
Transgender, Two-Spirit and Nonbinary Indigenous Literatures

Introduction

KAI MINOSH PYLE AND DANNE JOBIN

There is a significant history of depictions of queer and transgender themes in Native American literature, especially since the Native American Literary Renaissance. Writers such as Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, and Paula Gunn Allen, among many others, have grappled with the complexities of gender and sexuality in Indigenous contexts in their writing. In the past decade, there has also been an increasing number of contemporary transgender, Two-Spirit, and nonbinary Indigenous writers who have published creative work. In recognition of the burst of both creative and scholarly writing that has emerged in the past ten years, we wanted to gather contributions that would specifically consider transgender lives in Native American and broader Indigenous studies contexts. This special issue of *Transmotion* is intended to help address some of the gaps that exist in the scholarly study of queer, trans, and Two-Spirit Indigenous literatures.

Literature and literary analysis have been central to the development of queer Indigenous studies in the past decade. While the scholarly origins of the current field of queer Indigenous studies are often dated to the 2011 publication of the anthology *Queer Indigenous Studies* and the 2010 special issue of *GLQ* titled *Sexuality, Nationality, and Indigeneity*, several years earlier in 2008 there had been a prior special issue of *Studies in American Indian Literatures* focusing on queer figures in Indigenous literature. All three collections dealt with literature as a central facet of their

investigations of queer Indigenous life and experiences. Among the monographs on queer Indigenous studies that followed these three publications, literature remained a prevalent concern, particularly in the work of Mark Rifkin and Lisa Tatonetti. Analyzing both works by queer Indigenous writers as well as queer figures in writing by non-queer Indigenous authors, these academic works made a strong case for the centrality of literature to the analysis of queer Indigeneity as well as the centrality of queerness to Indigenous literature.

These scholars have made the case that gender and sexuality must be attended to in any consideration of Indigenous realities. Indeed, the establishment and policing of binary genders consolidates settler logic and echoes other sets of restrictive classifications. Joanne Barker states that “gender as a category of analysis stabilizes and universalizes binary oppositions at other levels, including sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and nationalism” (*Critically Sovereign* 13), while Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda and Lisa Tatonetti reclaim “sovereign erotics” as a political and spiritual act that “relates our bodies to our nations, traditions, and histories” and whose suppression derives from settler colonisation (Qwo-Li Driskill et. al. *Sovereign Erotics* 3). Driskill further points out that the heteronormativity of patriarchal gender systems “undermines struggles for decolonization and sovereignty, and buoys the powers of colonial governance” (*Queer Indigenous Studies* 19). As such, critical attention to sexualities and gender expression constitute a crucial nexus for Indigenous studies.

Despite their disciplinary positioning within women’s studies, gender studies and queer studies, trans studies sit somewhat uncomfortably within these fields. Far from being a recent development, transgender realities have long been either obscured or else seen as an appendage to other concerns regarding sexual orientation and gender. Cael M. Keegan frames trans studies as a truth that cannot be heard

("Getting Disciplined" 4) and defines them as "a story that seeks to illuminate the experiences of transgender people and give an account of our claim to sex and gender, without which we cannot fully appear as other than a problem in someone else's narrative" (4). In order to break free from models that will always treat trans lives as an afterthought, trans studies must develop their own epistemological frameworks (5). Indeed, trans is much more than an allegory for queerness, anchored as it is in the material realities of embodied experience. In addition, trans studies ask whether "bodies simply are certain genders/sexes unquestionably" in ways that "map neatly onto the operations of power" (7). With this in mind, trans Indigenous studies are likely to re-examine and challenge some of the premises that queer Indigenous studies take as a given. What is more, transgender people's experience of embodiment is shifting as medical care becomes more accessible and the discourse around genderqueer, genderfluid and nonbinary identities gains a wider audience. How do Two-Spirit individuals both adopt and resist some of the signifiers mapped onto trans bodies? How can we discuss access to hormones and surgery and the ways in which these have created new possibilities for transgender embodiment that perhaps break away from older categories of *winkte*, *nádleehi*, or *māhū* without reifying questions of authenticity? How important/useful is it to try and maintain continuity with such categories?

While we use "transgender" and "trans" as interchangeable umbrella terms that can encompass, but do not necessarily coincide with, other labels such as 2SQ and nonbinary, contributors may use different terminology. Vocabulary evolves at a fast pace and there are cases where the authors discussed by our contributors use terms to describe themselves that are less appropriate in the context of scholarly discussion (Max Wolf Valerio's identity as a transsexual, for instance). Indigenous communities also have distinct understandings of gender and sexuality and some literary depictions may

not fit comfortably within the categories of “transgender” or “cisgender.” Queer Mohawk scholar Marie Laing has written that there is also often significant pressure placed on Two-Spirit, queer, and trans Indigenous people to define what Two-Spirit means in an “easy answer” or a brief soundbite (*Reframing Two-Spirit* 35). We have aimed to handle these complexities appropriately without restricting the full range of identifications. As Laing notes, while definitions are important, becoming tangled up in them can sometimes prevent us from getting to deeper and more urgent conversations.

In this issue, we seek to celebrate and interrogate the exciting emergence of many new trans Indigenous authors, but we also want to recognize that trans Indigenous literature does not begin in the 2010s. Lisa Tatonetti’s article, for instance, reminds us of a longer history in the trajectory of Max Wolf Valerio’s literary career. Often older records of trans Indigenous writing appear in forms we might not expect. Aiyana Maracle, whose work has been amplified by younger trans artists like Morgan M. Page and Arielle Twist, was a prolific performance artist in the 1990s, and her article “A Journey in Gender,” which critiqued popular Two-Spirit discourse for centering non-transgender experiences, was published over twenty years ago. Diné/Oneida artist Carrie House created the film *I Am*, about queer and trans Indigenous workers, in 1997, while nonbinary Cree filmmaker Thirza Cuthand released her first film, *Lessons in Baby Dyke Theory*, in 1995. Undoubtedly there are many more of these earlier trans Indigenous creators who have yet to come to the attention of the mainstream, whether the Indigenous literary mainstream or the trans literary mainstream. Considerations of more recent work by trans Indigenous artists are enriched by placing them in the context of those who have come before.

Trans Indigenous studies have specific elements to bring not only to Indigenous studies as a whole, but to the field of queer studies as well. For one, Two-Spirit,

transgender and nonbinary Indigenous North American writers represent an exciting juncture in Indigenous literature that articulates new ways of relating and building community. Queer expressions of gender challenge preconceived notions of belonging to outline alternative forms of kinship. More specifically, the articles included in this special issue make it clear that trans people take on very different roles and identities depending on the context in which they evolve, and that their gender identity requires them to renegotiate their positionality and relationships within their communities. How do trans people's lives shed light on family dynamics and the viability of wider communal networks? Another important aspect of trans Indigenous studies is the extent to which the policing of gender and the regulation of monogamous heterosexuality have been part and parcel of the colonial settler project. Kim Tallbear denounces "compulsory settler sex, family and nation" ("Making Love and Relations" 151), as well as "heteronormative settler sexuality categories," as extraneous impositions on Indigenous bodies. This idea is complicated by the Eurocentric impulse to romanticise traditional Native American and First Nation views of gender, which tends to obscure the frequent discrimination of queer subjects by their families and reservation communities as well as the racism and fetishisation that Indigenous individuals face in the dating world. Billy-Ray Belcourt reminds us that "Reserves can be incubators of transphobia and homophobia as a symptom of the Christianizing project carried out by settlers for decades" (*A History of My Brief Body* 111). Thus, trans Indigenous identities often strike a precarious balance between the traditional gender roles disrupted by settler colonialism and more globalised contemporary articulations of gender. These two axes—the definition of transgender identities and the relationships that are disrupted and reimagined in the wake of coming out—run through all of the contributions to this Special Issue.

Exploring the life's work of one of the first trans Indigenous writers, Lisa Tatonetti's analysis of Max Wolf Valerio demonstrates how masculinity tends to be assimilated into a marker of whiteness by Natives and non-Natives alike and interpreted as a negation of the Indigeneity written onto the body. Valerio wrenches masculinity out of the constraints of settler normativity and colonial shame as his transition enables him to draw a joyful, exuberant felt experience from his changing physicality and repair the relational fractures that often affect the lives of queer subjects.

James Mackay tackles the next generation of trans writers in his analysis of digital media's role in contemporary poetry. Applying innovative methodologies to Smokii Sumac's interplay between digital platforms and poetic praxis, he discusses how social media informs trans Indigenous people's experience of gender and describes some of the techniques Sumac employs to resist fragmentation, such as incorporating natural spaces and ceremonial elements into his work.

"Hunger for Culture" represents the coming together of queer/2SQ/trans Indigenous performers Clementine Bordeaux, Kenneth R. Ramos, and Arianna Taylor to offer a unique reflection on the premiere of Larissa Fasthorse's *Urban Rez* production in 2016. Through this rare opportunity to bring their whole queer and Indigenous selves to the stage for a community-focused performance, the co-authors position *Urban Rez* as a disruption of settler logic and a form of visual sovereignty.

Lee Schwening explores Sydney Freeland's reflections on nádleehí identity in the film *Drunktown's Finest*, a term that lacks specificity in its definition as a "third gender" but nevertheless provides a way for nádleehí to connect to one another. While heteronormativity is framed as a colonial cliché—albeit one that is often reproduced by male Navajo leaders—trans identity enables modes of belonging beyond the biological family through other forms of mutuality and dynamics of interdependence.

In Maddee Clark's reading of Australian Indigenous trans literary accounts, the terms "sistergirl" and "brotherboy" articulate a nuanced and communal relationship to gender embodiment that problematizes western understandings of queer and trans identities. As Clark argues, such community self-definitions and "desire-based" frameworks offer alternative narratives that oppose "damage-centred" research that tends to treat transgender and Indigenous lives in damaging ways.

June Scudeler frames Tommy Pico's Poetry quartet (*IRL, Nature Poem, Junk and Feed*) as a contemporary epic that artfully combines pop culture with theory and Kumeyaay song tradition with urban Indigeneity into an intersectional, queer poetry cycle tracing the seasonality of romantic relationships. Through the character of Teebs, Pico effectively writes his own epic until he reaches the point where Teebs, "becoming himself through his various communities," is no longer defined by relational loss.

Many of the themes that contributors discuss in these pieces are also common themes emerging in Indigenous literatures more broadly. Bordeaux, Ramos, and Taylor's focus on community-driven approaches to Native American performance and Clark's depiction of how Indigenous Australian trans, sistergirl, and brotherboy individuals resist damage-centered research are two examples of how concerns within Indigenous communities and literary studies are refracted through trans and gender-specific contexts. Scudeler and Mackay's exploration of the works of Tommy Pico and Smokii Sumac likewise take up the issue of digital spaces and popular culture that have come to the fore of much present-day Indigenous literature and art. One thing these contributions reveal, then, is the ways trans Indigenous literatures are very much intertwined with broader Indigenous issues. At the same time, they also remind us that their specificity as trans is important. For instance, Tatonetti's reading of Max Wolf Valerio's oeuvre asserts that the transness, or the non-cisness, of Valerio's Indigenous masculinity has important ramifications for reading his work. The interplay between

trans-specificity and broader Indigenous contexts is one area that we might suggest as a fruitful starting point for future investigations of trans Indigenous literatures.

Far from attempting to set any definitive parameters on what trans Indigenous studies might look like, we offer this special issue as an invitation in hopes that more scholars might take up these questions. This issue only brushes the surface of the vast possibilities that arise in thinking *trans* and *Indigenous* and *literature* together. With numerous trans Indigenous writers in the United States and Canada gaining acclaim in recent years—Jas M. Morgan, Arielle Twist, Janet Mock, Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, to name a few—there is certainly an ever increasing body of literature to work from. Furthermore, beyond Anglophone North America artists such as Dan Taulapapa McMullin, Yuki Kihara, and Amaranta Gómez Regalado have made waves and even challenged the categories of “transgender” and “cisgender” altogether from Indigenous perspectives. We hope that this issue may open up conversations that span the full geographical and temporal reaches of transgender Indigenous literatures in order to more deeply address central questions in Indigenous studies, trans studies, and beyond.

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