

Lesson One: Background

A Clash of Values: Colonization in Canada



Dancers at the first annual Two-Spirit Pow Wow in Winnipeg, 2017. Photo: Sadie Phoenix Lavoie

Indigenous Concepts about Gender Identity

Across Indigenous North America, some people lived as neither men nor women. Others were seen as combining – even transcending – masculine and feminine qualities. They performed important social roles, held knowledge, led ceremonies, raised children, married and lived in same-sex relationships. Customs related to gender and sexuality varied between First Nations. But they did not divide people into two groups of men and women based on biology. Nor was there a single moral code that condemned same-sex and same-gender relationships. That came later with Christianity and colonial settlement.

When Europeans came to North America centuries ago, they brought their social and cultural norms with them. Traders, missionaries, settlers and soldiers spread these values as they colonized what is now Canada. The new arrivals encountered gender and sexual diversity among Indigenous peoples. This diversity was condemned as “sinful” and “immoral.” When Canada became a nation-state in 1867, new laws and policies enforced Christian forms of marriage and family life. Same-sex relationships became crimes. Two-Spirit people were shunned and removed from public life in their communities.

Gender Oppression: Canada’s *Indian Act*

In many First Nations, family lines were traced through women. But in 1876, Canada passed a law called the *Indian Act*. It undermined the right of Indigenous peoples to govern themselves. The Act declared the status of an “Indian” woman depended on her husband. This eroded the social and political roles of Indigenous women, gender-diverse individuals and Two-Spirit people. According to Canada’s *Indian Act*: “.. any Indian woman marrying any other than an Indian or a non-treaty Indian shall cease to be an Indian in any respect...”

Profile:
Osh-Tisch



Osh-Tisch (1854-1929) was a well-known *bade* – a male-bodied person who performed social and spiritual roles alongside women within the culture of the Crow Nation. Osh-Tisch achieved great renown as a warrior, fighting bravely in the Battle of

the Rosebud (1876). They were also celebrated as a maker of jewellery and clothing.

Courtesy of Dr. James Brust, photograph by John H. Fouch

Forced to Conform

In the early 1800s, Canada introduced Indian residential schools to destroy Indigenous cultures and identities. Christian churches operated these schools. They divided and dressed children according to gender. Boys and girls had separate dorms and classrooms. Rules often prevented them from socializing with one another. Students were taught in ways considered suitable for their gender. Indigenous youth who displayed queer forms of expression were severely punished.

With colonization, and particularly after the birth of Canada in 1867, Indigenous cultures were attacked and suppressed. New Canadian laws enforced Christian marriage. Same-sex relationships were criminalized. Children were removed from their families and “re-educated” in Indian residential schools, which enforced European gender norms and punished queer expression.

The Meaning of Two-Spirit

Two-Spirit is an inclusive term used today by many Indigenous people. “Two-Spirit is indefinable,” mentions Felix Clarence Berry, curator at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. “It’s a complex term, an umbrella term, a placeholder: an organizing

tool/framework for people to find their way home (to a nation- and/or language-specific term that works for them). It’s about—or ought to be understood in relation to—self-determination.”

It describes individuals whose gender and sexuality resist colonial definitions of masculinity, femininity, homosexuality and heterosexuality. Indigenous languages, including Cree and Anishinaabemowin, have many terms and expressions for people we would now call Two-Spirit. “It’s more of an understanding than a definition,” according to Myra Laramée, who coined the term Two-Spirit. “It’s a meaningful and complex signifier. Alex Wilson refers to it as (among other things): ‘a modern term that recognizes our ancient understandings of our identity.’”

Two-Spirit Resurgence

The late twentieth century saw efforts to recover and reclaim Indigenous traditions of gender and sexual diversity. In 1990, an international gathering held near Beausejour, Manitoba, embraced the term Two-Spirit. It was adopted by participants as an identity that linked contemporary LGBTQ+ experiences with Indigenous traditions and worldviews. Today, Two-Spirit organizations exist across North America. An upcoming generation of youth are continuing the struggle for Two-Spirit resurgence through art, literature, music, film and political activism.

Selected Cree Terms and English Translations

Napêw iskwêwisêhot	A man who dresses as a woman.
Iskwêw ka napêwayat	A woman who dresses as a man.
Ayahkwêw	A man who dresses, lives, or is accepted as a woman.
Înahpîkasoht	A woman who dresses, lives, or is accepted as a man.

Profile:
Albert McLeod



Albert McLeod (Cree and Métis) is a respected educator, activist and Two-Spirit Elder. He played a pivotal role in organizing the international gathering at which the term Two-

Spirit was adopted in 1990. Albert was the Director of the Manitoba Aboriginal AIDS Task Force from 1991-2001. He has facilitated Two-Spirit recognition and inclusion in countless contexts, such as the National 2SLGBTQI+ Monument in Ottawa and advising on content in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

Photo: University of Winnipeg Archives, Albert McLeod Fonds, 11.11,5-2, 16

Profile:
Charlotte Nolin



Born in Winnipeg in 1950, Charlotte Nolin was taken from her family as part of the Sixties Scoop. Assigned male at birth, she was shuffled between foster homes in southern Manitoba and was abused both at home and at day school. Charlotte ultimately escaped the foster system in her late teens. Turning to sex work and dealing drugs to survive, she moved back and forth between Winnipeg and Vancouver and spent stints in jail in both cities. Understanding that she was trans from a young age, Charlotte lived as a woman for brief periods when it was not too dangerous. She first heard the term Two-Spirit at a sweat lodge ceremony in British Columbia in 1990. And something truly clicked in her self-understanding.

Photo: Aaron Cohen, CMHR

Profile:
Ma-Nee Chacaby



Elder Ma-Nee Chacaby's (Oji-Cree) life has been full of challenges – abuse, homelessness, addiction and homophobic attacks. But she has emerged to become a respected Two-Spirit Elder whose influence extends across Canada. Ma-Nee's journey was nourished by her grandmother's insistence that being Two-Spirit is a gift with deep roots in Indigenous worldviews and traditions.

Photo: Ruth Kivilahti