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Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India by Serena Nanda

Review by: Walter L. Williams

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on whom one can rely, people who give each other affective as well as material support. Other sentiments also contribute to the definition of gay families: the perception of a shared past, the resilience of the relationship to conflict, the sense that the ties are unconditional.

By tackling the varied ways in which lesbians and gay men use the vocabulary of kinship to make symbolic sense of their place in society, Weston offers a sophisticated account of what kinship has come to be in the diverse, even fragmented, world of contemporary American culture. The flexible system of meanings and expectations that is kinship emerges as the true protagonist of this volume, thus solidifying the critique of rigid structural interpretations launched years ago by advocates of a processual anthropology and expanded by the recent generation of scholars influenced by postmodernism and deconstruction. Lesbians and gay men are in this way revealed not as marginal observers of the American scene, but as central players in a cultural system, even as their conscious stance shifts from acceptance to rejection to adaptation of its formal properties.

Weston's ability to present this level of analysis while maintaining her credibility as an insider in the community is perhaps her most impressive achievement. Her interpretations of the broader cultural significance of lesbians' and gay men's experiences, whether they be concerned with coming out, forming chosen families, deciding to become parents, or coping with AIDS, never dilutes the voices of the narrators. Kath Weston's ethnography reveals the texture of gay life to be both distinctive and derivative; lesbian and gay constructions of kinship emerge as both creative ventures in culture building and as deeply embedded in existing meanings. What is most provocative, perhaps, about this work is the underlying question it raises about people as active creators of culture. We must accommodate, by the end, the complicated notion that generating new forms and symbols and crafting metaphoric adaptations of old forms can be aspects of the same cultural process. In this way, studying lesbians and gay men brings us to the heart of the matter; the marginal and the typical dance together, presenting the best that anthropology can bring to the study of gay and lesbian culture.

**Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India.** SERENA NANDA. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990. xxv + 170 pp., map, photographs, notes, glossary, references, index.

WALTER L. WILLIAMS  
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This book makes important contributions to the study of gender variance, sexuality, and South Asian cultures. It was awarded the Ruth Benedict Prize, given by the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists, and contains a foreword written by the sexologist John Money. Nanda's focus is the *hijras*, effeminate or androgynous males who do not fulfill a standard man's role. She bases her book on several years of fieldwork in an unnamed city in

southern India, where she studied a *hijra* community of about two hundred persons. She also worked in Bombay, which is a center of *hijra* culture.

Nanda defines *hijras* as occupying an alternative gender role, distinct from either men or women. She draws comparisons with the American Indian *berdache*, the *xanith* of Oman, and the *mahu* in Tahiti. In contrast, she points out, the transsexual role in Western culture is not accepted as a fully recognized gender. This nonacceptance, she argues, is due to a lack of religious sanction and an "unyielding Western commitment to a dichotomous gender system" (p. 137), which expects all "normal" persons to conform to one of only two gender roles. Western ideology, uncomfortable with ambiguity, strives to resolve in-between categories.

Hindu ideology not only accommodates the reality of ambiguity and diversity among different personality types, but also conceptualizes androgynous persons as special sacred beings. Hindu mythology makes frequent reference to combined man/woman beings. The cognition of *hijras* as religious figures, as neither men nor women, provides them with social respect and an institutional character. They are seen as representatives of the Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata, which gives them ritual power. Not just tolerating contradiction but actively embracing it, Hindus believe that *hijras* have powers to bless heterosexual marriages so that they will be fertile, and infant males so that they will grow up to become masculine men.

Nanda, a professor at John Jay College, corrects many inaccuracies that anthropologists have written about *hijras*. First, she points out, they are not morphological hermaphrodites, but were androgynous in character from early childhood and voluntarily joined a *hijra* community during their adolescence. Second, they are not forced to undergo a surgical operation to remove their penis and testicles, though many of them do this by their own wish. Third, most *hijras* are sexually active with men, being the insertee in anal intercourse. Some gain their livelihood through prostituting themselves to masculine males, while others marry a man and live together as husband and wife.

Indian society traditionally did not see such pairings as "homosexual," since *hijras* were not considered to be the same gender as their masculine partners. *Hijras* are not defined as men, because they have no desire to engage in masculine labor and activities, do not wish to have sex with women, and do not want to father children. Conversely, *hijras* are not seen as women, because even though they may engage in women's occupations, they do not menstruate and cannot give birth. The book's striking photographs show *hijras* dressed in women's clothing and wearing feminine hairstyles and jewelry. Yet, at the same time, Indian people recognize that *hijras* are not actually women. They are not-men/not-women.

Due to the Western colonial influence, which condemns gender variance and homosexuality, the status of *hijras* in modern Indian society has declined. Among Westernized Indians, *hijras'* presence at weddings and baptismal ceremonials is only barely tolerated. *Hijras'* temples are not given adequate financial support and many *hijras* suffer employment discrimination. As a result, prostitu-

tion is often the only occupation open to them. Nanda's study unfortunately does not address the impact of the spread of the AIDS epidemic. Recent reports indicate that AIDS infection is quite prevalent among both male and female prostitutes in India. The fact that vaginal or anal intercourse is now considered the only proper form of sexual interaction in India is unfortunate, especially considering the popularity of oral sex, interfemoral sex, and other less dangerous forms of erotic interaction in precolonial Asia. For many, the imposition of Western notions of "normal" sexuality will literally lead to death.

Though her psychoanalytic interpretation is problematic, Nanda's study is an important addition to the growing literature of life histories. The book includes four *hijras'* detailed personal narratives, which contribute to recent trends in feminist anthropology emphasizing life stories. Nanda rightly recognizes the need for scholars to acknowledge individual variation, to understand the gendered perspectives of non-Western peoples in their own words. This book avoids the pitfall of many ethnographies, which present only a generalized "culture" while lacking a presentation of real peoples' lives.

Nanda agrees with this reviewer's thesis, presented in *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Beacon, 1986), that religion is the crucial factor in the acceptance of homosexuality and gender variance. Nanda concludes that alternative gender roles will be socially accepted when the religious ideology of that culture offers (1) a specific explanation for such difference, (2) formalized traditions in ritual, (3) a recognition that there are many different paths to personal fulfillment, enlightenment, or salvation, and (4) the idea that gender-variant persons cannot resist following their own true nature and are fated to be the way they are. The implications here are important for a cross-cultural understanding of homophobia and what must be done for it to be overcome. It is not enough for a religion to be "tolerant" of gender diversity and sexual variation; it must also provide specific recognition for such diversity. Because it shows the social advantages to be gained by an appreciation for diversity, Nanda's study deserves a wide reading.

***The Zuni Man-Woman.* WILL ROSCOE. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991. xxi + 302 pp., photographs, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index.**

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Roscoe's *The Zuni Man-Woman* is a major achievement, the first book-length work depicting the life and times of a particular American Indian *berdache*, We'wha of the Zuni (1849–96). Through thoughtful analysis of the ritual and social implications of the Zuni *berdache* role, which Roscoe defines as an alternative or third gender role, he makes a significant contribution to gender studies and to the anthropological understanding of difference. Roscoe's work, which is based on numerous stories

about We'wha and the period in which she lived, is a biography of We'wha's life as well as commentary on an infamous period in American history. As a contextualized biography of a *berdache*, it is the first American work to present a much-needed, long-overdue study of the *berdache* role within one American Indian society.

The book takes the reader through the events of We'wha's life. The historical data are culled from a variety of sources: ethnographies, newspapers, and oral histories. While We'wha's early life is of necessity primarily conjecture, the portrayal of We'wha in her later years is based in part on firsthand accounts from anthropologist Matilda Coxé Stevenson, who met We'wha in 1879. From these stories arises the image of We'wha as a serious, dignified, and hard-working person, who was not only a mediator between the increasingly overwhelming Euro-Americans and the Zuni Indians, but also a person who strongly supported her own tribe in the face of hostile white actions.

Roscoe weaves the story of We'wha's life into a description of Zuni life and customs taken from a number of Zuni ethnographic texts—predominantly those of Frank Hamilton Cushing, Elsie Clews Parsons, and Ruth Bunzel, as well as Stevenson—thus providing the necessary context of gender, kinship, and society within which We'wha moved. The book leaves little doubt that We'wha, despite her large build and heavy features, was accepted by her family and village in her *berdache* role. She moved easily among the women of her household, becoming a skilled potter and household manager (as were other women) while also excelling at farming, weaving, and ritual storytelling, activities more typical of the men in the community. In this portrayal, We'wha stands out as a special, gifted, and complex person.

The question of We'wha's gender, which Roscoe takes considerable effort to define in chapter 5, is more problematic, and I will come back to that later. Yet from Roscoe's description (but less so from his analysis), We'wha emerges as a person who occupied a third gender, conforming neither to a male nor female gender.

Following three chapters devoted to the biographical tale, Roscoe delves into Zuni mythology and ritual to explain Zuni notions of gender and the "dimensions of third-gender status" (p. 149). In a detailed and complex analysis employing the tenets of Jungian and Freudian analysis, Roscoe examines archetypal characters in Zuni origin myths, including the archetypal Zuni *berdache*. While I am uncomfortable with the wholesale importation of "Western" psychological theories to understand Zuni theory about the nature of humanity, the analysis of the Zuni *berdache's* cultural mediation of gender and its basis in Zuni metaphysics is fascinating.

In the origin myth, the firstborn of the gods is a man-woman, that is, a man and woman combined, who Roscoe suggests "represents an undifferentiated state of gender" (p. 151) preceding the development of gendered society. This figure is later transformed into a *berdache* called Kolhamana who, as represented in kachina figures, wears women's clothes and a man's dance kilt over the shoulder, with hair dressed in both male and female style,