Two-Spirit Identity in a Time of Gender Fluidity

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ABSTRACT
Indigenous sexual and gender minority people have been identifying as two-spirit since 1990 and are reclaiming traditional Indigenous gender terms such as nádleehí or agokwe. At the same time, Settler-dominated communities are undergoing a cultural shift toward challenging binary categories of sex and gender, causing some Settler governments to adopt a multigender framework reminiscent of the Indigenous systems they aimed to erase through colonial systems and practices. This article examines how shifts in Settler gender frameworks relate to traditional and contemporary understandings of gender in Indigenous nations and how Indigenous gender systems support resistance to ongoing colonization.

KEYWORDS
Two-spirit; Indigenous; language; colonialism; non-binary gender

Introduction: land, gender, & language
Indigenous sexual and gender minority people have been identifying as two-spirit for close to 30 years now. The term originated in Canada in 1990 among Indigenous attendees at the Third Annual Intertribal Native American/First Nations Gay And Lesbian Conference in Winnipeg, as a neologism (Elhakeem, 2007). The emergence of two-spirit identity coincides with a cultural shift within Settler-dominated communities toward challenging binary categories of sex and gender. By “Settler,” I refer to individuals whose claim to territorial occupation derives from the permission of a colonial government. “Settler” includes European colonists and their descendants, later waves of immigrants or refugees and their descendants, as well as the descendants of individuals held in slavery or bondage. “Settler’ does not include the Métis, whose right to territory stems from their Indigenous ancestry and whose history includes being actively suppressed by colonial governments. While I use Settler and Indigenous as mutually exclusive categories, not every Settler participates fully in, or reaps the benefits associated with, Settler colonialism (Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Phung, 2011).

Challenges to the gender binary emerging in Settler-colonial discourse raise questions for two-spirit people and scholars: How do changes in
contemporary gender expression relate to the identities we embrace? How does our understanding of two-spirit identity correspond with pre-colonial Indigenous gender systems? How can gender identities assist Indigenous people in rejecting colonial mindsets? I approach these questions as a two-spirit Indigenous scholar, a Mi’kmaw woman, and a member of the Lennox Island First Nation. My academic and community-based research work focuses on gender and sexual diversity in Indigenous and Settler populations. My interest in how Indigenous communities understand gender, and how that might change over time, is therefore personal as well as professional.

To write about Indigenous gender I have to start with land. A Mi’kmaw Creation Story suggests that we have sprung from the land, like a plant, and that my continued existence and identities are rooted in my relationship with the land that birthed me. Land shapes my relationship with humans and other animals in the web of life around me, creating culture and identity. Land shapes language, teaching us what can be said about anything (including gender) and what must remain ineffable. And if we’re starting with land, we need to frame our analysis of gender and sexuality around the fact that the land, and the people who spring from it, are actively being colonized. Indigenous scholars Waziyatawin Angela Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird define colonization as “the formal and informal methods (behaviors, ideologies, institutions, policies, and economies) that maintain the subjugation or exploitation of indigenous Peoples, lands, and resources” (Wilson & Bird, 2005, p. 2). Inevitably then, Indigenous gender identities are impacted by colonization.

Settler scholar Leslie Feinberg noted that Settlers have historically interpreted Indigenous peoples’ acceptance of more than two genders as evidence of our moral inferiority and used this to justify “genocide, the theft of native lands and resources, and destruction of their cultures and religions” (Feinberg, 1996, p. 22). Starting in the 19th century, colonial governments forcibly assimilated Indigenous children into Settler religion, culture, and gender systems, first through residential schools in Canada (circa 1884 to 1996) or boarding schools in the United States (circa 1819 to 2007) (Ansbergs, 2014a, 2014b), then through practices such as the state apprehension of Indigenous children from their families and their placement into non-Indigenous homes in periods that have been termed “the 60s scoop” and “the Millennial scoop,” but which actually describe an active and ongoing phenomenon. Immersing Indigenous people into Settler culture at a young age, enforcing Settler-defined gendering practices, and asserting such practices as ordained by God did much to erase traditional Indigenous gender systems. The forcible conversion of Indigenous people to Christianity – especially through residential and boarding Schools, most of which were run by Christian institutions – instilled binary gender and heteronormativity for generations and as a result some Indigenous communities
became homophobic and unwelcoming toward people living traditional gender roles (Garrett & Barret, 2003).

By forcing Indigenous students to speak only in English or French, and severely punishing those who spoke their Indigenous language, residential and boarding schools played a key role in eliminating Indigenous gender systems. The intentional eradication of Indigenous languages erased traditional Indigenous ways of understanding the world, including perspectives on gender. It has been estimated that at least 168 Indigenous languages in the United States have terms to describe a person who is neither a man nor a woman (Tafoya, 1997). Speaking an Indigenous language supports Indigenous people in describing our gender in terms our Indigenous nations can recognize and accept. Having our languages eradicated undermines our ability to describe who we are to ourselves and others, outside of colonial ways of knowing and doing.

Indigenous language has a relationship with gender that must be further explored by Indigenous linguists and cultural scholars. Spotted Eagle, a two-spirit woman of the White Mountain Apache, born in 1945, reports that her nation had three dialects – one spoken by women, one spoken by men, and one used only for ceremony. She, and other two-spirit people she knew, spoke all three (Feinberg, 1996, p. 28). If some two-spirit people had duties as multi-dialect speakers then it seems logical to me that they would be heavily impacted by colonial processes targeting Indigenous language capacity. The restoration of two-spirit people to places of respect helps decolonize Indigenous nations in terms of cultural values, practices, epistemologies (how we understand knowledge), and ontologies (how we think about and understand ourselves and our place in the world). As a result of the history of Indigenous cultural suppression, two-spirit people – for whom there is no exact equivalent within Settler culture – have a key role to play in protecting Indigenous languages, cultures, and the land upon which these all depend.

From berdache to two-spirit

The existence of suprabinary genders (i.e., genders in addition to male and female) in Indigenous nations across what is currently North America has been well documented, in part because they reified Settler views of Indigenous people as backward or degraded (Allen, 1986; Boag, 2011; Holder, 1889; Slater & Yarbrough, 2012; Williams, 1992). Early Settler anthropologists labeled Indigenous people who lived other genders as “berdache,” a term apparently derived from an Arabic word, bardaj, referring to a prisoner used for sex (Williams, 1992; cf Roscoe, 1998). This meaning did not reflect the cultural and spiritual role of third or fourth gender people in Indigenous nations. A second issue with the term berdache is that its application conflated distinct Indigenous gender systems, framing a Diné berdache as the same as an A:shwi
berdache, rather than viewing each nation’s genders as culturally specific. Conglomerating genders from different nations under “berdache” also ignored or dismissed the terms that Indigenous languages used to describe gender.

The A:shwi (sometimes called the Zuni) had a gender of people called lhamana, who mixed masculine and feminine. Lhamana has been translated as “man-woman” (Roscoe, 1992, 1988a, p. 56; Basaldu, 1999, p. 107) and as “meditating spirit” (Hopcke, 2002, p. 176). We’wha (1849–1896), the most famous lhamana, was assigned a male sex at birth but presented mostly as a woman since puberty (Roscoe, 1988a, p. 57). The A:shwi reportedly used feminine pronouns for all the lhamana, such as when they explained, “she is a man” (Stevenson, 1904, p. 37). Settler anthropologist, Matilda Coxe Stevenson, who met We’wha in 1879 and maintained a friendship of almost 20 years, referred to We’wha using feminine and masculine pronouns within the same book (Stevenson, 1904, pp. 37, 310). Settler anthropologist Will Roscoe uses masculine pronouns for We’wha, reasoning that the A:shwi “never ignored the fact that We’wha was male” (1988b, p. 128). Roscoe notes that the lhamana participated in “one of two male initiation rites,” and in “all-male kachine [spirit] societies,” were referred to using “male kinship terms” (e.g., brother) and were buried on “the male side of the cemetery” (Roscoe, 1988b, p. 129, 1992, p. 106). Roscoe concludes that “We’wha was not crossing genders, but bridging or combining the social roles” (1992, p. 59), constituting a “third gender…that combined both men’s and women’s traits,” making pottery and housekeeping (roles Roscoe reports the A:shwi considered feminine) but also farming and making prayer sticks (roles Roscoe identifies as masculine) (Roscoe, 1988b, p. 130). This interpretation of We’wha as occupying a third gender role may be supported by Stevenson’s report that We’wha was buried in both a dress and trousers, although she describes the trousers as “the first male attire she [We’wha] had worn since she had adopted women’s dress years ago” (1904, pp. 312–313).

The Lakȟóta (also called the Dakota, or the Sioux) use the term wíŋtke to refer to people identified as male at birth who later combine masculine and feminine. Wíŋtke (also sometimes spelled winkte or wi’inkte) is reportedly a shortened form of winyanktehca, meaning “to be like a woman” (Medicine, 2002; Williams, 1986). Indigenous psychologist Martin Brokenleg has argued that the term refers to a man who “speaks Lakota using the grammar and sentence structure appropriate for women” (2006, p. 5). The term has also been translated as “would become” woman (Williams, 1992, p. 28) and as “kill women” (Medicine & Jacobs, 2001, p. 118), the latter of which Brokenleg identifies as a mistranslation (2006, p. 5). In an article from 1986, one Lakȟóta man (identified as a 60-year-old traditionalist) reported, “it’s easy to pick out a winkte. They don’t marry women, but they act and talk like a woman. But they’re ‘half and half,’ and will dress mostly like men” (Williams, 1986, p. 193). The Lakȟóta
people interviewed by Williams (1986) describe the *wiŋtke* as engaging in women’s quill and beadwork and performing traditional dances in the women’s style. Medicine (2002) notes that *wiŋtke* engaged in women’s crafts, raised children, engaged in warfare as men did, and had sexual relationships with men.

Wesley Thomas (1997) outlined a supragender model prevalent within his Diné (Navajo) Nation prior to 1890. In addition to feminine women and masculine men, he identifies three categories of people called *nádleehí*, which he defines as meaning “constant state of change” (Thomas, 1997, p. 171): feminine men; masculine women; and intersex people. Thomas notes that masculine women are more accurately called *dilbaa’* (warrior girl), but are sometimes called *nadlee h__ ba‘*, with a family name inserted in the middle (Thomas, 1997, p.160, 171). Hastiin Klah (1867–1937), the most famous *nádleehí*, presented as male which contradicts reports that *nádleehí* dressed as women (Roscoe, 1988b). The designation as *nádleehí* seems to be based on Klah’s artistic and economic activities (such as weaving, which Reichard identifies as a feminine occupation by the Diné), and a disinterest in dating women (Reichard, 1944, p. 19). Franc Johnson Newcomb, a Settler teacher who took an interest in Diné medicinal sand painting, noted that the Diné expected Klah “to master all the knowledge, skill, and leadership of a man and also all of the skills, ability, and intuition of a woman” (Newcomb, 1964, p. 97).

Halverson (2013) reports that the Ojibwe (Chippewa) had four genders: *inini* (masculine male), *okwe*, (feminine female), *agokwe* (feminine male), and *agowinini* (masculine female). Settlers described the *agokwe* as engaging in feminine activities and having a feminine style of speaking and walking (Lang, 1998). One of the best known traditional *agokwe* was Ozawwendib, whose name is reported to mean “yellow head” and whose father was a celebrated Ojibwe chief, Weshkobug (sweet) (Tanner, 1830, p. 105). Early Settler and interpreter John Tanner described Ozawwendib as “one of those who make themselves women and are called women by the Indians,” noting that Ozawwendib was “very expert in all the various employments of the women, to which all his time was given” (Tanner, 1830, p. 105). Tanner refers to Ozawwendib as both “this man,” and as “she,” and the passage is peppered with repulsion, referring to Ozawwendib as “this creature” whose “disgusting advances” embarrassed and shamed Tanner to the amusement of his Indigenous associates (1830, p. 105). Tanner reports that Ozawwendib married Wagetote, who had two wives already (1830, p. 105, 106). A story about Ozawwendib is also recorded by Settler Alexander Henry the elder, who reports having met “the berdache, a son of Sucrie [Sweet].” Henry’s description is similar to Tanner’s albeit without complaints of unwanted sexual advances:

This person is a curious compound between man and woman. He is man both to members and courage, but pretends to be womanish and dresses as such. His walk and mode of sitting, his manners, occupations, and language are those of a woman. His father, who is a great chief among the Saulteurs, cannot persuade him to act like a man (Henry & Thompson, 1897, p. 163).
Henry notes that “there are several of this sort among most, if not all, the Indian tribes; they are commonly called A-go-kwa, which is expressive of their condition” (Henry & Thompson, 1897, p. 54). The term *agokwe* is still used today, popularized in part by Anishnaabe actor and writer Waawaatay Fobister whose award-winning play, *Agokwe*, portrays a romance between young men living on neighboring reserves (Barsotti, 2011; Posner, 2009).

Thomas (1997) argues that assimilation through the residential or boarding school system eradicated many suprabinary Indigenous genders by 1930. The impact of growing up in a mandatory assimilation institution is key to understanding the contemporary historical trauma and grief experienced by many Indigenous people and communities. This history is also important to understand the impact that the loss of cultural identity, cultural role and status, and linguistic identifiers has had on two-spirit people.

The imposition of a western gender model continues to shape how Indigenous nations understand gender and sexuality and the place those concepts have in Indigenous law (Brotman, Ryan, Jalbert, & Rowe, 2002). So while many Indigenous nations traditionally had suprabinary genders and did not view same-sex relationships as taboo, Christianization has led some to pass legislation prohibiting same-sex marriage, including the Muscogee Creek Nation in 2004, the Navaho Nation (the Diné) and the Chickasaw Nation in 2005, and the Seminole Nation in 2012, all of which remain unaffected by the 2015 Supreme Court ruling on *Obergefell v. Hodges* that legalized same-sex marriage in United States (Burkes, 2015). This is an ongoing issue, and several scholars have explored how Christian conservatives continue to use state and private funding to influence Indigenous culture legislation on issues of same-sex marriage (Heath, 2012; Smith, 2008).

My reading of the anthropological literature suggests that people had leeway in how they lived their *lhamana*, *winkte*, *nádleehi*, or other suprabinary gender. Due in part to the variety of gender expression there is no easy translation from Indigenous gender systems into Settler equivalents. We cannot, for example, simply declare We’wha to be a trans woman without overwriting the unique meaning of being *lhamana* by imposing concepts of gender that are anachronistic, foreign, and colonizing. Lakȟóta anthropologist Beatrice Medicine (2002) notes that before it was abandoned the category of *berdache* had become overburdened, being read as gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex, and trans, among other Settler terms. Settler systems – more focused on sexuality than on gender – pose problems for Indigenous people looking to describe our differences to ourselves and to others.

As a result of the erosion of Indigenous gender systems, many Indigenous people began to self-identify with Settler terms such as bisexual, gay, lesbian, or trans, bonding with Settler communities and distancing Indigenous people with non-binary gender expression or same-sex attractions from our Indigenous
nations. In 1990 Indigenous people began to use the term “two-spirit” in place of “berdache” (Vowel, 2016). Two-spirit reportedly originates from Anishinaabemowin, with neizh meaning “two” and manitoog meaning “spirit” (Medicine, 2002; Vowel, 2016), but was not a traditional gender identity such as agokwe. Two-spirit identity enables some Indigenous people to reclaim traditional roles within our nations and facilitates solidarity with people from other Indigenous nations (Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo, & Bhuyan, 2006). Two-spirit identity prioritizes cultural roles within one’s Indigenous nation over connections with Settler-dominated LGBTQ communities. In doing so, two-spirit identity asserts that the meaning of sexual or gender difference among Indigenous people is to be found in Indigenous cultural frameworks rather than Settler categories.

While an improvement over “berdache,” the term “two-spirit” comes with its own issues. Thomas notes that for the Diné the term “could be interpreted to mean a person with both a dead spirit and a living spirit within them—not a desirable situation” (1997, p. 172). Like “berdache,” two-spirit homogenizes distinct genders across nations, and may overwrite terms such as agokwe, undermining Indigenous language survival. Lang (2003) associates the term with urbanized Indigenous people, making it less relevant or accessible for those in rural communities including most reservations or reserves. Despite these challenges the term two-spirit has replaced “berdache” and is now used in Indigenous communities and nations across North America and in multiple academic disciplines.

Two-spirit identity enables Indigenous people “to negotiate boundaries” between bisexual, gay, lesbian, queer or trans communities and our own nations (Brotman et al., 2002). In gender and sexual minority Settler communities, two-spirit identity makes Indigeneity visible and serves as a buffer against assimilation. Where Indigenous communities have internalized Settler homophobia two-spirit identity enables us to connect with traditional suprabinary genders (if they existed in our nation) “opening up of a space… to identify and live a self-affirmed life” (Brotman et al., 2002, p. 75). Such space can be a welcome refuge for Indigenous people grappling with Settler discourses that frame sexuality and gender as in-born and unchanging on one hand, or as willfully sinful on the other.

Of course not every Indigenous community embraces Settler homophobia. When I came out to my grandmother, a life-long Catholic with a room dedicated to prayer, her response was a story in which a woman’s car accident was described as a punishment from God for having stolen a gay man’s boyfriend. Multi-generational family forms the basis of traditional Indigenous nationhood and many accept people with same-sex attractions or suprabinary gender because of kinship ties. One study of two-spirit people in the United States, for example, found that half the participants had always known they were two-spirit, had always been comfortable with this aspect of
themselves, had never hidden their identity, and therefore fit poorly into sexual identity development models rooted in Settler experience (Adams & Phillips, 2009). Two-spirit scholar Alex Wilson argues that “coming out”—identifying ourselves in ways that separate us from others in our community—may not be relevant or desired for Indigenous people. Wilson frames adopting two-spirit identity as “coming in,” which she describes as “an affirmation of interdependent identity” that enables two-spirit people to understand their relationship to and place and value in their own family, community, culture, history and present-day world” (Wilson, 2008, pp. 196, 197). Rather than separating us from our Indigenous communities, two-spirit identity can be a way back into them (Walters et al., 2006).

**Changing gender systems**

The adoption of the term “two-spirit” among Indigenous people has coincided with broader cultural shifts toward challenging binary categories of sex and gender—first in Settler-dominated bisexual, gay, lesbian, queer, or trans communities and then in Settler frameworks more broadly. Since August 31 of 2017, Canada has provided “X” as an option by which citizens may identify their gender on their passport, in addition to M for male and F for female (Government of Canada, 2017). The “X” gender option is also available for documents in the American states of Oregon, and California, and third gender options are available on passports in other countries, including Australia, Denmark, Germany, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, India, Ireland, and Nepal (Bowcott, 2017; Jenkins, 2017; Lawson, 2017). Court challenges are underway in the United Kingdom (Bowcott, 2017) and Washington State is considering offering a neutral gender option as early as 2018 (Jenkins, 2017). We may see a time when suprabinary gender (albeit within a Settler framework) has strong recognition and support from colonial governments. Indigenous nations may yet face the irony of being pressured to conform to Settler views of gender that resemble the Indigenous systems those same governments attempted to eradicate over the past two centuries.

Indigenous gender practices are also changing in response to issues related to the environment. Indigenous lawyer and activist Pam Palmater writes that being a Mi’kmaw woman traditionally entails obligations to be a leader, caregiver, and teacher, and “to pass our history, language, culture, and laws to not only my children, but the world at large” (Palmater, 2013, p. 149). Yet as a conscious response to colonialism she notes that many women serve our communities as warriors:

Which carries with it the duty to protect our nations and territories from harm. While traditionally this role [warrior] has been primarily exercised by our Mi’kmaw men, the devastating effects of colonization have left some (not all) of
our men dispossessed of their strength, their freedom, and their traditional knowledge about their responsibilities. Thus, some of our Indigenous women must assume this additional responsibility alongside our men. (Palmater, 2013, p. 150)

Examples of Indigenous women putting themselves in harm’s way to protect others abound. One need only look at land-based protests to see the role of women warriors is strong, socially approved in Indigenous communities, and spreading. Settler media rarely highlighted the role of women warriors in the Oka uprising of 1990 but have taken notice of women’s role in protests opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline, the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric dam in Labrador, or fracking in Elsipogtog, New Brunswick. This acknowledgment of women’s role as warriors highlights the fluidity of Indigenous gender roles, and their benefits as a tool in the fight against colonialism.

The role Palmater describes harkens back to stories of Indigenous warrior women. Among the Niitsítapi (Blackfoot), for example, Running Eagle fits the suprabinary gender pattern, preferring to socialize with boys and to engage in what Agonito (2016) describes as traditionally masculine activities such as buffalo hunting, wearing men’s clothing, and engaging in warfare, eventually dying in battle. Lang (2003) argues that the integration of Indigenous people into settler capitalism has altered Indigenous understandings of gendered work and two-spirit men may now express their femininity through occupations such as social work while two-spirit women may engage in masculine gendered jobs such as ranching. Palmater (2013) notes that no Indigenous cultural role is exclusively masculine or feminine and this may allow some people to take on cross-gender roles without altering how they or others view and label their gender. While Palmater frames cross-gender role changes as temporary, needed only while Indigenous people heal from colonialism, such practices may indicate a shift in how Indigenous gender is lived and understood more broadly.

Changes in gender expression raise questions about gender identity. In 2017, for example, I presented about two-spirit identity to a group of provincial employees, one of whom was my cousin, Lisa. Afterwards Lisa asked, “So if I’m shoveling snow while Cree [her male partner] is changing the baby, are we being two-spirit?” To be honest, I wasn’t sure how to answer. Many activities previously categorized as masculine or feminine have lost this distinction as other needs take precedent over gender role cohesion. I’ve read that making quillwork baskets, for example, was traditionally done by Mi’kmaw women (Whitehead & Jewett, 1982), but I was taught how to do this by my father who turned to craftwork out of economic necessity. There is no homogenous pattern among Indigenous nations regarding which activities are considered masculine and which are feminine. Sabine Lang (2003) notes that third and fourth gender roles are “embedded within worldviews that emphasize and appreciate transformation and change” (p. 203), making Indigenous gender roles flexible enough to accommodate changes in how we categorize activities and how we
understand ourselves when we engage in such activities. The very term nádleehí, for example, acknowledges that change is constant (Thomas, 1997).

There are key differences, it seems to me, between the role of third gender people such as the nádleehí, or contemporary gender identities such as two-spirit, and the kind of cross-gender roles that Palmater or my cousin Lisa describe. The first difference is in how Indigenous communities – or more broadly, Indigenous nations – understand and name this type of gender expression. Palmater names such perception as “external identity” (2013, p. 148), which she defines as how others view us. People like We’wha, Hastiin Klah, and Ozawwendib were all seen as distinct enough to be a different gender, or in the case of Running Eagle to be acknowledged by the bestowal of a new name, connecting the identity with social recognition. By contrast, Palmater or Lisa are still what we might call “cisgender.” No spiritual responsibilities accompany Lisa’s decision to shovel snow nor is she bestowed with a new name. Palmater’s decision to be a warrior is based on political and practical necessity rather than resulting from a dream, vision, or other spiritual experience. Such behavior is seen as temporary or driven by necessity and the categories of man or woman adapt accordingly. So while being a warrior might be a masculine occupation a warrior like Palmater is still a woman.

A second and related difference is that this cross-gender behavior hasn’t changed how the individuals see themselves—what Palmater calls “internal identity” (2013, p. 148). Palmater doesn’t adopt a new label as a result of her work protecting the land and the people who spring from it. While we can’t be certain how people like We’wha, Hastiin Klah, Ozawwendib, or Running Eagle understood themselves the stories about them suggest they accepted the terms applied to them by their Nations. In determining whether a particular activity “makes one” two-spirit a big piece has to be whether or not the individual thinks it does. Given the variety of gender expression among the lhamana, winkte, nádleehí, individuals have a lot of leeway in deciding whether their practices necessitate an identity such as two-spirit. Indigenous people have tended to import Settler understandings of trans, gay, lesbian, and bisexual into two-spirit identity, losing the Indigenous framework in which the identity makes sense. Perhaps the tendency to equate two-spirit identity with LGBTQ identities means that more than a shift in gender roles is required before two-spirit identity seems relevant. Gender is a social message that requires both a sender and a receiver so practice must be accompanied by self-identity and by social recognition of that identity to be concretized.

Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) participants in the 2010 Trans PULSE study were relatively balanced between self-identified trans women (n = 18, 56%) and self-identified trans men (n = 14, 44%) (Scheim et al., 2013, p. 112). Most of the Aboriginal trans participants (72%) had started or completed medical transition (e.g., hormones or surgery) and 15% were undecided or said the concept did not apply to them, compared
to 24% in the entire sample (Scheim et al., 2013, p. 112). These data suggest that transition may be more significant to Indigenous trans people than to their non-Indigenous peers. A tendency toward binary gender expression may be a response to the colonial violence that continues to shape Indigenous gender through intergenerational trauma, shame, and practices of gender policing. In the 2008 National Transgender Discrimination Survey participants who described their gender under the write-in option were more likely to have experienced a bias-based physical or sexual assault than those who used the given gender categories of male/man, female/woman, or part-time as one gender, part-time as another (Harrison, Grant, & Herman, 2012, p. 23). Similarly, a national survey of students in Canadian high schools found that 39.1% of Aboriginal youth had been harassed about their gender expression, making gender harassment a more common experience than being harassed about their Aboriginality (28.4%) (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 62).

If Indigenous people see our gender expression as combining, crossing, or transcending Settler-approved binary categories then the question arises of how we name our difference. The most common suprabinary genders reported by Trans PULSE participants were two-spirit (n = 14, 44%), intersex (n = 8, 25%) and genderqueer (n = 6, 19%) (Scheim et al., 2013, p. 112). Among Aboriginal participants in the 2012 Risk & Resilience study of Bisexual Mental Health the most common suprabinary genders were two-spirited (29%), genderqueer (24%), and bigender (10.5%) (Robinson, Plante, MacLeod, Cruz & Bhanji, 2016, p. 2). Given the relative young age of the Aboriginal participants in both studies (58% underage 35 in Trans PULSE and 51% underage 30 in Risk & Resilience) these data are a snapshot of gender among young Indigenous trans and bisexual people in Ontario (Scheim et al., 2013, p. 111; Bauer, Pyne, Francino, & Hammond, 2013, p. 41; Robinson, 2017, p. 11). By contrast, in the 2013 Two-Spirit Roundtable Project the most popular suprabinary genders were two-spirit (42%) and agokwe-nini (Ojibwe, masculine woman) (5%), although 86% of participants were over age 30 (Robinson, 2017, p. 11). This may indicate that younger people are less likely to take on an Indigenous-language gender label or that doing so may be the result of a longer-term process of identity discovery and therefore more likely to manifest in older people. These studies suggest that binary genders held in common with Settler cultures are widely embraced (even if what we mean by man or woman, masculine or feminine, may be different than what a Settler might mean), yet a significant number identify with a suprabinary gender – whether Settler or Indigenous.

Language names and shapes experience and there is no single understanding of two-spirit identity because understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality vary across nations. As a result, many two-spirit people use multiple identity terms, identifying, as bisexual, gay, lesbian, or queer and/or as trans
in addition to two-spirit. Two-spirit people also use terms from their Indigenous languages to describe themselves. While living in Toronto I met a number of people who identified as *agokwe* or as *agokwe-nini*. Scholars such as Quo-Li Driskill and Chris Finley find benefit in both two-spirit and queer identity, explaining that “when linked, queer and two-spirit invite critique of heteronormativity as a colonial project (Driskill, Finley, Gilley, & Morgensen, 2011, p. 3). Reflecting on my own labels (two-spirit, bisexual, queer), multiple identities can enable us to remain comprehensible to ourselves and to others as we move through Indigenous and colonial spaces.

**Conclusion: indigenous futurity**

When I present about two-spirit identity I sometimes show an image of an oil painting by American Settler artist George Catlin called *Dance to the Berdash*. The work was completed between 1835 and 1837 and portrays a dance celebrating a person who expresses a mix of masculine and feminine and is based on traditions the artist witnessed among Lakȟóta, Ozaagii, and Meshkwahkihaki people. Like many Settlers of his time Catlin disapproved of the “*berdache*” calling it “one of the most unaccountable and disgusting customs that I have ever met in the Indian country,” and expressed the wish that “it might be extinguished before it be more fully recorded” (Catlin, 1845, p. 215). Due to the efforts undertaken by colonial authorities Catlin’s wish was partly granted with many suprabinary gender terms being lost. That this loss has not been total is due in large part to the work of Indigenous knowledge keepers. Will Roscoe highlights this when he notes that “We’wha and Klah sought to preserve and promulgate traditional ways” and that their commitment occurred “years before Native American studies and tribally-sponsored cultural programs” (Roscoe, 1992, p. 127). The linguistic duties implied by Spotted Eagle’s observations of two-spirit multi-dialect speakers also suggests ways two-spirit people did and still do support Indigenous cultural continuity.

Two-spirit identity and other Indigenous gender identities can support psychological decolonization, which has been defined as “restoring the path of self-determination for a colonized people” (Wilson & Bird, 2005, p. 90). Wilson and Bird argue that decolonization must begin within the minds of Indigenous people ourselves yet the process is not purely intellectual but requires praxis (Wilson & Bird, 2005), uniting reflection with action to achieve change (Freire, 1970, p. 36). Traditionally, most Indigenous nations had strong leadership roles for women in stark contrast to Settler patriarchy, and valued balance between masculine and feminine rather than the dominance of men over women. If we are to embrace balance without reinforcing a heteronormative colonial binary we must explore and clarify what such concepts mean for Indigenous nations. While allies are valuable, the majority of this work must be done by Indigenous people ourselves. Settler sexual and gender minority communities in Canada,
the United States, and elsewhere continue to reinforce the dominance of White Settler men in an effort to mirror those in power (Bérubé, 2001), making them unsafe and unsupportive for people seeking to heal from colonial trauma.

Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor has used the term “survivance” to describe surviving genocide while resisting colonial domination (2008, 1994). Survivance entails physical and also cultural survival; it is “an active sense of presence over absence...is the continuation of stories,” and is oriented not backward, recalling what was lost, but forwards, toward “renewal and continuity into the future.” (Vizenor, 2008, pp. 1, 25). In the case of gender, Settler nations are beginning to acknowledge multiple genders even as Indigenous people are rediscovering, reclaiming, and re-visioning our own multi-gender systems. Such a move seems to affirm a circular view of time as the past and the future happen simultaneously. Alex Wilson describes two-spirit identity development itself in a similar way:

The narrative arc of these stories of two-spirit people is really about journeying along a circular path.... 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 (Wilson, 2008, pp. 197–198).

Indigenous gender systems contribute to survivance and to psychological decolonization by affirming our ongoing resistance (Robinson, 2014, 2017). When it comes to how Indigenous people decolonize gender it is not enough to think about gender differently; we must change how we practice gender and cycle toward a time when our gender expression (regardless of how it is labeled) is rooted in Indigenous values, culture, language, and our enduring relationship with the land.

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