

REVISITING *BERDACHE*: NOTES ON A TRANSLINGUISTIC LEXICAL CREATION

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ABSTRACT: The transformation of French *bardache*, ultimately a borrowing from Italian denoting the passive partner in sex between men, to English *berdache*, referring to Native American nonbinary gender identities or roles, involved a complex translanguistic dialogue in North America in the early nineteenth century. This history has never before been adequately explained. While *berdache* is now largely obsolete and considered offensive due to its exoticizing, colonialist, and ethnocentric origins, its multifaceted history encapsulates variation and change on phonetic, graphic, semantic, pragmatic, axiological, and ideological levels. In recent decades, Indigenous queer people have adopted *Two-Spirit* as a means of challenging this imposed categorization and asserting linguistic self-determination. With the aim of correcting previous accounts and omnipresent misconceptions about the history of the lexeme *berdache*, this article uses a qualitative philological method to describe the development of this internationalism from a linguistic perspective.

KEYWORDS: borrowing, loanwords, etymology, semantic change, Native American, LGBTQ, gender, queer, ideology

BERDACHE IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED as an outdated and potentially offensive term to refer to Native American gender identities or roles and has been largely replaced, since the early 1990s, with English *Two-Spirit* or French *bispirituel-le* (or variations or derivatives thereof). First of all, *berdache* was conceptually problematic due to the reductive nature of the category itself, which purported to name a multidimensional reality across many societies. As a negatively connoted term applied by outsiders, it also othered Indigenous peoples by defining certain nonbinary gender systems in contrast to the White patriarchal European norm. In recent decades, activists and scholars have done a thorough job of deconstructing the category, exposing the racist, colonialist, ethnocentric, and hetero-cisnormative biases motivating its creation among Western anthropologists and commentators. However, a great deal of confusion remains over the history of the term *berdache* itself, a loanword whose French and ultimately Italian roots originally denoted the passive partner in sex between men.

Most significant is the confusion surrounding the word's etymology. The supposed Arabic-Persian etymology ('slave', 'prisoner'), found in many dictionaries, is constantly cited, leading to the perception that its othering nature is rooted in its "Orientalist" origin (see, e.g., Guerra 1971, 43; Roscoe 1998, 17; Morgensen 2011, 36), despite no documentary evidence in support of this. At times this is seen as explicit ideological motivation for its application to the Native American context (e.g., Mongibello 2018, 158; cf. Roscoe 1998, 18), although this novel etymological hypothesis had not been articulated until the mid-nineteenth century, well after semantic restriction had occurred in North American French. Orientalist fantasies of exoticized lust surely, on the other hand, underpinned the uncritical treatment by etymologists, including those late into the twentieth century (see below, also Masson 2015, 54–55), and so such biases cannot be separated from the later understanding of *berdache*: in this regard, the flawed dictionary treatment itself can be seen as having contributed to the creation of 'berdache' as a modern construct. In addition, several sources wrongly attribute the innovation to Spanish, failing to establish any meaningful contact or documented discourse in the relevant period (e.g., Dorrance 1935, 59; Carrière 1939, 111; Fulton and Anderson 1992, 603–4).

The chronology of use on the North American continent has presented just as many problems. The *Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles (DCHP)* 1967, s.v. *berdash* cites the *Jesuit Relations* (1674) as the source of the earliest attested use of French *bardache* in reference to North American gender systems; however, while referring to the concept, the cited volume does not include the term itself. An annotation by the editor of the English translation does use French *berdache* and English *berdash*, but these uses date to 1900 (Thwaites 1900, 309–10). As a result, the erroneous seventeenth-century *DCHP* dating has been repeated by many secondary sources (e.g., Thomas and Jacobs 1999, 93; Longman 2002, 124; de Vries 2009, 63). Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang (1997, 4) cite the *Jesuit Relations* as well, but dating it to the eighteenth century. Jacobs and Cromwell (1992, 64) also place the earliest reference among the Jesuits, in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (1781), although I have been unable to locate *bardache* or any variant in the cited volumes (nor did Roscoe 1998, 272–73). The charts in Roscoe (1995, 202; 1998, 174–75) provide several misleading dates: among others, the appropriate dating for the attested use in Pierre Deliette's "De Gannes Memoir" should be 1721 rather than 1693 or 1704; the instances in McDermott (1941) begin in the nineteenth century, rather than going back to 1673. Since some of these inaccuracies appear in core texts on *berdache*, they continue to be repeated again and again, the documentary inertia only reinforcing the perception that the received history is settled.

Moreover, the graphic form *berdache* (-er-) has been seen as puzzling—if not outright “inexplicable” (Williams 1986, 10; see also Courouve 1982, 19; Dynes 2008)—with respect to the traditional French spelling *bardache* (-ar-). The recently updated entry in the *OED3* (2018, s.v. *berdache*; cf. Lo Vecchio 2021b, 107–8) succinctly notes that this form reflects “regional variation in North American French,” but it is possible to explain it in much more depth. In the simplest terms, the shift from *bardache* to *berdache* resulted from one realization of a well-attested variable phonetic feature in North American French being identified orally then transcribed, in English, in a translanguistic process that consolidated both formal and semantic restriction into an adapted lexeme, or loan. The changes that occurred in the process of lexical transfer from French to English are not, in themselves, particularly remarkable from a linguistic point of view, since such patterns are ubiquitous in language contact. Yet these changes can be described in detail on the basis of the philological record in several languages—a worthwhile task in order to clear up many misconceptions about the history of a word that has generated a great deal of interest and controversy in recent decades.

The history of *berdache*, though, cannot just be reduced to its formal and semantic evolution over time. As a colonial artifact, *berdache* compellingly captures how ideologies and social hierarchies are mirrored in language structure—and, more so, how agents of power create categories and actively impose them to serve their own ends, in this case seeking “to compress and redraw the boundaries of Indigenous political and cultural identity by imposing definitions and categories that invariably lead to Indigenous diminishment. Strategic and eliminatory categorization has been crucial to the settler-colonial imperative, evident in designations of federally-certified Indigenousness and the enforcement of a cis-heteropatriarchal gender binary” (Ellasante 2021, 1508). Yet the influence of underlying power dynamics on language itself is not unidirectional. The more recent Native adoption of *Two-Spirit* represents a discursive strategy deployed to counter the power apparatus and reclaim agency, exemplifying how the extralinguistic environment contours language change.

This article revisits *berdache*, this time as a LEXICAL ITEM: how it evolved linguistically, in a broad sense—not just formally and semantically, but also pragmatically and ideologically. The latter two are particularly pertinent since *berdache* is tied to overlapping strands of identity construction, of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Writing from the outside perspective of a White non-Native queer experience, I make no attempt to situate ‘berdache’ as a CONCEPT vis-à-vis any particular trans, nonbinary, or queer experience, but acknowledge the complex intersectionalities of gender and sexuality within Indigenous communities, which have been discursively framed and

disfigured, via the lexicon, in ways that merit linguistic scrutiny. Doing so inevitably entails engaging with the very sources that contributed to the creation of ‘berdache’ in the first place. So we should not lose sight of how, whatever philological interest the cited texts may present, “Indigenous people attempting to extract knowledge from such sources face a fraught journey of interpretation” (Pyle 2018, 578).

ETYMOLOGY AND EARLY USE OF *BARDACHE*

Berdache represents a variant form of French *bardache*, itself the adaptation of Italian *bardassa* (via a variant form such as *bardascia*). *Bardassa* was first attested circa 1340 as an insult (without explicitly ‘homosexual’ context), then used commonly in Tuscan in the second half of the 1400s to designate the (usually younger) passive partner in anal sex between men, followed by many morphological variants or derivatives in later centuries (Lo Vecchio 2020, chap. 3). The etymology is unknown.¹

The explanation traditionally supplied by dictionaries, as deriving from Middle Persian via Arabic (‘slave’, ‘prisoner of war’, ‘captive’), can be traced most concretely back to Diez (1853, 1: 44, It *bardascia*, Sp *bardaxa*, Fr *bardache*),² who proposed an Arabic etymon in the form of a question: “*pathicus; vom arab. bardağ sklave?*”—while acknowledging (as do many sources after him) the semantic incongruity with respect to related regional or dialectal forms with other meanings (e.g., ‘boy’). Diez’s question mark was ignored by all later sources that repeated it, progressively solidifying a tenuous hypothesis into doctrine. Scheler (1873, Fr *bardache*) was an early one to do so, subsequently cited by Eguilaz (1886, Sp *bardaja*). Eguilaz is significant because he appears to be the first modern philologist to advance the Persian origin, arbitrarily citing a Persian-Latin dictionary (Vullers 1855, 217) of no ostensible pertinence. A number of others followed him nevertheless. Rinaldi (1906, 51) does so, now suggesting an ad hoc explanation for the Arabic-Persian transfer to Italian. Meyer-Lübke (1911) hews to Diez’s Arabic proposition for the varied Romance forms, while still citing Eguilaz. Building on these, Corominas (1954; also in 1980–91, Sp *bardaje*) notes the unsettled nature of the etymology while simultaneously claiming its Arabic and Persian roots are certain (“relación segura”), an argument he later pushes quite far in his Catalan dictionary (“indubtablement irani,” Coromines 1980–91, s.v. *bardaix*).³ Wartburg (1966–67, Ar *bardağ* ‘slave’) then draws from most of the above, endorsing the dual Arabic-Persian hypothesis as well.⁴

Perhaps some modern philologists were led astray by the speculations of a number of predecessors whose etymological practice was largely unem-

pirical. The Persian origin first posited by Covarrubias (1611) for Spanish *bardaxa*, without providing any argument (and repeated in the *Diccionario de autoridades* 1726, s.v. *bardaxe*), was likely behind Eguilaz's error. Starting with the first edition of its *Vocabolario* in 1612, the Accademia della Crusca derived Italian *bardassa* from Greek *βαδᾶς* "cinædus"—yet another ancient artifact, apparently only attested in Amerias via Hesychius's glossary (and mentioned, too, by Covarrubias). In the 1866 volume of its unfinished fifth edition, the Accademia added a possible Arabic etymon alongside the Greek: "Forse dall'arabo *bardes*, uomo tristo" ('Maybe from Arabic *bardes* 'depraved man)'). The common thread tying together the varied etymological arguments, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, is the unsubstantiated attribution of a linguistic origin, if not an etiology for the referent, to other places and other times.

Beyond its lineage, the Arabic-Persian hypothesis is highly problematic on its own terms, as laid out thoroughly in Masson (2015). According to Masson, the proposed ultimate origin (*bardag* 'prisoner') is well attested in Persian, but this is manifestly not the case with Arabic *bardaj/bardaġ*, which is absent from all major lexicographic sources and for which only a tiny number of attestations are known, all of them with highly obscure meanings. Whether Arabic or Persian is taken as the origin, it would be necessary to demonstrate relevant contact with Italian in the period in question (before the mid-fourteenth century), provide actual documentary evidence supporting the claim, and explain the sense development from 'prisoner' to '(young) passive male in anal sex between men'—fundamental criteria for such an etymological argument that are not met in this case. This hypothesis is also problematic in terms of the phonetic integration of the supposed Arabic or Persian into Italian—a process that, as far as I am aware, no one has ever attempted to explain (see also *OED3*, s.v. *bardash*). The etymology of Italian *bardassa* therefore merits diligent reconsideration, starting from the hypothesis of an endogenous origin within Italo-Romance, which is all the more compelling a prospect considering the rich semantic network of possibly related (Italo-)Romance forms. (Masson, for his part, proposes a theoretical Romance base BRD, or "phonosymbolic matrix BRD," dating to late antiquity.)

Where there is little doubt is that, from Italian, this lexeme was adapted into other modern languages (French *bardache*, Spanish *bardaja*, English *bardass*, etc.), becoming an important part of the western European lexicon of same-sex sexuality in the early modern period. It prototypically designated the passive male partner in anal sex, but also had related meanings, such as 'male prostitute', '(effeminate) male lover', or more generally 'sodomite' (Lo Vecchio 2020, chap. 3). As such, we find several early applications to

Native peoples in the New World, in various languages, but these examples must be viewed in the context of the prototypical meaning in that era, which clearly is aligned with the meaning as transferred from the Italian. The following Spanish and French examples from explorer accounts date from the late 1500s and early 1600s (all translations are my own):

1. *Saltearon, al primer sueño, la casa del Tumanama. Tomaronle preso con dos bardaxas, y ochenta mugeres de entrambas sillas.*⁵
 ‘They raided, in the small hours, the house of Tumanama. They took him prisoner with two bardaxas and eighty women on the saddle both ways.’
 [Francisco López de Gómara, *Hispania victrix. Primera y secunda parte de la Historia general de las Indias* (Medina del Campo: Millis, 1553), 36r]
2. *en ce faisant ils paillardent: & si c’est un masle ils le font Bardache ou Bougeron, qu’ils nomment en leur langue Tevir: ce qui leur est fort detestable & abominable, seulement de le penser.*
 ‘in doing so they debauch themselves: and if it’s a male they make him a Bardache or Bougeron, which they call in their language *Tevir*: which is very detestable and abominable, just to think about it’
 [André Thevet, *La cosmographie universelle*, vol. 2 (Paris: Chaudiere, 1575), vol. 4, “Description de la quatrième partie du monde,” livre 21, 933r]
3. *de mas de su sobervia era vicioso, regalado, tenía muchas mugeres, y bardajes, sacrificava coraçones y sangre humana a sus dioses*
 ‘in addition to his arrogance he was depraved, spoiled, he had many women and bardajes, he sacrificed hearts and human blood to his gods’
 [Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Primera parte de los comentarios reales: que tratan del origen de los Yncas, reyes que fueron del Peru...* (Lisbon: En la officina de Pedro Crasbeeck, 1609), 229r]

In example 2, the sequence “Bardache ou Bougeron” probably represents a case of synonym reduplication, demonstrating a more general sense of ‘male sodomite’, since at that time *bougeron*⁶ was more likely to refer to the active partner: here, the two seem to be equated and thus in all likelihood represent a semantic extension in each case. Indeed, early European explorer accounts of the New World frequently categorized Indigenous behavior simply in terms of sodomy and sodomites.

Overall, there is no indication in any text earlier than circa 1700 that a word in the *bardache* family is being used to refer to a distinctively North American category.

NORTH AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT

Three main phases can be distinguished in the evolution of *berdache*: first, semantic restriction of *berdache* in North American French; followed by its metalinguistic description in English, German, and European French, often supplying the *berdache* form; and ultimately the consolidation and spread of the latter as a technical term in anthropology, in these and other languages, primarily intermediated via English.

EARLY USES IN NORTH AMERICAN FRENCH: 1700S. The earliest known uses of *berdache* in North American French texts do not show explicit evidence of reference to a distinctively North American category. Several bilingual dictionaries use *berdache* to gloss Illinois terminology. The Miami-Illinois-to-French dictionary known as the Largillier (or Gravier) manuscript, dating to circa 1708–1714, provides a fascinating yet impenetrable glimpse of the categorial system of this Algonquian language. Here are several relevant entries from this source; note that <ɔ> corresponds roughly to <ou>:

4. a. *Cɔɔɔaia chat femelle vide Icɔɔaia berdache.* [133]
'Cɔɔaia female cat; see Icɔɔaia berdache.'
- b. *Icɔɔaia berdache. it[em] femelle d'un chat sauvage. Icɔɔita berdache. icɔɔiɔni sodomie[.] icɔɔipinaritiɔni id[em]. icɔɔitinga penaraɔa, icɔɔipenaraɔa, icɔɔingaiɔpenaraɔa qui a servy de berdache, icɔɔiɔngaiɔpenarinta.* [169]
'Icɔɔaia berdache, also female of a wild cat [or raccoon]. Icɔɔita berdache. icɔɔiɔni sodomy. icɔɔipinaritiɔni the same. icɔɔitinga penaraɔa, icɔɔipenaraɔa, icɔɔingaiɔpenaraɔa [one] who has served as a berdache, icɔɔiɔngaiɔpenarinta.'
- c. *mantchinagɔsiɔa monstre, contre nature. berdache, contrefait, difforme[.] mantchinikiɔa idem. [mantchi] cateɔa pieds monstreux* [247]
'mantchinagɔsiɔa monster, against nature. berdache, counterfeit, misshapen. mantchinikiɔa the same. mantchicateɔa monstrous feet'
- d. *mentchinikita berdache, monstre. it[em]. qui n'a pas encore pris son cru, croist encore* [273]
'mentchinikita berdache, monster. also, that which is not fully grown, is still growing'

[Jacques Largillier, Miami-Illinois-to-French dictionary (ca. 1708–14) (ILDA)]

Here, *berdache* is used in association with *sodomie* and *contre nature*, as in earlier examples. But it is also applied to the animal world, which is curiously echoed by a later Canadian use of *berdache/berdache*, discussed below. In Le Boullenger's slightly later French-to-Illinois manuscript, the following entry is found:

5. *bardache Ecbeſita nintecſeſi je le suis*
bardache Ecbeſita nintecſeſi I am one
 [Jean-Antoine Robert Le Boullenger, French-to-Illinois dictionary (circa 1725–40), 98 (ILDA)]

The process of semantic restriction within French is not clear, but a description in another eighteenth-century text is suggestive of one possible explanation. French *bardache* (like corresponding forms in other languages) was not just a borrowing from Italian; it was also popularly perceived as such, imbuing its use with a particular othering connotation at a time when male sodomy was considered a typically Italian vice. That is what this passage, from a diary entry dated 1720 (published 1768), suggests:

6. *Il y a quelques jours que je m'entretins avec Monsieur de Bienville sur les mœurs & sur la religion des Sauvages. Il me dit qu'ils donnoient dans tous les vices ; que celui dont les Italiens étoient particulièrement accusés étoit fort commun parmi eux ; qu'il y avoit de jeunes gens qui sembloient avoir renoncé à leur sexe pour servir à des usages si contraires à la Nature*
 'A few days ago I spoke with Monsieur de Bienville about the customs and religion of the Savages. He told me that they indulged in all the vices; that the one the Italians were particularly accused of was very common among them; that there were youths who seemed to have renounced their sex to serve in uses so contrary to Nature.'
 [Vallette de Laudun, *Journal d'un voyage à la Louisiane, fait en 1720* (Hague/Paris: Chez Musier, Fils, & Fournier, 1768), letter 114 (July 21), 263]

While this author does not use the word *bardache* anywhere in this passage, his association of the Italian vice with the “mœurs” of the “Sauvages” might suggest a pragmatic motivation for its concurrent use in this context on the North American continent.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, a very important development took place. For the first time, several sources show clear evidence of the semantic restriction of *bardache*, such as the De Gannes memoir on the Illinois country (1721):

7. *J'ay vû un Bardache qui estoit a l'Ecart comme les femmes*
 'I saw a Bardache who was off to the side like the women'
 [Pierre Deliette (attributed), “Memoir of De Gannes Concerning the Illinois Country” (1721); in *The French Foundations, 1680–1693*, ed. Theodore Calvin Pease and Raymond C. Werner (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1934), 343 (see also 329 for additional context indicating the sense under study)]

Père Potier's dictionary, with a 1744 entry from the Détroit, provides the clearest early evidence:

8. *Bardache* hom : Sauv : qi s'habille en fem : pour se Libertiner * P.
 [= homme sauvage qui s'habille en femme pour se libertiner]
 'Bardache: Savage man who dresses as a woman to debauch himself'
 [Pierre Philippe Potier, 1744, ms. 126b10; in Halford (1994, 67)]

This valuable example is also the first (and quite rare) lexicographical treatment of the restricted meaning. The gloss was provided, according to the edited text, by the Jesuit informant Armand de La Richardie (Halford 1994, 16).

Other attestations are more ambiguous, suggesting that *bardache* could still be used with its earlier sense toward the end of that century, although the new restricted sense cannot be ruled out in such cases. The following is one such example, from Vaugine de Nuisement's journal (ca. 1765). Here, *bardache* might refer to the restricted sense under study or to the older meaning 'passive male partner', albeit still within the discursive context of supposed Amerindian mores:

9. *Il y a presque toujours dans ses [= ces] parties quelques petits banarets ou bardaches pour satisfaire leur infame passion et [ils] la passent jusques sur les animaux qu'ils tuent.*
 'There are almost always in these parts some little banarets or bardaches to satisfy their abominable passion, and they even practice it on the animals they kill.'
 [Vaugine de Nuisement, journal, ca. 1765; in *Journal de Vaugine de Nuisement (ca 1765): Un témoignage sur la Louisiane du XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Steve Canac-Marquis and Pierre Rézeau (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005), 56 (editorial glosses: *banaret* "jeune guerrier" ['young warrior'], *bardache* "jeune homosexuel passif" ['young passive homosexual man'], 76–77)]

Two examples from Missouri are of the utmost importance, since they are the earliest known documented uses in North America of both the form *berdache* and its variant *bredache*—which, together, provide graphophonetic clues that help to clarify the shift from *bardache* to *berdache* in the process of transfer to English. The following lines appear in two separate handwritten testimonies describing a public dispute between Messieurs Bequet and Huberdeau in Sainte Geneviève in November 1789:

10. a. *A répondu qu'il étoit éloigné d'environ deux Arpens du Sr. Jean Bte Bequet mais quil à entendu celui cy appeler Le Sr. Huberdeau en lui disant vient donc Foutu Berdache.*
 'replied that he was about two arpents away from Sr. Jean Baptiste Bequet, but that he heard him call Sr. Huberdeau telling him, Come on then, Foutu Berdache'
- b. *a cette menace ledit Bequet luy a répondu quil n'étoit bon que pour se plaindre et quil étoit une Sacré Bredache.*
 'to this threat the aforesaid Bequet responded to him that he was only good for complaining and that he was a Sacré Bredache'
 ["Baptiste Bequette vs. Simon Hubardeau," Nov. 14, 1789, Sainte Genevieve Archives, 1756–1930 (C3636), Litigations subseries, folder 0308, Missouri Historical Society, Saint Louis (see also Dorrance 1935: 59)]

The fact that *berdache* and *bredache* are presented as equivalent forms, representing a single oral utterance in public, is revealing of the phonetic situation on the continent, where French *bardache*, *berdache*, and *bredache* would all have corresponded to the same lexeme. This will be explained in the next section.

Examples 10a and 10b are also noteworthy semantically, in that they reflect an axiological shift toward insult status. In context, the noun phrases *foutu berdache* and *sacré bredache* seem to have no explicit denotative content but exploit the pragmatic value of each lexical item to express injurious intent, with *foutu* and *sacré* serving as intensifiers (akin to English *damn(ed)*, *bloody*, *fuckin(g)*). This kind of shift is quite common in all queer-related terminology (compare indeed the earliest 1340 attestation in Italian, noted above, and the meaning 'coward', discussed below), and homophobic discourse more specifically, such that this use of *berdache/bredache* does not necessarily imply system-level semantic change but could also indicate that it was a singular oral use strikingly captured in these written testimonies.

All of these early examples demonstrate, broadly, the vitality of this lexeme in certain lects of eighteenth-century North American French. More specifically, and in the absence of any similar examples in other languages in that period, they show that the origin of the meaning under study is, without any doubt, a North American French innovation. On the other hand, the incompleteness of the philological documentation should also be acknowledged. The relatively few documented uses known in North American texts limit the inferences that can reasonably be made about the semantic evolution of *bardache* on the continent, such as precisely where or to what extent the original meaning survived alongside the novel one. The ambiguity that emerges from some of the uses studied ought to be put into the broader context of historical queer lexis, where the coded nature of the language often makes it impossible to distinguish between various mean-

ings (and where silence in the textual documentation is equally salient). This is evident early on in the modern era, with certain uses, for instance, of French *bougre* or English *bugger* indistinguishable between their ‘heretic’ and ‘sodomite’ senses; likewise, indeed, the exact meaning of *sodomite* is in many texts indeterminable outside of its pragmatic context in discourse, precisely for the euphemistic or dysphemistic codings used to conceal the intended meaning (where in fact there even was one, other than pejorative expression). Despite these words of caution, the North American textual documentation on *bardache/berdache* remains revealing enough to provide satisfactory answers to the main questions raised by commentators over the years.⁷

It should be kept in mind, too, that there are numerous sources describing the phenomena which do not use *bardache/berdache*, resorting to periphrasis, Native denominations, or other reductive terms such as *hermaphrodite* (see examples of naming in Gay American Indians and Roscoe 1988, 217–22; Katz 1992, 281–334; Roscoe 1998, 174–75, 213–22). In a properly linguistic perspective, the concept needs to be distinguished from the name; while the two are obviously related, the history of the concept may diverge considerably from the history of one specific word applied to it. Much of the confusion and inaccuracy in the literature concerning the term *berdache* results indeed from this conflation of concept and terminology.

CROSS-LINGUISTIC TRANSFER WITH RESTRICTION. The next stage involves translinguistic transformation of the French, mostly in English and German, as commentators writing in these languages reported on the phenomenon and the French terminology itself. Based on the graphic representation in the philological record, the formal shift from <ar> to <er> can be explained quite simply, taking into account two major elements: the variable phonic realization of the lexeme in French and its reception by non-French-speakers.

The various attested forms—*bardache*, *berdache*, *bredache*—reflect several related phonological features common in North American French. First, preconsonantal [ar] and [ɛr]⁸ have regularly occurred in variation in French—a phenomenon observed both in North America and in Europe, but much more so in North America for the period in question, and still today in Canada. This long-documented phenomenon does not exactly occur in free variation, since it more typically goes in the reverse direction ([ɛr] + consonant → [ar] + consonant); yet the cases such as this one going from [ar] to [ɛr] are well attested and can be explained by hypercorrection or some other process of analogy (see Nyrop 1914, §§244–47; Bourciez 1955, §36, §47; Walker 1984, §3.10, §3.11; Meney 2017, §1.1.3.1, §1.1.10.1). Additionally, not only must [bardaʃ] and [berdaʃ] have been perceived as two phonic variants of the same lexeme, but even [bœrdaʃ] could have

existed orally. The *bredache* attestations confirm this. As is often the case in languages with liquid *r*, metathesis is frequently observed in this position, and *r* can even function here as syllable nucleus (i.e., [bʀdɑʃ]). The graphic form *bredache* could thus correspond to the pronunciation [bœrdɑʃ]—which, like [bɛrdɑʃ], explains the English form *berdache* (where the *r* also serves as syllable nucleus).

The alternation *bard-*, *berd-*, *beurd-* corresponding to [bard], [bɛrd], [bœrd] is attested in several North American French sources throughout the twentieth century (Dorrance 1935, s.v. *berdache*, *beurdache*; Carrière 1937, s.v. *beurdache*; ALEC 1980, *bàrd-*, *bòrd-*, Qs. 500 and 1850; Lavoie, Bergeron, and Côté 1985, *bàrd*, *bèrd*, *bòrd*, Qs. 1311, 1379, 1448). In contemporary Canadian French, the most salient analogy can be found in the alternation of a series that shares formal elements with this one but is etymologically entirely distinct: *bardasser/bordasser/berdasser/bredasser* “s’occuper à de menues besognes, à des riens; s’affairer à réaliser différents travaux manuels dans et autour de la maison, sur la ferme; remuer, manipuler, traiter [etc.]” [‘to attend to minor tasks or trivialities; to busy oneself with various menial tasks in or around the house or farm; to stir, to handle, to deal with’] (DHFQ 1998; also see Dionne 1909; GPFC 1930; ALEC 1980; Lavoie, Bergeron, and Côté 1985).

The fact that the early instances of the spelling *berdache* and similar occur predominantly (though not exclusively) in texts by non-French-speakers must have been decisive. As these observers were recording words from a language that was not their own, they likely transcribed this word phonetically, without knowledge (or without adequate knowledge) of the historical and conventional graphic French form, *bardache*. Since, depending on their geographic location, they could have heard a pronunciation close to [bɛrdɑʃ] or [bœrdɑʃ] as easily as [bardɑʃ], the form *berdache* represents less a vowel change than the simple transcription of a banal phonetic variant heard by non-French-speakers.

The various graphic forms attested in the following textual examples corroborate this explanation of the polymorphism, in addition to revealing interesting extralinguistic details that shed light on the process of borrowing *berdache*.

The earliest known occurrences in English are found in 1800–1806 in the diary of Alexander Henry, Jr., an English-speaking Canadian (conversant in French) who described his journeys to the northwest of the continent. *La Berdash* first appears in 1800 as a proper noun in an ambiguous form that, while anglicized, takes the French feminine definite article (ex. 11a). Henry employs *Berdash* as a proper noun several other times in his diary (ex. 11b). Once, in 1806, he uses it as a common noun (ex. 11c).

11. a. Names of the Indians were as follows: [...] La Berdash. Sucrie son.
[Aug. 21, 1800, 25]
 - b. Berdash, a Son of the Sucrie, arrived from the Assinebone River where he had been in company with a young man to carry Tobacco concerning the War. [...] Soon after the latter again approached them very fast, when Berdash again stopp'd and faced them with his bow and arrows and kept them at bay[.] [Jan. 2, 1801, 104–5]
 - c. I am also informed that they are much given to much unnatural lusts and often prefer a young man to a woman, they have also many Berdashes amongst them to make it their business to satisfy such beastly passions.
[July 21, 1806, 236]
- [Alexander Henry, journal; in *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799–1814*, vol. 1, *Red River and the Journey to the Missouri*, ed. Barry M. Gough (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1988)]

The phenomenon is mentioned in the expedition journals of William Clark, of the Lewis and Clark duo who undertook their famed expedition to the west coast. In an 1804 entry, he makes this observation, without applying a specific name:

12. a number of Squars womn & men Dressed in Squars Clothes Came with Corn to Sell to the men for little things
[William Clark, Dec. 22, 1804; in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, vol. 3, *August 25, 1804–April 6, 1805*, ed. Gary Moulton (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 260–61]

Birdash appears, however, in the notes of one of his publishers, Nicholas Biddle, who transcribed (the monolingual) Clark's words several years later. The French origin is addressed:

13. Among Minitarees if a boy shows any symptoms of effeminacy or girlish inclinations he is put among the girls, dressed in their way, brought up with them, & sometimes married to men. They submit as women to all the duties of a wife. I have seen them—the French call them Birdashes.
[William Clark, "The William Biddle Notes," ca. May 1810; in *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 2nd ed., ed. Donald Jackson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 2: 531]

The English examples presented so far all appeared in private writings (published much later), and so could not themselves have propelled the spread of this terminology, although they are clearly reflective of a growing consciousness of it. The uses attested in published works starting in the 1840s—in English, German, and French—reflect some intertextuality among themselves and likely were much more important in the conversion of *berdache* into a technical term with the restricted meaning under study.

The traveler and painter George Catlin uses the form *Berdashe* in a letter dating to circa 1838–41, again attributing it to French:

14. *Dance to the Berdashe* [...] is a very funny and amusing scene, which happens once a year or oftener, as they choose, when a feast is given to the “*Berdashe*,” as he is called in French, (or *I-coo-coo-a*, in their own language), who is a man dressed in woman’s clothes, as he is known to be all his life, and for extraordinary privileges which he is known to possess, he is driven to the most servile and degrading duties, which he is not allowed to escape[.]
[Geo. Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians* (London: published by the author, printed by Tosswill and Myers, 1841), 2: 214–15]

Catlin is frequently cited in other texts from the mid-century, including in French;⁹ as the source of one of the first published uses of this term in English, this author seems to be among the earliest lexical prime movers in terms of diffusion at that time.

Several examples in German texts help to put the English ones into wider context. In the writings of the explorer and prince Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied, the traditional French form *bardache* is Germanized as *Bardaches*. Over the course of two volumes (1839–1841), Maximilian provides several examples, attributed to the “Canadier” (that is, French-speaking Canadians):

15. a. *Sie haben viele Bardaches oder Mannweiber unter sich, und sind vor den übrigen Nationen Meister in unnatürlichen Gebräuchen.* [1: 401]
‘They have many Bardaches or Men-Women among them, and surpass all other nations in unnatural practices.’
- b. *Es giebt beinahe unter allen nord-americanischen Indianer-Stämmen Mannweiber (Bardaches der Canadier), die auch bei den Mandans nicht fehlen und von ihnen Mih-Däckä (zusammen gespr.) gennant werden. Sie sind Männer, die sich gleich Weibern kleiden, und alle Geschäfte der letzteren verrichten. Von den jungen Männern werden sie förmlich wie Weiber behandelt, leben auch in einem gewissen unnatürlichen Umgange mit ihnen, und Charbonneau behauptete sogar, dass in dieser Hinsicht die Bardaches den Weibern vorgezogen würden.* [2: 132–33]
‘Among almost all North American Indian tribes there are Men-Women (Bardaches, as the Canadians call them), and which are not lacking among the Mandans, who call them Mih-Däckä (spoken together). These are men who dress like women, and undertake all the same business as the latter. They are actually treated like women by the young men and keep a certain unnatural company with them, and Charbonneau even claimed that in this respect the Bardaches were preferred to the women.’
[Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied, *Reise in das innere Nord-America in den Jahren 1832 bis 1834*, 2 vols. (Koblenz: Hoelscher, 1839–41)]

The term *Mannweib* ('Man-Woman') in examples 15a and 15b might be read in its historical sense of 'hermaphrodite', well attested in German (and its lexicography) and consonant with other descriptions of *berdache* that also use the terminology of hermaphroditism (as in Lloyd's translation in example 16a; see also examples 17 and 18). Of course, this categorization is quite revelatory of Maximilian's conception of his subject and indeed also represents a sense shift toward denoting men seen as playing the role of women (see other citations in Roscoe 1995, 218, 222; and Lo Vecchio 2020, 276, on the use of *Mannweib* in the writings of early queer activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs as central to their views on uranism).¹⁰

In example 15b we also learn that Maximilian's information comes from Toussaint Charbonneau, the Québécois explorer and trapper who served as his interpreter—a role Charbonneau also played on the Lewis and Clark expedition (see examples 12 and 13).¹¹ The French-speaking interpreter thus likely contributed to the diffusion of this terminology among several influential sources. The English translation of Maximilian's account of his 1832–34 travels in North America, another major textual reference point, follows the German (and thus French) rendering, with the forms *bardache* or *Bardache*:

16. a. They have many bardaches, or hermaphrodites, among them, and exceed all the other tribes in unnatural practices. [175]
- b. Among all the North American Indian nations there are men dressed and treated like women, called, by the Canadians, Bardaches[.] [351]
[Maximilian, Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, trans. H. Evans Lloyd (London: Ackermann, 1843)]

In the early 1850s, the diary of Swiss writer and painter Rudolf Friedrich Kurz provides a few examples in German of the form *Berdache*, glossed as *Zwitter* ('hermaphrodite') and presented as grammatically feminine. For example:

17. *zwei Assiniboins, welche mit der Berdache (Zwitter kommen häufig vor) zu den Crows wollten, seien von den Blackfeet umgebracht*
'two Assiniboins, who wanted to join the Crows with the Berdache (hermaphrodites are common), were killed by the Blackfeet'
[R. Friedrich Kurz, Oct. 26, 1851; in "Aus dem Tagebuch des Malers Friedrich Kurz über seinen Aufenthalt bei den Missouri-Indianern, 1848–1852," ed. Emil Kurz, *Jahresbericht der Geographischen Gesellschaft von Bern*, vol. 14 (1895): 41; also see 44, 98–99]

It is also around the same period, starting in the 1840s, that the term appears in French texts published in France. A work by Victor Tixier, who

spent time on the American continent in 1839–1840, stands out for both semantic and phonetic reasons. Semantically, Tixier’s conception of *berdache* departs from the usual one in that he explains that the term applies to “hermaphrodite” animals (ex. 18a)—a sense which survived in Canada until the twentieth century. Later in his account, he transposes the word into the human realm and suggests that this is in fact the metaphorical use, with its original meaning reserved for animals. In example 18b he presents *la Bredache* as a proper noun:

18. a. *Les Sauvages croient qu’il existe parmi les bœufs sauvages des hermaphrodites que les créoles nomment des Bredaches, dont la vitesse est extrême et la chair très-estimée. Chaque chasseur habile dit en avoir tué une ou deux.* [176]
 ‘The Savages believe that among the wild oxen there exist hermaphrodites which the Creoles call *Bredaches*, whose speed is extreme and whose flesh is prized. Every skilled hunter claims to have killed one or two.’
- b. *Dans la loge du Grand-Chef, vivait un guerrier nommé la Bredache. [...] L’air mou¹² et extraordinaire de cet homme, le nom d’un animal hermaphrodite donnaient beaucoup à penser sur son compte. Baptiste l’accuse d’être l’amant de la Femme-Chef; mais les Osages ne disent jamais que la moitié de ce qu’ils pensent.* [213]
 ‘In the Head Chief’s lodge lived a warrior named *la Bredache*. [...] The extraordinary, limp appearance of this man, the name of a hermaphrodite animal, gave much to think about. Baptiste accused him of being the lover of the Woman Chief; but the Osages only ever say half of what they think.’
- [Victor Tixier, *Voyage aux prairies Osages, Louisiane et Missouri, 1839–1840*, Clermont-Ferrand: Chez Perol, 1844]

This last detail, noting that this warrior *berdache* was said to be the lover of a woman, also significantly departs from the conception that emerges from most of the early chroniclers’ accounts, where the figure is described as serving in a passively sexual role to other men, reflecting its etymological origins.

Phonetically, the graphic form supplied by Tixier, *berdache*, demonstrates that the earlier 1789 *berdache* (ex. 10b) was not isolated, thus providing further confirmation of the varied French realizations that may explain the resulting English form, since *berdache* could have corresponded orally to the pronunciation [bœrdaʃ] as well as to [brœdaʃ]. (Note that yet another rendering in English, *Broadashe*, dating to 1846 in a fictional account, suggests an approximation of the latter pronunciation.)¹³

The polymorphism evident at this point in North American French parallels, in fact, the situation in the earliest period of the borrowing from Italian in European French. *Bredache* ‘passive male partner’, ‘mignon’ is attested throughout the sixteenth century. The earliest known attested

use of this lexeme takes the form *bredaiche* (1537),¹⁴ followed by *bardache* (1546),¹⁵ and then by *bredache* (1548).¹⁶ *Bredache* alternates with *bardache* throughout the sixteenth century, but the latter is more frequent and rapidly becomes the established form (and the one recorded in dictionaries, with rare exceptions).¹⁷ Clearly, the formal variation is independent in these two periods on two continents, yet they share underlying phonetic patterns that are recurrent in the history of French but are particularly pronounced in Canada, where they may be perceived, or stigmatized, as strongly diastatically or diatopically marked (Walker 1984, §3.10, §3.11; Meney 2017, §1.1.3.1). Overall, then, while the phonetic variation that can explain the shift from *bardache* to *berdache* reflects the particulars of the North American origin of this innovation, it can also be analyzed within the continuity of larger phonetic phenomena in French.

TERMINOLOGICAL CONSOLIDATION. Once the process of transfer had begun, English played the primary role in consolidating the novel restricted meaning into a recognizable, if still variable, form. Despite significant graphic variation (*berdash*, *berdashe*, *berdache*, *birdash*, *burdash*, etc.), the spelling <er>, <ir>, <ur> in the first syllable represents a neutral pronunciation ([ɛ]) in line with *berdache*, a tendency that is repeated in other languages that subsequently adapted the word from English. It is attested as a technical term in numerous specialized documents starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, including in some early glossaries, either to gloss an Indigenous term (e.g., *berdache*, in Matthews 1877, 191, 217) or where it had apparently been adopted by Indigenous speakers (e.g., *burdash*, in Gibbs 1863, 2). The word made it into a major work by the early gay activist John Addington Symonds (“North American Bardashes,” in Symonds 1883, 61) as well as into the most important sexological work in English at the turn of the twentieth century (*burdash*, in Ellis and Symonds 1897, 8). By 1900, one writer had noted that English *berdash* “is everywhere in use in the West and North, to designate the men referred to” (Thwaites 1900, 310n26). Yet it would be a mistake to infer that, as a concept, ‘berdache’ was by this point settled; instead, the category would continue to be shaped and reshaped, in various fields, throughout the twentieth century.

In North American French, neither the form *berdache* nor the restricted meaning under study was ever fixed as it was in English and other languages, and several interesting meanings survived. The meaning ‘coward’ (in the Mississippi Valley: Dorrance 1935; Carrière 1937; McDermott 1941) probably represents a metonymic shift based on earlier meanings, while senses involving the animal realm merit further clarification (in Canada: “vache toujours en chaleur” [‘cow always in heat’], *ALEC* 1980, Q. 500; “animal

hermaphrodite,” “testicules du porc non descendus” [‘undescended pig testicles’], “race de chien” [‘breed of dog’], Lavoie, Bergeron, and Côté 1985, Qs. 1311, 1379, 1448, resp.).¹⁸ So the French was characterized by formal and semantic profusion over time, while the English adaptation was narrowed considerably compared to its source-language model—which is one strong argument for considering *berdache* primarily an Anglicism in other languages that adopted it as a technicism in the twentieth century.

Within the larger French diasystem, though, it is not quite accurate to consider its exportation to European varieties of French as a simple loan back from English (cf. Courouve 1982, 19), since textual evidence exists of direct contact between Canadian and European French at the same time as English- and German-speaking chroniclers were documenting this phenomenon early on. However, it is clear that English played a considerable support role in the diffusion of this North American innovation not only to European French but also, later, to other modern languages, such as Italian—which ultimately was the starting point for this whole affair. We are thus faced with a more complex scenario than more prototypical cases of lexical borrowing, which perhaps should not come as a surprise considering the multiple languages that contributed, at various points, to the translinguistic creation of *berdache*.

PRAGMATIC FACTORS, OBSOLESCENCE, AND THE *TWO-SPIRIT* TURN

Given this history, it is not hard to see why *berdache* was extremely problematic as a technical term, leading to its disuse. An often cited anthropological source noted in 1983 that “its etymology became irrelevant long ago” (Callender and Kochems 1983, 443)—a statement that was probably then true in denotative terms (since it was used interchangeably to refer to men or women, as defined by birth-assigned sex) but quite off the mark in pragmatic terms, as would become evident within a few years after those words were written. Of course, a linguistic sign cannot be reduced to its denotative value alone, its meaning equally tied to the pragmatic significance in the social context in which it is used. Here, extralinguistic factors ended up playing a direct role in lexical change, leading ultimately to Native Americans’ rejection of *berdache* in favor of *Two-Spirit*.

Omnipresent in the literature is the apparent link made between the use of *berdache* and the supposed original Arabic/Persian etymology ‘prisoner of war’, ‘slave’, as well as with modern senses such as ‘kept boy’, ‘male

prostitute’, and so on. This is no less the case in scholarship than in activist discourse—and a reminder of how the ideologies and errors “fossilized” in dictionaries may have consequences that reach far beyond the esoteric questions of lexicography (Nossem 2018, 176). Here are some examples:

The term *berdache* is applied (or rather misapplied) to both lesbians and gay males. It is originally an Arabic word meaning sex-slave boy, or a male child used sexually by adult males. As such it has no relevance to American Indian men or women. [Allen 1986, 31]

These terms have a long history dating back to the ancient world. In ancient Greek and Roman society, a catamite was a “kept boy,” the intimate companion of an adult male in a pederastic relationship. By the late sixteenth century, Europeans used this term as a slur. Similarly, the ancient Arabic *bardaj* or *barah* evolved into the Spanish terms *bardaxa* and *bardaje*, and the French *berdache*. Collectively these words referred to a “kept boy,” slave, or sodomite. [Smithers 2022, 31–32]

That the lexicography-sanctioned etymology is spurious in no way diminishes the negative perceptions speakers would have associated with *berdache*. But *berdache* needs no actual “Orientalist” origin for it to be an alienating term; the roots of its problematic nature are rather closer to home. Beyond etymology, the word was loaded with sordid history and negative connotations, in multiple languages; it was a biased, othering name applied by White European outsiders; and it was, most glaringly, reductive and inaccurate with respect to the phenomena being described.

The recent adoption of *Two-Spirit* in place of *berdache* was motivated not merely by attitudes about its meaning or origins (whether nearer or farther back in time) but equally so by the desire to assert linguistic self-determination—or what may be described as “rhetorical sovereignty” to counter “rhetorical imperialism” (Lyons 2000; applied to Two-Spiritness in Driskill 2010, 72, and Ellasante 2021). Various authors have emphasized the positive role of *Two-Spirit* itself and, more generally, the empowering role of self-naming within Indigenous communities as a critical resistance strategy (see, e.g., Driskill 2004, 2010; Cameron 2005; Davis 2014, 2019; Pyle 2018; Ellasante 2021). Since the precise trajectory of *Two-Spirit* as a lexical item remains unclear (Pyle 2018, 577; Ellasante 2021, 1519), with most published indications coming from the secondary literature (summarized below), a promising endeavor would be to describe its history on the basis of primary archival documentation (and oral histories; see Pyle 2018) from the 1980s and 1990s. Such a project would also benefit the lexicography and, in turn, activist discourse since, as we saw with *berdache*, many people consult dictionaries to find information about terms of self-identification.

Two-Spirit is thus a prime candidate for prompt revision in the authoritative *OED* (in line with the argument in Lo Vecchio 2021b), where currently only cursory draft revisions appear online (s.v. *two*).

The movement for change began in the late 1980s when Native queer communities in the Midwest began using *Two-Spirit*, with gatherings in Minneapolis in 1988 and in Winnipeg in 1990 considered milestones (Harris and Lone Dog 1993; Thomas and Jacobs 1999, 92; Roscoe 1995, 219; 1998, 108–9). Anguksuar (1997, 221) explained the origin of the neologism as follows:

The term *two-spirit*, which has come into recent popular usage, originated in Northern Algonquin dialect and gained first currency at the third annual spiritual gathering of gay and lesbian Native people that took place near Winnipeg in 1990. What we who chose this designation understood is that *niizh manitoag* (two-spirits) indicates the presence of both a feminine and a masculine spirit in one person.¹⁹

More essentially, it may refer to the fact that each human is born because a man and a woman have joined in creating each new life; all humans bear imprints of both, although some individuals may manifest both qualities more completely than others. In no way does the term determine genital activity. It does determine the qualities that define a person's social role and spiritual gifts.

A more elastic category than *berdache*, *Two-Spirit* is claimed more generally by Indigenous LGBTQ+ or gender diverse people and may be applied to other “Native American roles and identities past and present” (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997, 2; see some other descriptions in Thomas and Jacobs 1999, 92–96; Driskill 2010, 72–73; Driskill et al. 2011, 17; Pyle 2018, 576–77; Davis 2019, 79–82; Ellasante 2021, 1519–21). This should not be taken to mean that *Two-Spirit* is a catch-all category applicable in all contexts (Thomas and Jacobs 1999, 92; Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997, 3–4) nor that it is without critiques (see, e.g., de Vries 2009, 64; and cf. Driskill et al. 2011, 16–17 on the claim it is “beyond criticism”). As with most denominations in highly pragmatically marked fields (Lo Vecchio 2021a, 170), *Two-Spirit* is just as susceptible to metalinguistic dialogue and disagreement and to further lexical evolution.

This discourse entered the larger public sphere in the early 1990s as Two-Spirits sought engagement with anthropologists and other scholars with the aim of eliminating the use of the term *berdache* and, more generally, revisiting the concept from a new perspective (Thomas and Jacobs 1999). Randy Burns recalled how the Gay American Indians group initially reached out to anthropologists in 1992 to encourage them to adopt *Two-Spirit* instead of *berdache*:

Gay American Indians (GAI) with AAA members met at the 1992 San Francisco Annual Meeting. We discussed the term “berdache.” We politely asked that the term be replaced by the contemporary term “Two Spirit.” We felt that the term “berdache” was outdated, an insult to our Native women’s community, and that our tradition goes beyond sexual identity. [Burns 2004; cited in Faiman-Silva 2011, 5]

The terminology of *berdache* was more formally addressed at conferences in 1993 and 1994, entitled Revisiting the “North American Berdache” Empirically and Theoretically, which brought together a group of Native Americans and the American Anthropological Association (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997, 7–11; Thomas and Jacobs 1999). One outcome of these meetings was that, acknowledging *berdache* was inappropriate, participants agreed to place the term in quotation marks or use “[sic]” any time it was used (Lang 1998, xiv; Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997, 3; Roscoe 1998, 17). Such distancing strategies have been widely observed in academic writing ever since.

Another important pragmatic point to address is the linguistic reclamation of *berdache*, however limited this reported practice may have been. Certain Native communities reclaimed the word, for example, in the name of the lesbian group of “berdache women” (Grahn 1984, 291; 1990, 307), in several other Native gay groups (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997, 5–6), or in mixed ones (“berdache club,” Jacobs 1997, 39). Some non-Native groups also adopted the name, such as in the trans “Berdache Society” (Bolin 1988; Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997, 5–6), among others (Gilley 2006, 25). The Québécois gay community used the word in the title of the journal *Le Berdache* (1979–1982) in order to invoke the positive spirit of the figure (see Ménard 1985). All of these examples may also represent late instances of the tendency to subject *berdache* to an “idealizing view” or “romanticization” (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997, 5; see also Williams 1986, 3, 201–7; Thomas and Jacobs 1999, 94; Longman 2002, 132; on more recent non-Native queer emulation now of Two-Spirit culture or naming, see Cameron 2005; Gilley 2006, 121–29; Morgensen 2011, chap. 4; Ellasante 2021, 1518). In any case, these examples of linguistic reclamation or, if one prefers, cultural appropriation highlight hierarchies in social structure that are reflected back in language use.

More noteworthy, though, is how activist engagement can drive language change—very rapidly, in the progression from *berdache* to *Two-Spirit*. Not coincidentally, this change occurred at the same moment that *queer* was being rehabilitated in North America, challenging antiquated binaries and entrenched normativities (see Lo Vecchio 2020, chap. 12). While the adoption of *queer* and *Two-Spirit* may have taken place independently in distinct (though overlapping) social spheres, these linguistic changes were

operating within the same larger cultural dialectic, notably against the backdrop of the HIV/AIDS crisis, which triggered urgent grassroots action. Similarly to *queer*, the more fluid meaning of *Two-Spirit* could “confound” or “frustrate”—especially in scholarship—and this was in fact a central aim of activists’ decolonial project: to shift “the terms on which knowledge of Indigenous people would be produced and debated” (Driskill et al. 2011, 17). And as with *queer*, the first-person use of *Two-Spirit*—and indeed, the rich, ongoing in-group metadiscourse about its role—simultaneously contributes to the linguistic meaning of the sign and stakes out speakers’ position within the social system. As Ellasante (2021, 1521) argues, “the assertion of Two-Spirit identity is an act of radical sovereignty, of everyday decolonization.” So rather than being a simple lexical substitution for *berdache*, *Two-Spirit* has demanded a reconsideration of the categorization itself, starting out from Native American queer people’s experience.

CONCLUSION

The history of *berdache* is characterized not only by linguistic othering but also by activist agency in its conceptual transformation into *Two-Spirit*. In this way, as a monographic case study, it exemplifies broader trends observable in the historical LGBTQ-related lexicon. Strikingly, *berdache* is unique neither in the way pragmatic and ideological factors shaped its history nor in how it resulted from many layers—centuries worth—of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic exchange. Much more so than might be expected for such a “taboo” subject, many basic terms for queerness are highly internationalized, traceable within a complex interlinguistic dialogue across societies. While for most of the modern era it was largely extralinguistic biases of censure, repression, pathologizing, and the like that were coded lexically (such as the textual record enables us to glimpse), in the late twentieth century we observe a disruption in the discursive balance of power leading to language change in step with social change. This is not to say a reversal of power relations, since LGBTQ-phobic discourse is as operative now as in the past, if manifested differently and even more insidiously in many cases (i.e., algorithmically), yet recent experience shows that “taboo” is not the only frame within which to analyze this highly dynamic lexicon, since proud assertion in the fight for visibility, equality, and self-determination are equally strong motivators for lexical creation and change.

NOTES

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1. See Durkin (2014, §1.4) for a reminder of how, ultimately, etymologies are always mere hypotheses.
2. Diez (1853, 1: 44) cites the Arabic-Latin dictionary of Golius (1653, 253) as his source; Masson (2015, 51) signals the Golius gloss as erroneous and uncorrected by Diez.
3. While an important source for Spanish and Catalan etymology, Corominas must be read carefully as his “idiosyncrasies and prejudices often color his analyses” (Buchi and Dworkin 2019, §4.1, §4.5).
4. Wartburg’s *FEW* volumes on non-European loanwords in French (vols. 19–20) likewise merit particular critical examination; see a pertinent critique in Bausani and Cardona (1970, 132).
5. *De entrambas sillas* ‘of both saddles’ is a horse-riding metaphor that, here, appears to refer to the bisexual relations alluded to.
6. Fr *bougeron* is another Italianism (from *buggerone*), whereas much earlier Fr *bougre* ‘bugger’ was a vernacular development from Latin; *bougeron* is also attested in English, taken up via French (see Lo Vecchio 2020, 62–63, 78–79).
7. See Goddard (2005) and Vézina (2021) for other comparative studies that use the extant philological record to explain historical developments arising out of language contact on the North American continent.
8. Uvular [ʀ] is indicated here, although in Canadian French apical [r] is also frequently observed.
9. For example, see a similar description of the dance, using the form *berdache*, described by Emmanuel Domenech in “Les Indiens de l’Amérique septentrionale. Troisième partie: leurs jeux, leurs chasses, leurs fêtes publiques” (*Revue contemporaine et Athenæum français*, year 6, vol. 34 [1857]: 295) and in *Voyage dans les solitudes américaines* (Paris: Bureau Central, 1858, 206).
10. The current dictionary meaning of German *Mannweib* is ‘manly woman’, representing yet another sense shift (*Duden* 2019).
11. Note also that Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau, son of Toussaint and Sacagawea, accompanied William Drummond Stewart (see work referenced below in note 13) on one of his journeys.
12. French *mou*, *molle* ‘soft, limp’, *mollesse* ‘softness’ all carried the connotation of effeminacy and were used to code same-sex behavior (see Hennig 2014, 193–202).
13. *Broadashe* appears several times in William Drummond Stewart’s *Altowan; or, Incidents of Life and Adventure in the Rocky Mountains* (signed “An Amateur Traveler,” ed. J. Watson Webb, New York: Harper, 1846, 1: 54, 55, 240; 2: 17, 44, 79).

14. The form *bredaiche* appears in French in Pierre Saliat's translation *L'Oraison que feit Crispe Saluste Contre Mar. Tul. Ciceron. Plus l'oraison de Mar. Tul. Ciceron responsive a celle de Saluste*, from Latin (Paris: Apud Simonem Colinæum, 1537, 14r).
15. The form *bardache* first appears in French in *La Chiromance de Patrice Tricasse*, translated from the Italian (Paris: n.p., 1546, 7r).
16. The form *bredache* first appears in French in François Rabelais's *Le quart livre des faictz & dictz Heroiques du noble Pantagruel* (Lyon: n.p., 1548, chap. 9, F.v).
17. Poille's (1614) update to Nicot exceptionally records *bredache* "Exoletus" (Latin *exoletus* referred to the passive male partner). French *bardache* first entered Holbyband's bilingual dictionary in 1593.
18. *DCHP* notes a rare application to the animal world for English *berdash* too, clearly calqued on the French: "an emasculated buffalo, highly prized for the fine robe made from its skin and its choice meat."
19. Citing LaFortune, Roscoe (1995, 219) specifies that *Two-Spirit* was "the literal translation of a native Anishinabe (Ojibway dialect) term"; see further indications in Roscoe (1998, 263–64).

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