

Professor explores Two-Spirit literature in Northwest native groups

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Western culture's grappling with homosexuality and alternate genders isn't strictly limited to the United States, but is also prevalent in many Native American and native Alaskan groups -- or native nations. That issue is the focus of work by one Kansas State University researcher.

Lisa Tatonetti, associate professor of English and American ethnic studies, received a fellowship to "Native Cultures of Western [Alaska](#) and the Pacific Northwest Coast," a National Endowment for the Humanities' summer institute. She used the opportunity to meet with various native groups to learn about their policies and cultures, including those on alternative sexualities and genders.

Her findings will contribute to her upcoming book, "Queering American Indian Literature: The Rise of Contemporary Two-Spirit Texts and Criticism." It will be the first literary exploration into recorded Two-Spirit literature, mapping its inception in the early 1970s to its rise in present day and its criticism.

"Two-Spirit is a term coined in the '90s that refers to people of native cultures who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender/transsexual or queer," said Tatonetti, who is a foremost scholar in this field. "There's been this explosion of Two-Spirit literature since the '70s."

A native nation refers to a collective body of Native American people who are citizens in an indigenous nation existing within the U.S. or Canada, Tatonetti said. In Alaska alone, more than 300 native cultures

exist.

"Traditionally in native cultures, many native nations have alternate genders and different sexuality spaces," she said.

But when Spanish and French missionaries and settlers first encountered these beliefs and practices in native cultures, they deemed them barbaric, often resulting in the practitioners' deaths because they did not adhere to beliefs of Judeo-Christian origin. Consequently, this forced the Two-Spirit movement underground, Tatonetti said.

Although the summer institute wasn't focused on Two-Spirit work, Tatonetti said it allowed her insight into the Yup'ik, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw nations, whose cultures differ greatly from those of native nations in the lower 48 states.

For her research she met with internationally known scholars and native artists every day for month.

"When I learned about a particular culture, I asked if their nation had these Two-Spirit traditions. It was amazing because everywhere I went these traditions existed," Tatonetti said.

Even though a part of many cultures' histories, she found that acceptance of Two-Spirit practices varied, and contemporary Two-Spirit people often faced the same tribulations as those with alternative sexuality and gender roles in the U.S.

"There are Two-Spirit societies all over the northwest area I visited and also throughout the U.S.," Tatonetti said. "It's funny, because while nations like the Navajo and Cherokee have multiple gender traditions, they also have passed their own defense of marriage acts.

"It's been a back-and-forth in many nations for a long time. I think this literature is blossoming right now because of shifts in the larger conversations in academia and queer studies, and because of the changes in understanding happening in the U.S.," Tatonetti said. "Historically these native nations are ahead of where American culture currently is in terms of their understanding of the complexity of gender and sex roles, but today they face similar debates and challenges."

Tatonetti recently co-edited and contributed to "Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Contemporary Two-Spirit Literature," which is slated for release with the University of Arizona Press in spring 2011. Her work on Two-Spirit literature has appeared in various journals, edited collections and contemporary magazines.

Tatonetti began studying Two-Spirit [literature](#) soon after earning her doctorate from Ohio State University in 2001.

Provided by Kansas State University

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