especially considering the way it exists today and how it has changed over the past ten to fifteen years.[57] There has been a growing number of scholars involved in Native studies, and the field is recognised as an independent discipline rather than a subdivision of other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, or history.[58] The term Native studies usually applies to Native American studies in particular, while Indigenous studies often takes a more international approach and focuses on Indigenous peoples worldwide. The field is interdisciplinary in its nature, as it engages with different facets of Native America such as culture, history, spirituality, and politics, entering the fields of for example sociology, history, anthropology, and literary studies. Queer studies play a part in Native studies both from a non-heteronormative perspective when it comes to Native gender constructs, but also from a decolonial perspective where "queer" counters the institutional patriarchy that Native studies inherently challenges.[59] However, Billy-Ray Belcourt questions the position of Queer studies within Native studies as he observes that there seems to be little attention for contemporary gender identity and sexuality when it does not fit into traditional notions of indigeneity.[60] He pays attention to the interdisciplinary nature of Native studies and claims there should be room for Queer Native studies, as the dominant culture of masculinity within Native studies currently pushes Queer

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[57] Brendan Hokowhitu, "Introduction," *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (London: Routledge, 2020), 2. https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9780429440229.
[58] Hokowhitu, "Introduction," 1.
[59] Somerville, "Introduction," 5.
[60] Billy-Ray Belcourt, "Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?" *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, February 1, 2016, https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2016/02/01/can-the-other-of-native-studies-speak/.

studies and Women's studies to the margins. Due to this tendency, Queer Native studies are often relegated to other disciplines than Native studies, as is the case for Belcourt himself who works in the department of English and Film studies.[61]

This issue of Queer theory not being applied to Native studies is recognised by other scholars involved in Native studies as well, while they also consider this perspective to be a valuable one. Andrea Smith argues for an application of Queer theory on Native studies because the two disciplines share properties caused by colonialism and the heteropatriarchy that connect the two fundamentally. She writes that

> the logics of settler colonialism *and* decolonization must be queered in order to properly speak to the genocidal present that not only continues to disappear indigenous peoples but reinforces the structures of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy that affect all peoples.[62]

The way in which Queer theory goes against the established norms of the heteropatriarchy corresponds to the way Native studies continues to challenge settler colonialism. Both disciplines are actively working to create visibility and (re)claim an autonomous position in society.

Another similarity between the two fields can be seen in the issue of the "subject." Postmodernism of the twentieth century is characterised by a rejection of the idea of objectivity and focuses on subjective experience.[63] This reconceptualization of subjectivity means that there is attention for perceptions of subject/object relations, making space for

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[61] Billy-Ray Belcourt and Lindsay Nixon, "What Do We Mean by Queer Indigenous Ethics?" *Canadian Art*, May 23, 2018, https://canadianart.ca/features/what-do-we-mean-by-queerindigenousethics/.
[62] Andrea Smith, "Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (2010), 64. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2009-012.
[63] John Spacey, "18 Characteristics of Postmodernism," Simplicable, August 7, 2019, https://simplicable.com/new/postmodernism.

entities who used to be relegated to an object position to take the centre stage as subject. This theoretical framework is relevant for both Native studies and Queer studies as they focus on often marginalised communities who have been in the object position. Native studies are now working to create a framework in which Native peoples are in the subject position as producers of theory, rather than merely the objects of these studies.[64] This reinforced the position of Native peoples as less-than, since they were being analysed by others while not having the freedom to apply their own theory. A similar process takes place in Queer studies, where "people want to make theory queer, not just have theory about queers."[65] Similarly to Native studies, queer people are positioned as less-than when they are being analysed as queers instead of recognised for their perspectives as queer theorists. In both fields there is a need to turn the passive object of study into an active subject, since this strengthens the positions of these disciplines that are focused on social minorities who are looking for sovereignty. This development broadens the scope of both fields as their interdisciplinary theories are applicable in more scholarly contexts than their own.

[64] Smith, "Queer Theory and Native Studies," 43.
[65] Smith, "Queer Theory and Native Studies," 44.

Chapter 2: Reading Contemporary Two-Spirit Poetry

Having contextualised the term “two-spirit” and explained the (post)colonial forces at work in today’s society, this second chapter will focus on showing how Native sovereignty is displayed in “two-spirit” poetry, and how this poetry can be a tool of decolonisation and reclaiming sovereignty. This claim will be supported exclusively by the work of “two-spirit” authors in order to make sure “two-spirit” voices are at the centre of this argument, since they are logically the only voices that have any authority on the subject. Authors that will be discussed include Joshua Whitehead, Qwo-Li Driskill, Smokii Sumac, Marcy Angeles, Jaynie Weye Hlapsi Lara, Paula Gunn Allen, D.M. O’Brien, Luna Maia, and Maurice Kenny. The poetry collection *Sovereign Erotics* (2011) forms the most important source of “two-spirit” literature in this study, as the collection is specifically focused on the themes of “two-spiritness” and sovereignty. “The erotic” that is mentioned in the title, can be explained as manifestations of sexual desire and pleasure, and might have decolonizing potential because it offers a way of relating to the body in a positive manner. This allows individuals to beautify their bodies and stories and create a narrative of continuance and survival rather than victimhood. The selected works focus on themes such as gender and sexuality, sovereignty, colonialism, popular culture, and tradition. These different themes introduce multiple perspectives which will all be considered to provide a layered argumentation. The analysis will show how poetry by “two-spirit” authors directly engages with current issues and provides poets with a platform to educate, establish an argument, and position themselves in society.

2.1 *full-metal indigiqueer*

Joshua Whitehead is a "two-spirit" author and scholar, and a member of the Peguis First Nation in Manitoba, Canada.[66] His poetry collection *full-metal indigiqueer* was published in 2017 and is in Whitehead's own words "a project of re-membering and re-beautifying two-spirit folks and queer indigenous folks."[67] Whitehead identifies as both "two-spirit" and Indigiqueer; "two-spirit" because he wants to honour the term that originated in Winnipeg, his hometown, but he thinks of Indigiqueer "as the forward moving momentum for "two-spiritness."[68] The term Indigiqueer is meant to bring together the traditional aspects of Indigenous culture, and the queer identity which many Native Americans identify with today. Bringing Indigiqueerness into the future is important to Whitehead, and his poetry collection is a way of showing what it means to be "two-spirit" or Indigiqueer in the 21st century, "to remove us from the was, to remove us from this romanticized anthropological notion and place us into the now—into the future."[69] His poetry collection goes against the existing canons; Trickster figure Zoa creates a disruptive track and "takes on literary and pop culture figures like William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Sylvia Plath, J.K. Rowling, Lana Del Rey, and RuPaul."[70] Lastly, Whitehead explains that as an Indigenous queer person he is "tied to [his] own body," and does not "have access to write as a disembodied person."[71] He says with literature being a political act, writing from his position cannot be unrelated to his queer

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[66] "About," Joshua Whitehead, accessed May 5, 2021, https://www.joshuawhitehead.ca/about.
[67] *Joshua Whitehead Reads from Full-Metal Indigiqueer*, *YouTube* (The Writers Festival, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYlNyecuvcI&t=47s.
[68] "Poet Joshua Whitehead Redefines Two-Spirit Identity in Full-Metal Indigiqueer," CBC News (CBC/Radio Canada, December 15, 2017), https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/from-dystopian-futures-to-secret-pasts-check-out-these-indigenous-storytellers-over-the-holidays-1.4443312/poet-joshua-whitehead-redefines-two-spirit-identity-in-full-metal-indigiqueer-1.4447321.
[69] Justine Ponomareff, "Indigiqueer Storyteller Joshua Whitehead Turns Hope and Frustration into Literature," This Magazine, April 3, 2018, https://this.org/2018/04/03/indigiqueer-storyteller-joshua-whitehead-turns-hope-and-frustration-into-literature/.
[70] Ryan B. Patrick, "Why Joshua Whitehead Wants to Recentre Indigenous Characters with His Cyberpunk-Infused Poetry," CBC News (CBC/Radio Canada, February 1, 2021), https://www.cbc.ca/books/why-joshua-whitehead-wants-to-recentre-indigenous-characters-with-his-cyberpunk-infused-poetry-1.4360505.
[71] Patrick, "Why Joshua Whitehead Wants to Recentre Indigenous Characters with His Cyberpunk-Infused Poetry."

and Indigenous body. *full-metal indigiqueer* as a collection shows direct engagement with current issues of decolonisation, identity, and sexuality, which will be demonstrated through the analysis of several poems.

Whitehead's "thegarbageeater" focuses on the themes of colonisation, 21st century "NDN" life, and prejudices. It reads as a conversation between the author and his circumstances and displays the idea of the "urban Indian"; "individuals of American Indian and Alaska Native ancestry who may or may not have direct and/or active ties with a particular tribe, but who identify with and are at least somewhat active in the Native community in their urban area."[72] This is a concept that features often in contemporary Native literature as urbanisation continues; between 1970 and 2000, the percentage of Native Americans living outside of reservations rose from 38% to 61%.[73] In "thegarbageeater," elements of traditional Native culture are contrasted with colonial culture; "eagle-feathered-lapel / good-intentioned-warbonnet / crocheted-star-blanket-battledress" and "multicultural / bilingual / nation / can you see me[questionmark]"[74] The "me" in this poem is Zoa, for whom Whitehead uses they/them pronouns, and they wonder if in this multicultural nation, with its Native and colonial history, they are visible.

> can you see me[questionmark]
>
> ghetto-gutter-housing-boy
>
> piddling in puddles
>
> etching my name
>
> (what was it again[questionmark]xo;xx)

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[72] National Urban Indian Family Coalition (NUIFC), *Urban Indian America: The Status of American Indian & Alaska Native Children & Families Today*, (Seattle, WA: 2008), 7. https://joiningforces.nationalinitiatives.issuelab.org/resources/11518/11518.pdf.
[73] NUIFC, *Urban Indian America: The Status of American Indian & Alaska Native Children & Families Today*, 8.
[74] Joshua Whitehead, "thegarbageeater," *full-metal indigiqueer* (Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 2017), 33.

onto apologetic handouts

can you see me[questionmark]

in this haughty city

this dumpy sector

apocalyptic urban war camp

can you see me[questionmark]

from your balcony

your trendy loft

suburban daytime palace

can you see me[questionmark]

in my tennis shoes

walmart bags for socks

without my western markings[questionmark]

do you see me[questionmark][75]

This section displays how Native Americans struggle with their lack of visibility in society while they find themselves in poorer circumstances than others in the same cities. According to the NUIFC (National Urban Indian Family Coalition), urban Indians face far more health issues and have less access to healthcare, have a poverty rate 7.6% higher than the general urban population, and are 1.7 times more likely to be unemployed than non-Natives.[76] These factors all shape the urban experience of Native people and play into the feeling of invisibility that has been a part of Native life for centuries. In this poem Whitehead is repeatedly asking if

[75] Whitehead, "thegarbageeater," 33.

[76] NUIFC, *Urban Indian America: The Status of American Indian & Alaska Native Children & Families Today*, 11.

people even see them, and at the same time actively making a difference by making his voice heard through his published writing.

In “re(z)erving paradise” Whitehead references authors and artists John Milton, Edvard Munch, Walt Whitman, Meryl Streep, Justin Bieber, and Madonna while talking about a dying aunt. The poem starts with the words “[instealling miltonsoftware],” “[runningpro(1,0)zoaprogram],” “[re|decolonizing],” and “[indigenizationcomplete],” which is essentially the development that takes place in the poem.[77] Zoa says “i think of john milton / i wonder what losing paradise means / for a thirty-nine-year-old ndn mother of six[questionmark] / i wonder is shes making a heaven of hell.”[78] Zoa undermines John Milton’s literary classic *Paradise Lost* by putting the focus on their aunt’s deathbed rather than Milton’s work, which Whitehead also references in the title. A few lines down Justin Bieber is singled out: “i lipsync to a wannabe-ndn asking: / where are ü now[questionmark].” This is a reference to a claim Bieber made in 2012 that he is “part Indian, […] Inuit or something” and said that this entitles him to free gas in Canada.[79] The term “NDN” means “Indian” and can be used by Native Americans to refer to themselves, often in colloquial writing or speech. The next reference targets Edvard Munch: “when i look at her now i see edvard munch / his scream has nothing on her face.”[80] Munch too is undermined, as his world-famous painting *The Scream* is nothing compared to the horror than can be seen on the face of Zoa’s aunt. Similarly, “meryl streep has nothing on you, auntie” now that she has gone grey.[81]

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[77] Joshua Whitehead, “re(z)erving paradise,” *full-metal indigiqueer* (Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 2017), 49.
[78] Whitehead, “re(z)erving paradise,” 49.
[79] Mark Blackburn, “‘Part Indian’ (or Is It Inuit?) Justin Bieber Faces Online Backlash over ‘Free Gas’ Claim,” APTN News, July 24, 2012, https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/part-indian-or-is-it-inuit-justin-bieber-faces-online-backlash-over-free-gas-claim/.
[80] Whitehead, “re(z)erving paradise,” 49.
[81] Whitehead, “re(z)erving paradise,” 50.

Milton, Bieber, and Streep are referenced through association, while Zoa says "& for some fucking reason i think of whitman / tell him: fuck you, you colonial fuck," and continues "tell milton that he can fuck off too," "tell munch he should go fuck himself as well / what does he know about horror – / since when do settlers know how to scream[questionmark]."[82] Here the tone changes as Zoa actively distances themselves from these Western cultural icons. Zoa then looks at their aunt's earlobe and thinks "about how many madonna songs these ears have listened to[questionmark]."[83] This is the final reference Zoa makes, who now realizes "that native lives are precarious things" but that there is more than suffering in their lives, and that they have survived settler colonialism; "a smiling woman with brown eyes / that winks & says: hereiamhereiam."[84] In this poem, Zoa shows the presence of their internalized Western education and culture while constantly being reminded of their indigeneity through his aunt who is taking her last breaths. The poem can be seen as an example of a story of "survivance," and read as an active attempt to decolonise oneself by literally telling white authors and artists to be gone.

While "thegarbageeater" and "re(z)erving paradise" are mostly concerned with decolonisation, "can you be my fulltime daddy: white&gold[questionmark]" and "its these little things, you know[questionmark]" are also concerned with the themes of gender identity and sexuality in addition to the theme of decolonisation. Zoa aligns "two-spirit" identity with the position of the Trickster figure; "i was always an unusual boy / my mother told me i had a tricksters soul / no moral compass pointing north / no fixed personality, gender."[85] Trickster figures "challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries," they bring chaos and can

[82] Whitehead, "re(z)erving paradise," 51.
[83] Whitehead, "re(z)erving paradise," 51.
[84] Whitehead, "re(z)erving paradise," 51.
[85] Joshua Whitehead, "can you be my fulltime daddy: white&gold[questionmark]," *full-metal indigiqueer* (Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 2017), 54.

be humorous, but also foolish or arrogant.[86] They are capable of creating new worlds and cultures, so Whitehead uses this Trickster figure to challenge the gender binary and make room for "two-spirit" and queer identities.[87] Trickster figures are also known as shapeshifters, and in "its these little things, you know[questionmark]" Zoa explains that they change their appearance "because ndns arent allowed to be gay here."[88] Zoa describes a sexual encounter in their hometown with a man who says that he is not gay.[89] Though this sexual experience is secretive, Whitehead employs the erotic to give visibility to queer Native people and to show how Native Americans face homophobia in their own communities. Whitehead employs the Trickster figure to show the ambiguity present in Zoa's life; they simultaneously wish to defy oppression and hide from it, which they are capable of doing through their shapeshifting capacity. *full-metal indigiqueer* represents "two-spirit" identity through its Indigiqueer character Zoa, and directly engages with current issues of decolonisation, gender identity, and sexuality, allowing Whitehead to take control of his Indigiqueer identity and narrative.

2.2 *Sovereign Erotics*

The collection *Sovereign Erotics* features work from twenty-eight different authors and contains fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and essays. This diversity amongst the authors and their work helps to demonstrate the decolonial potential of "two-spirit" writing. It displays how multiple "two-spirit" authors are concerned with the theme of decolonisation in relation to their identities and choose to employ literature to engage with this. Maurice Kenny takes a physical approach to the concept of reclaiming sovereignty and writes "Just yesterday, like a dog, I pissed / on the grass in Dolores Park, / reclaimed California for Indians / as it had been

[86] Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 2-3.
[87] Smith, *Writing Tricksters*, 2.
[88] Joshua Whitehead, "its these little things, you know[questionmark]," *full-metal indigiqueer* (Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 2017), 73.
[89] Whitehead, "its these little things, you know[questionmark]," 74.

stolen from us years / ago."[90] The invocation of humour in these lines helps to represent a painful truth and may even display a secret wish; if only it would be so easy to reclaim one's land. Humour is an important part of Native American storytelling and can be seen as a type of antidote for tragedy; despite any hardships, one retains the right to laugh. This also plays into Vizenor's concept of "survivance," since being able to laugh at difficult circumstances subverts the assigned role of victimhood.

Jaynie Weye Hlapsi Lara's "Being Two Spirit" describes what it is like to identify as "two-spirit" today and how this plays a part in taking control of one's own identity and narrative. The poem targets homophobia, the lines "What does it mean to be "Two Spirit?" / Walking in the land of our ancestors, / Walking with our hearts open, / Walking close to Creator, / Walking with passion, / yet hiding who we are" reflect how Lara is following a tradition, and faces judgment for doing so.[91] This does not defeat Lara, "I pick and choose which of my / people to tell," taking control of her own traditions and identity.[92] A similar sentiment is echoed by Luna Maia in "authentically ethnic," who expresses that defining oneself is to no effect as others already have their minds made up about someone else's identity, "I don't want to make you believe anything, / you already have it figured out for yourself."[93] Maia does not actively take control of the narrative, but says that "the history of my ancestors is about survival," indicating that the judgment of others will not suppress her identity or traditions.[94] These two poems display the desire for the continuance of "two-spirit" identities, and show how Native culture is a given. It is now up to Native people themselves to decide how these identities and traditions are given life today.

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[90] Maurice Kenny, "Visiting San Francisco," *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 205.
[91] Jaynie Lara, "Being Two Spirit," *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 93.
[92] Lara, "Being Two Spirit," 93.
[93] Luna Maia, "authentically ethnic," *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 125.
[94] Maia, "authentically ethnic," 124.

The continuance of Native peoples and culture is also the topic of Paula Gunn Allen's "Some Like Indians Endure." This poem is from 1988, making it slightly older than the rest of the poetry discussed in this thesis and thus offering a voice from a different perspective. Allen aligns aspects of Native experience with homosexual experience, which is in line with her position as a figurehead scholar in Indigenous studies, who is known for having introduced female and lesbian perspectives to the field. When referring to lesbians she writes "they were massacred / lots of times / they always came back."[95] Both Native Americans and homosexuals have faced oppression and violence because of xenophobia, racism, homophobia, and settler colonial logic fuelled by restrictive Christian cultural standards, and though many of them have been killed, they are still here today. Allen describes how there is a feeling of shared trauma, "and it's now that dykes / make me think i'm with indians / when i'm with dykes."[96] Considering Allen's position as an Indigenous studies' scholar, this can also be seen as an argument for the importance of Native Queer studies, as similar traumas have created overlap in contemporary Native and queer experiences. Furthermore, Allen refers to identity as an idea, "indian is an idea / some people have / of themselves / dyke is an idea some women / have of themselves."[97] This comment puts emphasis on the idea that identity is self-determined and not dependent on others, thus the only person in control of this narrative is oneself. She repeats this idea later, "the rest / colonized it: an / idea about ourselves is all / we own."[98] She expresses that Native Americans and lesbians have both faced colonization, have had their freedom taken away, and are now left with only the knowledge of their identities, but little to show for them. This is the position from which both need to start decolonizing their narratives, and representing gay and Native people in

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[95] Paula Gunn Allen, "Some Like Indians Endure," *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 21.
[96] Allen, "Some Like Indians Endure," 21.
[97] Allen, "Some Like Indians Endure," 22.
[98] Allen, "Some Like Indians Endure," 24.

literature is part of this process. It displays their mutual perseverance, because "like indians dykes / are supposed to die out," but "they don't anyway—even / though the worst happens / they remember and they / stay."[99]

Qwo-Li Driskill, lead editor of *Sovereign Erotics,* writes about the decolonizing potential of love and the erotic in "Love Poem, After Arizona." The poem centres around a gay couple in love who seek comfort with each other in a world where they face colonial forces and feel the need to hide:

> We are two mixed-blood boys
> and know empires are never gentle
> Take off your Mexica mask
> so I can see your beloved
> Nahua face
> Remove your wooden shield
> so I can kiss your
> Apache sternum
> taste in your sweat
> the iron of Spain
> that never conquered us[100]

The narrator of the poem asks his lover to be his true self while they are in private, and to shake off the colonial violence of their past. This displays the decolonizing power of love that *Sovereign Erotics* means to demonstrate, and is rearticulated in the lines "Your hands / like

[99] Allen, "Some Like Indians Endure," 24.
[100] Qwo-Li Driskill, "Love Poem, After Arizona," *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 86.

butterfly wings / disrupt / smooth air / gather momentum / until our gasps birth hurricanes / no law can stop."[101] These lines illustrate how the erotic can function as a disruptive and decolonizing force; the gasps Driskill mentions indicate that sexual pleasure is an unstoppable force, and thus has the potential to disrupt existing cultural and political powers. This can be contrasted with the sexual encounter Zoa describes in "its these little things, you know[questionmark]." Though Zoa is a Trickster figure with the potential to disrupt, they choose to shapeshift and adjust, keeping their identity hidden because Natives are not accepted in their hometown.[102] Driskill and Whitehead write about the same potential of the erotic to disrupt oppressive forces, but while Driskill's narrator describes how powerful it is, Zoa keeps their non-conformity hidden. Lastly, the poem mentions the power of literature, as the two lovers are trying to seclude themselves from the violence that awaits them outside, the narrator states "But we have poetry / we have song."[103] This combination of love, sex, and literature embodies the decolonial potential that *Sovereign Erotics* seeks to convey.

The final poem from *Sovereign Erotics* to be discussed is D.M. O'Brien's "Living Memory," which she wrote "as a tribute to Two Spirit people."[104] The poem is set in a post-colonial societal context, with a strong emphasis on contemporary Native culture. O'Brien writes about the continuation of tradition in a current context; "We are neotraditional / dancing and singing / with large drums— / jingle dressing / and high flying bustles."[105] The word "neotraditional" shows how O'Brien perceives Native culture, as the traditional culture is still part of daily life, but has been adapted out of necessity to fit current social and cultural contexts. This is reflected in the lines "We are waking healers / talking old words / now

[101] Driskill, "Love Poem, After Arizona," 87.
[102] Whitehead, "its these little things, you know[questionmark]," 73.
[103] Qwo-Li Driskill, "Love Poem, After Arizona," *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 87.
[104] Jorge Antonio Vallejos, "Two-Spirit Week 2012: Interviews with Deborah Miranda, Louis Cruz, and Doe O'Brien," Black Coffee Poet, June 29, 2012, https://blackcoffeepoet.com/2012/06/27/two-spirit-week-2012-interviews-with-deborah-miranda-louis-cruz-and-doe-obrien/.
[105] D.M. O'Brien, "Living Memory," *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 52.

translated / into adopted Mother tongues / and spoken from dreams / in a language we can't speak— / except in our blood."[106] Traditional culture is ingrained in today's generation even if aspects such as language are lost. This also applies to traditional gender roles and the current interpretation of "two-spirit" identity; "We are daughters and sons / exchanging roles and intermixing."[107] This is followed by "and being punished— / slashed with words and hands / raped by our own families / recycling the hurts." O'Brien mentions the violence that "two-spirit" people face in their own communities, as a result of the violence that many Native people have faced and still face by people from outside their communities. However, she believes in the power of this neotraditional generation to change the existing patterns, and says that "two-spirit" people "can and will change the world."[108] In this poem she writes "We are the / Saving Seventh Generation / ready to change the world."[109] The "seventh generation" refers to the Iroquois philosophy that "In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."[110] This philosophy is shared by Indigenous peoples around the world, as is displayed by the Seven Generations Foundation Australia Limited. The organisation aims to "establish respectful and cooperative relations between all nations so that current and future generations may live peacefully, in harmony and in sustainable balance with all creation."[111] This shows how this philosophy is still followed today; focus must be on the future and "welfare of the whole people,"[112] and in order to do this, history must be remembered, understood, and talked about as O'Brien is doing herself in this poem.[113]

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[106] O'Brien, "Living Memory," 52.
[107] O'Brien, "Living Memory," 51.
[108] Vallejos, "Two-Spirit Week 2012: Interviews with Deborah Miranda, Louis Cruz, and Doe O'Brien."
[109] O'Brien, "Living Memory," 51.
[110] "7th Generation Principle," Seven Generations International Foundation, accessed May 12, 2021, https://www.7genfoundation.org/7th-generation/.
[111] "About Seven Generations Foundation Australia Limitted," Seven Generations International Foundation, accessed June 17, 2021, https://www.7genfoundation.org/about-us-2/.
[112] "7th Generation Principle."
[113] Vallejos, "Two-Spirit Week 2012: Interviews with Deborah Miranda, Louis Cruz, and Doe O'Brien."

2.3 "The Ascending Circle: A Two-Spirit Poem"

Marcy Angeles poem "The Ascending Circle: A Two-Spirit Poem" retells the story of settler colonialism and how it is responsible for the loss of "two-spirit" people and their traditions. Angeles describes the pain that is continuously present, "Inside is a sickened awareness, one for which the body has built no immunity. / Us Two Spirits & NDN Trans can listen to the Mountains & hear our Slain / Ancestors wailing in the distance."[114] She expresses that the hurt caused by colonialism will not be forgotten, and that society today still displays a lack of acceptance and understanding; "But us Unorthodox Creatures, not confined to The European Standards of / Sexual Orientation or Gender, our sunshine can often be dimmed by The / Hailstorms of an Apathetic Society."[115] Angeles mentions the difference between "two-spirit" identity and European constructs of sexual orientation and gender, indicating that "two-spirit" people cannot be considered part of the LGBTQIA+ community, have a different history, and a different process of emancipation. Distinguishing between these identities is an important part of creating an independent narrative for "two-spirit" people and empowers the fight for autonomy and sovereignty.

These past and current societal circumstances will not remove "two-spiritness" and sovereignty from Native life, and Angeles writes that "Survival is Ascending."[116] Survival can be seen as the main theme of this poem, and the repetition of this word throughout the poem conveys a message of hope. Angeles calls upon society to "Be Gentle with us in your Modern World," "As for us NDN Two Spirit & Trans Variant Siblings, / We only want to survive 500 years more & then let the future generations / survive 500 years after that & so on in an unbreakable chain of perseverance."[117] Angeles' poem clarifies how "two-spirit" people still

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[114] Marcy Angeles, "The Ascending Circle: A Two-Spirit Poem," Rest for Resistance, August 2, 2018, https://restforresistance.com/zine/the-ascending-circle-a-two-spirit-poem.
[115] Angeles, "The Ascending Circle: A Two-Spirit Poem."
[116] Angeles, "The Ascending Circle: A Two-Spirit Poem."
[117] Angeles, "The Ascending Circle: A Two-Spirit Poem."

face colonialism and often do not feel acknowledged for who they are. This poem has a didactic undertone in the way that it demonstrates "two-spirit" experience. Her focus on survival indicates how "two-spirit" people do not feel recognized and is an example of using literature to bring visibility to "two-spirit" people, their stories, and identities.

2.4 *You are enough*

Smokii Sumac is a "two-spirit" and trans masculine member of the Ktunaxa nation. His debut poetry collection *You are enough: love poems for the end of the world* (2018) is a collection of poems about personal experiences as a "two-spirit" and trans individual, engaging with themes such as love, relationships, sex, gender, grief, depression, and addiction. His work is personal and specific, but simultaneously "moves alongside broader Indigenous experiences and knowledges," providing the reader with a truthful account of "two-spirit" and Indigenous experience today.[118] The title of the collection is repeated in the poem "haiku / consent series or / #makesexgreatthefirsttime: iv."[119] The lines "you / are enough / and you deserve above all / your autonomy" refer to the addressees' position in a sexual context, as the first two lines reassure them of their completeness, and the last two lines guarantee them of their right to autonomy; consent is not a choice but a requirement.[120] These lines can also be explained as analogous to the more general context of Native sovereignty, as they seem to reaffirm the idea that Native identity is valid and self-determination is a right. Consent is an important theme in itself as long as Native people face remnants of colonialism and continuing cultural appropriation. Both practices display a lack of consideration and respect for Native lives and culture and take away the right to give or deny consent. In this context, using non-consensual

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[118] Jenn Cole, "You Are Enough: Love Poems for the End of the World by Smokii Sumac (Ktunaxa)," Muskrat Magazine, May 3, 2019, http://muskratmagazine.com/you-are-enough-love-poems-for-the-end-of-the-world-by-smokii-sumac-ktunaxa/.

[119] Smokii Sumac, "haiku / consent series or / #makesexgreatthefirsttime: iv," *You are enough: love poems for the end of the world* (Owen Sound, NO: Kegedonce Press, 2018), 30-32.

[120] Sumac, "iv," 31.

sex as a metaphor for settler colonialism is powerful; bodily boundaries and political borders are crossed unwantedly. Colonialism and non-consensual sex cause trauma by forcefully taking away the victim's autonomy and instigate a long and painful healing process of rediscovering and reclaiming this lost sovereignty. The metaphor simultaneously reinforces the idea of the "sovereign erotic," since claiming control of one's own body is a powerful sign of self-determination, in both a sexual and a political context.

These parallels between "two-spirit" experience and wider Indigenous experience are visible throughout Sumac's work. He regularly refers to political events and the position of Indigenous people in society in his collection, as for example in "Grief." and "what you don't understand."[121,122] The lines "do not be fooled by / their false claims of allyship / we are still at war"[123] demonstrate how colonialism is a continuing fight for Native Americans. Sumac also describes the results of collective trauma: "What you don't understand is / when you survive genocide / everyone left / is family."[124] The treatment of this topic in addition to that of identifying as "two-spirit" today, displays how "two-spirit" identity and the process of reclaiming sovereignty are closely related. Sumac writes "*self love is a revolution for an NDN*".[125] In this poem he is talking specifically about learning to love himself as a trans masculine individual, and the ways in which he tries to make his body feel more like his own, but by adding this line he opens up the conversation to a larger audience than "two-spirit" or transgender individuals exclusively. Loving yourself as a Native American is a difficult task when the presence of racism and xenophobia might give you the idea that you are worth less than others, thus learning to love yourself is a process that takes time and work. Sumac calls

[121] Smokii Sumac, "Grief." *You are enough: love poems for the end of the world* (Owen Sound, NO: Kegedonce Press, 2018), 41.
[122] Smokii Sumac, "what you don't understand," *You are enough: love poems for the end of the world* (Owen Sound, NO: Kegedonce Press, 2018), 43.
[123] Sumac, "Grief." 41.
[124] Sumac, "what you don't understand," 43.
[125] Smokii Sumac, ""do you want to take the Cadillac for a ride?" / Or: a love letter to Transthetics / the company that made my prosthetic dick," *You are enough: love poems for the end of the world* (Owen Sound, NO: Kegedonce Press, 2018), 36.

self-love "revolutionary," which carries political implications and demonstrates that this feeling is powerful enough to inspire fundamental political change. In this case, Native Americans learning to love themselves may lead to a more confident and demanding position in the struggle to reclaim sovereignty. With *You are enough*, Sumac adds to the corpus of "two-spirit" literature that the editors of *Sovereign Erotics* wanted to put on display and reinforces the idea that "two-spirit" literature can be used as a tool to reclaim Native American sovereignty.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the role "two-spiritness" and its representation in contemporary Native American poetry plays in aiding the reclamation of Native American sovereignty. Through the discussion of the historical and contemporary context of "two-spiritness" it has become apparent that the term has a decolonizing potential. The word was coined in order to resist the dominant Western narrative of gender and sexuality binaries, Western identities that fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, and settler-imposed terminology such as "berdache." The Diné origin story and gender spectrum have been discussed as an example of Native American gender constructs and helped to demonstrate the fundamental differences between Native American and Western gender identities. Furthermore, the discussion of the word "two-spirit" sheds light on its conceivable potential complications, such as its lack of specificity, translation gaps with terminology from Native languages, and cultural appropriation by non-Native Americans.

The topic of reclaiming Native American sovereignty through "two-spirit" literature was introduced on the basis of the collection *Sovereign Erotics*, which can be seen as an example of Gerald Vizenor's theoretical concept of stories of "survivance." The perseverance of Native American culture is central to the process of reclaiming sovereignty, and "two-spirit" identity is used as a tool to prove this continuance. Finally, the discussion of Queer and Native studies displayed how the two disciplines overlap in their resistance to the institutionalised patriarchy and demonstrated the potential of Native Queer studies. The topic of subjectivity proved relevant, since Queer and Native studies are both working to demarginalize their positions by focussing on Queer and Native theorists respectively rather than theory about queer and Native people.

The poetry analysed in this thesis showed how topics of sexuality, gender identity, tradition, 21st century life, and sovereignty are closely linked. Joshua Whitehead presented the

contemporary concept of the Urban Indian next to the traditional Trickster figure, which has the ability either to disrupt the existing order or to elude this order by hiding with its shapeshifting ability. Whitehead relates this to the position of "two-spirit" individuals in society, reaffirming the idea that "two-spiritness" encompasses the power either to bring change, or to fly under the radar: remaining present but concealed. He also undermines the Western canon, singling out John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and using it to magnify Indigenous trauma. The collection effectively engages with the trauma of colonialism and uses "Indigiqueer" character Zoa to bring "two-spiritness" into a future of decolonisation.

The collection *Sovereign Erotics* provided a large amount of the selected poetry. Jaynie Weye Hlapsi Lara and Luna Maia engaged with questions of identity in their poetry, explaining what it means to be "two-spirit" today and how tradition and contemporary culture are unified in this identity. Taking control of the "two-spirit" narrative is central to their poems. Paula Gunn Allen's poem "Some Like Indians Endure" engaged with the collective trauma of homosexual and Native people, demonstrating parallels between Native and Queer experience. Written in the 1980s, this poem shows that "two-spirit" authors have been engaging with issues of colonialism in their literature since before the term "two-spirit" was coined. Qwo-Li Driskill directly relates the erotic to colonialism in "Love Poem, After Arizona," as the narrator of the poem asks his lover to take off their armour. This refers to disposing off the violence in their colonial past, but also to undressing as an erotic experience. Driskill describes sexual pleasure as a force of nature that is able to disrupt political boundaries, indicating that sexuality has the potential to break through colonial structures.

D.M. O'Brien describes a post-colonial societal context in "Living Memory," paying attention to the traditional cultural elements in contemporary Native American culture, such as "two-spiritness." She considers "two-spirit" people today the "Saving Seventh Generation," stemming from the Iroquois philosophy that every choice must be made with

regard for the coming seven generations. In this way, O'Brien connects "two-spiritness" to building a sustainable and well-balanced future, free from oppressive colonial forces. Maya Angeles' poem "The Ascending Circle: A Two-Spirit Poem" also talks about bringing "two-spiritness" into the future; she explains the trauma caused by colonialism and describes the perseverance of "two-spirit" people. She displays that colonialism did not eradicate "two-spiritness" and that "two-spirit" people will reclaim their autonomy. Angeles uses this poem to educate the reader about colonialism and "two-spirit" history, making it an example of using literature to engage with the process of reclaiming Native American narratives and sovereignty.

Smokii Sumac's personal poetry highlights "two-spirit" experience today and presents the parallels between Native and Queer experience. His poetry is politically inclined and positions "two-spirit" identity and literature at the centre of the Native struggle for autonomy. The way he discusses consent in his work allows for non-consensual sex to be understood as a metaphor for colonialism, recognising that both events cause immaculate trauma that triggers a painful healing process. This metaphor also effectively demonstrates the "sovereign erotic" as Sumac describes how reclaiming sovereignty of one's physical body after sexual trauma is similar to reclaiming one's political body after colonialism. Finally, Sumac calls self-love "revolutionary" for Native Americans, and believes that this can inspire the confidence and steadfastness that is needed to bring about systemic change. The poetry in *You are enough* effectively demonstrates how "two-spiritness" can be at the centre of the struggle to reclaim Native sovereignty.

Through analysis of the selected work, it has become evident that "two-spirit" identity and poetry have the potential to aid in reclaiming Native American sovereignty. "Two-spirit" poetry is often thematically in line with broader themes of Indigenous sovereignty: questions of identity, autonomy, self-determination, and tradition form similarities between "two-spirit"

specific experience and wider Indigenous experience. As “two-spirit” people form a minority within a minority, they feel a strong need to demarginalise their position in both Native American society and North American society at large. Creating a movement of decolonisation is of exceptional importance, and “two-spirit” poetry has been shown to play a part in achieving this goal. The selection of poetry by “two-spirit” authors discussed in this thesis demonstrates that “two-spirit” people are actively reclaiming their narrative and demanding to have their voices heard. The versatility of poetry in this thesis proves that there is a rich body of work available, which offers possibilities for more interdisciplinary research into the role that “two-spirit” literature plays in Native society, as well as in broader discussions in gender, sexuality, and Queer studies.

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