

DYKE



PSYCHE

# Native American Two-Spirit People

BY ESTHER ROTHBLUM

At a time when sexual orientation and gender are being viewed as more continuous categories, there is renewed interest in the fluidity of who is a "woman" and who is a "lesbian." In many Native American cultures, gender and sexuality have not been as fixed as in western cultures.

Recently, a number of books have appeared on "two-spirit people," a term coined by Native Americans for individuals in their cultures who are gay or lesbian, or who are transgendered, or who have multiple gender identities. The term "two-spirit" is an attempt by Native American communities to re-define their past from the way in which it has been depicted by white male anthropologists, and also to distinguish Native American concepts of gender and sexuality from those of the western gay and lesbian communities.

I recently spoke with Sue-Ellen Jacobs, one of the co-editors of the book *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*. She said: "There are a number of instances where there are Native women, living on reservations, who don't stand out, who don't come forward. The gay white men who are out there studying Native American men don't see the women because these researchers don't recognize these women as who they are within their culture. Not many Native women use the words 'lesbian' or 'dyke' to describe themselves. The researchers didn't realize that there was a movement going on within the Native American communities, the two-spirit movement."

Sue-Ellen Jacobs described instances of "male-bodied women" or "female-bodied men" who took on the roles and became known as being of the "other" gender in Native

the universe) were among the greatest contributors to the well-being and advancement of their communities. They were (and we are) the greatest probers into the ways of the

*Sue Ellen Jacobs: The words I would like to see written about me and read fifty years from now should be words that reflect who I am as an individual.*

American cultures. As Jacobs and the other editors state in the introduction to their book: "Using the word 'two-spirit' emphasizes the spiritual aspect of one's life and downplays the homosexual persona."

In the chapter "I am a Lakota womyn," Beverly Little Thunder writes: "Most tribes that I have had the honor of knowing have specific names for men who love men and women who love women...I can understand that there may be a need by some to find a pan-Native term that can be used as a marker for the general population of Native lesbians and gays. We are all so different in so many ways, however. Culturally and physically, we are all different. Each tribe has its own name, its own structure. How can we all even be called 'Natives'?...The words I would like to see written about me and read fifty years from now should be words that reflect who I am as an individual."

Carrie House, of Navajo/Oneida descent, writes: "Our oral traditions acknowledge that the he-shes and she-hes (those who hold in balance the male and female, female and male aspects of themselves and

future, and they quickly assimilated the lessons of changing times and people. Recent studies into the lives of she-hes and she-hes have recovered models or near models of this rich, inventive, reverential, and highly productive approach to keeping balance within a society viewed as an extension of nature." ▼

For further reading see: Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas and Sabine Lang (1997). *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. Will Roscoe (1998). *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*. NY: St. Martin's Press. Lester Brown (1998). *Two-Spirit People*. NY: Haworth Press.

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