



Our Approach to Indigenous Genders

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Written by Laura Horak

Layout and Graphics by Kit Chokly

Felixia looks at SickBoy in Drunktown's Finest (Canada, Sydney Freeland, 2014)



A Diné trans young woman with bleached bronze long hair and makeup sits in a car and looks toward the driver, whose back is to us. The driver has a shaved head and looks back at her. Film still from Drunktown's Finest. [Source](#).

Summary of version changes

v1.0. First publication of this report on our website. November 2023.

v.1.1. Slight formatting changes for PDF layout. Changed "color" to "colour. February 2024.

v.1.2. Name updates. June 1, 2024.



I recognize the difficulty of categorizing Two-Spirit (2SQ) within Western conceptualizations of sex, sexuality, and gender. I cling to Two-Spirit because it became an honour song that sung me back into myself as an Indigenous person, a nehiyaw (Cree), an Oji-Cree; I have placed it into my maskihkîwiwat, my medicine bag, because it has healed and nourished me whenever I needed it. To be Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer, for me, is a celebration of the fluidity of gender, sex, sexuality, and identities, one that is firmly grounded within nehiyawewin (the Cree language) and nehiyaw world-views. I think of myself like I think of my home, manitowapow, the strait that isn't straight, fluid as the water, as vicious as the rapids on my reservation, as vivacious as a pickerel scale. My gender, sexuality, and my identities supersede Western categorizations of LGBTQ+ because Two-Spirit is a home-calling, it is a home-coming. I note that it may be easy from an outside vantage point to read Two-Spirit as a conflation of feminine and masculine spirits and to easily, although wrongfully, categorize it as trans[.] [...]

There are words for people like me within nehiyawewin, words like napêw iskwêwisêhot (a man who dresses as a woman), iskwêw ka napêwayat (a woman who dresses as a man), ayahkwêw (a man dressed/living/accepted as a woman), înahpîkasoht (a woman dressed/living/accepted as a man), iskwêhkân (one who acts/lives as a woman), and napêhkân (one who acts/lives as a man). These, of course, may not be all the terminologies for what you may call "queerness" within Indigenous worldviews, but they are the ones I have been gifted and storied from folks such as Chelsea Vowel and storytelling with my kin—if there are more, or if I have these wrong, I apologize, settler colonialism has taken so much from our mother tongues. [...]

I am an otâcimow, a storyteller, and I am making space for Indigenous folx whose language and identities do not fit within those paradigms; my narrator embraces fully the fluidity that 2SQ allows but doesn't fully embody either/or and nor do I. To put it in the easiest terms for Western languages to understand, I live my life as a gay-femme and not as a trans Indigenous person.

—Joshua Whitehead, "[Why I'm Withdrawing from My Lambda Literary Award Nomination](#)"

Introduction

In 2018, Oji-Cree Two-Spirit storyteller Joshua Whitehead withdrew his book of poetry, *full-metal indigiqueer*, from consideration in the Trans Poetry category of the Lambda Literary Award. He did this because he felt that his understanding of his identity as Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer did not align with the Western concept of transgender. So, he decided not to be part of that category.

This situation highlights some of the differences between how Indigenous and Western colonial cultures understand identity. It raises a challenge for our team:

How can we include Indigenous people in our “Transgender” Media Portal while recognizing that “transgender” might not accurately describe the gender identities of all Indigenous people?

Transgender, nonbinary, and intersex are concepts that originated in Western colonial cultures and they have certain Western built into them, like the belief that each person is a separate autonomous being, that gender can be divided into two options, and that sex, gender, sexuality, and spirituality are separate things. In Indigenous cultures worldwide, there are different ways of understanding sex and gender, which have persisted despite centuries of colonial suppression and genocide.

As Whitehead pointed out, equating “Two Spirit” with “trans” oversimplifies Indigenous experiences of gender.

However, excluding Indigenous people from our portal when their genders don’t align with Western concepts is not a good solution either.

Cree elder and scholar Myra Laramée shared the name “Two Spirit” at the 1990 Native American/First Nations Gay and Lesbian Conference in Winnipeg to replace the derogatory term “berdache” used by missionaries and anthropologies. As Métis writer Chelsea Vowel writes: “the term was deliberately chosen to be an umbrella term; a specifically pan-Indigenous concept encompassing sexual, gender, and/or spiritual identity.”¹ Two Spirit is used by Indigenous people on Turtle Island (North America) and encompasses various concepts, including:

- Older tradition-specific terms like wíŋkte (Lakota), nádleeh (Navajo), âyahkwêw, înahpîkasoht, iskwêhkân, napêhkan, napêw iskwêwisêhot, or iskwêw ka napêwayat (Cree).

¹ Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Issues in Canada* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: HighWater Press, 2016), 108.

- Recently coined or claimed terms like asegi (Cherokee) or Sts'iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li (Stó:lō)
- Originally Euro-American concepts like gay, lesbian, bi, trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, intersex, queer, and
- Alternative umbrella terms like Indigequeer (coined by Theo Jean Cuthand), Indigiqueer (Joshua Whitehead), and queerndn (Emily Riddle).

Different Indigenous people might identify with one or several of these different terms, depending on their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. For example, one person we consulted with told us that they identify as nonbinary in non-Indigenous contexts but use the Michif term “ayakwew” in their community. Another person said that he identified as gay and Algonquin but was gradually embracing the term Two Spirit as he learned about the spiritual roles and responsibilities of Two Spirit people from elders in his band. As Two-Spirit Métis and Sault Ste. Marie Nishnaabe writer Kai Pyle has written, the impact of missionaries and colonial genocide of 2S people makes it hard for contemporary Two Spirit people to access tradition-specific terms and concepts, but striving to connect with this past is still worthwhile as a form of “trans*temporal kinship.”²

Given the complexity of Indigenous gender identities, we had to figure out:

- Which Indigenous filmmakers should we include in the portal under the “trans+” category? For instance, should a filmmaker identifies as Two Spirit but not trans be included? What about a filmmaker who identifies as a specific tribal term like napêw iskwêwisêhot?
- What the button on the homepage leading to a list of Indigenous filmmakers be called? Options include Two Spirit, Indigenous trans+, Indigiqueer, or something else.
- What terminology should we use to describe Indigenous people in database fields like “Race/Ethnicity,” considering that Indigenous bands are national affiliations rather than racial categories

² Kai Pyle, “Naming and Claiming: Recovering Ojibwe and Plains Cree Two-Spirit Language,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 574–88, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7090045>.

Our Team

First let's introduce the people involved and our relationship with the land.

Carleton University and the Transgender Media Lab is located on the unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg nations. We take our responsibility to be in good relations with the Algonquin Anishnaabeg nations seriously. You can find our territorial acknowledgement and ways in which we engage with Indigenous initiatives on our [Indigenous Initiatives](#) page.

Out of the 12 people in the TML, the following four are in the Indigenous Consultations Working Group:

- **Jada Gannon-Day**, a Black Scotian anthropology student and researcher reconnecting to her Mi'Kmaq ancestry.
- **Evie Johnny Ruddy**, a trans nonbinary white settler living in in oskana kâ-asastêki, colonially known as Regina, in Treaty 4.
- **Kate Higginson**, a cis white settler living in Ottawa on the unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg nations
- **Laura Horak**, a white cis queer settler from the territory of the Cowlitz, Clackamas, and Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and of Siletz Indians, now residing in the unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Algonquin nation.

To address our questions, we began by researching what Indigenous people have written on the topic. We were guided by the writings of:

- Marie Laing (Kanyen'kehá:ka of mixed Haudenosaunee and Irish/Scottish/South African settler ancestry)
- Chelsea Vowel (Métis)
- Joshua Whitehead (Oji-Cree)
- Kai Pyle (Métis and Sault Ste. Marie Nishnaabe)
- Eve Tuck (Unangax')
- Saylesh Wesley (Stó:lo~/Ts'msyán)
- Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee)
- Deborah Miranda (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation)
- Gabriel S. Estrada (Caxcan Nahua, Raramuri, Chiricahua Apache, and Chicana/o descendent)

Based on these writings, we developed proposals and questions, and engaged in consultations with Indigenous scholars and leaders at Carleton, including Benny

Michaud (Métis), Kahente Horn-Miller (Kanien:keha'ka/Mohawk), Naomi Bird (Plains Cree), Philip Macho Commonda (Algonquin, Kitigan Zibi), Lane Bourbonnière (Métis), and Andrés C. López (Afro-Indio-Jamaican-Guatemalan).

Based on the feedback we got in these sessions, we established the following approach, which is a flexible policy subject to ongoing feedback and revisions.

Our Approach

1. We will focus on gender-variant Indigenous filmmakers (not all Two Spirit or Indigiqueer filmmakers).

Practically speaking, we will include Indigenous filmmakers who:

- request inclusion in the portal (self-declaring that they fit the criteria)
- publicly identify with any of the following terms: trans, nonbinary, intersex, gender-nonconforming, gender expansive, any linguistically/tribally-specific term that describes gender crossing of any kind, and/or
- use they/them pronouns.

Filmmakers who identify as "Two Spirit" without indicating gender variance in their bios will not be included. As Joshua Whitehead pointed out, "Two Spirit" is not equivalent to transgender, and many Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer individuals may not feel comfortable in a database meant to highlight trans people.

Additionally, one of the people we consulted with said that Two Spirit communities are often dominated by gay and lesbian individuals rather than gender-variant individuals. Therefore, our project aims to specifically highlight gender-variant members of the Two Spirit community.

When we say that the portal includes "trans, Two Spirit, nonbinary, intersex, and gender nonconforming people," we refer specifically to gender-variant Two Spirit people, not all Two Spirit people.

2. On the homepage, we will use the term "Indigenous Trans+ and Two Spirit."

Clicking this button will take you to a filtered list of filmmakers categorized as "trans+" and "Indigenous" and/or "Native American/First Nation/Métis/Inuit."

We use “Indigenous Trans+” as a stand-in until a more capacious Indigenous-centered term is coined. We use it in order to include Indigenous people outside North America and trans, nonbinary, intersex, and gender-nonconforming Indigenous filmmakers who don’t identify as Two Spirit. We hope that the “plus” will indicate that we include community-specific identities like *wíŋkte* and *nádleeh*.

We also use “Two Spirit” on the homepage because it is widely recognized as referring to Indigenous-specific genders and sexualities, even though not all Two Spirit filmmakers are included in the Portal.

3. Individual pages will describe people using the terms they use to describe themselves in their bios.

These terms may include tradition-specific terms or Euro-American terms. For example, if a person identifies as “muxe” but not Two Spirit, only “muxe” will be listed.

4. We will distinguish Indigenous filmmakers from non-Indigenous Black and POC (people of colour) filmmakers on the homepage.

Indigenous nationhood is a political affiliation, rather than a racial one, despite state attempts to racialize Indigeneity.³

Although some aspects of the database treat Indigenous identity as a racial or ethnic category (e.g., it appears in the field “Race/Ethnicity”), on the homepage we separate Indigenous identity from racial terms.

At the same time, given the global reach of colonialism and the widespread intermixing between cultures, we recognize that Black, Indigenous, and other racial groups are not mutually exclusive.

5. We will rely on Indigenous advisors to address suspected cases of false claims to Indigenous identity.

The principle is: “It’s not who you claim, it’s who claims you.” While many institutions rely on self-identification to determine Indigenous status, this approach has allowed non-Indigenous people to falsely present themselves as Indigenous and access opportunities meant for Indigenous people. Filmmaker Michelle Latimer is one recent example.

³ Kimberly TallBear, “DNA, Blood, and Racializing the Tribe,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 18, no. 1 (2003): 81–107.

At the same time, accusations of non-Indigenous identity have been used against trans and gender-nonconforming community members. And since Indigenous children have been removed from their families and communities for over a hundred years, including during the “Sixties Scoop,” and Indigenous people have been shamed and punished for their identities, some people with Indigenous heritage may not know much about the Indigenous communities they come from.

To navigate these complexities, we follow the guidance of the Indigenous people we have consulted with, as well as the work of scholars like Kim TallBear (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) and Darryl Leroux (settler). If we suspect someone’s claims are questionable (e.g. claiming to be “Eastern Métis,” inconsistent or vague tribal affiliations), we will conduct online research and then consult with Indigenous advisors.

While it might be easier to accept everyone’s claims at face value, this approach denies Indigenous sovereignty and contributes to settler appropriation of Indigenous culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our aim is not to interpret or distort Indigenous identity or gender systems but to respect how Indigenous Peoples use terminology to assert their sovereignty. Two-Spirit people and Indigenous gender systems are not for us to reinterpret using Western concepts. We acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous experiences and cultures and seek to amplify Indigenous voices challenging colonial erasure. Some terms may not fit within Western ideas of transgender or gender nonconformity, and we use non-English terms when appropriate. We will continually update our terminology and representation of Indigenous genders, identities, and gender systems and welcome feedback for improvement.