

## Background & Recent developments in Two-Spirit organizing

### 2 Spirit National remote summit

Background by Richard LaFortune, Two Spirit Press Room  
Native cultures, 2 Spirit identity

In North America at a time before European contact, various academic estimates identify as many as 800 nations (with reference to modern nation-state definitions) in this hemisphere. Scholars also place hemispheric population collapses that range from 2- to as high as 100 million people over the past 500 years, as a result of Western colonial military campaigns, local campaigns of systematic massacre, and the intended and unintended release of lethal biological contagions among populations with no natural immunities. Linguists have identified some 150 language families and 1,500 to 2,000 dialects. In the United States alone, approximately 200 languages (as distinct from each other as French is from Japanese) continue to be spoken today; in Canada about 55 languages are actively spoken, and in Central America, upwards of 125 distinct languages are used. In the US, over 370 treaties document the recognition of the unextinguished governmental power -and in many cases, unextinguished title to ancestral domain- since time immemorial. Western science has estimated continuous habitation in this continent by human beings, using chronological parameters that establish timelines of 25,000 - 40,000 years. Native people assert our primacy and sovereignty in these lands. According to Native oral histories, emerging scientific consensus, and comparative dialogue among our own communities, we have become aware of unbroken complexes of knowledge and intellectual traditions that point to prevalent international social constructions that encompass, embrace and celebrate multiple gender identities. These traditions currently present an opposing viewpoint to accepted models of biological determinism, construed by western science. There are presently more than 550 federally recognized tribes in 44 states, with approximately 31 state-recognized tribes in 11 states, and an additional 250 non-recognized tribes possessing federal-recognition petitioning-status. Centuries of documentation by early European explorers, more recent field study, as well as continuously sustained Indigenous knowledge systems, identify two spirit people as accepted, respected, and in fact crucial members of our societies. In Canada, a recently completed federal level report provides one accepted definition of the term two spirit - a popular cultural marker that emerged in Canada in 1990, near Winnipeg, Manitoba, at the 3rd International Two Spirit Gathering -as an indigenous alternative to the highly inappropriate term, 'berdache.' "Aboriginal people who possess the sacred gifts of the female-male spirit, which exists in harmony with those of the female and the male. They have traditional respected roles within most Aboriginal cultures and societies and are contributing members of the community. Today, some Aboriginal people who are Two-spirit also identify as being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender."

Citation: addressing homophobia in Relation to HIV/AIDS in Aboriginal communities: Final Report of the Environmental Scan 2004-05 CAAN (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network).

### Three decades of modern organizing

In the 1970s one of the first glbt Native organizations appeared in this country: GAI (Gay American Indians) was established in San Francisco, around the same time that Vancouver developed an active gay Aboriginal social organization. A decade later in the early-1980s, a culturally focused organization named Nichiwakan (pronounced Nee-chawken) appeared in Winnipeg. By 1986, LGBT Natives in the Twin Cities began meeting and organizing not only the first culturally focused Native organization in the upper Midwest, but went on to mount the first international convening of LGBT Native people in the hemisphere.

In 1988, the Minnesota Two Spirit Community hosted the first international Native Gathering of its kind: The Basket and The Bow provided a culturally focused concourse for GLBT Aboriginal people from across North America (and one representative from Australia) to meet in the Twin Cities, exchange cultural knowledge and organizing information. The Minnesota grassroots community that launched this event went on to host the 2nd annual Gathering, and from that point, the event has gone on to be autonomously hosted by more than a dozen Native communities around the United States and Canada, and is presently completing the 18th annual such event. These International Two Spirit Gatherings have seen participation by more than 2,200 people over nearly 2 decades, according to estimates built from records housed in the Tretter Collection, Two Spirit collection (University of Minnesota Archives and Special Collections).

Following 1989, when American Indian Gays & Lesbians opened an office in Minneapolis, grassroots organizations proliferated around North America. Seattle, San Diego, the Four Corners region, New York City, Toronto, Vancouver, Tulsa, Denver and Montana announced organizing efforts and local programming. In fact, the almost geometric growth of Native GLBT groups coincided with two significant factors: HIV/AIDS, and later the Internet.

The HIV pandemic, since its appearance, has continuously and disproportionately affected Native people across borders. Tribes that had survived centuries of other epidemics, in addition to violent military colonization and subsequent artificially imposed poverty, eventually faced a 60 year long federally mandated boarding school system,

established following the Civil War, that by the 1920s would become nationally recognized as the 38 official clearinghouses for planned starvation, physical and psychological torture of approximately 15,000 Native students a year- according to the Senate-commissioned Merriam Report (1928.) This system (run separately from much earlier church run boarding schools and state- and reservation- day schools serving smaller numbers) was designed to tectonically separate Native people from their languages, cultures, spiritual traditions, families and- of course, eventually- their lands. Hundreds and probably thousands of these Native boarding students died.

The generations that survived the boarding schools have unresolved historical grief and loss, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as some of the most elevated chronic physical and mental health disorder profiles in the country. Some Native people, dissected from their cultures and languages, lost significant spiritual teachings and intellectual properties, that were forcibly replaced by alien religious and cultural traditions that attached shame to Native identity, sin- to sexuality, and irrational fear and loathing to one of the world's most long standing and sophisticated systems of human gender construction known to this day.

"European explorers slaughtered Two Spirits in the name of Christianity; the Spanish colonizer Balboa once had 40 Two Spirits thrown into a pit, to be attacked by Balboa's dogs. By the early 1900s, Two Spirits had nearly disappeared, and the dispersal of Indians to Christian boarding schools forced native culture underground." The Minneapolis Star Tribune, June 25, 2005

AIDS was now causing a demographic meltdown among LGBT Natives (this disease affected all genders and orientations in two spirit communities), even while two spirit communities were engaged simultaneously in the rebuilding of edifices of rare humanities based knowledge related to our histories across a continent, in collaboration with Native Elders, and even the American Anthropological Society. This exacting and long process of cultural rebuilding and renaissance has come with scant assistance, or requests for assistance, from outside our communities.

Within only a few years, two spirits began adroitly to adapt new electronic technologies to our organizing efforts, in spite of one of the countless symptoms of economic injustice: the digital divide. Throughout this time, approximately placing this chronology at the point of The New Age, the national GLBT movement in the United States became aware to a limited extent of Native people and issues. New Age spirituality borrowed heavily (many would say with a great deal of accuracy, misappropriated) from Native spiritual traditions. These Native religious traditions pointed not only an alternative to a homophobic religious system, but there seemed to be some awareness that Native cultures have always had the answers that GLBT people in colonizing societies had been looking for, since before Stonewall, 36 years ago. Lewis & Clark wrote quite openly about regularly encountering Two Spirits in their journals.

By 2002-03, the first National Institutes of Health peer-reviewed grant in history was made to a Native Two Spirit health survey project launched by Native people in Seattle, at the University of Washington. The HONOR project was promptly attacked from the precincts of the US Congress, where conservative Republican congressmen (affiliated with The Club For Growth, a neo-conservative think tank) mounted a national campaign to defund the modest multi year grant serving Native people. Their measure was narrowly defeated, and defeated once more in 2004- again by the narrowest possible margin. Syndicated and cable broadcast coverage of this campaign was undertaken without any attempts to include Native Two Spirits in the dialogues (carried by MSNBC, FOX, CNN) in what surely earns, in retrospect, an unprofessional, cynical and cowardly mark for all of the journalists and newsroom editors involved. The elected officials involved in the media campaign have all lost their positions of public service in Congress in the time since.

In the meantime, a marriage license had been awarded to a lesbian couple in Oklahoma, both citizens of the sovereign Cherokee nation, who then were placed in a position of defending their legal union (in a state that forbids same sex marriage). Following a course through district tribal court, and proceeding to the tribal supreme court in 2005, Cherokee people then witnessed the legislation by conservative, assimilated tribal council officials to ban further unions.

Also in the interim, in April 2005, a small coalition of Navajo glbt people in the desert Southwest had mounted a national public education and petition campaign in response to their tribal council's attempt to ban same-sex unions. In both the cases of Navajo and Cherokee, which happen to be the two largest tribes in the United States, these actions against LGBT people are contrary to ancient and respected laws and customs that afford regard and esteem to two spirit people. The President of Navajo Nation vetoed the tribal council's attempt to legislate discrimination against LGBT people. The council thereafter narrowly overrode the president's veto, barely succeeding, and in the wake of wide Navajo community displeasure.

While both of these stories achieved national and international press, the significance to Native people does not rest in the same sex marriage issue. The greater question has to do with using this moment to understand what the events could possibly indicate, after 20-30 years of international organizing. As well, the marriage issue, for Native people, is overshadowed by the much larger issue of sovereignty. If the United States can not, nor would presume to legislate the marriage customs and styles of China, Sweden or Ghana, why would the US Congress include a stipulation that sovereign tribal governments in North America be eligible for consideration under coverage of one of the centerpieces of conservative evangelically inspired legislation: the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA).

Perhaps the more important question is: Is this law truly viable, given the implied mandate that interferes with unextinguished cultural, spiritual and human rights? Native two spirits are leading a discussion on this point around the continent.

June 2005

Adversarial impulses in the two largest tribal governments in the country became apparent in 2005, and it yielded high level discussions among Native community representatives, in very quick order. On June 17, in a call generously hosted by IGLHRC at the request of Indigenous communities, was held among 22 Two Spirit representatives from around the US. Separate discussions and electronic communications have been taking place across the US/Canada border. Citizens of both the Cherokee and Navajo nations in their own words briefed national representatives and organizers on the recent conditions of their communities. On June 24, the second call, contributed by HRC, community members re-convened to discuss sharing of limited resources to Cherokee and Navajo organizers, since Native communities largely observe non-interference in policy/governance decisions of other nations.

Some short term and longer-term events and capacity building measures were discussed and proposed. Other longer term solutions will require the partnership of national LGBT advocacy, media and service organizations.

Underlying principles

Native Two Spirit people represent sovereign nations and have been engaged in community rebuilding and regeneration for three decades, and we are approaching the portal to a forth decade of international organizing. Our communities have symbolically participated in mainstream GLBT national and regional organizing for 15-20 years, on a relatively visible scale, with relatively little support requested or received. We have been largely self-sufficient, attending to the needs of our communities, and quietly rebuilding the cultural and institutional memories of our communities, rather than engaging in militant, western style political organizing. In these efforts, we have been supremely successful, although some of these efforts are now endangered by the outside pressure of DOMA, and other battering rams of assimilation, that represent something distinctly different to our cultures, than they do to American society at large.

We have enjoyed some limited partnerships with various national glbt organizations over the years, at times more successfully than others. However, the level of attention and commitment has not been consistent and has not supported our growth as communities. We are in the LGBT communities, but not of them. We have a far older heritage, and the Wisdom Traditions that we represent have been returning rather rapidly (relatively speaking, in the wake of holocaust) to examine the histories of our inclusive, egalitarian, and quite often matriarchal and matrilineal cultures.

As we enter this new period in our organizing, with higher levels of grassroots and institutional efforts across the continent, our mature organizing history leads us to propose organized relationship building with national LGBT organizations. To the best of our estimation, this will require collaborations in three key areas: Media, Funding and Policy. During the month of dialogue that it took, all organizations participating in this process have been updated through phone conversations, electronic communication and peer briefing. Some non-Native organizations have a more extensive grasp of Native community issues, and Native Two Spirit issues than others.

Media

Two spirit communities around the country have expressed with some dismay the general lack of coverage of Native issues. Where we do see treatment of Native issues appear in the news, there is a history of often a detectable -to shocking- lack of cultural understanding.

The same sex marriage issue in Native Country parses in our communities very differently than it does in non-Native communities. With community dialogue and consensus, it is becoming clear that the issue for Native people does not so much comport with same-sex marriage, as it does with the much larger issue of tribal sovereignty. Community members are concerned that journalists are looking in the wrong direction on these matters, and perhaps more worrying, are distorting matters of internal community process. We are deeply concerned that the GLBT press may give an improper appearance of Two Spirit attacks upon our tribal governments, rather than our focus upon the enacting legislation (DOMA) at the US federal level at the core of the problem.

We need to discuss appropriate cultural resources for interested LGBT journalists, because we recognize that gay journalism is frequently the nexus for mainstream news coverage. In Two Spirit communities, we need technical assistance training, introductions to the pool of journalists, and we expect to be consulted for the vetting of stories.

Funding

While there is a wide perception in the general public that Native Americans = Casinos, Native people are too well aware that national philanthropy studies during the past decade revealed that only a little above 5% of tribes in the country have active gaming operations. Among these 5% of tribes, only 20% (one-fifth) have gaming operations that could realistically be described as lucrative. Most tribal gambling businesses produce enough revenue only to build or

fix schools (promised but never fulfilled by the federal government), fund health programs (drastically cut by the federal government), pave roads and purchase emergency response vehicles (occasionally funded, but largely ignored by the federal government). Other programs that gaming operations support may include senior lunch programs, water utilities upgrading, housing stock improvement, youth summer programming, etc. Not all tribal communities with gaming operations receive per capita (individual profit distribution) payments. Those tribal governments that do disburse per caps generally do so at predictably low or modest levels.

Nationally, philanthropy has come to share a popular and widespread view of Native people, which is that Natives are not cultures- we are Corporations. Not only is this conceptually untrue, it is economically untrue. Native communities seeking either public or private support for community programs are regularly redirected to tribal governments- or declined without comment- under the false assumption that all tribes have access to independent sources of wealth. This is a damaging fiction that has been largely perpetuated either by design or default by people who believe they are economically harmed by the competition, or politically threatened by Natives who are exercising a degree of social independence previously unattainable without discretionary sources of revenue. Another possibility is that virulent racism is a motivating factor in redefining Native identity, quite apart from any economic or larger political motivations.

There is actually little available tribal philanthropy money (except for purposes of social and material infrastructure building that were never fulfilled according to treaty). And apparently, if the Two Spirit community fears are realized, not only will our tribal governments not support our requests for program contributions, we have now witnessed internally originating, systemic discrimination against people who have always been regarded as leading spiritual and governmental members of society.

We are developing a two-year vision of continued, enhanced national community building and organizing, but in order to do so, we will need coordinated cooperation from national GLBT funders. Nationally, mainstream Native communities- and mainstream organized philanthropy- has responded with only a fraction of the resources needed to meet the often-dire circumstances of many of the poorest people in the country. Two Spirit people are no exception. Facing co-factors of housing, employment and education discrimination on the reservation, or in urban areas, Native people who are LGBT, as well as female, face compound challenges to having or making a life.

## Conclusion

With an ancient history and spiritual tradition that celebrates, rather than discriminates, Native American Two Spirit people have been rebuilding our cultures and reintegrating into our communities. Over a thirty year period, we have deeply impacted Western science, engaged in national and international LGBT social organizing, and presently plan to chart a course through the coming decade.

In 2005, we saw for the first time four Indigenous grand marshals for gay pride events across the country (SF, Minneapolis and Honolulu). At no time since Stonewall has there been such a convergence of public visibility or acknowledgement of Native cultures by the GLBT mainstream. Community members have experienced a sense of encouragement because of this.

We are however experiencing great challenges, arising not only from ongoing, intergenerational social and economic conditions, but from hostile political forces that are threatening to further erode not only our sovereign tribal governments, but attack the foundation of our identities, our spiritual practices and our lives.

We have of necessity sheltered much of our work and our cultures, a result in part of a long history of religious and other persecutions in this country; however. But we have also mobilized nationally in response to recent alarming events with very wide social, religious and political ramifications. Native communities are now preparing to take larger action, celebrating the past two decades and looking forward to the coming 20 years.

For more bibliographical references, please visit: [www.2SPR.org](http://www.2SPR.org).