

## Article

# I See Myself Strong: A Description of an Expressive Poetic Method to Amplify Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer Indigenous Youth Experiences in a Culture-Centered HIV Prevention Curriculum

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**Abstract:** Poetry is an ideal tool to convey participant voices in social research as it compresses the meaning and essence of participant narratives through using evocative sensory words that illuminate nuances of lived experience. Expressive poetics is an emerging arts-based research method that facilitates a multi-sensory and relational analytical process. In this article, the authors describe and illustrate an adapted expressive poetics research method through highlighting the experiences of Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, transgender, or queer (2SLGBTQ) Indigenous youth that participated in a culture-centered HIV prevention curriculum. It is our hope that through creating dialogic poems, we deepen and nuance the salient experiences of participant youth, acknowledge our relationship through adding our creative response to their calls for care, and create a model for others to engage in a similar process. In a time when 2SLGBTQ bodies are increasingly targeted and policed, it is more important than ever to center and amplify these voices.



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Research poetry is increasingly embraced by social science scholars as a meaningful way to convey richness and nuance emerging from qualitative studies that explore lived experience (Beltrán 2019; Faulkner 2017; Fitzpatrick and Fitzpatrick 2020; Lahman et al. 2010, 2019; Leavy 2009; McCulliss 2013; Miles et al. 2014). Poetry is an ideal tool to convey participant voices in social research as it compresses the meaning and essence of participant narratives using evocative sensory words that demonstrate lived experience (Fitzpatrick and Fitzpatrick 2020; Furman 2007; Furman et al. 2007; Leavy 2009; McCulliss 2013; Szto et al. 2005). It evokes the meaning that occurs between words but inspires the reader to interpret the data based on their own context and standpoint (Szto et al. 2005). From an Indigenous perspective, poetry can be understood as a form of storytelling—an essential source of Indigenous knowledge systems and education—as it educates the body, mind, heart, and spirit (Archibald 2008). Through poetry, we can also access language that conveys deep and rich context, feelings of care, love, respect, and relational accountability. Expressive poetics is an emerging arts-based research method that facilitates this process. However, literature describing and operationalizing the *process* of expressive poetic analysis is lacking. In this article, the authors describe and illustrate an adapted expressive poetics research method by highlighting the experiences of Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, transgender, or queer (2SLGBTQ) Indigenous youth who participated in a culture-centered HIV prevention curriculum. It is our hope that through the creation of dialogic poems, we add nuance to the salient experiences of participant youth, acknowledge our relationship by adding our creative response to their calls for care, and create a model for others to engage in a similar

process. In a time when 2SLGBTQ bodies are targeted and policed, anti-trans legislation is profuse, and gender-affirming care and gender and sexuality terms are banned, it is more important than ever to center and amplify these voices.

In 2015, researchers in an urban area of the Rocky Mountain West of the United States collaborated with five organizations serving Native American and Indigenous Latinx communities to design, implement, and evaluate a culture-centered HIV prevention program for youth called *Indigenous Youth Rise Up!* (IYR). The IYR program lasted four days and included experiential psycho-education modules on historical trauma, alcohol and other drug use, interpersonal violence and healthy relationships, and HIV and sexually transmitted infections to address the unique risks experienced in Indigenous communities. Findings from this study illustrate how the culture-centered approach to gender, sexual identity, and sexual health knowledge affected the 2SLGBTQ youth who participated (Beltrán et al. 2020b).

While the curriculum was implemented in 2015, given the current environment targeting 2SLGBTQ communities, we wanted to revisit the data with a relational process to center and amplify these important and often obscured youth voices. We engage this relational and creative process to situate ourselves in the work and to situate the work in us. Methodologies that name and consider the complexity of researcher/participant relationships in the analytical process purposely resist the positivist/post-positivist notion of researcher objectivity and explicitly place us as co-conspirators in the movement toward liberation for targeted communities. In this article, we are not centering the outcomes of the curriculum but rather the processes of reflection, connection, and iteration, which highlight the potential for growth in community-based research. Our intention is to demonstrate an analytical process to clearly articulate the following messages to the participants and to all youth with shared identities: We hear you; we see you; we love you.

In this article, we create and share poems resulting from an expressive poetic analysis of the themes that emerged from interview excerpts of 2SLGBTQ Indigenous youth who participated in the curriculum to more deeply convey the positive impact of the decolonizing approaches utilized in the curriculum on their understanding and experience of gender and sexual identity. Before describing significance and our expressive poetic method, we begin with a discussion of key terms we use throughout the paper that have socially and politically nuanced meanings and definitions. Understanding the ways these terms are implemented throughout the paper grounds the reader in the specific ways these concepts are applied to our study community.

## 1. Terminology

*Two Spirit*. The term *nij manidowag*, which translates to “two spirit”, was initiated by Fisher River Cree Nation Elder, Myra Laramie, at the 1990 Native American Gay and Lesbian conference held in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada (Wilson 2015). Since then, it has been used as a decolonizing term that allows Indigenous LGBTQ people to reject the limited colonial binary of Western/Christian definitions of gender and sexuality (Balsam et al. 2004; Lehavot et al. 2009; Asher BlackDeer, forthcoming). While tribally specific terms may be used and preferred, we use the term Two Spirit to be inclusive of the pan-Indigenous experience of gender roles and sexual identities that are present in the diverse, sometimes reconstituting, urban Indigenous community represented in the study sample.

*Indigenous*. We use the term “Indigenous” inclusively, as our community partners serve Native American and Indigenous Latinx communities regardless of federal tribal recognition or citizenship status. Federal tribal recognition within the context of the United States is a legal term based on a system of relations between the United States government and tribes as sovereign nations. Federally recognized tribes maintain self-governance rights as well as entitlement to federal benefits, services, resources, and protections (United States Department of Justice 1995). The term “Indigenous” for our participants reflects Indigenous peoples of the Western hemisphere, including but not limited to American Indian, First Nations, Indigenous peoples of Latin America including Mexico, Central, and

South America, as well as individuals of mixed-race Indigenous heritage (see also [Garcia et al. 2018](#); [Garcia 2021](#) for similar definitions). Participant youth were diverse in culture and identity, and identified as Lakota, Navajo, Hopi, Ute, Yaqui/Otomi, Mexica, Apache, and/or Indigenous Mexican. The term Indigenous, while complicated in the broader context of Native identity and tribal sovereignty, in this case was a unifying term that helped participants connect despite diverse tribal, racial/ethnic, and community identities.

*Gen(der)ocide.* Deborah Miranda (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation) uses the term *gendercide*, coined by Mary-Anne Warren as an act of violence committed against a victim due to their gender identity ([Jones 2000](#)). Gendercide, Miranda argues, can also describe the targeting and killing of third-gender Indigenous peoples by colonizers and missionaries ([Miranda 2010](#)). We use a variant of the term's spelling—*gen(der)ocide*—to deliberately align the denial and removal of gender roles—especially women and 2SLGBTQ gender roles—as an inextricably connected and strategic aspect of the overall tactics of colonial genocide on Indigenous people.

*Re-membering:* We use this spelling of “re-membering” to describe the process of both remembering cultural knowledge and re-membering or putting back together (queering) the bodies, minds, and spirits of our 2SLGBTQ relatives in a way that reflects integration of traditional Indigenous knowledge, as well as current needs and contexts ([Beltrán et al. 2020b](#)).

## 2. Significance

Colonial violence utilizes systematic, social, structural, spiritual, and emotional tactics of destruction toward Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (2SLGBTQ) Indigenous identities. 2SLGBTQ identities are often erased, abused, and dis-membered from Indigenous communal history ([Asher BlackDeer, forthcoming](#); [Denetdale 2009](#); [Hunt 2018](#); [Morgensen 2012](#); [Zepeda 2022](#)). Internalized racism, patriarchy, hetero- and cis-normativity, and the reenactment of Western/colonial gender roles in current Indigenous communities impact the health and well-being of Indigenous youth of all genders and sexualities. Restoring and re-membering respectful knowledge of 2SLGBTQ identities in Indigenous communities is a decolonizing approach to address the social determinants of these negative health impacts.

Though complex gender identities existed and were celebrated in many Indigenous communities prior to colonization, Two-Spirit people today are often targeted by acts of violence related to homophobia and transphobia from both outside and within their own cultural communities ([Asher BlackDeer, forthcoming](#); [Denetdale 2009](#); [Fieland et al. 2007](#); [Hunt 2018](#); [Morgensen 2012](#)). Indigenous feminism describes numerous tactics of colonial heteropatriarchy ([Green 2007](#))—defined as “the social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural”, ([Arvin et al. 2013](#), p. 13) in contrast to other social structures perceived as deviant. These tactics were and are still used to dominate and oppress Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQ people ([Arvin et al. 2013](#); [Smith 2006](#); [Smith and Kauanui 2008](#)). Some of these tactics include the orthodoxy of Western ethno/cultural/biological superiority; differentiation and “Othering”; the use of multiple forms of violence and control; seizure of economic resources; policing and defining normative behaviors, actions, and identities; and, excluding certain bodies and identities from positions of power ([Kanuha 2003](#); [St Denis 2007](#)).

Heteronormative policing of gender, sexuality, and gender roles within Indigenous communities recreates settler colonial oppression and further marginalizes members of our community who do not conform with Western constructions of gender and sexuality. In addition to emotional, social, and cultural policing of identities and expressions, there are numerous accounts of efforts to annihilate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and non-binary Indigenous community members ([Hunt 2018](#); [Miranda 2010](#); [Morgensen 2012](#); [Wesley 2014](#)). This historical violence and resulting cultural interruption has far-reaching impacts on health disparities today.

### 2.1. Historical Trauma, Substance Abuse, and HIV Risk among Indigenous Youth

Over the last several decades, Indigenous scholars have linked historical trauma (HT) to health risk behaviors in AIAN communities (Duran et al. 1998; Walters and Simoni 2002; Evans-Campbell 2008; Campbell and Evans-Campbell 2011; Garcia 2021; Garcia and Márquez 2021). HT is defined as a collective and cumulative trauma experience that is transmitted across generations resulting from devastating events targeting a community (e.g., Indian boarding schools, forced relocation, massacres). The effects can be personal and collective and can result in high rates of mental health problems, substance abuse, and other health and social cohesion issues (Brave Heart et al. 2011; Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Evans-Campbell et al. 2006; Evans-Campbell 2008; Garcia 2021; Garcia and Márquez 2021). Numerous studies document high co-morbidity of alcohol and other drug (AOD) abuse and HIV (Elm et al. 2016; Walters et al. 2002) among AIAN communities. AIAN people meet the criteria for alcohol dependence twice as often as non-AIAN counterparts (Bertolli et al. 2004) and experience higher rates of interpersonal violence (Tehee and Esqueda 2008; Evans-Campbell et al. 2006).

Two-Spirit communities face additional burdens related to their oppressed status as sexual minorities, resulting in increased HIV risk behaviors and negative health outcomes (Simoni et al. 2006). Limited research with Two-Spirit youth reveals that they may face even more complex obstacles. Further research is necessary to understand the complex factors impacting Two-Spirit youth vulnerability to HIV, and immediate attention should be focused on developing “culturally appropriate” prevention programs (Argüello and Walters 2018; Teengs and Travers 2006). These findings align with research that demonstrates the importance of culture in positive youth development (Garcia 2021; Garcia and Márquez 2021; Snowshoe et al. 2017).

### 2.2. Protective Factors for 2SLGBTQ Indigenous Youth

The internalized racism, homophobia, and transphobia that are “logics of colonialism” (Finley 2011, p. 33) must be fought through the “reimagining of the queer Native body” (p. 41). Acceptance of a queer/Indigenous identity, as well as a feeling of positivity associated with identity, are both markers of 2SLGBTQ identity integration, which is described as an important stage of development for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth (Rosario et al. 2001, 2006). While there is limited literature addressing identity within Two-Spirit communities (Adams and Phillips 1997; Walters et al. 2006), integration of a positive intersectional identity, and self-identifying as LGBTQ as well as an ethnic/racial minority, is correlated with self-esteem, higher life satisfaction, and positive support networks, and is a protective factor for psychological distress associated with negative health outcomes (Crawford et al. 2002; Elm et al. 2016; Parmenter et al. 2021; Rosario et al. 2001). This also aligns with the notion that a strong sense of cultural identity can buffer negative health impacts of historical trauma in Indigenous communities (Garcia 2021; Garcia and Hernandez 2023; Garcia and Márquez 2021; Soto et al. 2015; Walters and Simoni 2002). Participation in social activities with peers and community groups who share gender and sexual identities is another key step in positive identity formation (Jackson Levin et al. 2020; Rosario et al. 2006; McCallum and McLaren 2010; Scroggs and Vennum 2021) and has been linked to increased self-esteem in LGB youth (Detrie and Lease 2007). Feeling safe, developing meaningful relationships with LGBTQ peers, and forming a strong and positive identity have been found to buffer against HIV risks (Asakura 2010). Understanding risk and protective factors within a historical context could inform strength-based interventions.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Indigenous Youth Rise Up: A Culture-Centered HIV Prevention Curriculum

Throughout the four-day culture-centered curriculum, youth engaged in numerous modules grounded in positive aspects of Indigenous cultures that addressed behavioral, physical, sexual, and emotional health. Activities in the module addressing physical and sexual health included videos with information on the historical role of Two-Spirit people in

Indigenous cultures, current Two-Spirit identity experiences, and examples of non-binary identities (e.g., transgender and intersex), as well as definitions of varying gender and sexual identities. In one experiential activity, illustrations of reproductive anatomy were posted around the room, and participants matched them to anatomical names from a list. One of the aims of this exercise was to depict sexual anatomy in the absence of ascribed gender, to encourage discussion about the multiple ways that gender identity can exist within male/female and in gender non-binary bodies, and to connect these ideas to the ways that some pre-colonial Indigenous communities may have understood them. During the debrief, we asked questions about youth understanding of form and functions while describing body parts in ways that did not categorize them via sexual dimorphism. We used statements like “bodies that have a uterus. . .” or “bodies that menstruate” to discuss body functions without assigning a gender role. We described the differences between gender identity, gender expression, gender roles, and sexual orientation using ourselves (facilitators) as examples to model the ways that these identities can manifest.

This project was designed to measure changes in knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in Indigenous youth who participated in a culture-centered HIV prevention curriculum. Findings from surveys and post-workshop interviews have articulated the positive impact of the culture-centered curriculum on participating youth, including enculturation (Beltrán et al. 2020a) and supporting 2SLGBT youth (Beltrán et al. 2020b). In this article, we outline an adapted expressive poetic analysis of excerpts from interviews with 2SLGBTQ youth. This paper does not describe the overall results of the evaluation of this curriculum, but rather our relationship to the voices of the subsample of 2SLGBTQ youth who participated.

### 3.2. Data Collection and Participant Characteristics

Together with community partner organizations, we utilized purposive sampling to recruit 25 youth aged 14–23 who identified as Native American, Indigenous, or Indigenous Latinx (as described above). Of the 25 who enrolled, 23 youth completed the full workshop, pre/post-surveys, and post-workshop interviews. The post-workshop interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, eliciting youth perceptions of their experiences with the curriculum, as well as questions relating to their gender, sexual identity, and sexual health. Interviews lasted between 45 min and 1.5 h, were held one-week post-workshop, and were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. All research staff who conducted interviews identified as Native American or Indigenous Latinx. The transcripts were cleaned and deidentified by research staff.

Our analysis here presents an expressive poetic analysis of themes from interviews with 5 of 23 youth who identified and discussed their LGBTQ (N = 2) or Two-Spirit (N = 3) identity in interviews, and who are utilized in this analysis due to their unique identity characteristics as diverse members across the 2SLGBTQ community. The in-depth interviews from this subsample provided rich and salient descriptions of how participation in this intervention affected their 2SLGBTQ identities. While we understand that the small subsample does not yield generalizable data, we believe that these voices, which are often rendered invisible in the literature, deserve a space to be acknowledged, supported, and uplifted. Additionally, data poetry does not always seek to be generalizable (Furman et al. 2006; Lahman et al. 2010; Leavy 2009). Rather, it seeks to illuminate, deepen, and provide nuance on marginalized experiences.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through two distinct phases of analysis. This two-phase approach is an emerging social work method adapted from the work of Furman et al. (2007) and Lahman et al. (2011) on research poetry. It involves first interpreting the data through thematic analysis, and then using expressive poetic techniques to “magnify the intensity of the affective experience” of the youth (Furman et al. 2007, p. 302).

Phase one: Thematic analysis. Initial coding of the interview transcripts, led by the second author, organized the data into thematic categories, which enabled comparing and contrasting them with one another (Saldaña 2013). After initial coding was complete, an in-depth analysis revealed sub-themes that illuminated complexities in participant experiences. Three salient themes described the positive impacts on 2SLGBTQ youth identity experiences as a result of participating in the culture-centered HIV-prevention curriculum: (1) naming and claiming their gender and sexual identity with pride; (2) seeing and connecting with others who reflect their experiences; and (3) acknowledging the responsibility they feel in providing their own mentorship to their peers.

Phase two: Interpretive poetic expressions. After completing the thematic analysis, we began a creative dialogic process that placed ourselves as social work scholars with intersectional identities (e.g., e.g., Xicana of Indigenous Mexican descent, Filipina/Pinay, Menominee, Queer/Two-Spirit/Cis-Gender, Mixed-race women of color) in relationship with the participant experiences described in the themed interview excerpts. Through poetic rendering of youth voices, the authors connect more deeply and amplify the idea that these educational opportunities for self-identification fostered growth and nourishment among the young people who attended the program. Poetic analysis is an emerging, progressive qualitative method (Miles et al. 2014), increasingly used over the past few decades as an arts-based research method in social science research (Furman et al. 2007; McCulliss 2013). It involves the thoughtful organization of qualitative data into poetry to present a study's findings by extracting key meanings from multiple texts (Miles et al. 2014). When using poetic analysis, it is important to approach the selection, organization, and presentation of the data, as well as the art and science of the poetic method itself, in an explicit and deliberate way (Miles et al. 2014).

Poetry in research compresses the data while maintaining thick, in-depth quality (Furman et al. 2006). Poetic analysis “breaks through the noise to present an essence”, (Leavy 2009, p. 63), and evokes a differential consciousness, referred to by Anzaldúa as “the workings of the soul” (Sandoval 2000, p. 6). Furman (2006) asserts that these kinds of expressive poems are based on empirical data that are “sensitive and evocative in nature”. Using images and metaphors, poetry permits the reader to explore and cultivate a relationship with the text (Furman 2006). This adapted process (illustrated in Table 1) involved four collaborative steps by the authors: (1) multiple readings of the excerpts; (2) selection of words that were repetitive, and selection of words that were salient in meaning and the essence of the theme; (3) creation of individual reflective poems from the selected salient words and ideas (from all three authors); and (4) collaborative compilation of each author's poem into one thematic poem. The final poems reflect the creative dialogic process between authors and youth, described through the concept of “multivoicedness”, as the mutual construction of meaning between the participant's narrative and the reader (Furman 2007). In the following presentation of results, we include direct quotes from the participants using pseudonyms, the participant-articulated pronouns and gender identity, and the “minor” designation for participants under 18.

**Table 1.** Poetic Analysis Process, Theme One: Name and claim an Indigenous gender and sexual identity.

<i>Step one: Multiple readings of qualitative data</i>	<i>Selected examples from the data:</i>		
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Desi (minor, female) “I see myself as a manly person, and I’m a girl. But I’m a girl; so I’m a dyke. That’s how everybody describes me. And I describe myself like that you know . . . a dyke. I’m a strong dyke. [laughs] I use ‘they’ and ‘she’”.</li> <li>2. Amara, gender-fluid female. “I think I just left feeling a lot more comfortable with my sexual identity. I think it’s really hard for people to figure out their sexual identity, and I had already been trying to figure it out, but just going over some of those different sexual identities reassured me like, yeah. . . this is how I identify”.</li> <li>3. Javi (minor). “That [Two-Spirit] was like a better way for me to explain it, ‘cause I like always explained it another way; so when I heard them talk about it, the explanation was just absorbed by me, because I understood theirs better, and I felt like I could help other people understand it better the way they explained it”.</li> <li>4. Javi (minor). “I am Two-Spirited. I would say I’m masculine but also feminine”.</li> </ol>		
<i>Step two: Selection of words: repetitive, salient</i>	<p>Repeated words:  girl. dyke. strong dyke.  they/she. sexual identity.  sexual identities. I identify.  two-spirit. name. label. gay.  lesbian. whatever. masculine.  feminine. Indigenous</p>	<p>Meaning words—salient meanings/ideas:  I’m a girl so I’m a dyke. girl/dyke. strong dyke. left feeling more comfortable. Identity. sexual identity. sexual identities. Indigenous. reassured me. I identify. Two-spirit. putting the name on it—naming, Gay/lesbian didn’t fit. Two spirit—yeah that’s me. A better way to explain/describe. absorbed and understood, I could help others. Masculine but also feminine. Indigenous identity intersects. Indigenous is everything. queer. food cook grow feed. traditional. ancestors</p>	
<i>Step three: Author1 (A1) Author 2 (A2) Author 3 (A3) Individual reflective poems</i>	<p>Poem 1 (A1):  I’m a girl, so I’m a dyke  a strong dyke.  girl/dyke  reclaim  re-name  resist</p> <p>I/me  they/she  male/female  masculine  AND  feminine</p> <p>Identify  Identity  Identities  I am  Indigenous  Native</p> <p>I am Sexual  I have Sexuality  Queer  Two-Spirit</p> <p>whatever</p> <p>I am the intersections.  I live, breathe, sleep, eat  I am everything</p> <p>I am the ancestors’ dream</p>	<p>Poem 2 (A2):  I—  I see myself: I’m a girl.  A strong dyke.  I had been trying to figure it out.</p> <p>When you first get the label:  Sexual identity  Manly, masculine—  Whatever.</p> <p>Two-Spirit was absorbed by me—so right—  I can help people understand (I understand)  it intersects with everything—so Native—</p> <p>I am Indigenous</p> <p>I am also  She</p> <p>I am also  They</p> <p>Everything feeds me, grows me, calls my  Ancestors</p> <p>Reassures me.</p>	<p>Poem 3 (A3):  I see myself strong</p> <p>Dyke. Two-spirited. Gay.  Lesbian. Queer. Masculine.  Feminine. Whatever.</p> <p>So Native.</p> <p>It’s hard  Putting a label on  Intersections. . .</p> <p>I felt comfortable  Reassured, I describe myself</p> <p>I identify intersections. . .</p> <p>I grow, I cook, I eat the food  I feed myself  Our ancestors’ traditional food</p> <p>It reassures me  I could help other people.</p>

**Table 1.** Cont.

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<p>Step four: Collaborative thematic poem (Combining the poems from all three authors)</p>	<p><i>“Naming and Claiming”</i>  <i>I see myself strong.</i></p> <p><i>I’m a girl  so I’m a dyke.  A strong dyke.  (I had been trying to figure it out.)</i></p> <p><i>I/me  they/she  male/female  masculine  AND  feminine.</i></p> <p><i>When you first get the label:  Sexual identity—</i></p> <p><i>Whatever.  (Rename, reclaim, resist.)</i></p> <p><i>It’s hard  To put a label on  intersections. . .</i></p> <p><i>Identify  Identity  Identities  I am  Indigenous  Native.</i></p> <p><i>I am  also  so Native.</i></p> <p><i>I am also. . .  I AM the intersections.</i></p> <p><i>I grow, I cook,  I feed myself  our traditional food.</i></p> <p><i>I live, breathe, sleep, eat  Everything feeds me, grows me, calls my  ancestors—  Reassures me.</i></p> <p><i>I am the ancestors’ dream.</i></p>
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## 4. Results: Re-Membering

### 4.1. Naming and Claiming: Strengthening Gender and Sexual Identities

Three participants used language about their identities in the follow-up interview that was strong, clear, and empowered. They spoke with determination and self-efficacy after “trying to figure it out” for a long time (Amara, gender-fluid female). Their stories told of two processes—*queering* and *Indigenizing* their gender and sexual identities. Specifically, youth expressed affinity to a queer identity, feeling welcomed by this umbrella identity that is inclusive of multiple genders and sexual orientations. Youth also Indigenized their

LGBTQ identity through making explicit the intersection of their Indigenous and their queer identity. For example, Sasasui, a queer/Two-Spirit female described her experience as intersectional:

[I express] my Indigenous identity [in] a lot of ways, 'cause I feel like it intersects a lot with, well, everything. Because I'm not *just* indigenous every day. Like [not] *only* indigenous. I'm also queer, I'm also Two Spirit, everything else; and so it plays into like everything that I do.

Rather than having to separate being LGBTQ or Indigenous, the youth understood these aspects of their identity as interconnected and, potentially, one and the same. For two youth, that meant their Two-Spirit identity is both Indigenous and queer:

I'm a "Two Spirit" myself; and it's just . . . mostly the thing that has been the hardest, I guess, is just putting the name on it. Like at first you get the label that's like, "You're gay", "You're lesbian", whatever . . . and they didn't quite fit for me; so then when I heard "Two Spirit", I was like, "Yeah, that's me". It just felt like so Native and it just felt right. I didn't use the term before the workshop. (Galena, minor, female)

These intersectional experiences relating to strengthening queer and Indigenous gender and sexual identities were an important outcome of the IYR curriculum (Beltrán et al. 2020b). Using the poetic analysis process described above, the authors represented the experiences the youth describe in a reflective collaborative poem. Refer to Table 1 for an example of the poetic analysis process that led to the development of this theme and the final collaborative poem.

For the authors, the ways the youth described themselves inspired hope for the future of re-memembering and restoring Indigenous understanding and celebration of 2SLGBTQ people. The intersectional articulation of Indigeneity and 2SLGBTQ identity is a rejection of colonial gen(der)ocide and internalized homophobia, and (we believe) signals the potential to heal from historical traumas.

#### 4.2. Seeing and Reflecting: Seeing Self in Others

The excerpts from the youth that clustered into this theme speak to the joy, surprise, and delight of seeing themselves and their identity reflected by others. One youth described the uniqueness of Indigenous and 2SLGBTQ identities and being able to share that with other young people. "The coolest thing that I saw the first day that I went in was that one of the young people also identified as Two Spirit, and we were able to make that connection" (Sasasui, queer/Two-Spirit female). Amara described the power of seeing 2SLGBTQ identities and explained that the visibility of other young people helped her better understand the diverse possibilities of gender and sexual identity through their embodiment. "Meeting some people that identified as queer and what it meant to them was something that I learned that was new. Like when it comes to 'queer', I think it means a lot of different things" (Amara). She further explained, "I never really met anybody that identified as queer; so it kind of gave me like more of a visual and like a better understanding of it".

For the authors, this theme was active, alive, and relational. Words like "cool" and "super important" suggest a joyful, youthful tone, and several mentions of "visibility" and "visual" emphasize the importance of a supportive community. While the creation of a safe and affirming space was a goal of the intervention, the impact of the connections that developed throughout the workshop between and among the youth was not anticipated. This process is illustrated in the following collaborative collective poem, "Seeing and Reflecting" (for which the authors' used the same poetic analysis process described in Table 1):

"Seeing and Reflecting"  
We are

making visible through our vision  
 visibility  
 visual  
 (we exist!?).

It's the coolest thing—

In these spaces it's normally race.  
 Two-Spirit, transgender, non-conforming  
 put on the back (burner).

We identify our identities.  
 We don't fit in those boxes.

We see each other  
 building  
 Indigenous  
 trans and queer  
 connections

and making our meaning/s  
 (we exist!).

It's the coolest thing  
 (this relationship).

I will continue

#### 4.3. *Leading through Being: Modeling and Mentoring Other Youth*

Youth described developing an appreciation for visibility of 2SLGBTQ identity. For two youth, increased visibility (and, arguably, increased identity security) came with a profound sense of responsibility. Sasasui explains, “the biggest thing that I learned was that I need to be more visible about my identity”, and further explained it as necessary so that other young people can become more visible, too. Javi (minor), a Two-Spirit male, describes that he “could help other people understand” Two-Spirit identity, and that would positively impact others who may be experiencing a sense of isolation due to their gender and sexual identities. Javi explains, “I am Two Spirited. I would say I'm masculine but also feminine”. Javi is clear and confident about the possibility of living outside of heteronormative expectations of gender.

Sasasui described a yearning for other members in the 2SLGBTQ community—particularly the Elders—to be visible in their identities to better support the youth. This intergenerational understanding of support is a decolonial mutual aid approach that rejects the hierarchical power dynamics of Western mentorship. It emphasizes the continuity of relationships and the responsibilities of individuals within the collective to restore, (re)member, and recreate traditional Indigenous knowledge related to health and well-being. For the authors, this theme is succinct and, in some ways, more direct than the other themes. It centers on action—modeling and mentoring other 2SLGBTQ Indigenous youth. This analysis is reflected in the following collaborative poem:

“Leading through Being”  
 I need  
 to be visible.

Queer/Two-Spirit.

My identity, I learned,  
 could help other people.  
 Younger people.

I want Elders to be visible, too.

So that we can be  
we and they can be  
they and all can be us.

I feel like I can help explain it  
to understand

we are the Elders we seek.

#### 4.4. "Accountability and Reverence" (i.e., Member Checking)

In order to ensure that our poems were respectful representations of youth lived experiences, we engaged a member-checking process with community partners. In circle, we spoke over food and coffee about the findings from the thematic analysis in relation to the curriculum. We described our poetic analysis process and asked community partners to read them out loud. Of the four community partner members, one was a participant of the IYR program, another was a curriculum co-developer and long-time advocate/organizer in the community, and two were community organizers and advocates with Indigenous/Latinx 2SLGBTQ shared identities. After all three poems were read aloud, we asked our partners to give us any edits, feedback, or critiques they saw fit. Instead, they articulated gratitude for us in our efforts to capture and amplify participant voices. One person said "I feel like this is a map". They continued to say that the progression of the poems demonstrated the often-invisible processes that 2SLGBTQ youth must navigate to find identity and community safety. Another person said "as a 25-year-old, I still need elders. And I am the elder. We still need this resounding community". The former participant mentioned that the workshop was a "game changer" in his life and that it was the first time he had seen a "queer elder" in a leadership role. Finally, one of the community partners felt inspired by the poems and wrote a "response poem" during our meeting. He described it as a combination of edits and creation of a new poem to capture our shared process and honoring. Our community partner chose to have his social media tag associated with the poem, which is below:

"Untitled"  
I need to be visible, a garden home made clear.  
Queer/Two Spirit  
My identity I learned,  
Could help other people.  
Create oxygen to fellow flowering onions.  
Younger people.  
I want Elders visible too.  
So that we can be  
We and they can be  
They and all can be  
Us  
I can help explain,  
To understand  
Listen  
We are the elders we seek  
  
@loverboy.e\_

## 5. Discussion

By highlighting an expressive poetic analysis of youth experience, this article deepens findings that illustrate the possibilities of healing from colonial gen(der)ocide by strengthening 2SLGBTQ Indigenous identity through culture-centered prevention curricula. In

this culture-centered HIV intervention that employed inclusive and decolonial language, methods, and facilitators, three themes surfaced that were not directly related to the skills that were being taught yet align with literature that describes the protective role of an integrated and realized gender and sexual identity, as well as cultural identity on health risk behaviors and outcomes, including HIV. The three themes and the associated poems align with literature on important aspects of identity development of LGBTQ youth, including the benefits of high levels of integration of sexual/gender identity and racial/ethnic identity (Crawford et al. 2002); the multiple psychological benefits of the coming-out process for LGB youth, including self-disclosure of their identity and involvement in activities with peers (Rosario et al. 2001); and the continued (although not necessarily linear) integration of their LGB identity across time (Rosario et al. 2006). The themes also align with recommended approaches to prevent negative health outcomes among Indigenous youth, including suicide among Indigenous youth (Beautrais and Ferguson 2006; Hatcher 2016), substance abuse (Donovan et al. 2015; Elm et al. 2016), and HIV (Tello et al. 2010), and amplifying the importance of culture in positive youth development (Garcia 2021; Garcia and Márquez 2021; Snowshoe et al. 2017).

Throughout the interviews, mentions of “visibility” and “visual” emphasize the importance of a supportive community in increasing a positive and empowered sense of self within a social context. The excitement and resistance captured in the second poem speaks of a youthful hope and desire for community that is nostalgic for the authors, as well as the urgency and longing of adolescence. Youth gained a sense of individual identity and collective belonging, which has been found to be a profound protective factor against numerous risks for both 2SLGBTQ (Asakura 2010; Gamarel et al. 2014; Frable et al. 1997) and Indigenous communities (Beautrais and Ferguson 2006; Hatcher 2016). Findings speak to a call for action—youth are seeking leadership from the outside while simultaneously recognizing their capacity to lead from within. The youth demonstrate comfort with gender and sexual identity, and the willingness to share this identity with others, which is another important stage of identity integration (Adams and Phillips 1997; Rosario et al. 2001; Rosario et al. 2006). Furthermore, the youth describe a *need* for visibility—not only from themselves and their peers, but also from their Elders—and demonstrate a deep desire for more expansive (and decolonized) gender and sexual identities. By referencing ancestors and Elders, these Two-Spirit and queer young people describe an emerging awareness that people with gender and sexual identities like theirs have existed in Indigenous communities for a long time; have existed always. Youth are seeking not only an individual understanding of this truth, but also a community that understands, embraces, and celebrates the important contributions that 2SLGBTQ Indigenous people make. When given the opportunity and educational tools, Indigenous youth are conceptualizing and enacting gender and sexuality in ways that can make a powerful contribution to reducing HIV risk behaviors in 2SLGBTQ communities, de-stigmatizing gender, sex, and sexuality, and healing the wounds of the colonial heteropatriarchy in broader Indigenous communities.

Our recommendations for future research are as follows. First, we recommend additional adaptations and/or integrations of culture-centered curricula into HIV prevention efforts targeting Indigenous youth. This program was successful and impactful on numerous levels, and even led to the creation of a local non-profit organization focused on supporting Indigenous, Chicana, and Latinx 2SLGBTQ youth and their families (see *Fortaleza Familiar* 2023). Through our member-checking process, our community partners reiterated the importance of these types of curricula and continued necessity of community, care, resistance, and opportunities to amplify voices often rendered invisible.

Second, we believe that the findings from this study demonstrate the need to recognize and more broadly employ the use of expressive poetics as a foundation to inform future research that centers community-based knowledge as crucial to co-creating effective and sustainable interventions. Poetic analysis that creates research as poetry within a larger contextual narrative offers nuanced representations of participant stories (Miles et al. 2014), which honors the unique contribution each person makes in the research process. In these

efforts to disrupt historical and colonial losses, and to reclaim hope, finding ways to honor the voices of the participants themselves feels all the more important.

## 6. Conclusions

Poetic methods are responsive, appropriate, qualitative methods that align with illustrating the nuance and uniqueness of 2SLGBTQ Indigenous youth. The themes and poems in this paper demonstrate and evoke positive gender, sexual, and cultural identity development, and contribute to emerging scholarship demonstrating the promise of these mechanisms for improving health outcomes in Indigenous communities. Through interpretive poetic expression and an explicitly decolonial health education curriculum, findings from this project contribute to an ongoing effort to deconstruct and dis-member the colonial heteropatriarchy to respectfully re-member Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, transgender, and queer Indigenous youth.

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