

# HEALTH INEQUITIES AND THRIVANCE AMONG AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE LGBTQ/TWO SPIRIT POPULATIONS

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Based in part on Chapter with Dr. Michelle Johnson-Jennings (Ahina Ikhi<sup>n</sup>sh Holhpokunna)

Photo: hulleah tsinnahjinnie

# Story of Apanukfila (*Whirlwind*)



The story of Apanukfila (Whirlwind), also known as Apela (helper), Apalachi (giving help), and Apeli (act of storming) is a Choctaw Okla Hannali (Six Towns people) story and this rendition is shared through the Choctaw family of Dr. Johnson-Jennings

# Setting the Context

- Stories such as Apanukfila reminds us of the transformative power of love and relationality in healing from trauma
- Two-spirit women have stories of existence and transformative power, despite settler colonialism's attempt at erasure
- Two-spirit people in particular suffered disproportionate historical and contemporary traumas.
- Boarding school and Two-Spirits- any expression of physical affection or gender nonconformity met with physical punishment.
  - In some cases re-captured runaway boys would be forced to wear girls' dresses as a form of humiliation-thus reconfiguring a once normalized traditional practice for third gendered people – into a mark of dishonor or shame.
  - Traditional stories prohibited, replaced with Christian dogma and settler colonial heteronormative and patriarchal European norms
- Two spirit women bear burden of exceptionally high lifetime sexual (85%) and physical assault prevalence (78%) combined with ongoing structural inequities and chronic stressors leading to prolonged suffering and health concerns.
- Moving away from a deficit-oriented approach, we utilize an Indigenist-centered approach –re-contextualing behavioral health concerns by amplifying the strengths, resilience, and survivance of two spirit peoples.

# Historical Trauma

- Historical trauma is conceptualized as an event or set of events perpetrated on a group of people who share a specific group identity.
- Historically traumatic events are designed to:
  - 1. Eradicate a people-tribe, community, families (genocide)
  - 2. Eradicate their lifeways (i.e., culture, language, identity, religion also known as ethnocide)
  - 3. Eradicate their thoughtways (i.e., worldviews, knowledges, epistemologies; also known as epistemicide).
- Trauma is often conceptualized as collective- significantly impacting community; and, compounding as multiple events over generations join in an overarching legacy of assaults.
- HT events uphold settler colonial policies designed to support land dispossession and erasure



The punishment of the "sodomites" by the Spanish -de Bry's etching of "Balboa's Dogs Attacking a Group of Panamanian Sodomites."

\*<https://nativephilanthropy.candid.org/timeline/era/epidemics-slavery-massacres-and-indigenous-resistance/#timeline-content>









1954-80s: Atascadero State Hospital opens. Doctors working with the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) tried to “cure” the homosexuals of their sexual deviancy/disease and tried to get rid of homosexuality in American society.

Up until 1971, simply being a “homosexual” could result in a life sentence.

Twenty states had laws stating that the mere fact you were a homosexual was reason for imprisonment.

In California LGBTQ+ individuals could be institutionalized for life in a mental hospital. In seven states castration was permitted as a way to stop homosexual 'deviants.'

The medical experimentation in Atascadero included administering to gay people a drug that simulated the experience of drowning, sterilization, castration, and lobotomy and “aversion therapies.”

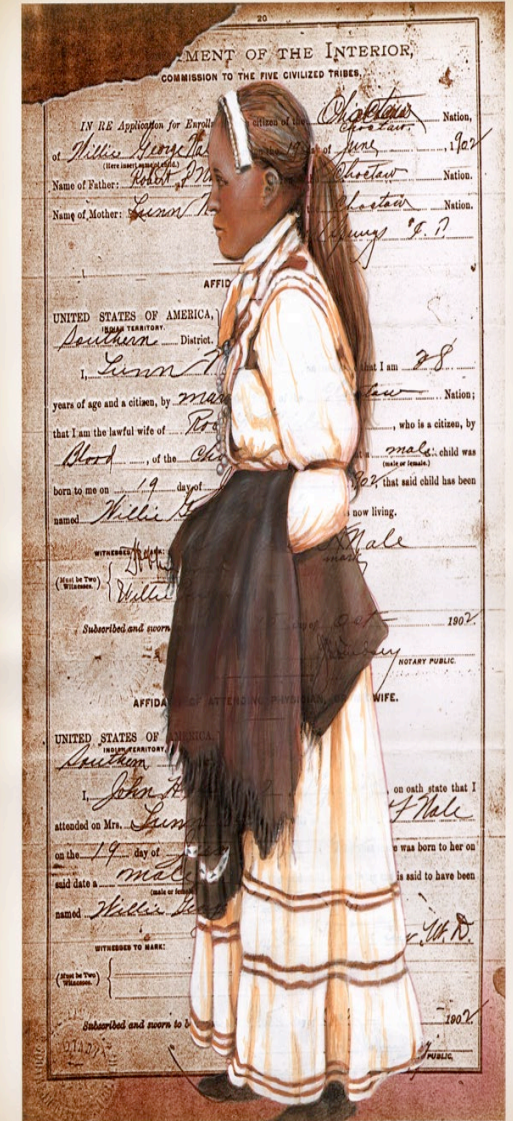


# Results: HT and PTSD/Substance Use

- In main analyses, lifetime physical abuse, sexual abuse, military service and their interactions with generation of trauma were used as covariates to control for the effect of lifetime trauma on retrospective reporting of trauma from past generations.
- **PTSD** (PDS; FOA, 1993)
  - Overall trauma across multiple generations was associated with elevated PTSD ( $\beta = .13$ , SE = .05, 95% CI= .04-.21,  $p=.01$ ).
  - Direct attacks across multiple generations were also associated with PTSD ( $\beta = .20$ , SE = .04, 95% CI= .11-.28,  $p=.001$ ); but not disruptive HT events.

## SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- Greater *alcohol-related problems* in the past year
- Greater likelihood of using *cocaine* in the past year
- Greater likelihood of other *stimulant use* in the past year (e.g., Speed, Dexedrine)
- Land based HT events over generations accounted for another 6% of variance in MH outcomes  $F(4, 346) = 5.56, p < .01$
- 12% of mental health associated with land-based trauma and lifetime trauma experiences





# Impact of Historical Trauma

- Disruption in our ability to fulfill our **original instructions**
- Disruption in our **relational ways of being**
- Disruption in how we **narrate/story our lives**
  
- Health Prevention/Promotion Interventions incorporate:
  - Original Instructions
  - Relational Restoration
  - Narrative Transformation





Wind  
Transformation

# PARADIGM SHIFT







**HONORING OUR RESPONSIBILITIES:  
THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF THRIVANCE**

# THRIVANCE

*Survivance* involves actively uplifting the visibility of Indigenous Peoples, the renunciation of powerlessness, victimization, and invisibility, and growing from the deep cultural strands of *Indigenous knowledges* and practices that endure to this day.

*Transformative resistance* involves a conscious process of engaging with and critiquing settler colonial conditions, identifying overt and covert strategies for resisting internalization of those messages, and decolonization practices within Native and non-Native contexts.

*Thrivance*, involves weaving those survivance and Indigenous knowledge strands (the warp) with the threads of transformative resistance (the weft) into a vibrant fabric of healthful living.

Thrivance grows from ancestral knowledges and wisdoms, which then actuates healthful practices and well-being (Johnson-Jennings et al., 2019; Johnson-Jennings, Billiot, & Walters, 2019; Walters et al., 2020).

Just as Indigenous weavers use backstrap weaving - using the weight of the weaver's body to control the tension of the loom; so too do Native two spirits navigate the embodiment and expression of thrivance.





# Methods & Sample

- National multi-site Honor Project Two-Spirit Health Study (NIMH R01 65871; N=452 surveys; 65 in-depth interviews)
- 65 diverse (by age, gender) two-spirit community leaders were identified by their respective communities and interviewed (ages 20s-late 50s)
- This yielded an initial sample frame of 23 Two-Spirit women (inclusive of one self-identified transgender woman)
- 23 transcripts, 11 participants provided complete data on thriving and are the data analytic sample
- Utilized the Listening Guide relational voice-centered method (Gilligan et al., 2003; Petrovic et al., 2015)
- The LG narrative approach is a relational, voice-centered method to analyze qualitative research data by listening carefully to and for themes; in this case, themes of thriving within two-spirit women's voices, stories and narratives.



# Five major organizing themes

- After data listening, we found 5 organizing themes in which to understand thrivance practices
  1. Setting the context: Settler colonialism and historical trauma
  2. Original Instructions (ancient stories/teachings)
  3. Relational restoration/generation
  4. Narrative transformation
  5. Ceremony and spirituality

We conclude with a war shield thrivance heuristic, which consolidates the relational processes of Original Instructions, relational restoration, narrative transformation, as well as ceremony and spirituality in promoting two-spirit women's health and well-being.

## Theme 1: Settler Colonialism and HT --I-poem (Chukvsh/Chunkash)

There has been, as in the whole Indian community,  
A whole phenomenon of disaster  
Huge, huge trauma  
Told they were less than...  
Configuration of savage...  
Women had no place.  
The men were drained by filling them with alcohol  
Moving them and taking their weapons.  
During that time,  
They had ghost dancers.  
Any spiritual thing going on was murdered.  
It was killed.  
It was devastated.

The only thing that stayed with us was our spirit.

Two spirits were trained to take care of the spiritualness.  
They were supposed to take care of the community.  
Here, now they are told...  
You are nothing.  
You're stupid.  
You don't have any right to live.  
What are you?

Let's do some genocide here.

Two spirits back then were looking at a community  
who already hated the sight of Indians.  
I'm sure that historical trauma was there.  
You feel it.  
You feel it today.  
I think we all feel that historical distrust.  
We carry around that dominance is still in our lives.  
The two spirit people back then were probably needing to go underground or they were eliminated.  
Until there was a time...  
Other people could recognize them  
Two spirits themselves.

## Theme 1: Settler Colonialism and Historical Trauma Context



Photograph: Magdalena Wosinska

# Theme 2: Drawing from Original Instructions

- Embedded in IK and enacted through OI are place-based teachings, relational worldviews, and ways of being, knowing and talking in the world...how we think, communicate, and act all carry power as well as intergenerational responsibilities taught through OI. (Walters, Johnson-Jennings et al., (2020; p.6)
- OI also involve teachings (e.g., trickster stories) related to playful and healthful diverse sexual and gender expressions (e.g., third genders or transforming back and forth across genders) and healthful ways of being in the world- including healing from trauma (e.g., Apanukfila-Whirlwind) or addressing sexual or gender-based violence (e.g., Deer Woman)
- Many have held on to teachings and threads or whispers of knowledge and practices related to two spirits which endure to this day.

## Sub-Themes

1. Fighting erasure: “We have a name for people in our community like you”
2. Belonging: “There have always been roles for us”
3. Ancestral purpose: “We have an obligation to our People, to help take care of them”
4. Ancestral destiny: “My ancestors placed me in this world for a reason”
5. Rites of passage persist: “Ceremonies still exist in some form or another”
6. Meeting the medicine half-way- IK & Power of persistence: “Each rough moment, I go in.”





# Theme 2: Original Instructions

## I-Poem (Apela)

My Native People accepted me and loved me  
It wasn't just my family  
It was the whole tribe.  
It doesn't matter what your sexual orientation is...

There were always two spirited people in our tribe  
People just didn't talk about it.

They were treated as well as anybody else.  
A lot of times better simply because...

They were good, productive, helpful, generous people.

My dear two spirit friend was always there  
If someone was sick or needed something, anything, groceries  
He'd take a trunk load of groceries to somebody.

He'd instilled in me *noblesse oblige*

We have an obligation to our People  
To help take care of them if we could

I would, in time  
Carry off where he left off.  
He kinda groomed me to do that

I don't know why, but he just did...



## Poem (Maiya)

Before colonizers came, the gay and lesbian individuals in Tribe where I'm from, were the people responsible for praying over the sick.

Helping the dying to die right and appropriately.  
In a good way.

To take care of the dead after they are gone...

I feel like that's what I do...teaching, healing...

I've always felt pulled in this direction...

I had friends who in the early 80s were dying of AIDS

I helped take care of them because back then nobody would touch them

When my [relative] was dying

I took care of her

I was with her when she died peacefully...none of her kids could do that for her.

See,

My family turns to me for those kinds of things a lot-It just comes naturally,  
In a lot of ways

I've grown into who I'm supposed to be  
Who my ancestors expected me to be when they put me here...

I think

I was put here for a reason.

My ancestors placed me in this place for a reason.

And,

My grandma knew it.

# Theme 3: Relational Restoration

## Sub-Themes

1. **Mind- Restorative remembering:** “ She knew what tradition was”
2. **Community love:** “I want to be the community member that’s available to you.”
3. **Grandmother’s love:** “A lot of us have some relative who gave us their spirit.”
4. **Grandmother’s love:** “Somewhere in there that value was instilled in me.”
5. **Auntie’s love:** “I will be your mother until your mother can be your mother again.”
6. **Ancestors’ love:** “They told me... I was significant, I was valuable.”
7. **Transformative resistance and walking towards love:** “I’ve found ways of walking away.”
8. **Land-based healing and Earth Love:** “I trust the earth, the trees... those people are my family, my home.”

- Deep reciprocal connectedness across space and time, part of vast web of life, ancestral generations and spiritual and natural worlds- all our relations
- SC disrupts relational ways of being and restoring is key to healing and health



# Theme 3: Relational Restoration

## Grandma's Love: I-Poem (Chukvsh)

A lot of us have in our lives some grandparent, auntie, uncle,  
somebody who gave us their spirit too.

We have a spirit already

When we walk into the world someone keeps reminding you that

**You belong.**

The thing that probably saved me is up until the time I was taken from my  
grandmother,

I was always...given a lot of love.

It wasn't all hugs and smooches.

One of the things my grandma always had me do was...  
give her a cup of tea.

Now how loving is that? That you would ask this little child to do that ...

it gave me a purpose,  
it gave me a chance to take care of my grandma.

To be taught about giving.

I'd watch her give things to people

give food to people walking by  
you never hoarded stuff that could be used by other people.



# Theme 3: Relational Restoration

## Auntie Love: I-poem (Maiya)

I had an aunt- my mom's sister.

I've always called her "Aunt Mom"

because...when

I was disowned...

She called me within an hour and said:

"I will be your mother until your mother can be your mother again."

"You're welcome to come to my house."

"Welcome to be a part of my family..."

My aunt taught me everything she was taught.

She taught me how to dance.

How to make a shawl.

How to do beadwork and all of that stuff.

It was almost a second childhood

Becoming one of her family, one of her kids.



## Ancestor Love: I-poem (Ahnichi)

I was going to take my life.

I was getting ready to...

All of a sudden...

I heard this chanting and singing

Up over the hill came all these women

They were singing a song

They were chanting

They were circling around me

The sun came out so bright that it [vision] stopped.

That was such a profound experience.

I was ready to ...and they stopped me.

The women told me...

That there was importance in my life

That I was significant

That I was valuable

There were many things in my life that

I needed to do

To get through the tough times

I think about that moment.



## Theme 4: Narrative Transformation- How we talk our story matters

- E.g., Mvskoke word
- Indigenous re-storying can shift historical trauma narratives towards ancestral love, resilience, and sacrifices to improve individual health
- Tribal communities have utilized narrative transformation for centuries through art, song, dance, ceremonies (e.g., naming ceremonies)-including creation/origin stories, ceremonial stories reserved for particular sacred rites, humorous life-lesson stories (e.g., trickster), legends, poems, songs, chants and dances.
- In modern times, Indigenous peoples are utilizing narrative transformative strategies through podcasts, blogs, digital stories, film, etc... these narrative practices are the vehicles in transmitting Indigenous knowledges, Original Instructions, and relational worldviews as well.
- Today, many two spirit communities are creating creative, safe and healing spaces to narrate their whole being into the world, to recommit and reconnect to tribal ways and knowledges, to participate in ceremony without fear of harassment or shunning, and to build a positive and vibrant community.

### Sub-Themes

1. Power of naming and re-naming
2. Power of storying and re-storying
3. Narrative transformative resistance: “Enough is enough”
4. Power of prayerful action



# Theme 4: Narrative Transformation

## Power of Naming: I-Poem (Ahnichi)

Part of my healing has been able to name things.

Define language for what has happened culturally.

To me and a lot of people in my family...the biggest part of my

healing has been able to understand history

To have words to call it and help me to go through those experiences with language.

I feel that's something that some of our people don't have the opportunity to do that, define language.

To deal with the anger and the continuation of trauma, either in the urban or on the rez.

Having language has been beneficial

To be able to name things for what they are...



## *I-Poem (Ahnichi)*

It's hard to break through and really bring about healing.  
I know that our ancestors gave their lives for us.  
I know that my ancestors sacrificed their lives. So...  
I could be here today.  
There are tools.  
Some of the tools are out there, they're kind of hiding...  
People have to go out there and find them.  
You got to be persevering in doing it  
Then you might find a tool that's broken or shattered  
It still has energy  
You have to go out  
Find those people  
Bring them back  
Wake them up again  
To ask their help for a clear path for healing.  
To get through these traumas.  
Really call it for what it is.  
**Start naming it.**



Photo Credit: ADAM JOHANSSON

# Theme 5: Ceremony & Spirituality

- Many Native cultures tie spirituality to health and being in balance
- Engaging in Native ceremonies and spirituality induce positive behavioral changes, mindfulness, lower disease risk, and raise overall well being
- Sub-Theme
- Cultural continuity through spiritual living: “We need to take of each other as family”



## I-Poem (Otapí)

My most vivid memory

I have as a child...

we sweat daily...grandmother, my mom, and aunts and all my little cousins

We'd go to the sweat lodge...the fire and the stones... and pass them in...

We'd be in there talking and laughing and listening to the stories...

I could hear my relative breaking the ice in the creek

You run out as little children into the creek and rinse off and run into the house..

That spiritual time...

They'd talk about life.

Things we need to do to take care of each other as a family.

How we need to look at our little cousins and watch them and take care of them.

We need to listen to older cousins because they had [more] time here...

It just was a spiritual kind of time.

At the time...

I didn't realize it was spiritual...just listening to the songs and feeling all that presence That was there.



## Meeting the Medicine Half Way-I-poem (Ahnichi)

I remember  
I was going through a tough time  
I went home.  
I was just so disjointed, so angry...

My grandmother  
she'd give me a big hug  
she looked at me and said, "yup, [NAME] come home."...

I went to the cabin  
I said grandmother  
I really need your help.

She says- go fast (ceremonial fast).

I said...

I don't want to go fast.

I don't want to do it.

She said, you have to do it.

I remember leaving the cabin,

I was really mad, going up trails, mumbling all the way down the trail.

That went on for a few days..  
each time I went in the cabin,

she'd say - go and fast.

I don't want to do it.

Actually

I said, I don't want to hear what that fucking spirit has to say! [laughs].  
I want to hear it from you.

I want human interaction, not spirit interaction! [laughs].

I was mumbling, so angry,

I didn't want to do anything,

I didn't want to sit down to dinner,

I was so pissed.

On the fourth day

I got up and

something happened,  
clicked into place before daylight

I went in the cabin

She said...come here, I'll mark a place for you (ceremonial place outside  
for the fast)

So, she did.

I went out and that was a really tough time.

I was very fortunate.  
I'm glad I did go out.

I did receive  
what I needed to help me get through  
it's really simple...

I say thanks for another day of life and breath-  
it's the simple things  
not the complicated things that gets me through the tough times...  
family and friends and people who have like minds  
who are clear can help you get through  
the real tough times.

# Theme 5: Spirit and Ceremony

## I-poem (Aianli)

I pray often and without preaching.

I pray while I'm arguing.

I pray while I'm peeing.

I pray when I'm scratching.

I pray [laughs] all the time.

I talk

I talk to the Creator

Like the Creator's sitting right next to me.  
Well the Creator is...

I mean like,

I can see the Creator in front of me



## I-poem (Kvli)

Two spirit gatherings every year are really helpful to me.  
It feels like that's the only time in the year

I get to be how whole self in one place.

Joking and laughing.

I wish we could have one that lasted a whole year.

We'd all be really different people when we come out of there...to  
me, that is very healing

The ceremonies that happen within that context at least twice have  
saved my life.

I was in really, really terrible shape.  
Ceremonies there just changed everything...

I would say that ceremony is absolutely crucial to my survival.

I am really grateful whenever

I can be a part of ceremony.

It's so good.

- Community connectedness is protective. Mentors and Elders matter...



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