I found my first clue

that trans people have not always been hated in 1974. I had played hooky from work and spent the day at the Museum of the American Indian in New York City.

The exhibits were devoted to Native history in the Americas. I was drawn to a display of beautiful thumb-sized clay figures. The ones to my right had breasts and cradled bowls. Those on the left were flat chested, holding hunting tools. But when I looked closer, I did a double-take. I saw that several of the figures holding bowls were flat chested; several of the hunters had breasts. You can bet there was no legend next to the display to explain. I left the museum curious.

What I’d seen gnawed at me until I called a member of the curator’s staff. He asked, “Why do you want to know?” I panicked. Was the information so classified that it could only be given out on a “need to know” basis? I lied and said I was a graduate student at Columbia University.

Sounding relieved, he immediately let me know that he understood exactly what I’d described. He said he came across references to these berdache in practically every day in his reading. I asked him what the word meant. He said he thought it meant transvestite or transsexual in modern English. He remarked that Native peoples didn’t seem to abhor them the way “we” did. In fact, he added, it appeared that such individuals were held in high esteem by Native nations.

Then his voice dropped low. “It’s really quite disturbing, isn’t it?” he whispered. I hung up the phone and raced to the library. I had found the first key to a vault containing information I’d looked for all my life.

*Berdache* was a derogatory term European colonizers used to label any Native person who did not fit their narrow notions of woman and man. The blanket use of the word disregarded distinctions of self-expression, social interaction, and complex economic and political realities. Native nations had many respectful words in their own languages to describe such people. Gay American Indians (GAI) has gathered a valuable list of these words. However, cultural genocide has destroyed and altered Native languages and traditions. So Native people ask that the term “Two-Spirit” be used to replace the offensive colonial word – a request I respect.

In a further attempt to avoid analyzing oppressed peoples’ cultures, I do not make a distinction between sex and gender expression in this chapter. Instead, I use sex/gender.
“Strange country this,” a white man wrote in 1850 about the Crow nation of North America, “where males assume the dress and perform the duties of females, while women turn men and mate with their own sex!”

I found hundreds and hundreds of similar references, such as those in Jonathan Ned Katz’s ground-breaking *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*, published in 1976, which provided me with additional valuable research. The quotes were anything but objective. Some were statements by murderously hostile colonial generals, others by the anthropologists and missionaries who followed in their bloody wake.

Some only referred to what today might be called male-to-female expression. “In nearly every part of the continent,” Westermarck concluded in 1917, “there seem to have been, since ancient times, men dressing themselves in the clothes and performing the functions of women....”

But I also found many references to female-to-male expression. Writing about his expedition into northeastern Brazil in 1576, Pedro de Magalhães noted females among the Tupinamba who lived as men and were accepted by other men, and who hunted and went to war. His team of explorers, recalling the Greek Amazons, renamed the river that flowed through that area the River of the Amazons.

Female-to-male expression was also found in numerous North American nations. As late as 1930, ethnographer Leslie Spier observed of a nation in the Pacific Northwest: “Transvestites or herdaches ... are found among the Klamath, as in all probability among all other North American tribes. These are men and women who for reasons that remain obscure take on the dress and habits of the opposite sex.”

I found it painful to read these quotes because they were steeped in hatred. “I saw a devilish thing,” Spanish colonialist Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca wrote in the sixteenth century. “Sinful, heinous, perverted, nefarious, abominable, unnatural, disgusting, lewd” – the language used by the colonizers to describe the acceptance of sex/gender diversity, and of same-sex love, most accurately described the viewer, not the viewed. And these sensational reports about Two-Spirit people were used to further “justify” genocide, the theft of Native land and resources, and destruction of their cultures and religions.

But occasionally these colonial quotes opened, even if inadvertently, a moment-
tary window into the humanity of the peoples being observed. Describing his first trip down the Mississippi in the seventeenth century, Jesuit Jacques Marquette chronicled the attitudes of the Illinois and Nadouessi to the Two-Spirits. "They are summoned to the Councils, and nothing can be decided without their advice. Finally, through their profession of leading an Extraordinary life, they pass for Manitous, — That is to say, for Spirits, — or persons of Consequence."

Although French missionary Joseph François Laflèche condemned Two-Spirit people he found among the nations of the western Great Lakes, Louisiana, and Florida, he revealed that those Native peoples did not share his prejudice. "They believe they are honored ..." he wrote in 1724, "they participate in all religious ceremonies, and this profession of an extraordinary life causes them to be regarded as people of a higher order...."

But the colonizers' reactions toward Two-Spirit people can be summed up by the words of Antonio de la Calancha, a Spanish official in Lima. Calancha wrote that during Vasco Nuñez de Balboa's expedition across Panama, Balboa "saw men dressed like women; Balboa learnt that they were sodomites and threw the king and forty others to be eaten by his dogs, a fine action of an honorable and Catholic Spaniard."

This was not an isolated attack. When the Spaniards invaded the Antilles and Louisiana, "they found men dressed as women who were respected by their societies. Thinking they were hermaphroditic, or homosexuals, they slew them."9

Finding these quotes shook me. I recalled the "cowboys and Indians" movies of my childhood. These racist films didn't succeed in teaching me hate; I had grown up around strong, proud Native adults and children. But I now realized more consciously how every portrayal of Native nations in those movies was aimed at diverting attention from the real-life colonial genocide. The same bloody history was ignored or glossed over in my schools. I only learned the truth about Native cultures later, by re-educating myself — a process I'm continuing.

Discovering the Two-Spirit tradition had deep meaning for me. It wasn't that I thought the range of human expression among Native nations was identical to trans identities today. I knew that a Crow bâlé, Cocopa warhemeh, Chumash jêya, and Maricopa kwivixame would describe themselves in very different ways from an African-American drag queen fighting cops at Stonewall or a white female-to-male transsexual in the 1990s explaining his life to a college class on gender theory.

What stunned me was that such ancient and diverse cultures allowed people to choose more sex/gender paths, and this diversity of human expression was honored as sacred. I had to chart the complex geography of sex and gender with a compass needle that only pointed to north or south.
Barcheeampe, the Woman Chief, was an acclaimed hunter and warrior, praised in songs composed by the Crow people. When all the chiefs and warriors assembled for council, Barcheeampe sat as a chief, ranking third in a band of 160 lodges.

You’d think I’d have been elated to find this new information. But I raged that these facts had been kept from me, from all of us. And so many of the Native peoples who were arrogantly scrutinized by military men, missionaries, and anthropologists had been massacred. Had their oral history too been forever lost?

In my anger, I vowed to act more forcefully in defense of the treaty, sovereignty, and self-determination rights of Native nations. As I became more active in these struggles, I began to hear more clearly the voices of Native peoples who not only reclaimed their traditional heritage, but carried the resistance into the present: the takeover of Alcatraz, the occupation of Wounded Knee, the Longest Walk, the Day of Mourning at Plymouth Rock, and the fight to free political prisoners like Leonard Peltier and Norma Jean Croy.

Two historic developments helped me to hear the voices of modern Native warriors who lived the sacred Two-Spirit tradition: the founding of Gay American Indians in 1975 by Randy Burns (Northern Paiute) and Barbara Cameron (Lakota Sioux), and the publication in 1988 of *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*. Randy Burns noted that the History Project of Gay American Indians “has documented these alternative gender roles in over 135 North American tribes.”

Will Roscoe, who edited *Living the Spirit*, explained that this more complex sex/gender system was found “in every region of the continent, among every type of native culture, from the small bands of hunters in Alaska to the populous, hierarchical city-states in Florida.”
Another important milestone was the 1986 publication of *The Spirit and the Flesh* by Walter Williams, because this book included the voices of modern Two-Spirit people.

I knew that Native struggles against colonization and genocide—both physical and cultural—were tenacious. But I learned that the colonizers’ efforts to outlaw, punish, and slaughter the Two-Spirits within those nations had also met with fierce resistance. Conquistador Nuño de Guzmán recorded in 1530 that the last person taken prisoner after a battle, who had “fought most courageously, was a man in the habit of a woman…”

Just trying to maintain a traditional way of life was itself an act of resistance. Williams wrote, “Since in many tribes bermaches were often shamans, the government’s attack on traditional healing practices disrupted their lives. Among the Klamaths, the government agent’s prohibition of curing ceremonial in the 1870s and 1880s required shamans to operate underground. The bermache shaman White Cindy continued to do traditional healing, curing people for decades despite the danger of arrest.”

Native nations resisted the racist demands of U.S. government agents who tried to change Two-Spirit people. This defiance was especially courageous in light of the power these agents exercised over the economic survival of the Native people they tried to control. One such struggle focused on a Crow *badé* (*bato*) named Osh-Tisch (Finds Them and Kills Them). An oral history by Joe Medicine Crow in 1982 recalled the events: “One agent in the late 1890s... tried to interfere with Osh-Tisch, who was the most respected badé. The agent incarcerated the badés, cut off their hair, made them wear men’s clothing. He forced them to do manual labor, planting these trees that you see here on the BIA grounds. The people were so upset with this that Chief Pretty Eagle came into Crow Agency, and told [the agent] to leave the reservation. It was a tragedy, trying to change them.”

How the *badés* were viewed within their own nation comes across in this report by S. C. Simms in 1903 in *American Anthropologist*: “During a visit last year to the Crow reservation, in the interest of the Field Columbian Museum, I was informed

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*We’Wha, a *ibamana*, wearing the ceremonial regalia of Zuni women. We’Wha was an accomplished weaver and potter and spent six months in Washington, D.C. in 1886, meeting President Grover Cleveland and others who never realized this six-foot Zuni was a *ibamana*. In 1896, We’Wha died and was buried in a woman’s dress with a pair of men’s pants underneath.*
that there were three hermaphrodites in the Crow tribe, one living at Pryor, one in the Big Horn district, and one in Black Lodge district. These persons are usually spoken of as ‘she,’ and as having the largest and best appointed tipis; they are also generally considered to be experts with the needle and the most efficient cooks in the tribe, and they are highly regarded for their many charitable acts....

“A few years ago an Indian agent endeavored to compel these people, under threat of punishment, to wear men’s clothing, but his efforts were unsuccessful.”

White-run boarding schools played a similar role in trying to force generations of kidnapped children to abandon their traditional ways. But many Two-Spirit children escaped rather than conform.

Lakota medicine man Lame Deer told an interviewer about the sacred place of the winkte (“male-to-female”) in his nation’s traditions, and how the winkte bestowed a special name on an individual. “The secret name a winkte gave to a child was believed to be especially powerful and effective,” Lame Deer said. “Sitting Bull, Black Elk, even Crazy Horse had secret winkte names.” Lakota chief Crazy Horse reportedly had one or two winkte wives.

Williams quotes a Lakota medicine man who spoke of the pressures on the winktes in the 1920s and 1930s. “The missionaries and the government agents said winktes were no good, and tried to get them to change their ways. Some did, and put on men’s clothing. But others, rather than change, went out and hanged themselves.”

Up until 1989, the Two-Spirit voices I heard lived only in the pages of books. But that year I was honored to be invited to Minneapolis for the first gathering of Two-Spirit Native people, their loved ones, and supporters. The bonds of friendship I enjoyed at the first event were strengthened at the third gathering in Manitoba in 1991. There, I found myself sitting around a campfire at the base of tall pines under the rolling colors of the northern lights, drinking strong tea out of a metal cup. I laughed easily, relaxed with old friends and new ones. Some were feminine men or masculine women: all shared same-sex desire. Yet not all of these people were transgenders, and not all of the Two-Spirits I’d read about desired people of the same sex. Then what defined this group?

I turned to Native people for these answers. Even today, in 1995, I read research papers and articles about sex/gender systems in Native nations in which every source cited is a white social scientist. When I began to write this book, I asked Two-Spirit people to talk about their own cultures, in their own words.

Chrystos, a brilliant Two-Spirit poet and writer from the Menominee nation, offered me this understanding: “Life among First Nation people, before first contact, is hard to reconstruct. There’s been so much abuse of
traditional life by the Christian Church. But certain things have filtered down to us. Most of the nations that I know of traditionally had more than two genders. It varies from tribe to tribe. The concept of Two-Spiritedness is a rather rough translation into English of that idea. I think the English language is rigid, and the thought patterns that form it are rigid, so that gender also becomes rigid.

"The whole concept of gender is more fluid in traditional life. Those paths are not necessarily aligned with your sex, although they may be. People might choose their gender according to their dreams, for example. So even the idea that your gender is something you dream about is not even a concept in Western culture – which posits you are born a certain biological sex and therefore there’s a role you must step into and follow pretty rigidly for the rest of your life. That’s how we got the concept of queer. Anyone who doesn’t follow their assigned gender role is queer; all kinds of people are lumped together under that word."  

Does being Two-Spirit determine your sexuality? I asked Chrystos. "In traditional life a Two-Spirit person can be heterosexual or what we would call homosexual," she replied. "You could also be a person who doesn’t have sex with anyone and lives with the spirits. The gender fluidity is part of a larger concept, which I guess the most accurate English word for is ‘tolerance.’ It’s a whole different way of conceiving how to be in the world with other people. We think about the world in terms of relationship, so each person is always in a matrix, rather than being seen only as an individual – which is a very different way of looking at things."

Chrystos told me about her Navajo friend Wesley Thomas, who describes himself as nadleeh-like. A male nadleeh, she said, "would manifest in the world as a female and take a husband and participate in tribal life as a female person." I e-mailed Wesley, who lives in Seattle, for more information about the nadleeh tradition. He wrote back that "nadleeh was a category for women who were/masculine and also feminine males." The concept of nadleeh, he explained, is incorporated into Navajo origin or creation stories. "So, it is a cultural construction," he wrote, "and was part of the normal Navajo culture, from the Navajo point of view, through the nineteenth century. It began changing during the first half of the twentieth century due to the introduction of western education and most of all, christianity. Nadleeh since then has moved underground."

Wesley, who spent the first thirty years of life on the Eastern Navajo reservation, wrote that in his initial fieldwork research he identified four categories of sex: female/woman, male/man, female/man, and male/woman. "Where I began to identify gender on a continuum – meaning placing female at one end and male on the other end – I placed forty-nine different gender identifications in between. This was derived at one sitting, not from carrying out a full and comprehensive fieldwork research. This number derived from my own understanding of gender within the Navajo cosmology."

I have faced so much persecution because of my gender expression that I
also wanted to hear about the experiences of someone who grew up as a “masculine girl” in traditional Native life. I thought of Spotted Eagle, who I had met in Manitoba, and who lives in Georgia. Walking down an urban street, Spotted Eagle’s gender expression, as well as her nationality, could make her the target of harassment and violence. But she is White Mountain Apache, and I knew she had grown up with her own traditions on the reservation. How was she treated?

“I was born in 1945,” Spotted Eagle told me. “I grew up totally accepted. I knew from birth, and everyone around me knew I was Two-Spirited. I was honored. I was a special creation; I was given certain gifts because of that, teachings to share with my people and healings. But that changed – not in my generation, but in generations to follow.”

There were no distinct pronouns in her ancient language, she said. “There were three variations: the way the women spoke, the way the men spoke, and the ceremonial language.” Which way of speaking did she use? “I spoke all three. So did the two older Two-Spirit people on my reservation.”

Spotted Eagle explained that the White Mountain Apache nation was small and isolated, and so had been less affected early on by colonial culture. As a result, the U.S. government didn’t set up the mission school system on the White Mountain reservation until the late 1930s or early 1940s. Spotted Eagle said she experienced her first taste of bigotry as a Two-Spirit in those schools. “I was taken out of the mission school with the help of my people and sent away to live with an aunt off reservation, so I didn’t get totally abused by Christianity. I have some very horrible memories of the short time I was there.”

“But as far as my own people,” Spotted Eagle continued, “we were a matriarchy, and have been through our history. Women are in a different position in a matriarchy than they are out here. It’s not that we have more power or more privilege than anyone else, it’s just a more balanced way to be. Being a woman was a plus and being Two-Spirit was even better. I didn’t really have any negative thoughts about being Two-Spirit until I left the reservation.”

Spotted Eagle told me that as a young adult she married. “My husband was also Two-Spirit and we had children. We lived in a rather peculiar way according to standards out here. Of course it was very normal for us. We faced a lot of violence, but we learned to cope with it and go on.”

Spotted Eagle’s husband died many years ago. Today her partner is a woman. Her three children are grown. “Two of them are Two-Spirit,” she said proudly. “We’re all very close.”

I asked her where she found her strength and pride. “It was given to me by the people around me to maintain,” she explained. “If your whole life is connected spiritually, then you learn that self-pride – the image of self – is connected with everything else. That becomes part of who you are and you carry that wherever you are.”

What was responsible for the imposition of the present-day rigid sex/gender system in North America? It is not correct to simply blame patriarchy, Chrystos stressed to me. “The real word is ‘colonization’ and what it has done to the world. Patriarchy is a tool of colonization and exploitation of people and their lands for wealthy white people.”

“The Two-Spirit tradition was suppressed,” she explained. “Like all Native spirituality, it underwent a tremendous time of suppression. So there’s gaps. But we’ve
continued on with our spiritual traditions. We are still attached to this land and the place of our ancestors and managed to protect our spiritual traditions and our languages. We have always been at war. Despite everything— incredible onslaughts that even continue now—we have continued and we have survived.°

Like a gift presented at a traditional give away, Native people have patiently given me a greater understanding of the diverse cultures that existed in the Western hemisphere before colonization.

But why did many Native cultures honor sex/gender diversity, while European colonialists were hell-bent on wiping it out? And how did the Europeans immediately recognize Two-Spiritedness? Were there similar expressions in European societies?

Thinking back to my sketchy high-school education, I could only remember one person in Europe whose gender expression had made history.

A 1594 Theodor de Bry engraving of Balboa using dogs to murder Two-Spirit Native people.