

Reclaiming Two-Spirits: Sexuality, Spiritual Renewal and Sovereignty in Native America. By Gregory D. Smithers. Boston: Beacon Press, 2022. 332 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

In *Reclaiming Two-Spirits*, Gregory Smithers offers an expansive and engaging history of Indigenous gender and sexual expression before European colonialization and traces the variety of ways that Indigenous peoples in North America have retained, recast, and reimagined their social, sexual, and personal connections. *Reclaiming Two-Spirits* seeks to decolonize histories of Indigenous North American sexuality and gender, working explicitly to center non-European voices while also contextualizing and critiquing the assumptions so frequently embedded in the colonial archive. The result is an ambitious and wide-ranging historical account that simultaneously challenges traditional histories offered of Indigenous sexuality while also offering a possible model for furthering a self-critical mode of writing history that accounts for the profound colonial origins of the discipline.

Reclaiming Two-Spirits broadly introduces the category of Two-Spirit to a wider audience while also resisting the tendency to use it as another term in a colonial history of sexuality. Smithers begins by warning the reader that *Two-Spirit* is not simply an additional static category to be applied alongside LGBTQ+; rather, it forms a larger umbrella that recognizes a variety of gender and sexuality variances. In making this claim, Smithers directly invokes Chickasaw scholar Jenny Davis in her path-breaking article, “More Than Just Gay Indians.” Davis, and later the author, both assert that simply adding Two-Spirit to a list of contemporary sexual categories runs the risk of reinscribing colonial frameworks, rather than actively making space for Indigenous liberation or self-articulation. By self-identifying with a concept that allows for broader fluidity and difference, Two-Spirit people instead “enact traditions of resilience and resistance to the destructiveness of settler colonialism” (xxiii).

In support of this, Smithers offers a *longue durée* history of Two-Spirited sexuality, gender, and kinship relations in North America. Such work goes beyond the coining of the term in the 1990s and the delicate alliances stitched across communities to examine and understand shared sexuality and gender origins. For Smithers, these histories must be traced back through the destruction of settler-colonial state intervention in the United States and Canada, moving past the crushing imperial violence of European colonial powers, and look to the multifaceted webs of community, society, and belonging that, in precolonial Turtle Island, characterized so many Indigenous communities. The author divides *Reclaiming Two-Spirits* into three broader sections: “Judgments,” “Stories,” and “Reclaiming.” Each seeks to uncover broader historical narratives behind Indigenous gender and sexuality formations, and, in the telling of these stories, primarily to foreground Indigenous voices.

The “Judgments” section is simultaneously the most orthodox historically and the most powerfully transgressive and decolonial. In its five chapters—titled “Invasion,” “Hermaphrodites,” “Sin,” “Effeminacy,” and “Strange”—Smithers undertakes a powerful and critical reading that, against the archival grain, recontextualizes European colonial views, centers Indigenous lifeways and agency, and challenges how a contemporary reader would make assumptions based upon historical violence. In “Sin,” for example, Smithers analyzes the writings of French and Spanish soldiers, traders, and missionaries, reading their words back to them as justifications for conquest, defenses of their own worldviews, and willful misrecognition. In so doing, the author renders culturally complex sexual interactions as involving diminished and incomplete notions of “sin” or “transgression” that also worked to reassure European anxieties over Indigenous bodies (47–48). Such work, for Smithers, “involves more than the deconstruction of archival silences; it also requires us to dismantle the damaging historical consequences of terms like ‘sodomite,’ ‘hermaphrodite,’ ‘sin,’ and ‘effeminacy’” (63). Overall, “Judgment” retells colonial encounter and bloody violence in new ways, rendering Indigenous voices as meaningful and European voices subjective and influenced narrators who for so long have assumed positions of authority, normalcy, or objective observation.

The second part, “Stories,” is comprised of chapters that mark “Resilience,” “Place,” and “Paths.” These sections emphasize Indigenous resistance, survival, and continued challenges to American and Canadian settler states’ control, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing here from a variety of sources that range from capture narratives, to Bureau of Indian Affairs reports, to the writings of Western anthropologists, Smithers pushes back against American and Canadian observers’ claims of “knowing” the Native mind and undercuts the constant self-centering that positions them as objective correspondents of truth about their benighted charges. As a result of his analysis, the pronouncements of artist George Catlin and neurologist William Hammond, for example, reveal far more about settler desires for control than actual Indigenous sexuality or life. Not only did Indigenous people who fell outside of Western gender and sexual categories confound these observers, they also “lived fuller lives than white writers were willing to admit (or were allowed to see) and continued to contribute to the fabric of their respective communities” (106).

Covering history from the mid-twentieth century to present, in the last section Smithers examines how Indigenous peoples reclaimed non-Western, nonnormative sexual and gendered practices. With considerable sympathy, he traces the activism of people like Barbara Cameron and Madonna Thunder Hawk, weaving their accounts with those of rising American Indian political movements and the complicated interactions with (largely white) Gay Liberation activism. He then turns to Indigenous queer activism in the era of AIDS and increasingly visible homophobic violence (including the horrific death of Fred Martinez in 2001), as well as the complicated articulations of tribal sovereignty in the face of gay marriage debates in the 2000s and 2010s. Smithers’s long historical approach effectively builds the immediacy of these debates and the power contained within these conversations; it is apparent to the reader that the debates of the 2000s continue long colonial struggles of previous centuries.

Reclaiming Two-Spirits is strong and compelling, but it is not without important shortcomings. First is Smithers's halting recognition of his positionality as a white, straight man who, at a time when so many Indigenous people are capable and desirous of telling their own stories, nonetheless has undertaken this work. Smithers's prologue does acknowledge this, particularly in a pointed exchange with Candi Brings Plenty. Yet writing "this concern is something I take seriously and think about often" is a rather limited approach, given how powerfully Smithers takes Western explorers, ethnographers, and colonists to task in their own writing. What would it mean for Smithers to be more rigorous in his own self-critique about his writing, or better yet, to have actively collaborated in co-writing this book with an Indigenous and Two-Spirited person?

Some limitations do come into play at moments in the book: treatment of wider tensions, such as the intense racist friction between Indigenous Two-Spirit Peoples and white queer movements, are muted and disappointingly minimal, especially in the later sections. This would have been a key moment to also think about how white LGBTQ+ organizing can frequently still invoke colonial claims to power, not unlike the fraught relationship between Matilda Stevenson and WeWha. In addition, Smithers's treatment of white, British-born Harry Hay equivocates somewhat when discussing Hay's problematic histories in attempting to colonize Indigenous queerness to make a settler claim for gay rights in the United States. The repeated invocation of the false motif of Hay's (fictional) encounter with an "elderly Paiute prophet Wovoka" distracts from the complicated lines of alliance in the latter parts of the book's narrative. Finally, Smithers' repeated use of archaic and reifying terms like "male-bodied" and "woman-bodied" to discuss gender fluid, trans, or otherwise nonnormative gender and sexual binaries is troubling, especially in a text that ostensibly works so hard to decolonize and undermine such binarist work.

These issues notwithstanding, *Reclaiming Two-Spirits* is a powerful and engaging historical narrative that gamely attempts to foreground Indigenous stories and lifeways and decolonize broader conversations about gender, sexuality, and settlement. It is a readable text that will find ready audiences, both in university classrooms as well as interested nonacademic observers.

T. J. Tallie
University of San Diego