

Book Review: *Two-Spirit People* edited by Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang

**R. Alexia McFee
Fall 2020**

It matters what you call a thing

Solmaz Sharif “Look”

In *Two-Spirit People*, an anthology edited by Sue-Ann Jacobs, Wesley Thomas and Sabine Lang, the contributors problematize how Anthropologists and other Ethnographers have historically treated with gender and sexuality within Native Tribes and the implications for understanding gender and sexuality in the present moment. The collective voice of the contributors echo what Ethnic Studies and other indigenous and People of Color (POC) scholars including Solmaz Sharif, Yen Espiritu, Amy Kaplan and Sayak Valencia see as the performative nature of language to create the reality that it articulates. In elucidating the imperial nature of western epistemologies, their arguments decenter binarism, centering instead relational analyses through what Goulet in her essay calls *social practices in context*. Specifically, they argue against the use of the term “berdache” which they agree is inappropriate because of how it privileges same-sex relations over spirituality, occupational relations and other social and cultural dimensions that more accurately characterize gendering in Native Tribes.

The anthology employs an interdisciplinary and intertextual approach that blurs the boundary between autobiographical and academic writing to visibilize aspects of Native American culture foreclosed or elided by the traditional archive- an archive which has

historically and in the present moment been structured by relations of power. Although this methodological approach is unnamed by editors or contributors, this unmasking was made possible by ‘reading against’ the traditional archive using what Katherine McKittrick (and later Tiffany King) terms the practice of ‘noticing’ that showed how Anthropologist not only fell prey to a sort of tunnel vision when in the field but how they deliberately revised history to suit their imperatives. The most poignant example of both this practice of noticing and the tendency to revise history is given by Goulet in her discussion of Honigmann’s report that misidentified the Kaska girl as “Berdache”. Goulet places the Kaska girl’s social practices in context thereby opening a range of possibilities for the meaning of behaviors that were missed because of the Anthropologist’s overreliance on externalized attributes and the application of western conceptualizations of gender and sexuality which do not cohere with how Native Tribes understand and talk about themselves. Furthermore, in her treatment of Walter Williams’ paraphrasing of Honigmann, Goulet gestures towards the citational practices that serve to maintain rather than challenge how we come to know - practices that construct and ensure the continuous circulation of ‘alternate facts’. Goulet and others are therefore very deliberate about exploring their thesis from different vantage points which explain the merging of disciplinary traditions (philosophy, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies); Genres (academic literature and personal reflections) and location (reservations and urban intertribal spaces).

In this five-part anthology, the contributors move to show how western epistemologies not only shape sociality and materiality but also how it shapes the subjectivities of native Americans who identify or disidentify with Two-Spirit or Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT) codifications. Some of the key interventions the anthology makes relate to (1) connections and

disconnections between gender and sexuality and the invisibilization of transgendered persons via links of transvestic behavior to homosexuality; (2) discursive violence and the social implication of naming and identification; (3) the collapsing of important differences between Two-Spirit people and trans* identified people and (4) how a focus on “social personae” permits a range of discussions more useful than reiterating the Indo-European binaries.

The strength of the text rests in large parts on how it enacts the decolonial research praxis it summons which is necessary for disrupting what Vimalessary, Pegues, and Goldstein (2016) call “Colonial Unknowing”- that is as active disavowals (or white innocence) that upholds the persistence of colonialism to structure social and political life of all racialized people regardless of geography. The space created for the subaltern to speak (to invoke Spivak) whether through interviews, presentations at the 1993 Wenner-Gren Conference or the subsequent inclusion of their reflections in this anthology that allows them to narrate their queerness on their own terms all both rupture coloniality and suture solidarity at the site of knowledge production. The use of these “dissident vernaculars” (p. 194-196) enacts resistance to positivistic methodologies that (falsely) separate researcher from the object of study; prioritizes embodied knowledge and works toward what Leanne Simpson sees as indigenous resurgence.

The foregoing notwithstanding, I question whether it would have been useful to place in this conversation other constituting elements of the racialization in western societies that became the basis of narrow conceptualization of gender in Native Tribes. If for example, the co-constitutive nature of race, gender, and sexuality toward the imperative of capital accumulation was examined, what further insights could have been gleaned from the preoccupation of western anthropologists with characterizing any and all variance in gender and

sexuality as “Berdache”. The material impact of this linguistic device is evident in the ostracization and displacement of Native Americans who become labeled homosexual whether they do in fact have erotic relationships with persons of the same gender and the same sex. How does, for example, this misidentification disrupt native community relations and fulfill the genocidal imperative of U.S imperialism and expansionism?