

Two-Spirits, Mahu, and Hijras

By looking at how the universal human rainbows of gender and sexuality fit into the social categories of other societies around the world and at other moments in history, we may glean some ideas about how our own institutions might function better. Perhaps we can avoid the lost time and needless expense of suppressing biological difference. As with animal diversity, the facts of cultural diversity in gender and sexuality are unexpected and engaging. Yet, like natural science, the social sciences of anthropology, sociology, and history, as well as theology, all discount the very diversity that their painstaking research and primary texts so clearly document. Instead, many are surprised to learn how widespread homosexual and transgender expressions are among the peoples of the world and throughout history. We've never been told.

This part of my book, "Cultural Rainbows," offers a worldwide historical survey of how gender and sexuality variation are manifested in human society. I experimented with different ways to organize this story. Should we simply go around the world—it's Tuesday, so this must be Tahiti? Or start with places where gender is a reflection more of occupation and social space than of body type, noting how in such cultures some male-bodied people are effectively women, and vice versa? What about emphasizing cultures that illustrate a collision between ancient, traditional social categories and modern, Western ones—between a view

of gender- and sexuality-variant people as sacred and accounts that assign medical pathology to homosexuals and transsexuals? Why not move from cultures in which the social categories emphasize gender to cultures that stress sexual orientation? Or maybe we should contrast societies that expect a sex-reassignment type of body morphing with those that don't. Or we could emphasize the role of religion in the construction of gender categories and mores of sexual practice. The number of interesting angles is limitless. The organization I offer is somewhat arbitrary, but please keep an eye out for all of these aspects.

I've chosen stories that stand out to me as a transgendered woman. When writing about ecology and evolution, I wrote as a native about my hometown. With developmental biology, I wrote about the town next door. Here I write as a tourist in foreign academic lands, the last leg of my journey of discovery through academia. I apologize for my insensitivities to foreign academic traditions, but do not regret my criticisms. Social scientists frequently denounce scientists' pretense to objectivity. I find social scientists just as flawed. They too deny the human dignity of gender-variant people.

TWO-SPIRITED PEOPLE IN THE AMERICAS

Since settling in San Francisco, I've encountered many expressions of gender and sexuality I didn't know existed, distributed across countless ethnicities. People being as they are. Lovely. Unnamed and without words for themselves. We're just beginning to discover ourselves. Sometimes I think we know more about diversity in the deep sea than we do about ourselves. Yet long before San Francisco was founded as a Western city, the Native nations in the Americas offered a rich social environment for the people we now call transgendered, gay, and lesbian. Gender-variant people in Native America are often referred to as "two-spirited," with the details varying from tribe to tribe.¹

Some tribes have held two-spirited people in exceptionally high regard, in part because of their religious role in ceremonies and beliefs about creation. Among the Zuni, for example, legend tells of a battle between agricultural and hunting spirits in which a two-spirited deity brought peace to the warring parties. Zunis reenacted this event cere-

monially every four years, with a two-spirited person playing the role of the two-spirited deity.² Similarly, among the Navajo, the survival of humanity was believed to depend upon the inventiveness of two-spirited deities. Having two-spirited deities at the foundation of religion endowed two-spirited people with dignity and significance.

OSH-TISCH

The anthropologist Will Roscoe reports an account of how Hugh Scott, a retired army general, interviewed a famous two-spirited woman named Osh-Tisch from the Crow tribe in 1919.³ In his first encounter with Osh-Tisch, General Scott "wandered into the huge buffalo-skin lodge of Iron Bull, head chief of the Crows." Iron Bull's lodge had been created by Osh-Tisch, who was also an artist, medicine woman, and shaman who had accumulated great prestige. Scott asked her why she wore women's clothes, although she was known to be physically male. "That is my road," she replied. How long had she been that way? She answered that since birth she "inclined to be a woman, never a man." What sort of work did she do? "All woman's work." Then, with great pride, she produced a dark blue woman's dress with abalone shell ornaments and a finely beaded buckskin dress with a woman's belt and leggings. Photographs of Osh-Tisch show a stately woman. Romantically, she was oriented to men.

Two-spirited people do not "pass" physically as members of the gender they identify with—their bodily state is known to everyone. A two-spirited woman is accepted as a woman, however, even though she is generally larger than a one-spirited woman and can't breastfeed. A two-spirited woman participates in women's domestic and economic activities and looks after the older children. She also carries out activities that take advantage of her height and strength, including, if necessary, fighting in battles. In fact, Osh-Tisch was distinguished for her valor. She also helped take care of wounded warriors. Even though fighting as a warrior was "man's work," Osh-Tisch was claimed by the other women as one of their own.

A young woman named Pretty Shield recalled the accomplishments of Osh-Tisch to a journalist: "Did the men ever tell you anything about a woman who fought?" "No." "Ahh, they do not like to tell of it, but I will

tell you. . . . She looked like a man, and yet she wore woman's clothing; and she had the heart of a woman. Besides, she did a woman's work. She was not as strong as a man, and yet she was wiser than a woman. The men did not tell you this, but *I* have. I felt proud . . . because she was brave."

In the 1890s, an agent from the Bureau of Indian Affairs tried to interfere with Osh-Tisch, as well as other two-spirited people, by cutting off her hair and forcing her to wear men's clothing and do men's labor. The Crow people were so upset by this that the chief of the Crow Nation told the agent to leave.⁴ This intervention by the chief of the Crow Nation on behalf of two-spirited people shows a remarkable depth of political support.

HASTIÍN KLAH

The anthropologist Will Roscoe also describes Hastiín Klah, a famous two-spirited Navajo who was gay but not gender-variant.⁵ Born in 1867, he showed an early interest in religion, learned his first ceremony at ten, and studied the healing power of native plants. In his early teens, he discovered a cave on a canyon ledge where a medicine man had left a ceremonial bundle. The walls of the cave were painted with images of Navajo gods, and Klah decided to become a medicine man. He became acknowledged as two-spirited. "He dressed in men's clothes and there was nothing feminine about him unless an indescribable gentleness be so called," but the Navajo considered him two-spirited because he wove blankets and was romantically interested in men rather than women.

As a two-spirited person, Klah was expected to assist his mother and sister in their weaving. Weaving was part of women's life cycle, offering a medium for expressing self-control and self-esteem, creativity and beauty. Weaving reflected a balance between the world of animals and plants—represented by animal fibers and plant dyes—and the world of humans, those who wear the cloth. Klah's artistic style was distinctive, using backgrounds of tan undyed wool from brown sheep and designs created with dyes from local plants, and it set a new standard of excellence for Navajo weaving. He pioneered the presentation of sand-painting images in tapestry. Previously, sand-painting images had been engraved only on the ground.

By his mid twenties, Klah had become recognized for his weaving. In 1893 the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago sought a Native weaver to demonstrate this skill to the public. They wished to bring a man, but didn't realize that a male weaver was necessarily two-spirited. Klah spent the summer in Chicago working before crowds of sightseers.

At the exposition Klah met a wealthy Bostonian, Mary Cabot Wheelwright, who wrote, "I grew to respect and love him for his real goodness, generosity—and holiness, for there is no other word for it. He never had married. He helped at least eight of his nieces and nephews with money and goods. . . . He never kept anything for himself. It was hard to see him almost in rags at his ceremonies, but what was given him he seldom kept, passing it on to someone who needed it."⁶ In the 1930s Mary Wheelwright began to consider her legacy, and collaborated with Klah in founding a museum now known as the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, in Santa Fe. Klah died at the age of seventy, just a few months before the museum was officially dedicated in 1937.

WOMEN WARRIORS

According to Roscoe, still other people were female-bodied and participated in manly pursuits. For example, Osh-Tisch shared her warrior days with another Crow woman. According to Pretty Shield, "The other woman was a *wild* one who had no man of her own. She was both bad and brave, this one. Her name was The-Other-Magpie; and she was pretty."⁷ The-Other-Magpie is not reported to have been two-spirited, but her tale suggests that the envelope of Crow womanhood was wide enough to encompass traditional masculine behavior.

Together, Osh-Tisch and The-Other-Magpie saved the warrior Bull Snake, who had been wounded by a Lakota and fallen from his horse. Osh-Tisch "dashed up to him, got down from her horse, and stood over him shooting at the Lakota as rapidly as she could load her gun and fire." Meanwhile, The-Other-Magpie rode around, waving a stick and deflecting the attention to her with a war song. "Both these women expected death that day. . . . I felt proud of the two women," recalled Pretty Shield.⁸

Other female warriors were evidently transgender. Among the Cheyenne, two-spirited women "were often great warriors who even sat

with the Chief Council and had an effective voice.”⁹ A Cheyenne artist depicted a bare-breasted woman firing a rifle; she was dressed like the male members of a special society who fought wearing only their breechcloths. Two-spirited women were known for romantic relationships with one another. A photograph from 1890 shows a two-spirited woman from the Quechan. She wears a man’s breechcloth, with male bow guards on her wrist, and stands with one hand on her hip in a characteristically male pose. She was reported to be married to a woman.¹⁰ A recent study includes maps indicating the location of tribes with male-to-female, female-to-male, or both types of genders, together with a table about which combinations of relationships were socially acknowledged and approved.¹¹

Being two-spirited primarily means being of a different spirit, marching to a different drummer, but not necessarily being gender-variant. As the narratives show, the two-spirit category spans people who in Western society probably would identify as lesbian, gay, or transgendered.

TRANSITION CEREMONIES

The anthropologist Walter Williams relates a Navajo coming-out ceremony that provided the community with an opportunity to endorse and bless a young two-spirited person.¹² On the day of the ceremony, the youth was led into a circle. According to a Navajo shaman, “If the boy showed a willingness to remain standing in the circle, exposed to the public eye, it was almost certain he would go through with the ceremony. The singer, hidden from the crowd, began singing the songs. As soon as the sound reached the boy, he began to dance as women do.” A youth who was not two-spirited would refuse to dance. But for a youth who was two-spirited, “the song goes right to his heart and he will dance with much intensity. He cannot help it. After the fourth song, he is proclaimed.” The youth was then bathed and received a woman’s skirt. She was led back to the dance ground, dressed in feminine clothing, and announced her new feminine name to the crowd. After that, she would represent being called by her old male name.

The Papago had a similar transition ceremony. A brush enclosure was constructed, with a bow and arrow and a basket placed inside. The youth was brought to the enclosure while the adults watched from out-

side. The youth was asked to go inside and then the brush was set afire. The youth had the opportunity to grab either the bow and arrow, or the basket, and then escape the fire. If a male youth grabbed the basket, she was accepted as two-spirited; otherwise he remained a boy.

Among two-spirited people, there is no tradition of body morphing to resemble the other sex. Males don’t modify their genitals to resemble female genitals, nor do females bind their breasts to hide them. Two-spirited people are not necessarily comfortable with their bodies, though. A Mohave two-spirited woman was described as embarrassed when making love because “the penis sticks out between the loose fibers of the bark-skirt.”¹³ Another two-spirited woman was sensitive to teasing about her penis, preferring that it be referred to as a clitoris. Good-natured sexually explicit teasing was typical, but, as the lover of a two-spirited woman related, “I never dared touch the penis in erection, except during intercourse. You’d court death otherwise, because they would get violent if you play[ed] with their erect penis too much.”¹⁴ Even though two-spirited people may have felt dissatisfied with their bodies, genital morphing was not a condition for social acceptance, nor was it expected by their sexual partners.

THE CONQUEST MENTALITY

The Spanish conquistadors of the 1500s were brutal to two-spirited people.¹⁵ In 1530 Nuño de Guzman said the last person he captured in battle who “fought most courageously, was a man in the habit of a woman, for which I caused him to be burned.” While in Panama, Vasco Núñez de Balboa saw men dressed as women and threw them to his dogs to be eaten alive. Calancha, a Spanish official in Lima, later praised Balboa for the “fine action of an honorable and Catholic Spaniard.”

Justifying the Spanish conquest of America turned on whether the natives were “rational,” meaning possessing a combination of reason, intelligence, and morality, as defined by the Catholic Church. If the natives were rational, then conquering them was not just. If the natives were irrational, then conquering and Christianizing them was just, similar to the domestication of animals. Sex between men would be irrefutable evidence of irrationality. Thus the Spanish explorers had a vested interest in establishing that gender-variant people practiced same-sex sexuality,

thereby justifying their conquest. Their conduct during the conquest went beyond domestication, though, because they were not limited by any moral opposition to cruelty to animals.

European repression has not annihilated two-spirits in America. The two-spirit tradition is ancient. Anthropologists have traced two-spirit imagery back 1,500 years in paintings on the walls of a kiva (a round ceremonial room) in New Mexico.¹⁶ The two-spirit tradition lives today too, as Native American groups throughout the United States reclaim this heritage.

Anthropologists, however, have tended to dwell on differences rather than similarities between today's transgendered people and Native American two-spirits, often using prejudicial language. Anthropologists use gendered pronouns for two-spirited people, including Osh-Tisch, that are based on their genitals, rather than using the pronouns appropriate to their gender presentation, which were used by the Native people themselves.¹⁷ These words erase successful gender crossing by two-spirited people. One anthropologist then refers to present-day transsexuals as "products of our culture" who pay the "heavy price" of "bodily mutilation" for "the ideology of biological determinism" and wind up feeling "no more comfortable as a woman than as a man," although this claim is unsupported by data. This anthropologist goes on to say a "gay identity is closer" to the two-spirited role than is a transgendered identity.¹⁸ Converting the obvious transgender aspect of two-spirited people into a gay identity appropriates transgender experience.

Other anthropologists assign gender-variant two-spirited people to a third gender, neither man nor woman, denying that some two-spirited people actually did belong to their gender of identification and not to some third, intermediate zone. All women vary in height, strength, aptitude, and capacity for breastfeeding and reproduction. Were two-spirited women simply another type of woman, albeit taller and stronger than the others and without the ability to breastfeed? Or were physical differences used to split them into a different category? The narratives suggest that some two-spirited people were folded into the two major genders of man and woman without forming a distinct gender.

Overall, two-spirited people in Native American societies are a diverse group, spanning all the rainbows of gender and sexuality that we Westerners divide into the different social colors of gay, lesbian, and

transgender. Polynesia, which we will examine next, shows an expression of gender and sexuality quite comparable to that of Native Americans. Polynesia was colonized much later than the Americas, and native institutions were not decimated to the same extent. However, native representations of gender and sexuality are now colliding with introduced Western ideas, leading to a conflict between the traditional and the modern.

THE MAHU IN POLYNESIA

The anthropologist Niko Besnier has related how French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville encountered the islands of Tahiti during a tour of the South Pacific in 1766–69. As his vessel approached the island, native canoes came out to meet it that were "full of females; who, for agreeable features, are not inferior to most European women. . . . The men . . . pressed us to choose a woman, and to come on shore with her; and their gestures . . . denoted in what manner we should form an acquaintance with her. It was very difficult, amidst such a sight, to keep at their work four hundred young French sailors, who had seen no women for six months . . . and the capstern was never hove with more alacrity than on this occasion."¹⁹

Alacrity soon gave way to condemnation. The London Missionary Society, which established an outpost in Tahiti, concluded that the island was "the filthy Sodom of the South Seas: In these islands all persons seem to think of scarcely anything but adultery and fornication. Little children hardly ever live to the age of seven ere they are deflowered. Children with children, often boys with boys . . . playing in wickedness together all the day long."²⁰ The missionaries were particularly bent out of shape by what the British captain William Bligh described as "a class of people called Mahoo: These people . . . are particularly selected when Boys and kept with the Women solely for the carnesses [*sic*] of the men. . . . The Women treat him as one of their Sex, and he observed every restriction that they do, and is equally respected and esteemed."²¹ Captain Bligh had encountered the Tahitian version of two-spirited people, called *mahu*, which means "half-man half-woman." All the Polynesian islands have *mahu*, although they have different names on Samoa and Tonga. On Hawaii, like Tahiti, they are called *mahu*.

Captain Bligh states that mahu were included in the company of women. Other reports suggest that they were seen as women by the sailors, leading to surprising encounters. In 1789, one sailor wrote, "One of the gentlemen who accompanied me on shore took it into his head to be very much smitten with a dancing girl, as he thought her . . . and after he had been endeavouring to persuade her to go with him on board our ship, which she assented to, to find this supposed damsel, when stripped of her theatrical paraphernalia, a smart dapper lad."²² The natives, for their part, followed along the beach laughing and enjoying the comedy. This passage shows that although the English may not have been able to tell mahu from nonmahu women, the Tahitians certainly could, raising the question of whether the mahu constituted a third gender or were merged into the gender of women.

Studies in recent times by Besnier show mahu working in women's occupations: cooking, cleaning house, gathering firewood, doing laundry, weaving mats, and making cloth. In urban settings, mahu are sought after as secretaries and domestic help. Socially, mahu live in women's space, "walking arm-in-arm, . . . gossiping and visiting with them" into old age. In appearance, mahu typically include some feminine characteristics and occasionally dress as women.²³ Mahu, it is said, adopt a "swishy gait" and are characterized by a "fast tempo, verbosity and the animated face, which contrasts with men's generally laconic and impassive demeanor." They are "coquettishly concerned with their physical appearance," wearing "flowers, garlands and perfume, and in urban contexts, heavy makeup." A picture emerges of mahu as being feminine, perhaps effeminate, but stopping short of a completely feminine presentation, while socializing and working in women's space.

Mahu are identified by their gender inclination as children, before the "awakening of sexual desires of any type."²⁴ Thereafter, mahu are likely to interact sexually with men, but a sexual orientation toward males is "neither a necessary nor sufficient criterion" for mahu status. Mahu do not consort sexually with other mahu. Also, a mahu may leave this status and become a man by marrying and fathering a child. Mahu are perceived as always available for sexual conquest by men. Mahu may sexually taunt men in a caricature of flirting. Mahu are often the target of harassment and physical violence from men, especially men who have had too much to drink.

Unlike two-spirits, mahu do not have access to male political power or prestige. They also differ from two-spirits by having a relatively low status in society. Mahu cannot aspire to the leadership roles that two-spirited people like Osh-Tisch did. Nowhere in Polynesia are mahu associated with religious life,²⁵ nor is there any public coming-out ceremony.

Yet the mahu, as half-man half-woman, share with the Native American two-spirits the characteristic of combining elements from both male and female genders. Also like two-spirits, mahu are accepted to some extent into women's space just as they are, without further bodily authentication. They therefore differ, as we will see, from Indian *hijra*, the eunuchs of the ancient world, and contemporary transsexuals, all of whom undergo a sex-reassigning body morphing. Nor are mahu thought of as neither man nor woman, or as lacking something, as are *hijra*, eunuchs, and transsexuals. Instead, mahu are half of each, like Native American two-spirits.

Although Polynesian society has been influenced by French colonial and missionary culture, Polynesian society remains largely intact, in contrast to the Native American cultures. Polynesian society, while decidedly non-Western, is not so different that the cultural gap is insurmountable. Thus Polynesia is an excellent site for further anthropological study of gender and sexuality.

The mahu have recently been shown by the anthropologist Deborah Elliston to include masculine women in addition to the feminine men that attracted the attention of the early explorers. One woman explained that a female-bodied person could be a mahu too, saying, "Mahu, that can be a man or woman because that's what it means, someone who's both."²⁶ Elliston reported initial difficulties in discerning the "the codes, cues, signs, and performances of female-bodied mahu." It became apparent, however, that occupations like truck driving and subsistence farming were coded as masculine, as well as certain gestures, clothing, and the wearing of short hair in a society where most women grow their hair very long.

Polynesians today are, on the whole, accepting of mahu, primarily because they view mahu as natural, as "being that way." Mahu make themselves known while still children by demonstrating transgendered styles of appearance or a preference for transgendered work. Boys with

feminine inclinations and girls who are tomboys (in French, *garçon manqué*) are likely mahu. Gender identity is more important to mahu status than is sexual orientation. In fact, the sexuality of mahu varies. One study reported that male-bodied mahu usually had sex with men, especially young men, yet several had also had long-term relationships with women and were fathers, and still others were celibate. Female-bodied mahu usually had women as lovers, but many had had male lovers at some time, and others were celibate.²⁷ This emphasis on gender rather than sexuality resembles that of contemporary American trans people, who express all types of sexual orientation, including celibacy. Yet American trans people also may have relationships with one another, whereas mahu form relationships only with men or women, but not with other mahu.

Polynesians conceptualize people as being “mixtures” of male and female ingredients.²⁸ People differ from one another by having different ratios of male to female. The mixture of a male-bodied mahu consists of more femaleness than maleness in a male body, and vice versa for a female-bodied mahu. A male-bodied mahu who is attracted to males represents the attraction of the mahu’s female ingredients to a male. Thus an elemental sexual binary is affirmed, but bodies are allowed to express different combinations.

According to Elliston, an especially interesting recent development in Tahiti, seen particularly in the capital city of Papeete, is the emergence of a Western transgender style called *raerae*, or *travesti* in French. Presently, these are exclusively male-to-female trans people who emulate a “specifically Eurocentric form of white femininity.”²⁹ In public, most travesti wear revealing European women’s clothes: miniskirts, skimpy shorts, halter tops, high heels—the kind of white femininity idealized in the mass media throughout French Polynesia. Most travesti work, at least part-time, as sex workers for male clients. Surprisingly, travesti say they have “chosen” to be as they are, meaning apparently that they choose to express their transgendered nature by this route rather than as mahu. Their path begins as males who have sex with other males, although without identifying as mahu. Later they transition into being travesti. Most take hormones, and many have had sex-reassignment surgery. Prior to transition, some fathered children.

Tahitians disparage the travesti because their dress is “over the top,”

their style is foreign, and they are thought not to be authentic, in contrast to the mahu, who “have always been that way.” Here we are witnessing a collision between two different cultural transgender manifestations. How this collision plays out will make for some fascinating real-time anthropology. Similarly, the new categories of *homosexuel* and *lesbienne* have arrived in Tahiti, representing European gay and lesbian identities, which also don’t map neatly onto the mahu category. Stay tuned.

THE HIJRAS IN INDIA

India’s size guarantees that the aggregate number of transgendered people is huge, even if the fraction of the population that identifies as transgendered is small. With a population of more than one billion people, India has over one million transgendered people (one in one thousand) who belong to a group called the *hijras*, a combination religious sect and caste.³⁰ The hijras, who consist of male-to-female transgendered people, acquire members mostly from the lower and untouchable castes.

The religious aspect of hijra life focuses on devotion to the Mother Goddess, Bahuchara Mata, or Mata for short. The major hijra temple is located near Ahmedabad in Gujarat, north of Bombay in northeast India. The religion is principally Hinduism, with some elements of Islam.

Hijras perform celebrations for the birth of a male child, and at weddings they offer the blessings of Mata. With the Westernization of India, the demand for these ceremonies is declining, and hijras increasingly work in the sex trade or as beggars. Hijras are attempting to break out of this downward spiral, and some have recently been elected to public office. In January 2001 the new hijra mayor of Katni, a limestone mining town with a quarter million people, was featured in the *New York Times*, along with five hijras elected to other positions around India.³¹ Another hijra political leader was covered three years earlier in the *Wall Street Journal*.³²

According to anthropologist Serena Nanda, hijras are organized nationally into seven named houses. An elder from each house, called a *naik*, has jurisdiction over a geographic region, such as a medium-sized city or one section of a large city like Bombay. The naiks meet collec-

tively as a *jamat*, or meeting of the elders, and function as a ruling board for the region. The *jamat* formally approves the admission of a candidate to the hijras. A candidate hijra is called a *chela*, or disciple, and is sponsored by and apprenticed to a guru, or teacher. To join the hijras, a candidate is taken under the wing of a guru, who then brings her to the *jamat* for induction. The *chela* gives the guru her earnings and submits to her authority. The guru is responsible for the welfare of her *chela* and for the initiation fees paid to the *jamat*. A guru usually lives with her *chelas* in a small commune, typically composed of five people. Occasionally a hijra marries and goes to live with her husband.

Hijra appearance ranges from passing as a nonhijra woman to mixed-gender appearance with gaudy clothes and a deep, booming voice. Hijras generally wear women's clothes, including a bra and jewelry, and have long hair in a woman's style. They pluck their facial hair to attain a smooth face. Hijras walk, sit, and stand as women do, and carry pots on their hips, which men don't. Hijras take women's names, and use feminine language, including feminine expressions and intonations. They request women's seating in public accommodations and sometimes demand to be counted as women in the national census.³³ Hijras may also exaggerate feminine dress and mannerisms to the point of caricature, use unfeminine coarse and abusive speech and gestures, and smoke cigarettes, which is normally a male "privilege."

Hijras are marginalized in Indian society and are not accepted as women by nonhijra women. They are forced to function outside the traditional two genders, instead forming a third gender. While Indians acknowledge gender variation, they do not accept the variation socially: "Don't make it sound like we're about to invite them in for a cup of tea."³⁴ Hindu society's attitude toward hijras is mixed. Their blessings at a wedding promise prosperity and fertility, but their curses may bring infertility or other misfortunes. A hijra may insult a family that does not meet her demands for money and gifts, starting with mild verbal abuse and ridicule, then moving on to stronger insults, and culminating in the most feared insult—lifting her dress to display her genital area.³⁵ Hijras' spiritual contribution is tempered with this element of extortion. Hijras are at once special sacred beings and objects of fear, abuse, ridicule, and sometimes pity.

CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES

The range of personal styles among hijras can be seen in the people living together in a commune described by Serena Nanda.³⁶ The woman in charge was over six feet tall, with classically beautiful Indian features and extravagantly thick jet-black hair hanging below her waist. She wore chiffon saris and diamond earrings, with gold chains and wrist bangles. Another hijra, who managed a bathhouse, was enormously fat and masculine in appearance, with extremely hairy arms and a tattoo on her wrist. She wore no jewelry and was described as looking like a "gigantic Buddha." Still another was young, beautiful, and feminine, and lived with her husband at night.

Among the other hijras interviewed by Nanda was Kamladevi, age thirty-five, who spoke fluent English, Hindi, and Tamal, as she had gone to a Christian convent high school up to the eleventh grade. As a child, Kamladevi refused to wear pants and instead dressed only in *lungi*, a traditional skirtlike cloth of brightly colored silk or cotton. She wore eyebrow pencil and lipstick at school, which she removed before coming home. At age eleven, she had her first sexual experience with a boy and later had trysts with several male teachers in the school. Her parents tried to prevent her efforts to feminize. Her father, a police subinspector in the crime division, even assigned an orderly to watch after her. However, the hijras noticed Kamladevi and invited her to join them. She did, going off to Bombay, where she became a sex worker. Her fate was bleak, and she died soon after being interviewed.

Another of Nanda's interviewees—Meera—was a successful hijra guru at age forty-two. Meticulous in dress and conservative in demeanor, like a "middle-class housewife," she had a masculine face but an exceptionally intense feminine gender identity. At four or five years of age, she pretended she was a girl and walked with a sway. Her parents allowed her to wear a *bindi* (the colored dot Indian women place on their forehead) and to dress in girls' clothes. As an adult, she began taking female hormones to increase her weight: "Now I am nice and fat, like a woman."³⁷

Meera had a husband, Ahmed. "If I feel dejected and there are tears in my eyes, then Ahmed will ask me, 'Why are you so depressed? What

do you want? What has happened to you?’ And if Ahmed is not well, even with just a headache, I will sit by him the whole night tending to him, massaging his head, his body. . . . He’s guarded me so well. If anybody teases me or disturbs me, he gets very angry. . . . When he is not here the police and the urchins bother me, but when he is here everyone is silent. . . . If anybody troubles me, Ahmed will thrash them and send them away. God and he are one to me. . . . If Ahmed [went] away to another lady or another hijra, then I would shave my head and burn myself, like a widow who commits suttee.” In a later interview, Meera showed a small baby she had adopted and was taking care of. After years of hormones, her breasts had fully developed. “Now my only wish is this, that my husband should be all right, my chelas should be all right, that God gives us enough money to sustain ourselves. God is great.”

Meera’s path to this point, though, was not direct. She had previously married a woman and fathered a daughter, later arranging a marriage for that daughter. Meera was evasive when asked about this part of her life. She knew, as Kamladevi put it, “To be a hijra, you should not have any relations with a woman.”³⁸

Sushila, who was interviewed at thirty-five, was born of a Tamil family in Malaysia. “From my earliest school days, I used to sit only with the girls,” she recalled.³⁹ She became sexually active at thirteen with a fisherman who was married and lived with his wife, mother, and sister. When Sushila moved in with them, her parents never came to take her back because she wore a *bindi* and *kajal* (feminine makeup). “My family didn’t like this,” she explained; they found it “embarrassing.” She returned home on her own initiative after a while, and one day met a hijra at the movies. The hijra invited her to join, saying, “You can always wear a sari and live” when you live with us. Sushila joined the hijras because “I hated my house so much.” This began a back-and-forth with her family. “Come home,” they would say. “I’ll come like this only [dressed as a woman].” “No, we’re such a big, honorable family, how can I let you come home this way?” “Then I won’t come.” Still, when her sister fell ill ten days later, she did return. “My father and brother both requested me to get inside one of the rooms and to change my dress into a *lungi* and shirt before people could see me. I told my father, ‘If you people feel ashamed of me because I am wearing a sari, I don’t want to embarrass

you. Allow me to go away here and now.’” After two days, she returned permanently to the hijras, and at times worked as a sex worker.

Sushila took a husband, a Brahman who was a chauffeur for a large corporation. She spoke warmly of her husband and was concerned that she could not give him a child, which she felt was necessary for him to have “a normal family life.” In a later interview, Sushila revealed that she had pulled off a coup. She had adopted her former husband as her son (!) and had arranged his marriage to a neighbor’s sister, who was poor but respectable and quite pretty. The newlyweds had a son, making Sushila legally a grandmother.

Meanwhile, Sushila had found another husband. “What I find attractive in my man is the way . . . he likes to see me well dressed, tidy, with flowers in my hair, with a bindi, wearing new clothes, keeping the house clean, and not using bad language. . . . I have my husband’s lunch ready by the time he comes home. I tend to his house. . . . You see how many people come and sit here with me to chat. . . . Now that I am respectable and talk to people well, people come and sit with me.” Even though she was a former sex worker, she could say, “Now I have my husband and he’s the only man for me. . . . Now I’m leading the life of a respectable woman with a husband, an adopted son, a daughter-in-law, and a grandson—and running a house.”

The three hijras discussed so far were born and raised male but wished to live as women. Kamladevi and Sushila were prevented from dressing as women at home, Meera was allowed to, and all three joined the hijras to live, at least to some extent, as women. In contrast, Salima was born intersexed. Salima was interviewed while living on the street, sleeping on a tattered bedroll in Bombay. At this point she was not even a sex worker (“no customers are coming to me”) because of her dishevelment, with three days’ growth of beard and dirty hands, feet, and clothes.⁴⁰ She recalled, “My parents felt sad about my birth. . . . My mother tried taking me to doctors. . . . My father made vows at different places, but it was all futile. . . . My organ was very small. . . . The doctors said, ‘No, it won’t grow, your child is not a man and not a woman.’ . . . If I was a girl they would have nurtured me and made me make a good marriage; if I was a boy they would have given me a good education. . . . But I have been of no use to them.” Salima went on to explain, “From the beginning I only used to dress and behave as a girl. . . . I never thought of my-

self as a boy. . . . My parents had given me a boy's name. . . . I would give them [the teachers] a girl's name." At school, the teachers would not allow Salima to sit with the girls. "For this reason I stopped going to school."

When Salima met the hijras, her mother said, "Since you are born this way, do whatever you want to do, go wherever you want to go, do whatever makes you happy." So Salima joined the hijras, and "the pain in my heart was lessened." Salima was treated well among the hijras while she was protected by her guru. After her guru's death, however, she was ostracized. She found a husband for a time, but eventually died on the streets.

As can be seen in these narratives, hijras don't propose a new and distinct conception of gender. Hijras are a third gender by default, not by design. Denied entry into the gender they identify with, they wind up as a third gender. Many, perhaps most, hijras clearly wish for the life of a conventional nonhijra woman.

NIRVAN: GENITAL SURGERY

The word *hijra* is often translated to mean "not man, not woman." Hijras have a form of sex-reassignment surgery referred to as *nirvan*, or "the operation," which modifies the genital region to a state intermediate between male and female genitals. *Hijra* is also translated as "eunuch." Of the four individuals whose narratives we have been given, Kamladevi and Meera had the operation, Sushila was planning to have it, and Salima didn't "need" one.

The nirvan is an elaborate ceremony in which a person is separated from her male form, resides while convalescing in a liminal state, and is finally reborn as a "true" hijra and empowered as a disciple of Mata. The operation is performed by a *dai ma*, or midwife. Meera, who was qualified to perform a nirvan, did so many times. Specifically, the testicles and penis are removed with "two quick opposite diagonal cuts."⁴¹ The mere mention of this highly symbolic action has probably made you uncomfortable.

Why would a hijra consent to a nirvan? Not only consent, but pay big money? Kamladevi paid Meera "so much . . . 27 saris, 20 petticoats, 27 blouses, 2 dance dresses, 1 big tin box, 9 stone nose rings, 200 rupees,"

revealing a strong motivation "no government, from the British to the Indian, has been able to erase."⁴²

Understanding the nirvan is hindered by the pejorative descriptions of anthropologists. Nirvan has been called an "emasculatation ritual" carried out as "part of a religious obligation." A man, it is said, offers his family jewels to a demanding goddess who devours, beheads, and castrates her consort. Supposedly, "identification with the Goddess through sacrifice of their genitals assures [hijras] of her life-giving presence, warding off death." Yet, the reports claim, instead of warding off death, the pathetic result is only "mutilated genitals."⁴³ Nirvan is construed as the irrational superstition of a primitive people.

According to their own narratives, hijras are not actually offering their genitals as a sacrifice. The genitals are not placed on an altar to Mata, but are quietly removed and buried in a pot at the base of a tree. If nirvan were a sacrifice, why would both penis and testicles be removed? Testicles alone would suffice if manhood were being yielded to Mata—that's what castration means. Construing hijra practice as an irrational devotion to a bizarre primitive deity denies dignity and agency to hijras and discounts the human diversity they represent.

So why do hijras undergo nirvan? Perhaps hijras are rational after all. Let's see if nirvan stands up to cost/benefit analysis, the benchmark of rational analysis. The costs are low. A hijra isn't giving up much when she cedes her male genitals to Mata. To a hijra, born male but identifying as female, male genitals are hardly family jewels. Kamladevi referred to her male organ as weak and useless, "not good for anything." Similarly, describing how she was before her operation, Lakshmi, a beautiful young hijra dancer, said, "I was born a man, but not a perfect man." And Neelam, who was waiting to have the operation, remarked, "I was born a man, but my male organ did not work properly." Preoperative hijras do not view their genitals as assets, so giving them up represents no cost at all. The operation itself is the major cost, both the sum paid to the *dai ma* and the pain of the six-week recovery process. The procedure itself is not painful, just "a small pinch" or "ant bite."⁴⁴

The benefits are many:

1. *A feminine body.* The operation furthers the feminization already begun with women's dress, including padded bras, a

woman's style of long hair, a smooth face from plucking facial hair, feminine language, and change of name. Meera explained, "After the operation we become like women." Removing the testicles eliminates the main testosterone-producing glands, allowing a more feminine body contour to develop, and removing the penis allows the hijra to pass urine as a woman does. Hijras consider the operation's result to be beautiful, not a mutilation. Meera mentioned she had been ill and examined in a hospital. "The doctors were amazed at how excellently I had been 'made into a woman' by the operation. Only with this proof of their own eyes were they convinced of the power of the hijras to transform themselves from men into women." To the interviewer, she added, "You must take a picture of my operated area so that people in your country will also know the power and skill of the hijras."⁴⁵

2. *Husbands' expectations.* Meera stated that her husband, Ahmed, said to her, "You're a man and I'm a man," and told her to have the operation. "So I went for the operation at that time." Similarly, Sushila said, "My husband wants me to get the operation done so I will look robust and nice, like the others."⁴⁶
3. *Authenticity.* Nirvan provides proof that a person is a real hijra rather than a cross-dressing impostor. Peer pressure contributes too. Kamladevi admitted, "Having lived so many years, if I didn't get the operation done, it would be a great 'black mark' for me."⁴⁷
4. *Power.* Nirvan endows a hijra with Mata's power. The operation ordains a hijra with the spiritual authority to bless in Mata's name. A cross-dressing male lacks this spiritual power. If he dances in a ceremony to bless a new baby or wedding and is discovered, he cannot claim a fee and is sent away embarrassed.⁴⁸ Furthermore, after nirvan, a hijra's threat to expose her genital area becomes credible, whereas before nirvan, any such threat would be a dangerous bluff.

Little wonder, then, that no government, from the British to the Indian, has been able to erase the hijra nirvan. The practice is rational in the local context, both now and in the past.

Any regrets? Sure, but not about the operation as such. After the op-

eration, a hijra is repositioned in society's power structure, where Mata's blessings don't cut any ice. She's no longer a man and no longer enjoys the possibility of male power. She can't switch to guy mode anymore to get out of a jam. Kamladevi said, "Before the operation, even when we went out at night, we never had a fear. But now, suppose we see a drunkard, or a rowdy; now after the operation we get frightened. . . . The local rowdies and bullies come at night, knock at the door, wake us up, and forcefully have their way with us. But still, we must do it."⁴⁹ Welcome to a woman's world. Meera had no such regrets. She had Ahmed to "guard" her.

Thus the nirvan practiced by Indian hijras can be a rational choice, a way for a person with cross-gender identity to make a better life in local circumstances. Although nirvan is described as a religious obligation, this appeal to religion may be nothing more than a cover for the real reasons. Nontransgender people are rarely able to comprehend transgender motivation, and transgender people come to depend on social fictions. In the West, transsexualism is couched in medical fiction; in India, apparently religious fiction holds sway.

A COMPARISON OF HIJRAS AND TWO-SPIRITS

For two-spirited Native Americans, the cost/benefit table of surgery was not the same as it is for hijras. The costs were higher, as the technology wasn't available, and the pain, suffering, and danger were likely to be much greater than for hijras, who have perfected nirvan over hundreds of years. The benefits were much less too. Only the benefit of acquiring a more feminine body would seem to apply to two-spirits. A two-spirited woman didn't have a husband pestering her for an operation. Native Americans were easy about same-sex sexuality, and a two-spirit woman's partner knew what came with the turf. Nor was some bodily symbol necessary for authentication; a two-spirited person was authenticated by her transition ceremony. Finally, no one body was religiously correct. A two-spirited person was admired for her spirit, not her body. For these reasons, surgery was not a rational choice for Native Americans, and it wasn't done.

There are also other differences between Native American two-spirits and hijras. The two-spirit transition ceremony was held by the

whole tribe and represented a person coming out into the society at large. A hijra nirvan is held within the hijra community, and the advance to full membership as a hijra is not witnessed, acknowledged, or endorsed by the wider society. Two-spirited people look outward to the whole tribe, where they can fulfill a role that benefits the greater good and aspire to succeed in the world at large. In contrast, a hijra must focus inward, and her existence depends on what she can extract from the larger community.

The concept of two-spirits is inclusive—a combination, union of man and woman, more than either alone. The concept of a hijra is exclusive—neither man nor woman, whatever's left over, intersection of man and woman, less than either alone. The two-spirited person is positioned to bridge gaps, to heal, construct, create. The hijra is positioned to threaten, to advertise loss, to demonstrate inability. India does not prosper from its hijras as much as Native America did from its two-spirits.

The two-spirited category is much broader than the hijra category. Hijras are limited to males and intersexed people who identify as female, but Indian society includes many other expressions of gender variance, which are poorly described and understood.

MORE TRANS PEOPLE IN INDIA

In southern India, the *jogappas* are similar to hijras in that they are male-bodied, wear feminine dress, take feminine names, wear their hair long in a woman's style, engage in bawdy bantering and flirting with men in public to solicit alms, and perform at marriages and the birth of a male child.⁵⁰ They follow the goddess Yellamma, considered a sister of the goddess Bahucharaji, whom the hijras follow. Unlike the hijras, though, the *jogappas* do not practice nirvan and are never referred to as eunuchs.

In northern India, the hijras coexist with groups referred to as *jankhas*, *kothi*, or *zenanas*.⁵¹ Jankhas are male-bodied and seem to identify as men, but they dress as women on a regular basis. The group is heterogeneous. Some appear to be biding their time while waiting to apply to the hijras. Some compete with the hijras for money by playing at celebrations. Still another group, the *kothi*, are more complex, having a wife with children as well as a male lover.

The realm of masculine females is largely unexplored, although a his-

torical study of lesbian expression from Sanskrit texts to the present has recently appeared.⁵² I've been told of people called *mardana aurato*, or manly women, who have female partners.⁵³

Now, with *Westernization*, people from the English-speaking upper classes are beginning to identify as lesbian, gay, and transgendered. The hijras are said to be uncomfortable with having their history appropriated and subsumed into Western categories, much as the mahu from Polynesia feel conflict over the introduction of Western categories for gender and sexuality.