

Model for Change: Two-Spirit Population

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Introduction

The term “Two-spirit” in describing variance in gender and sexual identity within indigenous populations is relatively new, however the American Indian/First Nations concept of gender identity as having varying degrees within a spectrum can be found in most tribal histories for centuries back.



This research aims to shed light on the ways in which the modern Two-Spirit population has enabled itself to reclaim an identity despite centuries of intersecting oppressions. Systematic dismantling of indigenous religions, education, and social structures has led to an internalized and externalized homophobia, transphobia, and sexism that contemporary Two-Spirit people must contend with in addition to the xenophobia, racism, and classism from larger American societies. An immersion in the Two-spirit culture has aided in providing a wealth of historical information, as well as in finding contemporary community members and advocacy organizations that are currently working to continue the empowerment of all Two-spirit identified individuals. Community members from Tulsa, Oklahoma, as well as Vancouver, British Columbia have shared their experiences and personal histories to assist in looking at what specific issues affect the contemporary Two-spirit community, as well as what is being done to continue the empowerment of this population. In addition, a review of literature and films have

assisted in providing a rounded view of the community. Ultimately, an effective model for change within the Two-spirit community will be presented, using all pertinent information.



Reclamation of the Words: Two-Spirit and Berdache

The term Two-spirit was initially chosen during an international conference of gay and lesbian activists in Winnipeg, Manitoba in the summer of 1990 (Thomas & Jacobs, 1999). The term was born out of a demonstrated need to replace the commonly used yet inappropriate term *berdache*, with a more culturally appropriate and applicable label. Two-spirit, while using the English language, aims to encompass the myriad of third and fourth gender and sexual identities prevalent in a multitude of indigenous societies. Wesley Thomas and Sue-ellen Jacobs assert that “two-spirit is an indigenously defined pan-Native North American term that bridges native concepts of gender diversity and sexualities with those of Western cultures” (Thomas & Jacobs, 1999). In this way, the term is inclusive of many gender variances, while also acknowledging the integration of Western culture into this identity for most indigenous gender-variant individuals. The term *berdache* was commonly used up until that time, to the chagrin of many gender-variant indigenous people. *Berdache* is rooted in the Persian and Arab *bardaj*, and evolved to the Latin based *bardasso* in Italian, *berdache* in French, and *bardaja* or *bardaxa* in Spanish (Thomas & Jacobs, 1999; Roscoe, 1991). *Berdache*, while colloquially known by anthropologists and those within indigenous communities to unofficially encompass meanings of gender diversity, and sexual identity variance, has a direct translation of “slave”, “kept boy”, or “male prostitute” (Thomas & Jacobs, 1999;

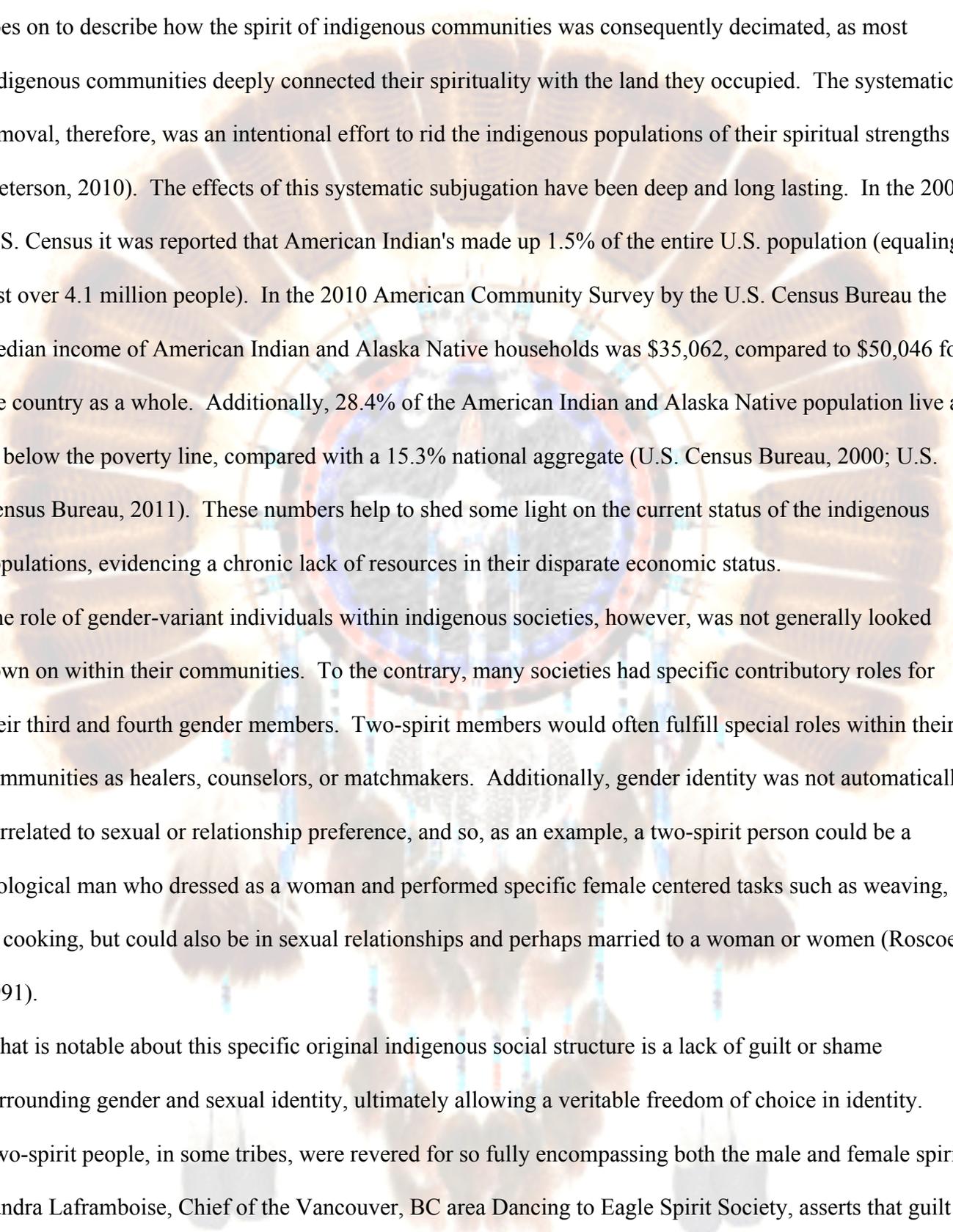
Roscoe, 1991). It was in response to this denigrating label that the queer indigenous community and its allies felt urged to redefine this identifier in 1990.



History of Gender Variance in Indigenous Societies

Berdache, with its insulting root definition in use, was the status quo coinage to describe gender-variant individuals within indigenous tribes from the very beginning of colonization. Spanish officials routinely used violence against homosexuals and gender-variant people as a form of control over Native tribes. Will Roscoe, author of *Zuni Man-Woman*, describes the introduction to the Spanish that the Zuni experienced: “The first contact between Zunis and Europeans was marked by conflict over differing values regarding sexuality and the status of women...According to Coronado, Esteban made the fatal error of assaulting Zuni women, 'whom the Indians love better than themselves.' The Zunis killed the Moor on the spot.” (Roscoe, 1991). Documented also were the many accounts of systematic violence against gender-variant people, borne from deep seeded religious convictions against homosexuality and variant gender identities. Roscoe reports that Europeans “had a long history of regulating sexual behavior for political ends...In 1513, the explorer Balboa had some forty berdaches thrown to his dogs - 'a fine action of an honourable and Catholic Spaniard,' as one Spanish historian commented.” (Roscoe, 1991).

The systematic dismantling of indigenous culture and education has been coupled with long-standing conflicts over land ownership with the U.S. Government. What can be described as a loss of culture began with resettlement efforts in the late 1880's. These efforts to move entire tribes and communities to completely different parts of the country was successful, and the result is what Herman Peterson describes in his book *Trail of Tears: An Annotated Bibliography of Southeastern Indian Removal* as “long-term cycles of poverty and a sense of powerlessness on many of the reservations” (Peterson, 2010). Peterson



goes on to describe how the spirit of indigenous communities was consequently decimated, as most indigenous communities deeply connected their spirituality with the land they occupied. The systematic removal, therefore, was an intentional effort to rid the indigenous populations of their spiritual strengths (Peterson, 2010). The effects of this systematic subjugation have been deep and long lasting. In the 2000 U.S. Census it was reported that American Indian's made up 1.5% of the entire U.S. population (equaling just over 4.1 million people). In the 2010 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau the median income of American Indian and Alaska Native households was \$35,062, compared to \$50,046 for the country as a whole. Additionally, 28.4% of the American Indian and Alaska Native population live at or below the poverty line, compared with a 15.3% national aggregate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). These numbers help to shed some light on the current status of the indigenous populations, evidencing a chronic lack of resources in their disparate economic status.

The role of gender-variant individuals within indigenous societies, however, was not generally looked down on within their communities. To the contrary, many societies had specific contributory roles for their third and fourth gender members. Two-spirit members would often fulfill special roles within their communities as healers, counselors, or matchmakers. Additionally, gender identity was not automatically correlated to sexual or relationship preference, and so, as an example, a two-spirit person could be a biological man who dressed as a woman and performed specific female centered tasks such as weaving, or cooking, but could also be in sexual relationships and perhaps married to a woman or women (Roscoe, 1991).

What is notable about this specific original indigenous social structure is a lack of guilt or shame surrounding gender and sexual identity, ultimately allowing a veritable freedom of choice in identity. Two-spirit people, in some tribes, were revered for so fully encompassing both the male and female spirit. Sandra Laframboise, Chief of the Vancouver, BC area Dancing to Eagle Spirit Society, asserts that guilt

and shame were not concepts that existed in many indigenous societies and that this directly contributed to the openness often seen regarding gender identity in indigenous societies (Laframboise, 2012). In a personal interview, Laframboise asserts “It's not about identity, it's about nurturing both sides of you” (2012). In addition, many tribes had specific words for third and fourth-gender members. Within Navajo society, for example, a man-woman, or a feminine man, is called *nadleehi*, and a woman-man, or a masculine woman, is called *dilbaa* (Nibley, 2010). This linguistic acknowledgment is significant in that it illustrates an inclusiveness and acceptance of the role of Two-spirited person within the community.

Discussion

Literature Review

Will Roscoe's 1991 book, *The Zuni Man-Woman*, provides a historical narrative of the life of We'Wha, a well known Zuni Two-spirit person during the late 1800's. We'Wha was born male, but from an early age began expressing as female in different ways. He may untuck a shirt of his traditional male dress, so that it flowed over his legs like a skirt, or begin spending time doing work with the women of his family, instead of choosing to pursue male activities.

His family members neither admonished him or encouraged different behavior, instead integrating We'Wha into the activities that he chose to pursue. As We'Wha grew, his repertoire of skills and talents expanded, and he became well-respected by the rest of his tribe for being strong, intelligent, an expert in weaving, pottery, and the Zuni spiritual practices, as well as a charismatic public speaker and natural

leader. Because he had been able to integrate himself in both male and female work and identities within the tribe, he was held in high regard.

At the time, anthropologists were studying native societies, and it was one of these social scientists named Ruth Bunzel who noted of We'Wha that “There are obviously several reasons why a person becomes a berdache in Zuni, but whatever the reason, men who have chosen openly to assume women's dress have the same chance as any other persons to establish themselves as functioning members of society.” (as cited by Roscoe, 1991).

Roscoe's writing also provides a detailed summary of specific actions taken against the Zuni and other tribes during this time. In depth descriptions of the effects of the Indian Removal Act are provided, with specific details on the loss of culture and religion as a result of the resettlement efforts, and the specific effect this had on the Zunis and on We'Wha. Missionaries had moved to the Zuni land to begin mass conversion efforts, and in doing so had somewhat assimilated We'Wha to Western culture. We'Wha did laundry, and assisted in the schools as a “matron” - all traditional Western women's tasks. In being “adopted” by the missionaries, We'Wha had also learned English, and was in essence an ambassador for the Zuni tribe.

Anthropologist Mathilda Cox Stevenson took We'Wha to Washington, DC in the late 1880's, where they befriended the Speaker of the House, attended charity events, and met with senators, Supreme Court Justices, and the President at the time, Grover Cleveland.

Roscoe's account of We'Wha's life, both as a Zuni tribe member, and as an ambassador between the two worlds, paints We'Wha in a remarkable light. Not only was We'Wha encouraged to be both man and woman as he chose, but was so revered within his tribe that he was chosen to represent the entire community.

Film: Two Spirits

The contemporary Two-spirit community was studied in the documentary *Two Spirits*, directed, written, and produced by Lydia Nibley. This film recounts the life and untimely death of Fred Martinez, a Nadleehe (feminine man) Navajo teenager living in Cortez, Colorado. From an early age, Fred had openly expressed as both a boy and girl, saying he did not want to choose. This self-expression carried on into his teenage years, where he would at times be Fred, at times F.C., and sometimes Beyonce, as an homage to his favorite artist. In identifying as Nadleehe, he also embraced the spiritual aspects of his gender identity.

Fred was encouraged and supported in his gender identity by his mother, Pauline Mitchell, and other family members. Growing with a cultural and spiritual acceptance allowed Fred to express himself comfortably, and sometimes loudly and gregariously. However, growing in both rural and urban environments, Fred experienced homophobia and transphobia in school and in the urban center of Cortez.

In June of 2001, 16 year old Fred went to Cortez's annual county fair with friends. It was there that he met Shaun Murphy, an 18 year old from out of town. According to the film, it was unclear how much contact Shaun and Fred had that evening, but it is known that while walking home alone outside of Cortez, Fred was accosted by Shaun and beaten to death and left for five days before being found in a desert canyon called "The Pits".

His mother, Pauline, was held by Navajo tradition to not discuss the deceased out of respect. However, she saw how much education was needed, and decided to use Fred's story to increase awareness of Two-spirit and transgendered issues, in an effort to stop further hate violence against this population.

What is significant about this particular story of Fred Martinez is the juxtaposition one sees when looking between two worlds – in the film, two-spirit advocate Richard Anguksuar LaFortune discusses how centuries ago, Fred would have been revered in the Navajo culture. He would have been highly respected for having his two spirits – man and woman – demonstrated so fully. However, because of his

gender identity, low socioeconomic status, rural living, and relatively conservative geographic area, he was murdered.

Notable is the intersection of these oppressions. Fred experienced racism, transphobia, and outsider status within the larger Cortez community for being Navajo. LaFortune asserted in the film that “The place where two discriminations meet is a dangerous place to live” (as interviewed by Nibley & Martin, 2010). This film was a sobering example of the myriad issues facing indigenous two-spirit people, and how precarious that status can be in personal identity and acceptance.



Two-Spirit Community Event

An active Two-spirit advocacy and community group, Bay Area American Indian Two Spirits (BAAITS), recently put on the Two-Spirit Community Event, located at the Oakland Public Library on Saturday, November 10th, 2012. The event was free and open to the public, and focused on building community through reconnection, storytelling, and a drum circle. The organizers also showed a short documentary entitled *Two Spirit People*. This short documentary provided a thorough overview of what Two Spirit means, how it originated, and some notable examples, such as We'Wha from the Zunis (Beauchemin, Levy, & Vogel, 1991).

An interesting phenomenon was noticed during this event, and that was that there appeared to be a high number of students there to observe and study, but not necessarily to participate. The number of people in the small room appeared to total approximately 50, and an estimated 20 appeared to be taking

notes, and observing. While this writer cannot claim to have been there for another purpose than that, it was striking how clearly the two groups delineated themselves, and as one would assume that this participant to observer breakdown would be evident to the Two-spirit community members, it would make one wonder if that fact somehow hindered the ease with which the community members were able to connect with one another.

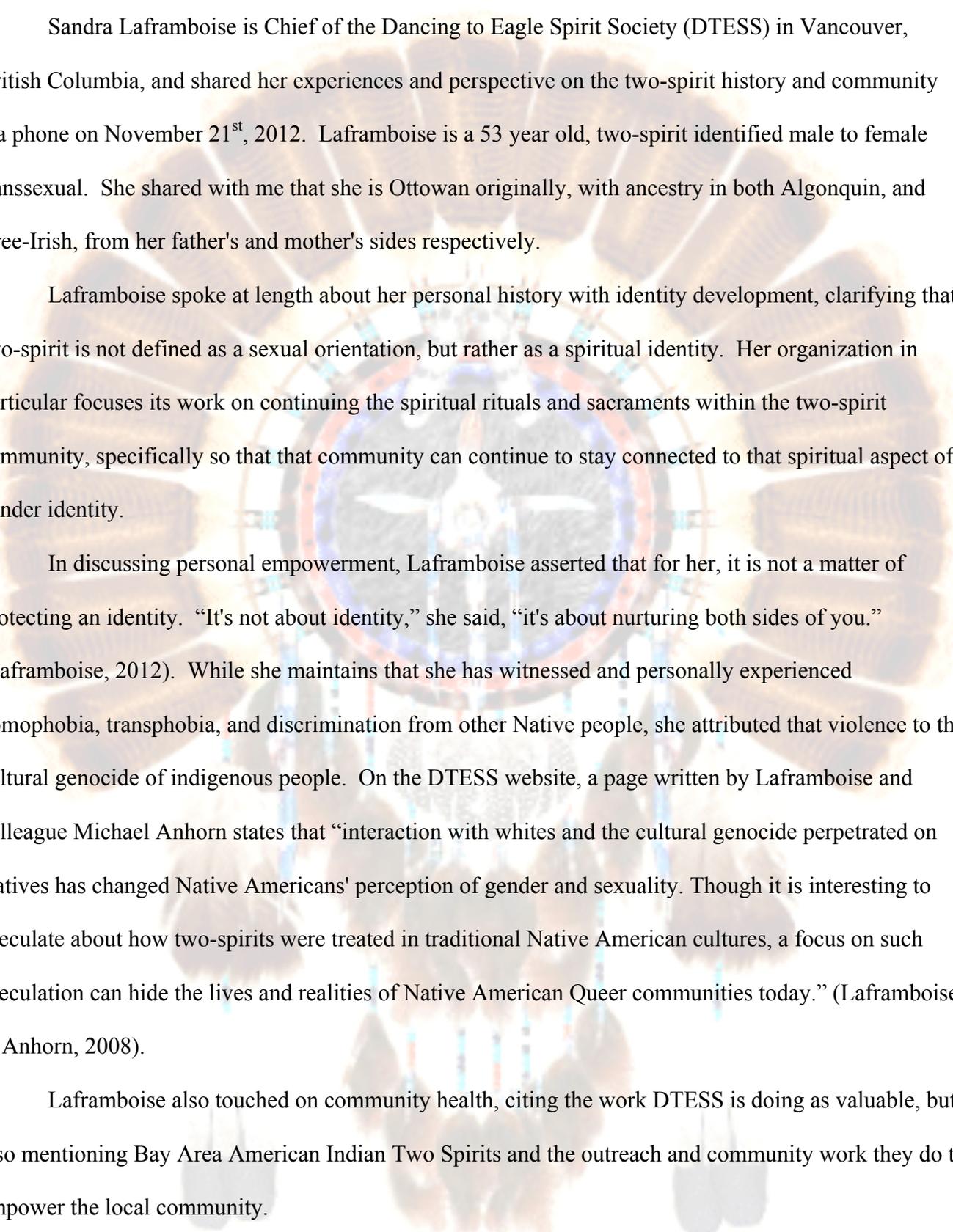
This is significant when looking at the history of not just the Two-spirit community, but of most indigenous populations historically. There have been numerous examples of anthropologists and social scientists tasked with studying indigenous communities. Trikoli Nath Pandey, a well known anthropologist studying Zuni culture quoted colleague Leslie A. White's running joke about the Zunis, that “a Zuni household consists of a mother, father, children and a social anthropologist” (as cited in Pandey, 1973). The history of “otherization” in studying indigenous cultures also has a long history, and was present at the Two-Spirit Community Event as well.

Despite this, however, the event still appeared to be successful in carrying out the intended focus – one of connectedness and celebration of indigenous community spiritual practices and pride in identity. BAAITS has this exact focus – to create safe spaces where those who identify as two-spirit can feel comfortable in that identity and create connections with others with similar experiences.



Interviews

Two interviews were granted by members of the Two-spirit community. Questions for both interviewees centered around personal history, identity development, empowerment, and what local communities in their areas are doing to continue the work of empowerment of two-spirit people.



Sandra Laframboise is Chief of the Dancing to Eagle Spirit Society (DTESS) in Vancouver, British Columbia, and shared her experiences and perspective on the two-spirit history and community via phone on November 21st, 2012. Laframboise is a 53 year old, two-spirit identified male to female transsexual. She shared with me that she is Ottowan originally, with ancestry in both Algonquin, and Cree-Irish, from her father's and mother's sides respectively.

Laframboise spoke at length about her personal history with identity development, clarifying that two-spirit is not defined as a sexual orientation, but rather as a spiritual identity. Her organization in particular focuses its work on continuing the spiritual rituals and sacraments within the two-spirit community, specifically so that that community can continue to stay connected to that spiritual aspect of gender identity.

In discussing personal empowerment, Laframboise asserted that for her, it is not a matter of protecting an identity. “It's not about identity,” she said, “it's about nurturing both sides of you.” (Laframboise, 2012). While she maintains that she has witnessed and personally experienced homophobia, transphobia, and discrimination from other Native people, she attributed that violence to the cultural genocide of indigenous people. On the DTESS website, a page written by Laframboise and colleague Michael Anhorn states that “interaction with whites and the cultural genocide perpetrated on Natives has changed Native Americans' perception of gender and sexuality. Though it is interesting to speculate about how two-spirits were treated in traditional Native American cultures, a focus on such speculation can hide the lives and realities of Native American Queer communities today.” (Laframboise & Anhorn, 2008).

Laframboise also touched on community health, citing the work DTESS is doing as valuable, but also mentioning Bay Area American Indian Two Spirits and the outreach and community work they do to empower the local community.

The second interviewee was a 31 year old Tulsa, Oklahoma native and resident. Corey Taber identifies as a two-spirit person and reported that he has ancestry from the Arkansas Cherokee, Muscogee Creek Nation, and Osage tribes, and also has German, English, and Scottish heritage. While Taber considers himself multiracial, he most closely identifies with the Muscogee Creek Nation.

Within the Muscogee Creek Nation, Taber noted that the terms *ennvrkvpv* (directly translated to “half of”) and *hosaklv* (“one preoccupied with sex”) are sometimes used to identify two-spirit individuals, but that usually there was no additional label, and that “it's also thought that there wasn't a separate class for such people – more often we were integrated into society around us” (Taber, 2012).

In discussing his identity formation, he says that once he found out that two-spirit could be a true identity – once it was legitimized to him – he felt entirely at ease with embracing it. The hard part, Taber asserted, was in knowing that he was different and not necessarily knowing where to cement an identity “outside this safe zone” and amongst racism and homophobia. (Taber, 2012).

Also active in community empowerment work, Taber began working in 2000 as a youth outreach coordinator for the Oklahoma City Two Spirit Society. Within his empowerment work, he maintains that “visibility is a key factor” in overcoming a history of abuse and in combating homophobia and racism in his daily life. For Taber, continuing to live in his personal identity and “showing strength of character” is an essential piece of work in helping to maintain the integrity of the two spirit community. Having one static identity, however, can be difficult. He has experienced a sort of duality in his personal identities. He identifies as both urban and “traditional Indian”, both a “local and an outsider”, recognized within the indigenous communities, but “not completely Indian”. He describes these experiences as isolating, but also states that he takes measures to make himself heard in those situations, by speaking up when he is uncomfortable. Other times he says he will leave an uncomfortable situation if needed.

Ultimately, however, he cites his current work as empowering – public speaking and community outreach, and maintains that cultural sensitivity will always be a key factor when looking at effective models for change.



Conclusion

Community Empowerment and a Model for Change

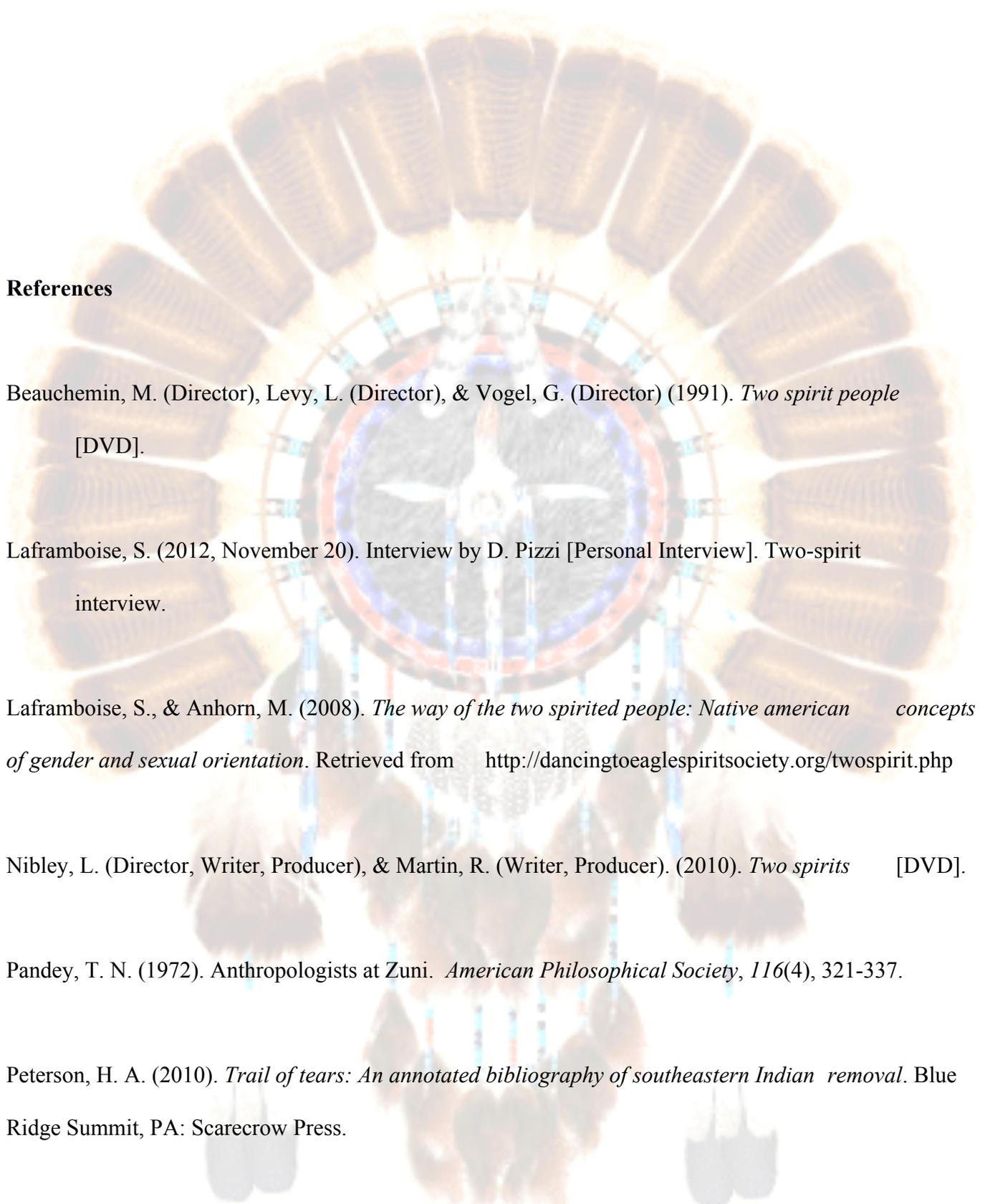
In looking at effective models for change within social work and the two-spirit community, it is imperative to first look to the community, and fully take into account their stated needs and suggestions for forward movement. In this case, both interviewees asserted the need for cultural sensitivity and safe spaces for the community to decrease isolation grow.

Through this closer look, it has become abundantly clear that the issues facing the two-spirit community are significantly multifaceted. Indigenous two-spirit individuals must contend with a history of trauma, a loss of culture, poverty in some cases, and racism, along with homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and shame and guilt. In addition to those significant barriers, the indigenous population has historically been manipulated by anthropologists and others who have claimed to be helping.

However, it has been made apparent that continued resilience has aided some individuals within this community to not only empower themselves, but also to organize and involve themselves in organizations and other efforts that foster and nurture the empowerment of fellow two-spirit community

members. What is significant here is that the empowerment has been initiated within the community, and not outside of it.

What will be imperative for all social workers to take into any work with two-spirit people is an understanding of cultural humility. Cultural humility, a term coined by Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-Garcia, encompasses the concepts of client-centered interviewing and practice along with a model of cultural lifelong learning. This asserts both that the client, patient, consumer, etc. drives all connections – with their questions, their goals, their stated needs, etc. as well as the fact that any clinician, social worker, etc. must enter any new relationship with the understanding that they do not know this person based on gender, ethnicity, religion, etc., and will need to ask about the individual and listen to them speak to ascertain what those needs are. Tervalon and Murray-Garcia describe this as “developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations” (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Only when those outside this community are able to approach a request for assistance with such humility, will we ever hope to assist the two-spirit community in empowering itself.



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