

Gay Culture in America: Essays from the Field by Gilbert Herdt. Review by: Walter L. Williams in *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 95, No. 1 (Mar., 1993), pp. 222-223
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Gay Culture in America: Essays from the Field. Gilbert Herdt, ed. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992. 266 pp. WALTER L. WILLIAMS University of Southern California

For the past century research on homosexuality has focused on what causes someone to become homosexual. Since few think to ask what causes heterosexuality, the agenda behind this focus clearly seeks to determine how same-sex desires might be eliminated. While cloaked in scientific language, such research proceeds from a heterosexist ideology that arose when Western expansion over non-White peoples required high population growth. Though overpopulation and the decline of imperialism have invalidated the West's need for pro-natalist heterosexism, academics continue to assume the advantages of compulsory heterosexuality.

In focusing only on a "cause," scholars miss more important questions. Gilbert Herdt, of the University of Chicago, seeks to refocus the study of homosexuality, by shifting attention to the life course of individuals *after* they identify as gay. In this anthology, he posits "a gay cultural system, with a distinct identity and distinct institutions and social supports," which has emerged and become "a major battleground for social change in America" (p. 3).

While it is unfortunate that Beacon did not publish a companion volume on lesbian culture, these essays make important contributions based on participant-observer ethnographic research in the large urban communities of gay males in Los Angeles (Michael Gorman), San Francisco (Stephen Murray), New York (Martin Levine), and Chicago (Richard Herrell and Herdt). Diversity is represented in excellent essays by John Peterson on African-American homosexuality and bisexuality and by Frederick Lynch on nonghetto White gay men in a Los Angeles suburb, as well as in Joseph Carrier's life history of a gay Mexican-American. What is missing are studies of gay resorts (Key West, Palm Springs, Provincetown), rural gay communes in the South, and such activist groups as the Radical Faeries, ACTUP, Queer Nation, and the Amerindian group Two-Spirited People of the First Nations.

While Levine's and Herrell's essays are marred by excessive jargon, overgeneralization, and pontificating theorizing, every chapter provides important anthropological analysis. Herdt's study of a Chicago gay youth group concludes that the process of "coming out" as gay is comparable to a rite of passage. The life crisis brought about by acceptance of their homosexuality requires gay youth to deconstruct ideas to which they had been enculturated, and produces an independence of mind and a resilience in dealing with adversity. This strength, Herdt suggests, is responsible for the gay community's incredible resolve in dealing with the grief and loss of the AIDS epidemic. Just as initiations into secret societies in small-scale cultures promote "a restructuring of personhood," so does coming out into the gay community provide an "alternative moral world" (p. 32).

Stephen Murray, who has made other important contributions to the field of gay studies, demonstrates that, far from being merely "a lifestyle," large urban gay neighborhoods meet all the social science definitions of "community": intense interaction among residents, concentration of community institutions in a specifiable territory, learned norms, collective action, and a sense of shared history (p. 113).

Along with Kath Weston's *Families We Choose* (Columbia University Press, 1991), which proves that gay and lesbian friendship networks meet anthropological definitions of "family," this anthology challenges scholars to consider emerging gay culture as an important subject for mainstream anthropology. Yet, faculty in anthropology departments continue to dissuade students

from studying homosexuality, and vote against hiring and tenuring scholars who publish gay-positive books. Anthropological journals publish few essays on homosexuality, and granting agencies seldom fund ethnographic research on the subject. This is ironic given the prominence of gay, lesbian, and bisexual theorists (Benedict, Mead, Westermarck, Foucault, etc.), publication of pathbreaking ethnographies on homosexuality, and anthropologists' boasts about helping oppressed minorities. Additional scholarship and activism, challenging the rampant homophobia within anthropology, seems necessary to remedy the situation.