

# **Reclaiming the traditional role of Two-Spirited people in post-secondary and community education**

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Submitted to

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ABSTRACT: Two-Spirited people, people who identify as mixed/ambiguous/plural gender, traditionally had a special, if not revered role in the social and cultural fabric of over 100 Indigenous nations in North America. The current prevalence of homophobia, including violent rejection and isolation from family and community found within Indigenous communities today, is a relatively new phenomenon. We argue this is a symptom of colonization and goes against traditional cultural norms of respect, if not cultivation, of difference in order to achieve balance. This notion of balance – a respect of difference -- is a fundamental part of Indigenous teachings and learning. This paper, builds upon academic, traditional and personal knowledge, to explore how such a drastic transformation took place across the continent in less than a century and how Indigenous communities can reclaim the traditional knowledge espoused by Two-Spirited people. Our goal, as community and post-secondary educators, is to provide a means of using traditional culture to help change imposed colonial cultural repression and shame.

*“Like all people we have been adapting our traditions...it is important to note that each of us comes from a specific context: social, historical, political and geographic. We share similarities, hopes and dreams and lives full of oppression and denial of who we are as people. We all share a belief that our children’s lives will be better because of what we do today.” – Noeliane Villebroun, National Dene Chief (2006, p. 14)*

Queer people in all cultures often need to carve a place of acceptance in their “traditional communities;” however this is not the case within North American Indigenous communities. The role of people with mixed/ambiguous/plural genders traditionally had a special, if not revered role in the social and cultural fabric of over 100 Indigenous nations in North America<sup>1</sup>. We argue that the prevalence of homophobia, including violent rejection and isolation from family and community found within Indigenous communities is, in fact, a relatively new phenomenon and a symptom of colonization that goes against traditional cultural norms of respect, if not cultivation, of difference in order to achieve balance<sup>2</sup>. This balance is a fundamental part of Indigenous teachings and learning. Our paper builds upon academic, traditional and personal knowledge, to explore how such a drastic transformation took place across the continent in less than a century and how Indigenous communities can reclaim the traditional knowledge espoused by Two-Spirited people.

We argue such reclaiming can, and should take place, through Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) especially through the teaching of Elders and the holistic notion

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is substantiated not only in academic literature such as *Two-Spirit People* (Jacobs, Thomas and Lang, 1997), *Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identity and Social Acceptance in Indian Country* (Gilley, 2006) and *The Zuni Man-Woman* (Roscoe, 1991) but also through the teachings of Elders’ Leonard George (Tsleil-Waututh Nation) and personal communication ( November 5, 2009) with Sandra Laframboise (Cree Nation).

<sup>2</sup> A fundamental and reoccurring cultural norm in many North American Indigenous communities is the notion that all people are created by The Creator and thus all people are gifts – including (but not especially) Two-Spirited people. This can be seen by Akimel O’odham, a Pima Elder, “We have always had some of ‘them’ around, nobody really hurt them. Oh, they were always teased, especially as children, but they are just part of life so no one really thinks anything about it. They are just part of the community.” (Jacobs, Thomas and Lang, 1997, p.15)

of learning and living. There has been some, primarily anthropological, writing done on the existence (at times reverence) of Two-Spirited people in addition there is symbolic inclusion of Two-Spirited people in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) circles<sup>3</sup>. What is missing is true engagement with, and within, IKS to explore the role that Two-Spirited people play within teaching and learning. If one is to examine the seven points of Indigenous Knowledge as noted by the 2007 Canadian Council on Aboriginal Learning: holistic, life long, experiential, spiritual, linguistic, communal & synergistic of Western and Aboriginal knowledge, one can recognize that the role of Two-Spirited people is a form of teaching and learning in and of itself and, put simply, the process of confronting and eradicating imposed homophobia can be seen as a process of cultural decolonization. That said, this entire process challenges us, as people committed to preserving and protecting Indigenous culture and gender and sexual expression, to look beyond the presumed - and false binary of tradition versus LGBTQ rights.

The paper discusses the impact of colonization, forced Christian conversion and residential schools on Indigenous cultures in North America, particularly Canada. Much has been written about the cultural genocide and rampant physical and sexual abuse that took place in residential schools and the impact this had on community based education and values. The later 1960s and early 1970s saw the rise of the Indigenous movement that demanded accountability for these atrocities and inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the socio-political realities of the country. One of the main means of activism was through cultural revival, as Sandra Laframboise, a Cree Two-Spirited Elder explained; the 1970s

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<sup>3</sup> For an extensive, often critical look at the anthropological literature focusing on Two-Spirited peoples please reference Jacobs, Thomas & Lang (1997) in addition to the work by the *Gay Indian Association* (USA) and the *Two Spirits of the First Nation* (Ontario and Quebec), available online.

helped “bring the sweat lodges out of the closet.” But although the sweat lodge may have “come out” many Two-Spirited people did not. This paper will continue by exploring how Two-Spirited people often face bias through neglect in both the Indigenous movement and the LGBTQ movement.

But rather than focus on victimhood, we chose to explore how this neglect has been addressed – and redressed – by Two-Spirited people themselves. Borrowing from Shayna’s (2012) previous work we use the concept of De/Re -- the purposeful, written process of De-naturalizing, De-normalizing and De-colonizing as a means of Re-defining, Re-writing and Re-claiming – we demonstrate how Two-Spirited people are confronting the homophobia within modern Indigenous communities and racism within the LGBTQ community. We illustrate this process by reflecting on the pivotal role that the HIV/AIDS pandemic played in forcing the existence of sexuality and homosexuality into the forefront both on and off the Reserves. Specifically we examine how this tragedy led to the emergence of a more vibrant, defiant and yet respectful, rise in queer Indigenous identity thus leading to the Two-Spirited movement in the early 1990s that seeks to highlight the spiritual role of Two-Spirited people within Indigenous traditions.

The paper ends with concrete suggestions about how the role of Two-Spirited people, including the attempted erasure and reclaiming (and reshaping) of identity can be incorporated into post-secondary and community education. Many of our thoughts are based on our roles as community-situated educators within post-secondary institutions, the teachings of Elders Sandra Laframboise and Chief Leonard George in addition to the suggestions made by Two-Spirited youth in a 2004 survey commissioned by the Urban Native Youth Association.

## HISTORICAL, PERSONAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

*It was inside the house Avikwame....Now that baby lay there, looking around. Sit back from him there said Mastamho. That boy knows much more than you all. He will be a leader. Now the baby was looking this way and that, its eyes winking. Then it said I want a name. What will you call me? Mastamho said he is a boy, but I think we will give him not a boy's name, nor a man's name but a girl's. I call him Hatsinye-hai-kwatsie. - Mohave story as quoted to Elledge circa 1972, p. 77*

*"Many urban Native American men attempted to return home to their reservations to spend their last years with their families before dying from complications of HIV infection. Each of us has heard personal stories from men who were not welcome "home" because they had the "white gay man's disease" and that gayness was not part of the traditional culture." - Jacobs, Thomas and Lang, 1997 p. 3*

We selected the quotes above to illustrate how one hundred years could change cultures and traditions that are thousands of years old. In three maybe four generations, Two-Spirited people went from being revered by Elders to being rejected and shunned on a community and familial level, resulting in isolation, sickness and at times even death We were struck by how the entire system of knowledge, of balance, of respect for all peoples could be eradicated. We were angry. On a personal level. On a cultural level. On a political level.

But there has been much written through anger. Sloppy anger. Defiant anger. Hard blood-sweat-and tears in the trenches anger. This did not need to be repeated. We have both been politically involved in LGBTQ issues: David, one of the writers, a Two-Spirited Sto:lo man trained as a social worker, ran a Two-Spirited drop-in group for youth involved in the sex trade and now works with Indigenous students at a post-secondary institution. Shayna, a queer non-Indigenous woman from Chicago and Los Angeles, worked for an international human rights organization and trained teachers in incorporating LGBTQ and Indigenous issues within human rights classes in secondary schools throughout the States. We incorporate our learned experience into this work. We bring the passion of our lives.

There was no shortage of passion. There is, however a shortage of constructive engagement through an Indigenous Knowledge System. And this shortage left us with a challenge. How can we use the tools found within all North American Indigenous cultures to reclaim a group of people and a part of the cultural teachings that had been defiled and erased? How could we help facilitate change not through anger, but through hope? This is the role of education and, according to Lee Brown's pivotal (2006) work; education can only be successful if it involves healing. This healing must be culturally appropriate and must address the emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wounds of the person, family, community and culture<sup>4</sup>. We agree with this assessment. We also agree with Jo-ann Archibald's (2008) continued teachings about the role of Elders, both in terms of the importance of Elders within Aboriginal communities, and important modeling they show regarding respectful interaction with others in an open but non-prescriptive manner. As Archibald (2009) illustrates Elders are waiting to be asked, but the question that kept coming up as we researched for this paper is, how do we respectfully approach the Elders to ask how we can reclaim and adapt our traditional knowledge of Two-Spirited people when, in most cases, the entire topic is at best met with silence?

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the importance of healing through education and the role that education plays within healing, particularly as it relates to children of those placed in residential schools, please see Lee Brown's 2006 work, *The Native training Institute: A place of holistic learning and health*, *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 29(1), pp 102-116.

## TERMINOLOGY

Although the term "Two-Spirit" was used by a few activists and academics in the 1980s, it was officially coined in Winnipeg, Canada in 1991 during the third annual intertribal Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference. (Personal communication, Laframboise, November 5, 2009; Jacobs, Thomas & Lang, 1997) The term "Two Spirit" derives from the Ojibwa words *niizh manitoag* (two-spirits). It was originally chosen to distance Native/First Nations people from non-Natives as well as from the words "berdache" and "gay." Berdache is a French colonial term derived from Persian that refers to a male recipient of anal sex often with the connotation of coerced prostitution or a "kept boy". It has come to be perceived as a derogatory term by Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous anthropologists (Jacobs, Thomas & Lang, p 4 & pp 21-68). Noted scholar Brian Gilley (2006) writes, "The transition from a 'gay Indian to 'Two-Spirited' and the establishment of Two-Spirited societies created an alternative identity for the mainly urban oriented Indigenous gay and lesbian people" (p. 32.). It is a form of reclaiming roles through identity.

In this paper we will use the term "Two-Spirited" to refer to Indigenous people who identify as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered or Transsexual in addition to people who are openly fluid with their gender. We will also refer to Two-Spirited people as "us" and the community as "our community".<sup>5</sup> It is our goal that this paper will serve as a mobilizing tool for education and thus position ourselves as part of the culture. Lastly we note that we use the term "gender", "gender expression" and "sexuality" interchangeably because the term two-spirit speaks to all varieties of gender and sexual fluidity.

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<sup>5</sup> Although Shayna, one of the authors of this paper is not Indigenous, David, the other author is a Two-Spirited Sto:lo man who is active in the Indigenous community and it seemed odd to speak about the population with whom he identifies in the distant third person.



We have our work cut out for us, but it is not impossible. The process of “reclaiming” words, symbols and traditions is not new. The pink/black triangle, the word “queer”, the word “Indian” all of these had been tools of suppression that are now used as a means of pride. Our paper will explore how the importance of “difference” can, and should be reclaimed as a key element of functioning Aboriginal communities. Drawing upon the work of scholars such as Battiste (2002) who explored the importance of varied perspectives – of the “minority voice” to ensure good governance for all, we then turn our gaze to the traditional role of a Two-Spirited person in Indigenous communities. The Two-Spirited person was often revered because they could see things from a more fluid perspective and thus often served as spiritual gate keepers and social mediators because they were not bound by gender. Their “difference” was their asset. There is much we can learn from this appreciation of difference.

## THE RESPECTED ROLE OF DIFFERENCE

*“Our existence was used to justify the belief in our barbarism as primitive peoples. Where that history began - we now live with today. Homophobia is not indigenous to this continent. Tolerance is.” – We are Part of a Tradition (2008)*

*“We didn’t have paper – we didn’t have writing. We created rituals that helped us understand the difference. Remember – Two-Spirit is an English word that means an identity other than that which you were born with. We accept and nurture the different” – Cree Elder, Sandra Laframboise (personal communication November 5, 2009)*

Traditionally, Indigenous communities sought harmony within the community in order to function. But harmony did not mean homogeneity, it meant everyone had a role, everyone provided and everyone was dependent. This ideal of harmony serves as the foundation for modern day understandings of “balance” including the components necessary to ensure

successful health and education. This can be seen in the structure of certain governance practices such as those explored by Jeanette Armstrong (2008) in her explanation of how decisions are made, for the good of all and with a special ear towards the “minority voice” in Okanagan society. This can also be seen in Chief Noeliane Villebrun’s (2006) teachings of the importance of difference and the embracing of change. Those who were “different” were often seen as gifts simply because they could see a variety of perspectives.

Many people who work as academics, activists and advocates of Two-Spirited people point to this cultural foundation as an epistemological justification for the inclusion of Two-Spirited people within traditional Indigenous cultural frameworks. (Lang,1997; Red Earth,1997) The acceptance, if not reverence, of Two-Spirited people “fits” within the greater vision of how a healthy (read: balanced) society is supposed to function. Historically, Two-Spirited people were responsible for particular social functions in their communities:

Some of our Elders teach us that Two-Spirited people have a special place in our communities. We believe that Two-Spirited people have specific duties and responsibilities to perform. These include counseling, healing, being pipe carriers, caring for children, visionaries and conducting oneself in accordance to our belief which states, ‘to respect all life.’ (Lang pp. 100-103).<sup>6</sup>

This point was further explored and supported by Marcel DuBois’ (2008) piece in, “*We are Part of a Tradition*,”

Communities often assign power to that which does not conform to the conventional. The unconventional is often imbued with negative power i.e.: sin, pollution, and taboo. In this way, cultures deal with the mysterious by removing them from the unexplainable. The misunderstood is often viewed as a threat. However, some cultures deal with the mysterious by removing them from the realm of threat and to sanctify them. The berdaches [sic] role as a mediator was also between the physical and the spiritual. Aboriginal cultures

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<sup>6</sup> According to Elder Sandra Laframboise (personal communication, November 5, 2009), two spirited people often had the role of caring for orphaned children in the community (specifically referring to the Burrard Reserve) this point is also made by Leonard George (Tsleil-Waututh Nation) on the following clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwDqCdQ2NP4>

took what Western cultures view as negative and made it positive. Aboriginal people correctly perceived that Two-Spirited people have spiritual powers and unique skills and insights. Whereas in Western culture such people have been stigmatized and their powers wasted. (*We are Part of a Tradition*, 2008, p 26)

From nations as geographically disparate as Zuni to Crow to Shoni are descriptions of Two-Spirit individuals having strong mystical powers. In one account, raiding soldiers of a rival tribe begin to attack a group of foraging women when they perceive that one of the women, is a Two-Spirit. The invaders halt their attack and retreat after the Two-Spirit counters them with a stick, “recognizing that the Two-Spirit will have great power which they will not be able to over-come.” (Williams pp 31-43; *We are Part of Tradition*, 2008) By telling these stories, including the well known story of Running Eagle (Piegan) and Woman Chief (Crow), it is evident that people who were publically recognized as Two Spirits “were legitimate on many levels in and among their peoples and respected in their roles as such. It cannot be underestimated how important that (being accepted) was.” (*Two-Spirit Women*, 2008). This process of Re-defining and Re-claiming the presence of Two-Spirited people and then Re-Writing this historically is a form of De-naturalizing and De-normalizing homophobia. Recognizing the role of Two-Spirited people is a form of De-colonizing.

An example of the fluidity of the roles, gender, identity of Two-Spirited people, Lang (1997) explains “the mere fact that a male wears women’s clothing does not say something about his behaviour, his gender status, or even his choice of partner...” (Lang, p. 89) Cross dressing of Two-Spirited people was not always an indication of cross acting (taking on other gender roles and social status within the group). Often a child’s gender was determined early on, depending on their inclination toward either masculine or feminine activities. If a child was intersexed, it was often the child’s predisposition that determined

which (or both) genders were cultivated.<sup>7</sup> Puberty often served as the “outing” – when various rituals were observed and other forms of publicly disclosing gender, but as noted in Williams and Roscoe, there were also people who would continue to enact multiple genders throughout their life.

Two-Spirited people, specifically male-bodied (biologically male, gender female), could not only cook and clean but also go to war and have access to male activities such as sweat lodges. This role is once again taken up by modern, urban Two-Spirited people. As Elder Sandra Laframboise (Cree) shared with David and Shayna over tea:

Look – I am a sister. I am who I am and I am part of the group and if I make you uncomfortable I will pray for you... I’ve had Elders tell me I don’t belong here. I told them I had a sex change but not a soul change. I am comfortable with myself. I am a transsexual and I have a right to pray. I have a relationship with Mother Earth who is the mother of all people. When people tell me I don’t belong here I just think well – there goes another man made rule...” (personal communication, Laframboise November 5, 2009).

Like many Elders, Laframboise reminds us the importance of remembering the tradition roles of Two-Spirited people and also those roles are changing much like First Nations cultures have changed since European contact.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information please see the introduction to Jacob, Thomas & Lang (1997) as each nation handled the situation a bit differently. Suffice to say, there was much more fluidity than in the rigid notions prescribed by Judeo-Christian norms in residential schools.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF COLONIZATION AND RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

*There are as many traditional tribal names for these “Two-Spirited people” as there were tribes. Among the Lakota, these men were referred to as “winkte”, and the Zuni called them “lhamana”. This is another case of history being written through the cultural biases of the historians, and of a distinct culture being lost due to the prejudices of the invaders. - (Elledge, 2002 p xv)*

*“As Two-Spirited women of the First Nations, you become aware of “triple oppression”: you are lesbian, female, and native in a society dominated by a world that often does not honour women or indigenous peoples and by a world that says your sexuality is nonexistence, a phase, a threat or a sin against God. The church has made sex dirty and women evil. We are expected to marry a man or suffer the consequences of our wilfulness. As lesbians, we understand our sexuality in a social, political, historical and cultural context. [And] as Two-Spirited men you know there is not room for your life on the reserve. Your sexuality is not tolerated and many men leave to find urban centers where they can express themselves. Many men live a dual life: bisexuality on the reserve is more common then you think. If you are strong enough to be who you are, you are ridiculed, harassed and only sometimes understood as being different.” (We are part of the Tradition, p. 22)*

In referencing the quotes above, we argue that this modern day experience of Indigenous peoples, reflected not only in theory but also in our own experience, can be directly traced to the political decisions of the Canadian and American governments from the later 1800s – mid 1960s during the residential school “experiment.”

Residential Schools were established by the federal government of Canada and run by various churches as a way of assimilating and ‘educating’ Aboriginal people. These residential schools were across Canada. In the early days, federal Indian Agents went onto Reservations to take Aboriginal children to these schools (UNYA, 2004 report). Aboriginal children were in some cases stolen and taken to these schools. While attending residential schools, many children faced various forms of abuses: mentally, emotionally, physically, sexually and spiritually (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996)

In an attempt to “assimilate” Indigenous peoples into Anglo-Christian norms, Aboriginal children were often told that their Creator was evil and that “God” would punish

them if they practiced their traditions. This forced cultural practice created a generational homogenizing effect by imposing Christian beliefs of morality and removing children from other forms of Traditional Knowledge and teaching practices within the community. The children often faced various forms of abuse and shame, often in front of their peers. (UNYA report 2004, p 4) There are numerous accounts of physical, emotional and sexual abuse by those who attended residential schools and subsequent generational impact. There are many examples of this abuse and shame that has occurred. Teens illustrates this abuse in “Two Spirited Women” (2008)

Homophobia exists today among Aboriginal People because of our colonization. Aboriginal People learned at residential schools to hate or hide our own culture and that sex is a sin in any form except one – man on top in marriage. Sexual abuse experienced as children (witnessed or direct), contributed to confusion and homophobia as the children did not know it was not a homosexual act, but an abusive act. At least three generations lived through residential schools, which was long enough to negatively influence our traditional knowledge and understanding of sex and sexualities. (p.14)

This is not just a matter of abstract history. David’s maternal grandparents both attended Coqualeetza residential school in Chilliwack, BC in the late 1910s – early 1920s. The impact of removing them as children from the community was severe: neither of David’s grandparents would share any of their traditional teachings, language or culture with the family. This silence created a significant loss of Indigenous knowledge in David’s family and is representative of Indigenous communities throughout Canada. It is no wonder that, in such an environment, the embrace of difference – including that of fluid gender and sexuality – would be become replaced by a fear of difference, conforming to the Judeo-Christian norms of gender. The UNYA 2004 report reinforces and supports what many already know to be true when they state:

Another devastating result of the residential school experience was the denigration of women and Two-spirit people in Aboriginal communities. The

dominant religion did not make room for women to have equal roles as men, or for there to be alternate genders or sexual preferences than that of heterosexuals. As a direct result of the residential school experience, homophobia is now rampant in most Aboriginal communities, even more so than in mainstream society. The religious dogma of the Residential Schools has erased a proud and rich history of Two-spirit people in most Aboriginal communities.” (2004, p. 7)

Fortunately, David’s Grandmother was not completely influenced by the Church and always accepted David being Two-Spirited whereas other members of the family still refuse to speak with him today. David witnessed firsthand the negative impact residential school has had on his own family where the imposed norms of dogmatic Christianity perpetuated by the Residential School system ran counter to that of traditional teachings. Unfortunately the negative impact of residential schools is multi-generational.

### **BIAS THROUGH NEGLECT<sup>8</sup> – THE ABSENCE OF TWO-SPIRITED PEOPLE IN THE INDIGENOUS MOVEMENT AND THE LGBTQ MOVEMENT**

The later 1960s and 1970s saw an increase in many identity based empowerment movements throughout North America many of which explicitly utilized language and techniques from other decolonization movements throughout the world. The American Indian Movement (AIM) originating in urban Minneapolis, served as a wake-up call and role model for many Aboriginal communities in Canada including establishing formal alliances with the Mohawk Warrior Society in Quebec (Alfred and Lowe 2006). This was further galvanized by the well-publicized stand-off between FBI forces and AIM at Wounded Knee, including the imprisonment of Leonard Peltier, illustrating the extent colonial forces would

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<sup>8</sup> We are borrowing the notion of “bias through neglect” as cited by Brayboy and Castagno (2008)

go to keep socio-cultural and political power. (Churchill & Vaderwall, 1988) But as the pride and revitalization of Indigenous language, spirituality and culture increased, and became re-institutionalized in a variety of traditional settings and fought for in Western educational settings, there was a noted absence around sexuality in general and Two-Spirited people specifically. In fact, even as the Black Panther Movement made specific public alliances with the Gay Liberation Front, in our research we have not found any public statement originating from AIM about Two-Spirited people, even though Two-Spirited people play a fundamental role in what it means to be Aboriginal the 2004 report and analysis 80% of Two-spirited youth stated that “a better understanding of Two-Spirited (GLBT) issues is needed in my own First Nations community.” (2004)

In fact, in both urban communities and on the Reserve, many Two-Spirited people have experienced homophobia, particularly in being rejected by family and community. Not being accepted by family, and community can have negative effects on all people but there are particular risk factors found in Aboriginal communities in Canada including, increased rates of substance abuse, sexual, mental and physical abuse, internalized racism, participation in the sex trade, low self-esteem, shame, fear, guilt, lack of work experience/education, lack of safe sex, increased risk for HIV, and depression (UNYA, 2004, *We are Part of a Tradition*).

We come and learn from our experience. As David reflects in his own journey discovery who he is a Two-Spirited Sto:lo man:

*Growing up in the Vancouver area, I was bullied and harassed not only for being Aboriginal but also for being Two-Spirited. This caused me much pain and shame, and eventually led to a number of years drinking very heavily. As of result of this experience I tried to hide the fact that I am Aboriginal which I now recognize as internalized racism...There was one time when, while working at a restaurant my very intoxicated Uncle came in and I had*



*someone else wait on him and would not even admit I knew him. That was one of the last times I actually saw him as not long after that he was murdered on my reserve. It was only in my sobriety that I was able to forgive myself. It was also in my 23 years of sobriety I have sought out who I am as a proud Sto:lo man.*

*I worked as a social worker with Two-Spirited youth in the mid-1990s and I would see first hand how troubled our youth are with being not accepted – either because they are Two- Spirited or Aboriginal or both. Many of those youth including myself were so isolated from their community, family and culture. At times this lack of self acceptance led them down the black road of drugs, and alcohol abuse. In severe situations this even led to suicide.*

David's experience shows the conflation of internalized racism and homophobia resulting from being isolated and cut off from community. Even when seeking help from "professionals" focusing on LGBTQ issues, there is often a cultural disconnect. First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission and the Vancouver Urban Native Youth Association state that mental health professionals, paraprofessionals and volunteers may not be sensitive to cultural differences; therefore, they may be unable to give appropriate services and supports to the Two-Spirited community that speak to the particular cultural role of gender fluidity within Indigenous communities, let alone Two Spirited communities. There is a lack of substantive research and literature on our diverse population. This lack of information is what has lead us to believing that education, in formal and community settings is needed for the larger Aboriginal community for this lack is what often leads not only to isolation from communities, but internalized homophobia and racism.

Put simply, because of the role of colonization many Two-Spirited people a difficult time accepting their own identity -- assuming that one needs to choose between being queer, and being Aboriginal. (Two-Spirited Women, 2008). As Paula Gunn Allen, the late Aboriginal lesbian scholar was noted in the Two-Spirited women report:

...while many modern lesbians have come to see themselves as singular but not sick, many of us are not that secure in our self-assessment. Certainly, however we come to terms with our sexuality, we are not in the position of our American Indian forester who could find safety and security in her bond with another woman because it was perceived to be destined and nurtured by non-human entities, as were all Indian pursuits as was therefore acceptable and respectable to others in her tribe. (p.255. 2008)

Many people who are Indigenous may have not felt completely at home within the Lesbian and Gay movement that arose in the late 1960s. There has been much literature addressing the often-uncritical assumptions of class, ethnicity and privilege found within the predominantly white and middle class movement – primarily focusing on the African-American and Latino/a experience<sup>9</sup>. And although it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this issue, it is worth noting that we found a dearth of literature addressing the experience of Gay and Lesbian Indigenous peoples. Further research on this topic on this topic is needed.

There are many who note that the emphasis on the spiritual and traditional role of Two-Spirited people increased as the AIDS pandemic swept across Indigenous peoples living on reserves or in urban communities as a means of speaking to the larger need of community supports. In 1994, Jacobs, Thomas and Lang noted:

[The] AIDS pandemic is of great concern to contemporary Native American gays, lesbians and two-spirits as it is to everyone else with a social conscience. The HIV virus is spreading rapidly in reservations as it is everywhere. Tribal councils, the Indian Health Service and communities at large face the unwelcome necessity of coping with same sex behavior rather than denying its existence. (pp 3-11).

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<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that the person recognized as starting the Stonewall Riots, Sylvia Ray Riveria, was a Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican drag queen. For more information on the institutionalized racism within the LGBT movement, and the need for critical engagement in this issue, particularly in formal and community education, please see the work of Audre Lorde and bell hooks.

That said, although noting that HIV and AIDS was a real catalyst for the community and, “one of our biggest teachers.” Lang notes, “I am not sure that I would propose that the AIDS movement is what brought Two-Spirited people out of the closet.” Rather it seems it provided the real life and death opportunity to more fully understand the power of reclaiming and redefining cultural understandings for political and social change. But it also showed that culture is not static – and what it means to be Two-Spirited now may not be the same as Hatsinye-hai-kwatsie, the Mohave Two-Spirited baby referenced at the beginning of this piece, there may no longer be invaders in the desert confronted by Two-Spirited women – perhaps now the fight is in the budget meetings, the classroom, or the halls of government policy – but there is a very strong role for the Two-Spirited person.

## THE TWO-SPIRITED TEACHINGS AS A BRIDGE

*“Too many times in the past we had to give up either being part of the Aboriginal community or our sexual or gender identity to be part of the Aboriginal community. It is only when we are strong in both our Aboriginal roots – the blood that runs throughout veins and our sexual diversity that our Aboriginal communities will be strong and healthy again.” – Two-Spirited Women, 2008*

We end this paper with a story of a murder, but also a story of hope. Fred Martinez was a young *nádleehí* from Navajo Nation. According to the Navajo culture, *nádleehí*, is someone who possesses a balance of masculine and feminine traits—a special gift from the Creator. Fred’s determination to express his identity tragically cost him his life. At age sixteen, he was one of the youngest hate-crime victims in modern history when he was murdered in Cortez, Colorado. (Two-spirit documentary, 2009). Two-Spirited people across North America continue to face homophobia, and racism. This tragedy has brought Fred’s community and family together to celebrate his life and that the fact he was a brave young *nádleehí* who was true to his ways Navajo teachings. Gail Binkly

writes in the *Huffington Post*, “Fred's friends at Montezuma-Cortez High School reported that he had sometimes been harassed for his feminine manner, that he had eventually switched to adult-education courses to avoid the harassment.” But he was accepted by many members of his family and community in life and in death. After his murder:

There was also a candlelight vigil one night in Cortez that drew more than 100 people, including Judy Sheppard, mother of Mathew Sheppard, the young gay man tortured and killed in Wyoming in October 1998. Speakers shared memories of Fred, shed tears, and called for forgiveness and healing rather than continued anger. Fred's mother, Pauline Mitchell, gave a moving statement, saying that her son “would want us all to join together and work to the understanding that we can get along. He would want the schools to be a place where those who are different will find peace and joy in being at school instead of name-calling, harassment and hate. (Huffington Post, 2009)

It is from these words and experiences that we can learn – as Aboriginal people. As queer people in post-secondary institution and in ritual and in the various roles and communities we constantly find ourselves. There are different ways to engage with the world. Two-Spirited people can show us one of these ways – a way that embracing gender fluidity and Aboriginal identity.

The term Two-Spirited was not intended to mark a new category of gender. Instead Two-Spirit is an Indigenously-defined pan-Native North American term that bridges Aboriginal concepts of gender diversity and sexualities with those of Western cultures. (Gilley p. 32; *We are Part of A Tradition* 1998; *Two-Spirited Women*, 2008). As Lang, Williams and Jacob note, “Using the word, “Two-Spirited” emphasizes the spiritual aspect of one’s life and downplays the homosexual personal. Homophobia may not be completely thwarted by using the term, but it may be held off in some instances...”

This term also helps to solve some self-identity problems that Native Americans and First Nations Two-Spirited people have faced, thus allowing those who live in both urban

and rural areas, but not necessarily on reservations, the opportunity to use only one unambiguous term

As Two-Spirited Elder Sandra Laframboise stated, “Two-Spirited is a modern, English word. It was created because we didn’t fit into the queer community because of our long hair or the fact that we sun danced or participated in sweats or...” (personal communication, Laframboise, November 5, 2009). Lang also clarifies that rather than just “a different word for gay,” “...the ‘berdache’/Two-Spirited roles are seen as manifestations of constructions of gender in North American cultures that differ from Western ways of defining and constructing gender.” (Lang, p.101) By reclaiming the word, and thus the epistemological underpinnings of gender construction, the term “two-spirit” is also a way to remind the larger Aboriginal community that traditionally there had always been a place for Two-Spirited people.

## **Conclusion**

*“People expect you to have all this information and context and wisdom but that is not true. You get such different perspectives when you talk to an Elder who lives on the reserve. My teaching and experience is influenced by the urban. We were colonized and had our culture beaten out of us. The church – the conservative, strict values, they still exist and you can see that within Elders too...they need to do their healing too.” – Sandra Laframboise*

Given the diversity of the populations (student, faculty and staff) in post secondary institutions, the historical, cultural and current experiences of Two-Spirited people could serve as a tangible example of how traditional knowledge and modern “rights language” and movements can support each other. This process can be incorporated not only into a variety of curriculums but also in terms of services offered and encouraged on campus and

in the larger communities. Too often when a social or political gap is exposed, the wound is left open – we hope to counter the violence and neglect Two-Spirited people have experienced by offering practical, educationally based approaches that can be incorporated in both community and tertiary educational institutions and processes.

Again, this is not simply theory – the evening news is full of stories of young people who feel they cannot “come home” (in the queer community, at their Reserves, with their families) because of a fear of physical and social abuse and isolation based on the completeness of who they are. There is a false belief that they need to choose between themselves as an Indigenous person or an LGBTQ person. Our aim is to demonstrate that this “choice” is an imposed choice – imposed by colonialism. But this unlearning and relearning traditional understanding of Two-Spirited requires working with Indigenous communities in a variety of ways – including asking Elders to reflect on their own traditional teachings. We look to respectfully engage community and Elders to unearth traditional teachings of Two-Spirited people. Our goal is to provide a means of using traditional culture to help change imposed colonial cultural repression and shame. But we are left with a pressing question – how do we engage communities, in a respectful and constructive way, with a topic and a people that is often silenced? We purposefully engage with this contentious question in order to suggest practical educational implications in formal and community based learning.

Indigenous people often say, ‘Our children and youth are our future.’ By extension, then, the future depends on the effectiveness of education. Education shapes our pathways of thinking, transmits values as well as facts, teaches language and social skills, helps release creative potential and determines productive capacities (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996, p.82).

## **APPENDIX: TANGIBLE IMPLICATIONS WITHIN EDUCATION SETTINGS**

Much of this article has focused on deconstructing and decolonizing much of the relationship between LGBTQ issues and Indigenous communities but we wanted to end in a constructive manner. Therefore, based on our own experience as well as in consultation with Elders, we have chosen to include five educational strategies for communities and post secondary educational settings; we offer these suggestions as people who are both involved in community based education and work as faculty in post-secondary institutions.

**1. Create courses in post secondary institutions that explore the traditional role of Two-Spirited people** in LGBTQ courses, Women and Gender Studies courses, Religion and Spirituality courses, First Nations Studies, Sociology and Anthropology courses (including research methods and ethics) in post secondary institutions.

**2. Working with Aboriginal communities to incorporate TK and IKS within Aboriginal groups and reclaiming roles in a non-LGBTQ specific setting.** We need to find ways to speak with Elders in a respectful way to bring up the existence and role of Two-Spirited people so they may better work with students/ Aboriginal groups at post secondary institutions.

**3. Creating an open space for ongoing cultural gatherings and practices so that old teachings can be shared and new meanings made.** Sandra Laframboise offered a very detailed suggestion, “We need healing social health conference. A gathering. A potlatch. Not just a place to do our beading but a place to sit and call out for all Two-Spirited people. We can do protocol with one another. We can sit for days and let people speak and not need to respond. There is wisdom in the collectiveness. Everyone is part of the solution. We need to come together and all heal the hurt as a group. What the urban has done. What previous generations have had to go through. We are always in survival mode. Now we

need to sit down and we can build a solid foundation.” “Our hurt is our isolation, the segregation, not coming together, there’s more than bars – there has to be more than bars.”

**4. Create new research and research models** – In doing research for this paper, we were only able to locate three books and one documentary within the library at the First Nations House of Learning – a library at the University of British Columbia (UBC) focused on Aboriginal studies. This absence speaks loudly. There needs to be more engagement and more scholarly literature. Again, Laframboise, who is trained as a psychiatric nurse, offers a tangible suggestion:

“I went to UBC and I went to the Long House and I asked UBC to take up a project with students. To have students go in teams of two – one straight, one two spirited, and to go into the communities and ask “is there anyone who is “different” on the reserve? How are they treated? Do you nurture the difference or do you shun it. Not to analyze the information but to collect it. And not just interviews but photos. We need to collect the anecdotal evidence. This is the approach that is needed. We need to be present but not push it. This is what makes it ok to talk about. This is what happened in Kamloops with Shushwap we have worked there for so long and just now – just now things are changing. Now – [just] now we can talk a bit about AIDS.”

## **5. Community education within the LGBTQ community for new strategies of empowerment**

Too often gender and sexuality become equated simply with whom one is attracted to. What is obvious from the work coming out of the Two-Spirited community is a means of bringing together many identities. This approach can be good for all people – particularly the incorporation of spiritual, intellectual, emotional and physical well being. Two-Spirited people offer much to the history of the larger LGBTQ presence in various histories as well.



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