

TRANSGENDER FORUM “Community News”

<http://www.tgforum.com/wordpress/?p=5635> March 1, 2010

Walter Williams’ Academic Transgender Studies Website

By Ronnie Rho, TG FORUM “Community News” March 1, 2010

There are often complaints that not enough research is done into the transgendered world: No-one’s sure exactly how many people in the world are TG, or what exactly qualifies as transgendered. But, there are a few people who are digging, exploring and asking the right questions.

Among them is **Dr. Walter Williams**, a professor of Anthropology, History, and Gender Studies at the University of Southern California. He has not only compiled what could be the most comprehensive look at gender identity from a multicultural viewpoint, but has published his findings online, for the world to read.

The [Academic Transgender Studies Website](http://www.transgender.org/atsww/index.html) at <http://www.transgender.org/atsww/index.html> features lectures, studies, and reports from around the globe.

Dr. Williams’ interest in gender identity rose from his studies of Native American culture. He did fieldwork on the Eastern Cherokee and Pine Ridge Sioux reservations, and among other Native American tribes, including some in Alaska and Yucatan, Mexico. He writes:

“Many Native American indigenous cultures have traditionally held intersex, androgynous people, feminine males, and masculine females in high respect. The most common term to define such persons today is to refer to them as Two Spirit people....”

(It should be noted that Dr. Williams has applied some of his observations and theories to the world of fiction, co-writing the oft-praised novel [Two Spirits](#).)

But, the Academic Transgender Studies Website isn’t just the work of one man; It includes papers from his students, and links to news stories. And it’s not just about presenting information. He calls for action from academia. For instance, in his keynote speech at the 1997 Harry Benjamin International Gender Association conference, he emphasized,

“The need for academics to take a more direct role in activism benefiting sexual and gender minorities. Academics and other researchers are needed to assist activist organizations, which do not have much research base on which to make their strategic decisions.”

What could be the most fascinating aspect of his website is the look at gender identity in non-Western cultures. There’s already plenty of material on the Internet about crossdressers in Europe, and non-op transsexuals in North America, but what about the rest of the world? Relying solely on pop culture, one may think that transgendered Brazilians are either porn stars, or not unlike their American counterparts. However, one study by a student at the website points out unique aspects of Brazilian transsexuals and travesties.

Another of Williams’ students wrote a class report investigating the government of Iran, which has gained a reputation as having a more liberal attitude toward gender reassignment surgery. The religious establishment not only condones it, but the state pays for it. And there too is a certain niche for transgendered citizens who aren’t interested in surgery, as there is what could be called an equivalent to the Western drag show.

Other papers cover China, Japan, and South Asia, including India.[see the video “World in Transition” in the South Asia section]

The research shows there are differences in gender identity, and how cultures treat those with non-binary ideas on gender expression, but it also demonstrates that there is a spectrum, and that gender is not binary.

Dr. Williams answered a few of our questions:

Q: How did you come to be interested in this field of study?

I had been doing research and publishing books on Native Americans for several years, when I started running across references to transgender people in native cultures. I had all the negative opinions about trans people that others raised in our transphobic culture have absorbed. Then in 1982 I lived on the Sioux reservations doing ethnographic fieldwork research in South Dakota, and saw with my own eyes how deeply respected and central to family and community life they were, and still are among traditionalists who follow the Lakota religion. That experience revolutionized my attitudes, and I realized my cultural prejudices and limitations.

I fell in love with a “winkte” (the name for transgender people in the Lakota language) and that experience transformed my life. Even though I am not transgender myself, ever since then I have championed transgender rights. My

1986 book “The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture” and my most recent book “Two Spirits: A Story of Life with the Navajo” both grew out of that fieldwork research.

Q: There’s a focus on the transgender experience outside of the United States and Europe. Why?

In the class that I teach on Transgender Studies at the University of Southern California, there is a focus on the transgender experience outside the USA and Europe because other scholars like Susan Stryker and Connie Rogers are beginning excellent research and publication on the US and Europe, but little has been done on the rest of the world.

My expertise as an anthropologist is in non-Western cultures. In the field research that I have done with Native Americans, as well as in Polynesia, Indonesia, and Thailand, I have found traditions of acceptance of transgender people that would amaze most people who think that attitudes of condemnation have always existed in all societies. I have lived in small Isan farming villages in northeast Thailand where every village has at least one or two transgender people, and they participate equally in local Buddhist ceremonies and as part of village life. Isan villagers are more accepting than anything I have seen in San Francisco, Los Angeles, or New York.

The more research I do, the more I realize that in most cultures before the spread of Western imperialism and Christianity, transgender people were socially accepted. In many ancient cultures they were highly respected religious leaders, and central to the operation of their society. In fact, it was the ancient Hebrew reaction against the high status of transgender people in the goddess religion of the Canaanites, that led the Hebrews to condemn crossdressing and same-sex sexuality.

It has only been in the last 2,000 years, a very brief time in human history, when that condemnation has spread around the world due to the Christian religion.

My argument is that what once existed in the past can exist again in the future. I think we ought to be developing religions for the 21st century that drop the anti-sexual and transphobic attitudes of the current Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions, and instead transgender people should be reinstituted as important religious leaders who have great spiritual insight.

Q: What are your hopes for the study?

My hopes for the [Academic Transgender Studies website](#) is that it will become a place where people who have information about different cultures around the world can write in and contribute data on those societies. At this point we have only begun to scratch the surface. See particularly my student's video "A World in Transition" about the hijra in India at the South Asian section of the website, for an inspiring example of what kind of work needs to be done. But I also want to include information on the United States and Europe, so that the website can be truly global.

My hope is that anyone, from a scholar to a transgender youth who is just coming to accept their own nature, can go there and realize the long history of transgenderism as a factor in human existence. My hope is that this website can help people to get beyond their cultural limitations and recognize the reality that transgender people are an integral part of humanity and should be accepted and valued for the unique contributions they can make for human progress in the future.

That future can only be built on an accurate knowledge of the past, and of the diversity of cultures around the world. That is what I hope to contribute.