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The Queer Urban Indigenous City: Understanding the Impacts of the settler- colonial state on Urban Indigenous and Two- Spirit Identity

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*The stillness of brown, red, and orange landscapes began to tremble
 While yellow school buses rolled up to doorsteps.
 Children kissing their grandparents "goodbye"...
 For now.
 Heavy wet tears dripping down tan cheeks,
 Time moving slow as the wheels travel across state lines,
 Coming to a stop at the church.
 The church with a golden angel at the peak who they call Moroni.
 Melanin skin being our sight of beauty but to them, a means of cleansing.
 Through their eyes our kids were Lamanites,
 Lamanites are uncivilized and savage.
 To convert to the church, their "dirt-colored skin would wash away,"
 Is what the missionaries would tell yt foster parents,
 While telling our Elders that they were going to receive a "better life."
 One by one, each child going into one room and out the other.
 Not knowing to say "goodbye"
 Dunked into the water that was meant to protect them.
 Drips of holy water trickling down, touching every part of the body,
 Whispering promises in their ears for this "better life."
 Brown and freshly clothed to meet their new families
 Provo, Spanish Fork, Salt Lake City
 Each divided to be on their own.
 Taught in Utah public school,
 Growing and raising their food,
 Yt mothers sewing their clothes,
 And church on Sundays for three hours.*

*Six years later.
 Taken out by sixteen to go back to the Rez
 To live with their father.
 Feeling cast aside by their Nation,
 And feeling alone within Mormonism.
 It was not for them.
 Either of them.*

Growing up, I heard of the experiences of my mom, aunts, and uncles, who were forced into the Indian Placement Program in the mid-1970s, forcing them to move to Provo, Utah and be converted into the Mormon or LDS (Latter Day Saints) church when they were younger. More recently, while helping write the eulogy of Shí Cheii (my grandpa) in 2018, I was informed that he was in the Relocation Program (what my family called it at the time) in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Chicago, Illinois.

The Relocation Program, better known as the 1956 Relocation Act, was a policy created by the United States (U.S.) federal government that forced Indigenous people to move from Tribal/Traditional homelands to urban areas, typically far away from our origins.

Hearing of my family's history and experiences, I began to think through my own urban identity. Their stories of the 1956 Relocation Act and the 1970s Indian Placement

Program are stories of survival and resiliency that we do not often discuss in Native America. But through these experiences of survival, I argue that these stories can heal our people and our nations from the harmful policies that the U.S. federal government and other organisations, usually religious, have put our people through. This piece is dedicated to my mother, my family, and my community who have survived these forceful removal and relocation policies that were aimed to silence and displace their lived experiences within urban spaces. Your stories and your existence are what fuel me and my identities!

Introduction and background

In the 1980 U.S. Census, about half of Native American people were living in urban areas, and the 1990 Census reported 63%. In the most recent U.S. Census, 2010 (pending data results from 2020 census which was delayed due to COVID-19), 71% of American Indians live in urban areas and it is predicted within the 2020 U.S. census, there is roughly 75% of Native people living in cities or off Tribal Nations ("Census Bureau to Host Webinar on 2010 Census American Indian and Alaska Native Summary File," 2012). This shift from reservation Natives to urban Natives has been influenced by the Relocation Act of the 1950s, and other relocation programs. In the U.S., after the end of World War II, the Bureau of Indian Affairs expanded funding to implement the employment placement program or, better known as the Relocation Act, in the hopes of recruiting Native American people, particularly men, to relocate to cities for employment.

Similar to the 1830 Removal Act, the 1956 Relocation Act was intended to assimilate Native people into western society by removing us from reservations to cities and detaching us from our cultural ties. Donald Fixico (Shawnee, Sac and Fox, Muscogee Creek and Seminole) states that "government officials envisioned relocation as a reform effort to assist American Indians in finding jobs and housing, but it was again Indian removal like in the 1830s and the following decades when the government ordered Indians moved to reservations" (Fixico, 2000, p. 4). Understanding settler-colonial states, such as the U.S. and Australia, we see the design of urban structures through urban planning and design for settler populations, not Indigenous peoples. I argue that these are systems designed to prevent traditional teachings and cultural knowledge transfer for Indigenous peoples in urban areas.

Many scholar-activist, such as la paperson, argue that settler-colonialism operates as a system and structure that is held up through violence toward Indigenous peoples. We can see this through the extractions of goods and resources from Indigenous people in the U.S. and Australia that is then used by the settler: the one who is staying and doing the action of extraction. In *A Third University is Possible*, the Settler-Native-Slave triad describes the settler-colonial structure in relationship to land and people of the Americas. "The 'Settler' is a juridical space, the 'Native' is a world to be disavowed and dismembered, the 'Slave' is an ontological system" (la paperson, 2017, p. 10). I position the Settler-Native-Slave triad as one of my main foundations because this is the everlasting and ongoing triad that is in existence with settler colonialism that we must unravel as a society.

Within the U.S., the Settler-Native-Slave triad can be positioned for understanding the operation of settler colonialism and how it functions through systems, such as urban planning. la paperson argues that "'Settler' is not an identity; it is an idealized juridical

space [. . .] the Settler is a site of exertion from which whiteness emerges, Whiteness is property, it is the right to have rights, it is the legal human" (la paperson, 2017, p. 10). la paperson fits these three into a triad that shows the system of colonisation of Indigenous and communities of colour, which we even see within urban spaces and city design. As Sylvia Wynter describes in *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument*, Man is seen as white cis hetero male, and anything outside of that is not man, which is then not human (Wynter, 2003). Settlers have the juridical space because they are Man, which allows them to have rights, while "others" do not because they are not Man, completing the triad of Native and Slave that are connected because of settler "power." Within urban planning and urban studies, we see this centring of Settler, or in this case the "Man." By centring Man, urban planning/studies are continuing settler colonialism with their very design. By (re)centring Indigenous peoples as the focus in urban planning/studies, we are able to create a decolonial urban system, with focus on Queer and Two-Spirit individuals.

Most, if not all the time, urban planning/studies does not recognise Indigenous peoples in cities because they are not Man, thus we are inhuman. To be inhuman is to allow for these harsh conditions, trauma, and disabling spaces to continue. To combat high rates of assaults, I would like to position "Queer Indigenous Urbanism," which I am creating, to offer this framework for my community as the production of acknowledging and bridging the urban Native communities with urban planners and city development to build improved infrastructures that dismantle the Settler-Native-Slave triad. Queer Indigenous Urbanism (QIU) allows for the input of the community. Although urban planners hold townhalls, QIU works directly with members to address issues that they are facing. Through traditional practices, QIU touches on the overarching issues that occur for Native peoples in urban areas.

The 1956 Relocation Act

In the Summary Proceedings in 1951, "critics alleged that relocation would dump Indians in cities and that then the Bureau would abandon them" (Fixico, 2000, p. 9). This allegation against the Relocation Act highlights how false promises were made to Native American people in order to assimilate into western culture of city living. During this time, there is a shift from using the name 'Relocation Program' to 'Employment Assistance Program' to push the overall context under the rug. With this in effect, "American Indians immediately faced two concerns – employment and housing; relocation workers assisted in talking to company managers about hiring Indian relocatees, and less expensive apartment housing was usually available" (Fixico, 2000).

The employment opportunities were often minimum wage jobs, and housing was among the poorest in the city, often referred to as the 'Red Ghettos' or 'Slum Dwellings.' These living conditions have become the pathway to how Native people are viewed in urban areas today. In *Disability Incarcerated*, Erevelles states:

La Paperson (2010) theorizes the ghetto not as a fixed sociological space but rather as a dislocating procedure – that draws on the apparatus of empire to exclude, contain and control the proliferations of excess bodies; 1) walls serve to contain the body, 2) legal and civil divestment that ensures educational, social, and economic deprivation of those contained, 3) racial markings where minority status is assigned to those bodies that are contained, and lastly 4) the signifying

practice of compulsory able-bodiedness that is the wellspring of these dislocations. (Ben-Moshe et al., 2014, p. 90)

The conditions that Native people were forced into were and are disabling spaces for the body, mind, and spirit. These federal Native American policies continue to cause intergenerational trauma for our people to this day.

Relocation has been a recurring trauma of loss of land and culture among Native American populations since the beginning of European contact. It arrives in the form of government “encouragement” and economic “incentives” to relocate to urban centres. Fixico quotes a Native person in Southern California who believed that the Relocation Act should be known as the ‘Extermination Program’: “the Indians would be integrated by taking all the youngsters off the reservation, the old would die off, the young would be integrated, and the land would become free for public domain, and all the [other] people could grab it” (2000, p. 20). Removing Native youth from elders was an assimilation tactic to erase the Native identity and prevent the resurgence of Native philosophies for future generations. As Natives move into cities, they are less likely to be in close enough proximity to attend ceremonies, have the opportunity to speak their native tongue, or the ability to practice their Native culture. Exposure to resources and community become slim when Natives move to urban areas. As roughly three-quarters of Native Americans live in urban centres today, the implementation of Indian Centres and various other Indigenous resources were formed to combat the issues that stemmed from the Relocation Act.

Among the many negative stereotypes about Native American people in urban settings, the most prominent depictions include characterisation as poor, alcoholic, and uneducated. Stereotypes and violent language that are used against Native people have an impact on our overall well-being. According to the Center for Native American Youth at Aspen Institute, suicide is the second leading cause of death –and 2.5 times the national rate –for American Indian & Alaska Native [AI/AN] youth in the 15-24 age group, the poverty rate among AI/ANs in 2009 was 23.6%, and the reported rate of binge alcohol use over the past month was higher among AI/AN adults than the national average (30.6 percent vs. 24.5 percent) (Center for Native American Youth at Aspen Institute, 2014). These statistics hit urban Natives tremendously hard due to the isolation of Native identity among predominately white spaces and inadequate resources.

Although there are some Indian Centers and emerging resources to tackle these issues, they are newly formed and are not able to address all issues at once. Also, there is not just one Native urban experience but multiple, intersected, and diverse identities of Native peoples. Often, Queer Native voices are not depicted in the discourse of Relocation among Native peoples. This leads to the assumption that only heterosexual Natives were only impacted by Relocation. Native American communities have and will always be diverse with various gender and sexual identities. In 2015, among the Navajo Nation, roughly 41% of Navajo youth who identify with LGBTQ+ were physically harassed and assaulted and about 20% are kicked out of their home for their Queer identity (Navajo Nation LGBTQ Report, 2015). Within the Queer and Two-Spirit Native American community, there are higher rates of trauma that is produced, especially within urban settings. Many Indigenous communities have been impacted and assimilated by Christianity to live in western culture by enforcing binary gender, sex,

and sexuality. Through the history of Native American law and policy, we see these confinements of the “ghetto” not only as a place of disabling but also a place of settler-colonial perpetuation on urban Natives, more specifically onto Queer and Two-Spirit urban Native bodies.

Queer Indigenous & Two-Spirit Urban Identity

Occurring around the same time -- going into the 1960s -- the mainstream LGBTQ+ community saw a lack of representation or knowledge about People of Colour who were also LGBTQ+. Gilley discusses how the rising gay movement had been creating change for the LGBTQ+ community. However, it often excluded people of colour, especially ones who identify as Native American, leading to the recent term Two-Spirit (Gilley, 2006, p. 26). The term Two-Spirit is the umbrella of what is known now as Queer, which categorizes individuals to fit a specific mould, originating among urban-oriented Indigenous gay and lesbian people (Driskill, 2004; Gilley, 2006). Many members of the gay community have been fighting for their sexual identity but for some, that was the only minority identity they carried while others, such as people of colour, carry intersecting marginalized identities such as race, sexuality, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Two-Spirit allows for Native American people to embrace their intersected identities and to fully express being a member of a Native American Nation while also being Queer or LGBTQ+. It highlights that Two-Spirit is about gender identity and expression, not solely based on sexuality. I like to describe Two-Spirit as the recognition of diverse gender, sex, and sexuality prior to settler-colonial contact in the Americas. Concentrating on "reinventing the enemy's language," Mayer (2008) introduced the notion that heterosexual, bisexual, and same-sex narratives within Indigenous communities are set alongside one another. Mayer contemplates the concept of desire not being a hetero- or homosexual experience, but another classification of Two-Spirit sexuality that should be encompassed without reservation. It is essential to highlight that gay American Indian men rely on aspirations and separation from the LGBTQ+ norm, culture, and identity to embrace their mobility based on the lack of representation of Two-Spirit individuals (Gilley, 2012).

The Native American Queer experience differs from those of our white counterparts. Many Native American people who identify underneath the umbrella of Queer would like to be referred to as Two-Spirit. Some have stated that they usually do not use Two-Spirit but rather LGBTQ+ terminology because not many people know or understand the term. Studies have uncovered that gay American Indian men displayed a higher mobility rate and relied on the resources of social interaction networks, kinship, and fellow community members to survive (Gilley, 2006). This social interaction that gay American Indian men face highlights the difficulties that they continue to face in a contemporary time while emphasizing the importance of kin among American Indian communities off reservations.

Many Native American communities have lost their traditional stories about Two-Spirit or their variation of Two-Spirit, such as a third gender, within their community due to colonisation and assimilation. Gilley stated that “Two-Spirit social relations are founded on the goal of self- and social acceptance, which many gay and lesbian Natives feel cannot be found in mainstream Indian society” (2006, p. 48). The community began to form social gatherings specifically for people who identified as Two-Spirit to build

awareness of intersectionality within cities, but also tackle the issues that Two-Spirit people face that the mainstream LGBTQ+ community does not. Some of these issues revolve around loss of tribal identity, HIV/AIDS awareness, tribal community understanding, safe sex practices, and overall health through an indigenous perspective. Some limitations in this field of study are how the term Two-Spirit is generalized to create a pan-Nativeness without representing each tribal community, further grouping the diversity of Two-Spirit needs as one, particularly in urban settings.

The complexities of Two-Spirit identity revolve around tribal identity, the function of spirituality, poverty rates in the community, sexual violence, and lastly, the impact of colonialism. Mental health disparities among Queer Native American people have been on the rise. Another issue in Native America is alcoholism; Yuan reported that among Two-Spirit, 72.3% of identifying men and 62.4% of identifying women have engaged in hazardous and harmful alcohol usage, even to the point of being alcohol dependent (Yuan et al., 2014). As Two-Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ individuals who are discovering their identity, if not already in cities due to Relocation, will leave the reservation in hopes of finding their community, one that they lacked on the reservations. Many explore, experiment, and rely on community through the gay bar scene, which encourages alcohol intake.

There have been Queer and Two-Spirit prayer and talking circles that have allowed Two-Spirit people to share their experiences. One participant states that "we have been so assimilated as a culture that a lot of them do not even know their history and do not remember" (Driskill, 2016, p. 158). The progression of Federal Native American Policy has had a domino effect on Native American identity. The Employment Assistance Program is not a thing of the past; its effects are still seen today. These types of programs are implemented to erase the lived experiences of Two-Spirit Queer Natives in urban areas, disconnecting communities from their cultural teachings, and ultimately creating heteronormative spaces that do not acknowledge Two-Spirit people of the past, present, or future.

Conclusion

Overall, in order for urban centres and areas to get to a decolonial imaginary, we must work together to (re)centre the Indigenous urban experience as the foreground of the work. Cities within the U.S. and Australia are built on top of Indigenous lands and peoples, and not the other way around. It is time to make that known and use critical decisions that benefits Indigenous peoples through the use of Queer Indigenous Urbanism. The intersectional and unique experience of being Indigenous, Queer, and Two-Spirit adds to the conversation about Indigenous urban identity that will benefit urban studies, Indigenous studies, Gender/Sexuality Studies and even urban planning to (re)create spaces with us in mind.

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