



Since the coming of the Anglo-Europeans beginning in the fifteenth century, the fragile web of identity that long held tribal people secure has gradually been weakened and torn. But the oral tradition has prevented the complete destruction of the web, the ultimate disruption of tribal ways. The oral tradition is vital; it heals itself and the tribal web by adapting to the flow of the present while never relinquishing to the past.

Paula Gunn Allen, *the Sacred Hoop* 45

Two Spirit Women

We are Aboriginal women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer or other gendered. We like to define ourselves and we don't want to give up any aspect of who we are to do that. 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 a part of the Aboriginal community. It is only when we are strong in both our Aboriginal roots - the blood that runs through our veins - and our sexual diversity that our Aboriginal communities will be strong and healthy again.

Two Spirit women have a long cultural history in most Aboriginal Tribes on this continent that we call Turtle Island. Two Spirit people were visionaries, history keepers, storytellers, medicine people, artisans and specialized crafts people, landowners, heads of families and communities, mothers and caregivers, leaders and followers, hunters and warriors. Two Spirit women were involved in every aspect of daily living and survival and cherished as family members and respected as gifts from the Creator.

Our colonizers tried to erase our cultural heritage and existence from our memory and history, but as renowned Aboriginal Scholar, Paula Gunn Allen states, "Simple reason dictates that lesbians did exist widely in tribal cultures for they exist now" (Gunn Allen 255). We are here and we are now finding those roots are long and strong behind us.

Aboriginal Women and our Identity

European contact had a huge impact on Aboriginal People and their descendants. The reservation system and the residential school system starting in the late 1880's in Canada (and in the United States) were the biggest tools used to change and influence Aboriginal people and culture.

Who we are today as Aboriginal women and as Two Spirit women is greatly impacted by our history. If we do not know our history, our sense of identity is even more impacted by this loss. We have been colonized in a specific way: to take equality and harmony away from Aboriginal Peoples. They wanted to separate the men and the women in decision making and disrupt the natural harmony between the land and the Peoples. They tried to replace our values and ways with alien values that demonized our ways of life and cultural practices. The legacy of their oppression can be seen in Aboriginal women's lives across the continent.



The Residential Schools took the children out of the living culture and replaced it with brutality. The Reservation system took Aboriginal People off of the land and traditional family and/or clan based territories and replaced it with a sexist social order dependent on government handouts. “Native women do share historic oppression, but the cultural, racial, and economic variations among Native women render any sort of national coalition virtually impossible. Our needs and wants may be similar, but they are not the same” (Mihuesuah xix-xxx).



Aboriginal women, including Two Spirit women, have been impacted by the loss of parenting teachings that would have been learned while living with extended families. The residential school experience was deliberate in the strategy to civilize Aboriginal people and convert them to Christian and urban living. In our hearts, we resisted. As mothers, we resisted. If Aboriginal women “have nothing else in common, we share the experience of being different from (and often fundamentally opposed to) the dominant culture, which has a significant impact on our ability to mother as we see fit, according to our own values, and traditions” (Lavell-Harvard 2).

We understand that it takes a community to raise a child and that communities could mean different things. “Community...can mean those who are of similar clan and Spirit; those who are encompassed by a particular Spirit-being are members of a community...So it was not impossible that members of a community could have been a number of women who ‘belonged’ to a given medicine society or who were alike in that they shared consciousness of a certain Spirit” (Gunn Allen 252). Such concepts were not acceptable to the Church who imposed their own worldview upon us.

Many Aboriginal women who were raised by non-Native adoptive or foster families in what is now known as the 60’s scoop (which actually continued through to the 90’s as well). It was coined the 60’s scoop because that is when the highest number of children were adopted or fostered out of Aboriginal communities. Thousands of Aboriginal children were taken out of Aboriginal homes and placed in non-Aboriginal homes in Canada, the United States and even Europe. “[I]n many cases where consent was not given, that government authorities and social workers acted under the colonialistic assumption that (N)ative people were culturally inferior and unable to adequately provide for the need of the children”(Kimelman). Many of the children are now grown and find it difficult to have a sense of identity, not being white like their ‘families’ and not being ‘Native’ among the Natives because they did not grow up with them and do not know the language and cultural nuances(Hall).

Thus, when the residential school era ended, the government took the next generations of children away from their communities entirely and they would not return until their adulthood, if ever. Many Two Spirit women who are adoptees or fostered may not only feel disconnected from their families for being two spirited, but they may have to also come out to their birth families and communities when they are reunited, adding to their stress. For biracial children who did not even know they were Aboriginal, finding out their heritage can be a shock, a blessing, or a burden.



Understanding our colonized past and present will help us create a stronger identity for who we are as Two Spirit women and also who we are as communities and Nations of People. Having compassion for each other and recognizing that we share this oppression may help to solidify that identity.

But who were Two Spirit Women before Contact?

We are currently searching for who we were before the influence of non-Aboriginal culture as Two Spirit Women. Not so that we can change and become that again – it would be impossible in our daily lives without the old culture to support it – but so that we can know the three things that contribute to our identity today: first, blood memory of who we are, and hearing stories of our past will be a direct link to that; second, knowing our colonization as it continues to shape our lives through the world and country that we live in; and third, our personal experiences that have and continue to shape who we are. All three things help shape our identity whether we know it or not, and learning as much about our past and history gives us an understanding of how our families have come to be the way they are and where we fit in the fabric of our communities - whether that experience has been in our communities, away from our communities, with family or not. Everyone's personal experience is individual and it is our unique experiences that make our community stronger when we come together.



1. Osch-Tisch and the Other Magpie

When we try to define or understand Aboriginal women we often use relative language to do so. A woman is defined by who she marries or her role as a mother or aunt in the community. It is known that in some cultures (Anishnawbe specifically) that a woman who married a man, had children and then lost her husband (by an accident or death), may choose to remarry or not. It does not reflect badly on her if she did not remarry because an Anishnawbe woman was not entirely dependant on a man for survival (Lang 269). Arranged marriages could still take place for economic or social reasons which would create familial ties that could exist beyond the marriage, and/or beyond monogamy. She may have chosen to partner with another woman and they would raise children on their own hunting and trapping in the woodlands, and it would be tolerated, if not accepted, because they would not be a burden to anyone around them.

“According to ethnographers’ accounts, among the tribes there were women warriors, women leaders, women shamans, women husbands, but whether any of these were lesbians is seldom mentioned. On the few occasions lesbianism is referred to, it is with regard to a specific individual who is noted because she is a lesbian” (Gunn Allen 245).

Remember that white anthropologists were not as interested in women as much as men. They missed a lot of ‘sisterhood’ that was going on.

Many Aboriginal cultures had social roles for men and women that were clearly defined and restricted. Meaning that as a ‘career’ a woman might not hunt regularly for large game as men do, but she could hunt to feed her family if she had to. Thus, “female warriors were generally women who strove for masculine (social roles) without giving up their role in gender status”(Lang 303).

Each culture had a specific word or designation for those who crossed gender roles or who held special status in their communities. A few examples are agokwe-nini in Ojibwe, maroni noho in Paiute and hwame among the Mohave. Certain spiritual roles were acknowledged in some cultures that were more complex to accommodate this. “Examples of a Tolowa woman who ‘purchased a wife and lived with her’ and of a female shaman who exhibited ‘similar proclivities’ show that some same-sex partnerships were not necessarily accompanied by a reclassification of gender status. At least this shaman continued with her occupation, which is Tolowa society was mainly open to women and women-men(Lang 274).

Aboriginal women were the backbone of every Aboriginal culture doing most of the labour for survival (getting water, snaring smaller game, storing food, growing food, gathering food, curing hides, making clothes, carrying loads while moving, raising children, etc), and so it is not surprising that in some cultures, a man’s community standing relied upon his wife. This allowed for a way of life for women who did not want to marry men.

They could become warriors and hunters and provide for their own family if they wanted, because they could already do most of the work(Lang 269). “In traditional cultures the ‘stay at home mom’ would have been a very cold and hungry woman”(Lavell-Harvard and Corbiere Lavell 5).

Thus, same sex relationships were acknowledged in some cases, but gender status and role in their community would have been more important to her, her family and the community and Nation.

Two Stories Two Lives:

Woman Chief (Crow) and Running Eagle(Piegan) mid 1800’s

Both, at the young age of 10 years old showed an interest in learning men’s activities and were supported by their fathers. They both proved that they were good at war, and Woman Chief’s acts were so daring that she was invited into the war council meetings, and in the circle of heads of families. She ranked third in a group of 160 lodges. Running Eagle’s first war escapade lead to a Scalp dance to be held in her honour, and a subsequent battle earned her a man’s name – the only woman in their known history to be given one. She was also invited into the Brave’s society. Neither woman married men and Running Eagle had a vision in which she was given supernatural powers and told that she could not marry a man.

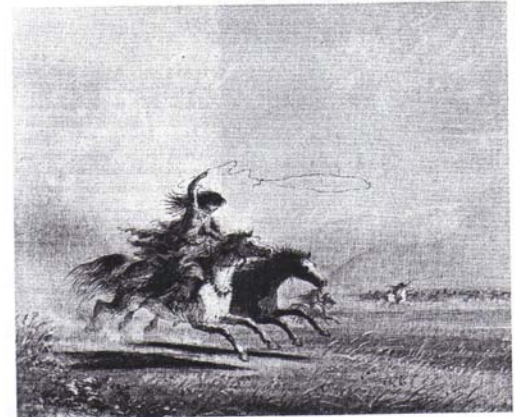


PLATE 8. Shoshone woman roping a horse. Painted by Alfred Jacob Miller, 1837; Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland.

2. Shoshoni Woman hunting on horseback

Running Eagle differed in that she wore men’s clothing and her only goal was the honour that she won in war, where she eventually came to her death. Running Eagle did take a wife to help her provide for her family. Woman Chief on the other hand, used her early successes in war to her advantage. The horses she stole in war and the many hides she got while hunting, made her wealthy, and she married four women to help manage her lifestyle. She was also occupied as a trader. All of these factors reinforced her status as a chief.

Because of Running Eagle’s vision, she was given the status of a medicine person, or holy person. It is likely that Woman Chief was also accorded supernatural abilities. In doing so, they were legitimate on many levels in and among their peoples and respected in their roles as such (Lang 277-8). It cannot be underestimated how important that was. Having a vision of this life meant that no one could interfere with their choices and lifestyle and actually validated them and gave them the respect and awe of their People.



3. Women hunting bison on horseback

Social Roles and Visionaries

There are more documented accounts of Two Spirit Women’s lives being found all of the time. We should remember that non-Aboriginal anthropologists were seeing them through a certain lens and made assumptions about what determined what is different, and how clothing and activity, etc, played a role in recognizing it.

Examples follow:

- A “few Santee Dakota females hunted bison on horseback and went on the warpath”(Lang 275). Another “Klamath man-woman...’lived like a man’ and married a woman. When this woman died after many years, the man-woman carried out the mourning ritual customary for men, and like a man, wore a belt made of bark” (Lang 275).
- Nootka ‘warrior women’ went to war on account of special visions”(Lang 275).
- Achomawi men-women kept their feminine clothing, but they performed exclusively men’s work and cohabited with women...The female partners took over the feminine areas of the sexual-gendered division of labour (Lang 273).
- Wintu...in one local group a female in women’s clothing performed men’s work and lived together with a woman (Lang 273).
- As children, Ingalik ‘men pretenders’ usually refused to learn women’s skills and their fathers looked after them and taught them men’s tasks...As adults, they assumed the social role of a man completely, but they only rarely married women (Lang 273). Because the harsh climate survival of the family group relies on every individual, and these men pretenders were important when there were too many women and not enough hunters. It was more important for the family group to have hunters than many wives, as they would need as many people procuring meat as possible (Jacobs, Thomas and Lang 267).
- Among the Paiute, Mohave, and Quinault, men-women wore men’s clothes and, as in some Nevada Shohoni groups, did men’s work and married women. One Quinault man-woman bore a man’s name(Lang 274).
- Some Paiute maroni noho carried out gender role change, but remained single, just like some Shononi tangowaipi(Lang 274).
- As girls, Mohave hwame played with boys, refused to learn women’s work, and demanded a loin-cloth instead of a women’s skirt. As adults they were regarded as excellent providers, and they adopted masculine role components, such as taboo against sex when their wives were menstruating or were pregnant; the wives generally did not get pregnant from the hwame, but rather from former husbands or from male lovers(Lang 274).

“The tribes were distinct social groups; but many had patterns that did not use sexual constraint as a means of social control. Within such systems, individual action was believed to be directed by Spirits (through dreams, visions, direct encounter, or possession of power objects such as stones, shells, masks, or fetishes). In this context it is quite possible that lesbianism was practiced rather commonly, as long as the individuals cooperated with the larger social customs. Women were generally constrained to have children, but in many tribes, childbearing meant empowerment. It was the passport to maturity and inclusion in woman-culture. An important point is that women who did not have children because of constitutional, personal or Spirit-directed disinclination had other ways to experience Spirit instruction and stabilization, to exercise power, and to be mothers.”(Gunn Allen 250-1)

Not all of these women or men-women made complete gender role changes. But in all of these stories, only those women who made some gender role change were able to take wives in the social systems of the past. There was always a balance between male and female gender social roles in relationships that were strictly maintained. A man-woman who did men’s tasks would marry a woman who preformed women’s social roles. And consequently, a woman-man who did mainly women’s roles and activities and lived like a woman could

marry a man who did male activities. Most Aboriginal cultures strive for balance and these relationships were a balance of the male and female social roles as they complimented one another.

Modern Two Spirit Women

We are Aboriginal women who identify as one who loves other women, lesbian, bisexual, transgender women or other spirited. The younger generation might use terms such as gender bender, queer or boi. As Paula Gunn Allen says,

“The modern lesbian sees herself as distinct from ‘society’. She may be prone to believe herself somehow out of sync with ‘normal’ women and often suffers great anguish at perceived differences. And 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 nonhuman entities, as were all Indian pursuits, and was therefore acceptable and respectable (albeit occasionally terrifying) to others in her tribe.” (255)

Thus, we do not always have the luxury of our cultural history to protect us. We likely have grown up in very homophobic communities, whether that was on a reservation, in a rural community or big city.

Two spirit people often move from our homes and the communities where we spent our childhoods. Perhaps we never go back.... We are constantly searching, changing, tasting, learning, teaching.

~Ariel



No family support ever. It was my friends, I think all three times. And people who have become my family over the years. I have been in a foster family for a long time and as soon as they found out that I was two spirited, they all freaked out, so I wrote them off on that. Completely. Because that's how they were. Really homophobic.

~Elaine

Homophobia exists today among Aboriginal People because of our colonization. Aboriginal People learned at residential schools to hate or hide our own cultures 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 understandings of sex and sexualities.



I was 24 when I came out officially. It was actually a long process for me, because of that fact that I had some childhood trauma dealing with sexual abuse from my adoptive father and adoptive sister, and because of that it was hard for me to kind of distinguish if I was actually truly having feelings for the same sex, or it was just something that was whatever and whatnot and as the years progressed.

~Jen

Homophobia in our communities takes it toll. “Having a different sexual orientation or gender identity doesn’t in itself cause one to have more health problems, but the homophobia many GLBT people experience in their lifetime certainly has an enormous impact on their health and wellness(CRHC 4). “Many GLBT people’s health problems, smoking, abusing drugs and alcohol, are related to the fact that they are trying to cope with the stress caused by the impact of homophobia and heterosexism: ignorance, social isolation, rejection, and feelings of self-hatred (CRHC 4). “Studies suggest that the cost of homophobia in Canada is at least \$8 billion a year and that at least 5500 lives are lost prematurely each year because of homophobia”(CRHC 5).

Many Two Spirit people leave their home communities at a young age to escape this homophobia which can become abusive and turn into gay bashing. They are undereducated and under prepared for what living in a bigger city requires to be safe from social predators and things like HIV infection (O’Brien-Teengs and Travers 21-23).

When Two Spirit people reach the city, they may still experience homophobia in the city. Many agencies are starting to adopt non-discrimination policies and we hope that every Aboriginal agency will implement one that includes our sexual diversities as well.



An example of a non-discrimination policy for an Agency:

There shall be no discrimination, oral or written, expressed or implied, by members of the staff or any Board committee associated with employee relations with respect to either an applicant for employment or an employee by reason of age, marital status, number of dependents, political affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, colour, ethnic background, creed citizenship, physical and/or mental handicap, membership in a collective bargaining unit or HIV status by any other factor that is a violation of fundamental human rights.

For Drop-in:

This is a safe space where every person’s human rights are respected. People who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgendered, transsexual, 2-Spirited, questioning, friends and allies are treated with dignity and respect and are welcomed and supported.



Internalized homophobia occurs when we as Two Spirit women have absorbed the homophobic culture that we were raised in and don't like how we are and who our spirits fall in love with. We may create a surface personality, but there are a lot of feelings that we have that we will not tell anyone or let anyone know about. It may be years for a woman to become comfortable in being Two Spirited. Having an understanding of Two Spirit women of the past may help alleviate these feelings. Family support or lack of is also a huge factor in self-acceptance. "(Internalized homophobia is often related to GLBT youth and adults having low self-esteem, experiencing depression and having suicidal thoughts and tendencies. Many GLBT won't seek help and support because they are ashamed of what they feel and are afraid of people's reaction, health-care providers included)"(CRHC 4).

I think, my impression right now is that everyone is underground. Especially if you are well to do...one of the board members (of a Native agency) is a two spirited woman, but you don't see her here around the ...office, do you? We don't see her volunteering her time or helping us raise money or awareness...yeah, it's disappointing. There is another woman that I saw at a woman's dance. I think she nearly had a heart attack when she saw me at a woman's dance, and she was just sort of like, Hi, and I was the one trying to go over to her, and she was like, you know, I didn't corner her or anything, but she looked very uncomfortable, and she walked away. She's pretty affluent. I know she does a lot of work and counseling...There's lots of them...I don't know...I think these women are just worried that they're not going to be accepted. That they don't fit into any of the areas and that's dangerous...I wish I knew why they don't feel comfortable supporting our community...

~Kimberly

When I was still in the closet if you will, I tried dressing feminine, for a bit there, in my early 20's, wear really nice dress pants and really nice leather boots, the whole nine yards. I looked like I just came out of the bay street office...when I came to Toronto I became comfortable wearing comfortable clothes, you know, I don't really want to wear feminine clothes anymore. It sucked. I felt uncomfortable, it felt like I was just putting on this façade, that I thought people couldn't see through, you know what I mean, and it's just pretty much about being honest with yourself. When you are honest with yourself, things will go a lot more easier after that.

~Jen

"As Indian women, as lesbians, we must make the effort to understand clearly what is at stake, and this means that we must reject all beliefs that work against ourselves, however much we have come to cherish them as we have lived among the patriachs" (Gunn Allen 259).

Two-Spirit makes more sense to me than identifying as a lesbian – the term lesbian is so wrapped up in defining us only by who we sleep with. To identify myself as Two-Spirit means so much more – it speaks to all of me... how I relate to everyone I meet (not just women), my role in all the communities I am part of, how I do things personally, professionally and in ceremony, how I live and fit in the world.

~Sharp

When one is able to embrace a Two Spirit identity, it is more than just being other gendered or attracted to the same sex. It is cultural and has a deeper meaning for Aboriginal people.

Well, I never knew there was two-spirited, but I assumed that there were gay people across every culture. I didn't know they were two spirited...when I actually got into a relationship with a woman, that I actually heard the term two spirited. And then from there, I had actually got teaching about two spirited, about three years into that relationship we got teachings together, that even my partner had never heard. And having been out a long time, that never heard.

~Angel

I don't know. I wish I had the words about what I feel most of the time...But it's, I feel so empowered all the time by it...wanting to know and learn more and to see the power that we have, and pull together, women, other two spirited women to feel the same way, not to be scared away...

~Kimberly

I was learning about Native culture and I realized that we have a beautiful culture. And I realized that Native People weren't these monsters that my parents perceived, and that's when I started to kind of regain more self esteem about my ethnicity. And then I remember somebody talking to me about two spirited people and it confused me at the time because I didn't know why this person ... came to talk to me about two spirited people and all this other stuff right...their gaydar probably went off, so then I heard about that, and then I said okay there are those people out there that are kind of experiencing the same feelings that I am, and at that time I just wasn't ready to deal with it.

~Jen



I think our role in any case is to follow our visions, to take back our honoured place in our communities as teachers, mediators, dreamers, artists, warriors and medicine people. Our role in both places is to challenge our communities to grow and change for the benefit of all our people.

~Sharp