

The Truth Untold: Shedding Light on the LGBTQ+ Native Americans Who are Making History

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Abstract

Despite the rise in awareness and support for the equal treatment both of the Native American and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer plus (LGBTQ+) communities in the United States, there is a distressing lack of representation for queer Native Americans, both in fiction and in accounts of history. This lack of representation is troubling and speaks to a larger issue of erasure; the silencing of Native American voices even within more generally progressive circles. This paper seeks to explore the stories of those activists and storytellers who have fought and continue to fight to make the world a better place for the LGBTQ+ community at large and queer Native Americans in particular. Before delving into the central issue of LGBTQ+ Native American representation, the crucial distinction between gender, sex, and sexuality is drawn to provide a more solid framework of understanding. The terminology used within various spheres of both the LGBTQ+ and Native American communities are also explained—particularly, the definition of “two spirit”, which is often lumped under the larger LGBTQ+ umbrella, is clearly differentiated as its own term. After firmly establishing the importance of language and its correct usage when discussing these issues, the paper then explores specific examples of fictional and nonfictional queer Native American representation and the importance of these stories’ contributions to the larger conversation surrounding the LGBTQ+ Native American community. Instances of such representation, though few, are more plentiful within the sphere of fiction. Based on previous research, the expectation is that it will be more difficult than not to find more, substantial references to historical LGBTQ+ Native Americans. This informational gap further proves the existence of LGBTQ+ Native American erasure.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Native American, Representation

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a rise in awareness and support for the equal treatment of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+) community in many first world countries. Despite the rising visibility and success of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other gender-nonconforming individuals, and more frequent portrayals of such characters in popular fiction, examples of queer Native American representation are alarmingly few. Furthermore, despite several years of research into the Gay Rights Movement in North America, I have seen almost nothing about the LGBTQ+ Native American history makers who must have worked to make their country a safer place for future generations of queer Indigenous peoples. This lack of representation, both in media and in accounts of history, is deeply troubling. It speaks to a larger issue of erasure: the silencing of Native American voices even within more generally progressive circles. I seek to explore the stories of these largely unsung heroes—those activists and storytellers who have, and continue, to fight to make the country a safer and more welcoming place for the LGBTQ+ community at large and queer Native Americans in particular.

In his article for *Feminist Studies*, entitled “What’s After Queer Theory? Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies”, scholar Michael Hames-Garcia discusses what he calls queer ethnic and indigenous studies. He gives a brief account of the birth of this field of study: the conversations held between queer graduate students of color in the 1990s that became part of the larger conversation of queer theory. Hames-Garcia also explains that, despite there being a number of works dedicated to the relationship between race, indigeneity, and gender and sexual identities, many often treat the issues of “race, indigeneity, and colonialism” as “secondary” at best.¹ It does not do to ignore one aspect of one’s humanity when exploring another—identity is multifaceted and complex, and each aspect of one’s being interacts with and impacts one another in some way, even if that facet’s influence is small. It is therefore crucial to look at one’s identity as a whole of distinct yet entangled and ever shifting parts.

The continuously evolving discussion of queer ethnic and indigenous studies fundamentally shapes our understanding of gender and sexual identities in relation to ethnic and indigenous ones. By studying and understanding the stories of others, we may better understand our own narratives. In realizing that this discussion of identity has been going on since before I was born, I also realize that it will continue for generations to come.

The conversation surrounding gender in today’s society is equal parts murky and fascinating. The definitions of gender, sex, and sexuality are hotly debated. One reason this discussion is so contentious is because individuals on either side of the argument assign slightly different meanings to these words, thereby causing tension at the outset. This prevents the parties involved from coming to an understanding and moving the argument beyond mere semantics. Before delving more deeply into the ever-churning waters of the discussion surrounding these terms, let us take a closer look at their definitions as I use them and how they relate to each other.

The World Health Organization defines “gender” as “socially constructed roles that shape the behaviours, activities, expectations and opportunities considered appropriate in a particular socio-cultural context for all people.”² Sex, on the other hand, refers to the biological and physiological characteristics (genes, hormones, and reproductive organs), that allow for the differentiation between male, female, and intersex at birth.³ So, one’s gender may not necessarily align with one’s sex. Finally, sexuality, or sexual orientation, refers to a person’s attraction toward others.

While gender, sex, and sexuality are related, they do not dictate each other. Someone assigned female at birth (AFAB) may identify as a man and may be attracted to men, women, and nonbinary individuals. These aspects of human existence live on a spectrum brilliant in its range of diversity. This potential for discrepancy in identity can cause confusion and distress for those who have a limited or conflicted understanding of these identities or have been raised in a community that does not celebrate these differences but condemns them.

2. Literary Analysis

Craig Womack’s *Drowning in Fire* tackles this particular issue with compassion and clarity. This coming-of-age novel tells the stories of young queer Native Americans throughout history. The narrative primarily focuses on a young gay Creek man named Josh Henneha. In exploring Josh’s story of cultural and self-discovery, this novel artfully interweaves prose and poetry, historical fact and heartfelt fiction. There is no question that one’s cultural upbringing shapes one’s understanding of the world and the self—how do the differences in people’s upbringings affect their views of gender and sexuality? *Drowning in Fire* explicitly addresses the importance of the individual’s experience grappling with various and occasionally conflicting aspects of their identity.

The novel also illustrates for the reader the harm caused by bullying, whether it is steeped in racism, sexism, homophobia, or a hateful combination of the three. Josh, for example, feels that he has no escape from the oppression and abuse he faces. Whether he is at school or with his cousin and his friends in the summer, he is the target of constant bullying.⁴ This is a reality many queer kids face, and it can be especially difficult if one is a queer person of color as the bullying is often compounded with racism. It is important to tell and listen to the stories of those who are bullied, lest we perpetuate the cycle of ignorance, hatred, and apathy.

Drowning in Fire tackles homophobia, racism, and how difficult it is for one to have to deal with them simultaneously both through historical and contemporary lenses. Though the book was written in 2001, and its majority is set in the 1990s, with some scenes set in the 1960s and 1970s, there are chapters dedicated to—and told from the perspective of—characters who lived as early as 1904. It is crucial to remember that history is neither entirely straight nor entirely white, and that homophobia and racism have existed for as long as people have been capable of love and hate. The most effective way to address these issues is through educating ourselves and others on these issues and sharing in the experiences of those grappling with them. Only through thoughtful exploration, education, and compassion can we hope to make the world we live in a kinder and safer place for all of us.

A queer author and scholar who relatively recently has joined this larger conversation of sexual, gender, and indigenous identities is Daniel Heath Justice. In *Kynship: The Way of Thorn & Thunder*, the first installment of his

fantasy trilogy, Justice masterfully constructs a world almost tangible in its vibrance, whose history is equal parts fascinating, beautiful, and heartbreakingly gruesome. This story is both refreshing and rich in the diversity of its characters. Tarsa'deshae, our heroine, is a “fearless Kyn warrior trained in the Redthorn ways of battle and blood” who happens to be a young bisexual woman of color.⁵ I was thrilled to discover that her love interest is also a queer woman of color who is just as dynamic as she is. It is rare to find bisexual representation that features the thoughtful development of a same-sex relationship. It is also extremely rare to encounter queer representation of any kind that does not make the character’s gender identity or sexual orientation the primary feature of their story. The fact that Justice provides this diverse representation in such a normalizing way is wonderfully refreshing.

Tarsa'deshae is only one of many fascinating and multifaceted characters who challenge the reader’s notions of the fluidity of gender and the diversity of sexuality. Other such characters include the zhe-Kyn of the novel—the gender-fluid or gender-nonconforming (nonbinary) members of Kyn society—both in relation to the Native American concept of two-spirited individuals, who embody both female and male identities, and our ever-evolving understanding of gender-nonconformity. The zhe-Kyn, though inhabiting a fantastical universe, are clearly based on those people in our own reality who identify as both male and female, or neither.

The language used to refer to gender-nonconforming individuals is constantly changing. Currently, in the year 2019, many nonbinary people identify with, and prefer using, the pronouns “they” and “them”. At the time *Kynship* was first published, however, there was a rise in nonbinary individuals referring to themselves as the recently coined pronouns “zhe” and “zher”, hence the term “zhe-Kyn” in Justice’s novel. Though the conversation surrounding LGBTQ+ issues seems largely to be focused on sexual orientation, social awareness and politics have caused a shift in conversation more toward gender identity. For one to have the whole picture of the queer community, it is absolutely essential to study various gender identities as well as sexual orientations.

This emphasis on the importance of using proper terminology when discussing LGBTQ+ issues and representing LGBTQ+ people in media is further discussed in “BCP Talks Queer Indigenous Literature with Daniel Heath Justice”. In this interesting and informative YouTube video by content creator BlackCoffeePoet (BCP), he interviews Justice about what it means to be two-spirited and the importance and breadth of works by two-spirited scholars. Near the beginning of the video, Justice explains his understanding of two-spiritedness while also discussing the importance of semantics. Specifically, he explains that the etymology and underlying meaning of the term “two-spirited” is quite different than those of more commonly used terms like queer, gay, transgender, or bisexual.⁶ Each word has its own set of nuances, and one’s preference for one or another is entirely personal, because one’s identity is inherently and deeply personal.

The page entitled “Two Spirit” on the Indian Health Service’s website provides its own definition of what it means to be a two-spirited individual. Just as Justice does in his interview with BlackCoffeePoet, the writer clarifies in the page’s very first sentence that, even though the term “two-spirited” is often grouped under the larger LGBTQ+ umbrella, it does not inherently mean that a Native American or Alaskan Native who identifies as two-spirited also identifies as gay.⁷ As previously mentioned, to be two-spirited is to embody both maleness and femaleness—though in many tribes, as the website states, people who are two-spirited are often considered “neither men nor women; they occup[y] a distinct, alternative gender status.”⁷ As such, they are often thought of as inhabiting a third, or even a fourth, gender, separate from male and female.

In many tribes, two-spirited people are held in high esteem, because they are thought to hold certain spiritual capabilities—their gender is a result of divine intervention, through which they are able to better connect with the spirit world or fill spiritual roles in the community, as shamans, healers, or ceremonial leaders. However, this is not the case in all tribes. Like many people who lack a full understanding of gender identity, there are some tribes in which it is considered taboo or even hateful to be two-spirited. In this regard, it is important to remember that a community being progressive in some respects does not necessarily mean it is progressive in all respects.

In her article for *Indian Country Today*, Samantha Mesa-Miles briefly discusses the struggles faced by many young queer Native American people in the twenty-first century—struggles that stem from prejudice and ignorance. She contends that, in early Native history, many tribes held two-spirited people in high esteem; however, with the rise and influence of colonialism in the nineteenth century, more Native American tribes began to ostracize the two-spirited people within their communities.⁸ This prejudice still permeates many Indigenous tribes to this day. As such, some young queer Native American people take refuge in urban LGBTQ+ communities, where there tends to be more diversity and open-mindedness among their members.

Though one’s identity and the language used to describe one’s identity may differ, the struggles faced by members of the LGBTQ+ community—particularly those who are young, questioning, and vulnerable—unite the people in that community. Even if the labels we choose vary, the fear, judgment, and insecurity we may feel because of who we are and how we identify is the same. Therefore, it is important to connect with, confide and take comfort in one another.

Even though the world is slowly becoming a safer place for us to exist, it is still difficult to find spaces in which we can be our true selves without fear of judgment, bodily harm, or even death.

Furthermore, while it is important to acknowledge the more progressive and understanding sectors of a given society, we must also look at those parts that are more closed-minded and dangerous for certain people to live in simply because they are different. If we fail to acknowledge the ugly parts of humanity—the prejudice, ignorance, and hatred—we will in turn fail to help those who suffer the consequences of those larger issues.

3. Nonfictional Representation

Since my goal in this essay is to explore fictional and nonfictional LGBTQ+ Native American representation, I would be remiss if I failed to mention one of many historical wins from the 2018 congressional election. Sharice Davids made history on November 6, 2018, when she won the 3rd Congressional District seat in Kansas. Not only is she the first openly LGBTQ+ Kansan to be elected to Congress, as a member of the Wisconsin Ho-Chunk Nation, she is also one of the first two Native American women ever elected to Congress. When discussing Davids' victory with NBC News, Annise Parker, the former Houston Mayor and current president and CEO of the LGBTQ Victory Fund, remarked, "Sharice won the hearts of voters by putting forward a positive and solutions-oriented agenda while explaining how her experiences as a Native American LGBTQ woman influenced her policy positions and beliefs. [...] Sharice's victory [...] will become a model for other LGBTQ leaders considering a run for office."⁹

As Parker said, this groundbreaking young woman likely will inspire countless people in their pursuit of positive change, regardless of their race, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Her election to Congress gives young LGBTQ+ people a glimmer of hope for what their futures could be, and hope is a very powerful thing indeed.

The stories I have explored in this paper are only a small fraction of those that still remain untold. For the betterment of society and the edification of curious and passionate minds, it is crucial for us to seek out these stories and to understand their historical and cultural importance. The representation of queer people generally—and queer people of color, specifically—both in history and in media, is essential for our growth, education, and empathy, as individuals and as a society at large.

The caricatures of racial minorities generally, Native Americans specifically, and queer people presented in the media often do the opposite of thoughtfully educate and inspire empathy within the general public. Rather, they perpetuate the harmful stereotypes associated with a given group of people—stereotypes that continue to permeate a disturbingly large portion of our society's mentality, thereby continuing to negatively impact the treatment of those minorities in daily life. Furthermore, I cannot think of a single example of queer Native American representation in popular culture. Neither can I call to mind more than one queer Indigenous person from our nation's history. This informational gap begs a simple but crucial question: why?

4. Conclusion

I contend that these factors point to a disturbing amount of Native American erasure in both history and fiction. It should not be so difficult and daunting to find the bare minimum of information on historical Native American members of the LGBTQ+ community. References are few, and a large portion of those few that exist either lack the credibility necessary to be deemed reliable sources or are so steeped in superfluous academic language that they are inaccessible to all but the most privileged and well-read.

The stories of queer Indigenous peoples should be more readily accessible and widely represented. Bisexual, lesbian, gay, transgender, and gender-nonconforming Native American children should not be denied seeing themselves in the stories they are raised with, whether those stories are largely fantastical, like Justice's trilogy, or based solely in historical fact. As Cynthia Leitich Smith, *New York Times* bestselling author and enrolled tribal member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, states, it is crucial to "reinforce that we all belong in the world of books [and] spotlight that any kid can be a hero everyone cheers."¹⁰

Though progress is being made, we still have a long way to go until we have fair and equal treatment and representation of Indigenous Americans in general, and those who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community in particular. Some sectors of the queer community have added the number 2 to the community's initialism, turning it into LGBTQ2+. This is an encouraging sign of greater inclusion as we strive toward a future in which young queer Native Americans will be able to watch the news, read a book, or watch a movie and see themselves reflected in the faces of policymakers, protagonists, and heroes.

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