

Using L'nuwey¹ Worldview to Conceptualize Two-spirit

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Geenumu Gesallagee is not Berdache, or Two-spirit in Mi'kmaq

The use of two-spirit to identify as Indigenous LGBTQ+ has been growing among Mi'kmaq because of cultural awareness campaigns to learn about the two-spirit culture. As a researcher and a self-identified two-spirit person or gay *L'nu*, which is the person in Mi'kmaq, 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 Mi'kmaq.

The first process in conceptualizing two-spirit was to understand the origins of the term. It was coined by Myra Laramée in 1990 to identify individual sexuality and gender identity within a cultural context (McLeod, 2016). The term berdache was used before the term two-spirit became the umbrella term for Indigenous LGBTQ+. Berdache originated from colonial periods and passed down into common use among Indigenous groups, and it was used by non-Indigenous historians and anthropologists. The word was contentious among Indigenous groups because it was a Eurocentric word, not to mention its connotation as a catamite or sexual slave was inappropriate to describe two-spirit individuals (Roscoe, 1998). I analyzed *geenumu gesallagee* as a Mi'kmaw term for berdache.

¹ L'nu is person in Mi'kmaq. L'nuwey is of the people which is similar to using Mi'kmaq as an adjective.

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 native² 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’kmaq) informant by Walter Williams in his research about berdache cultures in North America (Williams, 1992). It is the only published term used in Mi’kmaq in reference to non-gender conformity or sexuality. The authors 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. There is a lack of adequate analysis of the nuances in the language.

Mi’kmaq “is a polysynthetic language with very complicated word systems of morphology with relatively simple syntax” (Inglis, 2004, p. 393). As a Mi’kmaq speaker, I was able to provide a concrete analysis and breakdown of the term *geenumu gesallagee* to lack the specific description of gender-specific or to accept the term as a direct expression of sexuality in Mi’kmaq. In the analysis of *geenumu gesallagee*, I consider the concept to be partially correct because the term has numerous interpretations, but it is not a clear statement of gender non-conformity or sexuality which berdache was meant to signify.

The subject of the term is assumed to be a man “who loves men,” but that does not identify the sexuality of the person who uses

² Native is the original word used, otherwise the word Indigenous is used in the article.

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*³ (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 gay, bisexual or trans, or any other descriptor to identify sexuality or gender variance. The phrase would merely mean that a man loves men. It does not specify that the man has sex with men, for example. 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.

In my knowledge of our language, there is a word or term in Mi'kmaq to describe non-heteronormative sexuality, like *kistale'k*, used to identify an individual who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. It is a translation of queer. The other connotation for *kistale'k* is to describe the person to act oddly. The use of this term was considered offensive during my youth in the 1980s, but it has fallen out of use which may be because speaking Mi'kmaq is declining in

³ *Genum* (orthography commonly used in the northern areas of Mi'kma'ki in New Brunswick and Gaspé region of Quebec) as opposed to the Smith-Francis orthography commonly used in Nova Scotia.

my home community of Eskasoni First Nation, or that English terms are used more, but more likely, the reason is a combination of both causes. The term *kistale'k* may be reassigned into a contemporary use, but that is my topic of interest for my doctoral studies in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University.

Indigenous scholars and first-language speakers recognize the complex nature of Indigenous languages and cultures. It is challenging for non-Indigenous writers to capture the spirit of the concepts of gender, sexuality and their relation to Two-spirits because they are far too removed from the Indigenous experience (Battiste, 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 broader spectrum of characteristics than just one's sexuality or gender, or even class and race.

Conceptualization in Mi'kmaq: Absence of Mi'kmaw Knowledge and Teachings about Two-spirits

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 scholars.

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 about early Mi'kmaw culture. Early 17th Eurocentric - Catholic perspectives strongly influenced European colonialism. These perspectives were based on strict Eurocentric, heteronormative, male-female gender binaries and patriarchal experiences and

expectations, beliefs and norms in a society of that period (Canon, 1998, p. 2). The result was the development of heteronormative laws that outlawed any non-heteronormative sexual practices like homosexuality and sodomy⁴ (Ibid) in the colonies. Any Indigenous groups that would have considered it normal to practice gay sex would have been viewed as abnormal and sinful. The climate in Europe was intolerant of sexual freedoms, other than heteronormative customs. The influences 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. European perspectives on colonial mandates in Americas hindered or altered Indigenous behaviour regarding their cultural practices concerning sex, gender and sexuality.

There is little or no academic literature about Two-spirits from a Mi'kmaq perspective, except by Margaret Robinson (2014) who shares perspectives about bisexuality. Luis Esme Cruz, also Mi'kmaq/Acadian, shared his writing in the *Sovereign Erotics*. 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. I believe that I am the only Mi'kmaq-speaking researcher to conceptualize two-spirit within an L'nuwey worldview.

Conceptualization about Two-spirits and its analysis must be situated in a contemporary setting because of the lack of historical references to any cultural identity regarding Two-spirits. It is precisely the motivation for researching two-spirit identity in a

⁴ Sodomy is the word used in the article, but it is not commonly used in casual conversation or language.

cultural context. Part of the process of this conceptualization is to understand how L'nuwey worldview enhances our cultural perspective about two-spiritedness.

L'nuwey Worldview

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

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), provide essential 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. It lays the foundations of cultural significance that paves the way for more acceptance and recognition of Two-spirits in the current setting. According to Robinson, this is a critical 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 use Mi'kmaw knowledge to develop an analysis of two-spirit identity in a contemporary setting. We can 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, this study brings to the surface how two-spirit identity is analyzed within the context of contemporary place and time.

Connectiveness and Kinship is L'nuwey Worldview

J. Sakej Youngblood-Henderson's philosophical framework (2009) is 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 Elders Murdena and Albert Marshall for reaching the optimum health.

An L'nuwey or Mi'kmaw worldview is derived from the Mi'kmaq and all living things interacting within a local ecosystem (Henderson, 2009) that has developed into a community of knowledge, language and kinship with all spirits living in that space or the land – Mi'kma'ki.⁵ It is derived from the interconnectedness of all things in a time-space, known as cosmos in an ecosystem. It is in that ecosystem, Mi'kma'ki, all living things or spirits are bound to each other through kinship; microorganisms with other organisms,

⁵ 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.

plants with animals, animals with humans, humans with others under social structures which all are living within a continuum, and they are interconnected 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 their relations, that sense of interconnectedness, which all living things have with one another is based on mutual needs and mutual understandings of their role in their ecological space.

In relation to our worldview that bridges to the conceptualization of two-spirit, A. 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 Henderson’s description of the sacred order, where animal, plant and human spirits thrive and balance each other in kinship. In a relatable context, Elder 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). It is a conceptual analysis of various Indigenous scholars which provides the framework for two-spirit analysis.

Essentially, I pieced a puzzle of concepts to explain the two-spirit identity described in the following. Two-spiritedness is an interrelatedness of its multi-forms of expressions, such as sexuality, gender, and spirituality in an individual’s identity within the four realms of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, similar to how people are interrelated with other people and entities or spirits in a space or territory within an ecosystem 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. Sakej 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. The interactions between 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 or ecological space. The 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 (Bartlett, 2009).

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*⁶ (Youngblood-Henderson, 2009, p. 257) transform over time and space within one’s identity within the four quadrants during the lifetime of a person. 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 in physical form. These four areas need to be in balance for the individual to

⁶ Mntu is singular which is used by J. Sakej Youngblood-Henderson. The apostrophe and the letter “K” is added to make it plural.

complete their identity. 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.

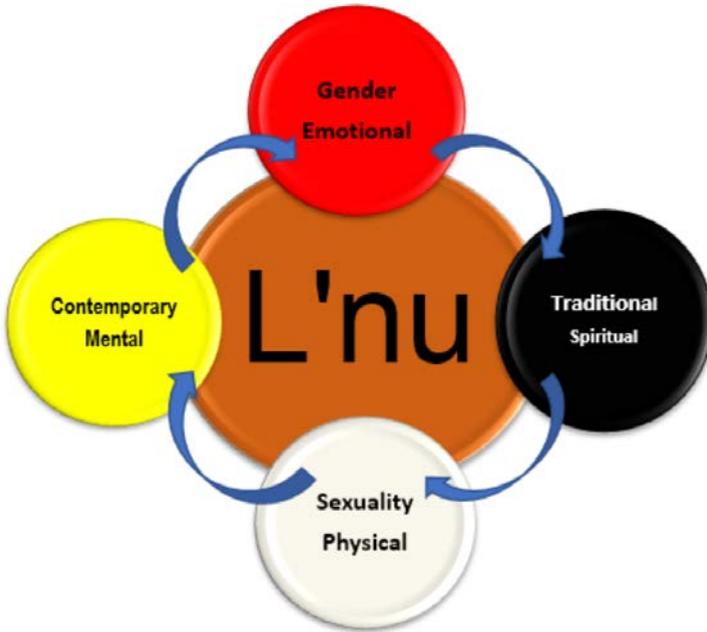
These spirits may manifest in various forms, for example for the physical characteristics like hair, the colour of eyes, and height. They alter or evolve during the various stages of physical growth, like transformations in puberty, and the various elements that affect the inner body through chemical and hormonal processes. These are natural occurrences that our people consider as part of the natural process of inner and 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.

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 within the larger ecosystem of the body, which is also part of the larger macrosystem of relations with other individuals in the community and Nation.

The diagram (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/individual/human in Mi'kmaq. It is the principal identity before the surfacing of gender identity and sexuality. 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 adequately nurtured in their stages of one's life cycle.

Figure 1 Visual representation of gender, sexuality and spirituality acknowledging historical and contemporary contexts



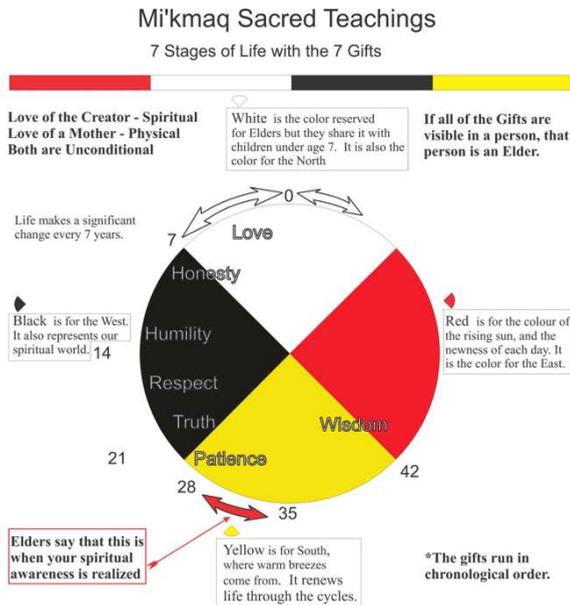
The diagram is my interpretation of how gender and sexuality can be visualized as part of the central identity of *L'nu*. The four outer circles are red, white, black and yellow that represent the quadrants of mental, emotional, physical and spiritual. They represent the colours of humanity according to Mi'kmaq and in many Indigenous groups. They are in no coordinated, permanent position in the diagram because they are in a constant circular movement that represents the process of flux or the evolving

development of an identity/identities for each individual. They are what make up the identity of each L'nu. In a recent study with Two-spirits in Atlantic Canada, one aspect of identity that was shared by various Two-spirits is the binary nature of spirituality; there are Two-spirits who embrace the culture in a traditional sense through art, music and dancing. In fact, various stories revealed how Two-spirits sought their cultural traditions during or immediately after coming out. Other Two-spirits connected with the contemporary notion of spirituality, and they embraced their Christian beliefs (W2SA, 2017).

The interpretation of gender and sexuality and its connectiveness within one's identity/body/ecosystem is an interpretation using L'nuwey worldview. The spirits (elements that develop into identity) 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 in one permanent realm or circle. They are in flux throughout everyone's lifecycle. The interpretation using our cultural perspective is that gender and sexuality are non-linear because they are in a circular process of development on a continuum. That flux includes the nature of *L'nu* identity that ebbs between contemporary and traditional worldviews, such as one's spiritual identity. There is 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 life cycle. That flux is a living process by which each person manifests internally and externally in their stages of development in their life cycle. The idea of in flux concerning identity also is shared by L. Silko whereby "sexual identity is changing constantly" (Silko, 1996, p. 13).

I refer to Elder Murdena Marshall’s diagram of the Seven Sacred Teachings (APCFNC, 2010) to analyze how one’s identity develops in cycles during one’s life cycle(s). Elder M. Marshall states that there is a significant development that takes place approximately every seven years in which one of the seven sacred teachings (Love, Honesty, Humility, Respect, Truth, Patience, Wisdom) begins to develop until one reaches the stage of wisdom later in life. I parallel the process of coming into one’s gender identity and sexuality in a similar process.

Figure 2 Mi'kmaq Sacred Teachings: 7 Stages of Life with the 7 Gifts



There are simultaneous negotiations between all organisms within a system, which Henderson refers to as the ecosystem or Mi'kma'ki. I believe this occurs in individuals when their gender and

sexuality spirits evolve. The individual's inner spirits are characteristics or markers of gender and sexuality within the body which eventually evolve into an expression of the wholeness or completeness as L'nu. These spirits establish kinships with each other within the body to reach a balance. The process, if balanced within the four quadrants, is also understood to be a healthy process if the internal and external elements and circumstances are aligned. These transformations may converge in various points in one's life cycle, but when there is stable convergence, alignment occurs. That balance signals the conditions 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.

Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance's study on Two-spirits coming out experiences parallel a similar process of becoming two-spirit. Many Two-spirits in the study self-identified as either two-spirit, trans, gay, and 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). The experiences by Two-spirits correlate with Elder Marshall's stages of development which account for why coming out varies for each person in time and space; if the conditions are not optimal, the spirits will remain dormant.

Wilson's (1996) reference 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 linear 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. Without going into a detailed analysis of Cass's theoretical model for which there is much literature, I agree with Wilson's observation that Two-spirit identity formation is non-linear based on my study on coming out narratives by Two-spirits in Atlantic (Sylliboy, 2017).

Language and Storytelling

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. It is important to underscore that the Mi'kmaq were impacted by cultural erosion which affected our language and oral tradition. Mi'kmaq were the first Indigenous group to establish relations with Europeans ahead by approximately 150 - 200 years before the western Indigenous groups. The French Jesuits wrote their anthropological accounts of the Mi'kmaq by publishing their letters beginning in 1609 which were included in the *Jesuits Relations*. Elder and Traditional Chief Stephen Augustine shares that the Mi'kmaq were in contact with the Basque fishers approximately two generations before the first publications of the Jesuits' letters dating as far back as the early 1500s (Augustine, 2018).

Evidently, there is a gap in knowledge regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and queers from 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. There is a growing number of Mi'kmaq researchers and scholars who express that there is a need to understand who we are as Mi'kmaq in a contemporary setting that

reflects the diversity of youth who also self-identify using English terms for gender and sexuality. Questioning who we are and where we come from is common among cultural groups in this age of resurgence of traditions and ceremonies. Damien Lee (Anishinaabe) (2012) shares coins this process as part of decolonization and cultural rediscovery.

As a Mi'kmaq educator, Mi'kmaq is my primary source of knowledge about our cultural content, like traditions, values, beliefs and how I relate to people and social phenomena. Elders would say that this knowledge is inherent in all of us 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, which was to translate the words to understand their meaning in my language. It still did not make sense.

Descartes echoed "I think, therefore I am" in my thought process; 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 Two-spirits, gender and sexuality. I inferred through research that much of our oral tradition and teachings were eradicated, lost or went underground since the time of contact with Europeans with respect to how Mi'kmaq may have lived as genderqueer, or what we now call Two-spirits. In that process of societal transformation(s), words, phrases, and identities were replaced by a new dominant cultural hegemony that was patriarchal and heteronormative.

The role of language and culture is integral to the reawakening process of knowledge. The interconnectedness of our culture is through language, which is the source of our knowledge and learning (Battiste, 1998). 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.

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) primarily for Indigenous youth, who face challenges with self-identity and self-acceptance. It is vitally important to develop a positive cultural identity for youth, which according to Elders, are the priority for cultural continuity. I suggest that our cultural knowledge is not lost but in transition and this study’s finding is exemplary of that. We are continuously developing new language within a complex modern world. There are tremendous challenges in this process of knowledge reawakening, yet research offers a significant point of departure to cement the process. The notion of coming out and using L’nuwey worldview is an essential cultural foundation for critical analysis of the social phenomenon, such as conceptualizing two-spirit, gender, spirituality and identity. The most significant finding for me personally is the confirmation study that being *L’nu* precedes any other social identifier in our cultural context.

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John R. Sylliboy originates from Eskasoni and Millbrook First Nations. His mother's family comes from a long line of basket makers, storytellers and spiritual teachers. John's great, great Grandfather was Grand Chief John Denny Jr. (1887-1918), or better known in his family as *Kji Saqmaw* John Denny Jr. He was the last hereditary Grand Chief until an elected process was established with the first elected Grand Chief - Gabriel Sylliboy - John's great grandfather who was elected in (1918-1964). John believes that being Mi'kmaq is the most important source of his knowledge; it

guides him in research on contemporary concepts of identity and place. John recently defending his research by completing a Master of Arts in Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. His thesis is entitled “Two-spirits: Conceptualization in a L’nuwey Worldview.” John engages in his PhD journey at the University of McGill this Fall.

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