

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identity and Social Acceptance in Indian Country. By Brian Joseph Gilley.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/98m209dj>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Miller, Jay

**Publication Date**

2007-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

## Reviews

---

---

**Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identity and Social Acceptance in Indian Country.**  
By Brian Joseph Gilley. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. 213 pages.  
\$16.95 paper.

Acceptance is at the heart of this study, a comparison of two-spirit communities in Denver and northeast Oklahoma. The author's initial focus regards how Natives dealt with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but soon shifts to the personalities and identities involved.

Chapter 1 discusses gender diversity in the Native Americas and highlights many cultures' tolerance and acceptance as an adjunct to a welcoming of difference rather than a bland acceptance of sameness. Childhood rituals that involve gendered artifacts like baskets or bows make a child's choice to the community public. Historically known as *berdache* by Europeans, and condemned as such, tribal terms such as the Diné *nadleeh*, Lakota *winkte*, and Numic *tuvasa* are now preferred in ethnographic contexts. More generally, the term *two spirit* applies in order to underscore the ceremonial and spiritual roles that are vital to this identity. With an emphasis on "critical self-knowledge," Gilley explores the cultural compromises that such an individual has to make between dominant attributes in the capitalist or tribal communities and one's own sense of self, which is often forged in hardship and exile on the streets.

Chapter 2 traces the gay movement as largely Anglo-American and prosperous and ignores (except in rhetoric) people of color. As a result, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people of color organized themselves. In 1975, Gay American Indians (GAI) began in San Francisco. From 150 members in 1980, it grew to one thousand members by 1988. Many serious scholars traced these developments on the scene and into the archives, and this provided an intellectual background that was largely unknown to the public or to tribal members. A telling comparison is now made between the loss of tribal languages and the loss of gender diversity within the increasing "loss" of tribal cultures. The role of generic gay bars as a space to enhance community involvement provides only social outlets, not distinctively Native ones. In Denver, two spirits expanded their cultural sense by hosting ceremonies (Wenakuo), with their own pitfalls and awkward "hybridity," at camping locations outside the city.

Chapter 3 uses examples of cruelty to address homophobia in tribal communities. Several of the interviewed two spirits were raised in fundamentalist Christian homes, had unhappy childhoods because of their growing realization of who they were, and had not “come out” to their parents and relatives. Sheila, a transvestite who fulfills the Lakota role of *winkte* as a superb craftsperson and caregiver, laments the decline of her status even among members of her prominent family. She left the Dakotas for the city, lived on the streets, and slowly put her life back together. Other two spirits discuss strategies for “passing” by means of “surveilled masculinities” and impression management. Public scenes, however, can be sites of tension. One intolerant drum group, who agreed to participate in a two-spirit powwow, was rude and used the occasion to extort more money before it shortened its time at the drum.

The chapter “The Aesthetics of an Identity” treats the ceremonial significance of two spirits as being both male and female, whereas other Natives are simply gay Indians who are more concerned with their sexuality than with a tribal ceremonial persona. Child rearing is traditionally a special concern of their role, despite negative mainstream perceptions of gays as likely molesters. It is an aspect of their general concern with passing on a culture through namings, ceremonies, and elder care. Most want to take on ceremonial responsibilities and train to become leaders, though they have to “pass” to do so. They also work within the gay community to establish their own distinctive worth and seek allies. Ideals of a “perfect partner” and a healthy lifestyle resonate among Natives but rarely happen. Although they are generally accepting, two spirits politely contend with a whole range of wannabes and what are called “granolas/New Age lesbians” amassed in Colorado. Coping with the wannabes/granolas/lesbians’ narcissistic spirituality is especially vexing.

Chapter 5 deals with working solutions to being two spirit, especially in terms of ceremonialism. The Denver group relies on Lakota inspirations, but other traditions are also involved. Among Southeastern communities, women arduously “shake shells” tied in rows around their ankles as the percussion accompaniment to Stomp Dances. In their own contexts, however, two spirits do this. At a two-spirit powwow, an individual can cross-dress, and they add “campy drag shows” to the mix at other public occasions.

The chapter “Mending the Hoop” is a plea for acceptance on the basis of commitment, responsibility, and utility, especially for child and health care. Two spirits seek fulfilling lives of substance and contribution, practically and ideally.

In the preface, Gilley positions himself to speak as a researcher and not as a member of this community. His discussion mentions drinking, partying, bar hopping, and other socializing during research, like any anthropologist, but the intimacy ends there. Although two spirits assume full acceptance in the tribal past, what they do now seems to be what has always been done. In her sensitive discussions of *berdache*, Ruth Landes notes that such an individual was gently exiled from the natal community to join another one within the tribe, where acceptance relied on hard work for women and hospitality

for men. In *Becoming Two Spirit*, moreover, two spirits' highly personal and extremely honest discussions of themselves, their lives, and their aspirations illustrate how colonialism and trauma have taken a toll. Yet resilience rules by connecting with community, ritual, and spirits.

Jay Miller

The Ohio State University

**Blonde Indian: An Alaska Native Memoir.** By Ernestine Hayes. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006. 200 pages. \$32.95 cloth; \$16.95 paper.

Once as I was fishing for salmon, a pod of killer whales worked the edge of a drop-off; they would roll, and salmon would burst out of the water fleeing. One killer whale moved under our little boat, and when he surfaced I saw what the Lingít (or Tlingít) call his *a gooshí*, his dorsal fin, sunlit, electric. Ernestine Hayes beautifully captures that same moment of oneness in her memoir when she says, "I stand here on this particular boat, late in the afternoon of this certain day, with these people who have traveled distances near and far to stand here and be captured with me in this moment, which is gone before I blink and which will continue always to exist" (147).

That sense of oneness or the recapturing of self within the world's chaos is a central theme of Ernestine Hayes's *Blonde Indian: An Alaska Native Memoir*. Her life appears like two bookends, as an *at k'átsk'u* (child) and as a *sh yáa. awudanéiyi* (respected person). Hayes loses her way between the bookends (for twenty-five years). By interweaving firsthand accounts, metaphor, myth, and parallelism, Hayes recaptures her Lingít life and finds closure.

From the beginning of her childhood, Hayes was singled out as not fitting in, even by her own grandmother: "*Blonde Indian*. Grandmother sang and sometimes danced with me while I dipped my head and shook my hands *Blonde Indian*" (7). This was further accentuated when Hayes attended grade school and was force-fed European fairy tales, fended for herself when injured in a bloody accident, or was afraid to attend white children's birthday parties (11, 14–17). These firsthand accounts remind us how poorly children of two cultures are often treated, and we begin to understand why Hayes withdrew from Lingít culture and left Alaska. We also realize that it is imperative for her to return in order to heal and reconnect with place.

Metaphorically, Hayes constructs the memoir effectively by using chapter titles such as "The Retreating Glacier" and "The Bog." By thinking more figuratively, the memoir deepens and allows for further meaning. For example, she writes about glaciers: "After pushing as hard as they could for as long as they could, finally they gave up. They stopped pushing. They stopped pushing . . . and began to back up. Slowly in most cases. Bit by bit" (36). A reader can infer a multitude of interpretations in the selection: the Lingít culture may be backing up, which infers recovery and possibility, but it is also receding, due to the shrinking number of fluent speakers (between two hundred and four hundred). By pushing against something, Hayes suggests that her culture may