

# A BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

for *Spaces between Us* by Scott Lauria Morgensen

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott L. Morgensen is an ethnographer and historian of queer politics in North America. His gender and sexuality activism is grounded in white anti-racism and anti-colonialism, and his work now focuses on the critique of settler colonialism. He is co-editor of *Queer Indigenous Studies* (Arizona, 2011) and of *Karangatia: Calling Out Gender and Sexuality in Settler Societies*, special issue of *Settler Colonial Studies* 2:2 (2012). An award-winning teacher, he is associate professor of gender studies at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada.

## PRAISE FOR *SPACES BETWEEN US*

“*Spaces between Us* is brilliant work that is unceasingly critical, ethical, and illuminating in its research, analysis, and theorization. Morgensen challenges formations of queer settler colonialism in this major intervention undertaken with a critical methodology that has implications for numerous fields.”

—J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, author of *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity*

“This is a fascinating multi-disciplinary book that analyzes the intricate linkages, appropriations, and productions around discourses of Native and non-Native queer movements of indigeneity and national belonging. Scott Lauria Morgensen is a gifted writer and scholar with an elegant eye for detailed and nuanced analysis.”

—Martin E. Manalansan, author of *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*

“Demonstrates that neither scholarly questions nor queer decolonizing politics have to be ‘special interest’ matters but instead good tools for anyone who seeks justice. Generous, thoughtful writing makes all the difference.”

—Kimberly Alidio, Lantern Review Blog

## BACKGROUND

In 1992, at an informational session during the American Anthropological Association meeting, members of the San Francisco group Gay American Indians told anthropologists to respect their leadership when representing Native LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) people. Native activists critiqued writings by gay, lesbian, and allied anthropologists that described Native people using the colonial term “berdache,” or that appropriated Native traditions as part of non-Native LGBTQ history. They called non-Natives to learn instead from their new identity, “Two-Spirit,” which they first promoted in 1990 to tie their contemporary lives to their nations’ traditions of gender and sexual diversity.

This conflict reflected a long legacy in which the meaning of being queer / trans in the United States hinged on debating the cultural heritage of Native Americans. Reaching back into colonial history and the growth of modern LGBTQ movements, *Spaces between Us* explains how indigeneity came to be a central focus of queer politics among non-Native and Native people. On this basis the book theorizes settler colonialism as a shaping force of sexual and gender politics in North America.

*Spaces between Us* presents stories drawn from historical and ethnographic research on the intimate, power-laden relationships joining LGBTQ non-Natives and Two-Spirit people. We learn how non-Natives adopted the traditional gender and sexual diversity of Native nations as their own patrimony, or nature. The book asks how these sentiments express the desires of settlers, which it investigates ‘from the inside out’ through critical reflection and participant observation by the author, a white queer cisgender man raised in the United States.

While focusing on non-Natives, *Spaces between Us* also consistently evaluates their actions by comparison to the long histories of anti-colonial activism by Native LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people. Native activists persevered, despite being misinterpreted or ignored, by arguing that colonialism shapes the desires and actions of non-Natives, and that gender and sexual politics must defend Native sovereignty and decolonization.

Tracing “conversations” that linked Two-Spirit people with non-Natives, *Spaces between Us* highlights moments when communication appeared to be possible, even if its failures showed how the power of settler colonialism shaped non-Native and Native people’s lives. The book finally invites a return to conversation: not as a solution, but as a way to confront the ongoing activity of settler colonization that LGBTQ non-Natives have been called to challenge by Two-Spirit activists.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you first encountered this book, what did you think was meant by the title phrase, ‘spaces between us’? After reading the book, what meanings for this phrase did you find?
2. *Spaces between Us* cites historical and contemporary sources to portray ‘settler colonialism’ – how it acts; how it affects people’s lives. With reference to the book, what would you say is a good example of settler colonialism? How does the book portray settler colonialism in everyday life today?
3. Native LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people share long histories of caring for their own needs and working to change the conditions that marginalize them. What key factors sparked Native LGBTQ people to organize for their liberation?
4. *Spaces between Us* critically examines how Native LGBTQ people have been portrayed by non-Natives, especially by anthropologists. How did representations by anthropologists differ from self-representations by Native LGBTQ people themselves – especially, after the emergence of Two-Spirit identity?
5. *Spaces between Us* examines how race inflects settler colonialism. When non-Natives are called to participate in settler colonialism, how does this happen differently for white people or for people of color? How can anti-racist movements challenge settler colonialism? What can obstruct this from happening, and what makes it possible?
6. Why do you think this book devoted so much space to examining counterculturists, and notably the Radical Faeries? What importance did counterculturism bear not just to non-Native queer politics, but also to the history of Two-Spirit activism? How do you think the stories about Radical Faeries informed the argument of the book as a whole?
7. How did the rise of HIV/AIDS make Native women and Two-Spirit people important communicators about health in Native communities? How did HIV/AIDS activism position them as leaders in work for Indigenous decolonization?

8. What different histories led Morgensen to write about queer non-Natives vs. about Native people? Why does the book portray Two-Spirit people primarily by citing texts published by Two-Spirit activists? Why do you think Morgensen chose not to write much about conflicts within Native LG-BTQ and Two-Spirit communities, in this particular book?
9. What does Morgensen mean when he argues that – whatever else it does or does not do – Two-Spirit activism “denaturalizes” settler colonialism? Why do you think the book highlights this point? Why is it important that settler colonialism be denaturalized?
10. *Spaces between Us* examines how non-Native and Native LGBTQ people are linked through “conversations.” What does Morgensen mean when he says, “in this analysis, conversation is not something that can be sought out, as if it is not already happening; nor can it be absolutely refused”? (229) Why does he conclude by arguing that non-Natives should return to conversation with Native people; what is he asking them to do?

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

### SCOTT L. MORGENSEN ON NEW BOOKS IN NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

In this interview, posted February 14, 2012, host Andrew Epstein interviews author Scott L. Morgensen about *Spaces between Us* and its implications for politics and scholarship.

<<http://newbooksinnativeamericanstudies.com/2012/02/14/scott-morgensen-spaces-between-us-queer-settler-colonialism-and-indigenous-decolonization-university-of-minnesota-press-2011/>>

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### INTRODUCTIONS

03:15 Scott L. Morgensen explains how he came to write *Spaces between Us*

**Question #1: Once non-Natives understand themselves as “settlers,” how does this change politics or the academy?**

07:40-18:30 - Settler colonialism provides a crucial frame for the history of queer politics in the United States.

18:30-24:40 - “Settler” should be understood less as an identity than as a “process of subject formation,” which can affect both non-Native and Native people.

**Question #2: What does the term “homonationalism” refer to, and what do you mean by your phrase “settler homonationalism”?**

25:40-29:30 - Jasbir Puar’s important concept, “homonationalism.”

(Israeli pinkwashing and potential ties between Two-Spirit and Palestinian queer critiques at 27:40)

29:30-32:45 - Homonationalism in the U.S. is rooted in the settler colonization of Native nations, and the alignment of white queers with settler civilizationalism.

**Question #3: People may agree that European colonists imposed heteropatriarchy to conquer Native peoples. But how can queer people – who deviate from heteropatriarchy – be thought of as implicated in this?**

33:45-43:40 - Europeans collectively “queered” Native people and people of color outside heteropatriarchy’s white-supremacist, colonial terms. In white settler societies, people who could claim “individuality” – notably, those read as white, middle-class, cisgender male citizens – first promoted political identity as “homosexual” and “transsexual.” Their desires to belong to and sustain white settler society formed a legacy that still shapes homonationalism today.

**Question #4: What is Two-Spirit organizing, and how does it impact non-Native queer people?**

44:15-53:30 - Two-Spirit organizing formed in the late 20th century as a politically radical, pan-tribal movement serving Native LGBTQ people and their nations. Responsibility to Two-Spirit organizing informed the structure and arguments of this book.

**Question #5: What is the history of Native HIV/AIDS organizing, and what do you mean when you describe it as promoting “health sovereignty”?**

54:45-1:02:25 - “Health sovereignty” describes the commitment of Indigenous health activists to attain Indigenous control over the conditions as well as the methods of health.

**Question #6: What audiences do you intend this book to reach?**

1:03:00-1:11:10 - *Spaces between Us* addresses Native studies, Two-Spirit activism, and the growing critique of non-Native complicity in settler colonialism.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE** FROM SCOTT LAURIA MORGENSEN

*Spaces between Us* is written to many audiences, including Natives and non-Natives, queer and allied people, and academics and activists. While you might read it cover-to-cover, it was written to be readable by skipping among sections with similar themes. I encourage readers with a specific interest to read a sequence of sections, first. Then, if you are still interested in the larger story, you could return to the beginning and work through the book as a whole.

### TWO-SPIRIT ACTIVISM

For readers interested in histories of community organizing by Two-Spirit / LGBTQ Native people, the argument of the book is easy to grasp by reading just these parts, in order: the second section of the Introduction (pp. 4-12); the last section in each of Chapters 2 - 5; Chapter 6.

### U.S. LGBTQ POLITICS

For a history of LGBTQ politics in the United States as it relates to Native people and settler colonialism, readers may start with: the Introduction; the third and fourth sections of Chapter 1 (pp. 36-49); Chapters 2 - 3.

### QUEERS OF COLOR

On the relationship of queers of color to white LGBTQ communities and settler colonialism, readers can focus on: the third and fifth sections of the Introduction (pp. 12-16, 22-28); Chapter 3; the third section of Chapter 4 (pp. 145-152); the fourth section of Chapter 5 (pp. 178-187).

### SETTLER COLONIALISM

Settler colonialism is theorized explicitly in: the fourth and fifth sections of the Introduction (pp. 16-28); Chapter 1; the last section of Chapter 6; the Epilogue.

### “CONVERSATIONS”

*Spaces between Us* argues that settler colonialism places LGBTQ non-Natives and Two-Spirit people in intimate relationships, which it interprets as “conversations.” This argument drives the book from start to end, but it is explicit in: the Preface; the second and third sections of the Introduction (pp. 4-16); the Epilogue. Readers may read Chapters 1 – 5, in sequence or in any order, to meet the historical evidence backing up this argument.