

Two-Spirit Beings, Gatekeeping, and Cultural Exclusion: We Were Always Here, But we are Just not There Yet—Reflections from IIVSW Conference 2025

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Keywords: • Indigenous • Indigenous Identity • Two-Spirit • Gender • Colonization

Abstract

This paper reflects my participation in the International Indigenous Voices in Social Work conference held in August 2025 in Calgary, Alberta. My reflections are based on the broader conference discussions and participant questions that arose from my presentation on Anishinaabeg Two-Spirit identities, as well as those from other conference presenters. The discussion highlights that current cultural practices, such as gatekeeping, policing protocols, and skirt shaming, persist as significant challenges within the broader community. I offer a reflection and awareness that inclusion is not the problem; rather, it is exclusion under the guise of preserving and protecting cultural teachings. Social workers, educators, and community leaders are called to confront and address these embedded, hostile perspectives that perpetuate gendered exclusions.

Indigenization Statement

Jac Nobiss is an Indigenous scholar and social worker and is a registered citizen of the Red River Métis.

Reflections on Exclusive Practices

I was an active participant at the International Indigenous Voices in Social Work (IIVSW) conference held in August 2025 in Calgary, Alberta, where I delivered a talk on Two-Spirit people, titled "Anishinaabeg Niizh Manitoag: Ashaa A'maa: We Were Always Here." This presentation provided a historical overview of the relational aspects of Two-Spirit ways of being. I was not the only speaker addressing this topic; other sessions also focused on Two-Spirit conversations and teachings. Some presentations included Two-Spirit voices, even when not

their primary focus. I appreciated witnessing discussions that were once avoided, misunderstood, or unwelcome. Throughout the event, I listened closely to questions following each speaker, including my own. I was captivated by the audience's questions about 'how to' include Two-Spirit people in circles, address protocols, collaborate with Elders and ceremonial leaders, and support multiple-gendered expressions. In this reflection, one significant perspective I have been contemplating since being in those spaces is the idea of gatekeeping of cultural teachings and ceremonies, as well as the inclusion-exclusion debate surrounding Two-Spirit voices as a form of exclusion.

I would like to begin by clarifying the meaning of 'Two-Spirit' so that we share a common understanding of the space in which I am writing. "Two-Spirit reconstitutes an identity that, although misstated by anthropologists, had been based on the recognition of people with alternative genders and/or sexualities as contributing members of traditional [Indigenous] communities" (Wilson, 1996, p. 305). Several scholars highlight the cultural clash between Indigenous peoples and colonial influences, acknowledging the harmful divisiveness and the emergence of a "gendered colonialism" taking root (Norman et al., 2025, p. 30). As I listened to questions about 'how to include,' my thoughts shifted to 'how not to exclude' instead. In my view, Indigenous people are already part of their communities; it is the colonial enforcement of gendered exclusion and rejection from spaces they belong to that causes the problem. At odds are traditional inclusions and the colonial divide that imposed exclusionary practices. Gatekeepers enforce this exclusion. Gatekeeping often involves individuals policing protocols, as Robinson (2020) calls them, "protocops" (p. 174). In my view, the 'protocops' are gatekeepers acting as self-appointed guardians who control access for those with alternative genders and sexualities seeking to enter communal ceremonial spaces. Examples include attitudes towards gender-

specific roles and positions within ceremonies, as well as skirt-shaming and the wearing of specific attire when individuals with multiple gender expressions present differently.

The challenge of skirt shaming arose through participant questions, where Two-Spirit people are pressured to present in ceremonies only as the gender they were assigned at birth — meaning male-bodied individuals only in men's ceremonial spaces dressed in male-specific attire, and female-bodied individuals wearing skirts. This stance on gender conformity creates vulnerability, requiring individuals to seek permission to join gatherings, which can make them feel less than or incomplete if they present in a way not officially accepted by the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper or 'protocop' is the first to present traditional and sacred knowledge, telling female-bodied Two-Spirits that not wearing a skirt violates natural laws and cultural teachings, resulting in exclusion. Likewise, male-bodied individuals must not wear skirts either. I was struck by the fact that allies in the room were asking critical questions to support Two-Spirit inclusion and raise awareness about the rigid adherence to protocols that serve a patriarchal, homophobic, colonial structure stuck in the past. To me, their voices confirmed that this is an area where we need to have further conversations—perhaps it is not about inclusion but about the enforced exclusion.

My personal reflections on the Two-Spirit conversations from the conference speakers provided insights into what was missing from my own delivery and message to participants. Sharing my doctoral research on this subject is challenging, as I presented an enhanced model of relational understanding of Two-Spirit people, viewed through a historical lens marked by colonial atrocities. I realized I lacked direct, poignant assertions that could have strengthened the presentation and addressed questions. I was mainly struck by the awareness that the audience really needed time for a genuine dialogue on the history of Two-Spirit people at a fundamental level. Reflecting on the conversations and what resonated with me, I realized certain topics I had

considered earlier were still absent from my discussions. Two key areas for future dialogue and reflection are confronting gatekeeping — both intentional and unintentional — and understanding how the rigidity of traditional teachings influences diversity and accepted participation in cultural environments. Both concepts involve the delicate task of balancing inclusion with cultural teachings and the critical reflection that exclusion is the actual underlying issue.

Presenters, audiences, and allied voices reaffirmed in my mind that we still face a cultural divide, a lack of understanding of the deep colonial split. My presentation contributes to this necessary discussion, but, more importantly, the fact that we have a documented history of always being here is a vital part of the conversation that highlights the destructive pathways carved for Two-Spirit existence and refusal today. The implications for social workers and allies are that deep-seated hostilities remain embedded and unaddressed. Advocating and educating in an area that is culturally off-limits leaves conversations unresolved and creates a remaining chasm where ongoing tensions related to cultural safety persist, and exclusions will endure. Ultimately, what struck me most was the stark juxtaposition—one side being part of my own presentation titled, 'We Were Always Here,' and the opposing awareness that we are not quite there yet. We need to do better, and our calling is now.

References

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