

Queering Collective Dreaming Weaving Métis Futures of Belonging

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Abstract

Using sash weaving as a metaphor, this paper is a sharing of two journeys of “coming in” to identities over time through narrative storytelling, grounded in queer theories, queer Indigenous theories and an imagining toward a queer Métis theory. The co-authors articulate how the absence of 2SLGBTQ+ Métis role models and representation earlier in life interfered with aligning their own felt and expressed identities and ability to envision a joyful, connected future. In their search for those with resonant experiences, they found strength in community and kin. As a result, 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people and allies are invited to join a collective dreaming process to revitalize our queer teachings, reclaim our place in community, and return to relationship with one another.

Key words: Métis, 2SLGBTQ+, collective dreaming, Two-Spirit, identity, weaving, story, Indigiqueer, sash

Introduction

The search for who we are as Métis people can be a profound journey of discovery and reconnection, though not without heartache and plenty of questions. This complicated experience is often paired with confronting complex power relations between colonization and Indigeneity, and for many Métis people, it requires an immense amount of work to connect to living Métis communities (Monchalin, Smylie, & Bourgeois, 2020). Having survived generations of strategic displacement, attempted assimilation largely at the hands of missionaries (Lavallee, 1991), and attempted genocide by colonizers (Woolford & Benvenuto, 2015; Wildcat, 2015), healing our

individual, family, and ancestral relations is part of coming home to who we are as Métis people (Auger, 2021; Beniuk, 2016). Of further concern is the widespread overemphasis on mixedness and hybridity as the cornerstone of Métis identity while overlooking “Métis people’s territory, events, history or culture” as distinct peoples with unique historical relations with European settler and Indigenous ancestors (Andersen, 2014, p. 5). This is problematic in that it perpetuates racialization against Métis peoples while dismissing the ways that we have, and continue to be, “misrecognized as a hybrid off-shoot of two races - “Indian” and “white” - rather than as Indigenous people” (Andersen, 2014, p.6). Thus, it is of utmost importance to not only situate ourselves as Métis people but to make known our connection to Métis communities in so-called Canada who have existed and persisted for many generations.

Whether one is aware of their 2SLGBTQ+¹ identity early in life or later on, the process of coming in (A. Wilson, 2008, 2015) to one’s queer identity is also a challenging, yet profound, personal journey. This is at least in part due to the systematic attempts by colonizers to enforce a gender binary, heteronormative roles and identities informed by European ideals and Christian values (Driskill, 2011). These colonial systems of oppression function to exclude queer people, evidenced in Canadian blood banks not accepting donations from gay and bisexual identified men (Dryden, 2010) and more recent legislation in the United States that enacts thinly veiled anti-transgender policies (Kinkaid, 2020). These, among other forms of discrimination, are the result of longstanding societal cisheteronormativity, which is the “the relationship of heterosexual and cisgender privilege stemming from patriarchy” (Franco-Rocha et al., 2023, p.1). Further, cisheteronormativity is fuelled and upheld by the assumption that there are only two genders and that people can and should only experience attraction to people of the opposite gender (Beagan et al., 2022). The result is a hegemonic social system that assumes and prioritizes cisgender and heterosexuality as the norm, thus othering and oppressing gender identities and sexualities beyond the binary (Zaino, 2021). Queerness as a theory (described below) and living practice (explored in our personal stories) challenges us to dissolve firm binaries of woman/man and straight/gay to see gender and sexuality as a spectrum with multiple intersections. Bringing together a queer Métis visioning enables us to see across binaries and boundaries in the interest of supporting a diverse, inclusive, and decolonial community.

It is worth noting that the multitude of identities people hold (e.g., race, age, disability status, income level, gender, sex, education level, mental health status) intersect to create context-dependent and dynamic positionalities. Crenshaw (1989) described this in her early work on intersectionality, which she coined and offered as a tool to critically examine the systems of power that work to privilege or oppress people based on the ways identities intersect and ultimately create one’s social position (see also Hankivsky, 2014; Gopaldas, 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Drawing on this understanding of intersectionality, we reflect on the particular intersection of Métis identity and queerness, and we share our “coming in” experiences (A. Wilson, 2008) as two Métis queers. During our identity development, we were left searching. As we continued to feel the absence of 2SLGBTQ+ Métis peers, role models, representation, research, data, and visibility (Madden et al., 2013), we turned inward and relied on identity to emerge from within.

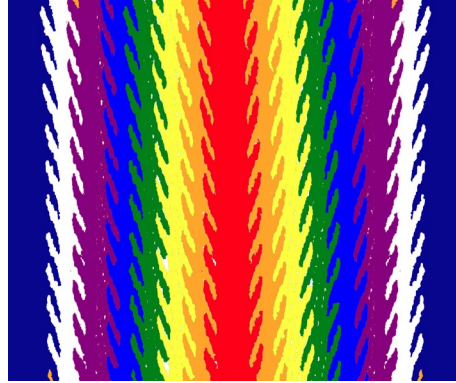
¹2SLGBTQ+ is the acronym and umbrella term referring to Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and other identities typically considered gender and sexually diverse. The + symbol is used for brevity and is not meant to erase identities beyond the letters included in this acronym.

This paper weaves together queer and Métis experiences to invite readers into the collective dreaming of a time when we are known and recognized for who we are as 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people. Through our personal narratives, the purpose of the paper is to discuss how queer Métis people and perspectives can contribute to the decolonization of our Nation. This paper is a continuation of an initial coffee visit, and so we present our stories in a *kiyokewin* visiting manner (Gaudet, 2019; Flaminio et al., 2020; McDonald & Paul, 2021), using similar approaches to narrative, conversational and story-based methods used by Indigenous scholars such as Shawn Wilson (2008), Jo-Ann Archibald (2008), and Burke and Robinson (2019). So, while this paper has not originated from an empirical research study, the result is a valuable knowledge exchange and discussion grounded in our worldviews and experiences as queer Métis people. Storytelling is an essential part of resistance and decolonization that challenges a “colonized mindset” and reminds us to slow down and centre kinship (Curtice, 2023, p. 16). We start by situating the terminology used throughout, followed by our self-locations. We then share our journeys to illustrate the past, present, and future dreaming as 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people. We close with a dreaming of how 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people will be able to more easily identify, construct, articulate, and celebrate their queerness in the context of a nurturing and accepting Métis culture and community; where our community will see a vibrant circle of Métis queers; and where our queer Métis kin will know themselves and be known by our community as the valuable, essential, and sacred relatives that we are.

Métis Sash as a Metaphor

To ground this paper in Métis imaginings, we weave together our stories of becoming and envision a collective dreaming by using the Métis sash as a metaphor. The coloured threads are woven together, though each strand retains its unique colour and meaning (Donald, 2009). In their research on Indigenous frameworks and methodologies, Fraser and O’Neill (2021) propose and describe the Métis sash as a framework that weaves together more than just coloured threads. The colours and associated meanings may differ among Métis people familiar with the sash, and it can hold other symbolic meanings that are unique to Métis researchers using the metaphor (Burke & Robinson, 2019; Fraser & O’Neill, 2021). Utilizing this metaphor offers an imaginative exploration of how our identities come to be woven together into the fabric of our lives while remaining grounded in Métis culture. Further, sashes have long been indicators of identity, with different regions, families, and communities represented by the unique patterns. In addition to the many historical sashes, there are contemporary sashes with different meanings. Some 2SLGBTQ+ examples include the Two-Spirit Michif Local sash (Figure 1) and the Métis Nation BC 2SLGBTQ+ sash (Figure 2). Like our relatives weaving together unique strands to create physical sashes, we describe a metaphorical and relational weaving. In this way, we dream of each queer Métis person having the opportunity, resources, and mentorship to weave their own sash with the threads of their identity to create a unique pattern of self-expression and acceptance. This metaphorical grounding aligns with our use of intersectionality theory as it is not just each individual identity (strand) that is important, but rather the interrelation with all other strands and the systems of power one is positioned within to express unique lived experiences.

Figure 1. The Two-Spirit Michif Local sash, designed in collaboration with Etchiboy



Etchiboy, n.d. (<https://2smichiflocal.ca/in-the-news/>)

Figure 2. Métis Nation BC 2SLGBTQIA+ sash 2023 (photo by Lydia)



Queerness, in Theory

It is important to clarify what is meant by *queer* as it is intentionally used throughout this work about identities beyond the confines of binary sexes, genders, and orientations and in reference to queer theories (TallBear & Willey, 2019; Tilsen, 2021). Further, queering is “an ever-emergent process of becoming that is flexible and fluid in response to context, and in resistance to norms. When we queer something, we question and disrupt taken-for-granted practices and we can imagine new possibilities” (Tilsen, 2021, p.6). In an attempt to situate and understand queerness in the context of Métis lived realities and experiences, the contribution of queer theories cannot be overlooked. Queer theories reveal many different understandings and interpretations of what queer is and does. Whether centring queering as an approach to destabilizing norms through viewing performance of gender and sexuality as a response to one’s sexual identity as described in Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (2003) or as a social construction born from the functions of biopower as emphasized in *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1990). To be an effective critical tool, queer theories rely on explorations of the subjective experiences of queer people in combination with questioning the universality of normalized and naturalized ways of experiencing and expressing gender and sexuality (Grzanka, 2020; Acadia, 2021). The critical

stance that queer theories take must also be questioned, and are increasingly being interrogated regarding the privileging of whiteness and erasure of important culturally grounded and intersectional experiences of non-White people who may experience queerness differently than is assumed by such queer theories (Alexander, 2008; Driskill, 2010; Hames-Garcia, 2013). This tendency to oversimplify intersectional experiences has been rightfully called out in queer of colour (Ferguson, 2004) and Two-Spirit critiques for perpetuating colonialism as an essentializing and ongoing process (Alexander, 2003; Driskill, 2010, 2011; Hunt, 2016). Many Indigenous communities have specific terminology and language that may be used to describe gender identity and/or sexual orientations that affirm 2SLGBTQ+ identities in a culturally relevant way (Carrier et al., 2020; Fox & Wu, 2023; Hunt, 2016). In this paper, we use 2SLGBTQ+ and queer interchangeably to acknowledge the common use of acronyms while honouring our preferences to be referred to as queer Métis people. It is worth noting that not all 2SLGBTQ+ people identify with the term queer. Queer theory is relevant to this work, despite its limitations, as there is substantial potential for what it can add to queer Métis studies. Queer theory affords an opportunity to complicate and add nuance to Métis studies by challenging binary understandings of and conformity to normalcy, as defined by the colonial systems we exist within. For instance, there are ideological dichotomies of white vs. Indigenous, straight vs. gay, and cisgender vs. transgender that assume identities must fit solely into one of those binary categories in order to be valid. As such, queer theories and Indigenous studies intersect in important ways that can further Métis studies.

Weaving Queer Indigenous Studies and Métis Perspectives

Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Identities

When attempting to understand and explore Indigenous understandings of queerness, it is vital to situate and discuss Two-Spirit, as it has entered many discourses on the topic. The term Two-Spirit is a word bundle gifted to all Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people by Anishinaabe. Elder Dr. Myra Lamee received a dream and a word in Anishinaabemowin that describes the gifts that Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people bring—such as the power to “see things in two ways” (Fiola, 2020, p. 141). Lamee brought the English translation, “Two-Spirit,” to an Elders circle at the Third Annual Inter-tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference, held in Winnipeg in 1990 (Fiola, 2020; Thurston, 2022). There, the Elders discussed the term at length and ultimately accepted it through ceremony (Nolin & Bruce, 2023). Part of the intention of this pan-Indigenous term was to replace other problematic terms used to refer to gender and sexually diverse Indigenous peoples (Thomas & Jacobs, 1999). Perspectives on what Two-Spirit means when referring to identity vary, which speaks to the complexity and nuance of how people come to experience and name their identities. For instance, Wilson (2015) argues that Two-Spirit was never meant to describe an Indigenous person who embodies both masculine and feminine spirits, as the binary constructs of masculinity and femininity are colonial and not in line with Indigenous conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. Instead, Wilson proposed Two-Spirit in reference to the experience of being queer and Indigenous, both of which are imbued with cultural and spiritual meaning (2015). Further, not all Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ people use the term Two-Spirit. Some may prefer Indigiqueer, another pan-Indigenous term reportedly coined by trans Plains Cree artist TJ Cuthand (2017). It has since been taken up by some Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people to describe themselves as reflective of both their

Indigeneity and queerness while not necessarily identifying as Two-Spirit, as noted by Failler (2023). There is a diversity of teachings, language, expressions, and embodiments of Indigenous queerness and transness, but we share the experience of surviving the colonial imposition of patriarchal, cisheteronormativity, a common experience that allows us to identify and critique both the “colonial nature” of “many” non-Indigenous LGBTQ+ movements as well as the homophobia and transphobia that has been internalized by many Indigenous people and organizations (Driskill, 2010, p. 69).

Queer Indigenous Studies

One key contribution of queer Indigenous studies is the subjectless critique which challenges, or queers, the ideologies, discourses and epistemological standpoints that position identities as objects or ‘subjects’ of study and emphasizes critiques of the systems of power that create social positions in the first place (Hames-Garcia, 2013; Smith, 2010). Further defined, a subjectless critique “emphasizes neither genealogies or traditional gender roles...but rather takes the form of structural or ideological critique (for example, of settler colonialism and heteronormativity)” (Hames-Garcia, 2013, p. 392). This is relevant within queer Indigenous studies by affording the space to question and name how structures of power (e.g., media, politics, academia) perpetuate discourses that position ‘normative’ LGBTQ+ subjects as being increasingly granted rights and recognition while ignoring ongoing violence experienced by non-normative LGBTQ+ people (Eng & Puar, 2020).

Driskill’s queering of first contact is another important contribution to the area of queer Indigenous studies, by describing how not only were heterosexuality and binary gender roles assumed by settlers when arriving uninvitedly into Indigenous communities, but the land was heterosexualized as something penetrable, possessable, and up for ownership (Driskill, 2011). The relationship between Indigenous women and white male settlers was romanticized, while Indigenous men were largely erased from the discourse in part because settlers could not imagine how communities could survive without male domination of the land and its beings (Driskill, 2011). The value placed on masculinity and dominance remains an important and influential factor in the ways that today’s colonial systems of power continue to function. Queering the narrative surrounding the so-called ‘discovery’ of Indigenous peoples and lands can disable the heteropatriarchal conquest that remains a site of struggle. For instance, queering Indigenous bodies, particularly Indigenous women, would make it non-consensual for white male settlers to engage in the romanticized pursuit of sex and possession (Driskill, 2011). In other words, by disrupting the discourse surrounding Indigenous women’s heterosexual desire for white men, there can no longer be a clear justification for the conquest and settlement of the land (Driskill, 2011). This counters heterosexuality as the assumed norm, thus dismantling the entire construction of the colonial-settler history and queers the discourse. This is further explored in the question “If Indigenous bodies matter as embodiment of the land...how might we understand gender and sexuality, property and territoriality, consent and freedom differently, if the land itself is the source of fluidity, authority and groundedness outside the means of (re)production?” (Byrd, 2020, as quoted in Eng & Puar, 2020, p. 13). Contributions such as these made by queer Indigenous studies/thinkers have been and continue to be pivotal in the imagining of queer Métis studies. Through exploring queer theories that were largely developed from white, colonized understandings of gender and sexuality, considering how queerness and Indigeneity intersect,

and weaving in stories of Métis lived experiences, an imagining of queer Métis studies becomes possible.

Imagining Queer Métis Studies

Queer Métis studies can draw on developments in mainstream queer theories to help identify how cisheteronormativity impacts 2SLGBTQ+ people, while queer Indigenous studies helps to identify the settler-colonial forces driving the subjugation of Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people. With these tools, we can build a path away from colonial gender and orientation prescriptions and, in articulating queer Métis experiences, we can work toward the revitalization of traditional values that support 2SLGBTQ+ community members. For example, Cree and Cree-Métis communities held/hold the value of non-interference (Fiola, 2020) and respect which “makes Cree cultures more open to disparate genders” (Scudeler, 2016, p. 8). However, as Two-Spirit Métis/Anishinaabe scholar Kai Pyle (2020) argues, an attempt to return to traditional gender teachings is fraught as colonial heteropatriarchal philosophies have been internalized by many Indigenous people, thus reinforcing gender inequity under the guise of “traditional” ways - for example, perpetuating stereotypes of Indigenous men as warriors and Indigenous women as mothers. Pyle argues that whether or not certain gendered practices and teachings are traditional and predate contact, teachings that reinforce the subjugation of women and 2SLGBTQ+ people should be carefully considered to decide whether we wish to perpetuate them in the future. We, as Métis people, came from the blending, adapting, and co-constructing a new tradition from the fabric of our ancestors’ ways; we can return to this project to reevaluate our practices, revitalize cultural values, and recreate practices that address internalized cisheteronormativity and patriarchy as well as those teachings and practices that are regarded as traditional and yet are harming our community members.

Two-spirit Métis scholar Chantal Fiola (2020) discusses the phenomenon of “skirt shaming,” where people who are AFAB (assigned female at birth) are told they must wear a skirt in ceremony or be barred from participation (2020). Fiola shares a moving discussion on the matter with Nehiyaw and Anishinaabe Two-Spirit Elders/role models, and together, they emphasize both the rich teachings of the skirt as well as the cultural ethic of non-interference that extends to “body sovereignty and gender self-determination” (2020, p. 149). To navigate ceremony and protocol as Two-Spirit people, Fiola suggests that we can approach leaders and Elders, offer tobacco, and respectfully ask questions about where and how Two-Spirit people can participate. In her thesis, Two-Spirit Red River Métis educator Nicki Ferland (2022), cites discussions with Métis women and Two-Spirit scholars and Elders from which she realized, “Métis people have always gathered knowledge, and asked and answered the important questions” (p. 42). By sharing our questions and stories with one another, we strengthen our understanding of and connection to self and community. Many Métis people share the experience of feeling not Indigenous or white enough, but for many 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people, these feelings can be compounded when struggling to feel queer or trans enough (Fowler, 2022). When we come together and listen to each others’ stories, and we see our similarities and our diversity, we find our place in the circle. Queer Métis studies are still in early development, but queer Métis people are asking key questions and are leading important conversations. In writing this paper, we intend to contribute to this burgeoning field and to offer affirmation and inspiration to other 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people.

Self-Locations

Self-locations are essential in Indigenous research, as researchers must position themselves within the work and communicate how that position shapes the information and knowledge they produce (Braun & Clark, 2023; S. Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2021). By self-locating, we explain “not only the questions we ask and how we go about asking them but who we are in the asking” (Kovach, 2021, p. 142). It also demonstrates “how personal experience and community connections are interwoven into our researching” (Kovach, 2021, p. 145). Locating ourselves in such a personal way within academia can make us vulnerable to personal critique, among other forms of discrimination. However, it is also “protective” because through this self-reflection, we can demonstrate how we are uniquely positioned and “empowered” to do this work (Kovach et al., 2013, p. 491). Knowing and conveying who we are honours the common Indigenous community protocol whereby people are expected to introduce themselves, often with specific information to share, and engage in reciprocal sharing of story and community connection(s). If our knowledge as 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people is to be evaluated as trustworthy and purposeful, we must first establish trust with readers by sharing our stories and disclosing our positionality (Kovach et al., 2013). It is crucial to note that we are not attempting to speak for all 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people, and through our self-location we hope to demonstrate that we are speaking from our own unique truths and intersectionality (Absolon & Willett, 2005).

Lydia’s Positionality:

Tansi, Lydia nitisiyigason. Hello, my name is Lydia. *Tastawiyiniw ayahkwew otepimisiw niya.* I am an in-between person/Two-Spirit and use they/she/he pronouns. On my father’s side, I am a second-generation Canadian from the Netherlands. On my mother’s side, I am a mixed French, English, Irish, and Scottish settler and Bungi Métis from the Bruce, Cook, Short, Cocking, and McNabb families of the Red River. I was born in Katzie and Kwantlen territory in what is now called Maple Ridge, BC and lived there until I was ten years old. I then moved to W̱SÁNEĆ territory on the so-called Saanich Peninsula on lower Vancouver Island, where I spent my adolescence. In 2018, I moved to lək̓ʷəŋən territory in the now city of Victoria. I am neurodivergent and manage chronic illness, but am otherwise able-bodied. I am a light-skinned, red-haired femme who is often coded by others as a white, cisgender, and heterosexual woman. I feel frustrated by the erasure of my identities and sad that I am not immediately recognizable as an Indigiqueer by my peers, but I also benefit from the privilege my lightness grants me to move in white and cisheteronormative spaces (e.g., bathrooms, health care, social spaces) without the aggressions that folks whose marginalized identities are more readily identified. I also take seriously the privileges that my education has afforded me.

At the University of Victoria (UVic), I completed my honours degree in anthropology with a minor in Indigenous studies in 2018, then my Masters in anthropology in 2023. I am now a PhD student and am pursuing a community-based research project gathering Métis Two-Spirit knowledge and teachings. My research interests include audio-visual, community-engaged, and Indigenous methodologies; Métis research approaches; and sensory and Indigenous studies. I have also worked at UVic as an Indigenous Student Recruitment Officer and, most recently, the Tri-Faculty Indigenous Resurgence Coordinator, where I have been supporting decolonial

initiatives and education within the faculties of Science, Social Sciences, and Humanities and the broader institution. I am a member of the 2SLGBTQQIA+ Advisory Committees of both Métis Nation BC and Métis Nation of Greater Victoria. I am also a Youth Council member for the 2 Spirits in Motion Society.

Holly's positionality:

In order to show up in a good way, I must position myself in relation to this work as modelled by the many Indigenous scholars and peoples who have come before me. I am a queer, trans/non-binary person of mixed Métis and Scottish ancestry who currently uses they/them pronouns. My maternal Métis family comes from the St. Francois and St. Boniface regions of the Red River settlement, though we lived in Lac St. Anne, the Northwest Territories, and Lesser Slave Lake regions. I have spent the majority of my life living on the unceded lands of the Quw'utsun, W̱SÁNEĆ, and K'ómoks. My Métis family names include Scouten, Nesotew, Commandant, L'Hirondelle, and Nipissing. It is apparent that my Métis kin struggled with their own intersecting identities, evident in my maternal relatives' use of white face powder to appear lighter skinned and documented changes of last names and birth dates. These actions were likely rooted in experiences of sexism and racism within both Indigenous and settler communities and other reasons that we will never be sure of. A story like mine is common among Métis families and speaks to the complex historical relationships between settler and Indigenous communities.

My father immigrated from Scotland to Canada and has benefited from being a white, male, English-speaking immigrant in a society that privileges such identities. As a result, I also have come to benefit from the unearned privileges, safety, and opportunities that my whiteness affords me, though the potential erasure of my Métisness saddens me. As my gender expression has changed, I have also lost certain privileges, such as safely accessing public spaces without invasive questions or confrontation (e.g., bathrooms, barbershops, change rooms, workplaces, health care appointments, etc.). Regarding academic positionality, I am a PhD candidate in a rehabilitation sciences program in British Columbia, where my research is situated within the discipline of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy (OSOT). I have a clinical background as an occupational therapist, a health care profession that defines occupations as all the different activities and forms of doing that occupy our time and bring meaning to our lives. These occupations and activities are also how we interact with our environment and other people, such as caregiving, working, studying, spending time on the land, socializing, singing, dancing, engaging in ceremony, playing, reading, and so on. As an occupational therapist, my role has been to work with people and families to help facilitate their ability to resume engaging in occupations that are meaningful to them, which can oftentimes be interrupted by disability or injury. I am currently co-creating a community-based participatory research project in partnership with two local Indigenous organizations, with an overarching aim to explore and better understand the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ Indigenous peoples with respect to occupational engagement and possibilities. Within OSOT, there are increasing calls for research that explores the diverse lived experiences of those who have historically been forgotten, erased, or otherwise silenced in discourses surrounding what people do, how they do it and what meaning is derived from such occupations. I recognize the importance of remaining critically aware that my work is taking place on lands I am an uninvited guest on, as my relatives are from

Red River homelands, and this work is taking place far from those lands. I wholeheartedly intend to do this work in a good way, living according to the values that I have been taught.

Untangling and Sorting: Our Seasons of Searching

*I searched forest floors
and summer skies,
I looked in every pond for my reflection
but was only met with ripples
and distorted images
of faces and shapes that weren't mine.
I listened to the wind
gust through the branches
but couldn't make sense of the sounds,
so unfamiliar to my own ears.*

Lydia:

When I was young, my family did not know much about our Métis heritage. When my mom was working in Indigenous education at a local high school on Katzie territory, she was invited to attend a community event and brought me with her. I remember watching the dancing, admiring the regalia, and listening to the songs. I remember seeing so much vibrance and togetherness. On the car ride home, I started to cry, and when my mom asked me what was wrong, I wailed, “I don’t have any culture!” I know now that my spirit and blood memory knew I was missing a connection to my culture and community. My mom had built strong relationships with some Katzie families from the school, and those close folks encouraged my mom to look into our Métis ancestry, reconnect with our extended family, and reclaim our family’s culture. She invested herself in researching historical documents, travelling back to the homelands, meeting with family members, and re-learning our family story.

We moved to W̱SÁNEĆ territory when I was ten, and the bullying started my first day. Kids used whatever insults they could think of, and as we got older, frequent themes included slut-shaming, body-shaming, and homophobia. For reasons I still do not know, the bullies determined that I was a lesbian. I now assume their reasons included my muscular/thick physique and interest in sports, my relatively short haircut, and my general disinterest in feminine gender norms. I had been identified as queer before I had even identified it in myself. Due to my own experience with homophobia and witnessing my close friends being bullied for being queer, I joined the Gay Straight Alliance in my first year of high school. This helped me learn about different queer identities and to build a sense of community with other queer people. I became certain of my queerness by grade 10, when I had my first lesbian date. I sifted through the different identity labels in search of my own. Being the fluid person I am, I found it hard to commit to any particular identity, but I settled on calling myself bisexual. When I announced my bisexuality on Facebook for the first time, I was “coming out” in the common North American sense, where a LGBTQ+ individual “musters their courage” to declare their “independent identity” while bracing for “anger, resistance, violence or flat-out rejection or abandonment” (A. Wilson, 2008, p.197). For me, it was an act of defiance against heteronormative society and an

assertion of pride in the face of years of homophobic bullying. However, I continued to struggle to feel legitimate, or “queer enough.” It was damaging to hear biphobic comments from partners, peers, and society and I internalized that insecurity. I felt a need to assert my identity in a context of colonial cisheteronormativity and a laterally violent queer community.

I did not feel safe enough to explore my gender identity in grade school, so it was not until my university years that I began to interrogate my gender. I was still searching for who I was, and I was not finding answers or examples in others around me. I knew I was connected to womanhood but there was more. I had often wished I was a man in the past, but I started to realize how seriously I wanted it. I remember the surge of gender euphoria when I wore a chest binder for the first time, when I wore men’s clothes, and when I went out for the first time as a drag king. I was so fluid, it was hard to feel certain about my identity. Different aspects of my gender would emerge depending on who I was with, what I was doing, and how I felt that day. I wondered about the bigender label, but it did not resonate with me. I learned about the term Two-Spirit in my early twenties, and it started me on a journey of understanding what Two-Spirit is. The language of Two-Spirit gave me the freedom of “yes and,” where I could say, “yes, I am a woman, and also, I am a man;” “yes, I love my body, and I also like to change it too;” “yes, I like men, and I also love women and non-binary people.” With the “yes and” of my Two-Spirit identity, I could more easily express my identity. I also knew that Two-Spirit is a useful term to communicate my gender in English, but the term was not intended to replace the unique and specific language and gender teachings of different Indigenous nations. I knew I needed to understand what Two-Spirit meant in my own community for me to know what it could mean to me. To understand my queerness fully, I needed to understand my culture; to understand myself, I needed to understand my community. I was so grateful to have found my place in the circle as an *otipemisiw*, but it was challenging to find information on Two-Spirit or queer Métis teachings and others like me. I was searching again.

I sought out *nehiyawewin* language lessons, Indigiqueer workshops, lectures, gatherings and conferences, online and academic resources, and other queer Métis folks. I learned the word bundle, *tastawiyiniwak* from online resources by Two-Spirit Nehiyô family physician and scholar, Dr. James Makokis. *Tastawiyiniwak* translates to “in-between people” and encompasses the diversity of sexualities and gender expressions (Makokis, 2021). When I understood this word, I understood that our Nation(s) and language(s) valued people like me; we held the space in between. I also learned of the word *ayahkwew* from Métis scholar Chelsea Vowel’s *âpihtawikosisân* blog. Vowel shares a few different definitions for this word, one of which being a sort of third gender, neither man nor woman (Vowel, 2012). Cree and Métis Elder, Edward LaVallee, confirmed this definition of a third gender when I spoke with him at the 2 Spirits in Motion Society Youth Summit (LaVallee, 2023). I love the fluidity of the in-between, and I finally saw that role as important to my community - I saw myself as important to my community. Where I once felt uncomfortable with being assigned and restricted to womanhood in community and ceremony, I learned our *tastawiyiniwak* teachings of being able to move between women’s and men’s roles and spaces and to also have our own place in-between as well.

Finally, my sense of self as a queer person and an *otipemisiw* were stitched together, and I “came in” to my *tastawiyiniw ayahkwew* identity. As Two-Spirit Cree scholar Alex Wilson (2008) describes, “‘coming in’ is not a declaration or announcement...it is an affirmation of an

interdependent identity” wherein a Two-Spirit person “comes to understand their relationship to and place and value in their own family, community, culture, history and present-day world” (p. 197). The interdependence is key; my in-betweenness does not make me an anomalous outsider as it would be in a cisheteronormative, binary world. Instead, it makes me a valued community member with an honoured place in the circle, a place that I have *come-into* as I have remembered (Absolon & Willet, 2005; Rowe, 2013) my true identity that has been with me all along! My tears in that car ride home from the Katzie ceremony were my Bungi ancestors calling me back home to my teachings. The bullies in school, although they were aiming to devalue me, were noticing my *tastawiyiniw* spirit. I was always this person, and I would not have found the self-love and understanding that I have now if I had not had the relatives, language, and teachings to build me up and bring me in. It was through knowing my community and my culture that I was able to know who I am and where I belong.

Holly:

When I think about my early life, I am reminded that I am one of the fortunate 2SLGBTQ+ people accepted by their family for exactly who they are. I grew up in a family that celebrated unique self-expression, and am fortunate to have parents who did not question my way of being. As parents of a gender-diverse child, I imagine it was challenging to know if they were making the right decisions by honouring my need to express my gender in ways that did not conform to the expectations set out for people assigned female at birth. Going shopping for clothing was an epic battle and source of distress for me as we searched for clothes that I felt like myself in. There are pictures of me as young as two and three years old, wearing a hat backwards and playing with dolls (Figure 3). There is plenty of video footage of me playing sports with my male cousins, riding bikes off jumps, and swimming shirtless with long, wildly curly hair. As much as there was freedom and unconditional love within my family, there was also conflict and questioning from outside this safety net. I cut my hair short when I was ten and continued dressing in stereotypically ‘masculine’ clothing, until one day a female peer at school confronted me: “Why do you dress like you are always playing sports? Girls don’t dress like that, you know.” This was my first experience questioning what it meant to be a girl or a boy, and I was devastated by the decision I faced: conform to be accepted or honour my authenticity but risk exclusion and discrimination from peers. I decided to wear more stereotypically feminine clothes and grew my hair out from that day onward until I was twenty-five. That’s fifteen years of conforming to social pressures and gender-based standards, and time I will never get back. This is the power of internalizing harmful words and beliefs, and the lengths we go to avoid being labelled as different and the subsequent isolation that often follows. What I wish I knew then was that I could continue being who I knew myself to be, long before anyone told me what girls and boys do, and do not do. The simple truth is that I was born gender-diverse and did not have the presence of someone in my life who represented what my future could look like, so I started searching.

Figure 3. Holly At age 3, wearing their brother's hat backwards and playing with a dollhouse (own photo).



As a result of the lack of 2SLGBTQ+ representation (Brown, 2009) early on in my life, and specifically 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people (Madden, 2013), I felt as though I was walking deeper and deeper into a forest that I did not recognize and that did not recognize me. I left behind me a small trail of footprints, each one an imprint of the search I was on to find my identity that continued to escape me. In my early twenties, I spent hours, sometimes days, hiking alone in hopes that something would come to me. I likely spent more time outside than inside during these summers and would return home a slightly different, more authentic version of myself every time. I was completing an undergraduate degree at this time and continued to be surrounded by people I did not feel connected to, though I was not sure why. I recognize now that it was such a strange feeling to me, to be in a classroom with so many other people and not hear or see anyone who looked or felt like a familiar version of myself. I eventually graduated and moved from my small hometown to obtain a degree in occupational therapy, in a city much more diverse than where I was from. Shortly after moving, something began shifting inside me as I felt a connection to and recognition of the people around me. It felt like I was visiting with the younger version of myself, just before social pressures and expectations changed who I felt I could be. I stepped into my resilience and resistance - I cut my hair off again and began to socially transition my appearance to align with my internal sense of being. As my strands of hair fell to the ground, so did the fears, internalized negative feelings about queerness and the heavy weight of unattainable social standards. I finally had the clarity to move forward by returning to my past self and trusting who I knew myself to be all along.

Strands of Strength: Finding Kin and Connection

*Finding kin and calling in,
was as refreshing then
as it is now.
Peeling back the layers
revealing raw edges
of the parts of me
I tried so hard*

*to crawl out of.
It turns out that our cracks, edges and rawness
are where our light shines through,
guiding others to us.*

Lydia:

Growing up, my identity work was impeded by violent colonial discourses and cisheteronormative socialization. As a result, my sash weaving did not begin with selecting my thread colours; it began with a great untangling, sorting, searching, and sourcing of threads. Anishinaabe scholar Absolon (2010) describes Indigenous people as being in a time of “resurgence and revitalization” where “we are recovering, re-emerging, and reclaiming our knowledge base” (p. 78). Many Indigenous people are on the journey of remembering (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Rowe, 2013; Simpson, 2017) who we are through family research, self-reflection, and for some, attempts at community/nation/band enrolment; in this way we build ourselves up through culture, blood memory, and community connections (Absolon & Willett, 2005). As Indigenous peoples, coming to know who we are is inherently connected to our healing journeys (Absolon & Willett, 2005). We, the authors, have re-membered ourselves for who we have always been: Métis people who walk with the gifts and teachings of in-betweenness and of queerness. We have done and continue to do the good searching for and *recovering* the threads of our Métis and 2SLGBTQ+ teachings through our conversations with peers, *Kihtêyak* (Elders), Knowledge Holders, ancestors, and spirit. We are now *re-emerging* as our true selves as proud and visible 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people; and *reclaiming* our place in the circle along with our right to sit within and move between men’s and women’s roles, teachings, and spaces in addition to our own unique roles, teachings, and spaces. We share our stories to remember our collective past, understand our present, and dream of a future for our 2SLGBTQ+ Métis kin where they will look up from the work of weaving their sashes and see the beautiful tapestry of other 2SLGBTQ+ Métis sashes, dancing from the diverse bodies and gender presentations/celebrations of people like them.

I have worked hard to feel pride in my identity. I have been actively de/re/constructing my ethnocultural identity in the context of continuing colonial violence and conditioning. I have been trying to actively decolonize and unlearn white supremacy, and search - in a good way - to re-learn and return to my Métis teachings. I feel like I have been walking backwards at the same time as walking forward. I have been untangling and undoing threads of internalized colonial and cisheteronormative thinking, spinning new threads of language and relationship, weaving together a sash that I can be proud to lay over my heart (or wrap around my hips). Because of my light skin and hair, I often feel like I am not Métis enough. When I walk down the street, I am often perceived to be a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman, and so I often feel not queer, gender queer, or Indigenous enough. I mourn the fact that I am not recognizable to others like me. I often feel like I have to assert my identity to address the assumptions that others make about me and justify my belonging, an ongoing assertion that feels like a “coming out,” as described by Wilson (2008). However, in the past few years, I have connected with many other *tastawiyiniwak* and finally see that I am not alone. I have found my place in a circle where I do not have to justify, prove, or explain. I am accepted, and I am known. I can say, I am mixed and light skin, *yes, and* I am Indigenous. I am partnered with a man, *yes, and* I am queer. I am queer,

yes and I am Two-Spirit. I have re-membered the fluidity and freedom I had as a child, and I have re-membered the culture I was missing. As I meet more *tastawiyiniwak* like me and as I learn our revitalized traditions and contemporary teachings, I understand that I have always been known by my ancestors, and I have always known who I was; I just did not have the words to describe it. I did not have the teachings that would have guided me, or the culturally educated relatives who could have heard my spirit say, “*ayahkwew niya*.” Now, I find the affirmation I need, and I know my spirit through my relationships with my family and my community. I know that I am *otipemisiw ayahkwew* because I know my community, and they know me.

Holly:

Since stepping into my truth as a 2SLGBTQ+ Métis person, I have entered a season of healing substantially enriched by finding and connecting with others like me (Reid & Pride, 2023). It is important to note there is also immense value in connecting with people who are different from us, as it is our differences that help us to see from other perspectives (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000), accept there are multiple truths (Tynan, 2021), and build empathy (Neary, 2020). It is not that we are *only* interested in connecting with people who share an identity or experience, though these connections can be important for us to feel as though we are not the only one who thinks, feels, and behaves as we do. It is a relatively common narrative within the 2SLGBTQ+ community that building a social network of close friends and partners is important for our health and well-being (Jackson, 2020). Since these are often not people we are related to or the family we are born into, this supportive community is called ‘chosen family’ (Jackson, 2020). In the early days, as I navigated the unavoidable changes that would take place with respect to my role(s) in my family and community, I found safety in my chosen family. I acknowledge that I also found safety in my birth family, which I am immensely grateful for. However, there are challenges to navigating queerness with parents and siblings closely involved, because of the deeply ingrained beliefs and assumptions about who they understand us to be. Spending time with my chosen family allowed me to experience many expressions of identity that I would otherwise likely not have seen as possible for myself. This was a pivotal part of finding my strength and self-acceptance, as I was surrounded by others who proudly owned their identities and modelled revolutionary acts of self-love.

As I continue to connect with other 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people, I am constantly learning more about myself, as if the people I surround myself with are a mirror for me. After years of searching, I am finally seeing parts of myself reflected back to me in the people I meet, the spaces I am invited into, and the opportunities to collaborate with others. This experience aligns with my community-based participatory (CBPR) doctoral research journey in unexpected and positive ways. The principles of CBPR prioritize co-learning and the emergence of knowledge that is multidirectional and mutually beneficial, emphasizing community autonomy and values at all stages of a research project (Castleden, 2012; Etmanski et al., 2014). This is not all that different from the experience of coming into our identities (A. Wilson, 2008, 2015), which has largely felt like a co-learning journey and emergence of knowledge that partly came from within and has been further supported through relationships with others. My positionality as a Métis person, research trainee, occupational therapist, gender-diverse and queer person requires recognizing how my relationships to others and my community helps me know how to weave my strands together to yield a strong, yet soft sash that is unique to my own lived experiences.

The Future: Collective Dreaming and Weaving Our Community Back Together

*I look to the land,
I trace the paths,
and it leads me to a home.
Inside this home, there is music,
the door opens as a voice says:
Pihtikwe, come in.
Inside, there are relatives,
they see me, and the circle says,
Tawâw, there is room here.
And I hear myself say,
Nipekîwân, I have returned
to where I am
re-membered.*

Identity formation is an expected and natural part of individual development, however interdependent, community, cultural, and ancestral connections are key to 2SLGBTQ+ Métis identity building. Perhaps this is another “yes and” moment, where 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people need to undertake personal exploration while also finding their place in community. We, the authors, developed our identities in a more linear manner where our queer and Métis identity formations occurred independently before we were able to weave them together. We dream of a future where our people can develop those identities in concert and in complement. We feel that this will better support 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people's journey to see their queerness as a factor of belonging within our community rather than a factor of exclusion.

Coming into our identities is a process that can greatly benefit from collective dreaming, which involves collaborative community input to spark “introspection, healing and hope for the future” (Day, 2023, p.50). This is particularly true and relevant for 2SLGBTQ+ Métis peoples, as we oftentimes do not grow up with opportunities to dream a future for our true, embodied selves that is familiar to us. Further, with many generations of violence against 2SLGBTQ+ people and the AIDS crisis, we also have a dearth of 2SLGBTQ+ role models (Brown, 2009) and Elders to show youth the possibility of a long, healthy, and happy life. While working on the paper, Lydia said of the lack of older 2SLGBTQ+ role models, “Did no one make it this far?” This evokes the question, “Will I not make it that far?” As we take in the beauty of our sash weaving so far, we feel joy and pride in our successes and growth in our queer Métis identities. We also realize our responsibility to actively seek out and gather 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people across generations seeking to dream of and weave their own sashes in circle with others. We must bring together our living relatives, tell stories about our ancestors, and prepare to become role models for others.

We are so fortunate to have treasured 2SLGBTQ+ Métis Elders who inspire us to continue forward and become the mentors and role models that we have been searching for. For the authors, spending so many years looking for and sorting through our strands means we are at a crucial time where we can invite other 2SLGBTQ+ Métis peoples to join together and weave their sashes alongside us. When we get our strands tangled in life and struggle to clearly see how

they relate to each other and how they should be placed, it can be helpful to have others around us to turn to for help, guidance, and mentorship. This is collective dreaming, a time when we reflect on ourselves and our lives, seeing ourselves in relation to our community in the way of *Wahkohtowin* (Macdougall, 2006). When we enter the circle with others who are also weaving their sashes, we establish hope for our shared futures. We can work toward finding how the threads fit together within ourselves, community, and creation. The patterns and colours may be unexpected, as the strands fit together in ways we did not previously consider. This relational learning and doing fosters a queering of collective dreaming in a way that disentangles our ways of being from the imposition of heteropatriarchy and cisheteronormativity, ultimately reclaiming our belonging.

Conclusion

This paper is a sharing of our stories as two 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people who worked long and hard to connect with ourselves and our communities. Driskill (2010) reminds us that “decolonial activism and scholarship ask(s) us to radically reimagine our futures,” and for Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ people, our imaginings are supported by “weaving together” 2SLGBTQ+ and Indigenous critiques to challenge our “colonial realities” (p. 70). Our hope is that by articulating the process of discovering and embodying our authentic identities and exploring how queer theories and queer Indigenous studies can further queer Métis studies, we can inform directions for future story sharing and collective dreaming with 2SLGBTQ+ Métis kin more broadly. In this paper and in our lives, we aim to lift up 2SLGBTQ+ Métis people to be visible, valued, and celebrated in our Nation. Colonization has introduced homophobia and transphobia into our communities where we once had acceptance and celebration, but we can tease out these knots and intrusive threads if we join together. Therefore, we call on non-2SLGBTQ+ Métis allies to recognize and affirm our unique value and join our dreaming—as this dreaming is an act of love and resurgence. Our dreaming is sacred.

We envision a future where, rather than looking outward at the colonial, cisheteronormative, patriarchal culture and grappling with the dissonance between internal and external worlds, 2SLGBTQ+ Métis will be able to look to their community and see their inner truth reflected back in acceptance and celebration among Métis people. The collective dream is for each of us to be supported to journey through our sash, weaving in a circle with others who have done and are still doing that work and who can provide mentorship and encouragement. We will then more readily find ourselves at home in our bodies and in community, surrounded by a rich tapestry of sashes depicting the joyful and resilient lives and legacies of other 2SLGBTQ+ Métis kin.

Limitations

Though making important contributions, this work has limitations. As this paper is in a narrative style rather than a reporting of an empirical study, the literature reviewed and presented along with the stories of the two co-authors is not exhaustive. More first-person accounts of lived realities as queer Métis people must add to this limited body of knowledge. A full comprehensive literature review, including grey literature, is an area for further exploration to better understand this area.

Acknowledgements

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Holly

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Biographies

Lydia

Lydia (they/she/he) is a Two-Spirit, Bungi Métis and mixed-settler person living as a visitor on *ləkʷəŋən* and *WSÁNEĆ* lands. They hold a BA (Hons) and MA in Anthropology from the University of Victoria and are now a PhD student. Lydia is also a beader, singer, and drag king.

Holly

Holly (they/them) is an occupational therapist and PhD candidate of mixed Red River Métis and Scottish-settler ancestry, living on *WSÁNEĆ* territory. Holly's most cherished occupations include gardening, rock climbing, hiking, and visiting with their family; especially their nieces.

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