

**One Man's Story of Being Gay and Diné (Navajo):
A Study in Resiliency**

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What is it to be gay in an American Indian family? We begin our discussion by emphasizing that the terms “Native American family” or “American Indian family” are misleading and obscure the truths about actual family realities. In the United States there are approximately 660 federally recognized tribes—360 located in the forty-eight [contiguous] states and another 300 in Alaska. These numbers do not include the 200 tribes still struggling with legal and governmental agencies to gain federal recognition (Wright, Lopez, & Zumwalt, 1997). Each tribe has its own beliefs, practices, ways of living, and language, including its own phenomenology with regard to family and sexual minorities (Roscoe, 1987). As with any human group, there is also diversity within any given tribe.

We asked Teles, a 28 year-old gay Navajo graduate student, if he would share his story with us so that we might situate our discussion of “two-spirit people” in American Indian families within the context of one person’s lived experience and avoid inappropriate generalizations. This paper became a process of self discovery for Teles as well as a learning experience for us, a non-native lesbian social work practitioner\educator and a gay Diné scholar and educator. Consistent with contemporary narrative theory as well as with the Navajo tradition of teaching through stories, we present the text of Teles’ story without the extensive paraphrasing and analysis that is customary in European American academic discussions of people’s lives. We invite the reader to enjoy Teles’ story and to allow the text to speak for itself.

Teles¹ travels [physically and psychologically] between Phoenix, Arizona where he is a graduate student and the Navajo Nation in Northern Arizona where he spends time with his family. When at home, Teles thinks and speaks in Navajo and participates in traditional Navajo lifeways. His mother [of the Salt Clan], a long-time community activist; and his father [of the Bitter Water Clan], a native herbalist, raised Teles and his 11 siblings both on the reservation and in the adjacent town. In so doing, they prepared their children both to embrace traditional lifeways and to navigate in the dominant society. Teles' Navajo and urban worlds converge in his relationships with his nieces who are college students in the city where he lives. Consistent with Navajo tradition, as their maternal uncle, Teles plays a major role in his nieces' lives. He maintains daily contact with them, providing nurturing and guidance as well as instrumental support.

Family?

Family has long been seen as the main context for the development of personal identity. Nowadays, however, the term "family," has a postmodern ring to it, especially given that the idealized 50's model of the white, middle-class, intact nuclear family, headed by a breadwinner father and supported by a homemaker mother, is currently found in only 3% of households (Coontz, 1997). One wonders, "Which family? Whose idea of family are you talking about?" In a recent volume on family resilience, family theorist Froma Walsh (1998) cautions, "our language and preconceptions about 'the normal family' can pathologize or distort family...." She cites, for example, a case in which a judge denied a parental rights request by a lesbian who had

¹Identifying information has been changed to protect Teles' right to "come out" at his own pace.

shared parenting for her partner's biological child, on the grounds that "it would be too confusing for a child to have two mothers" (p. 29).

Sexual minority American Indians have another challenge. In addition to the usual heterosexual preconceptions, they run up against preconceived notions of "family" that exist within the dominant lesbian/gay community. The term "family," in the dominant lesbian/gay community is code for "one of us;" signifying "family of choice" in a community in which many individuals are disengaged from family of origin. In this context the term "family" also suggests the existence of a network of social support. For American Indians and others of color, however, the social support commonly associated with the word "family" in the dominant gay community is often not available (Font, 1997; Marsiglia, 1998). As a Navajo man in a large city, Teles must navigate within a hostile dominant culture. Rather than finding an oasis in the urban gay subculture, he finds another context of marginalization. Accordingly, he looks to his Navajo family as his most important source of social support. Teles describes a sense of closeness with his family of origin that far exceeds the closeness he experiences in his relationships in the city.

I think that we are such a close family, I mean we've become actually closer, even though we don't see each other for quite some time, you know, a month, or two months. But still, I feel a connection to everybody back home in a sort of sense to where it will infiltrate my dreams, my thought processes, and sure enough, I'm right. If something's going on. Like for example, my sister is like, really, for some reason or another, I'll just pick up the phone to call, and it so happens that at that moment, you know, she will be trying to call me. We'll pick up the phone at the same time and we both get a busy signal. You know, that kind of thing. And so, and with my mom and dad

it's that way too. And so in that sense, that I don't see them often but still feel this, I don't know, huge waves of something or another I feel like emanating from the North, and sure enough. And sure enough, when it's with me, I just know. It really kind of startled me for a while. It's, it's overwhelming. Especially with my mom and dad, and my sisters and brothers as well, it can be very overwhelming. But you know, you deal with it, you deal with it.

Romanticization and Appropriation of American Indian Sexualities

The current fascination with “two-spiritedness” in the dominant gay community may be yet another instance of distortion, exotification, and exploitation of Native traditions by European Americans. European American travelers, missionaries, and anthropologists have long been fascinated with the sexual practices of Native Americans (see Jacobs, 1997 and Wright, Lopez, & Zumwalt, 1997 for more comprehensive discussion of discontinuities between Native and European American constructions of gender and sexualities). Thayer (1980), for example, illuminated the historical overemphasis on the sexual aspects of Native individuals classified as “berdache,”² “due, no doubt, to an obsession with primitive and sexual ‘odd customs’” (p. 293). Reductionistic Euro-centric classifications distort the wide diversity in Native American constructions of sexualities, and levels of acceptance of sexual diversity across tribes and over time. Little Crow, Wright, and Brown (1997), for example, contrast the Dakota “winkte” [not-woman] who was relegated to non entity status, forbidden to interact with members of his family or tribe, and considered dead by the community; with the Lakota “wicasa wakan” [healer,

² We put this term in quotation marks as it is “now considered to be an inappropriate and insulting term by a number of Native Americans as well as by anthropologists”(Jacobs, Thomas, & Lang, 1997, p. 3).

performer, wizard] who was revered and considered an essential member of Lakota society.

Some researchers assert that more traditional American Indians tend to respect sexual minority individuals, whereas more acculturated American Indians tend to devalue and stigmatize them (Williams, 1986). Teles' story paints a much more complicated picture. He has grown up in a Navajo family that continues to actively participate in traditional lifeways, yet he has heard nothing from his family that suggests that being gay is acceptable. At the same time, he has heard "bits and pieces" from here and there that make him wonder if this has always been the case. Anything positive he has heard about homosexuality has come, not from his family or elders in his tribe, but from friends in the city or things he has read in books. As a Navajo gay man in the 90' s, Teles is left to reconstruct the story of the meaning of being gay and Navajo from the words of outsiders.

In the dominant gay community you see this sense of romanticism, that "you guys are indigenous, have the relationship with the land, and on top of all that, have the beauty of being two-spirited." It's like saying, "Oh, dancing with wolves." You know? And all this other stuff. All of that. Those are the kind of terms that are, you know, coined in such a way that, so that you know you have to think about individual people less. Like the [idea of the traditional] bisexuality of American Indians, I hear about that a lot in the dominant gay culture, but I have no response because I've never heard of it. As I was growing up I did not see any reverence toward Navajo individuals who were gay. I was aware of the opposite. I heard many derogatory references made to gay individuals, especially men. Gay men are seen as lesser than straight men. Not real different than the mainstream's misperception of mainstream gays.

I have heard that when Navajo people would go out on their raiding parties, these people [effeminate men] would take on a domestic role for the warriors. They were risking their lives, because they weren't trained as warriors. It makes you wonder about how much they were valued. They even serviced the warriors, you know, had sex with them. Today, I still do not know where gays fit into Navajo cultural life. As far as the language that's used for gay men, it's real derogatory. Nádleehí means "changing person." When it comes to an individual male, the way he's referred to is Nádleehí combined with a crude reference to his penis. I won't say the Navajo word. I can't say that.

Butch women in Navajo culture, from what I've seen, are seen in a different light than effeminate men. Butch women are valued on the reservation because they can work with cattle and things like that. They're economically useful. They are seen as well-rounded, accomplishing the tasks of men as well as the nurturing functions of women. Butch women are almost not seen as different than straight women. I don't even know of any Navajo word for lesbian women. They're often married too. I know many women who I perceive as being butch and they're married with children.

And it makes me even more curious about, you know, what is this thing about, um, religion and spirituality and being a homosexual? Were they really revered at one time? You know, and then I hear all these different stories. You know I've never heard that from my family. I have read contemporary pieces that talk about gays holding a special place in native culture. Where? Have I missed something important while growing up? Nobody's ever made reference to that except my gay, my gay friends, gay

Navajos, Navajos. I really don't know. I mean, for a lot of people it's totally different. I really can't speak for another tribe. I'm not too sure. I haven't read the literature. So, that's even more interesting. Like who knows, some of it might have been, like we've talked about, you know, whitewashed. Mainstream influence on Navajo life? Of course!

And of course they're generalizing. They always generalize when they talk about Indian people to begin with. But there might be some tribes, for example I've heard, just bits and pieces from other people, from some of my friends, just talking to people, about that tribe [Zuni] who had that person [We'Wha] who was dressed up as a woman and he even went to Washington D.C. as a part of a delegation to honor somebody, or something along those lines. A lot of people have gay people as part of their religion, you know, and all that, their origin stories, just like Estsánatlehi [Changing Woman] for the Navajo, or Diné. I try to use Diné, because Navajo is a term that has been imposed upon us by Europeans. Navajo, for some reason or another that I've heard, has a derogatory meaning. I forget what it was, thieves, or something like that? Diné means "the people." I just bounced totally off the subject. I would make a horrible native storyteller.[laughs] I remember, there's this one person who I know who talked about some sort of island where they [gay men] separated themselves from the rest of the community and somehow they were revered and played a religious role and all of that. Like some sort of society of gay people living all alone.

Jacobs (1997) suggests that contemporary romanticization of Native American sexuality and gender diversity may be an "adventure of white homosexual males who are either appropriating cultural elements from Native cultures or imputing to Native cultures

characteristics that would resolve their heartfelt desires to be recognized fully as productive and important members of their own society”(p.21). Of course, the same may be said of white lesbian researchers.

There is deep, epistemological irony, for example, in the term, “two-spirit people.” The term was originally coined by Native American gay activists in the early 90's who wished to distance themselves from white, gay male culture, but was quickly appropriated by the white gay community as a symbol of freedom from oppression (Jacobs, 1997). Whatever the motives driving the curiosity of non-natives, the romanticization of Native sexualities obscures the harsh realities experienced by contemporary sexual minority American Indians. Gutierrez (1992) asks, for example, “How do we reconcile the ridicule and low status the berdaches had in Zuni society with the high status and praise others [especially non-Indian gay males] lavish on them?” (p. 66). Jacobs (1997) captures this incongruity in the following quote, “The irony is that as the “bedarche” became an honored figure in the reconstructed romantic history of Native American cultures, lesbian, gay, two-spirit, and transgender people of various American Indian heritages were being beaten, disowned, and disavowed on their reservations”(p. 22).

Euro-centric romanticization and appropriation of Native beliefs and practices has become a psychological as well as physical health hazard to sexual minority American Indians, both on the reservation and in the city. Wright, Lopez, and Zumwalt (1997) point out that the discontinuity between Indian and dominant culture worldviews creates a sense of disorientation for many urban-dwelling Indians that is further exacerbated by deprivation of social support from family, clan, and tribe. Given these discontinuities, it is not surprising that many people report difficulty integrating their gay/lesbian and Indian identities (Chan, 1989; Espin, 1987;

Garnets & Kimmel, 1991, Morales, 1989) and forging a positive sense of self (Walters, 1997). Some find that the stress associated with negotiating both gay and ethnic identity challenges their coping resources and psychological well-being (Jarvenpa, 1985; Kemnitzer, 1978). Teles describes this identity confusion as a “journey” that many gay American Indians find themselves taking.

You see I think that it’s a little bit more risky for people who are more impressionable, people who are younger, to be sucked up into all of that. Because I’ve come across really young people who have just really, who are, are just lost and who are, are searching, you know? And they’re being led, you know, somewhere, and they find it an interesting, exciting journey but with all of that comes alcohol, drug abuse, and all this other stuff, and I see that, because I’m a little bit older than a lot of these young people in Phoenix now and those on the reservation. I see that a lot. Young Navajo people who are very impressionable. Of course, when you talk about role modeling, you know, they do attach themselves to people in the community. And here it means the bars and parties and drug abuse and all of that. And in the meantime, you know, they dress the part. They act the part and dress the part. As far as, you know, either, um, cross dressing for example or um, certainly, people who dress a certain way, certain fetishes and that kind of thing. And you see that. And they go on that journey, you know.

And those who choose to stay on the reservation are, of course, not as prevalent as far as being openly gay. I see them more or less as making their own community. A few years ago, some Navajo queens got together and had their own Navajo gay pride parade in a park on the rez. Some of my gay counterparts are the funniest people. I bet it

would be a blast.

Romanticization of the “two-spirit” identity by the white gay community is akin to the wider-scale appropriation of Native beliefs and practices by curious “New Agers” who may then derive a sense of identity, spiritual connectedness, and social status, and may even enjoy monetary gain from marketing traditional medicine ways such as the Sweat Lodge, “smudging” [burning sage], using ceremonial feathers and fans, assuming “Indian sounding” names, etc.. Teles sees it this way.

So back to spirituality and exploitation, so that’s why I think all of that does a lot of damage. A lot of it has to do with the [dominant] value system changing. I see it more as an assault, appropriating American Indian values, practices, etc., and what exactly is that going to do? You know, I mean, I think there are a lot of people who think that Indian people, Indian cultures, or Indian people in general, are like living saviors, you know. People have realized that we’re all going to Hell anyway [laughs], you know, and try to slow down the process, you know, so let’s see what the Indians are doing. I think people are searching, and when it comes to Indian people, we are now expected to be above all of this, you know? I think that that does damage as well.

Because I think that, so if people gear attention towards that, just like for example, um, spirituality, like with all these New Agers, it’s just like it leaves a wide open space for exploitation, I mean, I mean, believe me, I see that. And I see people who are totally, you know, um, who shouldn’t be doing that. You know they’re messing with, you know, our, our universe... messing with our spirituality, our ceremonies, and all of that, you know. And people are making money off of it.

And what if a young gay person who's trying to find their place, you know, starts reading that? It's totally wrong, in most cases. So, I'm curious about all of this and then, when I pick up a book, I know if something, if its, you know, real, um generalized, and you know, its, and I, me, I pick up a lot of material and see a lot of materials as well, in my anthropology class, you know, and I can see that it's wrong, which is, which is good. And I can identify, you know, what's going on as far as, you know, talking about people. And we're all distinct cultures, very distinct. Everybody has their own view. Every tribe has their own views on different, different gender roles and all of that. So that's what I want to know. Capture all of that. You know, why can't somebody write about it rather than just talking about it, you know, lumping all of the tribes together. You know, this is what it's like to be gay and Indian! [laughs] You'll be accepted by everybody. [laughs] And you'll be considered a holy man or holy woman and all that kind of stuff. As if being gay had some sort of religious meaning. I think at one point in time you know, homosexuals may have been revered, that's why I think it's such an assault. It's so damaging, mainstream values regarding homosexuals and all of that, you know, and... and sort of romanticizing about it, you know?

Modoc novelist Michael Dorris (1987) explains the dynamics of this unrelenting (500 years and counting) process of exploitation.

For most people, the myth has become real and a preferred substitute for ethnographic reality. The Indian mystique was designed for mass consumption by a European audience...it is little wonder then, that many non-Indians literally would not know a real Native American if they fell over one, for they have been

prepared for a well-defined, carefully honed legend. (p. 99)

As well as being personally confusing, the Indian mystique is played out in cultural misunderstandings that range from the comical to the grotesque. For example, “An Indian who doesn’t fit the stereotyped, romanticized image is often insulted with statements such as ‘You’re not really Indian, are you? or, ‘So, you’re part Indian?’” (Wright, Lopez, & Zumwalt, 1997, p. 75). In her poem, *Her Name is Helen*, Beth Brant (1988, p. 177) illustrates how cultural misunderstandings occur in relationships between Indians and Whites.

When she was laid off from the factory
 she got a job in a bar, serving up shots and beer.
 Instead of tips, she gets presents from her customers.
 Little wooden statues of Indians in headdress.
 Naked pictures of squaws with braided hair.
 Feather roach clips in fuschia and chartreuse.
 Everybody loves Helen...
 She’s had lots of girlfriends.
 White women who wanted to take care of her,
 who liked Indians,
 who think she’s a tragedy...

Her girlfriends took care of her.
 Told her what to say
 how to act more like an Indian.

You should be proud of your Indian heritage.

Wear more jewelry.

Go to the Indian Center

Given the experience depicted in this poem, it should come as no surprise that one study (Grandbois & Schadt, 1994) found a positive correlation between the number of years an Indian woman resides in an urban area and the degree of social isolation she experiences. Teles tells it this way.

Sometimes when I go out with friends, somebody comes up to me and at first I think it's me they're interested in, and for once I feel like I'm being included. But as it turns out, what they're really interested in, curious about, is this whole romanticized thing about gay Native Americans having total acceptance in their communities. As if gay Native Americans live without experiencing discrimination in their lives! It's kind of embarrassing, because I think I'm being romanced, but they're really romancing my culture or whatever. This has happened to me many times.

Because of the intentional and unintentional racism Teles routinely experiences with urban gay friends and acquaintances, the dominant gay community doesn't feel like "family" to him.

Discontinuity between "Coming Out" Theories and the Navajo Worldview

A striking phenomenological discontinuity appears when one juxtaposes "coming out" models with a traditional Navajo worldview. It is said that stage theories are not necessarily linear (Grotevant, 1987), and that individuals may spiral back through earlier stages at higher levels, or possess qualities of different stages simultaneously (Parham, 1989). Nevertheless, stage theories suggest movement from a lower to a higher stage of development. The "coming

out” models of Cass (1984) and others, like all Euro-centric stage theories, are predicated on the assumption that autonomy and self-expression reflect a “higher” level of psychological development. “Coming out” models are so named because they view being openly gay as necessary for healthy identity development (Cass, 1984; Walters, 1997). “Coming out” is the highest stage and, apparently, the endpoint, as none of these models addresses life after “coming out,” i.e. the continuing evolution of sexual identity over the course of adulthood (Walters, 1997).

Stage theories have no place in the Navajo understanding of the world. In the Navajo worldview, development is a cyclical process with no endpoint, and human beings are neither autonomous nor distinct. Rather, human beings are inseparable from everything else in the cycle of the universe (Epple, 1997). From this perspective, respect for and participation in the interconnectedness of all things is the hallmark of healthy human development. Maturity is the ability to nurture and maintain harmony within the complex web of family, clan, tribal, and universal roles and responsibilities. Given these diverging realities, declaration of one’s gayness to one’s family of origin signifies personal integrity in one meaning system and betrayal of responsibility to the group in another. Teles describes the reaction he might expect if he capitulated to the pressure of the dominant gay community, and declared his gayness to his family.

We’ve all heard stories about people coming out, you know, personal accounts, and I think it’s a risk. And with Navajo people, with my family, you know, I just, I choose not to do that like, in your face thing, because they’ll question my intentions. Why am I doing that. Why am I doing it, you know? Or bring a bunch of butch bikers

home

[laughs]. That Act Up and be out thing just doesn't wash with most Indian people I know. That kind of thing, and it just doesn't wash.

The same identity models that may be empowering and offer a sense of coherence to his European American counterparts discount Teles' reality. He seems to experience a sort of existential dissonance as he learns that success in the mainstream and, indeed, gaining status in the mainstream gay community, is predicated on self-assertion, whereas maintaining the integrity of his Navajo identity requires respect, deference, and the ability to engage in subtle social interplay rather than obvious self-expression.

It's like there's a lot of respect going both ways and there's so much of it between myself and then my parents and my family, even my nieces, nobody will say anything about it [Teles' being gay] and I don't say anything because I have too much respect to just bring it out. I'm not taking that part of me home. I'm not sharing it. So that's what I mean about too much respect.

In the Navajo context especially, I think if we [Navajos] talk about sexuality, or sex in general, I mean, that part of your life, I don't know what other people see, but this is the way I understand it, that part of your life, your sexuality, you know, that's just, that's very private and that's not to be shared with other family members, that's something that's so private, you know. You just don't do it. It's, it's taboo and there are repercussions. Major repercussions. I've heard this among other people as well. What repercussions? Um, insanity, um, that type of thing, if you talk about sex, even just jokingly. You just don't do that.

Morales (1989) attempted to integrate gay/lesbian and ethnic identity models with a five-stage ethnic gay and lesbian identity model. In this model an individual moves through denial of conflicts (I am not clear on what my gayness means to me and my ethnicity is no big deal); bisexual versus gay/lesbian (I prefer to identify as bisexual, even if my behavior and relationships are primarily homosexual); conflicts in allegiances (I identify as gay and not ethnic around gays and ethnic and not gay around other ethnics); establishing priorities in allegiances (I am ethnic and resent the racism in the gay community or I am gay and resent the homophobia in my ethnic community); and integration (I am both ethnic and gay). This model comes closer to describing Teles's experience, but still attributes feelings to Teles that he doesn't have.

Being Gay and Diné: One Family's Construction

The dominant gay community in the city tells Teles one story about what it is to be gay. His traditional Navajo family tells another.

What's even more interesting in terms of our discussion is family dynamics. And that's what I'm interested in. The two-spirit people did have a very definite role in the community. You know I don't, I didn't see that in my family when I was growing up. I didn't see that. My family has like totally closed themselves off from the teachings about two-spirit people. They never shared it with me. It's a closed subject. And I still don't ask why. About all of that, because of that, you know, walking that fine line. I wonder how they are when I'm not around.

And of course, especially, for example, my grandmother and grandfather, especially my grandfather, was the funniest guy. Well, that's the way I thought cause, you know, he's the one who would tell me certain stories. I remember my grandfather

told a very derogatory story about a group of men who had wanted tobacco. They had run out. So they had tricked a neighboring family into marrying off their very effeminate son for tobacco. The group of men decided that the bride price [the equivalent of a traditional dowry paid by a bride's family to the family of the groom] would be tobacco. It was very crude. His family didn't know. The groom didn't know until his wedding night. It was a story about trickery. Trickery is somehow tied in with being a homosexual.

And you know, it's like, where did he come up with this, you know? What was he thinking? You know? But it was all part of the humor. Our relationship with our maternal grandfather was wonderful, you know. My grandfather was kind of like...when we were on the reservation-- we grew up on the reservation basically on weekends and during the summer-- so he was kind of the authority figure in the hogan and its just interesting to me that, now reflecting on all of that, and thinking what he was talking about, you know?

And then again, my parents use to call me Beezhee. You know Navajo parents have a way of revering someone they respect by giving their child that revered person's name, instilling the memory of that person in the child. This is especially true if their child reminds them of that revered person. My parents never told me why, but they used to call me this name, Beezhee, which was the nickname for my dad's uncle. Beezhee. That was the craziest name. My dad's uncle was such a character, very outgoing, and comical, and stuff. He was always joking with people. He was a boisterous kind of character. He wasn't effeminate in any way. A few years ago, my sister disclosed to me

that he was gay.

I don't think I'm treated any differently than my siblings, but with my brothers they talk to them in that context, oh you know, "One day you'll have a family and that kind of thing." And with me it's kind of like, they never talk about that kind of thing. I should have picked up on that a long time ago. I don't think that they expect me to be in a relationship. I've brought Ramón [Teles' lover] home a few times and you know how goofy he is. He gets in with that Navajo humor and plays with everybody. But I don't know if my partner would ever become like part of my family, in that sense of an in-law, though. I guess that is a milestone that hasn't happened yet. Lord knows my parents probably don't want to think about their gay son having sex. It's like something they just wouldn't understand.

What they stress with me is that traditional role of maternal and paternal uncle with my nieces and nephews. There's that relationship that's expected because, really, kinship wise, and family wise, your paternal nieces and nephews are really considered your children. And as far as your maternal nieces and nephews, there is that relationship as well, but it's seen differently. It's a very special relationship. There's a lot of respect. You're sought out and revered more. Your maternal nieces and nephews defer to you as far as decision making, like as far as in a ceremony, or something like that. So my father and my mother stress the uncle role even more with me because they probably know that I'm not going to have a woman around or get married, or have children. Maybe that part also has to do with my being the one to pursue higher education and serving as a role model that way, and stuff like that.

So they've always told me, it's up to you what you want to do. It's always up to you. Like my brothers and sisters who have decided to stay on the reservation. Or when I decided to leave the reservation, they never were like, "Oh he's leaving the reservation and becoming whitewashed, and that sort of thing. They just trust that you'll do the right thing. But that support and all that fuzzy stuff is always there whatever you decide to do.

The battle between the diverging realities of the dominant gay community and Teles' traditional Navajo family is enacted in Teles' struggle to compose a tricultural identity as a Navajo man, a gay man, and a participant in dominant society. Discontinuities routinely invade his thoughts, feelings, and relationships. Circular versus linear. Respect for the interconnectedness of all things versus Cartesian dualism. Family and tribe versus autonomy and self-assertion. The mythical versus the actual Indian. In his own homeland, Teles is an immigrant who can never go home. He faces homophobia within the Navajo community, and as an ethnic gay man, he faces racism (DeMarco, 1983; Morales, 1989) and loss of support (Chan, 1989; Espin, 1987) in the gay community. Conflicts in allegiances are routine (Garnets & Kimmel, 1991; Loiacano, 1989; Mays, 1985; Morales, 1989). He "walks in multiple worlds which requires a delicate balancing act that demands crossing many boundaries and enacting multiple social roles" (Walters, 1997, p. 54). As Morales (1989) puts it, "it requires constant effort to maintain oneself in three different social worlds, each of which fails to support significant aspects of a person's life" (p. 217).

Romanticization and irrelevant identity models contribute to the lack of accurate understanding of American Indian sexualities. This lack of understanding, coupled with poverty, generally substandard health care, racism, and other forms of oppression imposed by the

dominant society, along with homophobia within some Native communities [possibly a byproduct of interaction with European Americans], may help to explain the dismal statistics that put American Indians in a class of their own as regards human suffering. One example is the rapid increase of HIV-positive and AIDS cases in Indian communities. Unlike other populations, the distribution of Native American AIDS cases has hardly changed since reporting began. The majority of cases are among men (85%). Gay/bisexual men account for 79% of these cases (Rowell, 1997).

We suggest that it is time for researchers to stop imposing European American models on Indian people and move beyond appropriating and romanticizing American Indian sexualities as “symbols of potential liberation from gender identity construction, homophobia, and sexuality containment” (Jacobs, 1997, p. 36). We concur with Jacobs (1997), who proposes an alternative motive for the study of Native sexualities, “If I can find answers... maybe the young people will stop hurting; maybe they will stop killing themselves, maybe they will be respected instead of denigrated and beaten up in their communities” (p. 26). In Teles’ words,

So, um, it’s not, it’s not like our lifeways are beautiful and traditional. We’ve changed. We have changed, you know. If you get meshing the two cultures together, um, Indian people have been changed, we’ve been conditioned, and all that, and some of that thinking [about sexual minority people] from way back is just lost, and you know you try to revitalize some of that, but you know, people change, all cultures change, you know, and we are changed, and we’re headed in a new direction, and, and I think that people who are acculturated may be coming to terms in that sense.

And you know with our history, our, you know, our connections with different

aspects of Navajo life, you know hopefully I can make it all work. Somebody can make it work. Hopefully I can too, you know, that kind of thing. And, um, but you know everything's cool. Everything's cool. I think I'll reach that stage pretty soon. Maybe in the next couple of years. Being totally open and have actually found a strategy to, to maybe tackle this issue of creating dialogue within my family and to include my parents. To include them in. Well maybe, you know, not to include them in, in the sense, "accept it or else." Give them some space, as far as, you know, I'm not gonna bring in a string of, you know, transvestites [laughs], who are all flamboyant and stuff like that and take them to my mom's house, you know? Kind of let them deal with it. And if it's not appropriate, that's really fine, you know, we'll come to that point.

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