Author’s updating revisions for the 1986 book,   
*The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*by  
Walter L. Williams,

Shortly after the second edition of this book was published in 1992, the term

"Two-Spirit Person" became more popular among indigenous people than the older  
anthropological term "berdache." When I learned of this new term, I began strongly  
supporting the use of this newer term. I believe that people should be able to call  
themselves whatever they wish, and scholars should respect and acknowledge their  
change of terminology. I went on record early on in convincing other anthropologists to  
shift away from use of the word berdache and in favor of using Two-Spirit. Nevertheless,  
because this book continues to be sold with the use of the word berdache, many people  
have assumed that I am resisting the newer term. Nothing could be further from the  
truth. Since it is not possible to rewrite what is already printed, I urge readers of this  
book, as well as activists who are working to gain more respect for gender variance,  
mentally to substitute the term "Two-Spirit" in the place of "berdache" when reading  
this text.   
 One of the laments of authors who publish books is that we are forever subject to  
criticism for our choice of words that we used at the time we wrote the book. Think of  
Mark Twain, one of the most progressive and original writers of his era, being castigated  
and condemned as a racist for his use of racial terms that, though common during the  
time he wrote about in his novel Huckleberry Finn, would never be used today.  
 When I wrote The Spirit and the Flesh in 1983-85, I cautioned readers that my  
writings, as the first modern book on the subject, would have to be read in the context of  
ideas at that time. I stated that I looked forward to the publication of other studies,  
some of which might challenge or dispute some of my conclusions. This is to be  
expected, as the normal process for a pioneering book on a previously-ignored subject.  
Unfortunately, my book was published before the term Two-Spirit Person became  
popular among Native Americans. When Beacon Press decided to bring out a second  
edition I asked if my use of the word *berdache* could be changed in new printings of the  
book to *Two Spirit.* My request was denied, because it would have cost too much. So  
the change I wanted was not possible.  
 I feel similarly about the use of the English pronouns he/she, him/her, his/hers. At  
the time I wrote the book, scholars in the new emerging field of Gender Studies had not  
yet come to the criticism of gendered pronouns that we have today. In general, I  
followed the use of the pronouns used by the Native American people I interviewed.

When I lived on several Indian reservations in 1982 and 1983, as I did my interviewing  
with knowledgeable people, when they spoke to me in English they usually used the  
masculine pronouns, and that is the choice of wording that I followed.  
 Unfortunately, it was only when I started doing research in Southeast Asian cultures,  
from 1987 to 2009, that I came to realize how abnormal and weird English is, in its use  
of gender to denote pronouns. First person and second person English pronouns  
“I/we/our/you/your/yours” are all used without reference to gender. Third-person  
plural pronouns “they/them/their” are also ungendered. It is only third-person singular  
pronouns “he/she/him/her/his/hers” that use gender as their distinguishing  
characteristic.  
 I regret using masculine pronouns in regard to Two-Spirit persons. In recent years I  
have been educated by other Gender Studies scholars about the arbitrary and temporary  
way that gendered pronouns force a choice of masculine versus feminine. I have seen  
how many other languages are communicated quite well without gendering their  
pronouns. Because of this, in the 1990s I stopped using gendered third person singular  
pronouns. Instead of having to choose “he” versus “she,” I now respond with the third  
person plural pronouns “they/them/their.” Sometimes this use may be a bit unclear  
when using “they” to refer to a single person. That is the same problem with the word  
“you” which can refer to a single person or a group. The context of the sentence will  
usually make it clear, but English does just fine with that ambiguity. Sometimes “you  
all” might be used to refer to a group. “They all” can be used if necessary, but “they”  
alone works equally well.  
 I wish there had been the kind of sophisticated analysis of gendered pronouns when I  
was doing my research. But, unfortunately, such a critique did not occur to me as I was  
writing this book in 1985. If I were writing this book today, I would definitely use “they”  
instead of “he” or “she.” I plead the case of writers who publish books at a certain year,  
but feel frustrated not to be able to change things as academic perspectives change and  
knowledge advances. Nowadays it is fairly easy for a book text to be changed, but that  
was not the case three decades ago.  
 I wish those persons who read an older book would be able to understand this  
difficulty, and not conclude the author feels exactly the same way now that they did  
when they published the book. It is possible to critique a book negatively, without  
condemning the author in general. When critics go beyond criticizing a text, to  
attacking the author as a person, that is not fair to authors. Instead, critics should invite  
the author to join in the critique.  
 I am sorry that when I was writing The Spirit and the Flesh in 1985, I did not predict  
that gendered third-person singular pronouns would become so important in public  
discourse. I agree with the critics, and am making those changes in my current writing.

There is a more substantive criticism of my book, in terms of my conclusion that  
Native American Two Spirit traditions were and are more “gender mixing” rather than  
“gender crossing.” Once again, if I were writing this book today, I would change my  
language. I apologize to anyone who might be offended by my conclusion that Indigenous concepts are not the same as the Western concept of transsexual. It is clear that some individual Two Spirit persons today identify as transsexuals rather than the mixing of both masculine and feminine characteristics in their gender identity.

I plead for readers’ understanding about the context in which this book was written. When I was writing it in the early to mid-1980s, transsexuals were just beginning to be (somewhat) accepted in society. But society still had the rigid notion that there were only two genders, men and women. It was one or the other, with no room for ambiguity. If some males wanted to be  
recognized as feminine, they must become a woman. The thrust of my book was to argue for the acceptance of androgynous people who were somewhere in the middle. One of the things I am proud of, is that my book helped to open up the academic field of Gender Studies to focus on what today is understood as transgender identities. For example, in 1986 I titled a speech I gave at an important Gender Studies conference, “Women, Men, and Others.” Since then, I have been thrilled to see concepts like gender ambiguity, gender fluid, and gender queer become part of the larger field of study as transgender. The context of what I was arguing against was the view that there are only two genders, and that if males wish to abandon their masculinity they must become transsexuals. That is not a criticism of transsexual persons, but of the rigid gender categories that existed in Western society.   
 When I first encountered this subject, based on what I learned from my Native  
American teachers, there were no clear words in English. I wish I had come up with the  
term “transgender” at that time, but I did not. However, as the concepts of gender  
fluidity became more popular in the 1990s—in part because of the impact of my book—I  
teamed up with Dr. Connie Rogers (a leading pioneer transgender scholar) and we originated and taught the very first class on Transgender Studies that was taught at a major university. I am proud that USC approved this class without controversy or delay. Dr. Rogers and I continued to teach that class until my retirement in 2010.  
 Within that USC class, we taught about transsexuals, and used biographies of famous  
pioneering transsexuals like Christine Jorgensen. But we also used biographies of other   
pioneers like Virginia Prince, who argued for acceptance of people who cross-dressed or  
mixed gender in various ways, without going through surgeries. All variations, we argued, should be respected and accepted.  
 I am sorry that, in my zeal to plead acceptance for gender mixers, my words came across to some readers as hostile toward transsexual people. That was not my intent, and I should have been more careful in my wording. Human beings have multiple differences in all kinds of  
ways, and a humanistic approach calls for acceptance for all kinds of variations.

I am not in any way opposed to transsexual people. I applaud and support the right of individuals to undergo gender reassignment surgery if they choose to do so. Whether the subject is birth control, abortion or gender surgery, the ethic is the same: each person should be able to control their own body. No person should be subject to forced marriage, rape, or sexual imposition of any kind. And, conversely, this ethical stance also includes respecting the right for persons to be sexual with whomever they choose, as long as that other person also makes that same choice. Erotophobic reactionaries who attempt to deny either adults or adolescents their right to control their own body, in terms of choosing both their gender expression and their sexual behavior, are oppressors of human freedom.

Most cultures consider puberty to be life’s great dividing line. They consider a person as entering adulthood at that age. In the United States, there is increasing acceptance of the right of adolescents to have access to birth control and to abortion services, even without their parents’ consent. But, unlike many cultures, legal codes in the United States still deny anyone under 18 the right to engage in sexual behavior with persons of their choice. As young people lead the way in adopting the new technologies of the internet age, an entire generation is criminalized simply for taking unclothed photographs of themselves to share with their friends. Ironically, a 13 year old American can legally take powerful gender-reassigning drugs or get an abortion, but cannot legally engage in many forms of safe erotic behavior. Independent-minded teenagers who engage in sex are subject to arrest, being charged with crimes, and even life-long registration as a “sex offender.” For the rest of their life, they are subject to onerous regulations and oppressive government intrusion into their most private behaviors. All this is a direct violation of the U.S. Bill of Rights in the 14th Amendment, which guarantees to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States… the equal protection of the laws.” U.S. laws are woefully inconsistent with the lived experience of Americans, especially of racial, gender and sexual minorities. The fact that transgender people have the highest record of arrest and prosecution, of any demographic group in the United States, is itself evidence of discrimination and persecution.

One of the things that I have been pleased to see in recent decades is the sharp reversal of attitudes of feminists on the issue of transsexuality. Feminists like Janice Raymond were implacably hostile toward what she called “The Transsexual Empire.” I witnessed this hostility in 1994 when we were organizing a queer studies conference at USC. I had to oppose feminists on our planning committee, to get the word “Transgender” inserted after “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual” in the title of the conference. Thankfully, this attitude has changed, and feminists today are now almost totally supportive of transsexuals, transgenders, gender fluid people, nongendered people, and those who identify as gender queer.  
 None of those categories of persons, except for transsexuals, were recognized at the  
time I wrote my book. I remember the response when I approached the chairperson of  
the USC Gender Studies Program, in the 1990s, and presented my proposal to organize  
and teach a class on Transgender Studies. This chairperson, who was a prominent feminist scholar, asked me “I know about transsexuals, but what does transgender mean?” I was surprised at this level of ignorance, and had to explain the concept. There was no hostility in that question; that’s just how unfamiliar mainstream scholars were from an understanding of transgender concepts and issues.

A few years later, when we organized a transgender conference to be held on USC campus, I asked another gender studies professor to come with me to a session. This professor agreed to attend, but as we entered the conference hall they were visibly shaking. This professor had  
never been around transsexuals or transgender people at all. After a point, this professor settled down and enjoyed listening to the speakers. It was a surprise to me how nervous this professor was, especially in sharp contrast to the comfortable way I felt in interacting with the other people there.  
 So, though I regret my poor word choice in some places of the text, I hope readers can  
recognize the context in which I wrote my book. Articles that had been published in scholarly journals kept asserting that Indigenous American “transsexuals were not homosexual.” Those assertions were completely inconsistent with my own research. The sexual experience and erotic desires of every Two Spirit person I interviewed, from the Aleut in Alaska to the Maya of Yucatan, was oriented toward the same sex. And on the question of transsexual “gender crossing,” my Native American teachers kept telling me, “No, [insert here the word for Two Spirit people in their language] is not a case of men becoming women, but it is the fact that our culture recognizes and accepts more than two genders.” That was a mind-blowing concept to me as I did this research in the 1980s. Consequently, in my book I emphasized the close association that indigenous people made between Two Spirit people and androgynous homosexuals. For example, when I interviewed the Omaha tribal historian in 1982, on the Omaha reservation in Nebraska, and asked about the Omaha “mexoga” tradition, they told me, “It’s exactly the same as gay. It’s just like in California.”

My mistake, while trying to correct the scholarly literature which denied the homosexual behavior of Two Spirit people, I did not sufficiently explain that some Two Spirit people, did  
and do accept themselves as transsexual (with or without gender reassignment surgery). I quoted   
Harriet Whitehead, one of the most important scholars working on this subject, who concluded that the indigenous traditions were transsexual. In 1992 a group of feminist anthropologists organized a conference where Harriet Whitehead, Evelyn Blackwood, Beatrice Medicine, me and others held a discussion about which terms were best. Two Spirit Native American anthropologists at this conference kept objecting to speakers who came down on either side of the question. They made it clearly understood that while some defined themselves as transsexual, most Two Spirit people did not. “Don’t try putting us in boxes,” they repeatedly said. From their perspectives, both transsexual “gender crossers” and nonbinary “gender mixers” were part of their Two Spirit traditions. All variations were equally acceptable.

. Professor Whitehead made news at that conference when she announced that she had reconsidered her approach, and decided to join the rest of us in using the new more fluid term “transgender” instead of the “gender crossing” transsexual term she had previously used. While I try to stay out of a group’s internal defining of themselves, I am very glad that there has emerged a strong alliance between transsexuals, gender mixers, gender queer, gender fluid and agender persons. There is strength in recognizing the diversity within the subculture.

Not knowing this history within academia, a transsexual reader condemned me as a person, in a comment about *The Spirit and the Flesh* that was posted on the Amazon.com website. They labeled me a “phallocentric fascist”. I’m certainly phallocentric in my personal tastes, but I would never refer to a lesbian or MTF transperson as “vaginacentric.” When I read this slur I was stunned; I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone call me a fascist. I find this offensive. My father almost gave his life fighting fascism in Germany during World War II. After my father’s death my mother married a Jewish man who became my stepfather. His entire extended family was killed by fascists during Germany’s 1939 invasion of Poland. The word “fascist” is odious in my family, and not something to be casually charged. I hope my leadership in the academic field of Transgender Studies, and my history of activism in behalf of transgender rights can be  
taken into account.

I stand by the findings of my research which I conducted on several Indian reservations, but if I were writing my book today I would use some different words. Authors of books, like other human beings, can change their mind on things. Unfortunately, once my book was printed in 1986, there was no way to make changes without substantial costs. Readers need to recognize that reality, and confine their criticisms to the text itself without assuming things about the author as a person.

When I wrote *The Spirit and the Flesh* I made a plea for others to do further research and publish their own books. I knew that, as the first major book on the subject, I would make mistakes and that some of my interpretations would be challenged. Fine, that is part of the academic process. Take what I have done, in the years of research I put into this book, and then use that as a basis to write your own book. Challenge whatever you like, but do the research to back up your critique.  
 Writers of books need to be aware that their publications may radically change their life. Readers should be informed that, in early 1986 when I submitted the unpublished  
manuscript to the Anthropology Department at the University of Southern California,  
the faculty voted against me for tenure. The faculty decision was very explicit, that they did not want their department to become known for research about homosexuality. I had a letter from Dean Paul Bohanan (who was also an anthropologist) telling me that the upcoming year would be my last year teaching at USC. After he retired, Dr. Bohanan told me he had felt pressured to approve that faculty decision, but I wondered why a scholar with such a stellar reputation would allow himself to be swayed by others who had nowhere near the publication record which he had received. As for myself, I had published three books and many scholarly articles before *The Spirit and the Flesh*, more than most tenured faculty in the Anthropology Department, so their decision was certainly not based on my lack of publication. Their faculty decision specifically cited their reason, that they did not want anyone in their department publishing research on homosexual behavior in other cultures. Tenure is usually denied on the basis that the untenured professor has not published enough. Within academia, this reality is known as “publish or perish.” In my case, with four books and a slew of articles published in scholarly journals, it was “publish AND perish.”

Fortunately for me, when my book was published in September 1986 there was an  
immediate outpouring of support for it. Leading scholars in Gender Studies wrote letters extolling the importance of my research. Dean Paul Bohanan retired, and the new Dean Sylvester Whitaker told me the Dean’s office had received more letters from students protesting my firing than they had ever before received regarding a denial of tenure. Dr. Whitaker was USC’s first African American dean, and he argued strongly that my firing was a clear case of discrimination and a prejudice against research on stigmatized minorities.

In October *The Spirit and the Flesh* won the prestigious Ruth Benedict Award, presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. When the award was presented, by Professor Esther Newton, it was praised as a model for more ethnographic research in Gender Studies. Then, a few weeks later, pioneering activist Barbara Gittings chaired the committee of the American Library Association, which presented it the Gay Book of the Year Award. I was not able to accept this award in person, so in my place I sent my friend Randy Burns, the Paiute founder of San Francisco’s activist group, “Gay American Indians”, who I quoted extensively in my concluding chapter. Randy accepted the award on behalf of Two Spirit people everywhere.

I could not attend that awards presentation at the annual meeting of the American Library Association, because at that time I was being flown to accept another award, from the World Congress on Sexology, meeting at Heidelberg University in Germany. That international body of sexologists gave *The Spirit and the Flesh* the award as the best book published, anywhere in the world for the previous two years, in the field of sexology.  
 This flurry of international attention, as well as exceptionally positive reviews that the book was receiving in the *Los Angeles Times, the New York Times*, and other newspaper book reviews, plus the support of Dean Sylvsster Whitaker and many Gender Studies professors, led USC’s progressive Provost Cornelius Pings to overrule the decision of the anthropology faculty, and ordered me granted tenure. Though I was appreciative of the Provost and the Dean, I held  
resentments against the anthropology faculty for their blatantly homophobic reaction to the book.   
 The academic year 1986-87 became a surreal time of my life. The book that had almost cost me my job and my career, had suddenly become the basis for my international success. To my surprise the International Exchange of Scholars awarded me a prestigious Fulbright Professorship, and I was shortly off to Indonesia, to teach a year-long graduate seminar on research methodology at Gadjah Mada University. This time at Indonesia’s oldest and largest university had a tremendous effect on me, and I shifted my research interests to Asia. Living in Indonesia was one of the happiest years of my life, as I adapted to their calm and relaxed attitude toward things. That change was very welcome after the hostility I had faced at USC.  
 The controversy surrounding my tenure led many USC professors to speak up on my behalf, and against homophobic prejudice on campus. When I returned to Los Angeles in late 1988, to my surprise I was given a big salary raise, and USC’s new Provost Lloyd Armstrong appointed me to chair a university-wide committee on gay and lesbian issues on campus. Being in that position enabled me to build a strong association of LGBTQ faculty, staff, and students. I became faculty advisor for the queer student group. We held a number of conferences and film festivals, and were able to gain recognition for same-sex partners to have the same benefits as heterosexual married couples.

My most important accomplishment, as readers can learn more about in the section of this website relating to my role as an Archivist, I began pushing for the university to provide a large building on campus to house ONE National LGBT Archives. Due to my leadership from 1988 to 2001, ONE Archives is now the largest collection of LGBTQ materials in the world.

I don’t think any of this would have been accomplished if I had not published *The Spirit and the Flesh*. It has become, by far, the most famous book of all my publications. But it has also  
been the most controversial. Other critics have taken issue with my approach on different grounds. The fact that I support the right of LGBTQ adolescents to establish loving romantic relationships with the persons of their choice, makes clear that those critics support the United States’ ageist laws which criminalize sexual behavior regarding people below age 18. This is contrary to the very accepting attitudes on sex which I witnessed on Indian reservations and in many cultures I investigated in Asia and Pacific Islands. It is also a direct violation of the U.S. Constitution’s guarantee of “equal protection of the laws” in the 14th Amendment. I take these criticisms as a reflection of American ambivalence on sex, which has tragically resulted in the arrest and prosecution of many thousands of people who are now incarcerated in America’s sex prisons and juvenile detention centers. The United States holds more people in prison than any other nation of the world. The U.S. has 4% of global population but 20% of the world’s prisoners. See my writings on the need for criminal law reform, in the section on current political controversies.

I am confident that oppressive laws on the rights of young people will eventually be overturned, just as I similarly felt in the 1960s when I was a young activist working on behalf of civil rights for African Americans in the South, then on Indigenous American rights in the 1970s to the 1990s, and on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights from 1979 to the present.

If my writings have had any effect on wider social attitudes, what I am most proud of is my role in helping to change contemporary prejudices against sexual diversity. We as a species are highly variable in our feelings and behaviors, on all sorts of levels. That characteristic of high levels of individual variation is a major factor in our success, in adapting to many different environments. Unlike most species of animals, Homo sapiens have spread to all regions of the earth, and flourished. Like it or not, humans vary widely. Individual variation in sexuality, as  
in other things, is a blessing, not a curse.

I thank my Native American and Indigenous peoples in Asia, for helping me to recognize this blessing, in my own life and for the readers of my publications.