

Two-spirits: Conceptualization in a L'nuwey Worldview

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Education

at

Mount Saint Vincent University

Halifax, Nova Scotia

December 2017

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### Abstract

The term two-spirit is a social marker used by Indigenous people who are LGBTQ in North America. The term gives a sense of unity among Indigenous people because of its commonality in socio-cultural, historical and spiritual contexts about their gender, sexuality and identity in general. In Nova Scotia, the term is common in mainstream and its use is becoming more accepted in our Mi'kmaw communities. In an era of Truth and Reconciliation and the ever-increasing movements of self-determination and decolonization of systemic homophobia and heterosexism, our Mi'kmaw youth question how the concept of two-spirit is interpreted within our culture. Findings show that there is no documented evidence of ancestral knowledge, teachings, or ceremonies with what we now know as two-spirit identity, before the arrival of Europeans in Mi'kma'ki. Cultural and academic interest to research two-spirit identity and how it relates to Mi'kmaw culture is important especially for Mi'kmaw youth who are barraged with cultural erosion and loss of cultural identity. Conceptualization of two-spirits is possible by analyzing how gender, sexuality and identity are contextualized using Indigenous epistemology or L'nuwey worldview in a contemporary setting. The findings confirm that understanding how gender identity and sexuality can be contextualized in a cultural context through oral tradition, such as a personal narrative, is a source of empowerment and cultural continuity. For Mi'kmaq who identify as two-spirit or with other social markers used in English, the result is always the same: we are still *L'nu*.

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## **Chapter One: Coming into my Two-Spirit Identity: A Journey of Gender and Sexual Self**

### **Part I – Storytelling and Academic Research in Contemporary L’nuwey Epistemology**

I am *L’nu* which means the person or human in Mi’kmaq. I speak Mi’kmaq, and I am a storyteller which are components that help me write this thesis. The narrative is also a story which is a cultural foundation in L’nuwey worldview. Mi’kmaw ways of knowing and learning are through oral tradition (Battiste M., 2009) whereby its knowledge is transferred through stories. My story is a narrative that helps me explore identity, gender and sexuality in a Mi’kmaw context. It is part and parcel of understanding how my identity as L’nu, gay and two-spirited has evolved in my life. The following quote from Simmons (2011) captures the spirit of the intention in my narrative.

Narrative allows the teller of the story to establish order among events and is a powerful way for a person to create and communicate their identity (Young 2008). This communication can also operate as a valuable social tool for connecting the self to others. Narratives are not only a reflective account of a situation, but they also present the narrator’s unique point of view on the occurrence, as they are both teller and listener (Simmons, 2011, p. 124).

I share my narrative from the same perspective of a teller and listener because I am both a teacher and learner in the story. Jo-ann Archibald’s statement referencing narrative in research for Indigenous people resonates: “one way in which individual research is distinct from research approaches is that, in locating self, we identify ourselves not only by our social markers (such as gender, race, class, etc.) but we also locate ourselves in relation to spirit” (Archibald, 2010). My narrative is a two-spirit journey that is ongoing and continuously developing who I am as a L’nu.

## **Packing and Unpacking Lived Experiences**

It was 2007 in beautiful Bogota, Colombia when I decided to move back to heal with family in Millbrook, my home community. I had been living away from home for 20+ years in wonderful places like Quebec, Ontario, Costa Rica, Washington, D.C., and that year in Colombia. After some crazy and memorable experiences in my journeys, that final year in Colombia was supposed to be my year of success because I had landed a dream job in Bogota. It was a great experience to live in Colombia in many aspects, but there is a darker side to that memory. It was the first time in my entire adult life that I had experienced homophobia. This experience changed everything for me. I can't say I felt physically violated, but I was stabbed mentally like no other way before or since.

My pride was bruised, but I refused to accept defeat. I knew it was a fight I couldn't win, so I had to bow out gracefully. Many things flashed instantly in my mind when I decided to quit my job in Colombia – like the time when I was a closeted young teen in Millbrook. Or like when I danced with another guy for the first time when I was 20 on the beach in Costa Rica or the time I came out for the first time when I was 21 so far away from home. They were memories that made me smile. I winked at myself in the mirror for reassurance that I made the right decision. Then in what seemed like a gravity-defying leap from one end of the room to the other side where my mobile was, I called home to let my mother know. She asked right away if I was ok. I assured her that everything was fine, but it was just time to go home. I asked her to keep it under wraps until things were definite. My mother always made sure that when I went home for visits, she would have all my friends over. She knew that this time was different, and no planning was required for a gathering for me and my friends.

After I hung up, I felt an urge to yell ‘finally’ which was a positive memory trigger about being happy and excited. Ce Ce Peniston’s song, *Finally* (Peniston, 1991), a popular dance song in the early 90s, always transported me to a time when I came out when I was 21 in Costa Rica. It brought a feeling of elation and nervousness about coming out, but I felt free and energized when I did. I had secretly come out in my mind and spirit before verbally saying that the actual phrase, I am gay. There was no specific time and place when I came out because it was a process, but there are specific memories during my lifetime that I recognize as pivotal points in when I felt free to be gay. One such time was when I fell in love with a guy for the first time in 1991.

The falling in love part happened gradually, but it ripened during a beach vacation in Costa Rica on New Year’s Day. The song, *Finally*, came on at a community dance that New Year’s Eve and I grabbed my boyfriend to go dance. I stole him away from his 20 or so friends who were all huddled in celebratory hugs to wish each other a Happy New Year. I grabbed him away and danced with him apart from the crowd. I kissed him and hugged him again. His responses were magical and reassuring. We didn’t even care that we were two guys dancing in a straight environment. We were young, in love and free. It seemed so innocent and liberating. But, that memory faded back into the reality of not such a happy time in Bogota.

There is so much to reflect on. I’ll time travel through my coming out process and how I released the inner me to join the gay world. It is a journey from being a young, self-involved 21-year-old and later to become a social activist and educator in the current day. *Finally*, (Ibid) is one of many songs I have stored in my mental journal. It’s mnemonics of gay experiences and dance music; a coming out journey that is ever present in my memory.



I felt motivated to go back home for good. It meant change, possibly for the best. In the back of my mind, I pondered what change meant. Has anything back home changed? I had been away from home for 20 years, and I knew I was not the same 17-year-old Rez boy when I had left. I changed. I am an adult. I am gay. I am an educated person. I am independent. I left as a young closeted youth and 20 years later I was returning as a proud gay man full of wonderful lived experiences, yet I found myself at a crossroads of trying to understand how I could positively use those experiences in my life. Was I going to stay in Latin America or move back home to Millbrook? The decision was difficult. Would I move back to Costa Rica where I felt joy and comfort as an openly gay man, or would I move back to Millbrook, where I am a closeted man in my home community? Eventually, that minor conundrum about being out or not in my community was not the priority at the moment because I felt comfort knowing that my family and friends would welcome me no matter what.

Since my first gay experience in 1991, I had slowly crept out of the closet while I lived away from Millbrook all those years. I lived in Quebec, Ontario, Central America, Washington, D.C. and my last year in South America. The majority of my life was spent living in Costa Rica — 17 years. I spent my entire 20s until I was 30 years old in stunning locations in Costa Rica. It was my home away from home. It was where I did my post-secondary studies and where I transitioned from youth to adult. When I realized in Colombia that the situation was not going to improve for me at my job, I decided to resign my position. I thought about going back to Costa Rica first, but something inside me told me to go back home, the home in Millbrook.

I'm a strong-minded individual and I am pretty good at sticking to my guns despite hard challenges that are thrown at me in life. I thought long and hard about making that final decision to resign. I asked myself, was packing my bags and leaving South America like throwing in the

towel? Many things persuaded me to make the decision, but the deciding factor was when I realized that I didn't feel safe as a gay man in my workplace. My job was at its most stressful point and I felt persecuted because of being gay.

### **Vacation turns to Persecution**

I had been away on vacation for two weeks over the Christmas holidays. I returned to my office to find a letter of reprimand on my desk. It came from a senior executive named Mr. Garcia<sup>1</sup>. He was very stylish, confident, handsome and very conservative. In his opinion, I had taken too much vacation time during the holidays. I made sure that my vacation was pre-approved by the president of the company before the holidays. I had an email regarding this which was not communicated to Mr. Garcia for some reason. When I was away on vacation, there were some employee issues, which Mr. Garcia felt needed to be addressed by me since they were under my management. He insisted on contacting me on my mobile to express his concerns regarding my absence.

I politely explained that I had friends from Central America who arrived on Christmas Day to spend their holidays in Bogota. I could not just ditch them to attend to office matters, which in fact should have been handled by my back up coordinators or by his support staff. He strongly insinuated that I had no authority to leave the office over the holidays, especially for 12 days. I explained that there were others in my place to attend to any departmental duties; they were assigned to deal with all tasks during my absence. I completely trusted their judgment to resolve any concerns. My vacation time-off was all previously planned and approved by the president. Mr. Garcia didn't care about any of this and ordered me to go to the office the next

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<sup>1</sup> Names of the people in this narrative have been changed to protect their identity.

day or else I would deal with the consequences. The telephone call quickly escalated from a polite conversation to a heated discussion, but I maintained my stance about the office respecting my time. I refused to go in, so he warned that there would be hell to pay.

Once my vacation was over, I returned to my office to find a letter of reprimand on my desk. I tried to reason with Mr. Garcia, but we could not agree on the matter. I had a letter of resignation ready in case we couldn't come to a solution. I was prepared for the worst but had hoped for the best. Deep down, I had already made my decision to return to Canada.

A few days before the Christmas holiday, I was given a heads up that Mr. Garcia was informed that I was gay. Then, it made sense to me of the sudden change of character with me at the office. At first, I thought it was my paranoia, but the change in his behaviour from being polite and respectful to being downright rude and cocky with me in formal situations was too obvious. I felt there was an immediate change in our office relationship, especially on his behalf.

Before, he supported my ongoing projects and initiatives within the organization. After he found out about my sexuality, my sense of leadership was questioned in all matters. The autonomy I had in decision-making depleted. I felt that I had no authority to lead within my department. I knew that there was little or no hope for change. Mr. Garcia was famous for his anti-gay position. Mr. Garcia was firm on maintaining a strong sense of heteronormative rules in the office and he voiced those beliefs quite openly. Homosexuality was seen as a sin in his eyes.

### **Fire those Gays**

The organization had no written policy to discriminate against gay employees and the country's laws prevented from outright discrimination based on sexuality, religion, age, gender and ethnicity. However, Mr. Garcia, a senior VP and 33+% shareholder of the company was not

tolerant of gays. The other 66+% shareholders were the President and the president's wife also the VP. They were considered one of the most successful families in Bogota in the language service industry. And they belonged to the same ultra-Christian church. In other occasions, I had dismissed three gay male employees for suspicion of fraternization with male clients.

Fraternization, such as dating, partying together, or after work gatherings were tolerated among straight employees who practiced similar activities, but their cases were not treated as unjustly as the cases against gay fraternization.

I had to deal with such a matter just before my Christmas vacation. In fact, I was practically ordered to fire a male employee for having an "illicit relationship" with another male learner. Apparently, there was a complaint about the fraternization between the two adult men. Therefore, I was instructed by one of the administrators under Mr. Garcia's department to fire the employee immediately. I took the opposite stance, which was to protect my employee from unwarranted termination because I felt that he was treated unjustly.

I felt that he was being terminated based on a malicious rumour. Even if was true, I felt that this instructor should not be terminated because he was persecuted for being gay. I also felt that I had to defend my employees, including myself in the process because I was also gay, albeit "closeted" at work. I investigated the matters and concluded that there was no evidence of misconduct. I heard the story. My employee assured me that the men became close friends because they shared similar familial situations and that was it.

They were two men who liked to go out for good food, more of a 'bromance' than a romance. The employee understood why there was suspicion about his sexuality because he was in constant company with the male learners. However, he assured me that they were just good friends. I was extremely sensitive to the whole ordeal because I felt I was living this man's

experience at the executive level. I had established many great friendships in the company. Some people knew about my sexuality, including the President and the VP. They were always supportive, but Mr. Garcia was another story.

I managed to transfer the employee to another location which saved his position for the time being. I also knew that I had compromised my sense of safety within the company because I stuck up for him. Ironically, I never felt unsafe in South America as a gay man, nor had I ever felt unsafe as a gay person in the company in five years working in Central America until the final year.

I lived my life discreetly but happily in Colombia, and everywhere I lived. I established healthy and wholesome friendships with guys I could dine, dance and travel with in the city. The capital city is beautiful with an abundant gay culture. I arrived there with big plans and big dreams. I felt I was making it in the corporate world. Little did I know that my world would begin to spin out of control because there were no policies to protect my sexual identity in the company.

I made every effort to avoid Mr. Garcia during my last month at the office, but things were tense. I had to complete all my duties with extreme professionalism so that I could have a good reference and to keep the doors open for me in case I wanted to return to work in Latin America again.

The problem with Mr. Garcia was not about miscommunication, but something deeper. I knew Mr. Garcia was opinionated about gay people and he expressed them quite freely. In the last few months at work, I felt that his remarks were aimed at me, like comments about single male employees being opportunistic about their sexual exploits at the workplace, or that gay people lacked family values and responsibilities which made them weak under the temptations of

the flesh. I felt it turned into a witch hunt for gays in the organization and I was the coven master who needed to be staked.

Even though the president was aware that I was gay, I felt that I did not have support when he was away from the office, like during that time over Christmas. The president's approach was respectful and professional about my personal life. He practiced the "don't ask, don't tell" approach when it came to my personal life. When things got sour between Mr. Garcia and me, the president tried his best to mend the relationship between Mr. Garcia and me, but I had made my mind up to go home already.

At this point, I was in South America for about 12 months since I transferred from Central America to take on a new position. In the beginning, I thought Mr. Garcia was just unsupportive of my management style. I thought at the time that we would come to some understanding because he was very supportive of my leadership in the first half of my time in Bogota. There was an abrupt change when he found out about my gay life. Mr. Garcia grew increasingly annoyed with my work.

It did not occur to me at first that it was about my sexuality because I felt this couldn't happen to me. I looked for a scapegoat about the whole ordeal, but it became clearer that things with Mr. Garcia were just getting worse.

As time progressed, it became more evident that I had lost Mr. Garcia's support in my position to lead. I tried relentlessly to gain his approval. I even tried to be more proactive and creative about developing alternative solutions addressing human resources and training modules for professionalism and work ethics. Things still got worse.

Then, that incident between one of my team members and the male client at the army base just gave Mr. Garcia ammunition to attack. It felt like my neck was being constricted harder and tighter. I felt I needed to be smarter than Mr. Garcia, so I spoke to human resources about how I felt. I also began to log dates, save emails and track my communication with Mr. Garcia. I maintained hope that Mr. Garcia was just a micromanager. I did not want to believe that Mr. Garcia had me on his chopping block. I had witnessed how he trampled over employees and got them ousted from the company. Was I next? I was the one on the receiving end. I had to be alert and cautious, but maintain a keen sense of professionalism.

### **Reprimand the Gay**

After I received the reprimand, I went home to think about how to address the situation. I knew that I could not win. There would be one thing or another that would just keep motivating Mr. Garcia to hunt me down, and I couldn't give him that satisfaction. Then I thought, it was the perfect opportunity for transition. I thought about my options that night, but I knew deep down that I needed something else in my life. The next day, I gave him my letter of resignation and thanked him for all the support I had from the company for the last six years. It was my way of telling him that I am my boss and he could do whatever he wanted with his letter, but I was not signing it.

There, it was done on the next day. I expressed a 'fuck you' to Mr. Garcia in action rather than words. My sense of dignity was intact - in fact, it was elevated!

I had to sell my furniture and pack all my belongings, which I discovered were very few – especially after living away home for 20 years. I wondered why I packed so lightly in life; was it because I knew that I would need my light bundle to pick up and go whenever I needed to

leave? Was I just journeying through life in search of the next adventure? I became quite efficient at packing only my favourite items: clothes, belts, shoes, CDs, pictures, art, and tiny treasures, all collected over the years as memories. They all crammed into two suitcases and a flimsy carry-on.

My material things fit in three-piece luggage, but my lived experiences were also neatly bundled in my memory, alive and full of spirit from my journey in life, and ready to be unpacked.

### **Traveling back in Time**

I felt that there would be more opportunities for me back in Canada instead of returning to Costa Rica in 2007. The first thing on my to-do list was to find a job. Other things would follow, such as applying to graduate school and buying a home – essentially to do grown-up things. Other things occurred, but I had not outlined them as objectives at the time, but I recognized they were as equally important, like ‘coming out’ to my family, finding a boyfriend, and getting involved with my Mi’kmaw culture in some meaningful way.

I had been debating with myself about returning home and leaving my life in Latin America. I figured that once I had established myself in Canada, then I could begin to work my way back to Central America as an adult, not like the young, free-spirited 20-year-old who arrived there in 1990. I could not believe that 20 years had gone by. In 1987, I had decided to leave my home reserve to go Quebec to complete my high school. Twenty years later, in what seemed like an instant, I was heading back home to the same reserve; it was a complete life cycle.



In 17 years of living and working in Central America, I was never disrespected for being gay. It was amazing to me that just living one year in South America that I would have to deal with such intolerance and violation in my workplace. I needed time to understand and absorb the reality of the whole experience. In fact, I had never shared this experience in public. I never knew what persecution was, but I had a taste of its sense of betrayal and hurt in Bogota. I hadn't felt that sense of insecurity since I was a 17-year-old, closeted teen back home on the reserve. Back then, I was naïve and innocent in the ways of the gay world, but I was never openly discriminated against by my immediate family or friends. I left Millbrook to search my true self – explore my sexuality and gay identity. I was not forced to leave by anyone, but I knew enough that it was not the right place to be back then. Ironically, I was running back to Millbrook to my family for support and to finish my coming out process.

I also had to come to terms with my frustration about the ordeal in Bogota. I felt humiliated, but I couldn't help to feel that I had failed my colleagues who were gay and still dealing with Mr. Garcia. Was I betraying them by leaving the company? I know that there are many Mr. Garcias out there in life. I accepted in time that I had to remove myself from that toxicity so that I could help myself first before I could even think of helping others deal with office bullying and homophobia. It was hard to admit that I was a victim of homophobia because I had nothing but positive experiences as a gay man in my life until that point in my life. When I lived in Costa Rica, it was a safe place to live as a gay person in general. I also knew that moving to Canada would be safe as rights and freedoms for LGBTQ were far more advanced in our country than any of the previous countries where I had lived until then.

I wanted to be near my family and community, but I didn't know that I would begin a new life cycle. I never thought that I would begin another journey of self-discovery and cultural reawakening at 37 years of age. Life couldn't get more exciting and invigorating.

### **Who am I?**

When I arrived in Millbrook, I wasn't sure who I was and how I fit in the scheme of things back home. I was unfamiliar with my culture; my language skills were rusty, so was my knowledge about our communities, people and current events. On top of that, I had to rebuild my relationships with each person in my family. In 20 years away from Mi'kma'ki, I had learned about many cultures like Quebecois, Ticos, Americans, Colombians, but the one that was constant in my life was being Mi'kmaq. That identity was always with me during my education, travel, relationships, employment and spirituality. My culture pushed and pulled me in all directions. I wasn't sure what the future looked like in 2007, but I followed my culture forward again

I had acquired more than a language in Central America; I adopted a culture and a language with its beliefs, traditions and way of life. I was often mistaken as a Central American / Costa Rican because I had similar physical features – dark haired, brown slanted eyes, high cheekbones and medium complexion. Little did anyone know that I was Mi'kmaq. I was a chameleon because I could adapt to my surroundings. If one looked deeper into my soul, they would have seen reflections of an ancient culture deeply rooted in my spirit. This chameleon needed to find its true colours in his true surroundings. Although I had not come out to my family or friends in Canada, I suspected that this was only a minor bump in my coming out journey. I was back home to get to know the real me.

## **Part II – Unpacking Identities and Sexuality**

I was many identities during my 20 years away from home. I was an out-of-province and English-speaking student in Quebec from 1987-89. I participated in a cultural student exchange in Ontario and Central America in 1990-91 with Canada World Youth. I was a foreign student in Costa Rica. I was a straight young man when I first arrived in Costa Rica, but I left a year later as a gay man. I was a gay clubber in my youthful days between the ages of 22 to 27 in San Jose. I was a teacher when I graduated with my undergrad. Later, I became a consultant and a successful manager in my last employment. I had travelled all over Latin America, United States and Canada. But back home I was just John Robert – a regular guy who was eldest of 14 siblings in two separate families.

The reality of re-entering my former life was incredible and surreal. I was a “Rez guy” back again. Mind you; it took time to readjust from a cosmopolitan city-life to a small community life. Bogota had a population of 8,000,000 and Millbrook had about 700 people living on Reserve in 2007. Most of my life at this point was residing “Off-Reserve” rather than “On Reserve.” This distinction was a colonial concept whereby “Indians,” the official term about First Nations in Canada, were categorized by government agencies like Indian and Northern Affairs (now called Indigenous and Northern Affairs) and Health Canada. This distinction affects the level of services and treaty rights one can claim as an “Indian.” For example, if I lived on-Reserve, I can claim income tax exempt salary, while living off-Reserve, I would have to pay all the income taxes. There are many other distinctions, but that was the most significant factor because I was actively looking for employment.

My identity as Mi’kmaq away from Nova Scotia was overshadowed by other cultural identities around me. I had to acknowledge others before they would acknowledge my identity as

L'nu – or a person who is Mi'kmaq. I would consider my identity as a Mi'kmaq as dormant throughout those 20 years because there was no one to speak my language with or share my sense of indigeneity within Costa Rica. It surfaced constantly in the presence of my family and friends. That spiritual connection with my language was powerful, and all it took was being able to speak Mi'kmaq with another person. It happened often when I met up with a fellow Mi'kmaw speaker outside of our Mi'kma'ki territory.

When I was 17, being Mi'kmaq on my Reserve was great - it was just a way of life. However, it wasn't easy being Mi'kmaq at the town high school, or at town dances where rural guys did not see eye to eye with guys from the Reserve. Truro was a conservative town with a strong tradition of racism in high school during the 80s. I knew back then that a gay – L'nu youth would have a hard time dealing with Truro racism and homophobia.

I knew that there were guys who were gay in Truro when I left in 1987. They were brave, and they dealt with the social stigmas and bullying, but I don't know how their mental health would have been back then. I was comforted to learn that they survived high school and lived wonderful lives today as very successful individuals. Back then, I watched them from afar as closely as I could without seeming too obvious. I was curious about my sexuality back then as I secretly had crushes on guys in my classes. I envied some of the gays because they seemed so free, but at the same time, I pitied them because they were the brunt of homophobia back then.

It was quite normal to hear words like fag, queer, and fruit to describe people who were gay, but I had never heard of the term gay back then. Queer was a negative word just like fag was. It was never used in a positive sense to describe people who were LGBTQ. Lesbian was used as a negative description to belittle anyone female who was slightly masculine. I also heard of butch or lezzy to describe females who may have demonstrated anything but the

heteronormative spectrum. I secretly thought about my sexuality because I had numerous girlfriends throughout my teens and early 20s, but I was also extremely attracted to guys. I am sure this sounds quite familiar to many guys during that time. I heard my closest friends make wisecracks about other students or people who did not fall under the heteronormative spectrum. When they used the “fag” word, I felt their sting as well. I knew deep down I was like the other gays, but I just kept it hidden as best as I could. Those are the memories I had of high school and about being a closeted gay student.

The only word in Mi’kmaq that I knew was *kistale’k* which was a term used to describe anyone who was gay or lesbian. The word was a noun, and it had a deep negative undertone which equalled to being called a pervert. If used in a phrase as an adjective, it would be understood to mean “acting odd or oddly” as in behaviour. This connotation was recognized as a temporary situation. If it were used as a noun to describe one’s sexuality, then it was understood to describe a permanent state of being – that is unchangeable. *Kistale’k* was negative, and no one would like being described that way.

Mi’kmaq, my deepest rooted cultural identity was always extremely important. It resurfaced in pride and celebration every time I met other Mi’kmaq anywhere and anytime. In 2007, being Mi’kmaq became the driving force of my life and the focus of my career and academics. In fact, the first decision I made was to move back to our family home on the Reserve because I wanted to relearn and refresh my knowledge about our cultural teachings. The best way was to immerse in Mi’kmaq culture and language, so I moved into my Mother’s house, the cradle of my culture and language.

One of the biggest surprises to people back home was that I could still speak Mi’kmaq even after living away from home for 20 years. I would always credit my mother for this gift of

knowledge because she taught me early in my first few years away from home to try to think in my first language as much as possible. When I went to Costa Rica on that exchange program in 1990, I learned Spanish in 8 months because I was already wired to learn languages.

My Mi'kmaw language didn't come out as fluently in the first few weeks and months, but it greatly improved with practice and perseverance. I worked at it and my mother would only speak to me in Mi'kmaq. We had a blast with it and shared many fun linguistic mishaps, like problems with pronunciations.

I found a job at an Indigenous policy organization which was my first official employment in Canada. I had to relearn being a Canadian as well. I had to adjust to life in Nova Scotia. Things have changed in Nova Scotia as was life on the Reserve. There had been a strong resurgence of Mi'kmaw and Indigenous identity in Canada.

In my immediate family, my siblings and I never learned to drum, chant or wear regalia during our upbringing. The effects of Indian Residential School did its number on the majority of Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia, especially on the Reserves in mainland Nova Scotia. We were originally from Eskasoni, but my parents' divorce landed us in Millbrook First Nation in 1982. The first thing we had to face was that people in our age group in Millbrook didn't speak Mi'kmaq, only a few people in my mother's generation and a handful of Elders. The one thing my mother tried extremely hard to do was hang on to our ability to speak our language.

I made a conscious choice about not sharing my gay identity yet with my family. In fact, during my first year back home, I lived a closeted life. It did not make sense how I fell back into my old closeted ways. How was it possible that I left home as a closeted 17-year-old only to return as a closeted 37-year-old? I didn't have a plan for that process, even though I plan everything in my life: getting a job, buying a car, planning my finances to buy a home...the

essentials. In all my years as a gay man, I experienced many facets about coming out, such as coming out to myself, then coming out to friends, which eventually led to living an openly gay life in Costa Rica. How could I live such an openly gay life elsewhere in the world and not be open with my family? It was like living in a fantasy.

The process of coming out was unpredictable, but it happened. I knew enough that the time would come when I had to come out with my family. I didn't feel rushed or pressured to come out ever. I hadn't known that I was the centre of whispers about my sexuality. My family and friends were curious about my personal life, but I maintained a sense of discretion about my personal life. My best friend shared some comments about what our closest friends were saying about me. They wondered when I would just come out. I just played it down and pretended that it didn't bother me. It didn't except for lying to my family for so long.

### **I am a Bionic Woman...**

I am now returning to a memory from my childhood even before moving from Eskasoni to Millbrook. As a kid growing up, I learned negative words such as fag, faggot, fruit, sissy, lezzy, dyke, homo, queer, to make fun of others who acted gay. There was no word to describe transgendered people. In fact, I had never heard of the word transgendered during my younger years living on a Reserve. I heard the word *kistale 'k*.

As a kid, I heard people describing boys who acted effeminate as *epitejijewe 'k* or boy/person acting like a girl. One would say, *mu 'k epitejijewey* which meant don't act like a little girl or don't act like a sissy. I remember hearing it when I was much younger in Eskasoni when someone was being teased for not acting like a boy, or for not being tough.

My sister and I were only about a year apart, and we were very close. When we were 6 or 7 years old, we played bionic man and woman all the time. One time, I decided to be a bionic woman because I loved the way bionic woman's hair moved in slow motion on television. Of course, my sister quashed that idea about me playing bionic woman because I didn't have long hair. I answered that I could put a towel on my head to pretend that I had long hair. She didn't have a problem being a bionic man because she could just put her hair in a ponytail. The dilemma was that I didn't have real long hair to play my part as bionic woman, but it wasn't because I was a boy trying to play the part of a girl. There was no maliciousness on my sister's behalf for letting me play Jamie Somers or bionic woman. She never made fun of me about wanting to play a girl's role. That is the earliest and only memory I have of ever exploring playing a female part in playtime.

My mother walked in on us when I had the towel on my head pretending to be a girl. I froze in mid-action when I was pretending to jump like the bionic woman. I knew that it wasn't normal for me to play the role as a girl, so I slipped the towel off my head as fast as I could. I guess I was embarrassed that someone saw me playing a girl part. I looked down, and I could feel my cheeks redden. I was sure that my mother noticed my discomfort. She just looked at us with a gentle smile and told me to put the towel away because it was clean. I'm sure that was her way of correcting my gender-bending activity without making me feel ashamed or embarrassed. We never switched our gender roles ever again. I never shared that story until now, which made me even blush a bit while remembering the incident.

When I was about 10, I remember observing an older girl who was described as *l'pa'tujewe'k*, which meant girl/person acting like a boy. I recall how this girl chewed tobacco and wore a baseball cap. Everyone described her as *l'pa'tujewe'k*. She played with the boys,



acted like a boy, and even moved like a boy. I remember watching her play softball, and I envied her ability to be so athletic. The phrase for a boy acting like a girl, or a boy acting like a sissy was *epitejijewe'k*. If a boy acted like a girl or a sissy, then someone may say, *m'uk epitejijewey* or 'don't like act like a girl' or 'don't act like a sissy' as a means to correct their gendering at that moment. It was a way of making fun or bullying as well. I heard this sometimes when I didn't want to play hockey with the boys in the neighbourhood. I became sensitized to its use because I felt that it was an attack on my identity, rather than a statement about playing hockey with the guys. It was peer gendering in our culture.

I remember how our age group was tolerant of our "tomboy" friend, but not so tolerant of young guys who were effeminate, or *epitejijewe'k*. I think the boys accepted her, but they didn't accept any "sissy" behaviours from boys. I distinctly remember kids who were teased for being a sissy. I grew up with these teachings from my language. I didn't know that there were others who were gay in my community in Eskasoni or when I moved to Millbrook in 1982. Things were confusing and scary as a boy who liked other boys.

### **Closeted and Sweet 16**

As a grade seven student, I wondered if I had AIDS because I was gay. I began to have innocent fantasies about kissing other guys at that age. Since AIDS was a gay disease, I thought I would be found out that I was secretly gay because I would get AIDS. The whole world was bombarded by a new killer disease called AIDS in the early 80s. There were horror stories about this disease surfacing in big cities in Canada and United States. Being a 12-year-old gay kid didn't seem so cool given the AIDS thing. That was my sense of ignorance and innocence back then.

The upcoming teen years were stressful because of hormones, dating, making new friends, and thinking that being gay was perversion in the eyes of the world. It didn't help that AIDS killed gay men. The world called it the gay disease. There were all kinds of people who were branded as sickos and perverts during the 80s because of AIDS. It was bad enough that social stigma as a 'fag' was horrible, but the epidemic made it worse. As I was having innocent fantasies about kissing guys, I felt ashamed and scared that I would get AIDS as well.

There were numerous stories about Rock Hudson's fall from grace because he was the face of AIDS. This idea is what stuck in my mind as a teenager being gay. There was nothing positive about gay identity in popular culture during the 80s or in the following decade for that matter. It was all about the AIDS epidemic. I remember how a teacher in Nova Scotia was fired from his teaching job because he had AIDS. The world seemed so harsh and unforgiving.

I made it through middle school with no major sexual identity crises. I played the straight game well. The priority for me during junior high and high school was being like the other kids - straight. I thought everything seemed normal in my life. I thought that the desire to kiss boys would go away eventually. I didn't expect it to follow me everywhere throughout my life.

In the 80s, I heard about a few gay Mi'kmaq from other reserves who were living as openly gay people. I secretly admired their bravery and I felt envious I guess. I envied their lives in the big city of Halifax. Halifax seemed huge compared to Truro. I also heard rumours about a few closeted men on my Reserve, or people living in other Reserves, but I didn't know anyone personally. The people who were open seemed happy and content with their lives, but they were still stigmatized and judged by people in our Mi'kmaw community.

I always thought of ways to leave my community, and I couldn't wait until I was old enough to move to the big city. The pursuit of an education was my opportunity to leave my

home. It was the perfect disguise to be able to leave without stirring much suspicion about my intentions, which was to explore my sexual identity in a safer place than Truro. My mother supported this fully because I felt that she always knew about my secret identity. Some things were better left unsaid, but I felt my mother's emotional support. She and my new stepfather drove me to Quebec to finish my final high school year there. On the day of her return drive back to Nova Scotia, she turned to me and said, take every advantage and opportunity to live and learn, but always take care of yourself *k'wis* (son in Mi'kmaq). I took this as advice as a precaution to live, love and learn responsibly.

I knew early in my pre-teen years that I had deep emotions developing within my spirit about being gay. I knew this when I hit puberty – I suddenly saw guys differently than before. I was now attracted to them sexually. I guess this happened gradually during middle school. I fantasized about having a boyfriend, even if was a secret one. I was not confused about how I felt, but I was scared by what others may think if they knew. I kept it deep within me. Junior high was about making friends and learning to socialize with other kids. In junior high, I had my first girlfriend.

Now that I look back at my youth, I realized that my whole teen years was about exploring my straight world. I went out with many girls. I was comfortable in this role. I was popular among my male friends because of my heterosexual conquests. Like youthful males, my friends and I often shared intimate stories about our successes in our sexual adventures. There was no respect or regret about sleeping around as a teen if it was straight sex. My first sexual experience was when I was 16. It was not your sweet sixteen event or anything; it was straightforward, pleasurable and somewhat confusing. I wasn't sure if it was normal that I

enjoyed sex with girls, even though my fantasies about guys were becoming more intense and frequent. I had many crushes on guys, but I kept them hidden.

I lived in a fantasy world mentally, emotionally and spiritually, but I lived like a straight guy physically – meaning that I acted and dated as straight as I could until I could safely live the life of the real me. I wasn't sure if there was such a life anywhere at the time. It sure wasn't around me in Millbrook or Truro. Things from my teen years reverberated in my mind and soul, like hearing the word FAGGOT! I heard that word often, and it was never in good light. I had to maintain my faggot identity deep within me. I became good at keeping it out of sight, but it was not out of mind.

### **Not Gays, Just Fruits and Fags**

I had not known any other gay Mi'kmaw people around my age or within my circle of friends as a teenager. I heard harsh judgements about people who were suspected of being gay who were often described as “perverts” or “diddlers” or “fags”. I had not heard the word “gay” used by anyone. I only knew negative words for gay like: “queer,” “fruit,” “sissy,” “fag,” “lezzzy,” “dyke,” and “faggot.” I guess they were less severe than being called pervert and diddler.

The point is, it didn't matter if you were just gay because ignorant people judged gay people as perverts on my Reserve. The word diddler was synonymous with the word pedophile. Therefore gays were also considered pedophiles in my community back then. People associated one thing with another. You were a diddler because you liked people of the same gender. This social stigma was incredibly damaging and outright dangerous. Gay people were stigmatized as social predators in some situations. I knew people who were called many names who were

decent, upstanding people, but because they were gay, they were socially ostracized in the community. These were not happy memories of happy gay people. Perhaps there were openly gay people, but I did not know any. Perhaps, there were stories of good things as well, but the negative was what my mind only understood. There were no mentors to look up to as gay Mi'kmaq. There was no way in hell that I would come out as a gay 17-year-old back then.

I heard the word “tranny” for the first time in Halifax when I used to visit a friend in 1985. I was only 15. This friend used the word “tranny” for transvestites. The connotation that I understood was that trannies were males in female drag or prostitutes who hung out on Hollis St. I heard stories about guys dressing as gals, but I had never witnessed that in person as a teen. The only depictions of transgendered people I remember were about transvestites. I heard about “sex changes, ” but I never heard anyone who had the procedure done. I certainly did not hear about trannies or transvestites on the Reserves in Nova Scotia. As I said, there were rumours about gay people in almost every reserve, but very few were openly gay.

I must mention though that there were a few brave men who were openly gay from one Reserve that were known to cross-dress now and again. They stuck together as a pack. They were openly gay and quite “in your face” about their identity. All I ever saw was a group of effeminate guys who acted obnoxiously when they partied. I couldn't relate in any way. I looked at myself as a straight acting, sports minded guy – nothing about me was like them, except we all liked guys. There were times when these guys dressed in drag and paraded around the community from party to party, but they were not bullied because they were also tough as nails. No one would think of saying anything directly to them in a group because they knew how to defend themselves. I think it must have been their way of survival in that community. I could not imagine what they may have had to endure as younger boys, but I'm almost certain it was the

reason why they banded together anywhere they went. It was for mutual protection and a way of dealing with life on the Rez.

At that point in my life, I never had any notion of gay identity. I didn't want to be associated with any of the negative words to describe gays and lesbians at that time. I knew that I didn't want to be stigmatized. I know now that if I came out gay back then, my family would have been cool about it in their way. My mother was a rock and would have protected me no matter what. She always did.

### ***Vive le Quebec Libre***

When I was 17, I left my family and Millbrook to continue with school in Quebec. I knew that I had to leave Millbrook because I felt there was no opportunity for me to explore the gay-ness swelling inside me. My ambition for post-secondary education was my ticket to explore the world and my world. The opportunity came to me after a March break visit with my aunt who lived in Coaticook, Quebec. She suggested that I move in with her to finish my last year in high school in Lennoxville, an English town on the outskirts of Sherbrooke. It was a perfect stepping stone to a new life.

In Quebec, I discovered many first loves, like shoes, clothes, dance music, and liberty to look at beautiful young guys of my age. I discovered that Quebecois culture was more open and accepting of other lifestyles and personal expression. I relished this new sense of tolerance. My reaction to this new life was positive. I took my mother's advice to expand my education. I wasn't sure if my mother's advice was for me to explore my gay identity, but living away from home provided me with that opportunity of exploration and soul-searching. I firmly believe my

Mother meant for me to leave Millbrook for my well-being as well. Perhaps, the education excuse was convenient for both of us.

Once I settled in Quebec, I felt far away from prying eyes to begin exploring the world of gays, but I wasn't sure what that was. I felt safe to explore my sexuality. By this time, I accepted that I was different, but I wasn't sure just to what degree I was different. I felt safe with my aunt in Quebec and my transition into a new school was successful. School was amazing, life was amazing. It was the right time to further my exploration of gay culture in Quebec.

Back home, my siblings were always very proud of me as their big brother. They always mentioned how cool it was that I went away to school. They bragged about my life because there weren't many Mi'kmaw kids who went off to school and were able to survive the pressures of leaving the Reserve. My friends back home were always supportive as well. They saw me as a free spirit.

On Saturdays, I secretly read the Montreal Gazette's ads in the section: "guys seeking guys" and discovered a secret gay life. I read the ads to see if there were people who found love. I imagined many young men to be looking for love. I imagined some of them as high-school students like me. I called the paper to find out how one could place an ad in the paper. I was instructed to open a post office box to receive mail. Remember, this is 1987, and there were no online networking sites a young person could use to navigate the world of LGBTQ opportunities that are available today. I was discouraged that I would need to show my face and identification to establish an account; so much for anonymity. At least I was courageous enough to begin to explore my options. I mustered enough courage and responded to an ad in the paper. It was a young male seeking friendship with other young gay males. I jumped at the chance, and I

established my first gay pen-pal friendship which lasted for years. In fact, we became great friends and remain friends to this day.

It was my last year of high school; I made a huge effort to make it the best year. I had to get out of my comfort zone and just enjoy school. It was a new beginning from the awkward years in Truro dealing with the social problems at school among ethnic groups, black versus whites versus Indians. The word “Mi’kmaq” was not widely used during this time – we were called Micmacs. We were still called Indians in mainstream Canada. Constant interruptions were dealing with social drama rather than getting good grades in Truro. Quebec was where I could redeem myself as a good student.

I refocused my objectives to achieve excellent grades to get accepted at a good university. Another objective was to play as many sports as possible so that I could have a solid social life. Popularity at school was important as a 17-year-old. I wanted that school year to be like Samantha’s from *Sixteen Candles* (Hughes, 1984) with the fairy-tale ending and finding the perfect “Jake Ryan.” I can still hear that song in my mind when I think about my senior year in high school, *If You Were Here* (Thompson Twins, 1983) by the Thomson Twins. It was the final scene when Jake and Samantha kissed, both sitting facing each other on top of the dining room table. I was such a romantic. I wanted the same experience for my first gay love. I wanted Jake Ryan; a jock, handsome, and a great dresser. Samantha was so lucky!

My gay curiosity was getting stronger. I felt I became more aware of my identity, but I was still too afraid to do anything about it. I noticed that I became infatuated with guy’s fashion. I was fascinated by shoes, leather belts and watches. I thought it to be the perfect combination of self-expression of neatness, organization and appreciation of small, material things. Maybe it was a way for my gayness to externalize itself. I dressed impeccably.



My school year was a major hit. I managed to achieve my school goals that year. I also felt that I could put my guard down when it came to accepting slowly that I was extremely attracted to boys just as much as I was attracted to girls. Varsity sports were challenging because I found that I had to pretend even harder to be or act straight, even though I knew I was slowly conceding to queerness. I had never associated myself with being effeminate, nor was I attracted to anything effeminate. Stigma about typical gay men as hair-dressers, teachers, figure-skaters, or theatre artists were common stereotypes. I think people often believed that gays were often associated with a world of cross-dressers or butch women in men's clothes. Another was that gay men hated to play sports, while lesbians loved them. I didn't want to be branded negatively in any way.

I didn't want any association with stereotypes. I tried hard not show any effeminate behaviours. Playing sports was my way of keeping my gender identity properly aligned to heteronormative expectations.

### **Enjoy the Silence**

Finally, it was time for post-secondary education. I was accepted into CEGEP in Lennoxville, QC in 1989-1990. I wanted to make my Mother proud because I would be the first in her family to continue to college and university. I wouldn't disappoint my parents on that goal. My first year was a continued experience of trying to find out who I was and how I fit into the larger framework known as society. I wanted to know if these feelings of being gay were normal or only a phase that I'd grow out of. If it was a phase, then how long would it go on? Would I snap back to reality and want to marry a girl? My sexual tensions were only stronger during those university days. It appeared that I could do nothing to change my reality. I dated lots of

girls in college. I was involved in social activities and sports, but not at the varsity level at this point.

Academically, I developed a love for social sciences, especially political science, international relations and comparative political systems. I thought I was going to study psychology or business, but I was turned off by its introductory courses. It was also the time I wanted to travel and get to know the world.

In my spare time, I played squash and volleyball at Bishop's University Sportsplex. I made many friends from all over Canada, especially with guys from Montreal. I was fascinated with their sense of *joie de vivre*. I thought that exploring Montreal was my way of slowly taking first steps to explore the gay world. When I met my first gay friend by answering an ad in the Gazette, things changed forever. It was the best thing that could happen because I found a friend who had similar experiences and characteristics as I did. I couldn't wait to meet him.

In the summer of 1990, we exchanged stories through letters. Then, we agreed to meet in Montreal. He invited me to stay in his home with his family who knew that he was gay. We hit it off instantly. We became close friends almost instantly. He was my mentor, even though he was a year younger than me. Like me, he was athletic and studied at CEGEP in Montreal. He was the one to introduce me to the gay milieu of Montreal that summer. I fell in love with life that year. I knew that I was on the right track so far.

So, that first-weekend visit was about exploring bookshops, restaurants, pubs and sex shops on St. Catherine St. I had never seen so much gay life in my world. I was mesmerized by the whole process. I absorbed as much as I could, but I dreaded the weekend to come to an end because I would return to Lennoxville – back to a girlfriend and back to straight life, but hope was there.

I anxiously waited a few weeks to return to Montreal. My new friend and I wrote letters every second day. I was elated whenever I found a letter in the mailbox. He wrote detailed letters about his experiences and drama. I lived vicariously through his gay experiences. My friend, who I will call Jacque, had a boyfriend and lots of gay friends his age. He was involved in sports activities and gay outings on weekends, like camping, hiking and biking. I wanted that life. By the end of the summer, I decided that I needed to live in Montreal, that I would transfer from my CEGEP to Montreal in December.

I took a bus to Montreal after classes on Fridays. Jacque picked me up at the bus station, and we would just hang out. It was a process of exploration. The next step was to go to a gay bar. I guess they were rites of passage as a gay person back then. Jacque convinced me that it was time to take the next step. We got ourselves all “dolloed” up as he would describe it. We were two 20-year-old college boys ready to conquer the world. I couldn’t wait to get to the club called The Jungle. It was a famous gay club in the gay village in Montreal in 1990.

I remember how jittery I felt that night. I thought I would die if I ran into anyone I knew. But, once I got past security, and into the club, I lost all sense of discomfort. My eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the lights and flashes of laser-like light beams. The music was pounding in my chest, and all I could see were miles of beautiful gay men, many shirtless and sweaty from dancing. I swear every person looked like a model in that bar. My friend grabbed my hand and led me to the dance floor. He said, “my favourite song is on, let’s dance.”

I let myself go. I melted into the music and the rush of the moment. The song was also my favourite called *Enjoy the Silence* by Depeche Mode (Gore, 1990). It was some remix, and it sounded like a freedom song to me. I danced with my friend for the next four hours that night. We stopped only to slurp up water to keep ourselves hydrated. We hugged periodically because I

was so happy that he was my friend. We snuck back into his house at 3 am and talked for another two. I did it. I was slowly but surely coming out. I had finally been to a gay club, the first of hundreds throughout my gay life. I had a taste of gay life in Montreal, but I wasn't out officially. The only person in the world who knew my secret was Jacques.

Then, I took a different turn in life, and I deviated from my original plan to move to Montreal in the following fall. Instead, I was accepted into an exchange program with Canada World Youth for 1990 – 1991. My plan to finish CEGEP would be put on hold until I finished my exchange program because I accepted to go away for a year to Costa Rica. My outlook changed on life again.

### **Coming Out Again: Costa Rica and Finding My Gay Identity**

*Finally, it has happened to me right in front of my face and I just cannot hide it. Ce Ce Penniston*

I moved to Costa Rica soon after my CWY experience in 1991 to learn more about the language and culture, but it was because I had fallen in love with a man. I finally found what I was looking for, my own Jake Ryan. He was smart, played basketball, spoke three languages, and was very handsome. I wanted to be with him forever. Remember, I was 21, and my expectations about life happiness were based on teenage movies in the 80s. I wanted that romantic story for my own life. Here I was in Central America, so far away, but I found my first love. It seemed natural that I would go to school there and restart my academic life there. My lifecycle was growing in experience and worldview.

Central America was captivating and smelled of fresh life; the cities were loud and full of movement; people intrigued me, and they were proud people; men were good-looking and sexy. What wasn't there to like? I packed my life and moved there for the next 16 years. My years in

Central America were filled with memorable experiences, not to mention that I had finally found my gay identity which I had been looking for in my teen years. I decided to study international relations, and once I graduated, I worked as an educator. I consolidated my life as a gay man and lived life as such since I came out among my closest friends. I was not out with my family at that time. What was the point of coming out to my family when I lived my entire life in Costa Rica?

### **Coming out to Male Co-Workers**

My first coming-out experience at the workplace was short and sweet. It happened in 1998 when I worked at a private school in the western part of the city in San Jose. It was a beautiful hot September 15, Independence Day in Costa Rica. My male colleagues and I went to work early that morning to celebrate with the students and raise the flag to celebrate the holiday. In two hours, we were done. One of my colleagues, a teacher, suggested that we go to a social club to enjoy the holiday at poolside. It was a recreation club near the school.

Then, one of the guys just out of the blue asked me if I had a girlfriend. I contemplated the question for a few seconds and stared him directly in the eye and said, “No, I have a boyfriend.” All the guys just looked at each other and laughed loudly. They all thought I was having an affair with one of my female colleagues at work who was married. Then he added, “well that answers my second question then, so never mind.” He raised his cold glass of beer and offered a cheer with the rest of the boys. The afternoon ended pleasantly with a few games of billiard and just having more food at the Club. The next day, it was business as usual at work. No one batted an eyelash.

I eventually changed careers and accepted a position with a company that offered major opportunities for capacity development and positions in other parts of Latin America. I was

going through a rough break-up, and I needed a change of pace. Little did I know that employment would bring me to travel all over the continent, which eventually landed me a major position at headquarters in Bogota, Colombia. I left Central America in 2005 and never returned to live there again.

### **Completing a 20-year cycle for Coming Out**

It had been 20 years since I left Millbrook. I was about to make a full circle in life. Ironically, I hadn't come out to my family and community, but I was out everywhere else in the world.

Just to recap my gay life in a paragraph. I came out to myself in 1990 when I had that eureka moment dancing all night in a gay club in Montreal. But, I didn't do anything sexually related until I moved to Costa Rica in 1991. The time would have been after my exchange program, but before I started post-secondary studies in San Jose in 1994. I fell in love with the first man who I had a four and a half-year relationship between 1991 until 1995. Two years later I graduated with my undergrad 1998. After my first relationship ended in 1995, I floated from job to job and lover to lover. During that time, I had three more long-term relationships. I attempted to move back to North America by accepting a year-long contract in Washington, D.C. between 2000 – 2001. But, my heart was still in Costa Rica. Then, I found that marvellous job which provided me with excellent professional skills for future employment in Canada. That job was my last employment in Latin America with its headquarters in Bogota. In this part is where this narrative had started. Now, onto my final coming out journey.

### **Coming Out to My Family is Coming Out in My Community**

My coming out process as a 37-year-old was not as eventful as it would have been if I had been that 17-year-old kid back in 1987. I suspect that the process would have been much more dramatic. Of course, there is no way of ever knowing that because my quest of self-identity went on a fabulous path.

Soon after my reintegration with my family and community, I felt my sense of pressure to come clean about my sexuality. I needed to get out of that ridiculous closet. When I was 17, it was a safe place to be. When I was 37, it was just wasted space. The timing was perfect. I was mature, independent, financially secure, and I was well physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The coming-out process was not as glamorous as I imagined it to be. In fact, it was more of a confirmation of identity rather than anything.

I planned a trip to Miami to meet up with my gay friends for New Years. My New Year's resolution was to come out to my mother as soon as I returned from that trip. Besides, I was secretly dating Chad (not his name, but it is a name that I like), who I met a few months before. Chad wondered when I would come out to my family so that we could plan things for the future. I was elusive about providing a concrete answer because I didn't know when that would be. I knew that this was difficult for him because he wanted to move forward. I wasn't quite there yet with coming out or with Chad in the picture.

While I was in Miami, Chad fell in love with another man anyway, so that story did not go further. I was gone for only a week, so I couldn't have meant that much to him if he fell in love that soon. But that is a reality. Human nature is like that though, unpredictable and at the

same time wonderful. I felt disappointed that Chad broke it off with me on the day of my return from Florida. I accepted his reasons for wanting to move on with his life. He didn't want to wait for me to come out to my family. At that point, I hadn't informed Chad of my decision that I was going to talk to my family that very weekend. It didn't matter; his mind was made up about moving on. I respected that. The timing was just crappy. Nevertheless, I felt that my decision to open up with my family was my decision and I wasn't doing it because he was in my life at that time. I didn't want him to think I was doing it for him. I was, in fact, doing it for me.

That night, I went into my mother's bedroom to talk about my trip to Miami with my mother. She was in the middle of her prayers, but she invited me to sit and chat. I came in feeling tired, but I always enjoyed these moments with my mother. They were opportunities to catch up on family matters and to plan things to be done around the home. But, this talk was really about something else. The following was our conversation in Mi'kmaq.

*Nkij: P~skwa kwi's , asama kaqi alasutmai eskminaq ajimpaw. Maqtewoqsinq aqq kispnamuksin.*

**Mom:** Come in son, I am just finishing up my prayers before I sleep. How was your trip? You are very tanned, and you look a bit tired.

*Ni'n: Kispney ti. (Katu taqowey ketu tlue'ap na'sik na kispney ta'n tel pema'tuan ta'pu'kl mimajuaqn ) Gayowi aqq kesalkik jinmuk , ketu telmulap ta'n apija'siap Kolombia. Katu e'tasu naqatkelsi . Nike', mu ala'tu kowey naqa'litew naqatkeltim~n. Mu nutaqnuk naqatkeltmin knuwa'tuan nikmaq ta'n teli pma'tu ni'n mimajuaqnm.*

*Nkij jiksutk aqq matqwa'toq wunji. Nkij wpukwikl o'plowi pantetekl, pasik menaqa jiksituit.*



**Me:** I am tired (But what I wanted to say was that I was tired of leading a double life and that I am gay). I wanted to come clean about who I was the day I came home from South America, but I made excuses. Now, I had no more excuses. I don't need excuses to share my life with my family.

My mother listened. She nodded. Her eyes were alert, just listening to me.

*Nkij: Kwi's, sa'q ki's kejitu wla na'kwek ikaqiew. Ki's sa'q kejitu kinekk nkamlamun pilue'yin aq kejituap piluey ksatiken . Kis sa'q ankite'tm koqoey wjit mena'q telimuek. Kejitu'n na tan pasik koqoey kisi tlmitiesk ni'n aqq maw tan pasik koqoey kis tlimatesk kikmanaq.*

**Mom:** Son, I knew for a long time that this moment would come. I always felt that deep inside my heart that you were always different, that you were unique and that you are gay. I always wondered what held you back from letting us know. You know that you could talk to me and anyone else in this family about anything.

*Ni'n : Mu na'sik pekiji eymuap tan tujiw pekisinn , mu telte'tmuap wjitua'lsin tujiw. Ni'n pasik ms~t koqoey kelo'tmap aq kejituap me'jpa nqalatisk kikmanaq. Katu nike' mu tami eliew aq amujpa ekinua'tul. Ki'l amujpa ekinua'tulap eskimina'q piluey wen.*

**Me:** I was never around long enough to feel the need to come out. I just kept things to myself because I always knew that I would leave the family soon anyway. This time I am not leaving, and it is important that I tell you. You are the first to know.

*Nkij: Telta'siap pasik jipasin ekinuwatuwinen. Aq maw teli ankita'siap etuk na nekmowey wjit mu ketu eymu'n kiknaq m~ta jipasin kisna natu koqoey. Ta'n tujiw pemi aji kisukuwinek , pemi aji sespete'tmul ki'l newtu'kwa'lukwetesk.*

**Mom:** I was always worried that you were just scared to let us know. I also imagined that you stayed away from home because you were afraid or something. As you got older, then I became more worried that you would be alone.

*Ni'n: Moqo, pasik na ta'n tele'k tlm'u'ltoqsip, mu kulumuap tan tujiw kis tlimultes. Mu nutaqnuk nekmowey sespete'tmn.*

**Me:** No, it was just the time thing. I never looked for the time to do so. You don't have to worry about me for that.

*Nkij: Katu nike'. Katu nike' jinm tan nemi'tioq ?*

**Mom:** What about now? What about the man you are seeing?

*Ni'n: Talikeyitu'n wjit nekmowey?*

**Me:** How do you know about that?

*Nkij: Oh kwi's , ni'n keyitu aji pukwelk aqq ta'n telte'tmin. Ki'l na mawtimk weskiyinuin. Lpa ma koqoey ki'l kisna wijikmjik kisi aquikatuq. Ms't kowey keyitu. (toqi weskoweyiek ).*

**Mom:** Oh, son, I know you more than you think. You're my firstborn. There is nothing you or any of our siblings can hide from me. I know everything. (we laughed together)

*Ni'n: Tepiasoq nin aji-kjijitun je' aquikatmin koqoey. Mu' na ketu aquikatmulnuap u't, telipkie'k wiki kikuaq.*

**Me:** I should have known better than to try to hide. I didn't mean to hide this from you, especially living in your home.

*Nkij: U't na maw ki'l kikuow, ( eskmat ), Tanuk katu ekinua'tajik kikmanaq aqq kitapk? Kejitu'n na ni'n ekinua'tuin aqq maw kikmanaq, na ekinua'lsin tan telki'k u't utan. Kejitu'n ta'n telo'tijik l'nuk wjit koqoey na telamu'k...meskik u't klusuaqn kiskuk , sa'qawey sapo'nuk. U'tan kaqi kjijitaq mu pekije'nuk, ke' pasik ankaptitesk.*

**Mom:** This is your home as well. (She paused). So, when are you going to let the big news out to your family and friends? You do know that by telling me and your family, then you are coming out to the community. You know how we (Mi'kmaq) are about sharing stuff like this, it is big news today, old news tomorrow. The reserve will know in a matter of days, just watch and see.

*Ni'n: Kejitu, katu ni'n mu sespita'tmu nekmowey , nike' meta ki'l kejitu'n.*

**Me:** I know, but I'm not worried about that, now that you know.

*Nkij: Mukk sespita'su , ni'n keknua'tuates kikmanaq, katu amujpa ki'l keknua'tat kujj, nekm wikimaaq amujpa maw kejitu'tij.*

**Mom:** Don't worry, I will take care of letting our family know, but you take care of breaking the news to your father. His family needs to know.

I told her that I was just dumped earlier that day. I smiled at her so she wouldn't worry. I said he wasn't the right guy. So, I related the story about how this guy wanted to move on and how he couldn't wait until I came out to my family. Then, she said to me quite abruptly, *k'wis*, this guy is with someone else already. That's why he dumped you. It took a moment to sink into what my mother had just said. I couldn't believe it. Was that even possible?

So that next Monday, I asked Chad directly if he broke up with me because he had met someone else. He seemed startled by the question and almost looked at me accusingly, but he

slowly nodded. Then, he cried. He said he was sorry and that it just happened. We talked for a bit and shared my coming out story with him. I hugged him and I wished him and his new boyfriend all the best. I left the apartment and thought about what my mother said about starting fresh. I knew that my new life as a gay Mi'kmaq just began right then.

The next few weeks were hectic because my mother did share the news of my coming out *en masse*. She called all my siblings, aunts and uncles within days. Then, my mother began just letting random people in Millbrook know that I came out. I met up with a friend of mine at a local coffee shop in Truro. He said to me that he knew about me coming out. I asked him how he knew this. He said my mother told him in front of many others at the health centre. This nonchalant manner of my mother sharing this news caught my friend by surprise. My mother had always been open about our family. My friend said that my mother was proud that I had come out.

My theory is that my mother just felt a sense of relief she didn't have to make excuses for me for not being married or for not having children at 37. Most Mi'kmaw men would have at least one or two kids at my age even without being married. Many people in my community asked over the years, but my mom could not and would not make any assumptions about my life. She was more respectful than that. I guess her most common answer was: "John is too busy enjoying life." My mother was right.

Coming out to my family was indeed coming out to my community. She made certain of that.

### **Coming out or Coming In**

My journey brought me to a world which I never knew existed. It brought me to question my identity and sexuality all over again. I thought I closed that chapter of my life when I came out to my family. I was wrong. It was only the beginning of another cycle of life and learning for me which landed me back in university.

I started to work with an Atlantic region tribal organization in 2007. I realized that my educational foundations were rusty and in need of a major overhaul. I worked in health policy and education portfolios.

The term two-spirit was introduced to me by a friend in 2008. I had shared my story, and he quickly responded that I was now a two-spirit. I responded quickly that I was gay, not two-spirit. He briefly explained that each LGBTQ had two-spirits in us which were male and female; that indigenous people share a common history and cultural values, not just gay or lesbian.

In my ignorance, I clarified to my friend that I had no female spirit, that I was a man through and through, except my sexual orientation was gay. Honestly, I was a bit offended by my friend's candid judgement towards me. After all, it only took me approximately 20 years to come out in every part of the continent. Who was he to just judge me with such an assurance? I was caught off guard and a bit defensive towards being called Two-Spirit.

I wasn't familiar with the true use of the concept, which brought me to ask a few people within my LGBTQ circle of friends. The internet provided an emaciated framework of knowledge, which only increased my starvation for teachings. As I read more about two-spirit

identity, I discovered that the concept was more foreign to me than ever. I could not find definite answers within my own culture. It was time to go back to school. It was time to reflect on my experiences and my own story to see if I could find answers there. I didn't even realize that storytelling was part of a research methodology, which could be used as a powerful tool of knowledge transmission. The story I relate is a mirror of my journey of cultural identity, soul and spirit searching. One will take what one wishes, but it is a two-spirit journey.

When I wrote this journey, I never suspected that I would dig far into my memory for my journey. I never assumed that I would have an answer for anything, which is still true when I conclude this portion of the story. I do realize how powerful sharing a story is. I am only beginning to understand that my lived experience is also part of that knowledge building process which can be used for critical analysis of my own culture concerning gender and sexuality. It is my own story, but I know that many other Mi'kmaw youths, people and Elders have their own stories to share. I hope that this is a drop of knowledge to understand the nature of gender and sexuality and how it forms a part of our cultural identity as Mi'kmaq.

## **Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Methods**

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) recognizes that people of colour are holders and creators of knowledge based on their lived experiences. These experiences are unique to their place in history, culture and social contexts, which can be explored through personal story, narratives and collective experience to produce knowledge (Bernal, 2002). This knowledge can manifest into constructive social change (Deyhle, 2007). Beatrice Medicine (2002) adds that CRT gives voice to people of colour, like Indigenous people, through their stories and by doing so, situates the individual(s) in the centre of knowledge development and its transmission (Ibid). This process is critical and transformative because it challenges Eurocentric epistemology (Donald, 2009) and institutional conformity in academics. CRT provides a framework that counter-weighs “dominant ideologies” (Bernal, 2002, p. 109) by challenging cultural paradigms that oppress marginalized peoples in academics. I began with and now build upon this theoretical framework by using my narrative about coming out to understand how language and lived experience can develop knowledge that is transmitted through story-telling. I am L’nu, and I share stories because it makes sense to me to share knowledge that way. It is part of our oral tradition, and Indigenous epistemology are integral foundations of our L’nuwey worldview. I will then use the narrative to build the conceptualization of two-spirits in my thesis. My narrative is a source of first-hand knowledge, and it is an Indigenous way of knowing (Battiste M. , 2009).

### **Indigenous Epistemology**

In addition to CRT, the theoretical framework in this thesis incorporates Indigenous epistemology as a basis for the conceptualization of two-spirit identity in both a pan-Indigenous and a Mi’kmaw perspective. This research delves into historical, cultural, linguistic and social

foundations that frame L'nuwey worldview. Mi'kmaw and other Indigenous authors have contributed to Indigenous epistemology in education (Battiste, 1998 & 2009), traditional knowledge (Youngblood-Henderson, 2009; Little Bear, 2009), and research (Smith, 1999; A. Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009). Their contributions in developing foundations and expanding scholarship on Indigenous epistemology and challenging Eurocentric academy has opened opportunities for Indigenous scholars to explore new boundaries in research methodologies that are more congruent to the needs of the Indigenous researcher. This thesis includes their contributions to the understanding of two-spirit identity in the development of Indigenous inquiry using my voice through storytelling.

Indigenous epistemology is foundational in this thesis because I am researching cultural identity using language and Indigenous voice. It is a source of empowerment and guidance from academic 'Elders.' Their knowledge translates as a pathway for my knowledge-seeking journey.

The whole relationship and interconnectivity among one's surroundings during the research process are meaningful. The concept states that the "self-in-relation" of the individual in research and relationality between the individual with all its surroundings in place and time (Kovach, 2009, pp. 55-57) and with others (people, animals, plants) is part of the process.

Language and culture are part of the interconnection between one and 'others' as well as a means of communication through ceremony, spirituality, beliefs, teachings, and oral tradition. "Language matters because it holds within it a people's worldview...it is a primary concern in preserving Indigenous philosophies, and it is something that must be thought through within research epistemologies" (Kovach, 2009, p. 59). In my narrative, Mi'kmaq is spoken on paper which is a fundamental component of cultural identity that I analyze in the forthcoming chapters.



If Mi'kmaw language is a point of departure for my narrative, as Indigenous epistemology, then it should also be considered an ongoing spiritual process and sacred; it is alive in spirit because it is active as I write these very words on paper. That process was activated when I lived the experiences as an entry level of knowledge creation; then as I share my narrative, I relive the experiences through memory, and I begin to process that knowledge in mind and spirit and externalize that knowledge using my language. The spirit of knowledge remains active as I write this thesis, and it remains in a state of continuum because the knowledge is externalized and spoken, and now written. The spirit of that knowledge traverses from its original place and time and translates into knowledge when my narrative is heard, read and relived by others. That manner is how I understand how Indigenous epistemology through language and story is applied in theory and analysis in this research.

### **Indigenous Scholarship on Two-spirits**

People of colour are the source of knowledge based on their lived experiences manifested through the power of story in CRT. That is an important source of knowledge which Kovach recognizes as “methodologically congruent to tribal knowledges” (Kovach, 2009, p. 35). It centralizes the knowledge development process internally and holistically for the Indigenous person in a personal manner. It is congruent to the individual because sharing lived experiences through stories is a natural and cultural process for tribal knowledge to be developed. One cannot just remove oneself from the process if one is part of the lived experience in the story. It centralizes the role of the individual in the learning process, rather than removing them for the sake of objectivity, which is foundational in western approaches for research (Kovach, 2009). In Canada, tribal knowledge is a result of thousands of years of knowledge passed on through oral traditions, often through stories as well as for the Mi'kmaq (Battiste M., 2009). Therefore, the

method of developing knowledge through the story would be more in line with traditional practice for creating knowledge.

Indigenous authors cited in this thesis provide perspectives on two-spirits from their Indigenous perspectives, such as Alex Wilson (2008), Paula Allen Gunn (2011), Qwo-Li Driskill (2011) and more. Their narratives are part of the movement to scrutinize the Eurocentric knowledge on Indigenous content related to historical, social and cultural content about gender and sexuality in two-spirits or Indigenous LGBTQ. Kovach cites Ladson-Billings in acknowledging that authors of cultural epistemologies are not necessarily addressing racism, but seeking knowledge based on truth and social reality (Kovach, 2009, p. 28) which slowly addresses the “systemic shift in the ideology of knowledge production” (Ibid). This thesis would be an extension of that approach to understanding the concept of two-spirit through a Mi’kmaw lens.

As a Mi’kmaw educator, it is essential that I develop knowledge around the concept of Two-spirit identity because I hope to further scholarship about *l’nu* identity and how it relates to gender and sexuality; therefore, existing knowledge about Two-spirit identity from other cultural perspectives is an excellent foundation before I reanalyze the concept using L’nuwey worldview.

### **Storytelling**

My narrative is a form of storytelling because it is a journey of self-identity and self-realization, much like traditional journey stories shared in oral tradition by Indigenous people. It is a deep journey in memory to understand the process of my maturity process to self-identify as a gay or Two-spirit man. There is a direct relation between the narrative and voice and the creation of knowledge in the CRT methodological framework.

The use of my narrative as a contemporary version of traditional storytelling and as Indigenous epistemology, then combining this with the application of critical race theory as a western academic theoretical framework can be considered as “métissage.” Donald (2009) uses the metaphor of weaving sweetgrass with a Métis sash to symbolize the relationality between the historical Indigenous narrative and the larger narrative of a nation. The unity is derived by weaving diverse perspectives while recognizing that there are differences and commonalities which make up each, but their connections made are considered points of affinity. The value of this process is that Indigenous epistemology is respected by acknowledging the historical relationships that are manifested in current settings.

The former is an ongoing process to build curriculum and pedagogy that challenges the universality of western epistemology and weaves in Indigenous epistemology. The whole idea of gender variance and sexuality from a two-spirit perspective, unfortunately, does not include historical perspective in my language. Since two-spirit is mainly pan-Indigenous, that was meant to be a bridging term that was originally meant to be further contextualized within each Indigenous cultural group – in this case in Mi’kmaq —part of this thesis is a métissage in a sense, as I will explain.

I aim to rewrite into the current setting, what is being two-spirit in a Mi’kmaw concept. In fact, there is next to no written historical, cultural or social knowledge about this concept or any term that was used in Mi’kmaq before the arrival of Europeans in Mi’kma’ki. Therefore, I use my story to create knowledge about two-spirit identity into contemporary discourse through this research. My story is part of the process of introducing knowledge in a contemporary setting. This knowledge is a point of departure for a continued discourse which can be included in future curriculum development. Nevertheless, the pedagogy for knowledge transmission can be

explored using various meaningful strategies that are closely connected to those cultural ways, such as storytelling. This thesis includes a personal narrative of a personal journey of self-discovery and self-realization of a young to mature gay – two-spirit Mi'kmaw man.

This research is based on my lived experience as a L'nu, who speaks Mi'kmaq and self-identifies as L'nu first, followed by other identifiers, such as cisgender male, gay, and a two-spirit. I will use this term until the time comes when I discover what is the most appropriate and culturally relevant term in my language to capture two-spirit or gay identity. Knowing that I am L'nu is inherent which comes from language, teachings, and beliefs, oral traditions and philosophy as a Nation. They are integral components that make up our collective consciousness, knowledge and L'nuwey worldview (Young, 2016 ).

I revisit my lived experience within the contexts mentioned above of identity, such as gay and two-spirit through my narrative. It is situating myself as the knowledge holder with language and cultural interactions in each space and time, and that source of knowledge is legitimate that enables me to present it as such in the academy.

## **Research Questions**

The objective is to learn about any existing concepts related to two-spirits based on cultural, historical, linguistic, and experiential knowledge which would give evidence that Two-spirit identity and culture exists in Mi'kmaw culture today. The central question is:

- How can two-spirit be conceptualized in a contemporary L'nuwey worldview?

The following questions were a driving force for this research and developing this thesis, but they are not part of the current thesis.

- How have historical policies since European arrival influenced Indigenous perspectives on gender, sexuality and spirituality?
- How can existing pan-Indigenous studies about two-spirit identity aid in the process of researching two-spirits in a Mi'kmaw cultural setting?

## **Methodology**

A review of the literature on two-spirit provides a conceptual perspective from non-Indigenous and Indigenous scholars, including their concepts about two-spirit, gender, sexuality, and spirituality. In writing this thesis, evidence indicated that there is little to no contemporary written knowledge or research about two-spirits, historical nor contemporary, from Mi'kmaw writers, researchers or historians. The aim is to understand the concept of two-spirits from various scholarly perspectives and analyze it from my L'nuwey worldview.

In addition to the literature review, a narrative is used to further develop a viewpoint from a two-spirited Mi'kmaw man in my coming out process in various stages of life. The narrative is my journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance, how I have come to self-identify as a two-spirited person, and my reflections about language and terms used to identify a person who is LGBTQ in our culture.

A literature review enabled me to learn about existing knowledge about two-spirit identity from a pan-Indigenous perspective and then to learn about two-spirit conceptualization through the lens of L'nuwey worldview. Janice Tulk (2012), who researched on Mi'kmaw culture in Newfoundland, explains the importance of looking beyond one's culture to understand Indigenous identity:

...it must be duly noted that one's self-identification as Mi'kmaw is only one facet of a person's identity (discussed in Chapter Six). For these reasons, it is necessary to cast the conceptual net broader to encompass the complexity of Indigenous identities...Further, my research considers identity and cultural expression through the lens of localization of culture that is learned through encounter with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Tulk, 2012, p. 29).

A literature review is a form of “casting the net” to capture what it means to be two-spirited, then bring it back to be interpreted within L’nuwey worldview.

Additionally, the narrative provides a powerful source of knowledge based on a lived experience that situates two-spirit identity in Mi’kmaw culture in a contemporary setting. Its combined sources will provide a point of departure for this thesis and ongoing discourse on gender, sexuality and spirituality on two-spirits from a Mi’kmaw perspective. Clandinin and Connelly (2002) describe how a three-dimensional (time, space and personal/social) approach for a narrative inquirer can live, tell, retell and relive stories:

Thinking about an inquiry in narrative terms allows us to conceptualize the inquiry experience as a storied one on several levels. Following Dewey, our principal interest in the experience is the growth and transformation in the life story that we as researchers and participants author. (Clandinin, 2000, p. 71)

Retelling stories or storytelling is part of knowledge sharing, and it is essential in maintaining that sense of spirit, which comes from a storyteller’s voice and individual style of writing (Macedo, Dec. 1999/Jan. 2000). Most indigenous people consider that exchange as part of their education and socialization process with children (Little Bear, 2009, p. 81). This education, according to Little Bear, is achieved by praise and recognition through ceremonies, leading by example and by experience, which leads to retelling that story. Mi’kmaw oral traditions like storytelling are part of the tradition of transmitting knowledge, such as L’nuwey worldview (Battiste, 1998, p. 51)

Dewey's reference to experience is a process by which an individual constructs knowledge based on a series of individual life experiences and its processes in developing this knowledge into new experiences, hence to develop further knowledge. About the last point, it is directly related to critical race theory's notion about people of colour creating knowledge from their experiences. This form of knowledge-building is in line with Mi'kmaw oral tradition based on storytelling according to Tuma Young (2011) where stories are often about life journeys which would also build onto life experiences. These life lessons from stories are left open to interpretation by the individual, which allows the individual to gain new perspectives from their individual experiences, hence building new knowledge. The interaction of experience into knowledge is transformative which offers growth in life for individuals (Dworkin, 1959, pp. 97-103), similar to Young's learning process based on personal interpretation about life journeys.

Finally, *Telling Stories*, by Mary Jo Maynes et al. (2008), offers valuable content on intersecting stories on sexual identities and gender to analyze historical contextualization and personal narratives, confirming that:

The construction of gender and sexual identities is a rich arena for exploring the contribution of personal narrative analysis to the study of social action....Recent analyses of sexual identity formation, however, have provided groundbreaking contributions to the reconceptualization and historicization of subjectivities and identity construction (Maynes, 2008, p. 51).

My narrative began with my experiences and journeys throughout life to understand my self-identity and coming out process. Later in life, I discover a whole new world of ideas that defines Indigenous worldviews on sexuality and gender identity. The concept of two-spirit is introduced and welcomed as a potential term for me to use to identify who I am from an Indigenous perspective. In time, my research led me to delve deeper into my cultural

perspectives to conceptualize what is two-spirit from our cultural worldview. The further I researched, the more I learned about the nature of our cultural worldview about Mi'kmaw identity about sexuality, gender, and how my culture's spirituality has evolved over history to explain the natural world. I understand from this cultural introspection that Indigenous epistemology is rich in oral tradition. I learn that storytelling is part of our epistemology. Therefore, it is this idea of using my voice and to use my story to understand the concept of two-spirit. At the same time, it purposely situates my narrative in the contemporary framework of storytelling. Simply, my story is about intersectionality in gender, sexuality, tradition and contemporary frameworks about my identity as a L'nu or as Mi'kmaq.

It is important to use my narrative as a starting point for this thesis because the story allows me to incorporate Mi'kmaw epistemology within the context of academic research. According to authors that I cite, storytelling is a legitimate method and a powerful way to bring cultural voice and setting in academic research. There is nothing more important than acknowledging my cultural knowledge in my learning process. In doing so, use of language and vocabulary from my story is part of conceptualizing two-spirit identity in a contemporary Mi'kmaw setting. The combination of storytelling and sharing of a narrative to explore gender identity are part of the thesis as a means for building and sharing knowledge, and enhancing understanding about two-spirits within L'nuwey worldview.

### **Two-spirit Research by a Mi'kmaq for the Mi'kmaq**

According to Jason Cromwell, it is common that "gender variant individuals" who research identity look back in history to find evidence about their origins (Cromwell, 1997). This thesis aims to discuss how historical events, such as the establishment of colonial Christianity, the Indian Act of 1876, and the Indian Residential Schools would have altered Indigenous and



L'nuwey worldview concerning gender and sexuality. It is part of building a puzzle to learn how historical events impacted societal, cultural and spiritual perspectives which are now part of L'nuwey worldview; which then provides a framework to conceptualize two-spirit identity in the present cultural setting.

The Jesuits, in their “process of theological indoctrination” (Battiste, 1998, p. 103) onto the Mi'kmaq, slowly impacted our worldview, especially our cultural and spiritual traditions and ceremonies. This, along with the effects from Colonialism, the implementation of the Indian Act in 1884 (Robinson, 2014), and the Indian Residential Schools have either slowly deteriorated or abolished spiritual and ceremonial practices, perhaps including two-spirit culture (Ibid). These policies of assimilation affected language, culture and religion for generations of indigenous people (Ibid), which has caused a fragmentation of beliefs and ceremony (Smith, 1999). Linda Smith refers to fragmentation of culture, which she confirms is all too well-known by Indigenous cultures.

We know what it is like to have our identities regulated by laws and our languages and customs removed from our lives. Fragmentation is not an Indigenous project, it is something we are recovering from. While shifts are occurring in the ways in which Indigenous peoples put ourselves back together again, the greater project is about recentering Indigenous identities on a larger scale (Ibid, p. 97).

Smith recognizes that these policies directly affected Indigenous populations by taking away their right to practice their language, culture and religions to assimilate Indigenous people into the dominant society (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, pp. 1-6). Smith refers to how Indigenous peoples were fragmented from their cultures, spirituality and linguistically.

In Canada, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) report details the process by which Indigenous people of Canada and the rest of Canada must work towards reconciliation. The report has calls to action for all Canadians to address which would be the initial part of what Smith referred to as “putting Indigenous peoples’ lives back together” (Smith, 1999, p. 97) including reclaiming Indigenous identities. TRC recognizes that it will be a long process (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). TRC’s 94 Calls To Action identify health, education, culture, language and spirituality (Ibid, pp. 319-337) as areas of priority for Reconciliation to begin in Canada.

Part of the research is to develop an understanding of how assimilation impacted the way Indigenous people viewed their spiritual practices and beliefs (Battiste, 1998), which may lead us to understand why there are no records of two-spirit identity within our language and cultural practices. Indigenous worldviews were based on belief systems about respecting everyone’s path, which Youngblood-Henderson confirms is an integral characteristic of Indigenous worldview. Youngblood-Henderson furthers that “Each person has a right to a personal identity as a member of a community but also has a responsibility to other life forms and the ecology of the whole” (Youngblood-Henderson, 2009, p. 269). The opportunity to develop one’s sense of identity derives from that worldview, which would have been altered, and in some instances later replaced by Eurocentric Christian faiths.

Hypothetically, if there were a sense of individual expression of individual identities, such as being gay or transgender, then that sense of individual expression would have been challenged by the collective belief based on Christianity (Battiste, 1998). Perhaps, individual expression of gender and sexual identity would have been deemed taboo or sinful during the

early colonial period, which could have resulted in pushing two-spirits into hiding and abolishing their spiritual leadership and individual expression of alternative genders.

It is unknown if the Mi'kmaq had openly welcomed individual expression of alternative or non-heteronormative genders, sexuality and cultural practices like two-spirit concepts of identity that are currently used. What is known is that L'nuwey worldview respected the journey of the individual in exploring and developing their identity as part of personal development, learning and furthering their inner growth in balance with earth (Youngblood-Henderson, 2009, 265). The idea of recognizing the individual journey is promising about contextualizing how two-spirits may be regarded in modern day by Mi'kmaq, that each is supported in their journey to fulfill their personhood. According to L'nuwey worldview, the process of self-discovery and learning is part of life.

Mi'kmaq worldview would have evolved since the arrival of earliest Europeans to present day. It is part of this thesis to recognize how Eurocentric worldviews during colonialism would have influenced contemporary L'nuwey perspective. Understanding this process is part of piecing together how two-spirit identity can be contextualized in L'nuwey world view in the historical present. This research is part of piecing together the puzzle to understand how the L'nuwey worldview has evolved through the dominant forces of Eurocentric perspectives like religion and politics and its continued influence on its evolving nature even to this day.

In the absence of research in Mi'kmaq about two-spirit/LGBTQ identities, this thesis explores how other Indigenous cultures share their perspectives about two-spirit. Combining this with a L'nuwey worldview conceptualizing two-spirit, I offer a Mi'kmaw context in a modern setting. The thesis includes a personal narrative about coming out which situates a lived experience by a self-identified two-spirit Mi'kmaq in the contemporary setting. The narrative

offers a critical perspective using storytelling as a cultural practice to share a personal journey about coming out, and self-exploration as a gay man, and finally arriving at self-identifying as two-spirit Mi'kmaq. This research may be the first conceptualization of two-spirit in Mi'kmaq. It is also probably a first by a Mi'kmaw-speaking two-spirit.

The nature of this inquiry is to recognize the complexity of Indigenous cultures, including Mi'kmaq to understand what is gender and sexuality within contemporary L'nuwey worldview based on academic research. It is uncertain the scope of knowledge which can be brought to light through this conceptualization of two-spirit or what conclusions will come from it, other than it is important to encourage discourse about gender and sexuality within Mi'kmaw present history. It is important to research this identity, so it makes sense within L'nuwey worldview, to establish a point of departure for further knowledge building and sharing. This process of inquiry could be expanded as cultural continuity within a Mi'kmaw context.

### **Chapter Three – Conceptualization of Two-spirits in L’nuwey Worldview**

#### **Overview of Two-spirit Concept**

The terms two spirit (noun), two-spirit (still a noun, now hyphenated) or two-spirited (adjective) are used interchangeably by authors without any specific rule. They are also used interchangeably throughout this thesis. The use of two-spirit is widely accepted in the LGBTQ community and by many Indigenous<sup>i</sup> groups in North America. Its use has become accepted as a pan-Indigenous concept which is meant to be further contextualized by individual cultural and tribal contexts. In keeping with this work, this thesis will contextualize two-spirit from a Mi’kmaw<sup>ii</sup> perspective. First, the thesis lays out the foundations about what two-spirit is, by highlighting its origins, authors and its evolution from non-Indigenous to Indigenous writers. Authors, such as Beatrice Medicine (2002), Evelyn Blackwood (1997), Alex Wilson (2008), and Paula Gunn Allen (2011) have led the development of cultural perspectives on two-spirits, its relation to gender and gender roles, sexuality and Indigenous identity in general, by looking at language, perspectives and worldviews from various origins.

The concept of two-spirit has been slowly adopted by Indigenous people in North America since it was coined by Myra Laramie in 1990 to identify individual sexuality and gender identity within a cultural context. Myra Laramie sat in a protest at the Manitoba Legislative Assembly to support a woman who faced losing her children to her husband. Myra had set up a teepee and protested for some days. One night, Myra had a vision where seven spirits stepped forward in her presence, and two of them identified as representatives of Indigenous LGBTQ (McLeod, 2016). Myra shared her vision with Indigenous people from the LGBTQ community in Manitoba (Ibid). Later that year, the term two-spirit was adopted by Indigenous LGBTQ at the Annual International Gathering by Indigenous participants and representatives of LGBTQ groups in the

United States and Canada (Ryan, 2003). It was meant to be used temporarily by each culture until each language culture can find its similar context or develop one that identifies gender, sexuality, and corresponding terms from their cultural perspectives. I will use the term two-spirit/ed throughout the thesis for consistency. There are other terms that are used before 1990, such as Berdache or language-specific terms that were used by Indigenous groups in North America. The default will be to use the term two-spirit, except in those contexts whereby authors use their terms, such as Berdache or language-specific terms by Indigenous writers.

The use of two-spirit is recognized in both Indigenous and mainstream LGBTQ settings to describe individuals who self-identify as Indigenous and LGBTQ to express their gender and/or sexuality. It is considered an umbrella term to represent Indigenous perspective(s) about gender and sexuality, non-gender and non-binary conformity and fluid expressions of sexuality. The notion of gender duality where the male and female ‘spirits’ as gender/role expressions is also recognized to be characteristic of two-spirits. Historically, there are Indigenous cultures that recognized the concept of gender fluidity as part of gender identity, in fact, some of those individuals were revered as spiritual leaders among their groups and communities (Brown, 1997; Gilley, 2006; Jacobs S. E., 1997).

The use of two-spirit to identify as Indigenous LGBTQ has been growing among Mi’kmaq due to awareness and education campaigns by Mi’kmaw educators who teach about sexuality and gender identity from an Indigenous perspective in Atlantic Canada (W2SA, 2011). As a cultural educator and a self-identified two-spirit person or gay *L’nu*, I borrow knowledge about two-spirit concepts from other North American Indigenous cultures because of the lack of ancestral knowledge or research about this concept in my language and culture. Often, I am asked by Mi’kmaw youth just how two-spirit identity is relatable in our Mi’kmaw culture. Therefore, it is

a priority for me as a Mi'kmaw educator to expand knowledge about a two-spirit culture by making it meaningful in a Mi'kmaw context.

### **Two-spirits Concepts: Non-Indigenous to Cultural Specific Origins**

Two-spirit identity is considered a pan-Indigenous term because Indigenous people have been accepting its use as a bridging term, if you will, while Indigenous scholars and writers make sense of its use within a cultural context. Indigenous people often share aspects of social, cultural and historical lived experiences, such as deprivation and erosion of their spiritual beliefs and values, and knowledge about two-spirit identity in North America. Indigenous groups in North America used their languages to describe people who showed multiple aspects and expressions of gender and sexuality before two-spirit was adopted as a pan-Indigenous term for sexual, gender and spiritual expression among Indigenous LGBTQ individuals in 1990. The Manitoba Teacher's Society published the following definition of two-spirit in its report, *Every Teacher Project* in 2015 which is comprehensive and captures pan-Indigenous characteristics relatable to many Indigenous cultures in North America.

An umbrella term that reflects the many words used in different Indigenous languages to affirm the interrelatedness of multiple aspects of identity, including gender, sexuality, community, culture and spirituality. Prior to the imposition of the sex/gender binary by European colonizers, many Indigenous cultures recognized Two Spirit people as respected members of their communities and accorded them special status as visionaries, healers and medicine people based upon their unique abilities to understand and move between masculine and feminine perspectives. Some Indigenous people identify as Two Spirit rather than, or in addition to, identifying as LGBTQ (Taylor, 2015, p. 6).

### **Evolution of Conceptualization: Historical to Contemporary Perspectives**

Historians, anthropologist and social scientists (mainly non-indigenous) have contributed to the scholarship of Indigenous concepts of gender identity and sexuality. This thesis is not about the conceptualization of their work, but to acknowledge that their work has contributed to my foundational knowledge about two-spirit concepts related to gender variance and dimensions of sexuality often expressed by Indigenous people. It is their perspectives that dominated the conceptual landscape of Indigenous cultures concerning gender and sexuality and the use of terms before the term two-spirit.

The term ‘berdache’ was used among scholars and historians, but the term was considered inappropriate by Indigenous groups because of its derogatory reference to catamites or young slaves of either sex in French (Roscoe, 1998). Authors like Walter Williams (1992) and Will Roscoe (1998) used the berdache concept to describe variance in Indigenous gender and sexuality in their books and influenced the conceptual framework about Indigenous culture on gender and sexuality. Other authors like Lester Brown (1997), Harriet Whitehead (1988), Evelyn Blackwood (1997), and Sabina Lang (1997a) have also contributed enormously to building onto perspectives on gender variance and binary non-conformity, including the role of genders, as opposed to looking at just sexuality among two-spirits in history.

The above-listed authors’ perspectives were later expanded on and collaborated with Indigenous scholars and writers who brought specific cultural perspectives through their writings. Indigenous writers represent community-based knowledge and authenticity based on their lived experiences. Therefore, their scholarship brought powerful voices to counterbalance knowledge about two-spirits in current literature. These authors include Wesley Thomas



(Navaho-Dine), Terry Tafoya (Taos/Warm Springs) and Beatrice Medicine (Standing Rock Lakota) who were contributing writers in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Jacobs S. E., 1997a).

The evolution of publications about two-spirit identity and culture includes a complete list of Indigenous authors in the book *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* (Driskill, 2011), such as works by Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee), Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna), Louis Esme Cruz (Non-status Mi'kmaq/Acadian), Janice Gould (Concow), and Deborah Miranda (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation/Chumash). Their contributions in two-spirit conceptualization are the decolonization of “heteropatriarchal gender regimes” (Driskill, 2011, p.3) and centralizing eroticism as part of sexual diversity in Indigenous culture by Indigenous people.

The process of decolonization is ongoing, and numerous Indigenous academics and writers are contributing enormously in Indigenous scholarship and conceptualization of two-spirit in their cultural worldviews, such as Alex Wilson, Cree (1996) and Margaret Robinson, Mi'kmaq (2014) whose works are cited in this thesis.

Indigenous writers recognize the complex nature of Indigenous languages and cultures. It is challenging for non-Indigenous writers to capture the spirit of the concept because they are far too removed from the Indigenous experience (Battiste M. S., 1998); they do not speak the language nor have the same lived experience of an Indigenous person who faces the multidimensions of identity like class and race. The concept of identity encompasses a wider spectrum of characteristics than just one's sexuality or gender, or even class and race. Alex Wilson adds, “affirmation of identity: an Aboriginal person who is LGBTQ comes to understand their relationship to and place and value in their own family, community, culture, history and

present-day world” (Wilson, 2008, p. 196). The whole concept of what makes up one’s identity is how one relates to others, like family and community in one’s culture – a sense of interconnectedness. Interconnectivity and kinship among “all relations” is explained further in the chapter.

Indigenous perspectives have transformed knowledge about two-spirits from dominant Eurocentric perspectives to more cultural-specific Indigenous worldviews. This thesis references concepts as part of my foundation of knowledge. This allows me to have a general conceptual mapping of where and how the concept(s) about two-spirits have evolved. There is great importance in how other tribal cultures have developed their understanding of what two-spirit is. I can reference their process of conceptualization for this thesis. For example, I reviewed the literature about two-spirits by other authors, which motivated me to write my narrative as a gay/two-spirit person.

### **Challenges in Conceptualization of Two-spirits by Non-Indigenous Authors**

Prior to the vision by Myra Laramie in 1990, when the term two-spirit was given to us, the existing historical references about gender and sexuality are based on Western social categorizations by European colonialists in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Brown, 1997, p. xxii; Tafoya, 1997, p. 198; Wilson, 1996, p. 306; Garret & Barret, p. 134). Battiste recognizes this scholarship to be a contributing factor in the continued misinterpretation of our cultures because “missionaries, anthropologists, and linguists have tried to understand Indigenous languages from the perspective of Eurocentric linguistic conventions” (Battiste, 1998, p. 102) which separated them as the observers. The knowledge holders (non-indigenous people) are separated from the Indigenous people who are considered the observed

Mi'kmaq contains intricate details on content, spirit, precision, and linguistic nuances, which only Mi'kmaw language speakers will capture while reviewing oral traditions, narratives, stories and legends. C.L. Sheffield shares the importance of how language speakers and non-speakers differ in the interpretation of Indigenous concepts or ideas for linguistic inflection. The experience of Anishinaabe is transferable to Mi'kmaq because it is the importance of context which applies true to both cultures.

Language is at the heart of all storytelling. While nonspeakers may be able to glean a surface meaning from stories translated to English, we miss the subtleties of linguistic inflection that make them inherently Anishinaabe. In the opening chapter, Basil H. Johnston argues that stories are foundational elements of Anishinaabe culture and identity because they are inextricably linked to language. To know a language, he suggests, is to know a people. "Without the benefit of knowing the language of the Indian nation that they are investigating," he writes, "scholars can never get into their minds the heart and soul and spirit of a culture and understand the Native's perceptions and interpretations" (5) (Sheffield, 2015, p. 432).

Observations based on merely Eurocentric views omit the nature of the kinship and relationship that are expressed through languages within Indigenous groups. European perspectives would not capture the intricate details expressed in words, phrases and the spirit of the language. They would not comprehend the nature of the flux or the unspoken sentiments of kinship expressed through language within the context of spirit, not necessarily as words. This point is further exemplified in the next section in the analysis of *Geenumu Gesallagee* which is a term in Mi'kmaq for berdache that was published by non-Indigenous authors.

### **Mi'kmaq term for berdache: *Geenumu Gesallagee***

In reviewing the literature about two-spirit identity and the previous paragraph, I came across another term used for berdache before two-spirit became an umbrella term. The term was used by non-Indigenous writers, which gives reason to the importance of specific Nations/Tribes

to provide their context about two-spirits. I analyze its context concerning gender and sexuality, or any other expression about gender variance, non-binary conformity and gender-role fluidity.

Will Roscoe references Walter Williams to identify *geenumu gesallagee* (“one” loves men in direct translation), but their translation is “he loves men” in his glossary of native terms as the word phrase in Mi’kmaq for berdache or alternative gender roles and sexuality (Roscoe, 1998, p. 214). The word phrase originated from an interview with a Micmac (Mi’kmaw) informant by Walter Williams on his research about berdache cultures in North America (Williams, 1992). It is the only published term used in my culture to describe berdache. The authors have published this term to mean berdache in Mi’kmaq in their categorization of Indigenous terms to represent gender and sexuality. However, the interpretation of this phrase is incomplete, therefore incorrect to be considered as an authentic reference of berdache in Mi’kmaq.

Mi’kmaq is my first language, which provides me with a keen understanding and first-hand knowledge about its spiritual and cultural context to understand and properly use our language in current modern contexts, and to recognize its nuances, which is how I can analyze the term/phrase that was published by Roscoe/Williams.

In my analysis of *geenumu gesallagee*, I consider the concept to be partially correct as a Mi’kmaw term to identify berdache. I say partially because the author omitted to provide context about its usage in Mi’kmaq. I understand the complexity of our language and understand there could be numerous interpretations of the phrase to signify something else besides its intended/implied concept for berdache.

The phrase as it is written simply means “...loves men,” so as a stand-alone, it is not an expression of gender variance or sexuality specifically for the following reasons. First, the phrase

does not identify the gender of the individual (subject) in Mi'kmaq, but the authors provide a translation to include the subject pronoun “he” to mean a male individual. The nuance about the subject is understood to mean someone, but it is not gendered specific. About context, such as who said it, to whom it is said, and in what context is the phrase being used, the subject would further define the whole meaning of the phrase. Secondly, it does not identify the sexuality of the person who uses it nor does it specify to whom it is referred to as berdache. This is where the nuances of the use of this term may vary. Let's say; it is understood to be about a “man who loves men” because the author(s) does/do reference the person as a Mi'kmaw male, but there is no clarity provided whether the informant is a gay male, bisexual or trans in identity or their gender expression.

Back to the first point, the subject could be included in the phrase to complete who it is that loves men to provide more clarity. In this case, add the word *genum* (man to represent “he”) to identify the gender of the individual. If it read *genum genuumu gesallagee*, then it would provide a clearer expression of who the subject is, a man loves men, then we can reference it as “he loves men.” It does not clarify if the man is either gay, bisexual or trans, or any other descriptor to identify sexuality or gender variance. The phrase still simply would mean that a man loves men. It does not specify that the man has sex with men, for example. In my knowledge of our language, there are words or terms in Mi'kmaq to describe non-heteronormative sexuality, like *kistale'k*, used to identify an individual who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The word also means a person who is acting oddly. The analysis for *kistale'k* is in the section called “My Narrative is Oral Tradition in Written Form.” Therefore, the phrase is not a concrete term to represent either Mi'kmaw sexuality or gender variance. It is not a term that encompasses the context of gay men's sexuality.

My last point is that this phrase/term is weak in its usage to describe sexuality or gender variance because there is no evidence of any validation for its use by the author. I fail to confirm if either Roscoe or Williams had properly validated to see if *geenumu gesallagee* was truly an equivalent concept of berdache or two-spirit, or that it represents gender and sexuality variance in Mi'kmaq by Mi'kmaw elders, and by language and cultural knowledge holders. According to linguists in Eskasoni, a word, term, or phrase is validated by at least three Elders. Therefore, this analysis can be considered as the initial part of a conceptual revision of the term by a Mi'kmaq-speaking two-spirit educator. The question remains how many words or phrases in Roscoe's book could have similar misrepresentations of cultural knowledge. In fact, "geenumu gesallegee" is also mentioned in the introduction in *Sovereign Erotics* (Driskill, 2011, p. 6) about how Indigenous people are rejecting Eurocentric terms about gender and sexuality because they do not properly convey the nuances of the linguistic or cultural perspectives with those identities completely. Even though the use of "geenumu gesallegee" is used to underscore cultural conceptualization of identity, it cannot be ignored that the term is continuing to be used in publication as current as 2011.

The previous analysis brings to light Battiste's point of how non-Indigenous historians, anthropologists and other academics are too far removed from Indigenous linguistic and cultural perspectives to get the nuances and the varying complexities that are found within cultural expressions to explain phenomena or social reality. In this case, Roscoe and Williams are not Mi'kmaq, therefore they would not fully comprehend the full context of the term that they claim is a Mi'kmaw term for berdache. Their research would need much further validation and cultural input in today's research process, especially when there are ethics and research protocols that provide guidelines in conducting research with Indigenous peoples in Canada, such as OCAP

(Ownership, Control, Access, Possession)<sup>iii</sup>, Tricouncil Chapter 9 involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada<sup>iv</sup> and Mi'kmaq Ethics Watch, which is specific for Mi'kmaq people and content.

Williams' (1992) publication came before the establishment of OCAP (FNIGC, 2017) principles. Williams considers that ethnographers (researchers) who research with Indigenous people require the right combination of sensitivity and relationship building skills to interview individuals, especially about topics that are as sensitive as sexuality and gender roles (Williams, 1992, pp. 140-141). These are of course important principles, even if William's work may be called into some question as I have done here. One can appreciate that researching with Indigenous groups has made much progress since Williams's publication.

### **Conceptualization in other Indigenous Cultures**

According to my review of the literature, there is evidence from other Indigenous cultures about individuals who expressed and lived openly, as what we now know as two-spirits, among many North American cultures which have been documented by non-Indigenous and Indigenous people. There are many Indigenous cultures, like the Blackfoot, Cree, Navaho, and Lakota (Williams, 1992; Brown, 1997; Roscoe, 1998) who revered two-spirits, then referred to as berdaches and who also were known in their groups to assume roles as shamans, spiritual leaders and medicine people. Canadian Indigenous tribes, for example, Blackfoot Nations (Sissika, Kainai, Piikari), Cree Nations (Anishanbeg or Ojibwe/Oji-Cree Nations), and Bella Coola (Nuxalk), and in the United States, Navaho, Lakota (Dakota), and Zuni Tribes have vocabulary that identifies berdaches in their language and culture as early as colonial times (Roscoe, 1998). Roscoe has a breakdown of family languages according to tribes (Roscoe, 1998, pp. 213-222). This is where the berdache term in Mi'kmaq is also listed.

### **Conceptualization in Mi'kmaq: Absence of Mi'kmaw Knowledge and Teachings about Two-Spirits**

It was not expected that there would be any references to two-spirits in historical documents like the *Jesuits Relations* (Thwaites R. G., 1896) where researchers have used references to early Mi'kmaw culture. European colonialism was strongly influenced by early 17<sup>th</sup> Eurocentric – Catholic perspectives. These perspectives were based on strict heteronormative, male-female gender binaries and patriarchal experiences and expectations, beliefs and norms in society (Canon, 1998, p. 2) which carried into the development of heteronormative laws that outlawed any non-heteronormative sexual practices like homosexuality and sodomy (Ibid). Any Indigenous groups that would have considered it normal to practice homosexuality would have been viewed as abnormal and sinful. The climate in Europe was intolerant of sexual freedoms, other than heteronormative customs. This extended in the intersectionality of sexuality, colonialism and religiosity in the 1580s – 1650s in Latin America (Tortorici, 2012) to help define social meaning based on strict religious and moral codes. Tortorici mentions the deficit of knowledge on lesbian sexuality due to lack of research in colonial studies but acknowledges that women were targets of sodomy inquisitions for practicing sex for non-reproductive reasons (Ibid, p. 165). The main point here is to comprehend the role of European perspectives on colonial mandates in Americas which ultimately hindered or altered Indigenous behaviour regarding their cultural practices concerning sex.

An important point to underscore is that there is little or no academic literature about two-spirits from a Mi'kmaw perspective, except by Margaret Robinson. Luis Esme Cruz, also Mi'kmaq/Acadian shared his writing in the *Sovereign Erotics*. Cruz integrates his writing from Silas Rand's collection of stories that were collected during his time as a missionary. Rand



travelled extensively in Mi'kma'ki to learn about the Mi'kmaw language, life and culture in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Rand's collection of Mi'kmaw oral traditions were published over the years, like Ruth Holmes Whitehead's publication called "Traditional Story: The Boy Who Visited Muinis'isk" which was the inspiration for Cruz's story called "Birth Song for Muin, in Red" (Driskill, 2011, p. 70). This is significant because the story is based on a Mi'kmaw tradition of story-telling. Cruz combines oral tradition with storytelling using elements of language, culture and a legend to explore gender variance, which could be easily interpreted as transitioning from one gender to another.

Conceptualization about two-spirits and its analysis is a good place to begin. This conceptualization must be situated in a contemporary setting because of the lack of historical references to any cultural identity regarding two-spirits. I understand the complexity of the lack of historical references or oral traditions about two-spirits in Mi'kmaq, which is exactly the motivation behind my narrative to explore any current references or relatable terms to two-spirits from a contemporary perspective. There is an important process that must take place in understanding my sense of lived experience, and that is to understand where I come from as a Mi'kmaq or the source of L'nuwey worldview.

### **L'nuwey Worldview**

Our worldview has developed over thousands of years from an oral culture based on oral traditions: stories, myths and legends, that evolved to explain our origins, beliefs, traditions and language (Battiste M. S., 1998). Our culture derived from our land, much like other Indigenous cultures who situate their knowledge from their ecological spaces, which became their cultural, spiritual and traditional territories. Our most important gift from our territory is our language and with it, thousands of years of wisdom and its spirituality (Bartlett, 2009).

There are Indigenous scholars like Marie Battiste (Mi'kmaq), James Sakej Youngblood-Henderson (Chickasaw Nation and Cheyenne Tribe), Tuma Young (Mi'kmaq), Margaret Robinson (Mi'kmaq), Albert Marshall (Mi'kmaq) and Murdena Marshall (Mi'kmaq), who all provide important contributions to Mi'kmaw scholarship on L'nuwey worldview. Their knowledge is significant in developing a conceptual framework for interpreting how two-spirits are (may have been) perceived and even supported within our ancestral culture. This would give foundations for providing a cultural importance in the acceptance and recognition of two-spirits in the current setting. According to Robinson, this is a key factor in developing a cultural link for continuity (Robinson, 2014).

It may never be known if there existed phrases or words such as two-spirits, or similar concepts that described or identified individuals who were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, or how these people would have been perceived or treated among the Mi'kmaq before European contact. However, we can still use Mi'kmaw knowledge to develop an academic analysis of two-spirit identity in a contemporary setting. We can also hypothesize using current L'nuwey worldview to imagine how two-spirits may have been integrated into the community in pre-colonial times. Even though there are no ancestral traditions or teachings about two-spirit identity based on my literature review, this thesis brings to the surface how two-spirit identity is analyzed within the context of contemporary place and time. Now, to explain what is L'nuwey worldview and its relation to identity is the first process of conceptualization.

### **Connectiveness and Kinship is L'nuwey Worldview**

I apply Sakej Youngblood-Henderson's philosophical framework (2009) about the interrelatedness of all spirits within an ecosystem as part of the foundations to explain gender

and sexuality development. I braid in the connectiveness (Bartlett, 2009, p. 5) of well-being by Murdena and Albert Marshall for reaching an optimum state of health.

L'nuwey worldview or Mi'kmaw worldview is derived from the Mi'kmaq and all living things interacting within a local ecosystem (Youngblood-Henderson, 2009) that has developed into a community of knowledge, language and kinship with all spirits about the land – Mi'kma'ki<sup>v</sup>. It is derived from the interconnectedness of all things in a time-space, known as cosmos in an ecosystem. It is in that ecosystem, known as Mi'kma'ki that all living things or spirits are bound to each other through kinship; microorganisms with other organisms, plants with animals, animals with humans, humans with others under social structures which all move and are related to each other in a state of flux. Their interrelatedness is what determines their well-being and what defines their values and beliefs. The natural order of things is determined by the relations, that sense of interconnectedness, which all living things have with one another based on mutual needs and mutual understandings of their role in their ecological space.

Wilson (1996) relates that “Two-spirit identity affirms the interrelatedness of all aspects of identity, including sexuality, gender, culture, community and spirituality” (Wilson, 1996, p. 305). This expression of interrelatedness ties in with Youngblood Henderson's description of the sacred order, where animal, plant and human spirits thrive and balance each other in kinship (Ibid). Murdena Marshall explains how the cohesion of self and the world is the primacy of one's existence and its connectiveness is the source of our spirituality and well-being (Bartlett, 2009).

Essentially, I gather the pieces together to build an understanding that two-spiritedness is an interrelatedness of its multi-forms of expressions, such as sexuality, gender, and spirituality in an individual's body, similar to how individuals share an interrelatedness in space or territory like Mi'kma'ki, according to our L'nuwey worldview. It is to know that kinships and our social

norms and beliefs are in a state of flux within the ecosystem; these “social categorizations and value systems” (Youngblood-Henderson, 2009) are also part of the flux. Youngblood-Henderson states that all life forms adhere to finding their balance and further confirms “such relationships are not always achieved, but they are the purpose of life” (Ibid, p. 258). It is a natural process that our value systems are checked and re-checked in that state of flux, whereby social cohesion among individuals or their kinship is always evolving to meet the individual and social needs. These interactions between the individuals are a part of our cultural values and traditions. The understanding is that social cohesion takes place when there is a system of balance within that ecosystem. This connectiveness of individuals is also an integral process for balancing relationships to reach optimum health (Bartlett, 2009) and it results in stronger kinships and spiritual well-being for our nationhood (Ibid).

### **Kinship of Inner Spirits Make Up Gender and Sexuality**

This worldview is the source of my knowledge to conceptualize gender and sexual identity: that a state of flux occurs continuously within an individual in a circular motion, which I view as the lifecycle. Spirits, or *mntu’k* as Youngblood-Henderson calls them, transform over time and space within one’s body. The spirits are inherent to each person like a genetic design which are gifted by the Creator. They are what makes up the individual’s physical, emotional, mental and spiritual composition that range from microscopic and chemical form to our solid state physical form. These four areas need to be in the balance for the individual to be in an optimum state of being. Therefore, there are spirits that make up the physical composition of the body. They work together to help maintain the proper developmental stages of that body.

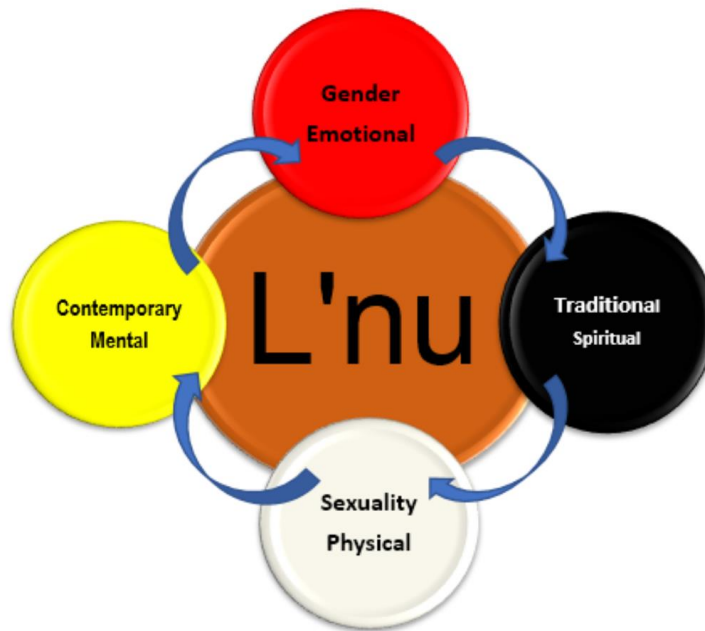
These spirits may manifest in various forms, for example for the physical (outward expression) like hair, the colour of eyes, height. They alter during various stages of physical

growth, like puberty transformations, and the various elements that affect the inner body through chemical and hormonal processes. These are natural processes that our people consider as part of the natural process of inner/outer growth that our Creator gifted everyone. They are a part of the life cycle, and each person goes through these stages in their natural process of maturity. See Murdena Marshall's diagram (Appendix #1) to observe how those stages of life are part of the natural cycle.

Since everyone goes through this process individually, the transformations of spirits in everyone are in a state of flux. They are continuously evolving, developing, transforming to reach their optimal level of balance which makes up the composition of a human being. That process of life cycles of the spirits within the body is a microsystem.

*Figure 1* below is a visual representation of a two-spirit/Indigenous LGBTQ person's gender/sexuality and spiritual identity. The centre circle is *L'nu* (plural form is *L'nuk*), which means person or Mi'kmaq. It is the principal and anchor identity before the surfacing of gender and sexuality identities. Even though these spirits (gender, sexuality) are inherent within all four quadrants (represented in the four universal colours of race/cultures as red, white, yellow and black), they will remain dormant, undeveloped or irrelevant until they are properly nurtured in their stages within Marshall's lifecycle diagram (Appendix 1).

Figure 1 Visual Representation of Gender and Sexuality within Historical and Contemporary Contexts. This is my interpretation of how gender and sexuality identities are developed within the main identity as L'nu. The four outer circles are red, white,



black and yellow. They represent the colours of humanity according to Mi'kmaq. They are in no coordinated location in the diagram, and they are in a constant circular movement that represents the process of flux. They are what make up the identity of each L'nu.

In my interpretation of gender and sexuality and its connectiveness within one's self, these spirits are in constant motion within the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual realms of an individual. Gender and sexuality are not meant to be static, nor are they meant to be placed in one permanent realm or circle. They are in flux throughout everyone's lifecycle. What I understand from this is that gender and sexuality are in motion in a circular process. That flux includes the nature of L'nu identity that ebbs between contemporary and traditional worldviews. There is an intersectionality between contemporary and traditional beliefs, and sexuality and gender identities as well. The arrows in the diagram represent a continuous circular motion that moves in either direction, similarly as it would in the lifecycle diagram. That flux is a living process by which each person manifests internally and externally in their stages of development

in their lifecycle. The idea of in flux concerning identity also is shared by Silko whereby “sexual identity is changing constantly” (1996, p. 13). There is a significant development that takes place approximately every seven years in which one of the seven sacred teachings begins to develop until one reaches the stage of wisdom later in life. I share Elder Marshall’s lifecycle of sacred teachings to underscore the importance of how Mi’kmaw understand the process of personal growth as a lifecycle, which is part of what makes up our L’nuwey worldview.

There are simultaneous microsystems negotiating between all organisms which then form part of a larger system, which Sakej-Henderson refers to as the ecosystem or Mi’kma’ki. I believe this could also occur in individuals. The individual’s inner spirits are characteristics or markers that make up gender and sexuality within the body which eventually makes up wholeness of the person. They are in constant state of negotiation or flux within the body ready to reach their maturity. These spirits or *mntu’k* establish kinships with each other as well within the body to establish a balance which transforms into an individual identity in a healthy manner if the elements and circumstances are right. These transformations may take place at various points in one’s life when both internal and external conditions are balanced. When the conditions are balanced for the individual, then it is time for the person to ‘come out’ as a two-spirit. This is part one of many cycles that develop into one’s identity. Alex Wilson (1996) refers to the circle model in how identity develops. This model challenges the phase approach models of identity development which will be briefly discussed in the next paragraphs.

Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance (W2SA) conducted a study on two-spirits coming out stories in Atlantic Canada in 2016-17. The story-tellers were individuals who self-identified as either two-spirit, trans, gay and also self-identified as Mi’kmaq or Maliseet. That sense of intersectionality in self-identifying was more frequent among trans individuals. They identified

as gay, or lesbian and two-spirit (Sylliboy, 2017). They did not just self-identify as two-spirit, but they recognized the other identifiers, like gay or lesbian. One of the findings of the study showed that individuals came out at various times during their lives, often two or up to three times, especially among trans people (Ibid). Elder Marshall's lifecycle of stages could be used to understand the process of development that coincides with the stages of life when people feel the most confident or safe to come out as two-spirits. This non-linear expression of gender and sexuality is relatable to Alex Wilson's (1996) reference to the circle model and Silko's (1996) reference to changing sexualities.

The former explanations may account for why coming out for individuals may vary in time and space; if the right conditions are not met for those spirits to feel safe to manifest into what makes up our gender and sexuality, they will be dormant until the time is right and their full maturity will be delayed. This notion of coming out and using L'nuwey worldview is a meaningful cultural link. The conceptualization example provided is how Mi'kmaq use our knowledge to provide a critical analysis of events and social phenomena. In the W2SA study, two-spirits identified the types of supports they had during their coming out process and the majority mentioned peer and family support in the absence of formal mental health supports for Indigenous LGBTQ or two-spirits (Sylliboy, 2017).

Wilson's (1996) reference also describes self-identity development among gay and straights as a non-linear process that is based on experiences that are not dichotomous. They are continuous processes within a circle model. The circle model is an alternative conceptualization to stages or phases models, because they are too linear and prescriptive according to Wilson. One such model is outlined in a report by the Canadian AIDS Society (Ryan, 2003). Ryan references Vivienne C. Cass's theoretical model for homosexual identity which outlines a six-phase process



for identity formation. (See also Ryan's use of two-spirit descriptors in Appendix 2). Without going into a detailed analysis of Cass's theoretical model for which there is much literature, I do want to confirm that I agree with Wilson's observation that for two-spirits, identity formation is non-linear based on my study on coming out narratives by two-spirits in Atlantic (Sylliboy, 2017). This process of identity formation is exactly how I perceive my identity formation to be developing, even as I write this thesis. In fact, I recognize that process of identity formation to be ongoing, and it ceases to end.

### **Language and Storytelling**

Marie Battiste, a Mi'kmaw educator, provides valuable cultural insight in the importance of language and storytelling as a means of interpreting and transmitting Mi'kmaw knowledge (Battiste, 1998). Battiste shares how education is a personal journey which must be nurtured and supported by the collective because it is a journey set out for each person as part of his/her life cycle and to reach wholeness as a person (Ibid). Part of the journey is to find one's path in life and self-determination is foundational in that process of learning. The role of elders is highlighted in that transmission of knowledge through storytelling (Battiste, 1998; King, 2003; Little Bear, 2009).

I felt perplexed and motivated at the same time to learn more about my culture when I realized that there might never be a way to know about ancestral teachings regarding two-spirits. Evidently, there is a gap in knowledge regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and queers in a cultural perspective in Mi'kmaq. However, I understand that the need for this knowledge is due to the resurgence of our cultures and self-determination in contemporary contexts in Mi'kma'ki. There are numerous researchers and knowledge holders who brought to light the need to understand who we are as Mi'kmaq, who also self-identify with gender markers that use English

terminology to describe sexuality. Questions about who we are and where we come from is a common process among cultural groups in this age of resurgence of traditions and ceremonies. Damien Lee (Anishinaabe) (2012) shares that this a process of decolonization and cultural rediscovery.

As a Mi'kmaq, I reviewed my understanding of parallel concepts of sexuality and gender that exist in my language. I mention some terms in my narrative of self-discovery and coming out. Mi'kmaq has always been my source of knowledge about cultural content, like traditions, values, beliefs and how I relate to people and things that surround me. Elders would say that this knowledge is inherent because it is so profound and integral to our way of life, especially when you speak the language. When I heard the word two-spirit, I did what anyone would do, and that is to try to conceptualize the word/phrase by translating it into my language. It still did not make sense. My next step then was to examine my language in written form. In the following paragraph, I looked at the complexity of my language in written form.

Mi'kmaq “is a polysynthetic language with very complicated word systems of morphology with relatively simple syntax” (Inglis, 2004, p. 393). As a Mi'kmaw speaker, it is comprehensible how one would try to translate each specific word: two is *ta'pu*, or *tapu'kl* (two of them) *ta'pu'najik* (has two), *ta'punkl* (also means has two), *tapu'sitkik* (there were two) and spirit is *mijjaqamijj* or *mijjaqamijjk<sup>vi</sup>* (plural form). Inglis states that Mi'kmaq, as an Algonquian language, has a relaxed word order in sentence formation (Ibid).

I realized then that the word and concept are foreign in my language, but I was aware that it was not a foreign reality about being gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans or queer among our people.

It was that moment when the phrase, *I think. Therefore I am*, played out in my mind; if there are two-spirits or Mi'kmaq who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer, then there

must be some explanation about the origin of our two-spirits. I come to this realization by understanding that much of our oral traditions and teachings were eradicated, lost or went underground since the time of contact with Europeans. In that process of societal transformation(s), words, phrases, and identities were replaced by a new dominant cultural hegemony.

There is much value from the decolonization rhetoric by Indigenous writers and activists across Canada, and that is part of the story that is shared by many Indigenous perspectives. I come from a more proactive approach by looking at the incredible work our Mi'kmaw people have surfaced in the process of resurgence and self-determination of our history, culture and teachings. I borrow from Damien Lee in *“Placing Knowledge as Resurgence”* whose idea I agree with:

Gaps in knowledge are not permanent losses of knowledge as much as they are symptoms of the colonial project in Canada. Such “gaps” might be understood instead as silent resistances, temporary mutings of knowledges that await being (re)found by someone in a dream. Through reconnecting with place, Indigenous peoples are able to reclaim their ways of being and their knowledges (Lee, 2012, p. 9).

I suggest that our knowledge is not lost but in transition. I accept that there are tremendous challenges in this process of knowledge reawakening, yet this thesis offers a point in addressing gaps in knowledge.

It is language strongly based on verbs, rather than on nouns, which makes up Mi'kmaw worldview. The role of language and culture is integral in the reawakening process of knowledge. The interconnectedness of our culture is through language, which is the source of our knowledge and learning (Battiste, 1998). The language, culture, and knowledge are reflective of any given time and space within the ecosystem, which is also in flux. There are transformations

within the language to reflect the needs of the people. Therefore, if there are any expressions of any transformations that provide meanings in life (Battiste, 1998, p. 76), these are then transformed into the perceived world through language. “The Mi’kmaw language builds on verb phrases that contain the motion of that flux with hundreds of prefixes and suffixes to choose from to express a panorama of energy” (Ibid). Those verb phrases express the flux of that realm. It is that verb based language which reflects the transformation of energies in realms. According to Battiste, the Mi’kmaw worldview has very “few fixed, separate objects” because energies are in constant transformation (Ibid). It is also within the realms or ecosystems that individuals learn based on their experiences, which are told through stories.

Conceptualizing two-spirit within Mi’kmaw language and storytelling to understand it within a cultural worldview, is part of the transformations within the flux, a source of developing new knowledge as a part of cultural continuity. There are characteristics which may be sources of cultural significance which encourage cultural continuity (Robinson, 2014, p. 22) and empowerment for cultural reconnection and “healthy identity integration” (Garret & Barret, 2003, p. 138) especially for Indigenous youth, who face challenges with self-identity and self-acceptance, which in turn can lead to mental health problems (Evans-Campbell, 2012) and suicide (Hill, 2003).

It is vitally important to develop a positive cultural identity for youth, especially in their time of distress, or during their coming out process. About that notion, the use of language for cultural continuity and story-telling will be further analyzed through my narrative in the section titled “My Narrative is Oral Tradition in Written Form” See p. 90).

### **Cultural Identity is Spiritual and Community Based**

The literature review on two-spirit and related concepts that identify sexuality and gender from a Mi'kmaw perspective has led me to only one published article by a Mi'kmaw academic, Margaret Robinson. She shares present knowledge about two-spirits and how her voice relates to the importance of knowledge building about two-spirit identity in a contemporary setting in her work "A Hope to Lift Both My Spirits: Preventing Bisexual Erasure in Aboriginal Schools" (2014). The article relates Robinson's claim that "Two-spirit identity enables Aboriginal people to claim contemporary and traditional significance for our same-sex attraction or gender expression" (Robinson, 2014). This provides a key element in explaining why the concept of two-spirits is meaningful to Mi'kmaq. It is its dual nature of allowing individuals to explore their sexuality and gender identity in a modern-day context, but at the same time maintain a relationship to its traditional components, such as spirituality, ceremony and cultural identity.

In other words, the phrase, the concept of two-spirit allows Indigenous people to walk the best of both worlds. One can expand this idea by integrating Linda Wilson's point about how Indigenous people look at their relationship with their surroundings as part of what makes up the indigeneity of sexuality and gender because Indigenous people are closely linked to their community, spirituality, and relationship to the land (Wilson, 1996). I would add that language is also part of what makes indigeneity of sexuality and gender. One main purpose of this thesis is to be a starting point to explore the concept through language use.

The combination of perspectives represents a sense of wholeness which makes up an individual's identity in the context of Mi'kmaw culture. Evelyn Blackwood recognizes the

importance of “culturally based, contemporary research” (Blackwood, 1997, p. 293) to develop two-spirit studies because of the diversity and richness of Indigenous cultures and respective worldviews. Therefore, the contextualization of the concept of two-spirit is developing an understanding of how its multiple perspectives and diverse ideology related to gender, sexuality, and spirituality can be reflected within the L’nuwey worldview. Robinson confirms that “if Two-spirited identity is to be an effective element of cultural continuity then it needs to be grounded in Aboriginal tradition and our contemporary context” (Robinson, 2014, p. 24).

### **Interpretation through Oral Traditions**

“Oral traditions transmit the L’nuwey worldview” (Battiste M. S., 1998, p. 51). Tuma Young offers and expands on how oral traditions can be a conduit in interpreting two-spirit identities in trickster stories where central characters and themes are left to individual interpretation (W2SA, 2011). Young explained in a conference in 2011 that our stories could be translated into two-spirit teachings in the modern sense.

The analysis of oral traditions like legends and stories about Mi’kmaw culture would provide an important source of understanding how two-spirit identity can be explored within L’nuwey worldview. Mi’kmaw oral traditions that have been passed down generation after generation are open to interpretation based on their given setting, audience and moral teachings (Young, Conference Presentation, 2011). Young’s presentation included the importance of analyzing Mi’kmaw legends and stories because there are nuances in their storylines and characters, like animals and spirits, and their portrayals and challenges that they face in life, including life journeys. These stories are open to interpretation, which could provide important substance for two-spirit cultural identity (Ibid). Even though there is no existing analysis of Mi’kmaw legends and stories from a two-spirit perspective as far as current review of literature

shows, Luis Esme Cruz's writing is significant in that he explores sexuality and identity in his work in *Sovereign Erotics*; this is prime example of how oral traditions are meaningful sources of cultural knowledge that can be further developed and interpreted into contemporary stories.

Storytelling is an essential part of education for Indigenous people where cultural values and traditions are shared and passed down (Little Bear, 2009, p. 81). Little Bear also mentions that many of the stories have tricksters – “the trickster is about chaos, the unexpected, the “why” of creation, and the consequences of unacceptable behaviour” (Ibid, p. 82). Elders left listeners to arrive at their conclusions about stories (Wilson, 2008, p. 123).

Mi'kmaw stories are part of oral traditions where actions and characters are interchangeable as tricksters or shape-changers; part of their nature is to change according to their emotional state at a given moment. Shape-changers are often central to the story. It is the person who is talking to the shape-changer who sees what they choose to see. This is evident in Cruz's story as the main character grows boy skin to cover her girl skin, which is almost a process of metamorphosis of gender. It is a brilliant use of oral tradition in a contemporary setting that captures the true nature of our current reality in our Indigenous communities with the increasing number of people who self-identify as non-gender conforming (Sylliboy, 2017).

These stories are translatable into curriculum development for teaching LGBTQ and two-spirit themes for children. Perhaps, they were stories elders used to teach about anomalies within social structures, since tricksters often portrayed the role of various identities. Could trickster stories include two-spirits identities? The simple answer is yes since they are stories of personal journeys or embedded teachings about social values and beliefs.

## **Understanding History is Reconciliation and Resilience for Two-spirits**

Indigenous cultures suffered from forced assimilation by the church and government policies (AFN, 2015) such as to “force a patriarchal familial structure” on Indigenous people through the Indian Act (Canon, 1998, pp. 2-3). This would have led to insurmountable stress on people now known as two-spirits, who were non-gender/sex conforming and did not fit European societal norms.

The effects from assimilation policies greatly affected two-spirits in North America, who suffer from disproportionate rates of health-related issues, such as mental health issues and suicide caused by oppression and discrimination that they face in society (AFN, 2015, pp. 12-13). The Assembly of First Nations National Youth Council recognizes that two-spirit youth are victims of hate and bullying across Canada and are considered a vulnerable group (Council, 2016).

A core part of my work here is to provide an understanding of how two-spirits would have been affected by shifts in sociocultural and historical circumstances from the past until present day, perhaps to shed light to what could have happened to Mi'kmaw two-spirits. Mi'kmaq were also victims of forced assimilation through Indian Residential Schools. Our cultures have been resilient, but at a high cost to the health and well-being of people in our communities. Did two-spirits in Mi'kmaw communities suffer the same fate as other Indigenous groups? Were Mi'kmaw two-spirits pushed into assimilation or forced to go underground to live out their lives in fear?

It is critical to understand the history of two-spirits to give support to the process of reconciliation outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and its Calls to



Action (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). We need to reconcile with the past to build a safer place for two-spirits in Canada today.

### **Oral Traditions are a Part of Cultural Continuity for Two-spirits**

It was mentioned in the previous section that Mi'kmaw stories are part of oral traditions which may shed light on conceptualizing Two-spirit identity in the modern context. There were spiritual and warrior leaders who were highly revered within the Mi'kmaw culture, such as the *Puoin* (healer/destroyer) and *Kinap*, who was a warrior and higher power (Whitehead, 1988, p. 3). This next section will explore how Mi'kmaw oral tradition like storytelling can provide significant cultural meaning about the existence of two-spirit culture among the Mi'kmaq in a contemporary setting.

*Puoin* (singular form) or *Puoinaq* (plural form) are ones with the power to heal, to cure, or lead (Whitehead, 1988). *Puoin* also has the power to destroy, aside from their role to cure. They can shape-change in stories where they transform from animal to human or be both at the same time. *Kinap* (singular) or *Kinapk* (plural) are those who can expand their strengths which are born with powers or can acquire them (Ibid, p. 9).

This rich cultural context can be re-interpreted to teach about gender variance and sexuality to young school-aged children and to develop culturally relevant curriculum for Mi'kmaq in K-12. It would require an exercise of reviewing legends, myths, stories and narratives to determine how these stories can be used for cultural learning about two-spirits. There is another example that is not Mi'kmaq, but it underscores the process by which oral traditions are relevant in that process of knowledge translation and building.

Leslie Marmon Silko, in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Two Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*, shares how oral tradition through stories provide a collective consciousness, teaching about survival and worldview passed down for generations. The Yellow Woman is an interchangeable character full of powers who helps her Pueblo people survive during hardships and famine. Kochininako is another character who Silko identifies from her Pueblo stories, which is a story about how an individual must act despite social approval (Silko, 1996, p. 14). Silko's use of storytelling to explore two-spirit culture is a key element to do a similar analysis using Mi'kmaw storytelling in this thesis. Stories are based on one's interpretation and understanding within their state of being. Silko's use of oral traditions is a core process in exploring how to contextualize two-spirit identity with characters in Mi'kmaw oral traditions.

Legends, which were once part of oral tradition, are now found in written form (King, 2003, pp. 98-101). Writing my lived experience about coming out as a gay man and exploring my identity as a two-spirit person in a contemporary setting is part of oral tradition, but now in written form. My narrative could be a source of developing new knowledge for cultural continuity in the process.

### **My Narrative is Oral Tradition in Written Form**

I was uncertain that I could contribute to this process of reawakening and resurgence of cultural identity about two-spirits or LGBTQ Mi'kmaq. There are people who strongly believe that two-spirits did not exist in Mi'kma'ki before contact. I would rather view this from other perspectives. Lester Brown suggested that two-spirits' gender alternative practices were either forgotten or went underground (Brown, 1997). Another author, Gabriel Estrada, points out that cultural knowledge about what we now refer to as two-spirits, may have been erased over time

due to homophobia (Estrada, 2011). These are potential reasons why there is an absence of knowledge about the two-spirit culture before European contact. I go back to the notion of *I think. Therefore I am*. That is precisely the reason why I share my narrative so that I can demonstrate that our stories about sexuality and gender identity do exist in our culture, albeit from a modern context.

I use my narrative to understand how my sexual identity has developed over time. In doing so, it sheds light on the use of language and vocabulary which may be related to two-spirit identity. The words that I was familiar with as descriptors were gay, lesbians, and queers and they are mentioned in my narrative. Although queer was used as a negative connotation as opposed to how it is recognized to be a positive word today.

I share words that I knew as I was growing up in my community that identified individuals who were gay, lesbian or bisexual. At that time, I only knew those three words when I was approximately 10 – 12 years old. The word *kistal'ek* was used to describe a person who was one of the three descriptors. The word had a strong negative undertone. I explain its connotations in the following.

1. Non-Two-spirit related: *kistal'ek* describes a person's current mood, character, or emotion, which can be interpreted as "the one who behaves oddly" or "the one who is odd" or "the one acting strangely." This word describes the behaviour of an individual but does not imply any reference to determine gender variance or sexuality.

2. Two-spirit related: *kistal'ek* describes the person's sexual preference, which can be used by any gender and interpreted as a gay male or lesbian, or bisexual in either gender.

Analysis of the Mi'kmaw word *kistal'ek* is a point of departure for developing an understanding of how Mi'kmaw language may reflect our evolving language. For example, the word *kistal'ek* is not so commonly used in contemporary language. In fact, English terms are more commonly used. The use of two-spirit is growing, but I feel that we can develop our Mi'kmaw specific descriptors that are more meaningful and representative of the evolving language to describe sexual and gender identities. There is a need to further develop positive language that reflects our evolving worldview.

Storytelling “allows us to draw linkages between themes of land, family, living histories, and acts of resistance” (Corntassel, 2009, p. 147). This narrative is a story of self-discovery based on a relationship in community, family and living histories. My memory includes language and words that I remember from when I was growing up in Eskasoni and Millbrook First Nations. These components complement each to provide what Corntassel refers to as linkages of my home, my community and my language. My act of resistance is more of a life of resilience within a heteronormative society within my cultural setting and outside it. According to Truth and Reconciliation, sharing these stories is a form of maintaining truth, so my lived experience is my truth which I choose to share.

My narrative is relevant in creating a new story based on two-spirit experiences within a point of time and space. It is a point of departure for creating stories with Mi'kmaw two-spirit experiences as anecdotes. Sheffield relates the importance of understanding the world through stories by stating that “...contemporary storytelling includes not only the retelling of traditional stories but also the creation of new ones,” and storytelling “is at its core decolonizing, because it is a process of remembering, visioning, and creating a just reality...” (Sheffield, 2015, p. 432).

This process is more than a simple analysis of cultural identity; it is a journey to understand how our cultural perspectives may conceptualize gender diversity and sexuality. It is a process to understand our social and biological gender constructs, individual and social expression of gender and sexuality, and to further explore about Mi'kmaw social norms and values within spirituality and religion as it pertains to two-spirit culture and identity. If not decolonizing, this writing is at least beginning the process of acknowledging two-spirit identity in the present L'nuwey worldview.

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<sup>i</sup> The words 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' are used without any specific rule. I will use the word Indigenous throughout this thesis, except when citing with direct quotes which use 'Aboriginal'.

<sup>ii</sup> Mi'kmaw, a word ending with a "w" is understood to be an adjective of the word Mi'kmaq, while the word ending in a "q" is a stand-alone noun. Example: He is a Mi'kmaw (adjective) man. He is Mi'kmaq (noun).

<sup>iii</sup> OCAP principles are protocols and codes of ethics in conducting research with First Nations, which must respect the nature of sovereignty, self-determination and that research practices are linked or interconnected based on Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession. Retrieved from: <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/archives/policy-politique/reports-rapports/riap-rapa>

<sup>iv</sup> Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans, 2nd edition (TCPS 2) Retrieved from: <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/chapter9-chapitre9/>

<sup>v</sup> The geographical/cultural extent of the Mi'kmaq in the Maritime Provinces, Gaspé Peninsula of Quebec, Newfoundland and northeastern part of Maine, which is also the ecosystem that has developed a L'nuwey worldview.

<sup>vi</sup> *mjijaqamijj* or *mijjaqamijjk*: the connotation for these words have religious bases from Catholicism, such as the Holy Spirit, which is a sharp contrast to the connotation meant for Two-spirit.

## Chapter Four: Final Thoughts and Conclusions

### Scouting the Landscape on Gender and Sexual Diversity in Mi'kmaw Territory

The most relevant confirmation so far on my thesis is that I am *L'nu* before any other identity. Two-spirit is within my whole identity as *L'nu*. Being *L'nu* is what determines the rest of my identity, even as a gay, two-spirit man. This research is a scouting journey. Traditionally, Mi'kmaw scouts were navigators, explorers and journey leaders for the Mi'kmaq. They travelled ahead of the families and clans within their traditional territories to seek the most productive hunting grounds. Their responsibility was to navigate the best paths to move forward. Their role was to make the journey from winter to summer hunting and fishing grounds as safe and simple as possible, which included the assessment of potential challenges. I regard my role as a cultural educator. I am scouting knowledge about two-spirits using my worldview to learn ideas and perspectives about sexuality and gender identity.

I am scouting our cultural landscapes to ensure that our two-spirit and Mi'kmaq LGBTQ people remain safe in our journey of self-discovery and self-determination as two-spirits, as *L'nuk*. This is an educational journey with a strong cultural and philosophical undertaking about Mi'kmaw perspectives on knowledge, philosophy, education, and identity.

My thesis is an academic stance to recognize that two-spirit and Mi'kmaq LGBTQ people live, survive and thrive in our territory. This includes acknowledging that two-spirits, which may not be the term used to describe gender variant identities and sexualities as I write this thesis, or people who identify as LGBTQ or use other social identifiers do indeed live within our families, communities and in our unceded and ancestral territory of Mi'kma'ki.

### **Contemporary Mi'kmaw Perspectives are L'nuwey Worldview**

I understand now because of my research that developing cultural identity may take place for two-spirits within a contemporary context of time and space. I may never rediscover our ancestral teachings, ceremonies, or words to describe two-spirits or similar concepts that may have been used by Mi'kmaq, which other Indigenous groups have maintained through their languages. There are very few academic references found in my review of the literature by Mi'kmaw academics or writers. This thesis is an introductory analysis of two-spirit conceptualization with a Mi'kmaw perspective in an academic setting by a Mi'kmaw person, who is also two-spirit.

Similarly, my thesis is an important exercise in building knowledge about our cultural perspectives on LGBTQ and two-spirits. The study offers a critical analysis of two-spirit concepts which relate to L'nuwey worldview, which includes an in-depth analysis of the Mi'kmaw term for berdache.

My research is a Mi'kmaw speaking person's perspective. Therefore, I offer a first-hand account of my lived experience as a *L'nu* navigating cultural identity. I use story-telling as a method for bridging my lived experience into knowledge about two-spirits using my language, experience and understanding of who I am as a Mi'kmaq. This is essential because it allows this knowledge-building process to be grounded in my cultural worldview as *L'nu*. My story is part of conceptualization of two-spirits that can be considered part of a process of understanding our cultural identity from within. I believe this to be a process of self-determination and cultural acknowledgement because that lived experience now translates to the knowledge that lives in

spirit within my culture, which confirms Battiste's point about education and oral tradition. It also speaks to Battiste's notion that we all have an educational journey in life. This is my journey.

My story is not unique because there are Indigenous people in our region including Mi'kmaq who shared their coming out stories for research to learn about supports during their process of self-identity and self-acceptance as two-spirits (Sylliboy, 2017). These stories are a collective of voices as two-spirit and/or Mi'kmaq LGBTQ. My lived-experience is one story, but when you have 20 stories, then it is a collective consciousness and a powerful voice. Our stories are part of the contemporary makeup of our culture. We have a voice, and we must take our proper place within our cultural identity as Mi'kmaq.

In critical race theory, voices from oppressed people through story is a powerful manifestation of self-determination. Stories from two-spirits in the study previously mentioned are about resilience and hope. There are numerous references to how two-spirits are an oppressed population targeted by systemic homophobia by government policies. The Indian Act, the Indian Residential Schools and the church have all contributed to the erasure of two-spirits in Canada. All of these institutions were considered to be foundations of democracy, education, progress, development and spirituality, but they contributed to the near destruction of our ceremonies, languages, spirituality and traditions. Resilience prevails, and it has been the source of cultural reawakening to understand how our ways of life as *L'nuk* continues. This includes the understanding of who two-spirits are and how they shape our cultural identity.



### **Conceptualization of Two-spirit Identity in L'nuwey Worldview**

There are various options for translating the term 'two-spirit,' but the concept remains to be untranslatable in Mi'kmaq language per se. Therefore, the concept had to be broken down into fragments that are translatable using our worldview. My research provides a conceptual framework using L'nuwey worldview by linking key cultural contexts, like kinship, storytelling, oral traditions, language, cultural continuity and cultural identity to analyze how two-spirit identity, including gender and sexuality, are translatable into our cultural perspective or L'nuwey worldview.

The concept of two-spirit remains to be an umbrella term that represents various gender identities (trans, genderfluid, multiple gender expressions, non-binary, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or genderless) and sexuality (gay, bi, asexual, pansexual, etc.), which includes historical, cultural and spiritual contexts that constitute identity. One can also refer to Ryan's categorization of two-spirits (Appendix 2). This study is important in continuing discourse on sexuality, gender identity and spirituality from a Mi'kmaw worldview. There are close similarities between the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet languages, cultures and worldviews. Our cultures are more similar than different, permitting transferable research process and methodology. This would be a fascinating project because it would strengthen our regional understanding as First Nations in the Atlantic region.

### **Interpretation of Two-spirit in Mi'kmaq**

The examples provided in translating two-spirit underscores nuances in Mi'kmaw language. Two-spirit is a bridging term which is meant to be conceptualized in specific cultural perspectives. When Indigenous leaders and knowledge holders assembled at the 1990

International Two-spirit Gathering, I believe they intended to empower Indigenous writers and scholars to explore their own culture and languages to take back our knowledge about who we are as two-spirits. They meant for us to decolonize settler views about who we are as two-spirits because Eurocentric perspectives were the dominant voice in academia which perpetuated a form of continued cognitive imperialism about who we are as Indigenous people. It was a conscious effort to trigger the decolonization of non-Indigenous perspectives and to begin a new era of resurgence and reawakening of two-spirits and Indigenous LGBTQ identities from within our worldviews. It was an acceptance and acknowledgement of cultural spirituality and recognition of Indigenous resilience in the face of detrimental policies that aimed to eliminate, repress, discriminate and isolate our unique sense of cultural, spiritual, sexual, and gender identities.

Our geographical area is the location of the earliest settlements in colonial Canada, yet we have been resilient as a Nation to survive and evolve over 500 years to live with settler populations in our territory. The Mi'kmaq have had to continuously engage with colonial rule, and have survived its governing rule thanks to our sense of resilience.

### **Two-spirit Cultural Identity in Mi'kma'ki**

*I think. Therefore I am.* My interpretation of this is, I am gay. Therefore two-spirits exist. There are people who are two-spirited in our culture which should be acknowledged as part of our culture of identity, not necessarily from ancestral teachings, but from a contemporary worldview. I have mentioned that our stories, lived experiences and our voices are strong. There are stories of people, who we now refer to as two-spirits or gay Indigenous individuals, who lived silently and secretly in our cultures. When they could not deal with the pressures of their closeted lives, they moved to seek where they felt safe as two-spirits in larger urban areas. There

are people who identify as gays, lesbians, transgendered, and Two-spirits in contemporary Mi'kmaw populations in Nova Scotia (Sylliboy, 2017).

Language and cultural memory through oral history are important sources of knowledge in researching about Mi'kmaw culture. L. L. Forbes (1997) references Linda Smith (1991) on the importance of how language and stories forge knowledge because they are a part (Mi'kmaq) memory. In another piece of writing, Smith affirms that despite efforts by colonizers to rid Indigenous peoples of their beliefs, "many of those beliefs still persist; they are embedded in Indigenous languages and stories and etched in memories" (Smith, 1999. p. 43). According to Forbes, there is a spiritual connection between memories and stories which are expressed as oral knowledge through language. I believe that reference to spirituality has a cultural connotation as opposed to a religious one. Spirituality is embedded in our cultural origin, and it is the place of wisdom for the Mi'kmaq. It is spirituality that is essential in the healing process of our people who have lived in the margins of oppression and homophobia.

There is a keen interest in the Mi'kmaq to understand sexuality and gender identity of Two-spirits. People from our Atlantic First Nations expressed their need to understand why there are so many youths who self-identify as two-spirit or as LGBTQ. People who work as educators, clinicians, and even Elders have expressed the need to learn more about LGBTQ issues in general. People who work in our communities want to understand our youth and how they can support them.

In general, there is a growing interest in Canadian society to learn about Indigenous people. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission sparked awareness from all sectors of public agencies in service of Indigenous peoples, health and education departments, and public civil servants. The mainstream LGBTQ community has reached to the Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance

to build a closer relationship. They have approached our organization for guidance and support in their community engagement with the Indigenous community. They recognize their challenges in engaging and recruiting two-spirits to become more involved in their activities to support LGBTQ youth.

There is an assumption that LGBTQ organizations are welcoming to all people who fall under the rainbow spectrum, yet they have not been successful in recruiting Indigenous representation for their boards and group activities, not due to lack of will, but to lack of cultural sharing opportunities. They need to properly engage our Indigenous people in our settings and communities. That is also changing as many organizations recognize the work that W2SA has done to build our relations with peer support organizations. In the summer of 2017, W2SA presented two-spirit identity at seven pride events in the Atlantic region. We have lacked significant cultural and community-based knowledge about two-spirits from our perspectives. This thesis may change that reality.

### **Two-spirit Language and Community Validation**

My research underscores the importance of language as a key component for cultural development and survival. Language is integral to cultural continuity. Dr. Battiste justifies the importance of preserving Indigenous knowledge as a means of transmitting knowledge. Language is also important in the formation of pride and cultural identity for “sharing and preserving Indigenous terms for sexual behaviour, cultural roles, or identities may be an important part of cultural continuity for Two-spirited people” (Asanti, 2010, p. 29). Asanti underscores the role language has in its young population, especially in suicide prevention. Indigenous groups with higher levels of language have lower levels of suicide (Ibid). This reverberates Battiste’s point about language as a means of survival.

Mental health and suicide are continuous health concerns among Atlantic indigenous youth (W2SA, 2011). The Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance was tasked to build knowledge about two-spirit content and to conduct research at a regional two-spirit gathering in 2011. It was there that mental health and wellness, suicide prevention, and two-spirit research were identified as priorities. Since then, I have been interested in researching two-spirits and how it is conceptualized in our worldview.

It was my original intention to delve further into researching how to develop a language with new terms that represent the various English descriptors for gender and sexuality. This would require a vigorous community-based data gathering process involving language experts, Elders and people who identify as two-spirits and LGBTQ. It would require time and resources to properly acknowledge knowledge holders for their contribution. The validation process would be lengthier because each word that is developed would require at least three Elders to validate individually. It would also require an extensive process that respects our Elders' time and space. Then there are all the ethics and protocols to follow with communities involved. There is the Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch and the university review boards to take into consideration. Finally, there are proper protocols for using traditional knowledge and involving Elders in research. This research is an endeavour for a Ph.D. student because students can apply for funds to undertake research of this magnitude.

Developing Mi'kmaw terms would be a wonderful way to engage our community in the discourse on sexuality and gender identity. I do feel that this thesis is a bridging process before that can happen. It sets foundations to further this research with solid arguments using L'nuwey worldview. The potential for resistance may come from strongly religious Mi'kmaq. Mi'kmaq are devout Catholics, and they are proud of their faith and spirituality. In my opinion, that may

have played a role in the erasure of ceremonies, teachings and even language about concepts and identities of what now we refer to as two-spirits. Historical patriarchal and heteronormative policies would have had long-term impacts as well as religious influences.

I feel optimistic that our involvement in awareness campaigns about two-spirits for youth have made impacts in our First Nations. Elders are supportive of creating culturally-based supports for youth who face challenges in their self-identity as two-spirits or LGBTQ. Our people did not speak about sexuality and gender identities. It was common for families to keep silent about their loved ones being *kistal'ek*. This term is negative and carries a stigma and it was associated with sin. That shame kept people silent. I also believe that families tried to protect their loved ones from that shame and stigma. They protected their loved ones by not acknowledging their true identities.

The term *kistal'ek* is not used by the youth as it was used during my adolescent days, perhaps because there are many English words that are more modern and accepted as positive descriptors. Research would determine how our youth self-identify in our cultural settings.

I mentioned that our Elders and our worldview are sources of knowledge and understanding life around us. I cannot leave our youth out of that equation. In fact, it is youth who have assumed leadership in affecting change in our communities.

Eskasoni youth hosted its first-ever Pride parade and celebrations in 2016, and a follow Pride week in 2017. The event made headlines in the news and social media. It was incredible to witness how the community embraced this event, but more importantly how they showed community support to youth who self-identify as *L'nu* and LGBTQ or two-spirits. They decided on their own to march and made their voices heard. More than 200 people from the community walked with the youth on that day. Their self-determination to celebrate their sense of pride was

powerful and convincing. *Kepmitelsi* is the translation for pride (noun), but it is also a verb-based phrase to mean “I am proud, ” or “I am filled with pride.” In the absence of positive language in Mi’kmaq that associates with being proud of who you are, the youth in Eskasoni adopted *kepmitelsi* – brilliant!

This reverberates loudly the need to develop positive language that instils cultural identity for Mi’kmaq. It is my objective to develop language that reflects the current needs of gender diverse people and sexuality for the Mi’kmaq. There is strong justification to develop Mi’kmaw words as part of a self-naming process for two-spirits and to include them in our language. It is a process of self-ascription (Medicine, 2002) to develop strong cultural foundations for our youth. This process of self-ascription would give way to review our language to research other potential words like *kepmitelsi*. Perhaps, we can convert the term *kistal’ek* from its negative connotation and change it to mean something positive. This process would be comparable to the appropriation of the word “queer” for the LGBTQ community in recent decades. *Kistal’ek* also means one acting odd, or being strange. If we change that to mean the “unique one” then it may be a way of appropriating the word to mean something more positive. The key is getting our youth to take it back as their word for their use as a descriptor similar to two-spirit in English. The point is that words can be created or re-assigned, if you will, in Mi’kmaq to represent evolving identities expressed by Mi’kmaw people. Our language is continuously evolving in flux that has the power to evolve according to the philosophical, cultural, and spiritual transformations in individual and societal contexts which make up our cultural identity as Mi’kmaq.

### **L'nuwey Worldview Defines Our Cultural Identity as Two-spirits**

L'nuwey worldview is my source of knowledge, that is abundant in wisdom, language and teachings to conceptualize two-spirit, gender and sexuality. Mi'kmaw authors continuously contribute to an Indigenous scholarship from our traditional knowledge to give meaning to life, to help advance what is our understanding of gender and sexuality from our cultural perspective.

My narrative presented is an expression of our traditional knowledge and cultural continuity. My knowledge building is also part of the collective consciousness of Mi'kmaq, even as an individual student. My narrative is as much an oral tradition, even though it is written. It is a living spirit because I carry it with me always and share it orally in my language as much as possible. It is my story about my self-discovery and coming out. It is meaningful because it is an intimate conversation between my mother and I. It is written in Mi'kmaq to maintain that strong sense of bond that I felt with my mother. She is now in the spirit world, but her teachings are part of who I am. I believe that the words in our language have the power to create knowledge through voice. This is what this thesis is about – story and voice of our two-spirit people.

I consider my thesis a pivotal point of departure to continue researching our cultural identity, gender, sexuality and spirituality including ceremonies to celebrate our two-spirits traditions. My academic and cultural interest is to research what traditions and ceremonies are currently celebrated by two-spirits in Indigenous cultures in North America. This will be another story.



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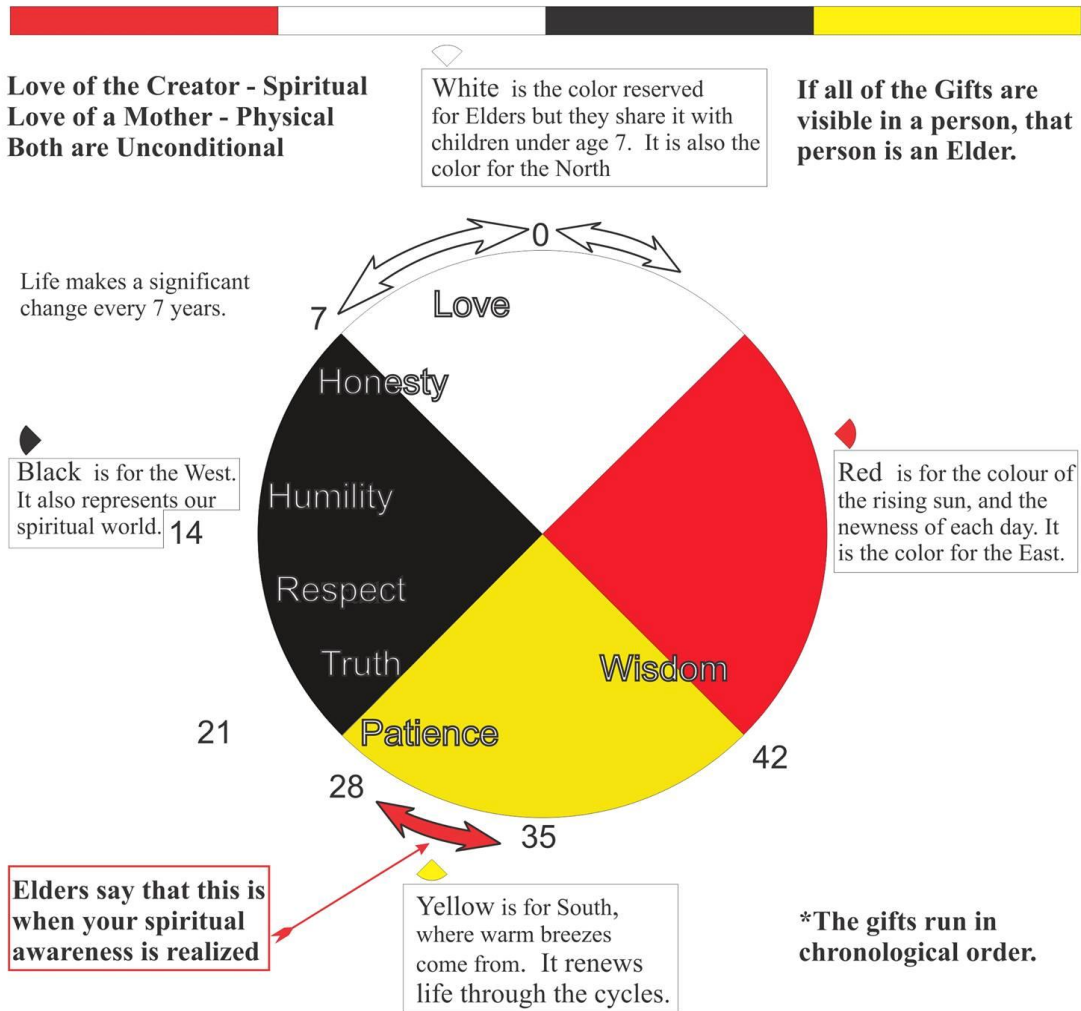
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## Appendix 1

### Mi'kmaq Sacred Teachings

#### 7 Stages of Life with the 7 Gifts



**Elders believe that we can go back to age 7. This is the only time that the circle reverses in life. Apaji-mijua'ji'juen**

*Apaji (preverb) - repeat, go back, again.*

*Mijua'ji'j (root word) - child under 7*

*uen (inflection) - in the process of, to be, state of being.*

## **Appendix 2**

### **Terms Used by Two-spirits**

The Canadian AIDS Society published a report in 2003 that provided a scope on the two-spirit issues based on their focus to look at homophobia and heterosexism across Canada. Its author Bill Ryan shared a snapshot of two-spirit categories that are intersectional to LGBTQ categories as well.

There are a number of categories which can be used to define gender and sexual orientation of Aboriginal people, some are related to Two Spirit orientations. The majority tend not to disclose their orientation(s) and identify only in their peer group, or be ambiguous about it. They reside in urban, rural, and First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities. These categories are presented here because they are relevant to promoting healthy sexuality for Two Spirits and safer-sex for all Aboriginals (Ryan, 2003, p. 33)

**MSM or WSW:** Heterosexual Aboriginals who have emotional and sexual relationships with the same gender. Many are married and keep this part of their life hidden and only identify as heterosexual;

**Bisexual:** Aboriginals who have emotional and sexual relationships with both genders. Many are married and identify as heterosexual, but may also be ambiguous about their bisexual orientation;

**Neutrals:** Aboriginals who have emotional and sexual relationships with the same gender who never disclose their orientation;

**Gay or Lesbian:** Aboriginals who have emotional and sexual relationships with the same gender who only identify as gay or lesbian;

**Two Spirit:** Aboriginals who have emotional and sexual relationships with the same gender, who only identify as Two Spirit (having the attributes and spirit of both male and female);

**Two Spirit (Traditional):** Aboriginals who demonstrate their identity primarily through culture and spirituality. They have emotional and sexual relationships with the same gender;

**Two Spirit/GLBT:** Aboriginals who have emotional and sexual relationships



with the same gender, who identify using one, either or both definitions;

**Transgender:** Aboriginals who are biologically male or female who are partially or completely the other gender. They identify as transgender, heterosexual or as a Neutral would and may have emotional and sexual relationships with heterosexuals or same gender partners. They may opt to have sex reassignment surgery;

**Two Spirit (Transgender):** Aboriginals who are biologically male or female who are partially or completely the other gender. They identify as Two Spirit and may have emotional and sexual relationships with heterosexuals or same gender partners;

**Two Spirit (Asexual):** Aboriginals who demonstrate their identity primarily through culture and spirituality. They may be emotionally and sexually attracted to the same gender but are not sexually active. They also may identify as Two Spirit;

**Indigenous (GLBT):** Aboriginals who fulfill various traditional (Two Spirit/GLBT) roles in their culture and identify using indigenous language identifiers such as “winkte” (Lakota). They have emotional and sexual relationships with the same gender.