N'tacimowin inna nah'

Our Coming In Stories

ALEX WILSON

Cette femme "two-spirit" admet que la perception et l'expression de son identité sont très différentes de ce qui prévaut dans les autres cultures canadiennes, et elle en est reconnaissante car elle est certaine qu'une Identité "two spirit" est donneuse de pouvoir. Cet article présente les résultats d'une recherche quantitative qui a exploré la question de ce que l'identité veut dire à d'autre peuple "two spirit" et comment ce pouvoir identitaire apparaît dans un contexte de racisme, d'homophobie et de sexisme qui est connu de plusieurs.

My family is from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, a community several hours north of Winnipeg. The Swampy Cree dialect of our community has no word for homosexual and no gender specific pronouns.[1] Rather than dividing the world into female and male, or making linguistic distinctions based on sexual characteristics or anatomy, we distinguish between what is animate and what is inanimate. Living creatures, animate objects, and actions are understood to have a spiritual purpose (Ahenakew). Our language and culture are rooted in this fundamental truth: that every living creature and everything that acts in and on this world is spiritually meaningful.

This understanding is reiterated in the term "two-spirit," a self-descriptor used by many Cree and other Aboriginal lesbian, gay, bi, and trans people. When we say that we are two-spirit, we are acknowledging that we are spiritually meaningful people. Two-spirit identity may encompass all aspects of who we are, including our culture, sexuality, gender, spirituality, community, and relationship to the land.

As a two-spirit woman, I know that an understanding and expression of my own identity is very different from those that prevail in most other Canadian cultures and I am very grateful for this. For me, two-spirit identity is empowering. As an educator and psychologist, I wanted to learn more about what our identity means to other two-spirit people and how this empowered identity appears within the context of the sustained racism, homophobia, and sexism that most of us have experienced. This article presents findings from a qualitative research project that explored those questions.

"Make Sure You Get Your Words Right"

The Shoshone two-spirit writer Clyde Hall entitled his contribution to an anthropological collection about two-spirit people: "You anthropologists make sure you get your words right" (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 272). This admonishment is long overdue. Anthropologists and gay historians have produced a substantial body of work on sexuality and gender in Indigenous North American communities (Angelino and Shedd; Callender and Kochems; Driver; Gutierrez; Jacobs; Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang; Lang 1996, 1998; Lewis; Parsons; Roscoe 1987, 1991; Simms; Steffenson; Thompson; Balboa, Chanca, Castillo, and Las Casas in Trexler; Williams). While this work has formed the basis of a critique of Western cultural assumptions about sexuality and gender, it has only rarely focused on or been informed by the lives of contemporary two-spirit people (Wilson 1996). Similarly, while this work may have helped to create a more comfortable and safe living space for non-Aboriginal lesbian, gay, bi, and trans people,[2] only a few of these authors appear to have thought about how their work might contribute to the well-being of contemporary two-spirit and other Aboriginal people.[3]

Two-spirit people have also been underserved by other social science disciplines, which historically viewed gender, sexual, and racial identity as discrete developmental strands (Wilson 1996). Feminist researchers have examined ways in which cultural constructions of the self are produced (Gever), the multilayered texture of identity for women of colour (Etter-Lewis), and conscious community identity as a liberation strategy (Robinson and Ward; Salazar). This proxy literature may help us work through some of the theoretic density of two-spirit identity. However, if we want to understand the ways in which two-spirit identity

effects self-discovery, political resistance, and social change for Aboriginal people and communities, we need to talk to two-spirit people (Keating 1993).

Indigenous Research Methodology

The research described here began as an exploration of the question, "How does the empowered identity of a two-spirit person appear within the context of sustained homophobia, sexism, and racism?" This question could only be answered by two-spirit people and that, if I wanted them to share their knowledge and experiences, I needed to work in ways that were congruous with their values, ethics, and practices.

The design and methodology of this research were guided by teachings from Cree and Ojibway cultures, the communities to which most of the research participants belong. These principles, which include the communality of knowledge (knowledge does not belong to any one individual), relational accountability (we are accountable to each other for everything that we do), reciprocity (we give back to our communities and each other), and holism (we must care for all of being, including the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual elements), have informed and guided other Aboriginal scholars' research design[4] (Cardinal; Hermes; Martin; Meyer; Native Women's Research Project; Steinhauer 1997; Steinhauer, E. 2003; Weber-Pillwax 2001, 2003; Wilson 1996, 2000, 2001; Wilson, S. 2004).

Research activities also incorporated community research protocols developed by Aboriginal community members in Manitoba (Graveline, Wilson, and Wastasecoot). These protocols include accountability, respect for and adherence to an Aboriginal worldview, relationship building, and giving back to the community. Respect for an Aboriginal worldview requires a researcher to respect the integrity and authenticity of Aboriginal peoples' knowledge, experience, understandings, and voice. I sought to preserve the authority of Aboriginal voices by inviting two-spirit community members to participate in personal interviews and group discussions and collaborate in all stages of the research process, from data collection through analysis to the presentation of findings.

Research activities were based in Northern Manitoba and in Winnipeg. Eight people who identify as two-spirit and who were willing to reflect on and share their experiences joined me for individual open-ended and unstructured interviews and group discussions. The participants, who ranged from eighteen to fifty plus years of age and represented a continuum of gender identities, were encouraged to explore and share in detail their lived experiences as two-spirit people. The information they shared was recorded and then analyzed using a voice-centred relational method. As the data was reread and discussed, I recognized a shared narrative arc in the participants' stories. Early in their lives, they had been relatively comfortable with who they were. Around or soon after they reached school age, their sense of self began to fragment and they responded by cutting themselves loose in some sense. Eventually, a more integrated sense of self began to return and, finally, they came into their identities as two-spirit people.

Beginning Together

At the start of our first meetings, participants were asked to introduce themselves in whatever way they were comfortable. In addition to their name, almost every participant also mentioned their home community and/or the First Nation to which they belonged. Others offered more detail. For example, after stating her name, one participant then identified the First Nation community in which she was born and the communities from which each of her parents came. She offered her family clan name and identified the home community of her partner. Introductions such as these made it clear that participants' identities extended well beyond any individuated sense of self. They revealed identities in which their sexualities, families, histories, communities, place, and spiritualities are inseparable from each other and understood in the context of their whole lives.

Many of the participants grew up in northern bush communities. As children in these and other small and isolated communities, they relied heavily on creativity and imagination in play, with activities that reflected a close connection to family and place. They played with siblings and cousins and neighbours, at family and friends' homes, in the bush, acting out their own plays or playing doctor, chef, house, and Sasquatch. As children, many participants were able to slip unchallenged across, between, and along gender boundaries. These same participants, however, were later reined in for gender trangressions:

> *I just liked playing [games] with girls. I had what could be called a "girlfriend" at 13 but somehow I didn't see myself as a lesbian or even attracted to girls. I just saw it as affection.… I didn't even know there was a word for it until high school. But what the hell was a "les-be-friends" anyway?*

Fragmentation

While early in their lives, participants had found comfort and safety grounded in family and place, there also came a time when those things began to fracture. Although only two participants had attended residential schools, each referred to the devastating impacts that residential schools have had on their lives, families, and communities. Many of us have heard stories about residential schools, but it is easy to forget how totalizing that experience was:

> *… The first thing they did was divide us by boy/girl. Girl go this way, boy go this way. Girl wear pinafores. Boy*

wear pants. All hair cut…. I didn't really know which side to go to. I just knew that I wanted to be with my sisters and my brother. I had never worn a dress before so I went with my brother…. It was like a little factory—one priest shaved my head while the other tore off my clothes. I was so scared. I covered my area. It didn't take long for them to notice…. That was my first beating.

The schools were designed to strip Aboriginal children of their language, spirituality, and any other connections to their culture, community, or family. Children at the schools did not get to learn the simple daily "how-to" of affection, caring, communication, and love—lessons that our families and communities ordinarily provide.

As one woman who had not attended the schools noted, "All the residential school shit was repeated on [us]!" Some participants talked about being sexually, emotionally, and/or culturally abused by family members and others and their own struggles with depression, anger, and self-destructive behaviours. As they moved towards their teens and their racial, sexual, and gendered identity became more apparent, participants had typically encountered racism, homophobia, and sexism. For some, this began in their family homes. One light-haired, blue-eyed participant was teased by older siblings who suggested she was not her father's child. Another participant described how their family life changed when their mother remarried:

A white man raised us. He did not know or care about Aboriginal people, nor did he encourage us to retain our culture. We had a very abusive and rigid upbringing. We weren't allowed to speak Cree and soon forgot it. As my siblings got older they were systematically driven from the house. So eventually I alone had to deal with the violence and [my parents'] alcoholism on a daily basis…. I remember often feeling awkward and uncomfortable around most people. I never knew what to say or how to act…. I didn't know why I felt so different. I never wanted to do what other girls were doing. It just didn't interest me…. Boys were incredibly boring and might as well have been from another planet…. And the rules of my life at school or home or church were baffling. I just didn't feel like I fit anywhere.

For many participants, the sustained experience of racism, homophobia, and sexism separated them from their family and community and diminished their belief and confidence in who they were and their place in their worlds:

I remember thinking that [gay] was a dirty word because everyone around me said it was. I took a long time to even say and admit that I was gay. And when I did, I still had lingering thoughts on the subject…. Nno matter what I did to try and prevent being gay, I was very recognized from others that I was.

I knew I was gay but … I wanted to fit in with my family and friends. It was not until I was thirty-five that I started to live my gay life for myself. This was after both my parents passed away…. I denied them knowing who the real me was and is.

In my community, you are the butt of all jokes. And they would tease me about setting me up with the rubbies in the community. That is what really turned me away from myself because I didn't want to be made fun of. I didn't want people to look at me differently or treat me differently.

As children, they relied heavily on creativity and imagination in play, with activities that reflected a close connection to family and place…. Many were able to slip unchallenged across, between, and along gender boundaries. However, they were later reined in for gender trangressions.

Some inscribed their fractured sense of self on their skin: "I have a little row of scars on my arm from cuts because of all this," said one participant. Another lamented, "I reached the point where I was stifled. I could not move. I cut myself. Nothing I did made sense anymore. I knew I was on the wrong track." Others numbed themselves with alcohol and drugs. One related that, "The first time I got drunk I was eight and starting drinking with my mother regularly by fourteen. By seventeen, I was drinking and taking drugs on a weekly basis with my friends or at home." Turning thirteen proved traumatic for another participant who drank, took drugs, and smoked for the first time: "I remember crying and crying. I was all fucked up—not a pretty sight."

Cutting Loose

As a first step towards reclaiming an integrated identity, the participants had looked for ways to escape and get safe. Some found this within their home communities. Some had immersed themselves in creative activities like writing or music. Some had found support networks. Most, however, did not feel safe enough to actively and

openly explore their sexuality until they had left their communities. One participant described the aftermath of her move to the city: "I started to really think and feel things about my sexual identity. I thought about all the ramifications and had all the same doubts, denial, fears, anger, acceptance, and finally joy." While it does not seem unusual for Aboriginal people who are gay to be overwhelmed by their struggle to find a place to comfortably be themselves in the unfamiliar culture of a new city, it may also be a place where they find important supports and opportunities to explore their identity.

they have no answer or say, "because that is the way it has always been done," run away from them.

My spirituality is a cross between the Bible and Native spirituality…. You can believe in some aspects [of the Bible] but not let it run you. On a spiritual side, I have come to acknowledge that we are a very powerful people. History states that we had our ways of living in harmony with the land. It makes sense to me and yet, that Bible influence will always be there to remind me of where I grew up.

In the narratives of two-spirit people, "coming in" is not a declaration or an announcement. Rather, it is an affirmation of interdependent identity: an Aboriginal person who is GLBT comes to understand their relationship to and place and value in their own family, community, culture, history and present-day world.

Coming Together: Finding Our Selves Again

Several participants described points in their lives when they recognized their own ability to interpret their experiences and choose their identity. In one group discussion, a participant offered this response to another person's description of their confusion about identity:

I think we all went through that. It sucks! And it still does, but we have to try to remove those chains—kind of like Black people had to—and admit it, say it: We are the only ones that enslave us now.

Many participants came to this recognition with guidance and support from other people. Participants described how their own understandings of sexuality, gender, spirituality, and "traditional" culture emerged and merged:

When I first came out, I came out as a lesbian, I thought I had to "pick a side."…That was okay for a while. I was comfortable with having relationships with women. But the more emotionally/mentally/spiritually/physically healthy and confident I became, the more I recognized that I was also attracted to men—which is not to insinuate healthy equals straight but that I became more aware of myself and who I am.

When I started learning about Aboriginal spirituality it all seemed so "mystical." There was a sacredness that seemed so much more pure…. I had a high school teacher who also became my traditional teacher. He explained that it is not just that things are done, but also how and why. He always encouraged me to question and debate…. He said if ever you ask someone why and

Assuming control of their experiences and identity (particularly with respect to their sexuality and spirituality) empowered participants and brought them closer to an integrated sense of self. So too has their naming. The self-descriptor "two-spirit' clearly resonates for participants, drawing together the cultural, sexual, spiritual, and historic aspects of their identities:

I first heard the term during a two-spirit gathering…. At the time I was about two years into my coming out process, very comfortable with it. But I was really searching for how my culture fit into the queer culture. I didn't see myself anywhere in the pride marches, demonstrations, gay scene, or support groups. So when I heard our own histories around being gay I was thrilled. It just made sense to me that we would have a place, a purpose in our nations…. I identify with it more than any other label, like bi-sexual, which is too centred on sex…. I am more than that…. Two-spiritness [is] someone who has both masculine and feminine energies rather than man and woman spirits. It may be semantics but to me the words "man" and "woman" are separate and opposite from one another therefore it suggests gender roles and rules … a very white, middle-class, Christian construct—man is aggressively in charge and women is a passive follower. Not very cultural as our nations tended to be balanced. But when you say masculine and feminine energies that could mean anyone or anything.

Being two-spirited is an identity that I have to acknowledge on a personal level. I know I am and I can say to myself that I am…. To my knowledge, there was no Cree word for gay…. Not understanding gays and lesbians is something we are struggling with. But we are getting better at it…. I love telling others about the history of

our people. I would say that I am gay.… To be specific though, I would also mention that I am two-spirited. I think that it's important to let others know that there is the term.… I first heard of the term in 1997 when I started coming to the Pride parades.… I am proud to be a First Nations person; it was kind of like icing on a cake to know that we had our own identity within an identity.

Coming-in

> … On the wall of the main cabin a sign was posted: it said, "Pow-wow, Saturday night." When I read it, I felt dizzy, overwhelmed by my imagining what the dance might be. Two-spirit people dancing. I have lived with dreams of dancing, dreams where I spin around, picking up my feet. I have many feathers on my arms and on my body and I know all the steps. I turn into an eagle. Arms extended, I lift off the ground and begin to fly around in big circles. Would this be my chance? I waited patiently for Saturday night to come, listening.…When the drumming started, I was sitting still, listening and watching...And then a blur flew by me and landed inside the circle of dancers that had formed.… It was a two-spirit dancing as it should be. After that, more two-spirits drifted into the circle. I sat and watched, my eyes edged with tears. I knew my ancestors were with me; I had invited them. We sat and watched all night, proud of our sisters and brothers, yet jealous of their bravery. The time for the last song came. Everybody had to dance. I entered the circle, feeling the drumbeat in my heart. The songs came back to me. I circled the dance area, and in my most humble moment, with the permission of my ancestors, my eleven-year-old two-spirit steps returned to me.… (Wilson 1996: 316)

As my friend Wayne Badwound said, "Coming in"—"that's what two-spirit people do." As a final step toward the development of their identities as two-spirit people, participants began to take responsibility for and control of the meaning of their own experiences and identities. Their reflections on sexual identity, traditional culture and spirituality revealed that rather than trying to fit themselves into an established identity, they were embracing and developing identities that fit who they are, including two-spirit identity. Participants described the fit between two-spirit identity and their own understandings of the distinct cultures, histories and traditional knowledges of Aboriginal peoples. Two-spirit identity is one that reflects Aboriginal peoples' process of "coming in" to an empowered identity that integrates their sexuality, culture, gender and all other aspects of who they understand and know themselves to be.

As the two-spirit people who participated in this research make clear, their understanding of sexuality is inseparable from their culture and socio-historical position. For two-spirit people, who typically live with sustained racism, homophobia and sexism, the process of "coming in" to their identity is likely to be very different from the conventional "coming out" story circulated in mainstream Canadian (GLBT) culture. In these narratives, "coming out" is typically a declaration of an independent identity: an GLBT person musters their courage and, anticipating conflict, announces their sexuality to a friend or family member—at the risk of being met with anger, resistance, violence or flat-out rejection or abandonment. In the narratives of two-spirit people, however, "coming in" is not a declaration or an announcement. Rather, it is an affirmation of interdependent identity: an Aboriginal person who is GLBT comes to understand their relationship to and place and value in their own family, community, culture, history and present-day world. "Coming in" is not a declaration or an announcement; it is simply presenting oneself and being fully present as an Aboriginal person who is GLBT.

The two-spirit people who collaborated in this project described times when they felt grounded and whole and stated what their identity means to them:

I feel like I am really a part of the circle, like I belong to something bigger … to the Great Mystery.

It is a Mystery or Creator or whatever, but things seem to make sense once I found the two-spirit community. It was and is healing. Two-spirit is healing.

Things started to clear.… I realized that it wasn't about colonization and oppression.… It wasn't about measuring up and comparing and not being good enough or smart enough.… It wasn't about wasn'ts.… It is about our strength, our land…our hearts.

The final word goes to a participant who more often than not preferred to listen and observe during our discussions, but closed our last group meeting with this statement:

It has taken me a long time to see that I am valuable. Now that I see it and feel it, everything seems possible. I looked to so many places by travelling and even dating "exotic" people. But here the answer was right within me, and the answer is in our communities. We are our communities and they are us. Being two-spirited means I am always at home.

Conclusion

The narrative arc of these stories of two-spirit people is really about journeying along a circular path. It is our nature to be whole and to be together. We are born into a circle of family, community, living creatures, and the land. Our encounters with racism, homophobia, and sexism may disturb our balance and we sometimes lose our place in the circle. For those of us who lose our place, our traditions, history, memories, and collective experi-

ence of this world will still guide us. Two-spirit identity is about circling back to where we belong, reclaiming, reinventing, and redefining our beginnings, our roots, our communities, our support systems, and our collective and individual selves. We "come-in."

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[1]The Cree **name** *Aayahkwew* was used by anthropologist D. Mandelbaum to describe a Plains Cree person who seemed to defy western gender roles.

[2]For example, Williams (1996) argues that one anthropologist's sexual experiences in the field privileged him with information about "Indigenous" sexual practices that can now be incorporated into mainstream safe-sex literature for gay men.

[3]For example, in articles included in *Out in the Field* (Lewin and Leap) none of the anthropologists who had conducted research with two-spirit people described ways they had contributed positively to the communities in which they had conducted research—none, that is, other than Williams, who described himself as a "status symbol" for the Mayan man who was both his lover and his informant.

[4]Specific Indigenous scholars have identified respect, reciprocity, and responsibility as three basic principles of Indigenous research methodology.

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PATRICIA MONTURE

Kohkum would be Mad at me

kohkum would be mad at me
if she were still here.
for dying my hair
hiding the gray
(hey, I'm not 50 yet)
wearing make-up
and fancy clothes.
supposed to love who you are
and how the Creator made you.
not supposed to try and change that.

Kohkum would be mad at me
if she were still here.

kohkum never had to live with
white people
least not how I have live with white people.
i have them every day, all day,
at work.
(maybe I have it wrong, maybe they got me)
kohkum just had the indian agent
telling her what to do
every now and again
reserve used to be refuge
(maybe it still is)

but, see
I listened to what the white folk told
get an education
got me a job
in a fancy university

I hide my hair and the evidence
of gray injun wisdom.
I hide my face, behind a mask
of revlon "easy, breezy, beautiful"

I hide.
(Or maybe, I just like "war paint")

Patricia Monture's poetry appears earlier in this volume.