



LAND, LANGUAGE AND TWO-SPIRIT BEINGS

ANDREA CUSTER

Sky, my handsome daughter, is my greatest teacher. Her name suits her as the Sky has no assigned gender, it is neither female or male. Sky in our Cree language is *kîsik*.

kîsik; beautiful, majestic, necessary and powerful.

Early Years

My daughter was born on April 1st, 1996. I would dress her in pretty dresses as a toddler and young child. She had long, curly hair, which she cut off one day at the age of four years. At this time, she started playing with and wearing Pokemon clothes; then later Spongebob and cowboys were the trend. Sky always had boys for best friends, so I just assumed she was a tomboy. No big deal.

School

At school, Sky had a difficult time because kids would often put her down. She was determined to dress like a boy, and at first glance, you couldn't tell that she was a girl. It was also a challenging place to be because she refused to use the girl's bathroom and wasn't allowed in the boy's bathroom. There were no gender-neutral bathrooms available, so home was the best place for bathroom breaks, which often caused Sky to be late and get in trouble, or to be treated differently by staff. Phone calls from schools became the norm, and at one point the school put her in a school for 'troubled' kids. My mom would remind me of how well she did in her primary years, how bright she was and how easily she grasped concepts. I thought that she was

KÎSIK; BEAUTIFUL, MAJESTIC,

NECESSARY AND POWERFUL



being difficult with staff; little did I know that she was having daily struggles she with her identity as a young Indigenous two-spirit being, with no one to speak to about it.

Coming 'Out' & Relationships

I still didn't know that I was the mother of a two-spirit child until her pre-teen years, when I found out that she had a girlfriend. I asked her about my reaction, and she said that my response was that she shouldn't be scared to tell me anything and that I wouldn't judge her. What little I knew about gay and lesbians came from the movie "Boys Don't Cry," and this filled me with fear for my baby. I calmed these fears by having discussions with Sky about being honest and not deceiving people about her identity. To me, as her mother, her non-conforming

gender and sexuality was no big deal, but to some family members being gay was a sin. I was livid when word came back about what had been said to her: that she was a sinner and that she would go to hell! It was then that we had a good discussion about the impacts of Christianization on Indigenous families. Over time, family has come to accept and love her for who she is and they have begun questioning the effects of Christianity and the imposition of gender binaries in their own lives. None of this would have been possible if it weren't for Sky. I had never agreed with a lot of my Catholic upbringing, including the idea of gays and lesbians were sinners, so I looked to my own Cree language and traditional teachings for guidance.

Land, Language and the Connection to Two-Spirit Beings

My Cree language tells me that about how we do not gender the Earth: Water is nipi, Sky is kîsik, Earth is askiy, wind is thôtin, clouds are wasko and sun is pîsim. We often look to nature to guide how we as humans should live our lives. What we find in our language is that these elements are non-gendered and that nature teaches us about love, acceptance and diversity. In *Our Coming In Stories: Cree Identity, Body Sovereignty and Gender Self-Determination*, Alex Wilson writes that our Cree Principles of wahkotôwin, tapâhtîthimowin and mitho-pimatisiwin guide our lives and help us to live in balance. In Indigenous societies, two-spirit beings are part of this balance: they were not historically rejected but accepted as equals.

Traditional Child-Rearing Practices

As a mother of a two-spirit being what I know is this; there are enough difficult situations out there in the world for our two-spirit children. They are challenged with racism, classism, homophobia and transphobia, so the suicide rates are higher for two-spirited children. We as Indigenous parents have been blessed with the SACRED responsibility of protecting and loving our children. To reject them is to leave them vulnerable to even more harm. We cannot tell our children who to be, we do not have that control; and children who display non-conforming genders as neither strictly male or female are demonstrating a healthy creative variation of gender. Our homes for our two-spirit children need to be spaces that are filled with love, hope

and encouragement, spaces in which we can have dialogues about colonialism and its impacts on Indigenous people, to think critically about systems of power and hierarchy, to remember and honour our teachings as well as our ties to the lands from which we come.

Sky's Reflection

When I speak with Sky about all of this, she says that she didn't know that two-spirit meant Aboriginal and Queer. She laughs and says: "I feel happy that I don't have to hide who I am, that I'm free to express myself and I feel sad for people who don't have that kind of love and support from their families. Their lives must be hard." With tears in her eyes, we talk about someone she knows and his experience hiding his identity for years: "I couldn't imagine what my life would have been like if you didn't love me unconditionally."

KIT THOMAS >



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