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## *Romancing the Transgender Native*

### Rethinking the Use of the “Third Gender” Concept

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ANTHROPOLOGISTS TOWLE AND MORGAN EXAMINE the concept of “third gender” in U.S. anthropological scholarship over the past quarter-century. They find it to be a useful and popular, though problematic, term precisely because its inherent ambiguities are well-suited to its historical moment; at a time when large segments of the U.S. population are encountering cultural differences from around the globe, “third gender” signals both tolerance for diversity and an adherence to Western categories of personal identity. The authors note that, increasingly, in social science literature, the term “third gender” is being replaced by or conflated with the newer term “transgender.” Towle and Morgan are also interested in popular texts by and for members of North American transgender communities that treat “third gender” natives of other cultures as part of their own imagined communities. The authors acknowledge that thinking about “third genders” elsewhere has been a powerful way to envision emancipatory possibilities within Euro-American contexts, but they consider this practice to be fraught with pitfalls. Specifically, they consider popular transgender writing on “third genders” to make several errors. To begin with, it falsely places other cultures in an idealized “primordial location,” a Garden of Eden where gender diversity flourished before the Fall into Western modernity. It tends to reduce the complexity of non-Western gender configurations to a single “third gender” status and to ignore other forms of gender diversity in a given culture that cannot be relegated to the culturally specific “third” term. Furthermore, “third gender” terms necessarily commit typological errors by reifying gender categories and ignoring the range of differences that can exist within any given identity category. They tend to treat non-Western societies as static, while imagining Eurocentric societies to be dynamic—“they” have culture, while “we” have history. Finally, this inconsistent application of the concept of culture fosters a “West versus the rest” mentality that contributes to the misrecognition of others, and complicates any potential political alliance across the boundaries of cultural difference.

Towle and Morgan note that the dialog between contemporary U.S. transgender communities and discourses, and gender communities and identities elsewhere, is in an early stage of formulation. The authors justifiably insist that U.S. transgender writers not caricature other cultures to advance their own local interests and agendas; they should, however, take equal care not to caricature U.S. transgender writers and activists (for example, Anne Ogborn, a transsexual woman who has spent considerable time participating in hijra communities in India, and who receives considerable attention in the article below) who make conscientious, ethically self-reflexive attempts to encounter, recognize, and interact with members of other cultures. At this early stage of the dialog, it is important to encourage, rather than silence, people willing to engage in an important conversation.

This essay offers a critical examination of how “third gender” concepts are used in popular American writing by and about transgendered people. Over the past decade there has been an increase in

the popular use of cross-cultural examples to provide legitimacy to transgender movements in the United States. Descriptions of the “transgender native” are often drawn from ethnographic portrayals of gender variation written by anthropologists for American audiences. Introductory anthropology textbooks commonly cite the *hijra* of India, the *berdache* of native North America, the *xanith* of the Arabian peninsula, the female husbands of western Africa, and the Sambia (a pseudonym) boys of Papua New Guinea who engage in “semen transactions.”[1] Such examples are often glossed together under the “third gender” rubric.

“Third gender” roles and practices were once regarded by most Western readers as exotic, with little relevance to our “modern” societies. These days, however, anthropological accounts of “third gender” variation are used frequently by popular writers such as Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg, and by contributors to periodicals such as *Transgender Tapestry* and *Transsexual News Telegraph*, to buttress the argument that Western binary gender systems are neither universal nor innate. Paradoxically, this rise in popularity comes just when some anthropologists are finding serious fault with the “third gender” concept.[2] This essay explores its appeal as well as recent critiques of it. We illustrate the critiques with excerpts taken from several popular academic and nonacademic works whose authors write about transgender theories and experiences, and we point out some of the analytic paradoxes, contradictions, and dangers inherent in invoking the transgender native.

We come to this discussion from anthropological experience as well as from personal transsexual experience. As the self-conscious subjects of our own inquiry into how anthropologists and trans-identified individuals alike use transgender-native models, we are ultimately invested in ensuring careful, responsible representation of individuals outside our culture. We are simultaneously committed to supporting transgender/transsexual scholarship, representation, and activism. If a common complaint among trans individuals is that their lives and identities are violated and misrepresented for the goals of scholarship, then it behooves us to make sure that we do not commit the same offense against others for the goal of political advancement.

Although our examples are drawn from popular, widely read texts about transgenderism, our purpose is not to criticize the authors’ intentions or even the products of those intentions. We understand that these texts rise to popularity because they are immeasurably helpful and meaningful to many readers searching for support and guidance. They carry weight because they inform not only the trans individuals themselves but also their therapists, doctors, family members, partners, and coworkers. One text that we discuss briefly, *True Selves*, is commended in numerous glowing reviews, such as the following:

I’ve read a number of books describing transsexualism, hoping to find the right one to give to people as I tell them about my own transition. When I read this one, I knew this was it, and I told my parents about myself within the week. They have since told me that this book was essential to their understanding of my condition. I believe the authors have provided an invaluable resource for anyone whose life is touched by knowing a transsexual person.[3]

Twenty-seven similar reviews on Amazon.com, as of this writing, attest to the book’s value to its wide readership. Our goal in this essay is to facilitate constructive critical inquiry into how we imagine ourselves and the place and time in which we live. In the process, we ask about the ramifications of such inquiry for the cultures considered to offer positive gender models as well as for the cultures (especially our own) implicated in the critiques.

Disagreements among anthropologists about using “third gender” concepts show that the issue need not be who holds “better” or “more accurate” or “more significant” knowledge. Anthropological knowledge is based on the conviction that examining a situation from slightly outside it can expose

meanings that the participants might miss. (As Bornstein quotes an anonymous source, “I’m not sure who discovered water, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t a fish.”)[4] And “member” knowledge is based on the conviction that members have a right to represent themselves, both to inspire others and to resist hostile and repressive political forces. But the politics of membership are complex. Do transgender natives, speaking for themselves, merit a place in the literature? What if they elect to be silent or invisible? Ideally, knowledge circulates freely and continually among scholars, laypeople, policy makers, activists, and theorists, any or all of whom might belong to or ally themselves with member communities. A contradiction emerges, however, when members appropriate scholarly accounts for their own ends and then deny others a voice, or vice versa. The argument about dominant knowledge might better address how knowledge is produced, deployed, and consumed within a given set of power relations.

Despite our commitment to the value of ethnographic comparison, we are skeptical of the utility of the generic transgender native in the popular literature. Understanding of other cultures is not enhanced by broad, decontextualized transcultural surveys or by accounts that encourage readers to take cultural features out of context. We do not believe that the goal of dismantling gender oppression and the binary gender system should seek legitimacy in narrow or sanctified appropriations of non-Western cultural histories or practices, although this method is used both in anthropology and in the popular literature. Rather, analysis should center on the meanings, ideologies, disputes, and practices that situate gender dynamics in specific historical and cultural contexts.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF “THIRD GENDER” CONCEPTS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

One longtime goal of anthropologists has been to document the diversity and meanings of human cultural practices. Historically, anthropology has been the Western discipline with the greatest access and sensitivity to non-Western cultural practices and with the greatest authority in writing about them. Well before Michel Foucault restored historicity to the study of sexuality, anthropologists had provided ethnographic accounts of gender practices in various cultures.[5] One of the most important analytic contributions was the sex/gender distinction, which made it possible to argue that biological features did not “naturally” correspond to sexual practice, sexual orientation, gender identity, or sexual desire. The sex/gender distinction itself has been confounded and criticized over the years, with critics arguing that anatomical sex as well as sexuality and gender can be socially constructed.[6] Subsequent theories have resulted in an increasingly complex understanding of the intersections among biology, identity, performance, power, and practice.

In the 1980s anthropology underwent a so-called crisis of representation, in which anthropologists began to come to terms with the realization that supposedly objective descriptions of non-Western cultures were infused with ethnocentric assumptions and colonial privilege. This realization, in combination with postcolonial studies and the emergence of gay and lesbian social movements, led anthropologists to redirect the anthropological gaze toward the Western societies from which many of them came. There they began to scrutinize the social construction of Western gender dichotomies and sexual forms of expression.[7]

The term *third gender* was apparently introduced in 1975 by M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies, who employed it to draw attention to the ethnographic evidence that gender categories in some cultures could not be adequately explained with a two-gender framework.[8] This revelation had profound implications for feminist and gender theory as well as for social movements and political activists in the United States, because it allowed them to think outside a dichotomous gender system. *Third gender* began to be applied to behaviors that transcended or challenged dyadic male-female codes or norms. It was also applied to societies (most of them non-Western) that seemed to provide institutionalized “intermediate” gender concepts and practices.

Gilbert H. Herdt, one of anthropology's most ardent and widely read proponents of the "third gender" concept, has used the term to discuss gender and sexuality among the Sambia, a New Guinea group that practices "semen eating" (in which young boys perform fellatio on older men) and, more generally, to open the discursive space for analyzing nondichotomous gender categories. But a close reading of Herdt's work suggests that he is motivated to use *third gender* more by his own dissatisfaction with dualistic theories than by any conviction that the term is ethnographically accurate or adequate. In short, he uses it as a heuristic device, for illustrative purposes. In his preface to *Third Sex, Third Gender* Herdt cautions the reader that the word *third* should not be taken too literally; rather, it is "emblematic of other possible combinations that transcend dimorphism." [9] Like his colleague Will Roscoe, who has written extensively about "alternate gender roles" in Native North America, Herdt has been influential in introducing non-Western perspectives into the gay rights and transgender movements in the United States. [10] Articles written by Herdt and Roscoe allow transgender activists to argue, loaded with ethnographic ammunition, that they were "born [not into the wrong body but] into the wrong culture." [11]

Anthropologists make an important contribution to contemporary discussions of gender by pointing out that the two-gender system is neither innate nor universal. For many transgender activists and their allies, the cross-cultural perspective provides a welcome alternative to the heavily psychologized, medicalized, and moralistic analyses previously invoked in the West to explain gender variation. Using cross-cultural comparison—a tried-and-true strategy for deconstructing and challenging many supposed cultural truths—anthropologists have argued against the biological basis of race, just as they have against the biological basis of gender: "What began as a critique of universals and a search for factors of cross-cultural comparison has become instead a critical inquiry into the assumptions of Western scientific models of sexuality and folk ideologies of the classification of individuals." [12] Anthropologists demonstrate the cultural logic of seemingly aberrant practices, showing, for example, how female-to-female marriage may function to perpetuate patrilineal social organization or how performing fellatio can be interpreted to promote the virility of young men. [13] Such examples provide ethnographic evidence to people working to challenge binary gender-based social arrangements in the West.

In recent years, the term *transgender* has sometimes replaced *third gender* to designate "gender roles and practices which are not definable in terms of local understandings of gender normativity," but the substitution has not necessarily rectified the attendant epistemological problems. [14] David Valentine argues that the concept of "transgenderism," and the corresponding social movements, arose recently and rapidly in the United States out of specific, identifiable developments in the cultural politics of sexuality. The birth of transgenderism responded to the sentiment among gay and lesbian rights advocates that one's sexual orientation does not reflect on one's gender; that is, "you can be a man and desire a man . . . without any implications for your gender identity *as a man*," and the same is true if you are a woman (190). This envisioning of gays and lesbians, who are to be seen as identical to heterosexuals in all ways but private sexual practices, removed many individuals—drag queens, butch lesbians, cross-dressers, and others—from the categories "gay" and "lesbian." These individuals, who are different from heterosexual and gender-normative people in other, possibly more conspicuous ways, are left to assume the category "transgender(ed)" (191–93).

The word *transgender* is a trendy signifier. But Valentine argues that it should not be applied incautiously to nonnormative gender practices elsewhere:

If . . . "transgender" has a specific history and set of meanings which implicitly mark it in terms of its difference from USAmerican understandings of "gay," then labeling *bantut* [Philippines] or *travesti* [Brazil] as "transgender" is just as problematic. That is, despite the sensitivity to local practices and beliefs, the use

of “transgender” in these ethnographic texts actually relies on the same ontologies of gender and sexuality presupposed by the category “gay” which these authors [Mark Johnson and Don Kulick] so assiduously avoid.[15]

Anthropologists are not immune from the temptation to use the word transgender as a shorthand gloss. Despite the care they often take to “mark out a cultural specificity to the gender and sexual practices of their informants and to avoid ‘gay’ in the USAmerican or European sense,” Valentine points out that they sometimes sweep a variety of nonnormative gender identities under the heading of “transgender” (91). He cites the subtitles (although not the substance) of Kulick’s *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* and Johnson’s *Beauty and Power: Transgendering and Cultural Transformation in the Southern Philippines*, as well as Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Wieringa’s edited volume, *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices across Cultures*, as examples of this trend.

Valentine is interested—and deeply implicated, by his own admission—in the ways that anthropologists are complicit in creating the very categories they seek to understand and deconstruct. The appearance of selected books by anthropologists on transgender reading lists is a way for “transgender-identified people [to] draw on such anthropological texts to talk about themselves and others as transgender.”[16] Yet certain anthropological texts are inevitably passed over, while others find an avid readership. Valentine suspects that the key to the popularity of these texts is the extent to which the ethnography in them seems to condone or reinforce, if it does not actively contest, “the categories of [U.S.-based] identity politics” (90). For example, ethnographic accounts of Native American two-spirit (formerly *berdache*) peoples such as Roscoe’s *Zuni Man-Woman* and Sabine Lang’s *Men As Women, Women As Men* may resonate with a U.S. readership because they are consistent with social movements that promote gay and transgender rights, autonomy, and self-determination for first-nation peoples, as well as New Age spirituality. The phenomenon of appropriation shows how widely anthropologists are recruited (sometimes willingly and deliberately, sometimes unknowingly) to participate in projects of identity formation. By the same token, when anthropologists use the “transgender” concept to discuss “non-normative genders and sexualities cross-culturally,” they “are complicit with those activists who imagine ‘transgender’ as a universal category of gender difference” (199).

## EMANCIPATORY POSSIBILITY MEETS ANALYTIC PARADOX

For a society steeped in a binary gender ideology, the notion of “third gender” is intriguing and revelatory on many levels. It has been instrumental in sparking theoretical reflection about the “nature” and, especially, the social construction of gender. As Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna said over twenty years ago, “Studying gender categories in other cultures... makes gender problematic, that is, uncovers our taken-for-granted belief in the facticity of gender which prevents us from seeing gender as a social accomplishment.”[17] “Third gender” ideas build on our long-standing cultural fascination with societies that are allegedly less inhibited than our own. “A common and more or less clearly articulated motivation in this corpus of work,” Niko Besnier writes, “is to demonstrate that preindustrial societies are more ‘tolerant,’ ‘accepting,’ ‘approving,’ or ‘accommodating’ of erotic diversity and gender variation than ‘the West.’”[18] Thus the “third gender” concept set the stage for celebrating non-Western societies while disparaging Western ones.

This concept opens up creative possibilities for reimagining the “natural” expression and performance of identity and desire. After all, why should we be constrained by binary gender assumptions if the full range of human desire and behavior is substantially broader? Examples of societies that accept “third gender” roles justify the argument that homophobia and other forms of social opprobrium are

unnecessary and even wrong, which in turn justifies antidiscrimination legislation and other legal protections. Carolyn Epple points out that ethnographic evidence of multiple genders has obvious emancipatory potential, for it “is clearly central to many social goals (deliverance from biology as destiny) and political agendas (disruption of the masculine, heterosexist hegemony).”[19]

Marjorie Garber constructed her influential book on cross-dressing, *Vested Interests*, around the idea that “thirds” are analytically useful because they upset the binary and encourage flexibility. She rejects the idea that the “third” is principally a word, sex, or specific referent of any kind. It is, rather, “a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility.” Garber is especially interested in the ability of multiple kinds of “thirds” to disrupt multiple binary categories and symmetries by placing them in larger, messier contexts. In this sense, the “third” is good to think. Throughout *Vested Interests* Garber uses the notion of cross-dressing “thirds” to explore “the extraordinary power of the transvestite as an aesthetic and psychological agent of destabilization, desire, and fantasy.”[20] According to Valentine, Garber insists that “crossdressing (and by extension, transexualism) should be understood on its own terms, not simply in terms of the ‘twoness’ of male and female.”[21] This analysis allows gender variability and performance to be positioned at the center (rather than on the fringes) of social theorizing about gender and sexuality, and in this way Garber’s perspective is useful and potentially empowering. But the free-ranging creativity that gives *Vested Interests* its popular allure (the book is good to think) also leaves Garber vulnerable to criticism from those who prefer their research subjects to be located in ethnographic, historical, and political contexts.

In his study of transvestite beauty pageants and the transformation of gender and culture in the Philippines, for example, Johnson criticizes Garber for reducing transvestitism “to the realm of literary or aesthetic psycho-sexuality, [to] that which escapes cultural categories but which makes their reformulation possible.” It is vital, he argues, to examine the experiences of actual people as they negotiate gender, sexuality, and identity in contexts of cultural and political transformation. Johnson objects to two dimensions of Garber’s analysis. First, the “space of possibility” she indexes by the “third” cannot exist outside, or prior to, “the repressive constraints and generative power of culture.” If transvestites, hermaphrodites, and other transgender categories occupy a space of desire and possibility, of undecidability, then they do so no less as socially and historically constituted subjects than as those who inhabit the conventional space that Garber claims they interrupt.[22]

Second, Johnson “questions[s] the usefulness and validity of universalizing psychoanalytic semiotics in cross-cultural analysis.” In this sense, he says, Garber’s argument is predicated on culture-bound assumptions, because it assumes that the “transvestite figure inhabits a cultural world where identity, including sex and gender, is premised on dualism and where transactions between persons are conceptualized in terms of opposition and distinction.”[23] Johnson, underscoring the need for a culturally sensitive analysis, shows that these assumptions do not pertain to Southeast Asian cosmologies.

The “third gender” is a uniquely Western concept produced by a society just beginning to grapple with the theoretical, social, political, and personal consequences of nondichotomous gender variability. It is thus an apt rhetorical and analytic device for the current historical moment, because it can accommodate contradictory social impulses; it signals both tolerance for cultural diversity and adherence to Western categories. Rather than accept uncritically the need for a “third” gender category, though, we should ask how “our” narratives about “them” (cultural others) reflect our own society’s contradictory agendas concerning sexuality, gender, and power.[24]

In spite of the obvious imaginative and political potential created by the awareness of gender diversity across cultures, several flaws emerge in the utilization of “third gender” concepts. In the remainder of this essay we enumerate and illustrate these flaws, which we organize as follows:

1. The primordial location. “Third gender” societies are accorded a primordial, foundational location in our thinking, as though they underlay or predated Western gender formulations.
2. Reductionism and exclusionism. The “third gender” concept lumps all nonnormative gender variations into one category, limiting our understandings of the range and diversity of gender ideologies and practices.
3. Typological errors. By identifying “third gender” types, the concept ignores the diversity of experience within categories and glosses over the often contentious processes through which social formations, relations, and hierarchies are created, lived, negotiated, and changed.
4. Inconsistent use of the culture concept. Does culture facilitate or delimit social change?
5. The West versus the rest. “Third gender” concepts may isolate the West, for analytic purposes, from other societies, thereby reinforcing our ethnocentric assumptions; inhibiting us from forging alliances across national or cultural borders; and inducing us to focus on diversity between cultures while ignoring diversity, or the complexities of social change, within them.

The reader will find the figure of the transgender native woven throughout the discussion. This figure is a literary trope often used in transgender testimonial writing to invoke longing for the other. It serves in several texts as a generic, seductive figure who lives an idealized existence in a utopian place and time. The transgender native is portrayed not as a normal, fallible human being living within the gender constraints of his or her own society but as an appealing, exalted, transcendent being (often a hero or healer). He or she can be imagined (e.g., as a transgender ancestor), discovered (e.g., on a trip to a foreign land), enacted (e.g., as one’s own persona), or simply cited to justify one’s own argument. The transgender native surfaces in several of the following examples as an object of desire.

### THE PRIMORDIAL LOCATION

Many contemporary transgender authors give “third gender” examples a primordial place in their narratives.[25] Primordialism works in two ways, often simultaneously. First, accounts of historical and non-Western gender variability are used to suggest that our contemporary (trans)gender variability is both ancient and natural. (Some authors even conflate time and place, collapsing historical with distant situations.) Second, summaries of historical and non-Western gender variability often appear at the beginnings of texts, suggesting that “old” and/or “other” forms of gender variation provide the foundation for the modern forms.[26] Bornstein, a playwright, a male-to-female activist, a performance artist, and author of the influential book *Gender Outlaw*, invokes the transgender native in the form of her assumed primordial ancestors, whom she imagines living in an age before oppressive gender ideologies were invented: “My ancestors were performers. In life. The earliest shamanic rituals involved women and men exchanging genders. Old, old rituals. Top-notch performances. Life and death stuff. We’re talking cross-cultural here. We’re talking rising way way way above being a man or a woman. That’s how my ancestors would fly. That’s how my ancestors would talk with the goddesses and the gods. Old rituals.”[27] Bornstein recalls an idealized past at the same time that she positions non-Western societies as superior to Western societies (“We’re talking cross-cultural here”). This rhetorical strategy is intended to create a kind of collective magic, to summon for the reader a pleasant and supportive, if imaginary, community. Yet the danger of portraying the transgender native in this way is that it can perpetuate stereotypes about non-Western societies, with their “shamanic rituals” and panoply of gods.

The beginning of *True Selves* asserts that “transsexualism exists and has always existed.” The authors, Mildred L. Brown, a clinical sexologist and therapist, and Chloe Ann Rounsley, a writer, journalist, and marketing consultant, add the following description of our cross-dressing ancestors: “Shamans

and medicine men were thought to hold special powers and were considered ‘twin souled,’ with knowledge of both male and female secrets. As such, they typically played prominent roles in ancient rituals, fertility rites, religious festivals, medieval folk ceremonies, and seasonal celebrations. These individuals were typically men who dressed in elaborate skirts, feathers, makeup, and ornamentation. Most cultures had at least one such individual, who held a unique position within the group.”[28] Brown confesses that one of her motivations for writing the book was years of work with transsexual patients who would “search in vain for materials that would help them communicate *the* transsexual experience” (2; emphasis added). This is certainly a laudable goal, and we would not suggest that every book written on the subject must withstand academic scrutiny. Yet Brown misleads her readers by suggesting that there is a single, universal transsexual experience, as well as a single “third gender” experience characteristic of all people who lived in other places or times.

The primordial transgender native who is invoked as a symbol of healing in the past can also portend healing for the future. In this sense, the past becomes the future: “Older, so-called primitive societies usually valued their transgendered people as special beings. They were given roles of healers, visionaries, spiritual leaders, mediators, teachers, and guides. These powers are a natural outgrowth of harmonizing the masculine and feminine energies within. There are even some who are now saying that more and more transgendered people are being born into this world to help our troubled planet.”[29] Another example of how crosscultural gender variation plays a foundational role in explaining modern transgenderism crops up in *Transsexual Workers*, whose author, Janis Walworth, offers the following response to a question about how to explain a worker’s transsexualism to international clients: “Transsexualism is a worldwide phenomenon. In many parts of the world, traditional cultures have provided a place in society for transgendered people, whether or not they have made any surgical modifications to their bodies. In some cultures, including Native American cultures, transgendered people were not only accepted but revered.”[30] In other words, international clients should need no explanation of the transsexual phenomenon, presumably because many already know and accept gender variation in their own societies. While we applaud Walworth’s willingness to consider what others may think or know in cross-cultural encounters, she commits several oversights. For example, we question her assertion that a gender variant found in one part of the world necessarily holds constant (i.e., takes the same shape or has the same meaning) across countries and cultures. Walworth lumps the wide diversity of “Native American cultures” into one category and further assumes that familiarity with gender variation translates into acceptance, which, unfortunately, it often does not. For instance, while the *hijras* in India are well known, they are not universally revered or even accepted. Walworth might have posed her assumption as a question: Would it be a good thing if an Indian businessperson familiar with *hijras* regarded an American transsexual as similar and deserving of similar treatment? The answer is by no means clear.

A more ambitious way to introduce the transgender native to Western readers is to find him or her. Our search has turned up the following journalistic travelogue, in which American seekers visit foreign lands in search of the transgender native. In *Transgender Tapestry* Nancy Nangeroni writes about her journey to the Hawaiian island of Molokai “in search of *māhū*” (a Polynesian term for a genderliminal person). With the goal of “meeting and interviewing some transgender people who [had] been fortunate enough to grow up in a climate that was more accepting of gender difference than was ours,” Nangeroni and a photographer set out to find the people whose “spirits . . . follow similar paths” to theirs.[31] After a good deal of asking and searching, they manage to track down a *māhū* named Moana who runs a hula school and drives a school bus. Having “introduced themselves and [given] her copies of Mariette’s [the photographer’s] book, *Transformations: Crossdressers and Those Who Love Them*, as well as a recent copy of *Transgender Tapestry* magazine,” they waited as Moana,

Moana's sister, and another *māhū* named Jody "looked the materials over"; they "seemed suitably impressed" by them (27). Nangeroni's action can be seen as a simple act of generosity, yet it can also be interpreted as having encouraged the *māhūs* to view themselves as akin to mainland American transgendered people, like the presumed readers of Nangeroni's article. But it is not at all clear that Nangeroni and Moana shared an understanding of what either *māhū* or *transgendered* meant. When Moana used the word *māhū*, she referred to effeminate men. She did not use it to refer to more broadly defined transsexuals, such as those who are biologically male but wish to live as women or those who see themselves as neither male nor female. Moana later referred to herself as a homosexual, not as a transsexual, indicating that the local understanding of *māhū* reflects presumed sexual practices rather than internalized gender identities. But Nangeroni does not dwell on the subtleties of identity, practice, or semantics; [32] the reader learns no more about them.

At one point Nangeroni was denied further interviews with Moana because parents (presumably of students at the hula school) asked Moana not to talk with reporters. Yet when Nangeroni approached Moana at the airport to say that she would send her a draft of the article to approve before publication, Moana replied, "Just print it," which prompted Nangeroni to say that she "knew that we are of a common soul, engaged in the same struggle for simple human dignity and respect." Although Nangeroni shifts in the middle of the story from "enjoying [the] island visit to feeling like subversive intruders in a precarious paradise," she leaves the reader with the firm idea that *māhūs* and transsexuals are essentially the same; their identities may be at different stages of cultural evolution, but they are nonetheless interchangeable. [33]

Many American readers became familiar with another transgender native, the *hijra*, through the anthropologist Serena Nanda's popular ethnography, *Neither Man nor Woman*. Anne Ogborn took the project a step farther when she traveled to India and adopted this identity. Her account tells of her life in a community of *hijras*: "For as long as I have been out as a transsexual woman, I have been in a cycle. First to be healed by the community, then [to] heal the community. I applied this to my voyage to India. I didn't go to study *Hijras*, but to be with them, and as it turns out, to become one. I am not an anthropologist or a student of comparative religion. I'm a transsexual woman. I wanted to have a new experience of that." [34] Ogborn was on a spiritual journey in search of belonging. She was looking not for scholarly understanding but for fulfillment as a transsexual woman. She went to India armed, one suspects, with a superficial knowledge of a "third gender" utopia there. She wants to equate Indian *hijras* with American transsexuals, but the comparison is a crude one. To her, life as a *hijra* is merely an elaboration on the American theme of transsexuality, but in India *hijras* exist in a completely different context and constellation of meanings. Repeating the problem seen in the above examples, Ogborn assumes that the enactment and interpretation of identities formulated in one cultural context will remain stable when transferred to another context.

Ogborn's simplistic interpretation of the meaning of "third gender" categories may be the result of how gender variability is presented to American readers. Books and articles about transgenderism in the United States often begin with brief, superficial reviews of gender variability in other times and places. This is true of Feinberg's widely read *Transgender Warriors*, which, while generally ignored as a work of history, has enjoyed great popularity because it is accessible, romantic, inclusive of a wide range of gender variability, and optimistic. Feinberg has packaged a message that people want to hear. One young man from Perth, Western Australia, writes:

I'm a 20-year-old female-to-male transsexual. Five years ago, I didn't even know other people like me existed. Now, thanks to this book, I know people like me have been around as long as human beings from the more ordinary walks of life . . .

Leslie presents a very personal history of transgenderism. Hir short autobiography echoes that of the many people who don't fit into the male OR female ONLY roles society has pushed us into over the centuries. . . .

. . . I want to major in History now. ::grin::[35]

Feinberg's story of self-realization in the book offers readers a vision of a primordial, eternal community of "transgender warriors" that extends much farther than the title suggests. "Have all societies recognized only two sexes?" asks Feinberg. "Have people who traversed the boundaries of sex and gender always been so demonized? Why is sex-reassignment or cross-dressing a matter of law?" "How," she wonders, "could I find the answers to these questions when it means wending my way through diverse societies in which the concepts of sex and gender shift like sand dunes over the ages? And as a white, transgender researcher, how can I avoid foisting my own interpretations on the cultures of oppressed peoples' nationalities?" [36] Much to her credit, Feinberg acknowledges the ethical and political complexities of appropriating cross-cultural information for selfish purposes. Paradoxically, however, her argument requires that she appropriate other cultural models of gender or, more specifically, an interpretation of cultural models that says, "Our ancestors lived in societies that enjoyed much more humane social relations than we do" (121). "I am heartened," Feinberg continues, "by the realization that hatred of sex and gender variation is not rooted in human nature. The more I dig, the more I find that although what we think of as gender today has been expressed differently in diverse historical periods, cultures, regions, nationalities, and classes, there appears to have always been gender diversity in the human population" (121).

After a speedy review of gender-related practices and beliefs among non-Western peoples, Feinberg suddenly calls a halt to the exercise, explaining that she intends to focus on the West to avoid participating in the "campaigns of hatred and bigotry that are today woven into the fabric of Western cultures and have been imposed on colonized peoples all over the world." [37] Her relationship to crosscultural evidence is ambivalent, however, because she also admits that she "found the key to a vault containing information [she] had looked for all [her] life" during her first visit to the Museum of the American Indian in New York City (21). But although the cross-cultural examples she found there were pivotal to her selfawareness, Feinberg warns the reader that studying non-Western societies (or even discussing them in any detail) may amount to Western imperialism. One wonders whether she intends her own life story to serve as a model for young, American "gender warriors" so they will not feel the need to explore treacherous crosscultural terrain themselves.

To relegate non-Western societies to the primordial slot is deeply problematic. Primordialism implies that ancient history lives on in the contemporary lives of non-Western peoples, who are then called on to exemplify "our sacred past" (the title of Feinberg's chapter on commonly used ethnographic examples of gender variability in non-Western societies). It further implies that there is (or was) a single pancultural genealogy from which all humans evolved (although some presumably evolved farther than others). The question of whether "diverse [non-Western] societies" are closer to a collective ancient cultural heritage than we are was long ago rejected by most scholars, who do not accept the social Darwinian notion that the world's societies can be ranked on a hierarchy of evolutionary stages from "barbaric" to "modern" (even when the goal is to glorify the former). Anthropologists and postcolonial scholars insist that all living human beings and cultures are equally contemporary and thus equally far removed from a panhuman cultural past.

Assigning non-Western accounts primordial status would seem to suggest that other cultures can (and should?) provide us with our own history. This assumption, evident in the literature that gives prominent attention to the Native American *berdache*, implies that gender variation among peoples

who once lived on what is now American soil should be more relevant to American gender discourse than distant cultures. Could we say, for example, that accounts from precolonial North America are somehow more relevant to contemporary Americans than accounts from Papua New Guinea or Oman? Even some scholarly studies, including Kessler and McKenna's often cited *Gender and the History Project's Improper Bostonians*, introduce examples of Native American *berdaches* to show that gender shifting and homosexuality were once accepted on what is now American land.[38] These authors would certainly agree that in the case of North America there is little cultural continuity between native peoples and Europeans, because the colonizers so effectively destroyed the native peoples and their customs. Yet if geographic proximity or occupation of the same land is no guarantee of cultural affinity, what justifies the popular fascination with the *berdaches*?

Feinberg's great success is attributable to her ability to tap the understandable desire of marginalized and oppressed people to imagine and derive meaning from stories of a proud past. It is clear why she would want to reclaim a history that was strategically denied her: "It's time for a fresh look at history and this time, I don't intend to be left out." [39] The danger, however, is that our "fresh look at history" might lead us to violate or misconstrue other peoples' histories and experiences. Feinberg wants to draw on the work of anthropologists and historians only for raw data with which to advance specific, highly controlled political agendas. She herself keeps her distance from academic anthropologists, at once criticizing their characterization of Native American gender systems but using anthropological data, however loosely, to support her world history of transgenderism. Much is lost in the process, including the voices of Native American peoples, ethnographic details that might make their gender ideologies comprehensible to outsiders, and an appreciation of the need to look for meaning closer to home. To avoid the pitfalls of primordialism and to understand better the roots of gender oppression and the possibilities for gender liberation, we need more investigations of our own society's gender politics and histories.[40]

## REDUCTIONISM AND EXCLUSIONISM

The "third gender" concept is by nature flawed because it subsumes all non-Western, nonbinary identities, practices, terminologies, and histories. Thus it becomes a junk drawer into which a great non-Western gender miscellany is carelessly dumped. Ethnographic examples can come from distinct societies located in Thailand, Polynesia, Melanesia, Native America, India, western Africa, and elsewhere and from any point in history, from ancient Greece to sixteenth-century Brazil to nineteenth-century England to contemporary North America. Popular authors routinely simplify their descriptions, ignoring or, worse, conflating dimensions that seem to them extraneous, incomprehensible, or ill suited to the images they want to convey. In her description of life as a *hijra*, for instance, Ogborn admits that "I haven't the faintest idea what the religious tenants [*sic*] of this place are. They [the other *hijras*] told me I should ask Ratnaa [her guru] about God every day, but my Hindi isn't good enough to talk about abstruse things. So I just sing the praises of Allah and I'm happy. It's a simple, Franciscan sort of thing to do." [41] Ogborn has already told us that she is not a student of comparative religion, yet we doubt that one can begin to understand *hijra* existence or to communicate *hijra* experience to Western readers without referring to "abstruse things." Ogborn does not mention the social and political contexts that gave rise to the current condition of *hijras*, or the complicated relationship in India between Islamic and Hindu faiths and cultures, or the caste system, probably because they are beside the point she wants to make. Her message is simply that transgendered individuals (as well as the category of "third gender") are mobile across cultures and have affinities that transcend language and cultural barriers. In this sense, Ogborn gives primacy to what she imagines as transcultural gender

similarity, placing it above all other kinds of difference and giving, as Valentine puts it, “little attention to the specific historical and political conditions, or ontological assumptions, underlying it.”[42]

Paradoxically, the “third gender” concept can constrain and narrow—as well as expand—our ability to imagine different kinds of gender variability. By focusing on *hijras*, for example, American readers may be less inclined to inquire about or to investigate other Indian discourses around sex and gender.[43] The “third gender” concept encourages students to think that “the natives” must have only one alternative to the dichotomous gender system available to them.

Leaving aside the question of how to sort and make sense of the contents of the overburdened “third gender” category, we should ask whether it functions to protect “first” and “second” categories from becoming analytically muddled or contaminated. The existence of the “third” category might imply—wrongly, in our view—that “first” and “second” categories are inviolable and unproblematic, at least for the purposes of exploring gender variability. But while critics argue that gender categories should not be limited to two,[44] simply adding one more accomplishes little. One danger is the tendency to believe that adherence to a three gender system would necessarily be less oppressive. “The greater the number of genders,” cautions Agrawal, “the greater their oppressive potential as each may demand the conformity of the individual within increasingly narrower confines.”[45] The role of *hijra*, for instance, is quite narrow, she argues, noting that locals insist that a “real *hijra*” is a castrated individual and not “just” an effeminate or crossdressing male (292–93). The alternate gender roles cited in the literature are not necessarily more open or accommodating than binary gender roles; Agrawal’s example shows that “third gender” systems, too, can be rigid and intolerant.[46]

Ethnographic examples of gender variability can uphold, or can be interpreted as upholding, the tired two-gender ideology, although some ethnographic cases show that this interpretation can be profoundly mistaken. For example, Kulick’s compassionate study of Brazilian *travestis* attempts to understand why homosexual men who “live their lives in female clothing, call one another by female names, and endure tremendous pain in order to acquire female bodily forms” reject the suggestion that they want to be or to become women.[47] Among *travestis*, gender identity is understood to derive from sexual practice rather than from anatomy. It is determined by “the role [that] genitals perform in sexual encounters” (227), and *travestis* understand and position themselves as having the same gender as women (233). In this sense, Kulick argues that *travestis* solidify a normative binary gender system, but not the Euro-American system that makes gender contingent on anatomical sex. The “third gender” concept would have prevented a researcher from reaching this conclusion, he says, because “there is a real danger that theories of third gender in fact radically naturalize and reinforce traditional understandings of sexual dimorphism” and thus “[leave] the traditional male-female binary intact” (230). Epple, writing about the Navajo *nádleehí*, makes the same point from another ethnographic location: “Casting [Navajo *nádleehí*] as [an alternate gender role] does not subvert but reifies—indeed is based upon—the very system it is intended to dismantle: the binary gender system and its assumed natural coherence among sex, gender, and desire.”[48] The term *third gender* does not disrupt gender binarism; it simply adds another category (albeit a segregated, ghettoized category) to the existing two. It is ironic, Epple observes, that the “third gender” concept “sets gender incongruence apart, keeps the meanings of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ safe from its disruptive influences” (273).[49]

## TYPOLOGICAL ERRORS

The “third gender” concept focuses attention on the classification of types and on the functional interactions among people as they assign and act out social roles. In such schemes, one type of gender variation is posited per nation or per culture: India has its *hijra*, Tahiti its *māhū*, the Arabian peninsula

its *xanith*, Thailand its *kathoe*, Native America its *berdache*, and so on.[50] Roscoe, coeditor of *Boy-Wives and Female-Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities* and *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*, editor of *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology* and *Queer Spirits: A Gay Men's Myth Book*, and author of several other popular works, argues that some cultures do recognize and label specialized gender "types." [51] These, he says, are the products of material historical conditions, including the division of labor and means of production. His point is well taken: the "third gender" concept draws attention to just such examples. One flaw of the typological framework, however, is that it reinforces the all-too prevalent tendency to pigeonhole people and therefore to prejudge their identity, behavior, and interactions. Creating a normative template of the presumptive alternate gender role has the unfortunate effect of privileging certain narrowly defined cultural scripts over others and ignoring the possibility of diversity within roles. Typologies also encourage static thinking: are the *hijras* timeless and unchanging? Typologies can be heuristically useful, but only to a point, for ultimately they yield an unchanging model that seems paradoxically antithetical to many transgender political aims.

Contemporary gender theories include many alternatives to typological models. Poststructuralist and performance theories show how gender identities and relations are discursively produced, negotiated, enforced, resisted, and transformed as power shifts in a society.[52] These theories tend to emphasize the dynamism and malleability of gender identities without overlooking the hegemonic and regulating effects of medicine, jurisprudence, and the state on gender formation and preservation. Theories of gender performativity, for example, can take account of the popular American temptation to manipulate and disrupt conventional gender norms.[53] The ability consciously and deliberately to disrupt gender conventions, we argue, is vital to transgender political projects, but in this context it is important to analyze the dynamic social change that occurs in non-Western societies as well as at home.

### INCONSISTENT USE OF THE CULTURE CONCEPT

We have written this essay because we are uncomfortable with how non-Western examples are used in some popular transgender literature. All too often, such examples convey the image of a transgender Shangri-la elsewhere; they encourage us to think that the mere existence of "third" gender categories allows difference to flourish and be accepted. Yet this utopianism is flawed not only on empirical grounds, as anthropologists have shown, but on epistemological grounds. An argument that relies on cross-cultural evidence of gender variation elsewhere to support the possibility of radical change at home is illogical: if gender is determined by culture elsewhere, then it must be determined by culture at home, too. If gender and sexual expression are shaped by culture, then they can only ever be changed through collective social action, not through simple acts of will.

All societies demand a certain degree of gender consistency and conformity to the prevailing norms. One prevailing norm in the United States is that gender is both binary and adopted for life. That this expectation is not universal does not mean that other societies allow individuals to put on, take off, or exchange gender identities or behaviors on a whim. Yet Feinberg says, again, that there are "diverse societies in which the concepts of sex and gender shift like sand dunes over the ages" and uses this interpretation to claim that gender warriors should be able to adopt whatever identity they desire whenever they choose. In other words, if one culture has a role for X and another culture accepts the practice of Y, then we should be able to have (and be, and do) whatever we want. The problem is that while culture is malleable, it also constrains gender norms and behaviors; societies hardly ever allow individuals to transgress their norms freely and publicly. The existence of categories such as *hijra*, *berdache*, and *māhū* shows that cultures can create what one might interpret as alternatives to

a binary gender system, but it does not support Feinberg's hope that the United States will achieve gender norms that are completely open-ended or unaffected by cultural constraints, because these alternative social positions do not tend to behave in the emancipatory ways they are portrayed. Instead, these categories work in specific relation to their cultural contexts. In several cases, this means upholding a rigid gender system by formalizing variations.

Ironically, the emphasis on "third gender" types may also diminish the richness and complexity of other peoples' lives, flattening their lived realities. This effect is evident in the tendency to romanticize, to assume that people living in societies that recognize "third genders" must enjoy greater gender liberation and freedom. When Ogborn relates her typical day as a *hijra*, the careful reader can find numerous inconsistencies between the events she describes and her upbeat interpretation of how *hijras* are received. Ogborn quotes one Indian woman as saying, "We are poor, but at least we have the *Hijras* living with us," and does not seem to understand that the woman might have meant, "At least we are not as badly off as the *Hijras*." In another instance, Ogborn reports that "everyone stops and watches as we go by, even though we do this three or four days a week." [54] Ogborn interprets both events as signs that *hijras* are regarded as nobility, although she has just finished describing her harassment at the hands of a gang of children: "They shout 'Gandu, Gandu' ('Butt fucker') at my back. Later they realize I speak only broken Hindi and instead yell, 'Faggot, faggot.' They ring the doorbell and throw rocks at my door when I am home" (20). Here local knowledge does not separate gender identity and sexuality, as do American transgender (and gay and lesbian) activists; what is and what is done may not be meaningfully distinct. The children's actions can tell us quite a bit about what it means to be a *hijra* or a non-*hijra* participant in that society. They demonstrate that knowledge about *hijra* sexual practices is widespread (whether the information is accurate is an interesting question, given that *butt fucker* implies an active role in penetration and *hijras* are known to be castrated), that a biologically male person in female clothing is first criticized for homosexual acts, and that such an individual is not given the freedom to choose a sexual partner.

When her group of *hijras* is not given enough money for a performance at a wedding or birth, Ogborn is one of the first to expose her genitals. To a man who cannot pay enough, Ogborn threatens, "If you want your son to have children, I'd take up a collection." (She is referring to the rumor that *hijras* kidnap and castrate boys to add to the *hijra* population.) [55] Ogborn prefers to think that she enjoyed a high status in her adopted *hijra* identity. Yet the relationship between *hijras* and the general population is complicated, involving scorn, fear, and derision as well as a complex form of appreciation. [56]

The "grass is always greener" phenomenon that presumably drew Ogborn to India is perhaps inevitable, but the misery she may have experienced at home had nothing to do with the possibility of her acceptance elsewhere. Popularizers tend to ignore or minimize the harassment, ridicule, discrimination, and violence sometimes directed at those who live as alternate-gendered individuals. [57] The presence of alternate gender categories does not necessarily mean that people living in such societies enjoy greater freedom to choose their own gender identities or forms of sexual expression, or that alternate gender roles are accorded social respect. To find out whether they do and are, we need to investigate the lived quotidian realities of people in various settings. Few ethnographic accounts of such realities appear even in the anthropological literature. The omission is significant, because it implies that Western readers are interested in others' lived realities only insofar as they suit our fantasies or political aims. Happily, ethnographers have begun to document lived transgender and gender-variant experiences. Nanda's work with *hijras* was an early example; more recent ethnographies are filling in the gap. [58] In a society with no cohesive transgender community, a society that does not routinely accept gender expression outside prescribed norms, it is understandable that community is sought

where it is presumed to be, outside the here and now. In the lived realities of isolation, a mythical transgender community is ever present and ever supportive, although in our own society transsexual and transgendered individuals argue about whether we experience similar or comparable oppressions, about the value of passing, about surgeries and standards of care, and about degrees of disclosure. In short, our identities are consistently contested. In our communities and discussions we experience conflicts that do not seem to afflict these other individuals, who, we assume, do not argue about their identities, which are fixed.

### THE WEST VERSUS THE REST

Gender ideologies and relations evolve in highly politicized, ever-changing cultural landscapes whose boundaries will not necessarily coincide with geopolitical boundaries and should not be assumed a priori. If on some level we know that being Indian does not “cause” *hijra* identity, then what factors do explain its emergence? Distinguishing “the West” from “the rest” does not advance our understandings of the historical and political contexts in which gender ideologies are negotiated. Does gender variability flourish under conditions of victimization, for example, or of resistance? Is it authorized by spiritual intercession? Do material conditions (such as hunger or affluence) affect whether it is tolerated? To what extent does it result from the exercise of state power or technological capacity? How is it affected by the interpretations of biology or the requirements of kinship? For example, in Japan’s famous Takarazuka theater, young Japanese women perform all the roles, including those of romantic Western male sex symbols. One interpretation of this state-sanctioned exercise of gender discipline is that it directs heterosexual female desire toward figures who will not threaten the normative heterosexual family. The Takarazuka theater, in combination with the geisha tradition (which can likewise be seen to preserve the institution of marriage), also provides a cultural script for the *onnabe* phenomenon, in which biological females act out ideals of American chivalry to straight women in bars for money.[59] The distinction between “Western” (oppressive) and “non-Western” (potentially liberatory) gender systems has the unfortunate effect of essentializing other cultures and keeping us from examining other conditions of possibility.

Setting the West apart from the rest can result in old-fashioned American ethnocentrism, specifically, the assignment of who gets to name and represent “the transgender community.” When the American critic Jody Norton reviews a book on transgenderism written by the British social psychologist Richard Ekins, she criticizes him for forwarding an interpretation that contradicts her own. The issue is whether male-to-female “transgenders” should be regarded as male or as female. Norton writes: “First, Ekins declares that ‘male femalers’ are men (as indeed, his term for m-t-f transgenders suggests[]). Ekins is not writing about transgender as it has been embodied in many historical cultures (hura [*sic*], *xanith*, *māhū*, *berdache*/two-spirit) at all. Similarly, many *American* m-t-f transgenders do not understand ourselves as fundamentally male.”[60] That is, Norton criticizes Ekins not only for not using cross-cultural examples but for not putting American interpretations of gender transgression at the center of his analysis. Norton wants us to see that the American form of transgenderism, as advanced by popular American authors, is the descendant of the cross-cultural examples and is the standard bearer for worldwide transgenderism. Norton exacerbates, in our view, the very problem that transgender politics should aim to solve, namely, how to create a society that does not force individuals to conform to others’ expectations of them. Invoking “third gender” examples in an oversimplified way or citing them out of context to underwrite Western social agendas is an unwitting kind of neocolonial (or at least ethnocentric) appropriation that distorts the complexity and reality of other peoples’ lives.

## CONCLUSION

We join an increasing number of anthropologists who caution against using caricatures of other cultures to advance locally situated arguments. The “third gender” concept encourages Westerners to make poorly informed assumptions about the meaning and significance of gender dynamics in non-Western societies. Epple warns us to beware of re-creating the worlds of other cultures “to suit our own intentions.” [61] Rather than rely on superficial understandings of “third gender,” we would prefer to examine the content and complexities of gender in each specific cultural setting.

The issues we raise in this essay ask whose knowledge is authorized and legitimated in the struggle for greater freedom and knowledge. Debates over appropriate gender behavior have not always included the input of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals and collectivities, but the rise of social movements has made space for these voices. Norton even claims that the voices of transgendered people themselves should be granted greater legitimacy than those of academic scholars: “The most *significant* ‘expert’ knowledge and theory is [*sic*] generated by members (. . . Feinberg, [etc.]).” [62] The questions, of course, are, “Significant for whom?” and “Expert on what?” Our ability to comprehend the complexity of others’ lives is jeopardized when the power to represent them is placed in the hands of those who stand to gain from misrepresenting them. Under this scenario, a member or native can relegate the social scientist expert to providing incidental raw data correctly interpreted only by the member or native. The danger inherent in this strategy is that the other becomes merely a rhetorical device for forwarding the identity of the self.

The complex relationship between member, lay, and expert knowledges (to use Ekins’s terms) and participants has yet to be satisfactorily explored in the context of popular transgender literature. We know, for example, that popular literature (such as *Transgender Warriors*) influences the views of transgenderism that are held by clinicians, supporters, and transgendered people themselves. Such influence should go hand in hand with the responsibility of promoting the appropriate use of cross-cultural examples. Unfortunately, the popularization of “third gender” concepts often contributes to ethnocentric assumptions about other cultures, even when the authors’ intentions are liberatory, progressive, and transcendent.

Transgender and transsexual activists need not invoke mythical gender warriors to support the idea that individuals should be free to express and embody themselves as they see fit or to justify their existence. (If warriors are sought, they are here.) Nor do they need to look elsewhere for acceptance. (Acceptance comes through understanding and mutual respect.) The potential that trans bodies and trans lives have to shed light on normative gender relations is immense. Who else has the opportunity to live these questions: What is the difference between women and men? Through what acts are gender identities communicated? What does failing to communicate a gender identity mean for social interactions?

Some use this potential to enable the study of gender “transgressions” in the United States to help illuminate what it means for everyone to inhabit gendered bodies. As Valentine and Riki Anne Wilchins write: “Bodies which are suspect, whether because they are wearing T-shirts that proclaim ‘Transsexual’ or because they have big Adam’s apples, or because they are born with genitalia that cannot be classified as either male or female, are not what have to be explained. Rather, the requirement that they explain themselves should itself be investigated.” [63] Research that positions the trans body and life as foundational to the study of gender allows for the possibility of our (transgender/transsexual) greater freedom and also for greater knowledge about how we, collectively, have come to this point in the social life of bodies.

Rather than reify or romanticize presumed gender variability in non-Western societies, we would prefer to see greater attention given to the historical and social contexts in which gendered and sexualized bodies and relationships are produced, reproduced, and transformed.[64] The examination of context should include a critical interrogation of the circumstances under which other cultural examples are brought into American gender discourse. Why are such examples salient now? To what end have they become so? When we look at gender variability in other cultures, whom do we see and not see, and why? What are those individuals doing, and how are their actions constrained or facilitated by their social, political, and religious milieus? How much wishful thinking is evident in the way that cross-cultural evidence is mobilized and popularized in the United States? Is such evidence used to legitimate certain gender agendas (e.g., bodily reconfiguration through hormones or surgery) over others (e.g., symbolic or spiritually based gender reassignment)? These contexts will increasingly be transnational because of the heavy traffic across borders in images, bodies, ideas, technologies, and transgender political activism. What new social movements are created by connections made across cultural and national borders? What new possibilities for social and political solidarity might be fostered? The sensitivity with which we address these questions will depend on our ability to understand the limits of “third gender” thinking.

## NOTES

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1. See Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1990); Sabine Lang, *Men As Women, Women As Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures*, trans. John L. Vantine (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Will Roscoe, *The Zuni Man-Woman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Roscoe, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998); Unni Wikan, *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed, 1987); Gilbert H. Herdt, *Guardians of the Flutes: Idioms of Masculinity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981); and Herdt, *The Sambia: Ritual and Gender in New Guinea* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1987).
2. See Anuja Agrawal, “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., 31 (1997): 273–97; Niko Besnier, “Polynesian Gender Liminality through Time and Space,” in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert H. Herdt (New York: Zone, 1996), 285–328; Deborah A. Elliston, “Erotic Anthropology: ‘Ritualized Homosexuality’ in Melanesia and Beyond,” *American Ethnologist* 22 (1995): 848–67; Carolyn Epple, “Coming to Terms with Navajo Nádleehí: A Critique of Berdache, ‘Gay,’ ‘Alternate Gender,’ and ‘Two-Spirit,’” *American Ethnologist* 25 (1998): 267–90; Mark Johnson, *Beauty and Power: Transgendering and Cultural Transformation in the Southern Philippines* (New York: Berg, 1997); Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Ki Namaste, “‘Tragic Misreadings’: Queer Theory’s Erasure of Transgender Subjectivity,” in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*, ed. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 183–203; Kath Weston, “Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22 (1993): 339–67; and Saskia E. Wieringa and Evelyn Blackwood, Introduction to *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices across Cultures*, ed. Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Wieringa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1–38.
3. xydonna@aol.com, “The Best Book of Its Kind,” 2 February 1998, accessed on 5 April 2002 at [www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/0787902713/customer-reviews/3/ref=cm\\_rev\\_next/104-4278502-4690310?show=submittime](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/0787902713/customer-reviews/3/ref=cm_rev_next/104-4278502-4690310?show=submittime).
4. Kate Bornstein, *My Gender Workbook: How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You, or Something Else Entirely* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 7.
5. For a review of the literature see Weston, “Lesbian/Gay Studies.” 6. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic, 2000).
7. See Carole S. Vance, “Anthropology Rediscovered Sexuality: A Theoretical Comment,” *Social Science and Medicine* 33 (1991): 875–84.
8. M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies, “Supernumerary Sexes,” chap. 4 of *Female of the Species* (New York: Columbia

- University Press, 1975), 23. Agrawal cites Karl Ulrich as the person who coined the term third sex (“Gendered Bodies,” 279 n. 8), although it is unlikely that he used it to refer to cross-cultural gender categories. See Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Besnier, “Polynesian Gender Liminality,” 338; and Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (New York: Wiley, 1978), 23. 9. Gilbert H. Herdt, “Introduction: Third Sexes and Third Genders,” in Herdt, *Third Sex, Third Gender*, 20.
10. Roscoe uses the terms third gender and fourth gender somewhat idiosyncratically: for him, third gender refers to “male berdaches and sometimes male and female berdaches, while ‘fourth gender’ always refers to female berdaches” (*Changing Ones*, 7). The basic idea, however, follows Herdt: nondichotomous, institutionalized genders can be analytically gathered and enumerated as “third” and “fourth” genders.
  11. Riki Anne Wilchins, *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand, 1997), 30.
  12. Herdt, “Introduction: Third Sexes and Third Genders,” 441.
  13. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*; Herdt, *Guardians of the Flutes*.
  14. David Valentine, “‘I Know What I Am’: The Category ‘Transgender’ in the Construction of Contemporary U.S. American Conceptions of Gender and Sexuality” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2000), 90.
  15. *Ibid.*, 91.
  16. *Ibid.*, 89.
  17. Kessler and McKenna, *Gender*, 22.
  18. Besnier, “Polynesian Gender Liminality,” 316.
  19. Eppele, “Coming to Terms with Navajo Nádleehí,” 273.
  20. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 11, 71.
  21. Valentine, “‘I Know What I Am,’” 68. Valentine deliberately uses the nontraditional spellings transexual and transexualism throughout his work. The usage follows that of his study participants, who seek to depart from the medicalized discourse about transsexuality (vii).
  22. Johnson, *Beauty and Power*, 24–25.
  23. *Ibid.*, 25.
  24. See Besnier, “Polynesian Gender Liminality.”
  25. See Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Mildred L. Brown and Chloe Ann Rounsley, *True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism ... for Families, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996); Randi Ettner, *Confessions of a Gender Defender: A Psychologist’s Reflections on Life among the Transgendered* (Evanston, Ill.: Chicago Spectrum, 1996); Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* (Boston: Beacon, 1996); Tiffany Elisabeth Jordan, “Tiffany Elisabeth’s Ballet Studio,” accessed on 19 September 1999 at [www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/4519/tiff\\_tgx.html](http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/4519/tiff_tgx.html); and Janis Walworth, *Transsexual Workers: An Employer’s Guide* (Los Angeles: Center for Gender Sanity, 1998).
  26. See Brown and Rounsley, *True Selves*; Ettner, *Confessions of a Gender Defender*; Jordan, “Tiffany Elisabeth’s Ballet Studio”; and Walworth, *Transsexual Workers*.
  27. Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 143.
  28. Brown and Rounsley, *True Selves*, 25, 26.
  29. Holly Boswell, quoted in Jordan, “Tiffany Elisabeth’s Ballet Studio.”
  30. Walworth, *Transsexual Workers*, 89.
  31. Nancy Nangeroni, “In Search of Ma`hu`,” *Transgender Tapestry*, no. 85 (1998): 24. For a discussion of the problematic definition, history, and etymology of mähü see Besnier, “Polynesian Gender Liminality.”
  32. See Deborah A. Elliston, “Negotiating Transnational Sexual Economies: Female Ma`hu` and Same-Sex Sexuality in ‘Tahiti and Her Islands,’” in Blackwood and Wieringa, *Female Desires*, 232–52.
  33. Nangeroni, “In Search of Ma`hu`,” 29.
  34. Anne Ogborn, “Saheli!” *Transsexual News Telegraph* 3 (1994): 20.
  35. trentboy@mindless.com, “Trans\* People Have a History Too,” 8 October 1997, accessed on 19 September 1999 at [www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/0807079413/customer-reviews/026-5989269-0429268](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/0807079413/customer-reviews/026-5989269-0429268).
  36. Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, xi–xii.
  37. *Ibid.*, xii.
  38. Kessler and McKenna, *Gender*, 21; History Project, comp., *Improper Bostonians: Lesbian and Gay History from the Puritans to Playland* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), 8.
  39. Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, 59.
  40. For an excellent example of queer history that does not rely on an idealized past see Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*.
  41. Ogborn, “Saheli!” 29.
  42. Valentine, “‘I Know What I Am,’” 64.
  43. See Mary E. John and Janaki Nair, “Sexuality in Modern India: Critical Concerns,” *Voices for Change* 3 (1999): 4–8. Accessible at [www.hsph.harvard.edu/grhf/SAsia/library/libraryframe.html](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/grhf/SAsia/library/libraryframe.html).
  44. Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough,” *Sciences* 33, no. 2 (1993): 20–25; Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*.
  45. Agrawal, “Gendered Bodies,” 294.
  46. See also Kulick, *Travesti*.

47. Ibid., 5–6.
48. Eppe, “Coming to Terms with Navajo Nádleehí,” 273.
49. See also Agrawal, “Gendered Bodies,” 292–93; Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 132–35; Gert Hekma, “A Female Soul in a Male Body: Sexual Inversion As Gender Inversion in Nineteenth-Century Sexology,” in Herdt, *Third Sex, Third Gender*, 213–39, 234; and Rosalind Morris, “Educating Desire: Thailand, Transnationalism, and Transgression,” *Social Text*, nos. 52–53 (1997): 53–79, 62–65.
50. Of course, Native America consists of many distinct nations, and berdache is a colonial term that glosses over and erases the gender variability among these nations.
51. Will Roscoe, pers. com. with Lynn M. Morgan, 1999.
52. See Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster, eds., *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Samuel Delaney, “Aversion/Perversion/Diversion,” in *Negotiating Lesbian and Gay Subjects*, ed. Monica Dorenkamp and Richard Henke (New York: Routledge, 1995), 7–34; Cathy Griggers, “Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post) Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 178–92; Marcia Ian, “How Do You Wear Your Body? Bodybuilding and the Sublimity of Drag,” in Dorenkamp and Henke, *Negotiating Lesbian and Gay Subjects*, 71–92; Rosalind Morris, “All Made Up: Performance Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 567–92; and Stephen Whittle, “Gender Fucking or Fucking Gender? Current Cultural Contributions to Theories of Gender Blending,” in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*, ed. Richard Ekins and Dave King (New York: Routledge, 1996), 196–214. We would like to thank Susan Shaw for pointing us to these references.
53. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
54. Ogborn, “Saheli!” 21.
55. Ibid., 23.
56. See Agrawal, “Gendered Bodies.”
57. See *ibid.*, 292; Kessler and McKenna, *Gender*, 29; and Kulick, *Travesti*.
58. See Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*; Holly Devor, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Johnson, *Beauty and Power*; Kulick, *Travesti*; Annick Prieur, *Mama’s House*, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens, and Machos (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Valentine, “I Know What I Am.”
59. See Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
60. Jody Norton, review of *Male Femaling: A Grounded Theory Approach to Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*, by Richard Ekins, *Transgender Tapestry*, no. 84 (1998): 23; emphasis added.
61. Eppe, “Coming to Terms with Navajo Nádleehí,” 275.
62. Norton, review of *Male Femaling*, 23; emphasis added.
63. David Valentine and Riki Anne Wilchins, “One Percent on the Burn Chart: Gender, Genitals, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude,” *Social Text*, nos. 52–53 (1997): 221; see also Kulick, *Travesti*. On Valentine and Wilchins’s use of the nontraditional spelling *transsexual* see n. 21 above.
64. See Namaste, ““Tragic Misreadings,”” 194.