



Two Spirit Women

2nd Edition



Two Spirit Women 2nd Edition

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We look forward to your feedback

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A note on the second edition

I am pleased that we were able to create a 2nd Edition for Two Spirit Women. As each year passes, Two Spirit women's issues are rising to the surface in more prominent ways. We are becoming more involved in fundraising, community events and leadership, but we are also becoming infected with HIV. We found that we needed to update this booklet to provide a more comprehensive reflection of our lives and experiences. We have included four more interviews with Two Spirit women to expand this edition and to break the silence and the mystery. I am going to put their quotes from interviews in italics throughout this booklet as well as in the last section entitled, "Two Spirit Women Speak More". I don't claim to know everything about Two Spirit women and our lives, but this is a reflection of what I have learned thus far.

Explore our world, find new sources and share them. Only through learning and sharing can we bring everything back to us that is sacred about our identities and ourselves in our communities and among our Peoples.

I would like to acknowledge 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, the Primates World Relief and Development Fund for their funding of this project, and the Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy for allowing me the time to write it.



Regional Outreach Worker

Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy

Dedicated to all Two Spirit Women

To the Ancient Ones and the Future Ones: I would say, thanks for waking us up. Thanks for Being...thank you for existing, so that I can know I can exist and that I know what I need to do. And to the young people, please come and find us. Come and find people like us who are there and are proud and come to these things, we want you to be alive because we need you to carry on.

~Elaine



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Glossary of Terms

A note on the terms: Although we would prefer to not to live by labels, they are useful in self-identifying and defining a place in a community. Because cultures are always changing, the subtleties of identity and how women have shaped that identity has changed over the years. Some of the terms may only relate to certain age groups or time periods. In all cases, people should have the right to identify themselves, and this glossary is written as a guide.

ASO – AIDS Service Organization

Aboriginal – A person who is of First Nations, Metis, or Inuit heritage. An alternative umbrella term used in this booklet is “Native”.

AIDS – Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

APHA – Aboriginal Person living with HIV/AIDS

Bisexual – a person who loves and partners with both men and women in life and sex.

Boi – a modern young lesbian who dresses and acts like a boy in gender role play, but does not necessarily want to change her sex.

Butch – A lesbian who dresses in masculine-like clothes and takes on the social roles of a man in a relationship with another woman, e.g. opening doors, paying the bill, etc. Most butches are attracted to femme-like women.

Coming Out – when someone recognizes that they are attracted to the same sex, or that they have their own gender identity, and starts to be open about it with other people. It can be a slow or fast process depending upon their circumstances.

Discrimination – The act of showing prejudice; a prejudicial act

Dyke – a woman who is a lesbian and identifies with a specific part of lesbian culture and expresses this through clothing and attitude, e.g., short hair and doc martens shoes.

Femme – A lesbian who dresses in feminine clothes and takes on the social roles of a woman in a relationship with another woman, e.g. wears lipstick, dresses and/or skirts and likes to be treated with special deference. Most femmes are attracted to butch-like women.

Gay – a man who is attracted to another man. For a long time this term was used for everyone who was attracted to the same sex, and there are still some women who will call themselves gay when they are talking about their sexual orientation.

Gender bender – a young person who dresses like the opposite gender or a mixture of genders and it may be difficult for people to know if they are a boy or girl. They play with gender identity and sexual orientation, but do not necessarily consider themselves transgender.

Harm Reduction – in the Aboriginal Community is a creative approach and practice that strives to preserve our people and cultures by encouraging and maintaining balance. Harm Reduction approaches work toward reducing harm and risk in the presence of substance use.

HIV – Human Immunodeficiency Virus

Homophobia – The irrational fear and intolerance of people who are homosexual. Homophobia assumes that heterosexual people are the normal way of being, and therefore, better and right.

Homosexuality – same sex attraction, whether it is physical, emotional, mental or spiritual that results in romantic or physical connection.

Internalized Homophobia – occurs when the person who has same sex attractions believes it is wrong, and therefore, does not want to have same sex attractions and does not like that about him or herself. The outcomes can be small or severe.

Intersexual – a person who is born with ambiguous male or female genitalia. There have been intersexual people as long as there have been people, and they would have been raised according to how they presented themselves in behaviour as they were growing up.

LGBTTI or GLBT – Acronym which has grown, and will continue to change to try and be as inclusive as possible. It refers to Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Trans, Two-Spirited and Intersex.

Lesbian – a woman who loves and partners with women in life and in sex.

Man-woman – a term used by various anthropologists in books to refer to Aboriginal men and women of the past who were born as female, but lived as men in their respective communities. The change of gender role was on a spectrum of behaviour and clothing. Not all man-woman gave up their female roles when adding on male roles.

Queer – a term meaning that something is different or odd, and was used against LGBTTI by homophobic people in the 70's and 80's. This term has been reclaimed by LGBTTI in the last 15 years or so and is used to show pride in being different.

Sexual Orientation – is determined by who you are attracted to and partner with romantically. It is the basis for all of the labels for the LGBTTI.

Straight or heterosexual – a person who loves and partners with a person of the opposite sex.

Transgender woman – a woman who defies biological limits of gender, having been born male but now lives as a woman in lifestyle. She may have had surgery or hormone therapy to change her biological gender.

Transgender man – a man who defies biological limits of gender, having been born female, but now lives as a man in lifestyle. He may have had surgery or hormone therapy to change his biological gender.

Two Spirit – an Aboriginal person who is attracted to the same sex, or both sexes, and/or is transgendered or intersexual, and/or someone who possesses sacred gifts of the female/male spirit which exists in harmony in the one person. Most Aboriginal cultures in North and South America have special status or roles, or understood gender crossing roles ceremonies to acknowledge his/her special identity and special relationship with the Spirit.

Woman-man – a term used by various anthropologists in books to refer to Aboriginal women and men of the past who were born male, but lived as women in their respective communities. The change of gender role was on a spectrum of behaviour and clothing. Not all women-men gave up their male roles when adding on female roles.

WSW – women who have sex with women, but do not necessarily identify as lesbian



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.

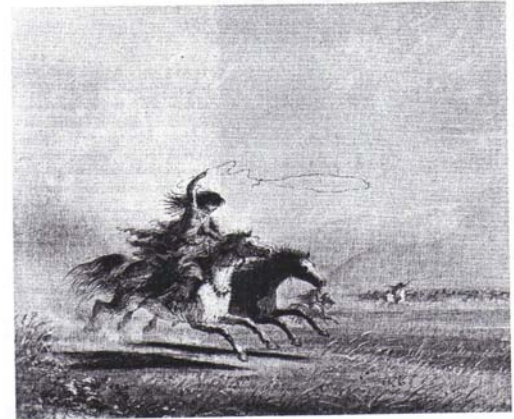


PLATE 8. Shoshone woman roping a horse. Painted by Alfred Jacob Miller, 1837; Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland.

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

Transgender Women

Transgender women in the past would have changed their gender roles at a young age and had a ceremony at puberty to make it official. They would have simply done the work of females and been accepted by their relatives and community as women. After that, they would not necessarily have had special status, because they would have been considered a woman and that was that. Some cultures had accorded special status due to economic factors, such as land ownership going through the matrilineal lines. All in all, transgender women were accorded respect and had healthy family lives with partners.

There are many examples of Two Spirit Transgender Women of the past because the male anthropologists were interested in them. Whewha of the Zuni people is both famous in her lifetime, and in modern times as she continues to gain fame leaving a legacy of a life lived as a woman and a role model. Osh-Tisch is another famous Two Spirit Transgender Woman who was Crow and lived in the 1800's. She was a famous artisan and trader.



4. Whewha of the Zuni people.

Transgender women today have a difficult road to follow because most Aboriginal people have forgotten our cultural histories due to residential schools. They experience homophobia and transphobia in their families and communities. There are a few who are understood and protected by their families. As more and more Aboriginal people learn our histories, Transgender Women will take their place in our communities and live as they are meant to among us with dignity and respect.



5. Osh-Tisch of the Crow People

Transgender Men

Many of the examples of Two Spirit 'warrior women' and 'men-women' would fit into this label today. They crossed gender and/or social roles to gain social status with men as warriors and chiefs, to be able to hunt and trap and to have a wife or wives, and/or to use their skills in the male fields to support family and community. It would have been easier for the warrior women who were skilled at warring and hunting to change roles successfully. The survival of each community or family group relied both on providers and hard working women who managed their lives and materials.

Trans men today have the opportunity to change their gender through surgical and/or hormonal therapy. It is clear now when men and women can do most jobs equally well, that gender identity is deeper than activity or clothing. And that warrior women of the past felt more than just a need to hunt. They must have wanted to be seen as men and lived as men on every level as well, because Trans men today need to change more than just their roles. They want to change how others perceive their gender. As in the case of the Klamath man-woman who took on the traditional mourning rites when his wife died.

A Sexual Spectrum

Our understandings of gender identity and sexual orientation have become limited in the English language. The following diagram illustrates how complex and diverse identity could be:

Neuter (Male Essence)

Asexual (Biological Male)

Common Male (Heterosexual)

Bi-sexual (Biological Male)

Homosexual (Biological Male)

Inter-sex (Predominantly Male Genitalia)

Transitional Inter-sex (Natural or Medical)

Inter-sex (Predominantly Female Genitalia)

Homosexual (Biological Female)

Bi-sexual (Biological Female)

Common Female (Heterosexual)

Asexual (Biological Female)

Neuter (Female Essence)

(Tony Nobis)

In this diagram it is amazing to wonder that heterosexual people can be seen as the only way, when there are so many more possibilities and realities.



I was definitely going around saying I was gay, and she said, now that you are coming out, in your community, they call it two spirited. And I really still don't have that one down pat. But I'm enjoying it, now that I know that there is another expression in our life, instead of using the term gay. I like gay, but I'd rather be two spirited anytime, you know....It's something that should be thought of as a gift. A gift to have two spirits in your body...should really be honoured.

~ Night Butterfly Woman



Domestic Violence

Unfortunately, Two Spirit women report that they experience domestic violence at similar rates as their heterosexual Aboriginal sisters. Many generations of colonial abuse has created a legacy of abusive cycles of behaviour and unhealthy relationships are among them. There is also a fear of discrimination to reveal abuse because of the stereotype that “women interact in a caring and supportive manner and therefore cannot be abusers” (Stewart 5).

Domestic violence can take many forms: emotional – cursed or swore at, humiliation, insulted, yelled at, etc; mental – limited freedom in one’s own environment, limited access to friends and family, coercion and intimidation, harassing phonecalls, etc; physical – shoving, pushing, grabbing, bruising, hitting, etc; spiritual – putting down spiritual practices, putting down cultural practices, stopping ceremonial involvement, etc.

In a study done by 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations,

60% of Two Spirit women have experienced homophobia in their communities

60% of Two Spirit women didn’t know where to go for social services agencies

70% of Two Spirit women practice safe sex

73% of Two Spirit women feel their identity is important

73% of Two Spirit women want to know how to protect themselves from abuse

75% of Two Spirit women have been stalked by their partners

80% of Two Spirit women sought out counseling on more than one occasion

Two Spirit women do not feel welcome at social services agencies as a result of racism and sexism

This study recommends that Non-Native agencies need to partner with other agencies that Two Spirit men/women and trans community members access. They also need to help Two Spirit women by listening to and believing their experiences; therefore, validating their experiences. It is important that Aboriginal agencies work with these agencies so that they will be culturally sensitive and respectful of Two Spirit women’s lives and experiences.

It is also important for the Aboriginal agencies and community members to recognize that Two Spirit women also experience domestic violence. It is especially important that Elders in the community recognize that there are Two Spirit women and men in and among us and we share the same issues, including domestic violence. Two Spirit women do not want to be outside of the community, but a part of it, and Elders need to know that we want to learn our cultures and need spiritual guidance without judgement just like everyone else.

(Project on Domestic Violence among Two Spirit People by 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations in Toronto. For more information see www.2spirits.com)



HIV/AIDS

At least 60% of new infections among Aboriginal peoples in Canada are women. A lot of them are Two Spirit women. A person can get HIV from sharing needles, unprotected sexual contact and from vertical transmission (HIV positive mother to child when the mother is pregnant or during birth). Only one in four babies could get HIV from their mother, and with treatment of HAART, it goes down to only 1%.

Two Spirit women can still be at risk. It is not who you identify as, but what you do. There are some Two Spirit women who still have sex with men, and if a condom or barrier is not used, they are at risk. There are Two Spirit women who use substances and might share needles in the process. For women who are in prison, sharing needles for drugs, tattooing, or piercing is a huge risk as a needle can be shared between many people.

“Homophobia present(s) a huge obstacle to our prevention efforts, (and) it also serves to increase the stigma and isolation experienced by HIV positive Aboriginal two spirit people”(Zoccole, Ristock and Barlow 1). For Two Spirit Women living with HIV, they have to face the additional stigma because they are thought to be the least at risk (because of assumptions about their sexual activities and drug use) and because they were initially at the front lines of the epidemic and therefore, they should have known better. Getting HIV does not mean that a person is bad it just means that they came into contact with another person who has HIV. It is a virus.

A huge risk factor for everyone is falling in love. We want to believe that trust and intimacy is sacred and will keep us safe. We live in a world and time where we cannot rely on that alone to prevent HIV transmission.

Two Spirit women have been in the trenches since the beginning of HIV and have been and continue to be caregivers for those who have HIV and AIDS. Everyone is affected by HIV and AIDS. Those who are living with it: friends, families and the community at large. We need to change the way we relate and act with one another to stop the spread of HIV among our people. Using condoms, gloves and latex barriers during sexual contact, and practicing Harm Reduction are good places to start.



Harm Reduction in the Aboriginal Community is a creative approach and practice that strives to preserve our people and cultures by encouraging and maintaining balance. Harm Reduction approaches work toward reducing harm and risk in the presence of substance use. Handing out needles and glass pipes for crack use are both Harm Reduction methods. Keeping someone alive longer and safer from HIV infection is a long term goal and more realistic than merely insisting that people abstain from using substances.

Suicide

It is known that a high percentage of Aboriginal youth commit suicide. Aboriginal youth suicide rates are 4.5 times the national average and between the years of 1989 and 1993, the ratio for Aboriginal girl between the ages of 0 – 24 was 35 / 100 000 when the national average for girls is 5 / 100 000 (Health Canada). And the suicide rate is getting higher. It is also known that a high percentage of gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans youth commit suicide (CHRC 3). LGBTTQ youth contemplate or attempt suicide 32%, compared to 7% of all youth. It is not being gay that makes them kill themselves, it is the “stigma and discrimination they face in the heterosexual world.” (Cross Currents). As there is often a sense of hopelessness among Aboriginal youth in Native communities in general, having to deal with homophobia on top of that can be overwhelming for youth and adults.



A friend of mine attended a funeral in NorthWestern Ontario of an Oji-Cree youth who killed herself. She was a trans woman in a community that did not believe or follow Aboriginal cultural traditions. The community was very strong in Pentecostal Christian beliefs, which left no place for her to identify herself in a healthy and proud manner. She experienced both homophobia and transphobia. The moment that struck my friend the most was when another youth went to the casket with an eagle feather and prayed over the body in tears. No one stopped him. One wonders whether the community recognized the loss of life was not hers alone, but the entire community who lost what she had to offer by living among them.

~ Mary

“When faced with this unrelenting storm on a daily basis, youth leave because it is an alternative to suicide – an escape from hopeless situations” (O’Brien-Teengs and Travers 21). We are only going to heal as whole communities when people don’t have to leave in whatever manner they choose to survive or be happy. For those that don’t want to end their lives, they leave their community.

Friends and Allies

We do not live in isolation in communities of only Two Spirit women. It is important to take a note and thank our friends and allies in our lives. For us, without our friends at some point, we would not be here. We are lucky if we can count our family members as our allies. For those who are not supported because of homophobia, they find that their friends become their families and often share all of their holidays and special occasions with them.



When I came out, my primary supports were my friends... it took me about a year to tell my family... and telling them was a gradual thing. I had an advantage of coming out in University in that many of the friends I had made there were either gay or gay-positive.

~Sharp



I remember thinking that I was falling into complete darkness and I didn't know how I was going to get out of it or be, and my best friend was so worried for me. Finally, we talked and I told her, well, I let her guess, because she knew, she figured it out, that I was in love with a woman. And once I told her and I was still there and she still loved me, I felt this huge release of pent up everything and I was like an ocean that couldn't be held back anymore. I owe her my life and my sanity.

~Mary

Oh, I think probably, all of my life. In myself I've been out, but out on the streets, I've just been out. My mother was, well, you're old enough to do what you want, you're old enough to think what you want, and if that was my choice, that was fine with her. I mean, she was really open about me being out as a prostitute when she found out about that, so I figured all systems are go with her.

~Night Butterfly Woman



Meegwetch! Niā:wen! Hai hai! Lim limt! Hu naq naq nay nay! Hiswke! Thank You!

Conclusion

We are precious to the world and our communities. We are growing stronger in our own understanding of our lives and our place in our communities and Nations. Living our lives in our own way is the best teacher for everyone who does not know about the history of Two Spirit women and our present lives. We have been and will always be part of this Earth Mother.



I think what it means to me, certainly, it doesn't mean my sexuality only, it means my spirituality, it means what engages me mentally, it means responsibility and accountability to the community, and the roles that I'm supposed to perform, it's not like, I'm cool, it's...when you are given those gifts, we do have a lot of gifts, and we are given a lot of gifts, you have a responsibility to use them properly...I also think we are supposed to be in our communities. Not all lumped together in urban centres, 'cus I think that's where all the gossiping and crap comes from. I think we should be in our communities using our gifts there to help the community...we also want those young people to know that it comes from something that is remarkable. And not evil and not bad and not something that was created out of residential schools, which is what people are starting to think. Something...the Creator made us, you know.

~Elaine

Two Spirit Women Speak More

I don't know much about the term, I never actually used myself. I never heard it before. Not until I came to the organization, and even now, I just...I do say to myself, I'm a two spirited person, but never actually got into what it means, and where it actually came from...For me that's just like, that defines that I'm comfortable with my sexuality and my culture.

~Tobi

Coming Out

Sixteen, seventeen...I always knew. I mean, I had an idea that I was always attracted to women, I didn't really have boyfriends...and it was a gay male friend that I was in school with that sort of geared me towards the idea that, oh yeah, you can see women, too. Because I was in high school, I had no idea, because everyone was so straight. I suppose the different thing with me is that, I didn't know of my Aboriginal background because of my adoption. Initially, I was just, you know, this chick coming out. I didn't have any, there was no ethnicity attached to it, or you know, I didn't know I was two spirited. I just, oh, I'm a lesbian, I suppose. My identity, my background, didn't come out about until I was twenty-five.

~Kimberly

I was 26. I told a few of my friends first. And then I knew I had to tell my mother first, before anyone else in the family. We went to this little cabin to spend the night. We listened to her Solitudes Cd with loons in the background. And we had a long talk, and it was hard to start, but I did it. She is very Catholic and said that she would pray for me, not to change or anything like that, but because she thought that I might get hurt by other people. And then she said that she kind of hoped she would have more grandchildren. I said that could still happen, I still have a womb! She laughed, but she didn't believe me at the time. Before we went to sleep that night she had three cigarettes before sleep instead of two. I hugged her for reassurance and said, I love you, mom. And she said, I love you, too. You are my creation. I was so relieved. And she is now, too, I think, because I now have two children and she has her grandchildren.

~Mary

I came out a few times. I was 21, I moved to Toronto and got involved in the gay community – all gay men and me, so I was out within that group of people. And then about ten years later, I was on some City of Toronto committees and I was really out there, so I was out in the gay community, and I was out in the larger non-Aboriginal community. And then by about '86, I was outed in the Toronto Star as a lesbian, so I guess I was about 30 by the time I came completely out of the closet.

~Elaine

Fifteen...I don't know. I just knew I was different. Because I liked playing with the boys. I didn't like having girl friends. It wasn't until I got til probably grade seven that I started like associating with girls and letting them be my friends. When I was younger, just the thought of them being my friends, it was gross, you know. I don't know why. It just was. Like, I liked looking at them, but I just didn't want anything to do with them. Because the idea of playing with barbies and any braiding of the hair, that was of no interest to me. You know, I liked playing with my G.I. Joe and legos.

~Tobi

Twenty-four...It kind of happened smoothly, that is just...I had always said, that it wasn't because of my partner's sexuality that I fell in love with her, it is just who she is. So that transition, because I fell in love with her had nothing to do with whether or not she was a woman or a man. I fell in love. So, it just seemed natural, it kind of just flowed. And I guess the awkward part is to verbalize it, to say things out loud...because it just happens so naturally. So, heterosexuals don't walk around saying, I'm heterosexual, you know, so it just seems so out of place to...

~Angel

Searching for Lesbian Two Spirit Community

I like being in the city because there are other lesbians, there are other activities... and if we go up north that's not going to happen. It's going to be very much more secluded, sort of thing... We enjoyed the idea that that day was just for women... To be in the company of other two spirited women, to not have to explain ourselves or anything, right?

~Angel

...like I tried the lesbian stuff, but it's like lesbian.com to me and I tried getting in touch with other Natives on the computer, I can't find the knack...like they're in there, but I can't get them out...I don't know anybody else coming out, but myself coming out towards them (Church/Wellesley crowd), it's like beating myself every time I go out...(when it comes to Native two spirited women) I don't know where they are. Do you think they are out in some sort of Reserve? I went all over, last summer, to different pow wows and I haven't seen any action, there were no two spirited. I mean, there was the odd one running around, but I don't meet a lot of two spirited women wherever I go...I'm just wondering, have they all gone straight?

~Night Butterfly Woman

I just wish there were more women here, especially younger women, because I find that women that do come here, they're older...I would like to meet somebody else that is around my age. But it is not for selfish reasons – I have a partner – it's just something that I could maybe get in touch with.

~Tobi

I still kind of feel estranged from both communities in a sense because, I don't know, my own personal issues. I didn't grow up in a Native community, but I never been around other two spirited people, like you know, I've only actually started kind of getting more involved in the two spirited people when I came to Toronto, which was back in 2003. There was the odd gay man here and there, you know...that's why when I first came out I dressed as a woman because I didn't want to fall into those stereotypes, of being that bull dyke and what not, but it's inevitable, whatever, I've always been like that, and it's good for me to accept that, I'm a handsome woman, I'm not a pretty woman.

~Jen

Family

Well, generally, I can say that I have never had an overwhelmingly bad reaction to my coming out at any point. My mother took some time to come to terms and actual acceptance as opposed to tolerance. My sisters were all great and my friends' reactions varied from – “that is not an issue” to “we always knew”.

~Sharp

I said I was a lesbian and he flipped out and my aunt didn't say anything, she was kind of okay with it, and didn't say anything about it. But when we got to the Pas, back home, and we did the wedding and everything, after we had the ceremony, like the gathering...I didn't like the crowd outside because everyone was drinking, so I went back inside and I kinda got nominated to be the door person....and my aunt, who is supposedly a Mormon, she got wasted and she came in the house and started talking to me...I didn't want to talk to her. All of a sudden she screamed out that I have no right to be here and all of a sudden a coffee pot came flying towards my face and I just flipped out and asked her why I didn't have the right to be here. She was like, your kind, you shouldn't be here. She came up to me and pushed me up against the wall, so I gave her a back hand to the face and I pushed her away from me, and I called outside and called for someone to come help me. That whole weekend was just terrible because my mom was trying to figure out who told and we think that my aunt that lives in Toronto told everybody... we had to stay with my mom's uncle, so basically I just stayed in the house for the rest of the weekend. I didn't go outside. Nobody came in and visited me. My mom and sister went to my grandmother's to go see everybody else...After we left the Pas, we came back to Winnipeg. I told my Dad. I said your family is your family, and it's not mine, and I kind of abandoned everybody...I told my Dad I didn't want anything to do with him anymore.

~Tobi

My family was really good. They were just amazing. They are still amazing. I get my support from them. They treat us like we are any other couple, you know...So, right across the board, they have been really good. Even in my home community, my reserve. Since coming out, I've worked on the reserve. No one's ever said anything. I don't put myself in situations...I'll go to a dance, and I'll stay for the early part, but when they're all drunk, I know not to stay there, because in my home community, drinking brings out a lot of nasty things in people, so I just don't stay for that part. But I'll go for the earlier part of the dance, and everybody is welcoming to me...they know my partner. It's a little strange because I come from a little town and the reserve is side by side, and everyone has just been, that's the way it is...I think part of that is because my family has been so, no big deal.

Our Two Spirit Lives

The very term two spirit is a positive affirmation of our inner lives, not just a label for sexual orientation. It is an affirmation of our historical roles as negotiators, warriors, medicine people...and tricksters. The loss of oral culture means a loss of the sacred, funny, mother earth –oriented teachings about two spirit people that must have existed at one time. We therefore have to create our own teachings today, as poets like Beth Brant and Chrystos and so many other expressive and eloquent women do.

~Ariel

We spend so much time trying to find our differences. We focus so much on our differences that we overlook the similarities, and the common ground where we can all meet each other. And I think it is incredibly important that we do that. That we spend more energy finding what we have in common than what we don't have in common. You know, so if people could change their focus, move their energy a bit towards unification.

~Kimberly

I dance at pow wow with the veterans as a men's traditional dancer. I just danced out my regalia this year. I would never have been able to do that without the support of my community who have helped me to create my regalia and eased some of my fears. Finally it feels right, what I am wearing and how I am dancing at pow wow. Just recently I was at a small traditional pow wow and they announced that a men's Sneak-Up was to be done... so I decided that in this friendly place, I would give it a try. With some fear I walked to the Eastern door... I said to the three men who were there... I want to do this, but have never danced this before but I am going to give it a try. One of the men, a young man, said to me... you just watch me and follow my lead – I will make your mocasins smoke! So I went out and I danced, watching all three of them... it was great! They all shook my hand after and said... Good Dancing! Can't wait 'til the next one!

~Sharp

I am so happy to be two-spirited. I have a good job, and I have love in my life with my partner and children. I am so lucky in my life. I wouldn't have it any other way.

~Mary

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Written by Doris O'Brien-Teengs "Doe"

This book was written for and about Two Spirit women, our partners, our families, our friends, and our communities. It contains stories from the past, the present, and our hopes for the future.

