

‘SPIRITUAL SLUTS’

**MOBILIZING AND MEDIATING SPIRITUALITY
IN RESPONSE TO AIDS**

CRISES OF BELONGING

- The epidemic destabilized gay institutions, enacting a crisis of belonging for gay people
- How was the field of the spiritual used to ‘answer’ this crisis, and what do the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (SPI) and Radical Faeries (RF) reveal about who qualifies as a cultural mediator?
- Things we’ll go over:
 - Parody
 - Post-secularism
 - Berdache
 - Indigenous roots of gay nature
 - Whiteness



PARODY AND POLITICS

- Video: [SPI on People Today talk show, 1991](#)
 - “We use theatre to educate...and then we slip them the serious message.”
 - “AIDS is a shocking situation, and it requires shocking activities.”
- “The Sisters’ activism was not only at the forefront of queer politics around HIV/AIDS, but...their continued activism has developed into an ethics of care within the space of performance that is in itself a unique contribution to queer politics.” (Wilcox 2018)
- “Parodic” politics
- Healing *through*, rather than *from*, religion: sexuality as a source of positive affect rather than shame
 - “***The habit is intrinsic...it’s not in opposition***” (unnamed Sister, People Today)

POST-SECULAR?

- “‘Postsecular’ religion and ‘postsecularization’ sociology might then centre in part on the religious ‘nones’: those who are ‘spiritual but not religious’, believing but not belonging, agnostics, and religious bricoleurs. ‘Postsecular’ phenomena might be those that are neither traditionally secular nor traditionally religious, those that smack of the religious and yet are not such by standard definitions. In both ways, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are a case in point” (Wilcox 2018)
- Spiritual “multi-lingualism:” blending of the religious and secular
- *So what does spirituality mean to the sisters? How does it complement their mission?*
- Video: [ITL media Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, San Francisco](#) (from 1:24 to end)
 - *‘[We are] celebrating an old vocation and taking it outside the walls’* (Sister Merry Peter)

ARRIVAL AT HOME

- Creating sanctuaries from homophobia, stigma during AIDS epidemic
- The promise of homecoming: what does it mean to offer (settler) gay men belonging wherever they go?
- Creating legacies of gay ancestry to challenge dominant narratives of inheritance, family, belonging
- What kind of political stakes are at work in claiming a place as home? How is this emplacement justified?



CONTEXT: WHAT IS *BERDACHE*?

- a logic of sexual primitivity and civilization that created Indigenous people and colonists in relation to each other: originally existed in early contact narratives by European settlers
- Lesbian and gay anthropology in the 1970s onward took keen interest in berdache as a way to demonstrate that sexual and gender diversity ‘existed everywhere’
- Berdache “supplied a sense of roots, a feeling of being part of a long tradition...a return to kinship” for white gay settlers (Morgensen 2011)
- Harry Hay, founder of Radical Faeries: “Let us invoke...the banished and forbidden spirits of nature...ghost of Indian, wise women, faggot, Black sorcerer, and witch...Through us the spirits will speak”

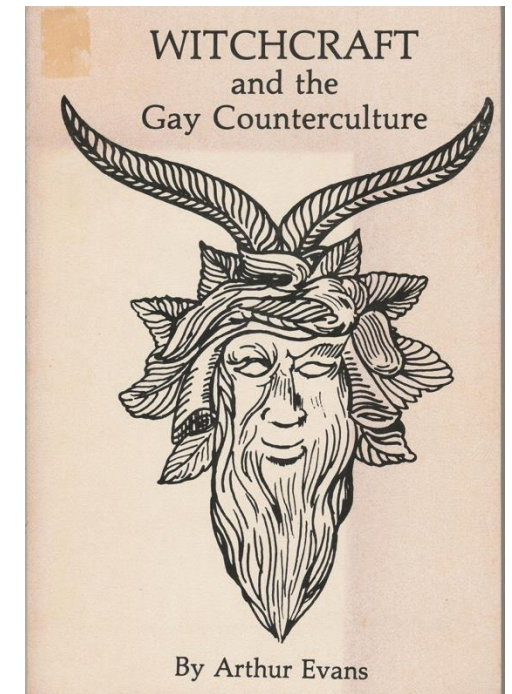
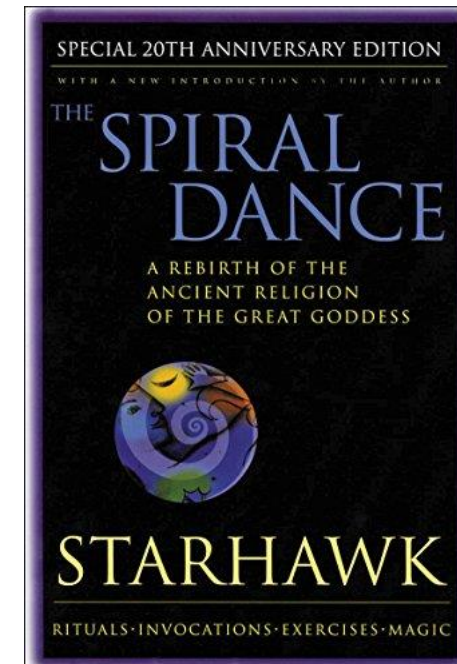
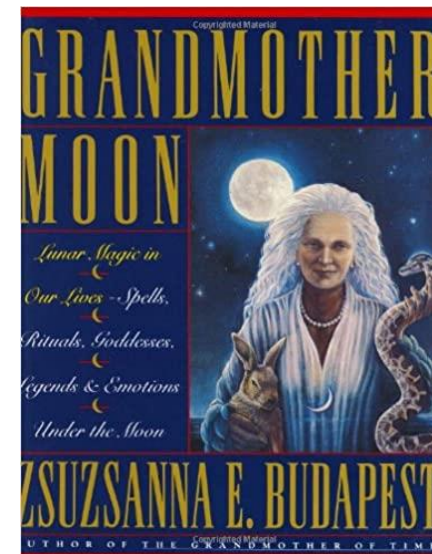


INDIGENOUS ROOTS OF A GAY NATURE

- “Radical Faeries offer a **rural homecoming** to indigenous roots as authentic gay subjectivity” (Morgensen 2011)
- “In the 1980s and after, RF increasingly located gatherings at sanctuaries acquired for the purpose of creating memorial for RF who had died of AIDS...sanctuaries became privileged sites where RF could return to recommit to collective survival” (ibid)
- RF culture espoused many facets of early AIDS organizing: Recalling and sustaining sexual cultures threatened by the pandemic (sex framed as healing rather than pathological and dangerous); breaking isolation; communities of care
- “Grappling with an epidemic brought RF home, when memorials and their collective ritualization materialized the sanctuary’s promise of sacred refuge in indigenous sexual nature” (ibid)

INHERITING TRADITIONS?

- “We are celebrating an old vocation that women have carried for centuries” (Sister Merry Peter)
- “Remembering what we already knew” as strong sentiment in lesbian goddess spirituality
- Radical Faeries framed the country and primitivity as repositories of authenticity long sought by gay urban subjects
- “There is a special magick in gayness...”



WHITENESS AS BACKDROP

- Sexual minorities (in this case, mostly white cis gay men) negotiate their racial and national locations within empire/settler colonialism in the US through spirituality, including how they mourn the impacts of AIDS on their communities
- Whiteness too often escapes unexamined, dovetailing with settlement as the 'normative horizon' of belonging (the status that goes without saying)



- Wilcox, Melissa. 2018. *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody*. NYU Press.
- Morgenson, Scott Lauria. 2011. *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*. University of Minnesota Press.