



Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality by Sue-Ellen Jacobs; Wesley Thomas; Sabine Lang; Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures by Sabine Lang

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text would have benefited from a fleshing out of her theoretical claims, but *Pillar of Salt* gives the reader a provocative portrayal of women's history and the psychologically colored subjective positions that we both inherit and transform. ■

Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality. Edited by Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures. By Sabine Lang. Trans. John L. Vantine. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998.

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Here are two books that take on the problem of how the “berdache” is represented in the anthropological literature. At their heart, these books—*Men as Women, Women as Men*, by Sabine Lang, and *Two-Spirit People*, edited by Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang—engage two broad anthropological questions: first, how do we describe genders and sexualities that fall outside Western binary organizational schemas; and second, the deeper epistemological and political question of translating non-Western categories in ways that both make sense of them and adequately represents native meanings. It is evident that there is a lot at stake here, for these questions are not simply theoretical but have impact at the personal, political, and social levels. Indeed, contemporary anthropologists working in the field of the Native American “berdache”—and more broadly, the field of homosexuality and alternative genders and sexualities—are beset by the competing demands generated by social justice movements, the need for accurate ethnographic representation, and the possibilities of critical scholarship.

The authors and editors of both books are careful to give the reader a clear understanding of why, in the light of the American Indian Movement, the Gay American Indian movement, and developments in anthropology, the term *berdache* is problematic at best. It is seen as pejorative (in its association with prostitution), inaccurate (an Arabic-derived, European term used to describe a broad range of Native American sexualities and genders), and highly selective (in its privileging of same-sex sexual relations over occupational, spiritual, and social dimensions of daily life). The desire

to move studies of Native American gender and sexuality beyond the confines of *berdache* thus derives from an anthropological concern and a political demand—particularly among Native Americans themselves—that this term be dropped in favor of attention to cultural specificity.

This dual concern, however, generates several tensions that are evident in both these books, but most clearly in *Two-Spirit People*. This collection is perhaps best read as the documentation of a historical moment in which anthropologists and Native Americans are negotiating the effects and implications of the literature on “berdache.” The introduction by the editors lays out the complexity of the theories, politics, and ethical considerations of engaging Native American alternative genders and sexualities. They outline the history of exoticizing and moralizing that have accompanied the characterization of the “berdache” in the ethnographic record and the ways that the category “two-spirit” has developed since the early 1990s among some Native Americans as a paradigm of identity formation, and as an alternative to “berdache.” Yet there is a tension here, for the editors must acknowledge, even as they invoke “two-spirit” as a category, that it is at best only a heuristic device. Indeed, despite its origins in a progressive social justice movement and in its grouping of all Native American non-binary genders, it does much the same epistemological work done by “berdache.”

Many of the essays by non-Native American scholars fail to engage fully with this complex issue. Some of the authors are wedded to a “reclamation of ancestors” paradigm, focusing too readily on rehabilitating the historically validated categories of Native American alternative gender and sexuality or suggesting direct links between contemporary transgender-identified individuals and pan-Native American alternative gender categories (frequently as “two-spirit”). Others seem simply to reproduce the ethnographic mode of classification and description from which the editors are at pains to distance themselves.

By far the strongest essays in this book are by Jean-Guy Goulet and Carolyn Epple. Goulet reinterprets John Honigmann’s influential discussion from the 1950s of the “berdache” among the Kaska Indians, arguing that Honigmann’s data has become reinterpreted and embellished on by later anthropologists to create a “newly discovered” category of “berdache.”¹ Goulet’s method is to focus on social practices in context rather than to engage in a reification of categories, allowing him to argue that Honigmann’s case of the female child “raised as a boy” reflects Kaska

¹ For John J. Honigmann’s original monograph on the Kaska, see his *Culture and Ethos of Kaska Society* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1949).

investment in individuality and personal autonomy rather than being an example of “berdache.”

Epple’s chapter on Navajo worldview and the *náádleehí* (the Navajo “two-spirit” category) underscores these points. Stressing that the Navajo worldview regards all things and persons as intimately interconnected and embodying maleness and femaleness, Epple argues that a “third gender” category cannot be established simply by referring to an externally derived list of traits such as style of clothing or occupation, which has historically been the case. She too insists that we pay attention to practices in context rather than depending on categories of personhood derived from Euro-American notions of the autonomous individual. In a cultural universe where all things are seen to contain and manifest masculinity and femininity, *náádleehí* do not represent a “third,” “alternative,” or “nonnormative” gender for the Navajo but, rather, one way that the interconnectedness of all things manifests itself.

Since an explicit aim of the editors of *Two-Spirit People* is to give voice to nonacademic perspectives, a section is dedicated to thought-provoking, first-person narratives by both anthropologist and nonanthropologist Native Americans. The pain of colonialism, the effects of assimilation, and the possibilities of reclaiming tradition are constant themes here. Yet, this section, too, is characterized by the tension that pervades much of this book: that between the power found in a new social movement and in the development of terms such as *two-spirit*, and a simultaneous—indeed contradictory—insistence that anthropologists pay attention to the particularities of Native American cultures and traditions.

Originally published in German in 1990, Sabine Lang’s English translation of *Men as Women, Women as Men* rehearses many of the same themes of *Two-Spirit People*. This book is a much-needed attempt to bring together and reanalyze the ethnography and ethnohistory of the “berdache” in the anthropology of Native American peoples. Lang avoids using *two-spirit* to refer to the nonnormative gender and sexual categories with which she deals, resorting to her own formulations of *women-men* and *men-women* to describe a broad range of gendered and sexual social identities in Native American traditions. Her chief concern is to show that there is no single “berdache” category that can successfully explain all nonbinary gender or sexual categories or experiences in Native American societies, and her exhaustive research makes a convincing argument. But the development of her thesis results in an alternative—and perhaps equally problematic—set of categorizations, evident in the hefty number of chapters (twenty-one in all) which highlights a broader conceptual problem.

In order to get around the problem of defining her subjects as either

“berdache” or “two-spirit,” Lang adopts two different strategies. The first is her use of specific terms to refer to particular categories of persons, such as *winkte* (Lakota) or *naadle* (Lang’s spelling of *náádleehí*) (Navajo), terms previously grouped under the category of “berdache.” The second is her reinterpretation of the data within a range of different frameworks, distinguishing, for example, between crossing out of a gender role, gender role mixing, gender role change, and gender role splitting in order to contest the simple classification of people as “berdache” on the basis of cross-dressing, same-sex sexual relations, or roles associated with another gender. Furthermore, she argues that what she calls *gender role crossing* (taking on the occupational roles of another gender, or cross-dressing) does not necessarily result in a change in gender status (which has traditionally been referred to in the literature as “berdache”). She notes that cross-dressing is neither a necessary aspect of “berdache” nor an abandonment of the assigned gender role. Further, cross-dressing does not correspond in any direct manner to what she calls *cross-acting*. Indeed, as she argues: “[a]s a unitary phenomenon, the ‘berdache’ quite obviously does not exist” (62).

Lang’s schema does sometimes get her into somewhat tortuous phraseology, which represents deeper conceptual problems. By the end of the book the reader might be confused by some of the ways that Lang organizes her data and slots the various ethnographic examples into them. It is often not clear why individuals are assigned to gender role crossing, gender role change, gender role mixing, or gender role splitting categories. As Lang herself points out, the “transitional zones” (343) between these alternatives are fluid, yet the schema she sets up works against the complexity she is attempting to demonstrate. Her desire to provide an exhaustive discussion of all the sources on “berdache” through this sometimes confusing categorical framework actually vitiates her attempt to offer a new interpretive framework. Nonetheless, Lang has made an important contribution in grappling with and drawing on published ethnographic materials and historical records. In the final analysis, both books require us to query whether even seemingly broad categories such as “alternative genders” or “nonnormative genders” can be applied to Native American societies or be used to talk about gender and sexuality in non-Western contexts where understandings of the world, action, and personhood are organized in radically different ways. As Eppler argues in her essay in *Two-Spirit People*, defining *náádleehí* is nearly impossible, for “Western epistemologies do not accommodate persons who are both herself and himself as well as everything else” (184).

Another serious shortcoming of these two books is the remarkably little attention given to recent theoretical developments within the fields of

gender and sexuality. Judith Butler's now famous observations about the performative nature of gender, for example, could have enabled Lang to avoid the uncomfortable categorical framework she develops.² Further, questions raised by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* might have inspired these authors to ask why—either politically or theoretically—there is a need to develop categorical frameworks that separate out “sexuality” or “gender” from the lived relations of daily lives, and that allow an approach to the politics of Native American “alternative” genders and sexualities from a more nuanced perspective.³ The personal narratives included in *Two-Spirit People* point to a central theoretical and political issue for the field of anthropology: How do we discuss cultural categories when the epistemological basis for so much anthropological theory unmakes these worlds? In the end, the desire to reclaim and reimagine the “berdache” through new but still shaky frameworks—well-intentioned as they are—may only be another kind of appropriation. ■

Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women? Susan Moller Okin with Respondents. Edited by Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter. By Susan Stanford Friedman. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Critical Condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century. By Susan Gubar. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

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What is feminism's relationship to multiculturalism? Is an analysis of gender undercut by analyses focused on race and differences among women? Has multiculturalism eclipsed feminism's prominence within liberationist scholarship and activism? How have white feminists responded to critiques leveled by women of color? Can feminism sustain humanist commitments while simultaneously coming to terms with difference? Is there a future for feminism, or will its current “critical condition” (to borrow a diagnosis from Susan Gubar) give way to the demise

² Judith P. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980).