

QUEER IMAGININGS

Kara Thompson

Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature
Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and
Scott Lauria Morgensen, eds.
Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011. vi + 246 pp.

Queer Indigenous Studies is a collective endeavor by scholars, activists, and artists who are Native and/or queer, Two-Spirit (the 2 in GLBTQ2), or GLBT-identified. The collection rightfully demands readers approach the colonial archive from a Native perspective and argues clearly that sexuality, including queerness, is a construction of settler colonialism: heterosexism prevalent among contemporary Native communities is a symptom of colonization; anthropological accounts of the berdache tend to romanticize precolonial communities without acknowledging anthropologists' own contributions to and investments in settler colonialism; and in terms of activism, mainstream GLBT and New Age movements have tended to overlook or appropriate Two-Spirit and/or queer-identified folks while (ironically) seeking to honor them.

The anthology is divided into three sections that correspond roughly to three distinct, yet interrelated, approaches to queer Indigenous studies: performing, situating, reading. The essays in section 1 endeavor to perform queer Indigenous critiques—Chris Finley and Andrea Smith each argue for productive ways of overlaying (rather than simply combining) queer and Indigenous studies by being attentive to how the “queer” subject is also the settler subject. Smith's essay is especially cogent and forceful. Using Denise Ferreira da Silva's term “ethnographic multiculturalism,” Smith contends that traditional ethnography, which sets out to “demonstrate Native peoples' worthiness of being universal subjects, actually rests on the logic that Native peoples are equivalent to nature

itself, things to be discovered that have an essential truth or essence” (44). Before assuming that this point calls on the queer theorist to save the day, however, Smith and others make the crucial point that queer studies/activism without Native studies, Native-identified scholarship, or Native artists has the potential to reenact the “doctrine of discovery” or the colonial logic of the vanishing Indian. Michelle Erai and Dan Taulapapa McMullin’s essays best fulfill the promise of performing through their engagement with archives—colonial, personal, and potentially queer. Erai suggests that half-caste child figures in New Zealand colonial archives possess a kind of queer potential that cannot be contained by heteronormative categories of race. Taulapapa McMullin’s thirty-two aphorisms variously concern his life as a mixed-blood Samoan artist and *fa’afafine*.

Sections 2 and 3 are the most coherently assembled, even though their archives and specific arguments are unique unto themselves. Section 2, “Situating Two-Spirit and Queer Indigenous Movements,” takes up specific communities—some organized nationally, others by other identity formations—with a focus on activism and accountability. Accountability is perhaps the most consistent term used by the editors and many of the contributors. Scott Lauria Morgensen addresses the issue specifically for non-Native queer/GLBT readers who must hold “themselves accountable to alliance with Native struggles for decolonization” (134). Through his own work with Two-Spirit organizers, Morgensen shares examples of accountable actions, but in other essays, readers (whether Two-Spirit or allies) may be left wondering exactly what “accountable,” a nebulous and somewhat fraught term, means. Section 3, “Reading Queer Indigenous Writing,” makes an intriguing correlation between literary and queer Indigenous studies. The standout for me is Mark Rifkin’s readings of Qwo-Li Driskill’s poetry, which should convince anyone that close reading is one of the most important and difficult practices we do as literary or cultural critics. While never at odds with the poetry, Rifkin’s close reading is itself poetic and artful, literary analysis at its best.

The collection hails Indigenous GLBTQ2 people as interlocutors with the assumption that allies (whether non-Native or non-GLBTQ2 or both) are listening and perhaps even taking part in the conversation. Nevertheless, readers familiar with or primarily located in queer studies and activism will likely notice some contradictory points about queer theory across the anthology. For instance, between Finley and Smith, readers are asked to understand both how colonialism queers Native peoples and that all scholars must queer the analytics of settler colonialism. *Queer* signifies very differently in these two statements.

I can overlook some of this in favor of essays, such as Driskill’s “**D1Y** **D3C** (*Asegi Ayetl*): Cherokee Two-Spirit People Reimagining Nation,” which ask

readers to consider how queerness and traditional Indigenous concepts of nationalism might productively or even necessarily coexist. Driskill shows how the Cherokee word for “nation” counters the heteropatriarchal nationalisms by which many Cherokees now abide, which are aftereffects of colonization. Hir interviews with Two-Spirit, gay, or queer-identified Cherokee writers underscore that the imagination is key; these writers “are pointing to an **DBC** (ayetl, nation/center) that asks Cherokee people, now and in the future, to remember other stories, other histories, that are inclusive” (109). Building from Craig Womack’s *Red on Red* and his *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, edited with Jace Weaver and Robert Allen Warrior, such arguments offer one of this anthology’s most bracing interventions in queer studies, queer of color critique, postcolonial studies, and transnational American studies. Not only do these essays address nationalism specifically, but the anthology’s very form and structure also intervene in colonial nationalisms by including scholars and artists who identify with (or whose work concerns) Indigenous communities outside current US national boundaries, such as Taulapapa McMullin, Erai, Clive Aspin’s piece on Takatapui identity in Maori communities, and June Scudeler’s essay on Gregory Scofield’s Cree Métis stories.

Ultimately, I was taken with the editors’ claim, borrowing a term from Joy Harjo, that this book is an imagining, an emergence story. To believe in the imagination might be one of the queerest acts we could perform as scholars and activists. *Queer Indigenous Studies* introduces us to a presence and vitality among GLBTQ2 scholars, activists, and artists. And it performs the absolutely crucial work of building institutional memory—such as its comprehensive history of the term *Two-Spirit*—that consciously invites its readers in (the last chapter is titled “The Revolution Is for Everyone”). Perhaps most importantly, it recognizes that there is still much work to be done. The work of the anthology, at least in part, is to make way for others—this in and of itself is an act of accountability to history, to the present, and to the not-yet. The editors and contributors of queer Indigenous studies beckon their readers to rely on their own sense of the not-yet, of the becoming: of a field, subjectivities, coalitions, and potentialities that coalesce around the ongoing, necessary work of decolonization both in and outside the academy.

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