

# Twin-Spirited Woman

*Sts'iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li*

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**Abstract** Coast Salish people, particularly the Stó:lō of the lower Fraser Valley, have lost much of their language, histories, and teachings as a result of colonization. One such important identity that has been forgotten or erased is the two-spirited role. The author wishes to revitalize the cultural roles of transgendered/two-spirit people within the Coast Salish territory and ways in which they historically contributed to their societies prior to colonization. Traditionally, the Stó:lō are matriarchal and matrilineal, and only grandmothers can create any new laws for their descendants. Thus given the vital role played by the author's grandmother in her process, this essay is a long-overdue proposal to all living grandmothers not only to stand by and accept their two-spirited grandchildren but to call for a celebration of their coming out. This visionary work serves to inspire future generations of Stó:lō to fully embrace *all* members of their community, especially two-spirits. The first *Sts'iyóye Smestíyexw Slhá:li*, or *Twin-Spirited Woman*, as this essay is about, offers an example to this sacred work.

**Keywords** two-spirit; transgender; gender; restoration; reconciliation; indigenous; twin-spirited woman; storytelling; queer; LGBTQ

To decolonize our sexualities and move towards a Sovereign Erotic, we must unmask the specters of conquistadors, priests, and politicians that have invaded our spirits and psyches, insist they vacate, and begin tending the open wounds colonization leaves in our flesh. . . . A Sovereign Erotic is a return to and/or continuance of the complex realities of gender and sexuality that are ever-present in both the human and more-than-human world, but erased and hidden by colonial cultures.

—Qwo-li Driskill, “Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic”

The Stó:lō people of British Columbia's lower Fraser Valley have ancient stories, or *Sxwōxwiyám*, to turn to when seeking traditional knowledge or teachings; however, the vast majority of these stories have been forgotten due to the colonial effects of assimilation. As an mtf transgendered Stó:lō citizen and PhD student in

gender, sexuality, and women's studies, I have made every effort to locate any precontact stories of the Stó:lō two-spirits, but to no avail so far. In this essay, I endeavor to re-member the past differently, marshal new traditions and language together in ways that create a new vision of the future. For the Coast Salish territory, I wish to illustrate how we historically contributed to our society prior to colonization. My grandmother has overcome the colonized homophobia imposed upon her enough to coin a title for me from our Halq'eméylem language. Given it has been her acceptance I wanted most of all, I would like to propose to all living Stó:lō grandmothers, the *Sisele*, that as the traditional makers of all laws on our matriarchal lands, they support this long-overdue initiative to reclaim lost identities erased through Western gen[der]ocidal action. The restoration of lost identities back to the Stó:lō nation would further reestablish the identities deleted by Western gen[der]ocidal actions. This essay is a movement toward personal healing and internal reconciliation for the Stó:lō as a whole. I feel that what my grandmother has done for me is a perfect example for this.

As Canada currently seeks to reconcile<sup>1</sup> with its indigenous people against whom it practiced genocide, in my case, as an mtf person who has lost access to traditional knowledge about people like me, I feel the need for this country to atone for its gendercide. While this reconciliation is important, it is more crucial that indigenous people reconcile among themselves first.

Therefore, this essay is intended not only to regenerate the lost teachings and stories of all Stó:lō two-spirits but also to offer a new beginning toward a new realization and acceptance for all indigenous people. As a member of the Stó:lō nation, I have inquired with elders and consulted all published works for a Halq'eméylem translation, and I have found that *two-spirit* is not yet a part of the Halq'eméylem language, nor can it be found in the English-to-Halq'eméylem dictionary (First Voices 2013a). Upon my request, my grandmother has been the first to conjure a Halq'eméylem term for my transgendered identity. In the recounting of my grandmother's work, I follow the "story-work" methodology of Stó:lō scholar Jo-ann Archibald, articulated in her *Indigenous Storywork* (2008), whereby personal experience is considered in relation to stories of the elders, to craft an analysis that takes indigenous knowledge seriously. This is my story and analysis woven together.

First, I share some of my history in order to clarify how I carry both Stó:lō and Tsimshian bloodlines. Approximately three years before I was born, my maternal grandmother moved from the Fraser Valley, her traditional Stó:lō territory situated in Southwest British Columbia, Canada.<sup>2</sup> During this time, she was still married to my late biological maternal grandfather, who was also Coast Salish from the Musqueam nation located in Vancouver's Point Grey area. Their marriage had dwindled at this point, and they agreed to separate and divorce. She was federally contracted at the time to travel around the province to promote and

help preserve all traditional fine arts that many nations were quickly losing. On one of these excursions, she landed in Terrace, a small north coast town of British Columbia. This is when she met and eventually married my late step-grandfather who was a resident of Terrace and a member of the Tsimshian nation. The Tsimshian territory spreads vastly across the Pacific Northwest Coast and geographically includes Terrace and Prince Rupert, British Columbia, as well as southern parts of Alaska. Her plan was to send for her children from her previous marriage once she was settled, and my mother, a teen at the time, was one of them. Before my grandmother had anticipated, my mother showed up on the Greyhound bus from Chilliwack, because she missed her mother too much to wait any longer. It was not long before she met my father, who was not only Tsimshian but also my step-grandfather's maternal nephew. Thus this new grandfather of mine was also my great-uncle by blood.

My parents eventually married and I was born on October 28, 1972, at the Terrace Mills Memorial Hospital. The time of my birth was 10:30 p.m. My mother almost bled to death after an extremely difficult three-hour labor, and she remained as a patient for another week to recover from a life-saving postdelivery surgery. As I was jaundiced and three weeks premature, I had to be incubated in hospital for another two weeks. This birth resulted in two quite profoundly different stories, one from my maternal (Stó:lō) grandmother and one from my father. He tells that the night I was born, the northern lights danced across the clear night sky more brightly than he had ever witnessed, and they apparently lasted throughout the night. To him, this was a spiritual sign. What is more significant is that he was not a spiritual man. He took the northern lights as an omen that his first-born son was going to be special—which I feel I have proved true. In those days, and in a town like Terrace, a son had great expectations placed on him to become a “man of men.” Terrace was, and still is, a very redneck little city; “Indians” must overcompensate for anything and everything they do. The racist attitudes toward the indigenous populations in this rural community have changed little over the years that I have visited, so I understand the double work any “Indian” has to do to fit in. I cannot imagine what my father envisioned for me as his potential “hero” of a son, but he responded to the northern lights with hope that I would do him proud and with a belief that something divine acknowledged his vision for my future. Though these hopes for me weren't necessarily achieved as he imagined they would be, I must share that he is now absolutely proud of who I have become.

My grandmother's story is different. She first told it to me when I was about thirteen years old. She shared that my mother had almost bled to death as a result of my delivery. She also explained that such a difficult birth foretells a difficult life for such a child (according to her elders). As both the Stó:lō and

Tsimshian are matrilineal, it goes without saying that I am to identify as Stó:lō even though my blood is a blend of the two, and to this day, she maintains political jurisdiction over me. Perhaps this is why she felt she had the right to share what she did, as hurtful as it might seem. Throughout the remainder of my teenage years, it seemed that what she had foretold in regard to how tumultuous my life would become had come true. I was nearing the end of puberty. I knew that I was not the *man* that I was expected to be. Every night I prayed that a supernatural force would transform me into a “normal boy.” Over the course of my lifetime and despite my family’s dismay over my apparent lack of masculinity, my grandmother did love me and played a critical role in bringing me up. I spent many weekends throughout my childhood under her loving care, and there are no sad stories I can tell, except for the time she told her version of my birth. I never again felt her angst toward me until I came out as transgender. In fact, when I was a child, she would allow me to play with dolls and dress up like a bride, and she would have tea parties with me when no one else would. It hurt her to see how my family would shame me to the soul for indicating in any way that I was not supposed to be a boy. Ultimately, I loved my grandmother from the day of my memories and still do today.

I was also close to my maternal auntie, almost ten years my senior and my grandmother’s youngest child. She was genderqueer like me, except the polar opposite. She, in her own crass words, “was supposed to have a pecker.” By the time I was courageous enough to come out, my aunt had yet to do so. My entire family knew that she was, as everyone thought, a “lesbian,” even though she later confessed to also being “trans” like me. Her story is even more painful than mine, and I will not delve into it here. When I was twenty-three, I came out to her and to the rest of my family. I started off identifying as gay, since it seemed less scary than to say I was actually a woman; however, I announced my true trans identity over the phone to my aunt. She was incarcerated at the time for dealing drugs and prostitution. She warned me: “Don’t tell anyone! I don’t want you to go through what I did!” She was the first in our extended family to break the ground for homophobia internally, as one might well imagine, and she faced far worse consequences for being gay than I would. Against her plea, I went ahead with revealing the truth about my identity. I was willing to be cast out from my family, but I hoped for at least some acceptance. Otherwise, I would have had to find a way to end my life for the mistake that I felt I was. Over the next little while, my aunt was released from prison, and we became even closer. My seemingly smoother journey of coming out compared to hers years earlier gave her the courage to do the same.

All this time, my grandmother had remained as diplomatically mute as possible, I think for the sake of my aunt and me. In 1997, about three years after I

told our family I was gay, I phoned her: to tell her that I was transgendered and ask if she would host a “coming out” feast for us. She said she could not fathom how I came to be this deviant, and how I thought I should be blessed with such a celebration. Perhaps in her mind, I should have grown out of my feminine phase. Needless to say, the conversation ended with her hanging up the phone and me in tears. In 1999, my aunt passed away from a heroin overdose. As keen as she was to continue negotiating her queer identity, she did not survive her own demons. For my grandmother, this was a loss from which she never fully recovered. I have since prayed these words to her countless times:

I invite you Grandmother, to shape-shift your own thought process and open your mind a bit more and see that I am still, essentially, the grandchild with whom you shared a reciprocal loving relationship. I am not asking you to change who you are in principle, but rather, that you attempt to enhance your ability to be more at peace with diversity given your late daughter’s fate. Perhaps I can take this opportunity to point out metaphorically that you too are akin to being two-spirited. In your stories of your cultural immersion combined with your experience as a converted Catholic, and how you now dwell (to some degree) in both faiths, you too share your own duality. Albeit, it isn’t about your gender or sexuality, but in your own words “To Thine Own Self Be True” you justify your biculturalism and I beg that you accept my two-spirit identity all the same. I am, after all, a descendant of your rich bloodline, so there must be something worthy I can offer. The creative juices within you that produce your baskets flow through me too. I am taking what you taught me and now weave my own stories. My baskets are not literal, but they are certainly coming out to be “masterpieces” that would be finished perfectly with your loving pride.

My grandmother is a world-renowned basket weaver who not only continues to pass on her mastery of Stó:lō styles of weaving but single-handedly revived the lost Tsimshian cedar bark and spruce root weaving and taught it back to them. I have since rooted in Chilliwack because my parents also divorced after fifteen years of marriage. My mother took my sister and me back to her hometown, and here I stay. In April 2012, my grandmother’s second husband tragically passed away. This event prompted her to return to Chilliwack, since it is where the bulk of her children and their families live. This was a difficult transition for her, given that she is at this point in her 80s and that she has lived in Terrace for nearly forty years. In the last two years since she returned, my relationship with her has been entirely reshaped. As well, I am now her primary caregiver. Our closeness has given me the opportunity to become her weaving apprentice. I have learned to gather and prepare strips of cedar and roots for weaving; sitting with her, I have

learned basic techniques for making baskets and shawls. And as she shares with me her most cherished indigenous knowledge, I also share with her my insights about being two-spirited and how I have learned about this concept in university. Though this is uncharted territory for her, her receptiveness has clearly developed. She places absolute priority on higher education for her children and grandchildren. She feels as though if she had had the opportunity to get a postsecondary education that she would have become a scientist. Instead, she only received a grade six education in an Indian residential school. Though she still wrestles with the idea that I am now a woman, she respects my academic achievements and my natural flare for weaving. Given that I have revealed the emotionally awkward aspects of our relationship here, I want to emphasize that it is the progress we have made, not the pitfalls, that I wish to spotlight. My grandmother's instinctual *transphobia* is not her doing. This is the "good work" of the Catholic Church and the rest of the colonial project; but as mentioned, our budding friendship also works to reprogram her worldview.

While my grandmother speaks English, learned at residential school, her first language is Halq'eméylem (First Voices 2013b). And recently I asked if she could meditate and conjure a title for me as a male-to-female in our traditional language. As previously mentioned, no such thing exists in recorded history. I had already shared with her what I have learned in university about two-spirited identities and so she took some time to think about it. Eventually, she came up with a Stó:lō two-spirited identity for me in our mother tongue—an exchange that remains surreal and miraculous. She coined the term *Sts'iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li*. When she handed the piece of paper to me with this title on it, she included the English translation, "Twin-Spirited Woman," and explained that I could interpret it as "two-spirited woman," or "twin-soul woman," or "same spirit as a woman." Ultimately, she left it open for me to decide how I would like to interpret it, given that our language is much more fluid than English. As a fluent speaker of Halq'eméylem, she has taught me that our words were able to wield various contexts and concepts depending on the discussion. Therefore, she gave me permission to decipher for myself how *Sts'iyóye smestíyexw* translates. This was truly a "HALLELUJAH!" moment. I then asked her if it would have made sense to introduce my late aunt as *Sts'iyóye Smestíyexw Swí:qe*, or "Twin-Spirited Man," and her response was something to the effect of "I guess if she would have wanted to."

As I state in the opening paragraphs of this essay, the Stó:lō have lost much of their Halq'eméylem language, histories, and teachings to colonization. As a result, any such focus on gender transition challenges many perspectives, particularly for gender-normative kin who must adjust their worldview once a family member discloses that she or he will change gender. I share this because I have observed how those who loved me were tremendously bewildered by my dramatic

transition and how, fifteen years later, this shift is not yet finished for everyone. For the most part, my family and community members have come a long way. Many did not know how to perceive me in a literal sense; some still do not. I remain troubling and/or invisible in their presence. Most have come to a frame of mind where *I am* who *I am*. Or, “That’s just the way she is,” with no agenda or bias, just matter-of-fact acceptance. In other words, they have achieved true contentment with my identity and in some cases have found even more love and respect for me as a result of my transformation, given how they have witnessed my life-and-death struggle with it.

This leads to the complexities of the term *two-spirit* and how perplexing it is for everyone’s psyche to negotiate. For instance, any given cisgender Stó:lō person who identifies as a contemporary two-spirit may not feel like a “twin-spirited woman” (i.e., my aforementioned late aunt might have adopted “twin-spirited man”). It only makes sense for them to choose how they wish to identify in Halq’eméylem as I have. In the introduction to the anthology *Queer Indigenous Studies* (Driskill et al. 2011), the authors suggest that the continued use of the prototype *two-spirit* is problematic: like *lesbian*, *gay*, *transgender*, and other terms, *two-spirit* “inevitably fails to represent the complexities of Indigenous constructions of sexual and gender diversity, both historically and as they are used in the present” (3). However, they also contend that two-spirit is a starting point toward the decolonization of queer indigenous identity in general. This admittedly implies that all cisgender queer people have both male and female spirits; it seems important to keep two-spirit open for such individuals to self-identify as to whether or not they understand themselves to have “two” spirits (3). Moreover, I tell my story in order to isolate my specific “queer” Stó:lō identity that makes space for other transfolk of my nation and subsequently for all queer indigenous people who remain unidentified and/or displaced from their home territory(s). In other words, I happily share the newly conceived *Sts’iyóye smestiyexw* status with any who feel it fits, though it is only an invitation. As each nonindigenous person who fits under the evolving LGBTQ spectrum has the right to self-determine where they fit and/or how they identify, it makes sense that the same goes for the Stó:lō “LGBTQ.” Should any of those who do not identify as transgender wish to quest for a customized Halq’eméylem title as I have, then all the power to them.

Qwo-Li Driskill and colleagues also tell me to “talk back” to Western scholarship and compile and publish my own story: to claim first-voice authority as a contribution to the academic mainstream. Their message encourages me to bring what remains still in the proverbial closet—the lost and stolen history(s) that, until recently, remained the work of white scholars to excavate (10). However, I am grateful to some of these scholars who have engaged in this work, especially for any recent work that attempts to capture accurate and articulate

accounts with clear integrity (Morgensen 2011; Rifkin 2012). However, I am fortunate to be able to bring a firsthand, lived experience to enrich this budding field. In this sense, I make every attempt to “link arms together” with other two-spirited theorists and philosophers to continue imagining what our scholarship should look like (Rifkin 2012: 18).

As previously mentioned, the term *two-spirit* is not in the English-to-Halq'eméylem dictionary. Thus it is necessary to work to reestablish the best or most appropriate “fit” to name this term and determine how it may serve as an addition to the Stó:lō gender binary.<sup>3</sup> Coast Salish nations traditionally hold ceremonial gatherings to “stand-up” ones who are receiving such names or honors,<sup>4</sup> and as our systems of passing knowledge and title down are matrilineal, only the eldest woman can legitimize this sort of work. I would thus require my grandmother to endorse this vision and support the endeavor to gift these roles back to the Stó:lō. I have truly become not only her granddaughter, but also her friend and teacher who helps to reshape her worldview, which includes my queer identity. She now understands that the “grandson” I once was remains very much alive through my female eyes. For a woman of her age and stature, this is no small feat.<sup>5</sup> The Catholic Church and the Canadian Indian Residential School system (which only closed in 1996<sup>6</sup>) have thoroughly accomplished their assimilationist goals in her. Coincidentally, it was the grandmother who raised the children prior to colonization. So, in effect, my grandmother and I have fallen back to ancestral ways of child rearing. I realize I am not a child, according to Western ideology, but I place myself in this stage given that I am “first-born” as *Sts'iyóye smestiyexw slhá:li*, and my legacy for the Stó:lō has begun.

As a philosopher and dreamer, I have come to know that fantasies of how the past could have been different are senseless, but I *do* know that there are miracles yet to unfold and that there is a possibility that my writing of this essay may very well become one. With Archibald's notion of “storywork,” which gives academic freedom to scholars to cite indigenous elders and the stories they share as legitimate sources, I am secure in the fact that my grandmother has full authority to contribute to my work as she has in this essay. Storywork also has “the power to educate and heal the heart, mind, body and spirit,” which is the absolute goal I have attempted to harness since the onset of my transition through the writing of this essay (Archibald 2008: back cover). Also, my work aims not only to “share back” what I have come to know but to support the change of the Coast Salish cultural landscape toward a setting that continues to honor and fulfill whatever remains necessary to please our Ancestors and to include *Sts'iyóye smestiyexw slhá:li*—while continuing to cultivate what “culture” is, how it will continue to evolve and adapt to our ever-changing world, and to “gift back” (143) fully our traditional matriarchal systems of governance and title. In order to



reestablish such two-spirit roles, it is crucial that matriarchal systems replace the current Indian Act elected-chief system of governance,<sup>7</sup> given the grandmothers' role of making any new "laws" and/or "declarations" that hypothetically include the reclamation of *Sts'iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li*. I am certain the Ancestors have been wondering where we, as two-spirits, have been on "This Side."<sup>8</sup>

Current indigenous scholars such as Archibald and Driskill have contributed the use of indigenous words, names, and concepts. Many of these warriors may not have many more than my forty years, and though not all of these warriors are Stó:lō, I instinctively follow my teachings as a *xwélmexw te Semá:th* (Sumas Nation member) and regard them as elders, meaning that I am respectful of their knowledge and courage to speak what is in their hearts. In one of my conversations with my grandmother, she mentioned how she still notices my former "male" self peeking through my female identity. In a way, it is as though I have developed two personalities: the beloved [but vulnerable] male child who finds refuge in the arms of the protective and much more competent big sister. My grandmother explained to me in that conversation she misses her grandson but that she has come to really respect the woman I have become. It does, however, make her happy that "he" comes out and will say something funny and/or endearing in a way that only he could. As "he," I was much more emotional and extreme, with melodramatic outbursts and passion. I was not able to function well in the world, but my effect on a crowd was undoubtedly appreciated, given my alleged sweet nature. As "she," I am much more focused, serious, and even ambitious. I am well aware that it is "she" who has taken "us" this far with regard to education: I am now in a PhD program. While he remains very much a child, she has become a fully functioning adult.

I am fully committed to meeting the need to "stand-up" all roles (restorer, empowerer, healer) for future and ongoing battles toward the seemingly infinite uphill climbs toward liberation, self-determination, entitlement, title, restoration, privilege, empowerment, and decolonization. As I currently live and work on my own traditional Coast Salish territory, then perhaps the Halq'eméylem terms *xéyt* (transform it) or *méa:ylexw* (revive; come back to life) would serve more appropriately and inclusively to the aforementioned ideologies. As such, the articulation process for this essay feels intrinsically off, as if I am attempting to fight fire with fire—though this may prove to be ironically effective in other instances. Speaking in my own Halq'eméylem language would make for as close to perfect a way as possible to honor any who have been invisibilized (i.e., Stó:lō women and *Sts'iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li*). It would then seem as though I would be more effectively fighting fire with water.

In the beginning of August 2012, a number of years after the phone call story with which I introduced this essay, I had the opportunity to work with my

grandmother on a cedar bark shawl project I had wanted to do for a long time. As I mentioned above, she is a world-renowned Stó:lō weaver known for her skills and genius as the person who also revitalized the lost Tsimshian basketry techniques. I asked her to teach me to weave my garment. In my mind, I envisioned myself dancing around a gathering floor cloaked by my proud *Syewá:l* (Ancestors), particularly those who have been waiting for *Sts'iyóye smestiyexw meá:ylexw* (twin-spirits to come back to life). This was not an easy task for either of us, as this became a dual mission for me: to learn to weave such a garment as well as to request a specific identity for me that comes from our Stó:lō language and her Stó:lō consciousness. If I can borrow Driskill's words, from "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques, Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies": "By pulling together splints from both disciplines [native studies and queer studies], we can doubleweave Two-spirit critiques that challenge and sharpen our scholarship and activism" (2010: 79). Driskill's words help me understand this weaving project and its dual purpose. As such, my grandmother and I embarked on serious work: this work not only taught me the skills to craft such a piece but also worked to *restory* the two-spirit beings who have long disappeared from her elders' memories and give them back to her. As my mind has transformed from child to inquisitive adult, I have come to know that to ask her (or any other elder) questions regarding culture and history must be done very carefully and that I must accept a nonresponse when they do not wish to answer at the time. To question and/or comment intermittently while an elder speaks often hinders what they are sharing and can abruptly stop the story or teaching. Usually, learning happens when they simply start talking about the *old days* and the *old ways* and lose themselves in these inner dialogues. I just listen, pay very close attention, and do the best I can to carefully take follow-up field notes. Serendipitously, I had just completed a research methods course the day before my weaving education began, and I had acquired new ethnographic tools; thus I went in with brand new "participant observation/observant participation" lenses. Also, I quickly realized that when I signed myself up for my grandmother's "course," attendance and punctuality were key—even though she provided no syllabus indicating these parameters. I had to tread carefully, every day and every moment of my learning. I waited for an opportunity to present itself to propose again what I had attempted to do since that painful phone call nearly fifteen years earlier. As much time, space, and worldviews as had passed for everyone, and for those who I was and had remained connected to since I came out as transgendered, I knew shifts in perspectives had to take place. My grandmother was not excused from this critical shift. I knew she would have moments where she would be softer with me given that I pleased her with my weaving progress, or at the very least, I hoped for that. So far, she has accommodated this crucial endeavor of mine, and I could not be

more relieved. At this point, I can only offer limited, albeit significant, findings from my quest to determine what *Sts'iyóye smestiyexw slhá:li* truly means. I do know that it is nothing short of a miracle. It is a miracle that she coined this title for me specifically, even though it went painfully against her colonized “homophobic” way of thinking after her eighty-plus years of living.

In the summer of 2011 I was approached by a prominent Tsleil-Waututh (Burrard First Nation) family and received a very esteemed invitation to “open the floor” for the memorial gathering of their late two-spirited son. This role involves attendance as an honored guest: to witness how a family honors their belated, and also to dance ceremonially to honor the one who has passed. In a Coast Salish Memorial gathering such as this, the teachings say that as four years have passed since the loss, the family will gather and rejoice one last time, and from there on in, they will cry for them no more. As I am a “Dancer,”<sup>9</sup> and a two-spirited one at that, I was asked especially because the young man who passed was also two-spirited. For this reason, I knew I wanted to make a special cedar bark cape to do justice to his beautiful memory. I knew him personally and remember well his sweet and feminine nature, and so I wanted to do justice to the beauty with which he carried himself. This occasion was a milestone not yet achieved before this moment, given there had never been a “two-spirited theme” for any event of this nature in recorded history, so I had never felt so compelled as when I was asked to undertake this important project. It was unprecedented that the family would bring his two-spiritedness to the forefront of this gathering and felt surreal for them to ask me to perform in such an important role. I needed to dance for more than just this memorial—for five hundred-plus years of two-spirited ancestors and their deleted identities. Ceremonial dances of this kind require some physical exertion. The rigorous style of dance must keep in time to a steady drumbeat. My cape is very heavy; I knew I would have to dance with added weight. Added to this was my age: I was already forty. I was concerned that I would not be able to complete my dance around the floor: as the date of the gathering drew near, I jogged daily to get my wind up. While I ran to shape up, I prayed that I would have the strength to make it around the floor and finish strong. When the time finally came, I unveiled my garment, fastened it around my neck, and could only hope that my spirit and body would not fail me. I do not recall anything beyond that point. I do not remember feeling the weight of my cape, but I do know I was flying. Before long it was over and I was back at my seat. Though the cape was heavy, it turned out that I had made myself wings. I made it around and, according to others present at the event, my feet did not touch the ground. It was a momentous occasion, and I still feel butterflies when I think about it today. I wove the cape you see me wearing in figure 1 in the summer of 2012 under my

grandmother's mentorship. It took approximately two months to prepare the bark and only a few days to weave.

Although the Canadian government made a very successful attempt to erase *Sts'iyóye smestiyexw*, some of us live on to tell new stories and to re-generate an entire gender and sexuality category that has been put away for so long. I invite other self-identified *Sts'iyóye smestiyexw* to pray together, laugh together, and weave our stories into a new *theirstory*. This invitation, of course, includes all that represent the spectrum of difference as the acronym *LGBTQ* intends, given that not all will identify as a "twin-spirit-to-a-woman" as I do. There are many *Sts'iyóye smestiyexw* who have passed and who never experienced the emancipation of a true coming-out as those of us who are left behind now have the privilege to do.

My grandmother and I have come a long way since 1997. I have had to heal and spiritually strengthen myself for independence because, at that point in time, she was not able to accept my transgendered identity within her political gaze. I can now say that this has changed. *X̱exa:ls* (four children of *X̱a:ls*, the Creator/Transformer) have had pity on me.<sup>10</sup> They helped her to shape-shift her mind to one that demonstrates that transformative thinking and learning stop at no age. Now this new chapter begins, and the Coast Salish people as a whole can continue flourishing in their feasts with this new story.



Figure 1. The author wearing a cedar cape she wove in the summer of 2012. Photograph by Charlotte Point

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**Saylesh Wesley (Stó:lō/Ts'msyán)** is completing her PhD in Simon Fraser University's Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies Department. Her research aims to re-story the deleted queer and two-spirit identities of the Stó:lō people as well more broadly for all Coast Salish.

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### Notes

1. See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2014. This website details how the federal government aims to make amends and rebuild relationships with the surviving students, whose attendance in residential schools was mandatory nationwide, as well as acknowledge the travesties to which it subjected all First Nations peoples in this legislated attempt.
2. See the working map showing the First Nations peoples of British Columbia and their territories (British Columbia Ministry of Education 2014).
3. As an example, see Wesley Thomas's (2010) categorization of Navajo gender systems.
4. Coast Salish people have adopted the idea of "standing-up" individuals to receive names, honors, or blessings at traditional longhouse gatherings.
5. She is an eighty-six-year-old hereditary "Big Woman" of the *Semá:th* (Sumas) Territory, located in the Fraser Valley along the Canadian/United States border. In other words, if we went back in time five hundred years, she would be the sovereign ruler and owner of the Fraser Valley, not unlike a queen.
6. See CBC News 2008 for more information on the history of residential schools in Canada.
7. See Aboriginal Affairs 2012 for more on elections under the Indian Act and Indian Band Election Regulations.
8. I refer to "This Side," or *third* dimension: those of us who are living in the flesh, as opposed to "The Other Side," or the Spirit world, where late Ancestors dwell, according to the Stó:lō.
9. For more information about spirit dancing and its importance, see Bergen and Kelly 2013.
10. For more information about the Stó:lō Transformer figure, sometimes referred to as "Creator," and his Divine Children (*Xa:ls* and *Xexa:ls*), see Hanson 2014.

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