

Gender Diversity Across Cultures: Two-Spirit

Dr. Roger Kuhn (he/him) is a Two-Spirit individual, licensed therapist and Certified Sex Therapist.

Q: Tell me about the identities you hold that are important to you?

I identify as a Poarch Creek, Two-Spirit Indigiqueer, gay person. Poarch Creek is my tribal affiliation, we are part of the larger Muskogee Nation that was split during the Trail of Tears. Two-Spirit is a term that I use to recognize my gender and sexual orientation variants.

Indigiqueer is a fairly modern term I have adopted that speaks to the idea of being both indigenous and queer. And I use the lowercase version of gay as it's more representative of marginalized bodies. An uppercase "G" generally refers to the white Gays, who often have access to many things that a person like me does not.

Q: How have your various identities shaped your life?

There's a photo of myself holding a Cabbage Patch Kid doll when I was five years old, wearing a little country western shirt. I feel like this photo represents me pretty much to a tee, even to this day. I felt this mix of gender within my experience. I've never felt like a boy and I've never felt like a girl and I didn't have the language as a child to express that. I got called a lot of pejorative names, mostly about orientation. I was called "sissy" and "femme" a lot and those were always meant as pejoratives. The only time it hurt me was the tone that was used.

I have three older sisters who all identify with their assigned gender, but that just wasn't me. I always felt like I was the brother who was also a sister.

I knew that there was something about me that didn't resonate with the other kids

my age. I grew up in a tiny conservative farming community in Central North Dakota. My family was the only mixed family in the entire town. I have a white father and a Native American mother.

Being more than one thing was just a big part of my life, having a bicultural household I grew up in, having a biracial identity. When I started school, other people pointed out that being biracial is weird, being not a boy not a girl is weird, being queer is weird. I internalized that for a very long time. I struggled a lot with acceptance of who I am. It wasn't until I was in my 20s when I left North Dakota.

I moved to New York City and I was introduced to the term Two-Spirit.

Q: So that wasn't a term you had heard growing up?

No. The term Two Spirit didn't come around until the 1990s. In 1990 I would have been 13 or 14 and there was no internet. Growing up in North Dakota we didn't have access to anything like that. And even though there is a Native population there, the Native population is not very intermixed. There was one other girl in High School that was Native, and I was friends with her. there were a few people I knew, but it wasn't like there were a bunch of Native people around. And we weren't talking about sexuality or gender.

When I moved to New York, I got involved with an organization called the American Indian Community Center (AICHC). I met someone there and upon our first meeting, he said "Oh, so you're Two-Spirit?" And I was like "Oh, what does that mean?" He shared that Dr. Myra Laramee from the Fisher River Cree Nation coined the term Two-Spirit in the 1990s. Two-Spirit comes from the Northern Algonquin word "niizh manidoowag", which translates to "Two Spirits." It was originally chosen to

distinguish Native/First Nations people from non-Native terms for gender diversity, as well as from the word "berdache," a pejorative term.

I said "Oh my gosh! Finally! Thankfully!" There was a term I felt like I understood and represented who I was. I was using the term gay, and it just never sat well with me. It just doesn't fully encapsulate who I am.

A few years later, I was back on my reservation with my cousin who shared with me that in our language, Muskogee, there is a term for folks like us and he shared that term with me "Ennrkvpv" (ee-nuff-gah-bah). It's also the word that we use for Wednesday in the Muskogee language. Ennrkvpv means "in the middle." It perfectly encapsulates my identity. I feel like I am in the middle. That really helped me understand my gender through understanding my culture.

Q:Our conceptualization of transgender and the transgender umbrella is very white, westernized idea of what diverse genders are "supposed to look like." How is the conceptualization of diverse genders different in indigenous communities?

It's regionally specific. The way that gender is understood post colonization also differs. If you look at what we now call the United States, from the east coast and over to the west coast, you'll see there is more nuanced understanding the further west you get. Colonization affected the West at later times, a little slower. In cultures like the Plains culture, and also the Southwest, there's a much richer understanding.

One thing that's important to point out is, regardless of what Indigenous community we are talking about, is that we come from community based cultures,

which differs from how the US Empire has operated on individualism. I feel that a lot of trans people get left behind from their communities. That wasn't the case in Indigenous communities. We accepted everyone, because we recognized and knew that everyone was needed, everyone had a place. The Creator had a space for everyone. So Two-Spirit folks were in roles like keeping peace between nations, doing naming ceremonies, puberty ceremonies, medicine people. We were organizing.

The ethnographers (polite term) would see someone they would have identified as male doing what they would have identified as a traditional female role, and it confused them. Whereas in our communities, we think that's just the way the person is.

To have this experience of some cultures having three, four, five genders, depending on what culture you come from, is more Indigenous than the term transgender. To even put Native people under the umbrella of transgender, I think is a forced ideology onto Native People. If a person wants to claim a trans identity, more power to them. The same way a Native person wants to claim a gay identity, or a bi identity or anything under that rainbow umbrella, then more power to them.

But we can't say every Indigenous Two-Spirit person is transgender. I might actually identify as Two-Spirit and then, within that Two-Spirit umbrella, I might actually identify as *ennvrkvpv* and not *leakey*, *hayama*, *batai*, or *bowtaai*. There's at least 152 terms that have been found in ethnographic literature for gender in Native populations. A lot of the words were lost because that's how genocide works. It's not only the disruption of people, but it's also the disruption of culture, which includes language. So we have to adopt terms like gay, lesbian, and transgender because we

don't know our terms. There's something empowering for Native people, when we can say "In my language, here's the term that we're using."

I always say to transgender folks that, in my culture, you're sacred. Your body is sacred.

Q: What advice would you give to an Indigenous person who also wants to explore their gender identity and expression?

We can't assume that just because you're Native, you have enrollment or that you have been raised in or have been part of your community. Actually, I think it's more common to not have a strong connection to Native culture.

For Indigenous folks who are wanting to explore gender, if you have access to your culture, find out if there is terminology or language for gender variance, and if you can't find it, don't be surprised. More than likely, the language was lost due to colonization.

Know that you can look at other Indigenous communities and learn from them about how their bodies and ideologies are celebrated. Gender variance is a celebrated ideology. We get to be both Two-Spirit and indigiqueer and trans and gender-non conforming and non-binary. We get to be all those things. That's the beauty of it—we don't have to choose, we get to celebrate all of it. It is all ours for the taking.

The other thing that I would say is, that within the larger queer umbrella, there's this ideology of coming out as transgender. I don't care for that language. As Indigenous people, it's not that we're not coming out.

We are returning. We are returning to ourselves, returning to our culture, returning

to our traditions, returning to our true birthright as Indigenous people on these lands. We are returning to the ways of our ancestors. And the best way we can honor our ancestors is to return to their ways, to return to the knowledge that they left for us.

Q: What advice would you give someone who wants to transition with more ease, curiosity and pleasure?

For non-Native folks exploring their identity, learn from Indigenous knowledge. Many of us believe that our knowledge is not just for us. The more access that people have to the truth of the land, of the peoples of these lands, the more that we all will move closer toward liberation together. Be willing to open up your own perspectives, and say, “What can we learn from Indigenous people around gender fluidity?”

Look to the stewards of this land. Look to the ancestors of this land and learn from them. We’ve been fighting this idea of gender for 529 years at this point. If we go back to that 1480 date that they kind of stamp into our brains, education systems.

I haven’t met one Native person who’s not some kind of rebel in some sort of way. We’re all rebellious. And I think being a gender rebel is great.

Q: Do you have any guidance about how, as white people, we can engage with Indigenous knowledge and language without appropriating it?

I feel very strongly when I hear non-Native folks refer to themselves as Two-Spirit. It’s specifically an Indigenous term. You’d be surprised by the number of non-Native people that have co-opted that term now and think it’s cool to call yourself Two-Spirit if you’re not Native. But that’s all Native folks have. Let us have something that is just ours. You took our land, you tried to take our culture, you commit genocide against us. We all (I have to include myself in that too as someone that also benefits from white

privilege) have benefited from the genocide of the American Indian People. So let us have that term.

Indigenous knowledge is sacred and it's valuable and, because we live in a society that is based on currency and because it has forced Indigenous people to live under a capitalistic society, pay people for their knowledge.

When we can learn from Indigenous people, it's okay. Read Indigenous authors and not just the academic stuff, read the literature. Learn from our community and then give back to our community. And always, always, always credit. Have a beginner's mind and be willing to promote and center Indigenous peoples and knowledge.

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