INDIGENOUS RESEARCH

Theories, Practices, and Relationships

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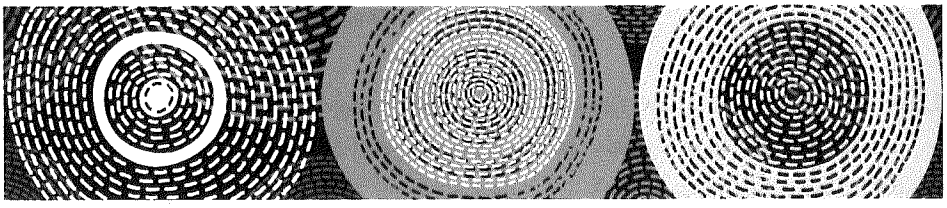

CHAPTER 17

Researching within Relations of Violence: Witnessing as Methodology

Sarah Hunt

When I was seven years old, I took part in my first potlatch. There, I learned to dance among my aunties, cousins, and other relations as we moved around the fire together. Even though I asked over and over again for someone to show me the dance steps before the ceremonies began, I was told to watch my aunties in front of me and follow their lead. At that potlatch, and every one I have attended since then, I have been part of a shared practice of learning, teaching, creating, and continuing Kwagiulth – and broader Kwakwaka'wakw[1] – cultural and socio-legal relations. In the *gukwdzi*,[2] or bighouse, knowledge is created collectively, and its continuation relies on each person fulfilling a specific role. To learn the dances, I have had to be watchful, present, and attentive of my movements in relation to everyone else around me.

During each potlatch, payment is given to witnesses for their role in validating what they have seen. Their role of "communal acknowledgement" (Nicolson, 2013, p. 235), too, is dependent on them being present, watchful, and involved. Witnessing is part of a larger system of maintaining an oral culture, and just as the role of a dancer or singer is embodied, so too is the role of the witness. Sitting in the smoke-saturated bighouse, hearing the songs being sung in Kwak'wala, watching the movement of the dancers as they sweep across the dirt floor, witnessing requires being fully engaged. Witnesses can then be called upon to verify what has taken place, particularly if any act of business or ceremony is questioned in the future. In

this way, cultural and political knowledge is kept alive in the bodies, spirits, and minds of everyone who makes up the potlatch, including witnesses.

It is in this context of active, embodied, relational systems of knowledge that my understanding of witnessing methodology has emerged. In the chapter that follows, I will share how I have developed principles of witnessing in my research on contemporary realities of violence in Indigenous communities, families, and lives. Throughout this chapter, I am concerned with a number of tensions inherent to navigating contemporary realities of knowledge production. It is often assumed that Indigenous people can take up any Indigenous issues as "insiders," yet we are at risk of replicating dominant power relations if we are not attuned to the responsibilities that come with wielding power as researchers. This is particularly true for those of us who work with members of our communities who experience most acutely the risk and vulnerability produced by ongoing colonization – those whose lives and voices are most frequently dismissed, silenced, or ignored. I have thus developed witnessing as a methodology to keep myself grounded in principles and ethics emerging within Kwagiulth systems of knowledge as I navigate these complex power relations. While witnessing has been discussed by several Indigenous scholars in relation to various aspects of Indigenous pedagogies, here I will develop aspects of witnessing methodology specific to research on gendered colonial violence. As I will show, witnessing in the context of settler colonialism comes with a set of responsibilities specific to the network of relationships within which researchers live and work. In the sections that follow, I will discuss how I have self-reflexively examined my own power as a researcher concerned with violence perpetrated against our relations who trade or sell sex in communities across British Columbia (BC), and will suggest some foundational elements of what it means to act as witness in this context.

THE RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF WITNESSING

My work on violence is rooted within the particular history of colonial relations that shapes the network of communities in which I live and work. In the mid-1990s when I was an undergraduate student, a relative close to my age took her own life. I didn't know her very well but was close with her mother, and since her death, I have come to know her story and have been driven by the silence left in her passing. Before she died, she spoke out about abuse she suffered at the hands of a powerful man in the community. But there would be no justice for her, no legal recognition of the abuse, and limited community recognition that she had spoken out. In the days following her death, I observed that other women were

speaking with one another, revealing that they knew others who had been abused by the same man. Since that time, over 20 years ago, no legal action has been launched against the offender. But the conversations among women continue. After she died, I thought of the countless youth and adults – particularly women, girls, and Two-Spirit[3] people – who have spoken out, and asked myself: who will be the voice for her silence? I felt a responsibility, as witness to her life and her death, to recount what I had seen and heard in order to ensure that she would not be forgotten. This is what it means to be a witness – stepping up to validate what you have observed when an important act is denied or forgotten.

Acting as witness responds to postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak's (1988) call to attend to the ways in which subaltern voices are written out of the archive, or the ways that discourse disciplines what can be heard. In other words, being a witness means sometimes creating new language, new stories, new avenues for validating those voices that are most at risk of being erased. In concluding that "the subaltern cannot speak" (p. 87), Spivak was not arguing that the subaltern woman literally had no voice, but that "if there was no valid institutional background for resistance, it could not be recognized" (Spivak, 2010, p. 228). Witnessing, then, might be understood as a methodology in which we are obligated, through a set of relational responsibilities, to ensure frameworks of representation allow for the lives that we have witnessed to be made visible.

This obligation is particularly vital in the context of normalized violence against Indigenous girls, women, and Two-Spirit people, as it has been argued that sexual violence is a central tool of colonialism, marking "the evisceration of Indigenous nations" (Million, 2013, p. 7). Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) explains that it is not enough to recognize that violence against Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people occurs, but we must see that "it is intrinsically tied to the creation and settlement of Canada. Gender violence is central to our on-going dispossession, occupation and erasure and Indigenous families and communities have always resisted this" (n.p.). When my relative died, I felt compelled to "help" women, girls, and Two-Spirit people who had survived violence by validating their experiences through research. However, since that time, my understanding of the power dynamics of academia and processes of knowledge production have caused me to refine how I understand my role as witness to colonial violence. In part, this has been informed by seeing how research itself can work to entrench positions of power, which is so often the case with (and indeed, the goal of) academic work. While violence against Indigenous women, and the stereotypes that justify and normalize this violence, impact us all, researchers are often in positions of power or privilege

relative to the people they write about. Further, as a Two-Spirit scholar, I am acutely aware of the way Two-Spirit and transgender people's experiences are often overlooked entirely in scholarly research, pushing me to further interrogate my own power in representing what comprises gendered and sexual violence.

The ethics of navigating institutional power became particularly salient as my work on violence led me to focus on issues of sex work after volunteering in the late 1990s with organizations in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver that were advocating for police action in the unsolved murders and disappearances of women (including transgender women[4]) in that community. People who trade or sell sex are particularly targeted for interpersonal violence, and, as I have come to understand, they are also subject to the violence of erasure that is accomplished both in mainstream socio-legal relations and within anti-violence work itself. Over the years since I began working on this issue, violence targeted at sex workers has gained national and international attention through the conviction of numerous serial killers, the most well known being the murderer targeting women in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Despite this increased visibility, however, the voices of Indigenous people who trade or sell sex are still being silenced. Their voices are absent from many community organizations who purport to work on their behalf, as well as from national Indigenous organizations and both scholarly and community anti-violence publications.[5] Anishinaabe activist and writer Naomi Sayers explains, even when justice is sought on their behalf, "the justice system presents this idea that Indigenous sex workers are deserving of the violence they experience and they should at minimum expect the violence they experience" (Sayers, 2016, n.p.). Only after sex workers have died, disappeared, or stopped working in the sex trade are they brought into remembrance or dialogue.

As I have become more attuned to these processes of silencing, I have seen the sensationalism that accompanies increased recognition of these issues. Academic writing and research on sex work can have a "shock and awe" (Clark, 2016, p. 1) quality that creates a buzz around this work, particularly when funders, including government agencies, decide to make this a topic of concern. As an academic talking about sex work, I am treated as brave, honourable, and edgy. Yet, at the same time, the people with whom I work in solidarity remain framed through a marginalized subject position. Violence against Indigenous girls, women, and Two-Spirit people is often treated with detached acceptance, not only in dominant society but in Indigenous communities as well. Working in diverse communities across BC, I have heard young people talk about violence as a part of daily life. For too many of our relations, violence is expected. In some of our communities,

everyone knows abuse is rampant and nobody does anything, or when they do, they are silenced. In this way, talking about violence as an academic can at times feel pointless when it does nothing but advance a researcher's career, while material realities of violence remain unchanged.

These dynamics inherent to work on colonial violence, and specifically violence against people who trade or sell sex, raise important questions about witnessing. How can I step up to my obligation as a witness, recalling the realities facing our relations engaged in sex work, who are most at risk of being silenced? At the same time, how can I live up to obligations to centre the agency, voice, and self-determination of the people whose stories I seek to validate, given the institutional constraints in which I work? (See Shelly Johnson's chapter in this book for more discussion of these constraints.) And how can I remain ethically committed to the ongoing relations in which I live and work, while being called to respond to the guidelines of university ethics boards, the pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals, and other institutional demands?

As my work unfolded over the years, I felt ever-uncomfortable with the power dynamics of trying to represent the voices of youth, women, and Two-Spirit people whose stories were most in need of retelling. Concerned with the normalization of pervasive gendered, racialized, and sexual violence against sex workers, I have remained committed to talking about the criminalization and stigmatization of people who trade or sell sex, as well as the means through which some lives – particularly those of women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people – become treated as disposable. However, I am careful in how I go about this work, given the power differences between myself and my relations in the sex trade (Hunt, 2013). As I have developed the culturally specific qualities of witnessing, it has become clear that my ego and my academic career need to be secondary as I take up this work. Indeed, the duty of a witness is not to tell their own story, but to recall what they have experienced from their own perspective in order to validate someone else's actions, rights, or stories. We must be cautious, then, of research that only serves to further validate academics who write about people who trade or sell sex, while not changing the material realities or marginalized subject positions of sex workers themselves.

In this chapter, I draw on a range of projects I have been involved with since 2001, both as a collaborator and as a solo investigator working in community, government, and institutional contexts to address violence (Clark, Bognar, & Hunt, 2002; Clark & Hunt, 2011; Hunt, 2006, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2016). My work has involved interviewing youth about experiences of exploitation and abuse, as well as adults engaged in trading or selling sex, and service providers working

with youth and families in Indigenous communities and rural and urban areas across BC. I have worked in many of these same communities as an educator and support person to assist in building capacity and developing programming to address violence, particularly in contexts of ongoing intergenerational abuse. Further, when invited to do so, I take up a solidarity and support role in diverse contexts in which sex workers' voices are at the centre. As with Angela Mashford-Pringle, who describes her research in this volume, my work is dependent upon the development of a strong network of relationships within and across the communities in which I work, as well as with the people with whom I have collaborated, laughed, shared food, and mourned. Rather than being situated solely in a professional relationship, stories are often shared within the intimate spaces of people's homes, jails and detention centres, community centres, among family and friends, and in times of emotional and physical vulnerability.

It is within this context of working simultaneously as an advocate, educator, researcher, and, at times, relative, that I have become a witness to stories of violence. I have been witness to rape, sexual abuse, intergenerational violence, murder, child apprehension, and abuse of power in communities across BC and beyond. Across diverse geographic contexts, the stories often bear a striking similarity to one another, as does the response (or lack thereof) from police and other state officials. My work is driven by the responsibilities that are inherent to witnessing these realities of violence, as well as their systemic normalization and the continuation of violence in the daily lives of Indigenous girls, women, and Two-Spirit people. Rather than drawing from generalized knowledge about violence, my role as a witness emerges within the individual stories that have been shared with me, and the quiet moments I spent in close relation to women and Two-Spirit people of all ages who have experienced some form of violence. Many of the people who became colleagues in this work – often Indigenous women who are speaking out and taking action to address violence in their community – have also shared their own histories of violence and abuse. Like sitting in the *gukwdzi*, watching my relatives dance and sing around the fire, my knowledge of these issues has been embodied, emotional, relational, and life changing. Where academia attempts to train us, as Indigenous researchers, to capture knowledge in a particular way within the confines of an individual research project or paper, this kind of relational learning defies false divisions between academic knowledge and other aspects of our being. It is instead part of a lifelong journey of taking up my duties and responsibilities as Kwagiulth.

As Smith (1999) explains, Western concepts of time and space include a perception of distance that is fundamental to rational and impersonal systems

of power and governance. In a research context, distance implies a neutrality and objectivity. However, Indigenous research, and specifically here, witnessing methodologies, insist on working in an intimate network of relations – an epistemologically distinct approach from this Western distancing.

Emerging from the development of this knowledge-in-relation, when I say I was witness to many stories of violence, I don't mean merely that I heard, saw, or observed these stories. As I have come to understand witnessing methodology, I view these experiences as shared with me in the context of reciprocal relationships within an Indigenous cultural framework. Therefore, in witnessing the stories, I am obligated to ensure they are not denied, ignored, or silenced. Further, if I see them being denied, it is my responsibility to recall both the truths of what I have witnessed and the ways in which their erasure is being accomplished. In my own teachings, the responsibility of witnesses to recall what they have seen is particularly important when something is called into question, or is at risk of being lost. I consider this to be the case with the normalization of violence against Indigenous girls, women, and Two-Spirit people, especially those engaged in trading or selling sex, who so often are silenced, ignored, or stigmatized when they share their experiences or advocate for change.

FOUNDATIONS OF KWAGIULTH WITNESSING METHODOLOGY

Although emerging from systems of knowledge creation, law, and governance used within diverse Indigenous oral cultures, witnessing has only recently been explored as a methodology in Indigenous scholarship. Witnessing has been discussed in such fields as Indigenous storytelling (Iseke, 2011; Thomas, 2005), child and youth care (Kovach, Thomas, Montgomery, Green, & Brown, 2007), family therapy (Richardson, 2012), and the Indigenous paradigm of insurgent research, which explicitly orients knowledge creation toward Indigenous people and worldviews (Gaudry, 2011). In each use of witnessing, Indigenous scholars draw their understanding of this approach from the cultural and institutional contexts in which they live and work. While my framework of witnessing shares similarities with some of these scholars, it is distinguished by its specific roots in Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch traditions and adaptation to account for the power dynamics of research on contemporary social issues. The principles and foundations of witnessing methodology that I discuss would therefore not necessarily be applicable to working with traditional knowledge, as my concerns emerge within the power relations of colonial violence.

Witnessing entails creating knowledge not as solitary actors (Iseke, 2011), but within a network of reciprocal relations (Nicolson, 2013). As Kovach and colleagues (2007) write, "we chose to notice – witness – the work being done within Aboriginal child welfare from our own stories" (p. 116). Yet Kwagiulth witnessing methodology differs from Kovach and colleagues (2007) in that it is inherently bound up in relations based in responsibility. I therefore experience witnessing not as a choice, but a duty, to recall something that is being questioned. Since the death of my cousin, I have felt bound by my role to bear witness to the violence she experienced within the larger network of community responsibilities that ensures the continuation of Indigenous knowledge, law, and culture.

Witnessing can involve acts of remembrance as "a powerful form of recovery from a colonial past" (Iseke, 2011, p. 312) in which we reinterpret the past in order to understand the present. Kwagiulth witnessing methodology uses a different temporal frame, as stories are recalled and enacted to make them alive in the present rather than focusing on their past use. Potlatches are about re-embodying a set of stories, ancestral claims, and "familial connection to the past, the present and the future" (Nicolson, 2013, p. 235) that make us who we are, acknowledging and respecting an ongoing, active set of responsibilities. Thus, recalling an event or story as a witness is about bringing those responsibilities into the present through confirming their power.

Witnessing has been used in the recreation of collective spaces where the contemporary experiences of Indigenous people are validated through ceremony. For example, Richardson (2012) calls on witnesses as part of marking important life events in family therapy using cultural witnessing groups. Here, witnesses are invited to be part of a contained therapeutic space, where they do not question or have conversation with those in therapy, but listen, observe, and remember. Witnessing here occurs within a set of reciprocal relations, as "there is an implicit future commitment to social justice and social change in return for the gift of the learning" (p. 72). Similarly, Kovach and colleagues (2007) use witnessing as a framework for examining resistance and resilience in Indigenous child welfare through the creation of a feast to honour community members who support local child welfare programs. Here, witnesses are called upon to "hold the memory and retell the activities of the event. The act of witnessing is an integral part of the oral tradition as it is the means by which a public accounting of the work being done will live on in the oral history of the community" (p. 98).

Given the stigma surrounding sex work and the internalized shame experienced by many victims of violence, this need for collective validation resonates with my understanding of witnessing. Witnessing can become central to undoing

the harms of colonialism by humanizing, valuing, and loving sex workers, among other members of our communities and families, through acknowledging their stories, experiences, and perspectives. This collective process strengthens relationships and communication, working against the dehumanizing effects of categorizing Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people in colonial terms which have reduced us to being singularly defined by our victimization.

As I have described, my approach to witnessing emerges from my experiential understanding of the Kwakwaka'wkaw potlatch system, in which witnesses are paid to remember what has transpired during the business of a potlatch. Building on witnessing testimony or stories (Iseke, 2011), Kwagiulth witnessing is not only a mental exercise but also includes the spiritual and physical experiences involved in a shared community process. Bearing witness in the context of a potlatch involves all the senses, not only the passing on of a story, facts, or information. Witnessing is about the affective, embodied, spiritual role that emerges from sitting among your relations in the context of a sacred place of cultural business. Thus, my role as a witness is dependent on the quality of relations within which I do my research on issues of gendered and racialized violence. This is often in tension with the values underlying academic knowledge creation within universities, their ethics processes, need for solo authorship, and rigid boundaries around the roles of researchers and research subjects. While academic institutions have begun making changes in how they engage with Indigenous communities, they predominantly continue to value and to measure knowledge that is expressed in peer-reviewed research papers and books rather than oral dialogue or shared processes that are spiritual in nature. These discrepancies create barriers for Indigenous academics like myself, who move between and across institutional and community sites of knowledge creation and validation.

As I have shown, research by Indigenous people about marginalized members of our communities can serve to reproduce colonial power dynamics in which the voices of Indigenous people must be translated into colonial language in order to be considered valid in the context of Western knowledge systems. Gaudry (2011) writes that "this translation also reinforces the colonialist assertion that Indigenous knowledges are not valuable in their own right or defensible on their own terms" (p. 115). Similarly, the voices and experiential knowledge of sex workers are often filtered through the frameworks of academics in order to provide legitimacy or validation.

While this may be true whenever we work across differences in social location, Indigenous researchers should be particularly attuned to these dynamics when bringing the stories of people who trade or sell sex into mainstream discourse. For

example, with the emergence of broad recognition of the high levels of violence against residents of the Downtown Eastside, including the long-term presence of a serial killer, scholars, activists, and Indigenous organizations have sought to represent the lives of residents (especially women) in that neighbourhood. In these processes, I fear the voices of Indigenous sex workers themselves are being obscured, particularly as anti–sex work prohibitionist agendas have driven much of the work on this issue. This absence of voice has far-reaching implications, as discourse and theoretical frameworks on related issues of gendered colonial violence, sex work laws, and international human rights have been developed in the absence of these women whose quality of life is most immediately at stake. In this way, assuming others can act as "witness" on the basis that they are Indigenous women also works to silence the women whose lives we hope to witness in the first place. Power differences lie at the heart of this conundrum, as Indigenous scholars and others who have access to the tools to write about violence often centre their own perspectives, while those they seek to speak for continue to be denied the legitimacy and practical tools with which to represent themselves. Witnessing must be accompanied by actions to create welcoming spaces in which sex workers can speak for themselves and have their voices heard. As Sayers (n.d.) states, "invite sex workers to the table[,] especially sex workers who come from various backgrounds and life experiences. I say this to both sex work and non-sex work related organizations. If you are not talking about race, class, colonialism, indigenous issues, violence, or migrant rights, then the spaces you are creating are not safe to have those discussions. Start creating safe spaces to have these discussions" (n.p.). Thus, in my work, I strive to advocate for centring of the voices of sex workers while not speaking for experiences that are not my own. I have found it more in line with the ethics of witnessing to name the gaps in experience between sex workers and academics (while not assuming these are mutually exclusive groups), as well as power dynamics between these groups, rather than replicate the power dynamics inherent in academic knowledge construction by naturalizing it. In my experience, it has been more powerful to make visible my inability to resolve these power differences than to pretend I can ever fully address them.

Just as I was called to act as a witness in the death of my cousin, my obligation here is to recall the way risk, marginalization, and silencing of sex workers is produced systemically and interpersonally in our communities rather than to speak *for* anyone. In the potlatch, witnesses are called upon to collectively recall what happened, in order to reinforce, rather than replace, the individual whose political or ceremonial act was in question. As witnesses, then, we should not

seek to become the voice of those whose stories are denied, but should work to make them more viable, more visible, more audible, and more deeply felt, on their own terms.

BALANCING INSTITUTIONAL DEMANDS

While Indigenous researchers may or may not be working cross-culturally when conducting research within Indigenous communities, I have illustrated here that we are nevertheless always faced with power differences and dynamics. These gaps are particularly pressing when our work is concerned with representing marginalized members of our communities, or any of those whose lives are at a greater distance from the halls of the universities and other institutions in which knowledge becomes valued and validated within dominant discourse. As Smith (1999) cautions, Western research is imbued with an attitude and spirit that at some level assumes ownership of the entire world. In other words, it assumes academics can have access to any kind of knowledge they choose from their distanced, objective, and superior position to Indigenous and other communities in which they work. As Indigenous researchers, we must be cautious not to approach our work with this same air of superiority. We must also be cautious of entering into the kinds of divisive debates that Western academia disciplines its students into. These kinds of debates only work to divide our communities and shut us off from hearing one another across our diverse experiences.

As I have outlined, Kwagiulth witnessing methodology is not akin to simply hearing, seeing, or being told something. Witnessing here is taking up a specific role in maintaining the integrity of Indigenous knowledge and community. It entails not just an obligation to recall but to act, given that violence continues to be normalized. It requires us to bear witness to the ontological violence of forgetting certain stories, as much as to the stories themselves. As academics, witnessing assumes working across a range of intersecting power relations that we must navigate as we determine how best to live up to our responsibilities. As witnesses, our role is not to take up the voice or story we have witnessed, nor to change the story, but to ensure the truths of the acts can be comprehended, honoured, and validated. Colonial violence is normalized through ongoing denial, silencing, and ontological gaps that make it impossible for Indigenous women's and Two-Spirit people's stories to be heard on their own terms, particularly individuals like those trading or selling sex who are often viewed through a dehumanizing lens of stigmatization. Thus, the need for us to step up as witnesses remains as vital as ever.

At its heart, witnessing is about the persistent reintegration of voices of people who have been pushed to the periphery in processes of knowledge creation. It is about making visible and audible those members of our communities who are being silenced, forgotten, erased, and spoken over. Witnessing emerges within the context of dominant gendered and racialized power relations in which the voices of academically trained researchers are privileged over those of other members of Indigenous communities. For this reason, we must be attuned to the responsibilities that come with our multiply situated identities (within universities, our own communities, other Indigenous communities, and so on). As my work unfolds across these spaces, I find processes of self-reflection vital to fulfilling my responsibilities as witness. In recalling the truths of violence around me, I am called to de-centre my own voice by acknowledging that my story is not the one most urgently in need of validation. Indeed, once realities of violence are no longer at risk of being denied, and once sex workers are called to speak for themselves and their lives are no longer at risk on a daily basis, the work of witnesses such as myself will necessarily change. Within this network of relational responsibilities, witnessing can thus adapt and transform as we aid one another in the healing work of decolonization.

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NOTES

1. The Kwagiulth are part of the Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw nation, or Kwak'wala-speaking people, who live on the northern part of what is now known as Vancouver Island, in British Columbia. The Kwagiulth people of Tsaxis, or what is now called Fort Rupert, are registered with the federal government as the Kwakiutl band.
2. See Nicolson (2013) for more on the meaning of *gukwdzi* within Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw culture.
3. Two-Spirit is a term used by Indigenous people whose gender and/or sexual identity fall outside the Western gender binary and/or who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgender, or otherwise non-heterosexual. It is also used to connote a specific cultural or spiritual role. In this way, Two-Spirit is used to describe diverse identities and cultural roles which cannot be captured in the English language.

4. For more, see Hunt (2015).
5. For a statement on these dynamics written by Indigenous people with experience trading or selling sex, see the Indigenous Sex Sovereignty Collective at http://indigenoussexsovereignty.tumblr.com

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