

## WHAT IS TWO-SPIRIT? CENTRING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT TWO-SPIRIT GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN SEXUALITY EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT.** The term Two-Spirit (often abbreviated to 2S) reflects the resurgence by Indigenous people to share knowledge about gender identity and sexuality through cultural or linguistic-specific perspectives anchored in their worldviews. The term has consolidated within the queer community on Turtle Island since it was introduced in 1990 at an international gathering. The use of Two-Spirit is also increasing in the general population, especially in the queer community and public institutions. Recently, the federal government of Canada began to use “2S” at the start of the acronym 2SLGBTQQIA+ to acknowledge the Two-Spirit historical experience and space in Canada. This paper highlights the importance of including Two-Spirit knowledge in sexuality education, which has largely employed Eurocentric perspectives. Centring Two-Spirit gender identity and sexuality is a deliberate repositioning of Indigenous knowledge to the centre of sexuality education, which supports the process of understanding what being and living as Two-Spirit means from a L’nuwey worldview in Atlantic Canada.

*Keywords.* Two-Spirit Knowledge, Sexuality Education, Gender Identity and Sexuality

### 1. POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

As a L’nu Two-Spirit educator and researcher, I am empowered by our Two-Spirit Elders and knowledge carriers across Turtle Island to further explore what Two-Spirit means from a L’nuwey worldview. They continually support this knowledge-building process about being and living as a Two-Spirit person. I include Klamuksis (Uncle) Albert Marshall in this process because he has guided me through every stage of my doctoral studies as a practitioner of Etuaptmumk or Two-Eyed Seeing to further explore Two-Spirit gender and sexuality in our cultural context for sexuality education.

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*Date:* Received: September 9, 2024

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## 2. INTRODUCTION

I was introduced to the term Two-Spirit<sup>1</sup> in 2008 at the Atlantic First Nations Health Conference after coming out to my family that same year. I began to explore what the term meant in the Mi'kmaw language. However, it was not until 2010, when I co-founded the Wabanaki Two-Spirit Alliance (W2SA), that I decided to formally research what Two-Spirit is during my master's studies. I shared my coming-out process as part of my narrative for my thesis (J. Sylliboy, 2017).

My knowledge-building process about Two-Spirit identity spans 17 years at the time of this publication. To answer the question about what Two-Spirit is, I have been on a spiritual and academic journey that has led me to my ongoing doctoral research. What began as a Google search for the term “Two-Spirit” led me to expand my own understanding from various nations’ perspectives to exploring our cultural worldview. Between 2008 and 2015, I understood the term Two-Spirit to describe “Indigenous” gender identity and sexuality mainly by non-Indigenous authors and academics. In 2015, I conducted a study to gather the narratives about the coming-out process of Atlantic Two-Spirit people for the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (J. Sylliboy, 2017a). The study coincided with my master's studies, where I integrated the narrative's findings into my thesis (J. Sylliboy, 2017b).

It was during the literature analysis for my thesis that I expanded my understanding of what Two-Spirit is, drawing on other Two-Spirit researchers, authors, and knowledge-carriers, including Alex Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree Nation), Margaret Robinson (Epekwitk), and Tuma Young (Malagawatch). I began to understand the importance of the term Two-Spirit as a point of departure to a cultural introspection of L'nuwey knowledge, spirituality, values, and beliefs that I only had begun to conceptualize by analyzing gender identity and sexuality from a L'nuwey worldview.

I explored ways to understand Two-Spirit gender and sexuality from outside a Mi'kmaw reality. I learned what Two-Spirit is from authors, historians, and anthropologists. From 2015 to 2017, I began to explore what Two-Spirit is from a L'nuwey worldview. In this paper, I will implement a storytelling method as an integral part of knowledge development from L'nu (Indigenous) teachings, referred to as storywork (Archibald, 2008). The method guided me to have conversations with Elders and Knowledge-Carriers throughout my research.

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<sup>1</sup>I use the term “Two-Spirit” throughout the paper for consistency; however, I understand that the term may be interpreted differently in diverse cultural and linguistic settings. I also use the term “Indigenous people” or “Indigenous community” for consistency. There is no intention to diminish or ignore the diversity of the nations, territories, or cultures on Turtle Island.

### 3. FRAMEWORK OF KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT ABOUT TWO-SPIRIT RESEARCH

As the research foundation, Two-Eyed Seeing (Bartlett, 2009, 2012; Hall et al., 2015; Iwama et al., 2009; Marshall, 2023; Martin, 2012; J. Sylliboy, 2021; J. Sylliboy et al., 2022) brings together different ways of knowing from the strengths of Indigenous knowledge and non-Indigenous perspectives in a co-learning and integrative process to counterbalance all perspectives. Elder Albert Marshall coined Two-Eyed Seeing and shares that the importance of conducting research is understanding that our knowledge is sacred, legitimate, and spiritual (Marshall, 2023).

While Western-based methods are prevalent in academic output, the present study's primary focus is integrating L'nuwey's strengths of Etuaptmumk. In the implementation of Indigenous knowledge, more specifically L'nuwey knowledge, the study refers to various methods that reflect the process of knowledge development for Indigenous people in a broad sense (Peltier, 2018). Indigenous knowledge reflects the Indigenous worldview (M. Battiste, 2009) and is central to the epistemological foundations of research (Kovach, 2009, p. 56). Kovach, a Plains Cree, shares that "language matters because it holds within it a people's worldview. Language is a primary concern in preserving Indigenous philosophies, and it must be thought through within research methodologies" (2009, p. 59). Kovach adds that knowledge is developed through language used in stories (2009, p. 94). I write as if I were sharing a narrative about being and living as a Two-Spirit person while understanding that I am integrated into the narrative as a learner and knowledge-carrier in this Two-Spirit knowledge development.

Language and my role as a Mi'kmaw speaker are interrelated in the research methodology and writing presented here. One way is that I am a source of knowledge is because I am a speaker immersed in the study of understanding Two-Spirit. The other is a more profound process of developing new knowledge about the term(s) for Two-Spirit relating to gender and sexuality that is part of the evolving nature of language and knowledge development in our cultural context.

Lastly, I embed the Two-Spirit methodology shared by Hunt et al. (2023) in the writing and analysis of what Two-Spirit is. They identify the importance of gender self-determination as a vital principle of a Two-Spirit methodology, as "gender self-determination is an affirmation of our ability to name, reclaim, and express our gender roles and identities on our terms" (Hunt et al., 2023, p. 257). It is a priority to include a Two-Spirit methodology for a Two-Spirit study about Two-Spirit gender identity and terms conducted by a Two-Spirit researcher as an ensuant process. This methodology aligns with Indigenous ways of living and giving back to the community as a social and cultural accountability process often practised by Indigenous researchers (J. Sylliboy et al., 2022; Wilson, 1996, 2008).

#### 4. WHAT IS TWO-SPIRIT? AN OPEN-ENDED QUESTION FOR ONGOING DISCUSSIONS

What is Two-Spirit? This question is the most commonly asked, according to fellow Two-Spirit (variations are 2spirit, 2-spirit, two-spirited, or 2S) people on the Two-Spirit (2S)LGBTQQIA+ National Committee in Canada. They collaborated in developing the *MMIWG and 2SLGBTQQIA+ National Action Plan* (Crown and Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, 2022). As a collaborator on the report to outline the 32 Two-Spirit Calls to Justice (Lezard et al., 2020), we defined Two-Spirit as follows:

A contemporary pan-Indigenous term used by some Indigenous LGBTQQIA+ people that honours male/female, and other gendered or non-gendered spirits, as well as spiritual and cultural expressions. The term may also be used interchangeably to express one's sexuality, gender, and spirituality as separate terms for each or together as an interrelated identity that captures the wholeness of their gender and sexuality with their spirituality. (p. 8)

The report's definition may not capture the emerging discourse around Two-Spirit as a term or an identity; however, it is widely accepted in publications to describe Indigenous gender identity, sexuality, and the interrelated contexts within various Indigenous communities.

Despite attempts to offer a fulsome understanding of Two-Spirit, the description is sometimes shortened to an "Indigenous person who has a male and female spirit" (Laing, 2021, p. 148). This simplified description occurs because the very nature of the term suggests that Two-Spirit is merely about gender duality, omitting sexuality or the terms interrelated to gender, sexuality, and spirituality. The phrase does not reflect all the varying interpretations and the complexity of discussions about the term Two-Spirit, especially between generations, or whether they represent how people may self-identify within Indigenous urban and rural communities (Laing, 2021). Furthermore, the term may be used interchangeably by Indigenous people with other English terms (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and "+") that represent other non-binary terms, especially among youth in urban centres, according to Laing (2021). The key point is that Indigenous people have choices to self-identify according to how they feel or wish to express themselves.

The present study shares the principles and characteristics of being and living as Two-Spirit and explores implications for sexuality education. It refers to the knowledge-building process from the Wabanaki region and, more specifically, the cultural perspectives based on a L'nuwey worldview while sharing existing knowledge sources about the Two-Spirit identity in Canada and more broadly in Turtle Island. It is a culmination of perspectives that offer a pan-Indigenous conceptualization while respecting specific Indigenous groups' knowledge about Two-Spirit identity. There is no intention to categorize or simplify a collective consciousness

of nations' sacred knowledge sources about identity related to gender and sexuality. Instead, it enhances an understanding of Two-Spirit within the context of sexuality education. The paper is thus part of a growing knowledge-building process by Two-Spirit educators, researchers, authors, leaders, and youth in a contemporary time and space. Indigenous groups are expanding their collective and cultural knowledge through the Two-Spirit cultural resurgence and decolonization of a male/female gender binary, which is the core of my research about Two-Spirit in our cultural context and which I share throughout this paper. Researching other cultural worldviews about Two-Spirit terms, examining cultural settings, and learning about their various contexts have supported the research about being and living as Two-Spirit in our L'nuwey worldview.

According to the L'nuwey or Mi'kmaw worldview, Two-Spirit identity is part of one's personhood that includes mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects, with gender and sexuality connected in the internal development and external expression of one's identity (J. Sylliboy, 2022). There is a connection between the spiritual part of identity and being or living as a Two-Spirit person that is rarely explored in sexuality education. Therefore, expanding that connection broadens the field of sexuality education to include contemporary and traditional Two-Spirit knowledge about sexuality and gender identity. By including knowledge centring on Two-Spirit sexuality education, there is an opportunity to decentre Eurocentric underpinnings of sexuality education and centralize Two-Spirit people and perspectives.

**4.1. Historical and colonial depictions of Two-Spirit.** Lezard et al. (2020) share a historical summary of Indigenous non-binary terms that now represent what is Two-Spirit from the 19th century to the present day. It begins with missionary and early settler accounts of Two-Spirit people, referred to as berdache, a derogatory term that means catamite or sexual slave (J. Sylliboy, 2017b). Examples of terms shared in Lezard et al.'s report (2020) and J. Sylliboy's thesis (2017b) are specific words that may be deemed sacred within their cultural settings or nations, such as the Cree-Ojibwa terms A-go-kwa ("one who is like a woman" or "woman-like"), Ayākwāo ("hermaphrodite" or "castrated male"), and Ayekkwē (a variant spelling of Ayākwāo), and the Anishanaabemowin term niizh manidoowag. Indigenous groups across Turtle Island sometimes use their language for the term Two-Spirit for sexuality or gender difference, such as winkt (Lakota) or nàdleehé (Diné) (Lezard et al., 2020). Filice (2020) includes other terms, such as napêw iskwêwisêhot and iskwêw ka napêwayat (in the Cree language), aakí'skassi (in the Blackfoot language), and titqattek (Ktunaxa or Kootenay language). The term Etuijijaqamijuinu for Two-Spirit in L'nuisuti (Mi'kmaw) was introduced in 2024. I share more about this term below.

A movement to reclaim Two-Spirit identity and healing for Indigenous people began to take shape in the 1990s. The term Two-Spirit was first used at the Annual Native American Gay and Lesbian Gathering in Winnipeg in 1990 by Elder Myra Laramee from Fisher River Cree Nation, who shared a dream where grandfathers and grandmothers came to share the greatness of Two-Spirit. In a

YouTube production (City of Winnipeg, 2021), Elder Myra Laramée narrates how seven orbs appeared, each with a male and a female face. In the dream, the orbs confirmed the existence of Two-Spirit people since creation. Two-Spirit people have gifts to see the world with two hearts and sets of eyes, yet they are neither male nor female; they are both (Manitoba, 2021). Later, Elder Myra shared the dream at the gathering in a sharing circle, whereby the Native American Gay and Lesbian Gathering participants officially accepted the term Two-Spirit through a ceremony.

Introducing Two-Spirit sparked a cultural resurgence and a manifestation of Two-Spirit knowledge that continues to promote Two-Spirit agency and challenges non-Indigenous and non-Two-Spirit discourse in describing and positioning us. From that point, other terms emerged, such as Indigiqueer by T. J. Cuthand, a Plains Cree, and Indigiqueerness by Joshua Whitehead (Lezard et al., 2020), which are terms used for people who prefer to use them for self-identification of their gender or sexuality variance. These two contemporary terms seemingly blend the Eurocentric use of “queer” with “Indigenous,” which may not be adopted everywhere.

How the term Two-Spirit relates to the L’nuwey (Mi’kmaw) worldview was first conceptualized in 2017 (J. Sylliboy, 2017b) and published two years later (J. Sylliboy, 2019). However, the only published Mi’kmaw phrase “geenumu gessalagee” was by Walter Williams (1992) as a definition for berdache, which was used to describe Indigenous gender and sexuality before Two-Spirit was introduced in 1990. The derivation of the word berdache as catamite was considered offensive. Non-Indigenous writer Will Roscoe (1998) cited the non-Indigenous Williams (1992) by adding the term geenumu gessalagee to a list of terms for berdache. In the following section, I explain how the phrase is incorrect, as it is the term for berdache and Two-Spirit.

**4.2. Cultural analysis of L’nu term for berdache.** In 2017, I analyzed the cultural and linguistic nuances of geenumu gessalagee (J. Sylliboy, 2017b; J. Sylliboy, 2019) from the L’nuwey worldview and argue the term is used incorrectly because it is an inaccurate translation or interpretation of berdache. I studied the parts of the two words that make up the phrase. Geenumu is men (plural, nominative), and gessalagee is love (verb), which translates to “men love.” After the verb, the phrase misses the second word, geenumu (plural, accusative). If added to the term, the phrase would be written as geenumu gessalagee geenumu or men who love men. However, the phrase still does not necessarily signify “men who have sex with men,” if that was its intention. It does not represent gender variance either or Two-Spirit in the way it is described by Williams (1992). I considered the time of the publication to understand its cultural context. Then, I compared it to the existing terms that represent gender and sexuality variance; however, the phrase does not match the conceptualization of Two-Spirit in a L’nuwey worldview. I concluded that geenumu gessalagee does not entirely capture the essence of either same-sex attraction, gender variance, or the spirituality of the L’nu people, so it cannot be accurately described as berdache or

Two-Spirit. The lack of language about being and living as a Two-Spirit has led me to further delve into the L'nuwey cultural worldview by researching the term as part of my doctoral studies and maintaining that keen sense of understanding the discourses across Turtle Island. As a result, it has brought me to further explore the sources of cultural erasure and the impacts of colonialism.

## 5. IMPACTS ON INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES ABOUT GENDER AND SEXUALITY DIVERSITY

Many language groups have terms representing gender or sexuality diversity, like the term Two-Spirit in English; however, they are in various stages or processes of resurgence, reintroduction, or researching what Two-Spirit identity is from their worldviews. The term Two-Spirit provides a platform to explore Indigenous knowledge and cultural perspectives about gender and sexuality as part of sexuality education. Indeed, the term Two-Spirit is a pan-Indigenous term that represents a form of kinship and interconnectedness among Two-Spirit people on Turtle Island. This interconnectedness of knowledge is instrumental in the ongoing knowledge-building efforts through collective action, advocacy, research, and development of sexual education about Two-Spirit people.

The cultural erosion caused by colonization in Atlantic Canada began approximately 200 years before Western Canada (J. Sylliboy, 2017b), and the First Nations of Atlantic Canada and the eastern United States experienced negative impacts, such as the decreasing numbers of first-language speakers among Indigenous groups due to the dominant use of English and French, directly impacting the numbers of new speakers among Indigenous groups (McIvor et al., 2013). This imperialism impacts Two-Spirit people, and as a result, many Indigenous Nations in Western Canada and the southwestern United States share cultural knowledge about the Two-Spirit identity as a form of resistance (Estrada, 2011) to maintain an active memory of linguistic terms for Two-Spirit in their current language and culture and mentor younger or emerging Two-Spirit people.

The earliest recorded interaction of Atlantic First Nations and Europeans is between the Basque fishers and L'nu'k (Mi'kmaq) on the northern shores of the Gaspé in the 16th century (Bailey, 1938). Beyond the negative language impacts described by McIvor et al. (2013), the cultural erasure of Two-Spirit ceremonies and traditions that may have existed before the arrival of permanent settlers in Atlantic Canada would have been enabled by the shift toward Christianity (J. Sylliboy, 2019). The period started with the baptism of Chief Membertou in 1610 (Y. Battiste, 2010), a deliberate "process of theological indoctrination" (M. Battiste, 1998, p. 103). The impact of religion on Two-Spirit culture was immediate and long-term, as Eurocentric worldviews dominated social, spiritual and political landscapes, which imposed their heteronormative foundations onto Indigenous people. This indoctrination would eventually negatively impact existing cultural beliefs and practices that may have reflected L'nuwey knowledge about gender and sexuality, including the Two-Spirit identity and related terms. In summary,

any expression of gender variance or same-sex practices of our people would have been condemned from a European worldview.

Martin Cannon (1998), an Oneida academic, explains that the “compulsory heterosexuality” of the Indian Act of 1867 established the foundations of the systemic heteronormativity imposed by the Canadian state. The Indian Act only recognized the Christian or Eurocentric gender binary of marriage, patrilineal land acquisition, and passing down Indian status intergenerationally based on patriarchal laws. While the policy was intended to achieve the assimilation of L’nu’k, it was also a direct attempt to erase the gender and sexuality diversity of Two-Spirit people. The Indian residential schools enacted systemic heteronormative policies to strip L’nu’k of their cultural identity; the last school did not close until 1996. The immediate and intergenerational impacts reverberate as Two-Spirit activists decolonize the educational system. Two-Spirit writers and activists argue that colonial descriptions of Two-Spirit people originate from heteronormative, patriarchal, religious, and binary perspectives (Cannon, 1998; Estrada, 2011) and are homophobic and transphobic. Two-Spirit decolonization questions the sources of knowledge about Two-Spirit people and Indigenous people in general. Decolonization is recentring Two-Spirit peoples’ lived experiences based on their narratives, stories, knowledge, language, beliefs, and rights (Lezard et al., 2020).

Exploring gender and sexuality through history and culture in Wabanaki Territory *Jesuit Relations* (1896) offers an account of Jesuit perspectives on Indigenous people, specifically the L’nu’k (Mi’kmaq), since 1610. There is no evidence in Jesuit writings to describe Two-Spirit people concerning gender or sexuality from a L’nuwey perspective (J. Sylliboy, 2017b). The analysis of that material was carried out to seek evidence of whether the L’nu term Puoin or Puoina’q (plural) could be interpreted as Two-Spirit. Traditionally, Puoina’q were revered spiritual leaders with healing powers who were regarded as having powers to bridge the physical and spiritual worlds (Whitehead, 1998).

L’nu Two-Spirit Elders recommended reviewing the Jesuit writings to determine whether if the Jesuits shared any depictions of gender variance or same-sex attraction among L’nu’k. There is no evidence that L’nu’k referred to Puoina’q similarly to how other Indigenous cultures regard their spiritual leaders as Two-Spirited, as demonstrated by various authors (Brown, 1997; Gilley, 2006; Jacobs et al., 1997). Given that gender and sexuality are contemporary terms, there was no expectation to find similar terms in colonial references about L’nu’k in the Atlantic region. Unlike in Latin America, “sodomy” and “sodomite” were depictions of or references to Indigenous people who practised same-sex relations, while “hermaphrodite” was used for non-binary gender (Fernandes & Arisi, 2017; Torrici, 2012;). Jesuit writings about L’nu’k did not include such descriptions, but they described sexual activities by stating that L’nu’k were polygamists (Bailey, 1938).



Concerning the lack of depictions of Two-Spirit people in the Atlantic region during the early colonial era, the Jesuits may not have fully comprehended expressions of gender variance displayed by early Indigenous cultures. Nevertheless, they were conscious of same-sex attractions because of the heteronormative laws characteristic of European nations (Tortorici, 2012). The first observations of Indigenous people in Canada appeared in the early 1600s. In later publications, references to gender or sexuality diverse people appeared in writings by explorers and missionaries as they moved westward in Canada and Turtle Island. Alfred Bailey (1938) published early depictions by Samuel de Champlain and the societal impacts between French and Indigenous people in the Atlantic region:

The influence of the contact may be traced with respect to the pre-marital state, courtship, marriage, divorce, and polygamy. Champlain is authority for the statement that the degree of sexual promiscuity was customary... Micmac appear to have had a higher esteem for chastity ... although it is probable that throughout the area of adolescence was the period of greatest sexual licence. (p. 102)

This statement demonstrates how colonial writings depicted the Micmac as sexually promiscuous or that Indigenous people practised polygamy. Could the concept of polygamy depicted in the colonial period include people with same-sex attractions, such as polyamory, in the contemporary setting? The question requires careful analysis by Two-Spirit academics and Elders. Bailey does not share any depictions of Two-Spirit people in his publication. However, he does cite numerous reflections about Jesuit writings that relate to sexuality as heteronormative within the confines of marriage. Bailey (1938) cites LeClerc's 1910 reference to the French interest in assimilating L'nu'k "in order that we might humanize these peoples, settle them with us, employ them at the cultivation of the land, bring them to submission to our laws and customs" (p. 88). Humanizing L'nu'k was to pave the way for French geopolitical and economic domination in Atlantic Canada. Missionaries were emissaries of conquest, not only of doctrine.

We may never know the extent to which knowledge about Two-Spirit people has impacted the Atlantic region since the colonial period. However, we do know that elements of cultural identity, including language and traditional practices, continue to erode to this day, affecting the overall wellness of Indigenous people in Canada (Iwama et al. 2009; McIvor et al., 2013). Language, a central component of cultural identity shared in stories, is embedded with a millennium of knowledge of the land, science, medicines, philosophy and spiritual ceremonies, threatening our nations' cultural continuity. Elder Albert McLeod, a Nisichawayasihk Cree and Métis, confirms that the role of Two-Spirit people is re-establishing and sustaining the balance in the circle of life to heal Indigenous people. Wilson (1996) shares that Two-Spirit people have a deep sense of connectedness between family, community, and land as part of their coming into their identity process

with their gender or sexuality with spirituality, which translates into community-driven activities that are manifested in roles as land protectors, healers, and spiritual leaders.

## 6. EVOLVING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE

The recentring of Two-Spirit from non-Indigenous authors to Indigenous- and Two-Spirit-led narratives has strengthened since the term Two-Spirit was introduced in 1990. Estrada (2011) shares that the non-Indigenous anthropological studies about Two-Spirit gender and sexuality base their interpretations on Eurocentric worldviews about the colonial periods in Canada and Latin America between the 16th and 20th centuries. Historical documents and colonial perspectives are devoid of Indigenous voices and often include harmful and erasure-filled depictions of Two-Spirit people and perspectives. Cultural erasure may include negative and harmful depictions of Two-Spirit people or heteronormative, patriarchal, and Eurocentric perspectives on sexuality and gender (Sigal, 2003; Tortorici, 2012).

Publications and knowledge about Two-Spirit identity, gender identity, and sexuality are growing in Canada. This material helps develop our understanding of Two-Spiritness and raises awareness of our cultural distinctiveness in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. For example, Alex Wilson (1996), shares the importance of Two-Spirit identity and its interconnectedness with one's spirituality, community, and sexuality. Margaret Robinson (2014), a L'nu scholar, explores bisexuality and themes related to mental health and the impact of cultural erasure. The Ojibwa-Cree Elder Ma'Nee Chacaby worked with Mary Louisa Plummer (2016) to share an intimate journey of a lived experience as a Two-Spirit person, underscoring the impacts of colonization and the resilience of First Nations. Marie Laing (2021), a Kanyen'kehá:ka scholar, contributes to the Two-Spirit discourse by challenging the taxonomic contextualization of Two-Spirit with traditional gender descriptions. Through research, Laing explores how urban Indigenous youth interpret conceptualizations of Two-Spirit. The youth who participated in that study suggest a need for Two-Spirit linguistic resurgence and agency to reflect their knowledge development.

Today, our understanding of Two-Spirit people is multi-faceted and goes beyond academic scholarship. Lucy Fowler (2024), a Métis scholar, shares that artists offer a rich tapestry of exploration about what sexuality may look like through their crafts and arts as a way to further explore Two-Spiritness in sexuality education. There are Indigenous Two-Spirit artists sharing voices that consist of lived experiences, narratives, stories, arts, fashion, and other forms of collaboration. Two prominent Wabanaki 2S artists who are breaking ground for Two-Spirit people are Jeremy Dutcher and Brett Hannam. Dutcher, a Wolastoq singer-songwriter and Juno Award winner, shares the importance of cultural identity in music based on ancestral chants from the Wolastoqiyik people (Wallis, 2019), while Brett Hannam is a L'nu 2S filmmaker who brings Two-Spirit stories

about family relations, love, and self-discovery to film (Kengt, 2022). Hannam describes his films as contemporary storytelling, which allows space for Two-Spirit stories on the big screen, such as his film *Wildhood*.

Authors and artists continue to share ancestral and emerging knowledge as texts or in alignment with oral traditions. The publications, multimedia output, and evolving language that Two-Spirit people share on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook directly relate to the groundswell of information about being and living Two-Spirit people. Scott Wabano, an Eeyou and Swampy Cree from the Cree Nation of Waskaganish, is a rising star in the Canadian fashion industry who states that “I feel I have a role in my community to ensure that Two-Spirit youth don’t feel the need to sacrifice their Indigeneity or their queerness to achieve their dreams” (Wabano & Martin, 2022, para. 5). Kairyn Potts is another Two-Spirit influencer. A prominent Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation youth activist, Potts has a large TikTok following thanks to his videos about popular culture, fashion, and promotion of Indigenous artists (Goodyear, 2022). Potts shares that “the biggest teaching that I got as a Two-Spirit person is that I’m somebody who builds community. I’m one of those inbetweeners, as they say—somebody who kind of bridges gaps and brings people together” (Goodyear, 2022). During the 2023 New York Fashion Week, Wabano stated that “the future is going to be Indigenous-led. It’s going to be two-spirit-led as well too” (Blacksmith, 2023, para.3). As social media influencers, Wabano and Potts are among those leading a new generation of youth through multimedia by simply being and living as Two-Spirit people.

Elders and knowledge-carriers from the National 2S Committee, including Albert McLeod, Albert Beck, and Sylvia Maracle, report that there have always been gender-diverse people or people who practice same-sex relations in Indigenous communities. In the absence of specific terms or language because of the cultural erosion of the term Two-Spirit caused by colonization, people sometimes use English terms, Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer for self-identification.

Despite these variations in language, Indigenous worldviews share similar characteristics about what is defined as Two-Spirit. One similarity is that there are varying degrees of ancestral knowledge about the Two-Spirit identity that survived colonization (Lezard et al., 2020). Knowledge about Two-Spirit people is shared in many ways, including oral traditions, contemporary storytelling, linguistic analysis, and research about cultural norms, beliefs, and values. However, Two-Spirit knowledge development must be led by Two-Spirit researchers, Elders, knowledge-carriers, and educators to determine authentic sources of that knowledge, speak to inaccuracies and misunderstandings, and identify any normative practices. The ongoing existence of Two-Spirit people is a demonstration of the resilience of the community.

Two-Spirit people share that the process of decolonization involves challenging colonial and early settlers’ writings about Indigenous peoples’ activities. Marie Battiste (2009), a L’nu scholar, describes cognitive imperialism as systemic

oppression of Indigenous knowledge in higher education. Addressing cognitive imperialism means that Two-Spirit people must free our minds from the colonial debris of content that has negatively portrayed our lives as sodomites and berdaches. It must be a deliberate act of centring ourselves in the discourse of sexuality education, led by us, involving us, and for us. Otherwise, we will never control the narrative that tells our stories, knowledge, and experiences.

To return to how all of the above relates to being and living as Two-Spirit in my cultural context, I acknowledge our worldview. Knowledge about Two-Spirit people brings a sense of collective consciousness, which L'nu Elder Murdena Marshall describes as active knowledge representing a collective thought process shared through oral traditions and relationships for L'nu'k (Bartlett et al., 2012; Iwama et al., 2009). One of the main reasons why Two-Spirit people gather is to share ceremonial practices, cultural activities, and stories during powwows or cultural celebrations, which are part of knowledge development and knowledge-sharing for Indigenous people.

For 37 years, International Two-Spirit Gatherings have alternated between the United States and Canada. These gatherings are a primary source of cultural knowledge about the traditional and contemporary roles of Two-Spirit people. Sharing spaces is considered spiritual for Two-Spirit people (Meyer-Cook and Labelle, 2004), and the resurgence of the Two-Spirit ceremony that occurs at the gatherings enables healing for Two-Spirit who are experiencing distress or mental health issues (J. Sylliboy et al., 2022).

The celebration of being and living as Two-Spirit people is described as part of the kinship between the many Indigenous groups on Turtle Island. The relationality between the nations and their knowledge is one degree of kinship, which Wildcat and Voth (2023) indicate can ebb between nation-specific relationality, inter-Indigenous connections, and global Indigeneity. The authors caution against generalizations that border on pan-Indigenous reduction. However, the gatherings are instrumental in creating debate and critical thinking platforms. I interpret those authors' description of relationality to mean that the Gatherings are a primary avenue by which relationality can allow knowledge to flow from Nation-specific contexts to a more global Two-Spirit community within a context of global Indigeneity, while maintaining diversity in relationality among specific nations' knowledge and cultural practices about being and living Two-Spirit. The practice is critical, especially when there have been varied impacts of cultural erasure among individual Nations' knowledge sources about Two-Spirit cultural knowledge and ceremonies. Elder Murdena Marshall would agree that our relationality and our strong sense of collective kinship is a primary source for healing at any gathering, which is why the International Gathering maintains its strength and vigor to this day.

## 7. CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT TWO-SPIRIT GENDER AND DISCOURSE

Describing gender and sexual diversity for Indigenous people is highly complex, given the history of colonialism and ongoing globalization that stifles our

existence. First, using English to share knowledge about Indigenous people is inherently paradoxical. On one hand, the original context about Two-Spirit knowledge comes from various cultural perspectives in Indigenous peoples' worldviews and represent a cultural group within their ancestral space in their respective languages. Ideally, knowledge about Two-Spirit identity should be shared in its first language to maintain the integrity of its cultural context. My first language is L'nui'suti (speaking in Mi'kmaq), which is my way of thinking and speaking. For example, even though I write in English, I maintain the cultural integrity of our knowledge by implementing our L'nuwey worldview as the primary source of knowledge throughout my writing. On the other hand, existing knowledge about Indigenous gender and sexuality diverse people between the 16th and 20th centuries is found in anthropological and historical works by non-Indigenous scholars in French and English, which reflect the dominant academic worldview. Indigenous knowledge and voices about Two-Spirit perspectives began surfacing in the 1990s, although it was mainly written in English. Indigenous and Two-Spirit authors, scholars, and educators have been publishing their knowledge about Two-Spirit stories, lived experiences, and worldviews (Laing, 2021), which is recognized as a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It was also a period when Indigenous people took ownership of our knowledge about gender and sexuality diversity. For example, the term Two-Spirit was introduced in 1990 to deliberately replace the term *berdache*, which was considered derogatory (Laing, 2021; J. Sylliboy, 2017b).

Elder Myra Laramee was gifted Niizh manidoowag in Anishinaabemowin, which was rendered as "Two-Spirit" in English. That gift of knowledge comes from a sacred place and a collective consciousness from Elder Laramee's place of land, place of people, and place of ceremony that produce knowledge bound by cultural values and beliefs. Being and living as a Two-Spirit person is becoming more accepted among many Indigenous groups, especially in Atlantic Canada, because of sexuality education and cultural awareness about Two-Spirit. The resurgence of knowledge about Two-Spirit people and the recentring of beliefs and values about gender and sexuality diversity is slowly returning in public ceremonies. Public Two-Spirit awareness in general has positively impacted how Two-Spirit people are perceived in Indigenous (on-reserve) and non-Indigenous communities and urban centres (Sylliboy et al., 2022).

Littletree et al. (2020) share the importance of centring relationality to promote Indigenous knowledge practices and a deliberate approach to decolonizing Western mentalities. It is critical in this paper to reflect the principles of centring how Two-Spirit people in the Wabanaki region share their knowledge within an Indigenous paradigm of knowledge organization that aligns with concepts explored in this paper of decolonization, self-determination, resurgence, and sharing knowledge about Two-Spirit people for sexuality education.

## 8. TWO-SPIRIT AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION

So, what are the options for gender identity for Two-Spirit people in sexuality education? Two-Spirit people identify however they feel most comfortable or using whatever gender or term best describes their most authentic identity. There are ongoing discussions about the Two-Spirit gender, which may reflect the varied ways in which Indigenous people's place of residence, demographics, level of language, and even relation to their cultural beliefs and values. There is no simple answer, yet Indigenous worldviews offer deep-rooted cultural perspectives about the Two-Spirit gender as unique, sacred, fluid, non-binary, multidimensional, non-linear, layered, circular, spiritual, and part of a continuum of cultural identity as Indigenous people. Nevertheless, Two-Spirit and Indigenous queer people share a deep belief that gender identity comes with roles and responsibilities. I turn back to my worldview to further explain how we conceptualize what is Two-Spirit within spirituality.

In the L'nuwey worldview, being and living as a Two-Spirit person recognizes sexuality as a gift from the creator. This belief is part of the findings of the research project based on coming-out narratives from Two-Spirit people in Atlantic Canada (2017a). It was the first research on Two-Spirit sexuality by a Two-Spirit person for Two-Spirit people that provided community-based data for sexuality education in the region. The research led to my thesis research to further explore cultural knowledge about sexuality. Sexuality is part of one's life, and one is part of one's sexuality, which also makes up the personhood described within the realms of a person's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual being. Sexuality is multidimensional and fluid, a part of one's identity. There are commonalities between gender identity and sexuality because they are part and parcel of one's identity, yet these gifts may appear connected or separately within a given individual's personhood.

Sexuality evolves as part of one's identity over time. It becomes a person's cultural identity because being and living as a Two-Spirit person manifests similarly to other collective identities recognized in the community, like Elders, knowledge-carriers, and healers. As such, Two-Spirit people play an invaluable role within the cultural fabric of that societal structure. As previously stated, Alex Wilson shared that Two-Spirit identity is a process by which one grows into one's identity, including sexuality and spirituality (1996). I contribute to this conceptualization of sexuality by treating identity as a process in flux within one's life cycle, which may overlap with one's gender identity and spirituality (J. Sylliboy, 2017b, 2019; J. Sylliboy, 2022). Nevertheless, the central identity is permanently anchored in one's cultural identity as a L'nu or Indigenous person (J. Sylliboy, 2017).

Influential Indigenous scholars, leaders, and activists like Alex Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree), Margaret Robinson (L'nu), Sylvia Maracle (Skonaganleh:ra Mohawk), Albert McLeod (Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and Métis), and Ma-Nee Chacaby (Ojibway-Cree) are influencing the resurgence of Two-Spirit thought and discourse nationally. A common theme of Two-Spirit perspectives is the understanding that one's sexuality is a spiritual journey. The identity process

evolves in a circular motion rather than in the linear process described in Western models, like the Kinsey Scale to rate the level of one's 'homosexuality' (Kinsey Institute, 2019) or Cass's identity process model (Ryan, 2009).

Sexuality development may be conceptualized distinctly between Indigenous groups, including what terms, words, and phrases that may describe Two-Spirit people or how Two-Spirit may self-identify using Two-Spirit with other words or even no terms at all. Similarly to the concept of gender, sexuality has an evolving process that is sexual yet powerfully spiritual that manifests into more than just having sex between people, but fulfilling a desire to explore the art of love through cultural identity, ceremony, spirituality, and a deep purpose toward one's community.

In response to the question of how Two-Spirit relates to sexuality education, the link must be made between the concept of Two-Spirit as part of a cultural identity that recognizes sexuality as a natural progression of personhood that all people experience throughout their lives. Elders recommended that I implement cultural knowledge to conceptualize what Two-Spirit is as a process in analyzing the coming-out process of Two-Spirit people. It is the first demonstration of sexuality education to contextualize Two-Spirit concerning sexuality and gender (J. Sylliboy, 2017b, 2019, 2022).

## 9. SPIRITUALITY AS SEXUALITY EDUCATION

It cannot be emphasized enough that being Two-Spirit has a deep sense of spiritual resonance. It is not a coincidence that the word "spirit" is used; however, it has been contentious for some Indigenous people or L'nu'k who may interpret the use of the term to signify either a secular or a religious meaning. In my research on Two-Spirit identity and the word "spirit," the term has evolved to represent religious, non-religious, or traditional meanings. Kjiiaqmij (singular) and Kjiiaqmijk (plural) are interpreted as the secular spirit, especially after the introduction of Christianity in Mi'kma'ki. The non-secular meaning of Kjiiaqmij is used to represent the animacy of things or objects with a spirit. The belief is that all living things have a spirit or mntu, part of the cycle of life that is connected in the natural order (Youngblood-Henderson, 2009).

Our people have a rich and deep devotion to Catholicism, adopted after Chief Membertou became the first Indigenous person to be baptized in North America in 1610 (Y. Battiste, 2010). In the religious tradition, L'nu'k believe that there is only one spirit in our bodies; therefore, an Elder suggested that the term Two-Spirit cannot be interpreted from anything but a secular perspective. The problem was that we were translating the term rather than interpreting the concept from a broader understanding of what it means to be Two-Spirit. We learned that literal translations do not necessarily capture the overall concept, which Marie Laing shares as part of the challenge in theorizing Two-Spirit (2021, pp. 90–91). The W2SA explored other ways to help conceptualize what Two-Spirit is by using ancestral knowledge, as I detail below.

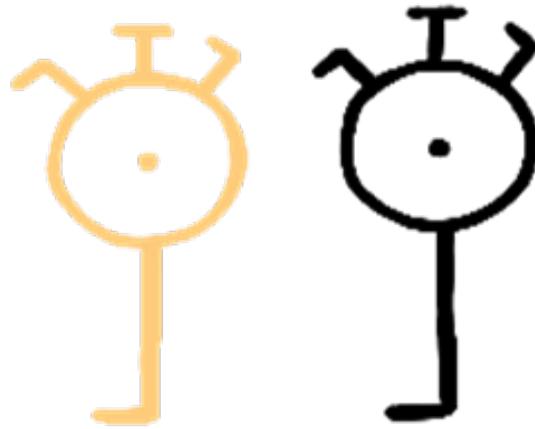


FIGURE 1. Fig. 1 Hieroglyph of the spirit used for the W2SA logo to represent the Two-Spirit individual.

The W2SA uses the Kijjaqmij symbol for spirit in a non-secular fashion (See Figure 1) and as a form of self-determination of our collective identity in our region as gender and sexuality diverse people. The symbol is part of an ancient way of L’nu writing called komqwejwi’kasikl (M. Sylliboy, 2022). The symbol is replicated to represent the number two and spirits, written as “two spirits.” More importantly, the symbol represents the entity of spirit, unseen yet understood as ungendered or non-binary. One of the beliefs about being Two-Spirit is that it is a gift from the creator that enables Two-Spirit people to bridge the spirit world with the physical world. As a co-founder of the Alliance, I believe that the kijjaqmij hieroglyph represents that imagery of our role as Two-Spirit people. The circular image, the central body of the Spirit, reaches up toward the sky, while the lower extension maintains a link to the Earth. As an organization, W2SA’s role is to bridge knowledge about being and living as Two-Spirit people in the Wabanaki region, both literally and metaphorically.

Michelle Sylliboy, a L’nu poet and scholar, researched how L’nu’k communicate through the Nm’ultes (the word used to say “see you again”) theory using komqwejwi’kasikl. L’nu’k named it komqwejwi’kasikl because it resembles the symbols that suckerfish leave as markings on the ocean floor when they seek food. Michelle Sylliboy (2022) reports that “for me, Nm’ultes expresses a better understanding of the collective consciousness that has motivated me to keep learning how to decolonize and reclaim my Indigenous voice” (p. 3). Sylliboy’s scholarship provides numerous opportunities to further explore how sexuality education and Two-Spirit identity can use komqwejwi’kasikl to represent terms for gender and sexuality diversity instead of using only alphabetical or alphanumeric ways to communicate. The W2SA’s use of komqwejwi’kasikl for Two-Spirit as the organization’s logo manifests decolonization and our voice as Two-Spirit people.



In our language, I defended my thesis in front of 25 Elders in Membertou First Nation in 2017. It was a historic moment because it was the first time a thesis defence was conducted in both L'nui'suti and English at the Mount (Mount Saint Vincent University, 2023). Many Elders who attended my thesis defence have lived experience as students at Indian residential and day schools with curricula rooted in colonialism. Elders asked how culture, language, and our worldview conceptualize Two-Spirit as part of gender, sexuality, and its connection with our identity. They welcome any opportunity to explore more substantial cultural knowledge in curriculum development. A significant recommendation by Elders was to integrate my thesis findings about Two-Spirit conceptualization into curriculum development for sexuality education. The plan is to develop a curriculum for sex education for schools under the administration of Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, a L'nu organization with authority over L'nu education in Nova Scotia.

#### 10. BEING AND LIVING AS A TWO-SPIRIT PERSON IS SACRED

Two-Spirit people are leading the recentring of ceremonies, celebrations, and cultural continuity through gatherings—and gatherings are medicine (Sylliboy et al., 2022). We must recognize all the Two-Spirit youth in all First Nation, Inuit, and Métis communities who continue to challenge identity and sexuality barriers in society through fashion, poetry, crafts, drag, youth councils, and social media. Youth who identify as 2S should be part of all activities that involve their well-being, research, and knowledge-building (Hardy et al., 2020).

There are several common traits based on ancestral knowledge and contemporary perspectives about being and living as Two-Spirit. They are not intended to erode a specific nation's identity or generalize individual Indigenous groups' teachings, beliefs, or ceremonies about Two-Spirit identity in a pan-Indigenous way. The following characteristics represent Two-Spirit people, which can be explored as integral to Indigenous sexuality education. They come from evolving and ancestral knowledge, teachings, beliefs, and values that represent a kinship or relationality between all the Two-Spirit people of Turtle Island. They can be accepted, amended, rejected, expanded, reduced, or shared as knowledge that is fluid, non-binary, and free as the most authentic reflection of Two-Spirit people.

- Two-Spirit people share historical and evolving experiences that have evolved into a collective consciousness in various cultural perspectives.
- Being and living as a Two-Spirit person is inherent to one's gender identity, which may include specific cultural terms or contemporary expressions like trans, non-binary, multiple genders, non-gender expressions, queer, Indigiqueer, and future terms.
- Being and living as a Two-Spirit person is inherent to one's sexuality, which may include culturally specific terms or contemporary expressions

that are part of the English acronym 2SLGBTQQIA+ (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual; the “+” symbol holds the space for future terms).

- Being and living as a Two-Spirit person is inherent to one’s cultural identity and spirituality based on existing and evolving cultural practices, beliefs, and values.
- Being and living as a Two-Spirit person is inherent to one’s role in the community and may include ancestral, traditional, or contemporary roles that have developed or evolved through their gender expression(s), sexuality, and spirituality.
- The roles of Two-Spirit people are in flux in their ecological space, which evolves into culturally specific needs to maintain a natural order within the life cycle (protectors of community, land, water, rights, ceremonies, protocols, beliefs, and values).
- Two-Spirit people’s roles respond to the shifts in the ecological space that may affect the community’s well-being mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.
- Two-Spirit people are sensitive to shifts in the balance of the circle of life or the natural order because of their evolving roles within their nations; therefore, they have a deep-rooted passion for maintaining that balance through ancestral and contemporary practices.
- Two-Spirit people are part of the fabric of all Turtle Island’s Indigenous cultures that have ever existed.
- Being and living as a Two-Spirit is a creator’s gift, which is understood to be a personal journey of self-discovery about one’s gender identity and/or sexuality and balancing that with one’s sense of spirituality and roles within nationhood.

## 11. RESURGENCE OF A TWO-SPIRIT TERM IN MI’KMA’KI

As stated above, Indigenous worldviews may vary in the terms used to represent Two-Spirit. Indigenous groups use expressions to refer to people who are Two-Spirit in their own language, especially in Western Canada and the southwestern United States. There are terms from those areas that have survived the impacts of colonial and patriarchal policies better than the Indigenous groups of Atlantic Canada (Sylliboy, 2017b). This may be attributed to the fact that colonialism impacted the Atlantic region far earlier than some other regions. Until 2024, there were no actively used terms for Two-Spirit in the Wabanaki Territory (Atlantic Canada and Maine), such as L’nui’suti (Mi’kmaw language) or other nations’ languages of Wolastoqiyik, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Innu, or the Inuit of Labrador, in contemporary language use because of negative cultural impacts on the language (Sylliboy, 2017b).

In 2024, the term *Etuijijaqamijuinu* (singular; plural *Etuijijaqamijuinu’k*) was publicly introduced by Tanas and John R. Sylliboy at the Juno Awards show in Halifax. Two Elders from Eskasoni First Nation, Kenny Prosper and Barbara Sylliboy, created the word based on their understanding of the English term Two-Spirit. The term is new and has thus not reached widespread use. According to Prosper, terms and words evolve as the context evolves. Prosper published his father’s dictionary, a *Collection of Mi’kmaw Words and Meanings* (Prosper, 2024) and analysed how words may shift in their use or significance over time. The use of *Etuijijaqamijuinu* was already gaining traction as this paper was written, which is part of the knowledge-sharing process that aligns with overall research about Two-Spirit identity from a L’nuwey worldview.

## 12. CONCLUSION

Western perspectives heavily influence gender; however, Two-Spirit activists, writers, and scholars are taking their rightful place in leading the discourse about Two-Spirit gender and sexuality based on their Indigenous worldviews. According to Two-Spirit people, colonialization, systemic patriarchy, and cis-heteronormative values have negatively impacted cultural perspectives through deliberate condemnation by both religious and secular authorities of Two-Spirit traditional knowledge since the 16th century in Canada (Lezard et al., 2020). On the other hand, contemporary Western perspectives derive from biomedical models based on physical or biological markers and outward appearances. For example, genitalia, breasts, body hair, and muscle growth are classified into binary attributes as either male or female. The biomedical model has proven challenging and harmful for Two-Spirit people seeking gender-affirming care (J. Sylliboy et al., 2022).

Indigenous knowledge often transcends Eurocentric ideological and philosophical frameworks about gender identity and sexuality, which may not align with traditional sex education. Two-Spirit advocates on Turtle Island view Western perspectives as reductionist in that their concept of gender does not necessarily represent the worldviews of Indigenous groups about personhood or how identity relates to gender and sexuality diversity. According to most Indigenous worldviews, the wholeness of one’s identity includes physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual realms, of which gender is a part. Eurocentric perspectives of gender are linear and unidimensional, like Cass’s six-phase process of identity development (Ryan, 2009), which may not capture the holistic nature of a Two-Spirit identity. Gender is directly bound to physical markers, which include binary social constructs about being male or female—the socialization of gender is systemically binary.

There are Elders and knowledge-carriers among L’nu’k who support Puoin, healer and spiritual person, as a potential Two-Spirit term to reflect the traditional yet evolving nature of identity among L’nu’k. However, the W2SA decided not to use Puoin as a term for Two-Spirit because of its indefinite link to gender identity or sexuality. In the past 10 years, First Nations in the Atlantic region

have hosted Two-Spirit gatherings, pride events, and parades, and the question of what is Two-Spirit in Mi'kmaq was constantly raised. That is the motivation for the Alliance to continue with the knowledge-building exercise for sexual education and L'nu cultural identity to further explore terms for Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ in our language, work I continue in my doctoral research at McGill University. Meanwhile, this article is part of the ongoing process of building knowledge about Two-Spirit people, one of many exciting and simultaneous conversations about what Two-Spirit is on Turtle Island.

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