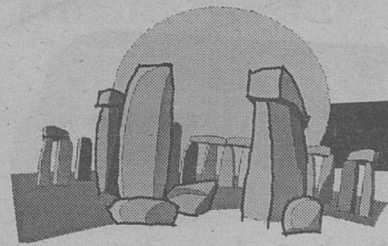


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Stonehenge to Stonewall

By Charlie Emond

Cowgirls and Indians

"She drank, she swore, she courted girls"

There are many examples in American history of what are called "passing women:" women who dressed and lived—often undiscovered—as men. This was especially true on the Western frontier.

Calamity Jane fled "the society of women forever and joined the male sex." There was Deborah Sampson, who fought in the Revolutionary War, Murray Hall in turn-of-the-century New York City, and Dr. Mary Walker, who got the Medal of Honor for her service in the Civil War. These and many others had in common their masculine attire and their girlfriends.

Willa Cather (1873-1947), whose novels express "her deep love of the land," wrote wonderfully of frontier life. She was always called "Willie," and during girlhood, she dressed as a boy and wore her hair short. She expressed a "vast contempt for skirts and dresses," and continued to dress as a man at university, where she invariably played men in theatrical productions. During her long and fruitful life, she never even came close to marriage. Her last 40 years were spent with her girlfriend, Edith Lewis.

The Spirit and the Flesh

My favorite book on gender-bending native Americans, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, speaks largely of the berdache—womanly men—with barely a mention of manly women. The problem for observers of Indian customs on the frontier was that men, especially white men, were excluded from the world of women. These observers were universally male; as a result, hardly anything has been written about lesbian Indians.

Walter Williams gives some examples of girls who, in the absence of male children, took on a hunting role for their families. An early explorer named the Amazon River for the Amazons of classical Greece after observing women of the Tupanimba with their hair cut like men, with bows and arrows, and with wives.

Several Indian tribes had

"man-like women" who hunted and rode as warriors with the men. One of these was "Woman Chief" of the Crows, who excelled at traditional male pursuits as a girl. The Crow Indians came to revere her. So successful was she that they thought she was immortal—until 1854, when she was killed while on a peace mission. She had four wives.

"Two-spirit people"

To expand my knowledge of both lesbian and native American issues, I bought *Two-Spirit People*. Since it was written and edited by two women—plus a token male Indian—I figured that I couldn't go wrong.

However, much of the book is a diatribe against using any of the following words in any context: gay, lesbian, berdache, two-spirit, transgendered, transsexual, cross-dressing, and amazon. They hate all these terms. In fact, they seem to hate all terms.

They hate the European term "berdache" so much that they never use it without quotation marks and the term [sic] after it.

They also really hate the term "amazon" because a white male (Walter Williams) proposed it as a convenient term for non-traditional women. Yet one writer cheerfully switches at random from "womyn" to "wimmin" without a word of explanation, and another sets up a table in which fag, gay, dyke and lesbian are four possible categories of people!

They answer at great length your pressing questions. Is that Navajo word spelled "nadleeh" or "nadleehi" or possibly "nadleehe?" These people apparently lose sleep over this! So unless you enjoy reading page after page of abstruse anthropological sniping, don't buy this book. It has all the charm of a high school term paper.

The title of the book is an attempt to cash in on a modern term for people once called berdache. (So much for their objections to its use!) Some people don't like "two-spirit" as a description for having both male and female qualities, because it appears to empha-

size a spiritual element.

Now, I happen to think that is a good thing but then, I am a non-native. It is clear from the readings in this book that we non-natives have no right to write about native cultures.

(Where is MY token Indian when I need him?)

Imagine the Possibilities!

To come closest to the Native American way of thinking, you have to realize that most tribes have, and have always had, members who identify with genders beyond just male and female. You have to accept that there are three, four (or five) genders, all of which were fully integrated into tribal life. A Navajo sage said; "The world is made of two: woman and man. But there has always been the third one who is both, the 'nadleehi.'"

There are both male and female "nadleehi" and a fifth gender is hermaphrodites. Native Americans saw no problem with a relationship between one of these genders and another. When a "two spirit" woman loved a woman, since there were really two different genders involved, that was perfectly OK.

Willa Cather appreciated "the importance that place and spirit have in forming the human personality." Now, she would have liked the term "two-spirit people," and so do I. It is a shame that she never got out there to interview and write about lesbian Indians. Now *that* would have been a book worth buying!

Charlie Emond has a bachelor's degree from Queens College and master's degree from both Dartmouth and Keene State. He teaches college history courses in Springfield and White River Junction. *Stonehenge to Stonewall* is syndicated by *Above the Fold, LTD*, info@abovefold.com.

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