



Two-Spirit

Conversations with Young
Two-Spirit, Trans and Queer
Indigenous People in Toronto

a zine by Marie Laing

Shé:kon! Welcome to this zine.

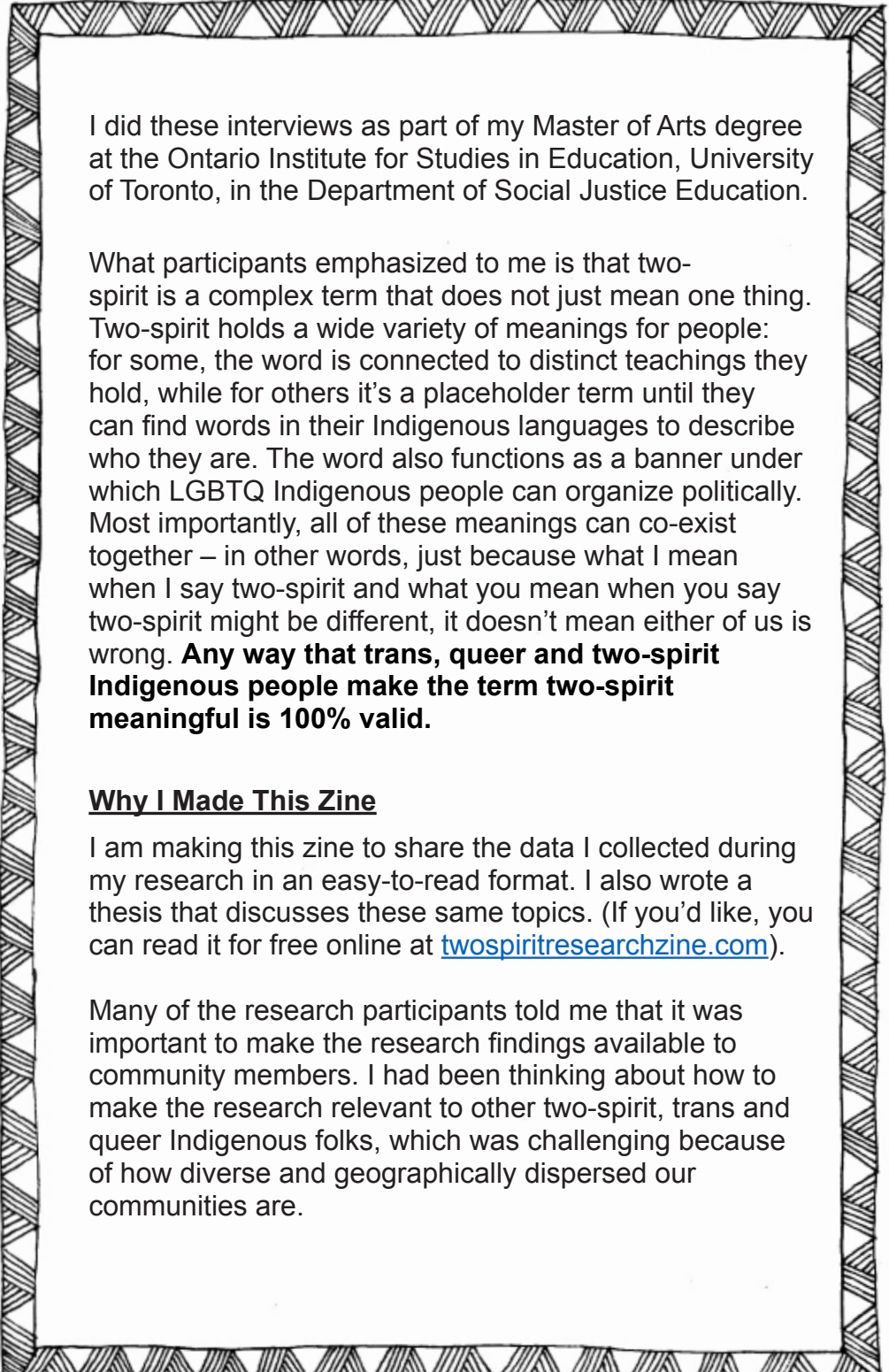
About Me

My name is Marie Laing. I'm a queer Kanyen'kehá:ka person. I belong to the turtle clan. My family is from Six Nations of the Grand River, but I grew up in Kingston, Ontario and now I live in Toronto. Other parts of my family are Irish, Scottish and South African settlers. I use the pronouns she and her.

What This Zine is About

This zine is about research I did on how young trans, queer and two-spirit* Indigenous people use the word two-spirit. I interviewed fellow young queer, trans, and two-spirit Indigenous people here in Toronto about two-spirit as a term – how we use it, how we see our communities using it, and the relationships between two-spirit and other words that are related to our genders, sexualities, and who we are as Indigenous peoples.

* Throughout this zine, I use the phrase “two-spirit, trans and queer” to refer to all gender-complex, LGBTQI+ and two-spirit Indigenous people, because not everyone identifies with the term two-spirit. Obviously, not everyone is okay with being lumped under the umbrella terms of “trans” and “queer” either, but there just isn't enough room to say “gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, intersex, transgender, transsexual, gender non-conforming, non-binary, bigender, agender, and genderfluid” on every page.



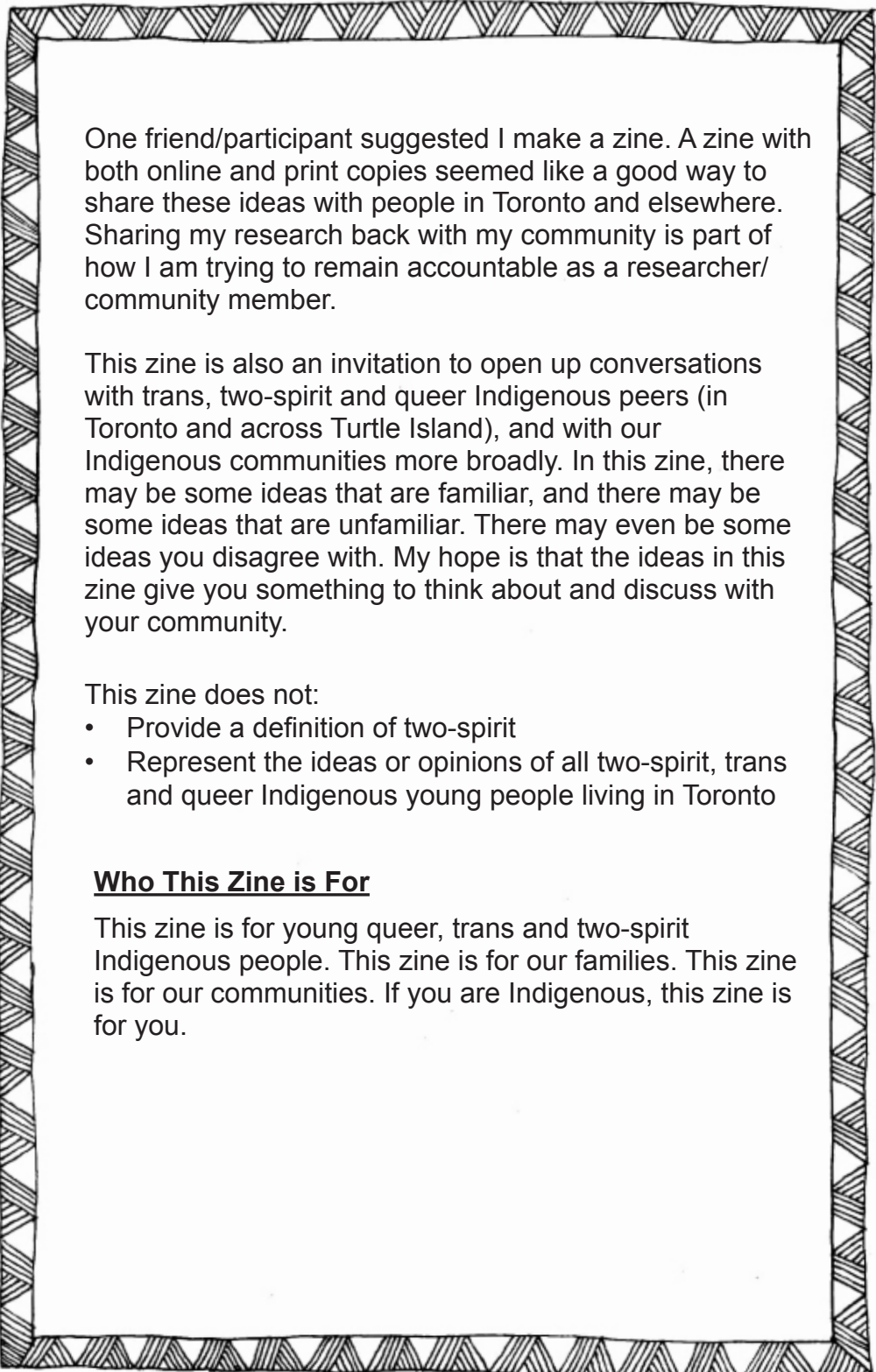
I did these interviews as part of my Master of Arts degree at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, in the Department of Social Justice Education.

What participants emphasized to me is that two-spirit is a complex term that does not just mean one thing. Two-spirit holds a wide variety of meanings for people: for some, the word is connected to distinct teachings they hold, while for others it's a placeholder term until they can find words in their Indigenous languages to describe who they are. The word also functions as a banner under which LGBTQ Indigenous people can organize politically. Most importantly, all of these meanings can co-exist together – in other words, just because what I mean when I say two-spirit and what you mean when you say two-spirit might be different, it doesn't mean either of us is wrong. **Any way that trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people make the term two-spirit meaningful is 100% valid.**

Why I Made This Zine

I am making this zine to share the data I collected during my research in an easy-to-read format. I also wrote a thesis that discusses these same topics. (If you'd like, you can read it for free online at twospiritresearchzine.com).

Many of the research participants told me that it was important to make the research findings available to community members. I had been thinking about how to make the research relevant to other two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous folks, which was challenging because of how diverse and geographically dispersed our communities are.



One friend/participant suggested I make a zine. A zine with both online and print copies seemed like a good way to share these ideas with people in Toronto and elsewhere. Sharing my research back with my community is part of how I am trying to remain accountable as a researcher/community member.

This zine is also an invitation to open up conversations with trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous peers (in Toronto and across Turtle Island), and with our Indigenous communities more broadly. In this zine, there may be some ideas that are familiar, and there may be some ideas that are unfamiliar. There may even be some ideas you disagree with. My hope is that the ideas in this zine give you something to think about and discuss with your community.

This zine does not:

- Provide a definition of two-spirit
- Represent the ideas or opinions of all two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous young people living in Toronto

Who This Zine is For

This zine is for young queer, trans and two-spirit Indigenous people. This zine is for our families. This zine is for our communities. If you are Indigenous, this zine is for you.

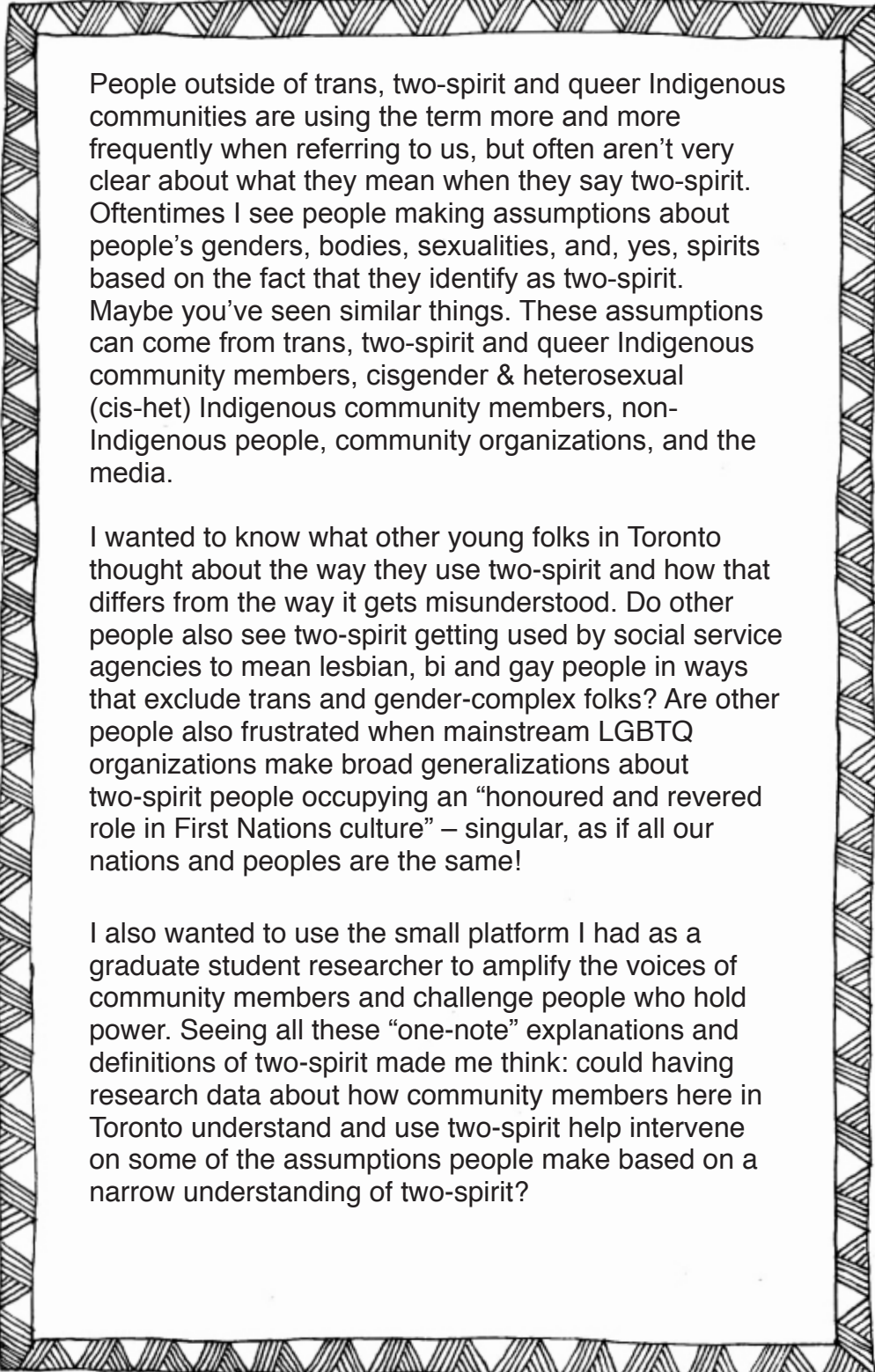
Part 1: Research Framework

Why This Research?

The term two-spirit is was coined by Myra Laramee, a Cree community member, grandmother and scholar, at the Third International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians held near Beausejour, Manitoba in the summer of 1990.¹ Prior to colonization, many (but not all) Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island had systems of gender that exceeded the binary of man/woman – but through the violent imposition of the European gender binary (via language theft, Christianization, residential schools, and child apprehension practices like the 60's Scoop) our Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality have been suppressed, and homophobia and transphobia have blossomed in our communities. Two-spirit is a term that is used to recognize the complex and diverse understandings of gender and sexuality among Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island, as well as the contemporary need to have a word to describe our shared experiences of being Indigenous and sexuality/gender complex.

Living in Toronto, I often see two-spirit being used as an umbrella term for all LGBTQI2S+ Indigenous folks, or to mean a person who literally has two spirits. Of course, these are both completely valid ways of understanding the term. From what I have seen, problems come when these understandings are portrayed as the **only** meaning the term has.

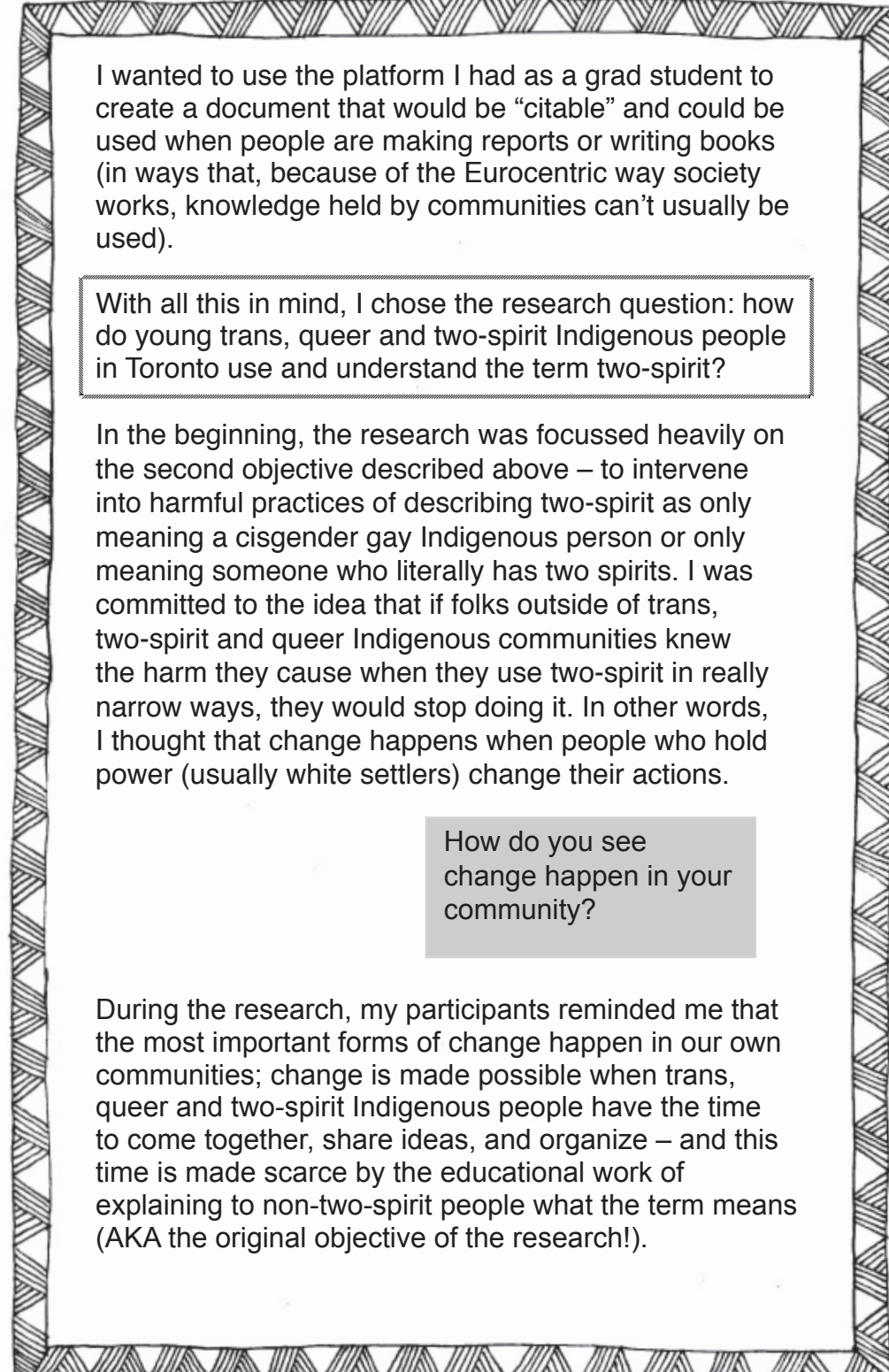
¹ More information can be found on Two-Spirited People of Manitoba's website: <http://twospiritmanitoba.ca/we-belong>



People outside of trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities are using the term more and more frequently when referring to us, but often aren't very clear about what they mean when they say two-spirit. Oftentimes I see people making assumptions about people's genders, bodies, sexualities, and, yes, spirits based on the fact that they identify as two-spirit. Maybe you've seen similar things. These assumptions can come from trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous community members, cisgender & heterosexual (cis-het) Indigenous community members, non-Indigenous people, community organizations, and the media.

I wanted to know what other young folks in Toronto thought about the way they use two-spirit and how that differs from the way it gets misunderstood. Do other people also see two-spirit getting used by social service agencies to mean lesbian, bi and gay people in ways that exclude trans and gender-complex folks? Are other people also frustrated when mainstream LGBTQ organizations make broad generalizations about two-spirit people occupying an "honoured and revered role in First Nations culture" – singular, as if all our nations and peoples are the same!

I also wanted to use the small platform I had as a graduate student researcher to amplify the voices of community members and challenge people who hold power. Seeing all these "one-note" explanations and definitions of two-spirit made me think: could having research data about how community members here in Toronto understand and use two-spirit help intervene on some of the assumptions people make based on a narrow understanding of two-spirit?



I wanted to use the platform I had as a grad student to create a document that would be “citable” and could be used when people are making reports or writing books (in ways that, because of the Eurocentric way society works, knowledge held by communities can’t usually be used).

With all this in mind, I chose the research question: how do young trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people in Toronto use and understand the term two-spirit?

In the beginning, the research was focussed heavily on the second objective described above – to intervene into harmful practices of describing two-spirit as only meaning a cisgender gay Indigenous person or only meaning someone who literally has two spirits. I was committed to the idea that if folks outside of trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous communities knew the harm they cause when they use two-spirit in really narrow ways, they would stop doing it. In other words, I thought that change happens when people who hold power (usually white settlers) change their actions.

How do you see change happen in your community?

During the research, my participants reminded me that the most important forms of change happen in our own communities; change is made possible when trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous people have the time to come together, share ideas, and organize – and this time is made scarce by the educational work of explaining to non-two-spirit people what the term means (AKA the original objective of the research!).

Although the research started out with a focus on the outward-facing conversations, over the course of my conversations with participants, it became clear that the inward-facing conversations – the conversations between you and me and your friends and your grandma – were more important. That's why I'm making this zine, so we can talk together.

Research Methodology & Methods

- *Methodology*: a set of ideas or principles about how knowledge is created that guides how you do research.

My methodology was based on the methodologies developed by amazing Indigenous scholars (like Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, Shawn Wilson, Margaret Kovach, and Alex Wilson) which position lived experience that we develop in our relationships to our communities and the land as valid knowledge. The most important thing to me in doing this research was to be responsible to my community of two-spirit, trans and queer peers.

- *Research Method*: a technique for gathering information in a structured way. Examples include: interviews, focus groups, surveys.

My research methods were one-on-one interviews and concept mapping. A concept map (sometimes called a word web or idea web) is a visual representation of ideas using words and/or images. My research supervisor (Dr. Eve Tuck) suggested that I use interviews and also a non-verbal way of expressing ideas, for folks who are visual communicators.

For more information on the methods & methodology of the research, get in touch with me or check out my thesis online!

Who Participated?

10 participants, all of whom were:

- 18-35 years old
- Indigenous
- Living in Toronto
- Queer and/or trans and/or two-spirit

Consent

The consent process (I say process because it's an ongoing negotiation, not just a one-time yes – in research and in every other scenario!) was important for me. Because research has been used to harm our communities and undermine our sovereignty for a long time, I wanted to make sure participants had all the information they wanted/needed, as well as opportunities to opt-in or opt-out, at each stage of the research. The consent process included:

- Reading and signing informed consent forms
- Verbal consent before turning on the tape recorder during interviews
- Participants chose their own pseudonyms (names, numbers, and even an emoji) & I asked them what pronouns they use
- Participants were free to stop the interview at any time
- I gave participants copies of their interview transcripts so they could edit them or add to them before I analyzed them
- I also gave participants a copy of the final thesis to review, to make sure I didn't misinterpret anything they had shared with me

The quotes and concept maps included in this zine are just a small selection of the brilliance participants shared with me.

Part 2: Results²

Almost every participant shared the experience of seeing cisgender, heterosexual Indigenous communities (and all non-Indigenous communities) understand two-spirit in a very narrow, sometimes literal way. (I talk about the reasons for this a bit later.) The depth and breadth of different two-spirit experiences was something that many participants felt was urgent to bring to the fore, because singular understandings of what two-spirit means can reinforce cissexism and do harm to community members.

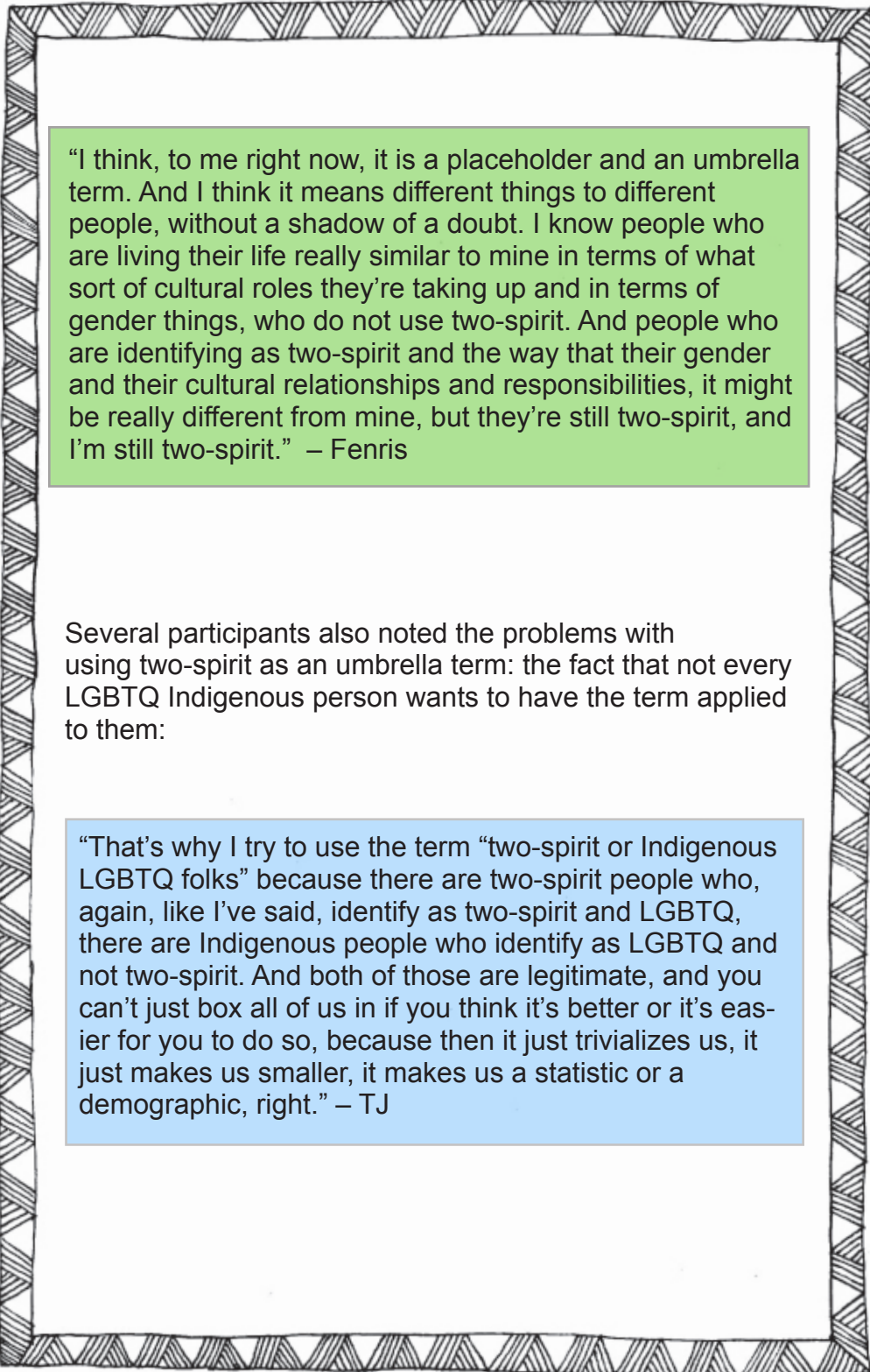
Do you see this happening in your community?

An Umbrella?

Two-spirit is a term that holds space for a range of identities. It can hold meaning about people's genders, sexual and attraction preferences, the community roles and traditional teachings they hold, and their spiritual lives:

“The term definitely has many understandings. For a lot of people, there's a lot of different definitions. For myself, it describes the intersection of being Indigenous and being transgender and queer. And although not everyone who identifies as two-spirit has a connection to the culture or tradition — which is fine — but for myself, I grew up in a traditional family, going to longhouse on the reserve. So, for me, it does speak to more of a spiritual aspect or nature of my identity, and speaks to the traditional or cultural experience as being an Indigenous, transgender, queer woman. And there's a large part of reclamation and education around it. I, for me, attach a sense of responsibility to the role.” – 21

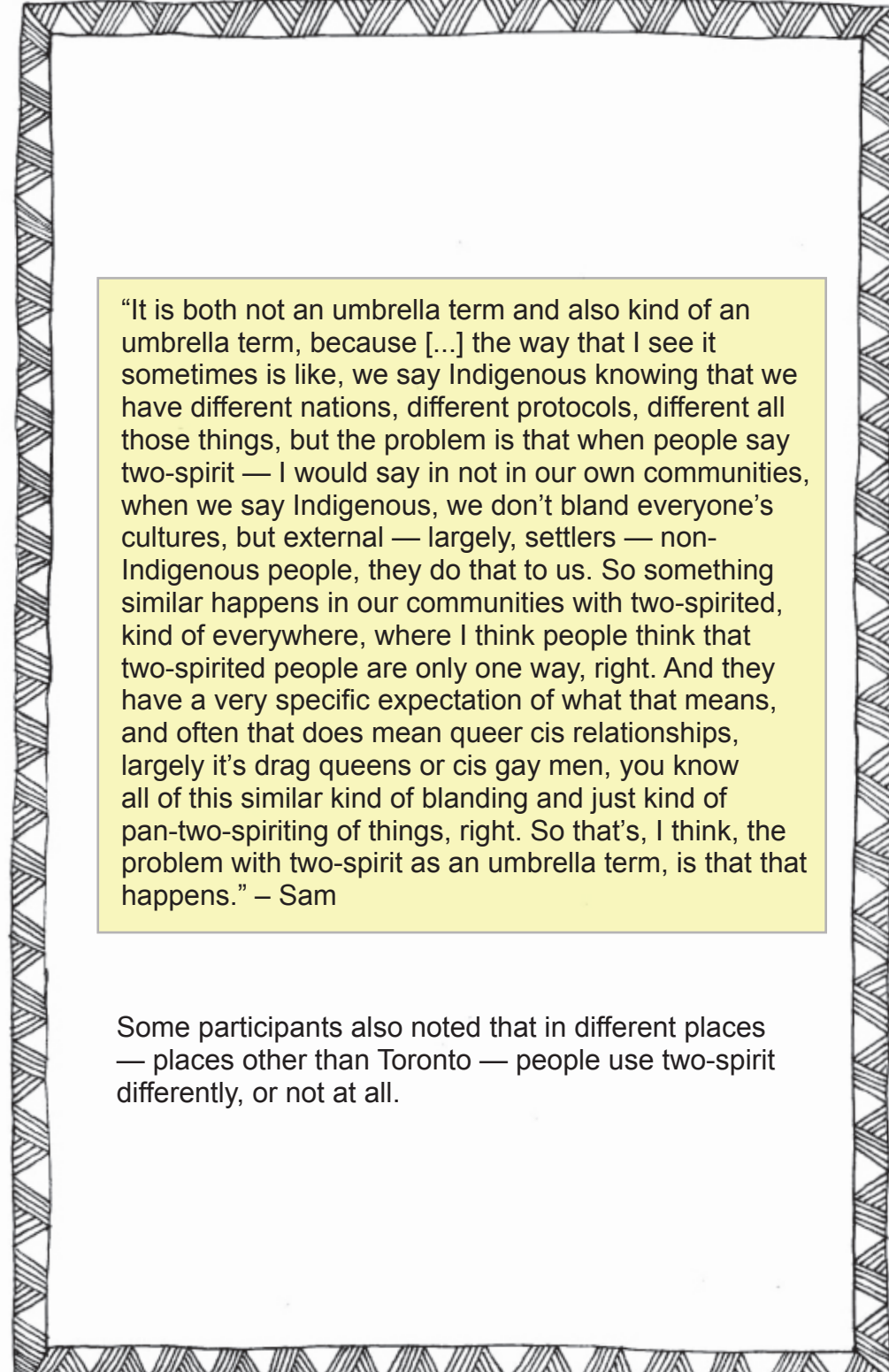
²The full thesis also includes an interview I did with Dr. Alex Wilson, from Opaskwayak Cree Nation. She's a professor at the University of Saskatchewan and was one of the first two-spirit scholars to do research with our own communities. Due to space constraints, the interview is not included here.



“I think, to me right now, it is a placeholder and an umbrella term. And I think it means different things to different people, without a shadow of a doubt. I know people who are living their life really similar to mine in terms of what sort of cultural roles they’re taking up and in terms of gender things, who do not use two-spirit. And people who are identifying as two-spirit and the way that their gender and their cultural relationships and responsibilities, it might be really different from mine, but they’re still two-spirit, and I’m still two-spirit.” – Fenris

Several participants also noted the problems with using two-spirit as an umbrella term: the fact that not every LGBTQ Indigenous person wants to have the term applied to them:

“That’s why I try to use the term “two-spirit or Indigenous LGBTQ folks” because there are two-spirit people who, again, like I’ve said, identify as two-spirit and LGBTQ, there are Indigenous people who identify as LGBTQ and not two-spirit. And both of those are legitimate, and you can’t just box all of us in if you think it’s better or it’s easier for you to do so, because then it just trivializes us, it just makes us smaller, it makes us a statistic or a demographic, right.” – TJ



“It is both not an umbrella term and also kind of an umbrella term, because [...] the way that I see it sometimes is like, we say Indigenous knowing that we have different nations, different protocols, different all those things, but the problem is that when people say two-spirit — I would say in not in our own communities, when we say Indigenous, we don’t blend everyone’s cultures, but external — largely, settlers — non-Indigenous people, they do that to us. So something similar happens in our communities with two-spirited, kind of everywhere, where I think people think that two-spirited people are only one way, right. And they have a very specific expectation of what that means, and often that does mean queer cis relationships, largely it’s drag queens or cis gay men, you know all of this similar kind of blanding and just kind of pan-two-spiriting of things, right. So that’s, I think, the problem with two-spirit as an umbrella term, is that that happens.” – Sam

Some participants also noted that in different places — places other than Toronto — people use two-spirit differently, or not at all.

Gender and Sexuality

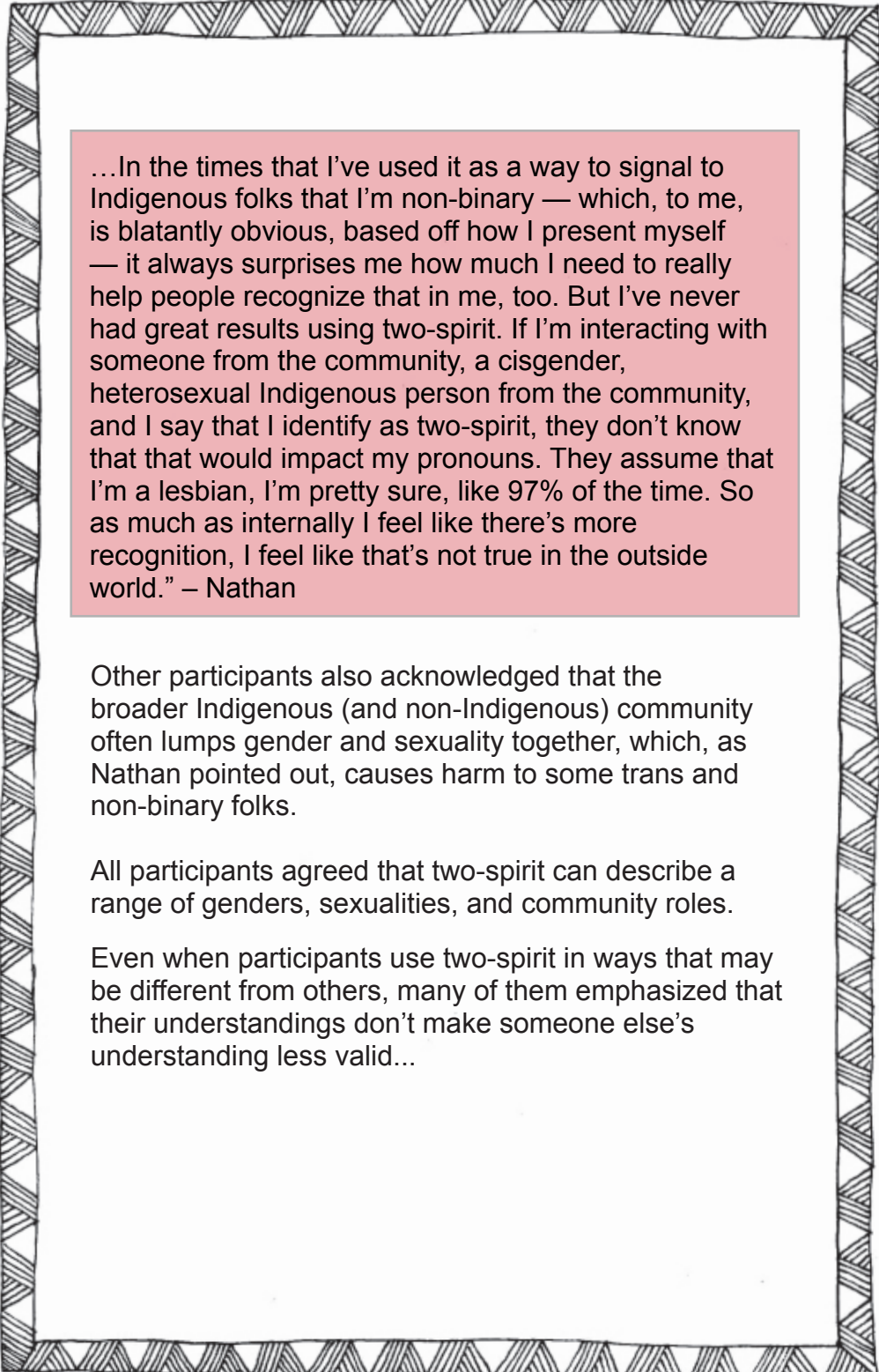
Although some participants shared that they see community members “policing” the use of two-spirit – saying it is only about one’s gender, or only about one’s sexuality, or only about one’s community roles – most participants expressed, in different ways, the idea that two-spirit is a word that can be broadly used to describe Indigenous people who have complex genders or sexualities.

Some folks observe their communities using two-spirit more to talk about gender than sexuality:

“I would say more often than not it’s used as a trans or non-binary identifier and less so, generally, about sexuality.” – Dana

However, one participant, Nathan, noted that this understanding of two-spirit as a term that is used to “claim space for complex forms of gender” is shared primarily within queer and trans Indigenous communities, while cis-het Indigenous people tend to understand two-spirit as only having to do with sexuality. This can lead to harmful assumptions. Nathan shared this story:

“I feel that more within the queer Indigenous community. That we see each other using it in a way that claims space for complex forms of gender. The broader Indigenous community, I don’t feel like people have gotten the memo yet...”




...In the times that I've used it as a way to signal to Indigenous folks that I'm non-binary — which, to me, is blatantly obvious, based off how I present myself — it always surprises me how much I need to really help people recognize that in me, too. But I've never had great results using two-spirit. If I'm interacting with someone from the community, a cisgender, heterosexual Indigenous person from the community, and I say that I identify as two-spirit, they don't know that that would impact my pronouns. They assume that I'm a lesbian, I'm pretty sure, like 97% of the time. So as much as internally I feel like there's more recognition, I feel like that's not true in the outside world." – Nathan

Other participants also acknowledged that the broader Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) community often lumps gender and sexuality together, which, as Nathan pointed out, causes harm to some trans and non-binary folks.

All participants agreed that two-spirit can describe a range of genders, sexualities, and community roles.

Even when participants use two-spirit in ways that may be different from others, many of them emphasized that their understandings don't make someone else's understanding less valid...



“For me, two-spirit speaks specifically to my gender identity. To me, it doesn’t really reference my queer-ness — I identify as queer also, and my attraction, my relationships with people, that’s queer, but that to me isn’t anywhere near as related to two-spirit-ness as my gender. I feel like the way that I experience my gender is inherently Indigenous, because I am Indigenous and I can’t really separate my identities in that way. But also, just because of who I am. But I don’t feel like someone who is a cis gay man and is also two-spirit is any less two-spirit — just because the way that I view two-spirit really centres in on gender.” – Ferris

Community Roles & Gifts

Some participants talked about the gifts, responsibilities and roles they carry in their communities as two-spirit people:

“Being two-spirited, I feel like I have a responsibility to the world I live in. So, making a better world — so when we’re imagining, and we’re doing all this Indigenous worlding, as a two-spirit person, I have a responsibility to bring that into these new worlds we’re creating for ourselves. I think that where I am in my life and age, that I’m approaching auntie years, that I have a responsibility to younger people, to let them know what this word is, and what it could mean. And provide them with the things that someone provided me at one time. So in that way I think of it as being a very communal kind of concept, and there’s a kind of kinship involved in it.”

– Doug



Doug's Concept Map

Like Doug, Sam also talked about the responsibilities of being two-spirit:

“When I think about what two-spirit means to me, there’s the piece of it where I respect and understand that we do use it — and I do use it for myself as this term that encompasses the gender complexities and sexuality complexities of Indigenous folks on Turtle Island. That’s truly — that’s one piece of it. But then as an Anishinaabe person, when I’ve gone and looked for what two-spirit means and what those things mean, I’ve learned actually more about traditional notions about responsibility and self-determination that are not exclusively about really anyone’s sexuality or gender, but rather these processes and practices that we embody...

...For me, as a two-spirit person and as a trans person, when I think of the word two-spirit, really what that means to me is that responsibility that I carry. Specific responsibilities that are not actually about those Western categorizations but more so gifts that I embody — that, folks that are not two-spirit could embody those gifts, but they wouldn't embody it in the way that I do." – Sam

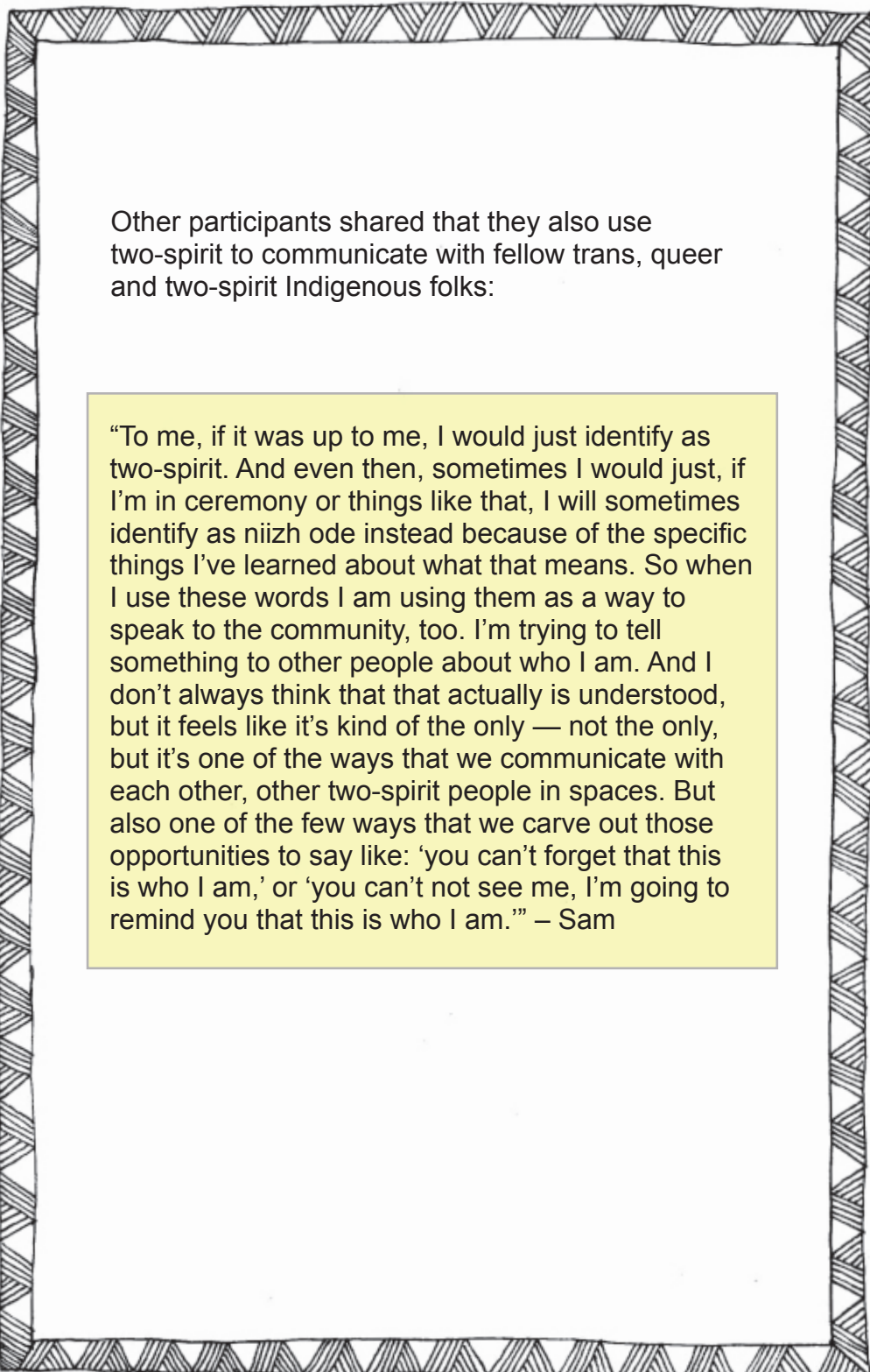
Claiming Space

One gift that some participants see two-spirit people in their communities holding was the power (and responsibility) to make change:

"I think when we talk about what gifts do two-spirit people bring to community, what are our roles, what are our teachings, I think that's one of the biggest ones that I've seen and been taught by community here, is that we are change-bringers. That we bring change into everywhere we go, and that's exhausting." – 🥰

Some participants noted that they see their community use two-spirit to claim space when interacting with cis-het communities:

"Within the community I know very few people who use the term two-spirit. As far as I know, within the community. It's more something we use when we're facing outwards within the larger Indigenous community, and then the non-Indigenous community, to sort of claim space for ourselves." – Nathan



Other participants shared that they also use two-spirit to communicate with fellow trans, queer and two-spirit Indigenous folks:

“To me, if it was up to me, I would just identify as two-spirit. And even then, sometimes I would just, if I’m in ceremony or things like that, I will sometimes identify as niizh ode instead because of the specific things I’ve learned about what that means. So when I use these words I am using them as a way to speak to the community, too. I’m trying to tell something to other people about who I am. And I don’t always think that that actually is understood, but it feels like it’s kind of the only — not the only, but it’s one of the ways that we communicate with each other, other two-spirit people in spaces. But also one of the few ways that we carve out those opportunities to say like: ‘you can’t forget that this is who I am,’ or ‘you can’t not see me, I’m going to remind you that this is who I am.’” – Sam

The Literal Definition

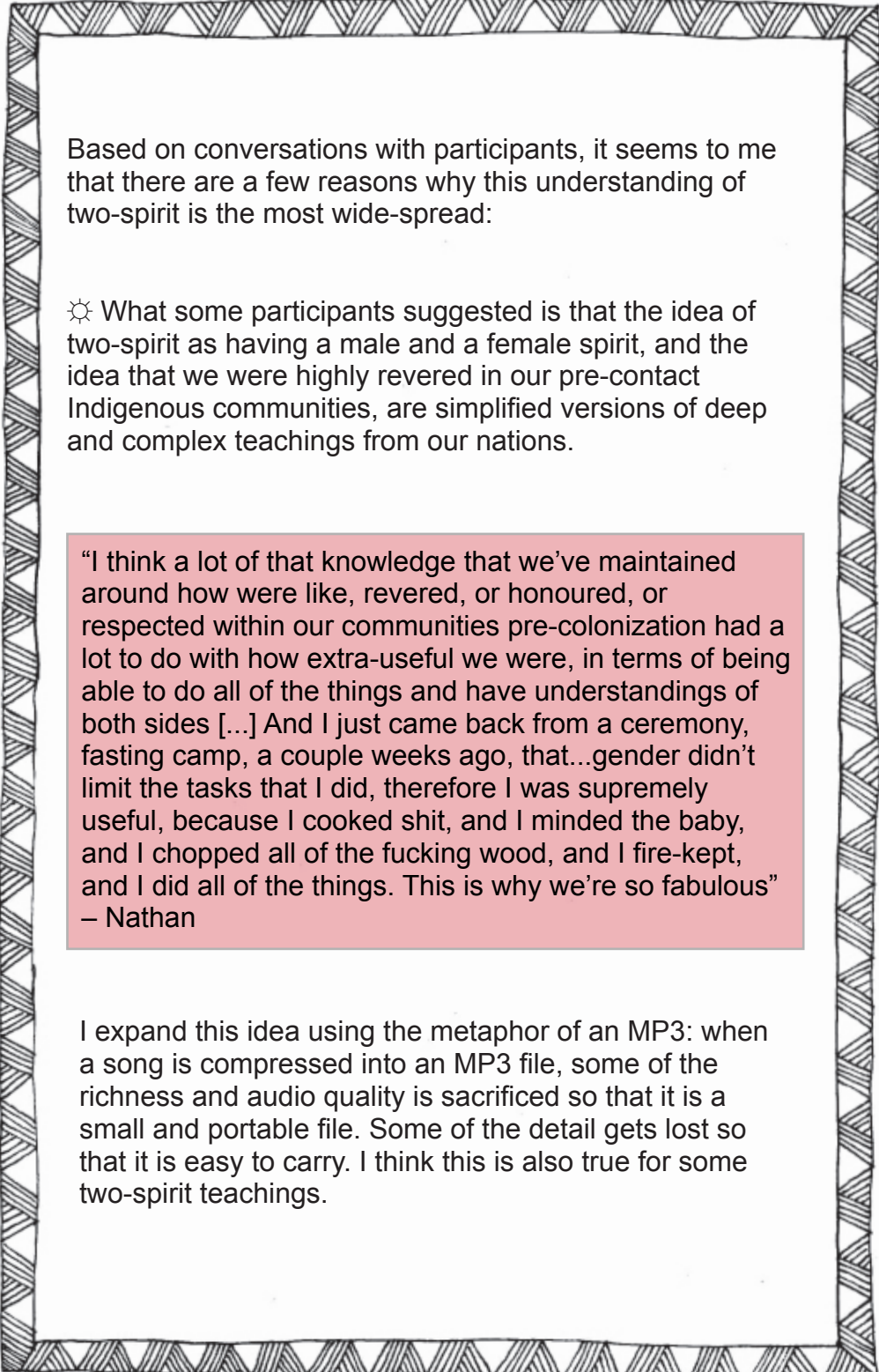
I also wanted to talk to participants about the common understanding that two-spirit means someone with a male and a female spirit. Lots of community members have strong feelings about the idea that being two-spirit means having two spirits.

To be clear, for some people this is their truth – for them, being two-spirit means carrying two spirits, literally. Perhaps this is true for you! For other people, the idea of having two spirits does not fit within their teachings.

I'll say it again: every way that two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people understand the term two-spirit is fundamentally legitimate.

Harm can happen when one way of understanding the term invalidates other people's experiences, even if it's unintentional. Sometimes when people describe two-spirit as having to do with having a masculine and a feminine spirit, they use language that reinforces the gender binary (the idea that there are only two genders). This can be harmful to people who are not men or women – genderfluid, genderqueer, non-binary, gender non-conforming, and gender complex folks.

This section is not meant to invalidate anyone's experiences or ideas – instead, I wanted to open up a discussion about why this literal understanding is often the only understanding of two-spirit that people talk about.

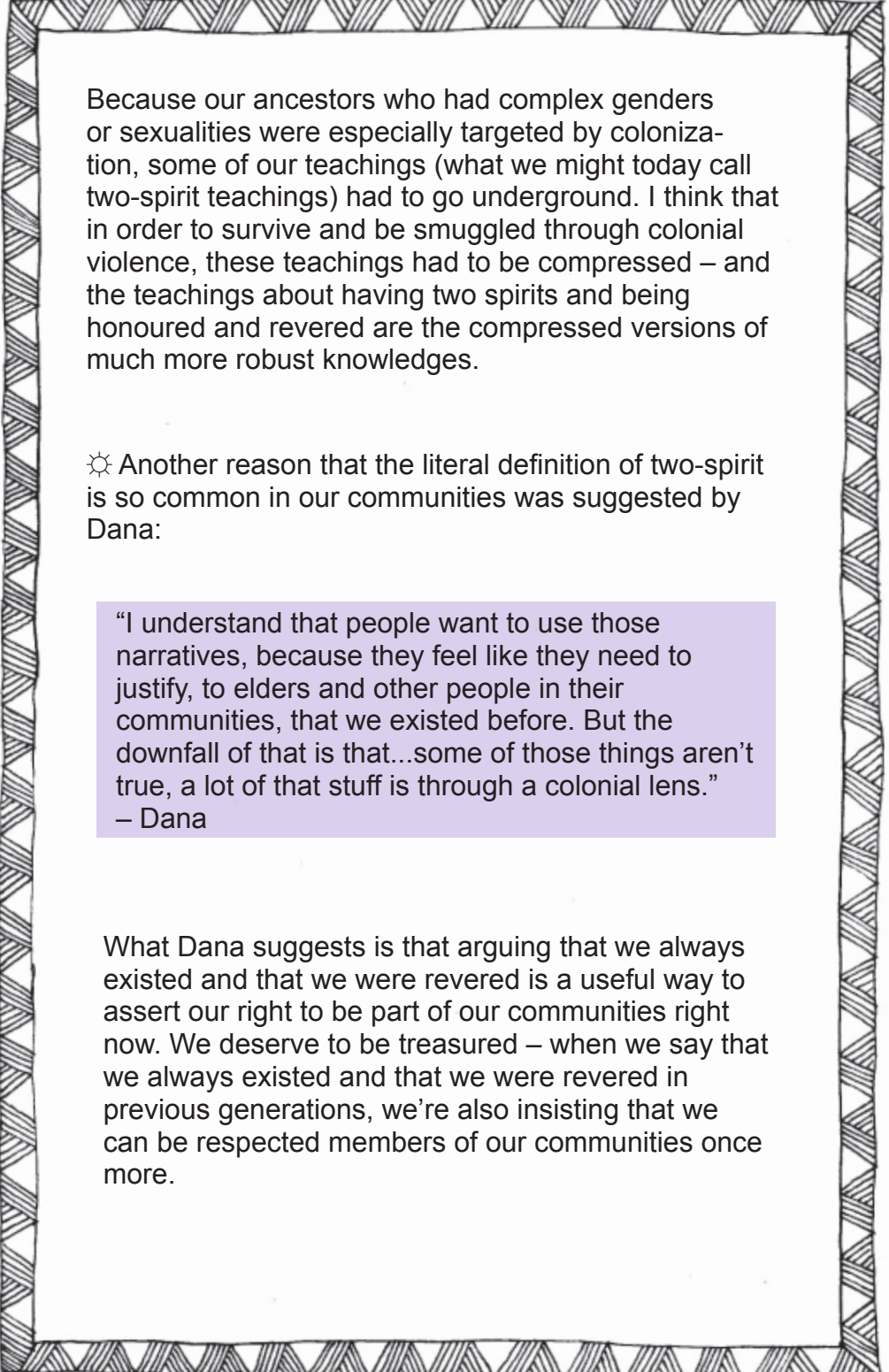


Based on conversations with participants, it seems to me that there are a few reasons why this understanding of two-spirit is the most wide-spread:

☀ What some participants suggested is that the idea of two-spirit as having a male and a female spirit, and the idea that we were highly revered in our pre-contact Indigenous communities, are simplified versions of deep and complex teachings from our nations.

“I think a lot of that knowledge that we’ve maintained around how we were like, revered, or honoured, or respected within our communities pre-colonization had a lot to do with how extra-useful we were, in terms of being able to do all of the things and have understandings of both sides [...] And I just came back from a ceremony, fasting camp, a couple weeks ago, that...gender didn’t limit the tasks that I did, therefore I was supremely useful, because I cooked shit, and I minded the baby, and I chopped all of the fucking wood, and I fire-kept, and I did all of the things. This is why we’re so fabulous”
– Nathan

I expand this idea using the metaphor of an MP3: when a song is compressed into an MP3 file, some of the richness and audio quality is sacrificed so that it is a small and portable file. Some of the detail gets lost so that it is easy to carry. I think this is also true for some two-spirit teachings.

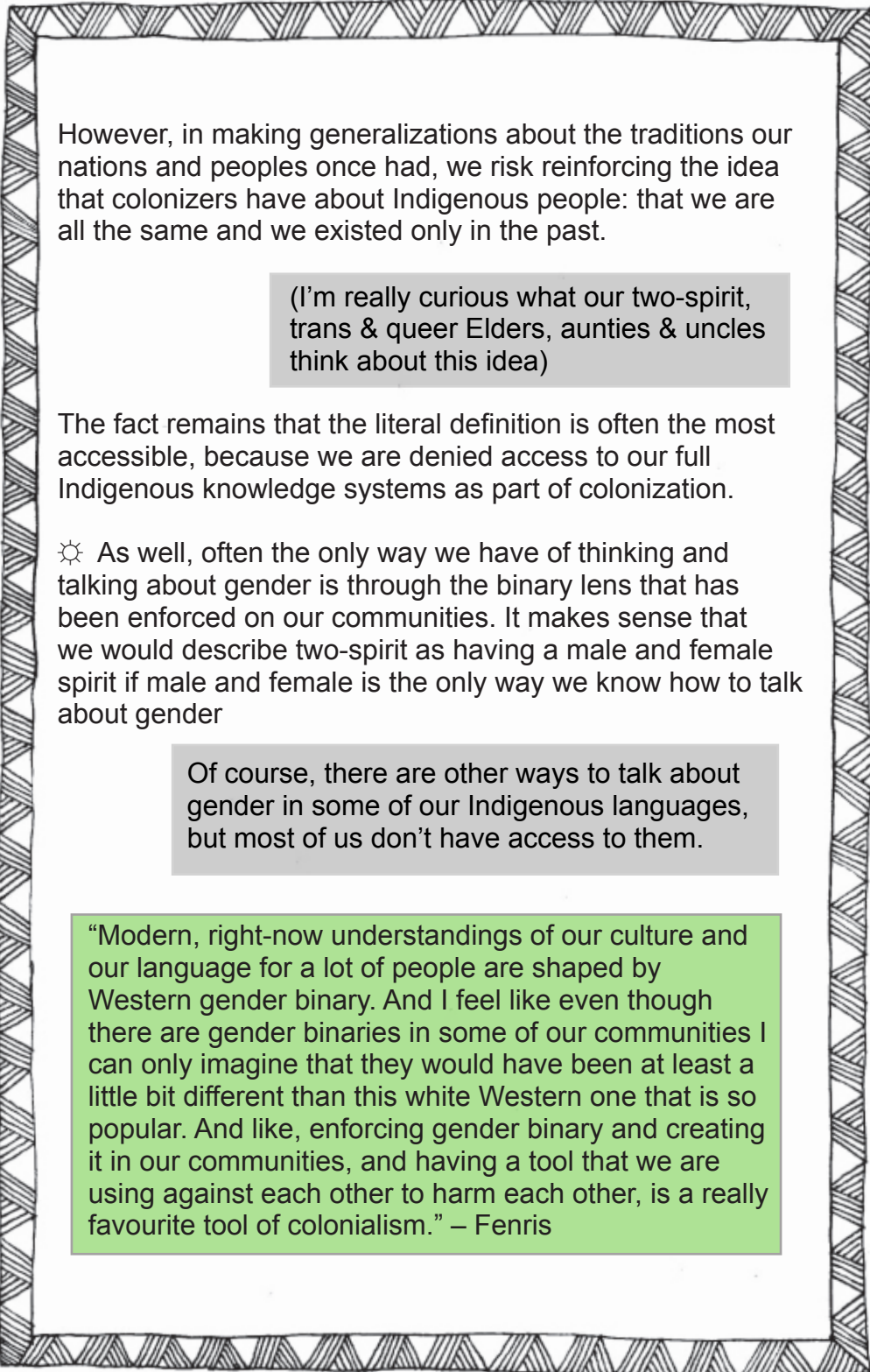


Because our ancestors who had complex genders or sexualities were especially targeted by colonization, some of our teachings (what we might today call two-spirit teachings) had to go underground. I think that in order to survive and be smuggled through colonial violence, these teachings had to be compressed – and the teachings about having two spirits and being honoured and revered are the compressed versions of much more robust knowledges.

☀ Another reason that the literal definition of two-spirit is so common in our communities was suggested by Dana:

“I understand that people want to use those narratives, because they feel like they need to justify, to elders and other people in their communities, that we existed before. But the downfall of that is that...some of those things aren't true, a lot of that stuff is through a colonial lens.”
– Dana

What Dana suggests is that arguing that we always existed and that we were revered is a useful way to assert our right to be part of our communities right now. We deserve to be treasured – when we say that we always existed and that we were revered in previous generations, we're also insisting that we can be respected members of our communities once more.



However, in making generalizations about the traditions our nations and peoples once had, we risk reinforcing the idea that colonizers have about Indigenous people: that we are all the same and we existed only in the past.

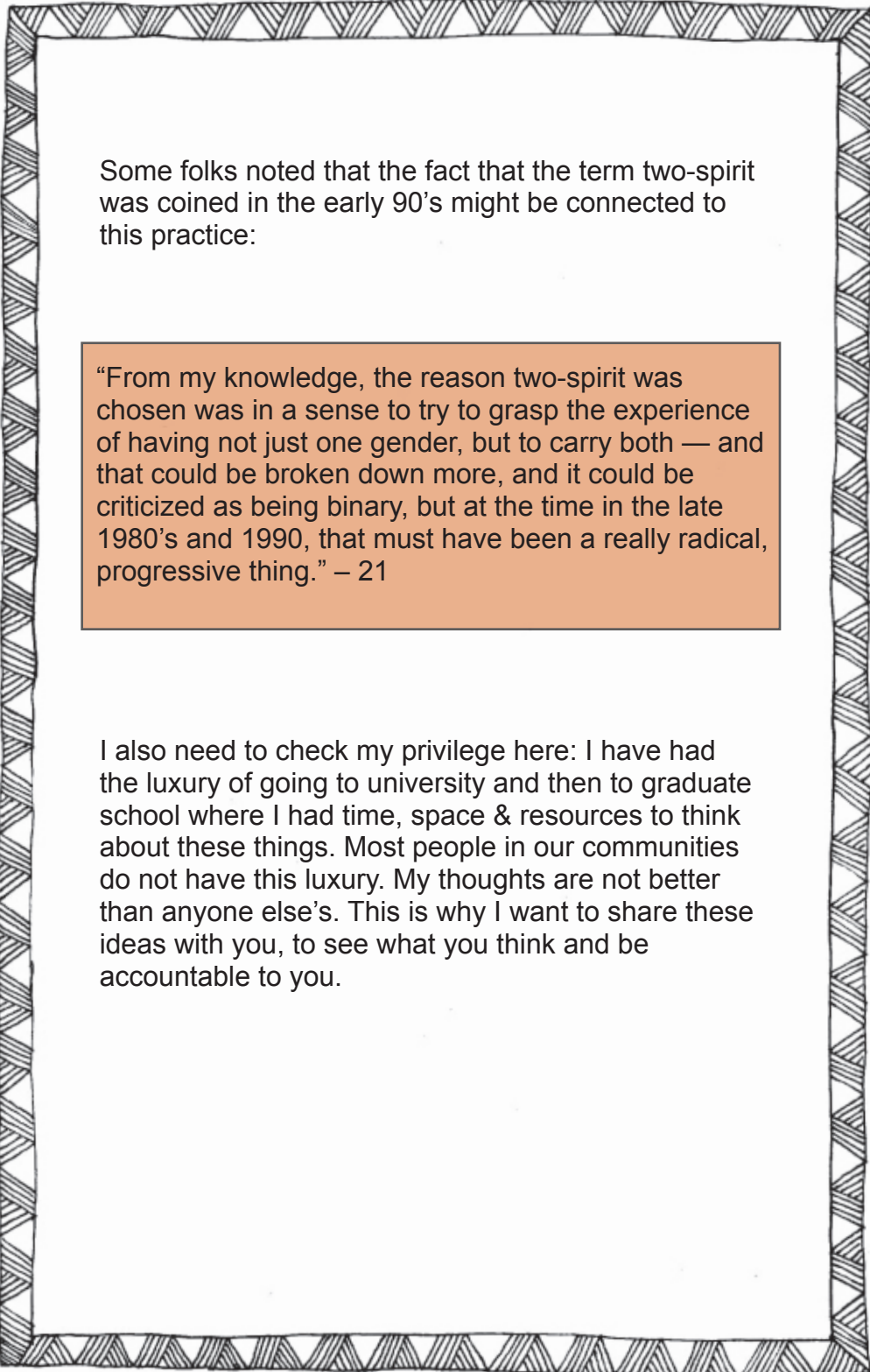
(I'm really curious what our two-spirit, trans & queer Elders, aunties & uncles think about this idea)

The fact remains that the literal definition is often the most accessible, because we are denied access to our full Indigenous knowledge systems as part of colonization.

☀ As well, often the only way we have of thinking and talking about gender is through the binary lens that has been enforced on our communities. It makes sense that we would describe two-spirit as having a male and female spirit if male and female is the only way we know how to talk about gender

Of course, there are other ways to talk about gender in some of our Indigenous languages, but most of us don't have access to them.

“Modern, right-now understandings of our culture and our language for a lot of people are shaped by Western gender binary. And I feel like even though there are gender binaries in some of our communities I can only imagine that they would have been at least a little bit different than this white Western one that is so popular. And like, enforcing gender binary and creating it in our communities, and having a tool that we are using against each other to harm each other, is a really favourite tool of colonialism.” – Ferris



Some folks noted that the fact that the term two-spirit was coined in the early 90's might be connected to this practice:

“From my knowledge, the reason two-spirit was chosen was in a sense to try to grasp the experience of having not just one gender, but to carry both — and that could be broken down more, and it could be criticized as being binary, but at the time in the late 1980's and 1990, that must have been a really radical, progressive thing.” – 21

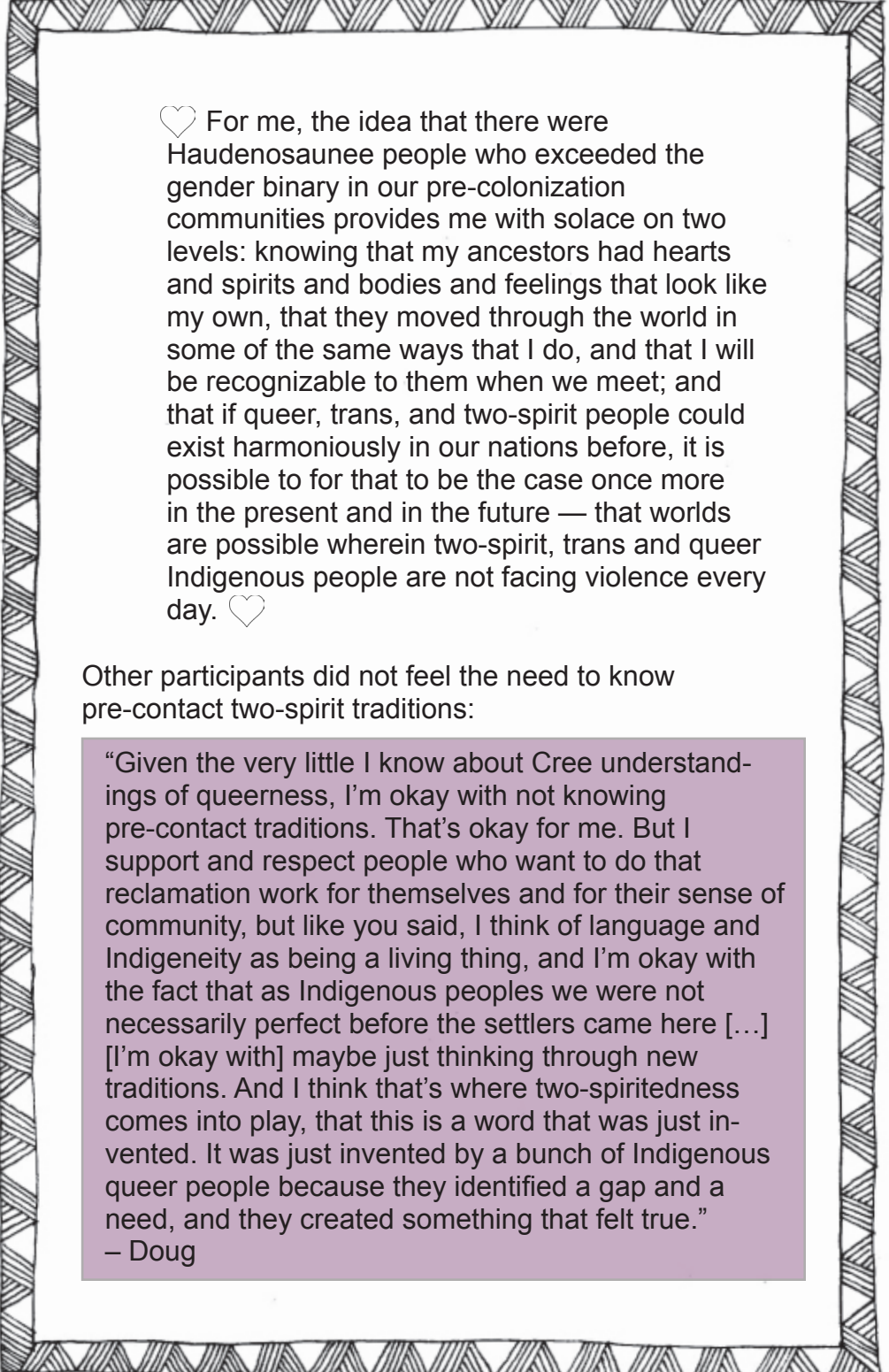
I also need to check my privilege here: I have had the luxury of going to university and then to graduate school where I had time, space & resources to think about these things. Most people in our communities do not have this luxury. My thoughts are not better than anyone else's. This is why I want to share these ideas with you, to see what you think and be accountable to you.

Questions We Want To Ask

One of the biggest messages participants gave to me was that they were not interested in defining two-spirit, or in spending their time teaching non-Indigenous folks about how not to harm our trans, queer and two-spirit communities. Though many saw the value in this outward-facing work, their priorities were on working in their own communities to build relationships and support their fellow two-spirit youth. Some folks also brought up the need for inter-generational conversations between two-spirit, trans and queer youth and our Elders, uncles and aunts.

Some participants expressed a desire to know about how two-spirit people were treasured in their communities before colonization:

“I am on a constant quest to find our lost stories and teachings and ceremonies and languages specifically in my Haudenosaunee community. I feel kind of envious that there are other nations and other communities who retained that, and who have those words to describe two-spirit people in their language, and who have the teachings of what it means and what your roles were, and what your responsibilities were.” – 21

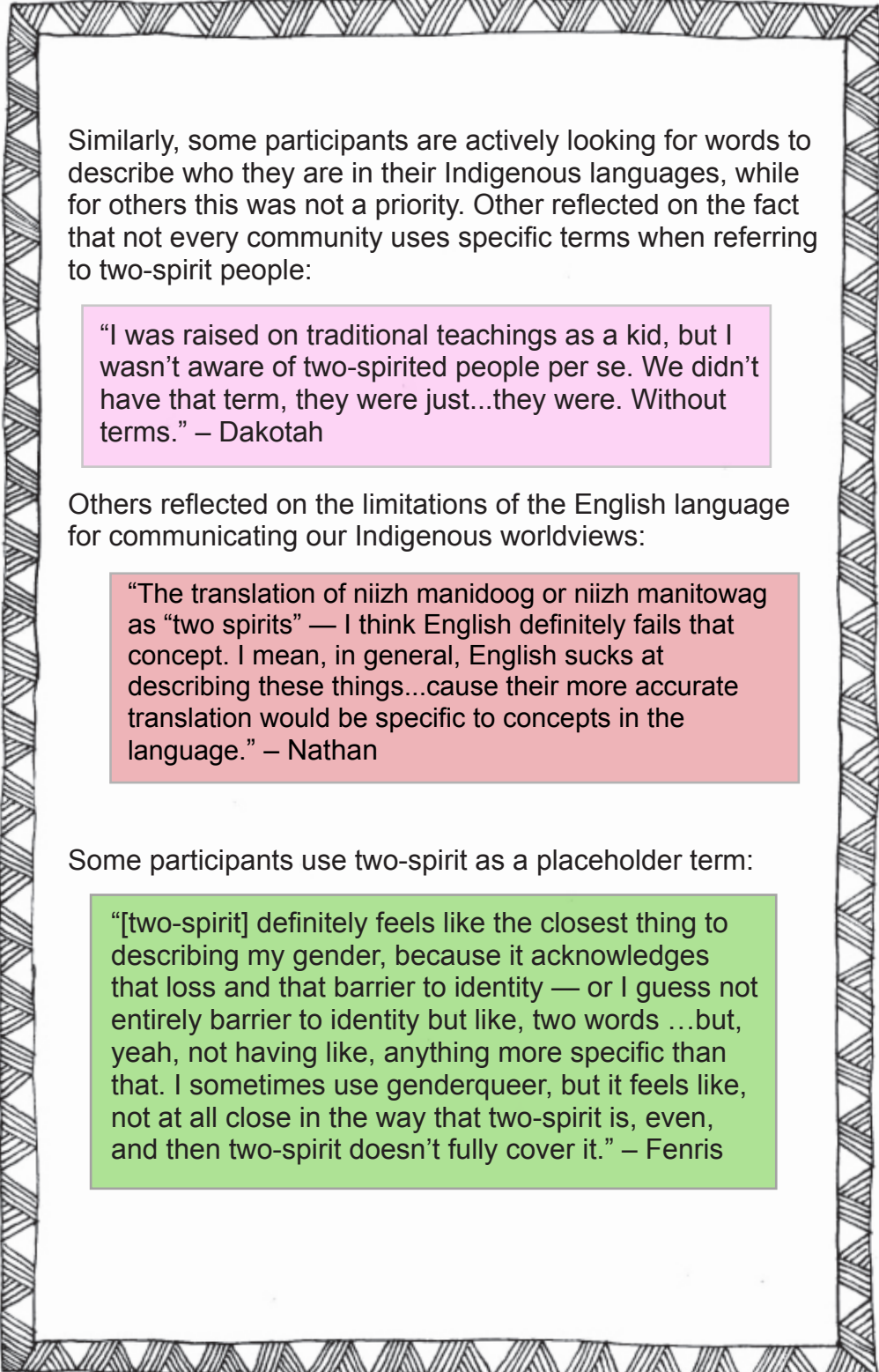


♡ For me, the idea that there were Haudenosaunee people who exceeded the gender binary in our pre-colonization communities provides me with solace on two levels: knowing that my ancestors had hearts and spirits and bodies and feelings that look like my own, that they moved through the world in some of the same ways that I do, and that I will be recognizable to them when we meet; and that if queer, trans, and two-spirit people could exist harmoniously in our nations before, it is possible to for that to be the case once more in the present and in the future — that worlds are possible wherein two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people are not facing violence every day. ♡

Other participants did not feel the need to know pre-contact two-spirit traditions:

“Given the very little I know about Cree understandings of queerness, I’m okay with not knowing pre-contact traditions. That’s okay for me. But I support and respect people who want to do that reclamation work for themselves and for their sense of community, but like you said, I think of language and Indigeneity as being a living thing, and I’m okay with the fact that as Indigenous peoples we were not necessarily perfect before the settlers came here [...] [I’m okay with] maybe just thinking through new traditions. And I think that’s where two-spiritedness comes into play, that this is a word that was just invented. It was just invented by a bunch of Indigenous queer people because they identified a gap and a need, and they created something that felt true.”

– Doug



Similarly, some participants are actively looking for words to describe who they are in their Indigenous languages, while for others this was not a priority. Other reflected on the fact that not every community uses specific terms when referring to two-spirit people:

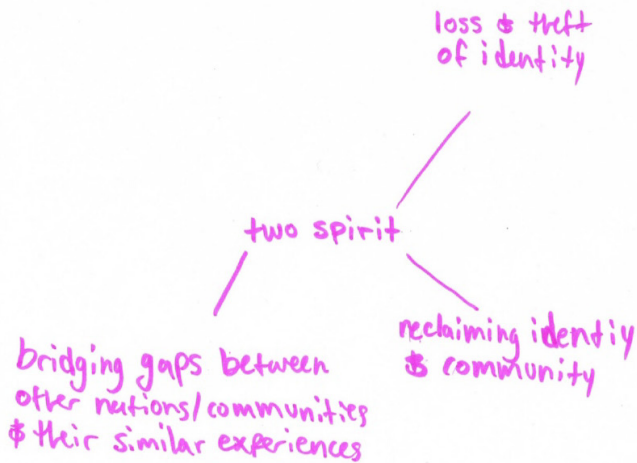
“I was raised on traditional teachings as a kid, but I wasn’t aware of two-spirited people per se. We didn’t have that term, they were just...they were. Without terms.” – Dakotah

Others reflected on the limitations of the English language for communicating our Indigenous worldviews:

“The translation of niizh manidoog or niizh manitowag as “two spirits” — I think English definitely fails that concept. I mean, in general, English sucks at describing these things...cause their more accurate translation would be specific to concepts in the language.” – Nathan

Some participants use two-spirit as a placeholder term:

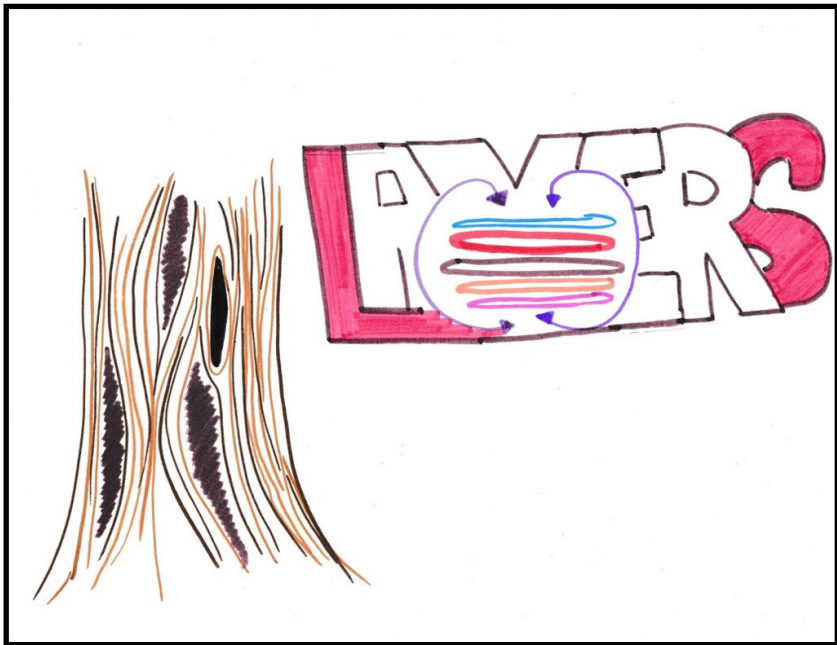
“[two-spirit] definitely feels like the closest thing to describing my gender, because it acknowledges that loss and that barrier to identity — or I guess not entirely barrier to identity but like, two words ...but, yeah, not having like, anything more specific than that. I sometimes use genderqueer, but it feels like, not at all close in the way that two-spirit is, even, and then two-spirit doesn’t fully cover it.” – Fenris



Fenris's concept map

Participants also use two-spirit as a way to connect to one another and build community:

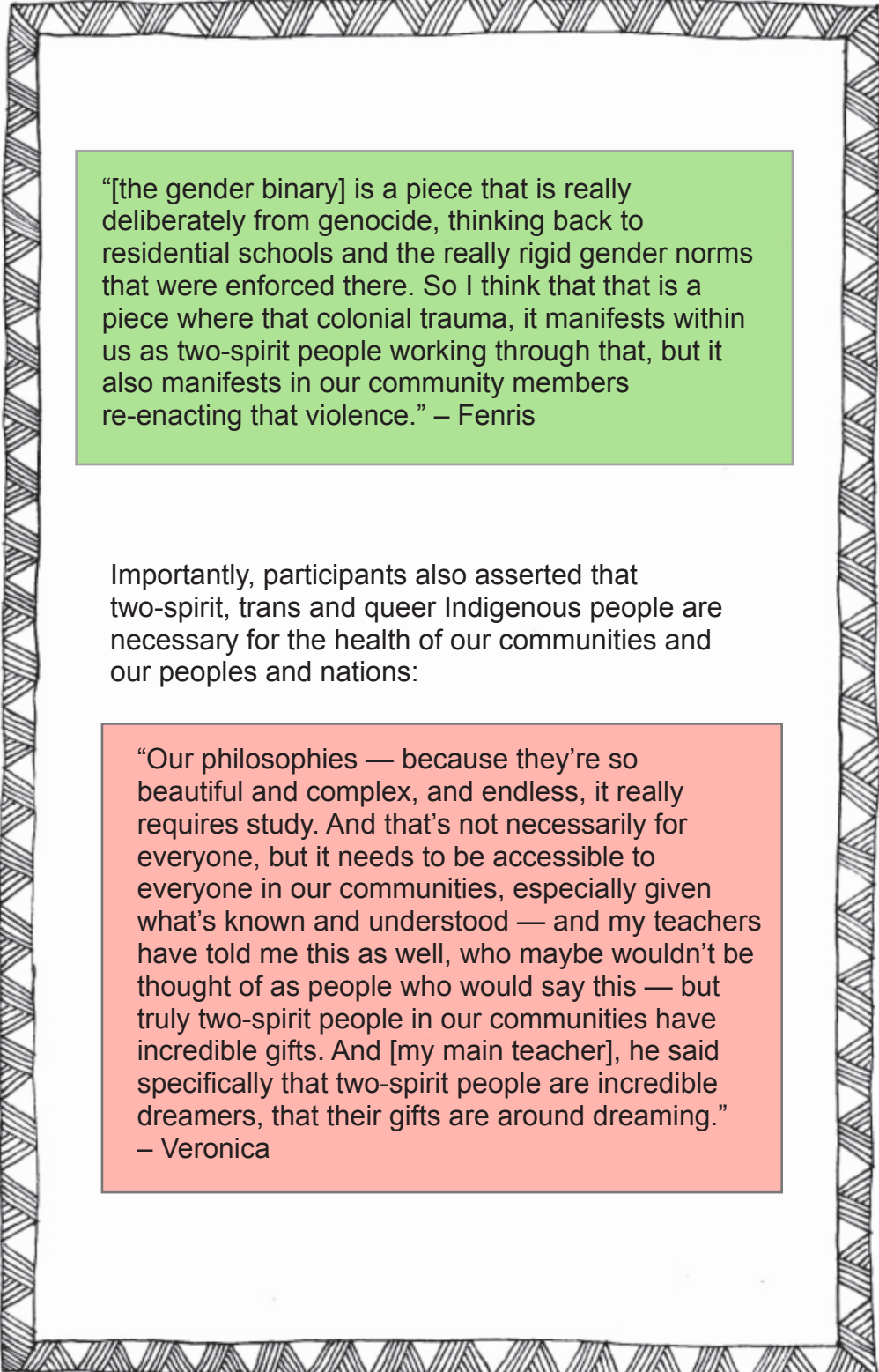
“[the term two-spirit is] maybe not perfect, it’s maybe very complicated, I think that there should be...like, we have to do the extra work to make sure that there’s space for all of us in that, and to make sure that we are making that space, we’re not just prioritizing certain people or certain ideas of two-spirit or any of those things. But I don’t actually see a better option, and that’s what feels hard, is that it feels like if we didn’t use that word — which some people, it’s totally okay, people don’t — for me, for a while I didn’t use that word and then I realized it was really powerful to use that word because it’s a word that we can connect on. It’s why lots of words have been made to use that way — even queer and trans communities, people organize around terms so that they can come together, and we haven’t always had that opportunity, and that’s part of the history of that word, right.” – Sam



Sam's concept map

Many participants indicated that the learning they want to do is about how to live in a good way as Indigenous people – but transphobia and homophobia in our communities make this difficult.

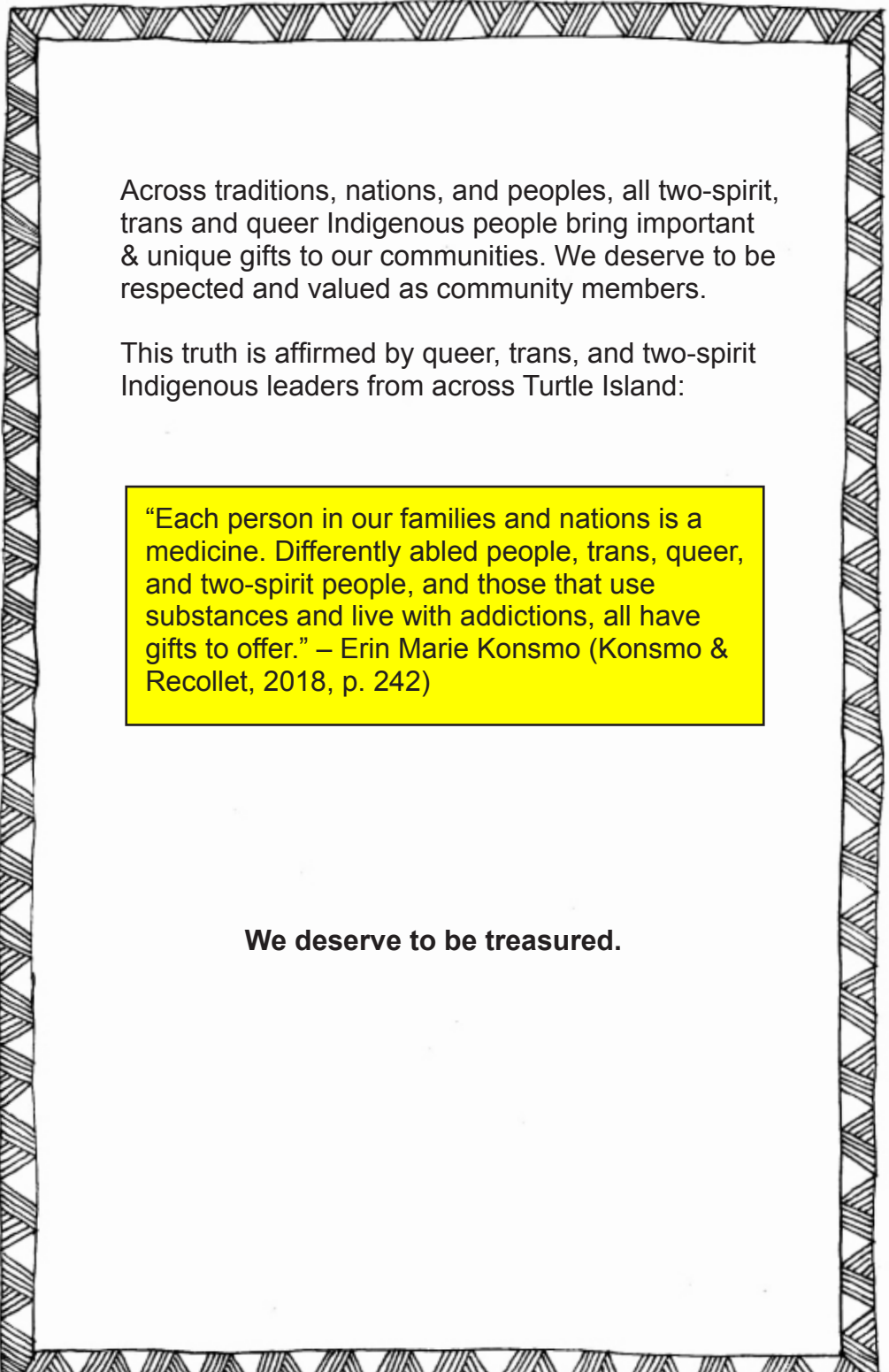
The times where I feel my gender identity having the most friction within the Indigenous community is when I'm participating in ceremony. And like, the struggle of identifying as a two-spirit, or even identifying in the language as niizh manidoog or niizh manitowag, in ceremonial circles, still doesn't feel like it activates any kind of magical power that helps you transcend the really strict gender protocols." - Nathan



“[the gender binary] is a piece that is really deliberately from genocide, thinking back to residential schools and the really rigid gender norms that were enforced there. So I think that that is a piece where that colonial trauma, it manifests within us as two-spirit people working through that, but it also manifests in our community members re-enacting that violence.” – Fenris

Importantly, participants also asserted that two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people are necessary for the health of our communities and our peoples and nations:

“Our philosophies — because they’re so beautiful and complex, and endless, it really requires study. And that’s not necessarily for everyone, but it needs to be accessible to everyone in our communities, especially given what’s known and understood — and my teachers have told me this as well, who maybe wouldn’t be thought of as people who would say this — but truly two-spirit people in our communities have incredible gifts. And [my main teacher], he said specifically that two-spirit people are incredible dreamers, that their gifts are around dreaming.”
– Veronica



Across traditions, nations, and peoples, all two-spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people bring important & unique gifts to our communities. We deserve to be respected and valued as community members.

This truth is affirmed by queer, trans, and two-spirit Indigenous leaders from across Turtle Island:

“Each person in our families and nations is a medicine. Differently abled people, trans, queer, and two-spirit people, and those that use substances and live with addictions, all have gifts to offer.” – Erin Marie Konsmo (Konsmo & Recollet, 2018, p. 242)

We deserve to be treasured.

Conclusion

Participants made it clear that for them, it wasn't necessarily important that folks outside the trans, two-spirit and queer Indigenous community know what we mean when we say two-spirit (because if we want someone to know what we mean, we will explain it to them!). Instead, the important thing is that people know how to respect us:

- Don't make assumptions about our gender or sexuality based on how we look.
- Don't make assumptions about which sex we were assigned at birth, or about our bodies.
- Don't assume what pronouns we use.
- Don't expect us to share intimate details about our bodies and our lives to educate you.

“[Two-spirit] means so many things, and it doesn't work the same way as some of these other words that we have, like Western notions of sexuality and gender. It's like, when people say woman, they're expecting a certain thing. When you say man, they're expecting a certain thing. And you can't do that with two-spirit. People do that with that word, but I actually don't think that that's how it should work, ever.” – Sam

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Toronto Two-Spirit Community Resources

ODE: Remembered Voices

A Toronto youth group by & for two-spirit Indigenous people age 13-29.

<https://www.facebook.com/ODE2S/>

2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations

Toronto's oldest two-spirit organization, providing HIV/AIDS services and community programming.

<http://2spirits.com/>

Two-Spirit & Indigenous LGBTQQIA Mentors, Elders & Grandparents Support Circle

Supported by the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, the support circle brings together two-spirit and LGBTQQIA Indigenous people across generations to share information and provide culturally-affirming support.

<http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/supportcircle.html>



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Thanks for reading!

