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## QUEERING INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

*Alex Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree Nation) with Marie Laing (Kanyen'kehá:ka)*

This chapter is based on a phone interview that took place between Alex Wilson (in Opaskwayak Cree Nation) and Marie Laing (in Toronto) on June 20, 2017. The conversation was based on a set of questions developed by Laing with assistance from Nisha Toomey. Here, we present a condensed and edited version of the conversation on community-driven research, Indigenous education, and two-spirit scholarship.

Dr. Alex Wilson, Opaskwayak Cree Nation, is a professor at the University of Saskatchewan. Her scholarship has greatly contributed to building and sharing knowledge about two-spirit identity, history and teachings, Indigenous research methodologies, and the prevention of violence in the lives of Indigenous peoples. Acknowledging that Western conventional ways of understanding LGBTQIA+ experiences do not describe well the everyday experiences of Indigenous peoples, her research led to development of the model of “Coming In” to describe individual and community empowered queer identities. She is one of many organizers with the Idle No More movement, integrating radical education movement work with grassroots interventions that prevent the destruction of land and water. She is particularly focused on educating about and protecting the Saskatchewan River Delta and supporting community land-based efforts.

*Marie Laing:* How did you come to the field of education?

*Alex Wilson:* My parents are both educators so the field has always been a familiar and comfortable place. When I first went to university, though, I was more interested in the hard sciences, beginning in a pre-med program and then moving into a general microbiology degree program. Midway through that, I took a long break from school to work, and when I returned I majored in psychology. It was not

until graduate school that the focus shifted to education and psychology. I had not intended to teach at a university but in the end that's where I landed.

*Laing:* Can you speak a little bit about the relationships that you see between community organizing, activism, and the academy?

*Wilson:* Most Indigenous scholars I know are in the academy because there's work that needs to be done in our own communities. There is a need for Indigenous people not just to theorize but, more importantly, to apply their theory in ways that help our communities. In my own case, activism was what propelled me to higher education. In the last years of my undergraduate degree (which was completed at a California State University), I was co-facilitating an LGBTQIA+-identified youth rap group. After coming home for the summer and returning for the last semester that fall, all of the Native American kids who were in the group had committed suicide over the summer. That was both traumatic and eye-opening. Growing up in my home First Nation most of my experiences around sexual orientation and gender identity had been positive. There was tremendous support from family, from elders, and from community members. But, I know many others who did not have that same support. When finding out that those Indigenous youth in the rap group had committed suicide, I realized that there are intersecting factors in our lives that can be so overwhelming for some people that they do not feel safe in this world. That led to an unsuccessful hunt for published research on Indigenous LGBTQIA+ youth and suicide. I found nothing on this specific topic and as far as I could tell, up to that point, no one had done any kind of formal research that related to the broader topic of Indigenous LGBTQIA+ youth.

Of necessity, then, activism intersects with scholarship and propels the work we do. Many of the Indigenous scholars I know have similar stories. We've become academics because concerns or issues in our own lives or the lives of our families or communities made it seem necessary to position ourselves so that we can not only name them but also understand why they exist and, we hope, drive and implement change to address them. We know that, historically and still today, education has greatly failed Indigenous people and we hope that our work will help change that. Like many of my peers, I have a long history of activism, beginning as a youth involved in ACT UP, Queer Nation, and Indigenous land rights. I think most of us didn't even consider ourselves activists. We learned, out of necessity, that there were things we had to do to protect our families and friends and defend our lands and waters.

## Restoring Relationships to Land

*Laing:* In your 2016 talk at the University of Winnipeg, “Coming In To Indigenous Sovereignty, Relationality, and Resurgence,” you talked about land-based education as one route for us, as Indigenous peoples, to return to our own educational systems. Could you talk a little bit about that?

*Wilson:* With the possible exception of Indigenous Australians, Indigenous people in the Americas have lived continuously on our land for millennia. A lot of knowledge comes along with that relationship and connection to these lands and waters. We’ve also been impacted by different climatic and political forces. For example, the Cree language of my family includes terms that refer to both the last ice age and the ice age before that. We migrated when the ice came, returned here when it receded, and throughout maintained a very strong connection to and relationships with the lands and waters that we moved through, relied on, and lived with. Our education systems—that is, traditional ways of understanding and learning about the world around us—and the knowledge that we had accrued in the context of the places and spaces that we come from had remained intact for almost 100,000 years. Then suddenly, in the blink of an historic eye, all of that changed.

The term epistemicide is an accurate descriptor of the sustained effort to sever Indigenous peoples from traditional education and traditional knowledges. For Indigenous people in the Americas, epistemicide began with the colonization of our lands and waters and continues today. Most people who are familiar with the history and present-day experiences of Indigenous peoples have some awareness of the many ways in which, as part of the process of colonization, Indigenous people’s bodies have been regulated, controlled, subjected to violence, and killed. Many who have learned about this history describe these activities as genocidal. Similarly, colonization, by displacing or removing Indigenous peoples from our traditional lands and waters, has cut our ties to critical sources of our traditional knowledges. I, along with many of my peers, recognize this as epistemicide.

In Canada, there have been many government policies that have disrupted our relationships with the land. In some cases, these policies were designed to separate us from our traditional lands and waters, and in others, this has occurred as an unintended result. Regardless, though, the impacts are the same. I live and work in the Saskatchewan River Delta, where the river itself and other waterways are regulated and controlled by corporate entities such as hydroelectric companies and Ducks Unlimited. This has impacts on the waterways and on all living creatures (including people) who rely on those waterways for food, transportation, and other resources. Reconnecting to land is critical for moving forward and trying to undo the legacies and ongoing impacts of colonization and land-based education

is, at its core, an anti-oppressive form of education. Reclaiming or restating our relationship to our lands and waters is a starting point, and then nurturing that as an ongoing relationship reinforces the fact that we have the right to be there. It also reignites the continuity of energy that has existed for hundreds of thousands of years and that makes us human. It is part of our cosmology. I think once you get onto the land (and literally, you do not have to drive hundreds of miles—you can just walk outside or look at the sky), you ignite that energy.

It is really critical that, as we move forward as Indigenous people, we reclaim and nurture our relationship with the land and waters because you cannot really protect something you do not know much about. The more you learn about the land and waters, the more you realize that they determine everything. When you're on the land, all the socially constructed hierarchies around gender, around sexual orientation, around race, or around class disappear. The land engenders itself and we engender it.

*Laing:* In this framework, the connections between land sovereignty and body sovereignty are really strong.

*Wilson:* They are inseparable. Christianity and Western culture have really impacted our communities. Many of our people have internalized what Judeo-Christianity has taught them and adopted the pedagogy it uses to instill those teachings, that is, proselytization, a framework that employs rules, regulations, dogma, enforcement of laws, practices and institutions of social management. This includes people who say they are not Christian and practice, for example, traditional Cree spirituality but have internalized this framework and transported or transposed it onto our own spiritual traditions. So now, instead of ten commandments, we are directed to follow “teachings,” which draw on the same ideas and generate the same outcomes you might find in a Christian church and impacts the bodies of Indigenous people in diverse and asymmetrical ways. It introduces a framework that is hierarchical and that benefits certain people and oppresses others, in particular, women and two-spirit people. It is a delicate topic to discuss because people have gone through so much. The last thing they want to face is that their beloved relation might have taught them or modeled oppressive practices. But, it has to be said otherwise the same people benefit while others are continually hurt and in the end the colonial agenda prevails.

Susan Faludi (1991) introduced the term “backlash” to describe how, within the women’s movement, when (big or small) wins occur that move women closer to achieving equality with men, an anti-feminist backlash follows. Within Indigenous rights or sovereignty movements, we also find that when our actions generate positive change or we feel like we’re making progress, something similar to Faludi’s backlash often occurs. What’s different about how this plays out in

Indigenous communities is that when that pushback occurs it typically most affects or impacts specific groups and, for that reason, I describe it as “whiplash” rather than backlash. Indigenous women and two-spirit people bear the brunt of colonial hierarchies and processes and we also bear the brunt of whiplash that occurs when colonial frameworks invade our own cosmology and are presented as “natural,” as something that has always been a part of our traditional teachings. The impacts accumulate, undermining our sense of self-in-community, and I think that contributes to the horrifyingly high number of Indigenous women and two-spirit people who are missing or may have been murdered in North America. Within the context of colonialism, violence is highly gendered. While many Indigenous men are also missing or murdered, it is typically in circumstances and/or relates to factors that are very different than those of Indigenous women and two-spirit people.

Body sovereignty is inseparable from sovereignty over our lands and waters. It means that we are reclaiming and returning to traditional understandings of our bodies as connected to land. That does not mean assigning women to roles as child-keepers or keepers of the tipis. It does mean understanding that our traditional cosmology, like all aspects of creation, was not and is not fixed. It is fluid, flexible, and constantly recreating itself. Creation was not a single event—it is an ongoing state of being, and our creation stories do not end. We have a lot of work to do in our own communities. We need to talk with each other about the pervasive influences of Christianity and other Western or Eastern religions in our cultures, and the ways in which they have impacted our own spirituality, our bodies, and our body sovereignty.

## Decolonization

I rarely use the term decolonization. It is a useful and valuable term that describes well what we are doing, but I avoid using it because I do not think we (or our struggles) should be defined by colonization. I am Nehinuw (Cree) and our people, like all Indigenous peoples or people of any culture, have a worldview that, over time, has not changed in some aspects and has changed significantly in other aspects. Those changes do not make our worldview any more or any less valid or less legitimately Nehinuw/“Cree.” Rather, they signal that our worldview and our culture itself are responsive and dynamic—they are alive. If we describe ourselves as “decolonizers,” it implies that colonization is what defines us, but my people were Cree before the colonizers arrived. While we have been impacted by colonization, our Cree identity and worldview have survived and have persisted. I rarely use the term decolonization because it gives colonization power. It also assumes that we do not change as Indigenous people, and we have always been changing.

Many people are familiar with the use of the iceberg analogy in discussions of culture. It’s also useful as a way talk about knowledge systems (Wilson, 2016;

St. Denis, 2011).<sup>1</sup> As Indigenous people, our cultures are shaped by knowledge and ways of knowing that are connected to the land. Anyone who has access to Google can learn about material expressions of our cultures like our clothing or our food, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. What's visible is far less important or substantial than the 90% of the iceberg that is beneath the surface of the water. Similarly, the most critical aspects of our cultures are those that are not seen—our value systems, our deep philosophies, our cosmology, and how that all connects to how we teach and how we go about being in the world. One of the features of colonization in our territories has been that systemic and institutional violence, effected through, for example, the imposition of Christianity, residential schools, resource extraction, Hydro development, the Sixties Scoop, Western education, policing and prisons, and child apprehension, have severed the top of our cultural iceberg from the bottom. So now, many non-Indigenous and Indigenous people's knowledge of our cultures is restricted to its visible and material aspects. The tip of the iceberg has come to define what it means to be Indigenous. Many Indigenous people recognize that decolonization requires repairing that damage and restoring the relationships between our visible and material culture and the deep knowledge, value systems, philosophies, cosmologies and other invisible aspects of our cultures. I do not think you can do that without land-based knowledge. When you look at government policies, whether they're federal, provincial, or even, in some cases, our own governments, it's clear that governments have always known that land is the key to the identity of Indigenous peoples. In Canada, Section 24 of The Constitution Act of 1867 gave the federal government authority over "Indians and lands reserved for the Indians," and, in 1876, the Indian Act detailed the responsibilities the government would assume with respect to the management of these lands. Since that time, the government has repeatedly used the Indian Act to restrict Indigenous peoples' access to our traditional lands and force us to move into reserves, settlements, and cities. In the US, the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act was used for similar ends. In both countries, these Acts have enabled the settler populations to occupy and exploit lands that they see as rich in extractable resources.

I do not know if decolonization is possible and it feels like the term has become a catchphrase. I see decolonization stickers on people's computers and there's an irony in that—a sign that our movement has been branded. I hear people talking now about resurgence (Coburn, 2015) and I understand that term to mean something related to but not necessarily the same as decolonizing. It refers to the ways in which we're bringing to the surface and making room for the deep knowledge that we already have in us. I like that.

## Land-Based Education

*Laing:* Could you talk a little bit about your work developing the land-based education master's program at the University of Saskatchewan?

*Wilson:* The program came about because elders and others in the community saw the need for real change in what was going on in education. We have had our own education systems and our own ways of teaching and learning that we developed and used over tens of thousands of years. It was only a few hundred years ago that non-Indigenous people arrived in our territories, bringing and ultimately imposing their own ways of teaching and learning on Indigenous people. In the time that has passed since then, the primary purpose of non-Indigenous education systems (as evidenced by the residential school system in particular) has been to forcibly assimilate Indigenous peoples. Over the last half century, however, Indigenous people have demanded and gained more control and autonomy with respect to formal education. This has included, for example, the development of Indian Teacher Education Programs at the University of Saskatchewan (where I work) and other post-secondary institutions. Programs such as these and other initiatives have helped to produce more Indigenous teachers. While post-secondary participation and completion, and other educational outcomes are improving for Indigenous people, they still lag well behind those of non-Indigenous people. We also know that Indigenous-controlled or staffed education systems need to do more than simply replicate the mainstream educational system. It makes no sense to continue doing what has already proven not to work for our people. As Verna Kirkness, who has provided invaluable leadership throughout the fight for Indigenous control of Indigenous education, has observed, unless an Indigenous person “learns about the forces and the history of [their] people, the values, the customs, the language, [they] will never really know [themselves] or [their] potential as a human being” (Pidgeon, Muñoz, Kirkness, & Archibald, 2013, p. 28).

Verna’s reminder of our history, values, and customs ties to another reason the land-based master’s program was developed. Indigenous communities, lands, and waters are currently facing multiple environmental threats. We are experiencing the impacts of climate change, increased industrialization, hydro development, tar sands extraction activities, development of nuclear energy and contaminant storage, corporatization of land-based practices, hydro development, and the extraction of multiple other resources. The impacts of these activities industries are compounded because they are occurring simultaneously, and because they drive and direct government and corporate policy and investments (and non-investments) in our communities and people. It is critical that we to protect our lands and waters. To do this, all of us, including our teachers, need to understand why they are valuable and how they are threatened. That is how the master’s degree program in land-based education came about. Our communities said we need people that understand the land, and the pedagogy of land. How do you teach about land-based education? How do you teach about the land? Many

communities have culture camps and people who participate in them can learn traditional skills such as how to filet fish, gather medicines, or tan a hide. What we heard from the community, however, is that there is a need for more than practical skills. We need to foster in our students a deep intellectual understanding of the importance of and our relationships with the land and waters, and the best way to do that is to use land-based pedagogies, where we learn from our experiences on the land. That's what we're trying to offer. They are our future educators.

The land-based program also enables students to remain in their own communities for most of the two or three years it might take them to complete their master's degree. We use a cohort model in which a group of students go through together and can offer each other support. The majority of the classes are structured as intensive field schools that run for a two-week period. The students complete two or three land-based courses in each of the field schools, and in between the land-based components, complete an additional three online courses for a total of 10 courses. The students are typically teachers or have other professional positions in the education system and, as they proceed through the master's program, they can draw on or integrate what they've learned into their own professional practice. Remaining in their home communities also makes it easier for students to access ongoing support from their families and communities.

We are now (again at the request of community members) designing a land-based Ph.D. program for educators. All Indigenous nations have their own strong and distinct intellectual traditions, full of philosophers, engineers, mathematicians, and other big thinkers and doers who searched out the answers and solutions to the challenges their people faced. Living with and on the land requires a kind of intellectual rigor. We didn't just accidentally discover how to make an arrow. We designed it. The Cree people had a mathematical system and calendar based on the number four. Surviving in this harsh landscape and through our long winters took a lot of forethought, planning, and calculation. We constructed a way of life that had minimal negative impact on the environment, and not only sustained us but enabled us to happily thrive as individuals and communities.

*Laing:* Could you speak about the relationship that you see between land-based pedagogies and the field of Indigenous studies?

*Wilson:* The field of Indigenous studies has changed for the better in recent years, and that change has been welcomed because in the past the framework of many Indigenous studies or Native studies programs has been a friendly version of the Western gaze ("Hey—let's just see what the natives were doing!"), using historical accounts and occasional interviews. I admit that's an obvious oversimplification—and one that signals my level of disappointment in what some academics have thought worth studying about our peoples. In the past decade, however, the frameworks of most Indigenous studies programs have shifted towards recognizing and validating Indigenous knowledge, knowledge systems, languages,

self-determination, and sovereignty. This is a really important shift and, because these areas of interest are all inseparable from our relationships with the land and waters, I would predict that over the next few years an increasing number of Indigenous studies programs will embrace land-based approaches to pedagogy.

## Queerness, Indigeneity, and Two-Spirit Research

*Laing:* Do you see a relationship between the fields of Indigenous studies and queer studies?

*Wilson:* I've already described some of the inherent problems of the Western model that used to prevail in Indigenous studies. The early departments also had problematic hierarchies in relationship to race and gender. White males were overrepresented in positions such as department chair or full professor, and if a department hired an Indigenous person, it was typically for a lecturer position. That has changed (perhaps out of necessity) but I think there's still work to be done. Indigenous studies needs to queer itself up. By queering, I mean opening up discussion of and challenging the ways in which some within the field of Indigenous studies have reinforced and entrenched binaries and hierarchies related to gender and sexuality. For example, I'm familiar with scholarship that reinforces gender binaries and gender roles, constructing histories that allocate specific tasks to women and reserve other tasks for men. It's as though, intentionally or not, these scholars have just skipped over or avoided validating Indigenous cosmologies that recognize and accept gender fluidity, gender and sexual diversity, and queerness, the kind of understandings that are reflected in the legends or stories of my nation. Now we are starting to see some of our worldviews having more influence and presenting an important challenge to essentialism. We still have a long way to go, though. A significant proportion of my scholarship and activism has focused on two-spirit people. When I started this work, white men, often gay-identified, had authored the vast majority of the literature on the topic. We need to be mindful of the colonial relationship between the people who position themselves as the authors of our stories and ourselves as their (frequently fetishized) subjects. Are they actually writing about us or are they writing about themselves? Do they see themselves as anthropologists? Historians? Or our allies? If they actually are our allies, they need to step back and let us tell our own stories.

*Laing:* Your work on two-spirit identity is foundational in the field of Indigenous studies, and to the emerging and consistently growing body of Indigenous scholars, including two-spirit and queer-identified Indigenous scholars, who are working in this vein of two-spirit critique. Could you speak a little bit about how this type of research and scholarship has grown?

*Wilson:* In the early '80s, when in my twenties, I began hanging out in the gay community in Winnipeg. Within about five years, I lost more than 30 friends to AIDS and AIDS-related illnesses, many of whom were First Nations gay-identified men. That experience (as with the elevated suicide rate within the population of Indigenous LGBTQ2S young people) really brought home that the outcomes and ongoing impacts of colonization are especially dangerous and too often deadly for Indigenous bodies that challenge Western constructs of gender and sexuality. The impacts of HIV/AIDS on our community was one reason that queer-identified Indigenous people started organizing in the '90s. The term two-spirit came about at that time—out of necessity. We began to question all kinds of institutions, including the white male anthropologists who were talking, theorizing, and writing about our lives. In the literature they produced, we saw that, rather than *our* stories or *our* ideas, they were writing their conclusions about us, based on what they were interested in rather than what mattered to *us*. Their body of work romanticized Indigenous people and Indigenous queerness in our communities, and, from my perspective, did a lot of damage.

The term two-spirit originally referred specifically to people who were LGBTQIA+ and First Nations. The meaning has shifted since then, particularly around gender. My article “How We Find Ourselves: Identity Development and Two-Spirit People” was published in 1996, but it was written a few years earlier when I was an undergrad. Since that time, my thinking has changed around the idea of a masculine and feminine continuum, and now I'm not sure if it even exists or what it means. Two-spirit identity ought to question that continuum but more and more people are now teaching that people have two spirits, a male spirit and a female spirit. I'm not sure where that came from. I've never heard an elder say that or anyone communicate that idea in our Cree language. The idea that we all have a male and a female spirit seems like one more way in which Indigenous people are romanticized. It also feels somewhat homophobic to me, as though, as a two-spirit woman, that I have a “male” part, and it's only that male part that allows me to be with another woman. Binarizing the gender identity of two-spirit people draws us into the ways in which Indigenous women's bodies are regulated. For example, some of the members of our community who lead or organize traditional ceremonies require women to wear skirts if they want to take part in ceremony. People will make an exception to this rule for a two-spirit person who is cisgendered female, with the explanation that, “Oh, well, she is two-spirited and that means she is part male, so she does not have to wear skirt.” That is problematic because it essentializes us and, at the same time, sidesteps the real issue, which is that women who do not wear a skirt would be denied access to ceremony.

Currently, Sarah Hunt, Leanne Simpson, and others are really opening up the conversation about what it means to be two-spirit and what it means to be queer.

The term two-spirit was first used in a small circle of people in the prairies. Twenty-some years later, you can now find it in documents like the University of Saskatchewan's anti-discrimination policy and included as an identity in Red River College's demographic section of their admissions application. While there have been lots of (small) positive changes, there's clearly much more work to be done, because the suicide rate in the two-spirit and Indigenous LGBTQIA+ population is not decreasing. In fact, I would say there is hesitancy in some communities to talk about two-spirit or LGBTQIA+ identity. I've already pointed to signs of a shift toward fundamentalism in our communities. This includes our traditional spiritual systems, some of which have become more conservative, taking on very gendered and very binary approaches to spirituality that I never saw when I was a child. Back then, no one was demanding that women wear skirts for ceremonies. In my experience, Indigenous people didn't regulate bodies that way. Now there are issues around women's bodies that never existed before and there are very few safe spaces for two-spirit people in either the mainstream or our own communities or even on social media.

*Laing:* How can—or perhaps how should—the fields of education and Indigenous studies respond to these realities?

*Wilson:* The fields of education and Indigenous studies have a responsibility to respond. They *must* respond. If you work in these fields, your job is to challenge and invert hegemony. One way to do that is by providing voice to those who are being marginalized and those who are impacted the most by the whiplash that is happening. Scholars have a responsibility not just to open up the conversations and add things to their syllabi but also to really examine the way that their own practices and the practices of their departments or colleges are structured. Look long and hard at the power dynamics and the power structures and try to undo or unravel some of that.

With respect to the risk of suicide for two-spirit and Indigenous LGBTQIA+ people, those of us working in the field of education have to do something about it. There have been innumerable presentations and lectures on suicide and almost no one mentions the high suicide rates in the queer Indigenous community. Even when they have been told the statistics, they are still afraid to talk about it. There are all these programs that are supposed to prevent or raise awareness around suicide, and almost none of them ever touch on two-spirit people. When we do appear, we are typically presented in this deeply romanticized way—that traditionally two-spirit people were shamans and deeply honored members of their communities. Tell that to the people of Northern Manitoba, where, in 2016, a number of lesbian self-identified youth committed suicide. Their deaths occurred in the context of a suicide epidemic that also claimed the lives of other youth, a crisis that led the First Nation's leadership to declare a state of emergency. The

declaration generated promises of support from governments, gained international attention (NoiseCat, 2016), and even resulted in a junior hockey team flying into a northern community to spend a day visiting, talking, and playing hockey with youth. In spite of this flurry of activity and attention, it seemed that no one could speak the word lesbian. Who does that serve? It might serve gendered and heteronormative ideas about what it means to be a kid but it does not serve the kids who need to know that, regardless of their sexual or gender identity, they are valued members of their community.

Scholars and educators have a big role to play. We need to incorporate knowledge mobilization and knowledge translation activities into our work that ensure that our research and our pedagogical practices are accessible and shared with communities. That often happens naturally because most Indigenous scholars have pretty strong connections to their home communities. Unfortunately, much of the work we do to ensure that our work is useful to our communities doesn't fit into the structure or process of the system used to determine who gets tenure and who is promoted within university systems. As academics, we need to work together to push universities to recognize and validate oral knowledge transmission and the importance of relationality and relational accountability in our research activities. I would much rather do an interview, or an oral presentation, than write a paper because they are more accessible, engaging, and interactive formats than words on a page, and they build relational accountability into the knowledge exchange that's taking place between myself and whomever else might be in the room.

I would like to challenge students and scholars to go back to their own languages, histories, and traditions and seek out the stories that aren't usually shared regarding the links between queerness and cosmology, as well as find the ways to tell them that do not reinforce heteropatriarchy. Take, for example, the Weesageychak trickster stories that we grew up with and that remain very popular. When people translate them into the English language, Weesageychak suddenly becomes a male in a little buckskin outfit. Even when these stories are written in Cree, artists' renderings of Weesageychak again portray the character as male. As a result, in most people's minds, Weesageychak is male. But Weesageychak is not male or female. Weesageychak is energy. We need to bring our artists together with those who have this kind knowledge so that our culture can actually be represented. We do not need another statue of Louis Riel or Chief So-And-So. That reinforces heteronormativity and gender supremacy and is another way in which our women have been disappeared. We can find other ways to recognize our cosmology and share the fact that, as a people, we do have deep intellectual traditions that we have developed and sustained for 100,000 years or more, and, as scholars, we come from and continue that tradition. When we step up as public intellectuals, we are demonstrating relational accountability in our lives as academics and should be grateful that we are able to do so.

*Laing:* I am thinking about all of your observations on the ways that two-spirit has become a meme. That one singular narrative about two-spirit people

that gets reproduced, which centers the one mythical, romanticized role that two-spirit people were held as highly revered shamans and healers is so visible. I see that a lot. It gets reproduced so much, and it does not serve us. It is just another romanticization of Indigenous people.

*Wilson:* Yes, it is like being turned into a mascot. Some people will say, “Well, being a mascot is an honor”—well, no, it’s not. We just want to be considered as human. And of course, there are two-spirited or queer people who actually are healers or medicine people but there are also two-spirit people who are not that, who do not want to be that, or for whom that is not part of their life and the meme can easily make those people feel like they must *become* healers or medicine people to be useful. I have also read many places and heard friends (most of them gay men) say that, traditionally, two-spirit people took care of the children. Usually mothers take care of children. There may be instances in which gay men have taken care of children, but I am not aware that this was a widespread practice or a role allocated to gay men. Claiming this as a traditional role for gay men feels like another intrusion of Western heteropatriarchy into our traditional cultures, as men find a sense of self-worth by erasing the contributions of women. Sexism and misogyny are present in and have damaged the two-spirit community. The romanticizing memes about two-spirit people give two-spirit men (and, to a lesser extent, trans women) a kind of power—whether they want it or not. A two-spirit male can be both a man and a superwoman. But two-spirit cisgendered women are sometimes pushed to the side by “traditional” regulations of their bodies, such as the skirt rule described above or menstruation taboos that are used to deny women access to ceremonies or ceremonial items. Two-spirit men, however, seem to have unlimited access. This has left some two-spirit women questioning what that identity means. These issues have been discussed at the annual gatherings of two-spirit people from throughout North America and have also contributed to the decision made by two-spirit women in Saskatchewan and Manitoba to organize their own gatherings. All of this of course would not be an issue if we really did validate and honor a continuum of gender identities.

*Laing:* The other thing with regard to this singular narrative about two-spirit is that it obscures what you were speaking to just now, the importance of learning our stories and going back to our languages and the teachings of our own nations around gender and sexuality.

*Wilson:* Yes. People need to remember that our elders, regardless of whether they attended residential schools (and most did), have still been impacted by the education system of that time. Everyone is influenced by mainstream media, education, and other institutions. There is no way around it. At schools, Indigenous children were taught new stories that legitimized the power of the colonial state, the queen, the church, settler economics,

racial hierarchies, gender supremacy, and heteronormativity. These stories were overprinted on what they already knew and would continue to learn later from their own families, communities, lands, and waters. On the other hand, our generation has had the luxury of being trained to think critically about what they were taught in the schools and about our cultural teachings about gender and sexual diversity. When we talk to our elders, it can take a while to tease out the concepts of gender and sexual diversity that may exist in their languages and cultures. The presentation on our Cree cosmology and Weesageychak, which was referred to earlier, took over 20 years to piece together (Wilson, 2016). It was not just a single teaching someone gave to me. It was a process of listening to and learning from hundreds of people in my community and beyond, around language to figure out the meaning of the term—a long process of learning from others, developing an understanding, and then going back to them and asking, “Is this what it means?” It wasn’t time to share the understanding until the teachers who had shared their knowledge with me gave permission. You do not just go to an elder, ask about sexuality, and they give you the exact answer you were looking for, which you then take out to the world. You have to do hard work to figure this stuff out, to understand what this means in our language. We need to think about how the context of our lands and waters informs the meaning. How does that play out? In my conversations I’ve learned that traditionally we did not have a concept of “Mother Earth.” With that knowledge, I had to learn more about when and why that concept appeared. What is evident is that it is about the relationships and relationality between us and the land and waters. We come from the earth and we rely on the earth to sustain us. When we refer to Mother Earth, we are saying that we have a deep and loving relationship with these lands and waters that we depend upon. Similarly, in our language, the moon is not referred to as “Grandmother Moon.” It is just the moon. When we say Grandmother Moon, we are understanding and acknowledging that the moon impacts bodies of water, that we, as humans, are constituted of water, so, of course, the moon impacts us. In Indigenous cultures, the moon might be a brother, a father, or grandmother. We are all right, because the terms we use are a way to acknowledge the relationship we have with the moon. In my family, I was taught that our language does not gender people, but of course we have descriptive terms for “man” and “woman.” The existence of those words does not mean that we only acknowledge two genders in general. Rather, they are terms that mark specific gender positions on a continuum.

It takes a lot of work (and much of it is hard work) to learn about our languages and cultures and to do so in a respectful way, especially when the people with the

most knowledge in these areas are elders who are first language speakers but have become entrenched in and committed to heteropatriarchy and other wayward teachings from the residential school system and other Western influences. It is challenging for both them and for me because even though they may know their language and have a sophisticated understanding of it, they may not have considered the questions we are asking today around queerness, for example. I have found that most are supportive and encouraging and even excited to contribute to new understandings based on the old knowledge. And when we come to an answer, they then might say, “Oh, yeah, that totally makes sense. I never thought of it that way, but yeah, that’s right.” You have to keep at it. That is the lesson that I have learned for myself. Just keep at it.

## Note

- 1 St. Denis offers a discussion of how deep knowledge is silenced through multiculturalism discourse.

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