

Nádleeh and Trickster: Accounting for the Absence of Non-Binary Genders in Foucault's History of Sexuality

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Abstract

From a theoretical standpoint, queer sexual categories remain in the wake of Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality. However, Foucault's work in the three volumes of The History of Sexuality primarily focus on a gender binary of male and female. One may find this logical under the false assumption that gender-fluid categories are a recent advent, but such an assumption excludes figures such as the Native American berdache, a third gender category. To complicate matters further, this gender identity is not set to a fixed sexual preference. Native American literature that explores both the gender and sexual fluidity of the berdache includes texts such as the Navajo creation myth as told by Irvin Morris in From the Glittering World and a selection from "The Winnebago Trickster Cycle" recorded in Paul Radin's The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology. Through a comparative reading of these texts as well as Foucault's The History of Sexuality, we see how Foucault's work could be expanded by incorporating a discussion of non-binary genders. Ultimately, this project explores the gap of gender difference in Foucault's work by examining the role of the berdache in Native American society and literature.

Introduction

From a theoretical standpoint, queer sexual categories remain at the foreground of Michel Foucault's work. His influential *History of Sexuality* provides both queer scholars and queer individuals who are not associated with the academy an analytical arsenal by which to measure the systems that has defined their sexuality and designated their desires as "sinful" or "inappropriate." More recently, though, queer discourse has favored a shift from sexual liberty to gender identity. In a "Talks with Google" lecture, transgender author Thomas Page McBee asks, "How do we become more than what's 'sold' to us? Meaning, we have an understanding of what masculinity means, but where do we get that understanding?" Devoted readers of Foucault may recognize the institutional implications in McBee's use of the expression "sold to us." In particular, his phrase suggests that powerful institutions govern the dissemination of gender identity, a Foucauldian principle. McBee goes on to say that gender is innate and that "we, in a lot of ways, are born with some understanding of who we are in the world, but the way we embody that gender is something we have a lot of choice around." Once again, Foucault's readers can mark the connections between McBee's suggested formation of gender identity and Foucault's notion of agency in the utilization of sexual identity. And yet, Foucault makes little to no mention of alternative, "non-binary," genders or the construction of gender in the three volumes of the *History of Sexuality*.

Of course, Foucault's theories could not be expected to employ gender discourse that gained prominence several decades after his death, let alone the publication of *History of Sexuality*. However, non-binary gender categories are by no means exclusive to current formations of gender identity that allow the individual greater agency in recognizing and challenging a strict gender binary. For example, the berdache, a figure who represents non-binary Native American individuals, predates the Victorians Foucault describes as disseminating the restrictive discourse on sexuality still mirrored today. Furthermore, Native American literature chronicles the presence of the berdache and resonates well with Foucault's theories. This literature includes texts such as the Navajo creation myth as told by Irvin Morris in *From the Glittering World* and a selection from "The Winnebago Trickster Cycle" recorded in Paul Radin's *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. Morris's telling of the Navajo creation story uniquely complicates some of the notions on power and control in the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, while Radin's Trickster tale adds to the conversations presented in the latter two volumes, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. This project does not aim to discredit any of Foucault's critical notions involving the construction of sexual identity as a means of power and control. Rather, I mean to explore the gap of gender difference in Foucault's work by

examining the role of the berdache in Native American society and literature.

Clarifications

Before delving into the specific literature mentioned above, our knowledge of the berdache in relationship to Foucault's eras of interest bears exploration. One could make the convenient argument that the berdache as a historical figure precedes Foucault's chronological focus. After all, Foucault stresses that his research, at least for the first volume, stems mainly from the "modern epoch" (12), which ran from 1500 C.E. to 1800 C.E. To be fair, the mythology of the berdache comes well before the modern era, but the introduction of the berdache to Western thought falls within the appropriate time span. When Europeans of the 1500s began exploring the Americas for colonization, they encountered native culture firsthand, including native sexual cultures and gender roles. In particular, Cabeza de Vaca recorded his thoughts on Native American same-sex couples: "I saw a wicked behavior, and it is that I saw one man married to another, and these are effeminate, impotent men" (132). De Vaca's description readily uses marriage and reproduction, which nicely corresponds with the binal institutions to which Foucault draws attention: "The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law" (3). Also, the word "berdache" itself bears European influence. According to Native American scholar Midnight Sun, the term "berdache" is "derived from a Persian word meaning 'kept boy' or 'male prostitute' and [was] first applied by French explorers to designate 'passive' partners in homosexual relationships between Native American males" (34). Evidently, the same European powers that govern the categorization of sexuality in Foucault's first volume also lent their hand to the Western categorization of Native American non-binary genders, revealing that an analysis of berdache literature can clearly coexist in the realm of Foucault.

There is also an important distinction between Western and Native American categorization that needs clarification if one is to analyze berdache literature respectfully. Where a Western person sees a sexual category, a traditional Native American may see a gender category. In different Native American cultures, the berdache is seen as a separate gender category altogether, even though sexual inclinations may indicate this gender identity. Midnight Sun clarifies that the sexual identification of the berdache "is complicated, however, by the fact that many individuals labeled berdaches also engaged in cross-dressing and cross-gender behavior. Most ethnographers have interpreted this behavior as indicating the assumption of another gender role" (34). In this case, "cross-gender behavior" includes taking up obligations that would normally be performed by the opposite gender of one's birth; a Native American man born with a disposition for "women's work," such as agriculture or the creation of tools and baskets, may be consid-

ered a berdache. Furthermore, as Native American scholar Maurice Kenny points out, same-sex attraction did not necessarily mark one as a berdache: “It is known that the Indian berdache sometimes married their own sex and lived together, and the ‘husband’ was not always a fellow invert” (17). Finally, European colonization narratives also bear this distinction, albeit subtly. Even though de Vaca initiated his description by emphasizing sexuality and partnership, he also states that the berdache “go about covered like women, and they perform the tasks of women, and they do not use a bow, and they carry very great loads. And among these we saw many of them, thus unmanly as I say, and they are more muscular than other men and taller; they suffer very large loads” (132). De Vaca’s word choice clearly indicates his awareness that the berdaches he saw were participating in work that was usually performed by female members of the community. Though homosexuality does not always a berdache make, the berdaches mentioned in this literature, specifically by Radin, participate in sexual activity that complicates Foucault’s work, as will be seen.

Volume 1: The History of Sexuality

Foucault opens the first volume by singling out the institutions that kept European sexuality in check: “if sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative. At a time when labor capacity was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits, except in those—reduced to a minimum—that enabled it to reproduce itself?” (6). Foucault’s reasoning relies on a society acutely aware of and bound by reproduction. Prior to colonization, Native American tribes grew to such an extent that their cultures managed to mold enclaves for the berdache that bypassed Foucault’s theoretical interest in reproduction. According to Maurice Kenny, the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes held notable third-gender cultures for “no particularly good reason . . . other than the possibility that these were large and powerful tribes . . . Within such large groups a social-religious use could be found for the berdache. As there were enough warriors and hunters to both protect and feed the community, some males were allowed to pursue more gentle endeavors” (17). Though not mentioned by Kenny, the Navajo, another large tribe, successfully integrated the berdache into its religion and literature, as evidenced by the Navajo creation story.

Regarding the role religion can play in forming sexual identities, Foucault draws attention to the introduction of confession to European Christianity. Foucault states, “An imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse” (21). Whereas European Christian configurations of desire rely on confessional discourse, the Navajo

religion uses the religious discourse inherent in creation myths, here rendered by Irvin Morris, to incorporate queer identity into the fabric of their culture. Towards the beginning, First Man and First Woman give birth to more humans, the berdache among them: "In four days a pair of twins were born to them, and these first children were *Nádleeh*, those who have the spirit of both male and female. Only the first pair were like that. In four days, another pair of twins were born, and so on" (38). By incorporating the berdache, here called the *Nádleeh*, the Navajo utilize their religious discourse to suggest that non-binary genders have existed since creation, thus codifying and introducing the idea of a third gender.

In addition to this codification, the Navajo creation myth also includes an alternative to Foucault's interest in reproduction. According to Morris, "[First Man and First Woman] planted great fields of corn and other crops. They also built an earthen dam, and the *Nádleeh* were appointed to be its guardians; while they watched over the dam they created beautiful and useful things, pottery and basketry, and the people praised these inventions. For eight years they lived in comfort and peace" (39). It bears mentioning that mortality has not been introduced to humanity at this point in the myth, so reproduction is not as major a concern. Even so, utility through craftsmanship, the promise that an individual can benefit the tribe through some form of work, validates a person's presence within the tribe. Whereas Foucault's configuration of European culture empowers reproduction as the deciding factor of a union's validity, the Navajo culture expresses more concern with craftsmanship. Morris further demonstrates the utility of the berdache when early Navajo men set out to discover more land: "The men agreed and gathered up their tools and all the things they had made. First Man, recalling the industriousness of the *Nádleeh*, invited them to come along, and they brought their grinding stones, baskets, cooking utensils, and other useful implements" (39). Evidently the berdache's inability to reproduce does not exclude it from the powers that disseminate validity among the tribe's identities.

As the creation story continues, the berdache's utility is illustrated as not only useful, but essential to the tribe's ability to function. For example, unrest occurs at the passing of one of the *Nádleehs*:

One morning not long [after the promise of mortality was introduced by the animal spirit Coyote], they noticed that one of the *Nádleeh* had stopped breathing. This was the first death. With instructions from the Holy People, they prepared the body and placed it in a rocky crevice. At about the same time, there was a dispute with the *Kiis'áanii* [the Pueblo peoples] over the seed corn that had been brought from the lower world, and the groups separated because of it. (41)

Though in theory there should be at least one remaining *Nádleeb*, it seems that no industrious *Nádleeb* was at hand to circumvent the issue with the Pueblo peoples. Morris's juxtaposition of these events hearkens to anthropological studies previously conducted on the Navajo. In addition to Navajo literature, anthropologists also describe the *Nádleeb*'s importance. For example, anthropologist Willard W. Hill states "I think when all the *nadle* are gone, that it will be the end of the Navajo . . . If there were no *nadle*, the country would change" (274). Evidently, the Navajo creation myth utilizes religious discourse to illustrate the importance of a non-binary gender as not only useful, but also a spiritual necessity for safety and well-being. In contrast to Foucault's work, which historicizes the power of religious discourse in identifying sexual desire, the Navajo creation myth relies on both religious *and* gendered discourse as the means of establishing the *Nádleeb* as a role within the tribe.

Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure

The second volume of Foucault's trilogy, *The Use of Pleasure*, shifts the focus from the modern era to ancient Greece. Whereas the first volume focuses on how modern Europeans devised the institutions through which the dissemination of sexual discourse empowered certain sexual identities, the last two volumes examine a period that pre-dates the modern epoch to illustrate how Foucault's theories can be applied to different historical periods. As its title suggests, the second volume explores how pleasure and ethics also act as institutions that figure into sexual discourse. While Morris generally excludes the sexual activity of the *Nádleeb*, Paul Radin demonstrates in "The Winnebago Trickster Cycle" that the berdache participates in and complicates the construction of sexuality.

Before delving into the intimate connections between *The Use of Pleasure* and "The Winnebago Trickster Cycle," the premises purported by Foucault and Radin require further elaboration. In order to characterize the joint role that pleasure and ethics play in sexual identity, Foucault states that "what distinguished a moderate, self-possessed man from one given to pleasures was, from the viewpoint of ethics, much more important than what differentiated, among themselves, the categories of pleasures that invited the greatest devotion" (187). Foucault's analysis of Greek sexuality finds that the object of one's desire did not hold the same weight as one's ethical pursuit of that desire. Moderation and context worked in tandem to draw the ethical borders of appropriate sexual activity. Foucault applies these borders to illustrate how a man of Ancient Greece could have intercourse with both women and men (particularly younger men) without being assigned a separate, "unethical" sexual category.

Radin complicates this configuration by presenting a berdache figure that operates as both male and female. In contrast to the human *Nádleeb*, the Winnebago Trickster is

a supernatural being who can physically transition between sexes. For example, “Trickster now took an elk’s liver and made a vulva from it. Then he took some elk’s kidneys and made breasts from them . . . Then he let the fox have intercourse with him and make him pregnant” (79). The Winnebago construction of the berdache, according to Radin, possesses even greater fluidity than Foucault’s Ancient Greeks because Trickster evades both a firm sexual categorization as well as a singular gender identity. Therefore, Trickster and the berdache in general can enjoy greater fluidity within the tribe’s categorization of sexuality and gender.

Now the question remains as to what pleasure Trickster and his befriended animal spirits get out of gender-swapping, and whether this pleasure is considered ethical by the Winnebago. In the context of Radin’s telling, Trickster, with the aid of his animal spirits, becomes a woman to seduce a wealthy chief’s son, ensuring they would have food and shelter to last the winter. From this summary, one may draw the conclusion that their motives lack pleasurable intent. However, when Trickster presents his scheme to the animal spirits, they respond by shouting “Good! . . . All were willing and delighted to participate” (78). Radin’s use of “delight” calls for some ambiguity: one could argue that their delight stems from the assurance that they will be fed, but Radin also draws attention to their delight in participation, suggesting some degree of pleasure in the physical, sexual processes by which they plan on deceiving the chief’s son.

However, this pleasure, particularly the deceitful means by which it is achieved, is not ethical to the Winnebago. Trickster blows his cover while preparing a meal: “the chief’s son’s wife (Trickster) jumped over the [cooking] pit and she dropped something very rotten [ostensibly the vulva crafted from the elk’s liver]. The people shouted at her, ‘It is Trickster!’ The men were all ashamed, especially the chief’s son. The animals who had been with Trickster, the fox, the jaybird, and the nit, all of them now ran away” (80). A Western reader may intuit this shame as indication that the men of the tribe had been sexual with Trickster and are now shocked at their own intercourse. However, this claim does not match the culture of the Winnebago. According to cultural historian Will Roscoe, the Winnebago tribe has a berdache figure capable of receiving visions and dealing wisdom (13). Therefore, the Winnebago are familiar with non-binary genders, distinguishing the shame felt by the men of the tribe as that of confusion or hurt at being deceived by a more spiritually powerful being. Furthermore, the fact that Trickster and his friends ran away after being discovered demonstrates a mutual understanding that their deceitful behavior was unethical. Ultimately, Radin’s work expands Foucault’s theories by demonstrating how pre-modern individuals who possessed gender fluidity had an ethical responsibility not to use their fluidity in pleasure-seeking to manipulate and deceive other individuals.

Volume 3: The Care of the Self

The final volume in Foucault's trilogy returns to ancient Greece as a means of observing the formation of the individual. Foucault finds that in responding to concerns of sexual identity, individuality answers to the following three factors:

(1) the individualistic attitude, characterized by the absolute value attributed to the individual in his singularity and by the degree of independence conceded to him . . . [by] the institutions to which he is answerable; (2) the positive valuation of private life . . . the importance granted to family relationships, to the forms of domestic activity, and to the domain of patrimonial interests; (3) the intensity of the relations to self, that is, of the forms in which one is called upon to take oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action, so as to transform, correct, and purify oneself, and find salvation. (42)

Trickster's decisions after being found out mirror these three factors with some important differences to the third. After running away from the tribe he deceives, Trickster asks himself, "Well, why am I doing all this? It is about time that I went back to the woman to whom I am really married. Kunu must be a pretty big boy by this time.' . . . Trickster hunted game for his child and killed very many animals. There he stayed a long time until his child had become a grown-up man" (80). Regarding Foucault's first factor, Trickster understands that he is answerable to his family, and while he has enough agency to wander from them, he recognizes that he must return from time to time. The consideration shown by Trickster exhibits tenderness not present in his previous, deceitful actions; therefore, his decision to return to his family evokes a sense of well-being and personal development. The second factor expresses the valuation of private life and "patrimonial interests," which are evident in Trickster's decision to provide for his family by hunting. Both factors expressed by Foucault resonate cleanly with Radin's work.

In the third factor, however, Foucault explains that individual care provides a salvation or purification of oneself, but Trickster's decision does not aim for personal purification. As previously stated, the berdache within Winnebago culture is a mystic figure useful for instruction, which is more apparent in Trickster's decision to stay until his son is grown: "Then, when he saw that his child was able to take care of himself, he said, 'Well, it is about time for me to start travelling again for my boy is quite grown up now'" (80). The first volume distinguishes reproduction as the necessary means for perpetuating society, yet Radin's piece shows that instructional attention to younger generations plays a role in this perpetuation and that this perpetuation replaces the purification called for in

Foucault's configuration of the self. Furthermore, Foucault connects this need for purification with the realization that one is an object of knowledge and a field of action. The only need tantamount to this in Trickster's story is when he and his companions decide that they need food and shelter for the winter. When Trickster accepts that the world will soon become difficult to live in, he says "I will disguise myself as a woman and marry [the chief's son]. Thus we can live in peace until spring comes" (78). As opposed to purification, Trickster seeks fortification by assuming the field of action that a Winnebago woman would take. Overall, both his need to educate his son and his decision to transition into a woman stem from awareness of his own gender fluidity.

Conclusion

Foucault's *History of Sexuality* establishes a foundational framework for examining the power inherent in controlling sexual discourse. However, in establishing this framework, Foucault does not account for the discourse by which individuals determine gender identity and the roles of that gender within a society. Berdache literature, such as the Navajo creation myth and "The Winnebago Trickster Cycle," exemplifies how the inclusion of non-binary gender categories complicates Foucault's work. As a concluding note, one could argue that the berdache lacks validity in this conversation due to its supernatural abilities, but this claim ignores both how this literature codified a place for non-binary genders in Native American culture and that this literature precedes contemporary discourse on alternative genders. When reflecting on his memoir of physical transitioning, Thomas McBee says, "I wasn't interested in specifically writing the 'trans experience,' but I was interested in writing about the male experience and the human experience, and I think gender is just one powerful dimension of identity, and just a way for me personally to examine that." Today gender plays a pivotal role in distinguishing one's sexual identity, so when considering theoretical texts such as Foucault's that examine the construction of sexual identity, literature that observes gender identity belongs within the same conversation.

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