

## Disrupting the Climate Emergency through Indigiqueer Futurities

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### Abstract

The climate emergency poses particular challenges for gender and sexually diverse members of Indigenous communities, rooted both in the historical legacies of colonization and its ongoing forms. To date, there is a dearth of research documenting the climate change experiences of Indigiqueer peoples. Existing research demonstrates clear pathways between the social and Indigenous determinants of health and vulnerability to climatic shifts and extreme weather events for Indigenous and LGBTQ+ communities independently of each other. People at the intersection of these identities – those who are both Indigenous and have gender or sexual diverse identities – will inevitably encounter heightened challenges relative to each population. Furthermore, lived experience of climate impacts and saturation in “climate-vulnerability” discourse has prompted Indigenous and LGBTQ+ advocacy and action regarding the particular capabilities they can contribute to climate change science and strategy. However, within both Indigenous and LGBTQ+ communities, the unique challenges and potential contributions that Indigiqueer peoples might make to climate adaptation and mitigation strategies – and more broadly to Indigenous futurities and planetary well-being – are vastly under-researched and overlooked. Yet many Indigiqueer peoples are actually on the frontlines of climate justice movements, embodying unique cultural-ecological resurgent agencies that arise from intersecting identities and contributing to the epistemic diversity (multiple ways of knowing) of queer climate justice. Accordingly, this commentary by two Indigiqueer scholar-practitioners and one queer racialized scholar argues that Indigiqueer peoples have unique agencies with which to respond to the climate emergency. Just as significantly, we argue that these agencies, which are sometimes overlooked within Indigenous environmental justice frameworks, have broader relevance for the cultural-ecological restoration work which is so urgently needed for planetary health and wellbeing today.

## Introduction

Human-caused environmental change is not new, but climate impacts – both dramatic and subtle – are now evident everyday (The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization, 2024). Despite the proliferation of climate justice debates, equity considerations remain predominantly western and human centric. These stand in stark contrast to Indigenous environmental justice perspectives, which address the well-being of all entities – including human and more-than-human (McGregor, 2018).

Indigenous peoples have long navigated and adapted to ecological collapse. Many now regard rapid climate change and the associated dispossession of cultural-ecological communities to be the result of colonialism's intensification (Guerrero, 2023; Whyte, 2017). Given the centrality of land to Indigenous wellbeing, as well as the accelerating impacts of global neoliberalism, ecological extractivism, and severe weather events, environmental dispossession is a key contributor to Indigenous health disparities (Richmond & Ross, 2009; Greenwood et al., 2018). These negative health impacts are arguably exacerbated further for Indigiqueer peoples, given their unique roles and responsibilities to the human and more-than-human communities of which they are part.

Despite extensive literature on Indigenous health disparities, there is comparatively little research on Indigiqueer wellbeing, especially regarding the climate crisis (Ramnarine, 2023). However, current evidence pertaining to climate health impacts on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup>) communities – which can include Indigenous peoples – demonstrates clear pathways between the social determinants of health and the mitigation of these impacts on health outcomes (Goldsmith & Bell, 2022; Kilpatrick et al.,

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<sup>1</sup> We use the acronym LGBTQ+ to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other sexual and gender minority identities which are primarily rooted in Western epistemological perspectives.

2023; Kivioja et al., 2023). Given the health impacts of the climate emergency on Indigenous and LGBTQ+ communities independently of each other, it is reasonable to assume that those at the intersection of these identities (i.e., Indigiqueer peoples) will face increased risk compared to each group individually.

Current mainstream conceptualizations of queer climate justice<sup>2</sup> often centre Eurocentric epistemologies (Carr, 2023). Specifically, Carr (2023) argues that queer climate activism is uniquely positioned to challenge the hypermasculine cultural norms contributing to the extractive logics of planetary destruction, while Indigiqueer and Indigenous perspectives remain marginalized. The dominance of cis-heteropatriarchy in climate governance reflects oppressive structures that naturalize domination of land, resources, and bodies (particularly racialized femme, queer, and trans bodies). The imbrication of this ideology with settler colonialism and capitalism fuels environmental degradation through toxic hypermasculinity; this framing positions the earth as an object to be exploited, rather than a living network of relations, mirroring the violent erasure of Indigenous and gender-diverse epistemologies under colonial modernity. Emerging non-western queer perspectives have led to the application of anti-colonial thinking and practice within climate justice efforts (Aung, 2023). To this end, Aung (2023) advocates for the power of queer resistance to oppose colonial forces attempting to “wipe out the diversity of sexuality and gender” (para 18). Such approaches unsettle binary epistemologies of sexuality and gender through contesting and resisting normative structures that underlie interconnected systems of oppression (Marshall, 2021), revealing how cultural-ecological resurgence and climate justice are contingent upon dismantling the cis-heteropatriarchal and settler-colonial formations that condition ecological devastation.

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<sup>2</sup> Climate justice refers to the intersection of queer politics and human equity concerns

We further extend this analysis though emphasizing the interrelationship between the contributions of queer normativity (the normalization of difference) by highlighting the work of Beze Gray, an Anishinaabe/Lenape/Oneida Two-Spirit land defender, who explains how “protecting future generations” is a part of “what we consider Indigenous Law” (McSwain 2024, para 2). Furthermore, as we discuss later in this commentary, queer normativity is embedded in the sexual and gender-diverse epistemologies and cosmological frameworks of our Indigenous ancestors.

Throughout this article, we use the term resurgence and on occasion thrivance. This is deliberate. The roots of the term thrivance are apparent in the work of Anishinaabe scholar, Gerald Vizenor, who uses the term survivance to encapsulate both “survival” and “resistance” and describe “an active sense of presence, the continuance of narratives, not a mere reaction or survival.” (1999, p. vii). Thrivance builds upon this concept to emphasize intersectionality and shift focus to Indigenous flourishing, joy, and wellness. Principles of thrivance include kinship relations, relational accountability, refusal, radical love, multiplicity, and transformative justice (Jolivé, 2023). Resurgence further emphasizes Indigenous anti-capitalism, self-determination, land reclamation, and relational forms of governance (Simpson, 2017; Coulthard, 2014; Williams, 2022). Both verbs open the imaginative space for Indigenous Futurities, which foreground Indigenous epistemologies, realities, and temporalities in ways which are unfettered by the imposition of western separatist frameworks of capitalist accumulation and linear modes of time.

We contend that Indigiqueer perspectives challenge dominant climate justice framings, including non-Indigenous queer pluralities, in radically generative ways. As scholar-practitioners engaged in climate action and cultural-ecological restoration work, we look past the colonial

gaze - a colonial power dynamic in which the colonizer represents colonized people as “other” – which has pathologized Indigiqueer bodies, to offer our perspectives regarding the unique agencies and contributions of our communities to much needed cultural-ecological resurgence and climate justice. The climate crisis is a cultural emergency, and cultural-ecological resurgence can only be built by restoring practices of connectivity between human and more-than-human worlds (Williams, 2022).

Lewis Williams identifies as Takatāpui person of Māori, specifically Ngāi Te Rangi descent who is queer. Sākihitowin Awâsis is an Anishinaabe-Métis Niizh Manidoo (Two-Spirit) of mixed descent from the Pine Marten Clan. Jordan Ramnarine is a queer Indo-Caribbean person, descending from Dalit indentured labourers that were forcibly migrated to Trinidad and Tobago. This commentary is informed by our own positionalities, as well as reflections arising from exploratory conversations between each other around these themes. Central to our methodology is the Māori-based concept of whakapapa - the genealogy between entities, living and non-living, seen and unseen – enabling us to draw on and share our respective epistemological and ancestral lineages which historically traverse continents and oceans. For example, Lewis Williams, through ancestral migration, has a long lineage of Takatāpui ancestors throughout the Pacific (including Samoa) through their genealogical connections to ancestral migration waka (canoes). Given the fragmented knowledge pertaining to pre-colonial Indigenous genders and sexualities, as well as their roles in Indigenous societies, the views offered in this commentary are not intended to provide a comprehensive discussion, but rather a jumping-off point for provoking Indigiqueer agency in enabling cultural-ecological resurgence and the thrivance of planetary kinship relations. The intersections between colonialism, climate emergencies/resilience, and the erasure/resurgence of Indigenous genders and sexualities are

vastly underexplored, yet there is much that can be learnt through bringing the epistemologies, traditional roles, and unique agencies of our Indigiqueer and otherwise-colonized ancestors to contemporary cultural-ecological challenges.

### **Historic and ongoing colonization of Indigiqueer peoples**

Pre-colonization, Indigenous women and LGBTQ+ peoples had tremendous autonomy, often holding well-respected roles in our communities and governance systems. Colonial structures of power that imposed heteropatriarchy onto Indigenous communities contributed to the erasure of traditional gender variant roles and sought to control and pathologize Indigiqueer bodies.

Colonial powers throughout Aotearoa have vigorously sought to suppress precolonial expressions of Māori genders and sexualities (Hutchings & Aspin, 2007; Paora, 2019). For example, sexual organs in whakairo (carvings) were often removed (Aspen, 2019) with other whakairo depicting same sex relationships either destroyed or exoticized in the museums of colonizers. The removal of references to diverse gender and sexual identities within moteatea (chants) and waiata (songs) paralleled the criminalization of homosexuality and female impersonation by colonial governments. For takatāpui, colonization has been devastating, “resulting in marginalization, discrimination and fractured cultural identity” (Paora, 2019, p.14). Frequently encompassing widespread alienation from whānau (family), hapū (subtribe), and iwi (tribe), the resulting cultural and ecological dispossession for many takatāpui has been far reaching.

Today, within the Great Lakes and Plains of Mikinaak Minis (Turtle Island or North America), Indigenous peoples who exist beyond the colonial gender binary are often referred to as “Two-Spirit” or “a third/fourth gender” and can include Indigenous LGBTQ+ individuals.

Since contact, Two-Spirit and queer (2SQ) Indigenous peoples have been the target of intense colonial violence. As early as 1724, Jesuit missionaries were boasting about their perceived elimination of queer Indigenous peoples (Simpson, 2017, p.124). Subsequently, the Indian Act, residential school system, day schools, and sanatoriums further imposed heteronormativity, compulsory monogamy, and the colonial gender binary on 2SQ Indigenous peoples. Despite attempted erasure and ongoing colonial violence, 2SQ Indigenous peoples clearly existed and continue to do so.

Indigeneity in India was altered by the creation of the caste hierarchy to stratify groups of people based on privilege (Ambedkar, 2014). The lowest caste (Shudras) can be divided into Other Backward Class, Scheduled Class (Dalits), and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis) - the latter two of which are the Indigenous peoples of India and often referred to as “untouchables” (Ambedkar, 2014; P. Chaurasia, personal communication, May 14, 2024). After the abolition of slavery in the 1800s, many Dalits and Adivasis were coerced onto ships and into indentured labour in the Caribbean under false promises of a better life (Anderson, 2009). Regarding queer/trans Indo-Caribbean identities, Chevannes (2001) discusses how queerphobia was largely absent in Indo-Caribbean culture due to a reconstruction of cultural identity that occurred during the transoceanic movement.

### **Climate emergency and unique agencies of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer peoples**

The umbrella term Two-Spirit(s) (Niizho Manidoo(k)) originates from Cree Knowledge Keeper Myra Laramee who proposed the term in 1990 during the Third Annual Inter-Tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian Conference held in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Another term for Two-Spirit, *niizhin ojijaak*, is used by Ojibwa/Cree Two-Spirit Elder Ma-Nee Chacaby (2016). Two-Spirit encapsulates how distinct gender roles are described in Indigenous

languages. For example, in the 1800s, Ozaawindib (Yellow Head) was a celebrated Anishinaabe leader and guide referred to as an Agokwa, who was born male and lived as a woman (Pyle 2019); Aazhawigiizhigokwe (Hanging Cloud) was a respected Ogichidaakwe (warrior woman) who attained ceremonial rights and leadership roles that were, at the time, usually only granted to men among Anishinaabeg (Filipczak, 2013). There are at least six ways of describing gender variance in *nêhiyawêwin* (Cree language), including *âyahkwêw* (a third gender) (Vowel, 2016). Nishnaabe/Métis Two-Spirit scholar Kai Pyle (2018) suggests “there was and is great variation in the words used for Two-Spirit people” (p. 583) likely due to differences among communities and individuals. Colonizers aimed to eliminate the relationships and values embodied by 2SQ Indigenous people in order to control Indigenous lands and bodies (Simpson, 2017).

Homo/transphobia and the colonial gender binary do not make sense within land-based ethical systems. While what can be interpreted as homosexuality is observed in the natural environment, homophobia takes place exclusively among humans, and the colonial gender binary is not practical for survival on the land because it restricts our relationships and actions (Simpson, 2017). Anishinaabe knowledge systems value consent, autonomy, variance, agency, and diversity for resiliency and sustainability; if we have a diversity of practices, we have greater knowledge available before problems even arise (*ibid*). In this sense, Anishinaabe knowledge can “be considered queer because it honours epistemic diversity” (Awasis, 2020).

Constantly evolving, in recent years the concept of *Takatāpui* – a traditional term referring to an intimate companion of the same gender which fell into obscurity following colonial contact, has been reclaimed to encompass all Māori Queer identities (Kerekere, 2017). Being *Takatāpui* is central to one’s *wairua* (spirituality), ancestral inheritance, and *whakapapa*. *Whakapapa* centralizes diversity, inclusion, and interconnectedness. Within this worldview,



queerphobia does not come from tikanga (Māori protocol) but from colonized ways of thinking and being. Rather, gender fluidity is contained within Māori cosmology, as all Māori are uri descendants of Papatūānuku (the earth mother) and Ranginui (the sky father) and so embody both female and male elements (Paora, 2019). Furthermore, research on Māori sexualities with Elders suggests that genderfluid Māori have played “an important role both within the Takatāpui community and wider Māori society as holders and transmitters of ancestral knowledge” (Aspen, 2019, p.4).

Drawing on the intimate entwinement of Māori migration whakapapa with the lands and lifeways of Polynesia offers a way forward in drawing on the epistemologies of Lewis Williams’s Takatāpui forebears where some of the precolonial cultural norms surrounding queerness has persisted. For example, Samoan climate activist and artist Yuki Kihara (Teaiwa et al., 2023) points out that Samoan society has four culturally recognized genders and that the reason why “Samoa has sustained as a resilient community over the past 4,000 years is because all of the four genders worked in unison” (para 24). In Samoa, the fluidity of gender roles such as fa’afafine and fa’atama (those assigned male and female identities at birth who subsequently express their genders in feminine and masculine ways, respectively) may mean that they are better equipped to deal with environmental emergencies because of the adaptive and reflexive capacities of these genders to take up tasks associated with both men and women; a view which has recently been put forward by the International Institute for Environment and Development (Carthy & Landesman, 2023). The adaptive capacities of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer peoples in climate justice movements helps build connections between diasporic and emplaced Indigiqueer epistemologies that are facilitating the re-indigenization of nonbinary identities.

The potential of Indigiqueer agencies also have profound impacts in transnational contexts. Amidst the settler-colonial imposition of international disaster recovery measures within the Caribbean during severe climate events (Benjamin & Haynes, 2018; Stanley, 2021; Perry, 2023), translocal solidarities between Asian, Black, and Indigenous folks living on these islands emerge as forms of climate resiliency through intimate relations with local archipelagic ecologies to enable the resurgence of traditional and nascent knowledges from these communities (Jerez Columbié & Morrissey, 2023; Lowe, 2015). This dialogical exchange becomes an agentic site which facilitates the circulation of ideas, strategies, and resources; in doing so, it reinforces the interconnectedness of struggles against colonialism, thereby enriching the global repository of subjugated knowledges that becomes critical for addressing cultural-ecological restoration. By recognizing their radical potential, Indigiqueer agencies contribute to the epistemological pluralization necessary for effective climate action, cultural-ecological thriving, and planetary well-being.

### **Conclusion**

By mirroring the rest of creation, Indigiqueer individuals contribute unique capacities to climate justice movements that are rooted in queer normativity, gender fluidity, and sexual diversity. In this commentary, we have argued that Indigiqueer agencies make three main contributions to climate justice by centring: (1) land-based relationality and kinship, (2) a diversity of tactics and methodological praxis, and (3) a multiplicity of Indigenous cosmologies, epistemologies, and ontologies.

To conclude, we revisit the interrelationship between the contributions of queer normativity and climate activism by emphasizing the work of Beze Gray, which includes cultural restoration, such as sugar bushing and hide tanning, to “create a safe space for other Two-Spirit

people to learn more about land-based” ways of knowing and doing, especially considering how “culture and revitalization is impacted by climate change” (McSwain, 2024, para. 17). This distinct positioning, as outlined throughout our analysis, is what we propose allows Indigiqueer individuals globally to radically (re)imagine identities in ways that are deeply interwoven with embodied place-based relationships. Oji-Cree/néhiyaw Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer author, Joshua Whitehead, in dialogue with Angie Abdou (2023) asks, “What does Two-Spirit mean?” and responds:

I know. And I don’t know. The body remembers, the blood knows, it has a memory like water does... To animate 2S like a necromancer to fit cleanly and neatly in the present is a violent reanimating of our ancestors... It needs to mutate and change. Hence Indigiqueer. Hence, not knowing and knowing... That’s the whole futuristic key of Indigenous sexual, and by relation, environmental sovereignty because to be undefinable is to be unknowable to colonial powers — that’s radical freedom. (pp.17-18)

The resurgence of Indigiqueer ways of knowing and being – and, by extension, queer normativity – offer critical insights into diversity, fluidity, agency, and variance.

Indigiqueer perspectives can help us reimagine our collective approaches to cultural-ecological resurgence and Indigenous environmental justice, guiding us toward a more just and liberatory future.

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