

Best Paper Award**Two-Spirits, Four Medicines: Two Spirit Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation Day and Embracing Community**

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**ABSTRACT**

In this essay I reflect on my experience of Truth and Reconciliation Day as a Two-Spirit person. I illustrate how Queer, Trans, and Two Spirit (or 2S) Indigenous individuals have been affected by the legacy of Canadian Residential Schools. I also engage with the history of the term Two-Spirit and the politics surrounding this identity.

Aaniin nindinawemaganidok, Nenaa'ikiizhikok indizhinikaaz. Gokomisanan indizhinikaaz gaye. Pizhew indoodem. Onigaming gaye Mikinaak Wajiwin indoonjibaa. x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm akiing indaa noongom. English translation: Hello, 'Healing Sky Woman' is my name. 'Our Grandmother' is my second name. I belong to the Lynx clan. I'm Anishinaabe from Onigaming and Turtle Mountain. I currently live on x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm land. Because of the cultural and spiritual content of this essay it is only appropriate to introduce myself, my kinship, and the land I'm on using my Indigenous language, Anishinaabemowin. Miigwech.

I was secretly relieved when my partner, Tru, and my best friend, Waxase, discussed going on a hike rather than attending a Truth and Reconciliation Day gathering. As the cousin, niece, daughter, grandchild, and great grandchild of Residential School survivors, it's imperative to embody the actions which my ancestors are owed. Yet, I've never joined a gathering on Truth and Reconciliation Day as the thought of attending has always been too overwhelming. This hike was the first time I hadn't shut myself away and retreated to bed for the duration of the national 'holiday.' That morning I packed my backpack with tobacco, sage and smudging materials, and we all drove to the bottom of Cypress.

For Plains Indigenous people there are four major medicines: tobacco, sweetgrass, sage, and cedar. The joining of these medicines represents the power in a unified community. The Canadian Residential School system specifically sought to destroy community and cultural bonds through the abduction, forced assimilation, and systemic abuse of Indigenous children. Residential Schools enforced colonial structures such as heteropatriarchy, gender binary, and white supremacy onto Indigenous communities, all of which continue to plague Indigenous communities today. This opposes the historical fluidity of gender and sexuality which many Indigenous nations held prior to the introduction of settler colonialism. Today, the legacy of Residential Schools can be witnessed within the continued existence of heteronormativity, misogyny, and cisnormativity. Distressingly, these systems have suffused themselves within our community gatherings and traditional ceremonies.

The imposition of heteropatriarchal and cisnormative systems onto Indigenous populations was a direct strategy to promote assimilation into settler society. In Marie Laing's Zine *Two-Spirit: Conversations with Young Two-Spirit, Trans, and Queer Indigenous People in Toronto*, she interviews various Two-Spirit people in Toronto on how they understand and experience their identity. As Laing notes, there are multitudinous interpretations of Two-Spirit identity and it is imperative to acknowledge that any way which a Two-Spirit individual identifies is fundamentally authentic (Laing 2017, 14). The only illegitimate definition of Two-Spirit would be if a non-Indigenous person identifies with or polices the term. The historical context of the term Two-Spirit is also crucial to this furthered understanding. When first introduced in the 1990s, the term Two-Spirit came from the Anishinaabe word

“Niizhoowadizi,” roughly translated to “Two Spirits.” This word was never intended to refer to a specific identity but rather was supposed to be an umbrella term for marginalized individuals who exist at the intersection of Indigenous and Queer. Two-Spirit as an identifier was created in reaction to the exclusion of Queer relatives from Indigenous communities and the centering of whiteness within Queer communities. At its conception, the term Two-Spirit (2S) was intended to be generative and fluid so as to encompass any and all experiences of Indigeneity and Queerness, and thus for 2S, Queer, and Trans individuals to find community. Returning to etymology, because of its roots in Anishinaabemowin, Two-Spirit was also intended to only be a substitute word until individual Indigenous nations could connect, retrace, and embody their historical understandings of gender and sexuality. This context is often ignored and misunderstood outside of Queer Indigenous communities but is extremely important to acknowledge for those hoping to provide solidarity with 2S, Queer, and Trans Indigenous peoples.

The common definition of Two-Spirit posed by non-Indigenous and cis/straight Indigenous people, is to embody both the masculine and feminine spirits however this definition lacks cultural nuance. In Anishinaabemowin, there is little emphasis placed on the construction of a gender binary, rather the major category is spiritually alive or not. So, for English speakers first hearing the term ‘Two Spirit,’ the assumption was that the ‘two’ referred to the duality of the gender binary as well as the embodiment of ‘masculine and feminine.’ However, (and as a beginner speaker I don’t want to overstep in my summarization) the term ‘Niizhoowadizi’ could also refer to embodying other Anishinaabe dichotomies beyond gender such as animacy or spirituality. In assuming an overly simplified and rigid understanding of Two-Spirit, the colonial centrality of the female; male gender binary is replicated in a context where it is at the very least unwelcome if not directly harmful.

As someone who grew up in the Midwest, where the only thing resembling a ‘mountain’ is a short uphill walk, my body was not ready for hiking anything more than a slight tilt. After sweating and gasping my way up, we reached the first stop of our hike, a lake watched over by moss, cedar trees, and Whiskey Jacks. I suggested we investigate the small, flat trails weaving around the lake, mostly due to growing soreness in my calves but partially to admire the area. Soon we landed at a sunny spot where we sat and watched the water striders propel themselves over the water. The rocks we had stopped at had strips of dark lichen growing on them which for any Anishinaabe will bring to mind the story of Nanaboozhoo and why lichen grows in stripes. The story involves the Nanaboozhoo, commonly called the Trickster, their butt cheeks, and a bear. After reciting the story to my captive, two person audience, we began to discuss Nanaboozhoo as a Queer figure in Anishinaabe oral tradition. Nanaboozhoo, the half man, half spirit who in some stories, helped create the world, is a shapeshifter always getting caught in compromising situations. In these stories, Nanaboozhoo frequently transforms between man, woman, gender queer person, and other than human beings. When transforming, Nanaboozhoo has romantic, sexual, and intimate relationships with people of various identities. Recently, some have begun to recognize Nanaboozhoo as representative of the fluidity between gender and sexuality which many Indigenous nations had prior to colonialism. For 2S, Queer, and Trans Indigenous people, Nanaboozhoo’s antics and ever changing identity reflects a personal story of discovering our identities in relation to our Indigeneity.

While the Trickster is a major character in Anishinaabe oral tradition, their queer and gender-fluid nature goes relatively ignored. This reflects a move within some Indigenous communities to fundamentally ignore the existence of 2S, Trans, and Queer Indigenous identities. As discussed, this is a remnant from Residential Schools and the settler colonial system at large. In Marie Laing’s zine, an interlocutor named Fenris discusses the historical context of homophobia and transphobia.

[the gender binary] is a piece that is really deliberately from genocide, thinking back to Residential Schools and the really rigid gender norms that were enforced there. So I think that that is a piece where that colonial trauma, it manifests within us as two-spirit people working through that, but it also manifests in our community members re-enacting that violence (2017, 28)

For Indigenous peoples today, historical colonial violence manifests through the perpetuation of settler structures which were not traditionally part of Indigenous cultures, such as the colonial gender binary, heteropatriarchy, and cisnormativity. The cyclical nature of intergenerational trauma converts violence which one generation faced and reproduces it onto the next, in this case through the validation of transphobia and homophobia as being “traditional.” This rhetoric of Queerness not being “traditional” echoes mainstream homophobic rhetoric that Queerness is somehow “new” or “more prevalent” though it's more likely that it's just more accepted to be Queer now than in the past. To refrain from understanding all Indigenous cultures as a monolith, it is also important to note that some Indigenous cultures were not traditionally welcoming to Queerness. Yet, that fact does not make 2S, Queer, and Trans people of those Indigenous cultures any less valid in their identity. Furthermore, rather than focusing on validating Queerness or homophobia as traditional through specific historical examples, it might be more beneficial to focus on Indigenousizing the future through providing safe, community-focused spaces, events, and services for all Indigenous people including our 2S, Queer, and Trans relatives.

Truth and Reconciliation Day is a national day created in acknowledgment of the discovery of unmarked graves, the historical legacy of Residential Schools, and the atrocities committed at Residential Schools. This day of national mourning brings to mind the immense loss of the children found in graves, as well as the grief of our languages, stolen generations, ceremonies, cultural knowledge, oral tradition, and our oral histories. In addition, for many Two Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous people who come from nations which historically had broad understandings of gender and sexuality, there is grief over the loss of inclusion, acceptance, and community.

Tru, Waxase, and I, each identify with the term Two Spirit in some way. Apart from being two of my closest friends they also deeply relate to my experience as a Queer Indigenous person in Canada. This is why I chose to spend Truth and Reconciliation Day hiking through the woods, shielded by cedar trees, sharing jokes and stories. Tru, Waxase, and I, all come from different nations and have had varied experiences in what it means to be both Indigenous and Queer. However, we have all experienced transphobia, cisnormativity, and homophobia within our own Indigenous communities. Many elders say that community is medicine but when we're pushed away from our communities for our identities, it creates a barrier in accessing that communal healing. For Trans, Queer, and Two Spirit Indigenous people, it is integral to nurture relationships and solidarity within our community so that we can one day be the Trans, Queer, and Two Spirit elders we wish we could have had.

After hiking for a few hours we reached the goal of our hike, Eagle Bluffs. We sat high over Vancouver as the sun started to lower. While gazing over our home, now shifting to gold in the mid afternoon sun, my partner and I brought out our tobacco. Holding a small pinch in each of our hands we prayed. I began with a prayer for the healing, health, and happiness of those that I love who were forced into Residential Schools. I said a prayer for all Residential School survivors, their families, and their children, who live in Vancouver. Once done, I looked over the edge of the cliff and let the tobacco scatter from my hand, as it fell it looked like it was floating over Vancouver. Eventually, Waxase brought out their sweetgrass letting thin smoke float around all of us. Tru and I unwrapped the Buffalo Sage which our friend gathered

for us and we began to smudge. Guiding the smoke with our hands and bringing it close to our hearts then washing it over our bodies. Listening to the Whiskey Jacks sing over Vancouver, we each asked for healing, acceptance, and love to re-enter our communities and thanked the spirits for guiding us here. After arriving home and reflecting on my first time leaving the house on Truth and Reconciliation Day, I realized we had accidentally brought the four medicines throughout our hike: tobacco, sweetgrass, sage, and the cedar trees which we walked under. The potential for community healing is always there, it requires effort similar to my breathless journey up to Eagle Bluffs, however medicine always finds you. Miigwech, Mi'iw.

### References

Laing, Marie. 2017. *Two-Spirit: Conversations with Young Two-Spirit, Trans, and Queer Indigenous People in Toronto*. Toronto.