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@ Creating Change '09: Embracing Two Spirit Traditions

Posted by [Miriam](#) - January 30, 2009, at [06:25PM](#) | in [Queer Issues](#) , [Transgender Issues](#)
Organized by the [Two Spirit Society of Denver](#).

Some thoughts from the panelists of the Two Spirit Society about what it means to be Two Spirit: [Two-spirit](#) is a universal term we have adopted. In the early 80s, there was a group of Native Americans who wanted to change the perspective of what two-spirit meant. It used to be known as "[berdache](#)" in academic communities, and Two Spirit was a new word that could be accepted. That's where the two-spirit term came from. Two spirit people did exist within our cultures and we want to go back to that. It's about going back and relearning traditions.

Some of the native communities didn't support two-spirit people within the communities. Many of the two-spirit people would leave the reservations and flee to the cities. Two Spirit is different than gay or lesbian.

Two Spirit is life. Before I had a word for it, it's me. Even as a kid I was a mediator between the sexes, between genders. I was raised--I can lay cement and shingle a roof with the best of them. I can also wear a suit and high heels with the best of them. Tradition says that we have been touched by the grandfather, the great spirit, to be who we are. This is not something we chose. It is a deep responsibility. It's not something that is taken lightly. It doesn't mean that some of us don't identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

Two Spirit people exist everywhere. We were the people who held the community together. We were more concentrated on the community--carrying on the songs, the stories, the cultural ways.

Film: [Two Spirits](#) about Fred Martinez, a young two-spirit person who was murdered. He identified as gay at the time of his passing.

It is amazing the parts of our cultures that have been robbed from us by colonialism. There are many examples from history of this type of gender variance in other cultures--primarily indigenous communities. What is so difficult is that these oppressions, gender oppression, heteronormativity, have been forced on us by our colonial history. And now, gender non-conformity, queerness, is seen as a "white" thing. It's seen as a "white" movement, and there is resistance among some communities of color to these supposedly new movements of gender liberation and sexual openness. We've so internalized the oppression of colonialism and now we are using it on each other.

As a Latina who identifies as genderqueer, this is important to me. I have had people of color tell me that gender non-conformity is a white thing. It is so sad to be disconnected from our own history, to have internalized the oppression and message of religious colonialism. To have squelched the diversity of our own people and now we have to fight so hard to remember who we are--what we were and how to reclaim our own cultural autonomy. I believe this two-spirit movement is so important because it reconnects Native communities with their histories. Reminds them of the role that two-spirit people played in society before colonialism came. Often times we find the most oppression, the least acceptance of our gender identities and sexual orientations from our own communities--this is the long lasting effect of colonial oppression. We need to fight to reclaim our history and not oppress members of our communities.