

## **COUNTRY QUEERS SEASON 1 EPISODE 1**

**DESCRIPTION:** In this episode, featuring an interview recorded in June 2014, Crisosto Apache describes their journey after coming out at 17 and leaving the Mescalero Apache reservation in New Mexico where they were born and raised. After unsuccessfully searching for a sense of belonging in gay scenes in urban Colorado, Crisosto speaks on how coming out again as Two-Spirit later in life enabled them to reconnect with their people, culture, and an Indigenous identity that had been there all along.

In this episode, we are asking listeners to support Indigenous communities suffering from Covid-19, please donate to The Navajo Nation Covid-19 Relief Fund and The White Mountain Apache Tribe Covid-19 Relief Fund.

**CREDITS:** Host/Producer/Lead Editor: Rae Garringer. Assistant Editor/Composer-Performer of Acoustic and Electric Guitar Music: Tommie Anderson. Editorial Advisory Dream Team: Hermelinda Cortés, Sharon P. Holland, and Lewis Raven Wallace. Theme Song Composer/Banjo: Sam Gleaves. Theme Song Pedal Steel: Rebecca Branson Jones. Special thanks to Laura Staresheski and AIR Media's mentorship program for support on this episode. And, thanks to Hideo Higashibaba, Riley Cockrell, Abby Huggins, Sam Gleaves, and Yasmine Farhang for feedback on the first draft. Thanks also to Benny Becker for helping clean up the background noise in Crisosto's interview. Most importantly, thanks to Crisosto Apache for sharing their story so generously with us all.

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## **TRANSCRIPT**

*[Sound of a thunderstorm]*

GABRIELLA JUSTICE [Intro]: I'm Gabriella Justice in Portageville, Missouri, and you're listening to Country Queers, the podcast.

*[Theme Song]*

RAE GARRINGER [Host]: Hey, my name's Rae Garringer and this is Country Queers, a podcast featuring oral history interviews with rural and small-town queer and trans folks in the U.S. Each episode features an oral history interview I've recorded since founding this project in 2013. In this episode, you'll meet Crisosto Apache.

Crisosto is a Two-Spirit writer and advocate who was raised on the Mescalero Apache reservation in New Mexico, and now lives on Arapaho, Cheyenne, Ute, and Sioux land in Denver, Colorado. Crisosto talks about growing up on the reservation and then

leaving to search for a sense of belonging in gay scenes in Boulder and Denver, where instead, they found themselves disconnected from their people and their culture. I'd connected with Crisosto through the Two-Spirit National Cultural Exchange, an advocacy and educational non-profit organization that they directed at the time. Crisosto was a student in the MFA program in Creative Writing at the Institute of American Indian Arts.

CRISOSTO APACHE: It's customary that I introduce myself in my native language, so I'm gonna do that. Shí'taí k'an dé, ni'daagut'é. Shí Crisosto Apache húun'zhyé'. Shi Mashgalénde áan'sht'ííd.

So, what I basically said is, "Hello, my name is Crisosto Apache, and I'm Mescalero Apache. My age – I'm 42, and I currently live in Denver, but I'm originally from the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico."

RAE [Host]: I interviewed Crisosto at their home in Denver during the summer of 2014. At that point, Country Queers was a year old, and I'd only done a handful of interviews. I was working in rural public schools back home in Western Virginia at the time. Since I had summers off, I decided I was gonna take a road trip to try to meet and record interviews with as many rural and small-town queers and trans people as I could. With funds raised from a Kickstarter campaign, I bought a camera, a tent, and a camp stove, and I travelled through Mississippi, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma. I drove 7,000 miles and interviewed 30 people in 30 days, with only a flip phone and a paper atlas. The summer this interview took place Barack Obama was in his first term as president. It would be another year before the Supreme Court ruled that gay marriage was a right in all 50 states, and in the next few months, both Eric Garner and Michael Brown would be killed by police, and three Black women, two of them queer, would found the Black Lives Matter movement.

It's hot on June 28, 2014, when Crisosto and I sit down at their kitchen table in a bright, airy house in a quiet suburb of Denver. Crisosto is wearing a blue t-shirt and black shorts. Their slightly graying, shoulder-length hair is pulled back into a ponytail. Crisosto's mother, spouse, and nephews very politely try to stay out of the kitchen for most of the hour that we talk, but occasionally, you can hear them in the background. The clock on the wall announces the hour with an owl's call along the way. Crisosto is an amazing storyteller and I only ask a few questions over the course of the hour. The rest of the time, their story unfolds organically. Occasionally, you'll hear me laugh or ask a clarifying question.

CRISOSTO: I was born and raised on the Mescalero Apache Reservation. I originally grew up with my father, who was Diné, Navajo. When I was really younger, I remember staying with him a little bit, and he was from To'hajiilee, that's formerly known as Cañoncito, outside of Albuquerque. So, after a while, he ended up taking me back to my mom's, in Mescalero. So I grew up on the Mescalero Apache Reservation.

On the reservation, we sort of moved around a little bit, because it's really vast and huge. The area that I grew up in is between seven and eight thousand feet, so it's up in the mountains. That's pretty much what I remember growing up, like wherever I went there's always forest around, and we'd play in the forest. But growing up on the reservation I think is...it's a very interesting experience, and I think it's taken me a long time to sort of realize the significance of being Native American, being Two-Spirit, and also having an education, which is really kind of unique to my family.

There's this whole idea called historical trauma. It's the transmission of inter-generational trauma that a lot of Native Americans have dealt with. From forced removal from their homelands, to massacres, to the school systems, to, you know, just starvation, to internment camps, whatever you name it. All of that plays into my history, and it plays into a lot of Native American history.

It was difficult, I mean, growing up, because my mom had separated with my father and then remarried to my stepfather, who's currently still in the house. And it was hard growing up. You know we were sort of a poor family. My parents, meaning my mom and my stepfather, the highest level of education they had was tenth grade. They both dropped out. My stepfather had some experience working trade, so whatever experience he would get as a tradesman, is what he did. They both have a lot of experience in silversmith, so they made jewelry on the side to supplement the income. My mother worked as a dietician when I was a lot younger, but then, because we moved around a lot, ended up having to take care of us.

My older brother is from a different parent, and then there's me and my little brother—we're from my mom and my father—and then there's two stepsisters who were from my stepfather's previous marriage, and then there's my two sisters from their marriage now. So we kinda grew up, off and on, with a huge family. So there was a lot of us. It was kind of interesting to sort of just move around on the reservation. And I'm sure that it was really hard, to raise that many kids, on the level of education that they had, and for whatever jobs they could get. At the time, I didn't understand that, but now that I'm older, and now that I have my nephews, I start to realize what it takes to raise a family and to be financially responsible for them, to be emotionally responsible for them, and you know, all of these things that parents go through. I've sort of been thrown into that within under a year. But yeah we grew up with very little money, but we managed.

I always knew, my whole life, that I was gay. From a very young age. I was very curious about it, but I didn't understand it. And in the back of my mind, I've always wondered if people were all like that. You know? So, all the friends that I had growing up in school, in the back of my mind, I've always wanted to ask them if they felt the same way. But I was always afraid. Because I started to see that there was this sort of behavior that was happening, where guys and girls got together, and that was dating. But I never did see girls and girls or guys and guys. And I didn't see that in any of the relationships that I observed on the reservation or off the reservation, in the schools or not in the schools. However, you know, while I was growing up, I did remember seeing, some guys that would dress up as women on my reservation. And I knew who they were, you know,

and the community knew who they were. In fact, me and my mom, we talk about that all the time. You know, from her experience too, growing up on the reservation, she knows some people that were men that dressed as women, and you know, that's the way they presented themselves.

You know, there's a heavy debate, I think, in Native American communities about how much of that is real, and how much of that is cultural. So, I think from all the research that I've done in terms of Two-Spirit people and reservation communities, and all the different elders that I've talked to who are very traditional, I've come to make the determination that, culturally, that behavior was accepted within the community because they had a function. There was a spiritual function, there was a communal function. And there's a lot of what we talk about that, we don't disown our people, we don't disown our families, and everybody has a purpose. So within the culture itself, these people are given responsibilities. They might not fit the responsibilities that straight people have, such as you know, procreation, providing for the family, but in terms of the way they operated within the community, there was a purpose for them. And in some societies and some cultures, because of how that balance is integrated within one person, a lot of these communities saw that as a gift, because of how we describe the universe around us. There's a male universe and a female universe, and there's a sense of balance that allows it to sort of interact with each other. Our seasons are male and female. Our directions are male and female. Our environments are male and female, even the rain. There's a male rain and there's a female rain. There's a lot of different interactions in the cosmos that determines our identity within ourselves. So, those are a lot of things that I've been taught growing up, in terms of who I was.

Now, growing up, however, there has been this conflict, and I've sort of inherited that a little bit in terms of Western thought and Western religion, and how much guilt and shame that was sort of pushed on a lot of people for practicing their culture, and for participating in their culture. But I think, now that is something that I see a lot of people struggle with still. You know, it's that integration of fundamental religion, and how much damage that continues to do to Native communities.

So, growing up, we did identify that there are people that exist within our community that are able to express themselves the way they do, and there isn't any shame in presenting yourself that way. And I remember that a lot of the interactions that I have had with my mom, because my mom comes from a fairly traditional background, she continues to teach us that we are sort of an integrated community, and we have to accept one another for who we are. And we have to teach each other that, and we have to be there for one another.

So, that's what I was taught growing up. But I was still confused, you know. I went to a public school off the reservation, and I did my own research, in terms of what I thought I was. And I started hearing from other people and the way they talked, the derogatory terms, you know, like faggot, gay, and sissy... You know, what you hear. So, I started looking those up in the dictionary. And I was like "Well, what does this mean, 'You homo'?" *[Laughs]*

So I started looking at that, I started finding out what these terms were, but I found out that they weren't nice. So I started to internalize a lot of that, and I was like, you know what, "Who I am, and what I am, I can't tell anybody, because it's 'wrong,' quote unquote." But what I should've done is, I should've talked to my mother early on. And I didn't know that she knew all this time. My aunts and my grandmothers, they already knew, but I was the one that didn't. I didn't go and seek out the information like I should have.

And when I was younger, I had to try to figure out what this thing was, being gay. So, I remember on the weekends I used to hitchhike into town. And it's a small town. At that time, there was probably like, maybe 40,000 people annually, or seasonally, in summer and winter. And mostly rich people from Texas, you know, half a million dollar homes to a million dollar homes, kind of tucked off in the foothills, in the mountains.

RAE: And that was on the reservation or that was off the—

CRISOSTO: Off the reservation. But town was probably like eleven miles away.

RAE: Okay.

CRISOSTO: So, we had sort of this tiny road that winds into town. It's up in the mountains, and that's what I grew up in. I grew up in the ponderosa pines. And it's a small town and, you know, I was bent on trying to figure out what this was, this gay thing. So, I would hitchhike into town. I ended up finding a job on the weekends, and after I was done with my job I just wandered through town. And I was young. I was fifteen, sixteen. And I started to figure out that, you know, people met at the public swimming pool. The public swimming pool was there, and behind it, there was a parking lot, and there's some picnic tables, and I used to go there and sit and watch people swim. Cause of course I didn't have the money to go there, I would just sit there and watch them. It was one of the free things that I found myself doing. So, I would sit there and watch, and then, all of a sudden, I started realizing like, these cars pull up, almost one by one, after another. And sometimes they're the same ones, and these guys [are] going into the bathroom.

So, I was like, "What's that about?" And, you know, it happened frequently, I knew that there was a pattern. You know, so I got curious. And I went in there. And I guess, walked in on two males in there, and it clicked in my head. Like, "Oh, so this is what they do. This is where they go. This is what I'm gonna end up doing," you know?

I mean, as a young kid you don't have anybody telling you what this is, so you start to make these determinations for yourself. And then, you know, it's a small town and everybody seems to be doing it, and quiet. You know, so I'm like, "Oh my gosh, this is really what I am. What is this, still?" And I still couldn't at that point determine what that was. You know, "What is this still? We have to do this in the bathroom? Why in the bathroom?"

So it was really crazy, you know. That summer, that's what I did. Sort of frequent that place a lot, because: One, I wanted to further my identity and who I was. Two, I wanted to find out and talk to other people who were like me. And three, I wanted to fit in somewhere. Growing up in a small town, that's really hard to do. You know, and I know that still, some of my cousins are gay, are effeminate, but they have not come out and said it. And I know that they're back there doing the same thing. And I just wonder, you know, I really wonder to this day, how that can change. Because I don't think that it's right that people should just find these secret places, unsanitary places, to be, to find solace within themselves.

[BREAK]

*[Music]*

RAE [Host]: Hey friends. Because we know the impact of colonization on land and resources, we're encouraging our white listeners to engage in an ongoing process of reparations. So, during each episode break we're asking our white listeners who have extra funds, to donate to projects led by queer & trans Black and Indigenous folks and people of color. In this episode, we're asking you to support Indigenous communities who have been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. Crisosto has been fundraising in support of the [Navajo Nation's Covid-19 Relief Fund](#), as well as the [White Mountain Apache Covid-19 Relief Fund](#). The links to donate to both of those fundraisers are in the episode notes, as well as over on the website at [www.countryqueers.com](http://www.countryqueers.com).

Now, back to our 2014 interview with Crisosto Apache.

[END OF BREAK]

CRISOSTO: But I grew up. You know, growing up in our household—it wasn't the typical household because we were poor, there's alcoholism in our family, there's, you know, domestic violence, and there's...you know, my stepfather really didn't like us very much. And so I sort of grew up with that, and I struggle with that, and how the relationship with my stepfather is not the greatest. So, I didn't really have a father figure in my life to sort of rely on, to teach me what I was supposed to [know].

One day, my dad, my stepfather challenged me. He said, "If you think your life is difficult living here, why don't you try living out there?" And I thought to myself, "Well, how different could it be?" So I left. You know, I left home. And I, to this day, seem to have managed pretty well. I'm the only one in my family that has a high school diploma. I'm the only one in my family that has higher education. And now I'm the only one in my family that has graduate degrees under my belt. You know, and it's just amazing that I can even sit here and say that, because [of] everybody in my family and my whole lineage, there's not many people who have done that. I'll encourage my nephews, and my brothers and sisters, to continue doing that, cause it's very important that we get an

education. Not because it's conforming to Westernized culture, but to sort of have a better understanding of who we are as Native people.

Growing up, that's pretty much what I was exposed to. And so, after my dad—my stepfather—challenged me to go out, of course, in my mind, that's where I thought we met [in bathrooms]. So wherever I went, I was always on the search. And it wasn't until, after growing up and graduating high school and getting a scholarship to go to the Institute of American Indian Arts, I entered college, and I started meeting gay people there. You know, and some of them were out, and some people were like just, out and about, and they didn't care. And I'm like, "You're supposed to be that way in the bathroom!" *[Laughs]* You know? "You can't be that way here! You have to go in the bathroom to do that." And that's what I was thinking in my mind, you know, and I could never get out of that head trip of that part of my identity. Plus, you know, living with a dysfunctional family, it really put a pressure on myself, and, you know, I was very self-conscious about being Native American, and being gay, and being a teenager. And I became very insecure, and of course, you know, I turned to drugs, and I turned to alcohol. And I just sort of thought, that's what you do. Now, this is pretty much who my identity is. I'm doing drugs, I'm drinking, I'm running off to these weird places, and doing just about whatever to satisfy that part of me that was screaming to be normal.

And I lived that way for a good while, a good part of my life. And I've traveled across country just to get that sort of affection that I wanted, from being with another male. That was what my desire was, and that's what my personality wanted, and that's who I was my whole life. And it was a hard struggle. You know, I really beat myself up pretty good about it. About who I was and what my identity was screaming out to say.

And, you know, it wasn't until I graduated out of college, got a scholarship to come up here to Boulder to go to Naropa University and was doing really well. And that's when I came into this whole different culture of being in a larger city, being connected to Denver, and started realizing that, you know, "This isn't a choice anymore. I have to start being who I am." And during that time, I had sort of accepted the fact that this is who I am, and there's nothing in the world that will change that.

So, one of the trips home...when I was younger, seventeen, I went back home, and I was in the kitchen with my mother. We're doing dishes, and something in the back of my mind said, you know, "I need to tell my mother. I need to tell my mom what is going on." So, when I turned seventeen, I came out. Then that's when my whole family knew, I'm gay. My mom was...she wasn't upset, because her idea, in terms of what gay meant, was in a western term, you know, western sense of the identity. So because I said that, and that was my only connection to what this identity was, it was something that she wasn't prepared for in terms of what, in her mind, who I was. Because it's very different than in Native American culture and tradition.

So I told her I was gay. And she basically told me, "You know what, you're my son. You live your life how you were born into. You know, there's nothing you can do to change that. All I care is that you're happy, and that you take care of yourself. Because, you

know, I'm still your mother, this is still your family, and you're still my son. You know, nothing's changed."

So, it wasn't later 'til I found out, after I came out again as a Two-Spirit person, that she was not happy. Not because I was gay—it was because, I had had a disconnection to my culture. So, when I came out and found the term Two-Spirit and realized that there was a cultural part of my identity, which is what I felt was missing all these years...even though I told myself I was gay and was living in a gay way, there was still something missing. And that wasn't until I discovered the term Two-Spirit. And that was whatever was closest to whatever it is I was looking for, or what I was wanting to put back. It was that connection to my culture, that connection to my language, that connection to my creation stories. That connection to my family, and to my community. My heritage. My lineage. All of that.

Once I started to understand that, I went back home, and I started integrating myself back into my culture, my language, and all of that. I started including my cultural aspects in my identity. And I told my mom, you know, "I remember telling you I was gay a long time ago, do you remember that?" She says, "Yeah." And I was like, "Well I don't think I'm gay." I said, "I think I'm a Two-Spirit person." [*Owl Alarm Goes Off*] And she said, "Well what's that?" I said, "Well it's somebody that is connected to their culture, to their tradition, but still represents the male and female within themselves." And she goes, "Yeah, I know what you're talking about." And then we started swapping stories about the people on the reservation and talking about their roles within the community, and some of them are spiritual roles. I don't claim myself to be one of those people, but I know, in terms of my family, what my place is. So, she then said, "You know what, I'm very happy for you, because I think you came back, you came back into who you were supposed to be." You know...[*Owl Alarm Goes Off Again*]

So, I think it's really interesting as Native people, how we come out multiple times. I think about that story a lot, because, all this trouble that I've dragged myself through, to solidify my identity or to incorporate my identity, or to sort of find it, I mean, it was always there. So it's kind of interesting how I just sort of dragged myself through that, only to come out in the end, knowing that there were people there that already knew, and sort of reserved a place for me to stand back into.

There's a term that I like to tell people, called "Time Immemorial," which is the beginning of time. A lot of our emergence story talks about the Two-Spirit people. A lot of our ceremonies, and a lot of our cultural dances, still talk about the Two-Spirit people. If you look across a lot of different cultures, there's a lot of that representation of male and female embodied in one person. And there's some deities that are named after them. So, it's really interesting when I hear Native American communities say, "Oh, well that doesn't exist," what my response to them is, "That's Western colonization talking. When you go back to your own tradition, and when you back to those people who remember, they will tell you that we've always been here."



A lot of the political rhetoric that I hear, especially in the LGBTQI community, I think Stonewall is their benchmark. But I think our benchmark is our people, our communities, and those elders, and those community members that remember, and have stories told to them over and over and over again, that we exist. I think that is our benchmark in terms of who we are as Indigenous people, and our sexuality, and our gender expression.

It's kind of interesting, when I say things like that, I think people don't want to accept that, sometimes. It's always a challenge to run up against people, especially from the LGBT community who don't really understand Native American gender expression and sexuality. And our basic point of view is that sexuality is something natural. I mean there were chiefs, there's documented cases where chiefs have married Two-Spirit people. And there are some ceremonies where Two-Spirit people were said to be powerful, that all the men in the community wanted to have sex with them, because they thought that that would give them some of their power, because of that direct connection to the creator. So, I mean, there's a lot of these stories from all different cultures that I have learned, and that I've heard of, and that I talk about. Some of them are really funny, you know, and some of them are very spiritual, and some of them are very enlightening. And these are stories that have been passed down from generation to generation from the beginning of time.

I'm very grateful that my parents recognize that. So, I think I don't try to take advantage of that. I think it's really sad for me when I go out and I do public talks—and people are willing to come up and talk to me—and there's always one individual who comes up to me, and I think it's always sad for me to hear that they've been kicked out of their family's house just for who they were, and that their families don't want them around or recognize them as family anymore. I think that that is such a sad scenario for me to hear, and sometimes I just wish that there was already a community somewhere that, you know, I could say, "Well you can go there, and they'll say come on in. You don't have to worry." And it's always a young person. It is always a young person that I always hear that story from, and it's heartbreaking. So I think for myself, I have taken that, and tried to use that energy to try to make a difference wherever I'm at. And I think it takes a lot of courage to sort of stand up and say, "You know what, I'm gay. I'm a member of the LGBTQI community, and I'm also Two-Spirit." It also takes a lot of courage to do that in your own traditional community, because there's so much influence from Western culture that a lot of that residue is still there, that homophobia is still there.

Like I said, I mean it's taken me many, many years to sort of get to this point of being able to stand up and say, "You know what, there is nothing wrong with who I am. If the Creator was courageous enough to make me who I am, and the Creator's nobody I can argue with, then who are you to do that?" So I mean, that's pretty much what my philosophy is, you know, is that we all have a purpose, and we are all here for that purpose, and nobody has the power to take that away from us. Because that's what we were born into.

I mean, how crazy that somebody can say that? Or, how crazy a government can say that? You know, to try to break your spirit in that way, try to break your identity in that way, when it was given to you specifically from a higher power. To me, that's unfathomable. How we're still struggling for rights today, to justify who we are. People still hate who we are when they don't fully understand where we come from or what pains we might have endured. You know, and that's what I think for me, powers me to continue doing what I do. Cause I think, somewhere, I hope it's making a difference.

[Music]

RAE [Host]: Since the time of our interview in June 2014, Crisosto has completed their MFA in Creative Writing and published their first collection of poems, called *Genesis*. Crisosto now teaches English at an art college in Denver, Colorado. Their nephews are grown and out of the house, living with families of their own. Crisosto assured me that their family is all in good health during the Covid-19 pandemic, but reservations across the country have been hit hard. And while there's no donation site set up for the Mescalero Apache reservation where Crisosto was raised, they do recommend donating to the [Navajo Nation Covid-19 Relief Fund](#) and to the [White Mountain Apache Covid-19 Relief Fund](#). Both of those links are available in the episode notes and over on our website. To learn more about Crisosto's advocacy work and writing, and to buy their book *Genesis*, visit their website at [crisostoapache.com](http://crisostoapache.com).

Next time on Country Queers, we'll hear an excerpt from my 2017 interview with Sharon P. Holland. Sharon is a professor of critical race theory, queer theory, and sexuality studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She's also a horse rider, a gardener, prolific writer, she drives a big ole truck, and is one of the editorial advisors for this podcast.

SHARON P. HOLLAND: It's sad, it's sad...like you forget to care. And you find yourself driving down the road and going, "This is not acceptable! I need to go back home and put on undergarments!" And you know? Or you're walking on the land and you put your high boots on, you know, cause you see something. And the high boots are always by the backdoor. You know what I mean? So you can slip into them. It's just a state of mind. And it's peace. Maybe that's why I'm out here—because I don't have to desegregate it."

RAE [Host]: This episode was created and produced by me, Rae Garringer, with audio editing support from Tommie Anderson. Our theme song was written and performed on banjo by Sam Gleaves. Additional music in this episode was written and performed on electric and acoustic guitar by Tommie Anderson.

Endless thanks to our brilliant editorial advisory dream team: Hermelinda Cortés, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Sharon P. Holland. Special thanks to Laura Staresheski and AIR Media's mentorship program for additional support on this episode. Thanks to Benny Becker for helping clean up the background noise in Crisosto's interview, caused by my lack of having any idea what I was doing when I was recording interviews in 2014. And thanks to Hideo Higashibaba, Riley Cockrell, Abby Huggins, Sam Gleaves, and

Yasmine Farhang for feedback on the first draft. Thanks most of all to Crisosto, for sharing their story so generously with us all.

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Until next time...stay queer out there, friends.

*[Music]*

[END]