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# “My Spirit in My Heart”: Identity Experiences and Challenges Among American Indian Two-Spirit Women

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**SUMMARY.** Many Native women embrace the term *two-spirit* to capture their sexuality and gender expression. By analyzing the narratives of five two-spirit women who are Native activists, we explored contemporary understandings of the concept and what it means for Native communities. The incorporation of the identity within indigenous worldviews, its manifestation in terms of (be)coming out, and the triple stressors of heterosexism, racism, and sexism emerged as key themes. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** American Indian/Alaskan Native, lesbian spirituality, lesbian women of color, two-spirit, sexual orientation and discrimination, identity development, qualitative research

I feel as though being a queer Indian is the hardest job in the world . . . you have a colonized situation and dissolution of traditional ways—it's hard to be queer and Indian. (Maxine, a two-spirit Native activist)

Historically, Native societies incorporated gender roles beyond *male* and *female* (Brown, 1997; Lang, 1998; Little Crow, Wright, & Brown, 1997). Individuals embracing these genders may have dressed; assumed social, spiritual and cultural roles; or engaged in sexual and other behaviors not typically associated with members of their biological sex. From the community's perspective, the fulfillment of social or ceremonial roles and responsibilities was a more important defining feature of gender than sexual behavior or identity. Although there were exceptions, many of the individuals who embodied *alternative* gender roles or sexual identities were integrated within their community, often occupying highly respected social and ceremonial roles.

Western colonization and Christianization of Native cultures, however, attacked traditional Native conceptions of gender and sexual identity. The colonizing process succeeded in undermining traditional ceremonial and social roles for two-spirits within many tribal communities, replacing traditional acceptance and inclusivity with shaming condemnation (Tinker, 1993).

From within the academy, anthropologists have sought—unsuccessfully—to understand the historical status of indigenous peoples who lived with more fluid gender and sexual expressions (Farrer, 1997). As Blackwood (1997, p. 285) explained, “The critical importance of biology to Western constructs of gender meant that White scholars were rarely able to separate biology from gender successfully.” The label of *third gender* they proposed is based on the Western binary system of gender and diminishes the complexity of multi-gendered statuses and expressions. The term *berdache* is offensive because of its colonial origins and purely sexual connotations: it is a non-Native word of Arabic origin (i.e., *berdaj*), which refers to male slaves who served as anally receptive prostitutes (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang, 1997; Thomas & Jacobs, 1999). More contemporary anthropologists created the terms *women-men* and *men-women*, which are similarly deficient (Lang, 1998).

Native activists emerged with a term of their own—*two-spirit*. Adopted in 1990 at the third annual spiritual gathering of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Natives, the expression derives from the Northern Algonquin word *niizh manitoag*, meaning *two spirits*, and refers to the inclusion of both feminine and masculine components within one individual (Anguksuar, 1997). The term *two-spirit* is used currently to reconnect with tribal traditions related to sexuality and gender identity; to transcend the Eurocentric binary categorizations of homosexual vs. heterosexual or male vs. female; to signal the fluidity and non-linearity of identity processes; and, to counteract heterosexism in Native communities and racism in LGBT communities (Walters, 1997; Walters et al., 2001).

Blackwood (1997) suggested moving beyond labeling and classifying two-spirits to considering two-spirits as part of lived, contemporary human culture, situated within social relations that are negotiated and contested by family, community, and historical interpretations. She further recommended that extending the analysis of two-spirit gender into the realm of social relations and asking how two-spirit people position themselves in relation to other Natives as well as to White LGBT groups and individuals.

Toward these ends, we present in this paper experiences, perceptions, and challenges regarding the adoption of a two-spirit identity among Native women based on data from a large-scale national study of two-spirit health (i.e., the HONOR Project). Working in concert with local and regional two-spirit communities and Native agencies, HONOR Project staff conducted over 60 in-depth interviews with two-spirit

leaders and activists covering topics from identity to community strengths to health concerns. Consistent with narrative and indigenist research methods, the qualitative interviews provided opportunity for two-spirit leaders to give their *testimonios*, a type of oral history and life story as two-spirit leaders and women (Bishop, 2005; McMahon & Rogers, 1994; Tuhiwai Smith, 2005). Interviewers did not focus on eliciting factual historical data; rather, they aimed to uncover the meanings that familial, spiritual, communal, and historical events have in shaping identity and quality of life for two-spirit women. The five two-spirit women whose narratives we review here range in age from late 20s through late 50s and represent considerable tribal diversity. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used and limited tribal and other socio-demographic information is provided. Many of the quotes presented here were edited for readability and grammatical correctness.

**“IT’S ON A MORE DEEPER SPIRITUAL LEVEL”:  
DE-CENTERING SEXUALITY AND CENTERING SPIRITUALITY  
IN TWO-SPIRIT IDENTITY**

For Native persons, indigenous worldviews, including the centrality of spirituality, and ways of relating form the core of any behavioral expression. Indigenous traditional worldviews recognize the interdependency among humans and nature, the physical and spiritual worlds, the ancestors and future generations—connections that bind all living beings in spiritual ways. It is not surprising then that the term *two-spirit* is connected to traditional spiritual values and extends beyond the mainstream focus of sexual orientation as rooted in sexuality. Alex Wilson (1996), a two-spirit woman activist and educator, wrote that the term two-spirit “proclaims a sexuality deeply rooted in our own cultures. Two-spirit identity affirms the interrelatedness of all aspects of identity, including sexuality, gender, culture, community, and spirituality” (p. 303). The women in our study concurred with this perspective.

Being two-spirited, kind of goes beyond my sexuality. I am attracted to women, prefer to be with a woman, but it also is more about who I am as a person . . . there’s a spiritual side to it . . . there is a spiritual side that I just can’t find words for. (Sandy)

For me, I look at the word and I hear the word two-spirit, I look at the spiritual component of that, and I have to really say if I use this,

what does this mean to me on a spiritual level, what is my identity to this on a spiritual level? . . . I say I'm a spiritual woman walking a spiritual way of life. You know, that's how I really want to be seen, that's how I really want to be known. Not as necessarily the two-spirit woman, but a woman who's walking the spiritual path and struggling on that spiritual path but learning to walk it and to embrace it and be a spiritual kind of woman, but it's not gender specified . . . so anyways, so yeah. (Roberta)

***“BEING RESPONSIBLE TO THE PEOPLE”:  
TWO-SPIRIT IDENTITY MEANS SERVING THE COMMUNITY***

Indigenism values familial, communal, and ancestral roles and responsibilities. Indeed, all of the two-spirit women talked about the general importance of their roles as community caregivers.

I just feel like I have this responsibility to community that I have to fulfill and that's just a part of me and I feel like I'm—that's just something I naturally gravitate to, even if I consciously don't feel like I want to do that, you know, it's like I've gone through periods where I needed to take care of myself and I need to do this and work at this job or go to school or whatever, but it's like this community always seems like it takes priority to me, that I need to be something no matter how small it is . . . (Winona)

Additionally, many connected their fulfillment of these roles specifically to their identity as two-spirit women.

I believe that there have always been roles and I believe that each nation has had names for people like us. And it was just a way of life. There was no—my belief is that we didn't have to explain who we were, we didn't have to justify our existence, we were just who we were, part of our community and part of our village and those roles that we took on were just a natural aspect of who we were . . . And within myself today I see it happening. I don't have to think about it, I just fall into some role. I don't say—yeah, I'll do that! You know? It just happens to be. I might be there at the right time, the right place. I always believe that there have been roles for us. And those roles, either spoken or unspoken, [involve] just naturally filling in those gaps. (Roberta)

The traditional sacred ceremonial roles for two-spirit women have expanded in contemporary space to include political organizing and engaging in legal battles for indigenous sovereignty. As Maxine indicates, these roles often are perceived as a central organizing component of two-spirit identity.

I feel like the gift that I can try and give back to the Native community is um speaking out and saying things I've said and the work that I've done for treaty rights. And, of course, I'm one of many, many people. I mean it's not like I'm center of anything. I'm just doing what I see to do . . . that's where my heart is, you know, in trying to do that kind of work and make people's lives easier. Like I said, sending stuff to the rez and you know. . . . I don't have any traditional knowledge, I can't speak my language fluently, I'm not a very useful Indian [laughs] for Indians except for what I can do you know to help people who have less than myself so that's kind of what my center is.

Overall, this approach to conceptualizing a two-spirit identity is similar to how the women view their Native identity: multifaceted, involving spirituality, and manifesting in socially sanctioned behavior.

My great-grandfather said to me once that being Indian isn't being on a piece of paper; it's spirit. So I don't think for me that's what it's always been about. My identity isn't on a piece of paper, isn't on a tribal card, isn't a number—it's me and my spirit in my heart and the way I choose to live my life. So that keeps me grounded in what I do. (Roberta)

***“WE NEEDED TO KIND OF DEVELOP OUR OWN IDENTITY”:  
COUNTERING OPPRESSIVE DOMINANT DISCOURSES  
WITH A TWO-SPIRIT IDENTITY***

Many of the women spoke of how the term two-spirit emphasizes the importance of indigenous worldviews, histories, and experiences in the face of White hegemony in the mainstream LGBT community. Winona commented on how the two-spirit term has come to represent a form of indigenous resistance:

I usually use the term two-spirit . . . most people felt a lot of alienation from the White gay/lesbian community and really—I don't want to make it seem like it was reactionary to that—it really felt like we needed to kind of develop our own identity outside of that prejudice and I think the term two-spirit came out of that, of trying to have that identity outside of, you know, the prejudice from the Native community and the prejudice from the White gay-lesbian community or non-Indian gay-lesbian community.

The homogenizing effect of lesbian feminism, with its identity movement, positioned itself as “the expression of the aspirations of all women” (Stein, 1992: p. 558). The lesbian movement from the 1970s through the 1980s privileged White middle-class women for whom lesbianism represented a sexual object choice and political identity in opposition to white-male dominated systems. Lorde (1985) noted that lesbian women of color and white working-class lesbians were compelled by the privileged White middle-class majority to assimilate to their political agenda and identity politics, making this hegemonic lesbian identity their primary identity. This assimilation required a marginalization of race and class issues paramount in the lives of lesbian women of color and white working-class lesbians. As Roberta lamented:

How can one separate themselves from being two-spirit to being an Indian? So, I mean, to me it's a very hard concept to say that I am this or that. I'm all of that. Yes, I'm a Native woman, I'm two-spirit . . . it's all those things and encompassing and being, and for me to say I'm only this over here is not healthy because I'm not only this, I'm a multitude of things.

In response to the hegemonic identity politics of the White middle-class majority, many women of color challenged the notion of lesbian identity as organized around a fight against patriarchal influences and oppression and pushed for a more “diffuse notion of power and resistance” (Stein, 1992, p. 561). The women in our study were particularly uncomfortable with the anti-male separatism that is a core principle in some lesbian communities.

I have to thank the White gay and lesbian community for that because of their separatist issues. . . . I refuse to go into that little box,

shutting every [man] out, because they're an important part of all creation and you know they're going to be there. (Sandy)

For Native women, embracing men was a way to fortify defenses against White oppression.

A lot of times in the White community, lesbians will say, you know, 'I just don't like men.' Actually, I think that identifying as two-spirit, I have more of an alliance with Native men . . . because they're Native men and they have experienced a lot of similar racist attitudes as well as homophobic attitudes on the reservation that I have. Um, we seem to bond together better, the male and the female sides sort of complement one another. I have difficulty explaining it to White lesbians who would say, 'Well, why would you want gay men at an event?' Because Native gay men are not gay men, they're my two-spirit brothers. (Sandy)

Just as two-spirit women value women and men in the Native community, they embrace the feminine and masculine in their own two-spirit identity. Wilson (1996) noted that the balance of feminine and masculine qualities, of male and female spirits, embodied in persons is often emphasized in traditional Native communities. Indeed, many Native origin stories speak to the balance of male and female, the importance of harmony between opposites as a way of wellness and wholeness. For many of the two-spirit women, reconnecting with this sense of wholeness meant also reconnecting with both the masculine and feminine aspects of their spirit.

When we had pow wows at the two-spirit gatherings, there were men who danced traditional women's dances and I think that's definitely something that is a two-spirit thing that is important to those men and like I haven't seen any women dance traditional men's but, you know, when I was younger it was very important to me to not—to be able to have that male side of my personality come out and that was very repressed and I think especially younger women really need to have that option of being able to have that part of your personality. (Winona)

It's definitely a balance in understanding assets of both genders. (Sandy)

It is no wonder that the term two-spirit emerged in the late 1980s, given the emergence of race and class-based ideological shifts to de-center the lesbian feminist model of identity during this time. For many of the two-spirit women, the lesbian feminist movement first served as an initial haven in which to share and bond with other lesbian women. However, it later became a community whose underlying ideology about men and gender relations failed to connect with indigenous women's realities and solidarity with Native men in the fight against colonialism and racist oppression.

Sadly, the term created by Natives for Natives, in their effort to secure their own identity free from oppressive influences, in part has been appropriated by the very forces they were struggling against. Consequently, the term *two-spirit* has acquired metaphoric power, becoming synonymous with spiritual power and ceremonial practices in an inaccurate and misappropriated fashion (Wilson, 1996). The metaphoric power associated with the term has led to romanticization and objectification of indigenous peoples who are two-spirit, in yet another example of colonial oppression.

It's confusing sometimes because a lot of White people have started to identify as two-spirit and they don't get it, that it's not appropriate, you know. (Janis)

I don't mean that, you know, that every gay Native person is, you know, a shaman or a guru, you know. That's the way White people want to see us . . . (Sandy)

**“A UNIFYING NAME TO START TO HAVE A COMMUNITY”:  
TWO-SPIRIT AS A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY  
TO SPUR SOCIAL MOBILIZATION**

Two-spirit identity served not only to push away White dominance but to pull together the Native community with a collective identity in the struggle against racism, heterosexism, and internalized oppression. Many of the women described a two-spirit identity as a unifying construct that allows them to join with other Natives to explore their sexuality and gender from an indigenist perspective. As Winona remarked:

People are acting like it [the two-spirit label] has been around forever, it has this deep meaning and all of this, which it has come to

have more meaning to different people but to me it was just something that was—something we needed at that time . . . it was just . . . important to have kind of a unifying name to start to have a community of some common kind of things . . . we always knew everybody had their own traditions and communities we needed to go back to, but as far as having support, it's not always realistic for people to expect to be able to have support from other two-spirit people in their own community . . . that name I think to unify people and to have a place where people can go and be safe and talk about being two-spirit.

The increasing acceptance of the two-spirit identity among Natives facilitated national and international gatherings that served to create a safe space for identity exploration and development and to mobilize the community.

I don't feel like I have to divide myself up so much anymore because I went to a lot of [two-spirit] gatherings in the early years . . . so I have a lot of two-spirit friends . . . At the [two-spirit gathering] there was a lake there and it was just nice, and we laughed . . . it was a space where you could be normal, a week out of the year, and so just that in itself I guess is what kept me going back to the gatherings—even today where things are so much better, it's like you just can't go anyplace and not feel like you have to protect somebody or alter your identity or whatever. (Winona)

In general, the two-spirit gatherings every year are really helpful to me because it feels like that's the only time in the year I get to be my whole self in one place . . . to me it's healing. (Maxine)

The problem with a unifying term is that, although it is necessary for political mobilization, it simultaneously privileges a single experience of identity and diminishes within-group heterogeneity (Melucci, 1989). As the Native women had observed in the White LGBT community, unifying terms tend to privilege within-group dominant discourses and marginalize other voices, a process antithetical to the original intent of the term *two-spirit*. Indeed, social movement theorists have elaborated upon the ways in which the U.S. political environment makes stable collective identities both necessary and damaging (Gamson, 1998).

However, indigenous worldviews tend to embrace ambiguity, complexity, and non-linearity—processes that run counter to group mobiliza-

tion for a singular unifying construct. Perhaps, then, this is why some of the two-spirit women noted the ambiguity in the construct of two-spirit. Instead of embracing a singular definition of the construct, they were comfortable with having it be a placeholder, a momentary construct that is readily contested and negotiated within Native communities and two-spirit spaces until a word is created that captures the fluidity of gender and sexual identity and the interconnectedness and inseparability of identity with spirituality and traditional worldviews.

You know, even the word two-spirit as you may know is really just a contemporary marker . . . for lack of a yet-to-be-found better word. (Sandy)

So even today, I probably would acknowledge myself more as two-spirit than anything else. Because it fits me better and it's not the name in our language that says it all, but it's probably about the best fit I can find right now and that's how I consider myself to be—two-spirit. (Roberta)

I'm still kind of trying to figure out um, you know, what is the term for myself. (Janis)

**“THEY COME OUT INTO THIS WORLD LIKE THAT”:  
COMING OUT VS. BECOMING**

From two-spirits' perspective, coming out to self and others might be better thought of as *becoming out* in the sense that this process of identity acquisition is really a process of becoming who they were meant to be—a process of coming home or coming in, as opposed to coming out or leaving an old identity behind to embrace a new one. Wilson (1996, p. 310) captured this experience: “We become self-actualized when we become what we've always been . . .” A two-spirit woman's assertion that she's “been this way from birth,” conveys her understanding of how the Creator brought her into this world, this life, in a certain way that is directly connected to the ancestors and future generations in what might be called spiritual essentialism. This stands in contrast to the biological essentialism of mainstream lesbian discourses evoked by the same phrase, which alludes to genetic make-up or biological determinism. Hall's description of “warrior” women exemplifies this idea of spiritual essentialism.

They are just being, that is the way the Great Mystery made them. They come out into this world like that. And they are living their lives . . . they were just manifesting what they were. And how they lived. It was something given to them by Spirit-this way of living. (Hall, 1999, p. 274)

This process of becoming can be misread or missed by non-Natives, because two-spirits might not be out in ways that are consistent with LGBT politics or anthropological paradigms. For example, the following incident illustrates how two-spirit behavior can be misinterpreted when viewed through a Western lens.

When [an anthropologist] came to do her fieldwork, she said she wanted to meet some “warrior women,” so I told her, “O.K., come to the reservation, I’ll introduce you to some warrior women.” But [she] came back . . . and she said, “You know, they’re just the kind of women I am looking for but they do not know who they are.” Well, it is not that they do not know who they are, just because they do not know the label anthropologists have put on them—because they are just who they are. (Hall, 1999, p. 274).

**“GO ALONG WITH THE PARTY LINE”:  
CONFRONTING COMPULSORY HOMONORMATIVITY**

Just as two-spirit women struggled to create terms to describe their identity free of White-dominated LGBT language, they also sought ways of embodying their identity that were uniquely Native. Initially, however, they often felt constrained by more rigid models of LGBT *appropriate* behavior. Winona described how she felt compelled by the White-dominated lesbian community to be out.

You’re expected to be out if you were going to be part of the lesbian community. And if you weren’t, it was like a bad thing and you couldn’t be accepted. And so the other thing was you’re expected to go along with the party line, which was very White oriented also. If you didn’t go along with that, you also were rejected. (Winona)

This compulsory homonormativity extended to LGBT rituals as well, such as one’s first *dyke* haircut. Although this may be a rite of passage for some two-spirit women (e.g., Winona said, “[I] cut my hair off and wore flannel shirts and all of that stuff”) as well as mainstream lesbians,

the associated meaning often differs for two-spirits, as the following experience so poignantly illustrates.

I cut my hair, proclaiming a new identity. . . . I know that in Cree tradition, we cut our hair when we are in mourning. When someone we are related to or someone we love dies, a part of ourselves dies. It is a personal ceremony. The hair, usually a braid, is buried in a quiet safe place where no people or animals can step on it or disturb it. There I was with a flattop, shaved on the sides and short, spiky and flat on top. My hair was everywhere on the floor of the flashy salon . . . people were stepping on it, walking through it, and eventually it just ended up in the garbage along with everyone else's. A connection with my community was buried in that garbage can. (Wilson, 1996, p. 312).

Assimilation into White lesbian culture quite often placed two-spirit women in the position of disconnecting from Native relatives and community.

I really distanced myself from my family and um I felt like I had to for my own protection and I really got involved in the lesbian community, and, you know, we made other lesbians our family. (Maxine)

The cost of this disconnection, albeit temporary or transitional in nature, forced two-spirit women to split their identities, a process that can increase feelings of estrangement in both communities (Walters, 1997).

I think when I was young and I moved into that house [with White lesbians], I guess I was really in denial about, you know, nobody knows I'm here, so I can just do what I want! And then I can go back to the Native community again and nobody will know. . . . When I did go back to the Native community, [I'd] go back in the closet again. (Winona)

I guess I didn't have a clear identity, I kind of like divided myself up more, like I would hang out in the gay-lesbian community and just accept what the standard was there, and then I would be in the closet in the Native. (Winona)

In more extreme circumstances, this experience of disconnection led women to self-destructive patterns. However, women who discussed

suicide and hopelessness found solace in their spirituality and in some cases, divine intervention, which helped them move through the most troubling parts of [be]coming out.

I at 21, I almost committed suicide. . . . I remember putting the barrel of the rifle in my mouth. And I was getting ready to pull the trigger and all of a sudden I heard this chanting and singing and up over the hill came all these women and they were singing a song and they were chanting and they were circling around me and the sun came out so bright . . . that was such a profound experience . . . the women told me that there was importance in my life, that I was significant, that I was valuable, there were things in my life that I needed to do. And so to make it through the tough times I think about that moment. (Roberta)

Several women talked about how the effects of historical trauma and its aftermath in personal, familial, and community functioning also complicate the process of (be)coming out for two-spirit women.

All Native people are dealing with trauma from our communities past and present. (Winona)

When I came out, I had really a lot of confusion, and when I came out I didn't come out just as a two-spirit person, I was like trying to pull myself out of the muck and the dysfunction that had been my life. (Sandy)

We still have a lot of homophobia in our own communities, there's still a lot of homophobia that I believe stems from the dysfunction in the heterosexual families in our communities . . . it takes a long time to unravel [what] you know that this society has forced down our throats over all of these generations, and it's definitely you know unraveling generation after generation of dysfunction and pain and it's gonna take a couple of generations before that finally, you know, is changed. . . . (Sandy)

***“MORE OF A TRADITIONAL WAY OF DOING THINGS”:  
EMBODIMENT OF A TWO-SPIRIT IDENTITY***

Many researchers have noted that cultural values are critical variables that shape LGBT people's self-concept, coming out processes,

coping skills, and psychological well-being (Morales, 1989). For Native people, the effect of culture is powerful and pervasive, and many indigenous ethics directly contradict values held by LGBT communities (Walters, 1997).

Mainstream LGBT culture values coming out in an explicitly verbal manner, and there is empirical evidence that coming out in this fashion is linked to good mental health outcomes—at least among a White sample (Garnets & Kimmel, 1991). However, directness and drawing attention to oneself are not values within most Native communities, where cooperation, humility, and collectivism are more highly prized. Identity and authenticity are assessed by adherence to a traditionalist collective norm for behavior; accordingly, Natives often prefer more subtle, non-verbal ways of disclosing their sexual identity.

I've always said I was a two-spirit person and I was able to do it in such a way that it wasn't like here I am, this is who I am, this type of thing, I'm going to be in your face with it. But in a mannerism of bringing it up and talking about it and being calm about it . . . I did it in a very non-threatening, a very non-judgmental way and that if I could sort of present myself with my identity and to be strong within that identity and to come from a spiritual way of life with it, it would have more of an impact than being a rebel radical would have. (Roberta)

It's not really that I'm ashamed or that I don't want anybody to know because I mean everybody here knows. . . . It's more that uh in certain circumstances it's not helpful to sort of like push that in someone's face if they're, you know, like for instance when I . . . was at the elders' dinner, right. I didn't do anything that would indicate that part of my life because it's not appropriate, you know, it's an elders' dinner, you know. (Maxine)

I think we focused on ourselves and people didn't come to a group and say, "We're here, we're queer, get used to us." You know? It was more people would hear about our group [of two-spirits] from other people and they would watch what the people in the group did. . . . I think people became more accepting because of that, because we didn't get up in their face about things and I don't know, I just think that happened back then at least with more people, that that's more of a traditional way of doing things. (Winona)

Native conceptualizations of time are not linear; the ancestors as well as future generations are viewed as omnipresent. Therefore, two-spirit people may not subscribe to the notion that they must quickly progress through successive phases to achieve a preordained end—in direct contrast to the sequence described by coming out stage models based on White LGBT experience (Falco, 1991). Journeys are more circular in nature; things come in their own time. As Debran, a Navajo two-spirit activist quoted in Farrer (1997), explained: “I think it is just going to take time. It takes time. And I have that time. I do not expect to be accepted just like that. Over time, over years, or whatever, as people see who I am and how I am, that is what it takes” (p. 300). Wilson (1996) explained how the indigenous value of waiting until the time is right allows individuals to examine their state of mind prior to taking an action. Ross (1992) reported that the less familiar the context, the more likely a Native person is to withdraw, be silent, and reflect on possible outcomes, given various courses of action as well as to be cognizant of whether the time is right for action. Sandy alluded to these values in discussing when to come out to others.

I don't want to interrupt their process by saying, well, this is my experience. So now I find that I just sit back and I just kind of listen . . . there are some things that people need to learn in their own time and in their own way, and in their own space.

**“SHE FULLY ACCEPTED ME”:  
FAMILY AND COMMUNITY AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH**

Many of the women talked about a deep sense of belonging that could only be found for them in Native communities. Wilson (1996) explained that the support of family and culture plays a pivotal role in helping two-spirit women live authentically. She wrote: “Throughout my life, my family had acknowledged and accepted me without interference. . . . I acquired strength from my elders and leaders who were able to explain that as an indigenous woman who is also a lesbian, I needed to use the gifts of my difference wisely” (p. 313). Michael Red Earth, a male two-spirit activist, had a similarly supportive family: “For me, once I realized that my family was responding to me and interacting with me with respect and acceptance, and once I realized that this respect and acceptance was a legacy of our traditional Native past, I was empowered to present my whole self to the world and reassume the re-

sponsibilities of being a two-spirited person” (1997, p. 216). Roberta described how family and community support for her was personified in one relative, her grandmother:

She fully accepted me for who I was and I was her granddaughter, and that’s all that mattered. And it didn’t matter what my lifestyle was, as long as I was happy. As long as I was healthy. And so I would say that my grandmother was a major turning point in my life, to fully be accepted by them helped me to continue and to look at life and to look at what is healthy.

The strength of familial and community bonds, however, was not always unconditional. Two-spirit women discussed their hesitancy to be open and visible to their own communities for fear of losing this important cultural support system and sense of belonging and being excluded from their primary supports in dealing with racism and colonialism. As Little Thunder, a Lakota two-spirit women activist quoted in Farrer (1997), remarked, “The pain of being rejected by one’s own people can be the most devastating” (p. 311).

I think when I say people just didn’t have the option of being out before and some people still don’t feel that, it’s like you don’t have this big huge community that you can go someplace and start a new life, it’s like you just have this one small community and you can’t afford to alienate yourself from that, so that has shaped a lot of the two-spirit type politics. (Winona)

Some women move away from their communities to live a more open life. Eventually, though, many return to their communities, willing to deal with homophobia in exchange for an otherwise safe space of shared understanding in the battle against racist oppression. Wilson (1996) described this trade-off as follows: “In Cree culture, ‘silence’ does not equal ‘death’ and to ‘Act up’ should not lead us to remove ourselves from our community. If it does, we seem most often to quietly find our way back home.” Winona described her process of returning home as an act of compromise:

It was really hard, but I was so sick of being in a really alien environment, of not having, even having my speech misunderstood and all of that. So I was kind of reacting to that, so the first couple of years weren’t that bad, I was just so happy to be around some-

thing that was familiar again that I was willing to pay that price and after awhile it got to be a problem of—kind of that game where people know that you can't [come out], as long as you don't say anything and you put up with abusive crap from them once in awhile, that you'll still be accepted. (Winona)

**“SQUAW!” “DYKE!” “BITCH!”:  
RACISM, HETEROSEXISM, AND SEXISM  
IN TWO-SPIRIT WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE**

Traumatic life stressors, in particular discriminatory events, loom large in the life of two-spirit women and have devastating consequences (Walters & Simoni, 2002). They are a contemporary manifestation of the succession of systematic assaults perpetrated by the United States government, including genocide; ethnocide (i.e., systematic destruction of life ways); forced removal and relocation; health-related experimentation; and forced removal and placement of Native children in boarding schools. These traumatic assaults are known among Native peoples as historical trauma and can lead to a *soul wound* or *spirit wounding* (Duran & Duran, 1999). Balsam and colleagues (2004) found that two-spirits in their urban sample had much more historical trauma in their families, childhood physical abuse, psychological symptoms, and mental health service utilization than their heterosexual Native peers. As Maxine remarked, “You know, there's just all the, the ways in which racism has shaped my life from my earliest memories.” She reported experiencing discrimination and oppression in multiple forms, from verbal insults to direct physical assault.

I came out of the diner and these guys jumped me. And they were screaming at me, “Fucking bitch lesbian dyke!” You know, just, you know, and punching me and stuff like that.

Other forms of discrimination involve micro-aggressions—more insidious injuries such as the assumption that Natives are nonexistent or invisible.

People will come up to me and say, “Oh, I thought all Indians were dead.” And you look at them and you think, and how am I supposed to respond to this? You know, Emily Post doesn't have an appropriate response for, I thought you were all dead! It's like, no we're not all dead! (Maxine)

So [the nightclub] was loaded with White women. I mean it was so thick, I just freaked—I panicked. It's like I felt I was drowning, because every time I said excuse me, no one would move. People saw me, but they wouldn't move out of the way—it's like I'm in THEIR space type of thing . . . it's like I'm always in the way, but, in my reality, they're always in the way [laughs], you know? (Roberta)

Other micro-aggressions involve objectification or romanticization of Natives.

I've had women come up behind me and grab my earrings and say, "You're Indian, aren't you?" And I want to look at them and say like, "What? What is your point? Yes, I'm Indian. Fuck off!" (Maxine)

Some micro-aggressions subject two-spirits to the role of educator, having to undo colonial and racist oppression for the unaware White individual. Sandy talked about her losing patience with this expectation.

Twenty years later, it's the same thing, and, you know, I think the larger organizations out there want to be inclusive but don't know how in a respectful way and . . . I'm just over that now and I don't want to be the one to try to teach them that because if they haven't gotten it by now, a part of me is like, well, what's the use? I've got other things to do. I've got a garden to plant. (Sandy)

Often two-spirits don't know why they have been targeted—which aspect of their being has offended the attacker.

You know the thing is that I still to this day, when people insult me or do things, you know, like if someone calls me a bitch, which happened to me on the [bus], when someone is rude to me, you know, I go through this thing in my head: Is it because I'm Indian? Is it because I'm poor? Is it because I'm a dyke? What is it that I did this time, you know, to, to have these people be hostile to me? . . . sometimes it's really hard to tell, you know, particularly when something is a verbal assault. I mean, you know, I've been called squaw so then I know clearly that that's about being Indian. I've been called witch and that's a little bit more, you know, what does that mean, right? And I've been called a dyke, well a fucking dyke

[laughs] and a fucking squaw . . . don't know sometimes why I'm being attacked. I just know that I'm wrong to a lot of people. . . . I think there's a lot of hostility to the combination of things I am. (Maxine)

The women noted that even LGBT communities of color were not safe havens and were often oblivious to or unconcerned about Native-specific concerns.

I have worked in different communities of color, been in women of color groups, but that also, a lot of times, I'm the only Native person there and here it's been mostly dominated by African American men and then for a while it was a group of Asian and African American women, and . . . just the prejudices between those two groups and the working out of how people are going to work together, and so I think it was good to work in that community but it didn't really touch my community that much . . . maybe I'd say three or four friends kind of made that effort to find out what's happening in the Native community. (Winona)

In Native communities, two-spirit women can elude racist oppression, but they often encounter heterosexism.

[In Indian Country] it's safe to be homophobic. And in the cities, the urban [Indian] communities, I see a lot of violence, that is directed toward two-spirit people and sometimes it's hypocritical attitudes. "Oh, you're my friend and, yes, I really like you and I don't care that you're gay" and then that person walks away and then they [say], "God, you know, I don't want anybody seeing me with him because they're gonna think I'm gay, too." (Sandy)

The heterosexist attacks are sometimes veiled as another form of rejection.

[Indian] people will use the pretext of something else to exclude you or if you were in a party environment, to beat you up. They were actually beating you up because they were homophobic, but it would be something else. . . . (Winona)

They might even occur during a ceremony, creating a particularly painful experience.

I remember sitting there at a sweat lodge and the medicine was being passed around, one of the women saying, all of a sudden she came out and said, “I would never drink from the same cup as a woman who was a lesbian.” And it was just like—well, I hate to tell you this, but I just drank from it [laughter], you know? (Roberta)

There was some effort to contextualize the oppression from within Indian Country in terms of the historical trauma Native communities have endured.

I see us having problems of dissonance, from our families . . . you know, from each other sometimes because, unfortunately, some of us are so damaged we aren't trustworthy, and we hurt each other because we can get away with it. I mean that's one of the dangers of Indian culture is that because we are so oppressed, nobody gives a shit about what happens to us. So if we hurt another Indian person there are no consequences for that because traditional society has been so shattered for most of us, particularly living in an urban environment, there are no consequences if you hurt another native person. (Maxine)

Most of the two-spirit women felt Native communities had taken some strides toward combating heterosexism. However, with respect to the issue of racism in LGBT communities, they still had seen little to no progress.

I think that once individual queer people started talking to elders in the Native community, they saw that they needed to look at homophobia, you know, and, you know, they've done some Cedar Circles up North and, you know, there's all kinds of different things happening in the Native community. And I don't see that happening in terms of racism at all . . . there's been some sort of pitiful little efforts here and there but it just hasn't, you know, anti-racism work has not progressed. Not far enough for me . . . in fact, I think it's in some ways it's worse and become more polarized. And there's a lot of attitudes like, oh, racism isn't a problem. (Maxine)

Winona talked about conserving her energy regarding doing anti-racist work in the mainstream LGBT community, because efforts in that area appeared futile.

I don't spend that much time or energy in the White gay-lesbian community because I don't feel like there has been a big huge change in that community and so I don't really see a reason to put a lot of energy into that unless it's necessary, absolutely necessary.

Overall, there was a perception of significant change over the last few decades among Native people in terms of their attitudes toward LGBT issues.

I think there are a lot of places where people aren't that accepting now, but it's an incredible difference between when I was in my 20's and now, between the acceptance of people . . . most [Indian] people feel like they should be somewhat accepting of gay-lesbian people and a lot of people really have worked on homophobia and are more accepting in the [Indian] community in general. (Winona)

Sandy displayed a spirit of hopefulness about the future, especially for two-spirit youth.

You know, just little subtle, subtleties that happen . . . it's gonna take some time, but the strengths are that I see more and more role models for the younger people to follow . . . they have something to look ahead to. . . . (Sandy)

### CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we critically reassessed current theory on lesbian identity processes through the narratives of five American Indian two-spirit women. The narratives reflect dominant lesbian ideology from the margins, revealing overall how the women's experience of their sexuality and gender identity is inextricably linked to other aspects of their selves, particularly their spirituality and cultural heritage. The women described their identity and its development as complex, fluid, and emergent; they highlighted the importance of reclaiming and recreating two spirit roles; and they emphasized the need for countering oppressive dominant discourses. As they embrace their two-spirit selves, rather than *coming out*, these women found themselves (be)coming who they were meant to be and filling an integral space in their Native communities as caretakers, activists, and leaders.

The analysis demonstrated as well how indigenist forms of talk and identity construction are directly related to individual and community wellness. Because of their status as activists and leaders, the *testimonios* of these women and their actions are important for future generations of indigenous peoples. Their narratives weave a collective memory (Gongaware, 1999), not so much recreating a factual history of two-spirit experience but, rather, creating new norms and structures for social mobilization which can guide younger generations of two-spirits in their own journey—embracing ambiguity, contextuality, intersectionality, and above all, spirituality. Understanding the complex identities and roles of these women is key, then, to supporting not only the contemporary two-spirit community but for the well-being of future generations as well.

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