

Conversations with Young Two-Spirit, Trans and Queer Indigenous People About the Term Two-Spirit

by

Marie Laing

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Department of Social Justice Education

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
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Abstract

Since the coining of the term in 1990, two-spirit has been used with increasing frequency in reference to Indigenous LGBTQ people; however, there is rarely explicit discussion of to whom the term two-spirit refers. The word is often simultaneously used as both an umbrella term for all Indigenous people with complex genders or sexualities, and with the specific, literal understanding that two-spirit means someone who has two spirits. This thesis discusses findings from a series of qualitative interviews with young trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people living in Toronto. Exploring the ways in which participants understand the term two-spirit to be a meaningful and complex signifier for a range of ways of being in the world, this paper does not seek to define the term two-spirit; rather, following the direction of research participants, the thesis instead seeks to trouble the idea that articulating a definition of two-spirit is a worthwhile undertaking.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In downtown Toronto, on any given day, one can see and hear the term two-spirit being used in a variety of different ways. Taped to a telephone pole is a poster advertising an LGBTTTQQ2S youth drop-in program; on CBC radio, a panel of Indigenous scholars and activists discusses how two-spirit was a term coined by and for Indigenous people with complex sexualities and genders; at a poetry reading, a young Indigenous writer introduces themselves by sharing the community they come from and then identifies themselves as a two-spirit person. One might see two-spirit spelled 2spirit, 2-spirit, two-spirited, or abbreviated to 2S. Perhaps, seeing two-spirit used in different contexts and by different people, one might have questions about what exactly the term means. Or perhaps, one might glean from all of these myriad uses of the term that two-spirit can mean many things.

Although two-spirit is used with increasing frequency within Indigenous communities, LGBTQ communities and in mainstream media, there is rarely explicit discussion of to whom the term two-spirit refers. As we will see throughout this thesis, two-spirit is a complex term that is used in many different ways and holds many different meanings for different people. However, in popular usage, the word is often simultaneously used as both an umbrella term for all Indigenous people with complex genders or sexualities, and in ways that elide this breadth of meanings the term holds — such as using it with the specific, literal understanding that two-spirit means someone who has two spirits (ex. Egale, 2016), or defining two-spirit as a person who is gay and Indigenous (ex. Gilley, 2006; Jackson, 2003)- In all of these cases, two-spirit is frequently used as though its meaning is already understood and can be taken for granted. Yet paradoxically, it is also a term that trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people are often expected to explain to others. It is these multiple deployments, (mis)understandings, definitions,

and expectations of the term two-spirit — visible in scholarly literature, in popular culture, and in the Indigenous communities to which I belong — that prompted me to ask fellow two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous young people living in Toronto how they use and understand the term.

Though qualitative interviews and concept mapping with 10 participants, this research examines what trans, queer and two-spirit young people in Toronto have to say about two-spirit as a term. The research takes as the object of study the term two-spirit itself — rather than two-spirit identity, individual two-spirit people, or two-spirit communities — and understands the lived experiences of young trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people to be expertise. Though I began this research seeking to document what young trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous community members understand the term two-spirit to mean, over the course of the research it became clear that this is not a question in which participants were interested. Instead, the research participants redirected our interviews towards the conversations they want to be having in their own communities — conversations about Indigenous knowledges, the roots of cissexism, homophobia, and transphobia in settler-colonial state oppression, and the complexity and brilliance of their communities. So, instead of focusing on what two-spirit means, this thesis is primarily concerned with the ways in which participants and their communities make the term meaningful and refuse the compulsion to define the term. This introductory chapter traces the development of this revised research focus by contextualizing two-spirit as a term, introducing the theory of change that this research seeks to operationalize, introducing myself and how I came to this work, and explaining the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Contextualizing Two-Spirit

It was at the third International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians in 1990 that Myra Laramée, a Cree community member and scholar, coined the term two-spirit (Two-Spirited People of Manitoba, 2016). The political imperative behind the creation of the term was the replacement of the colonial term “berdache” that was frequently used by anthropologists and non-Indigenous appropriators of Indigenous spiritualities throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Driskill, Finley, Gilley & Morgensen, 2011; McKiver, 2017; Morgensen, 2011). Though most (but not all) Indigenous nations on Turtle Island had diverse gender systems that exceeded the binary of men and women prior to colonization, the imposition of the European gender binary through Christianization, the theft of Indigenous languages, and legal regulation of sexuality has led to dispossession of these teachings and exclusion of gender-complex people from Indigenous communities (Cannon, 1998; Danforth & McKegney, 2014; Deschamps, 1998; Estrada, 2011; Maracle, 2000; McKiver, 2017; Syrette, 2016; S. Wesley, 2014; A. Wilson, 2007; A. Wilson, 2015). Over the past three decades, activism within queer, trans, intersex, and two-spirit communities has led to the growth of community services in urban, rural, reserve-based and online spaces, as well as increased awareness of gender and sexual diversity within broader Indigenous communities. Much of this work utilizes the term two-spirit as a banner under which to gather.

Colloquially, the term two-spirit is deployed in many different ways by Indigenous people. Some people use it as a way to identify both their queerness and their Indigeneity (Robinson, 2014, May 16), and others use it to denote the responsibilities they carry in their communities (MacDonald, 2009; Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo & Bhuyan, 2006). Some queer and trans Indigenous people choose not to use the term for a variety of reasons, including because it connotes roles and responsibilities in their communities that they do

not yet hold (Robinson, 2014, May 16), or because the connotations of having two spirits in one body contradict their traditional teachings (MacDonald, 2009; Robinson 2014, February 18). Some Indigenous people use direct translations of the word two-spirit into their Indigenous languages to identify themselves (McKiver, 2017; S. Wesley, 2014), while others caution against this practice as one which misrepresents both the term two-spirit and the various meanings associated spirit in Indigenous languages (Medicine, 1997). Still other Indigenous people assert that finding words in their languages and connecting to their nation's own teachings on gender and sexuality is meaningful, personally and politically, for them and their communities (Benaway, 2017, April 26; MacDonald, 2009; Walters et al., 2006).

Although two-spirit holds all of these complex and nuanced meanings (and more), a singular narrative of what two-spirit means is propagated within many Indigenous and non-Indigenous spaces. As I mentioned briefly above, this narrative defines a two-spirit in a literal way — as a person who has both male and female spirits — and asserts that two-spirit people were revered as shamans in pre-contact Indigenous societies. This understanding of two-spirit is just as valid as any other understanding of the term; some people hold specific teachings about this literal definition of two-spirit, and there are long-standing traditions in specific Indigenous nations that are connected to this understanding of the term. However, problems arise when this one understanding is taken up as *the* singular definition of two-spirit. Indeed, this definition of a two-spirit person as one who has a female and a male spirit is identified as by many Indigenous scholars and community members (Deerchild 2017, December 17; MacDonald, 2009) as problematic because it homogenizes diverse understandings of gender, sexuality, spirituality and community roles into a singular identity. It was the wide spread of this literal definition and the ways in which its dominance affects the ways in which young trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people are able to use two-spirit to effectively communicate with others that first

prompted me to ask my peers about how they use and understand the term.¹ However, over the course of the research, the purpose of the research (and thus, its scope) shifted in response to what participants were telling me was useful and not so useful about my research questions.

1.2 Theories of Change

Over the past three decades, two-spirit scholars and community members have produced a foundational body of scholarship on two-spirit, trans and queer communities across Turtle Island, and on two-spirit as a word. This thesis builds on this body of scholarship, which includes research by Alex Wilson (1996; 2007; 2008; 2016), Qwo-Li Driskill (2016), Margaret Robinson (2014) and Dana Wesley (2015) — research that is discussed at length in Chapter 2. Even though there is a body of literature that clearly demonstrates that two-spirit is a complex term that holds many different meanings for different people, the literal definition of two-spirit discussed above still proliferates in scholarly and community spaces. The original political project of this work was to intervene in both the underrepresentation of young people’s voices in the literature and in the hegemony of the literal definition of two-spirit by creating a citable document with young trans, two-spirit, and queer Indigenous people’s thoughts on two-spirit as a term. Like all research projects are, the project that I had in mind when I began this thesis was underscored by a specific theory of change — a theory of change in which I am no longer invested.

When I initially conceptualized this research project, the theory of change with which I was working was one described by Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang in their 2014 article “R-words: Refusing Research” as a fairly typical (and colonial) social science research approach. The theory of change was to represent the authentic voices of dispossessed peoples (in this case, my peers) in order to bring to light the inequalities that underpin their/our dispossession and

¹ For a full discussion on the impacts of this literal definition and the reasons for its proliferation, see Chapter 7.

therefore begin the process of redress. However, over the course of the research, the theory of change that underpins this work shifted in response to the ways in which participants enacted refusal. Here, I use refusal as it is theorized by Audra Simpson in her 2014 monograph *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. For Simpson, ethnographic refusal is a position taken by researchers and communities that is animated by placing limits on what knowledge is shared with the academy as well as the participants' redirection of the research process. During the research interviews participants steered our conversations away from my original research question — how do young trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people in Toronto use and understand the term two-spirit — and towards the things they want to talk about within their own communities: the political significance of the term two-spirit, the ways in which Toronto as a place impacts their use of the word, and the ways in which they are building community with fellow two-spirit, queer and trans Indigenous people. These redirections were a refusal of the theory of change with which I was approaching this research. Participants did not believe that change would come from non-two-spirit people learning about the complexity of the term and modifying their behaviours accordingly; instead, participants offered a theory of change that in which they and their communities are the agents of change.

Accordingly, participants did not want to direct our conversations to an audience of non-two-spirit people — especially since many participants noted that they are frequently coerced into educating people outside of trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities on what two-spirit does and does not mean. They wanted what one participant termed the “opportunities to philosophize” that we² so rarely get as Indigenous communities, because we are kept in crisis by settler-colonialism. What I am trying to do with this research — both in the interviews with

² Throughout this thesis I will be using the words “we” and “us” as well as “they” and “them” in reference to queer, trans, and two-spirit Indigenous communities; I do this to reflect the dual roles I inhabit as both a member of Toronto's two-spirit/queer/trans Indigenous community and a researcher.

participants, the writing of this thesis, and the reflecting of the research findings back to trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities through the production of a website — is to provide some of these opportunities. By providing a scholarly source that non-two-spirit people can consult when they have questions about what two-spirit means, I am also trying to take on some of the educational labour that is constantly foisted upon trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous youth.

The dual aims of this research also necessitate that I write to dual audiences in this thesis: two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous people and everyone who is not a two-spirit, trans or queer Indigenous person (to whom I refer as “non-two-spirit people” from this point on, for the sake of brevity). Because I am writing with two very different audiences in mind, throughout this thesis I will be directly addressing you, reader, in order to be clear about which parts of this thesis are for which audience. Just as the place from which I am doing this research impacts what I write in these pages, your lived experience impacts the ways in which you approach these ideas — the expectations you bring, the ways in which you process this information, and how you use what you learn. Many of the times at which I use direct address are points in the text where many readers will have expectations about what I am sharing or the conclusions I draw from participants’ reflections; when I make moves that you might not be expecting, I will narrate this thwarting of expectations and tell you why I have chosen to move in another direction. Just as I entered into or brought new dimensions to relationships with each research participant, this thesis puts me into relationship with you as a reader; in order to make this relationship an ethical one, I need to communicate directly with you from time to time about my expectations and boundaries. There are some ways in which one might be inclined to use the ideas in this thesis to which I do not consent, and I explicitly state this throughout the work.

Although this work takes a critical look at the literal definition of two-spirit, it is important to note that this research holds as a foundational truth that any ways in which two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous people understand or identify with the term two-spirit are valid. The point of this work is not to police the ways in which Indigenous people use and understand the term two-spirit, nor to equip scholars, researchers, or even community organizations with the knowledge of what two-spirit means. If after reading this thesis, readers go out into the world and feel entitled to tell two-spirit people that they are wrong for thinking of two-spirit as meaning a person who has a masculine and feminine spirit, they are missing the point of the work. Those who would use this research to tell anyone what two-spirit means do not have my consent to do so. This point of this work is to demonstrate that two-spirit is a complex term that holds many meanings for different people. As I will reiterate frequently throughout this thesis: any way in which trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous community members imbue two-spirit with meaning is legitimate.

1.3 Introducing Myself

In her 2011 book *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know*, Anishinaabe scholar Kathleen Absolon (Minogizhigokwe) argues that Indigenous research is a holistic endeavor that encompasses our worldviews, lived experiences, analytical frameworks, the academic contexts in which we find ourselves, and who we are as human beings. In order to understand the knowledge-gathering process that each Indigenous researcher undertakes, one must understand at least a little bit about the epistemological framework with which the researcher approaches their project — epistemologies that, for Indigenous peoples, are always deeply tied to the lands and waters of our territories. This requires us as researchers to introduce ourselves and emplace ourselves in the research — a best practice that is articulated by (and enacted by) Indigenous

scholars across a variety of fields (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; S. Wesley, 2014; A. Wilson, 2007; S. Wilson, 2008). Absolon (2011) also notes that situating ourselves in relation to the research is a vital part of challenging colonial Western knowledge systems that promote the myth of scientific objectivity; in asserting that our theorizing cannot be separated from who we are as people, we are asserting that our Indigenous ways of knowing — in which our intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical selves are inextricable — are legitimate. Part of the epistemology with which I approach this research is the belief that lived experiences are a source of knowledge. So, in order to understand the ideas I present in this thesis, you need to understand at least a little bit about me.

I am a queer Mohawk woman. I have lived on the north shore of Lake Ontario since I was born, growing up in Kingston and then moving to Toronto in 2010. I have mixed Haudenosaunee and settler ancestry; my mother is of Irish and South African (British/Greek) settler heritage and my father is Mohawk, also holding Scottish and British settler ancestry. Our family is from Ohsweken (Six Nations of the Grand River) and through my grandmother I belong to the turtle clan. I introduce myself in this way because, as Absolon (2011) suggests, the places and people to whom we belong deeply impact our work as researchers. I am doing this research as a whole person; my observations and ideas as a researcher are inextricable from my lived experience as a white-coded,³ queer Mohawk person. As I will discuss in Chapter 3 of this thesis, it is because the subject of this research is so close to my heart, and the community with whom I did this research is my own community, that I am able to do this research at all. My

³ Métis scholar Chelsea Vowel (2017) offers a definition of “white-coded” that includes looking phenotypically white, people treating you as such, and as a result, benefiting in some ways from white supremacist power structures. She contrasts being white-coded with the act of passing as white, which she describes as an intentional act of obscuring one’s Indigeneity in an attempt to evade physical, social, and economic impacts of structural racism within settler-colonial states.

community relationships are what allowed me to have the rich conversations that I had, my commitment to these relationships underpins the rigour of my work, and my lived experiences as a community member inform my theorizing. I would not be doing this research if I did not have a stake in conversations about two-spirit, our relationships to the term, and the ways in which it is used within and outside of our communities.

1.4 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is laid out in eight chapters and a conclusion. In Chapter 2, I review the literature on two-spirit as a term and on trans and queer Indigenous community organizing. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology I implemented during this research, and the research methods used for data collection and analysis. It also includes further discussion of my reasons for undertaking this research and the ethical implications of doing research in one's own community. Chapter 4 consists of an interview between myself and Dr. Alex Wilson, professor at the University of Saskatchewan and eminent scholar on two-spirit identity, Indigenous epistemologies and land-based education. This interview discusses the history of the term two-spirit and the relationship between the literal definition of the term and broader processes of simplifying Indigenous knowledges, and provides a theoretical sounding board in conversation with which I later place many of the ideas offered to me by participants.

Discussion of the research findings begins with an in-depth exploration of the concept of refusal introduced above. Using the concept of ethnographic refusal (A. Simpson, 2007; 2014) as a generative practice (Tuck & Yang, 2014), Chapter 5 sets the stage for discussion of the interview data; I discuss which parts of the research interviews I have withheld, the participants' redirection of our conversations, and the ways in which participants refuse the coercive educational labour that stems from cissexist and heteronormative expectations of their

communities. Chapter 5 also details the theory of change under which this research operates: the idea that it is two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people themselves, not non-Indigenous people, who have the power to make the changes their communities require.

Chapter 6 recounts the ways in which participants described their communities' uses and understandings of the term two-spirit; it is this chapter which fulfills the original aim of this research: to provide scholarly representations of trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous youth perspectives on two-spirit that could be used to counter the dominant definition of the term. In this chapter, participants describe two-spirit as a term that means many different things to different people, a term that can be used to organize conversations and communicate in a multitude of spaces, and a term that has political weight.

Chapter 7 of this thesis contextualizes participants' reflections on the literal definition of two-spirit and the reasons behind the popularity of this narrow understanding. I propose four key reasons for the wide spread of the literal definition: the common practice of over-simplifying Indigenous knowledges, the survival and dissemination of some nation-specific teachings about the inherent value of gender diversity, the interpellation of colonial hierarchies and binaries into Indigenous social thought, and the fact that the idea of two-spirit people being honoured in pre-contact societies is often deployed to argue for two-spirit people's right to exist within our communities in the present.

Having addressed the ubiquitous literal definition of two-spirit, Chapter 8 takes up the ways in which participants articulated the needs and desires of their communities in relation to learning — learning two-spirit teachings, and learning how to exist in the world as members of their nations. Participants also discussed the conditions that currently preclude access to spaces in which they can learn these things, and what changes are necessary to remove these barriers. These are the ideas to which participants redirected our interviews; a set of ideas that is

predicated upon the central fact that two-spirit, trans and queer communities are complex and vibrant sites of agency and change-making. The conclusion of this thesis stitches together the ideas presented throughout these eight chapters and suggests directions for further research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

My citational practices throughout this thesis are deliberate; in reviewing the literature on two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people, I have made a choice to focus on the materials that communities and community members have produced, rather than focusing solely on academic texts. This is both because my epistemological framework is that knowledge is created and held in communities, and because it is to Indigenous communities to whom I am primarily writing, with non-Indigenous academics and researchers as a secondary audience. I am specifically excluding from this literature review the body of anthropological work that chronicled Indigenous sexual and gender diversity from contact onwards, because these colonial histories already hold too much discursive power; I refuse to give them more by re-hashing them here. For ethnohistories of gender and sexual diversity among Indigenous people written by white anthropologists, see Lang (1998), Roscoe (1991; 1998) and Williams (1992), and for a thorough and nuanced review of anthropological literature written on two-spirit people see Morgensen (2011) and A. Wilson (2007). Importantly, this chapter does not examine the body of quantitative health research on two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous communities that has emerged over the past three decades, nor does it include qualitative research on queer and trans communities in which queer, trans and two-spirit Indigenous people might form a small percentage of participants. I chose not to engage in a substantive way with the growing body of scholarly writing on two-spirit literary criticism and creative writing in order to focus on qualitative research with two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people. I had originally organized this literature review chronologically, but then was prompted to consider that doing so might imply that the question this literature review seeks to answer is “what is the chronology of

the emergence of the term two-spirit?” That is not the question with which this chapter is concerned; rather, it is concerned with the needs that precipitated the emergence of the term and the interventions into research, scholarship, and community-based writing that two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people continue to make in service of these ongoing needs. Put another way, the question that this literature review seeks to answer is “how have scholarly and community writing and research attended to the stakes of two-spirit as a term?” As such, this chapter is organized as a series of sections tracing the various ways that Indigenous communities and scholars create and intervene on bodies of knowledge produced about gender and sexual diversity in our communities.

All of that said, in order to examine what has been written about two-spirit as a term, and examine the research that has been done with queer, trans and two-spirit people, it is necessary to provide a truncated account of scholarly writing about queer, trans and two-spirit people, to contextualize both the coining of the term two-spirit to replace “berdache” and the emergence of two-spirit organizing and community-building which led to the research upon which this project builds. Because this research project as a whole is concerned with what trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people have to say about the term two-spirit, so, too, is this literature review. To begin this chapter, I will provide some context regarding the impacts of colonization on Indigenous modes of gender and sexuality. I will then briefly examine the writings of anthropologists on “berdache” before turning to the body of scholarly and non-scholarly texts authored by queer, trans and two-spirit people in the latter part of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. In order to contextualize this second set of writings, I will also provide some background on the emergence of two-spirit as a term and the ongoing growth of political organizing under the banner of two-spirit. I will then examine the ways in which the term two-spirit is used in scholarly and non-scholarly contexts. This chapter will conclude with

the foundational research with two-spirit, queer, and trans Indigenous communities from which this research learns and with which it is in conversation.

2.1 Gender, Sexuality, and Colonization

The fact that cis-heteropatriarchy⁴ is both a tool and an effect of colonialism on Turtle Island is well-established in Indigenous scholarship (see, for example, Barker, 2017; Cannon, 1998; Driskill, 2016; Finley, 2011; Hunt, 2015; L. Simpson, 2016; Robinson, 2014, February 18a). For this reason, this section only skims the surface of the body of research that theorizes connections between gender, sexuality, and colonization; I include this discussion here to contextualize participants' theorizing about colonialism in subsequent chapters. Critical scholarship by generations of Indigenous scholars has affirmed the linkages between the attempted destruction of the gender and sexual diversity present among Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, and the formation of settler-colonial nation-states like Canada. In his 1998 article "The Regulation of First Nations Sexuality," Oneida scholar Martin Cannon observes that the *Indian Act* of 1876 (and the related legislation that preceded it) enforced the European gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality in First Nations communities, while also discursively creating the racial category of the Indian. Cannon argues that compulsory heterosexuality enforced among First Nations by the Canadian state served to ensure patrilineal property descent and patrilineal bequeathal of Indian status, and was a method of assimilation of Indigenous people into settler-colonial capitalism; put another way, the (attempted) destruction of

⁴ Most scholars refer to this system of gendered and sexed power relations as heteropatriarchy, without the "cis" prefix. As one research participant, Sam, pointed out to me during our interview, the practice of using heteropatriarchy in reference to structures that include cissexism without explicitly naming cissexism — or even mistakenly using heterosexism in reference to incidents of cissexism — erases trans and gender-complex people. This collapsing of transness and queerness — the conflation of oppression linked to gender and oppression linked to sexuality — is reflective of the ways that Western systems of classifying gender and sexual diversity within the LGBTQ umbrella disregard the distinctness of gender and sexuality.

Indigenous gender and sexuality diversity and legal enforcement of heteronormative kinship formations was part of the state's ongoing project of undermining the nationhood of Indigenous peoples in order to lay claim to land.

The reason that this enforcement of colonial gender and sexuality norms was necessary is that Indigenous systems of gender and sexuality are the core of our nations; to destroy our ways of doing gender is to destroy our ways of being together — in effect, to destroy our nations. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson (2015; 2016, November 10; 2017) underscores the importance of queer, trans, and two-spirit people to the integrity of Indigenous nations, noting that queer Indigenous bodies embody political orders that represent strong bonds across difference; the fact that our bodies house the political orders that tie us to our clans, nations, and territories is why they were (and are) targeted by forces that sought (and seek) to destroy these things (L. Simpson, 2016, November 10). The legislative compulsion into heterosexual marriage described by Cannon (1998) is one of several methods that colonizers have used (and continue to use) in order to disrupt transmission of knowledge about gender and sexuality within Indigenous communities. Residential schools, along with other ongoing forms of child apprehension including the 60's Scoop, were (and are) purposeful strategies of interrupting knowledge transmission in our communities, especially around gender and sexual diversity (Idle No More, 2014). By physically removing children from their families, communities and territories — and in the case of residential schools, physically enforcing strict gender binaries (Hunt, 2015) — our Indigenous understandings of gender (and thus, the systems of kinship and governance that are inextricably entwined therewith), were purposefully undermined.⁵

⁵ The role of residential schooling in the interpellation of the Western gender binary into Indigenous communities is further explored in Chapter 7.

These legacies have been passed down from generation to generation, and are still deeply felt in Indigenous communities today; the ways in which we think about and talk about gender and sexuality (both in our Indigenous languages and in English) bear the imprint of these processes of colonization. Along with dispossession from our lands and waters, and the theft of our languages and children (processes which, together, form the backbone of settler-colonialism on Turtle Island) this attempted destruction of our ways of doing gender and sexuality has had profound impacts on all Indigenous people, but especially those whose genders and sexualities are complex. As we will explore further in Chapter 7, these processes of colonization have led to interpellation of the Western gender binary in many Indigenous communities, which causes harm to many trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous community members. The desire to recover the understandings of gender and sexuality within our Indigenous worldviews leads some community members to look towards the documentation of pre-colonization traditions found in anthropological literature for information; it is to these anthropological literatures that we will now turn.

2.2 Anthropological Writing

Prior to the last two decades of the 20th century, most of the scholarly work on queer, trans and two-spirit people was anthropological studies. While some, like Walter Williams' *The Spirit and the Flesh* (1992) were ethnographies consisting of interviews with living queer, trans and two-spirit people, many of the best-known scholarly works draw solely from writings by European settlers in the 16th through 20th centuries. Ethnohistory like Will Roscoe's *The Zuni Man-Woman* (1991), *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (1998), and Sabine Lang's *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures* (1998) rely almost exclusively on historical accounts of gender and sexual

diversity in Indigenous nations written by missionaries and explorers. In all of this anthropological work dealing with “men-women” or “berdaches,” the refusal to use the Indigenous-language terms with which people and communities identified themselves reflects an underlying core belief of Western scholarship: that Indigenous nations are inherently inferior and are to be objects of study, never sovereign and agential contemporary peoples. This is the scholarship that has been repeatedly taken up by ethnographers and historians when studying queer, trans and two-spirit Indigenous people, while a parallel body of writing by activists, Indigenous researchers and community members has steadily grown.

While writing by trans, two-spirit and queer community members continues to grow, anthropological work on two-spirit people is ongoing as well. Anthropological work in the past decade has largely followed in the footsteps of earlier work, taking two-spirit people — whether in the present or in the past — as objects of study, not as agential people and communities. Some of these newer works (Carpenter, 2011; Hemmilä, 2016) continue the tradition of anthropological scholarship described above — relying solely on accounts from missionaries, traders, explorers and other Europeans writing about Indigenous people from the 15th century onwards and ignoring the perspectives of contemporary queer, trans and two-spirit people — while others (Gilley, 2006) take a more ethical ethnographic approach to working with contemporary two-spirit communities. The traditions of anthropological study of gender- and sexuality-complex Indigenous people have been sharply criticized by writers, activists, and community members. One critique leveled at the ways in which anthropologists have written about queer, trans and two-spirit Indigenous communities is that it is not representative of the holistic nature of Indigenous gender and sexuality (which is part and parcel of each nation’s broader philosophical, political and cultural traditions) but rather a reflection of the Western worldview, including binary gender systems, through which white anthropologists see the world

(Estrada, 2011). Lakota author and prolific activist Beverly Little Thunder (1997) notes that this practice of erasing the complex systems of Indigenous gender and sexuality is upheld by anthropologists' characterization of individuals who transcend their understandings of normative gender as anomalies rather than everyday people whose existence is indicative of Indigenous nations' rich understandings of gender and sexuality. Midnight Sun (1988) notes that many anthropologists have used the existence of Indigenous people who did not conform to missionaries' or other chroniclers' expectations of women's or men's roles as articulated in early accounts of Indigenous people on Turtle Island as evidence to argue for the existence of a trans-historical homosexual subject — a practice visible in the works by Williams, Roscoe, and Lang described above. This practice disregards the fact that Indigenous systems of gender are inextricable from nations' economic, political and spiritual worldviews (Midnight Sun, 1988). Other anthropologists admittedly refuse to heed community members' requests to stop using certain terminology or to stop doing research on their communities altogether (see, for example, Carpenter, 2011; Epple, 1997; Jacobs, 1997). These types of decisions — to deliberately ignore the self-determination of Indigenous people in the service of creating a body of academic knowledge which is predicated on denying our humanity by rendering us objects of study — are the same decisions that earlier chroniclers made when they chose to mis-label and misunderstand our complex systems of gender and sexuality, erasing our two-spirit, trans and queer ancestors from Western history with the stroke of a pen.⁶

⁶ To me, this process of misnaming us now and then points to the undeniability of the existence of gender and sexuality diversity in our pre-colonial nations. If scholars in the late 20th and early 21st centuries can choose to over-ride Indigenous communities' self-identification, then one can only imagine the zeal with which 16th and 17th century writers who saw us as non-human would have ploughed over our words for complex genders and sexualities and replaced them with words for sin, or no words at all. The stories of our trans, two-spirit and queer ancestors exist, but they were stolen by colonizers who instead wrote berdache, or wrote nothing at all. For further discussion of the idea that gender- and sexuality-complex people have always existed in our nations, see Chapter 8.

Many of these anthropological works use terms like hermaphrodite to refer to intersex people and use the term “berdache” to refer to a wide range of people with various bodies and genders. The term “berdache” was used by some missionaries on Turtle Island as early as the 18th century to refer to anyone of genders other than man or woman, those who broke expectations of those genders, or those who had sexual or romantic partnerships with someone of the same gender or sex — though the term was primarily used in reference to people who Europeans read as being male (Jacobs, Thomas & Lang, 1997). The word is an Anglicization of the French word *bardache* (which is in turn drawn from the Persian word *bardaj*), used to describe a young, male receptive partner in anal sex (Jacobs, Thomas & Lang, 1997; Maracle, 2000; Morgensen, 2011). Morgensen (2011) draws on Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism in noting that in the word’s original use — Europeans making reference to sexual practices in the Middle East — “berdache” was used to position men from this region as enemies of Christian Europe; when deployed in reference to the Indigenous people of Turtle Island, “berdache” served to shore up the boundaries of European masculinity and gender differentiation as superior to “primitive” Indigenous systems of gender — providing rationale for colonial violence as a moral imperative. Another part of this discursive work was the homogenization of hundreds of distinct nations into the figure of the Indian (Rifkin, 2011). Many anthropologists continue this work when using “berdache” to signify one singular pre-contact gender role shared across a wide array of tribes and nations (Roscoe, 1988; Williams, 1992). The term “berdache” was applied by anthropologists to countless individuals and communities who did not use it themselves, ignoring contemporary sexually and gender diverse Indigenous communities (Maracle, 2000; A. Wilson, 1996). As A. Wilson (1996) points out, this practice of flattening distinct, nation-specific systems of gender and sexuality into the colonial term “berdache” contributed to today’s

widespread practice of harmful generalization that two-spirit people existed in the same way in every nation, and that their place was a special and revered one.⁷

Despite these shortcomings, the anthropological literature on “berdache” has been, for some queer, trans and two-spirit people, a lifeline that affirms that we belong in our nations and communities because we have *always* existed (an idea further explored in Chapter 8). Especially before the growth of two-spirit organizing in the 1980’s, in the absence of teachings and writings from our own communities in the wake of forced removals, residential schools and Christianization, many queer, trans and two-spirit people have used these anthropological texts as a way to learn about their trans and queer ancestors (Robinson, 2014, March 10; 2014, May 16; Scofield, 2008). Some used the word “berdache” as a way to make this collectivity legible. Because of the homophobia in Indigenous communities, many writers had to make an argument for our right to exist as queer and trans Indigenous people based on our historic existence, which required the use of centuries-old writings by colonizers. One example of this is Mohawk writer Maurice Kenny’s (1988) essay “Tinselled Bucks: An Historical Study of Indian Homosexuality” originally published in the winter 1975/1976 issue of *Gay Sunshine* magazine; though it uses language that is now recognized as inappropriate or inaccurate (making reference to “hermaphrodites” and “inverts”), this text itself became a reference point for queer Indigenous people to know that they were not the only person to have queer desires. Other community members refuse to rely on data unethically extracted from Indigenous communities to guide their search for belonging, and reject the idea that these texts are the only sources for knowledge about our nations’ traditions surrounding gender and sexual diversity — a stance neatly summed up by one participant in MacDonald’s (2009) oral history work with Indigenous lesbian women, who

⁷ For a detailed discussion of this argument, see Chapter 7.

stated “I don’t need a Western anthropologist to teach me about my culture” (p. 136). As this participant makes clear, anthropological texts are not the only source of traditional knowledge for two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people; it is to the community-building practices undertaken by trans, queer and two-spirit people in order to share knowledge with one another that we turn next.

2.3 Queer Indigenous Organizing and the Emergence of the Term Two-Spirit

Gay and lesbian Indigenous organizations were formed throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s across Turtle Island. In 1975, Randy Burns and Barbara Cameron founded Gay American Indians (GAI), the first organization of its kind in the United States, to organize politically and build community in San Francisco in the face of racism from mainstream gay and lesbian communities and homophobia in Indigenous communities (Burns, 1988; Two-Spirited People of Manitoba, 2016; Morgensen, 2011). Just over a decade later, in 1987, American Indian Gays and Lesbians was founded in Minneapolis (MacDonald, 2010). In Toronto, Gays and Lesbians of the First Nations was formed in 1989 to provide support and advocacy for community members living with HIV/AIDS; the organization later became 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations (Morgensen, 2011). In 1988, GAI members and other community members organized the first International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians, held in Minneapolis, Minnesota (MacDonald, 2009); this year also marked the release of *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*, a collection of creative and non-fiction writing by queer-identified Indigenous people, edited by members of the GAI along with Will Roscoe.

The term two-spirit was coined in 1990 by Myra Laramee at the third International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians held near Beausejour, Manitoba (Two-Spirited People of Manitoba, 2016). Queer and trans Indigenous people called

for a need to co-create a term other than “berdache” that could be used to describe a wide range of nation-specific genders and sexualities, and to facilitate inter-nation organizing (Jacobs, Thomas & Lang 1997; MacDonald, 2009; McKiver, 2017; Morgensen, 2011). McKiver (2017) also notes that the political and social moment that precipitated the coining of the word also necessitated new ways to organize and build community: in Canada, the Indian Residential School system was still operational, and HIV/AIDS was ravaging communities across the globe. Art Zoccole, long-time Executive Director of 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, attests that the organization’s first incarnation, Gays and Lesbians of the First Nations, formed in response to the need for a community-centred space to gather that was not a bar (Robinson, 2014, March 10). Albert McLeod, Co-Director of Two-Spirited People of Manitoba, notes that “‘Two-Spirit’ was introduced as a spiritual name for us. The act of *spirit-naming* mirrors First Nations who have renamed their communities using traditional names; the process is affirming and reinforces cultural history and social location” (Two-Spirited People of Manitoba, 2016, n.p.). Similarly, MacDonald (2009) argues that for trans and queer Indigenous people, naming oneself is an important agentic act, and states that two-spirit is both “a link to [I]ndigenous communities and an active form of resistance against the continuing colonial structure in the U.S.” (p. 98). For these reasons, two-spirit gained traction as a self-descriptor for trans and queer Indigenous peoples throughout the 1990’s, and is now a well-known and widely used term throughout Indigenous communities on Turtle Island. The term is also widely used to refer to queer and trans Indigenous people in scholarly writing, having displaced “berdache” in anthropological scholarship, following a series of conferences in the mid-nineties organized by Navajo scholar Wesley Thomas and non-Indigenous scholar Sue-ellen Jacobs that were held specifically to engage anthropologists and Indigenous communities on the issue of respectful terminology (Jacobs, Thomas and Lang, 1997; Lang, 1998).

2.4 How Two-Spirit is Used in the Literature

In scholarly writing, creative writing, and community contexts, two-spirit holds a variety of meanings; it is deployed as an umbrella term, a placeholder for specific community roles in various nations, a singular and specific ceremonial role, and as a term that gestures at the ineffability of Indigenous gender and sexuality. Many trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous community members note that two-spirit is a term that creates a sense of belonging for them and for others whose gender and sexuality are outside the scope of heteropatriarchal cis-normativity (Robinson, 2014, February 18a; D. Wesley, 2015; A. Wilson, 2015). For some people, two-spirit was the first word they came across that adequately distinguished their place in a spiritual and cultural tradition and did not subsume them into Eurocentric identity categories (Ristock, Zoccole & Passante, 2010). Some describe two-spirit as a word that simultaneously critiques the colonial anthropological term “berdache,” centres gender, and asserts the interconnectedness of sexual and gender identities with community, land, and memory (Driskill, 2016) while some portray the term as an alternative to English terms like gay or lesbian that also gestures at the spiritual significance of ourselves as Indigenous people (Deschamps & Wahsquaonaikezhik, 1998; Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo & Bhuyan, 2006). Many describe the usefulness of two-spirit as rooted in the fact that there are common experiences that we have as Indigenous people whose genders and sexualities are deemed other by cis-heteropatriarchy, so having a word to describe those commonalities while also leaving room for our differences helps us communicate and build community (Robinson, 2014, May 16; Two-Spirit Society of Denver quoted in Native Youth Sexual Health Network, n.d.; A. Wilson, 2007), while others deploy the term specifically to disrupt the white hegemony present in many LGBTQ spaces (Walters et al., 2006). While some community members use two-spirit in reference to their sexuality, and others

see as more connected to their gender, Benaway (2017, April 26) notes that in popular discourse, the term is routinely reduced to an identifier of sexual orientation, eliding its relevance to trans, non-binary and other gender non-conforming people.

Yupik writer Richard LaFortune (1997) proclaims that two-spirit is a direct translation of the Anishinaabemowin term “niizh manitoag” — a term used to indicate that an individual has both masculine and feminine spirits present inside them. LaFortune’s assertion of two-spirit as a direct translation from Anishinaabemowin is the first instance of this narrative in the literature, though this usage of the term is affirmed by Ojibwa-Cree elder Ma-Nee Chacaby (2016) who writes that she was identified by her community at a young age as someone with two spirits (niizhin ojijack — literally, two souls) inside her. However, others (McKiver, 2017) state that niizh manitoag is a translation of two-spirit *into* Anishinaabemowin. Regardless of the origin of the idea, describing two-spirit people as having a mix of feminine and masculine or spirits is a common understanding (see, for example, Miranda, 2010; Monkman, 2016). There are also two-spirit scholars who directly rebut this literal definition of two-spirit; Oji-Cree scholar and poet Joshua Whitehead is vocal in his desire to rupture the romantic stereotyping of two-spirit people as shamans who possess two spirits (Deerchild, 2017; Whitehead, 2018). Because of the wide pull that this literal idea of having two spirits has, there are queer and trans Indigenous people who choose not to use two-spirit to identify themselves, because the idea of having two spirits contradicts the teachings they hold (MacDonald, 2009; Robinson, 2014, February 18a). Still other community members use the term two-spirit both in this literal sense and as an umbrella term (O’Brien-Teengs, 2008; Robinson, 2014, February 18b).⁸

⁸ The significance of the literal definition of two-spirit is explored in-depth in Chapter 7, while the use of two-spirit as an umbrella term is taken up in Chapter 6.

Some participants in Walters et al.'s (2006) research articulated two-spirit as a stop-gap or placeholder term that can support all of our Indigenous trans, and queer family while we face the realities of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and work to return to our nation-specific community roles and the words to describe them — ideas echoed by my research participants in Chapters 6 and 8. This desire for words in our Indigenous languages to describe our community roles, genders, and sexualities, along with the importance of the two-spirit community and the rich history of two-spirit activism, and the need to talk to people in Indigenous languages about two-spirit as a concept, leads some to translate two-spirit into Indigenous languages. There are conflicting opinions, among Indigenous writers and across time, regarding the appropriateness of translating the term two-spirit into Indigenous languages. As early as 1979, Lakota scholar Beatrice Medicine cautioned that we must take care when creating translations of Indigenous-language terms in English; she also insists that “‘two-spirit’ as a pan-Indian term is not intended to be translated from English to Native languages” (2001, p. 119) because doing so may undermine the shared meaning it holds for self-identified two-spirit people, and because the term spirit has distinct connotations within many Indigenous languages, and translating two-spirit could lead to confusion or miscommunication. However, many community members asked elders in their communities to translate the term two-spirit into their languages to have a word in their Indigenous languages to describe their genders, sexualities, and the places they hold in their communities (see, for example, S. Wesley, 2014).

Many two-spirit people describe the term as a way to emplace themselves as part of the long, diverse traditions across many Indigenous nations in which queer and trans people were valued members of communities (Burns, 1988; A. Wilson, 1996) or to help fight the disconnection that many queer, trans, and two-spirit people face (Meyer-Cooke & Labelle, 2004; Scofield, 2008). Some argue that the term two-spirit collectivized us as Indigenous queer people

and provided banner under which to gather (Robinson, 2014, May 16; Walters et al., 2006) and as a political organizing term, continues to be of use (MacDonald, 2009); participants in my research articulated related ideas about the activist history of the term and its utility as a political organizing tool which are discussed in Chapter 6. When using it as an umbrella term, many people define two-spirit as describing both gender and/or sexuality complexity and an Indigenous cultural component (Robinson, 2014, February 18b; 2014, April 8; 2014, May 16; A. Wilson, 2008). Sometimes, two-spirit is used as an umbrella term without this level of specificity when it comes to the linkage between Indigeneity and sexual or gender identity — just as a term for anyone who identifies as LGBTQ and also happens to be Indigenous. Many writers define two-spirit similarly, as a “pan-American Indian” (House, 2016, p.330) term. Diné writer Carrie House (2016) uses two-spirit as a type of shorthand to convey complexity — that there is more to understand about a person than any one word can describe. Other queer Indigenous scholars use the term “queer Indigeneity” instead of two-spirit because of the perceived rigidity of the term two-spirit, the ways in which it connotes a trans-historical Indigeneity when it is understood as meaning a person with feminine and masculine spirits, and the comparative capaciousness of the word queer (B.-R. Belcourt, 2016).

Another way in which writers and community members characterize two-spirit is that it is a term that describes not necessarily (or not merely) one’s gender identity or sexuality, but one’s community responsibilities and role (2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, 2008; Gilley, 2006; Miranda, 2010; Syrette, 2016; Walters et al., 2006). A. Wilson (1996; 2007; 2008; 2015) asserts that two-spirit is a term that honours the interconnectedness of all aspects of ourselves (spirituality, gender, community, family, sexuality, and more) which stands in stark contrast to Western understandings of identity that place sexuality as a discrete category. However, some writers and community members emphasize that two-spirit is a term that was created specifically

to facilitate pan-Indigenous organizing, and is not attached to a specific ceremonial role in any community — perspectives also shared by some participants, discussed in Chapter 6. Because two-spirit is an English term, Benaway (2017, April 26) advocates for laying it aside and starting our understandings of our genders instead from nation-specific worldviews. In her teachings, identity did not come from the role one had within the community or one's gender, but rather from your kinship networks — your clan and who your grandparents are. Community member EJ Kwandibens articulates two-spirit as a term that connotes specific spiritual roles that varied from nation to nation and community to community, stressing that generalizations about two-spirit people being revered are simply not true (S. Belcourt, 2016). Kwandibens, among others, also stresses that, because it connotes a spiritual role, two-spirit is not a term that one can just choose to describe oneself if one identifies as gay and Indigenous (S. Belcourt, 2016; Robinson 2014, April 2).

For some, the broadness of two-spirit as a pan-Indigenous term is both a negative and positive element — though this broadness allows trans and queer Indigenous people to connect to one another, it can blur the many distinct meanings that two-spirit holds. Vowel (2016) notes that two-spirit is frequently misunderstood because settlers colour it with their worldview, and then, because of the power imbalances inherent in settler society, this settler definition of the term is the one that gets reproduced. Some writing by two-spirit community members specifically names the mainstream LGBTQ community's misunderstanding of two-spirit as a singular historical role as problematic. In her seminal essay "I am a Lakota Womyn" (1997) Beverly Little Thunder recounts her experiences of non-Indigenous LGBTQ folks trying to tell her what two-spirit means and connects these instances to the pan-Indian nature of the term, which she names as a reason that she does not identify as two-spirit. A. Wilson uses another line

of argument against the homogeneous understanding of two-spirit people as special or revered, in a passage worth quoting at length:

Today, academics argue over whether or not two-spirit people had a “special” role or were special people in Native societies. In my own community and culture, the act of declaring some people special threatens to separate them from their community and creates an imbalance. Traditionally, two-spirit people were simply a part of the entire community. When we reclaim our identity with this name, we signify our return to our place in our communities. “Twospirit” reconstitutes the importance of identities that, although misstated by anthropologists, had been based on the recognition of people with alternative genders and/or sexualities as contributing members of traditional communities. (2007, p. 19)

Unlike Little Thunder, who sees two-spirit as a term that divorces us from the specificities of our communities, Wilson here presents the term two-spirit as allowing queer and trans Indigenous people themselves the opportunity to name themselves as parts of their distinct communities. Like Little Thunder, I am cautious about the ways that two-spirit elides the specificity of our nations and communities; like Wilson, I see the ways that two-spirit allows us to self-define who we are as Indigenous people, even as non-Indigenous people continue to misunderstand us. The participants whose ideas drive this thesis, too, demonstrated nuanced and complex understandings of two-spirit as a term both susceptible to and transcendent of homogenization and misrepresentation.⁹ It is on the shoulders of both Little Thunder and A. Wilson’s works that the interventions into the homogenization of two-spirit that I offer in this thesis stand. The fact that this homogenization has been present in writing about queer, trans, and two-spirit

⁹ See Chapter 7 for an in-depth discussion of the literal definition of two-spirit and the impacts of this homogenizing narrative on participants’ trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous communities.

Indigenous people across academic disciplines and community contexts (see, for example, Brown, 1997; Cameron, 2015; Egale, 2016; Garrett & Barret, 2003; Meyer-Cooke & Labelle, 2004) and continues to be propagated is one of the core motivations for this research. This research was also brought to life by a desire to contribute to the growing body of ethical, reciprocal research in relation to two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous communities, which I will now discuss.

2.5 Research By and With Two-Spirit Communities

At one point in time, the anthropological accounts of queer, trans and two-spirit histories were the only scholarly work about two-spirit people one could find in a library. Thankfully, foundational work by researchers like Alex Wilson throughout the past two decades, and Qwo-Li Driskill in the last decade have generated work on and with two-spirit communities that does not rely on anthropological data but rather positions present-day queer, trans and two-spirit Indigenous people as agents of change. Many scholars in working on two-spirit critique and queer Indigenous studies acknowledge that trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous creative writing and scholarship stands on the shoulders of Indigenous women's writing — collected in anthologies like *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection of Writing and Art by North American Indian Women* (first published as a special edition of lesbian literary magazine *Sinister Wisdom* in 1983) edited by Mohawk author Beth Brant, and *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color* (published by Persephone Press in 1981) edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga. Much of this writing was produced by queer women, and indeed, some of the Indigenous contributors to *This Bridge Called My Back* were important figures in the birth of two-spirit organizing — such as Barbara Cameron, who co-founded Gay American Indians alongside Randy Burns in 1975. Whether it was writing that was self-consciously feminist or

writing by women who would never identify as feminist, poetry and prose by Indigenous women found in collections like *A Gathering of Spirit*, or other poetic works by Janice Gould, Chrystos or Beth Brant, writing by Indigenous women opened space for all of us to write about our bodies, spirits, genders and sexualities. This body of literature, in combination with the advent of queer Indigenous organizing throughout the 1970's and 1980's, helped to create the environment in which academic research by, with, and for two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous communities grew in the 1990's.

Much of the academic research on two-spirit communities has been in the field of health, including qualitative or mixed-methods studies on HIV/AIDS (Burks, Robbins & Durtschi, 2011; Jackson, 2003), mental health and substance use (Balsam, Huang, Fieland, Simoni & Walters, 2004) and barriers to accessing health care (Brotman, Ryan, Jalbert & Rowe, 2002). Some of this work relies on the definitions of two-spirit provided by academic literature (ex. Adams & Phillips, 2009) while other studies draw on participants' own definitions of the term. Though the number of publications on two-spirit health is in the double digits, many of these articles are based on data from a single mixed-methods research project conducted across seven sites in the United States between 2002 and 2007 (Elm, Lewis, Walters & Self, 2016; Evans-Campbell, Fredriksen-Goldsen, Walters & Stately, 2007; Evans-Campbell, Walters, Pearson & Campbell, 2012; Lehavot, Walters & Simoni, 2009; Walters et al., 2006). Other health research has focused on the migration of two-spirit youth and adults from reserve communities to urban centres, finding that many trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people move to urban centres to seek education, health services, employment, fellow two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people, or to make space between themselves and the transphobia and homophobia in their communities of origin (Ristock, Zoccole & Passante, 2010; Ristock, Zoccole & Potskin, 2011; Teengs & Travers, 2006). Some community-based research has been conducted in the social

science and social work fields, including HIV/AIDS research (2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, 2005; Thoms, 2007), needs assessments (Albert, Monette & Waalen, 2001; Carroll & Pion, 2014; Frazer & Pruden, 2010; Taylor, 2009), and best practices guides for service providers and communities (2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, 2008; Deschamps, 1998; O'Brien-Teengs, 2008)

This thesis takes direction from the smaller but consistently growing body of qualitative research with two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people. While some qualitative research with two-spirit people has been used to try and gain an understanding of two-spirit people's lives for the benefit of the academy, interrogating what it means to be a two-spirit person (Slutchuk, 2003) and/or to attempting to define two-spirit experience (Hale, 2013), much has focused on broader conversations on politics and culture within Indigenous communities. Anishinaabe scholar Megan MacDonald's (2009) doctoral dissertation used an oral history methodology to inquire into the connection between two-spirit and queer Indigenous women's sexuality and their citizenship (at the level of their Indigenous nations or tribes, and at the level of the nation-state). Her decision to utilize oral histories as a method in order to give participants room to be their entire selves informed my decision to offer participants visual and verbal modes of communicating their ideas (concept maps and qualitative interviews). Other work (Ross, 2011) critically examines the "nonprofitization" of the two-spirit community, arguing that the moment of the emergence of the two-spirit community in the 1980's and the banner of two-spirit under which they gathered, coinciding with the rise of neoliberal governance and the beginning of the HIV/AIDS crisis, has shaped the understanding of the two-spirit community as a population at risk. The framing of Ross's core research question — what work does *the term* two-spirit do? — combined with the analysis of the ways in which social service organizations stand in for two-spirit community, helped me to shape my both the focus of my research question — on the term

two-spirit itself rather than the concept of two-spirit identity — and my methods of individual interviews with participants recruited via the snowball method — asking the opinions of individual community members who are in relation to each other.

The work of Cree scholar Alex Wilson is a benchmark in scholarship on two-spirit identity. Her 2007 doctoral dissertation, “N'tacimowin inna nah': Coming In to Two-Spirit Identities” is one of the first instances of academic research with two-spirit community members undertaken by a two-spirit person. Investigating the ways in which participants formed their identities as two-spirit people, Wilson found that while participants all had unique relationships to the term two-spirit, their journeys to finding their place in their communities as whole people, with all of the parts of their identities inextricably bound together, shared a common arc. Wilson engaged in a series of three qualitative interviews with eight participants, using a methodology that positioned participants as experts on their own lived experience and engaged them in conversation about their lives rather than solely about their ideas on a single topic. This research paved the way for later research by, with, and for two-spirit communities that seeks to answer the questions the communities *themselves* are asking, in a respectful and culturally appropriate way.

Later qualitative, interview-based research projects undertaken by two-spirit, trans, or queer-identified Indigenous people (Driskill 2016; D. Wesley 2015) follow similar methodologies, asking questions to two-spirit community members about belonging, language and community in respectful and reciprocal ways. Driskill's monograph *Asegi Stories* (2016) uses qualitative interviews with GLBTQ and two-spirit Cherokee people alongside historical research on asegi (translated by Driskill as strange, odd, or queer) figures in Cherokee history to inquire into the relationships between language, the trauma of language loss, and GLBTQ and two-spirit Cherokee communities. Participants in this research noted that their relationships to the Cherokee language impacted the words they chose to identify themselves — for example,

many non-fluent speakers recounted having to go to other community members to ask for words to describe themselves, their bodies and their lives, a process made complicated by some fluent speakers' discomfort with queer and trans people. Virtually all of Driskill's participants, who had a variety of relationships to the term two-spirit, noted that the sexuality or gender of an individual was less relevant to their place in Cherokee communities than their balanced and cooperative relationships to others in that community.

Cree scholar Dana Wesley's (2015) master's thesis investigated the perceptions of two-spirit community and what the term two-spirit means held by two-spirit youth in Toronto. Partnering with the Native Youth Sexual Health Network to design and implement the research, Wesley engaged five participants in two separate sharing circles. Asking participants about their connections to two-spirit community, Wesley found that not all participants identified with the term two-spirit, and many did not experience a "two-spirit community" as such in the city. Participants also stated clearly their desire for teachings from two-spirit elders and knowledge keepers, and for social and cultural events for two-spirit people outside of a social service delivery setting. Because Wesley's research is the only other instance of academic research (outside the fields of social work or health) with two-spirit young people in Toronto, it deeply impacted the form my research took. In particular, her finding that each participant had a different relationship to the term two-spirit — some feeling unsure whether the term applied to them — denoted the need for further conversations with two-spirit, trans and queer young people about the ways that they use the term and how it is related to other terms they use to describe themselves and their communities. My core research question — how participants use and understand the term two-spirit — builds directly on this finding, as well as the finding that when two-spirit is understood in a one-dimensional way (which only deals with gender, or which means that a person literally has two spirits) it stops people from using the term. As well, the fact

that Wesley completed this research using sharing circles as a research method with the same community just a few years ago informed my decision to use interviews as a method, so as not to duplicate her project — since her questions included ones very similar to mine, including “What does Two-Spirit mean to you?” (2015, p. 48).

It is thanks to the nuanced and careful engagements with the term two-spirit undertaken by two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous scholars that this thesis can exist. With the contributions of previous generations of scholars in mind, we will now continue thinking through the complex ethical obligations I have as a researcher who is also a member of Toronto’s queer, trans, and two-spirit Indigenous community, and the ways in which these obligations inform my research methodology.

Chapter 3

Methodology & Methods

The terms research methodology and research methods are often conflated. When I began this research, I did not have a clear idea of the differences between method and methodology. One helpful way that a research methodology has been described to me is as “a decision-making matrix” (E. Tuck, personal communication, 1 December 2017). The methodology described in this chapter represents a synthesis of the ontological, epistemological, and axiological frameworks that underpin the research (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). In other words, my research methodology is a framework that reflects my worldview regarding knowledge, relationships, and consent. Therefore, in order to explain the methodology I used in this research, I must first say a little bit about the values and politics that undergird it. The premises that are foundational to this research include: no one should be compelled or coerced to participate in the research or to share any specific information; knowledge comes from lived experience (and as such, we are all experts on our own lives and lived experience); people and communities should have full control over where their knowledge travels and how it is used; and our knowledge is created in and by relationships (Absolon, 2011; S. Wilson, 2008). It is this last axiom of relational accountability (in relationships between people and, as S. Wilson [2008] helpfully reminds us, between people and ideas) that forms the core of the methodology described below, and which had the greatest impact on the choices I made during the research process. Thinking through each choice I made from the standpoint of being accountable to the people with whom I was entering into relationship affected all aspects of my research, from the literature review (in which I strived to establish respectful relationships with the thinkers on whose shoulders this work stands, as well as respectful relationships with their ideas), to the methods (which must maintain the

relationships I have with participants by suiting the needs of the community and centring an ethic of kindness) to the research question (which had to be relevant and impactful according to the folks with whom I'll be doing the research). In this chapter, I outline my rationale for undertaking the research, explain my research methodology, and describe the development of the research question. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the research methods and their implementation.

3.1 Why I Am Doing This Research

In her 2007 doctoral dissertation, Alex Wilson implores researchers to check their hearts and check their motives before doing research with Indigenous people, to ensure that selfishness or negativity in one's motivations will not lead to harm for research participants. From the inception of initial research question through the data collection process and the writing of this thesis, I have spent time thinking about and journaling about my motivations for undertaking this research. I came into graduate school knowing that research has done, and continues to do, immense harm in many Indigenous (and many non-Indigenous) communities across the globe. I further learned about how Indigenous communities and researchers have developed strategies to speak back to imperial and colonial forms of knowledge production in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's foundational text *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012). In this book, Smith draws on Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) ideas on doing research as outsiders within colonial spaces, suggesting that for her, research feels more like an "inside-out/outside-in" (p. 5) experience. Smith's concept of insider/outsider research has been valuable to me in thinking through my liminal status as queer Indigenous community member conducting research, and the mixed feelings I have about doing academic research at all. As an Indigenous person who is white-coded, grew up off of my home territory, and at the time of beginning this research was

not deeply involved in Toronto's Indigenous community (including the multiple layers of two-spirit, trans and queer community that exist here), I already felt like an insider/outsider in Indigenous space to begin with. Working with fellow Indigenous people as a researcher added another layer of complexity to the already complicated webs of relationships and power dynamics in which I exist. As Smith (2012) notes, negotiating the boundaries of research, personal, and community relationships while observing protocols and demonstrating respect requires sophisticated communication and self-reflection skills. I was unsure of whether I had these skills at the beginning of my research (and unsure about subjecting my somewhat tenuous community relationships to the strain of my learning how to be a researcher) but I felt strongly that I ought to try and make an intervention into the body of scholarship that impacts my life — an impact which my educational privilege makes me uniquely situated to do, and which may not otherwise happen.

I have been forthcoming with participants about my motivation to do this research; I shared it with them as part of our conversations in the interview process, as part of making sure they have a complete picture of the project and that they can make fully informed decisions about their participation and the information they choose to share. I approached the research as a peer to the fellow Toronto-based young Indigenous people with whom I did this work — with an awareness of the power I hold in the role of researcher and as someone who experiences class privilege, cisgender privilege, and is white-coded. Following the ethic of reciprocity, it was important for me to offer participants information about myself before I asked them to share information with me. This was also an important part of building trust between myself and participants. Here, I share what I talked about during those conversations as part of my process of emplacing myself in the research, noted by many scholars as a unifying practice in Indigenous methodologies (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; S. Wilson, 2008; see also Maracle, 2000).

What I told participants (different parts to different people, at different times) is that part of the reason I want to have conversations with fellow queer or trans or two-spirit identified young Indigenous people who live in Toronto is out of a search for community. I wanted to talk to people who are like me, but all of the organizations and programs in Toronto for two-spirit people are for people in need of services which I do not need to access. Part of the reason is that I wanted to hear how other people have come to use the term two-spirit to describe themselves, because my reticence to use the term for myself is rooted in not feeling “Native enough.” Part of the reason is that, as a mixed-ancestry person with white-skin privilege¹⁰ and class privilege which has led to my access to university education, I have an obligation to lift up the voices of those community members who do not have access to these spaces. Part of the reason is that I see the term two-spirit deployed by mainstream queer and trans organizations and communities in ways that flatten the multitude of experiences, traditions, and meanings with which people imbue the term — I see people describe two-spirit as meaning someone who literally has two spirits, and that is not how I hear my community (such that it is) using it. Part of the reason is that I wanted to leave something for the next queer Native kid who comes along and is trying to see themselves reflected in the white sea of academic writing — like Qwo-Li Driskill, Alex Wilson, Dana Wesley and others did for me. This research is part of my journey of figuring out what it means to be Kanyen’kehá:ka in a family where few of us are connected to that layer of ourselves, and figuring out how to be part of the Native community in Toronto and use my privilege in ways that are useful to the community. Generating knowledge through objective

¹⁰ Here I use the phrase “white-skin privilege” after Black and Saginaw Anishinaabe scholar Kyle Mays (n.d.). I use white-skin privilege in order to distinguish the nuance of the privilege I experience as someone who often gets treated as a white person and does not experience the violence encountered by Indigenous people with dark skin, stereotypically “Native” features, or who are also Black. The experiences of myself and other Indigenous people with white-skin privilege are different from white people’s experiences because although we experience those aspects of white privilege tied to skin colour, and as a result have varying levels of complicity in structures of whiteness (and anti-Blackness) we also experience the violence of colonization in the same ways as all Indigenous people do: the theft of lands, languages, and lifeways and attempted destruction of our nations.

empirical analysis is not the point of this research. Being responsible to my fellow queer, trans, and two-spirit Indigenous community members is the point.

3.2 The Research Methodology

The methodology which I am employing in this research is deeply informed by the methodologies used by A. Wilson in her 2007 doctoral dissertation and D. Wesley in her 2015 master's thesis. Both of these scholars grounded their research questions, approach, and methods in the realities of the communities with whom they were doing the work — A. Wilson expressing this as centring the research around the lived experiences of participants, and D. Wesley framing her approach as informed by the expertise of Toronto's two-spirit youth. I tried to apply this same principle to my work, structuring the questions and the methods in a way that focuses on the expertise participants have in the ways that they use the term two-spirit, and the experiences that inform their choice of words.

One of the resounding truths stated again and again in writing by Indigenous scholars on Indigenous research methodologies is that the research protocols of the community and territory on which one works must be observed (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; A. Wilson, 2007; S. Wilson, 2008). Because *tkarón:to/aterón:toh* (in Kanyen'kéha, where there are trees standing in water) is a place that has been stewarded by many peoples and many nations over time, and because the city of Toronto is home to people from so many Indigenous nations and communities, I did not engage in any specific nation-based protocols (i.e. offering tobacco to participants in the Anishinaabe way, etc.). I was hesitant about framing my methodology simply as “an Indigenous methodology” because, like Smith (2012), I am wary of the ways in which the term Indigenous, though useful to collective struggle, can gloss over important differences between peoples and nations in ways that replicate colonial logics of homogenization. However, because my

methodology does incorporate teachings from my own nation as well as best practices from Cree, Sauteaux, Anishinaabe, Unangax, Métis and Maori scholars — guided by the common ethic of reciprocity that Absolon (2011), Kovach (2009), Smith (2012) and S. Wilson (2008) articulate as unifying diverse Indigenous methodologies — the most sensible way to describe it seems to be an Indigenous methodological framework. It fits into Métis scholar Cora Weber-Pillwax's articulation of Indigenous research methodologies as “those that enable and permit Indigenous researchers to be who they are while engaged actively as participants in research processes that create new knowledge and transform who they are and where they are” (2001, p. 174). By considering the ways in which I was entering into relationships with participants and thinking deeply about how I could ensure that these relationships are reciprocal, I tried to be my best self.

My research methodology is also informed by how I exist in the world as a Mohawk person — one who is still in the very beginning stages of understanding what it means to live in accordance with the original instructions given to us as Onkwehón:we, as Haudenosaunee, and as Kanyen'kehá:ka. I tried to follow my own Kanyen'kehá:ka teachings while designing and engaging in this research in as many ways as I could (as I strive to do every day), by not asking participants to speak for anyone other than themselves, and by approaching each interview with ka'nikonrí:yo (a good mind) — meaning that I practice critical thinking and do not try to exert control over others or allow anger to cloud my judgement. I have been taught that giving thanks for all of creation begins with giving thanks for my fellow human beings. I expressed my gratitude to participants through my words, and through my actions of gift-giving. I have also been taught that I have a responsibility to the coming faces, those next generations of Onkwehón:we who have yet to emerge from the earth. This thesis represents an attempt to leave something useful for them.

3.3 Coming to the Research Question

Writing about her review of the literature on Indigenous research methodologies undertaken as part of her doctoral dissertation, Alex Wilson states that “The foundation of Indigenous research is the lived experience of Indigenous Peoples” (2007, p.36). The concept of lived experience is consistently articulated as a core feature of Indigenous research methodologies (Absolon, 2011; Weber-Pillwax, 1999). It is the expertise that comes from the lived experiences of two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous young people with which my research is concerned. A. Wilson’s statement also reflects another core principle of Indigenous research: relevance. If the foundation of a research project is in fact the lived experiences of the community itself, then the research must be relevant and responsive to the needs and desires of that community (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; S. Wilson, 2008). As stated above, one reason that I chose to investigate young people’s understandings of two-spirit and related terms was because I myself am a young person, making me uniquely positioned to engage in research with my peers. Another reason was that, in the limited assemblage of two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous voices in academic writing, almost none of the voices belong to young people. Young queer, two-spirit and trans Indigenous people have lived experiences from which we theorize that are distinct from those of the older generations who have written and published on their communities; these young people’s perspectives are an important part of the inter-generational and inter-nation dialogue on trans, queer and two-spirit realities that is urgently needed.

How to make this research relevant to the needs and desires of queer, trans and two-spirit Indigenous communities in Toronto was something I spent a lot of time thinking about over the course of the research process. It is well-known among trans, queer, and two-spirit communities

that many of us move to urban centres from reserves, rural areas, or smaller towns and cities to look for solace from homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in our communities of origin — a reality that is also well-documented in scholarly work (Cooper, 2008; Ristock, Zoccole & Passante, 2010; Ristock, Zoccole & Potskin, 2011; Taylor, 2009). I selected Toronto as the site of this research both because I live here and could easily find participants in the city, and because Toronto is a hub for queer, trans, and two-spirit Indigenous people from across Ontario who move here for work, school, or to find trans, two-spirit and queer community. I looked to research studies that directly addressed the stated needs of two-spirit youth in Toronto (Carroll & Pion, 2014; D. Wesley, 2015) and kept the stated needs of participants in mind as I formulated my research strategy. As mentioned in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the statements by participants in D. Wesley's (2015) research that they were unsure about their relationship to the term two-spirit played a large role in the formulation of my research question; I have tried to use this research as a forum for fellow young two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people to start conversations about their relationships to the term two-spirit.

Because I am a brand-new researcher who, at the beginning of the research journey, had few ties to trans, queer, and two-spirit Indigenous communities in Toronto, my ability to craft a research question and research strategy that mattered to the people with whom I was working was limited. I did not have the capacity to develop a participatory research framework wherein the community could collaborate on the research design and implementation. I wanted to approach some of the two-spirit community leaders that I was acquainted with to get their feedback on my research, but I was unsure of how to go about doing so; I was also wary of introducing myself to the community as a researcher rather than as a community member. I did have some casual conversations with some of the other queer, two-spirit and trans people I *am* in relationship with, and was told that my research question is worthwhile.

The specificity of my research question — how do two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous young people use and understand the term two-spirit? — is also informed by Indigenous, queer, and trans scholars' critique of "identity" as a fruitful vein of thinking. Métis scholar Craig Ross (2011) cites a 2008 panel discussion in which trans scholar Viviane Namaste proposed a shift in our thinking away from questions of identity in order to make space for questions of labour. I am conscious and w(e)ary of the ways in which identity takes up space in our conversations on Indigeneity, sexuality and gender in ways that both obscure the real lives of two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people, and draw focus away from questions of sovereignty, decolonization, and politics. In asking the questions "how do you understand the term two-spirit?" and "how is two-spirit related to other words you use to describe your gender, sexuality, or Indigeneity?" as well as discussing the merits of using two-spirit as an umbrella term, I realize that I ran the risk of opening up conversations about identity that foreclose conversations about politics and ceremony. However, structuring the discussions I had with participants to centre around how they use various words, as well as asking them directly what types of conversations they would like to be having with other two-spirit people and the broader Indigenous community, yielded discussions that were often centred around ceremony and the dire need for access to it — a conversation that holds space for the ways that identity and politics are co-constitutive. I also constructed this thesis in a way that holds space for the types of theorizing in which participants were most interested, by devoting Chapter 8 to the needs and desires that they expressed in relation to their communities.

The centrality of relationships in my thinking steered the development of the questions that formed the basis of my interviews with participants. In his discussion of Indigenous epistemological frameworks, Cree scholar Shawn Wilson contends that "Nothing could be without being in relationship, without its context. Our systems of knowledge are built by and

around and also form these relationships” (2008, p.77). The meaning that two-spirit holds, and the ways in which the term is used depend entirely on the contextual web of relationships surrounding its deployment as a signifier. In order to get a robust sense of how participants use and understand the term two-spirit, I had to ask them about the relationships between two-spirit and other terms to describe gender, sexuality, Indigeneity and community roles. The relationships between two-spirit and other words, and the relationships that participants have with two-spirit as a term, are the lived experience expertise that is at the core of this research.

3.4 The Research Methods

As researchers, our choices of methods reflect how we approach the inherent power imbalance between researcher and participant (Kovach, 2009). The methods I selected for this research reflect my drive to acknowledge this power dynamic while also ensuring that it does not interfere with forming mutually respectful relationships with participants, nor lead to a negative experience for any participants. This research was conducted using the methods of qualitative interviews and concept mapping. Other research with two-spirit communities (Driskill, 2016; A. Wilson, 2007; Walters et al., 2006) on which my research builds also utilized qualitative interviews. Kvale (1996) articulates the qualitative research interview as a form of knowledge co-production through conversation, in which both the interviewer and the interviewee play important roles. By conducting semi-structured interviews with participants — conversations in which I asked a series of open-ended questions that were loosely grouped thematically, subject to in-the-moment changes in direction — I attempted to create a space where they could think about and respond to the questions I asked in a safe way. It was important to me to create a space where I could talk openly with fellow young Indigenous people who are queer, two-spirit and

trans about the nuances of the term two-spirit and our relationships to it, because there are few opportunities to do so in this city.¹¹

I chose the method of concept mapping in addition to qualitative interviews after my thesis supervisor suggested that, since I am asking people to think and talk about a complex topic, it would be a good and generous thing to offer them ways of communicating their ideas other than just spoken words. After doing some research on visual research methods, I investigated the possibilities that concept mapping or mind mapping might offer participants. Concept maps are a multimodal form of communication which visually communicate complex relationships between ideas (Wilson, Mandich & Magalhães, 2015). Somewhat confusingly, the term “concept map” is used in the literature in reference to several different forms of visual data, organizational practices, and research methods. Some early writing on concept maps describe them as organizational tools that hierarchically list ideas in a visual way (Novak, 1998), while other writing defines concept mapping a method of collecting and analyzing data for planning and evaluation (Kane & Trochim, 2007). Though often used as a memory aid (Budd, 2004) or as a data analysis tool (Jackson, 2003), concept maps can also be used as a data collection method. When describing concept mapping as a research method here, I follow the lead of Wheeldon & Faubert (2009), who describe concept maps as unwedded to Novak’s (1998) and Kane & Trochim’s (2007) proprietary definitions of the method, and as overlapping with Buzan & Buzan’s (2000) method of mind mapping, a less hierarchical and more subjective visualization of ideas. Wheeldon & Faubert (2009) instead describe concept maps as a research method that allows participants to freely express their ideas, and the relationships between, them, in a visual way — providing another entry point into participants’ theorizing about their lives.

¹¹ Indeed, the desire for what one participant called “opportunities to philosophize” together came up in multiple interviews, and is discussed in Chapter 8.

Here, I use the term concept map to mean any graphical depiction of relationships between ideas. While few other studies have utilized concept mapping alongside interviews to collect data, Wheeldon (2009) utilized concept mapping in tandem with qualitative interviews to draw participants' focus to relationships between ideas, and used participants' maps to incite discussion during the interview. Because my research question has to do with the relationships between words and the relationships participants have with these words, and because concept mapping allows participants to express their ideas visually using images, text, and symbols, it made sense for me to offer concept mapping as a way for participants to respond to the interview questions.

In order to ground this research in the lived experiences of community members as much as possible, and in order to reach two-spirit, trans and queer young people who have a variety of levels of involvement with community agencies in Toronto, I implemented a snowball method of participant recruitment. The snowball method, as described by Morgan (2008), consists of a small initial sample of participants who, after participating in the research, nominate other potential participants by either sharing their contact information with the researcher or by passing on the researcher's contact information to people in their networks. This method is based on relationships, and allowed a two-way vetting between myself and the participants; recruiting potential participants through folks who had already taken part in the research (and thus had a good sense of what was needed not just in terms of eligibility criteria, but in terms of willingness to talk about two-spirit as a term) helped ensure that they would be open and willing to talk, and rather than writing to an unfamiliar email address seen on a poster, participants got my contact information from people that they know and (presumably) trust, which helped build trust between myself and the participants during the interviews. Participants could choose not to refer any friends or acquaintances to me if they did not have a good experience. These referrals were

part of the consent process, since as Smith (2012) notes, trust, like consent, is a reciprocal and “dynamic relationship rather than a static decision” (p. 137). Following A. Wilson (2007), who, in keeping with her Cree tradition and the overall ethic of her research, recruited participants through personal networks, initial participants for my research were recruited from my personal networks of two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous people in Toronto.

In my initial communication with potential participants, and in the letter of information and informed consent documents, I chose to use the language “queer, trans, and two-spirit” to include those individuals who may not identify as being two-spirit but who may still have a relationship to the term. Earlier versions of the title of this thesis also included intersex¹² in that list of terms, but because no participants identified themselves in that way, it is not included in the title (as the work does not include Indigenous intersex people’s voices). In using the terms “queer” and “trans” as umbrella terms covering a range of identities, there is always a risk of alienating those who do not see themselves reflected in those terms, and those who oppose the use of umbrella terms on principle. However, putting the language of “two-spirit, intersex, queer, lesbian, bisexual, gay, pansexual, asexual, trans, genderqueer, genderfluid, and gender non-conforming” in the title of my research, rather than just in the eligibility requirements, is logistically difficult. Even in this longer slew of words, I still deploy trans as an umbrella term, which some people may argue erases the nuances of identity and experience for people who identify specifically as transgender, transsexual, transfeminine, transmasculine, having trans

¹² Intersex is a term used to describe people who are not easily or neatly categorized within the binary sex system of female and male, or those who trouble this system. As intersex activists like Cheryl Chase (2006) remind us, the idea that all humans naturally fall into the two easily-demarcated categories of male and female does distinct harm to those whose bodies refute this binary; although there is overlap between intersex and trans communities, the specific needs of intersex communities make including them under the umbrella of “trans” or “queer” incorrect (interACT Youth, n.d.; Intersex Society of North America, n.d.). For more information on intersex activism on Turtle Island, see Chase (2006).

experience, agender, bigender, non-binary, gender-fluid, or other terms.¹³ Indeed, this inherent inadequacy of any one word to hold the experiences of many people animates the core research questions of this project.

In choosing to use the phrasing “queer, trans, and two-spirit” (in varying orders) both in the title of this thesis and throughout the text, I am trying to balance the practicality of umbrella terms with the distinct experiences of trans and queer people, heeding the reminders that trans Indigenous writers like Aiyana Maracle (2000) and Gwen Benaway (2017) offer regarding the ways in which transness is frequently subsumed into the umbrella of queerness in ways that reinforce the colonial dissolution of the distinctness of gender and sexuality. I know that, as a person whose gender is complex but who still experiences cisgender privilege, I often fall into the cissexist habit of just using “queer” when I am talking about both queer communities and trans communities. I am working on this and trying to do better, and throughout this thesis I have made an effort to not do that and rather to be specific when I am referencing trans individuals, scholars, and communities — and, as mentioned in Chapter 2, have taken to heart the advice of my friend and interviewee Sam in being explicit in the ways that I discuss cis-heteropatriarchy. With the term trans, two-spirit and queer, I hope that I hold enough space for all of us.

3.5 Putting Methods into Action

A total of 11 participants were interviewed. One participant chose to withdraw from the project, and their data (audio recording and transcript) was destroyed in accordance with ethics protocols. Interviews, save one, took place in a private room at OISE. One interview took place in a downtown Toronto food court, to work around the participant's schedule. Interviews lasted

¹³ For a nuanced Onkwehón:we critique of “trans” as an umbrella term, see Aiyana Maracle’s (2015) performance art work titled “Death in the Shadow of the Umbrella.” Partial video footage of the performance is available at <https://vimeo.com/137714829>

between 25 and 65 minutes. In keeping with ethical requirements for confidentiality as modelled in qualitative research with two-spirit people (A. Wilson, 2007; D. Wesley, 2015) and as required by the university, participants were offered the chance to pick a pseudonym. As well, I asked participants to indicate what pronouns (if any) they would like me to use when referencing them and their ideas; in the chapters that follow, I have heeded their directions as a basic ethical authoring practice. All identifying information (e.g. home community, nation, workplace) was redacted from interview transcripts, except in those cases where participants chose not to be anonymous. Three participants chose not to use a pseudonym, and their real names and other identifying information appear in this thesis. In addition to receiving a hard copy of the letter of information and informed consent form at the beginning of the interview, I verbally reminded every participant that their participation is voluntary and they can withdraw their consent at any time during or after the interview. I also asked for consent before turning on the audio recorder.

Following Wheeldon (2009) and Wheeldon & Åhlberg (2012) I initially began each interview by introducing the concept mapping activity and inviting participants to map their ideas, in order to “prime the pump of participant reflection” (Wheeldon & Åhlberg, 2012, p. 77). However, proposing this type of unfamiliar activity to participants at the beginning of the interview, before rapport was established between myself and the participant, resulted in several participants choosing not to make a concept map (though their decisions were likely due to other factors as well). When I changed the order of the interview so that I offered the activity of making the concept map in the middle of our time together, allowing me more time to build rapport with participants so that both of us felt comfortable, most participants made concept maps.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by me. Data was coded using the methods of holistic coding, eclectic coding, and theming the data as described in Saldaña (2016).

Each participant was sent a copy of their transcript, with identifying information redacted (if applicable), and given the opportunity to make any additional redaction they deemed necessary. Participants were also sent a copy of this thesis, with their words, ideas, or any references to them highlighted, and again offered the opportunity to add, omit, or change anything. This process, which closely mimics that used by Kovach (2009) and D. Wesley (2015), is intended to give participants maximum control over their data, to aid in keeping myself accountable to the participants with whom I am doing this work, and to make the research findings fully accessible to them. It is also a process of ongoing, active consent.

One additional way that I am making this research accessible not just to participants but to broader trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities, is through the construction of a website and online zine detailing the research findings. Making this research accessible to Indigenous communities in this way is my method of making this research useful to the communities with whom the work is being done. The idea of making a zine was originally suggested to me by a participant with whom I consulted prior to beginning the research process, as one of many possible options to give this project life and purpose outside of the academy in ways that might be of use to communities. In each interview, I asked participants how they might like to see the conversation about how the term two-spirit is used extended or made public, with several suggesting that I might partner with the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) in order to produce a document of some kind describing the research findings. Upon having some conversations with staff members at NYSHN, and talking to my thesis supervisor, I decided to move ahead with the creation of a website that can house a copy of this thesis, an abridged summary of the research, a digital zine. I considered the idea of having participants take on a more collaborative role in the making of the website and zine — something along the lines of inviting each one to help collaboratively decide how information should be organized, and

what the zine should look like — but decided against this approach for two reasons. Firstly, collaborating on a publication would shift the relationship that the participants and I are in unexpectedly; if I were to enter into a more collaborative relationship with participants, I would want to do it properly from the start, not shift the dynamics halfway through the research process. Secondly, to do this would be asking for more time and intellectual labour from participants, and to ask them for these things without having the resources to properly compensate them seems irresponsible to me.

In this chapter, I have detailed the epistemological, axiological and ontological foundations upon which this research rests. In introducing some of the ethical concerns with which I dealt during the research process and my strategies for handling them, I hope I have provided the information necessary for you, reader, to enter into your own ethical relationship with the ideas in the coming chapters. The following chapters detail the theorizing that was made possible by the implementation of this research methodology and the data collected using the methods I described above. Before discussing participant interviews, though, we will first turn to some ideas offered by Dr. Alex Wilson, which help provide groundwork for the theorizing that participants did.

Chapter 4

Queering Indigenous Education: An Interview with Dr. Alex Wilson

This chapter is based on sections of a phone interview that took place between Dr. Alex Wilson (in Opaskwayak Cree Nation) and myself (in Toronto) on June 20, 2017. The full text of the interview is included in the 2018 edited volume *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education*, edited by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang. What follows is a condensed and edited version of the conversation between Dr. Wilson and I on community-driven research, Indigenous education and two-spirit scholarship. This interview is included in this thesis in order to add first-person historical context to the history of the term two-spirit discussed in the literature review, and to add a cross-generational component to the discussion of two-spirit and related terms, thereby broadening the scope of this work. By offering Dr. Wilson's ideas and research participants' ideas side by side, I hope to enrich the discussion that both groups offer on two-spirit as a term, the common misunderstandings of the term, the flattening of Indigenous knowledges, and the possibilities and limitations of academic research.

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

educating about and protecting the Saskatchewan River Delta and supporting community land-based efforts.

4.1 Scholarship and Activism

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

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

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

4.2 Restoring Relationships to Land

Laing: In your talk last year at the University of Winnipeg, “Coming In To Indigenous Sovereignty, Relationality, and Resurgence,” (Wilson, 2016, December 6) you talked about land-based education as one route for us, as Indigenous peoples, to return to our own educational systems. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Wilson: With the possible exception of Indigenous Australians, Indigenous people in the Americas have lived continuously on our land longer than any other people on the planet. A lot of knowledge comes along with that relationship and connection to these lands and waters. We've also been impacted by different climatic and political forces. For example, the Cree language of my family includes terms that refer to both the last ice age and the ice age before that. We migrated when the ice came, returned here when it receded, and throughout maintained a very strong connection to and relationships with the lands and waters that we moved through, relied on, and lived with. Our education systems — that is, traditional ways of understanding and

learning about the world around us — and the knowledge that we had accrued in the context of the places and spaces that we come from had remained intact for almost 100,000 years. Then suddenly, in the blink of an historic eye, all of that changed.

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

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

have the right to be there. It also reignites the continuity of energy that has existed for hundreds of thousands of years and that makes us human. It is part of our cosmology. I think once you get onto the land (and literally, you do not have to drive hundreds of miles — you can just walk outside or look at the sky), you ignite that energy.

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

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

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

relation might have taught them or modeled oppressive practices. But, it has to be said otherwise the same people benefit while others are continually hurt and in the end the colonial agenda prevails.

Susan Faludi (1991) introduced the term “backlash” to describe how, within the women’s movement, when (big or small) wins occur that move women closer to achieving equality with men, an anti-feminist backlash follows. Within Indigenous rights or sovereignty movements, we also find that when our actions generate positive change or we feel like we’re making progress, something similar to Faludi’s backlash often occurs. What’s different about how this plays out in Indigenous communities is that when that pushback occurs it typically most affects or impacts specific groups and, for that reason, I describe it as “whiplash” rather than backlash. Indigenous women and two-spirit people bear the brunt of colonial hierarchies and processes and we also bear the brunt of whiplash that occurs when colonial frameworks invade our own cosmology and are presented as “natural,” as something that has always been a part of our traditional teachings. The impacts accumulate, undermining our sense of self-in-community, and I think that contributes to the horrifyingly high number of Indigenous women and two-spirit people who are missing or may have been murdered in North America. Within the context of colonialism, violence is highly gendered. While many Indigenous men are also missing or murdered, it is typically in circumstances and/or relates to factors that are very different than those of Indigenous women and two-spirit people.

Body sovereignty is inseparable from sovereignty over our lands and waters. It means that we are reclaiming and returning to traditional understandings of our bodies as connected to land. That does not mean assigning women to roles as child-keepers or keepers of the tipis. It does mean understanding that our traditional cosmology, like all aspects of creation, was not and is not fixed. It is fluid, flexible and constantly recreating itself. Creation was not a single event

— it is an ongoing state of being, and our creation stories do not end. We have a lot of work to do in our own communities. We need to talk with each other about the pervasive influences of Christianity and other Western or Eastern religions in our cultures, and the ways in which they have impacted our own spirituality, our bodies, and our body sovereignty.

4.3 Decolonization

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

Many people are familiar with the use of the iceberg analogy in discussions of culture. It’s also useful as a way talk about knowledge systems.¹⁴ As Indigenous people, our cultures are shaped by knowledge and ways of knowing that are connected to the land. Anyone who has access to Google can learn about material expressions of our cultures like our clothing or our

¹⁴ See Wilson, 2016. See also St. Denis (2011) for a discussion of how deep knowledge is silenced through multiculturalism discourse.

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

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

4.4 Queerness, Indigeneity, and Two-Spirit Research

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

Wilson: I've already described some of the inherent problems of the Western model that used to prevail in Indigenous studies. The early departments also had problematic hierarchies in relationship to race and gender. White males were overrepresented in positions such as department chair or full professor, and if a department hired an Indigenous person, it was typically for a lecturer position. That has changed (perhaps out of necessity) but I think there's still work to be done. Indigenous Studies needs to queer itself up. By queering, I mean opening up discussion of and challenging the ways in which some within the field of Indigenous studies have reinforced and entrenched binaries and hierarchies related to gender and sexuality. For example, I'm familiar with scholarship that reinforces gender binaries and gender roles, constructing histories that allocate specific tasks to women and reserve other tasks for men. It's as though, intentionally or not, these scholars have just skipped over or avoided validating Indigenous cosmologies that recognize and accept gender fluidity, gender and sexual diversity, and queerness, the kind of understandings that are reflected in the legends or stories of my nation. Now we are starting to see some of our worldviews having more influence, and presenting an important challenge to essentialism. We still have a long way to go, though. A

significant proportion of my scholarship and activism has focused on two-spirit people. When I started this work, white men, often gay identified, had authored the vast majority of the literature on the topic. We need to be mindful of the colonial relationship between the people who position themselves as the authors of our stories and ourselves as their (frequently fetishized) subjects. Are they actually writing about us or are they writing about themselves? Do they see themselves as anthropologists? Historians? Or our allies? If they actually are our allies, they need to step back and let us tell our own stories.

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

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

work romanticized Indigenous people and Indigenous queerness in our communities, and, from my perspective, did a lot of damage.

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

Currently, people like Sarah Hunt, Leanne Simpson, and others are really opening up the conversation about what it means to be two-spirit and what it means to be queer. The term two-spirit was first used in a small circle of people in the prairies. Twenty-some years later, you can

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

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

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

With respect to the risk of suicide for two-spirit and Indigenous LGBTQ people, those of us working in the field of education have to do something about it. There have been innumerable presentations and lectures on suicide and almost no one mentions the high suicide rates in the

queer Indigenous community. Even when they have been told the statistics, they are still afraid to talk about it. There are all these programs that are supposed to prevent or raise awareness around suicide, and almost none of them ever touch on two-spirit people. When we do appear, we are typically presented in this deeply romanticized way — that traditionally two-spirit people were shamans and deeply honoured members of their communities. Tell that to the people of Northern Manitoba, where, in 2016, a number of lesbian self-identified youth committed suicide. Their deaths occurred in the context of a suicide epidemic that also claimed the lives of other youth, a crisis that led the First Nation's leadership to declare a state of emergency. The declaration generated promises of support from governments, gained international attention, and even resulted in a junior hockey team flying into a northern community to spend a day visiting, talking and playing hockey with youth (NoiseCat, 2016, April 12). In spite of this flurry of activity and attention, it seemed that no one could speak the word lesbian. Who does that serve? It might serve gendered and hetero-normative ideas about what it means to be a kid but it does not serve the kids who need to know that, regardless of their sexual or gender identity, they are valued members of their community.

Scholars and educators have a big role to play. We need to incorporate knowledge mobilization and knowledge translation activities into our work that ensure that our research and our pedagogical practices are accessible and shared with communities. That often happens naturally because most Indigenous scholars have pretty strong connections to their home communities. Unfortunately, much of the work we do to ensure that our work is useful to our communities doesn't fit into the structure or process of the system used to determine who gets tenure and who is promoted within university systems. As academics, we need to work together to push universities to recognize and validate oral knowledge transmission and the importance relationality and relational accountability in our research activities. I would much rather do an

interview, or an oral presentation than write a paper because they are more accessible, engaging, and interactive formats than words on a page, and they build relational accountability into the knowledge exchange that's taking place between myself and whomever else might be in the room.

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

Laing: I am thinking about all of your observations on the ways that two-spirit has become a meme. That one singular narrative about two-spirit people that gets reproduced, which centres the one mythical, romanticized role that two-spirit people were held as highly revered shamans

and healers is so visible. I see that a lot. It gets reproduced so much, and it does not serve us. It is just another romanticization of Indigenous people.

Wilson: Yes, it is like being turned into a mascot. Some people will say, “Well, being a mascot is an honour” — well, no, it’s not. We just want to be considered as human. And of course, there are two-spirited or queer people who actually *are* healers or medicine people but there are also two-spirit people who are not that, who do not want to be that or for whom that is not part of their life and the meme can easily make those people feel like they must *become* healers or medicine people to be useful. I have also read many places and heard friends (most of them gay men) say that, traditionally, two-spirit people took care of the children. Usually mothers take care of children. There may be instances in which gay men have taken care of children, but I am not aware that this was a wide-spread practice or a role allocated to gay men. Claiming this as a traditional role for gay men feels like another intrusion of Western heteropatriarchy into our traditional cultures, as men find a sense of self-worth by erasing the contributions of women. Sexism and misogyny are present in and have damaged the two-spirit community.

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

Wilson: Yes. People need to remember that our elders, regardless of whether they attended residential schools (and most did), have still been impacted by the education system of that time. Everyone is influenced by mainstream media, education and other institutions. There is no way around it. At schools, Indigenous children were taught new stories that legitimized the power of the colonial state, the queen, the church, settler economics, racial hierarchies, gender supremacy, and heteronormativity. These stories were overprinted on what they already knew and would continue to learn later from their own families, communities, lands and waters. On the

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

with the moon. In my family, I was taught that our language does not gender people, but of course we have descriptive terms for “man” and “woman.” The existence of those words does not mean that we only acknowledge two genders in general. Rather, they are terms that mark specific gender positions on a continuum.

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

Chapter 5 Refusing the Question “What Does Two-Spirit Mean?”

In the final four chapters of this thesis, I will share the ways in which the participants answered, refused, and asked questions during the research interviews. These four chapters are meant to be read in concert. All four provide vital context for one another and provide different evidence supporting the key findings of this research: that the ways that people understand two-spirit as rigidly defined, or as a container for multiple distinct understandings of gender, sexuality and community roles are impacted by the places they are, the history of the term, and the state of Indigenous knowledges within the settler-colonial present. This chapter begins the conversation in a purposeful way, by centring participants’ and my own refusals of the research process, and our refusals academic knowledge production more broadly. By beginning with refusal, this chapter also serves to temper your readerly expectations of the following chapters, none of which offer an answer to the question “what is two-spirit?” To reiterate what I stated in Chapter 1, the question “what is two-spirit” is not the question with which this research is concerned; this thesis is concerned with what young trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people living in Toronto wanted to say about two-spirit as a term, very little of which had to do with explaining what two-spirit means.

The original research question that I brought to participants was “how do you understand the term two-spirit” — which, admittedly, is quite similar to the question “what is two-spirit.” I had thought that this question would direct the focus of our interviews towards the ideas and community practices that make the term meaningful for participants. I also chose this question because it has utility towards the original political project of this work: providing a citable document with the thoughts and words of trans, two-spirit, and queer Indigenous young people in Toronto, in order to intervene on the singular, literal definition that proliferates in academic

writing. However, over the course of the research, it became clear that both this question and this political project did not meet the priorities of the participants. During the research interviews participants steered our conversations towards discussions about the political significance of the term two-spirit, and the ways in which they are building community with fellow two-spirit, queer and trans Indigenous people. It was through these redirections that I came to understand that the ways in which non-two-spirit people understand the term — narrow as this definition is, and harmful though it may be — was not the biggest concern for participants. Instead, participants were focused on the ways in which they and their fellow trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people build communities, support one another, do ceremony, and create livable futures together. In this way, participants lead our interviews away from what non-two-spirit people and organizations ought to know, to instead focus on the knowledge that two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous young people in Toronto desire for themselves and their communities. This act in itself is a refusal of the theory of change endemic in scholarly research which seeks to remedy issues of social inequality through development of the white majority's knowledge of the Other, and an investment in a theory of change that locates power and agency within trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities (see also Tuck, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

In the coming chapters, I will discuss the tensions between the ways in which two-spirit is understood within trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous communities (where it is used to describe a wide range of identities related to gender, sexuality, and community responsibilities) and the ways in which the term is understood in Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities at large (where people often assume that two-spirit only means a gay Indigenous person). While participants sometimes use two-spirit as a tool to communicate specific information to others about their gender, sexuality or community role, at other times they use two-spirit in ways that refuse specificity, and to refuse other people's (usually cisgender and/or

heterosexual people's) entitlement to know what exactly they are saying about their sex lives, bodies, genders and assigned sex when they say they are two-spirit. This chapter theorizes this practice of using two-spirit to purposefully obfuscate details about oneself as a form of refusal, and explores it alongside two other types of refusal: the ways in which participants refused to provide any one definition of two-spirit within our interviews, and my own refusal to provide all of the details of our interviews in this thesis. I suggest that together, what these refusals make possible are understandings of two-spirit that hinge not on a definition of the term but rather an appreciation of the ways in which the term is truly by and for two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people, and therefore holds many meanings — only a portion of which any one person can ever know, and most of which people actually do *not* need to know. Instead, what non-two-spirit people need to know is how to be respectful to trans, queer, and two-spirit Indigenous people — a practice which includes but is not limited to not making assumptions about anyone's body, gender, assigned sex, or sexuality, and not expecting two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people to explain any details about our lives (or the lives of our communities) to people in order to educate them.

In this chapter, I discuss refusal in two distinct ways: the ethnographic refusal in which both participants and I engaged during the course of our interviews (through not directly answering my questions, redirecting the line of questioning, and my own withholding of some of the things participants shared with me) and participants' reflections on refusing to explain themselves, their genders, their bodies and their sexualities to non-two-spirit people. I begin by explaining what exactly I mean by refusal, drawing on the work of A. Simpson (2007; 2014) and Tuck & Yang (2014) to describe the ethical stance I inhabit as a researcher and the ways in which participants redirected our interview conversations. I will then detail the ways in which participants narrated refusal in our interviews: their refusals of the incessant compulsion from

non-two-spirit people to explain what two-spirit is, the ways in which they use the term two-spirit itself to obscure these outside gazes and refuse legibility, and their refusal to believe in a theory of change that locates agency outside of their own communities. I examine these refusals in two sections, the first dealing with how participants field questions about what two-spirit means in general and the second dealing with how they refuse questions about their own personal relationships to the term. Not unlike Chapter 3, this chapter provides a theoretical framework through which to read the rest of the thesis; by understanding the ways in which refusal animated the collection, content, and analysis of the data, you, as a reader, will be more prepared to appreciate the complexities offered by participants in the coming chapters.

Interviews with participants took place at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (save one, which took place in a food court in downtown Toronto) and lasted between 20 and 65 minutes. Snacks and smudge were made available to participants during the interviews. Each of the 10 participants were given the opportunity to create a pseudonym for themselves, with some selecting English-language names, one selecting a number (21), one selecting an emoji (😍), and several choosing not to use a pseudonym at all. Participants also indicated which sets(s) of pronouns (if any) they were comfortable with me using when I referenced them and their ideas. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and participants were then given the opportunity to review their transcript and make any additions or edits they liked.

The questions that I asked participants¹⁵ were designed to allow participants to theorize out loud. I came to understand interviews this way — as sites of meaning-making between interviewer and interviewees — through the work of Eve Tuck (personal communication, 27 October 2017) who, building on Kvale (1996), articulates the research interview as an instance of

¹⁵ For full interview guide, see Appendix C.

co-theorizing with research participants. Interview conversations followed a loose structure that began with the topic of how participants understand the term two-spirit, often followed by me asking about how they came to learn about the term, before moving into how participants see two-spirit as related or unrelated to other terms in the lexicon of gender and sexuality. Most interviews finished up with a discussion of how participants see two-spirit used in their Toronto communities, and the merits of its use as an umbrella term. In almost every interview, I explained the rationale for my research: seeing the singular, literal definition of two-spirit proliferated in many spaces sparked my desire to intervene on this practice and provide scholarly material for others to use while they do so. The interview excerpts quoted in this thesis represent participants' unique perspectives on two-spirit, reflections on their use of the term, and their own stances on the ethical and political implications of this research. In this chapter and those that follow, I work to theorize alongside participants, sharing context from our interviews, connecting their insights to themes in the literature as explored in Chapter 2 and in my conversation with Dr. Wilson in Chapter 4, as well as with the ideas shared by other participants. This practice of co-theorizing alongside participants is one of several ways in which I am refusing the academy's structures of knowledge production.

5.1 (Ethnographic) Refusal

In order to discuss these multiple types of refusal throughout this chapter, I must first provide some context to my use of the term. Refusal as a strategy of resistance within the academy has been theorized extensively by Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson. In her 2007 article "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship" as well as her 2014 monograph *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, Simpson theorizes her community's (the Mohawks of Kahnawá:ke) dissent to colonial structures

of state recognition as a form of political refusal. She also proposes the term “ethnographic refusal” to describe her own practices of redaction and refusal to provide fodder for the misrepresentations of Haudenosaunee people that litter the ethnographic archive. As Simpson points out in both texts, anthropology has long been a method of creating knowledge about Indigenous peoples — knowledge which is necessary for settler-colonial governance of our communities and our territories. The types of knowledge produced within the discipline of anthropology hinge on accounts of difference (discussed under the mantle of ‘culture’) that deploy authentic representations of the ‘voice’ of colonized peoples. Interrupting this type of knowledge production, then, can have important consequences for the contestation of settler-colonial domination.

Instead of abiding by the implicit rules of academic research and producing knowledge for consumption by the academy, Simpson asks researchers to consider what our data analysis could look like when the desires of the interviewees shape our methods and thinking. She offers several techniques of ethnographic refusal in which she as a researcher is engaged, including the demarcation of the limits of what is sayable within qualitative interviews (and what is repeatable in academic publications) and the direction of the research process towards the questions participants themselves wish to ask. These modes of ethnographic refusal proposed by Simpson all centre the sovereignty of research participants — in Simpson’s case, and in mine, the sovereignty of Indigenous communities who are also engaged in their own processes of refusal as discursive and political strategy. Thought about in this way, refusal offers multiple alternative lines of inquiry and courses of action that can push back against the colonial epistemologies of the academy and of settler-colonial societies.

Simpson’s contributions have also been extended by Tuck & Yang (2014) who posit refusal as a mode of analysis that can allow researchers to work alongside dispossessed peoples

(who may or may not be our peers) without re-enacting colonial forms of inquiry. Writing closely alongside Simpson, Tuck & Yang argue that refusal in research is always contextual and deeply linked to desire; it a purposeful redirection of the research question to what participants and researchers want and need to share, rather than what the academy demands to know. While Simpson poses self-reflexive inquiries that she considered during her ethnographic fieldwork in her community — “Can I do this and still come home; what am I revealing here and why? Where will this get us? Who benefits from this and why?” (2007, p. 78) — Tuck & Yang ask a related question: how can we depict the stories shared with us as researchers in ways that do not subject them to colonial gazes? Put another way, these authors ask: what can this research do, and what do we risk in undertaking it? For Simpson, and for Tuck & Yang, refusal is a way to work through these hard questions; a way to take direction from participants and their desires, and to find and respect our own limits as researchers.

The above questions from Simpson (2007; 2014) and Tuck & Yang (2014) structured my development of the research methodology, formulation of the interview questions, and the writing of this thesis. This core trouble of representing the voice of another is one which I spent much time considering while planning and executing this research. Exploring the refusal of anthropological knowledge production as it relates to the term two-spirit, A. Wilson (2007) proposes a related series of questions. At the beginning of her doctoral dissertation, Wilson poses several compelling questions that structured her literature review, including “is two-spirit itself a critique of aspects of anthropology? of queerness? can non-Indigenous researchers/audiences understand the identities or experiences of two-spirit people?” (2007, p.1) and “are anthropologists’ need for knowledge and two-spirit people’s need for self-knowledge competing and incompatible interests?” (2007, p. 1). These questions, though they do not use the term refusal, grapple with the heart of the matter of knowledge production and representation.

Building on A. Wilson’s provocations, I asked myself: how far can sharing the words of the participants go in advancing the project of two-spirit community-building without increasing the risk of being misunderstood or appropriated by anthropological and other academic knowledge industries? Is increased awareness on the part of non-two-spirit people really what is needed in order to create the worlds that our communities deserve? The former question is one with which I am still struggling — though I am trying hard to find balance between sharing enough of participants’ reflections to enable this thesis to be a space that treats their ideas with respect and puts them in conversation with one another, and directly addressing non-two-spirit readers so that they do not take license with these ideas, I am not sure how successful I will be. It is the dissonance or tension between “what you [readers] need to know and what I refuse to write in” (A. Simpson, 2007, p. 72) that structures this thesis; because I am addressing this work to both two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous people and to non-two-spirit people, what some readers “need to know” (that I am therefore including here) is information which I would refuse to write in for non-two-spirit readers in other contexts. Part of what non-two-spirit people “need to know” is the fact that I am refusing to write some things in because of their presence. The dual audiences of the work propel me to be explicit about to whom each piece of information is addressed.

However, the latter question — whether broadening the mainstream understanding of two-spirit is the thing we need most — is one which participants explicitly answered for me. In my interview with 🥰, a participant who has lived in Toronto for almost their whole life,¹⁶ they noted that educating non-two-spirit people (especially non-Indigenous people) about how not to

¹⁶ Throughout this text, I have chosen not to identify participants using their nations/Indigenous affiliation, as doing so could compromise their anonymity. Instead, I have shared another piece of demographic data collected during the research: the amount of time they have lived in Toronto. Contextualizing participants’ responses in this way allows space for me to make connections participants’ narration of their own coming to understand two-spirit and the common elements of Toronto community’s usage of the term.

harm two-spirit, trans, and queer community members is a draining and time-intensive task — and, though they see the necessity of this intervention work, it cannot be prioritized over the work they do to build community with fellow two-spirit youth. As we discussed the research process and my reasons for doing this project (which I expressed to them as creating a citable document with the thoughts and words of trans, two-spirit, and queer Indigenous young people in Toronto, in order to intervene on the singular, literal definition that proliferates in academic writing), they shared their hopes for the research, saying:

if this can come out in a way that's accessible to two-spirit youth, to be able to hear other people's stories being shared, I think that would be great. Cause I think honestly, that's what feels important to me. But, I also definitely — I think it's great and important that other people can do the work educating settlers, or making a clear thing for academia.

For 😍, one important thing that this research can do is reflect the stories participants shared with me back to trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous young people. Although 😍 characterizes the work of educating settlers and intervening in academia as important, for them it is not as high a priority as sharing stories with two-spirit youth. Here, 😍 refuses theories of change which posit that the actions of settlers are what make things happen in the world, demonstrating instead a belief in the power of two-spirit community as agents of change.

This theory of change shifted what I understand to be the political projects of this work. Since two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people are change-makers, this work can be of most use when it is made accessible to them and their communities — so I must address trans, two-spirit and queer people as a core audience here. However, my conversation with 😍 also affirmed for me that one role of this research is to take on some of the intervention work in settler and academic spaces, thereby freeing up participants' time and energy to use in the various community-building projects in which many are engaged. This means that in this thesis I must

also address non-two-spirit people as a core audience. My hope is that in addressing this thesis to both audiences I can both assist in the project of building two-spirit community knowledge (by making the stories participants shared with me accessible to other young trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people in this thesis and in the accompanying website), and absorb some of the educational labour that is constantly foisted upon two-spirit, trans and queer people (by clearly articulating that two-spirit ought to be used in ways that hold space for the inherent complexity of the term).

One way in which I have carried out these dual political projects is through utilizing the strategies of ethnographic refusal outlined by A. Simpson (2007; 2014) and Tuck & Yang (2014): redirecting of the process of inquiry to the questions that the participants (and myself as researcher) want to ask, and revealing only as much as I need to in order to make my arguments. I take up the strategy of redirection-as-refusal by eluding the question of “what is two-spirit?” — a question which, as the participants reminded me throughout our interviews, is *constantly* asked of two-spirit people — to instead ask how two-spirit people came to understand the term and how their communities use the term. Throughout the interviews, I attempted to follow the lead of participants and the desires that they articulated; sometimes, participants redirected our conversations away from my interview questions and toward ideas that participants wanted their fellow trans, queer, and two-spirit Indigenous people to know. It is to reflect their priorities and desires that Chapter 8 of this thesis focuses solely on the desires of the participants and the questions they themselves are asking within their communities in relation to two-spirit as a term.

Following the second strategy of redaction-as-refusal, the chapters that follow recount only certain portions of the conversations that took place between participants and myself. As mentioned above, some of this reaction is taking place because I am writing, in part, to those outside of trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities. There is much that participants

shared with me that I do not need to share with you, non-two-spirit readers, in order to describe their theorizing and argue for the capaciousness of two-spirit as a term. The limits of my writing here are reached when what I share would contribute not to readers' comprehension of the diversity of what two-spirit means, but would instead contribute to non-two-spirit people thinking that they know what the term means. As many participants insisted: if you are not a two-spirit, trans or queer Indigenous person, you do not need to know what two-spirit means. Instead, you need to *know* that you do not know what two-spirit means. The hope is that, in knowing this, you will also know that making assumptions about people when they use the term two-spirit is harmful. However, knowing that some readers of this thesis will be trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people, I have not withheld everything; I have tried to share enough of what participants shared with me that our communities can see themselves reflected in this text.

To be clear, I did not begin this research project inhabiting what Tuck & Yang (2014) describe as the “generative stance” of refusal (p. 245). When I initially conceptualized this research project, the theory of change with which I was working was one described by Tuck & Yang (2014) as a classic social science research approach: authentically representing the perspectives of dispossessed peoples (in this case, trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous youth) in order to bring to light the inequalities that maintain this dispossession and thus begin the process of redress. Specifically, what I sought to do was offer the ways in which participants understand and use two-spirit in order to give pause to those individuals, researchers and organizations who circulate the narrow, literal definition of the term. My original intent was to provide a citable source so that the next time someone from a mainstream LGBTQ organization is tasked with writing anything about two-spirit, they could look to this thesis and the voices represented herein and accurately convey the complexity of two-spirit instead of parroting information from white anthropologists. While not exactly the same as the ubiquitous pain or

trauma-focused narratives that form the bulk of well-meaning social science research with Indigenous peoples described by Tuck (2009), this project of amplifying the voices of two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous young people in order to interrupt the dominant misunderstanding of two-spirit would require the narration of the harms caused by this misunderstanding. Instead, what I was offered by my research supervisor, Dr. Eve Tuck, by the writings of A. Simpson (2007; 2014) and Tuck & Yang (2014), and by research participants themselves, was a theory of change in which the academy, the general public, or queer settler organizations having more knowledge about the pain of dispossession is not the fulcrum of change. Instead, what participants like 😊 offered was the idea that it is two-spirit, queer and trans Indigenous communities themselves who are the ones who are *already* creating the changes in the world that they need in order to survive and thrive together.

In engaging in the modes of refusal outlined above, I am also refusing the forms of academic knowledge production whereby you, the reader, walk away from your reading of this text with a new body of knowledge about the term two-spirit, about the participants, or about trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous communities. Instead of simply amplifying the voices of trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous young people in Toronto in order to provide evidence for the need to shift conversations about two-spirit away from singular and narrow understandings of the term, this research invites a conversation between participants that, while still fulfilling the aim of intervening on widely held misunderstandings of two-spirit, centres the knowledge, needs, and desires of participants and their communities. This research recounts the ways in which participants and I have theorized two-spirit, the ways in which it is understood within and outside of Indigenous trans, queer and two-spirit communities, and how these varied understandings impact their communities. This research does amplify the voices of participants in order to minimize harm caused by misunderstandings of two-spirit, but not (or perhaps in part)

because it was the original intent of the work; rather (or perhaps also) because this was noted as a worthwhile project by participants. As indicated in 😊's comments above, participants trusted that if I as a researcher and a community member saw the need for this type of intervention in academic scholarship, that it was an avenue I should pursue. Importantly, this research also asserts that the project of providing evidence to encourage behavioural change among non-two-spirit people is a side project to the community-building work in which participants are engaged. This stance is one that I learned directly from the participants and the ways in which they enacted refusal.

Participants were forthright both in their refusal to answer some of my questions, and in their narration of the ways in which they refuse the questions of non-two-spirit people looking for a definition of two-spirit. They recounted engaging in multiple modes of refusal in their everyday lives: refusal to use LGBTQ+ terms when identifying themselves, refusal to use any English terms to describe their gender or sexuality or community roles, refusal to explain what two-spirit means to non-two-spirit people in community spaces, and refusal to be erased by cis people's misunderstandings of what two-spirit means. It is these multiple types of refusal — the ethnographic refusal I enacted through withholding detail and directing the focus of my inquiry towards the desires of the participants, the ethnographic refusal of the participants who declined some of my questions in favour of others, and the refusals of legibility, erasure, and binaries that participants enact in their communities — that animate this thesis. The next two sections of this chapter outline the ways in which participants push back against the ever-present expectation that they will explain what two-spirit means to anyone who asks, the assumptions about two-spirit held by non-two-spirit people, and the entitlement to personal details about one's life that such interlocutors often exhibit.

5.2 Expectations, Assumptions & Entitlement I: Explaining Two-Spirit

Many participants relayed to me that they are incessantly asked what two-spirit means, who can identify as two-spirit, whether it means they have two spirits, and where they themselves learned all of the information they presumably are about to share with the person asking these questions. This section of the chapter discusses participants' reflections on the expectation that they will explain what two-spirit means to other people, and the ways that they elude and refuse this task. Dakotah, who moved to Toronto one year ago, shared that in their experience, “the term two-spirited, a lot of people don't even know what it is yet, still. And I'm always constantly asked, like, ‘what does two-spirit mean?’” Because many people do not have a solid grasp of what two-spirit is, Dakotah is constantly called on to educate others — and the question on their minds is “what does two-spirit mean?” This is just one example of the thirst for a single, intelligible definition of two-spirit that non-two-spirit people demonstrate — a thirst they always expect trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people to quench through the answering of their (sometimes invasive and inappropriate) questions. The ubiquity of questions like “what does two-spirit mean” was also noted by 🥰, who recounted that answering these types of questions — ““what is two-spirit, how does this work?”” — forms the bulk of the educational work they and their community are called on to do within in mainstream Indigenous spaces. This educational work is described in Chapter 6 as the work of bringing change to spaces — a practice recognized by many participants as a core part of what two-spirit community members do.

This thirst for a simple definition of two-spirit was expressed by one participant as a desire for categorization that was, like Dakotah's reflection above, linked to general lack of understanding of the complexities of gender and sexuality. TJ, who has lived in Toronto for a year and a half, theorized that “people don't have a basic understanding of what gender and

sexuality diversity is — they think it might be easier for them just to categorize it” as opposed to going through the labour of learning the complexity of what it can mean to embody two-spirit. People who are neither two-spirit, nor trans, nor queer (and sometimes, people who *are* two-spirit, trans, or queer) often approach conversations about gender and sexual diversity with a desire to group people into categories based on appearance or behaviour. Here, TJ pinpoints the core desire of non-two-spirit people for a simple definition of two-spirit that fits into the system of categorization of gender and sexuality that is so prominent in our settler-colonial present; if people’s understanding of sexual and gender diversity is limited to knowing that gay people exist, then it is understandable that they would want to categorize two-spirit in a similarly restrictive way without going through the work of learning about gender and sexuality outside of binaries.¹⁷ Put another way, the complexities of what two-spirit means are, well, complex — and many people want simple answers that are at odds with the nuances and diversity of two-spirit lives.

A core theme that ran through participants’ interviews was the idea that two-spirit is a complex concept that holds space for many different experiences; many people understand it in many different ways, and this multiplicity is in fact a core part of the term itself. Participant 21, who moved to Toronto 10 years ago, highlighted that the inherent complexity of two-spirit is at odds with the expectations many people have of a singular, stable definition of the term. She shared:

there’s a lot of levels and complexities to what it means to be two-spirit, and how to use it. And you know, I find a lot of people want a really simple easily digestible definition of what it means, that everyone can get on the same page of what it means. But that’s not

¹⁷ The role that access to the time, space and resources to think critically about these binary modes of thought plays in the proliferation of narrow definitions of two-spirit is explored more fully in Chapter 7.

possible, because I talk to so many people and everyone has such a different connection with it and a different understanding that it really is no one definition and no one experience.

Here, 21 indicates that both the ways in which people use the term two-spirit and what it means to be two-spirit are complex and multi-layered. In 21's experience, the myriad of understandings of two-spirit held by her peers make it impossible to have a single, "easily digestible" definition of the term, despite the persistent desire of many people for an easy answer to the question of what two-spirit means. Similarly, TJ shared that answering the ubiquitous question "'who or what is a two-spirit person?'" is hard because the answer "can look very differently compared to the next person, compared to the next person." The question to which non-two-spirit people most desire an answer is actually impossible to answer, because of the sheer variety of ways in which people embody and understand two-spirit. One way in which participants subvert the expectation of a single, "easily digestible" definition of two-spirit is by sharing the immense diversity of meanings and experiences for which the term two-spirit holds space (some of which are recounted in the chapters that follow).

TJ proclaimed that because of the term's inherent complexity, conversations about two-spirit hinge on

that confusion for folks to try and understand it. And it's supposed to be confusing! It's not supposed to be easy. If it was so easy then we wouldn't be having this conversation and you wouldn't be giving me twenty bucks at the end of the talk.

TJ, like the participants above, pinpoints the element of confusion among non-two-spirit people as a driving force behind many conversations about the term. However, similarly to 21, they proclaim that two-spirit is in fact supposed to elicit some confusion and elude easy answers.

Two-spirit is not a term that is intended to be understood easily (or perhaps at all) by non-two-

spirit people; it is a term that is by and for trans and queer Indigenous people. Yet here, as in their above comments about the ubiquity of the “what is two-spirit” question, TJ indicates that they are familiar with engaging in conversations that are centred around the confusion of non-two-spirit people, and being remunerated for this educational labour; they know well that these are the types of questions academic research seeks to answer.

TJ also suggests here that it is the fact that two-spirit is not “so easy” that animates my thesis research — a project that seeks both to ameliorate harms that come from narrow understandings of two-spirit and to make space for queer, trans, and two-spirit Indigenous community theorizing. The complexity of the term two-spirit is both what gives it meaning, and what makes misunderstandings of the term so prevalent and, sometimes, dangerous. Crucially, TJ also highlighted the ways in which the twin knowledge-making projects of this work are dictating the ways in which it is carried out, including the provision of an honorarium; if two-spirit had a simple definition, it wouldn’t be the subject of my master’s thesis, and I would not be “giving [them] twenty bucks at the end of the talk.” With a hint of sass, TJ gestures at the tensions inherent in a project that seeks both to intervene in the body of academic knowledge on two-spirit people in order to reduce harmful stereotyping, but in so doing, and in the observation of the university’s ethics protocols and degree requirements, necessarily also adds to that body of knowledge. What TJ (and 🥰, above) offered in our conversations was a redirection of the aims of the research; the idea that although reducing the harm that comes from widespread narrow understandings of two-spirit is an important project, it was not the project in which their communities wanted to invest their time.

In addition to noting the inescapability of the question “what is two-spirit?” and the role fluidity plays in their understandings of two-spirit and its importance as a word, some participants also described the ways in which they elude this question or redirect this line of

inquiry — strategies of refusal that match those described by A. Simpson (2007). One mode of refusal in which Simpson and her informants engaged together was the delineation of the boundaries of what could be said, what was unsayable, what could be said but not written about, and what did not actually need to be said aloud because it was already mutually understood. In Simpson’s work, these limits were informed by the specificities of her research: she, as a member and citizen of Kahnawá:ke, asking questions of her fellow Kahnawakeronon on the complex matters of citizenship and community membership in relation to the *Indian Act* and Bill C-31. Recounting a conversation with one of her participants, Simpson explains his refusal to explicitly state his “predicament” with regard to being excluded from band membership, instead repeatedly stating that he doesn’t know the specifics of the situation. She writes:

it was very interesting to me that he would tell me that “he did not know” and “no one seems to know” — to me these utterances meant, “I know you know, and you know that I know I know...so let’s just not get into this.” Or, “let’s just not say.” So I did not say, and so I did not “get into it” with him, and I won’t get into it with my readers. (2007, p. 77)

Here, Simpson and her participant did not need to vocalize the specifics of his situation because they both knew what they were talking about without making it explicit. To verbalize their mutual understandings would only serve an outsider readership; the choice not to make their conversation legible to those who are not in the know is a refusal to play by the rules of ethnography, which stipulate that the knowledge produced in interviews becomes part of the body of knowledge held by the academy. This refusal is an example of exercising dominion over representations and intellectual space.

This type of refusal to name phenomena for outsiders is also one in which 😊 recounted engaging with their community. During our interview, 😊 told me about their experience participating in another, unrelated research project being run by an Indigenous community

organization here in Toronto. This other research project in which 🧑🏻 participated sought to gather information on traditional two-spirit teachings; 🧑🏻 was part of a group of two-spirit youth who were provided a set of questions to take to two-spirit elders and knowledge keepers in order to gather this information. As 🧑🏻 explained to me, the question “what is two-spirit?” was at the core of the list of questions they and their co-researchers were initially provided by the organization running the research project. However, these questions did not reflect what they actually wanted to learn about. Instead of using these questions that were provided to them, 🧑🏻 and their peers chose instead to write their own list of questions based on what they as two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous youth needed to know. They explained that

We maybe didn't actually need to know what it means to be two-spirit, what the word two-spirit means, cause we're living that. We're living that in many complex and different and variable ways and we maybe actually didn't need to put it in writing.

Here, 🧑🏻 describes the knowledge-gathering in which they and their peers want to engage as very different from the search for a definition that undergirds most non-two-spirit people's inquiries about two-spirit. Because their community is living what two-spirit means in many diverse ways, they do not need to have a definition of the term; research that seeks to define two-spirit does not meet the needs of 🧑🏻's community. By redirecting the research process to focus on the questions they wanted to ask, 🧑🏻 and their peers engaged in refusal as described by A. Simpson (2007; 2014) and Tuck & Yang (2014): a desire-centred practice that redirects inquiry towards what communities actually want and need to know. In redefining the terms of their research initiative away from what non-two-spirit people wanted to know towards what they themselves want to know, these youth refuse the practice of knowledge production that positions two-spirit as an

object of study, choosing instead to affirm their own embodied knowledge and creating a set of questions that was useful to their community (part of which is discussed in Chapter 8).

Further, like the above excerpt in which A. Simpson (2007) and her participant both knew his membership predicament and thus refused to outline the details, 🙄 and their community all know what two-spirit means, so they did not need to record the specifics as part of their research; to “put it in writing” would only serve a non-two-spirit audience. This act of refusing to accede to non-two-spirit people’s thirst for a definition of two-spirit is an example of exercising dominion over the intellectual space of the word; by asserting that it is not for those outside of 🙄’s community to know what two-spirit means, they are also affirming that what matters are the questions they themselves want to ask. It was through this exchange with 🙄 that I came to fully understand that this thesis does not need to tell non-two-spirit people what two-spirit means; instead, it can both recount participants’ refusal of this question and the ideas towards which interview conversations were redirected. Trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people are already tasked with defining two-spirit on a daily basis; they are often also asked what they themselves mean when they say they are two-spirit. It is to this second ubiquitous and invasive line of questioning to which I will turn in the final section of this chapter, before moving into what participants *did* want to talk about in relation to the word two-spirit in Chapter 6.

5.3 Expectations, Assumptions & Entitlement II: Explaining Our Selves

Many participants recounted being frequently (and coercively) asked to explain what they mean when they identify as two-spirit. This next section of the chapter will recount participants’ experiences being asked not what two-spirit means, but what exactly *they* mean when they identify as two-spirit, and the ways in which they refuse this compulsion to share details about

their lives. Recalling TJ and 21's above comments regarding the ways in which two-spirit defies definition, Dana, who has been living in Toronto for less than one year, discussed how some non-two-spirit people express their continued thirst for a definition of the word by asking very personal questions. She noted that the term two-spirit can be confusing for non-two-spirit people, many of whom want "something that's not an umbrella term. They want to know, 'well, do you have sex with men, or women, or both? Or everybody? Or what?'" When people who are not two-spirit hear someone identify as two-spirit, they want to know specifically what it means. Although, as Dana noted elsewhere in our interview, most Indigenous people and some non-Indigenous people have a general idea that the term two-spirit indicates something about someone's sexuality and/or gender, the thirst for more (and more intimate) knowledge is often present. The entitlement of non-two-spirit people to know with whom a two-spirit person has sex is thwarted when the term is not explained further; people want clarity, but what two-spirit offers is something different: murkiness, impreciseness, elusion.

Sam, who has lived in Toronto their whole life, also theorized two-spirit as a term that can be used to defy assumptions and expectations of legibility. They shared that two-spirit means so many things, and it doesn't work the same way as some of these other words that we have, like Western notions of sexuality and gender. It's like, when people say woman, they're expecting a certain thing. When you say man, they're expecting a certain thing. And you can't do that with two-spirit. People do that with that word, but I actually don't think that that's how it should work, ever.

Here, Sam points to the way in which two-spirit does not function in the same way as Western descriptors of gender and sexuality; because two-spirit means so many different things, it is impossible to know anything about a person when they identify as two-spirit other than the fact that they identify as two-spirit. Although people do attach their own expectations and

assumptions to two-spirit, Sam asserts that this is not how the word ought to be used. Here, Sam points out the second common circumstance, alongside having no idea what two-spirit means, that puts trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people in the position of having to explain two-spirit: the narrow (and, sometimes, harmful) assumptions that people hold about the term's meaning. As Sam shows us here (and as Dana further demonstrates below), the term two-spirit can actually be used to deny and defy these assumptions that are placed on the word and refuse the educational labour expected of those who use it to describe themselves.

At this point in the chapter, I diverge momentarily from the discussion of assumptions attached to the term two-spirit to touch briefly on an important and intimately related topic: cissexism. The practice of assuming that everyone (including two-spirit people) is cisgender, the practice of assuming that you know someone's gender based on their appearance, and the belief that man and woman are the only two genders are part of the structure of cissexism that is foundational to the Western worldview. Noting that cissexism is “a huge problem” in Indigenous communities — and one which is talked about much less than homophobia or transphobia — Sam described cissexism as the practice of

literally making assumptions that everyone's cisgender, and making assumptions that if you look like a woman, whatever that means, you're supposed to do X, Y and Z, or you have X, Y, and Z body parts, all this really invasive, intrusive stuff.

The cissexist assumptions that 1) you know someone's gender based on their appearance, and 2) everyone is cisgender, are indeed both invasive and intrusive. As Sam noted above, the practice of expecting certain things when one hears the word woman or man is a practice that many people extend to two-spirit in ways that reflect cissexism. Several participants noted that when most people hear someone describe themselves as two-spirit, they usually assume that they are a cisgender, gay Indigenous person — and, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, these assumptions

cause harm in the lives of trans and non-binary two-spirit people. The assumption that everyone is cisgender, and the assumption that you know someone's gender by looking at them, are pillars of cissexism which are present in the assumptions people make about what two-spirit does or does not mean.

Alongside incorrect assumptions, widespread unfamiliarity with the terms trans and two-spirit also influences the ways in which two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous community members are made to educate others. In our conversation, Sam went on to share one example of the ways in which they are coerced into sharing details about their body and their gender with people who do not know what trans means. They noted that in Indigenous community spaces, one thing that is hard is

when people don't know what being trans is, there's also this expectation that you share really personal intimate information. Often I do feel coerced into these things where I have to describe like "oh, by the way, I have a uterus," or "oh, by the way, these things" that are actually totally inappropriate, just totally coercive and not okay. And they're not okay in any spaces, but in our spaces it does feel like we have to do that to be able to challenge that invisibility.

When people in their community do not understand what they mean when they use the word trans, Sam is coerced into sharing details about their life to challenge the invisibility that comes from pervasive cissexism. For Sam, the lack of comprehension when they say they are trans leads to an obligation to disclose personal information to counter the cissexist assumptions people make about them — assumptions which, it is worth noting, are also made about them when they use the word two-spirit to describe themselves. Not unlike people's lack of understanding or narrow assumptions when it comes to two-spirit, people's lack of understanding and harmful assumptions about what trans means puts Sam in the position of

having to explain details about themselves. Many of the assumptions that people make when they hear the word two-spirit are examples of cissexism; so, too, is the expectation that trans people will share intimate details in order to educate cisgender people.¹⁸ While there are times at which participants are coerced into doing this educational work, there are also times at which they refuse it.

In our interviews, participants recounted many different ways in which they at times comply with and at times refuse the coercive expectations of educational and emotional labour that Sam describes above. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, participants sometimes strategically use two-spirit to claim space for trans, queer, and two-spirit Indigenous community in mainstream LGBTQ spaces and in Indigenous spaces, to refuse having their genders and sexualities erased, and to communicate specific things about themselves to others. At other times (or in other places) participants use two-spirit to purposefully make it unclear what the term refers to. Dana described using two-spirit as a term that both is meaningful to other folks who are two-spirit and as one that non-two-spirit people may not understand — one which they may actually have no business understanding. Discussing her use of different terms in Indigenous and non-Indigenous spaces, Dana shared that

usually in mainstream queer communities, I will say I'm pansexual or I'm queer, whereas in Indigenous communities it'll just be like, "I'm two-spirit" and then kind of let them just, I guess — I feel like if you're my friend, you'll eventually figure out that that really means, but if you're not, why do you feel entitled to know that anyways.

¹⁸ Because the cissexism that Sam mentions above is such an ever-present but rarely-talked-about issue, it is further discussed throughout this thesis: in the following chapter the relationship between cissexism and the ways in which participants use two-spirit to claim space for themselves forms an important part of the discussion, while Chapter 8 centres around participants' desires for communities that are free from cissexist and transphobic behaviour. The reasons that underpin the strong hold cissexism has in Indigenous communities (the interpellation of Western binary understandings of gender into Indigenous social thought) is discussed in Chapter 7.

When she is in non-Indigenous, mainstream queer spaces Dana tends to describe herself using the words pansexual or queer, whereas in Indigenous spaces, she uses two-spirit, knowing that the term may raise more questions than it answers for those who hear it. Here, Dana demonstrates ambivalence towards other people's understanding of what she means when she identifies as two-spirit. Indeed, for people who are not her friends, what she means when she says she's two-spirit is not really any of their business. In this way, the unintelligibility of two-spirit in most Indigenous spaces works to subvert the entitlement to knowledge about Dana's gender, sexuality, body, and personhood that people express to her and to many two-spirit people. In other words, Dana uses two-spirit in Indigenous contexts not necessarily to communicate specific information but as a way to refuse the entitlement to knowledge about one's body and one's sexuality that is ever-present for queer, trans, and two-spirit Indigenous people. Not unlike A. Simpson's (2007) assertion that the people who *needed* to know about her participant's membership predicament already *did* know, and her subsequent refusal to explicate the details to readers, Dana here affirms that the people who really need to know what she means when she says two-spirit either already know or will figure it out.

Returning to the ideas that TJ and 21 offered above regarding the (at times intentional) confusion elicited among non-two-spirit people by the word two-spirit, Dana also suggested that those people to whom she would have to explain what she means by two-spirit actually do not need to know at all. When discussing the ways in which non-two-spirit people are often confused by the term two-spirit, Dana shared:

My other thing is like, "do I really care what other folks think about two-spirit?" Not really. In the sense of: if you don't identify as two-spirit, I don't actually care what you think about the term.

Here, Dana makes it clear that she does not care about how people who are not two-spirit understand the term. In addition to her above use of two-spirit to refuse other people's entitlement to know details about her gender or sexuality, Dana here refuses to place any stake in the idea that other people's awareness about two-spirit as a term is a matter of concern for her. If non-two-spirit people and their understandings of two-spirit are not the agents and sites of change, then the project of making non-two-spirit people understand the complexity of the term is not an especially important one. As A. Simpson (2014) describes of the refusal of Kahnawakeronon to abide by the politics of state recognition, I read Dana's comments here (and above) as an articulation of refusal to be recognized by non-two-spirit people.

In refusing the idea that non-two-spirit people need to know what two-spirit means, Dana is also refusing the notion that their knowledge is what will create change. Here, Dana articulates, as 🥰 does above, a theory of change that situates two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous people as the change-makers. The refusal of legibility that is highlighted by Dana here and earlier in the chapter undergird the political orientation of this entire project: although the ways in which two-spirit is misunderstood by, as one participant called it, "the outside world," is a situation that participants saw as requiring attention, the project of educating non-two-spirit people on what two-spirit is only needs to be taken so far as to counter their thirst for knowledge with the reality that they do not need to know what two-spirit means in order to treat people with respect. In other words, non-two-spirit readers: you do not need to know what two-spirit means in order to not assume that someone is heterosexual or cisgender; you do not need to know someone's relationship to two-spirit in order to not make assumptions about their assigned sex, their body, or their gender; you do not need to know what someone means when they say they are two-spirit in order to not make assumptions about what pronouns they use. You just need to 1) stop making assumptions about people's gender, assigned sex, sexuality, and the

pronouns they use based on their appearance and 2) know that you don't know (and do not need to know) all of what two-spirit means.

5.4 Reading the Rest of This Thesis

As I indicated earlier in the chapter, I did not begin this research already inhabiting the stance of refusal described by Tuck & Yang (2014); I came into graduate school observing a theory of change that posited if settlers just *knew* the real breadth of two-spirit that they were obscuring when they reproduce the literal definition, if people just *knew* the harms that are caused by the proliferation of this single definition of two-spirit, then their behaviours would change. In creating authentic representations of two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous young people's knowledge, I had sought to ameliorate the harms associated with the widespread misunderstanding of two-spirit. This political project locates non-two-spirit people as the agents of change. Having engaged with scholarship on ethnographic refusal, and been privy to the various modes of refusal enacted by research participants, I divested from the academy's project of knowledge production and acquisition and invested in the theory of change offered by participants: that two-spirit, queer, and trans Indigenous people and communities are the change-makers, and they are already creating the changes in the world that their communities require. This research can aid in these change-making projects both by recording participants' reflections and making them available to the community (both through the production of this thesis and the accompanying website), thereby providing a forum in which two-spirit, trans and queer people can engage with one another's ideas, and by arguing for the capaciousness of two-spirit as a term so that two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous community members can spend their time and energy in other ways.

To be explicit, I will repeat that the intent of this research is not for every reader to emerge from their reading of this thesis with a (re)new(ed) sense of familiarity or affinity with the term two-spirit (though those trans, queer, and two-spirit Indigenous readers among you may well do so, and I am happy if you do), but rather to consider why you know what you know about two-spirit — what your relationship to the term is, how that relationship is impacted by Indigeneity, queerness, transness, gender, assigned sex, and the languages you speak, and what you *don't* know about the term. As Dana gestures at above, if you are not a trans, two-spirit or queer Indigenous person, you do not actually need to know what two-spirit means — you just need to *know* that you do not know. You need to know that two-spirit means many different things to different people. You need to know that two-spirit communities are the experts on what two-spirit means, and the appropriate thing to do is to defer to their work (not anthropological texts) when the question “what is two-spirit?” arises. And, as above, if you are a two-spirit, queer or trans Indigenous reader of this work, then I hope that you can find meaning or usefulness somewhere in this thesis; that it is affirming for you and the ways in which you understand two-spirit and your relationship to the term; and that among the stories and knowledge shared by participants are some words or feelings that you connect with in some way.

In this chapter, I have outlined the modes of refusal (my own and that of the participants) that shaped this research, and the sources where I learned about refusal (A. Simpson, Tuck & Yang, A. Wilson, and the participants). This learning informed the dual political projects of this work: to intervene in the misunderstandings of two-spirit that proliferate in both academic and non-academic spaces, and to provide a sounding board for trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous young people to share ideas about two-spirit. The stance of refusal outlined in this chapter is an important concept to bear in mind as you make your way through the rest of this thesis. The ideas in the following pages are shared not to arm you with an exhaustive knowledge of what

two-spirit means that you can then go and share with the world while positioning yourself as an expert, but so that you can reflect on the gaps, fissures and frictions between what you do or do not know about two-spirit, what participants shared with me, and what they articulate (in this chapter and those that follow) about what you ought to understand about how the term works. As you continue to read, return to the idea of refusal often.

The rest of this thesis engages with the dual aims described above: to intervene on widespread misunderstandings of two-spirit, and to provide space for the sharing of stories and ideas between trans, two-spirit and queer young people. Chapter 7 theorizes participants' refusal to abide by a singular way of understanding two-spirit as a mode of resistance. In Chapter 8, I will return to the ideas to which participants redirected our conversations — the needs and desires of their communities, and the learning that they wish to do in those communities. However, before any of that, we will first turn to the ways in which participants understand the term two-spirit: as a complex and nuanced container for meaning.

Chapter 6

Two-Spirit as a Hashtag and a Container

As mentioned in the previous chapter, all four discussion chapters of this thesis are intended to be read in concert; to read only one or two is to miss the breadth of meanings that two-spirit holds — which is, in fact, to miss the entire point of this work. In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which participants understand the term two-spirit, using the term to communicate and build community while always acknowledging the plurality of ways in which others imbue it with meaning; in so doing, I set the stage for the discussion in Chapter 7 on how participants speak back to the literal definition of two-spirit. In talking about how they understand two-spirit, how they first came to (and continue to) learn about the term, how they see two-spirit being used in their communities, the connections between two-spirit and other concepts in English or Indigenous languages that describe their ways of being in the world, participants theorized about the connections between community roles, gender, and sexuality, as well as the impacts that the English language's flattening and mis-representations of Indigenous worldviews have on their lives. Participants reiterated many of the understandings of two-spirit present in scholarly and community literature — that two-spirit can be an umbrella term for LGBTQ Indigenous people, a placeholder until people find words or concepts in their Indigenous languages to describe themselves, and a term of political reclamation. But importantly, all of the participants highlighted the inherent complexities of the term and the impossibility of pinning down a single definition of the term — an idea that, while an underlying presence in a good amount of the literature, was explicitly emphasized in only a small portion of it (notably the work of two-spirit writer Carrie House [2016]).

Two key ideas offered by participants that anchor this chapter are the concept of two-spirit as a container that can hold multiple distinct truths and two-spirit as a term that participants use to claim space for themselves and others — as 21 described it, a “hashtag to organize conversation.” Tied to these ideas is the experience, recounted by most participants, of cisgender, heterosexual Indigenous communities (and all non-Indigenous communities) understanding two-spirit in a very narrow, sometimes literal way. These concepts are discussed here so that in Chapter 7, the ways in which participants refuse a single, literal definition of the term can be understood in the context of their own capacious understandings of two-spirit and the term’s history. In sharing the ways in which participants answered my questions about how they understand and use the term two-spirit, the core finding that this chapter highlights is that two-spirit is a complex term that holds many different meanings for different people. The depth and breadth of different two-spirit experiences was something that many participants felt was urgent to bring to the fore, because singular understandings of what two-spirit means can reinforce cissexism and do harm to community members.

For the young people I interviewed, two-spirit can hold meaning about people’s genders, sexual and attraction preferences, the community roles and traditional teachings they hold, and their spiritual lives; it is meaningful to many as a term that unites Indigenous LGBTQ people from diverse nations and territories, and as a word that asserts the inherent worth of Indigenous people with complex genders and sexualities, and is also understood as a term that some choose not to use for a variety of reasons. Further, these understandings of what two-spirit means are all rooted in participants’ experiences in community, their understanding of the term’s history, and the ways in which they see the term used by others. Participants overwhelmingly asserted that two-spirit is a concept that holds a lot of space for a range of identities, and there is no one definition for the term; this idea is a thread that runs through the following chapters. It is

important to note that although participants emphasized that there is no *single* definition of the term, this does not mean that the term has no definition, or that the term can mean anything that anyone wants it to mean. Rather, two-spirit is a term that holds multiple layers of meaning — as a placeholder until people recover their languages, as a catch-all term for Indigenous LGBTQ folks, as a gender identity, and more — and is made meaningful by the trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities who use the term.

This chapter is divided into eight sections: the first two sections will discuss, in turn, participants' understandings of the term two-spirit as related (and unrelated) to gender and sexuality, and to community roles, responsibilities and gifts. The middle two sections of the chapter deal with how participants see two-spirit used as an umbrella term, and the drawbacks of this common practice. The remaining four sections of the chapter will discuss the ways in which participants use the term to communicate details about themselves and their communities, differences in how two-spirit is used across generations and in different places, how participants recognize and utilize two-spirit as a political organizing term, and how participants use the term to claim space.

Each of the 10 research participants was interviewed individually, in conversations that lasted between 25 and 65 minutes. All participants were given the opportunity to create a pseudonym for themselves, with some selecting names, one selecting a number, one selecting an emoji, and some choosing not to use a pseudonym at all. Participants also indicated which sets(s) of pronouns (if any) they were comfortable with me using when writing about them. For more information about the interviews and the research methodologies that informed my use of this method, please see Chapter 3.

6.1 Gender and Sexuality Complexity

Most participants shared the baseline understanding of two-spirit as a term that any Indigenous person who is LGBTQ or has complex sexual, attraction and/or gender identities can use to communicate the interconnectedness of their Indigeneity, gender and/or sexuality. Doug, who has lived in Toronto for 10 years, stated simply: “I only use the term for Indigenous people who are self-identifying under the LGBTQ umbrella.” Similarly, 21 shared that “What I’ve observed is for people who do identify as two-spirit, for some it’s simply connecting being Indigenous and being LGBTQ.” Here, 21 nods to the wide variety of ways in which people connect to the term while noting that for some, the term speaks to the confluence of Indigenous and LGBTQ identities. Both Doug’s and 21’s statements reflect an understanding that two-spirit is a self-descriptor that any Indigenous person whose gender complexities or sexuality complexities would be included under the LGBTQ acronym could use; put another way, these participants expressed that two-spirit can have meaning in terms of one’s gender or their sexuality, or both.

Multiple participants spoke about the complications that arise when two-spirit is sometimes used in reference to gender, sometimes used in reference to sexuality, and sometimes used in reference to both. Some, like Dana, noted that “I feel like often, it’s — I would say more often than not it’s used as a trans or non-binary identifier and less so, generally, about sexuality.” Connor, who moved to Toronto 12 years ago, noted that this understanding of two-spirit as a term that is used to “claim space for complex forms of gender” is shared primarily within queer Indigenous communities, while non-two-spirit Indigenous people tend to understand two-spirit as only having to do with sexuality. These differences in understanding between the trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous community and the broader Indigenous community sometimes played a role in the ways in which participants used the term two-spirit, which I will discuss in detail

below. Though 21, Dana, and Connor all recognize the varied ways that two-spirit is understood as having something to do with gender, sexuality, or both, all three see these understandings deployed in different ways by two-spirit-identified community members and the Indigenous community at large.

In describing the ways in which two-spirit is understood in reference to sexuality and gender, some participants recognized the tensions within the two-spirit, queer and trans Indigenous community between those who say that two-spirit is *only* about gender or, conversely, *only* about sexuality. TJ noted that

you do have those people out there who say that sexuality is not a part of two-spirit identity, that has nothing to do about it, it's more about gender and gender expression and community roles. But then you also have people who do say that [sexuality is a part of two-spirit identity].

Here, TJ describes the two conflicting expressions of an exclusive definition of two-spirit: the idea that two-spirit is only about sexuality, and the idea that two-spirit is only about gender. It is clear that both of these definitions circulate in many communities; their impacts on two-spirit people who understand the term as having to do with only their gender or their sexuality is impacted by broader processes of cissexism in describing LGBTQ lives. TJ also pointed to cissexism and Western, settler-colonial practices of collapsing the categories of gender and sexuality as an underlying factor in the differing understandings of two-spirit as related only to gender or only to sexuality. Discussing the diversity and complexity of what it means to identify as Indigenous, TJ said that

it can even be more complex when you're tying gender on top of that, being Indigenous and queer or trans — and/or, queer, trans, because those are two separate categories themselves. That's another aspect, too, when you're talking about two-spirited people,

and within the acronym, it's like: well, you have to almost take apart the entire acronym itself because the T shouldn't even be in that acronym, when you're looking at sexuality. And folks who are talking about sexuality and gender they're like "well if we're talking about sex, we're not talking about this" and where does the two-spirit roles or teachings come into place?

Here, TJ notes that when thinking through the complexities of being queer and/or trans, it is important to note the distinction between the experience of trans-ness and the experience of queerness. They also point to the ways in which the LGBTQ acronym's placement of words for gender and sexuality right beside one another fosters the conflation of the discrete categories of gender and sexuality, as well as eliding the centrality of community roles for some people's two-spirit identity. Within the literature, some writers also name the harm that the practice of binding queer and trans identities together in the LGBTQ acronym causes, and connect this to the practice of associating two-spirit only with sexuality. Benaway (2017; 2017, April 26) names the conflation of two-spirit with sexuality part of the widespread practice of subsuming gender complexity and trans identities under the umbrella of queerness; theorized in this way, the common practice of using two-spirit only in reference to sexuality violently erases the specificity of trans Indigenous life.

Several participants noted the problems that arise from non-two-spirit people understanding two-spirit as only having to do with sexuality, or not attending to the distinct concerns of trans people. Speaking on the shift towards understanding two-spirit as related to gender, Connor shared that:

I feel that more within the queer Indigenous community. That we see each other using it in a way that claims space for complex forms of gender. The broader Indigenous community, I don't feel like people have gotten the memo yet. In the times that I've used

it as a way to signal to Indigenous folks that I'm non-binary — which, to me, is blatantly obvious, based off how I present myself — it always surprises me how much I need to really help people recognize that in me, too. But I've never had great results using two-spirit. If I'm interacting with someone from the community, a cisgender, heterosexual Indigenous person from the community, and I say that I identify as two-spirit, they don't know that that would impact my pronouns. They assume that I'm a lesbian, I'm pretty sure, like 97% of the time. So as much as internally I feel like there's more recognition, I feel like that's not true in the outside world.

Calling attention to the differences in understanding what two-spirit means in the queer, trans and two-spirit community and the broader Indigenous community, Connor also names the ways in which this misrecognition has real impacts. Because many heterosexual, cisgender people understand two-spirit as a term that only references sexuality (which, as both TJ and Benaway argue above, is related to the broader practice of subsuming transness under the mantle of queerness), Connor is frequently misgendered even when using two-spirit as a way to talk about being non-binary. Importantly, Connor notes that although within the queer Indigenous community, two-spirit is understood in ways that leave room for complex genders, it is not possible to use two-spirit and have the meaning understood in “the outside world” because of the narrow understanding of the term two-spirit held by cisgender and heterosexual people. Though Connor does not use the word cissexism in describing this phenomenon, it seems a fitting description of the ways in which processes of lumping gender and sexuality together have led to the narrow mainstream understanding of two-spirit as having to do only with sexuality, which in turn results in the complexities of gender and the specificity of non-binary identity not being recognized as part of two-spirit identity.

Though many participants had experienced the impacts that result from singular definitions of two-spirit, these sexuality- or gender-only definitions of two-spirit were at odds with participants' own understandings of the term, which were not strict or exclusionary in this way. Indeed, even as some participants expressed their own understandings of two-spirit as having to do with gender, they did not frame this as delegitimizing other people's understandings of the term that differ from their own. Fenris, a young person who has lived in Toronto their whole life, noted that

for me, two-spirit speaks specifically to my gender identity. To me, it doesn't really reference my queerness — I identify as queer also, and my attraction, my relationships with people, that's queer, but that to me isn't anywhere near as related to two-spirit-ness as my gender. And speaking to — I feel like the way that I experience my gender is inherently Indigenous, because I am Indigenous and I can't really separate my identities in that way. But also, just because of who I am. But I don't feel like someone who is a cis gay man and is also two-spirit is any less two-spirit — just because the way that I view two-spirit really centres in on gender.

For Fenris, two-spirit describes the ways in which their gender is deeply tied to their Indigeneity — and although for them, two-spirit doesn't reference their sexuality, they make a point of noting that this is not the case for everyone. Although Fenris (like many other participants) has a specific idea of what two-spirit means in their own life, their understanding of two-spirit as related to their gender does not discount other people's understanding of two-spirit as related to sexuality. In stark contrast to the rigid delineations of two-spirit as only having to do with a person's sexuality or a person's gender discussed above, Fenris exemplifies the ethic of holding space for the complex meaning with which two-spirit is imbued by community members. Along

with the other participants, Fenris is firm in their understanding that two-spirit is a capacious term.

6.2 Community Roles, Responsibilities, and Gifts

Many participants held the truth of two-spirit as a broad identifier for LGBTQ Indigenous people in tandem with more specific understandings about two-spirit as a term that describes community roles. When discussing the ways in which two-spirit is a term that describes the community roles and responsibilities that one holds, participants expressed a plethora of different (and at times, conflicting) understandings of what that means. Some participants shared that they have met two-spirit people for whom the term implies a certain spiritual practice or knowledge of their cultural traditions, 21 noting that for “some people it means being connected to the traditions and the culture, practicing a certain spirituality, while some take it to a more historical context and link it to the past.” Here, 21 affirms that two-spirit holds different cultural and spiritual significance for different people; for some, two-spirit denotes a contemporary or historical cultural role in community, while for others it may not. 21 also shared the ways in which two-spirit, for her, connects to culture and tradition, while still emphasizing the plurality of truths that two-spirit holds:

the term definitely has many understandings. For a lot of people, there’s a lot of different definitions. For myself, it describes the intersection of being Indigenous and being transgender and queer. And although not everyone who identifies as two-spirit has a connection to the culture or tradition — which is fine — but for myself, I grew up in a traditional family, going to longhouse on the reserve. So, for me, it does speak to more of a spiritual aspect or nature of my identity, and speaks to the traditional or cultural

experience as being an Indigenous, transgender, queer woman. And there's a large part of reclamation and education around it. I, for me, attach a sense of responsibility to the role. 21 expresses the interconnectedness of her experiences as a person who grew up in a traditional family, her spiritual life, and her experiences as "an Indigenous, transgender, queer woman." Importantly, 21 reiterates here that what being two-spirit means for her is not what it means for everyone; just like everyone's experiences of being Indigenous are different (and not every Indigenous person would identify as traditional or cultural) so, too, are each person's experiences of being two-spirit. Similar to the way in which Fenris signalled that their definition of two-spirit does not impinge upon anyone else's distinct understanding of the term, 21 clearly states that not everyone associates two-spirit with cultural or traditional experiences. She also notes that for her, being two-spirit means she has responsibilities related to educating others.¹⁹

Many participants connected the community roles denoted by two-spirit to certain sets of responsibilities. TJ connected the cultural element of being two-spirit to responsibilities in one's community, saying that two-spirit "means so much more than just somebody who is a gay person or somebody who is attracted to other folks with masculine bodies or masculine tendencies" and that, in their understanding

it is more the cultural component, more that spiritual component of giving back, and having that reconnection. And a lot of people have that connection back to Creator, back to their Indigenous roots by different means — sometimes it's through beading, sometimes it's through drumming, sometimes it's dancing. Sometimes it's just helping out, and for me, it was understanding and just being with other queer, trans Indigenous people — so even though we might not have an understanding of what it meant to be

¹⁹ Many participants mentioned the necessity of educating others about gender, sexuality, and being two-spirit, and the ways in which they are sometimes coerced into doing this work. This compulsion to educate others is discussed at length in Chapter 7.

queer, or trans, or Indigenous, we had a meaning and understanding of community and togetherness.

TJ expresses their understanding of two-spirit as not just denoting someone who is gay; for them, two-spirit denotes a role that involves connecting to culture and spirituality — and for TJ, spirituality is connected both to engagement in cultural practices like dancing as well as being of service to one’s community, “giving back” and “helping out.” Instead of denoting a specific type of cultural knowledge or traditional teachings around gender, TJ articulates two-spirit as a term that is made meaningful by being in community with other two-spirit, trans and queer people. This understanding of two-spirit identity as deeply linked to one’s everyday community role recalls A. Wilson’s (2007) finding that for many two-spirit people, the term two-spirit is integrative and holistic, denoting integration of their Indigenous cultural, sexual, spiritual and gender identities. This understanding of two-spirit is by nature broadly encompassing of a variety of experiences and traditions, by virtue of the multitude of ways that one can exist as an Indigenous person and the diversity of Indigenous communities. What ties these different experiences together, in TJ’s description, is the fulfillment of the responsibility to give back to your community — whatever it may look like.

Doug also mentioned that for her, two-spirit is a term that denotes a responsibility to educate others. She specifically named the responsibilities she has towards younger two-spirit people:

being two-spirited, I feel like I have a responsibility to the world I live in. So, making a better world — so when we’re imagining, and we’re doing all this Indigenous worlding, as a two-spirit person, I have a responsibility to bring that into these new worlds we’re creating for ourselves. I think that where I am in my life and age, that I’m approaching auntie years, that I have a responsibility to younger people, to let them know what this

word is, and what it could mean. And provide them with the things that someone provided me at one time. So in that way I think of it as being a very communal kind of concept, and there's a kind of kinship involved in it.

Here, Doug theorizes about the importance of ensuring that there is space for two-spirit people in the worlds Indigenous communities are dreaming and creating. Importantly, there is also an element of reciprocity in Doug's understanding of these two-spirit responsibilities — because someone provided her with knowledge about what two-spirit can mean, she is obliged to do the same for her younger kin. Just as 21 noted that the role of two-spirit carries responsibility and an educational component, Doug emphasizes that part of “building a better world” is sharing knowledge with younger two-spirit people. These types of responsibilities to serve one's community — through mentorship, education, or “just helping out” — are part of what two-spirit means for Doug, TJ, and 21.

The idea of holding a two-spirit identity denoting a responsibility or accountability to one's community was also expressed by Sam. They talked about their understanding of two-spirit from within an Anishinaabe worldview:

when I think about what two-spirit means to me, there's the piece of it where I respect and understand that we do use it — and I do use it for myself as this term that encompasses the gender complexities and sexuality complexities of Indigenous folks on Turtle Island. That's truly — that's one piece of it. But then as an Anishinaabe person, when I've gone and looked for what two-spirit means and what those things mean, I've learned actually more about traditional notions about responsibility and self-determination that are not exclusively about really anyone's sexuality or gender, but rather these processes and practices that we embody.

In another example of the layers of meaning that make up two-spirit, Sam here expresses that two-spirit means both sexual and gender diversity as well as nation-specific teachings. Although they use the term in a broad sense to talk about gender- and sexuality-complex Indigenous people, Sam’s teachings about what two-spirit means within Anishinaabe thought have more to do with “responsibility and self-determination” which are not tied to a specific gender or sexuality. Similar to how TJ articulated two-spirit as denoting a connection to community and creation, Sam here highlights the connection between being two-spirit and embodying Indigenous ways of being (an idea explored at length in Chapter 8). What these participants tell us is that two-spirit can be understood as meaning LGBTQ Indigenous people, yes — but for some it also has deep connotations of responsibility to community, spiritual practices, and nation-specific teachings.

Sam also talked specifically about the responsibility they have as someone who is two-spirit and trans:

for me, as a two-spirit person and as a trans person, when I think of the word two-spirit, really what that means to me is that responsibility that I carry. Specific responsibilities that are not actually about those Western categorizations but more so gifts that I embody — that, folks that are not two-spirit could embody those gifts, but they wouldn’t embody it in the way that I do.

For Sam, being two-spirit is intimately linked to their whole being as an Anishinaabe person, deeply related to the gifts that they carry and the responsibilities that they hold. These responsibilities are not necessarily related to Western categorizations of gender or sexuality, but the gifts that they bring to their community — in TJ’s terms, ways of “giving back” and being part of their community that are embodied differently by two-spirit people in ways that are unique to each individual. What Sam brings to their community — contributions which may be

similar to the contributions made by non-two-spirit people — is inextricable from their whole personhood, which includes being two-spirit.

Several participants shared an understanding that being two-spirit can impact the gifts that one carries, but one can also carry gifts that non-two-spirit people carry in ways that are impacted by the distinct experiences of being two-spirit. Some participants talked about the different responsibilities and skills that they see held by many people within their two-spirit communities. Speaking about the organizing work that two-spirit people in Toronto are doing to create spaces to build community, as well as the everyday change that two-spirit youth are forced to bring into spaces in order to exist within them (like advocating for all-gender washrooms in their schools), 🧡 noted that two-spirit people are called on to create and transform space frequently:

I think when we talk about what gifts do two-spirit people bring to community, what are our roles, what are our teachings, I think that's one of the biggest ones that I've seen and been taught by community here, is that we are change-bringers. That we bring change into everywhere we go, and that's exhausting.

Here, 🧡 reflects on the specific community roles of two-spirit people in Toronto, one of which is bringing change into spaces. Not unlike Doug's assertion that being two-spirit connotes a responsibility to help build a better world and 21's emphasis on the educational aspect of being two-spirit, 🧡 notes here that this change-making skill set —which two-spirit people are forced to develop in order to survive in cissexist colonial institutions —is both a gift and a responsibility. In other words, although two-spirit people fill many roles in different communities, one thing that connects these diverse roles is that they all carry a responsibility to have positive impacts on their community. The ways in which the skill of bringing change into spaces is cultivated as a

matter of necessity will be discussed further in Chapter 8, while the related practice of deploying the term two-spirit as a method of claiming space is discussed below.

6.3 Not an Umbrella, but Rather a Container

While participants understood two-spirit as a term that can speak specifically to the gender and sexuality complexities of Indigenous people, as well as the roles that they fill in community, many also use it as (or have seen it used as) an umbrella term — or, as Doug theorizes below, a container term. Most of the reflections participants made on two-spirit as an umbrella term were in response to a question I asked about how participants felt about the term being used as shorthand for all trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people. In the following sections, I discuss the overlap between the ways in which participants find this shorthand useful and the reservations many of them had about the ways this practice elides specific meanings that the term holds, and applies the term to people who do not actually identify as two-spirit.

In their reflections on two-spirit being used as an umbrella term, some participants talked about using it in this way themselves, while others talked about seeing the term used in this way by their communities. Connor, for example, sees the term used as “an umbrella term that includes all of the folks. So it’s not gender-specific or sexuality-specific, it’s sort of like, whatever you want it to be.” The way in which Connor sees two-spirit used as an umbrella term is in a way that challenges the mutually exclusive definitions of two-spirit as only about sexuality or only about gender — definitions which, as discussed above, cause real harm. In this context, Connor explains two-spirit as a term that has a large capacity to hold different meanings — whatever one wants or needs it to hold, it can. This connection between two-spirit being used as an umbrella term and the term’s capacity to hold whatever meaning someone needs it to was shared by other participants. Veronica reflected that

I think it's a really helpful term for a lot of reasons, and mostly just as a way to identify as something that's beyond or before what all the other terms that exist in English, what those terms are. So even thinking about how it is an umbrella, so we're able to use it, and know that we're referring to a lot, and it can be a really valuable shorthand for a lot of different things.

Here, Veronica gestures at the wide variety of identities, traditions, and understandings that two-spirit, as a term, can hold — among which an umbrella term for queer and trans Indigenous people is just one. She identifies this feature of two-spirit — that it is understood as something that stands in for a wide variety of different concepts — as one that is “really helpful.”

Interestingly, Veronica's experience of using two-spirit and seeing it used by others in a way that indicates the breadth of meanings it holds is different than the experiences shared by Connor and Sam above, in which two-spirit is not understood by others (i.e. the cisgender, heterosexual Indigenous community) as “referring to a lot.” Given this shared experience, it seems as though the “we” to which Veronica makes reference is likely the queer, trans, and two-spirit community. In this context, two-spirit is understood as a “valuable shorthand for a lot of things” — a description that echoes House's (2016) assertion that two-spirit is a word that is used to “simplify a very complex understanding” (p. 330) and gesture towards a multitude of distinct identities. Within trans, queer and two-spirit contexts, two-spirit can be a useful way to talk about the diverse realms of Indigenous gender and sexuality in three syllables.

The ways in which “umbrella term” elides specificity — umbrellas, after all, are meant to cover us — makes it an imperfect fit for a word that, all participants agree, has a large capacity to hold specific and nuanced meaning. Some participants expressed this idea of two-spirit as holding space for many different meanings as a “container” for the specific understandings that

Indigenous people have of sexuality, gender, and community roles. This idea was theorized by Doug, who looked comparatively at two-spirit and terms within the LGBTQ acronym, saying

I think that the experience of being queer or under the LGBTQ umbrella is profoundly different for Indigenous people than it is for any other group of people. And I think the term itself, it holds a lot. It's a container that can hold all of the very specific place-based understandings of what it means to be Indigenous and queer, so, I don't know if the other terms are able to do that.

In contrast to other English-language terms that do not convey the unique experience of being LGBTQ and Indigenous, two-spirit has the capacity to hold specific understandings of “what it means to be Indigenous and queer” that are deeply tied to place. Rather than an umbrella, Doug theorizes two-spirit as a container term that holds multiple, complex understandings of sexuality and gender complexity for Indigenous communities. While the shift from umbrella to container may seem small, there are significant differences in what umbrellas do and what containers do: while umbrellas cover things, containers hold space. The type of container I picture here is a basket: large enough to hold many words and stories and strong enough to carry their weight, but permeable and portable. In theorizing two-spirit as a container term rather than an umbrella term, Doug foregrounds the ways that two-spirit emphasizes rather than elides the many different relationships between gender, sexuality and Indigeneity that animate the term.

This nuanced idea of holding space was gestured at by Fenris who shared that “two-spirit, for me, is kind of an umbrella term or a placeholder term for the multitudes of identities that Indigenous people have.” In describing two-spirit as a placeholder term, Fenris emphasizes the many different specific Indigenous, gender, and sexual identities that two-spirit represents —

identities and language to which many people do not have access because of colonization.²⁰

Veronica, Doug, and Fenris, not unlike House (2016), understand two-spirit as a term that stands in for many different identities that Indigenous people hold — once again underscoring the complexity of the concept. Fenris described two-spirit as an umbrella and a placeholder later in our interview as well, expanding on the variety of meanings the word can hold:

I think, to me right now, it is a placeholder and an umbrella term. And I think it means different things to different people, without a shadow of a doubt. I know people who are living their life really similar to mine in terms of what sort of cultural roles they're taking up and in terms of gender things, who do not use two-spirit. And people who are identifying as two-spirit and the way that their gender and their cultural relationships and responsibilities, it might be really different from mine, but they're still two-spirit, and I'm still two-spirit.

Here, Fenris describes two-spirit as a term that holds many different meanings concurrently; two-spirit can describe a multitude of genders and “cultural relationships and responsibilities” without negating the specificity of any of those roles. Further, two-spirit, although used as placeholder or shorthand for all of these different roles, relationships and responsibilities, is not a term with which everyone identifies. By describing two-spirit as a place-holder and also an umbrella, Fenris underscores the term's provisionality as well as its elasticity: it can describe a wide range of responsibilities held within communities (which folks may later find other language to describe) and in so doing it can, in Connor's words, “be whatever you want it to be.”

²⁰ The understanding of two-spirit as a placeholder term is further examined in Chapter 8.

6.4 The Limits and Drawbacks of the Umbrella

At the same time as they recognized the usefulness of using two-spirit as an umbrella or container term, participants also emphasized that not everyone who is queer or trans and Indigenous identifies as two-spirit. Responding to a question about the use of two-spirit as an umbrella term for LGBTQ Indigenous people, 21 shared

I have encountered that a couple of times, but I don't necessarily agree with it, just because I know there's a lot of people who feel uncomfortable with the term, or they don't identify with it because they've never heard of it before, or they feel it's sort of a term in English that doesn't identify their experience, so... There's kind of a risk, I guess, or a problematic nature to using the term as an umbrella term, because yeah, I know for a fact that not everybody does identify as two-spirit [...] So I feel it's not necessarily appropriate to use it as an umbrella term, that it should be an option for people to identify as such.

21 lists many reasons why someone might not identify as two-spirit, acknowledging that using two-spirit as an umbrella is problematic because not everyone identifies with the term.

Importantly, 21 describes the risk that one takes when deploying two-spirit as an umbrella term: covering someone with that umbrella who does not wish to be covered. In describing this as a risk, she highlights the importance of self-determination in naming practices — which, in many ways, was the very reason that two-spirit was coined to begin with. Recall MacDonald's (2009) argument that for Indigenous people, the act of naming oneself — in the face of constant misrecognition ranging from being misgendered to being folded into juridical categories like “Indian” — is of great importance. When 21 names the importance of not applying the term two-spirit to those who don't identify with it, she underscores the centrality of self-determination to the term itself; to use two-spirit as an umbrella term is problematic because not everyone

identifies with it, but this usage is made even more inappropriate by the fact that two-spirit was coined as an alternative to terms (such as “berdache”) that were being applied to people in non-consensual ways.

The fact that not all queer and trans Indigenous people identify as two-spirit was acknowledged by many participants. For instance, 😊 noted that “I also know a lot of youth who identify as trans, and queer, but I don’t like the word two-spirit, for different ways it doesn’t fit into their nation, it doesn’t fit their understanding, which is great.” Here, 😊 references some of the same reasons folks might not use the term two-spirit that 21 mentions above: the term may not fit specific teachings they hold, or the ways in which they understand themselves to be in relation to their communities. Dana also reflected that “there’s lots of folks that identify as queer Indigenous that don’t wanna use it, and that’s cool too.” For both 😊 and Dana, two-spirit is a term that holds many specific understandings of gender, sexuality and community roles, but is not a term that exhaustively captures the experiences of all trans and queer Indigenous people. The fact that not all Indigenous queer and trans people describe themselves as two-spirit (while not understood by non-two-spirit, queer and trans communities, as evidenced by their frequent application of the term to all LGBTQ Indigenous people) is reflected in the literature. In D. Wesley’s (2015) research, though participants all responded to recruitment materials searching for two-spirit youth, not all of them identified with the term two-spirit; similarly, not all participants in MacDonald’s (2009) research identified as two-spirit. Not unlike the ways in which we, in our trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities, understand that two-spirit is a container for many diverse identities while the outside world often sees it as meaning only one thing, most of our queer and trans Indigenous communities understand that not everyone identifies as two-spirit, while outsiders use two-spirit as an umbrella term without recognizing this truth.

This tension between how our trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities use two-spirit as a broad term while recognizing that not everyone identifies as such, and the ways that the broader Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities label all LGBTQ Indigenous people as two-spirit in ways that erase the varied and specific meanings of the term, was highlighted again and again by participants. TJ noted that there are Indigenous people who identify as LGBTQ and not two-spirit, some who identify as two-spirit and not LGBTQ, and still others who identify as LGBTQ *and* two-spirit, offering:

that's why I try to use the term "two-spirit or Indigenous LGBTQ folks" because there are two-spirit people who, again, like I've said, identify as two-spirit and LGBTQ, there are Indigenous people who identify as LGBTQ and not two-spirit. But — and both of those are legitimate, and you can't just box all of us in if you think it's better or it's easier for you to do so, because then it just trivializes us, it just makes us smaller, it makes us a statistic or a demographic, right.

As TJ articulates here, any and all ways that Indigenous queer, trans, and two-spirit people choose to identify themselves — using two-spirit, LGBTQ terms, both, or neither — are legitimate. For TJ, the use of two-spirit as an umbrella term trivializes the multitude of experiences, identities and experiences held by queer, trans, and two-spirit Indigenous people, compressing the breadth and depth into a smaller, easier-to-manage word. As discussed above, this practice is at odds with the intent with which two-spirit was coined: as a term that holds space for the diversity and vitality of nation-specific roles and responsibilities we hold as queer and trans Indigenous people. Once again, participant insights resonate with findings from previous research; McDonald's (2009) findings highlighted the fact that the lumping together of all non-cisgender, non-heterosexual Indigenous people into the category of two-spirit (by Indigenous community, non-Indigenous community, and by the media) is ethically problematic.

Like Connor's articulation of the harm that a narrow definition of two-spirit can cause, TJ gives us an important admonition: deploying the term two-spirit in order to make generalizations about all trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people is not acceptable.

Sam articulated a related problem with using two-spirit as an umbrella term: that, as all pan-Indigenous terms do, it runs the risk of "blending" our distinct identities and cultures together. They shared:

I used to feel kind of complex about it because it is both not an umbrella term and also kind of an umbrella term, because we have...the way that I see it sometimes is like, we say Indigenous knowing that we have different nations, different protocols, different all those things, but the problem is that when people say two-spirit — I would say in not in our own communities, when we say Indigenous, we don't blend everyone's cultures, but external — largely, settlers — non-Indigenous people, they do that to us. So something similar happens in our communities with two-spirited, kind of everywhere, where I think people think that two-spirited people are only one way, right. And they have a very specific expectation of what that means, and often that does mean queer cis relationships, largely it's drag queens or cis gay men, you know all of this similar kind of blending and just kind of pan-two-spiriting of things, right. So that's, I think, the problem with two-spirit as an umbrella term, is that that happens.

Just as we as Indigenous people can use Indigenous as a catch-all term for the diversity of our peoples and nations, but non-Indigenous people misunderstand it to denote a single Indigenous identity, Sam sees non-two-spirit people demonstrate a single understanding of two-spirit that centres cisgender experience. Here, Sam articulates a tension between the ways in which our own trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous communities understand two-spirit as a shorthand that conveys inherent complexity, and the ways in which cisgender, heterosexual

communities understand two-spirit as narrow and specific, referring mostly to “drag queens and cis gay men.” I understand the “blending” that Sam describes as the blending of our distinct nations and peoples into a single entity that retains little (or none) of the depth inherent in our teachings.

A different risk than the mis-application of two-spirit to people who do not identify as such articulated by 21 and TJ above, Sam here gestures at the double-edged sword of “pan” terms: they are capacious and can hold lots of different nation-specific knowledge and understandings, but because of settler-colonialism’s drive to compress our distinct nations into one homogeneous and digestible entity, these “pan” terms are often taken at face value, as though they represent a universal truth about Indigenous experience. The way that Sam describes it, this blending and “pan-two-spiriting” practice is one iteration of the surface-level engagement with Indigenous knowledges that Dr. Wilson describes in Chapter 4; by blending all two-spirit traditions and experiences into one narrow definition that is then circulated widely, the texture, depth, and complexities of our teachings are obscured. One result of this process is that people take two-spirit to just mean cis gay people — which, as discussed by Connor above, and is discussed by Sam below, causes real harm in people’s lives.²¹

6.5 Communicating Something Specific and Complex

Reader, you may be expecting that in this point in the chapter, I would delve deeper into the ways in which participants identify with the term two-spirit. However, this section is not primarily about participants’ own relationships to the term two-spirit — though this is something many of them talked about in our interviews. Here, as in Chapter 5, I am engaging in refusal as

²¹ The homogenization of two-spirit experiences and identities, particularly in relation to the ubiquitous literal definition of the term, is explored more fully in Chapter 7.

theorized by A. Simpson (2007; 2014) and Tuck & Yang (2014) as a purposeful redirection of the research question; instead of focusing on the details of what participants mean when they say, “I am two-spirit,” I will engage the question of how participants use two-spirit and other terms to negotiate this meaning when communicating with others. In other words, and to use Doug’s language, I will not be discussing what two-spirit as a container holds, but rather the use of two-spirit *as* a container that holds meaning. So, instead of sharing details about the relationships participants have with two-spirit, the following sections will instead discuss the ways in which participants use two-spirit to create space for themselves in Indigenous and non-Indigenous spaces, the generational differences in the usage of two-spirit, the term’s utility as a tool for political organizing, and participants’ thoughts on the limits of two-spirit as a way to communicate about themselves.

In describing the ways in which they use the term two-spirit — both in reference to themselves and their own identity, and in reference to others — participants displayed a range of perspectives and strategies. In some cases, participants use two-spirit in order to communicate something specific about themselves, sometimes with limited efficacy. Sam shared that they often use the terms trans and two-spirit in conjunction in order to claim space for trans Indigenous people, and in order to challenge the assumptions people make about them based on narrow definitions of two-spirit. Expanding on why they use the terms two-spirit and trans in conjunction, Sam recounted:

For a while I only identified as two-spirit, and I didn’t identify as anything else. Once that was kind of shared with me and was...yeah. But, increasingly I realized that people didn’t actually see me in that, because they didn’t understand — they don’t even understand what two-spirit is, right, so then I have to explain more. But they were always assuming that I was cis, they were always assuming that I was gay, they were always making all

these huge assumptions about my gender and my body, and my experiences, that actually were becoming really harmful to me. I was like: I feel completely erased, I don't actually feel like — it's weird cause I can feel really hyper-visible-ness is my racial category with this two-spirit term, you know, I'm like "I feel really visible." But I actually feel really invisible, and the depth of what I'm sharing with people, and I'm sharing this vulnerability and no one's seeing it. So then I started trying to identify more openly as trans, and people don't really get that, too, because they don't know what being trans means. They think they have a very specific idea of what that looks like — which is super transphobic — but they find it very hard to believe that I'm trans, they often think that I'm transfeminine when I am not.

Here, Sam recounts a major barrier they encountered when using only two-spirit to identify: people assumed that they were cisgender and gay. Although they are in fact sharing a deep part of themselves, it is not seen by others because these others hold narrow and specific ideas about what two-spirit means. Further, Sam's experiences of using two-spirit to try and share something about their personhood and being met with assumptions mirror their experiences of misunderstanding when they tell people that they are trans: people make assumptions about their gender and their body based on their own specific ideas of what they think a trans person looks like. When people make assumptions about Sam, their gender, and their body because they have a specific preconceived idea of what two-spirit means that is limited to cisgender gay people, it is harmful. Through using two-spirit and trans in conjunction, Sam can signal that the two ideas are related and both of them describe facets of Sam's personhood — thereby refuting the preconceived idea other people may hold that two-spirit simply means a gay Indigenous person. However, even when using two-spirit and trans together, Sam is still met with cisgender people's transphobic ideas of what a trans person looks like.

This misunderstanding of what two-spirit means, and attendant assumptions about people's genders, is strikingly similar to the experiences Connor shared above about community members thinking that when someone tells you they are two-spirit they are telling you that they are a cisgender gay person, and thus not understanding that being two-spirit might impact one's pronouns. For both Connor and Sam, trying to use two-spirit to signal specific things about themselves to others is made complicated by the assumptions that community members have about what two-spirit means. Other people's narrow understanding of what two-spirit means, limited to a signifier of queer sexuality, can hinder their use of the term to communicate. Although, as described in the previous section, two-spirit is understood to hold a wide variety of meanings within trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous communities, outside of these communities it is not understood in this way, and this misunderstanding causes harm. By sharing the ways in which the narrow, sexuality-specific definition of two-spirit has impacted participants, my intention is to draw attention to the fact that this practice of making assumptions about people when they identify as two-spirit is harmful, and suggest that heeding the words of participants and following their lead in understanding two-spirit as a term that can mean a wide variety of things (and does not necessarily tell you anything about a person's gender, sexuality, assigned sex, or pronouns) is a better route. This thesis aims to intervene in the circulation of the widespread misunderstanding of two-spirit as a word that only describes cisgender gay Indigenous people both by naming the harm that this misunderstanding causes, and by highlighting the complex ways that young two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people in Toronto understand the term.

The lack of comprehension among non-two-spirit people regarding the many things two-spirit means was also highlighted by Dakotah. When I asked how they observe people in Toronto using the term two-spirit, they said plainly that "with the term two-spirited, a lot of people don't

even know what it is yet, still.” Alongside the misunderstanding of two-spirit discussed above, there is also widespread lack of any understanding about what the term means, which Dakotah references here. When the people with whom you are trying to share information do not know what you mean when you use a word, it makes it hard to communicate. However, even in the midst of this widespread lack of understanding, some participants have success in communicating important information about themselves using two-spirit. 🧡 reflected on the functional value two-spirit has in their life for communicating about their gender and creating space for themselves, sharing that

generally I use two-spirit, I use they and them pronouns. I think — you know, before I was doing that, I didn’t feel welcome in a lot of women’s spaces and I didn’t feel welcome in a lot of men’s spaces. So there’s definitely a functional aspect of it, for sure.

For 🧡, using two-spirit to identify, in conjunction with the pronouns they and them, is a useful way to signal to people that they exist outside the gender binary. While perhaps not everyone would get this message if 🧡 indicated only that they are a two-spirit person, or only that they use they and them pronouns, when used in combination these words carry the meaning that 🧡 intends.

🧡 was not alone in using the strategy of pairing two-spirit with other ways of informing their communities about who they are. As mentioned above, Sam spoke about why they use both two-spirit and trans to identify, highlighting distinctness of trans experience and the urgency of addressing cissexism:

now when I identify as trans, part of that is to really assert that being trans is really different, actually. That experience of being two-spirit and trans is really different, that a lot of places where there is acceptance for folks who are queer and cis, or in same-

gendered relationships, or any of those things, look radically different for trans folks.

That we don't actually experience the same acceptance [...] So it's really important for me to identify as trans, to try and assert some of that space, and try and assert some of that solidarity that is needed for folks who are trans.

Here, Sam calls attention to the differences between the level of acceptance experienced by two-spirit people who are cis and in same-gendered relationships, and that experienced by two-spirit people who are trans. For Sam, bringing to light the specific ways that transphobia and cissexism impact trans people —and the ways in which assuming that two-spirit references only sexuality both reflects and reinforces cissexism — is important. One way in which they assert space for fellow trans people is by using both trans and two-spirit to identify in community settings. When read in tandem with Sam's above reflection that they are made invisible by people's assumptions about what they mean when they identify as two-spirit, this idea of using both trans and two-spirit to claim space and fight erasure is a way to mitigate the misunderstandings of what two-spirit means. By sharing that they are both two-spirit and trans and resisting erasure in their communities, Sam demonstrates the practice of bringing change into spaces that 🥰 identifies as a gift held by many two-spirit people. This link between the use of two-spirit to communicate about oneself to community members and the practice of using two-spirit to assert space in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, which Sam alludes to here, is explored more fully at the end of this chapter.

6.6 Geographical and Generational Differences

As participants talked about the wide variety of meanings two-spirit can hold, they also talked about how their communities' use and understanding of two-spirit differs from place to place. Some participants asserted that in their communities, two-spirit is seen as an academic and

also a very urban term. 21 discussed her experiences talking to trans and queer youth from her reserve, many of whom eschewed the term two-spirit. She recounted one discussion she had with several young people,

a discussion about two-spirit people and events and identities in Toronto, and there was sort of, I could feel this tangible tension in the air, or awkwardness. And somebody basically said “well, we don’t use that term here. We’re not two-spirit, that’s a very city Indian thing to do, that’s a very Toronto thing. We’re not two-spirit, we’re just gay and LGBTQ.”

The young people with whom 21 spoke in her home community were clear about their understanding of two-spirit as both an urban term and a Toronto term; these youth do not identify with the term two-spirit. This fact further underscores the point raised by 21 and other participants that two-spirit ought not be used as an umbrella term, because not every queer or trans Indigenous person uses it to describe themselves. Although further speculation about the reasons that these young people do not identify as two-spirit is neither possible nor appropriate here, 21’s recounting of this conversation is important because it highlights the fact that the understanding and use of the term two-spirit among young people is impacted by the places and communities in which they live. The ways that one’s community impacts how one comes to understand the term two-spirit are discussed further below and in Chapter 8, but this part of my conversation with 21 was one of the few times in the research interviews wherein participants gestured at the impacts not only of people but of place — land, plants, water, and other non-human life — on the ways two-spirit is understood. Though we only touched on the idea, the role that place plays in how people imbue two-spirit with meaning and understand themselves in relation to the term is a rich area for further study.

In our interview, 21 also indicated that a different and interesting alternative direction to this research project would be “to speak to people from older generations or who are much younger,” emphasizing that when thinking about how people use two-spirit “it is interesting to see the dichotomy between urban and rez community as well as the generational gap between young folks and elder folks who had different generational experiences.” In a literal redirection of the research process, 21 here notes the differences between the ways in which two-spirit is used and understood by young people compared to the ways in which it is used and understood by older people. As above, she also notes that there are differences in the deployment of the term among urban and rez communities. The experiences of growing up in a particular place, and at a particular time, impact the ways in which one comes into relationship with the word two-spirit; as 21 suggests here, the ways in which young people in Toronto today understand and use two-spirit is likely going to be different from, say, how people on the Prairies use the term, which will again be different from how people living on Northern Ontario reserves might use it. Similarly, those people who have been involved in trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous communities since the 1970’s or 1980’s will have different relationships to the term than people who are of my generation. It is important to keep this place-based and temporal specificity in mind when reading the reflections of participants throughout this thesis; the knowledge participants are sharing here cannot be taken out of its context.

These generational differences mentioned by 21 were also noted by Dana. Dana observed that some people currently in their teenage years or twenties “have grown up hearing two-spirit more, and seeing it represented in mainstream queer stuff, so it’s something that’s more normalized for them.” She was careful to note, however, that this familiarity is also dependent on the place one has grown up. Though two-spirit is indeed more widely included in the LGBTQ acronym today than it was a decade or two ago, this does not necessarily mean that young trans,

two-spirit and queer Indigenous people have any particular relationship to the term. There are many places where young people today have not “grown up hearing two-spirit” any more than they would have in the 1990’s, whereas for youth who are exposed to “mainstream queer stuff” (likely, but not necessarily, those living in urban places) two-spirit may well be a more familiar term. Two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people have different relationships to and understandings of the word two-spirit based on the places and times in which they grew up. As Dana noted later in our conversation, it is the labour of the previous generations of trans, queer, and two-spirit Indigenous people who coined two-spirit and used it to claim space that allow our communities today to have these myriad relationships to the term. It is to these space-claiming and political dimensions of the word two-spirit to which we will now turn.

6.7 Connecting to Activist Histories & Building Community

Among the many vibrant and complex uses of two-spirit articulated by participants, one common thread was the idea of two-spirit as a term that has political significance to it. In addition to describing two-spirit as encompassing Indigenous people’s “gender, sexuality, Indigenous affiliation, their culture, language, worldviews” Doug added that “it’s an important political identifier, it situates you politically.” Further, when describing how two-spirit is a container for the diverse ways that Indigenous people experience sexuality and gender, Doug asserted that two-spirit “prioritizes Indigenous sovereignty in a way that no other term does. I think that’s one of the most important things about the term.” Throughout our interview, Doug theorized the idea of two-spirit as a term that encompasses the whole of an Indigenous person’s being — their gender, sexuality, and worldview — as politically significant. By holding space for Indigenous people with complex genders and sexualities *as* Indigenous people (something

that terms like gay or lesbian do not do), two-spirit expresses Indigenous sovereignty. For her, the political work that two-spirit does is one of the most critical aspects of the term.

Doug's concept map (figure 1) also illustrated that for her, two-spirit as a political concept is one layer of a complex understanding of the term.



Figure 1: Doug's concept map

In the centre of Doug's map, the word 2Spirit is written inside of a multi-coloured starburst, surrounded by the phrases sexuality, culture, gender, reclaiming sexual traditions, politics, land/aski, Nish, Indigeneity, language, and making your family uncomfortable. These words are interspersed with stars, hearts, and water, bordered on the top of the page by yellow sunshine, on the left and right sides by clouds, and on the bottom by green grass, red, purple and pink flowers, and rocks. The ability of two-spirit to gesture at the co-valence of all aspects of one's

personhood — gender, culture, language, political life — that Doug expresses in her map is a key part of the term’s significance for two-spirit writers across the past three decades. The understanding that two-spirit holds space for all parts of ourselves was also a key finding in studies by Driskill (2016), Walters et al. (2006), and A. Wilson (2007). Participants in each of these qualitative studies affirmed that the term two-spirit encompasses a holistic sense of self that includes spirituality, community roles, gender and more. The ways in which two-spirit names the interconnectedness of sexuality, language, culture, gender, and the political is a key feature of the term for Doug and for many other two-spirit people.

Naming that the concepts for which two-spirit holds space — land-based understandings of gender, processes of reclaiming sexual traditions and the act of living our cultures and speaking our languages — are, for us an Indigenous people, political acts, Doug centres the reality that Indigeneity is political. Some participants understood the political significance of two-spirit as rooted in the coining of the term as a word through which Indigenous people with complex genders and sexualities from diverse nations could come together and organize. Sam reflected that two-spirit is

maybe not perfect, it’s maybe very complicated, I think that there should be...like, we have to do the extra work to make sure that there’s space for all of us in that, and to make sure that we are making that space, we’re not just prioritizing certain people or certain ideas of two-spirit or any of those things. But I don’t actually see a better option, and that’s what feels hard, is that it feels like if we didn’t use that word — which some people, it’s totally okay, people don’t — for me, for a while I didn’t use that word and then I realized it was really powerful to use that word because it’s a word that we can connect on. It’s why lots of words have been made to use that way — even queer and

trans communities, people organize around terms so that they can come together, and we haven't always had that opportunity, and that's part of the history of that word, right.

Here, Sam notes that two-spirit is a complex and imperfect term that can easily be misunderstood in narrow ways. As they shared elsewhere, this a harmful practice which needs to be addressed by asserting space for diverse two-spirit identities. For Sam, two-spirit is an imperfect part of a limited vocabulary available to communicate complex concepts; it is a tool that we, as trans and queer Indigenous people, ought to use to organize because it allows us to “come together.” In their estimation, connecting and coming together is a powerful act — and making this coming together possible was one of the reasons two-spirit was coined. As we will see in Chapter 8, Sam, like several other participants, theorizes the term two-spirit as an important gift that organizers gave to queer and trans Indigenous communities — part of a tradition of community-building that many two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous young people in Toronto are involved in today. The fact that, as trans, queer and two-spirit people, “we haven't always had that opportunity” to build community, indicates that using two-spirit to organize and build community is an especially meaningful (and, indeed, political) act.

The coining of the term two-spirit as a political banner under which to organize was an understanding shared by several participants. 21 shared an understanding of the history of the term very similar to Sam's, reflecting that

the intention, from my understanding, was to have a unifying aspect so that everyone could get on the same page — cause you know, there's many different nations, and many different nations have their own languages and their own terminology for two-spirit people, and many different nations have different experiences after colonization where some people retained their histories and their teachings, and their understanding and their language to describe what we now know as two-spirit people, and some people had it

totally erased and stolen and were totally assimilated and colonized and have no access to that at all [...] But I think their intention was to unify people, to get everyone on the same page. I sort of like to describe the use of two-spirit as a hashtag to organize conversation, to have an understanding.

Once again, 21 speaks to the diverse traditions for which two-spirit holds space; the intent with which the term was first introduced was to bridge the experiences of Indigenous peoples who retained language around gender and sexual diversity during colonization and those that did not. 21 conceptualizes the term not as an umbrella term, but rather as a hashtag—a useful tool “to organize conversation” and communicate to one another and make ourselves seen. For 21, this “unifying aspect” of two-spirit is both part of the term’s history and part of the way she uses it today. Recall that 21 disagrees with using two-spirit as an umbrella term, as not everyone identifies with the word; instead, she indicates using two-spirit to signal to other trans, two-spirit and queer people that there is room for them in conversations and in spaces. This is another example of two-spirit being used to assert space for, and build community with, Indigenous people with complex genders and sexualities. Sam’s and 21’s understandings resonate with the way in which the Two-Spirit Society of Denver defines two-spirit as a term not meant to erase the specificity of nations’ traditional teachings around gender and sexuality, but rather one that “is intended to find common ground and to help educate in a contemporary context” (quoted in Native Youth Sexual Health Network, n.d.). This idea of two-spirit as a term intended to provide a basis for building community from common experiences was also expressed by participants in Walters et al. (2006). Not only does two-spirit allow trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people to connect with one another and communicate about our shared experiences, it allows us to be “on the same page,” find “common ground” to “come together” and organize, educate and build community—part of what participants described above as their two-spirit responsibilities.

In the above quote, 21 also gestures at the political significance of reclaiming traditions that were stolen during colonization and building community using the tools we currently have at our disposal. Fenris also discussed the ways in which two-spirit is a term that references the loss they have experienced, and the ways in which their community organizes. They situated this explanation as a political act, saying that

speaking to the loss, speaking to the direct violence that led me to this point of having placeholders instead of a word, a language, a community that like, that is meaningful to, is a big reason that I use two-spirit. And what that means for me is not operating from a deficit, like “oh, these two-spirit people have nothing,” but acknowledging this is what has been taken from me and what I’m working to rebuild with my community.

Fenris uses two-spirit as a word that encompasses both the violent theft of languages and lifeways that has resulted in their not having access to words in their Indigenous language to describe their gender, as well as the community-building work that is ongoing. For Fenris, countering the colonial narrative of a singular, historical two-spirit identity by acknowledging the violence of colonialism is one part of the work that the term two-spirit can do. Not unlike the way in which 21 frames two-spirit as a term that was intended to speak across Indigenous nations’ experiences of language and cultural theft and ongoing resilience, Fenris understands two-spirit as a tool to communicate their own experience of loss while also asserting that their community is gathering strength and rebuilding.

Fenris also connected this acknowledgement of loss to the reclamation work that two-spirit encompasses visually, by linking these two processes in their concept map (figure 2).

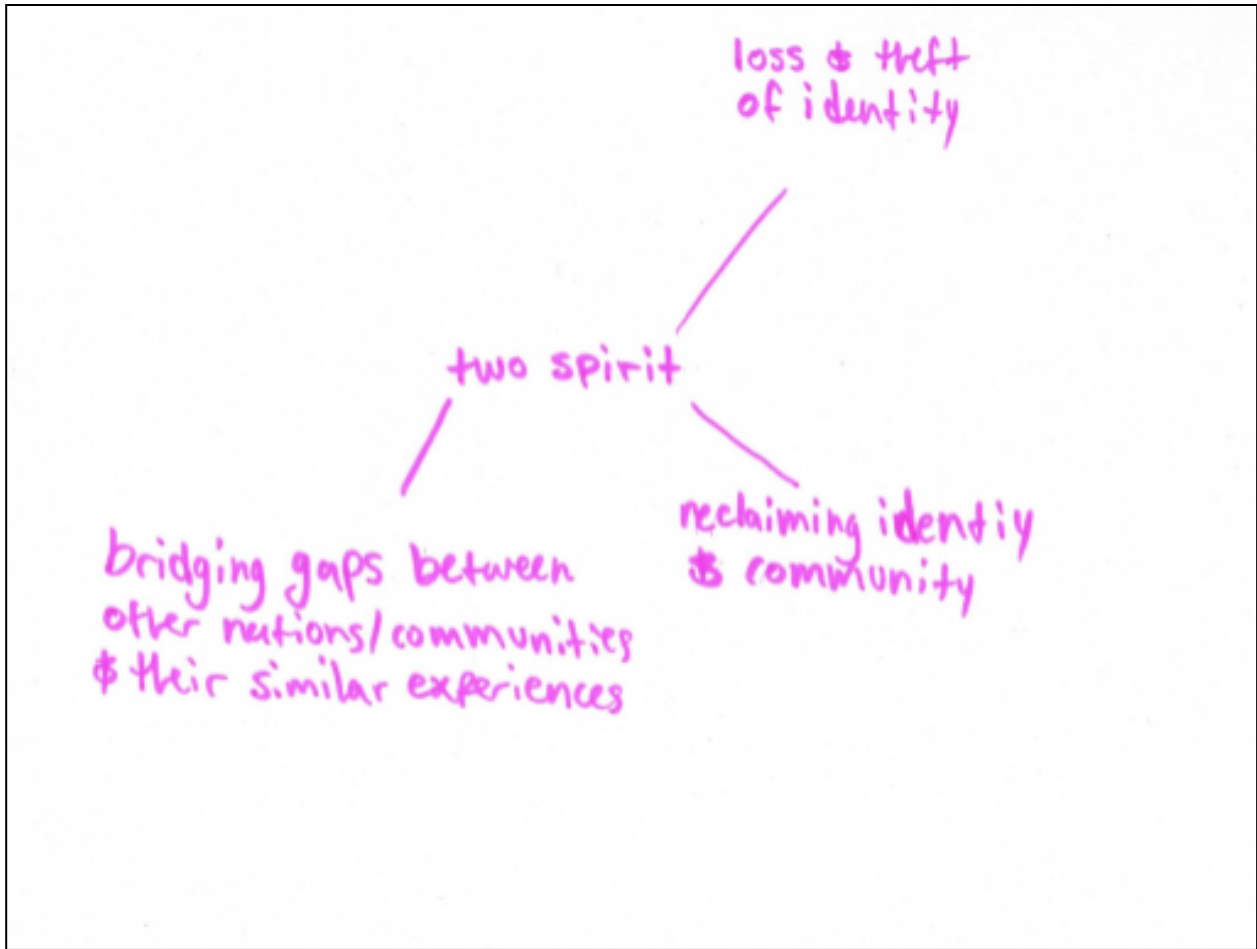


Figure 2: Fenris’s concept map

In their map “two spirit” is located in the centre of the page, with lines moving outwards connecting the term to three other ideas: in the upper right corner, “loss & theft of identity,” in the lower right corner, “reclaiming identity & community,” and in the lower left corner, “bridging gaps between other nations/communities & their similar experiences.” Visually, two-spirit is the common link between all of these ideas. Just as 21 described two-spirit as a hashtag to organize conversation, Fenris here theorizes two-spirit as a bridge that can be used to find common ground between diverse experiences while not blanding these nation-specific and community-specific stories together. Interestingly, Doug also noted the connection between the term two-spirit and the reclamation of certain nation-specific sexual traditions in her concept

map (see fig. 1). This explicit theorization of two-spirit as a term that does reclamation work mirrors A. Wilson's (2007) assertion that "When we reclaim our identity with this name, we signify our return to our place in our communities" (p. 19); once again, we see two-spirit as a refusal to be erased in the tides of settler-colonialism and cis-heteropatriarchy that seek to dislodge us from our communities. For both Doug and Fenris, this reclamation work is part of the political significance of the term two-spirit.

6.8 Claiming, Asserting, and Holding Space

Above, Sam mentioned using the term two-spirit as a way to remind other people of the specificities of trans two-spirit people's experiences; similarly, Connor recounted the ways in which two-spirit is used within trans and queer Indigenous communities to "claim space for complex forms of gender." This space-claiming or space-making element of two-spirit was affirmed by many participants. Some participants mentioned that they use different words to communicate about themselves in different spaces, depending on whether the space has a baseline knowledge of what two-spirit means, or if they wanted to claim space and do educational work. Connor shared that

within the community I know very few people who use the term two-spirit. As far as I know, within the community. It's more something we use when we're facing outwards within the larger Indigenous community, and then the non-Indigenous community, to sort of claim space for ourselves.

Here, Connor articulates a strategic use of the term two-spirit — a word that, for a variety of reasons, people may not use when describing their identities to folks who are familiar with the complexities of Indigenous gender and sexuality — in order to do some of the educational work necessary to exist within non-two-spirit communities. This idea of two-spirit as a term that

claims space is also part of Connor’s understanding of the origins of the term, one coined specifically “to create space, claim space within broader LGBTQ conversations for Indigenous folks who were somewhere in that spectrum.” Just as Sam and 21 recognize that two-spirit as a term was intended to bridge gaps between Indigenous communities, Connor here affirms that another part of the term’s legacy is staking out space for Indigenous people within broader LGBTQ communities. As noted above in Connor’s, Sam’s and 😊’s reflections on the functional usability of two-spirit as a communication term, the connections between reclaiming ancestral traditions, continuing the legacy of political organizing, and functional use of two-spirit are all important parts of how participants use the term.

Sam also spoke to the ways that identifying as two-spirit is not only a way to communicate something about who they are to community at large (a complex task, as discussed above), but also a way to find other two-spirit people, and to assert space:

To me, if it was up to me, I would just identify as two-spirit. And even then, sometimes I would just, if I’m in ceremony or things like that, I will sometimes identify as niizh ode instead because of the specific things I’ve learned about what that means. So when I use these words I am using them as a way to speak to the community, too. I’m trying to tell something to other people about who I am. And I don’t always think that that actually is understood, but it feels like it’s kind of the only — not the only, but it’s one of the ways that we communicate with each other, other two-spirit people in spaces. But also one of the few ways that we carve out those opportunities to say like: “you can’t forget that this is who I am,” or “you can’t not see me, I’m going to remind you that this is who I am.”

If it weren’t for people’s frequent misunderstandings of what two-spirit means, and the resulting assumptions made about Sam when they identify using the word, they would use only two-spirit — or, in ceremony spaces, niizh ode. Although their attempts to communicate with community

members about themselves using two-spirit are sometimes not understood, Sam still finds utility in the term two-spirit to both push back against erasure and to identify oneself to other two-spirit people in community spaces. At the same time as two-spirit functions as a way to organize conversations and communicate with other trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people, it also is used as a tool to claim space in cis-hetero dominated contexts (which, in turn, is a connection to the grandparents, aunties, uncles and elders who coined the term). This idea mirrors what Dana asserted as one of the reasons behind the term's creation, stating that the term "came out of this need for people to recognize each other, mostly in urban spaces." In some cases, two-spirit is a word that two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people use to find one another, and to find common ground underneath our diverse experiences.

Alongside this communication between two-spirit people, Sam also mentions that they use the term as a way to not be erased—even while, as they mention above, the ways in which people misunderstand two-spirit can invisibilize them. By using the term two-spirit, Sam refuses to be erased. But even as they try to tell something to Indigenous community about who they are using the term two-spirit, people's assumptions about what two-spirit does and does not mean make it necessary for Sam to share more about themselves. The root of these assumptions is the narrow, literal definition of two-spirit—and it is to this literal definition and the reasons behind its popularity that we turn in Chapter 7.

Chapter 7

Roots of the Literal Definition

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which participants theorized two-spirit as a complex term that holds space for multiple concurrent meanings related to gender, sexuality, spirituality, community roles and responsibilities, and community organizing. This chapter deals primarily with a concept briefly touched on the preceding chapter: the literal definition of two-spirit as a person with two spirits, who held honoured or revered roles in pre-contact Indigenous societies. Again, I will remind readers that to separate the ways in which participants understand two-spirit as discussed throughout this thesis from the epistemological structures that shape these understandings which are discussed below would be to misunderstand the project of this thesis; all four of these final chapters are meant to be read in concert. In this chapter, I will discuss participants' various relationships to and opinions on this widely held understanding of two-spirit, connecting and contextualizing these reflections within participants' articulations of the term's history and origins. This chapter also explores the ideas offered by participants, as well as Dr. Wilson, about why the literal definition of two-spirit holds so much sway and is so widely circulated. The relationships between who has access to the time and space to think critically about how binaries have been interpellated into our teachings and the life-saving capacities of compressed teachings about two-spirit also form an important part of this discussion.

In this first section of the chapter, I will discuss participants' impressions of the history of two-spirit as a term, including the relationships between the term's history and the literal definition of the term that proliferates today, in order to then discuss the literal definition in more depth in the following section. After spending some time with participants' thoughts on the literal definition as, for some, just one of many valid ways to fill the container of two-spirit, and for others, binary and problematic, I will then offer four key ideas (shared by participants and put

in conversation with one another by me) about why this notion of two-spirit as having a male and female spirit and being honoured and revered is so prominent. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the various factors that impact access to the time and space to think critically about the literal definition of two-spirit, and a reminder (to myself and to you, the reader) about the important role kindness plays in having conversations about people's identities.

All participants were individually interviewed, in conversations ranging from 25 to 65 minutes long. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed, and participants were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym for themselves — some selected English-language names, one selected a number (21), one selected an emoji (😍), and several chose not to use a pseudonym at all. For a detailed explanation of the interview process and the research methodology underpinning it, see Chapter 3.

7.1 History of the Term

Many participants mentioned their knowledge of the origins of two-spirit as a modern term when they were describing how they understand the word. While some participants asserted that two-spirit was a term that was “made up” by queer Indigenous people in order to claim space for themselves and their communities, others understood two-spirit as a translation of the Anishinaabemowin term *niizh manitowag/niizh manidoog* into English. Some participants noted the 1990 International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians as the event at which the term was coined, while others were unsure of when exactly the term came into use. As discussed in Chapter 6, many participants understood the political activist origins of the term as related to the meaning the term holds for them; here, I will expand on the ideas participants shared about the connections they see between the need for a term that specifically attends to the experience of being queer and/or trans and Indigenous and the political and

cultural climate of the late 1980's and early 1990's, in order to then contextualize participants' perspectives on the literal definition of the term in the next section of the chapter.

As Dr. Wilson highlighted in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the term two-spirit was coined “out of necessity” in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis, in order to have a term to talk about the intersections of Indigeneity, sexuality and gender that was not a colonial, anthropological term like “berdache.” The necessity of moving away from the term “berdache” was only mentioned by one participant, Dana, who stated simply that “two-spirit came about in part because there were all these messed-up anthropologists that were non-Indigenous being like ‘Berdache! Berdache!’” Here, Dana gestures at this necessity of providing non-pathologizing language to describe the experiences of trans and queer Indigenous communities as a way to narrate our own lives using our own language — a way to stop relying on colonial accounts of our histories that are intertwined with the word “berdache.” While Dana was the sole participant to reflect on the relationship between two-spirit and berdache, this relationship is highlighted in much literature (Jacobs, Thomas & Lang 1997; MacDonald, 2009; McKiver, 2017; Morgensen, 2011). One participant in MacDonald's (2009) research compellingly articulated both the impetus behind the coining of two-spirit, and the term's importance, as rooted in the total lack of other words to describe people in a decent and non-anthropological way. The necessity of having a way to talk about their community without invoking the language of anthropology forms one way in which participants theorized the connection between the term's history and the meaning it holds today.

Although few participants spoke directly about the word that two-spirit replaced, many participants expressed two-spirit as a term that holistically links Indigeneity with the ways in which people experience their gender, their roles in community, and their sexuality; several participants noted that gesturing at this inseparability was part of the original intent with which the term two-spirit was coined. TJ highlighted the ways in which the coining of the term two-

spirit was necessary to communicate the uniqueness of Indigenous LGBTQ experiences. They shared that part of their journey coming to identify with the term two-spirit was

going back to those teachings of how the whole term two-spirit came into being, was to use something that Indigenous people can use that was something for themselves and that was not part of Western concepts of gender and sexuality, right? So not adopting those terms of being called transgender, homosexual, bisexual, lesbian or what have you.

For TJ, two-spirit expresses an experience that is not captured by terms in the LGBTQ acronym — it is a term that exists outside of “Western concepts of gender and sexuality.” They understand the need to articulate this distinct experience of Indigenous sexual and gender diversity as part of the impetus behind coining the term. Because terms like lesbian or bisexual might not necessarily capture the nuances of existing in the world as an Indigenous person, two-spirit was generated by the community to meet this need. Dana also touched on this idea of two-spirit capturing the specificity and inextricability of queer and trans Indigenous lives as she explained her understanding of the term’s origins:

it was invented in 1990 at a conference in Winnipeg, by LGBTQ Indigenous folks who were trying to basically fight against colonial powers and re-assert themselves as somewhere along that spectrum of LGBTQ, and Indigenous, and also that those two things together is not just being queer and Indigenous...which is, I think, flattening it.

As Dana understands it, the term two-spirit was coined as an assertion of the unique ways that Indigeneity intersects with being LGBTQ — an assertion that, as mentioned in Chapter 6, was an act of claiming space within the spectrum of queer and trans identities for Indigenous people. Here, Dana also gestures at the unique way that two-spirit captures the enmeshment of queerness and Indigeneity; for her, two-spirit is does not just mean queer and Indigenous, but rather speaks to the ways in which our whole beings are more than simply the sum of our parts. Unlike terms

in the LGBTQ acronym, which reference only one's gender or sexuality, two-spirit speaks to the ways in which, for many two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people, it is impossible to separate our gender or our sexuality from our community roles and responsibilities, family histories, and the lands to which we belong.

Fenris also described the coining of two-spirit as a process of community coming together to meet a need. They stated that stating that they understood the term came from “the conference for lesbian and gay-identifying, at the time, Indigenous people, and then coming up with a word to describe identities that were very directly eradicated by colonialism, by Jesuits targeting gender non-conforming people.” Here, Fenris describes the word two-spirit as one coined specifically to address the devastation wrought by missionaries' and colonists' violent erasure of gender complexity within our Indigenous nations; in this way, Fenris identifies two-spirit organizing as a project of reclamation, as discussed in Chapter 6. They also recognize the contemporary community-building praxis that forms an essential part of the meaning behind two-spirit for many people — a topic discussed further in Chapter 8. By articulating the history of the term as one shaped by the need to describe identities “eradicated by colonialism,” Fenris frames the term as one that could be understood as speaking back to the words with which missionaries replaced our own Indigenous words, like “berdache.” They also acknowledged the differences between the language two-spirit, queer and trans communities use today and the language used to describe the queer and trans Indigenous community in 1990 — like the terms gay and lesbian. This awareness of the language available to organizers in the political and cultural moment of 1990 was touched on by several participants (recalling the generational differences in uses of two-spirit mentioned in Chapter 6). The idea that the understandings of gender and sexuality that were prevalent at the term's inception influenced not only the ways in which the term was described in 1990 but how it is understood today is a pivot point for our

discussion; here, we begin to discuss the relationship between the history of two-spirit as a term and the literal definition of two-spirit.

Sam was another participant who noted the differences in the language accessible to organizers in the early 1990's compared to that which is available to our communities now, and the lasting impact that this linguistic framework has had on prevailing understandings of two-spirit as a term. They reflected:

I think there is a historical piece to the word, so when I think about the word, I understand that in the early 1990's, just given the language that was accessible around things like the gender binary and cissexism, that people's understandings of how they wanted to articulate their understanding of themselves kind of made them describe two-spirit in a specific way. And that specific way is this idea that people embody a masculine and a feminine spirit. I don't actually subscribe to that idea, because I think it reproduces the gender binary again, that just doesn't actually meet me at all where I'm at in my identity, but also just I think that that's very true for Anishinaabe people.

Here, Sam situates their understanding of two-spirit within the context of the term's history. The ways in which gender could be talked about in 1990 — largely in a binary way, because of systemic cissexism — undeniably impacted the way in which two-spirit as a concept was first described, as the embodiment of a masculine and feminine spirit. Sam does not subscribe to the idea that two-spirit means embodying a masculine and feminine spirit — they later clarified that all Anishinaabe people, whether two-spirit or not, embody masculinity and femininity. In Sam's understanding, Anishinaabe spiritualities, cultures and languages are “inherently open and flexible” and it is colonial cis-heteropatriarchy that has disrupted these realities in Anishinaabe communities. The roots of the binary understanding of two-spirit are, for Sam, explained in part by the political and cultural moment in which the term was coined. Because critical analysis

around the gender binary and cissexism was not as widely available in 1990 as it is today, the organizers who coined two-spirit described the term in ways which, seen from the present, reinforce binary conceptualizations of gender.

This appreciation for the language available to community members when two-spirit was coined was also expressed by 21, who shared:

from my knowledge, the reason two-spirit was chosen was in a sense to try to grasp the experience of having not just one gender, but to carry both — and that could be broken down more, and it could be criticized as being binary, but at the time in the late 1980's and 1990, that must have been a really radical, progressive thing.

Here, 21 situates the origin of two-spirit as a term as an effort to convey the experience of having more than one gender. Although she acknowledges that the idea of carrying “both” genders can be criticized today as reinforcing a binary view of gender, 21 acknowledges that the idea of existing as a gender other than man or woman was certainly radical in 1990. Once again, the origins of the term are described in terms of a necessity to communicate a specific experience — an experience outside the genders of man and woman. Organizers in the late 1980's and early 1990's used the analytical tools and language accessible to them in order to meet this need to communicate.

The way that Sam and 21 narrate the organizers who coined two-spirit in 1990 using the language available to them at the time matches the shift that Dr. Wilson experienced in thinking about the idea of a masculine and feminine continuum; although Dr. Wilson used to use the language of a masculine and feminine continuum when theorizing two-spirit, she stated that “now I'm not sure if it even exists or what it means.” As language around gender as a binary, a continuum, and a universe has shifted over the past 30 years, so too have the ways in which people understand the meaning behind having more than one gender. As 21 and Sam both note

above, the ways in which gender was understood in 1990 coloured the ways in which two-spirit was described at the time — and sometimes, the way it is described today. The lasting impact of this binary worldview that is tied up in the history of two-spirit as a term is the visible in the literal definition of two-spirit that proliferates in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous spaces. Later on in this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which participants theorized the reasons behind the continuation of this understanding of two-spirit as the embodiment of a masculine and feminine spirit. First, however, we must turn to the ways in which participants described this literal definition and their relationship therewith.

7.2 The Literal Definition of Two-Spirit

Throughout this thesis, I have been making reference to the literal definition of two-spirit: the idea that two-spirit denotes a person who has two spirits (one masculine and one feminine) and that in pre-contact Indigenous societies such people were honoured, revered or worshipped. It is an understanding of the term that precludes the co-existence of other concurrent meanings the term could hold, and an idea to which participants expressed a multitude of complex relationships. In this section of the chapter, I discuss their reflections on including this literal understanding of the term within the web of different meanings two-spirit can hold, refuting the literal definition entirely, and the impacts that the prevalence of this literal definition are having in their communities.

Many participants noted just how widespread the literal definition of two-spirit is. Sam offered the reflection that “that’s always the thing that people are talking about,” while Dakotah highlighted that they have seen many instances of organizations taking two-spirit very literally. Connor noted that the literal definition is how most non-Indigenous LGBTQ people understand the term. These observations of the term’s predominance match my own experiences seeing the

literal definition propagated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations, journalists, scholars, and community members; the literal definition's prominence is also documented in the work of Beverly Little Thunder (1997), Joshua Whitehead (Deerchild, 2017, December 17), and was noted by Dr. Wilson in Chapter 4. Some participants also noted how this literal understanding of the term is one part of the total picture of two-spirit as a complex term with multiple meanings. Sam shared that, although they do not understand two-spirit to mean that they have a male and a female spirit, "I think for people that do feel that way, I think that's super legitimate, really real." Here, Sam situates the literal definition in the nest of complex, multiple understandings that two-spirit has the capacity to hold. As emphasized in Chapter 6, participants saw two-spirit as a term that has the capacity to hold multiple concurrent meanings without any of those meanings negating another; as Sam indicates, the understanding of two-spirit as having a masculine and feminine spirit is a legitimate way that some community members identify with two-spirit.

Other participants firmly stated that to them, two-spirit does not mean literally having two spirits. 😊, when discussing their use of the term two-spirit, stated that "I do use two-spirit now, that fits. But yeah, not in the literal, embodying two spirits literal kind of way, I don't understand it like that." Quite simply, for 😊, two-spirit does not mean embodying two spirits. For some participants, the literal definition of a two-spirit person as someone with two spirits matched neither their understandings of human spiritual existence nor the ways that they know the term to be a container for diverse gender and sexual identities. Veronica shared that

the concept of having two spirits, as being something that can be about someone's gender or sexuality, that's still a thing I don't totally understand, cause I think about myself as having one spirit, and as all beings as having one spirit.

Here, Veronica explains that within her worldview, all beings (including humans) have one spirit; the idea that having two spirits would be related to one's gender or sexuality does not make sense for her. However, Veronica also indicated that she is open to learning about how two-spirit and the many meanings it holds for people may intersect with their understandings of spirituality — learning that is related to her knowledge-gathering about gender and sexuality within her nation's worldview, discussed in the following chapter. Even as participants asserted that the literal definition is not an idea to which they subscribe, they demonstrated a great deal of respect for the ideas and beliefs of others.

Dana also indicated that within her community's understandings of spirituality, the idea of having two spirits does not make sense. Regarding the wide uptake of the literal definition among two-spirit people, she shared that “while I understand why people say it, it kind of kills me inside when people are like ‘we have two different spirits’ because the traditional people that I learn from are horrified by that idea.” For Dana, the dissonance between the idea that two-spirit means literally having two spirits and the traditional teachings which clearly state that humans have one spirit creates discomfort. This friction or tension between the literal definition of two-spirit and people's traditional teachings has also been discussed in the literature — by participants in MacDonald's (2009) research, and by community educator J. Andrew Baker (Robinson, 2014, February 18a). Although clearly many people hold teachings about humans having one spirit that are at variance with the literal understanding of the term, nowhere in either the literature or in my conversations with participants did even one person indicate that they held disparaging views of the literal definition or those who hold stake in it. In other words, although participants recognize the harms that can be caused by narrow and literal definitions of two-spirit, they also recognize that the idea of holding two spirits in one's body can be a life-sustaining teaching to receive, and is often the only understanding of two-spirit available to

people. This idea of the utility of the literal definition in affirming the lives of trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities plays an important role in explaining the prominence of the literal definition in the following section, after a brief discussion of other less beneficial impacts the literal definition has in trans and queer Indigenous communities.

Before turning to the ways in which participants theorized the reasons behind the predominance of the literal definition, I must first turn briefly to an important way in which the literal definition's wide influence impacts trans, queer, and two-spirit Indigenous communities. The widespread understanding of two-spirits as literally having two spirits, as a teaching that contradicts teachings held by some community members, was identified by Sam as a barrier to some trans or queer Indigenous community members identifying as two-spirit. They shared that the resistance to identifying as two-spirit that they see among queer and trans Indigenous community members

is often this idea of “oh, we don't have two spirits” or “oh, I'm not two-spirit because...” — a misunderstanding of the word itself. I think actually that's a bit too simplistic, cause I don't think it's the word itself, I think it's the teachings behind it. I think people — they hear the word, they maybe have heard a specific teachings about it, and there are definitely people who reproduce that teaching where they're like “it means masculine/feminine, blah blah blah,” but that's not what the meaning is behind it.

Sam proposes that the reasons some trans and queer Indigenous people have for not identifying as two-spirit, including the understanding (shared by Veronica and Dana above) that humans do not have two spirits, are rooted in the literal teachings that are frequently circulated about having a masculine and feminine spirit. Sam also clearly states that the meaning behind two-spirit is not limited to being both masculine and feminine or having both a masculine and a feminine spirit. Here, Sam gestures at the idea that the meaning of two-spirit exceeds the binary idea of having

two spirits; it is not the word itself that prevents people who might otherwise identify with the term from using it, but rather the teachings that reinforce the literal definition that act as a barrier. In the next section of this chapter, I share the ways in which Sam expanded on this idea of two-spirit as a concept that is multiple instead of dual and theorized how the flattening of multiplicity into duality obscures the complexity inherent in the term two-spirit. This flattening of the traditional teachings about two-spirit into a dualistic understanding (as part of the overall trend of simplifying Indigenous knowledges) is one of several key factors explaining why the literal definition of two-spirit is so widespread, along with the survival of certain nation-specific teachings about the inherent value of gender diversity, the interpellation of colonial hierarchies and binaries into Indigenous communities, and the idea that the notion of two-spirit people being honoured in pre-contact societies has been picked up from anthropological literature and deployed to argue for two-spirit people's right to exist within our communities in the present. All four of these interrelated ideas are discussed in the following section.

7.3 Examining the Prominence of the Literal Definition

The refusal of the literal definition expressed by research participants above was also part of the interview I conducted with Alex Wilson that makes up Chapter 4 of this thesis. Recall that Dr. Wilson narrated the spread of the literal definition as a relatively recent phenomenon, stating that the meaning of two-spirit has shifted to centre more around gender, in ways that trouble the idea of a binary or continuum between masculine and feminine. She continued:

Two-spirit identity ought to question that continuum but more and more people are now teaching that people have two spirits, a male spirit and a female spirit. I'm not sure where that came from. I've never heard an elder say that or anyone communicate that idea in

our Cree language. The idea that we all have a male and a female spirit seems like one more way in which Indigenous people are romanticized.

Here, Dr. Wilson makes a connection between the growth of the idea that two-spirit people have a male and a female spirit — an idea which does not originate in the teachings of any elders she knows — and the broader processes of romanticizing Indigenous people and our worldviews that is a key aspect of settler-colonial domination. This literal definition of two-spirit as having a male and a female spirit as a pan-Indigenous teaching that fits neatly into the romantic settler image of Indians as mystical (and indeed, mythical) beings from a bygone era is part of the “blending” of Indigenous peoples and nations that Sam theorized — another example of the surface-level engagement with Indigenous knowledge that Dr. Wilson discussed in our interview. In this section, I will spend some time theorizing a concept related to this blending of our nations into one homogeneous entity: the flattening and simplification of Indigenous knowledges.

I propose that the flattening or simplification process that both Dr. Wilson and Sam theorize is one of four key factors in the proliferation of the literal definition of two-spirit, along with the related elements of the content of the unsimplified teachings (having to do with holding multiple energies or spirits, and being useful in our communities), the utility of the idea that two-spirit people existed in honoured and revered roles within pre-contact Indigenous nations in arguing for our right to be part of our communities today, and the interpellation of Western binaries into Indigenous social thought. These factors — all of which are deeply interconnected with one another — were discussed by various participants during our interviews as well as by Dr. Wilson; in theorizing these four factors in tandem, I hope to paint a fuller picture of how and why the literal definition is so widespread and relate this phenomenon to wider practices of colonial truncation of Indigenous knowledge.

Before I delve into theorizing why the literal definition of two-spirit is so widespread, I must first pause and acknowledge the position from which I am writing. In keeping with the considerations of access and privilege that were offered by many participants during our discussions, and which are discussed at length in the last section of this chapter, I need to check my privilege. There are specific structures of power at play that dictate who has the time, support, encouragement and resources to undertake a project such as this one. I have the time and space to read about the history of two-spirit, talk to others about the term and synthesize my own ideas as a direct result of having access to university education, and being part of a vibrant and complex community of two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people in Toronto. The reality of having the choice to pursue graduate education is directly related to my white-skin privilege, class privilege, able-bodied privilege, and cisgender privilege. Part of what all of these types of privilege look like in my everyday life is that I have a certain degree of choice in how to spend my time that is not afforded to many other Indigenous people; because I have secure housing, because I am not spending time in a hospital, because I am in school and have the luxury of not working full-time to support a family while I complete my degree, because I do not struggle to access clean water, I have time to write this thesis.

As I discuss the ways in which the literal definition of two-spirit is the result of multiple ongoing processes of colonialism below, I do not mean to undermine the fact that this understanding of the term plays important roles in people's lives. I am not better than anyone or smarter than anyone because I don't think that two-spirit means that a person has two spirits. I am also not saying that people are stupid or have been "duped" into understanding the word in this way; there are many, many reasons why people understand the term to literally mean having two spirits. The reason that I am writing this section is because, as many of the participants reiterated, the literal definition of two-spirit is a complex and divisive topic among trans, two-

spirit and queer Indigenous communities; by attending to the nuances of how the idea circulates, I aim to contribute to ongoing conversations and offer my own thoughts in tandem with those offered by participants.

The political project of this work is to offer the understandings of two-spirit held by trans, two-spirit and queer young people in Toronto as expertise that can expand conversations about two-spirit beyond the literal definition that is so widely circulated in academic and community spaces. Because this work is also, importantly, an opportunity for trans, queer, and two-spirit Indigenous people to share knowledge and stories with one another, I am writing with two-spirit, queer and trans Indigenous people as the core audience. However, as mentioned in Chapter 5, I also write this work to all of the non-two-spirit people — cisgender, heterosexual Indigenous people, and all non-Indigenous people — in order to intervene on the widespread practice of defining two-spirit in a narrow, singular and literal way. The purpose of this work is not to suggest that anyone who identifies as two-spirit and uses the literal definition is misunderstanding the word or using it “wrong”; although the hegemony of the literal definition can cause problems, it is the circulation of this definition as *the* definition of two-spirit that is the problem, not the fact that some two-spirit people understand themselves as having a male and female spirit. In other words, every single way that a two-spirit person understands and uses the term two-spirit is completely and inherently valid. So reader, no matter if you are two-spirit or not two-spirit, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, a scholar or community member or social worker: if you try to use the arguments in this thesis to tell a two-spirit person what two-spirit means, or that their understanding is not as complete as someone else’s, or that they only believe the things they believe because they haven’t learned the “right” teachings, stop. If you are trying to use any of the ideas recounted here to position yourself as a knowledge-holder in relation to two-spirit, or to infringe upon the intellectual, spiritual or bodily autonomy of queer, trans, and two-spirit

Indigenous people in any way, you are missing the point, and you do not have my consent to use my work in this way. Instead, I invite you to think deeply about what you do not know about the term two-spirit, and why this might be.

The first factor in the proliferation of the literal definition that I will discuss is the widespread practice of simplification of Indigenous knowledges. In Chapter 4, Dr. Wilson used the analogy of an iceberg to describe Indigenous knowledge. The top portion of the iceberg that is visible above the waterline is surface-level knowledge that “anyone with access to Google” can learn; it is this small volume of knowledge with which most people (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) are familiar, because it is so accessible. However, the majority of our knowledge systems — our cosmologies and ways of being in the world — are below the water. For example, you can look up some surface-level information about the Dish With One Spoon wampum belt²² online, but the deeper understandings of relationality, reciprocity, *ka’nikonri:yo* (a good mind) and peace that the belt references are not as easily accessible. As Dr. Wilson suggested, during the process of colonization, the top portion of the iceberg has in fact become separated from the bottom portion, with the result that for many people the surface-level Indigenous knowledge is all we know. In the case of two-spirit teachings, the rich and complex meanings that two-spirit holds form the bottom of the iceberg, and the narrow understandings of two-spirit as literally two spirits, or two-spirit as a gay Indigenous person are the top, visible portion; due to the ongoing processes of colonization, the two pieces are separated and the top, visible portion is all that people understand two-spirit to mean. This reality is what Sam and others speak to when they connect the lack of access to both traditional teachings and critical

²² Wampum are beads made from quahog shells, strung together as single strings or in multiple rows to create belts that communicate specific information based on the number, colour, and arrangement of the beads. Wampum is used by Haudenosaunee and neighboring nations along the eastern coast of Turtle Island.

thinking spaces to the proliferation of the literal definition; because of residential schools, language theft, interruption of human-land relationships, child apprehension, mass incarceration and other features of the settler-colonial landscape, people in our Indigenous communities often have neither the opportunity to learn our traditional understandings of gender and sexuality complexities, nor the academic language of the gender binary and queer theory, nor a community of peers with whom they can openly and safely discuss these ideas. Thus, the surface-level teachings about two-spirit that constitute the literal definition are the only teachings many people end up being able to access.

The separation of robust philosophies from surface-level knowledge is part of the epistemicide Dr. Wilson mentioned in Chapter 4; in severing the connections between Indigenous peoples and the lands and waters that form the backbone of our knowledge systems, the philosophical and political systems that underpin our sovereignty are jeopardized — and as scholars and activists like Dr. Wilson, Leanne Simpson (2016; 2017), Laura Hall (2017) and Jessica Danforth (Danforth & McKegney, 2014) have argued, this process hinges on the destruction of Indigenous ways of doing gender. The settler state must undermine the systems of gender and sexuality that provide the basis for Indigenous peoples' philosophical, social, and political orders as a very condition of its existence; in to do this, it must prevent robust systems of Indigenous knowledge from flourishing, resulting in many people being unable to access teachings in their full form. When our teachings are flattened and simplified, the nuanced knowledge that gets lost includes the understandings of gender and sexuality outside of a binary; our community roles, the words used to describe them, and even our understanding of the term two-spirit itself become constrained by binary thinking.

Sam used the idea of flattening Indigenous knowledge when discussing the proliferation of the literal, romanticizing definition of two-spirit as a person with a male and female spirit.

Though they do not subscribe to the idea that two-spirit means that you literally have two spirits, they understand two-spirit as having to do with holding multiple energies or multiple roles within community — importantly, *multiple* and not dual. Sam expressed the simplification of the depth of two-spirit as having to do with the compression of the idea of multiples or many into the number two — turning vast complexity into a binary. Discussing a word in Kanyen'kéha that describes a person holding multiple energies, they recounted that

it was about energies, holding energies in your body, it wasn't holding two energies in your body the same way that I think that niizh manitowag — is like the two-spirit Anishinaabe translation that was given along with two-spirit, but there's older words than that word for spirit, you know, like ojijack, which is crane, before it was crane it was soul. So niizh ojijack is actually two-souled, but it doesn't mean two, it means multiples. And that's another understanding that I've gotten from an Onkwehón:we person, is that it's not about dualism, isn't about one or the other, it's about layers. So when I think about that word, that holding multiple energies, it's not holding two energies, it's not holding three energies [...] it's holding multiple energies. And the same way with two-spirit, and the same way that I think about medicine wheel teachings, too, right. Like, people look at it flat, but you're supposed to look at it this way [makes a sphere with hands]. That shows breadth and depth to two-spirit in a way that I don't think most people see when they're looking at it.

Sam distinguishes between the binary understanding of niizh manitowag or niizh ojijack as holding two spirits or two souls with the understanding of holding multiple energies and multiple layers of being. Though niizh manitowag, niizh ojijack, or two-spirit may be commonly understood as meaning *two* spirits, souls or energies, the niizh or two could also be understood to signify *multiples* and *layers*, not necessarily just two. Similar to the ways in which this

multiplicity is compressed into duality are the ways in which the medicine wheel is understood as existing as flat, in 2D. Sam gestured (literally) at the idea that the medicine wheel is meant to be understood in three dimensions; similarly, two-spirit is not meant to be understood as a flat concept, but rather as textured, dimensional and complex. Just as many people only know the medicine wheel in two dimensions because those are the teachings that are circulated, it is the literal definition of two-spirit as two spirits that is widely understood and taught; the truncation of Indigenous knowledge systems has led to the loss of teachings and understandings around the complexities of sexuality and gender.

Here, I want to extend this idea of flattening or compression that Sam offers to argue for this surface-level engagement as a partial explanation for the wide pull of the literal definition of two-spirit. I imagine the flattening of two-spirit teachings into the form of the literal definition as happening somewhat like the compression of an audio file into MP3²³ format happens. When a large audio file (such as a WAV file) is compressed into MP3 format, the data that holds some of the audio frequencies is removed to make the file smaller. In other words, some of the nuance and texture of the audio is forfeited in order to reduce to total size of the file. Although compression causes loss, this reduction in file size is a very effective way to store many files in a small space, thus making them more portable. Like the compression of WAV files into MP3 files allows us to bring a larger number of songs with us on our phones, the flattening of teachings about two-spirit made them more portable and more shareable.

²³ For those of you reading this in the future where, presumably, the MP3 is an obsolete and hence unknown file format: MP3 is a digital audio file format which uses lossy data compression based on the principles of psychoacoustics to decrease total file size while retaining (for the most part) the character of the original file. It rose to prominence as the format of choice for internet file sharing in the 1990's, and at the time of writing remains a much-used file format across the web (particularly for music).

This, I believe, is the process of teachings being put to sleep or being pushed underground that is frequently referenced with regard to two-spirit knowledge, language and roles (see, for example, S. Belcourt, 2016). Thought of in this way, the literal definition, as a compressed version of more robust teachings about gender, spirituality, and community responsibilities, signals to us (trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people) that our ancestors were thinking of us; they knew that they would have to make this knowledge portable in order for us to access it, so they compressed it. In his 2010 book *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent*, Ojibwe scholar Scott Richard Lyons theorizes signatures of Indigenous leaders on treaties throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as “x-marks” — markers of consent in coercive circumstances, a way of recognizing that adaptation and negotiation were necessary for survival in the face of change, loss, and violence. For Lyons, the concept of the x-mark is not limited to treaty signatures — any practice that signifies assent to compromise under coercive conditions, from land claim agreements to English-language schooling, could be considered an x-mark. The making of x-marks is a future-oriented practice, a way that our ancestors and our elders made the best choices available to them to ensure that us, the generations to come, would have the necessities of life, knowing that the conditions under which they made these marks were impermanent (see also Tuck, 2014). Similarly, the compressed information that constitutes the literal definition of two-spirit could be thought of as the best way our ancestors could give us the knowledge that we are valuable parts of our communities — which, as we will see below, is indeed a necessity of life for many trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people. The literal definition of two-spirit, then, acts as a type of x-mark — an artifact that bears the imprint of compression; a recognition of the fact that knowledge about sexuality and gender diversity would only weather the storm of colonialism if it was in a package small enough to be smuggled.

I would suggest that up until the past few decades, many of our communities were in the position of having to compress our knowledges into easily communicable and digestible formats in order to pass certain knowledge on in the face of child apprehension, residential schools and forced relocations. This is especially true for knowledge and traditions that colonizers had to destroy in order to undermine our governance systems: our gender and sexuality worlds. As Sam points out, this is why two-spirit teachings and knowledge about our nations' gender and sexual diversity have been lost. We have held on to the simplified understandings that were smuggled through generations of genocide, but are unable to access the nuance and texture of what these visages represent. Understood in this way, the wide pull of the literal, surface-level understanding of two-spirit as someone with a male and a female spirit is understandable — these are the only teachings about gender and sexual diversity in our nations to which people have had access, and even these simplified understandings of two-spirit are life-giving for people who feel like they are alone. To continue the analogy of the MP3 file, we are also listening to this file through the filter of Western worldviews that have been foisted upon Indigenous communities; because we live in a colonized world of gender binaries and cissexism, it makes sense that our interpretations of the limited information we have would reflect the binary worldview many of us have interpellated.

With this understanding of the simplification of Indigenous knowledge as a core factor in the propagation of the literal definition of two-spirit in mind, I will now turn to an intimately related factor in the definition's proliferation: the shape of the unabridged teachings from which this flattened definition comes. In understanding the literal definition of two-spirit as a compressed version of a more complex set of teachings, we recognize that the romanticized and simplified understanding of two-spirit people as revered, honoured shamans is underpinned by teachings our nations held before colonization. Put another way, if the literal definition is a

compressed version of a more complete teaching, then even when flattened it tells us something about the shape and content of the more robust version — meaning that the teachings that previous generations compressed to store for us had something to do with gender and sexual diversity being a respected and important thing. So, alongside the utility of saying two-spirit people were “honoured and revered” in asserting our right to be in community, and the broader practice of surface-level engagement as potential reasons for the proliferation of the literal definition, one reason behind the literal definition itself must be that it resonates with teachings we once held in our communities about the spiritual lives and community roles of two-spirit people.

As Sam suggests above, the more complete version of the idea of having a male and a female spirit could be the idea of having a spirit with multiple aspects, responsibilities, or ways of being. Connor offered an explanation of where the “honoured and revered” part of the literal definition may have originated: the practical usefulness of community members who can do both men’s work and women’s work. Connor explained:

I think a lot of that knowledge that we’ve maintained around how we were like, revered, or honoured, or respected within our communities pre-colonization had a lot to do with how extra-useful we were, in terms of being able to do all of the things and have understandings of both sides [...] And I just came back from a ceremony, fasting camp, a couple weeks ago, that...gender didn’t limit the tasks that I did, therefore I was supremely useful, because I cooked shit, and I minded the baby, and I chopped all of the fucking wood, and I fire-kept, and I did all of the things. This is why we’re so fabulous.

Here, Connor suggests that the usefulness of being able to do both women’s roles (such as child care and cooking) and men’s roles (such as fire-keeping) is the root of the understanding of “honoured” and “revered” roles that forms part of the literal definition of two-spirit. On the

surface, this assertion of outstanding usefulness may seem to contradict the understandings of two-spirit people as regular members of their communities asserted by some participants, and Dr. Wilson, above. However, I would argue that, because Connor asserts that it is usefulness to one's community that is the root of the honouring of two-spirit people, these ideas have much in common — trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people are “fabulous” because of the ways in which we contribute to our communities, which is one of the key parts of many participants' understanding of what two-spirit is.

Connor clarified that because this emphasis on practical usefulness is a hallmark of the Anishinaabe worldview, Anishinaabe philosophy is likely the source of the flattened knowledge about two-spirit people being revered in their communities, stating “the fact that I think about two-spirit folks, genderqueer folks in ceremony, and that that's one of our most amazing abilities, is probably highly influenced by Anishinaabeg thought specifically.” Within an Anishinaabe context, where practical use-value underpins much social thought and philosophy, being able to jump between women's work and men's work as necessary is such a useful skill that this practical value of two-spirit people forms a core teaching about our community roles. When this understanding is compressed and filtered through the lenses of Western thought — both that which has been interpellated into our Indigenous communities and that found in anthropological texts — we end up with a teaching about two-spirit people were revered, highly honoured shamans that is detached from the specificity of Anishinaabe thought in order to be widely circulated. To extend my MP3 analogy, this usefulness of two-spirit folks may be one of the only audio frequencies left when two-spirit teachings were compressed for transportation through our colonial landscape for the use of future generations.

The third factor in the entrenchment of the literal definition is the usefulness of this idea in arguing for our right to exist as trans, two-spirit and queer people in our nations today. While

this connection between the literal definition of the term and the utility of the idea that two-spirit people were “worshipped” in our pre-contact nations in asserting our contemporary right to exist in communities was only articulated by one participant (Dana), it is a generative idea. In our interview, Dana compellingly referred to the predominance of romanticizing, literal

interpretations of two-spirit as “the haunting of two-spirit by berdache.” She explained that

we made a new term, and it was supposed to mean our own thing, but what’s really happening is people in the present are still using the berdache ideas that are colonial ideas, to justify two-spirit existence in the present.

Here, Dana refers to the ideas that two-spirit people have “special gifts” and literally have two spirits as hold-overs from the writings of missionaries and anthropologies on “berdache” — which, as a rule, characterized them as having special or revered status within their communities.

A. Wilson (1996) also noted that the idea that two-spirit people held the same revered role in all Indigenous communities was (and continues to be) propagated by anthropological texts. Dana sees both the historical precedent of two-spirit people existing pre-contact and the idea of two-spirit people as those who were “worshipped” as evidence deployed to “justify two-spirit existence in the present.” An argument along these lines might look something like this: two-spirit people had special roles in pre-colonization Indigenous societies, and by excluding two-spirit people from Indigenous communities today through homophobia, transphobia and cissexism, communities are missing out on the unique gifts we have. Further, Dana noted that this idea of specialness is also an idea which enables people to “survive and love themselves,” something which they use “to feel like they deserve to be in this world.” Finding evidence that shows sexual and gender diversity in pre-contact Indigenous nations allows some people to know that they can have a place in their communities, which allows them to “love themselves” as well as use this evidence to fight for their right to exist in their nations. In this way, Dana

characterizes the literal definition of two-spirit as a term that enables survival both as an individual and as a community member for many two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people.

Within this understanding, the idea of being “worshipped” is a placeholder for simply being valued, treasured members of a community; because the realities of homophobia and transphobia mean that many trans, queer and two-spirit people are not treasured by their communities in the way they should be, it is understandable that a narrative in which people like them were so highly regarded and respected as to be worshipped is attractive. Further, in asserting that two-spirit people were worshipped in the past, people are also asserting that there are possible futures in which trans, queer and two-spirit people do not endure violence on a daily basis. Narratives that propose two-spirit people were once worshipped show two-spirit, queer and trans Indigenous people today that we are worthy of love and respect — in Dana’s words, these narratives show us that we “deserve to be in this world.” This, she argues, is why our communities circulate this aspect of the literal definition so heavily.

In this way, the “haunting of two-spirit by berdache” that Dana described is partially explained by the affirmation of belonging that such ideas offer contemporary trans, queer and two-spirit people. Discussing the ways in which she sees the literal definition of two-spirit deployed in her communities, Dana reflected:

I understand that people want to use those narratives, because they feel like they need to justify, to elders and other people in their communities, that we existed before. But the downfall of that is that...some of those things aren’t true, a lot of that stuff is through a colonial lens, and I see a lot of people simultaneously saying like, “we were just normal in our communities” and then also these berdache-y ideas that are like, “but we were worshipped and we had special gifts that no one else had.”

Dana explains that because of the homophobia and transphobia present in some Indigenous communities, some trans, two-spirit and queer people need evidence that we existed before contact in order to justify their right to be in their communities today.²⁴ The deployment of the idea that two-spirit people have unique and special gifts in order to argue for their right to exist in their communities today is one way in which the literal definition continues to be circulated. This argument about the special gifts two-spirit people have is not only used in our communities today, as Dana notes, but also forms an important part of early two-spirit writing. For example, in his introduction to *Living the Spirit* (1988), activist Randy Burns asserted that “Gay and Lesbian Indians were special to a lot of tribes. We have roots here in North America” (p. 2). Here, Burns makes an argument for the roots of gay and lesbian Indigenous people based on our existence and specialness in some nations pre-contact — strikingly similar to the arguments Dana recounts above. The literal definition of two-spirit has been deployed by trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people to argue for our right to exist for many years; while some community members continue to use this argument because it is effective, as Dana noted, there are also drawbacks.

Dana described the literal definition as a set of ideas that some two-spirit people “have used to survive and to love themselves,” understandably, in the face of much exclusion and hatred. However, she also cautioned that

On the other hand, I think that’s actually doing us a disservice, and yes, some elders and traditional people are totally homophobic and transphobic and violent, but also it’s confusing to them when people say “I have two spirits and I’m special and I have special gifts.”

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the argument that two-spirit people always existed in Indigenous societies, see Chapter 8.

Although the “berdache-y” idea that two-spirit people were afforded special status in Indigenous communities is one that people use to survive, there are drawbacks to our communities’ circulation these ideas. Dana notes here that the utility of this idea that two-spirit people are special in explaining to elders and traditional people that we have a right to exist is undermined by the fact that the notions of having two spirits or being more special than others do not fit in some Indigenous worldviews; in Dana’s spiritual traditions and, as seen above, many (but not necessarily all) nations’ spiritual traditions, humans are understood to have one spirit.

Importantly, in her discussion of the ways in which this notion of specialness contradicts her own teachings about all community members being equally valuable, Dana offered a caveat that there may be nations where two-spirit people *were* considered special — an idea that dovetails with Connor’s assertion above that the appreciation for two-spirit people comes specifically from Anishinaabe thought. Even as some people utilize the idea of special status two-spirit people traditionally held as a way to assert that they have gifts to offer their communities and should therefore not be excluded, the idea of specialness may in some cases function as a further barrier to inclusion.

Part of the “disservice” to which Dana makes reference above could also be the ways in which the idea of two-spirit “specialness,” though life-affirming for some, can also reinforce problematic generalizations about Indigenous people. As two-spirit community members like EJ Kwandibens have pointed out, making generalizations about the roles two-spirit people held in our nations pre-colonization is not possible because of the sheer diversity of our societies (S. Belcourt, 2016). Another potential pitfall of generalizing about the honoured positions two-spirit people once held in Indigenous communities, noted by Oji-Cree scholar Joshua Whitehead, is the ways in which the stereotypes that this narrative reinforces — stereotypes of two-spirit people as revered shamans with special, magic powers — lock two-spirit people (and all Indigenous

people) into the historical past (Deerchild, 2017, December 17). These stereotypes of two-spirit people as shamans with special, magic powers are likely familiar to many trans, queer and two-spirit people, and are linked to the broader practice of stereotyping Indigenous people (Waller & McAllen-Walker, 2001). As Barker (2017), Doxtator (2011), and others have argued, the process of romanticization and stereotyping imagines Indigenous people as extinct (and our territories uninhabited), thereby allowing settler states to lay claim to land deemed vacant. By placing so much emphasis on what two-spirit people *used* to do and how our nations *used* to be, the argument that two-spirit people used to be highly revered plays into the settler imagination of Indigenous peoples as one homogeneous entity that existed in the distant past, even as it aids two-spirit people in accessing community today. While these types of generalizations that are part and parcel of the literal definition are life-affirming in some contexts, they are also symptomatic of the blanding of our nations together that Sam theorized.

The fact that the literal definition is the most easily digestible by settlers also plays a role in its accessibility to Indigenous people. Dana noted that, due to the homophobia and transphobia found in some Indigenous communities, many trans and queer Indigenous people seek community in the mainstream LGBTQ community as they are coming out; for some, it is there that the idea of two-spirit as having two spirits and being honoured and revered is first learned. However, the ideas about two-spirit that circulate in these non-Indigenous trans and queer communities are often the binary, singular, romanticized ideas that comprise the literal definition; as Dana pointed out, these ideas of two-spirit people as revered shamans who have two spirits “are so pervasive because they fit into colonial ideas of gender and sexuality.” Because non-Indigenous people have very limited ideas about what the concept of spirit actually entails, and often hold a worldview that locates gender and sexuality as distinct spheres, separate from the rest of one’s personhood, they often only understand two-spirit on a literal, surface level

— and because, as Dana and other participants noted, two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people often go to the mainstream queer community to be accepted if homophobia and transphobia are present in their communities of origin, these surface-level, literal teachings are some of the first that we receive. In other words, because the literal definition is understandable to non-Indigenous trans and queer people, it is frequently reproduced in mainstream LGBTQ communities where it is highly accessible to two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people. We will return to this notion of access to traditional teachings at the end of this chapter, after first turning to the last factor in the wide influence of the literal definition.

The fourth and final factor in the proliferation of the literal definition that I will discuss here is the interpellation of binary thought into Indigenous communities and worldviews — the “colonial lens” that Dana mentions above. As discussed in Chapter 1, the coadjutant processes of the attempted destruction of Indigenous systems of gender and sexuality and the imposition of the cis-heteropatriarchy and gender binary have had deep impacts on Indigenous knowledge systems overall, and have had devastating impacts on the lives of trans, queer and two-spirit people. As Dr. Wilson points out in Chapter 4, in many of our communities the gender binary has been fully interpellated into our own systems of thought through mainstream media, the English language, and coercive state education, including residential schools. This point was also articulated by Fenris, who noted that

modern, right-now understandings of our culture and our language for a lot of people are shaped by Western gender binary. And I feel like even though there are gender binaries in some of our communities [...] I can only imagine that they would have been at least a little bit different than this white Western one that is so popular. And like, enforcing gender binary and creating it in our communities, and having a tool that we are using against each other to harm each other, is a really favourite tool of colonialism.

Fenris observes that many Indigenous people's understandings of language and culture reflect the Western gender binary that has displaced our Indigenous ways of understanding gender. For Fenris, the interpellation of the gender binary into Indigenous communities was (and still is) an imperative of settler-colonial systems that seek to enmesh violence in our communities so that we ourselves do the labour of harming one another instead of the state. The reality of the internalization of the gender binary, homophobia and transphobia in our communities as a vital part of the project of colonization is also well documented in the literature (Burns, 1988; Danforth & McKegney, 2014; Driskill 2016; Finley, 2011; Hunt, 2015; Idle No More, 2014; Robinson, 2014, February 18a; L. Simpson, 2017). As L. Simpson (2017) argues, by undermining our systems of gender, settler-colonialism undermines the very foundation of our nations and our worldviews. One of the results of the reproduction of this gender binary in Indigenous thought is that all of our teachings are interpreted through this lens, potentially obscuring the core meanings in ways that cause harm; by disrupting our understandings of gender, colonization has disrupted all of our knowledge systems. The understanding of two-spirit to mean someone with a male and female spirit (the only two genders being man and woman), rather than the more complex understanding of one's spirit having multiple aspects and multiple responsibilities that Sam offered above, is just one example of this phenomenon. We can see the ways in which this binary understanding of gender, when reflected in the literal definition of two-spirit, can be a "tool of colonialism," in the ways that it erases and does harm to trans, non-binary and two-spirit people.

The relationship between the interpellation of binary thought into Indigenous communities and the literal definition of two-spirit was also directly referenced by Sam. When discussing the common explanation of two-spirit as a word that simply references having both

masculinity and femininity, they stated plainly that this explanation is “another reproduction of the gender binary.” They go on to suggest that two-spirit is

not about that very strict binary understanding that people opt into, because they don’t have anything else. I don’t know. I don’t know if they haven’t had access to think about those things or...I also think that people are often reproducing cissexism in this way, in the way that cis two-spirit people embody two-spirit but don’t talk about trans-ness, or don’t talk about gender complexity, or any of those things, cause it’s also very different, right? So there’s an importance, I think, to talking more critically about that — and not in a way that’s shaming, but actually just showing the breadth of experiences.

Here, Sam posits that one reason that the literal definition proliferates is that people do not have access to the time or space to think critically about the term; because our Indigenous ways of understanding gender have been displaced by the Western gender binary, many people “don’t know anything else.” When we are interpreting teachings through a binary worldview that has been foisted upon our Indigenous communities, it is easy to see how one would understand two-spirit on a surface, literal level. The narrow definition both reflects and reinforces cissexism, and obscures the “breadth of experiences” for which two-spirit can hold space. Sam sees the need for more critical conversation and discussion around what two-spirit means as important; of equal importance is that these conversations not shame anyone for not having these tools and language to have these conversations. As we saw in Chapter 6, Sam here again references the ways that a singular definition of two-spirit (whether defined as having two spirits as in this instance, or defined as a gay Native person, as in their previous examples) does harm in the ways it erases trans and gender complex people. Sam also engages the issue of access to critical thinking; for Sam, it is not because of willful ignorance that people talk about two-spirit in ways that are problematic, but because these are the only ways of talking about it that are available to them.

This reality informs the strategies for expanding these conversation, which, Sam argues, must be framed and conducted in ways that do not shame people for not knowing what they don't know.

As Sam points out, the literal definition of two-spirit, as an example of the simplification of our robust teachings about two-spirit people, sexuality, gender, and community responsibilities and the imposition of the gender binary in Indigenous social thought, raises questions of access to knowledge. It is because colonialism requires the destruction of our systems of gender and sexuality (and thus, the foundations of our nations) in order to function that the gender binary forms the basis of many Indigenous community members' understanding of two-spirit. However, it is also because of the ways in which important knowledge about the roles two-spirit people held (and still hold) in ceremony were compressed for transportation and transmission through our colonial present that this literal "male and female spirit" understanding prevails. Though this binary understanding of the term is harmful to some two-spirit people, the source of this harm is not ignorance on the part of those people who define two-spirit in a rigid and exclusionary way, but rather the systematic denial of access to our Indigenous knowledges that forms the backbone of colonization on Turtle Island. In other words, the question of how to mitigate the harms that stem from the literal definition of two-spirit is not a question of blame or fault, but a question of access to information. It is this question of access to which we will now turn.

7.4 Accessibility & Privilege

Earlier in this chapter, I shared Dana's reflection that it "kind of kills [her] inside" when two-spirit community members reproduce the literal definition of two-spirit, since the idea of having a masculine and a feminine spirit stands at odds with many traditional people's understandings of human spiritual life. During our conversation, she, like many participants,

highlighted the role that access to traditional teachings, as well as access to the time and space to think critically about what two-spirit means, play in the ways that trans, queer and two-spirit people take up the literal definition. In this section I will discuss the ways in which participants noted access as a factor in the predominance of the literal definition, particularly as it relates to community members' deployment of these ideas in their ways of surviving and accessing Indigenous communities. Returning to Dana's reflections, I will then discuss what a privilege it is to have the time and space to deeply engage with these questions about what two-spirit means, before closing with the idea that Sam touches on above: all of the conversations about the meaning of two-spirit must be handled with kindness.

In our interview, Dana and I spoke at length about the ways in which the accessibility of the literal definition plays a role in its wide uptake in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. She pointed out that the anthropological texts about "berdache" are often the first books that one comes across when one is "Indigenous and queer and trying to find something to justify our existence." As a result of the impetus to find proof of the existence of gender and sexual diversity in Indigenous traditions in order to affirm our existence today as individuals and as members of our communities, many two-spirit, queer and trans Indigenous people look for stories about who we are from a variety of sources — and because most of the published writing about two-spirit is either rooted in or forms part of the body of scholarship on "berdache," the related ideas about literally having two spirits and holding honoured roles in communities are the most readily accessible. This cycle of accessibility is self-perpetuating: the literal definition is widely available, so many people come to understand the word this way and share this understanding with others; in sharing this understanding with others, the literal definition becomes ever more widely available, beginning the cycle again. However, all of this is easy for me to say as someone who has had the privilege of researching, writing, and thinking about two-

spirit for the past two years as part of my graduate schooling. Simply having the time to read the materials I have read, talk to the people with whom I have talked, and spend dedicated time thinking about these ideas are a direct result of my class privilege and white-skin privilege, and the ways in which both have enabled me to access post-secondary education.

The dearth of opportunities to think critically about these ideas reflects the conditions of settler-colonial domination in which our intellectual traditions have been interrupted, relatively few Indigenous people are able to access post-secondary education, and, as noted above, being able to freely choose to spend one's time thinking about these ideas is a luxury. The opportunity to have deep, sustained, safe conversations about our Indigenous knowledge systems with our communities is rare and precious because the settler state depends on keeping Indigenous people occupied with the work of survival.²⁵ As Sam noted in our interview

we don't often get opportunities to philosophize [...] We don't get to talk about philosophy, we don't get to think critically about our teachings or understandings, to better our communities. We're often always just dealing with the next thing, or doing the next thing.

Here, Sam points to the ways in which life under the conditions of settler-colonial capitalism prevent Indigenous people from coming together to philosophize and better our communities. Critical engagement with our philosophies and our teachings is an integral part of the health of our communities. Through maintaining conditions of life wherein Indigenous people are always “just dealing with the next thing” in order to survive, settler-colonial society constrains the

²⁵ Often, these conversations hinge on interactions with lands and waters that are restricted by current settler occupation of our territories; thus, part of the reason settler states must maintain Indigenous dispossession is so that our intellectual traditions and the political orders that they underpin remain compromised. Of course, they also must maintain our dispossession because it is the very foundation of their existence.

operation of Indigenous intellectual life, thereby continuing the process of epistemicide (and its parent project of genocide) described by Dr. Wilson in Chapter 4.

This concept of not having “opportunities to philosophize” is what I gestured at above when I characterized the real-world implications of privilege as the access to time, resources and support to think through complex ideas. As Indigenous people, systems of wage labour that demand we spend much of our time away from our loved ones, mass incarceration that fractures communities, and environmental racism that puts immense strain on our bodies and oftentimes restricts our mobility, mean that we rarely have the time or the space to converse with other Indigenous people about these ideas; most people do not have the time, space, and resources to spend several years of their life thinking in depth about two-spirit as a word in graduate school. These differences in the sheer amount of time we have to think about these ideas clearly impact the ways in which we use and understand two-spirit.

In my conversation with Dana, she also noted that her development of these ideas about the haunting of two-spirit by berdache was, in part, afforded by the time she spent studying two-spirit as a term in her Master’s research. The interrelationship between class privilege, access to post-secondary education, and different understandings of two-spirit coalesce into a complex dynamic in Indigenous communities wherein those who have the greatest stake in the literal definition are also those who have not had the privilege of having the time and space to read and talk extensively about two-spirit, and the impacts that Western, binary worldviews may have on its meaning. Access to the time, space, and resources that inform perspectives on the literal definition of two-spirit (including access to supportive elders and knowledge keepers, language speakers, and Western education) are impacted by class privilege, geography, relationships to land, age, disability, gender, community relationships, and many other factors. Sam noted that they were only able to understand two-spirit in a robust way once they had fellow two-spirit

people with whom they could converse about these ideas. For Sam, having “opportunities to philosophize” with other two-spirit people was a key element in the building of their relationship with two-spirit as a term. Without a community of two-spirit, trans and queer people with whom to discuss the nuances and complexities of the term, pan-Indian teachings and anthropological literature may be the only perspectives on two-spirit that people are able to access; this is the “very strict binary understanding” of two-spirit into which people opt because there are no alternatives. From this angle, mitigating the harms associated with the hegemony of narrow definitions of two-spirit (such as the erasure described by Sam and Connor in Chapter 6) is a matter of expanding opportunities for community to come together and share ideas in a respectful way and not, as Sam points out, a matter of shaming people.

In our discussions about differences in how people understand the term two-spirit, Sam consistently emphasized the importance of kindness in opening up conversations about two-spirit beyond the literal definition (as well as reasserting that, for two-spirit community members, the literal definition is a completely valid way of understanding the term). Similarly, Dana noted kindness as a key tool in broaching the sensitive subject of the literal definition, asking:

how do I use the teaching of kindness, for myself and for other people [...] how do we sort of...basically trying to talk with people about their trauma, and about the narratives that they have used to survive and to love themselves, are often these berdache ideas that haunt two-spirit, and to go up to those people and be like, “hey, you’re not special,” or “hey, that idea’s not even a Native idea” is devastating, right? So how do we kindly have those discussions with people in a way that doesn’t re-traumatize them, you know?

Dana points out here that talking to people about their relationships to the literal definition of two-spirit opens up an emotionally loaded conversation — and throwing into question the narrative that people use in order to stay alive has the potential to be devastating. The core

teaching of kindness must certainly be used to guide our actions as we work our way through these conversations, yes — but how we might operationalize kindness remains to be seen. What is clear from both Sam and Dana’s reflections — and, indeed, from all of the participants’ thoughts on the literal definition — is that two-spirit is a term to which people have an incredible variety of relationships and in which people place a wide range of meanings, and all of these relationships and understandings of the term deserve respect. Though people’s investment in the literal definition may be influenced by a lack of access to other understandings of the term, this does not make their understanding of two-spirit any less valid. Two-spirit is a container big enough to hold an astronomic breadth and depth of meanings.

In this chapter, I have recounted the ways in which participants connected the history of two-spirit as a term and the literal definition that has come to predominate scholarly and community conversations about what two-spirit means. I delineated the multitude of relationships that participants had to this literal definition before theorizing four interrelated factors in the literal definition’s wide influence: the systematic over-simplification and flattening of Indigenous knowledges, the content of the root teachings that are flattened in this process, the deployment of the notion of two-spirit people having special gifts in arguments for queer, two-spirit and trans community inclusion, and the interpellation of Western binary and hierarchical modes of thought into Indigenous worldviews. The final factor in the prominence of the literal definition that this chapter explored was the accessibility of this definition, and the necessity of demonstrating respect for the stakes of survival that are bound up in people’s relationships to the literal definition of two-spirit. Having examined participants’ understandings of two-spirit as a complex concept that can be a container for a wide variety of meanings, a hashtag to organize conversation, build community, and claim space, and their nuanced ideas about the term’s literal definition and the reasons behind its wide influence, I will now turn to the ideas participants

shared with me about their needs and desires related to two-spirit community, Indigenous knowledges, and access to spaces in which we can philosophize together.

Chapter 8 Needs & Desires

In our interviews, participants described their two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous communities as profoundly brilliant, complex, and nuanced places. In so doing, many conveyed the deep sense of hope they have for the futures of their communities and for the generations of trans, queer and two-spirit people to come. They articulated clearly the needs of their communities, and the ways in which those needs can be met — including strategies and organizing already being undertaken by participants and their communities in Toronto and beyond. They also expressed desires related to trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous modes of being, many of which centred around accessing nation-specific knowledge and language — both that which is specifically related to gender and sexuality, and the full breadth of the knowledge they need to exist as Indigenous people. Put succinctly, participants want to understand themselves in relation to their communities and the responsibilities they can fulfill within those communities. It is these desires and needs (and the actions being taken by participants and their communities to meet them) with which this chapter is concerned. The ideas and experiences shared with me by participants that I will discuss in the coming pages are demonstrative of the theory of change that I described in Chapter 5: the theory that change is made possible by the coming together of trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people for community building, knowledge-sharing and collective action.

In dedicating a chapter of this thesis to the desires of participants, I am trying both to enact desire-based research (Tuck, 2009) and to allow the research to be redirected by participants' refusals and the questions they preferred to ask. In her 2009 article "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," Unangax scholar Eve Tuck describes damage-centred research: the type of research frequently done in, on, and with marginalized communities that

collects and reproduces stories of pain. This research, Tuck argues, is predicated on a theory of change that seeks to document injury in order to receive reparation — the same ineffective and colonial theory of change with which I first approached this thesis. Tuck suggests that an alternative to damage-centred research is desire-based research: a depathologizing framework that centres the complexity of individuals and communities who are often both complicit in and actively resistant to structures of social inequity. Desire-based research can be underpinned by a number of different theories of change — including the one offered to me by participants, that posits two-spirit, trans and queer communities, in all their complexity, as sites of agency and change-making. It was participants' articulations of the changes that they are making with their communities, the learning they want to do, and what they need in order to live good lives that redirected this research. These redirections led me to structure this final chapter around the questions participants wanted to ask and the knowledge that they desire.

This chapter revolves around participants' desires related to the continued health and vitality of their communities, and the parallel need for greater access to the teachings and ceremonies that are integral to their communities' wellbeing. The chapter begins with participants' expressions of desire for knowledge about the understandings of sexuality and gender within their own nations' worldviews. In discussing their desires for safe ways to access traditional teachings, ceremony spaces, and their languages, participants articulated barriers including homophobia, transphobia, cissexism and other types of lateral violence within Indigenous communities that stem from colonialism. The second section of this chapter is devoted to participants' accounts of these exclusions from community, and their ideas about how the reinvigoration of our nations' practices of respecting difference can provide redress. Following the participants' emphasis on the importance of these nation-specific ways of being, the next two sections discuss the robust Indigenous knowledges that participants seek to gather,

and their articulations of how they are continually learning about what it means to exist as Indigenous people and as two-spirit, trans and queer members of their communities. After briefly examining the idea of two-spirit as a placeholder term — one that holds space until people learn the terms in their Indigenous languages that describe their ways of being in the world — the chapter concludes with an idea shared by Sam: that two-spirit is one term among many that allow us to work together with our communities towards the worlds for which we hope.

All 10 research participants were interviewed individually in downtown Toronto. Each person was given the opportunity to create a pseudonym for themselves, which included English names, an emoji, and a number. Some participants chose not to use a pseudonym. Participants also indicated which sets(s) of pronouns they were comfortable with me using in this text. For more information about the interview process, see Chapter 3.

8.1 Two-Spirit Traditions in the Past, Present, and Future

In my interview with 🧡, they told me an anecdote that bears repeating here. This anecdote is about another research project in which 🧡 recently participated. The research project was run by an Indigenous community organization in Toronto; the purpose of their research was to gather two-spirit knowledge and traditional teachings. As part of their involvement in this research, 🧡 was part of a group of two-spirit youth who were given the task of interviewing two-spirit elders and knowledge keepers to answer some questions laid out by the community organization — questions which revolved around the central query “what does two-spirit mean?” However, as mentioned in Chapter 5, 🧡 and their peers made their own list of questions to replace those provided by the community organization, which they then asked during their interviews. 🧡 shared some of these questions with me during our conversation. They and their fellow researchers asked two-spirit knowledge keepers:

What do you see in your community? How do you know two-spirit folks have entered the circle before, and what were their roles before, and what are our roles now? How do you see people step up?

Although 🧡 (and their peers) asked these questions as part of a research project completely different from my own, they provide a great window into the types of knowledge that two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous youth in Toronto are seeking. Instead of centring on the desire to find a definition of two-spirit, these questions focus on the ways in which two-spirit people are parts of their communities. As I discussed in Chapter 5, the redirection of focus by 🧡 and their peers during the research project they are talking about here is an act of refusal; in asking the questions that *they* want to ask, these young people are both asserting their intellectual sovereignty and affirming that they belong in their Indigenous communities and always have. 🧡 and their peers specifically sought out knowledge about the roles that two-spirit people have held in communities in the past (including the pre-colonization past) as well as the present — knowledge that participants in D. Wesley's (2015) research also sought. The idea of stepping up to do work within community also recalls an idea that was brought up by TJ, Doug and 21 in Chapter 6: that there are responsibilities associated with being two-spirit and filling the myriad of roles two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people fill in their communities. These notions of responsibility and community involvement form the heart of the traditions that many participants desired to learn more about.

The complexity of the notion of tradition, and the nuanced relationships which many Indigenous people have to the concept, is well documented among two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous communities (Driskill, 2016; Robinson, 2014, February 18a; 2014, May 16; D. Wesley 2015; see also Hall, 2017; Vowel, 2016). In our conversations, participants expressed a desire to learn two-spirit traditions — both pre-contact traditions and the traditions that

communities are creating in the present — as part of the total complement of their nations’ knowledge systems, language and ceremonies. Some participants expressed that part of the ongoing learning in which they are engaged has to do with the recovery or reclamation of language and teachings regarding the roles and responsibilities two-spirit people traditionally held in their own communities, again echoing the desires expressed by participants in D. Wesley’s (2015) research. 21 shared that she is

on a constant quest to find our lost stories and teachings and ceremonies and languages specifically in my Haudenosaunee community. I feel kind of envious that there are other nations and other communities who retained that, and who have those words to describe two-spirit people in their language, and who have the teachings of what it means and what your roles were, and what your responsibilities were.

21 expresses a desire for knowledge, language, stories and ceremonies to do with two-spirit people and their roles and responsibilities within Haudenosaunee traditions. Importantly, later in our interview 21 described this knowledge as being “stolen from us” — gesturing, as she did above, at the direct link between colonialism and the imposition of strict binary systems of gender within Indigenous worldviews. In the above quote, 21 also articulates a feeling of envy because her Haudenosaunee community has not retained knowledge or language around two-spirit roles and responsibilities like some nations and communities have. However, alongside these complex articulations of loss and longing, she also expresses hope for the future, since she still continues the search for two-spirit teachings within her own community. The process of learning about the roles and responsibilities one’s own two-spirit or sexuality- and gender-complex ancestors held is one called for by many community members and scholars (see, for example, S. Belcourt, 2016; Benaway 2017; 2017, April 26; MacDonald, 2009; L. Simpson, 2016, November 10; Walters et al., 2006). As 21 indicates here, it is also a privilege.

Although the ways in which knowing that gender and sexuality diversity existed in pre-contact Indigenous societies is meaningful to trans, queer and two-spirit people today is widely recorded and was articulated by some participants, other participants asserted that it was not pre-contact traditions that they desired, but rather the ways in which they are building community today that are meaningful. Alongside the ways in which non-two-spirit people constantly ask about what two-spirit means, another common line of questioning revolves around what two-spirit people's community roles looked like before colonization. Many participants noted the ubiquity of the "what did two-spirit people do pre-contact" question, and some expressed to me they are just plain sick of the ways it erases the work they and their communities are doing now.²⁶ Speaking about conversations they have had with Indigenous community members who want to create spaces that are safer for two-spirit people, Fenris said that many times

what they envision is seeking out these really rigid definitions and all the time referencing us to like, "oh, we can't have existed if we don't have really direct records of what we were in the past" and not very much, if any, kind of recognition for what we are now, what we're doing now, how we're living now. And what we need now.

Many people that Fenris encounters understand two-spirit inclusion to be a project that requires a definitive understanding of what two-spirit means, and historical precedent for two-spirit people's existence within Indigenous communities. This perspective ignores the realities of how two-spirit people are living today, and the real needs that they have when it comes to safety within broader Indigenous communities. Indeed, the logic within this assertion is that our Indigeneity is based on what we did before Europeans came to this continent — a view relying

²⁶ Not to mention the ways in which conceptualizing the moment of contact as *the* turning point in our long and varied histories implies that our nations were static and unchanging for the millennia we existed before Europeans arrived here.

on concepts of cultural purity, and not the ways in which most of our nations understand our ways of being. Fenris's observations are a good example of the obsession with tradition discussed above, and the ways in which it does a disservice to two-spirit people who are building community today. By prioritizing the identification of two-spirit people's pre-contact roles, the Indigenous community members Fenris mentions above are showing that they are not listening to what two-spirit people are saying about themselves, their lives and their needs.

Fenris also connected non-Indigenous people's preoccupation with our pre-contact roles to the settlers "not wanting to see us in anything but buckskin. So, not able to conceptualize us outside of anything but a mythical 'remember when...no we don't, cause we don't learn that in history class!'" Settlers ability to imagine two-spirit people (and all Indigenous people) only as "mythical" and in the distant past is one part of why conversations on two-spirit people are often focused on pre-contact traditions and roles. Recalling Dr. Wilson's statement in Chapter 4 that the literal definition of two-spirit is connected to broader discourses that romanticize Indigenous peoples, Fenris here describes the discursive placement of Indigenous peoples (including two-spirit people) in the past, which is a key modality of settler-colonialism. By only talking about pre-contact roles two-spirit people held, non-Indigenous people continue the project of forgetting that Indigenous people exist today, in order to name our territories vacant land and thereby legitimize the project of settlement. Joshua Whitehead has also noted that this preoccupation with mystical pre-contact two-spirit people locks us in the historical past (Deerchild, 2017, December 17). This discursive construct makes talking and writing about how two-spirit people are making community and traditions today is a crucial part of asserting our sovereignty and acknowledging that we (as trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people, and as the nations to which we belong) will continue to be here in the future.

This idea that pre-contact traditions are neither the only nor the most meaningful thing to learn about was expressed by Doug as well. As we were discussing the loss of our communities' knowledge and language around sexual and gender diversity during colonization, Doug reflected that

given the very little I know about Cree understandings of queerness, I'm okay with not knowing pre-contact traditions. That's okay for me. But I support and respect people who want to do that reclamation work for themselves and for their sense of community, but like you said, I think of language and Indigeneity as being a living thing, and I'm okay with the fact that as Indigenous peoples we were not necessarily perfect before the settlers came here.

Although Doug doesn't know a lot about what queerness means within a Cree worldview, she is okay not having this knowledge — though she is supportive of those who are doing the work to recover and reclaim pre-contact traditions. She asserts that because Indigeneity is not a static concept, she does not need to know what sexual and gender diversity looked like for her ancestors in order to exist as a two-spirit person today — and what's more, our pre-contact societies “were not necessarily perfect.” Here, Doug pushes back against the settler logics described by Fenris above that locate authentic Indigeneity in the past. By challenging the idea of an idyllic pre-contact world from which our authenticity and rights as Indigenous people stem, Doug asserts that our existence as two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people lies within our relationships with our communities and with the lands and waters of our territories.

Later in my interview with Doug, she continued on the above line of thought, saying that she's okay with

just thinking through new traditions. And I think that's where two-spiritedness comes into play, that this is a word that was just invented. It was just invented by a bunch of

Indigenous queer people because they identified a gap and a need, and they created something that felt true.

For Doug, the word two-spirit is part of the contemporary traditions which are meaningful to her; it is an example of an Indigenous community coming together to create “something that felt true.” Indeed, the act of queer, two-spirit and trans Indigenous communities meeting our own needs and taking care of one another could itself be thought of as part of these new traditions, and will be discussed later on in this chapter. The idea that new traditions are meaningful for two-spirit young people aligns closely with findings from D. Wesley’s (2015) research, in which she theorized Toronto’s urban two-spirit youth communities as sites of Craig Womack’s (1999) “new traditionalism” — a place where Indigenous people survive together using Indigenous worldviews and contemporary terminology. By coming together to create something meaningful, Doug suggests, the organizers who coined two-spirit were making tradition. Two-spirit, then, is a term that asserts the value of the traditions Indigenous people are creating in our present moment as future ancestors.

Alongside the settler-colonial logics outlined by Fenris earlier (and touched on by Doug above), another reason behind the ubiquitous focus on pre-contact two-spirit roles within Indigenous communities is that for trans, queer and two-spirit people, including myself, the idea that we had ancestors who looked and lived and loved like us is powerful and life-sustaining. As discussed in Chapter 7, the idea that two-spirit people held highly honoured roles in pre-contact Indigenous societies provides some trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people with the knowledge that their lives have value — and if their nations and communities once attended to that value, it can be so again in the future. A line of thought that is closely connected to this idea of holding special status in pre-contact nations is the basic notion that sexuality and gender complexity (regardless of whether or not people were held in high regard or were just ordinary

community members) was present in all Indigenous societies before colonization. This “we were always here” argument is frequently deployed by folks to argue for the right of trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people to exist within our communities today, and it also has a similar emotional resonance as the idea that we are special. In my case, the idea that there were Haudenosaunee people who exceeded the gender binary in our pre-colonization communities provides me with solace on two levels: knowing that my ancestors had hearts and spirits and bodies and feelings that look like my own, that they moved through the world in some of the same ways that I do, and that I will be recognizable to them when we meet; and that if queer, trans, and two-spirit people could exist harmoniously in our nations before, it is possible for that to be the case once more in the present and in the future — that worlds are possible wherein two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people are not facing violence every day. The idea that we were always here gives us hope, and it is also an idea that was expressed by many participants.

Though this line of thought may have similar roots as the idea that two-spirit people were revered (i.e. anthropological writings about “berdache” that homogenize all of our nations into one tribe that existed in the past, taken up by queer and trans Indigenous organizers faced with a dearth of other information sources), this argument differs from the idea that two-spirit people are special in that it leaves room for the diversity we know was (and is) present between Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. I believe that when we say “we were always here” we are not necessarily saying that all of our nations had specific roles for people who exceeded the gender binary, or words to describe people who were in same-gender relationships (though sometimes people mean this as well); we are saying that we would have been respected because we are human beings and historically, our nations taught respect for human (and non-human) life as a key teaching. 21 brought up this idea when she talked about the violence she faces in her home community and how these experiences are very different from how she would have been

treated in the past, saying that “hundreds of years ago, I totally would have been respected, but now it’s just...it’s completely different.” Although, as noted above, 21 is actively searching for Haudenosaunee traditions and language related to gender and sexual diversity, even without knowing what her community role might have looked like pre-contact she knows that she would have been respected. In this way, the idea that we queer, trans, and two-spirit people have always existed within Indigenous societies is a way to hold our present-day communities accountable to the values and teachings that are still recognized as the core of our philosophies. Although proposing that we have always existed may seem to be an argument which is transhistorical, it is actually one which contextualizes our struggles against erasure within our own contemporary communities and their distinct teachings about respect. In other words, what we are saying is that we do not need to have proof that we existed pre-contact in order to be valued members of our nations now; our nations and our communities need to remember their original instructions about respect and peace. Being respected within their Indigenous communities was identified by participants as something they need in order to learn in these places — and it is the ways in which disrespect and exclusion impact their learning to which we will now turn.

8.2 Barriers to Learning & Access to Ceremony

While some participants grew up surrounded by their Indigenous community’s language, culture and ceremonies, many did not. As gestured at in the previous section (and as will be discussed in detail below), access to these Indigenous knowledge systems and languages was a desire expressed by many participants. However, participants were also clear that there are barriers to their learning. This section will enumerate some of the barriers to learning and community involvement that participants shared with me (such as transphobia, cissexism and homophobia), and also the ways in which participants linked these specific behaviours to their

roots in settler-colonialism. However, in keeping with the animating ethic of this thesis, and this chapter in particular, I will not be offering a great deal of detail about the experiences of exclusion or violence that participants relayed to me. This is an act of ethnographic refusal (A. Simpson, 2007; 2014), and is one way in which I am trying to keep this research based in desire. Another way I will be doing this is by following the lead of participants who described the barriers to accessing knowledge in their lives as always linked to the community-building practices in which they are engaged. Just like the ideas in this chapter cannot be understood without the context of the preceding chapters, the exclusion participants described to me cannot be separated from the inclusion that they and their communities are creating for themselves, nor from the context of ongoing colonialism on Turtle Island.

Many of the types of exclusion from community and ceremony spaces that participants shared with me I have already mentioned in previous chapters — such as Connor’s reflection on being misgendered or Sam’s experiences of being made invisible recounted in Chapter 6. Other participants shared specific experiences of being excluded from ceremony either in Toronto or in other communities which I will not repeat here. Fenris spoke generally about the impacts that being two-spirit has had on their access to ceremony, saying that

I don’t participate in ceremony as much as I feel like I want to or I would be if I wasn’t two-spirit. So a lot of it is just kind of one-off experiences or stories shared from other people, just cause of what a safe distance feels like for myself, in terms of how much self-advocating I can do to be in community.

Because of their own experiences and the experiences of their peers, Fenris does not participate in ceremony as much as they would like. Ceremony spaces are sometimes unsafe for them. Although they express a desire to participate more in ceremony, Fenris went on to explain that they often do not enact this desire because of the ways in which their gender is policed in

community spaces, and the large amount of self-advocacy they need to do in order to exist safely there. In this way, the exhausting nature of the educational labour expected of two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people (discussed in Chapter 5) acts as a barrier to accessing ceremony.

Connor also talked about the impact that gender complexity has on ceremonial life, sharing that

the times where I feel my gender identity having the most friction within the Indigenous community is when I'm participating in ceremony. And like, the struggle of identifying as two-spirit, or even identifying in the language as niizh manidoog or niizh manitowag, in ceremonial circles, still doesn't feel like it activates any kind of magical power that helps you transcend the really strict gender protocols.

Here, Connor specifically names ceremony as a space in which friction occurs between gender complex folks and the rest of the Indigenous community. Further, using the terms two-spirit, niizh manidoog or niizh manitowag are not necessarily helpful in alleviating this friction. As Connor (and Sam) suggested in Chapter 6, two-spirit is not always an effective tool in communicating specific information about oneself or one's gender to Indigenous communities, because of widespread narrow understandings of the term. Although two-spirit is a useful tool for organizing and community-building, the realities of cissexism and binary gender logics can sometimes limit its functionality as a communication aid in Indigenous spaces. This cissexism and presence of strict, binary gender protocols was identified by some participants as a barrier — one that, as Dana, Fenris and Sam articulated in Chapter 7, is linked directly to colonialism and the ways in which the Western gender binary was forced upon Indigenous communities.

Indeed, the ongoing impacts of settler-colonialism were an important concept linking all participants' articulations of the barriers to learning within their communities. Expanding on

their ideas outlined in Chapter 7 about the gender binary as a tool of colonialism, Fenris theorized that the rigid gender binaries present in some Indigenous communities

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

Fenris clearly traces the violent impacts that the gender binary has in the lives of two-spirit people to the genocidal project of residential schools. This genealogy is affirmed by many scholars and activists (Danforth & McKegney, 2014; Deerchild, 2017, June 26; Hunt, 2015; Idle No More, 2014; A. Wilson, 2007) who note that the residential school system purposefully disrupted knowledge transmission regarding gender and sexual diversity as well as undercutting the relationships to language, land, water, and human and non-human kin that form the core of who we are as Indigenous peoples. The impacts of this trauma are visible not only in trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people's lives but are also visible in the violent ways in which other community members treat their gender-complex kin. Through the residential school system and widespread child apprehension, Indigenous children were denied the opportunity learn how to be in good relation with our families and communities, and instead were taught how to enact colonial violence upon one another. Over several generations, these behaviours have now become ingrained in our communities — and as Fenris states above, one way in which colonialism is re-enacted is through the exclusion of two-spirit, trans and queer people from ceremony.

Many participants noted how urgent and necessary it is to find paths to heal from the impacts of these collective traumas in ways that do not exclude trans, queer and two-spirit

people. Reflecting on the reasons behind intolerance within Indigenous communities, TJ noted that much of this disdain for difference is

based on colonialism. It's based on those impacts of what we've lost over generations. And we have to find a way to gain that back. Cause if we don't gain that back then we lose more people. And if someone's key to either sobriety or learning back their language or whatever comes through ceremony, and [they're] also struggling with their gender or their sexuality, and then being told that that's not the space for them to be a part of, where do they go? Where do they end up? Not in circles. Not in ceremony. And that's hard.

TJ is clear: when people with complex genders and sexualities are excluded from ceremony, it can jeopardize their well-being. The exclusionary practices that push trans, queer and two-spirit people out of ceremony spaces are rooted in colonial violence and the deliberate theft of our knowledge regarding gender and sexual diversity that has occurred over many generations. Métis artist Erin Marie Konsmo has also theorized the relationship between our nations' practices of embracing difference and the health of our communities, arguing that "Our communities will be stronger and our people will be healthier when we begin to enforce an ethic of caring for all" (Konsmo & Recollet, 2018, p. 244). Here, Konsmo insists that it is the return to our ethical ways of being together that are crucial in removing barriers for two-spirit, trans and queer people to participate in ceremony and simply exist safely within our communities. It is this "ethic of caring for all" — an ethic which lies at the heart of most of our nations' understandings of how we ought to be in community — that TJ speaks of when they say that "we have to find a way to gain that back." As TJ notes, the most urgent learning our communities can do is perhaps not asking what specific roles two-spirit people held before colonization, but reinvigorating the practices, protocols and ways of being together that allowed all of our gender- and sexuality-complex

ancestors to be respected in the past, and will allow all of us to bring our gifts into the circle today.²⁷

The thoughts shared by all of these participants clearly demonstrate that space needs to be made for two-spirit people in ceremony. This call has been echoed by two-spirit, trans and queer writers and community activists across a variety of platforms, from blog posts (Syrette, 2016) and Twitter threads (McKiver, 2017) to magazine articles (Benaway, 2017), scholarly research (D. Wesley, 2015) and academic book chapters (McKegney and Danforth, 2014). Indeed, two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous organizers have been both calling for inclusion into our nations' cultural and ceremonial activities and creating our own spaces for ceremony for decades; one example of the latter is the women's Sun Dance that Beverly Little Thunder organized with her peers when they were excluded from existing ceremonial communities (Little Thunder, 1997). As Doug gestures at above, and as is explored more fully in the following section, the ways in which two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous communities are (to use Fenris's words) "making community now" is part of the tradition of community care and creativity that spans across generations. Indeed, even as participants narrated the ways in which they experienced barriers when accessing ceremony, some also articulated the positive experiences they have had in ceremony spaces which (with much self-advocacy on their parts) were purposefully made accessible for them. This is an important point that was highlighted in many interviews with participants: the barriers to learning faced by two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous young people cannot be understood outside of the context of our continued drive to gather the knowledge we need in order to live. It is this knowledge that we need in order to live

²⁷ Such learning might include asking questions like: whose responsibility is it to speak up when an elder misgenders someone during ceremony? Or, what does the Great Law of Peace have to say about transphobia?

— knowledge of how to be in the world as members of our nations, and the ethical ways of being in community that TJ references above — which many participants highlighted as the core of what they are trying to learn.

8.3 “We’re asking how to be”

As noted in the first section of this chapter, some participants expressed a strong desire to contextualize two-spirit within their nations’ worldviews and understand their traditional roles and responsibilities as people with complex genders and sexualities. However, as participants spoke to me about how they and their two-spirit, trans & queer Indigenous peers are actively engaged in the search for knowledge, several noted that the knowledge that they are seeking is not just knowledge about two-spirit people and our traditional roles and responsibilities — rather, they are seeking the knowledge that will allow them to live good lives as members of their Indigenous communities. Sam recounted an anecdote wherein they were part of a group of people talking about two-spirit teachings, and a cis person proposed that, because the teachings in question didn’t feature a same-gender relationship or a trans person, they weren’t two-spirit teachings but rather were “for everyone.” Sam pushed back on this idea, sharing that when they and their peers are asking for two-spirit teachings,

we’re asking how to live. We’re asking how to be. And we’re also re-saying you know: people are not letting us in. So we’re asking like, how do we be, tell us the things that we need to know. And other people see those teachings and are like “oh, well that’s just a regular teaching” because they see us as not part of that. They see us as not part of that circle, as not regular.

Here, Sam clearly articulates that what constitutes a two-spirit teaching is any teaching containing knowledge that two-spirit folks need to know in order to live well. Sam illustrates

that, in suggesting that teachings that do not explicitly feature gender or sexuality complexities are not two-spirit teachings, the cis person they mention is demonstrating that they do not see two-spirit people as regular community members who are part of the circle. These underlying exclusionary attitudes are one of the barriers to learning that participants theorized in the preceding section of this chapter. For Sam and their peers, it is the full breadth of their nations' knowledge systems in which they need to be included.

Some participants articulated that the need for two-spirit people to be able to access our traditional teachings and be members of our Indigenous communities is not only crucial for the health of trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people, but also for the health and vitality of our nations. Veronica reflected that

there is that real dilemma in our communities of like, the things that we really really need to maintain, in their fullest integrity [...] It includes our languages, it includes knowing how to do shit, but also our philosophies — because they're so beautiful and complex, and endless, it really requires study. And that's not necessarily for everyone, but it needs to be accessible to everyone in our communities, especially given what's known and understood — and my teachers have told me this as well, who maybe wouldn't be thought of as people who would say this — but truly two-spirit people in our communities have incredible gifts. And [my main teacher], he said specifically that two-spirit people are incredible dreamers, that their gifts are around dreaming.

Here, Veronica explains that the maintenance of Indigenous knowledges, languages, and philosophies is an urgent priority, but the rigorous studying that our knowledge systems require must be “accessible to everyone in our communities” in order for these knowledges to be maintained. Although not everyone would want to study their peoples' philosophies as a life path, it is imperative that the option be presented to every community member, including trans,

queer and two-spirit people, because our gifts (like everyone's gifts) are necessary for our knowledge systems to be maintained in a robust form. Veronica's words affirm the point that Dana brought up in Chapter 7: that all of the gifts held by community members, including two-spirit people, are valuable and necessary. When two-spirit people are excluded from our communities and are not provided spaces to learn, important parts of our knowledge systems are not being maintained. As Erin Marie Koonsmo (2017; Koonsmo & Recollet, 2018), Leanne Simpson (2016) and others have argued, the revitalization of Indigenous knowledges (and decolonization movements more broadly) require each and every two-spirit, gender non-conforming, trans, and queer community member (and the gifts we have) in order to succeed. Koonsmo states this point in a simple and profound way, attesting that "Each person in our families and nations is a medicine. Differently abled people, trans, queer, and two-spirit people, and those that use substances and live with addictions, all have gifts to offer" (Koonsmo & Recollet, 2018, p. 242). As Koonsmo asserts here, those members of our Indigenous communities who are most frequently excluded from ceremony (including, importantly, disabled folks and people who use drugs) *are* medicine. Every single person within our communities have gifts that are important to the health and vitality of these communities. When two-spirit, queer and trans Indigenous people are excluded from the circle, our whole communities miss out.

Veronica continued thinking through the ways in which making ceremony safe for two-spirit, queer and trans community members is vital, saying that the gifts mentioned above are both skills that require practice, and also

are understandings that require support and access, and so there is this real tension — and it's beyond urgent that we address these things, and yet they move so slowly. That's just a persistent tension, that I can be asking questions for seven years, and still not feel like I

can really talk about them, talk about what I've learned. That's really how things move.

And yet: the urgency of life and death, every day.

In order to develop and hone the gifts that we hold, queer, two-spirit and trans community members need supportive elders and knowledge keepers, and communities in which to learn. However, Veronica notes that although the learning and skill-building of two-spirit, trans and queer is an urgent “life and death” priority, the change required in order to make access to community learning spaces a reality happens slowly. Although many trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people, including many participants, want to learn about what it means to exist as people within their nations and develop the gifts they bring to their communities, many are not able to do so because they are excluded or made unsafe in community and ceremony spaces. Somewhat ironically, it is because the practices we most want to embody (the foundational teachings about “how to be,” about how to exist together as human beings) are not being observed within these spaces that two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people are being excluded. As TJ suggests above, our own nations’ practices of respecting and caring for one another — Koonsmo’s “ethic of caring for all” — must be observed if trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous community members are to be given opportunities to safely learn about their nations’ worldviews, languages and understandings of gender and sexuality and develop their own gifts.

8.4 A Learning Journey

A core theme running through participants’ reflections on their knowledge about the word two-spirit was the idea that they were still in the process of learning about and coming into relation with the term — a process which many people indicated would be ongoing for their entire lives. For example, 21 noted that her understanding of two-spirit has shifted over the

years,²⁸ also stating that she is “constantly learning, all the time.” TJ, too, expressed that for them, “understanding the concept, it’s always — it’s forever learning, and forever asking questions, and not having the full answer.” For both TJ and 21, the process of learning about two-spirit is one that is constant, and one that will continue into the future. Similarly, Veronica articulated that she is currently in a period of trying to understand what two-spirit could mean within her Anishinaabe worldview. She reflected: “It’s sort of research that’s ongoing for me, because I don’t personally identify with that term, so [I’m] just trying to understand it better.” Here, she uses the term research to describe her search for understanding with regard to two-spirit; although she does not use the term two-spirit to describe herself, she is actively learning more about what the term could mean in the worldview, language, and diverse communities that make up her nation. This type of research — the process of learning what two-spirit can mean, and learning about the complexities of gender and sexuality within our nations — is the type of inquiry to which participants redirected our interview conversations, and is one of the main ways in which participants would prefer to spend their time, rather than being coercively engaged in the educational labour of correcting the assumptions people make about their genders, bodies, and lives.²⁹ The conditions in which to do this research safely and with the help of their communities is a desire and a need that many participants articulated.

Some participants indicated that, for them, this research takes place on the internet, or in academic books. For others, it happens within their Indigenous communities. Dana noted that in addition to her master’s research, “participating in two-spirit communities in some way, and

²⁸ It is important to note that these ongoing shifts in understanding do not mean that anyone’s identity is “just a phase,” a transphobic/biphobic/homophobic argument frequently levied at young people by older adults. Instead, the shifts described by participants are demonstrative of the ways in which all human beings continue to gather knowledge across our lifetimes.

²⁹ For more details on how participants theorized this labour, see Chapter 5.

seeing how people used [two-spirit]” had an impact on her understanding of the term. Similarly, Fenris described the process of coming into relationship with other two-spirit people as key in their ongoing learning about two-spirit, commenting that “I’ve steadily kind of always been expanding my knowledge of what two-spirit means, as I meet more two-spirit people and how they self-identify and self-define what this label means for them.” For Dana and Fenris, as well as several other participants, the process of getting to know fellow two-spirit people and the ways in which these people use two-spirit was a crucial part of the way they continuously come to understand the term. These reflections resonate with those shared by participants in A. Wilson’s (2007) research, many of whom noted how meeting fellow trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people was a transformational experience. The importance of two-spirit community underpins much of the content of this chapter, since the needs and desires which participants articulated were by and large rooted in their communities as sites of strength, knowledge-building and survival.

The ways in which participants describe their learning here — as predicated on relationships and community, and as ever-evolving — are deeply reflective of Indigenous epistemologies. In their 2001 book *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*, Vine Deloria Jr. and Daniel Wildcat suggest that there are several core tenets expressed in the metaphysics of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, most of which are very different from Western epistemologies and ontologies. They write that instead of developing supposedly objective knowledge based on the Western scientific method and referring to such knowledge as fact, Indigenous learners recognize the tenuous, temporal and incomplete nature of the knowledge we gather. In other words, instead of generating information, we seek to understand. According to Deloria and Wildcat, some core features underlying most (if not all) Indigenous knowledge systems based on Turtle Island are the idea that humans are knowledge gatherers; that we do not

(and do not need to) understand everything in our worlds; and that learning happens in relationship with other human and non-human beings and in relationship to place. These ideas are demonstrated in the comments of participants above — by describing their learning about two-spirit as a process that will continue for their whole life, participants acknowledge that they do not and will never know all there is to know, and by sharing the ways in which their learning was made possible by forming relationships with queer, trans and two-spirit Indigenous communities, they underscore the ways in which relationships for the core of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies.³⁰

Two key relationships in which learning happens for participants were their relationships to themselves and to their spirits; in learning about the world around them, they learn about how they fit into it. This was an idea that Veronica touched on when she elaborated on the ways in which she is learning about spirit within her Anishinaabe context:

I want to understand myself, in the context of my nation and the worldview of my nation, and I want to be able to create a life that feels good, in relation to that and in relation to the rest of the world that I'm living in, and I don't — I guess the desire to understand isn't a desire to categorize.

Here, Veronica clearly refuses the colonial logics that seek to categorize and control all life (the same logics that animate non-two-spirit people's desire for an answer to the question "what is two-spirit?"). Veronica affirms that she is seeking knowledge that will allow her to exist as a member of her community; in Sam's words, she is looking for the knowledge she needs to "live as an Anishinaabe person." For her, gathering this knowledge does not require rigid definitions

³⁰ For more on the importance of relationships within systems of Indigenous knowledge, see Absolon, 2011; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Grande, 2015; Kovach, 2009; S. Wilson, 2008.

or categorizations — instead, she is looking to understand how to exist as a member of her community and fulfill her responsibilities while also creating “a life that feels good.” In Veronica’s life, this ongoing, lifelong learning happens in relationship to her self, her spirit, and her community.

For Sam, too, it was the building of relationships with other two-spirit people that allowed them to think critically about the term two-spirit and begin to learn about the wide variety of meanings it holds. They noted that prior to the formation of cultural relationships with other two-spirit folks, they did not have the context in which to think through the literal definition of two-spirit or contextualize it within the other ways in which two-spirit is understood. Recalling the idea that Indigenous communities’ opportunities to philosophize are constrained by the violence of settler-colonialism and the ways in which Indigenous communities are kept in crisis by the settler state, Sam shared that

when I first heard the word [two-spirit], I was in that place, just doing the next thing, just trying to make it through and all those things. It really started to shift when I started to hear about different people’s perspectives on what it meant to them to embody being two-spirit.

Here, Sam affirms that their understanding of two-spirit is an evolving body of knowledge, the expansion of which is mediated by their relationships with two-spirit community. When they were in a period of just trying to survive or “just trying to make it through,” critical thinking about two-spirit as a term was not accessible to them. However, when they began to build relationships with fellow two-spirit people, their understanding of what it might mean “to embody being two-spirit” shifted and broadened. This statement also suggests that for Sam, understandings of two-spirit are created within community — perhaps suggesting that the learning about two-spirit and the meanings it holds in which participants are engaged can only

occur within Indigenous communities. Thus, not having access to supportive community relationships can act as a barrier to developing knowledge about two-spirit as a term and what it might mean to “embody being two-spirit.”

Along with the conditions of settler-colonialism that restrict our access to resources, time, and mobility discussed in Chapter 7, one reason that folks may not be able to access the cultural relationships Sam discusses is the cissexism, heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia present in some Indigenous communities. Some participants articulated a hesitancy to ask questions of their traditional teachers for fear that asking about sexual and gender diversity would negatively impact their learning relationships. For example, Veronica shared that she has been

carrying questions with me, asking people — but like really nervously asking questions, holding on to questions from like my greatest teachers for years because I was scared of what they would say, or that somehow it would affect my relationship with them. But over time, felt more comfortable asking questions, talking to people.

Veronica describes being nervous when asking questions about how sexual and gender diversity are understood within her nation, and even retaining questions for years before asking her teachers for fear of what the answer or reaction may be. Over time, though, she has gotten more comfortable talking to people about these questions. Though obviously the relationship dynamics within communities and with traditional teachers differ from place to place, when asking questions raises the prospect of jeopardizing these relationships, some participants choose to hold on to their questions until they feel comfortable or safe enough to ask them even though they have a strong desire to learn. By articulating this desire to learn in tandem with the fact that this desire is sometimes stymied by the potential for homophobia and transphobia within their communities, participants expressed a need for places to safely learn about themselves, about gender and sexuality within their nations’ worldviews, and about their Indigenous languages.

They also expressed this need explicitly, and it is to their forthright calls for access to their Indigenous languages to which we will now turn.

8.5 Searching for Indigenous-Language Words to Describe Ourselves

Above, I recounted some of the ways in which participants talked to me about their search for nation-specific knowledge about gender, sexuality, and what it means (in Sam's words) "to embody being two-spirit." In this section of the chapter, I turn to a related knowledge-gathering practice in which some participants are engaged: the search for words in their Indigenous languages to describe themselves and their ways of being in the world. Many (though not all) participants told me that they are currently searching for terminology in their Indigenous languages that could describe themselves and the roles they hold within community. Sometimes, they are looking for words that can accurately and holistically convey their complex genders in a way that two-spirit (as a word that is frequently understood to just mean a gay Indigenous person) cannot. Other times (as described by 21 above) they are looking for words that point towards the ways in which gender and sexual diversity was present in their nations before colonization. The desire for words in our Indigenous languages is one that is linked to the need many of us feel to know how our gender and sexuality-complex ancestors were understood by our pre-colonization communities, to the ways in which trans, two-spirit and queer communities are coming together to share knowledge (including Indigenous-languages words to describe our genders and sexualities), and to our desire to become fluent in our languages (as part of the total body of knowledge that we need in order to exist). It is also deeply linked to the inability of English, a colonial language, to convey with any depth the intricacies of Indigenous worldviews.

Several participants specifically named the ways in which English as a colonial language cannot contain the expansive understandings of gender and sexuality held within our nations'

worldviews. Connor was explicit about the failure of English to accurately convey the richness, texture and depth of these knowledges, saying that

the translation of niizh manidoog or niizh manitowag as “two spirits” — I think English definitely fails that concept. I mean, in general, English sucks at describing these things...cause their more accurate translation would be specific to concepts in the language.

Connor notes the inability of the English language not only to accurately communicate the concept of niizh manitowag/niizh manidoog, but its inability to contain the worldviews inherent in Indigenous languages. When it comes to communicating Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality complexity, English fails. Here, Connor also gestures at the precarity of direct translations — direct translations being translations of words from Indigenous languages into English using the equivalent English word instead of translating the meaning behind each syllable or unit of speech.³¹ When single English words are used to communicate the meaning of Indigenous-language terms instead of the sentence-length (or, sometimes, paragraph-length) explanations necessary to describe the meaning behind these terms (which sometimes *still* fail to capture the complexity of the concept), the meaning of terms like niizh manidoog/niizh manitowag is flattened. Here, both English as a language and the practice of direct translation are noted as having deleterious effects on how we are able to talk about our ways of being in the world as queer, two-spirit and trans Indigenous people.

For some, these failures of English were also bound up with a drive to find words in Indigenous languages that were not necessarily names of specific roles that people held in our

³¹ To give an example from Kanyen'kéha, the translation of yehyatonhkwa as “pen” or “pencil” when the component parts of the word actually mean “it is used for writing.”

pre-contact nations, but rather words to describe the myriad ways in which we experience our genders, our sexualities, our bodies and our lives today. After much engagement with fluent language speakers trying to find a relatable word in Anishinaabemowin (and many encounters with terms and attitudes that reflect the gender binary), Connor now uses words that may not necessarily be recognized as having gender connotations by fluent speakers. One such word is the Anishinaabemowin term *aabitoose*, which Connor first came upon in Margaret Noodin's 2015 poetry collection *Weweni: Poems in Anishinaabemowin and English*. Connor explained this word as having multiple translations into English, all centred around the idea of being "mixed, in-between, in the centre." Having noted the difficulties experienced while bringing words more closely linked to gender complexity to language speakers, Connor explained that the shift towards using words such as *aabitoose* — words which are not typically understood to have meaning related to one's gender — have come with increased language skills, and is a practice that is "really just for me." Even though fluent Anishinaabemowin speakers might not understand when Connor identifies as *aabitoose*, the act of having a word in the language to describe oneself is meaningful. As Connor points out here, it is not just words that were used to describe sexuality and gender complexity or the roles our ancestors had that are meaningful to us — we are looking for words to describe the ways in which we are engaged in the act of being Indigenous, being part of our communities today. Whether or not there were ever words to describe two-spirit, trans and queer members of our communities, the act of finding, holding, and re-creating language to describe the ways in which we exist today is a powerful one.

Indeed, some participants affirmed that their languages did not contain specific names for everyone's unique combinations of assigned sex, gender, and sexuality before colonization, and do not contain them now. Dakotah, for example, explained "I was raised on traditional teachings as a kid, but I wasn't aware of two-spirited people per se. We didn't have that term, they were

just...they were. Without terms.” As Dakotah was growing up in their community, there was not specific terminology used to identify the two-spirit members of the community. Similarly, Sam shared

I think it’s kinda weird when people are like “oh, there would have been a word for every single person.” I’m like: we did have a word for every single person, it was our name.

[laughs] Maybe there were jobs or things like that that had words, but I don’t necessarily believe that we categorized people in the way that we do now. Or that we have to opt into, in the way that we do now. I think it was very different.

Sam asserts that in their nation, before colonization, there would not necessarily have been a word to describe each individual combination of assigned sex, gender, sexuality, or community role. They later clarified that there are words in Anishinaabemowin that are used to describe some these specific experiences of gender and sexuality complexity, but there is no clear timeline on when they came into common parlance. In the above quote, Sam connects the search for words to describe specific community roles, genders, or sexualities within our pre-contact nations to the types of categorization and taxonomy demanded by settler society. Before colonization, we would not have needed words to describe the specificities of our individual genders, bodies, and sexualities, and so such words likely did not exist. However, Sam does not imply here that Anishinaabemowin terms that describe gender and sexuality complexities are not vitally important to some trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people now; although there may not have always been words in the language for every gender identity, this does not negate the real need for words (words we coin ourselves, or existing words that we imbue with new meaning) to describe our lived experiences in a time and place that, as Sam notes, categorizes people constantly. As we will examine below, for some two-spirit, trans and queer people, this

language is part of the knowledge they need to survive and thrive as members of their nations in our current time and place.

As I have been highlighting throughout this chapter, participants want access to the knowledge they need in order to exist in the world as Indigenous people. Coming home to their Indigenous languages was, for many participants, an important part of their ongoing learning about “how to be” as members of their nations — because, as countless elders, knowledge keepers and Indigenous scholars have noted, our languages contain our worldviews. The deep knowledge contained within Indigenous languages is a large part of why settler governments have tried to eradicate our languages through residential schooling and child apprehension; in so doing, they are trying to eradicate our worldviews (Kovach, 2009). As Dr. Wilson emphasized in Chapter 4 (and as Fenris noted above), many of the elders, knowledge keepers and fluent language speakers in our Indigenous communities have (like all of us) been impacted by Western educational systems and mainstream settler culture, including the gender binary. These realities not only impact the health of Indigenous languages overall, but also constrain the ways in which gender and sexuality are understood in our languages, as well as the questions it is possible to ask elders and knowledge keepers when searching for words having to do with being trans, two-spirit or queer (Driskill, 2016; Robinson, 2014, April 2; 2014, May 16). As Dr. Wilson importantly noted in Chapter 4, these realities make patience and hard work key skills for undertaking this learning respectfully, as it is a lifelong process.

The sheer length of time it takes to gather knowledge about sexual and gender diversity within our nations was also underscored by Sam. In our conversation, Sam noted that although there are drawbacks to using two-spirit as an umbrella term (such as the blanding together of our distinct nations and traditions that they discussed in Chapter 6) the word two-spirit is important

because it can describe people's lived experiences of sexuality and gender complexity in the face of widespread lack of access to Indigenous languages. They shared:

I think it is all well and good for us to talk about decolonizing and all these things, and we have all these words in our languages, but we don't have access to those things. We don't. And you know, two weeks ago was the first time that I was able to find one word in Mohawk that was close to two-spirit, and was a word. And I was like "that's awesome!" and then, "let me go tell all the Mohawk people I know that I know this word!" And that is actually most of our experiences, is that we've spent most of our time trying to find the one thing.

Here, Sam states plainly that most trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people do not have access to Indigenous-language words describing sexual and gender diversity. Not unlike how discussions about the term two-spirit must take into account access to the time, resources and space for critical thinking that inform people's relationships to the literal definition, the access (or lack thereof) to Indigenous languages and safe spaces in which to learn them needs to be taken into account when we talk about the revitalization of our languages as part of decolonization.³² Though, as some participants articulated above, the English language is extremely limiting when it comes to describing Indigenous worldviews, it is often the only language to which our communities have access. For some of us, the amount of time that we spend trying to find even one word in our languages that comes close to describing our ways of being in the world is enormous — and when we do find something, we share that knowledge with those members of our trans, queer and two-spirit communities to whom it might be meaningful. For Sam, this lack of access to Indigenous-language terms describing sexuality and

³² For more on the relationship between accessibility, ableism, and decolonization, see Koonsmo & Recollet, 2018.

gender complexity inform the weight and importance of two-spirit as a term that can help trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people find one another and make meaning together. This part of my discussion with Sam led to an exchange on the importance of two-spirit as a placeholder term and as a tool for organizing; it is to these ideas that we will turn to conclude this chapter.

8.6 Two-Spirit as a Placeholder

The idea with which I close this chapter is one which was shared by many participants and is also present in some of the literature on two-spirit, trans and queer community organizing: that two-spirit is a term that acts as a placeholder or stop-gap measure until people recover (or create) words in their Indigenous languages to describe their ways of being in the world. Returning to the idea that learning two-spirit teachings means learning how to live as members of our nations, Sam again highlighted the importance of the word two-spirit as a tool for community building. They shared that they have

been doing so much work in community to try to find: what does [two-spirit] actually mean, what does it mean to live that way, actually. Cause it's like, let's forget all these terminologies and things like that, how do we live — how do I live as an Indigenous person? How do I live as an Anishinaabe person? [...] I think until we are in a place where we can have those conversations and people can opt in to them in a way that feels comfortable or safe, and that we have our community members and elders and knowledge keepers willing to share that stuff, that it's really important to have that word.

Here, Sam talks about their search for what two-spirit means not as a hunt for an easily digestible definition of the term, but a process of gathering the knowledge they require in order to exist in the world. The knowledge that they require does not hinge on “terminologies and things like that” but rather on ways of being in the world as an Anishinaabe person. Sam also notes that with

the current realities of cissexism, transphobia and homophobia in some communities, this knowledge is not always accessible to us. This, Sam argues, is why two-spirit is an important term; it allows people to find one another, it can hold space for many different experiences, and provides a term of reference for organizing that will help make it more possible to have community spaces and conversations into which people can enter “in a way that feels comfortable or safe.” In this way, Sam gestures at two-spirit as a placeholder term — an idea also articulated by participants in Walters et al. (2006), who described two-spirit as a stop-gap measure people used when they were in need of support, which acted as a sort of bridge on their path to recovering nation-specific traditions and community roles.³³

In my interview with Fenris, they also referred to two-spirit as a placeholder term several times. Fenris also shared that for them, two-spirit

definitely feels like the closest thing to describing my gender, because it acknowledges that loss and that barrier to identity — or I guess not entirely barrier to identity but like, two words. But, yeah, not having like, anything more specific than that. I sometimes use genderqueer, but it feels like, not at all close in the way that two-spirit is, even, and then two-spirit doesn't fully cover it.

Recalling the idea they described in their concept map (fig. 2), Fenris here notes the utility of two-spirit in gesturing at the barriers to robust identity that colonialism has erected — an identity for which “two words,” even though these two words are meaningful, does not adequately stand in. They also note that although two-spirit is the closest word to describing their gender, it still “doesn't fully cover it.” Recall that in Chapter 6, Fenris also noted how two-spirit communicates

³³ It is important to note that, in describing two-spirit as a placeholder, participants did not undermine the specificity of two-spirit as a legitimate tradition in and of itself. Using two-spirit as a placeholder is just one way among many in which people imbue the term with meaning.

the process of dispossession that has led them to use placeholders in the first place; for them, the word gestures at the processes of colonialism that have resulted in a lack of access both to Indigenous language terms to describe their gender, and to communities to whom such language would be meaningful. Importantly, they emphasized that acknowledging this loss is not the same as operating from a deficit model; it instead calls attention to the work they are doing alongside their community to rebuild their traditions. In this way, Fenris demonstrates the future-oriented nature of the word two-spirit: it is a term that signals ongoing resistance to dispossession, remembers the work of previous generations, and indicates that together we can create the futures we need.

Just as the literal definition of two-spirit is a type of gift — the gift of highly compressed knowledge that our ancestors intended for us to carry and re-expand — the word two-spirit itself is a gift that our aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins organizing in the late 1980's and early 1990's gave to us. As outlined in Chapter 6, some of the work that participants are doing with the word two-spirit is claiming space (both in Indigenous communities and in non-Indigenous communities) for themselves and their fellow trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people. Returning to the idea of using the words trans and two-spirit in conjunction, I will share a part of my conversation with Sam that exemplified the ways in which they use two-spirit as a tool to find fellow community members and resist erasure. Reflecting on their use of trans and two-spirit in tandem, they shared that their aim is often to

carve out specific space for myself and others. Cause there's a lot of youth who I know who are younger than me — like, I'm still a youth — who are trans, and who are non-binary, and who aren't seen at all. And when I was younger, I didn't necessarily have the same level of peers that I now have being that age I am, so I think it's really important for me to be able to get support and give support, and part of that is being able to name —

that I feel courageous enough and safe enough, and that I'm willing to be vulnerable, by saying "this is who I am" so other people can either do that as well if they feel like that's important to them, or at least speak to me about it. And that was pretty life-changing for me, when I met people who did that. So even in those scary spaces I still challenge myself to do it, so even if there's one person there, they know that we can find each other.

Here, Sam notes the pervasive erasure of trans and non-binary people that occurs in various community settings. They also note that, since they were deeply impacted when other people made themselves known as two-spirit and/or trans within community spaces, they feel a responsibility to do the same and reciprocate this supportive, community-building and space-claiming practice. Now that they are at a point in their life where they have a supportive network of peers, Sam feels "courageous enough and safe enough" to "carve out specific space" and "give support" to younger youth. Two-spirit is a term that helps them find their peers and communicate to them even in scary situations.

The future-oriented character of two-spirit was also touched on by Sam as they were explaining their concept map (figure 3) to me.

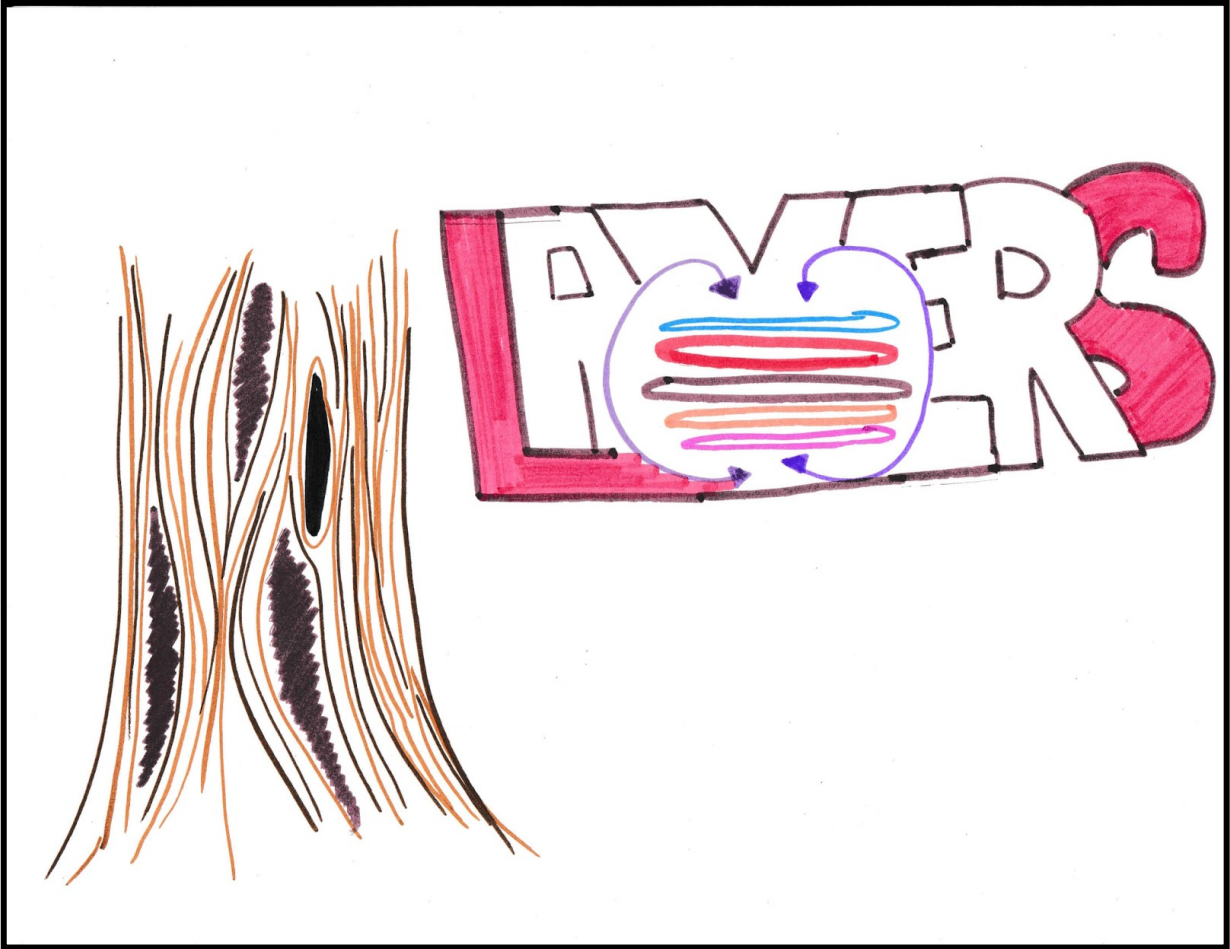


Figure 3: Sam's concept map

The map consists of two parts. On the left side of the page is the trunk of a large tree, with intricate ripples in the deep brown bark and a large, oval knot in the centre. On the right side of the page, the word “layers” is written in capital block letters. The “L” and the “S” are coloured in red, while the remainder of the letters are white. In the centre of the word, obscuring most of the “Y”, and part of the “A” and the “E,” is a drawing of five thin disks (one pink, one orange, one brown, one red, and one blue) stacked on top of one another. Curving around both the left and right sides of these stacked disks there are purple arrows, one end pointing at the top of the stack, the other pointing at the bottom of the stack. Sam explained these disks as a way of representing the inherent multiplicity (and not duality) of spirit to which the word two-spirit makes reference, the multiple layers of creation (or multiple dimensions) present in many of our nations’ creation

stories, and the multiple layers of personhood through which we transition over our lifetimes as we learn and grow. As we continue to gather more knowledge about ourselves and the world around us, we work our way through the layers of meaning Sam depicts here, as demonstrated by the arrows. In drawing these disks, Sam reiterates the importance of the continual learning about what it means “to embody being two-spirit” that they and other participants described at the beginning of this chapter.

The drawing of the tree was also linked to this ongoing learning journey for Sam, who described the vein-like bark as representing pathways of education. Among multiple other meanings that the tree in this map represents, Sam mentioned one particular tree teaching that resonated with our conversation, about the Great Tree of Peace.³⁴ They reflected:

the teaching about that, about being able to come back to the centre of the tree, that’s a really healthy reminder, too, that it’s not lost, actually, all we need to find is one of those roots, and then we can follow it back. [...] It feels more humbling to think about it in this way. Cause if we always think about it in a deficit model, that we’ve lost all these things and we don’t have them and this is all we have, it actually feels kind of shitty, because what we have is actually pretty awesome.

Just as anyone, no matter their background or their behaviour, can find a white root of peace and follow it to the Tree of Peace and the shelter of the Great Law of Peace, our two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous kin can find each other and come together to build community. Far from being defined by the loss of traditional teachings or language, Sam suggests that our communities have some things that are “actually pretty awesome”: the word two-spirit (as a tool to organize and

³⁴ The Great Tree of Peace is a white pine; it is the symbol of the Great Law of Peace brought to the Haudenosaunee confederacy by the Peacemaker. Any person or any nation can come under the shelter of the tree (that is, join the confederacy and live in accordance with the Great Law) by following one of the four white roots of the tree, which extend in the four directions. For more details, see Tehanetorens (2000) and Rice (2013).

find one another, as a reminder of the legacy of previous generations of community organizers), our ability to learn and work through layers of complex ideas, and one another. All of these meanings represented by the tree and the disks of Sam's map demonstrate an unshakable understanding that as trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous peoples, we have a future. Like the tree Sam drew continues to grow, our understandings of ourselves and the world around us continue to grow as well — as do our two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous communities.

In this chapter, I have described some of the desires and needs for knowledge, language, space and community that participants shared in our interviews. It is not just knowledge about pre-contact two-spirit traditions, nor even contemporary two-spirit traditions, that participants and their communities want to know; to use Sam's words, they want to know "how to be." Participants were clear that they want opportunities to philosophize with fellow two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people and with their Indigenous communities more broadly; to do this, they need spaces in which they can safely exist, and knowledge keepers, elders and non-two-spirit Indigenous community members who are actively making room for them in the circle. Importantly, these desires and needs are ones which participants and their communities are already meeting (or working towards meeting) through a variety of initiatives. The trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities to which participants belong (in Toronto and beyond) are vibrant, complex, and full of hope. It is with this core truth in mind that we move into the conclusion of this work.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

Though it began as a project to document the ways in which trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous young people in Toronto use and understand the term two-spirit, this research developed into an exploration of the myriad ways in which research participants refuse to answer the question “what does two-spirit mean?” and instead hold space for the complexity and diversity of meaning their communities put into the term. This thesis observes complexity in the ways in which participants grapple with and push back against the expectation of a singular, stable, intelligible definition of two-spirit in their everyday lives; in the ways in which participants answered my questions, refused to answer them, and asked questions of their own; and in the ways in which I as a researcher am navigating the process of collecting and analyzing data in community. In this concluding chapter, I will recount my process of coming to understand the purpose of the research, discuss the core findings of the research, indicate areas for further study, and explain what’s next for this project.

9.1 Purpose and Scope of the Research

I began this research — and my graduate school experience — invested in a specific theory of change. I thought, somewhat naively, that if non-Indigenous people just knew about the truths of settler-colonialism, they would stop participating in the systems that continue to devastate Indigenous communities and our lands and waters. This theory of change informed the initial goal of this research, which was to provide a platform for Indigenous young people’s voices to be magnified and legitimized, a way for young trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people’s truths to impact policy by providing a citable scholarly source containing their words. During the course of this research — and more broadly, over the past two years of graduate study

alongside brilliant peers and professors — I was exposed to a different theory of change that I came to endorse. This theory of change centres Indigenous people as the people who have the power to enact change. Instead of providing resources for settlers to learn about our truths, this theory of change is centred on the idea that change becomes possible when Indigenous people have the time and space to come together and theorize.

The specific theory of change that animates this work — one that is intimately related to this more general theory of change with which I am now working — was offered to me by participants in the course of our interviews together. Participants made it clear that creating a document to educate non-two-spirit people in order to change their harmful behaviours was not a high priority for them, because non-two-spirit people are not the ones who are the true agents of change; two-spirit, queer and trans Indigenous communities are *already* creating the changes in the world that they need in order to survive and thrive together. This theory of change that locates trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous young people as the change-makers shifted the purpose of my work as well as the structure and content of this thesis. Participants articulated this theory of change both in the ideas they shared with me and in the ways in which they enacted refusal during our interviews. In directing our interviews towards the topics that were meaningful to them — the ways in which they and their trans, two-spirit and queer communities come together to learn and live — participants demonstrated that it is these communities that are the places where change happens. By speaking directly about the ways in which two-spirit elides a simple definition, and by recounting their refusal to engage with the question “what does two-spirit mean” elsewhere in their lives, participants indicated that these are not the questions to which they need answers. Because the work that they and their communities do together is so important, some participants articulated a need for others to take up some of the labour of educating non-two-spirit people; by intervening into settler spaces and doing some of that

educational work, as well as providing a resource accessible to two-spirit youth, I am trying to strike a balance between two of the key educational needs articulated by participants.

As I write the final thesis, I think and hope that the change this thesis will make lies in being one more piece of the conversations about gender, sexuality, language, and traditions that we have been having in Indigenous communities for generations — conversations we will continue to have for many generations to come. Although I am happy to be providing a resource for non-two-spirit people to hear what two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous young people in Toronto have to say, I know that conversations within the academy or among non-Indigenous people are not the ones that matter the most. It is the conversations that I had with research participants that matter. It is the conversations that will (hopefully) happen in communities when folks access the online zine version of these research findings that matter. Our communities are the places where change is possible.

9.2 The Research Findings

As I indicated above, my understanding of the purpose of this research shifted over the course of interviews with participants. Instead of documenting what two-spirit means in order to educate non-two-spirit people, this thesis aims to trouble both the assumption that the meaning of two-spirit can be taken for granted, and the idea that non-two-spirit people need to know what two-spirit means at all. In Chapter 5, I discussed some of the ways in which participants enacted refusal that helped me understand the work of this thesis. Participants recounted that the actions of many non-two-spirit people put them into positions of needing to explain two-spirit; either because they are confused about what two-spirit means and ask them directly, or because they have specific expectations about what a two-spirit person looks like and thus make assumptions about participants that then need to be corrected. Many participants theorized a link between

narrow and literal definitions of two-spirit that circulate widely and the harmful assumptions that people make about them, their bodies, and their genders. These widespread misunderstandings of the term as just meaning a gay Indigenous person and attendant cissexist assumptions about people's bodies, genders, and assigned sex put two-spirit people — especially trans and non-binary two-spirit people — in the position of having to explain details about their lives to people. One way in which participants use two-spirit is as a purposeful redirection of this entitlement to information; a way to refuse to give people a straight answer about themselves, their bodies, and their relationships.

Participants articulated a number of other ways that they use and understand two-spirit, which were discussed in Chapter 6. They described two-spirit as a term that can have meaning related to one's sexuality, gender, and the roles one fills within community. Participants use two-spirit in a variety of contexts to communicate specific information about themselves to others, and as a banner under which to organize politically. Several participants also noted that they use two-spirit as a way to claim space for themselves and their communities. Many participants noted that, because not all trans or queer Indigenous people use the word two-spirit to describe themselves, using two-spirit as an umbrella term can be problematic. Instead of an umbrella term, Doug theorized two-spirit as a container that can hold a wide variety of specific meanings simultaneously. Importantly, participants also observed how two-spirit is used and understood differently in different places and across generations.

In Chapter 7, I discussed participants' ideas about the literal definition of two-spirit as a person who has both a masculine and a feminine spirit. For some participants, the literal definition of two-spirit contradicts specific teachings they hold about human spiritual life, while others contextualized this definition as just one of the many truths that two-spirit, as a container, can hold. I suggested four interconnected reasons for the predominance of this literal definition.

The first of these ideas was that the literal definition is just one example of the oversimplification of Indigenous knowledges that is rampant in settler society. A related idea, suggested by Connor, is that two-spirit people carry a multitude of gifts that truly are very useful in our communities, and this knowledge (like many nodes of traditional knowledge) has been somewhat compressed or flattened in order for it to survive and be transmitted under colonialism. The third idea, this one from Dana, was that our thirst for teachings that assert our inherent value and our right to be parts of our communities lead trans, two-spirit and queer people to take up the literal definition ourselves. The final idea, offered to me by several participants, was that the literal understanding of two-spirit is symptomatic of the widespread interpellation of the Western gender binary into Indigenous social thought. These four factors, in tandem with the accessibility of the literal definition, help to explain its prominence.

The ways in which participants articulated the needs and desires they hold — the skills that they and their communities want to learn, the questions they want to ask, the relationships they want to build, the knowledge they need to live — and redirected our conversations towards these topics were, as noted above, enactments of refusal. These desires and needs were discussed in Chapter 8. Many of the desires that participants talked to me about revolved around trans, queer, and two-spirit Indigenous young people having access to traditional knowledge (including traditional knowledge about gender and sexuality). Though some of the participants' desires have to do with the pre-contact traditions associated with gender and sexuality diversity in Indigenous nations, equally (if not more) important to them are the ways in which trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people are building community today — whether under the banner of two-spirit or not, whether recovering and revitalizing pre-colonization traditions or creating new ones. Participants noted that the barriers that can prevent access to safe community learning spaces for them and their peers (such as transphobia, cissexism, and homophobia) are direct

products of colonialism. They also talked about the related desire for access to their Indigenous languages — and many participants enumerated the ways in which English fails to meet their needs in expressing themselves and the complex relationships they have to gender, sexuality, and community. Many participants articulated that they are engaged in a process of gathering the knowledge they require in order to exist in the world — a process that will continue for their entire lives.

In recounting these research findings, my intent is not to present the ideas shared with me by participants as the only ways two-spirit might be used or understood. As participants made clear, trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people make meaning out of the word two-spirit in many different ways, all of which are valid. If there were some key points that I hope all readers take away from this work, they would be: the complexity of the term two-spirit; the ways in which trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous communities create space for one another using the word; and the fact that non-two-spirit people do not need to know what two-spirit means in order to treat trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous people with the respect we deserve.

9.3 Limitations of the Study & Further Research

As I mentioned above, this study is not intended to represent any objective truths about what two-spirit does or does not mean. It does not represent the ideas or opinions of all the two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous young people in Toronto; it only represents the ideas that the ten participants shared with me in our interviews. Alongside the fact that it is a non-representative sample, this study had a number of other limitations. I only talked to people who were able to attend the in-person interview conducted in spoken English, meaning that by design this study did not include youth who are incarcerated, do not have access to transportation to attend the interview, or do not speak English. As well, because participants were recruited

through a snowball sampling method in existing social networks, the study also did not include those individuals who may identify as trans, queer, or two-spirit but who are not known by others as being trans, queer, or two-spirit — i.e. people who are not “out.”

Since this study was designed to only include young people who live in Toronto, more research is needed to ascertain what trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous young people in other places — other cities, reserves, rural and suburban areas — have to say about the ways in which they use and understand two-spirit. Such research might inquire if there are youth in other places that share the perspective of those with whom 21 spoke in her home community, who asserted that two-spirit was an urban term, an academic term and a “Toronto thing.” Research participants also directly indicated areas for future research in our interviews. As discussed in Chapter 8, some participants expressed interest in research that engages young as well as older (and elder) trans, queer, and two-spirit community members to get a sense of the distinct and overlapping ways in which various generations understand two-spirit. In particular, Dana highlighted the urgency of recording the experiences and reflections of two-spirit elders while they are still here. These types of research called for by participants are not necessarily academic research; conversations among fellow trans, queer and two-spirit people in community are where much theorizing happens. Indeed, it is the type of research described by participants in Chapter 8 — the process of coming to understand what two-spirit means within their nation-specific worldviews, through learning alongside their communities — in which most participants were interested.

9.4 Where This Research is Headed

At the beginning of my research journey, I hoped that this thesis would help make change by leaving one small nugget of knowledge in the academy that would make the work of future

Indigenous scholars more possible. I also hoped that this thesis could be a resource that could help unseat the literal definition as the only understanding of two-spirit to which many people are exposed. I knew coming into this work that, as a researcher, I have a complex set of ethical obligations to my fellow queer, two-spirit and trans Indigenous community members. Many obligations which I expected of myself as a member of Toronto's queer, two-spirit and trans Indigenous community are articulated in the work of Indigenous scholars. Some especially important ideas are that all research done with an Indigenous community must be responsive to the needs and desires of that community, and that the research findings must be made available to the community in the formats they deem appropriate (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; S. Wilson, 2008). This set of obligations was reiterated to me by participants. During our conversations, many participants expressed that it was important to them that the findings of my research be accessible to fellow two-spirit young people, and that the research benefit the community in some way; as they highlighted time and time again, two-spirit, trans and queer communities are the places where meaningful, powerful change happens, so making the ideas in this thesis accessible to community members is the best way to ensure that this research is impactful.

During the research interviews, I spoke with participants about what future life they imagined for these conversations, floating the idea of a zine or a web page as potential mediums to share this research. Thinking through what participants said to me in those conversations, and in subsequent, less formal conversations with several participants and other community members, as well as meetings with my thesis supervisor, I have decided to produce a website. The website will contain this thesis and some condensed summaries of the research findings written in accessible language, as well as a digital zine. One key advantage of publishing a website with the research findings is that, as several participants told me during our interviews,

the internet is where many young people are doing the learning that is described above. Creating engaging summaries of the research and putting them online where they are freely accessible will make these data available to community members who do not have the time to read a 200-page manuscript. This website and digital zine will be a way for me to reflect the findings back to the trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous communities this research is for — a continuation of the core ethic expressed by participants that they want opportunities to philosophize with one another, and do not want to continue having conversations with the intent to educate non-two-spirit people. Since participants also articulated that it would be useful to have some of this educational labour taken off of their shoulders, the website, like this thesis, will have dual audiences of two-spirit folks and non-two-spirit folks. The zine, however, will be specifically for Indigenous communities, in order to (hopefully) add to conversations that are already happening, or else serve as a jumping-off point for discussions around the kitchen table. As we know, it is within our communities that learning and change take place.

The conversations which I had with participants — about knowledge, about language, and about our pasts and futures — are ongoing in trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities. They will continue for a long time because, as highlighted by Sam at the end of Chapter 8, two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous communities have long futures ahead of us. Together, we are making meaning, gathering knowledge, and building one another up. This thesis is just one part of this work.

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Appendix A
Letter of Information

Toronto-Based Two-Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous Young People's Understandings of Two-Spirit & Related Terms

You are invited to participate in “Toronto-Based Two-Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous Young People's Understandings of Two-Spirit & Related Terms,” a research study focusing on queer, trans, and two-spirit Indigenous young people's relationships to the term two-spirit. The purpose of this research is to investigate the ways in which trans, two-spirit, and queer Indigenous young people understand and use the term two-spirit (in conjunction with, or as separate from, any other terms to describe their gender, Indigenous nation, sexual orientation, etc.).

This research is being undertaken by Marie Laing as part of the completion of a Master of Arts degree in the Social Justice Education Department at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. The research is being supervised by Dr. Eve Tuck.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will complete a 30-60 minute interview with the researcher. Interviews will be held at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor St. W., Toronto. During the interview, you will be asked to make a concept map (also called a mind map or a word web) which maps out/draws/describes the relationships you understand between two-spirit and related terms to talk about gender, attraction, Indigeneity, yourself, and anything else you think is relevant.

Eligibility: participants must be Indigenous (self-identify as having Indigenous ancestry from Turtle Island, and affiliation with an Indigenous community); identify as two-spirit, intersex, queer, lesbian, bisexual, gay, pansexual, asexual, trans, genderqueer, genderfluid, or gender non-conforming; be between 18 and 35 years of age; and primarily reside within the city of Toronto.

Consent: Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate.

You will receive a digital copy (or hard copy, if requested) of your transcribed interview data, which you can edit, omit things from, or add things to as you see fit. You will also receive a digital copy (or hard copy, if requested) of the thesis so that you can make any additional additions or edits to your data before the thesis is submitted.

If you choose to participate in this research study, you are free to choose not to answer any question or engage in any activity during the interview process. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, no questions asked. You will be given digital copies of all data collected up to that point, and then the original copies will be destroyed and will not be used for any other purposes. You will still receive full compensation if you choose to withdraw at any point in the research process.

Compensation: you will receive \$20 for your participation in the study.

Confidentiality: at the beginning of the interview, you will have the chance to pick a pseudonym. Your name will not be attached to any of the information you provide during the interview process. All identifying details will also be altered or redacted from the interview data when it is transcribed to ensure confidentiality.

No one will have access to the data collected during this research study except the researcher and supervisor. Hard copies of demographic questionnaires and consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet to which only the researcher has access. Audio recordings and transcriptions will be stored on a secure server. After the research project is completed, all data will be retained by the researcher for five years and then destroyed.

All participants will receive a digital copy (or hard copy, if requested) of the submitted thesis. Some of the data collected in this research study may be used in presentations at academic conferences or in published journal articles. Participants will be notified if this any of the data is published.

Possible risks and benefits: The potential risks of participating in this research study are minimal. Answering questions about how you understand the word two-spirit may be perceived as a psychological or emotional risk. During the interview process, we some subjects might come up that are difficult to talk about (transphobia, biphobia, homophobia, racism) or which are associated with painful experiences. You are under no obligation to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable or which you find objectionable.

There is no direct benefit to individuals participating in this research.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your participation in this study, you can contact the researcher, Marie Laing ([REDACTED] or [REDACTED]), the research supervisor, Dr. Eve Tuck ([REDACTED]), or the University of Toronto Research Oversight and Compliance Office - Human Research Ethics Program (ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273).

This research study may be reviewed for quality assurance to make sure that the required laws and guidelines are followed. If chosen, (a) representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) may access study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review. All information accessed by the HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the research team.

Informed Consent Form

Toronto-Based Two-Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous Young People's Understandings of Two-Spirit & Related Terms

I, _____, affirm that:
(please print name)

1. I have read and understand the above Letter of Information in full.
2. I understand that participation in the "Toronto-Based Two-Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous Young People's Understandings of Two-Spirit & Related Terms" research study involves one 30-60 minute interview held at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor St. West, Toronto, which will be audio-recorded.
3. I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary, I am free to refuse to answer any question during the interview process, and I am free to withdraw from the study at any point, no questions asked.
4. I understand that I will be compensated \$20 for my participation in the study. I will be fully compensated no matter if I withdraw from the study at any point.
5. I understand that if I choose to withdraw from the study, I will be given a copy of all information collected during the interview process (audio recordings, transcriptions, and copies of concept maps) and the originals will be destroyed. All participants will be provided with a copy of the final submitted thesis.
6. I understand that all data collected during the interviews will be strictly confidential.
7. I understand that I will be provided with a copy of my interview transcription and I may add, edit, or remove information from it as I see fit. I will also be provided with a copy of the thesis before it is submitted, at which time I can, again, remove any information I see fit.
8. I understand that interviews will be audio recorded. I understand that the audio files and transcriptions will be stored on a secure server to which only the researcher has access, and that hard copies of demographic questionnaires and this consent form will be stored in a locked filing cabinet to which only the researcher has access.
9. I understand that if I have questions, concerns, or complaints about my participation in this study, I can contact the researcher, Marie Laing (_____) or _____), the research supervisor, Dr. Eve Tuck (_____), or the University of Toronto Research Oversight and Compliance Office - Human Research Ethics Program (ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273).

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix B

Toronto-Based Two-Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous Young People's Understandings of
Two-Spirit & Related Terms
Demographic Questionnaire

What is your age?

What is your Indigenous affiliation (nation, band, reserve, community, etc.)?

What language(s) do you speak?

What is your gender?

Please select the highest level of education you've completed:

- Elementary school
- Some high school
- High school diploma
- Some college or university
- College or university degree/diploma
- Some graduate school
- Master's degree
- Doctorate

How long have you been living in Toronto?

Appendix C

Toronto-Based Two-Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous Young People's Understandings of Two-Spirit & Related Terms **Interview Guide**

- How do you understand two-spirit? What is the meaning of the word? What meaning does it hold for you? How did you represent this on your concept map?
- What is the first time you came across the term two-spirit? Has your understanding of it changed since then?
- What are the relationships you see between two-spirit and other words or concepts for gender and sexuality? Between two-spirit and specific places?
- Do you use it as a blanket term for non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual Native people?
- How do you see the term deployed in your communities? In the media?
- Do you use the term two-spirit to describe yourself?
 - If yes, do you use it to describe your sexual orientation, your gender, your spirituality, the role you hold in your community, or a combination thereof?
 - What other words do you use to describe your sexuality? Your gender? Are the two related?
 - On your concept map, how is two-spirit related to other words in English, like gay or trans? How is it related to spirit? How is it related to words in other languages?
- How, if at all, does two-spirit mesh with or clash with spiritual and cultural teachings you hold?
- How does your use of two-spirit or other words you use to describe yourself inform or affect relationships between you and the communities in which you take part?