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Being Gay and Doing Research on Homosexuality in Non-Western Cultures

Walter L. Williams

As I attempt to understand why I have been attracted to doing research in non-Western cultures, I think I am reacting in the same way that past generations of gay people have done. Since at least the 17th century, there has been a tradition for homosexually-inclined individuals to try to escape the oppressiveness of heterosexism in Europe and America by migrating beyond the frontier. Whether with 17th century pirates or 19th century cowboys and cross-dressing females who passed as men (for examples of these, see Williams, 1986, pp. 152-174; Katz, 1976), such individuals had a particularly strong motivation for escaping Western morality. One such person was the writer Charles Warren Stoddard, who lived among Native Hawaiians in the 1860s. In 1870, after he had returned to San Francisco, he wrote the gay poet Walt Whitman, confessing his love of males. He wrote of his frustration in being back in sexually repressed America, saying, "I know there is but one hope for me. I must get in amongst people who are not afraid of [expressing their sexual] instincts and who scorn hypocrisy. I am numbed with the frigid manners of the Christians; barbarism has given me the fullest joy of my life and I long to return to it and be satisfied" (Katz, 1976, p. 507).

Although the documentation is slight, scattered evidence indicates that a high proportion of 19th century explorers and colonial officials who went to Africa, Asia, and the Pacific were homosexual. In the 20th century, many of these same types of people went into the profession of anthropology. Pioneers of the field, like Edward Westermarck and Ruth Benedict, are just two examples of the prominence of homosexuals as

ethnographers. And there are numerous others, like Margaret Mead and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, whose bisexuality provided them with an empathic perspective that without a doubt aided their connectedness to people who (like them) were very different from the Western norm. It is noteworthy that, of the numerous female presidents of the American Anthropological Association, beginning with Ruth Benedict, many have been lesbians.

What is it about anthropology that has attracted more than its share of homosexuals? Let me use my own case to illuminate this point. Growing up in the extremely bigoted and homophobic American South, I felt a secret identification with Blacks. The reason I identified with their suffering under racist discrimination is because I felt the pain of homophobic discrimination. As a deeply closeted homosexual, I did not feel brave enough to stand up for my own rights, but I did feel sufficiently alienated enough from the White heterosexual establishment that I joined civil rights demonstrations, sit ins, and protests when I was a college student in the 1960s. The documentation is lacking, but many Southern Whites who joined the 1960s civil rights movement were gay or lesbian.

Also in the 1960s, I remember quite vividly the emotional impact when I took my first introductory anthropology class. To learn for the first time that the social norms and tabooed behaviors of one culture might be radically different from those of another culture, especially relating to sex, was a revelation of utmost importance to my psychological development. By knowing of the arbitrariness of social norms, I was able to begin the process of gaining

self-acceptance. Another turning point was reading Vern Bullough's (1976) book, *Sexual Variance in Society and History*. I no longer felt like such a freak, knowing that many cultures accepted same-sex eroticism as simply a normal part of the range of human diversity. I determined then that someday I would do research and publish on what Bullough called "sex-positive societies."

However, my research on homosexuality would have to wait many years. As a young, untenured assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati, I was terrified that my homosexuality would be discovered and that I would lose my job. I knew of the rampant discrimination against gays and lesbians in academia, and older gay scholars advised me to wait until after tenure before beginning this research. Therefore, I poured my energies into research on the efforts of Blacks and American Indians to overcome discrimination. Based on my books (Williams, 1979, 1982, 1984), plus a number of scholarly articles published in academic journals, I received promotion to Associate Professor with tenure.

Only after I received tenure did I feel safe enough to become open about being gay. I had secretly become a leader of the Greater Cincinnati Gay

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Coalition but had turned down numerous requests for media interviews. One week after I received tenure, a television station was doing a live panel discussion about gay teachers, and they asked the Gay Coalition to suggest a gay teacher who would agree to be interviewed. I was the perfect person for this subject and the only teacher in our group who could afford to take the risk, so I volunteered. I told my students and departmental colleagues when I was going to be interviewed on television, but I did not tell them the subject matter. When the interviewer asked me if my students knew I was gay, I replied, "They do now!" That was my coming out at my university. It was all the talk around the department for a couple of weeks, but because I had tenure there was nothing the grumblers could do about it. This is why it is so important for every university to enact a clause in its anti-discrimination statement, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Still, academia has other ways to inhibit research on sexuality, in addition to delaying young scholars from doing this work in their years before tenure. Armed with my tenure, and having the full, loving support of my parents and my partner, I began giving papers at academic conferences on the social acceptance of homosexuality among aboriginal American Indian cultures. Some senior scholars warned me that I would be destroying a promising academic career if I pursued this topic. One scholar, who had admired my previous publications on Indian legal status and who had written several general letters of recommendation for me, now refused to write another such letter. His homophobic comments in his letter left no doubt as to why he refused.

But I persevered. I had decided that, having devoted years to helping racial minorities overcome prejudice and mistreatment, it was time to devote my energies to helping my own gay minority. I clearly would not have

undertaken this research if I had not by that time developed a strong, positive gay identity. Yet, this was a case where my interests would not be in conflict. I felt that by doing research on American Indian acceptance of homosexuality, I would also be helping contemporary Native Americans recapture part of their own cultural heritage. After having suffered through a century of brainwashing by Christian missionaries, many Indian people did not even know of their ancestors' tolerant attitudes. The 1970s had been a time of cultural renaissance among Indian people, and I felt that young gay and lesbian Indians deserved to participate in this renaissance of their heritage as well.

Because I was lucky enough to have gotten a grant to study Indian legal status at the UCLA American Indian Studies Center in Los Angeles, I had access to that city's gay libraries: ONE Institute of Homophile Studies and the International Gay and Lesbian Archives. Dorr Legg, Harry Hay, and Jim Kepner, truly pioneering heroes of the 1950s homophile movement, encouraged me and kindly provided additional sources. They also put me in touch with a lesbian anthropologist, Sue-Ellen Jacobs, who was wonderfully supportive and who sent me a copy of her pioneering essay on homosexuality (Jacobs, 1968). Armed with these leads, I began traveling to different archives, scouring obscure sources to see if I could find other mention of "perversion" or "sodomy."

Although I found that being openly gay gave me contacts I would not otherwise have known about, many academics hold the view that a gay person cannot be "unbiased" when writing about homosexuality. They ignore the many biases that heterosexual researchers have brought into the literature on sexual variance. Far from being unobjective, I feel that being openly gay has given me major advantages in gaining information on the subject. It has also influenced my interpretation of the subject. For

example, the conventional wisdom among anthropologists was that American Indian traditions of acceptance of berdache, a type of institutionalized homosexual alternative gender role that existed in many tribes, had disappeared many years ago. This was evidence, the anthropologists wrote, as to how contemporary Indians had been modernized and had "lost" their cultural traditions.

It would not be hard to understand why such traditions of respect for sexual variance would have disappeared. Tribes across North America had been subjected to oppressive colonial government controls by the United States and Canadian governments for more than a century. Policies of forced assimilation attempted to wipe out all vestiges of "savagism" among the native subjects, and sexual freedom was a prime target of White administrators. For example, a government agent among the Hopi in 1915 wrote that the native ceremonial dances containing sexual imagery "are too loathsome and repugnant for me to describe.... They are vulgar and I am almost shamed to send them through the mails" (Williams, 1986, p. 177). Another agent among the Hopi in 1920 stopped a ceremony when he observed a Hopi clown making suggestive movements toward both men and women with a huge artificial penis: "I told him that if he ever did a thing like that again, I would put him in jail. He told me that he did not know it was wrong, that it was a Hopi custom" (Williams, 1986, p. 178). Homosexuality was a particular object of wrath from both government agents and Christian missionaries, being referred to as "the most repugnant of all their practices" and "a shameful custom." Many homosexually-inclined Indians committed suicide as a result (Williams, 1986, pp. 178-183).

Accepting the anthropologists' claims that berdache traditions had died out, I still decided to spend my sabbatical year in 1982 traveling to reservations, to try to locate any eld-

erly Indians who might remember berdaches from their youth and who would agree to talk with me about it. I drove west from Cincinnati, and the first reservation I reached was the Omaha. I had read century-old documents about Omaha berdaches being highly respected. When I asked local people for someone who could talk to me about the old Omaha traditions, I was referred to the tribal historian. He was a kindly gentleman who seemed to take an immediate liking to me. Yet, after long discussions about Omaha history, when I finally got up nerve enough to ask about berdache, his demeanor suddenly changed. His eyes narrowed, and he took on a hostile look as he demanded abruptly: "Why do you want to know about that?"

My heart raced as I nervously thought about how to respond. In near panic I visualized this man making sure I was immediately kicked off the reservation, or worse. Finally, not knowing what else to say, I decided to be honest. I summoned every bit of my out-of-the-closet gay pride that I had picked up from my gay activist political activities and responded. I explained that, although my interests were about Omaha traditions in general, I had a personal interest in this particular subject, because I am homosexual and wanted to see if the berdache tradition had anything to do with homosexuality, as the written documents suggested.

As soon as I said this, the man relaxed and smiled warmly. I will never forget his next words: "We don't talk about this to outsiders, but I appreciate your honesty. I'll tell you. In Omaha language we call it 'me-xo-ga.' It's the same thing as gay; it's just like in California." After that, we relaxed and began an even closer interaction. It was as if, knowing something deeply personal about me, this man found it easier to reveal his sacred tribal traditions. This was my first experience in coming out as openly gay to informants. I can say that in virtually all such experiences during the last 10 years I have

received a positive (or at the least, neutral) response.

It also was the first time I noticed that elderly Indian traditionalists prefer to use the term "gay" rather than "homosexual." To them, focus on the sexual inclinations of the person is less important than what they call the person's "spirit." It took me a long time to realize, in many conversations with traditionalist Indians, that what they mean by "spirit" is close to what Westerners might call a person's "basic character." Because of my informants' emphasis, my initial focus on homosexual behavior was shifted to the spiritual and religious aspects of the berdache. That is why I ultimately titled my book *The Spirit and the Flesh* (1986).

When the tribal historian became satisfied that I did not intend to approach his tribal traditions in a disrespectful manner, he did something even more surprising. He took me to meet a 62-year-old male who is identified by his reservation community, and who identifies himself, as "me-xo-ga." After I identified myself as gay, that man agreed to talk with me about his life, which he said he would not have done if I had been the typical heterosexual anthropologist. He was the first berdache I interviewed. In that experience, as with numerous others since then, I feel that I have had an enormous advantage in doing my fieldwork by being openly gay. I have demonstrated that, although the berdache tradition among traditionalist Indians went underground, it has not disappeared. The conventional wisdom written by heterosexual anthropologists was wrong, and they had misinterpreted Native American cultural persistence because of their heterosexist blinders. This survival of the berdache role is an example of how Native American culture has endured, despite the attempts of Whites to wipe it out.

Since that time I have devoted my research to finding surviving traditions of acceptance of same-sex eroticism in different cultures around the world. Rather than doing the usual

community study that ethnographers regularly do, I decided that my community of study would be the homosexuals themselves. After staying for a time with my initial Omaha informant in 1982, he sent his nephew to accompany me to the Rosebud Sioux reservation and to introduce me to berdaches among the Lakota. After more experiences living at Rosebud, and doing life history interviews of them and additional interviews with their relatives and neighbors, they referred me to other berdaches on the Pine Ridge Sioux reservation. And from there, those persons referred me to berdaches they knew on the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations. And so it went, as I worked my way across the Plains.

I ended up observing and eventually participating in traditional religious ceremonies to which I am sure I would never have been invited if I had not established a personal gay-to-gay relationship with my berdache informants. I was warned by Whites in South Dakota that a White man would not be safe living on a reservation, especially in Pine Ridge, yet I never received any hostility. I believe my acceptance in the community was because of my association with berdaches. Traditionalist Lakotas are somewhat afraid of the spiritual power of berdaches, which provides berdaches and their consorts with a convenient form of protection. Being gay thus provided me an advantage in this fieldwork situation.

Although romance was not my motivation for undertaking this research, one of my informants and I became so close that he proposed for me to become his husband and live with him on the reservation. I explained that I had to return to my teaching job after my sabbatical year was over, but he responded that I could quit my job and he would support me. He said that I would not have to worry about anything, because I could move into his house and he would provide us a good living. I could, he said, focus on my writing and would not have to worry about

working at a university. I admit to being tempted, but at last I decided I could not give up my academic career. Also, I knew by then that I wanted to pursue research among other groups of Native Americans beyond the Plains.

By the end of 1982 I traveled down to the Navajo reservation and did additional research and interviewing. I was amazed to find that Navajo traditionalists were even more respectful of berdaches than the Plains tribes had been. But I found the Arizona winter unexpectedly harsh and decided I could depend on several excellent published sources that had been written about Navajo alternative gender roles. So, in the spirit of Joseph Campbell, who said the highest life course is to be attained by following your personal bliss, in January 1983 I took off for Mexico. In my library research I had run across a few 16th century sources by Spanish conquistadors complaining about how the Mayas in particular were "addicted to sodomy," and another later letter claiming that the Catholic missionaries and Spanish government officials had successfully wiped out such vices among the Indians (Williams, 1986, pp. 135-140). My previous research led me to distrust that claim.

Armed with nothing more than those few 400-year-old references and knowing no one, I headed for Mayan villages in Yucatan. Although I had not one personal contact, my positive experiences on the Plains during my 1982 fieldwork led me to approach the task with anticipation. I spent my first weeks in Yucatan touring the magnificent Mayan archaeological sites of Uxmal, Chichen Itza, Tulum, and other ruins. Whenever I asked my Mayan tour guides about homosexuality, they uniformly replied in a non-condemnatory, accepting way. Within a couple of weeks I had not only made contact with a group of Mayan "homosexuales" but was developing a circle of friends as well.

I found the Mayans to be among the most friendly and attractive

people I have ever met. One, whose nickname was "El Sexy," had a particular liking for me. He lived with his mother, who took me under her wing and was soon cooking delicious meals for me. One day, as we rode around the village in my automobile, a boy publicly called out to him, "El Sexy, I see you have found your husband!" This humorous reference to me was not in any way derogatory but merely a relaxed kidding that reflected the village's general knowledge about his attraction to men (Williams, 1986, pp. 143-144).

As usual, I was quite open about my research and publication goals, and El Sexy helped me meet other people to interview. He felt grateful that his and other homosexuals' viewpoints were going to be included in a book, and he talked freely to me about his sexual experiences as well as other aspects of his life. His friendly and open demeanor, like that of the Mayans in general, impressed me deeply. I left Yucatan reluctantly and only came home because my sabbatical time was coming to an end.

After going back to teaching and staying busy writing my fieldnotes and publishing my research, my next fieldwork was in 1987-88 when I won a Fulbright Scholar Award to do research in Indonesia. I had written a number of grant proposals to do research on homosexuality cross culturally, but all of them had been rejected. However, I managed to get funding by writing a grant for a different topic. My Fulbright research proposal was to do life history interviewing of Javanese elders, with a special focus on gender. On the way to Indonesia, I took the opportunity to stop in Bangkok and interviewed some Thai gay activists (Williams, 1990). I have thus managed to do fieldwork on gay topics by getting grants on other subjects and then doing my gay research in addition to the research I did for my grant. After my Indonesian research, I published a book of Javanese life histories (Williams, 1991) and am still writing other publications specifically

focused on homosexuality in Java (see, for example, Williams, 1992a).

The only time I have received a grant specifically on homosexuality research was in 1989 when I won a small travel grant from the Institute for the Study of Women and Men from the University of Southern California, where I had been hired in 1984. I used this grant to go to Alaska to do research on homosexuality among Aleuts and Yupiks.

This process is not something I complain about; I just have to work twice as hard to get more research done while I am in the field. In addition, although I think it is important for openly gay and lesbian scholars to publish articles and books on homosexuality, it is also important for us to publish general ethnographies which include homosexuality as just one among many socially accepted aspects of particular cultures. This is what I tried to do in my *Javanese Lives* (see Williams, 1991, pp. 180-190, 210, 230n2). Anthropologists can perform valuable documentation for the effort to overcome homophobia by pointing out to readers that same-sex eroticism is a fact of life in human societies around the world. It is thus doubly important that we focus upon cultures which are not afflicted with anti-homosexual prejudices. My most recent publication highlights the benefits which societies gain by not harboring such prejudices. This cross-cultural perspective can be an important part of the effort to reduce homophobia in American society (Williams, 1992b).

I have written elsewhere (Williams, 1990, p. 126) about the great need for openly gay ethnographers to investigate non-homophobic cultures before their accepting values are destroyed by rampaging Westernization. In every area in which I have done fieldwork I find alarming the extent to which fundamentalist Christian groups are exporting homophobia. Barraged with American missionaries, movies, television, literature, and outdated psychoanalytic theories of sexual deviance (that

are still being propounded by many Western-educated teachers), many cultures are rapidly changing their attitudes toward sexuality. If we do not gather this research soon, it will be too late to learn about the vast array of differing institutionalized forms of same-sex eroticism.

We desperately need a complete data base for a broader understanding of human sexuality. Given the almost complete ignorance of female-female sexuality in non-Western cultures, I think the highest research priority is for lesbian scholars to undertake this work. As a male interviewer, I was painfully aware of my inability to get women to open up on this issue, and even my male informants usually knew very little about the subject. In *The Spirit and the Flesh* I could only depend on the few historical documents and publications by women scholars. In Java, I was not able to locate even one lesbian who would agree to be anonymously interviewed. I eagerly await the publication of more studies like Jennifer Robertson's (1992) fascinating ethnography of a female theater troupe in Japan.

It is not that sensitive heterosexuals lack the ability to do research on homosexuality, and indeed non-gay anthropologists such as Nancy Lurie (1953) and Serena Nanda (1990) have made important contributions to the study of sexual variance. But it is still clear that openly lesbian ethnographers have an advantage in doing field research about female sexuality, and openly gay ethnographers have an advantage in doing research about male-male eroticism. Indeed, Jackson (1989) suggested that gay people have a significant advantage over other foreigners in being able to integrate themselves quickly into a local culture. Because native homosexuals often see themselves as different, sometimes as "outsiders" in their own culture, they are likely to feel an immediate identity with others they perceive to be "like themselves"—even if those persons are from a different culture. I have certainly

found that to be the case in my research.

Jim Wafer, an openly gay ethnographer in Brazil, pointed out several advantages to his being open about his sexuality among his informants. In the first place, his native lover provided many contacts and opened many doors. Because he had a personal relationship with the ethnographer and was committed to the project, this lover had additional motivation to make sure that what was written was accurate. Beyond that, Wafer pointed out, because their relationship was known and accepted in the community, it gave Wafer a "quasi-insider status It meant, for example, that I was regarded as 'accounted for' within the kinship system . . . [which] meant that I was less a threat than I might otherwise have been" (Wafer, 1990).

In non-homophobic cultures an openly gay researcher can be accepted by the local community and can gain access to people for interviewing. Over and over in my research, from Alaska to Java, informants have told me that they would never discuss such topics with a heterosexual. Native Americans in particular have reported feeling burned so many times when things they told to White researchers were made fun of and written about in a disrespectful manner. As Marilyn Story has pointed out in her research as a social nudist doing research on nudist communities (Story, 1992), by being personally involved in this subject, a researcher is better able to understand the issues facing informants and is more likely to be able to put data in their proper social context. A fieldworker with a personal involvement has an added incentive to persevere when problems (like a lack of funding) arise. Moreover, a lesbian or gay fieldworker can more easily avoid false information, which might be given to a heterosexual researcher because informants are well aware of Western prejudices. As I found from the help I received from gay archival organizations, an openly

gay researcher is able to draw upon specialized sources and unpublished documents which might be withheld from a non-gay researcher.

Another factor to consider is the disadvantage of lesbian and gay ethnographers trying to remain closeted. Frank Proshan (1990) reported the difficulties in his fieldwork with a Cambodian community in trying to hide his homosexuality. They could not account for his total avoidance of any discussion about his love life. Looking back on his fieldwork, he later wrote: "As a result of my own evasiveness and their sensitive avoidance of potentially embarrassing questions, I remained a riddle to the people with whom I worked" (Proshan, 1990, p. 59). He realized he had come across to his informants as a naive, asexual, childlike eunuch (Proshan, 1990, p. 61). Moreover, he learned years later that his informants had not told him of certain things about Cambodian sexual variance, simply because they were uncertain how he would react to them: "As long as I presented myself as a riddle, leaving any sexual identity undefined and unsaid, my Cambodian friends consistently left anything with explicit sexual content unsaid in my presence—silence begetting silence" (Proshan, 1990, pp. 62-63).

Anthropologists are beginning to write about the intersubjective relations connecting fieldworkers to informants. We do not just interview our research subjects; we *live* with them as part of their community for an extended period. That is the nature of participant observation ethnographic methodology. Yet in all this writing, the subject of sexuality—certainly one of the most important aspects of human behavior—remains practically unanalyzed in print. Anthropologists have incorporated the worst aspects of Victorian prudery in avoiding an honest assessment of our sexual behaviors in the field. Gay and lesbian anthropologists, by questioning sexual boundaries and social roles, seem ideally positioned to lead anthropologists

into a new honesty and openness about sexual interactions in the field, just as we freely write about other forms of daily interaction. When we live as part of a community as openly gay people, if that community is not afflicted with the kind of rampant homophobia and erotophobia seen in the West (and all too often reflected in anthropologists' writings), then we can truly offer an honest account of our participant-observation in that community. This is not by any means to suggest sexual irresponsibility on the part of the fieldworker, which will exploit or harm our informants. Just as there is a difference between an intimate union and a rape, we must learn to assess sexual interactions in a more realistic and sophisticated manner.

To be an effective fieldworker I must be honest, both with my informants and with my readers, if I wish to remain credible. My research entails interviewing informants about their most intimate sexual experiences and feelings. If a person reveals a particularly personal detail, it helps to mention some intimate detail about my own experiences. This simple act makes the interview less of a one-sided probing of informant by researcher and more of an exchange of information among equals. That, ultimately, is what anthropology is really all about: to establish an appreciation for human diversity and an empathy with other individuals across the boundaries of culture.

As a fieldworker I feel blessed to have had many fascinating experiences living among people of quite different cultures. One gains daily insight in the continuing education that is lived experience, in a way that is not possible for those who have lived their life only in one cultural setting. Yet I know my most important findings have been the result of introspective issues. The reason I am so fascinated with fieldwork is that I

structure my research around questions that are personally important to me. Many scholars do this, of course, but it strikes me as odd that some don't seem to have any particular personal motivation for doing what they do. My experience suggests that those researchers who have personal motivations do better research.

I know that my life has been changed by my research, and that although my writings, teaching, and speaking have benefited others, this research has also benefited me. A cross-cultural perspective provides such a different way of looking at sexual variance that I cannot imagine what my life today would be like without it. I have gained from my informants—who are also my friends—an ability to lead a fulfilled life by learning to appreciate the strength and the magic of human diversity. To illustrate some of what I have learned from them, I would like to quote two gay American Indian traditionalists from Arizona (Williams, 1986, p. 229).

Among my people, gay is a special status The more unique someone is, the more valuable they are, the more unique their vision, the more unique their gift, their perspective, everything they can offer is something that other people can't offer The thing that's different about where I come from, is that all human beings are respected because all human beings have potential, all human beings have value

I don't think I would like to change [my gayness]. I guess I'm just on my own personal little warpath—not against Whites but against heterosexuals who think that everyone should be like them. I'm not always happy, but I'm always me. And they can like it or lump it. Life's too short to spend your time being something you don't want to be. Like the old saying, "To thine own self be true." I'm true to my self and my own nature. I think that's all anyone has a right to ask of me.

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