EIGHT
INDIGENOUS QUEER NORMATIVITY

> To be queer and native and alive is to repeatedly bear witness to worlds being destroyed, over and over again.
>
> —Billy-Ray Belcourt, "Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?"

MY FAMILY REGULARLY PARTICIPATES in sweat lodge ceremonies. My kids have grown up in this ceremony. This past summer, we came together in community as we always had. At the time, my daughter was questioning her gender and how to express it in a truthful way. She was not wearing skirts, or lace, or pink, or anything that said "girl." She was asking about gendered pronouns and what it exactly it means or doesn't mean to be a girl. She was dressing in boys' clothes and wearing a boy's bathing suit. She's growing up in ceremony, and she is well aware of the accepted protocols in our wider community and our families' ceremonial practices. Typically, the accepted protocols are that women wear skirts, sit on a particular side of the lodge, have responsibilities around water and berries, and do not participate in the ceremony while menstruating. The morning of the sweat, she didn't pack a skirt but her boy's bathing suit. She helped me put the cedar in the lodge and the berries in a wooden bowl (in

some ceremonial communities this is a woman's role), and she helped with the fire (in some ceremonial communities this is a man's role). When it came time to go into the lodge, she sat in the circle with the rest of us, in between the men and the women. When the pipes came around, she smoked them. This was all normalized for her.[1] There was no discussion ahead of time or after (although we've had plenty of discussion over all of this for the past fifteen years). We just did things as, for her, they had normally been done. I felt proud of my community and my family and also sad in the realization of how uncommon her experience is right now. I thought about how crushed she would have been if someone had tried to make her wear a skirt or had discouraged her from fire keeping. If that had happened, I know the pain and hurt she might have felt might have been enough for her to remove herself from ceremony, maybe forever. I also know from listening and reading the stories of queer Indigenous youth that her experience is incredibly rare.[2] Queer youth are telling me that most often they get crushed. The toll of crushing on bodies, minds, and spirits is accumulative, diminishing, and restrictive. It also eliminates. It eliminates queer bodies from Indigenous spaces. It eliminates Indigenous bodies as political orders.

Their *Indigenous* worlds get destroyed.

This is so unacceptable to me within the ethical frameworks of Nishnaabeg grounded normativity, and also so unnecessary. It is also infuriating because while there are a lot of things we cannot fix right now, this is one of the things that we can collectively take on and make better. Right now.

At the very foundation of this story is the idea that my child has the responsibility of figuring out a meaningful way to live in the world that is consistent with her most intimate realities. The job of everyone else is not to direct or control that but to support her. This is a relationship between her and the spirit world. No one else has the right to interfere with that, unless it is causing great harm to someone else.[3] This is true for all Nishnaabeg people regardless of gender. We all have the responsibility to figure out how to become contributing members of our society

while honoring our deepest truths, our gifts and skills, our clan affiliations, and our names. Self-actualization is a relationship between ourselves and the spirit world, and it is supposed to take place in the context of family and community.

We all have a relationship to creation. Alex Wilson, a scholar from Opaskwayak Cree Nation, says, "We call the moon grandmother and the earth mother in English, but in Cree this is not the case. What is important is the relational aspect acknowledging some kind of kinship. In Cree, land (aski) is not gendered. . . . Same for water. It's not gender but it has spirit of life and it's fluid."[4]

This is true in Nishnaabewin as well: the earth is Aki; the moon, dibik-giizis; the sun, giizis; the sky, giizhik. Although there is a heteronormative imposed gender often projected onto creation, this is only one telling, a telling that is reflective in my view of a Christianized relationship to the earth, rather than one that is more deeply reflective of Nishnaabeg ethics and practices.[5] Perhaps one of the most powerful community-based tool kits ever written on the subject, *Violence on the Land, Violence on Our Bodies: Building an Indigenous Response to Environmental Violence,* produced by the Women's Earth Alliance and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, provides a simple exercise that can be used to consider one's relationship to all aspects of creation without gendering them. The exercise begins by asking participants to choose one particular aspect of the land—a river, the sky, and so on—and talk about it and their relationship to it without gendering it. The exercise emphasizes that we all have a relationship to creation and that these relationships are not tied to certain body parts. It centers the idea that creating life comes in many forms, not just from the womb, and it creates a space where all genders can have valuable, ethical, consensual, meaningful, and reciprocal relationships with all aspects of creation—which I believe is the point.[6]

My spiritual world is also benevolent and intelligent. Spiritual beings see the complications of colonialism that have asymmetrically targeted queer bodies because they've lived through this *with us,* because many of them are queer in sexual

orientation, and most of them come from a time when our nation embodied queerness in formation, as practice, ethics, and process. The violence of heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, and transphobia changes our lived context. I believe our Ancestors love us unconditionally and are willing to work with us so no Indigenous bodies feel the pain and hurt of exclusion, shame, or outright violence in our most intimate spaces. Not only have they consistently provided us with stories, song, and ceremonies that embody the concepts of consent, body sovereignty, freedom, and individual self-determination, they have repeatedly emphasized the ideas of compassion, empathy, and caring in everything they do. I believe my Ancestors and the spiritual beings I am in relationship with are brilliant and complex, and they are not going to strike me down because I didn't follow a "rule" about how I should approach them—this to me is how Christianity works, not Nishnaabewin. I'm going to be someone's Ancestor at some point, and that's certainly not OK with me.

We simply cannot accept a singular, shallow interpretation of Nishnaabeg thought and use it to shame, exclude, and degrade members of our nations. Our thought systems within grounded normativity are fluid, dynamic, and responsive, and it is our responsibility to practice grounded normativity in the way it was intended: to build strong societies of individuals who are functioning as their best selves. They also come from the land—the land that provides endless examples of queerness and diverse sexualities and genders.[7] We collectively have a responsibility to figure out how to make our spirituality relevant to *all* our people. That's the philosophical and practical challenge each generation inherits. I strongly believe, then, that I have a responsibility to interpret and live these practices in ways that do not replicate homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and heteropatriarchy. I think nation building and resurgence cannot be meaningful otherwise.

Alex Wilson has been working on this issue for decades now, from within her own Cree grounded normativity. She is from Opaskwayak Cree Nation in Manitoba, a community that normalized queerness when she was growing up. She writes,

"In my community, 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; as we reclaim our identity with this name, we are returning to our communities."[8] Over the years, when I've asked different Nishnaabeg elders about queerness, they often say that we didn't have that. Then when I ask if two women ever lived together intimately, without men, they will remember stories of queer couples, not as queer people, but just people who lived like that, as something that wasn't a big deal, as if it were a normal inconsequential part of life. What these elders and Alex are describing is a gender variance that existed in many Indigenous communities prior to the strategic implanting of the colonial gender binary. This imposed an artificial gender binary as a mechanism for controlling Indigenous bodies and identity and sets out two very clear genders: male and female. It lays out two sets of rigidly defined roles based on colonial conceptions of femininity and masculinity.[9] It then places colonial concepts of maleness and masculinity as more important than female and femininity and erases any variance. This is what heteropatriarchy needs to operate, and the more that heterosexual cisgendered Native men and women buy into the hierarchy and choose to reproduce and enforce violence, exclusion, and erasure, the better it works to divide and destroy the fabric of relationships that make up our nations. Heteropatriarchy isn't just about exclusion of certain Indigenous bodies, it is about the destruction of the intimate relationships that make up our nations, and the fundamental systems of ethics based on values of individual sovereignty and self-determination. The more destruction our intimate relationships carry, the more destruction our political systems carry, and the less we are able to defend and protect our lands, and the easier it is to dispossess.

2SQ Indigenous peoples flourished in many Indigenous nations and were highly visible to the first European "explorers." The archival and Western historical record sets down this visibility and the anti-queerness of these explorers, translators, traders,

and missionaries in the 1600 and 1700s. Samuel de Champlain, Jacques Marquette, Baron de Lahontan, Jesuit priest Pierre-François Lafitau, Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, military interpreter and writer John Tanner, David Thompson and Alexander Henry, Charles MacKenzie, fur trader Ross Cox, and, later, photographer George Catlin are a few examples.[10] In *Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner during Thirty Years Residence among the Indians in the Interior of North America*, John Tanner describes Ozawendib (Yellowhead), from Leech Lake, as a visible 2SQ man with several intimate partners, or "husbands."[11] Tanner records the term *agokwa* as one that was used to describe Ozawendib. He also describes an elder and the Nishnaabeg community around Ozawendib using the pronoun "she" to address Ozawendib and notes that her sexuality, relationship orientation, and gender were accepted as normal.[12] Tanner also records his own anti-queerness, as he describes this beautiful scene as "disgusting."[13]

Joseph-François Lafitau was a French Jesuit missionary and ethnologist working in Rotinonhseshá:ka territory in the early part of the 1700s. In his major and often cited work published in Paris in 1724, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times,* Lafitau "congratulates" missionaries for "suppressing" Indigenous queer relationships. He describes the missionaries' success in prompting many queer Indigenous people and their relations to see their identity as "shameful." He was pleased to report that after seventy-five years of missionary work, people once "regarded as extraordinary men," had now "come to be looked on, even by the Indians, with scorn."[14] Jesuit missionaries also counseled Indigenous parents of children who were not conforming to the colonial gender binary to force conformity.[15] This is significant to me because the book was published 1724, before the height of the residential schools system and the Indian Act, after seventy-five years of intense targeting of 2SQ people in Indigenous nations and communities within the reach of Jesuit missions.[16] By 1724, the Jesuits were boasting about the deliberate elimination of queer Indigenous peoples from our nations. Of course they were incorrect, because 2SQ

people clearly resisted and found ways of living invisibly to colonial powers, or I couldn't have written this chapter.

Scott Lauria Morgensen's *Spaces between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* makes the point that in other parts of the Americas 2SQ people were eliminated by death, but that by the mid-nineteenth century in French and British Canada and in postrevolutionary New England, 2SQ people were "less singled out for violence than subjected with their communities to military attack, containment or removal."[17] He goes on to say that colonial institutions such as Indian agencies, missionary churches, and boarding schools noticed sexual and gender variance but "without needing to exact brute force violence, these institutions used disciplinary education to try and break Native communities, languages and cultural knowledges."[18] Given the amount of surveillance of "unchurched" relationships among Indigenous men and women on reserves by clergy, Indian agents, and Christianized Natives, as discussed in the previous chapter, I find it difficult to believe that this wouldn't also be the case for 2SQ people in our communities, whether or not there is documented evidence in Indian Affairs archives.[19] I'm also unsure that I see the difference between brute force and the extreme forms of gendered, sexualized, physical, and emotional violence and abuse suffered by Indigenous children in residential schools, violence I can only imagine was amplified the more a child expressed variance from the strict colonial gender binary. We have no statistics on the number of queer children that died in residential schools, died escaping residential schools, committed suicide as a result of their residential school experience, or were forced to live an invisible life because of residential school homophobia and shaming. Nor have we fully investigated the intergenerational impacts of the infusion of anti-queer violence into our communities and its impact on our political systems and nationhood as a result of residential schools. Further, nearly four hundred years after Lafitau's book, queer Indigenous youth are telling us very clearly that anti-queer violence is still a tremendous, horrific force in their lives.

Two Spirit elder Ma-Nee Chacaby, in her autobiography *A Two-Spirit Journey: The Autobiography of a Lesbian Ojibwa-Cree Elder,* recounts her childhood in Ombabika, a community in northwest Ontario. Chacaby remembers her grandmother explaining to her that she had two spirits as a young child. She used the term *niizhin ojiijaak* to describe a male and female spirit living inside a girl.[20] She explained that Nizhiin Ojiijaak girls were often drawn to activities that boys like, and she said that Niizhin Ojiijaak could choose not to marry, could marry someone of the opposite sex, or could marry someone of the same sex. She explained that Nizhiin Ojiijaak couples would adopt children who had lost their parents, that they sometimes had special healing or ceremonial responsibilities, and that it was her responsibility to figure out how to live her own life. Her grandmother also told her stories of Nizhiin Ojiijaak—two men living and raising children together, another woman who was responsible for making navigational marks on rocks—and Chacaby remembers meeting other Nizhiin Ojiijaak in Ombabika.[21]

All of this evidence points to what Two Spirit and queer people have always known from living as 2SQ in settler colonialism: 2SQ bodies and the knowledge and practices those bodies house as Indigenous political orders were seen as an extreme threat to settler society, sovereignty, dispossession, and the project of colonization, colonialism, and assimilation. The powerful relationships queer bodies house—consent, diversity, variance, spiritual power, community, respect, reciprocity, love, attachment—were the very first thing colonizers sought to eliminate, and they began celebrating what they thought was the genocide of 2SQ people in my nation long before colonization reached nations on the West Coast or in the north.

I had the privilege of hearing Alex talk about queerness and Indigeneity in my class on self-determination at Dechinta last year. Alex talked about how normalized gender variance in Indigenous communities was attacked and the gender binary was violently enforced through residential schools, day schools, and sanitariums, where children were separated into boys or girls,

their hair forcibly cut, and their clothes changed to skirts or pants, and where they were punished for normal, healthy expressions of sexuality and gender expressions outside of the rigidity of Victorian masculinity and femininity. The gender binary was also reinforced through the Indian Act: only men could run for chief and council until 1950, marriage was defined in a heterosexual, monogamous way, and the rules for status and property were gendered and binarized. Indian agents forced English names on us, which also upheld the gender binary; a binary was also reinforced in the church, by anthropologists studying roles, and later by narrow interpretations of our own thought systems. Indian agents prevented the use of Nishnaabemowin and therefore the gender variance encoded in our language, and they policed the intimacy of Indigenous peoples, as described in the previous chapter, to promote heterosexual, monogamous relationships between cisgendered men and women to the exclusion of all other intimate partnerships. I thought about this as an attempt to break the network of intelligent relationships housed in Indigenous bodies in order to prevent the replication of Indigenous freedom, in order to get land. This is one way heteropatriarchy dispossesses, but it's not the only way.

While these actions caused the power and agency of all genders to shrink, those that are farthest away from colonial ideals suffered most and continue to be targets of harsh colonial violence. Remember Audra Simpson's characterization of Indigenous bodies as political orders. Queer Indigenous bodies are political orders. Queer Indigenous bodies house knowledge, relationships, and responsibilities. Queer Indigenous bodies are a threat to settler sovereignty, which is why queer Indigeneity has been and is violently targeted by colonial and settler colonial powers in an ongoing way in order to dispossess. Queer Indigenous bodies therefore also house and generate a wealth of theory and critical analysis regarding settler colonialism that straight bodies cannot. Engaging in anti-queerness, therefore, in all its various manifestations is tantamount in my mind to us consenting to and participating in autogenocide.

Queerness from within Nishnaabeg Thought

Naming the gender binary as colonial is important because when I think about this binary from within Nishnaabeg conceptual thought or from within the reality of so-called hunting and gathering societies, it makes no sense in terms of the ethical systems grounded normativity sets up. Further, it is at odds with the practicality of life in the bush because it restricts and prevents relationships, productivity, and, in many aspects, actual survival. If I am to be able to take care of myself on the land, I need to have a reciprocal and respectful relationship with all aspects of creation. I need to have a proficiency in hunting, fishing, gathering, making shelter, traveling, ceremony, warmth, light, and feeding and clothing myself and those reliant upon me. I cannot restrict myself to an exclusively gendered workload and just expect to survive.

The word *matriarch* in reference to Indigenous conceptualizations of power and gender makes no sense to me within Nishnaabeg thought because it reinforces a gender binary, it reinforces anthropological social constructions of Indigeneity, and it reinforces authoritarian power, rather than authentic grounded power. Nishnaabeg "women" hunted, trapped, fished, held leadership positions, and engaged in warfare, as well as carrying out domestic tasks and looking after children, and they were encouraged to show a broad range of emotions and to express their gender and sexuality in a way that was true to their own being, as a matter of *both principle and survival.*[22] Nishnaabeg "men" hunted, trapped, fished, held leadership positions, engaged in warfare, and also knew how to cook, sew, and look after children. They were encouraged to show a broad range of emotions and to express their gender and sexuality in a way that was true to their own being, as a matter of both principle and survival. This is true for other genders as well. And while there was often a gendered division of labor (one that I believe was exaggerated by anthropologists), there were also a lot of exceptions based on individual agency. The degree to which individuals engaged in each of these activities depended

upon their name, their clan, their extended family, their skill and interest, and most importantly individual self-determination or agency.[23] Agency was valued, honored, and respected because it produced a diversity of highly self-sufficient individuals, families, and communities. This diversity of highly self-sufficient and self-determining people ensured survival and resilience that enabled the community to withstand difficult circumstances. This diversity was seen in everything; for instance, there are a diversity of ways to harvest and process wild rice, which vary between individuals, families, communities, and regions. The *how* looks different for different individuals, but as long as the practices produce cured rice in an efficient and ethical manner, they don't need to be all the same. In fact, it is better for long-term sustainability if they aren't, so we have a variety of solutions and knowledge before any problems show up.

While the intersections between queer theory and Indigenous Studies are interesting, I am more drawn to recovering how Indigenous theory, in my case how Nishnaabeg theory, conceptualizes gender or can conceptualize gender and sexual orientation because my sense is that my Ancestors lived in a society where what I know as "queer," particularly in terms of social organization, was so normal it didn't have a name.[24] I've thought a great deal about Alex Wilson's words quoted early in this chapter, and in my fiction writing I try to create story worlds where queerness is normalized. This is consistent with stories I've heard from queer and straight elders.[25] It's led me to consider what straightness looks like in societies where queerness is normalized, where difference isn't difference but normal. Queerness provides for and celebrates variance, including straightness, whereas heteropatriarchy sets out to destroy, control, and manipulate difference into hierarchies that position white, straight, cisgendered males as normal, and everyone else as less.

This kind of thinking is now marginalized within Nishnaabeg intelligence, and I'm the first to offer that my thinking on this may be different than the majority of my nation. I want to begin by looking broadly at our values about diversity, consent,

self-determination, and noninterference, building upon the discussion I started in *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*. Nishnaabeg thought directs me to respect and celebrate individual self-determination and diversity. Coercion in this way of thinking is a kind of exploitation. Coercing someone into wearing something they are not comfortable wearing, using gendered pronouns that they do not want us to use, erasing queerness from every corner of the universe, is not consistent with any Nishnaabeg teaching I've ever heard. In this way, I believe that within Nishnaabeg intelligence, or grounded normativity, we have the concepts and ethics to build Indigenous nations where queer people have body sovereignty, self-determination, influence, and freedom and bear crucial political orders, and where homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity are unacceptable. I don't accept the narrow, singular interpretations of our knowledge systems that lead to "tradition" steeped in dogma, exclusion, erasure, and violence, and I am not willing to replicate that in the beautiful Indigenous worlds we will create in the present and in the future. I can't be part of a movement or a ceremonial community that is interested in building worlds that will continue to destroy queer Indigenous youth.

In 2011, Darryl Dennis hosted an episode of CBC's *ReVision Quest* on the theme of being Indigenous 2SQ people. I remember pulling over on the side of the highway and listening as he interviewed Nishnaabemowin (our language) expert Roger Roulette, Alex, and many others in his exploration of what it means to be "queer and Indigenous." Seven and a half minutes into the episode, Roulette explained some of the nonjudgmental terminology we have in Nishnaabemowin regarding queerness:

> wiijidaamaagan means s/he co-habits with a person; wiipemaagan means s/he sleeps with a person and wiijiiwaagan means a friend or companion; according to Roger's uncle . . . a gay person is described as wiijininiimaagan—a man whose partner is another man; wiijikwemaagan is a woman with a female partner—the word has no judgment in it.[26]

Roulette also explained to the host that gender was not exclusively bound to certain roles in life, "it was determined more by a child's natural inclinations rather than whether baby clothes were pink or blue, and in some places these survived right up into modern times."[27] I felt relieved that Roulette had confirmed something that I had learned from a variety of elders but that still somehow remains on the margins: that this rigid gender binary of male/female was brought to us under colonialism and exists in tension to some of our core values and ethics, or at least to some interpretations of our core values and ethics.[28] Similarly, Nishnaabeg historian Anton Treuer writes:

> [Sex] usually determined one's gender and, therefore, one's work, but the Ojibwe accepted variation. Men who chose to function as women were called *ikwekaazo,* meaning "one who endeavors to be like a woman." Women who functioned as men were called *ininiikaazo,* meaning "one who endeavors to be like a man." . . . Their mates were not considered *ikwekaazo* or *ininiikaazo,* however, because their function in society was still in keeping with their sex [gender]. If widowed, the spouse of an *ikwekaazo* or *ininiikaazo* could remarry someone of the opposite sex or another *ikwekaazo* or *ininiikaazo.* The *ikwekaazowag* worked and dressed like women. *Ininiikaazowag* worked and dressed like men. Both were considered to be strong spiritually, and they were always honored, especially during ceremonies.[29]

Nishnaabeg playwright Waawaate Fobister uses the term recorded by Tanner, *agokwe,* in his critically acclaimed play of the same name to describe gender variance and a gay male sexual orientation in a similar way. Waawaate translates the term to mean a "wise woman," "two spirit," and "woman within a man."[30] Some 2SQ people in the Nishnaabeg community also use the term *agokwe-ininito* to refer to gender variance and a lesbian sexual orientation, although my understanding of Nishnaabeg gender and sexual orientation is that we continue to express both qualities along a spectrum of variance.[31]

Later in the day, I returned home to my family and continued reading to my kids out loud from Nishnaabeg writer Louise Erdrich's Birchbark House series. This is Erdrich's juvenile fiction series and includes *The Birchbark House, The Game of Silence, The Porcupine Year,* and *Chickadee.* The series begins in the mid-1800s and follows an Nishnaabeg family living on an island in Lake Superior through three generations of living out an Nishnaabeg existence in an era of increasing settler surveillance and violence. Erdrich has carefully crafted a world that replicates the one so cherished in Nishnaabeg oral tradition, and this makes these novels both a gift and a masterpiece.

Erdrich's work is also an important reflection of the relationship between Nishnaabeg children and adults, and one that with a few exceptions is consistent with my understanding of this relationship coming through the oral tradition.[32] Children were afforded a lot of freedom and agency within their own lives. *The Porcupine Year,* for instance, begins with a story about two children, twelve-year-old Omakayas, the main character of the series, and her younger brother, Pinch, out night hunting for deer in a canoe. This in itself demonstrates a high level of skill (canoeing, firearms, navigation, hunting), self-determination (these two children are the decision makers), and trust from adults in their family. As in any good story, after the children are caught in the confluence of two rivers and whisked over rapids, they are forced to use their intelligence to take care of each other and make it back to their family.[33]

Similarly, the character Two Strikes clearly demonstrates that difference and diversity were both valued and fostered within Nishnaabeg practices. Two Strikes, while identified in the novels as a girl, takes up the responsibilities of hunting, trapping, and physically defending the family from a young age. The family, in fact, her extended family and community, not only makes room for her, but they support, nurture, and appreciate the gifts and contributions she makes to their community. She is an excellent shot and without question the best hunter and protector of her generation. She refuses to participate in the culture of women, whether its work, ceremonial responsibilities, or po-

litical responsibilities. She behaves and lives out the responsibilities of men, and rather than coercing or shaming her into the responsibilities of women, her family steps back and supports her expression of herself, in part because it is her responsibility to figure out how to live authentically in the world and in her family. Two Strikes chooses not to wear skirts and not to participate in girls' puberty rituals, because her path is different. Her relationship to the spirit world is a powerful one, which her family supports her in and influences, but they also have tremendous respect for her own agency within that relationship.

My daughter doesn't particularly like Two Strikes as a character, and neither do I, primarily because Two Strikes isn't written as a particularly lovable character. She is bossy, obnoxious, and mean, and she is also strong, uncompromising, and persistent. I wish the one gender "nonconforming" Nishnaabeg character my kid has read about was not written as someone who takes on the worst aspects of colonial masculinity as her queer identity, and I wish the gender fluidity that I know is part of my nation was written into all the characters. I wish my children were growing up surrounded by stories and literature written *by and for 2SQ people* that include trans kids as characters who are loving, brilliant queer Indigenous peoples.

Anti-Queerness as Autogenocide

This idea of supporting an individual's responsibility to self-actualize and find their own path with regard to their life's work, their gender expression, their sexual identity, their relationship orientation, and all other aspects of life is something I have repeatedly experienced within Nishnaabeg society, particularly among those practitioners who are engaged with the complexities of our ancient philosophies, as opposed to people, like myself, who are very much engaged in a process of reclamation and decolonization. I have also witnessed this in other Indigenous nations. When an individual asserts their identity, it is the community's job to make room and support that assertion. I have also of course seen the opposite of this, particularly directed toward women and 2SQ people, when rigidity

and singular interpretations of protocols and rituals are used to exclude individuals and communities of people. Exclusion has been more common in my experience then inclusion. I find this extraordinarily problematic and inconsistent with my understanding of Nishnaabeg thought because while I am well aware of these teachings and protocols, there is another set of practices that are ignored when women and 2SQ people are excluded from ceremonies or pressured into wearing skirts. I understand that I am responsible for how I perform and interpret these practices and that responsibility is between me and the spirit world. I don't blindly accept that elders or ceremonial leaders can dictate that for me (nor do they ask me to). They can certainly offer perspectives and advice, but ultimately I am responsible for how I conduct myself, and this is dependent upon my own personal relationship with the spiritual realm. I might have a responsibility to share skirt wearing or moon time practices with other self-identified women, but it is up to them to determine which practices they will animate in their life, and if I'm upholding Nishnaabeg practices of love, gentleness, and respect for individual self-determination, then I must also practice an ethic of noninterference, nonjudgment, and nonshaming.

Resurgence, though, is not just about bringing queer individuals into straight Indigenous spaces. Queer Indigeneity cannot be reduced to just sexual orientation. It is about a web of supportive, reciprocal, generative relationships that we often do not have names for in English and that exist outside of the hierarchy and the imagination of heteropatriarchy—a hierarchy that places the relationship of cisgendered, married, monogamous men and women at the top, and de-emphasizes or erases all other relationships. Ceremonies, ritual, social organization, and mobilization that replicate this invisibility and hold up the hierarchy also center heteropatriarchy. Radical resurgence is then about the destruction of the colonial hierarchy that heteropatriarchy embeds in us, our communities, and our nations, and restoring all Indigenous bodies as political orders within our political systems and nationhood.

Centering Queerness in Resurgence

Two Spirit scholar Dana Wesley spent a considerable amount of time for her master's thesis, titled *Reimagining Two-Spirit Community: Critically Centering Narratives of Urban Two-Spirit Youth,* listening to Two Spirit youth. She concludes her work with a challenge to the broader Indigenous nation-building community:

> In my personal experiences during the beginning of the Idle No More movement, I noticed that it became a bit of a trend to include Two-Spirit when talking about women and children in relation to nationhood and sovereignty. At first glance it appeared to be a step in the right direction, in that there was recognition of Two-Spirit people (as well as of women and children) among Indigenous people who were challenging hetero-patriarchy and heteropaternalism in conversation with each other about nation building. Unfortunately, the conversation often stopped short of any kind of real engagement with Two-Spirit people. In my experience I did not witness any Two-Spirit people take part in Idle No More as representatives of Two-Spirit leadership. In Indigenous social and activist spaces, I have witnessed a pattern wherein Two-Spirit people are invoked by gestures to inclusion in the absence of any meaningful Two-Spirit involvement. Essentially, Two-Spirit has become a buzzword to include in speeches and presentations, but there is no follow-through on how to support Two-Spirit people within their own Indigenous communities. There is still no mention of Two-Spirit roles or of how essential they are to Indigenous communities. If Indigenous people want to have real conversations about nationhood, then there have to be serious efforts made to foster relationships between Two-Spirit people and wider Indigenous communities. If our leaders, academics, teachers, clan mothers, elders and medicine people

> are serious about the idea that we are all related, and that nation-building is how we are going to decolonize our minds and communities, then there has to be more than just lip-service recognition of Two-Spirit existence. Creating real connections with Two-Spirit people means asking them what matters to them in relation to nation building.[34]

There are several important truths in this paragraph. Wesley is speaking back to a particular problem in Indigenous political mobilizations in general: the replication of anti-queerness through the erasure of 2SQ people from the leadership of these movements; the superficial gesturing toward 2SQ issues in organizing, presentations, and scholarship; and a lack of conversations with, or perhaps of listening to, the 2SQ community in nation-building exercises. She issues us a challenge. If nation building is how we are going to decolonize, then we have to ask 2SQ people what matters to them. I'd add that we need to do more than consult. We need to listen, hear, and center 2SQ people in nation building. To do otherwise is to dream Indigenous realities where we position queerness not as normal, as Alex Wilson practices, but as special and outside of the collective grounded normativity that generates us.

The contributions of Indigenous Two Spirit and queer organizers under the banner of Idle No More are also tremendous, and I want to be careful here to not erase the hard and often behind-the-scenes work of these organizers and the willingness of the Idle No More organization (www.idlenomore.ca) to address these issues within the organization. Several active chapters are led by 2SQ activists, the communications team of the organization includes many 2SQ leaders, the majority of Idle No More webinars have included 2SQ voices, and when INM was invited to meet with James Anaya (UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), they used their entire allotted time to bring forward the issue of homophobia and suicide in the Two Spirit community. These are tremendous contributions to Indigenous movement building and organizing and are a

result of years of hard work, sacrifice, and organizing on the part of the 2SQ community.[35]

I've thought a lot about the idea of queering resurgence and nation building throughout my life because I don't fit neatly into the colonial gender binary and the heterosexual, monogamous relationships it demands. It has never been the center of my work in part because I think there are brilliant queer Indigenous writers, scholars, and activists who are doing a better job of articulating these issues than I am, and because I've been in a long-term heterosexual relationship that bestows upon me privilege those in queer primary relationships do not have. I worry, though, that collectively we're not hearing or seeing the work of these brilliant queer Indigenous writers, scholars, and activists. I worry that Indigenous feminisms are sometimes too influenced by mainstream white, straight feminism. I worry that Indigenous masculinities reinforce the colonial gender binary, centering cisgendered straight men (who are already centered in everything) instead of dismantling heteropatriarchy, and that the binary set up between feminisms and masculinities casts queer people out, so they have to continually *come in,* because worlds have been constructed by straight Indigenous peoples that leave queer Indigenous thought out. I worry that Indigenous theory gets positioned in the past as unable to explain or generate queer Indigeneity in the present. I know that if we have to worry that we don't have enough queer voices on the panel or enough queer voices in the book, then we've already failed because we've constructed Indigenous worlds where 2SQ have to come in because anti-queerness placed 2SQ outside. This was clear to me at the 2015 meeting of the Native American Indigenous Studies Association annual meeting when hundreds of people showed up to hear the panel I was on, discussing *Red Skin, White Masks,* and a handful of people, who for the most part all knew each other, showed up to hear the queer Indigenous youth roundtable.

Queering resurgence begins for me by recognizing Alex's normalization of queerness within her community, by acknowledging, as Roger Roulette does, the normal descriptive

terminology used to recognize queer relationships, and by looking at how gender is conceptualized and actualized within Nishnaabeg thought. I think Nishnaabeg thought is queer, and if we're doing it correctly, we shouldn't have to queer resurgence, because the political, ethical, and social organization that the 2SQ Indigenous community has held onto and protected so fiercely would already be centered. Queer Indigeneity has a place for straightness, and that's why we should center it.

The Skirt. Again.

The question I have been asked over and over again since the publication of *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* is if I wear a skirt to ceremony. I deliberately didn't answer the question in that book because my point was to emphasize the process I went through to critically think about protocols and dogma in ceremonial practice, and to encourage others to do the same. I've made that point, and the repeated asking of this question tells me I need to be more clear.

I've been participating in Nishnaabeg ceremonies for about twenty-five years now across our territory. Different ceremonial leaders have different practices, which is part of the beautiful diversity of being us. I tend to think deeply about our practices and why we do the things we do. I think ceremony is everyone, and that every Nishnaabeg body and mind has a place in our circle, because I understand the point of ceremony to be to connect to the spiritual world in a good way, and to do so requires an open heart.

Over my life, I have seen us reclaiming our practices as Nishnaabeg. I think that's a beautiful thing to be doing. I think that's a critical thing to be doing. Knowing protocols is a way of showing we belong. But the more time I've spent language learning, on the land, and hanging out with elders, the less I think of rigid protocols and the more I think of relationships. In ceremony, I think the most important thing is that the group of people who have come together feel safe, respected, and openhearted as a necessary prerequisite to spiritual connection. That to me is the point of ceremony.

We have some important practices and stories in regard to skirt wearing for women. We have some ceremonial leaders that have very rigid protocols concerning gender. I have seen women and girls pressured into wearing skirts and excluded if they don't feel comfortable doing so. I have been pressured into wearing a skirt in order to participate. I have also seen the opposite. I have seen the skirt-wearing stories shared and ceremonial leaders adding that it is up to individuals to decide what they wear. In my own life, I mostly work with elders who believe that consent, respect for individual self-determination, diversity, and noninterference—basic Nishnaabeg values—are more important than rigid protocols.

Sometimes I think in our desire to reclaim what we've lost, we hold onto rules and protocols too tightly and forget that our way of life is about relationships—the practice of benevolent relationships. I often think of stories of ricing when I think about things like this. So-and-so used to rice from the back of the canoe. That family always sat in the front of the canoe. Old Kokum refused to use the sticks and only used her hands. Those guys used to duck hunt at the same time. Crazy old so-and-so built himself snowshoes and walked over the beds. We all did things slightly differently but in the context of shared values. I think ceremony is the same. Our communities hold so many, often hilarious stories of individuals doing things differently and being supported and cherished by the rest of the community. A particular incident also stands out in my mind from my experiences in Long Lake #58 First Nation. An elder told me that he didn't always have enough money to purchase tobacco when he went out hunting. Instead of tobacco, he would gift the animal whatever he had with him of value, which oftentimes, he explained, was a piece of his baloney sandwich. He felt that the animal spirit would understand his intent and accept this gift in the spirit it had been intended. These tiny rememberings are instructive to me.

In my own life, I don't always feel comfortable wearing a skirt, particularly if I am being pressured. Indigenous bodies, my body, have been a target for violence under colonialism and

settler colonialism for four centuries. We were forced to wear skirts in residential schools, at church, and in missions in order to assimilate us from being Nishnaabeg women into the ideals of settler housewives. I was forced to wear a skirt or dress to church. Under colonialism the skirt has been and still is in many cases a tool of oppression. My body remembers this.

I believe that my Ancestors and the spiritual world are aware of this. I have been taught that they love us unconditionally and that they are brilliant. I believe that they are benevolent and that "tradition" can change and adapt to the needs of the people. I believe it is important to reclaim our foundational ethics of consent, noninterference, respect for self-determination, and diversity.

I have been in ceremonies where all genders are welcomed and cherished, where some people wear skirts and others do not, where trans people and gender nonconforming folks are normalized, and where community pipes are smoked by everyone. These have been some of the beautiful, powerful, and gentle places of my life. This to me is the purpose of ceremony. At every point in the day, there is a different amount of light—it is not just day and night. Our circles are not just men and women. There is an endless amount of diversity in our communities. I want us to stop policing and judging and excluding and start to build the kinds of communities that would make our Ancestors proud. Our philosophies are far more complex than you can't come to ceremony if you're not in a skirt.

I'm not going to take my kids into ceremonial places where their gender expressions are not honored and appreciated, and in my own life, I am committed to creating ceremonial spaces where all Indigenous bodies are celebrated. I think that's the intelligent decision. When I see women wearing pants at ceremonies, I believe that they are wearing teachings of diversity, consent, and respect for body sovereignty. When I see queer, transgendered, and gender nonconforming Nishnaabeg at ceremony, I am reminded of 2SQ political orders and brilliance. My favorite ceremonies are ones where I see women wearing skirts to honor those teachings, where I see women wearing pants to

honor different teachings—where I see the full range of gender variance working together for a better future.

The heteropatriarchy of settler colonialism has regulated the bodies of Indigenous women and 2SQ people, and trans people particularly, to death. We live in a vat of heteropatriarchal violence. In this reality, gendered practices that once existed in a different context no longer generate the same intimate relationships in a settler colonial context, at the very least, not for everyone. In our current practices of Nishnaabewin, we simple do not publically regulate cisgendered heterosexual men's and boys' clothing or their bodies, particularly their reproductive body parts. Yet, we ask women and girls to publically exclude themselves when they are menstruating from many of our ceremonies, and we are continually regulating 2SQ bodies and relentlessly regulating trans bodies. The explanation for excluding menstruating women is that we are "too powerful" because we are cleansing ourselves. I've thought a lot about this over the years. No one, at any time, spiritual leader or otherwise, has ever asked me if I hold spiritual power when I am menstruating. I have felt and been spiritually powerful at several points in my life, so I am well aware of what that feels like. This isn't tied to menstruation for me. Further, I don't consent to discussing the intimate cycles of my body as a prerequisite for participating in a ceremony, particularly when men are not asked to do the same. I do know how this makes me feel, regardless of how this is explained to me. I do know that I do not feel valued, included, or powerful when my body is regulated. I don't feel respected when I'm honored as a "life giver" and not as an intellectual. For me, this regulation is a clear imposition on my own agency, sovereignty, self-determination, and freedom. It is a gendered regulation that controls women and 2SQ people and our spiritual power, and it prevents me from relating and attaching to the spiritual realm.

I understand the purpose of Nishnaabeg spiritual practices is to demonstrate respect to the spirits, to engage in rituals that infuse ceremony with meaning, to create a unity of purpose within the ceremonial group, and to engage with the spiritual

world, and so sometimes I wear a skirt to ceremonies and sometimes I do not. Sometimes I can wear it and be open spiritually, and sometimes I cannot, because I have grown up a target of heteropatriarchy and the skirt is a loaded symbol of white male power for me. Sometimes I wear jeans because that's what I'm comfortable doing. Sometimes I wear jeans to demonstrate to youth that ceremony is about what is inside, not about what you wear, and to make space for them. Sometimes I wear pants so that I'm the person who has to negotiate with the women who have boxes of skirts in their cars or the ceremonial leader that is excluding, so younger people, including my kids, don't have to. When I am a visitor in other Indigenous peoples' territories, I tend to follow the practices of the people I am with because I believe it is their place, not mine, to find ways to practice their grounded normativities without holding up heteropatriarchy. I also have these discussions with my comrades in their territories, and they have often already figured out how to do this. In my own practice, I explain skirt and moon time practices to people new to our ceremony, and let them know that they will be supported however they choose to interpret these practices. I don't think anyone—straight or 2SQ—should be coerced into wearing skirts. I think it is actually *extremely easy* to remove the gender binary and exclusionary protocols from ceremonies and recenter them in practices of consent, diversity, noninterference, and intent, and I believe it is these practices and these relationships that should be the basis of our ceremonial life, our lives, our moments, and our nation building.

I don't like the word *protocols*.[36] Ceremony is our birthright, straight and queer. Protocols, like laws, are rigid rules. I like the word *practices* because practices are relationships. If we have not grown up with our practices, one of the first things we can reclaim is protocols: wear a long skirt, walk around the circle in a clockwise direction, don't blow out the sage, and so on. Enacting protocols is a way of belonging. It is a very simple way to say that "I know the rules" and therefore I belong. Which on one hand I like. I like it when people feel they belong; our people should feel like they belong. On the other hand, protocols

make a lot of our people feel like they don't belong, including myself, and that's very problematic because it isn't congruent with the fundamental philosophical underpinnings of Nishnaabeg thought.

Breaking Indigenous peoples' spiritual connection to each other and to land is a critical part of dispossession. Breaking Indigenous peoples' social and spiritual mechanisms for processing trauma, for comfort, and for connecting to a higher power is critical in demobilizing our responses to colonial violence. This creates generations in some places of Indigenous peoples that have grown up without relationships to the implicate order, and we feel ashamed about that. As we re-embed ourselves in this system, we have to confront fear, shame, and anxiety and the idea that we are not good enough to be here among our ceremonial leaders. We have to confront the idea that we may be made to feel we don't belong, and we have to stop practicing interpretations of Nishnaabewin that cast people out. We don't exist unless we all belong. We all belong.

Cree poet and scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt recently shared this poem on his blog, *nakinisowin*, and I am sharing it here with his permission:

sacred

a native man looks me in the eyes as he refuses to hold
my hand during a round dance. i pretend that his pupils
are like bullets and i wonder what kind of pain he's been
through to not want me in this world with him anymore.
and i wince a little because the earth hasn't held all of
me for quite some time now and i am lonely in a way
that doesn't hurt anymore.

you see, a round dance is a ceremony for both grief
and love and each body joined by the flesh is encircled
by the spirits of ancestors who've already left this world.
i ask myself how many of them never knew what desire
tasted like because they loved their kookums more than
they loved themselves.

i dance with my arm hanging by my side like an

> appendage my body doesn't want anymore. the gap between him and i keeps getting bigger so i fill it with the memories of native boys who couldn't be warriors because their bodies were too fragile to carry all of that anger. the ones who loved in that reckless kind of way. you know, when you give up your body for him.
>
> and i think about the time an elder told me to be a man and to decolonize in the same breath. there are days when i want to wear nail polish more than i want to protest. but then i remember that i wasn't meant to live life here and i paint my nails because 1) it looks cute and 2) it is a protest. and even though i know i am too queer to be sacred anymore, i dance that broken circle dance because i am still waiting for hands who want to hold mine too.[37]

My immediate response to reading this was heartbreak, and the line "too queer to be sacred" stayed with me. I wanted to shout "so queer, so sacred." Radical Indigenous resurgence and Indigenous life cannot destroy the worlds of queer youth. Our responsibility is to hold each other up. We have to be the safe place. We have to build that future. Queer Indigenous youth are our teachers and our most precious theorists, even though they shouldn't have to be. They have experiences with acute heteropatriarchy as expansive dispossession. They hold part of the theory Indigenous nations need to escape settler colonialism. We need to listen.