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ÉGALÉ fait la promotion de l'égalité et de la justice pour les personnes lesbiennes, gaies, bisexuelles et transgenres, et leur famille, partout au Canada

THE INTERSECTION OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION & RACE: CONSIDERING THE EXPERIENCES OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDERED ("GLBT") PEOPLE OF COLOUR & TWO-SPIRITED PEOPLE

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A Research Paper prepared for EGALÉ Canada

(a Canadian organisation committed to advancing equality and justice for
gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, and their families)

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The History of the Research Project

EGALE's Executive Director, John Fisher participated in the second Preparatory Committee for the "World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance" ("WCAR") in Geneva in the spring of 2001. He and representatives of other like-minded organizations took the initiative to form a caucus on "Sexual Orientation, Multiple Discrimination and Related Intolerance". There was significant interest in this meeting that eventually had over 40 participants from more than 20 countries.

This paper is the second stage in what is anticipated by EGALE to be part of a longer-term process of learning more about the experiences and perspectives of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people in Canada. It is hoped that by continuing to work with GLBT people of colour, Two-Spirited people and the organisations that serve their needs, EGALE will be more effectively able to advance the dignity and equality of all GLBT & Two-Spirited people in Canada.

In their own words...

How can EGALE help in dealing with the fact of systemic racism?

First, by recognising that gay communities are not all white. Secondly, EGALE needs to begin a dialogue with organisers within the black community.¹

The Challenges and Benefits of Working in Coalition with Each Other

As Audre Lorde is reported to have once said, 'working in coalition is never easy. If it's easy, you ain't doing it right.' One of the reasons working in coalition isn't easy is because a *common identity* simply can never be assumed, rather, *shared interests and goals* must be negotiated, even contested. Essentially, working in coalition should be a process of educating each other and often, re-educating ourselves—unlearning oppressive mentalities, unburdening ourselves of the colonial yoke that has bound so many of us for so many years as peoples under siege. These processes, these struggles, are continuous, not finite.

EGALE and I recognise that we are relatively young and inexperienced in the community of individuals and organisations working towards understanding the perspectives and serving the needs of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people in Canada. As such, we feel that it is important to share some of our perspectives about the basis and goals of this report:

➤ The Problem with Speaking of 'People of Colour & Two-spirited People'

We recognise that this category starts with the myth of white supremacy, it is a category that simplistically groups people together as 'not-white'. This category is problematic for many reasons not least of which is that it cannot appreciate the reality of racism between racial and ethnic groups referred to as people of colour. However, we also believe that despite its racist origins it can be effectively used as a basis for work in coalition with each other as a *living concept*, not a *fixed category*. The concept of 'People of Colour and First Nations' People' is that we have *all* been the victims of the myth of white supremacy. Its use in this report *is not intended* to support the racist assumption that all people of colour

have the same history and culture, or that we all currently experience racism to the same degree and in the same ways. Put simply, the use of this concept is a reflection of our hope that we can participate with other organisations and individuals in the process of identifying our common interests and sharing our unique strengths and perspectives with each other. ‘As Francisco Valdes put it:

[...] any particular (mis)perception of sameness or difference, whether deemed substantively “real” or not, cannot become the point; the point is what we make of the perception — how we interpret sameness and difference, how we imbue perceptions of sameness and difference with cultural, legal, theoretical or political significance, and how we then accommodate each other constructively and mutually in the face of significant difference.²

» Recognising the Work Being Done & the Risk of Appropriation

As Fiona Meyer-Cook noted in her research report “The Two-Spirit Papers: The impact of heterosexism and homophobia on Inuit and First Nations People’s Lives”, much of the work about the experiences of First Nations people has been produced from an anthropological perspective by people who are not members of those communities.³ Anthropological perspectives are inherently problematic for several reasons, including that they are invariably tainted by the foreign cultural biases of the observer and also because they represent an appropriation of people’s voices. For example, a young two-spirited man described an incident that occurred at a conference he was attending. A white man began to discuss and explain First Nations people’s concept of being two-spirited. The young two-spirited man’s reaction was one of anger and resentment, not only because this discussion forced him to recall his own painful experiences as a two-spirited man, but also because he himself was still in the process of learning about *his* identity as a two-spirited man.⁴ These issues are relevant to most if not all GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people who must educate themselves about their heritage communities’ pre-colonial views (often relatively positive compared to Western/European views of the time) about gender and sexual diversity.

It must be understood therefore, that this report is certainly not immune from these shortcomings. Nevertheless, it is hoped that these shortcomings will be considered in their context, namely, as an attempt to be inclusive of as many perspectives of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people as possible.

Still, it is important to honour and respect the work being done by various organisations and individuals working within their heritage communities. As such, EGALE offers its gratitude to the following organisations for their willingness to share their work with us:

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Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (Black CAP)

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Methodology

The Author

This report was written by a gay man who identifies as mixed-race (Indo-Caribbean and white-Dutch). He is currently working as a human rights lawyer in Canada, however, he has also worked in South Africa and the U.S. in areas including discrimination related to race, gender, class & sexual orientation.

The Advisory Committee:

The research and writing of the paper was supervised by a Committee of people including several people of colour from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. (See Appendix Four.)

Sources

This paper incorporates and relies upon several sources of information:

- Interviews conducted by the researcher of the paper with GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people from various ethnic and racial backgrounds
- Interviews conducted by the researcher of the paper with organisations that serve the needs of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people
- A Survey (attached as "Appendix One") completed by GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people

- An extensive review of pre-existing materials on the subject of the experiences and perspectives of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people.

The Survey

The survey posed questions related to three broad subject areas: Personal Identity; Personal Experiences and General Reflections about Oppression & Discrimination; and Community and Familial Relationships.

The Relevance of the Issue of Sexual Orientation Based Discrimination at the World Conference Against Racism

Around the world, lesbians, gay men and bisexual and transgender people are imprisoned under laws which police the bedroom and criminalize a kiss; they are tortured to extract confessions of "deviance" and raped to "cure" them of it; they are killed by "death squads" in societies which view them as "desechables" - disposable garbage...the ways and means in which that violence manifests itself can vary enormously. LGBT people's vulnerability to violence will also depend on such factors as gender, ethnicity and economic status. Such factors may also affect the victim's access to justice.

In virtually every part of the globe, LGBT lives are constrained by a web of laws and social practices which deny them an equal right to life, liberty and physical security, as well as other fundamental rights such as freedom of association, freedom of expression and rights to private life, employment, education and health care. While the degree to which discrimination is institutionalized varies from country to country, almost nowhere are LGBT people treated as fully equal before the law.⁵

In their own words...

As recently as May 2001 in Egypt, 55 or more gay men were arrested and charged under public indecency laws...In this particular case, I feel that the Egyptian government is simply trying to ease the pressure from the Egyptian populace to take direct action to stop the aggressions of the Israeli government/military, and to divert attention away from the plight of the Palestinians...The Egyptian government in collusion with the state-controlled mainstream media further cements the fervour of the populace by framing the arrests in nationalist and Islamist rhetoric. This way the Egyptian government can be seen to be actively addressing so-called 'foreign influences', by challenging the proliferation of 'vices' such as homosexuality that, in the eyes of the many Egyptians, are seen as the result of European influences. This practise of cultural othering and inferiorizing of the West serves to satiate the appetite of the disenfranchised populace and allows them to feel morally superior to Westerners.⁶

issues, among others, that are often ignored or given only tangential importance. Many advocacy groups define 'sexual orientation' and related discrimination in a way that slots people into separate and discrete categories. These categories prevent consideration of

The persecution and equality of GLBT & Two-Spirited people have become, in recent years, topics that are more commonly being considered and debated at the international level. Indeed, the issue came to prominence when U.N. member countries voted to deny permission to the International Lesbian and Gay Association to attend the World Conference Against Racism as an accredited non-governmental organisation. This exclusion is especially unfortunate because GLBT people of colour, Two-Spirited people and people in same-sex relationships have had very few forums in which to consider their experiences of complex and intersectional oppression & discrimination related to both their race and also their sexual orientation.

In the debates about the inequality of GLBT & Two-Spirited people, both race and racism are

In their own words

LGBT mainstream organizations rarely make the effort to recruit people of colour or 2-spirited peoples on their steering committees or even within their membership, nor do they visibly support anti-racism efforts.⁷

racially based differences.⁸ Conversely, the governments of many developing nations have taken the official position that equality for GLBT people is exclusively a Western issue, or even more strongly, that GLBT people and/or same-sex relationships are unnatural and/or against the law of God. These are just two examples of the ways in which GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people are forced to split their identities and even their very lives into separate spheres of existence.

The experiences and oppression of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people must, therefore, be considered holistically. Unless this discussion takes place, people around the world who face intersectional or complex oppression related to both their sexual orientation and race will continue to be silenced both within their countries and more broadly as participants in international society. In this report, the perspectives and experiences of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people in Canada are discussed. It is hoped that this report will provide some insight into the obstacles facing people who experience oppression related to their race and sexual orientation. In turn, it is hoped that this report will provide a limited basis upon which to begin formulating strategies for challenging some of the many faces of racism.

The Concept & Reality of Intersectional or Complex Oppression

Lesbians have never had and do not have the economic or cultural power that gay men have possessed and still do possess. All lesbians experience not only lesbophobia, but sexism as well. Consequently, their oppression is double that of gay white men. Also, if they are a lesbian of colour (black or aboriginal etc.) then their oppression is more multi-layered.⁹

Not all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and two-spirited ("GLBT & two-spirited") people are affected by oppression and/or discrimination in the same way and to the same degree. Although all GLBT & Two-Spirited people experience homophobia and heterosexism to varying degrees, it

cannot reasonably be claimed that they share one common identity. For example, a wealthy gay white man does not experience discrimination and oppression in the same way and to the same degree as a working class lesbian who must remain married to a man if she is to be able to feed herself and her children.

A person's or group of people's identity and his/her/their relative privilege or disadvantage vary depending upon the intersection or combination of a complex set of factors, such as race, sex, economic class, national origin, place/country of residence, physical/mental ability, family status, ethnicity, religion etc. Even within a group of people the experiences of GLBT people & Two-Spirited people vary. The notion of complex oppression is not a recent one. As early as 1851 Sojourner Truth, a freed black woman living in the United States noted that the racism and sexism that she experienced could not be neatly separated into distinct issues. Sojourner had been shushed by white women who did not want to 'obscure' the matter of a universal franchise (women's right to vote, own property etc.) with the issue of the abolition of slavery. Tired of listening to the claims of white men—that 'women' could not have a public life because of their 'delicate nature'—she finally declared:

Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have born thirteen children, and seen most of 'em sold into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me—and ain't I a woman?¹⁰

Oppression and relative disadvantage often cannot be effectively challenged unless their complex and interrelated causes and effects are examined holistically from multiple perspectives. The implications of ignoring these complexities are very real for people who experience multidimensional oppression. For example, violence motivated by hatred is a sad reality which threatens many groups in this society, including (but certainly not limited to) people of colour and GLBT and two-spirited people. For GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people who are victims of violence, it may

In their own words...

I found it hard to embrace my gayness because so much of my energy was spent trying, in turn, to deny, erase, accept and defend my ethnic identity, which, after all, was the visible one, whereas gayness could be hidden. The double stress of having to deal with external and internalized racism, as well as external and internalized heterosexism, was a major factor in my development as a self-accepting, openly gay man.¹¹

People only have so much "tolerance." It is okay to be black as long as you conform (try to act white and straight). It may be okay to be a lesbian as long as you are otherwise "normal."¹²

simply be impossible to tell whether the motivation for a particular attack was racism, homophobia or some combination of both.

One such attack was upon a 29 year-old gay Puerto Rican man named Julio Rivera in Queens, New York in 1990.¹³ This man was attacked and killed by three members of a neo-Nazi/white supremacist gang, one of whom later confessed that Rivera was killed because ‘he was gay.’ Both the media and the police seemed intent on ignoring the obvious homophobic aspect of the crime, the latter refusing to list it as an ‘anti-gay crime.’ Activists in turn challenged the police refusal, arguing that this murder was precisely that: an ‘anti-gay’ crime. They argued furthermore that the police reaction was itself tantamount to ‘homophobia.’

One of many disheartening observations that can be made about these events—the crime, the investigation, media portrayal, and the reaction of activists—is that since the debate, as framed by activists, seemed to contemplate only ‘homophobia’, the issue of race was left unexamined and the evidence of racism unchallenged. Both the police and the media were permitted to utilize racist stereotypes about gay men and Latino people generally to obfuscate the issue of homophobia. Rivera became the stereotypical poor Latino man: a drug addict and/or dealer (read ‘death: typical and unimportant’) and certainly too much of a hot ‘Macho Latino’ to be gay (read ‘too butch to be a femme’). Whether the police were blinkered by their own stereotypical assumptions or more consciously racist/homophobic in motivation, as Darren Hutchinson writes: ‘The activists’ essentialist framing of the crime as a “gay” bashing, rather than a *racist-homophobic* attack, may actually have invited the police to use Rivera’s race to erase his gayness’ (emphasis added).¹⁴

More recently a young Haitian man named Abner Louima was brutally attacked and anally raped using a wooden stick by several New York City police officers. As John R. Keene noted,

[t]he earliest media reports intimated that Louima may have been at a gay club, and that his injuries, so severe that they nearly killed him, were the result of violent anal sex...In other words, [the police officers were] attempting to use blatant homophobia to evade responsibility for a heinous act of racial violence....¹⁵

In Canada, courts are mandated by s. 718.2 of the *Criminal Code* to impose more severe penalties for crimes motivated by hatred on certain grounds, including sexual orientation, sex and race. Many police services maintain hate crimes units, which specifically seek to address the particular complexities of hate-motivated violence. Currently, however, no national mechanism exists for tracking the prevalence of hate crimes in Canada. In addition, the current law does not adequately reflect the reality that hate-motivated crimes are often based on the intersection of multiple grounds of discrimination.

Your friend is beaten up on the street and you don't know if it's because the attacker didn't like Indians or fags.¹⁶

Another important point that these examples illustrate is that the concept of intersectional oppression is not limited to a claim of greater oppression as compared to other people, although this certainly is often the case. The concept also recognises that, for example, GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people may experience sexual orientation oppression ‘differently’ than people who do not face racism. These differences in turn often

require that any challenge to their oppression incorporate consideration of multiple sources of oppression simultaneously.

For example, people who experience multiple forms of oppression often also face a conflict of identities. They are pressured to form uneasy and partial alliances with communities constructed in opposition, thereby splitting their very existence into incomplete pieces. As Richard Telfer has explained it:

Conerly maintains that many 'African-American lesbigays' experience conflict between their two identities because 'they perceive racism among white lesbigays and homophobia among heterosexual blacks.' As a consequence, many black gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals do not feel fully accepted in either community. Moreover, the conflict between their identities is often intensified by a lack of overlap - or sometimes by an overt antagonism - between 'mostly white lesbigay cultures' and 'mostly heterosexual black cultures.' Conerly explains that this separation leaves black gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals in a dilemma: they may choose to move between the two cultures (and thus between their identities) or to choose a primary affiliation with either culture (thus emphasizing one identity at the expense of the other).¹⁷ References Omitted.

More than simply forcing a splitting of identities, the failure to recognise the complexity of intersectional oppression results in a more basic inability to effectively challenge the oppression on a holistic level. For example, a Canadian expert in income tax law has argued that the re-definition of spouse in the Canadian *Income Tax Act* to include people in same-sex relationships results in a net loss of after tax income for those couples with low incomes but it results in a net increase for couples in which a wealthy partner financially supports his/her same-sex spouse.¹⁹ Therefore, although an exclusively opposite-sex definition of spouse in laws oppresses all GLBT people insofar as they fundamentally deny the validity of those relationships, the simple redefinition of spouse may do little, or may even magnify the oppression experienced by many GLBT and two-spirited people. Given the relative economic disadvantages experienced by women and people of colour, to name just two, the mandatory inclusion of same-sex couples as spousal units within the income tax system will likely have a more adverse impact upon women and people of colour. As one expert in human rights noted: 'those whom marriage is most likely to benefit are those who are already fairly high up in the hierarchy of privilege that pervades society at large.'²⁰

In their own words...

Regarding same-sex marriage and spousal rights...a large segment of the gay black population are not there yet. They cannot access these benefits. There is a need to deal with systemic issues first.¹⁸

The concept of complex or intersectional oppression has been explained by reference to a graphical metaphor. Imagine that oppression and relative disadvantage in society is a line. Challenging oppression related to only one identity marker, such as sexual orientation, could then be represented as an attempt to get to the other side of the line. However, challenging oppression more generally, along all or several of the axes upon which it operates, would be represented as an attempt to erase the line altogether. Thus, any challenge to oppression and relative disadvantage based upon multiple perspectives and related to several identity markers is by necessity, more comprehensive. This approach is the crux of the concept of intersectional or complex oppression analyses.

Issues & Themes Raised in Surveys and Interviews

Homophobia in Ethnic Communities and Families

Within the Canadian context, it is often assumed that non-Western/non-white communities and cultures are more homophobic than the dominant Western/white communities. This assumption is often based upon unexamined and simplistic racist assumptions about the lack of sophistication or the cultural backwardness of non-Western/white cultures. The stereotype is so widespread and hurtful that when questioned about the 'general attitudes' of their heritage community, several research subjects expressed suspicion or downright annoyance about and objection to the question.

In their own words...

I grew up in a progressive family, so there was no closet to come out of.²¹

Several interviewees did, however, share personal opinions about whether or not their heritage community was more, less, different or no different than other communities in terms of the nature and extent of homophobia. In an interview, Peter Flegel of the 'Center for Research-Action on Race Relations' in Montreal, indicated that studies on the prevalence of homophobia within African-American communities were at best inconclusive and at worst contradictory. Similarly, the opinions of participants of this survey indicated that accurate generalisations about the levels of homophobia within entire ethno-racial communities are impossible. The opinions expressed by interviewees can be organised into several loosely defined topics.

➤ Reflections about General Attitudes in Heritage Communities

There were inconsistent opinions about the homophobia within heritage communities on several levels.

In their own words...

[GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people] are usually lumped under the banner of "perverts" in all the racial/ethnic communities that I belong to. The general attitudes within the Caribbean communities are negative. This can result in negative stereotypes, jokes, isolation, socially acceptable abuse, and violence. This is changing however, as Caribbean lgbt/2-spirited peoples become more visible.

A gay man born and raised in Nepal but living in Canada now, said that the general attitude of the South Asian community toward homosexuality was that it was 'at best, tolerated, at worst, persecuted.' However, this same man also noted that he received support regarding his being gay from some members of the South Asian

community. A woman of South Asian heritage indicated that 'generally [South Asian people in Toronto] are homophobic. They make it hard for us. At the same time, there are exceptions to this and I know many exceptional people.' She also explained that 'alienated would be a better word than excluded. I see little reflection of myself when I go to "general" South Asian events or spaces.' Another woman of South Asian heritage spoke about another way in which the homophobia within her community is qualified:

Because those involved in Indian cultural events can have very traditional ideas, I believe that they would have a very negative attitude. This has not, however, been my experience with younger, urban Indian women, who are sometimes more open-minded.²²

In their own words...

I know many gay Caucasian men who came out at age 16, 17 or 18, and whose gay lives have unfolded in very different ways than mine. I came out at age 24, after years of struggling to admit to myself that I was gay...I spent years trying to convince myself I was bisexual, tried to date women, etc. My parents took a close interest in my development, seldom seen in Caucasian families where privacy is more insisted upon and in which the children leave home earlier armed with the Western notion of independence at all cost. My father interfered in my life to such an extent that coming out would have been tantamount to being disowned and driven from my home. Because I wanted to remain close to my mother and sister, I opted for co-existence and secrecy -- a very Asian compromise -- and only came out when I was positive I would get a good reception. However, I am now much more open about my sexuality, and in every facet of my life, than most Caucasian gays that I know.²³

A participant who was of Indo-Caribbean heritage noted that although attitudes towards homosexuality within the Indo-Caribbean communities and Caribbean communities more generally are negative, they are evolving. However, in response to a question about the relative difficulty of 'coming out' within his communities as compared to Western/white communities, he indicated that: 'I would say it's "simply different" as I had to deal with coming out to general mainstream culture and the Caribbean/South Asian culture.'

A native Canadian (Mi'kmaq) who identified as gay²⁴ and lives in the eastern part of Canada believed that within his heritage community the attitudes towards homosexuality are essentially the same as that of Canadian society more generally. However, he also indicated about 'coming-out' that 'in terms of living on the reserve, it was much more difficult. They don't really understand it, and they generally fear what they don't understand.' Peter Flegel, a Black gay Montrealer, believes that 'while progress has been made, it still seems that as a community, Black Canadians tend to be more homophobic than Canadians are in general. In this, the perception that the Black community is more homophobic seems to hold true.'

➤ Considerations of Colonisation and Context

While we have been changed by you

This is not us

It is not you.

and so we begin again.²⁵

Another very important issue raised by several of the survey participants was that even if it may be true that some of their heritage communities are homophobic, these attitudes were invariably inherited from the West/Europe. As Peter Flegel noted, 'homophobia among racialized communities seems to be a product of European colonization. In several African societies, gays and lesbians had special social and religious functions and were revered by the members of their communities. After colonization, Africans began to traditionalize European homophobia.'

In their own words...

Muslim nations as well as Muslim communities living in the West are generally more homophobic at this moment globally in comparison to Judeo-Christian Western nations. But to a large extent this global proliferation of homophobia in Muslim communities/nations is part of an anti-imperialist movement to resist what is seen as Western, liberal ideas about sexuality and sexual identity. Historically there have been periods in Islamic history where the West was considered much less tolerant of sexual difference and much more prone to labelling such activities as heretical.²⁶

In the report, *We Are Part of a Tradition: A Guide on Two-Spirited People for First Nations Communities*, Deschamps wrote that:

Today, modern Euro-Western society views us as dykes, fags, perverts and queers. In the Aboriginal community, many of our people have adopted these negative attitudes and many two-spirited people have been ostracized from their own communities. However, we as two-spirited people are determined to reclaim our rightful place within the circle of all Aboriginal people...

We have come to believe that two-spirited First Nations people are disgusting and perverse. We learned that before colonization to be "two-spirited" was a gift which had promise and potential. Two-spirited people were respected and honoured, and were visionaries and healers in our communities. We have rediscovered that we continue to have a spiritual place in our world.

Through the decolonization process, we as two-spirited people are striving to reclaim our traditional positions within our Nations and are taking our rightful place.²⁷

Another contextual factor that is often ignored by many social critics of the alleged homophobia of people of colour and First Nations' people is that the homophobia of these communities is often part of the more general defensive posture of peoples under attack. As one South Asian man said about his family: 'They already think that a minority has a more difficult time in life, and now they worry that I will be without friends as I age, and that I will not be accepted at my place of employment.'²⁸

As one young mixed-race bisexual woman explained about one of her communities, 'there was a tension, especially within the black community. [Homosexuality] is more taboo when

In their own words...

[My father] experienced a tremendous amount of racism when he came to Canada in the late 1960's (denial of jobs/housing/services directly based on race) and I remember him saying that, "you have one strike against you, you don't need two."²⁹

you're speaking of the black community. It is a matter of pride to be heterosexual.' This pride is informed by a more general need for communities under assault to expect a higher level of perfection, to avoid any additional bases upon which their normality, even their very humanity can be questioned.

As one gay man put it, 'I think Aboriginal people are harder on themselves than most people...so being gay is looked at as a failure regardless of the success of a person, keeping in mind how success is looked at.' This defensive posture among peoples under attack have been described in this way by other commentators:

for many black leaders and activists, visible/public homosexuality is understood to threaten [their] cultural capital...homosexuality is figured as a threat to the survival of black communities.³⁰ (References Omitted)

The hostility within the Aboriginal community [homophobia, intolerance, and discrimination relating to HIV/AIDS] may be the result of the Aboriginal experience of "oppression, racism and colonization" (*Matiation & Jurgens, 1998, Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 1996*) which has led to a

movement away from cultural tradition and the adoption of the homophobic attitudes associated with established religions.³¹

➤ Community vs. Family

Another complexity often ignored is the differences between the acceptance of a community in general versus the responses of family members. For example, one woman who said that the general attitude of her community was homophobic pointed out that her family were more willing to support her and her same-sex relationships:

In their own words...

Today, it's much better. Like myself, they have had a lot of time to learn and grow. The unconditional love received from my family has resulted in a tremendous amount of support for my work, school, and volunteer activities, which includes many gay related causes. They have even spoken up at our church or at family gatherings when a homophobic comment has been made.³²

Most of my family was very supportive. They only fear for my safety in terms of bashings.³³

'I never received any rejection. My family is not comfortable about it, but they are not overtly homophobic either. Helpful things have been done. They attended a commitment ceremony in my honour, some of my aunties made a point of inviting my girlfriend to family functions, my sister tries to mention I am a lesbian to everyone as a way of making the issue visible and to educate people, and my father has started to ask questions about my girlfriend. Mostly it was my confidence and persistence by not being

in the closet that I think helped. As soon as they realised that I was lesbian and "OK" they stopped being concerned for me (I think).'³⁴

➤ Observations

Clearly, it is both more productive and analytically sound to avoid simplistic assumptions about the level of homophobia within people of colour and First Nations' communities. More important are the ways homophobia affects GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people. As the responses in this survey clearly indicate, the impact can be devastating. This impact is compounded because often GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people face an impossible choice between the safety of their communities against racism and embracing their full identity, including their homosexuality.

Living in a White Country

In their own words...

I am part of the South Asian queer community in Toronto. I have friends in this community and go to events. It feels good to be part of those communities, because there is some reflection of who I am within it.³⁵

I feel partially excluded... perhaps because white people are considered the "gold standard" of the gay community. When you think Toronto Gay Community, you think of white people. For the segment most relevant to me, one would associate the gay community with young white males. Anything else is simply the fringes of the community.

Just as the dominant society and culture in Canada is Western and white, so it is in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities across the country. It is important to point out, however, that there also are communities of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people. Nevertheless, the dominant gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities are populated primarily by white people and as such they largely reflect Western values and cultures. Only one of the participants in this research project indicated that he did not feel excluded by the dominant gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community. He said: 'I don't feel excluded, as mentioned I'm very active in the [gay] community.'

Another point raised by some of the research

participants was that for many people of colour religion is an important dimension of their heritage community and their own value system. GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited are pressured to adapt to a mainstream GLBT community that, for the most part, is apathetic or even antagonistic towards organised religion. This is not to say that there is not a reasonable basis for that antagonism. Several organised religious institutions are responsible for centuries of vilifying and persecuting GLBT people around the world. But as Keith Boykin noted in his book One More River to Cross, the virulently homophobic rhetoric of the religious-right is not reflected in the sermons of the Black Ministers with whom he chooses to worship.³⁶ Indeed, many GLBT and two-spirited people, people of colour and white people alike, are creating and discovering religious communities that are neither homophobic nor heterosexist and in so doing, rediscovering their own spirituality.

Several of the participants described their experience in relation to the larger Western white gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community in terms of feelings of 'alienation'. As one woman put it: '...there is very little inclusion or reflection of who we are sometimes in general LGBT spaces...I would say that it is more like "alienation".'

These feelings of alienation arise from many complex and interrelated causes which range from an inability by the larger dominant Western white community to appreciate racism and simple cultural differences to the overwhelming emphasis on Western and white ideals of beauty in the media and in interpersonal relationships.

In their own words...

Being a person of colour makes me an outsider in mainstream queer communities. I haven't been able to find a queer community that is understanding of my experience as a person of colour...I can feel as much alienated at a gay club as at a straight club....³⁷

I don't "feel" excluded, but people that look like me are never represented within the gay media.³⁸

In the area of sexual attraction and intimate interpersonal relationships, GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people often must contend with being either invisible or hyper-visible as reflections of racially exotic objectifications.

When combined, these attitudes and behaviours conspire to prevent GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people from discovering and embracing their full identities. What was clear from research participants is that overcoming low self-esteem is especially difficult for GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people. Low self-esteem in turn manifests itself in destructive behaviour. For example, as one man who works with gay men from Southern Asia and of South Asian ethnic heritage explained: 'It is easy for many South Asian men to say yes to a white man who wants to have sex, even if that white man demands unsafe sex. white men are considered a prize of sorts. This incorporation of low self-esteem is also reflected among First Nations people.³⁹

In their own words...

The white gay community is welcoming of gay men [of colour] for their queerness (and exoticism), but doesn't deal well with issues of race/ethnicity. In fact, I've never run into racism that works in quite the same way...gay men of colour in the white gay community seem to be either exotic or completely undesirable because they're not blond with blue or green eyes. Other factors come into play of course to determine desirability (both in terms of sex and in terms of community membership) but race is definitely a factor.⁴⁰

Black men are often objectified and exoticized by white men as being muscular, dominant and possessing extremely large phalluses while young East Asians men are conceived as being docile and submissive. Those who don't correspond to these images often feel inadequate. These behaviours and stereotypes reinforce colonial attitudes. Interestingly, many gays and lesbians of colour seem to internalize these attitudes by refusing to date people of their same ethnic or racial group. In the Black community, many Black gay men do not believe that other Black men are worthy of being dated.⁴¹

There is an assumption that darker skin equals more macho.⁴²

Some people blatantly exhibit that they have no interest in getting to know us because we are people of colour.⁴³

Perhaps even more offensive is the fact that many gay white men, in particular, are aware—whether consciously or not—of the power they derive from the internalised racism of many gay men of colour. As one research participant put it, 'there is an assumption that I must be attracted to the North American ideal of gay male beauty (tall, heavily muscular and young Caucasian men) and that anything I may say to the contrary is just political correctness.'⁴⁷

In their own words...

People go through hell trying to find reflections of themselves in the gay community.⁴⁴

I also believe that my ethnic background makes me less attractive to others of all races in a culture that prizes whiteness. I sometimes believe it myself.⁴⁵

Self-esteem is definitely the biggest hurdle. I have had a sense of not fitting in my entire life, which, compounded by family rejection on racial and sexual orientation levels, does not provide a great basis for a healthy self-esteem.⁴⁶

A participant in a research project, reported in a publication entitled, *Voices of Two-Spirited Men: A Survey of Aboriginal Two-Spirited Men Across Canada* said this:

HIV is very common in First Nations people, we are a people with very low self-esteem. Alcohol and drugs are the real problem. We use substances to get away and hide, we get drunk and high, we may have unsafe sex, or we may have safe sex. Sometimes we just do not care. Alcohol and drugs give us courage sometimes. It is not even the sex it is the affection we really want.

What is also clear, however, is that GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people can overcome low self-esteem caused by racism, often by surrounding themselves with other GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people.

I used to reject my Chinese heritage and even used to try to be as Caucasian as possible in my behaviour and appearance, due to my rocky relationship with my father. Conversely, I used to favor my French heritage because it was "White" and more desirable, given the racism I faced at grade school. During my university years in Toronto, spent amongst new friends from every nation on earth, I slowly realized I felt good about my various ethnic identities (Chinese, French, Canadian) and could envision accepting all of them.⁴⁸

Racism and Related Oppression is not only a Problem in the Straight Community

In their own words...

At a lesbian bar, a woman leered at me and called me "shiva"⁴⁹ years ago...

The idea that is fundamentally racist is that gay people are all white. This is powerfully harmful to queer people of colour. The fact that there is racism within the mainstream GLBT organisations is undeniable.⁵⁰

It is often assumed that people who experience one form of oppression and discrimination are less likely to incorporate or inflict discrimination upon others. Sadly, this is not an accurate generalisation. Racism within dominant

Western and white gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities does exist. It ranges from being physically excluded from certain dance clubs and bars to receiving poor service in restaurants and shops that primarily serve lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered clientele.

Reflections about the Oppression Facing GLBT People of Colour and/or Two-Spirited People in Canada

It is clear, therefore, that GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people in Canada experience complex oppression related to both their sexual orientation and their race and ethnicity. This oppression manifests itself both in the form of direct discrimination and more subtle and systemic oppression. In this section, the breadth and complexity of the oppression faced by GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people are presented in their own words.

In their own words...

There is no safe place.⁵¹

The most painful oppression I have experienced has come from feminists and human rights orgs, partly because it can be extreme and partly because it is a place where you (naively) expect not to encounter these types of attitudes.⁵²

I was called a “Paki” in public school, called a faggot/queer in high school, gay bashed due to wearing a pink triangle on my jacket. I am questioned, searched and escorted in airports, including Canadian airports, due to my Arab name and brown skin. I am denied access to spousal specials/benefits offered by corporations....⁵³

People of colour in Canada often have to make a choice between participating in their ethnic/racial community or the gay white community. This is a painful choice.⁵⁴

There is very little funding to support services and organisations geared to providing support and serving the particular needs of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people. The funding there is, is too little. As a result, these services and organisations must try to survive based on volunteer support, which is difficult over the long term. This vacuum needs to be filled by people who can work full-time.⁵⁵

There is no access to funding to facilitate self-governance of people of colour. Creating organisations for themselves is therefore difficult...After years of speaking about diversity, what little diversity there is has been inserted into a heavily consumerist culture. The result is that there is only the façade of inclusivity.⁵⁶

Drawing on Our Strength as GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people

Despite the many challenges to be overcome, and the daunting setbacks, GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people often know their strengths, and overcome their challenges.

In their own words...

Often, the young two-spirited people who come into town are preyed upon by older white men, who cannot get anyone else. I would agree that the young two-spirited people and even the older ones struggle with low self-esteem. Often, they deal with it by picking up a habit or two. But I wouldn't want to say that that is all there is. There are so many good things happening out there. There are a lot of two-spirited people that are retracing their steps, as we say, they are rekindling the fires extinguished by our grandparents and our grandparents' grandparents. What we called two-spirited people are now often just called great orators, teachers, artists and lawyers. But the only ones we often seem to be interested in seeing are stumbling on the street.⁵⁹

In their own words...

In my full identity I am conscious of all aspects of who I am. I draw strength from all aspects of my identity.⁵⁷

I think that my ethnicity has had a positive impact on my analysis of queer issues, and has given me a better understanding of the types of discrimination that people face.⁵⁸

Moving Forward: Challenging the Oppression Facing GLBT People of Colour & Two-Spirited People

In their own words...

Generally, each group is only concerned with one form of oppression and doesn't like to be reminded about other forms of oppression, especially when it is being pointed out that they are contributing to, or failing to confront other forms of oppression.⁶⁰

The most consistent responses on any issue was whether the oppression of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people could be addressed without a holistic approach to all aspects of their identity and oppression. Here are some of their responses to the question: 'Do you think that it is possible to address or challenge one source of the oppression and/or relative disadvantage you experience (e.g. race-related oppression only) without considering

all aspects of your identity(ies)? Please explain why you do or do not think this is possible.'

In their own words...

No, as I am not a person of colour or a gay person alone, but much more complex. The oppression I experience/have experienced is similar in nature. Racism and homophobia is about power, power to influence the way services are delivered, the way employment, housing or education are accessed, the way families love each other, among other things...The link between the two is strong.⁶¹

No. Most are looking for an excuse to hate. It doesn't matter what you pinpoint as long as there remains one source of oppression.⁶²

...we have to address oppression on a holistic level, we must all stop discrimination against one another completely...there are no types or levels of oppression, it's all the same no matter how you look at it.⁶³

It comes in packages...it is not possible to isolate a feeling detached from the whole person's experience.⁶⁴

I think it is possible, I don't think it's desirable though...at their root all oppressions are linked and have to be dealt with comprehensively as far as possible, though I'm not sure how one would do that.⁶⁵

No, because they are all part of our personality. It is also useful to study or explain one type of oppression from the angle of another, to create better understanding.⁶⁶

Perhaps...[but] until oppression of minorities based on sexual orientation within their own communities is reduced, the vast majority of people within the gay community will always be white. A concerted effort to deal with LGBTQ minorities would thus be much more effective than any single pronged approach to this problem.⁶⁷

I have found it very difficult to separate the different aspects of my identity. I rarely encounter clear-cut cases of racism, homophobia or heterosexism, or sexism in daily life. Discriminatory treatment is very difficult to distil.⁶⁸

Unfortunately, most organisations dedicated to social change do not adopt a holistic approach to oppression.

Conclusion

Neither the complex oppression that GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people face, nor its effects are hypothetical or academic. They are very real.

We observed a trend toward greater suicidal thought among racial/ethnic minority gay men than among white gay men (in contrast to the trend in the general population). Whether particular Cultural factors may contribute to suicidal thinking among Latinos is beyond the scope of our study... In general, however, being a stigmatized 'minority within a minority' may contribute to suicidality: Gay members of ethnic minorities are often disenfranchised from both mainstream and minority social institutions that normally provide support and psychological protection from distress symptomatology.⁶⁹

For two-spirit people, and in particular two-spirit youth, whose identity may be repeatedly assaulted by racism and homophobia, the risk for suicide is dangerously high.⁷⁰

Short of suicide, it is clear that many GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people cannot help but succumb to low self-esteem and as a consequence manifest self-destructive behaviour.

The findings [of our research of two-spirited men] show that our respondents face enormous personal and sociological pressures. Many have experienced unemployment and poverty, poor housing and homelessness, homophobia, racism, HIV/AIDS stigma, and ostracism by the Aboriginal community, in addition to the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS in their own lives or in the lives of people close to them.

Ten years ago, *Rekhart et al.* (1991) found that infection rates among Aboriginal people, originally lower than for the general population, had risen higher than the general population. Nine years later, Health Canada statistics showed that, although Aboriginal persons represented only 2.4% of all AIDS cases with known ethnicity, **the annual proportion of reported AIDS cases attributed to Aboriginal persons had increased from 1% before 1990 to 15% in 1999** (*Health Canada, 2000*). Researchers speculate that infection rates may still be underestimated because of under-reporting and because ethnocultural data are not collected in all provinces, including Ontario and Quebec.⁷¹

Substantial efforts must be made to challenge the oppression of GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people, as *people*, not a collection of separated *issues*. This, of course, necessitates that all aspects of their identity and all sources of the oppression they face be considered and challenged. Until this happens, GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people will only have partial access to equality, they will have gained nothing more than the status of equality, without being equal.

Perhaps even more importantly, until GLBT people of colour & Two-Spirited people are able to even speak about their lives and experiences, without first fragmenting their

identity, they will never be able to sing as the gay, African-American poet Marlon Riggs did, before his death from AIDS related illnesses:

*I was mute
tongue-tied,
burdened by shadows and silence.
Now I speak
and my burden is lightened
lifted
free.⁷²*

Recommendation

EGALE affirms the position adopted by the Sexual Orientation, Multiple Discrimination and Related Intolerance Caucus at the Second WCAR PrepCom that "human identity cannot be compartmentalized, and those who experience discrimination based upon multiple oppressions are not fully protected from racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance until all aspects of their personhood are explicitly protected from discrimination." For the reasons outlined in this research report, EGALE Canada strongly supports the explicit recognition in the WCAR Declaration and Program of Action that experiences of racism are exacerbated by, and cannot be separated from, discrimination experienced on other grounds, including sexual orientation.

¹ Trevor Gray, Coordinator of "Men2gether", a program in Toronto, Canada, that primarily provides education, support and services to black men who have sex with men. (Hereafter "Trevor Gray".)

² Francisco Valdes, "Sex and Race in Queer Legal Culture: Ruminations on Identities & Inter-Connectivities" (1995) 5 Cal. Rev. L. & Women's Studies 25 – 71 at 35.

³ Fiona Meyer-Cook, "The Two-Spirit Papers: The impact of heterosexism and homophobia on Inuit and First Nations People's Lives" (Montreal: McGill University, 1998).

⁴ This incident and the two-spirited man's reaction to it were related to me in a conversation with Fiona Meyer-Cook.

⁵ "Crimes of Hate: Conspiracy of silence, torture and ill-treatment based on sexual identity", Amnesty International, 2001, the full text of which can be found at http://www.ai-lgbt.org/ai_report_torture.htm.

⁶ Mohammed Khan, a South Asian (Pakistani) gay man and employee of an organization based in Toronto, Canada that provides education, support and services to South Asians related to HIV/AIDS. (Hereafter "Mohammed Khan".)

⁷ Anthony Mohamed, a South Asian (Indo-Caribbean) gay man and member of the Advisory Committee that supervised the creation of this report. (Hereafter "Anthony Mohamed".)

⁸ See Nitya Duclos, "Disappearing Women: Racial Minority Women in Human Rights Cases' (1993) 6 *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 25.

⁹ Gilbert Deschamps, *We Are Part of a Tradition: A Guide on Two-Spirited People for First Nations Communities* (Toronto: 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, 1998) at 1, 10 & 11. (Hereafter "We Are Part of a Tradition".)

¹⁰ Quoted in Kimberley Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Inter-section of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989) 89 *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139 at 153.

¹¹ Norman Liu identifies as a gay mixed-race (Euroasian-French/Chinese) man and lives in Montreal, Canada. (Hereafter "Norman Liu").

¹² Ros Salvador currently identifies as a bi-racial, androgynous lesbian and lives in Canada. (Hereafter, "Ros Salvador".)

¹³ Darren Leonard Hutchinson, "Out Yet Unseen: A Racial Critique of Gay and Lesbian Legal Theory and Political Discourse" (1997) 27-2 *Connecticut Law Review* 561 – 645. (Hereafter "Darren Hutchinson".)

¹⁴ Darren Hutchinson at 571.

¹⁵ John R. Keene, "Convergence of Hatreds" in *The Blackstripe* www.blackstripe.com/views/jkeene/luima.html.

¹⁶ "We Are Part of a Tradition", Report to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, by Susan Beaver, Executive Director, 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, June 25, 1992, at the Native Canadian Center of Toronto at 13.

¹⁷ Richard S. Telfer, "Black Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identities and the Activist Role of a Postmodern Sensibility in Dialogism" (London: 1999) [www.sspp.net/archive/papers/3\(2\)telfer.htm](http://www.sspp.net/archive/papers/3(2)telfer.htm) (Hereafter "Richard Telfer".)

¹⁸ Trevor Gray.

¹⁹ Claire F.L. Young, "Taxing Times for Lesbian and Gay Men: Equality at What Cost?" 17 *Dalhousie Law Journal* 534 - 559 at 535. Young questions the desirability of redefining 'spouse' in the Income Tax Act to include same-sex couples in part because she 'conclude[s] that it is those couples in which one partner is economically dependant on the other that would benefit most from being included as spouses under the Act.' For a discussion of the ways in which the system of maternity benefits privileges women in dependent relationships see: Nitya Iyer, "Some Mothers Are Better Than Others: A Re-examination of Maternity Benefits" in Susan B. Boyd, ed. *Challenging the Public /Private Divide: Feminism, Law and Public Policy* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997), 168 – 194.

²⁰ Nitya Duclos, "Some Complicating Thoughts on Same-Sex Marriage" (1991) 1 *Law & Sexuality* 31 at 58.

²¹ Ajay Bikram Thapa is a gay man from Nepal. (Hereafter "Ajay Thapa".)

²² Usha Bhatia is a bisexual, mixed-race (Indian/German) woman now living in Ottawa, Canada. (Hereafter "Usha Bhatia".)

²³ Norman Liu.

²⁴ Interestingly, this man, whose name has been withheld by request, did not identify as two-spirited because he said he currently did not know enough about what that term meant.

²⁵ Anguksuar, a.k.a. Richard LaFortune (Yupik, Eskimo) quoted in, We Are Part of a Tradition, Report to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, by Susan Beaver, Executive Director, 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, June 25, 1992, at the Native Canadian Center of Toronto at 22.

²⁶ Mohammed Khan.

²⁷ We Are Part of a Tradition.

²⁸ Name withheld by request. This person is a South Asian gay man.

²⁹ Anthony Mohamed.

³⁰ Richard Telfer.

³¹ Quoted in LaVerne Monette & Darcy Albert, *Voices of Two-Spirited Men: A Survey of Aboriginal Two-Spirited Men Across Canada* (Toronto: 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, 2001) at 27. (Hereafter "Voices of Two-Spirited Men".)

³² Anthony Mohamed.

³³ Name withheld by request. This person is member of a First Nation (Mi'kmaq) living in New Brunswick, Canada.

³⁴ Name withheld by request. This person is a South Asian (Indian) woman living in Toronto, Canada.

³⁵ Name withheld by request. This person is a South Asian (Indian) woman living in Toronto, Canada.

³⁶ Keith Boykin, *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

³⁷ Christopher Boodram, a gay man of mixed-race. (Hereafter "Christopher Boodram.")

³⁸ Anthony Mohamed.

³⁹ Voices of Two-Spirited Men.

⁴⁰ Christopher Boodram.

⁴¹ Peter Flegel.

⁴² Dunstan Egbert is a gay South Asian (Tamil) man living in Toronto, Canada. (Hereafter "Dunstan Egbert".)

⁴³ Name withheld by request. This person is an East Asian (Japanese) gay man living in British Columbia, Canada.

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- ⁴⁴ Mohammed Khan.
- ⁴⁵ Christopher Boodram.
- ⁴⁶ Ros Salvador.
- ⁴⁷ Norman Liu.
- ⁴⁸ Norman Liu.
- ⁴⁹ Name withheld by request. This person is a South Asian (Indian) woman living in Toronto, Canada.
- ⁵⁰ Peter Flegel.
- ⁵¹ Ros Salvador.
- ⁵² Ros Salvador.
- ⁵³ Anthony Mohamed.
- ⁵⁴ Mohammed Khan.
- ⁵⁵ Dunstan Egbert.
- ⁵⁶ Christopher Smith.
- ⁵⁷ Laura Burrows is a bisexual woman of mixed-race living in Ajax, Canada.
- ⁵⁸ Usha Bhatia.
- ⁵⁹ Nazareth, a two-spirited elder originally from Northern Ontario, Canada and now living in Vancouver, Canada.
- ⁶⁰ Ros Salvador.
- ⁶¹ Anthony Mohamed.
- ⁶² Ajay Thapa.
- ⁶³ Name withheld by request. This person is member of a First Nation (Mi'kmaq) living in New Brunswick, Canada.
- ⁶⁴ BGM is a black gay man from the Caribbean.
- ⁶⁵ Christopher Boodram.
- ⁶⁶ Norman Liu.
- ⁶⁷ Name withheld by request. This person is a South Asian gay man.
- ⁶⁸ Usha Bhatia.
- ⁶⁹ Quoted in Pierre J. Tremblay, "The Additional Problems of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth of Colour" in *The Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Factor in the Youth Suicide Problem* <http://www.sws.soton.ac.uk/gay-youth-suicide/04-gay-youth-of-colour.htm>.
- ⁷⁰ Voices of Two-Spirited Men.
- ⁷¹ Voices of Two-Spirited Men.
- ⁷² Marlon T. Riggs, "Tongues Untied" in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* 200, 205 (Essex Hemphill, ed., 1991).