

**Trusting the Untrustworthy: Two spirit Resurgence and the limits of Colonial Inclusion in
Canada**

Examining how trust, optimism, and recognition sustain colonial systems while resurgence redefines
belonging through land and relational accountability.

Ximena C. Maldonado Chavez

Thompson Rivers University

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Dr. Jenna Woodrow

Tracey Strain

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Introduction

Over the last decade, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives have expanded rapidly across Canadian institutions, shaping how Universities, governments agencies, and community organizations articulate what justice means and how to be a part of that process. Within this frameworks, Two-Spirit and Indiqueer identities have gained unrepresented symbolic visibility. Federal documents such as Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Action Plan, Pride Toronto's creation as a Two-Spirit stage, and university campaigns that combine land acknowledgments with rainbow flags present Two-Spirit inclusion as evidence of progress. Yet, this visibility is increasingly critiqued by Indigenous scholars and activists who argue that these forms of representation often function as symbolic gestures rather than structural transformation. While institutions celebrate diversity, the deeper colonial structures over land, governance, knowledge, and sense of belonging remain forgotten. This tension raises urgent questions about the emotional, epistemic, and political dimensions of EDI, specially regarding whose knowledge counts, who is specter to trust institutional promises, and what forms of belonging are made possible or impossible.

This paper examines these tensions by exploring how Indiqueer and Two-Spirit resurgence movements challenge colonial frameworks of inclusion embedded within Canadian EDI initiatives. The guiding research question is: How do queer Indigenous resurgence movements in Canada challenge colonial frameworks of inclusion, and what tensions emerge whe institutional EDI initiatives attempt to incorporate Two-Spirit identities? Using this question as a focal point, the paper pursues four central objectives: to analyze how EDI constructs inclusion through western epistemologies grounded in individualism, neutrality, and affective expectations such a as trust and optimism; (2) to show how affective colonialism creates emotional asymmetries in which Indigenous queer people must repeatedly extend goodwill to institutions built on their dispossession; (3) explore how stories, practices and teachings of Two-spirit resurgence redefine inclusion as relational accountability rather than institutional

recognition: and (4) to highlight how these resurgence movements generate epistemic justice by restoring Indigenous queer communities as authoritative knowers of their histories, identities, and futures.

This study challenges the assumption that inclusion is inherently beneficial. Drawing from critical indigenous scholars, two-spirit knowledge holders, queer indigenous theory, and work on epistemic injustice, the paper argues that inclusion can become a technology of colonial control when it demands emotional compliance, extracts cultural knowledge, or misrecognizes indigenous relational views. In this context, EDI becomes less a vehicle for transformation and more a settler move to innocence, giving permission to institutions to appear “progressive” without giving back authority and redistributing power. By contrast, two-spirit resurgence practices offer pathways towards transformative inclusion grounded in relational ethics rather than institutional benevolence.

To address this, the paper will outline the theoretical framework of decolonization, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy that support the analysis. Then it will examine affective colonialism and epistemic injustice as a key mechanism in which EDI regulates emotion and knowledge, to finalize on how Indigenous storytelling and two-spirit story work as sites of theory and resurgence. The analysis section considers how EDI Canadian initiatives authorize emotional and epistemic regulation through symbolic inclusion. Finally, the paper concludes by reflecting on two-spirit resurgence as a model of transformative inclusion and on the implications of EDI reconciliation, and queer indigenous futures.

Decolonization, Settler Colonialism, and heteropatriarchy

If we are trying to understand Two-Spirit and Indiqueer inclusion in Canadian institutions, we must start from a total consciousness that Canada is a settler colonial state. The idea that settler colonialism is an historical episode is far from the truth, it's an ongoing structure that keeps trying to gain access to Indigenous land and life through every mean possible, including a cultural one. Tuck and Yang (2012) showed that the decolonization process specifically requires the restoration of land and the reinstatement of Indigenous political authority. When "decolonization" is used with concepts as "diversity", "inclusion", or "equity", the discourse and usage of this specific terminology holds the risk of becoming a settler move to innocence as they name it, where settlers and institutions relieve guilt and present themselves as "progressive" or even worst: "saviors" while maintaining control over land, resources, decision-making and narrative. DEI can easily become this if they remain at the level of discourse, symbolism, or mild representation.

Arvin, Tuck, and Morril (2013) add on to this by showing that settler colonialism is fundamentally heteropatriarchal. Heteropatriarchy is constructed by intertwined systems of heterosexual and patriarchal dominance that attempt to naturalize binary gender, family norms, and male authority. For them, Heteropatriarchy is one of the central technologies of colonialism. The logic inherent is that if the crown, companies, and even society itself don't recognize Indigenous systems, delegitimize non-binary roles, and replaces community care for state and market logics it will help justify the dispossession of Indigenous peoples by presenting settler institutions as "civilized". In this light, decolonization must involve dismantling the gendered and sexual hierarchies that structure colonial power.

Morgensen's (2011) concept of queer settler colonialism shows how mainstream LGBTQ+ movements in Canada often reproduce settler logics by arguing that queer inclusion into the nation like same-sex marriage, antidiscrimination laws, or corporate Pride sponsorship can function as a form of

homonationalism, where queer rights become evidence of Canada's "moral superiority". In this context, the visibility of two-spirit people in EDI campaigns can be appropriated into a national story of tolerance without addressing ongoing dispossession and violence. By doing this, two-spirit identities risk being folded into settler narratives as symbols of diversity, rather than being recognized as grounded in indigenous governance, land relations and spiritual responsibilities.

The lived experience of two-spirit residential school survivors makes visible how these structures operate on the ground. In one video, Laurie McDonald describes how, like many indigenous children, they endured physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect in residential school, but insists that something crucial was overlooked into this settler process: the specific experience of being two-spirit. Coming from a traditional background of where this was considered not just normal but spiritual meaningful. They suggest that for two-spirit students, the abuse was probably much more severe because of the way of being was pathologized. This testimony shows how heteropatriarchy intensifies colonial violence in this particular intersectionality: the institution does not just attack indigenous people, they also singles out those genders and roles that went against Christian, binary norms. They also are clear on reconciliation, as Laurie notes "yes, reconciliation is a part of the package, but we have a long way to go yet" (McDonald, 2014).

Indigenous scholars and activists also insist that decolonization is embodied and material, not just ideological. Alfred (2017) and Tuck and Yang (2012) argues that reconciliation without land return and the resurgence of indigenous governance is simply another form of colonial management. Jacob's (2017) links colonialism directly to gender and sexualized violence against indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people, showing that attacks on indigenous bodies are attempts to eliminate future generations and sever relational continuities as a genocidal act. Manuel (2017) describes decolonization as a frontline struggle, grounded in land defense, intergenerational teaching, and everyday acts of refusal. Taken

together, these perspectives empathize that colonialism operates through land theft, gendered violence, and epistemic control. Decolonization must involve renewal of indigenous kinship, land, and spirituality as a whole, not just as isolated cases, because decolonization is also relational.

This is why this has direct implications for how inclusion is understood. If settler colonialism is maintained through heteropatriarchal structures, individuality, and moral practices of progress, the EDI initiatives risk reinforcing colonial power when they frame inclusion as access to existing institutions rather than transformation of these institutions. When two-spirit people are invited to spaces that remain governed by settler logics westernized gender binaries, and academic or bureaucratic norms of credibility, their pretense can be acknowledged while their worldviews are constrained by asking them to adapt their being into a western epistemology. In this sense, inclusion can function as a settler move to insulate, particularly when it is not accompanied by land restitution, redistribution of power or recognition of governance.

With this approach, decolonization and heteropatriarchy provide the structural lens through which institutional EDI practices must be read. They clarify that the problem is not simply the absence of representation, but the type of system into which representation is being invited.

Epistemic Injustice and the Politics of Knowing

If settler colonialism operates through land theft and heteropatriarchal violence, it also operates through control over knowledge: who is recognized as knower, what counts as knowledge, and which ways of understanding the world are legitimized or dismissed. Work on epistemic injustice provides a useful vocabulary of naming these forms of harm. Miranda Fricker defines epistemic injustice as a wrong done to someone “specifically in their capacity as knower”, and distinguishes two central forms: testimonial

injustice, when a speaker receives less credibility than they deserve because of prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, when people are unfairly treated in making sense of their experiences due to gaps or distortions in shared interpretative resources of a society (Ficker, 2007). Approaching this in a decolonial context, these concepts help illuminate how Indigenous and two-spirit knowledge has been systematically devalued, misheard, or setting aside within colonial institutions.

Ficker's concept of testimonial injustice is particularly helpful for explaining what happens when two-spirit people speak in spaces structured by western EDI and reconciliation settings. In testimonials, courts, universities and even queer NGO's, indigenous and Indiqueer voices have often been heard through a filter of deficit and pathology. When a two-spirit person speaks about land-based teachings, ceremonial roles, or the historical indigenous view of gender diversity, their testimony may be coded as "cultural" or "personal", while settler experts about speaking about policy, psychology, or law are treated as "objective" and "authoritative". This creates a credibility deficit: two-spirit knowledge is tolerated as decoration or emotion, but not recognized as theory, governance, or rigorous analysis. The result is not just hurt feelings, it is an epistemic harm that undermines their standing as equal parts in the collective work of knowing.

Life stories of two-spirit people themselves reveal how these injustices unfold. Ma Nee Chacaby (2025) recalls that in her language, being two-spirit is translated into "two brains in one body", a teaching her grandmother shared when she was four years old. Her grandmother also asked her father to teach her how to hunt "because she is different... I want her to survive on her own," framing two-spirit identity as a specific responsibility and capacity rather than a pathology, but recognizing that that's how the western world saw that as she also remembers her grandmother saying that "seven generations back many people lived this way and nobody had anything against anybody" but warning Ma Nee that she would have a hard time because "things are changing." This narrative offers a complex theory of two-spirit

existence: as ontological multiplicity, as seeing normal in her nation but stigmatized through colonial transformation. Yet, in many institutional contexts, couch a statement would likely be hard as touching personal story or “cultural belief”, not as a serious epistemic framework of rethinking gender, identity, and belonging. The failure to treat Ma Nee’s teachings as theory exemplifies testimonial injustice: her credibility as a knower is iminshed by the devaluation of indigenous cosmologies.

Nivii, an Inuit two-spirit person also articulates a way of knowing that exceeds dominant categories. They describe accepting both their masculine and feminine side and “being allowed to be them” while also recounting how people have walked away from them and at the same time, empathizing the support of their parents and chosen peer family, who create a space where their full self is not only tolerated but cherished (Nivii, 2023). Their experience shows how hermeneutical injustice works: broader social frameworks often lack concepts that can hold indigenous understanding of gender multiplicity alongside contemporary two/spirit and queer politics, leaving people around them unable (or unwilling) to interpret who they are without restoring to rejection. Within this gap, chosen kinship networks step in as way communities can co-create new interpretative resources that affirm Nivii’s being. Their story is about th politics of naming and making sense of two-spirit life when dominant languages and institutions cannot (or will not) do so.

Kristie Dotson extends Fricker’s work by empathizing that these are not isolated incidents, but forms of epistemic oppression: persistent, structural exclusion from full participation in epistemic communities (Dotson, 2014). Epistemic oppression, for Dotson, occurs when social and political structures limit the kinds of questions that can be asked, the kinds of evidence that are recognized, and the kind of people who are treated as credible sources of knowledge. She also identifies epistemic violence and practices of silencing as central to how oppression is maintained everyday in communicative context (Dotson, 2011). From this perspective, EDI practices that invite two-spirit people to share their stories but

not giving the same importance as a privileged western academic, legal, or psychological expertise is not correcting epistemic injustice, is re-inscribing it. Two-spirit knowers are allowed to speak but not taking into account when framing what counts as a problem, as evidence, or what a just response would look like.

Then, the politics of knowledge is not neutral. It is shaped by colonial histories that determine who is authorized to theorize, whose frameworks define what is knowledgeable and whose words are read as data instead of philosophy. Epistemic injustice is not only about individual prejudice but about institutional architectures of knowledge that keep two-spirit people in the position of being “consulted” rather than recognized as co-theorists and co-architects of social transformation. Recognizing this is fundamental for the argument of this paper: it suggests that any conversation about two-spirit inclusion that does not address epistemic injustice will inevitably reproduce colonial patterns, no matter how diverse a space appears. With this in mind, it’s important to review how trust, optimism, and hope are regulated in ways that keep indigenous queer people tied to institutions that have not yet learned to hear them.

Affective Colonialism and Institutional Trust

If epistemic injustice clarifies the ways colonial structures distort credibility and interpretation, affective colonialism names how those same structures regulate emotion. Affective colonialism refers to the ways institutions shape, direct, appropriate and demand feelings such as hope, trust, gratitude, and optimism in order to maintain legitimacy. Colonial systems not only operate on coercion or law, they also cultivate affective attachments that bind marginalized communities to the very institution that harms them. In the context of EDI initiatives, two-spirit people are frequently expected to feel grateful for

recognition, hopeful about reforms, and trusting of institutional promises, even when the underlying power relations remain unchanged.

Karen Jones' (1996) description of trust as an affective attitude offers a critical approach for analyzing this dynamic. For Jones, trust is not simply the belief that another will behave reliably; it is an "optimistic stance" towards another's goodwill, in which one is emotionally invested in other's responsiveness. To trust is to adopt an affective posture that makes one vulnerable because one is counting on the other to care (Jones, 1996). If we look at the relationship between indigenous people and Canadian institutions, this analysis reveals a profound asymmetry. Indigenous and Indiqueer communities are continually asked to trust (reconciliation processes, EDI policies, human rights frameworks, academics ethics boards...) despite a long history of broken promises and ongoing harm. The emotional burden of optimism is placed on those communities, while institutions benefit from them and rarely subject themselves to equivalent vulnerability or accountability.

From this perspective, EDI can function as a technology of affective colonialism. Steinmetz (2021) argues that EDI in western contexts operates as a moral techonlogy: a set of practices that allows institutions to present themselves as ethical and progressive without changing their colonial constructs. Diversity is measured, reported, and showcased; inclusion is framed as ongoing commitment; equity is positioned as an objective for the institution (Steinmetz, 2021). This narrative puts the institution as a morally developing subject, deserving patience and trust. Those who point out ongoing colonial violence, or who insist that land retourn and indigenous governance is non-negotiable, are seen as impatient, unreasonable, or ungrateful for the progress made. Emotionally, EDI can ask marginalized people to align their feelings with the institution's self-conception: to believe in its good intentions and incremental growth. In this way, trust is not earned through structural change, is demanded as a condition for participation.

Terry and epperson (2025) help this argument of a queer indigenous eye for EDI. They say that EDI initiatives often rely on the extraction of indigenous queer stories and emotions, especially pain and resilience, without shifting depiction-making power or centering indigenous frameworks. Two-spirit people are asked to share their experiences in panels, workshops, and campaigns, performing vulnerability in spaces that have not transformed their underlying logics (Terry & epperson, 2025). This expectation echoes Fricker's (2007) testimonial injustice: two-spirit people are granted conditional credibility as witnesses to suffering but not as theorists of what justice requires. At the affective level, they are asked to narrate traumatic events in the service of institutional learning while maintaining trust that the institution will eventually respond appropriately. Terry and epperson call for a fundamental reorientation: from institutional self-improvement to relational accountability, in which institutions are compelled to demonstrate trustworthiness through action rather than asking for trust in advance.

Two-spirit story work again shows the experiences of affective colonialism and its refusal. In Ma Nee chacaby's interview, the two-spirited interviewer refrains "coming out" of the closet, but by coming into themselves "there are no closets in tipis" they said. This statement challenges a dominant western script in which queer subjects prove authenticity by confessing their identity in relation to a specific space and a public sphere. Instead, they situate two-spirit becoming as a self recognition in a relational movement of indigenous speciality and community. Identity is not a secret to be revelatory to institutions, it's a process of returning to oneself, one's teachings, and one's relations (Chacaby, 2025). This reframing disrupts the affective script that positions institutions as the primary audience of queer revelation as holders of recognition. Other powerful knowledge comes with Ma Nee's advice to "love yourself the way you have to love yourself" and "sit beside a tree one day, something will happen" telling how she felt more secure than ever (Chacaby, 2025). She locates healing and strength not in institutional approval but in land-based connection and self-acceptance. Trust, in her teachings, is redirected from state to land. This is a refusal to affective colonialism: hope and love don't need to be tied to colonial institutions.

Rodney (Geeyo) Poucette's story of dancing in the women's category at powwows offers another window into affective regulation and resistance. They recall that they "should have said that they were two-spirit" because people didn't know a "guy" was dancing in the girls' category. When an Elder humiliated them, the shaming works as an attempt to regulate feeling by installing embarrassment and self-doubt about honoring the female spirit in them. Geeyo's mother counters this violence by telling stories of respected two-spirit people who were respected and by encouraging them to keep dancing as a path of healing. Then they reflect "when you start healing yourself, then you can start healing other people" (Poucette, 2023). Here, affective life becomes resurgence. Rather than directing trust to institutions, Geeyo's narrative centers trust to two-spirit continuities, refusing the emotional script of self-hatred and silence.

This perspective suggests that the politics of inclusion is also a politics of feeling. EDI often asks two-spirit people to trust institutions, to be patient with slow progress, and to express gratitude for limited recognition: they manage to appropriate emotions in a way they reinforce existing power relations. In contrast, two-spirit resurgence cultivates affective practices that refuse institutional demands and reorient trust toward land, ancestors, and community. Understanding this emotional terrain is essential for analyzing how institutional inclusion so often fails, and why resurgence offers more transformative possibilities. This is why storytelling and two-spirit story work needs to be a central practice through which epistemic and affective justice are pursued.

Storytelling, Epistemic Justice, and Two-spirit resurgence

If epistemic and affective colonialism work to misrecognize, silence, and emotionally discipline two-spirit people, then storytelling becomes a crucial site of refusal and transformation. Indigenous

scholars insist that stories are not merely illustrations of theory, but theory itself, governance, and pedagogy. Siam, Desai, and Ritskes (2012) describe it as an “act of living resistance”, arguing that stories carry teachings, ethics, and political analysis that challenge western assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge. So, treating indigenous stories as secondary to written theory reproduces epistemic injustice by reaffirming colonial hierarchies (Sium et al, 2012).

Simpson (2011) similarly frames Nishnaabeg stories as the primary text through which resurgence is enacted, demonstrating that storytelling is simultaneously intellectual, spiritual, and deeply rooted in land-based relationships. With this, two-spirit story work is not supplementary to academic theory; it is a central mode of theorizing about gender, sexuality, land and survival.

Approaching two-spirit video testimonies in this way foregrounds them as sites of epistemic justice, and not treating them as raw data to be used as examples. This paper reads them as theoretical interventions that critique colonial institutions and articulate alternative understanding of identity.

Taken together, this works on what Medina (2013) calls an epistemology of resistance, in which marginalized communities cultivate their own epistemic frames in the face of oppression. Rather than wanting to be recognized as credible by colonial institutions, two-spirit knowledge holders speak to and for one another, grounding their authority in land, ancestry, and shared struggle. Their stories contest testimonial injustice by being theorist of colonialism, survival, and solutions refusing the limits of western categories. Storytelling in this context is not an add-on to politics, it's the place where alternatives to colonial inclusion are imagined and created.

These narratives also intervene directly in the realm of affect. As Wilson (2008) and Sium et al. (2012) say, indigenous research and story work are grounded in relational accountability: to tell a story is to enter into responsibility relationship with listeners, land, and ancestors. Two-spirit stories about shame,

grief, joy, compassion do not merely describe feelings, they reorient them away from institutions toward community and land. When Ma Nee's grandmother invites her to connect with the land, she is teaching affective practice that is true to their knowledge and not to institutional validation (Chacaby, 2025). When Geeyo's mothers tell them to keep dancing until they heal, she centers community resurgence (Poucette, 2023). In this way, storywork confronts epistemic and affective colonialism. Showing that the work of resurgence is as much about reclaiming how people know and feel as it is about changing policies and laws. At the same time, it points toward other ways of living together, rooted in land, kinship, and responsibility, that can guide more accountable and decolonial forms of inclusion.

Conclusion

This paper asked how do queer indigenous resurgence movements in Canada challenge colonial frameworks and what tensions emerge from it. Drawing on decolonial theory, work on epistemic and affective injustice, and two-spirit story work in written and audiovisual form, show that contemporary frameworks of inclusion remain deeply entangled with settler colonial power, even as they increasingly name and celebrate two-spirit identities.

At a structural level, decolonial scholars remind us that Canada is a settler colonial state whose legitimacy rests on ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands and suppression of their governance. Within this structure, heteropatriarchy is not incidental but central: colonial projects have sought to recognize Indigenous kinship, erase non-binary roles, and impose Christian, binary gender norms as a part of securing control over land and life. Read through this lens, EDI initiatives that promise inclusion into existing institutions risk becoming a settler move to incense.

The framework of epistemic injustice helped illuminate how these dynamics manifest in knowledge practices. Two-spirit people frequently experience testimonial injustice, as their teachings about land, spirituality, and gender are heard as “cultural” rather than serious theory. Hermeneutical injustice appears where dominant frameworks lack concepts to capture the relational, spiritual, and land-based dimensions of two-spirit existence, forcing them to navigate lives that others refuse to interpret. EDI practices that invite them to share stories without rethinking who is allowed to define problems, evidence, and solutions risk reproducing epistemic oppression even as they appear inclusive.

The concept of affective colonialism extended this critique by showing how institutions also manage emotions. This analysis suggests that EDI and reconciliation frameworks often ask indigenous and Indigeneer communities to extend optimism and trust toward institutions that have repeatedly harmed them. Government action plans and institutional statements present the state and organization as morally evolving subjects deserving of patience and gratitude, while those who express anger, skepticism, or refusal can be framed as unreasonable. Two-spirit storywork contests these affective demands as they don't align their feelings with the narratives institutions tell about themselves.

Against these colonial epistemic regimes, two-spirit resurgence emerges as a transformative alternative. Stories shared do more than document suffering and resilience, they theorize two-spirit roles as healing and governance, reclaim pre-colonial history in which gender and sexual diversity is normal, and model relational practices grounded in land, chosen kinship, and intergenerational care. These stories challenge both epistemic and affective terms in which EDI usually proceeds.

Taken together, the findings suggest that two-spirit inclusion inside colonial EDI frameworks is structurally limited. Policies and programs can generate important gains, but they need to center questions about land, jurisdiction, and authority over justice. The tension is not simply between “good”

and “bad” inclusion, but between inclusion as relationship grounded in indigenous governance and relational accountability.

For EDI practitioners, policy makers, and queer movements, this analysis carries certain implications. What they are doing is not enough, institutions must be prepared to let two-spirit teachings reshape their understanding of knowledge, responsibility, and belonging. Also, addressing epistemic injustice requires more than consultation, it requires ceding conceptual and decision-making power so that indigenous frameworks can lead. And finally, affective justice needs that institutions stop demanding trust and gratitude in advance and instead cultivate trustworthiness through concrete actions, including support for land defense, two-spirit -led programs and information.

Ultimately, the challenge posed by two-spirit resurgence is not simply to “include” them in Canadian society, it is to transform the very terms on which society is imagined. That transformation begins when institutions stop asking to be trusted and instead learn to be accountable to people that have always held knowledge about how to live differently together on these territories.

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